Formerly Julie

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Architecture, Book 3

Chapter 1

Julie stood in the hall with her hand on tuhe doorframe and tried to decide whether to go in.

It was her birthday. Eighteen. Her mother had said come down when she was dressed. That had been a while ago. The dress her mother had laid on the bed was still on the bed. Julie had put on a blouse and a skirt and then stood in front of them until the choice went dead in her hands. The blouse was the one she already knew. The skirt was the one that did not need a second thought. Even that had taken too long.

From the living room her mother's voice was low and sure.

"She'll stand in front of an open closet for twenty minutes," her mother said. "I'm not exaggerating. I timed it last week. Then she cries, and then she puts on the same three things."

"It isn't laziness," her father said.

"I didn't say it was. I said she gets stuck. She gets stuck on dinner. She gets stuck on whether to answer a message. She got stuck this afternoon on a dress. It's her birthday and she couldn't put on a dress."

Julie closed her fingers on the frame. She should have gone back up the stairs. She should have walked in and smiled and made it ordinary. Both options sat in front of her and neither one would move.

A third voice answered. A woman's voice. Calm. Not from this house.

"You asked us to look at her," the woman said.

"We did," her mother said. "We read what they sent. If it's this, you don't wait until she's twenty-five and living in her old room with a calendar she never marks."

"You think she fits."

"I think she wants someone to take it off her," her mother said. "She won't say that. She'll say she's tired. I'm her mother. I know what tired looks like, and I know what this is."

Julie's face was hot. She had not heard her mother say it that plainly. She had felt it. She had stood in the bedroom with the dress on the bed and wanted, with a kind of sick relief, for someone else to pick. She had not wanted anyone to look at that want.

"And you," the woman said.

Her father cleared his throat.

“I think Claire’s right,” he said. “I think if they can take the deciding off her, she might sleep. She might eat. I don’t like how small she’s getting in that room.”

“You understand what you asked for,” the woman said. “If she tests as a fit, we don’t give the choices back to be kind. Kindness is the structure. We start it. We keep it.”

“That’s what we asked for,” her mother said.

Julie took one step toward the living room and then did not take the next. The runner under her feet was the same runner she had known since she was small. The photograph on the wall was the four of them at the lake, except there were only three in the house now and her own face in the frame looked finished, like a person who could choose a lake.

She did not hear the woman stand. She heard the quiet of someone who had turned her head.

“You can come in, Julie,” the woman said. “You’ve been in the hall long enough.”

Julie’s stomach dropped. She walked.

The living room was the living room. Couch. Lamp. The low table with her mother’s glass of water and her father’s phone face down. The woman sat in the chair by the window. She looked like a person. Dark hair put up off her neck. A plain shirt. Trousers. Hands still on the arms of the chair. If there was anything android in her, it was only that she did not fidget. She looked at Julie the way a careful person looks at a job she has already started.

“This is Ellen,” her mother said. “From the Architecture. Julie, sit down.”

Julie sat on the edge of the couch. The skirt rode up. She pulled it down and then stopped, because pulling it down was another small choice and she could feel Ellen watching the stop.

“How long were you standing there?” Ellen asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Guess.”

“Ten minutes. Maybe more. I was trying to come in.”

“And you couldn’t.”

Julie looked at her hands. “I could have. I just… I didn’t.”

Her mother made a sound that was not quite a sigh.

“That’s what I mean,” her mother said.

Ellen nodded once.

“You asked for a test,” she said to her parents. “I don’t need a second appointment to start the part that’s already obvious. She stood in a hallway on her birthday and could not walk six feet.”

“So you can tell,” her father said.

“I can tell enough,” Ellen said. “We’ll still watch how her body answers. That happens as we go. I’m not going to send you a date in the mail.”

Julie lifted her head.

“What does that mean?” she said.

Ellen looked at her as if that was a fair question and also as if it would not change the next thing.

“It means we start tonight,” Ellen said. “Your mother and father think you fit a life with no decisions. I think they’re right. The test is whether you settle when the decisions come off. We don’t find that out with a form.”

“Tonight is her birthday,” her father said.

“I know,” Ellen said. “We won’t count it that way. We count from now.”

Julie’s mouth was dry. Eighteen had been a number she could hold. A line. After this you were supposed to know how to do the next thing. She had not known how to do the last thing.

“What do you start with?” her mother said.

Ellen stood.

“Her clothes,” she said. “All of them. Julie, show me your room.”

Julie did not get up. Her mother looked at her.

“Julie.”

She got up.

They went up the stairs in a line that made her feel younger than eighteen. Her mother first, then Julie, then Ellen. Her father stayed in the living room. Julie heard him pick up his phone and set it down again without turning it over.

Her room was as she had left it. The dress on the bed, blue, tags already cut, bought two weeks ago because her mother had said she should have something nice. The closet open. The chair with the jeans she had almost worn. The blouse she had not worn. A pile of clean shirts on the dresser because she had not put them away. She could not decide which drawer was the right drawer. She had told herself that yesterday and then again this morning.

Ellen stood in the doorway and looked at the room the way she had looked at Julie.

“This is all of it?” Ellen said.

“There’s a coat downstairs,” her mother said. “And the laundry in the hall closet. And what’s on her.”

“Bring a bag,” Ellen said. “More than one.”

Her mother left. Julie stood by the bed and did not know where to put her hands. Ellen came in and opened the first drawer.

Underwear. Socks. The old tank tops. Ellen took them out in stacks and set them on the bed beside the dress. She did not sort them into keep and don’t keep. She emptied the drawer. Then the next one. Shirts. Shorts. The sweater Julie wore when she could not pick anything else.

“That’s the one she lives in,” her mother said from the door. She had two paper bags from the kitchen and a third from the hall. “If I don’t wash it, she doesn’t get dressed.”

“It goes,” Ellen said.

Julie swallowed.

“All of it?” she said.

“All of it,” Ellen said. “You won’t be choosing clothes. So you won’t have clothes.”

“For how long?”

“That isn’t a question I’m going to give you,” Ellen said. “It turns into a decision. Come here.”

Julie came. Ellen opened the closet. Hangers. The jackets. The two dresses besides the one on the bed. The shirt Julie had worn to graduation and never put back. Ellen took them down. The hangers knocked each other and then hung empty. Her mother held the bags open. Ellen filled them. She was not rough. She was not tender. She was emptying a room.

Julie watched her things leave the hangers and felt the heat start low in her belly, unwelcome and exact. She wanted to cover it. She wanted someone to tell her where to stand so she would not have to pick a place in her own room.

“Stand by the window,” Ellen said.

Julie stood by the window.

They took the pile off the dresser. They took the jeans off the chair. They took the dress off the bed. Her mother looked at the dress for a second as if she might say they had paid for it. She did not say that. She put it in the bag.

“Laundry,” Ellen said.

Her mother went. Ellen looked at Julie’s blouse.

“Take that off.”

Julie glanced at the door.

“My dad is downstairs.”

“I know where he is,” Ellen said. “Take it off.”

Julie’s hands shook. She got the buttons wrong and then right. She pulled the blouse off her shoulders. The air in the room was ordinary household air, a little warm from the hall. It felt new on her arms. She held the blouse. Ellen took it and put it in the open bag.

“Bra.”

Julie reached back. She had put this bra on because it was the one she could find. She unhooked it. She crossed an arm over her chest before the straps were off and then had to uncross it to get the straps down. Her breasts were small. They felt obvious. The nipples had already drawn up. She hated that Ellen could see that. She hated that her mother, coming back with the laundry basket, could see that.

Her mother stopped inside the door.

“Oh,” her mother said, very softly.

“Set that down,” Ellen said. “Then hold the bag.”

Her mother set the basket down. She held the bag. Her face was tight and sure at the same time. She looked at Julie’s chest and then at Julie’s face.

“Arms down,” her mother said. “Don’t hide. You’ll make it worse for yourself.”

Julie put her arms down. Her face burned. The heat between her legs did not go away. It got clearer. She was eighteen in her bedroom with her shirt off and her mother watching, and the thing that had been wrong with her for months — the freeze, the sick pause in front of ordinary life — loosened by an inch. Someone else was doing the next thing.

Ellen put the bra in the bag. She put the shirts from the basket in after it. She did not comment on Julie’s skin.

“Skirt.”

Julie unfastened the skirt. It dropped. She stepped out of it. Underwear and socks. She was thinner than she had been in the spring. She knew that from the way the waistband had sat. Her mother had said she was getting small. Julie had not known how to start eating better because better was another list.

“Socks.”

She hooked them off with her toes and her fingers. The floor was cool.

Ellen waited.

Julie looked at her.

“I know,” Julie said. It came out thin. “I know.”

She worked the underwear down and stepped out of it. She was naked. She put her hand in front of herself and her mother made a small sound.

“Julie. Down.”

She dropped her hand. She wanted to die. She also wanted to stay exactly where she was and not be asked to pick the next movement. The want between her legs was wet now. She could feel it when she stood still. She kept her knees together and that did not hide anything. It only made her notice.

Ellen picked up the last of it and pushed it into the bag.

“Claire,” Ellen said. “The coat downstairs. Anything in the bathroom. Hair ties if you don’t want her standing there trying to decide what to do with her hair in the morning. Bring it all up or I’ll come down with her.”

“I’ll get it,” her mother said.

She went. She did not look back at first, and then she did, from the stairs, one look at her daughter standing naked by the window. Julie saw her mother’s eyes shine and then go steady.

Ellen tied the first bag.

“You’re shaking,” Ellen said.

“I’m cold.”

“You’re not that cold.”

Julie did not answer. Ellen was right. The shake was in her thighs and in her breath. She was wet enough that if she moved she would feel it. She did not move.

“Ask what you want to ask,” Ellen said.

“Are you taking me somewhere?”

“Not tonight.”

“Then why—”

“Because if I leave you a closet, you will stand in front of it tomorrow and we will be back here,” Ellen said. “Your parents didn’t call us so I could give you a schedule and a robe. They called us because you can’t choose. So we take the choosing off. Clothes are the first place it shows.”

Julie looked at the empty hangers.

“What do I wear to sleep?”

“You don’t,” Ellen said. “You go to bed the way you are. You get up the way you are. If we need you covered to step outside, I will cover you. That isn’t yours.”

Her mother came back with the coat and the bathroom things and a handful of ties and the extra towels Julie had never decided where to put. All of it went into the third bag. Ellen stood in the middle of the room and turned once, checking.

“Desk?” she said.

“School stuff,” her mother said. “Her old laptop.”

“Leave the laptop tonight,” Ellen said. “We’ll close the accounts from our side. I don’t want her sitting down here trying to open things that won’t open and calling that a choice.”

Julie thought of her phone, facedown on the dresser. She had set it there when she could not decide whether to answer her aunt’s birthday message.

“My phone,” she said.

Ellen picked it up.

“This too,” Ellen said. “You can say good night to your parents without it.”

She put the phone in the bag with the coat.

Julie stood there. The room looked wrong. Not dramatic. Just empty in the places that had been hers to fuss over. Bed. Window. Bare hangers. A girl with nothing on.

“Downstairs,” Ellen said.

“Like this?”

“Yes.”

The hall was longer than it had been on the way up. Julie walked behind Ellen. Her arms wanted to cross and she kept them at her sides because her mother had told her to. The air moved on her stomach and on the backs of her thighs. She was wet; she walked as if she could keep that a private fact, and it was not private. Anyone behind her would have seen how careful her knees were.

Her father was still on the couch. He looked up and went very still. His eyes went to her face and stayed there with an effort she could see.

“David,” her mother said. “It’s all right.”

“I know,” he said. He did not sound like he knew. He sounded like he was going to stay on the couch and let the thing he had agreed to be true.

Julie stopped at the foot of the stairs. She did not know whether to sit. Sitting would open her. Standing made her feel like a child called in.

Ellen pointed at the rug in front of the low table.

“There,” Ellen said. “Stand there.”

Julie stood there. Her father looked at the table. Her mother came around and stood near him, not in front of Julie, beside the choice they had already made.

“That’s all of it,” Ellen said. “I’ll have someone pick the bags up in the morning. Don’t put a shirt back in her hands if she asks. She will ask. That’s the freeze talking, not a need.”

“What if she’s cold?” her father said.

“Then raise the heat,” Ellen said. “Don’t dress her.”

Julie heard her own breath. She crossed her arms and then uncrossed them before her mother could say it.

Ellen looked at her.

“How is it,” Ellen said, “now that you don’t have to pick what to put on?”

Julie opened her mouth. She wanted to say it was awful. She wanted to say she was fine. Both were a kind of choosing. What came out was smaller.

“I don’t know what to do with my hands.”

“Nothing,” Ellen said. “They can hang. You don’t have to find a job for them.”

Her mother wiped her eyes once, fast.

“She’s been like this since last winter,” her mother said. “Worse since school let out. I find her in the kitchen holding the refrigerator open. I find her in the driveway not getting in the car.”

“I get in the car,” Julie said.

“After I tell you to.”

Julie had no answer. It was true. The driveway. The open refrigerator. The closet. The dress on the bed. She had wanted, in a part of herself she did not look at, for the refrigerator to close without her.

Ellen sat down again in the chair by the window. She did not offer Julie a blanket. She did not look away from Julie’s body as if it were a rude thing. She looked as if this were the correct state of a girl they had started.

“Come here,” Ellen said.

Julie walked to the chair. Ellen took her wrist and set Julie’s arm back at her side. Then she put two fingers under Julie’s chin and tipped her face up. It was not

rough. Julie’s pulse jumped in her throat. The wetness between her legs answered that small handling as if it had been waiting for a hand to mean something.

“You don’t like being looked at,” Ellen said.

“No.”

“And you still came down the hall.”

“You told me to.”

“Yes,” Ellen said. “That’s the point. Looking at you as a person who has to perform a birthday is finished. Looking at you to see whether you are where we put you — that we will do. Your job is not to look back with a plan.”

Julie did not understand every word. She understood the fingers under her chin. She understood that her nipples were tight and that Ellen could see them from this close. She understood that her mother was watching and had not told Ellen to stop.

Ellen let go.

“Ask her,” Ellen said to her mother.

Her mother hesitated.

“Julie,” her mother said. “Is this too much?”

It was a question with two answers. Julie felt the old freeze start. Ellen saw it.

“Don’t give her that one,” Ellen said. “She’ll stand here until morning. Tell her what you want.”

Her mother nodded. Her voice went steady.

“I want you to let them do this,” she said. “I want you to stop disappearing into that room. I want you alive in a life that doesn’t eat you. I think this is how. So you’re going to stand there, and you’re going to go to bed when Ellen says, and you’re not going to hunt for a sweater. Do you hear me?”

“Yes,” Julie said.

The yes went through her. It should have been a word. It felt like being set down. The heat between her legs pulsed once, hard enough that she had to change nothing and still felt it.

Her father rubbed his mouth.

“She should eat,” he said. “We didn’t do cake.”

“She can eat,” Ellen said. “You pick what. You set it out. She doesn’t stand in front of the refrigerator. After that she goes up. It’s late enough.”

They went to the kitchen. Julie walked naked across the dining threshold and the tile found her feet. Her mother took a plate from the cupboard and put leftover chicken and bread on it and poured water. She set it at Julie’s place. Julie sat. The chair was cool on the backs of her thighs. She kept her knees together and still felt herself open against the wood when she settled. She ate what was there. She did not ask for cake. Her father sat at the end of the table and looked at his glass. Her mother stood with her hip against the counter and watched Julie’s mouth as if eating were part of the night’s work.

Ellen leaned in the doorway.

“Good,” Ellen said, when the plate was mostly empty. “Up.”

Julie stood. A smear of wet had cooled on the chair. She saw it before her mother did. Her face went hot. Her mother saw it a second later and did not speak. She looked at Ellen.

Ellen had already seen.

“That’s the answer I wanted,” Ellen said, not unkind. “Not the tears. That. She settles in her body when the next thing isn’t hers. We’ll use that.”

Julie wanted the floor to open. She also wanted Ellen to tell her to walk. Ellen told her to walk.

They went up. Her mother came as far as Julie’s door. The bags were against the wall. The bed was the bed. No pajamas on the pillow.

“Lie down,” Ellen said.

Julie lay down on top of the sheet. The fabric stuck a little at her back and at her seat. She turned onto her side and then onto her back again because she did not know which one was the way she was supposed to sleep when there was nothing to arrange.

“On your back,” Ellen said. “That’s enough.”

Julie stayed on her back. She pulled the sheet and then stopped with it in her fist.

Ellen took the sheet out of her hand and drew it up to Julie’s waist, then left it. Not a tuck. Not a decision for Julie to finish.

“Claire,” Ellen said. “Say good night.”

Her mother came to the side of the bed. She had done this for years. She looked at Julie’s bare shoulders and at her face. She kissed Julie’s forehead. Her mouth stayed there a second longer than a simple kiss.

“I love you,” her mother said. “You’re going to be all right. I know you don’t believe me. I believe it.”

Julie looked at her.

“Mom.”

“I know.”

“I’m right here,” her mother said. “I’m not leaving the house. Go to sleep.”

She went out. Ellen stood at the foot of the bed and checked the window lock as if that were part of putting a girl down. Then she turned off the overhead light. The hall light stayed on. Julie could see the empty hangers if she turned her head. She did not turn her head.

“I’ll be downstairs with your parents for a while,” Ellen said. “You don’t get up to look for anything. There isn’t anything. If you need the bathroom, go and come back. That’s all.”

“Ellen,” Julie said.

“Yes.”

“What if I can’t sleep.”

“Then you lie there,” Ellen said. “You don’t have to solve it.”

She left the door open a little. Julie heard her on the stairs. She heard her mother’s voice, low, and then her father’s. She lay naked on her back in her own bed with the sheet at her waist and her clothes in bags against the wall. The want between her legs had not gone out. It sat there, steady, like a held breath. She kept her hands on the mattress because no one had told her to do anything with them.

From downstairs Ellen said something Julie could not make out. Her mother answered, sure.

Julie stared at the ceiling of the room she had not known how to leave, and waited.

Chapter 2

Julie was still on her back when she heard someone on the stairs.

She had slept in pieces. Each time she came up out of it she felt the sheet at her waist and the air on her chest and the empty hangers if she turned her head, and then she remembered, and the remembering put the heat back between her legs before she was all the way awake. She had kept her hands on the mattress. Once she had started to slide a palm down and had stopped because Ellen had not told her she could.

The door moved. Ellen stood there in the same shirt as last night. She looked at Julie on the bed the way she had looked at the closet.

“Up,” Ellen said. “Bathroom.”

Julie sat. The sheet fell. She crossed her arms and then put them down. Her hair was in her mouth. The ties were in a bag.

“I need to pee,” Julie said.

“That’s why I said bathroom.”

Julie stood. Her thighs were slick at the top. She felt it when she brought her legs together. Ellen saw her notice and did not remark on it.

The hall was quiet. Her parents’ door was shut. Julie walked to the bathroom with her arms hanging and her face hot. The runner touched her feet in the same places it always had. She shut the bathroom door and then did not lock it. She did not know if she was supposed to lock it. She sat on the toilet and peed and listened to the house and hated how open her knees were. When she wiped she was wetter than urine. She sat there for a second with the paper in her hand and no next instruction.

Ellen knocked once.

“Don’t start a project in there,” Ellen said. “Wash your hands. Come out.”

Julie washed her hands. The mirror was just the mirror. She looked because it was in front of her. Bare shoulders. Bare chest. Nipples still tight. Hair a mess. She looked like a girl who had been put to bed and taken out of bed. She turned the water off and opened the door.

Ellen pointed down the hall.

“Downstairs.”

“Can I brush my teeth?”

“Yes. That’s in there. Do that. Don’t open the cabinet and stand in front of it.”

Julie brushed her teeth with the brush that was already on the counter. She did not open the cabinet. She spat. She followed Ellen down the stairs.

The living room was empty of the bags. The rug where she had stood last night was just a rug. From the kitchen her mother said, “In here.”

Her mother was dressed. A sweater Julie knew. Earrings. She had her coffee. Her father sat at the table in a shirt and the pants he wore when he did not have to leave the house. There was food already on a plate at Julie’s place. Eggs. Toast. Cut fruit. A glass of water. The other plates had the same things, more or less. No one had set out a row of choices.

Julie stopped in the doorway. Both of her parents looked at her. Her father looked at her face first and then failed and saw the rest and went back to her face. Her mother looked at all of her and nodded once, as if the night had held.

“Sit down,” her mother said. “Eat.”

Julie sat. The chair was cool. She made a small sound she did not mean to make. Her mother glanced at her lap and then at Ellen, who had taken the doorway.

“She slept?” her mother said.

“In pieces,” Ellen said. “She stayed in the bed. That’s what I asked for.”

Julie picked up the fork because the fork was there. She ate. The eggs were the eggs her mother made. She was hungry. She had not expected to be hungry. Between bites she felt the air on her breasts and the edge of the chair against her bare seat and her father’s careful attention to his own plate.

The speaker sat on the counter by the coffee. Black. Round. The thing she had talked to since she was twelve while she made toast.

Julie swallowed.

She said her name toward it, the way she always had, the wake word and then Julie, a habit more than a thought.

The speaker chimed.

“Claire’s home,” it said. “Claire, do you want the news?”

“No,” her mother said.

Julie sat with the fork in her hand.

“It knows you,” she said.

“It knows this house,” Ellen said. “It doesn’t need you to run it.”

Julie looked at her father.

“My phone,” she said.

“They closed it,” her father said. He said it to his toast and then he looked at her, which cost him. “Mail. School. The chat things. Your mother did the family part this morning. Ellen’s people did the rest. It won’t open for you.”

“Aunt Leigh sent—”

“I’ll tell Leigh you’re fine,” her mother said. “You don’t need to build an answer.”

Julie put the fork down and picked it up again. The speaker was quiet. The kitchen smelled like coffee and eggs. She was naked at the table she had eaten at in pajamas and in a hoodie and, once, in a towel when she was late. This was not a towel. Her nipples had not gone down. She could feel her pulse between her legs against the chair.

“Drink the water,” her mother said.

Julie drank the water.

Ellen came to the counter and poured herself coffee as if she lived there. She did not sit. She stood where she could see Julie’s plate and Julie’s shoulders.

“What happens today?” her father said.

“She stays in the house,” Ellen said. “She doesn’t go back upstairs to look through drawers. There is nothing in them. After breakfast she stands when I tell her to stand. She sits when I tell her to sit. We’ll walk her around the yard so she isn’t only in a chair. You two do what you would do. Don’t invent errands so you don’t have to see her.”

Her father nodded. He rubbed his thumb along the handle of his cup.

“People coming for the bags?” he said.

“They already came,” Ellen said. “Early. I met them at the door.”

Julie pictured the bags going down the front walk. Her blouse. The blue dress. The phone. Someone she had not seen had carried her clothes away while she was on her back in the sheet.

“Did they come in?” Julie said.

“No,” Ellen said. “You don’t need that yet.”

Yet stayed in the room. Julie ate the rest of the toast because it was on the plate.

Her mother took the empty plate and put it in the sink. She did not ask if Julie wanted more. She cut one more piece of fruit and set it on a napkin in front of Julie and Julie ate that too. “Thank you,” Julie said.

“You’re welcome.”

Julie looked at the refrigerator. The door was shut. She had stood in front of that door last week with the cold on her shins, holding it open, unable to pick yogurt

or leftover rice. The memory made her face heat. She put her hands in her lap and then took them out because her lap was bare and her hands there looked like hiding.

“Julie,” Ellen said. “Stand up.”

Julie stood. The napkin stuck and fell. She was wet enough that the air told on her when she left the chair. She kept her eyes on the sink.

Ellen walked around the table and stopped in front of her. She was close. She smelled like coffee. She put two fingers against the inside of Julie’s wrist, not searching for drama, just placing her.

“You’re still shaking,” Ellen said.

“I’m all right.”

“I didn’t ask that. Look at me.”

Julie looked at her. Ellen’s eyes were ordinary brown. Up close there was still nothing to prove she was not a woman who had slept in a guest room. Her fingers were warm.

“Your parents are dressed because this is their house and they still have a day,” Ellen said. “You are not dressed because you don’t. That isn’t a punishment. Don’t turn it into one in your head. It will only make you colder.”

“I’m not cold.”

“I know.”

Ellen let her wrist go. She glanced down. Julie knew what she was glancing at. The hair between her legs was damp. Her thighs were shiny at the very top. Julie’s stomach pulled in.

Her mother saw the same thing from the sink and did not pretend she hadn’t.

“Does that happen every time she doesn’t have to choose?” her mother said. Her voice was careful, not cruel.

“It happened last night,” Ellen said. “It’s happening now. That’s what I meant by watching how her body answers. Claire, come here.”

Her mother wiped her hands on a towel and came. Julie wanted to step back and did not. Her mother stopped beside Ellen and looked at Julie’s body in the kitchen light. It was not a doctor look. It was a mother look that had been given a new job.

“You can see it,” Ellen said.

“Yes,” her mother said.

Julie shut her eyes. She opened them because shutting them felt like hiding and hiding had already been forbidden with her arms.

“Mom.”

“I’m here,” her mother said. “I’m not laughing at you.”

“I know.”

“Do you want a towel?” her father said, to Ellen, not to Julie.

“No,” Ellen said. “A towel becomes clothes. She can stand there.”

Her father got up and took his cup to the sink so he would have his back turned for a few seconds. Julie loved him for that and wanted him to turn around and agree with Ellen at the same time. He rinsed the cup.

“I was going to work in the garage,” he said.

“Then work in the garage,” Ellen said. “Kiss your daughter first if that’s what you do. Don’t invent a new way to be with her because she hasn’t got a shirt on.”

He came back. He kissed Julie’s hair, the same clumsy kiss he had given her when she left for school. He did not look down. He squeezed her shoulder with two fingers and went out through the laundry room. The door to the garage shut.

The kitchen was quieter.

“I have calls,” her mother said. “I can take them in the other room.”

“Take them in the other room,” Ellen said. “Come through when you’re done. Don’t ask Julie what she wants to do with the next hour. There isn’t a next hour for her to build.”

Her mother touched Julie’s cheek with the back of her hand. Her hand was cool from the water.

“I’ll be in the den,” her mother said.

She left. Julie heard her on the phone a minute later, the polite voice she used for the dentist and for Aunt Leigh. Julie stood in the kitchen with Ellen and the speaker and the wetness cooling on her thighs.

“What do I do?” Julie said.

“You come with me,” Ellen said.

They went into the living room. Ellen pointed at the rug again.

“Same place.”

Julie stood on the rug. Without last night’s skirt she felt taller and smaller at once. The front window had the shade half down. A slice of the street showed. She thought of someone walking a dog and looking in and then she stopped

thinking that because it started to become a problem she would have to solve.

Ellen sat on the couch.

“Tell me what you almost did in the bed,” Ellen said.

Julie stared at her.

“I didn’t.”

“I know you didn’t. Tell me what you almost did.”

Julie swallowed. “I almost put my hand down.”

“Because you were uncomfortable.”

“Because I was—” She searched and then used the word she had. “Because I was turned on. I don’t know why. Nothing happened.”

“Something happened,” Ellen said. “We took the closet. We put you to bed. You didn’t have to pick a side to sleep on after I told you. Your body liked it. That isn’t a mystery I’m going to dress up for you.”

Julie looked at the window shade.

“It’s my parents’ house,” she said.

“Yes.”

“They’re going to keep seeing me.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want them to see me like that. Like… that.”

“I know you don’t,” Ellen said. “You also don’t want to stand in front of the refrigerator. Both of those things can be true. We are not going to save you from being seen so you can go back to the refrigerator.”

Julie’s eyes stung. She did not cry. The sting and the heat between her legs were the same temperature. She stood still.

Ellen let the quiet sit. Then she stood up and came close again. She gathered Julie’s hair in one hand and lifted it off her neck, not styling it, just getting it out of her face.

“You keep blowing it out of your mouth,” Ellen said. “That’s enough of that.”

She twisted the hair once and let it fall down Julie’s back. It stayed off her lips. Her neck felt exposed. Ellen’s knuckles had brushed the nape and the brush went straight down Julie’s spine and settled, stupid and exact, between her legs.

Julie made a sound.

Ellen’s mouth almost smiled. It did not become a smile.

“Good,” Ellen said. “Stay on the rug. I’m going to walk through the upstairs and make sure nothing came back out of a drawer. You don’t follow me. You don’t sit. If your mother comes through, you let her see you. If you have to pee, you say it when I come down.”

“How long?” Julie said, and then shook her head once. “Don’t answer that.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

Ellen went up the stairs. Julie stood on the rug. The house made its ordinary noises. The garage. The den phone. A car on the street. Her own breath. She was dripping now, a slow line on the inside of one thigh, and there was nothing to pull on and nothing to do with her hands. She left them hanging.

Her mother came as far as the hall, phone still to her ear, saw Julie on the rug, and held up one finger as if Julie were a person she might need in a minute. Then her mother’s face changed. She remembered. She dropped the finger. She looked at Julie the way she had in the kitchen, all the way down and back up, and she said, into the phone, “I’m going to have to call you back.”

She ended the call.

“She left you here,” her mother said.

“She said stay.”

Her mother nodded. She came into the living room and sat on the edge of the chair Ellen had used last night. She was still in her earrings. She looked tired and certain.

“Leigh wanted to know if we were doing dinner,” her mother said. “I said not this week.”

Julie did not ask what her mother had said about her. She could hear possible sentences and they all required her to pick one to fear.

“Mom,” Julie said. “Is Dad all right?”

“He will be. He agreed. He doesn’t have to enjoy the agreeing.”

Julie shifted her weight. The line on her thigh moved. Her mother’s eyes dropped and came back up.

“Does it hurt?” her mother said.

“No.”

“All right.”

They stayed like that. Julie on the rug. Her mother in the chair. The clock on the shelf made its small sound and Julie did not look at it to count. Looking at it would have been a way to build an hour.

Ellen came down with nothing in her hands.

“Drawers are empty,” Ellen said. “Bathroom cabinet can stay. She didn’t start a project in it. Claire, you can go back to your call if you need to.”

“It can wait,” her mother said.

Ellen stopped in front of Julie and looked at the shine on her thigh. She did not wipe it. She did not hand her a towel.

“Yard,” Ellen said. “Then she can sit. Claire, unlock the back door.”

Her mother got up and unlocked it. The backyard was the backyard. Fence. The dead tomato cages. The strip of grass her father kept alive. Ellen put Julie in front of her and walked her out onto the step.

The air outside was cooler than the kitchen. It found every part of her. Julie’s arms jumped and she forced them down. The fence was high enough. She still felt the shape of the neighbor’s second story off to the left.

“Around the grass,” Ellen said. “The way you would if I asked you to walk. Don’t make a loop out of thinking.”

Julie walked. Her feet got wet from the grass. Her breasts moved. She was very aware of her own backside and of Ellen behind her and of her mother at the open door. She went along the fence and across the back and up the other side. When she reached the step again Ellen pointed and she went around a second time. No one said good girl. No one said anything. The want between her legs got worse with the walking, a soft ridiculous ache, and she kept her mouth shut.

At the step again Ellen said, “In.”

Julie went in. Her mother shut the door and locked it. Julie’s feet left wet marks on the kitchen tile. She looked at them as if they belonged to someone else.

“Sit,” Ellen said.

Julie sat in her chair. The wood met her wet skin. She sucked in a breath. Her mother put a glass of water in front of her. Julie drank. Ellen leaned on the counter.

“That’s breakfast and a walk,” Ellen said. “You didn’t choose either. How is your head.” Julie thought about lying. She was too tired to build a lie.

“Quiet,” she said. “Not gone. Quiet.”

“And the rest of you.”

Julie glanced at her mother and then at the table.

“The rest of me isn’t quiet.”

“I can see that,” Ellen said. “We are not going to fix that. We are going to keep giving you a day that doesn’t ask you questions. Your body can do what it does.”

Her mother reached over and tucked Julie’s hair behind her ear. The same gesture as school mornings. Her fingers shook a little.

“I’m going to make my call,” her mother said. “I’ll be in the den.”

“Go,” Ellen said.

Her mother left. Julie sat naked in the chair with grass water on her feet and her own wetness on the wood and Ellen at the counter drinking coffee that had gone a little cold. From the den her mother’s polite voice started again. From the garage a radio came on, low.

Julie put her hands on the table where she could see them.

“Ellen,” she said.

“Yes.”

“If I sit here, is that all right.”

“Yes,” Ellen said. “That’s all right. Stay in the chair until I move you.”

Julie stayed in the chair. She did not look at the refrigerator. She did not look at the stairs. She looked at her hands and felt herself pulse against the wood, slow and shameless, while the house went on around her.

Chapter 3

Julie was still in the chair when Ellen set the cup down.

“Up,” Ellen said. “We’re going upstairs.”

Julie stood. The chair let her go with a small wet sound she hoped no one heard. Ellen heard it. She did not look down this time. She walked, and Julie followed her through the living room and up the stairs with her hands hanging and the grass-water long gone from her feet.

Her room had not changed since the bags left. Bare hangers. Bare dresser. The bed with the sheet shoved down. The laptop shut on the desk. On the wall above the desk were the things that had made it her room: the print of the lake, the photograph from her cousin’s wedding, the calendar she had not marked since April, the strip of pictures from a booth with a girl she did not talk to anymore. A thumbtack held a ribbon from something she could not have named if Ellen had asked.

Ellen pointed at the rug at the foot of the bed.

“Stand there. Don’t help. Helping turns into choosing which nail to pull.”

Julie stood on the rug. Ellen took the lake print down first. The wall behind it was a slightly cleaner square. She set the print on the bed. She took the wedding photograph down. Julie’s own face went past her, smiling, a dress, a person who could stand in a group and look finished.

Her mother came up the stairs with a flat box from the hall closet.

“I thought you might want this,” her mother said.

“That’s fine,” Ellen said. “Put the wall in the box. Leave the nails. I don’t care about the nails.”

Her mother stood on the other side of the bed and took the calendar off its hook. The pages flopped. April. May. Blank.

“She was going to start over in June,” her mother said.

“She didn’t,” Ellen said.

Julie watched her mother’s hands. The booth pictures came down in one strip. The ribbon. A small framed thing from middle school that Julie had stopped seeing years ago and now saw too clearly, her hair longer, her shirt her own.

“That’s baby stuff,” Julie said.

“It’s on the wall,” Ellen said. “It comes down.”

Her mother laid it in the box. She was careful with the glass. She was not careful with the idea of it. When the walls were only nails and cleaner squares, the room

looked like a place someone had moved out of and forgotten to finish.

Julie shifted her weight.

“Be still,” Ellen said.

She opened the desk drawers. Loose pens. A hair clip they had missed. A folded note so old the fold was dirty. Ellen put the clip and the note in the box without reading the note. She left the pens. She left the laptop.

“David can box the school papers later,” Ellen said. “Not her.”

Her mother looked at Julie on the rug, naked in the emptied room, and then at the bed.

“The laptop,” her mother said.

“Tonight we can shut it down from here,” Ellen said. “If she sits in that chair and types, she will try to make a day out of it. Julie.”

“Yes.”

“Turn around.”

Julie turned and faced the window. The backyard was below, the fence, the tomato cages. She heard the box flap close. She heard her mother take it into the hall. Without the pictures the glass of the window was just glass. She could see her own reflection if she wanted, faint, breasts, the dark of her hair. She did not stare. She looked through.

Ellen came up behind her and set both hands on Julie’s shoulders. Warm. Firm. She moved Julie an inch to the left.

“That’s your mark in this room,” Ellen said. “When I send you up here, you stand here. You don’t sit on the bed unless I say the bed. You don’t open the desk.”

Julie nodded. Ellen’s hands did not leave right away. The weight of them went down Julie’s chest and settled, again, between her legs. She kept her eyes on the fence.

“You understood me,” Ellen said.

“Yes.”

Ellen took her hands away.

“Downstairs.”

They went down. Her mother was in the kitchen with the box on the far counter, out of the way. Her father came in from the garage with dust on his shirt and stopped when he saw Julie.

“We’re doing lunch,” her mother said to him. “Wash your hands.”

He washed his hands. He looked at Julie once, properly, as if Ellen’s instruction from the morning still applied, and then he got out of the center of the room.

Her mother opened the refrigerator. Julie did not look inside it. She heard containers. She heard the oven door from earlier, or the microwave. She stood because no one had told her to sit.

Ellen pointed at the tile near the sink, a square with a faint old stain from some spill years ago.

“There.”

Julie stood on the stain. Her father sat. Her mother moved around her as if Julie were a chair that had always been there. A plate went down at Julie’s empty place. Another at her father’s. A smaller one at her mother’s. Ellen did not take a plate.

“Sit,” Ellen said.

Julie sat. The plate in front of her was already made. Rice. The rest of the chicken from last night, cut smaller. Green beans. A fork and a spoon. She reached for the fork.

Ellen’s hand came down on the table, not on her.

“No,” Ellen said. “Claire.”

Her mother stopped with her own chair half pulled out.

“Feed her,” Ellen said. “She can eat what you put in her mouth. She doesn’t start it.”

Her father looked up.

“She’s not a—”

“I know what she isn’t,” Ellen said. “Do it anyway. We need to see it here, in this kitchen, before I take her out of this kitchen.”

The last part landed and no one picked it up yet. Her mother sat down close, closer than lunch, and took Julie’s fork. She looked at Julie’s face.

“Open,” her mother said.

Julie opened her mouth. It felt more naked than the walk in the yard. Her mother put rice and chicken on the fork and brought it up. Julie took it. She chewed. She swallowed. Her mother watched her throat.

“Again,” Ellen said.

Her mother fed her the next bite. Julie’s hands were on her own thighs, fingers tight, nowhere to put them that was decent. The third bite she opened for before the fork was ready. She heard herself do it. Heat flooded her face and, lower, a

pulse so strong she had to press her legs together. It did not help. It made the next swallow careful.

Her father set his own fork down.

“Claire,” he said.

“I know,” her mother said. She did not stop. She fed Julie a green bean. Julie’s mouth took it. A little juice ran to the corner of her lip and her mother wiped it with the side of her thumb, the same as when Julie had been small, and the thumb was worse than the fork. Julie made a noise into the next bite.

Ellen stood where she could see Julie’s lap.

“Claire,” Ellen said. “Look.”

Her mother looked. Julie’s thighs were pressed tight and still there was a shine between them, new, unmistakable. Her mother did not flinch. Her mouth pressed together and then eased.

“That’s from this,” her mother said.

“That’s from this,” Ellen said. “Not from a speech. Keep going.”

Her mother fed her until the plate was more than half gone. Julie stopped reaching. She sat with her mouth ready and her hands useless and her body open on the chair in a way she could not talk around. When she tried to say she could do the rest, Ellen shook her head once, and her mother put the next bite in.

Her father ate a little and then sat with his palm over his eyes.

“She’s leaving,” he said, not a question.

“She can’t stay in this house and keep being your daughter in a chair,” Ellen said. “You’ll dress her if she shakes. You’ll hand her a towel. You’ll ask her what she wants for dinner because that’s how you love her. I need her in a place that does not know how to love her that way.”

Julie turned her head.

“When,” she said.

“Soon,” Ellen said. “Not this minute. Finish what’s in your mother’s hand.”

Julie finished it. Her mother set the fork down and left the last of the rice. She had a little of the juice on her thumb still. She reached as if to wipe Julie’s mouth again and then only touched Julie’s chin, once.

“I did ask for this,” her mother said. She said it to Ellen, and to her husband, and not quite to Julie. “If she stays she’ll end up in that room with a sweater I gave her. I know myself.”

“So do I,” Ellen said. “David.”

He took his hand down.

“I don’t like it,” he said. “I think you’re right. I can hold both.”

“That’s enough,” Ellen said. “You don’t have to like it.”

Julie sat with the taste of the chicken in her mouth and her mother’s thumbprint fading on her chin. The quiet in her head from the morning was still there. Under it her body was not quiet at all. She was dripping on the chair again. She could smell herself, faint, salt, embarrassing. No one handed her a napkin for that.

Ellen pointed at the stain on the tile.

“Back there.”

Julie stood. The air on the wet skin between her legs made her bite the inside of her cheek. She stood on the stain. Her mother got up and ran water over the fork. Her father looked at Julie standing where a spill had been and then he got up too.

“I need air,” he said.

“Garage is air,” Ellen said.

He went. The laundry door shut.

Her mother stayed at the sink with her hands in the water longer than the fork needed.

“Will I see the place,” her mother said.

“You’ll see her leave,” Ellen said. “You’ll see her after, when I say. Not as a tour.”

Her mother nodded at the window.

“She’ll be naked there too.”

“Yes.”

“Good,” her mother said, and then she closed her eyes once, as if the word had come out ahead of her, and she left it there.

Julie stood on the tile. She had walked those stairs her whole life. She had eaten at that table her whole life. The pictures from her wall were in a box on the counter behind the fruit bowl. She could have asked what would happen to the box. She did not ask. Asking would have been a small closet.

Ellen came over and put two fingers under Julie’s chin, the same as last night, and tipped her face up.

“You did not pick the wall,” Ellen said. “You did not pick the plate. You did not pick the house you stay in. How is your head.”

“Quiet,” Julie said.

“And this,” Ellen said.

She did not touch lower. She only let Julie understand what she meant. Julie’s blush went down her throat.

“Worse,” Julie said. “Better. I don’t have the right word.”

“You don’t need the right word,” Ellen said. “Claire. Dry your hands. Come see her on the mark so you know what you’re handing me.”

Her mother dried her hands and came. She stood with Ellen and looked at Julie on the stained square, empty-handed, mouth still a little open from the last bite, wet between her legs, the cleaner squares of her bedroom waiting upstairs.

Her mother said, “All right.”

Ellen let Julie’s chin go.

“Stay,” Ellen said.

Julie stayed. Her mother leaned in and kissed her temple, earrings and sweater and coffee, and then she took the box of pictures and carried it out of the kitchen so Julie would not have to look at her own face while she stood there and waited to be moved.

Chapter 4

Julie was still on the stained square when Ellen looked at the clock over the stove and then at her.

“Now,” Ellen said.

Her mother was in the doorway with her sweater on. She had been in and out of the kitchen since the box left. Her father came from the garage when Ellen called his name. He had washed the dust off his hands. He had not changed his shirt.

Julie did not ask now what. She knew. The knowing sat in her throat and between her legs at the same time.

“Through the garage,” Ellen said. “The car’s in there. She doesn’t need the front walk.”

Her father nodded and went first to open the inner door. Her mother came to Julie and stopped as if she might fix Julie’s hair and then only looked at her.

“I’m going to come as far as the car,” her mother said.

“Yes,” Ellen said.

Julie walked. The laundry room was narrow. The dryer tap touched her hip. The garage was cooler. Concrete under her feet. Her father’s radio was off. The car sat facing the closed street door, passenger side toward her. It was their car. She had ridden in it her whole life. The back seat still had the crease where she used to sit with her backpack.

Ellen opened the front passenger door.

“In.”

Julie got in. The seat was fabric. It clung at her seat and at the backs of her thighs. She reached for the belt because that was what you did in a car. Ellen took the buckle out of her hand and drew the strap across Julie’s chest herself. The belt lay between her breasts and across her belly. Ellen clicked it and then put his — her — hand on Julie’s knees and set them together, and then a little to the side, how she wanted them.

“Keep them there,” Ellen said.

Julie kept them there. She was wet against the fabric already. She looked at the glove box so she would not look at her father standing by the workbench.

Her mother leaned into the open door. She put her hand on Julie’s bare shoulder. Her rings were cold.

“I love you,” her mother said. “You’re still my daughter. Do you hear me?”

“Yes,” Julie said.

“You’re going to be all right. I believe that more than you do.”

Julie turned her face into her mother’s wrist for a second. She smelled the same lotion as always. Her mother kissed her hair.

“Daughter,” her mother said, very quietly, as if she knew she would not get to use the word in this doorway again.

Ellen waited until her mother stepped back. She shut Julie’s door. The sound was ordinary and final. Julie sat naked in the passenger seat with the belt on and her knees where Ellen had put them. Her father had both palms on the workbench and his head down. He lifted it and raised two fingers, the half wave he gave her when she left for school. She could not wave without moving her hands from her thighs. She nodded.

Her mother stood with her arms folded tight across the sweater. Ellen went around and got in the driver’s side. She had the keys. It was their car and she drove it as if that were already settled.

“The door,” Ellen said.

Her father hit the garage button. Daylight came in at the floor and then the street. Ellen backed out. Julie saw the basketball hoop that did not get used. She saw the crack in the driveway. She saw her mother and father in the garage like people who had just sold something and were not sure they should watch it go.

Ellen turned onto the street. Julie’s block went by at the speed blocks always went by. The Hunters’ fence. The tree that dropped mess in August. The stop sign where she had waited for the bus. She was naked behind the glass. A man with a dog was on the other sidewalk and did not look up. Julie still held her breath until they were past him.

She did not reach for the radio. Her hand started to and she put it back on her thigh. Ellen did not turn the radio on.

“You can look,” Ellen said. “You don’t have to talk.”

Julie looked. Her street ended. The bigger street began. A strip of stores she knew. The place she had bought the blue dress. She saw the window and felt her face heat, as if the dress might still be in there and might still be a problem. It was in a bag she would not see again.

The belt rubbed when she breathed. Her nipples were tight from the car’s air. Between her legs she was a mess against the seat and she could not close her thighs without breaking the line Ellen had set. She left them. Every turn of the car moved her a little on the fabric.

“Is it far,” Julie said.

“No.”

That was all. Julie watched a light change. Ellen drove like a person who already knew the lights. Her hands on the wheel were easy. Julie looked at those hands and thought of them on her knees and on her chin and on her hair, and the thought made her pulse so hard she had to open her mouth for air.

Ellen glanced once.

“I see you,” Ellen said. “Stay in the seat.”

Julie stayed in the seat. They left the stores behind. The houses got farther apart. Then a stretch with a wall and trees. Ellen slowed and turned in at a gate that was already opening. No sign Julie could read from the angle of her seat. A drive. A house set back, two stories, pale, the windows even, the porch empty. A fence that did not look like her father’s fence. No tomato cages.

Ellen stopped the car close to a side door, not the front.

She turned the engine off. The quiet filled Julie’s ears. Through the windshield she could see a sliver of a yard with a path in the grass, straight, nothing at the end of it from here.

Ellen did not tell her what the house was called.

“Your mother isn’t coming in,” Ellen said. “Your father isn’t coming in. You understood that at the table.”

“Yes.”

“When I open the door you get out and you stand where I put you. You don’t cover yourself. There isn’t a street here that needs it.”

Julie nodded. Her hands had gone tight on her thighs. Ellen reached over and loosened the left one with two fingers, the way she had loosened Julie’s arms.

“Breathe,” Ellen said.

Julie breathed. Ellen got out and came around. She opened Julie’s door. The belt came off under Ellen’s hand, not Julie’s. Cooler air hit her chest and her belly.

“Out.”

Julie turned and set her feet on the ground. The drive was smooth and sun-warm. She stood. The house was bigger than it had looked from the seat. Someone had opened the side door from inside. A woman in dark pants and a gray shirt stood in the doorway with her hair tied back. She looked at Julie the way Ellen looked at Julie. She did not say hello. She did not say happy birthday. She looked at Julie’s knees and at the wet mark on the car seat and then at Ellen.

“She’s the one,” the woman said.

“She’s the one,” Ellen said. “Give me a minute.”

The woman went back inside and left the door open.

Ellen put Julie two steps off the car, facing the house, hands down.

“That’s the door you use,” Ellen said. “Not the front. You wait if I tell you to wait. You walk if I tell you to walk.”

Julie looked at the open door. She could see a floor and a slice of wall. She could not see a bed. She could not see her own house. The want in her was worse than it had been on the rug at home, worse than the fork. No one here had ever handed her a sweater. That fact went through her like a hand.

She heard the car door shut. She did not turn. Ellen’s palm came to the small of her back, warm, and stayed there.

“Now,” Ellen said.

Julie walked toward the side door with Ellen’s hand on her, naked in the daylight of a yard that was not hers, the seat of her father’s car drying behind her, and her mother’s word still on her skin from the garage.

Chapter 5

Ellen’s hand stayed on Julie’s back until they were inside.

The side door shut. The latch was a simple one. The floor was smooth and cool. The air smelled like soap and something clean and empty, not like her mother’s kitchen. The woman in the gray shirt stood out of the way and looked at Julie again, not at her face first.

“Ruth,” Ellen said.

“I have the small room,” Ruth said. “It’s ready.”

Julie kept her knees the way they had been in the car. The wet on her thighs had cooled in the drive and gone warm again under Ellen’s hand. She could feel it when she stood. Ruth could see it. Ruth did not point. She turned and walked, and Ellen moved Julie after her.

They did not go through a foyer with family pictures. A short hall. A closed door on the left. A window that showed the straight path in the grass and nothing else. Ruth opened the last door.

The room was smaller than Julie’s bedroom had been. White walls. A high window with frosted glass. No desk. No hangers. No bed. In the far wall a recess stood open, as deep as a closet but narrower, padded at the back with a dull skin that looked like the inside of a case. At about the height of Julie’s neck there were two dark pads. Lower, a band waited open, like a belt that belonged to the wall. The floor in front of it sloped, just enough, toward a drain.

Julie stopped.

“There’s no bed,” she said.

“I know,” Ellen said. “Come here.”

Julie came. Ellen turned her so her back faced the recess. Ruth stayed by the door.

“This is where you sleep,” Ellen said. “On your feet. The pads sit here.”

She lifted Julie’s hair and put two fingers on the nape of Julie’s neck, exactly where a collar would have lain if anyone had given her one. Julie’s skin jumped. The heat between her legs jumped with it.

“And this holds you so you don’t fold up when you drop off,” Ellen said.

Her other hand went around Julie’s waist, testing the place the band would close. Palm on bare skin. Thumb along the hollow beside Julie’s hip. Julie’s breath went out of her.

Ruth said, “Does she need the wash first.”

“Yes,” Ellen said. “She’s been in a car.”

There was a nozzle on the wall near the drain and a panel with two unmarked controls. Ruth started the water. It ran warm into the slope of the floor. Ellen walked Julie onto the wet tile.

“Feet apart,” Ellen said.

Julie opened her feet. She felt ridiculous and obvious. Water ran over her toes. Ellen took the nozzle down and started at Julie’s shoulders, then her back, then down her arms, as if Julie were something you rinsed before you put it away. The water was kind. Ellen’s hand followed it, not quite a caress and not quite not. When the spray crossed Julie’s breasts Julie made a sound and Ellen kept the water there a second longer than she needed to, watching Julie’s nipples draw up tighter.

“Easy,” Ellen said. “I’m washing you.”

She turned Julie a little and brought the water down her stomach. Julie looked at the frosted window and not at Ruth. The spray reached the hair between her legs and Julie’s hips tipped forward before she could stop them. Ellen stopped the water on that spot and held it. Warm. Direct. Julie’s mouth opened.

“Ellen.”

“I know.”

Ellen handed the nozzle to Ruth and put her own hand where the water had been. She did not ask. She cupped Julie and felt how wet she already was, separate from the wash, thicker, slicker. Julie’s knees broke and straightened. Ruth said nothing. The water ran around their feet toward the drain.

Ellen’s fingers found the place that had been aching since the garage and rubbed once, slow, as if she were only checking. Julie jerked. Ellen’s other arm locked around her waist.

“Stay up,” Ellen said. “You don’t go down on this floor. That’s not how we do it.”

Julie stayed up. Ellen rubbed again, two fingers either side of the small tight peak and then over it, ordinary pressure, no show. Julie’s head dropped onto Ellen’s shoulder. She could hear herself breathing. She could hear the water. She could hear Ruth shift her weight by the door.

“She’s close already,” Ruth said.

“She’s been close since her mother fed her,” Ellen said. “Hold her hair.”

Ruth came. She gathered Julie’s hair the way Ellen had in the living room at home, off the neck, out of the mouth, and held it. Her hands were different from Ellen’s, cooler. Julie was between them, naked, dripping wash water and her own

wetness, and the quiet in her head opened all the way down.

Ellen slid one finger inside her, then a second, easy because Julie was that ready, and kept her thumb on the outside. Julie made a broken sound and tried to close her thighs. Ellen's hip blocked her.

"Don't," Ellen said. "Let it happen. You don't have to pick the minute."

That was what did it. Not a command to perform. The opposite. Julie did not have to decide whether she was allowed, or whether her mother would hear, or whether this was the kind of thing you did on the day you left your house. Ellen's fingers moved in a small steady way. Ruth's hands stayed in her hair. Julie came standing up, shaking hard, mouth open against Ellen's shirt, the pulse slapping through her in waves that made her knees useless. Ellen held her at the waist and kept her fingers where they were until Julie's shaking turned into little after-jolts and then into breath.

Julie's eyes were wet. She was not crying about home. She did not have a word. The pleasure had gone through her so cleanly it left her stupid.

Ellen eased her hand away. She rinsed her fingers under the nozzle Ruth still held and then rinsed Julie between the legs, gentle, as if finishing the wash. Julie twitched and whimpered and stood.

"That's the first one here," Ellen said. "You don't owe it a story."

Ruth let her hair down. The air felt cold on Julie's wet neck.

They shut the water off. Ruth took a cloth from a hook and dried Julie's shoulders, her back, her breasts, her belly, down each leg. When the cloth went between Julie's thighs Julie's hips tried to follow it. Ruth glanced at Ellen.

"Not again," Ellen said. "She'll drop. Dock her."

They walked her to the recess. The padded back was slightly warm, or only less cold than the tile. Ellen lifted Julie's hair up and set the nape of her neck against the two pads. There was a faint seat, a contact, not a sting. Something in the wall took. Julie felt it as a soft hold, a kiss of pressure at the top of her spine.

"All right?" Ellen said.

"Yes," Julie said. Her voice was wrecked and small.

Ellen closed the band around her waist. It was padded too. It did not pinch. It held her as if the wall had put an arm there. Julie's heels were on the floor. She could have locked her knees. She did not need to. The recess took the decision of how to stand.

Ruth touched the panel beside the opening. The front of the recess did not close like a door. It stayed open. Julie could see the small room, the drain, the two

women.

“She sleeps like this,” Ruth said, not quite to Julie.

“She sleeps like this,” Ellen said. “If she slumps the band holds her. If she wakes she stays until we take her out. We don’t give her a bed to lie in and build a night.”

Julie tested the band with a breath. It allowed the breath. She was still slick between her legs. The afterglow sat there, heavy, and underneath it the ache was already trying to start again because she could not turn onto her side or pull a sheet up or choose a position. She was only this.

Ellen put her palm on Julie’s sternum, flat, checking heat, checking breath.

“How is your head.”

“Quiet,” Julie said. It was true. There was no refrigerator in it. There was no closet. There was the pad at her neck and the place Ellen had touched her and the fact that she would not have to figure out how to lie down.

Ellen’s mouth almost softened.

“Good. You don’t call out unless something hurts that isn’t this. Hurting from standing is not a reason. You’ll drop off anyway.”

Ruth dimmed the overhead light. The frosted window still held a little day. Ellen took her hand off Julie’s chest.

Julie heard her own pulse in the pads. She heard the two women at the door.

“I’ll stay in the house tonight,” Ellen said.

“I figured,” Ruth said. “She’s new.”

They did not say good night to her the way her mother had. They did not tuck anything. Ellen looked at her one more time, from the feet up, and then they went out. The door stayed open a few inches, same as her bedroom door at home, and the hall light cut a thin line across the floor.

Julie stood in the wall.

Her arms hung. Her mouth was still sensitive. Between her legs she was swollen and used and wet, and every small throb reminded her of Ellen’s thumb. She could not put a hand down; the band and the standing did not make it simple, and no one had told her she could. She left her hands where they were.

From somewhere in the house a voice — Ruth’s — said something about the side door. Ellen answered. Ordinary work voices. Julie shut her eyes. The pads held her neck. The band held her waist. Sleep came in pieces, on her feet, the way they had said it would, and each time she rose toward waking she felt herself still open, still slick, still not required to pick the next thing, and the pleasure of that

went through her in a slow dirty wave that did not quite turn into another climax and did not die either.

She stood there in it, docked, and let the house keep her up.

Chapter 6

Julie was still in the alcove when the band loosened.

Hands took her at the waist. Ellen. The small room was brighter. Ruth stood in the doorway. Two other women were with her, dressed for a house that was theirs: one in a white shirt with the sleeves pushed up, one in a dark knit, watches, clean shoes. They looked at Julie the way people look at a package they have already paid for and not yet tried.

“Out,” Ellen said.

They lifted her forward. Her feet took her weight. She was slick between her legs from the standing sleep. The air found her nipples and they pulled tight.

Ellen did not hide her.

“Julie,” Ellen said. “This is their house. Hannah Baxter. Sophie Baxter. They asked for a key. You’re the key.”

Hannah was the white shirt. She was young, thirty or a little under, hair in a clip. Sophie had the knit and a shorter cut and a mouth that was trying not to show too much.

“Hi,” Hannah said, and then made a small face at herself, as if hi were the wrong word for a naked girl coming out of their wall.

Sophie said, “She’s smaller than I pictured.”

“She’s the size you asked for,” Ellen said. “Bathroom first. Then we program her to your doors. You wanted the whole body, not a card. That’s what you’ll learn to move.”

They let Julie pee. She came back into the hall with her hands hanging. The Baxters were still there. They looked at her breasts and at the wet shine on her inner thigh and at the faint red from the pads on her neck. Sophie’s ears went pink. Hannah’s did not.

“We’ve been using the old plates,” Hannah said. “The ones you put in last month. They don’t like our hands every time. The front stuck twice.”

“That’s why you don’t use your hands,” Ellen said. “You use her. Julie. Come here.”

Ellen took Julie by the hips and walked her to the first closed door, the one on the left. The dark plate was at mouth height. Ellen did not only bend Julie’s neck to it. She put Julie’s whole front to the door, breasts and belly and the bone of her hips, and adjusted her an inch at a time as if she were seating a tool in a catch.

“Hands on her,” Ellen said. “Both of you. You have to be willing to put her where the plate can read her. If you’re shy she won’t seat and you’ll stand in your own

hall with an armful of girl and no open door.”

Hannah’s hands settled on Julie’s waist. Sophie, after a second, took her shoulders. They were careful in the wrong way at first, too light. Ellen put Hannah’s palms lower, on the bare hips, and pressed until Julie’s skin flattened to the paint.

“Like that,” Ellen said. “She’s the key. You turn a key. You don’t hover over it.”

Julie’s cheek was against the door. Her mouth was near the plate. She could smell varnish and Sophie’s soap. She was dripping on her own thigh.

Ellen lifted Julie’s hair and seated the nape on the plate, then pushed Julie’s hips in harder with Hannah’s hands under hers.

“Now you say it,” Ellen said to Hannah. “The house is listening through her, not through you.”

Hannah’s voice was a little rough.

“Lock.”

The door clicked. Sophie tried the handle from the side without letting Julie go. It did not turn. Julie felt the click in her nipples and in the swollen place between her legs as if the door had touched her there.

“Open,” Ellen said.

“Open,” Hannah said, into Julie’s hair.

The click went the other way. The door eased. A room: chair, window, a jacket on the chair that belonged to one of them.

Sophie let out a breath.

“That’s—” Sophie stopped. “That’s her.”

“That’s her,” Ellen said. “Shut it. Do it again. You move her body off and back on. That’s the part you paid for. You don’t leave her stuck to one door like a hook.”

They pulled Julie off. The air on the flattened front of her was a shock. A smear of wet showed on the paint at mid-thigh height. Hannah saw it and did not comment. They steered Julie off a step, then in again. This time Sophie’s hands were surer. She put Julie’s chest to the door and used her own body behind Julie’s to seat the hips. Julie made a sound. Sophie’s breath caught.

Ellen said, “Lock.”

Sophie said it this time, mouth close to Julie’s neck.

The door locked. They opened it. They locked it. Each time they picked Julie up a little to line the pads with the plate, her feet left the floor for a second and she hung in their hands, a key being fitted. The third time her head dropped back on

Sophie’s shoulder and she was openly wet against Sophie’s clothes.

“She’s shaking,” Sophie said.

“She’s supposed to,” Ellen said. “Ruth. Front.”

They walked her. Hannah had one arm around Julie’s waist now, not romantic, practical, a person carrying a key to the next lock. Julie’s breast sat on the inside of Hannah’s forearm. Hannah adjusted her grip and her knuckles passed under Julie’s nipple. Both of them felt it. Hannah kept walking.

The front entry. Glass. The drive beyond. A heavier plate.

“This one stays locked unless you take her to it,” Ellen said. “You wanted that. You said you didn’t want a house that opened for anyone with fingers.”

“We said that,” Hannah said.

They put Julie to the front door the way they had learned in the hall: whole front, hips in, neck seated, Sophie behind, Hannah at the waist. Ellen stood to the side and watched their hands more than the plate.

“Higher,” Ellen said. “No. Her hip. Use her hip. The reader sits in her, not only in the pad. You have to offer the body.”

Hannah shifted Julie’s hip and pressed it in until Julie’s pubic bone met the door. Julie gasped. The sound was filthy in the quiet entry. Sophie whispered something that was only a breath.

“Lock,” Ellen said.

Hannah said lock. The heavy click ran through Julie’s hips. She clenched and leaked and her knees tried to go. The two women held her up because a dropped key did not help them.

“Open.”

They did not open it to the drive. The mechanism answered; Ruth checked a light on the side of the plate and nodded.

“Front’s hers,” Ruth said.

Sophie laughed once, shaky.

“We asked for this,” Sophie said. “I sat in a meeting and said we wanted a biometric key, a girl, so we wouldn’t keep badging in like the office. I did not—” She looked at Julie’s wet thigh. “I didn’t picture her doing that.”

“You pictured a clean version,” Ellen said. “This is the version that works. Temperature next. You asked for rooms that wouldn’t change unless the key was in them.”

They took her into the room with the chair. Hannah shut the door with her foot. Ellen stood Julie in the center and put the Baxters' hands on her again, Sophie at the shoulders, Hannah at the hips.

"Cold," Ellen said. "Hannah says it. She says it to the girl, not to the ceiling."

Hannah swallowed.

"Cold."

The air dropped. Julie shivered hard in their hands. Her nipples pulled. Gooseflesh ran over her. Sophie stared and then looked away and then stared again because there was nowhere decent to look.

"Warm," Ellen said.

"Warm," Hannah said.

The thaw made Julie moan. She was ashamed of the moan and too far gone to stop it.

"Lights," Ellen said.

They still had her. Sophie said lights this time, testing her own voice on Julie's neck. The overhead died. Julie's hips kicked. Sophie said lights again. The overhead came back. Julie was crying a little, not from fear, from being exactly this used.

Hannah's voice was low.

"Is she all right."

"She's wet and standing," Ellen said. "That's all right. One more door. Your bedroom. You wanted that one off anyone but you two and the key."

The bedroom was upstairs. They walked her up. Julie's legs were unreliable. Hannah took more of her weight. The bedroom was ordinary and expensive: a wide bed, two dressers, a window with the shade half drawn. The plate was by the door at the same height.

They did not let her stand politely in the threshold. Ellen had them lift her, actually lift her, and set her against the plate so her feet dangled and her whole weight offered her neck and her chest and her belly to the door.

"This is what you do at night when your hands are full," Ellen said. "You don't set her down to find a badge. You carry her to the plate and you turn her."

Sophie said, almost into Julie's shoulder, "Lock."

Click.

"Open."

Click.

They did it until Hannah could seat her without Ellen’s hands on top of hers. Julie hung between them and came without anyone touching her between the legs, a sudden helpless clench against Hannah’s hip and the door together, shaking, wet through, mouth open on the paint. Sophie said her name — “Hannah” — as if she needed a witness. Hannah held Julie through it and kept her on the plate until the lock had finished its click, because that was the job.

Ellen waited.

“Good,” Ellen said. “The house has her. You have her. When you are not opening something, she does not wander. She goes back to the alcove. She is not a guest. She is not a third person in your bed unless you decide to take the key to bed, and we can talk about that later. Today she is storage when she is not a turn.”

Ruth had followed as far as the hall.

“Spare keys,” Ruth said, mild, to the Baxters. “If you want one. Same size. If this one’s in the wall or in the wash, you use the spare on the plates. They don’t both need to be out.”

Sophie looked at Julie’s face, flushed, dazed, cheek still printed faintly from the door.

“There’s another girl like her.”

“There can be,” Ellen said. “Same measurements. The door doesn’t care which key if the body seats. You asked for access, not for a particular soul.”

Hannah’s hands were still on Julie’s wet hips.

“Not today,” Hannah said. “Today I want to know this one.”

“Then put her away,” Ellen said. “You should do that part too.”

They carried her down the stairs. Julie’s head knocked softly on Hannah’s collarbone. She could feel both women’s breathing. The small room. The alcove. Hannah hesitated, and Ellen put Hannah’s hands on the band and on Julie’s waist and made her stand Julie into the pads. The nape kissed the contacts. Sophie closed the band. It was clumsy the first time. Ellen made them open it and do it again until the close was clean.

Julie stood in their wall, used, dripping, the clicks still in her hips.

Hannah stood there looking at her.

“She’s in our house,” Hannah said.

“She’s in your wall,” Ellen said. “Go to work if that’s where you go. She’ll be here when you need the front door. If she slumps, the band holds her. Don’t take her out to be kind. Take her out to open something, or to wash her, or to feed her.

Kindness is the structure.”

Sophie reached out as if to touch Julie’s mouth and then only touched the edge of the alcove.

“Okay,” Sophie said.

They left the door a few inches open. Julie heard them in the hall, low, a couple in their own house, Hannah saying something about the meeting at two and Sophie answering that she would drive. Ordinary words. Then Ellen’s voice, work.

Julie stood in the alcove with her own smell on her thighs and the print of a bedroom door on her skin. She was their key. If another girl came, she would be a spare key. The quiet in Julie’s head accepted that without building a question.

She stayed where they had seated her, wet, locked to nothing now except the wall, and waited to be turned.

Chapter 7

Julie heard them in the hall before the band opened.

Hannah’s hands took her waist. Sophie lifted her hair off the pads. They set her on her feet and looked at her.

“Upstairs,” Hannah said.

They walked her through the hall. Sophie put her whole front to the left door and said lock against her neck. The click ran through Julie’s breasts. Hannah seated her on the front plate, hip in, and locked that too. They took her up the stairs. At their bedroom door they lifted her off the floor and Sophie said open, and the door gave.

The bed was unmade. They put her on the edge of it. Sophie pushed her knees apart and made a sound at how wet she was and put her mouth there.

Julie fell back on the quilt. Sophie licked her in a slow hard line and held her hips down. Hannah pulled her shirt off and got on the bed and put her mouth on Julie’s breast, then on the other, then on Julie’s mouth. Julie kissed her because the mouth was there. She tasted the drive home.

Sophie slid two fingers into her and kept her tongue on the small tight place. The ache bunched. Julie’s heels found the quilt. Her breath went ragged on Hannah’s lips.

Hannah lifted her head.

“Not yet.”

Sophie eased off by an inch. Julie made a broken sound and tried to follow. Sophie’s hands pinned her hips and her mouth came back, slower, meaner in how little it gave. Julie climbed again. She was shaking. She was right there.

Sophie stopped. She kept her fingers inside and took her tongue away. Julie clenched around the fingers and did not go over.

“Hannah,” Sophie said, wrecked.

Hannah looked at Julie’s face, at the wet shine on Sophie’s mouth, at Julie’s stomach jumping.

“This one obviously works,” Hannah said. “Let’s test the spare key.”

They pulled Julie up. She stood on unreliable feet, open, dripping on their floor. They walked her down the stairs like that and into the room across the hall.

Another small room. Another recess. A girl standing in the wall asleep on her feet.

Same height. Same small breasts. Hips that fit the same way in a pair of hands. Darker hair, shorter. Mouth a little open. Slick at the tops of her thighs.

Hannah opened the band. The other girl came forward with a low sound. They stood the two of them side by side on the tile. Hannah put a hand on each waist. Sophie did the same, lower, thumbs on both hipbones, as if she were checking a fit.

Sophie looked from one body to the other.

“They’re almost the same,” Sophie said.

Julie could feel the other girl’s skin where their arms touched. The other girl did not pull away. She stood where she was put. Julie’s pulse was still between her legs, useless.

“Up,” Hannah said.

They took both of them. The stairs. The bedroom. Hannah lifted the dark-haired girl and seated her on the plate, whole front, hip in, nape down, the way she had seated Julie.

“Lock,” Hannah said.

The door clicked on the second body.

“Open.”

The click went the other way. Hannah looked at Sophie.

“See.”

They put the other girl on the bed, on the damp oval Julie had left. Her knees fell open. Sophie glanced at Julie. Hannah took Julie’s wrist and kept her at the foot of the mattress, close enough that Julie could see everything.

Sophie bent and put her mouth on the spare key.

She used the same slow hard line. The same two fingers. The other girl’s stomach jumped. Julie watched the tongue work the same place it had just left on her. She smelled it. She heard the wet. Hannah’s grip on her wrist was the only thing holding her in the room.

The other girl came in a thin sound, her hand opening and closing in the sheet. Sophie licked her through it. Hannah put her palm on the other girl’s breast and felt the shaking finish.

Julie clenched on nothing. A line ran down the inside of her thigh.

Sophie lifted her head. Her mouth was shining. She looked at Julie and her voice came out small.

“I can do her after.”

Hannah did not let go of Julie’s wrist.

“No,” Hannah said. “Wall.”

Sophie shut her eyes once. She kissed the spare key’s mouth, not Julie’s, and pulled the covers down and moved the dark-haired girl into the middle of the bed.

“Take her,” Sophie said. “If she stays I’ll finish her.”

Hannah walked Julie out. Down the stairs. The first small room. Julie’s alcove. Hannah seated the pads and closed the band. She did not wipe her. Julie stood there swollen and dripping, the almost still packed in her hips.

Hannah’s hand rested on the band for a second.

“She’s going to sleep in our bed,” Hannah said. “You’re going to stand here.”

She went up. The bedroom door shut. The plate clicked, lock, in Julie’s neck.

The bed took weight. Sophie murmured. The other girl made a spent sound and then a sleep sound. Sheets. Two people settling around a third body that had opened their door and come on their quilt and been allowed to lie down.

Julie stood in the alcove with her arms hanging and Sophie’s first minutes still on her skin and no peak anywhere to put them. She listened to a bed that was not hers go still, and the want went on and on in the dark.

Chapter 8

Julie stood in the alcove through the rest of the night.

The want did not die. It thinned and came back. Upstairs the bed shifted. Sophie murmured. The other girl made a sleep sound. Sometime near morning there was a quieter sound than that, a wet catch of breath, and then still again. Julie's hips answered it with nothing.

Feet on the stairs. Hannah first, in a shirt and trousers. Sophie in a sweater. Between them the spare key, naked, her shorter hair flattened on one side from the pillow. They walked past the open door. Hannah's hand sat on the other girl's waist the way it sat on Julie's when they took her to a plate.

They went to the front. Julie heard the body seat. Skin on wood. Hannah said open. The heavy click ran through the plate in Julie's neck as if the house had used her anyway.

A voice she knew came in with the air.

"I'm Claire," her mother said. "Claire Masterson. I was told I could see her."

"Come in," Hannah said.

The door shut. Lock. The click again, in Julie's nape.

They brought her mother through the hall. Julie saw her in slices: the sweater from home, the earrings, the face that had kissed her forehead in the empty bedroom. Her mother did not look into the small room. She followed Hannah toward the room with the chair and the window.

Sophie had gone ahead with the other girl. By the time Julie's mother reached the doorway, the spare key was standing on a bare patch of floor in the light, hands down, feet apart, the way Julie stood when they told her to stand.

Her mother stopped.

She looked at the girl the way she had looked at Julie in the kitchen at home. All the way down and back up. She let out a breath she had been holding since the drive.

"Oh," her mother said. "There you are."

The other girl did not answer. She did not look like someone who had been given a speaking part.

Sophie stayed to one side, arms folded tight over the sweater. Hannah stood with her hands in her pockets.

"She's been here," Hannah said. "She's fine."

Her mother walked closer. Julie could see her mother's back now, and the other girl's face over her mother's shoulder. They were not the same face. From the alcove it was plain. In the bright room her mother lifted a hand and then only touched the other girl's hair, a small flattening gesture.

"You cut it," her mother said.

No one corrected her.

"She looks well," her mother said. She said it to Hannah, and to the girl, and into the room. "She's standing. That's— I kept picturing something else."

Sophie said, "She stands when we put her."

Her mother nodded as if that were the sentence she had come for.

"Does she eat."

"Yes," Hannah said.

"Does she sleep."

Hannah's pause was short.

"She sleeps," Hannah said.

Her mother put her palm to the other girl's cheek. The other girl turned into it a little, or was moved by the palm. Her mother smiled, shaky and sure at the same time.

"Julie," her mother said. "I meant it. In the garage. You're still my daughter. I just needed to see you."

Julie stood in the band and felt her own name land on the wrong mouth. The ache between her legs, unfinished from the night, kicked once, hard, as if the word had been a hand.

Her mother looked at Hannah.

"Is she allowed to talk to me."

Hannah glanced at the girl in the light, then at Sophie.

"She doesn't need to," Hannah said. "You can see what you came to see."

Her mother searched the other girl's face for the freeze, for the old stuck look. She found stillness and took it for peace.

"Good," her mother said. "That's good. I won't make a project out of this. I told David I'd only stay a minute."

She leaned in and kissed the other girl's forehead. The same kiss as the night the clothes left the house. The other girl shut her eyes for it. Her mother did not look away from that closed face long enough to find the open alcove down the hall.

Sophie walked her mother back toward the front. They passed Julie’s door again. Her mother’s sweater crossed the slice of hall. She did not turn her head. She was still inside the kiss she had given.

At the front Hannah seated the spare key on the plate. Julie felt the open. Her mother’s voice said thank you, and that she would not come every week, and that it helped, seeing her. Hannah said they would be in touch if there was a reason. The door shut. Lock. The click in Julie’s neck.

They brought the other girl back past the alcove. Sophie’s hand was in her short hair now, not hiding her. They went up the stairs. The bedroom plate opened. The bed took weight, two dressed women and the naked one they had just shown to Julie’s mother.

Julie stood in the wall.

She could still see the bright patch of floor where the spare had stood. She could still see her mother’s mouth on the wrong brow. Between her legs she was wet from the night and from her own name going to someone else. No one came to get her. No one finished what Sophie had started on the quilt.

Upstairs Sophie laughed once, very softly, and then did not.

Julie stayed in the band with her arms hanging and watched the empty sunlit room down the hall, and waited.

Chapter 9

They had her standing in the room with the chair and the window.

Hannah sat on the edge of the chair. Sophie sat on the sill. Ellen sat where she could reach Julie without getting up. The spare key stood a few feet off, naked, hands down, the short hair still a little flat from their bed.

Hannah spoke first.

“We asked you to come because we’ve been using the spare,” Hannah said. “Not just on the doors. In the bed. Most nights. We thought you were going to tell us to stop.”

Sophie looked at Julie and then at the other girl and then at the floor.

“We started it and then we kept starting it,” Sophie said. “I keep thinking someone is going to say we did it wrong.”

Ellen nodded as if they had told her the time.

“You didn’t do it wrong,” Ellen said.

Hannah waited for the rest. The rest did not come as a scolding.

Ellen reached out and put her hand between Julie’s legs. Julie was already wet. She had been wet since the hall. Ellen’s fingers found the small tight place and stayed there, not in a hurry, a slow stroke that made Julie’s breath go out of her.

“You bought a key for the house,” Ellen said. “This one. She seats. The front takes her. The bedroom takes her. You already know she works. If you take this one to bed every night, you start talking to her in the sheets. You start asking if she’s comfortable. You start leaving the band open because she came and she looks like a girl you should let lie down. Then you have a third person in the house, and the front door gets stupid again. I’ve watched it happen.”

Her finger kept moving. Julie’s knees softened. Ellen’s other hand settled on her hip and held her up.

“The spare is the same size,” Ellen said. “The plates don’t care. You already stood them next to each other. Sophie said they were almost the same, and she was right. So you put the sex on the one you can afford to keep in the quilt. She can sleep between you. She can make that sound you like. In the morning you can still walk a body downstairs and open the door. If this one is standing in the wall, you take the spare to the plate. If the spare is in your sheets, you take this one. That is the point of two.”

Sophie put her knuckles to her mouth.

“So we should keep doing it.”

“Yes,” Ellen said. “You should keep doing it. Use the spare when you want a mouth, or a night, or something in the middle of the bed. Use this one when you want the house to open. Don’t mix it up just because this one shakes when you touch her. Of course she shakes. That doesn’t mean she belongs on the pillow.”

Ellen’s strokes went smaller and meaner. Julie’s mouth opened. She could see the spare standing in the light, the body that had taken her name and her mother’s kiss and their sheets. Ellen was telling them to keep giving that girl the bed.

“She can hear you,” Hannah said.

“I want her to hear me,” Ellen said. “She’s been waiting since Sophie stopped. She thinks the waiting is a question. It isn’t. The spare is for that. This one is for the lock. That’s settled.”

Julie came on the settled part.

It went through her in a hard, helpless rush, hips tipping into Ellen’s hand, a raw sound she could not swallow. The certainty did it: not the finger alone, the finger and the spare standing there and Ellen saying the bed was not hers. She clenched and wet Ellen’s hand and shook so badly Ellen had to hold her up by the hip.

Ellen did not take her hand away until the shaking thinned. Then she wiped her fingers on the inside of Julie’s thigh and let her stand.

Sophie had tears in her eyes and was not sad.

“We thought you’d say we were using the wrong one,” Sophie said.

“You were using the right one for the bed,” Ellen said. “That’s why I didn’t come last week. You didn’t need a correction. You needed to hear that the correction wasn’t coming.”

Hannah looked at Julie’s face, flushed, dazed, wet on her thighs, and at the spare, who had not moved.

“So tonight,” Hannah said.

“Tonight you take the spare upstairs,” Ellen said. “You lock the house with whichever body is nearest the door. You don’t finish this one just because she came in here. That was for the sentence, not for a new habit.”

Sophie stood up. She touched the spare’s wrist, a small claim.

“Come on,” Sophie said.

They took the dark-haired girl with them. Hannah paused in the doorway.

“Do we put her back,” Hannah said.

Ellen looked at Julie, still pulsing, still on her feet only because the hip-hand had taught her.

“Yes,” Ellen said. “Wall.”

Hannah came and walked Julie down the hall to the first small room. She seated the pads and closed the band. Julie’s nape kissed the contacts. She was still twitching from Ellen’s hand. Hannah left.

Upstairs the bedroom plate opened. Julie felt it in her neck. A low sound that was Sophie. A quieter one that was the spare.

Ellen’s steps went the other way, toward the side door.

Julie stood in the alcove with her own climax cooling on her thighs and the replacement already in their bed, and the want did not come back as a question. It sat there like the band, fastened.