Room B

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Chariot, Book 31

Chapter 1

The wearables were smaller than June expected. A pale hook for each ear, almost like a hearing aid. The woman who owned the agency — Ms. Ortiz, gray streak in her hair, navy dress — dropped them into June's palm and then into Ren's.

"You leave them in until you clock out," Ms. Ortiz said. "It tells you the next thing. Summer's busy. We don't have time to hover. You two are lucky we could take both of you."

June was twenty-two. Ren was twenty. They had worn almost-matching slacks and tried not to look like they had practiced in the bathroom mirror. A small insurance office on a street with a bakery and a credit union. Four desks, a glass front, a short hall, a room marked B.

"We're good," June said. "We learn fast."

Ren nodded. She was already smiling too much. She always did when she was nervous.

They sat through twenty minutes of passwords and a binder of claim codes. Then both earpieces chimed at once, a soft tap, not a ringtone.

June's voice in her ear was calm, female, the same kind of voice that had helped her schedule her classes.

"June Adler. Your morning list is twelve renewals. Room B. Take the paper files on the left cart. Ren Adler is your ergonomic partner for this block. She will be in the brace. You will work from the seat."

Ren's ear said something June could not hear. Ren's eyes went wide, then she laughed under her breath.

"What," June whispered.

"It told me I'm the partner," Ren said. "And there's a brace."

Room B was not a conference room in the way June had pictured. A table, yes. A monitor. A low padded bench with a cut-out and a headrest and two padded cups for shoulders. It looked like something from a physical therapist's office, clean, pale gray, a paper sheet on it.

Ren stood over it.

"I think I lie down here," she said.

The voice in her ear, quiet enough that June only caught the tone: instructions, then Ren nodding along.

"Okay," Ren said, to the air. "Yeah. I got it."

She looked at June.

“It wants my shirt tucked and my mouth lined up with the hole. And it wants you to take your slacks off.”

June stared at the bench.

“For renewals.”

“That’s what it said.”

June touched her ear. “I’m sorry — you want me to take my pants off to read files.”

“Yes,” the voice said, still even. “You will sit on the partner station. Fabric in the way reduces contact and you will shift, which slows the list. Slacks and underwear off. Blouse can stay. Sit facing the monitor. Your weight goes on her mouth. Her job is to keep you hydrated while you work. That means her tongue on your clitoris for the length of the list. You do not get off the station until file twelve is coded. If you stand up early the batch stays locked.”

June let out a breath. “That’s a real sentence.”

Ren was already unbuttoning her own slacks because the earpiece had told her to get on the bench first. She did it like she was getting into a dentist chair. She lay on her back, scooted until her head was in the rest, mouth under the oval. The pads took her shoulders. She wriggled once.

“It’s actually comfortable,” Ren said. “It’s not a board. Tell it if my neck is wrong.”

“Height is good,” said Ren’s ear, loud enough this time that June heard it. “Open your mouth. When she sits, seal your lips. Start with the flat of your tongue. You are not kissing her. You are keeping her wet so she does not dry out and rush the codes.”

June laughed, one short sound. “Hydrated.”

“That’s the word it used,” Ren said. She looked up through the hole at June’s face. “I don’t mind. I’m serious. It’s weird. I know it’s weird. But I don’t mind. If you’re sitting on me I can do this.”

“You’re my sister.”

“I know who I am. Take your pants off. Your list is going to ding.”

June unhooked her slacks. She folded them over the chair because leaving them on the floor felt worse. Underwear too. She was already pink between her legs. She had been pink since the earpiece said *sit on the partner station*. She was darker-haired than Ren, a little softer in the stomach, breasts heavier in the blouse. Ren was narrower, mouth already open, waiting.

June climbed onto the bench. The monitor was at eye level if she sat exactly where the oval was. She lowered herself. Ren’s mouth was warm. June felt lips first, then tongue, then the wet seal the voice had asked for. Her bare ass sat on Ren’s cheeks and the padded rim. Her clit landed on Ren’s tongue.

“Oh,” June said.

Ren made a small sound that was not a word. Her hands found June’s thighs, not pulling, just there.

“Hands on her thighs is fine,” Ren’s ear said. “Do not pull her down. She has to see the screen. Lick. Short strokes. You can swallow. If she lifts up, follow her. If she says faster, go faster. Your job is hydration, not a finish unless she finishes. Then you keep going until I say the list is clear.”

June’s ear: “File one. Policy 44019. Read the name out loud, then the renewal date.”

“Hendricks,” June said. Her voice caught. Ren’s tongue had started moving, flat, exactly as told, over her clit in short strokes. “Renewal date August third.”

“Mark keep. Next.”

“Ren.”

Ren pulled off just enough to speak, lips shining. “I’m good. I like it. You taste like you just got here, that’s all. Sit back down. You’re going to mess up the first one.”

June sat. Ren’s tongue went back. June’s thighs tightened. She could feel herself getting wetter on Ren’s chin. The hydration job was already a joke. She was dripping.

“File two,” the ear said. “44022.”

“Patel. September first. Keep.”

She had to stop and breathe. Ren licked a circle and then a line and June’s left knee jumped.

“That’s my clit,” June said, too loud. “You know that’s my clit.”

“I know,” Ren said, muffled, and then not muffled. “It told me. I don’t mind. You can sit heavier. You’re hovering.”

“If I sit heavier I’ll come on your face in the middle of Patel.”

“Then come,” Ren said. “I’ll still be here. It’s a long list.”

June’s ear did not comment on that. “Do not stand. If you climax, stay seated and keep coding. Ren continues. File three.”

June coded three, four, five. Her handwriting on the paper log was worse than it should have been. Ren’s mouth was patient and wet and getting sloppier as June opened. June could hear the small sounds of it. She could feel Ren swallow.

“This is the strangest first day of work I have ever had,” June said.

Ren laughed against her. The laugh went through June’s clit.

“Don’t laugh there.”

“Sorry.” Ren licked her again, slower. “I’m comfortable. The brace holds my neck. I can do this all morning. I like having something to do with my mouth that isn’t smiling at the front. Sit still.”

“File six,” said the ear. “Read the deductible before you mark it.”

June leaned toward the monitor. The movement dragged her clit along Ren’s tongue. She gasped.

“Five hundred,” she said. “Keep. Ren. Ren, I’m going to—”

“Stay on the station,” her ear said. “You are on file six of twelve. If you stand to finish you will have to start the batch over. Let it happen seated.”

Ren’s hands tightened on her thighs, still not pulling. She licked faster because June’s hips had told her to. June came with her blouse still buttoned and a pen in her right hand. She shook on Ren’s mouth and tried not to crush her. Ren kept licking, swallowing, breathing through her nose. June saw white at the edge of the screen and then the policy number again.

“Still here,” Ren whispered, when June lifted a half inch. “You came on me. I know. I’m fine. I liked that. Sit.”

June sat. She was too sensitive. Ren softened the stroke without being told.

“Good adjustment,” Ren’s ear said. “Light pressure after a climax. Resume hydration. She has six files left.”

June laughed, shaky. “It’s praising you.”

“It should. I’m doing my job.”

They did seven through ten that way. June’s nipples were tight in her bra. Her thighs were shiny. Ren’s chin was shiny. Every time June shifted to click the mouse, Ren followed her clit with her tongue like that was the whole description of summer employment.

“Does it feel like work to you,” June said.

“It feels like I’m supposed to be doing this,” Ren said. “That’s close enough. You sound better when you’re on me. You were all tight in the parking lot.”

“File eleven.”

June made it through eleven. On twelve she came again, smaller, a hitch, her mouth open over the name *Morales*. Ren hummed. June marked keep with a wobble in the pen.

“Batch complete,” June’s ear said. “Stay seated until the screen releases. It will take ten seconds. Ren, you may swallow and then stop. Do not chase a third. She has to walk to her desk.”

The screen blinked. Released.

June lifted off. Ren lay in the brace with her mouth red, lips wet, eyes bright. She looked satisfied in a way June had only seen on her after a long run.

“You all right,” June said.

“Yeah.” Ren touched her own mouth. “I liked hydrating you. That’s a stupid word. I liked having you on my face while you did real things. I didn’t think I would. I did.”

June pulled her underwear and slacks back on. They felt wrong. She was still pulsing.

Ms. Ortiz was in the hall when they came out. She glanced at the tablet in her hand.

“Batch cleared on time,” she said. “That’s faster than last summer’s girl. Wearables stay in. There’s a two o’clock. Same room if it books you.” She nodded once, like a good file. “You two can eat in the break kitchen. Don’t take a long lunch.”

“Yes ma’am,” June said.

In the kitchen Ren wiped her chin with a paper towel even though she had already washed at the sink. She was grinning.

“She praised us.”

“She praised the time,” June said.

“Same thing today.” Ren bumped June’s hip. “I told you I didn’t mind. I still don’t. If it puts me in that brace again I’m going to get in it. You don’t have to make it a whole talk.”

June’s ear chimed.

“Lunch is twenty-eight minutes,” it said. “Drink water. You lost fluid. Next block will assign at 1:52. You both performed inside parameters. Keep the wearables in.”

Ren’s ear said something that made her cheeks go pink.

“What,” June said.

“It said I can ask for the same role if the pairing works. I want the same role.” Ren looked at her sister, not shy now. “I enjoyed it. I want you back on my mouth when the list comes up. That’s me saying it, not just the ear.”

June stood in the little kitchen with a vending-machine sandwich and her slacks sticking and the taste of being praised for a job she had done while she came on her sister’s tongue. “Okay,” she said. “If it books B, we go.”

Ren nodded, eager, already listening to the next soft tap in her ear, already waiting for the workday to tell her where to put her mouth.

Chapter 2

The earpieces tapped at 10:07, in the middle of June reaching for coffee.

“Recorded claim,” June’s ear said. “Adjuster is already on the line. You cannot type and hold the headset. Take Ren to your desk. She is the log.”

Ren touched her own ear and nodded before June spoke.

“It told me to lie down,” Ren said. “On your desk. Shirt up.”

June looked at the four desks and the glass front. Ms. Ortiz was in her office with the door half shut. The front counter was empty.

“On my desk,” June said.

“That’s what it said.”

They went. June sat. Ren stood beside the chair and waited, mouth already a little open, like Room B had taught her something her body had not put down.

June’s ear: “Headset on. Pen one is the blue. That washes. Loss date, claim number, deductible on her back. Pen two is the black in the cup. That does not wash. After the numbers, you write the partner tag. One word. MOUTH. Center of the back. Then you do not lift her until the adjuster hangs up.”

June picked up both pens.

“It wants me to write MOUTH on you,” she said. “In the one that doesn’t come off.”

Ren glanced at the black pen. She flushed, easy, from the neck up.

“Okay.”

“Ren. That’s going to be there tomorrow.”

“I know.” Ren unbuttoned her blouse enough to pull it off her shoulders and bunched it under her chest. She reached back and opened her bra. Her back was pale, a mole under the left shoulder June had seen in bathrooms their whole life. “I don’t mind. It’s a tag. Lie me down before it yells at you.”

“Adjuster is waiting,” June’s ear said. “Do not narrate the equipment. Put her down.”

Ren lay face down across June’s desk, cheek on a clean pad of paper, arms along the sides so June had the whole field of her back. Her breasts flattened on the wood. Her slacks were still on. She turned her face toward June’s knee.

“I’m comfortable,” Ren said. “The wood is cold. That’s all. Write.”

June put the headset on. The adjuster was a woman who said “go ahead” like she had eight more of these.

“Loss date,” June’s ear whispered. “Blue pen. High, left.”

June wrote 7/12 on Ren’s shoulder blade. Ren’s skin jumped under the first stroke.

“That tickles.”

“Don’t move.”

“Claim number.”

June wrote 18-44061 down the groove of Ren’s spine. The digits were large because she was writing on a person. Ren breathed out through her mouth and pressed her hips once against the edge of the desk.

“Deductible.”

“One thousand,” June told the adjuster, and wrote 1000 above Ren’s waistband. Ren made a noise that was not about ink.

June’s ear: “Black pen now. MOUTH. Center. You have to press harder. It is for the log so the next block knows her role. Do not write it small.”

June uncapped the indelible.

“This is the strange part,” she said, quiet, hand hovering.

Ren smiled against the paper. “You sat on my face three hours ago. You can write on my back. I like that it’s you. Do it.”

June wrote MOUTH between the shoulder blades, slow, each letter a wet scrape that would not lift. M. O. U. T. H. The ink sat on Ren’s skin like a second spine. Ren’s hands had made fists. The seat of her slacks had a dark line where she was pressed to the desk.

“You just wrote on me for real,” Ren whispered.

“I know.”

“I can feel every letter. I’m wet. I’m telling you so you don’t think I’m only being nice. Write if it says write. I’m good.”

The adjuster asked for the prior damage. June’s ear fed her the file line. June had no free hand except the one with the blue pen, so she added a short note under the deductible: hail, rear quarter. Ren shivered.

“She’s writing more,” Ren said, to no one, happy.

“Stay still,” Ren’s ear said, just audible to June. “Your job is the page. Do not roll over. If you get close, hold it. She cannot take the headset off to help you. Swallow if you need to swallow. You are not the caller.”

Ren laughed into the pad. “It’s telling me not to come on the desk.”

“Did you almost.”

“Yes. From the pen. Don’t stop talking to her. I can wait.”

June kept the call going. Each time the adjuster needed a number, June’s hand returned to Ren’s back. Blue ink over warm skin. The black word MOUTH already dry, already

permanent. June was wet in her slacks watching her own handwriting sit on her sister. Her nipples hurt against her bra. She had to press her knees together under the desk.

“This is not how people take notes,” June said, when the adjuster put her on a short hold.

“It is today.” Ren’s voice was thick. “I like being the log. I like that it won’t wash off. I’m going to feel it when my blouse is on. That’s fine with me. Are you all right.”

“I’m writing MOUTH on you and I’m on a recorded line.”

“Yeah. You sound like you’re doing your job. That’s all she can hear.”

The adjuster came back, took the last number, said she would follow up, hung up.

“Do not lift her yet,” June’s ear said. “Ten seconds. Confirm the screen saved. Then she may sit up. Do not attempt to wash the black. Water will not take it. Blue soap only on the dates.”

The screen saved. June peeled the headset off. She put her palm over the word MOUTH, not to hide it, just to feel the heat.

Ren sat up carefully. The blouse stuck. She pulled it on without the bra first, then reached back and hooked the bra over the fresh ink. A faint shadow of the M showed through the thin blouse if she arched.

She looked over her shoulder at the wall mirror by the copier, twisting.

“Oh,” she said. “That’s there.”

“I can try—”

“Don’t. It said it won’t come off. I don’t want it off.” Ren turned and took June’s wrist, the one that still had black on the side of the finger. “I enjoyed that. I liked you using me to keep the call. I liked the word. It’s embarrassing and I still liked it. You don’t have to apologize.”

June’s mouth was dry. “It’s going to be there when we clock out.”

“Good. Then I don’t forget what I was this morning.”

Ms. Ortiz came as far as the desk, glanced at the closed claim on the monitor, not at Ren’s back.

“Adjuster notes are complete,” she said. “That’s a clean call. Most first-week girls pause the line and lose them. Wearables in. There’s a 2:15 if it books you.”

“Yes ma’am,” June said.

Ms. Ortiz was already gone.

Ren buttoned the last button. The word sat under cotton, secret only if you did not know to look.

June’s ear: “Call logged. Partner tag applied. Drink water. Do not discuss the ink on the floor. Next chime at 2:11.”

Ren touched her own back through the blouse, once, over the M.

“If 2:15 is me again,” she said, “I’m already marked. That’s handy.”

June capped the black pen and put it in the cup. Her hands were not quite steady.

“If it books us,” she said, “we go.”

Ren nodded, eager, the same as after Room B, and went to her own desk with MOUTH drying on her skin and a smile she did not bother to hide.

Chapter 3

They rode in together again. Ren drove. June watched the bakery go by and tried not to look at Ren’s blouse. The letters did not show unless Ren sat back hard against the seat. June knew they were there anyway. MOUTH. Black. Center of her sister’s back.

“It’s still there,” Ren said, like she had heard the look.

“I know.”

“It pulled when I put my bra on. I liked that. I’m just saying.”

Yesterday after the adjuster call they had eaten in the kitchen and the earpieces had tapped at 2:11 exactly like they said they would. Room B again. Six files, not twelve. Ren in the brace. June on her mouth, slacks off, coding keep and non-renew with her handwriting worse than the morning. June had come once and stayed seated. Ms. Ortiz had walked past the closed door and later said the afternoon batch was clean. They had clocked out at five with Ren’s back still marked and June’s slacks still a problem.

That was yesterday. This was 8:24.

“Second day,” June said.

“Yeah.” Ren parked. “I’m excited. I know that’s weird.”

“It is weird.”

“I still am.”

They clocked in at 8:29. The earpieces tapped before June’s chair finished rolling.

“Morning queue,” June’s ear said. “Twenty-two inbound. Sit forward. Do not cross your knees. Your codes slip when you close up.”

Ren, at the next desk, touched her ear. “Mine said sit open too.”

June sat forward. First call: cracked windshield. She kept her knees apart because the voice had said to, and because yesterday her knees had been on either side of Ren’s head. Her body remembered the brace better than the chair.

Third call. Her knees drifted together. She did not notice until the earpiece did.

“You closed,” it said. “That is the third time. The chair is not enough. First-aid cabinet, left tray. Open it. Ren goes with you. The queue can hold for ninety seconds.”

They stood. June thought it would be a cushion. The left tray held a speculum in clinic plastic, a travel bottle of lube, a packet of wipes.

June stared at it.

“That’s not a wedge.”

Ren had already picked up the package. “It told me to bring you to the chair and help you put it in. It said I’m on check.”

“In.”

“That’s what it said.”

June’s ear, still even: “This keeps the posture without you thinking about your knees. Chair is faster than the bathroom. Underwear off, slacks at the thighs. Ren holds the package. You sit. Insert. Open it until I say stop. Then slacks up. You stay on the queue until 12:30. Ren verifies on the hour that it has not slipped. One look. Then she sits back down.”

June laughed once, the same short sound as Room B.

“I sat on your face yesterday and now this.”

“Yeah.” Ren peeled the plastic. “I don’t mind looking. I had your cunt on my mouth for two blocks. I can look at a speculum. Come on. You’re going to miss the next ring.”

No one was at the counter. Ms. Ortiz’s door was half shut. June sat, pushed her slacks and underwear down, and opened her knees. She was already wet. Ren saw it.

“You’re wet.”

“Don’t announce it.”

“I’m announcing it to you. Tilt.”

Ren put two drops of lube on the speculum because the earpiece told her to, and set it in June’s hand. June had to push it in herself. Cold. Then the width of it. She hissed.

“Open it,” June’s ear said. “One click. Breathe. Another. Stop.”

Two clicks. June’s mouth opened. She was held apart. Ren was kneeling between her knees, looking, the word MOUTH hidden under her own blouse.

“That’s far enough,” Ren said. “I can see you’re in. I can see everything. Does it hurt.”

“It doesn’t hurt. I have a speculum in me and I have to answer the phone.”

“Yeah.” Ren looked up. “I’m comfortable down here. I like being the check. You’re open and you’re shiny and I don’t mind. I’m going to like coming over at nine-thirty. I’m telling you now so you don’t spend an hour feeling guilty about yesterday and this.”

June swallowed. “Pull my slacks up.”

Ren did. Sitting forward, June felt every bit of it when she moved.

The phone rang.

“Ortiz Agency.”

Hail damage. She coded it. She wanted to close her knees and could not. Her clit felt swollen in the air the blades were holding. She dripped. She was sure it would show if she stood.

At 9:30 Ren’s ear said, “Check.”

Ren rolled over, crouched like she was plugging in a cord, and put her hand on June’s slacks.

“I have to look.”

“I know.”

June lifted her hips. Ren tugged the slacks down an inch and looked. Still in. June wet around the stem. Ren’s breath hit her.

“Still in,” Ren said. “She hasn’t slipped.”

“Good,” said Ren’s ear. “Sit down. Next check at 10:30.”

Ren’s thumb brushed June’s inner thigh on the way out. June twitched. The blades held her through it.

“Don’t.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You did.”

Ren smiled and rolled back. “I liked yesterday. I like this. I like my job.”

Three more calls. June sounded fine. She was soaked. At 10:31 Ren was there again.

“Still in. You’re dripping on the chair, just so you know.”

“Ren.”

“I’m not disgusted. I’m the opposite. Sit still. You’ve got a caller.”

June punched the line. She talked about a deductible with her sister’s eyes between her legs. When Ren pulled the slacks up, June bit the inside of her cheek.

“This is stranger than the brace,” June said, after.

“The brace I could hide my face in.” Ren sat. “This I have to look at you on the hour. I like that more. You don’t have to make it noble. I enjoy it.”

11:30. Same check. Ren looked longer. June’s clit was a hard point the speculum did not touch. She almost asked. She did not.

“Do not finish at the desk,” June’s ear said. “You are on the queue. If you need to, wait for 12:30. Code the next one.”

She coded it. Her handwriting was uneven, like yesterday afternoon in B.

At 12:28 the inbound line went quiet.

“Lunch,” the ear said. “Ren removes it. Bathroom. Wash it. Wipes for the chair. Then you may eat.”

Staff bathroom. Door locked. Ren slid the speculum out with two fingers. June made a sound she tried to keep in. Empty, dripping onto a wipe. Ren washed the speculum in the sink, set it on a paper towel, and then put two fingers where it had been and rubbed June’s clit with her thumb.

June grabbed the sink.

“It didn’t say—”

“It said I could take it out. It didn’t say I couldn’t touch you after.” Ren watched her face. “Do you want me to stop.”

“No.”

June came standing up, slacks at her knees, forehead on the mirror. Fast. Ren kissed her shoulder, not her mouth, and washed her hand.

“I liked checking you,” Ren said. “I liked taking it out. I liked that. All of it. I’m good. Same as the ink. Same as the brace.”

June pulled her slacks up. Her underwear was a lost cause again.

Ms. Ortiz was at the front with a salad.

“Morning queue’s clean,” she said. “No recodes. That’s two days. Wearables stay in. Eat. There’s a 1:50 if it books you.”

“Yes ma’am,” June said.

In the kitchen June drank water. Ren sat with her knees together, still smiling, back against the chair like she wanted to feel the letters.

June’s ear: “Device logged out. Chair wiped. Afternoon pairing at 1:52. You both stayed inside the block. Keep the wearables in.”

Ren touched her ear.

“It told me I did the checks on time.” She looked at June. “If it puts that tray in your hands tomorrow, I’ll open it again. I want to. If 1:52 is B, I want that too.”

June nodded, still pulsing, second-day sandwich in her hand, listening for the next tap.

“If it books us,” she said, “we go.”

Chapter 4

Lunch was a sandwich and twenty minutes. At 1:52 both earpieces tapped at once.

“Afternoon pairing,” June’s ear said. “Room B. Fifteen minutes. The 2:00 queue stays locked until the block is marked complete. Bring your sister.”

Ren was already standing. She had mustard on her thumb. She looked hopeful in a way June was starting to recognize.

“B,” Ren said. “Brace.”

“That’s what I thought.”

The brace was still in the corner with a clean sheet on it. June waited for the voice to send Ren to it. It did not.

“Sit on the table,” June’s ear said. “Both of you. Facing each other. Underwear stays on. Slacks can come down to the thighs so you can sit. Hands stay outside the underwear. You have been using genital contact and the after-call work is running long. Today the reset is nipples or inner thigh only. If neither of you finishes by 2:07 I rebook at 4:00 and the late files sit. Do not put a hand in the underwear to get it done.”

June stared at the table.

“That’s the opposite of this morning.”

Ren had already pushed her slacks down and sat on the edge in her underwear, blouse still on, the black word hidden on her back. “I know. I thought I was getting your cunt on my mouth again.” She said it plainly. “I don’t mind this either. Come here.”

June sat. Their knees touched. She felt empty from the speculum and swollen from coming in the bathroom and now she was being told not to touch the place that was still wet.

“This is strange,” June said. “You’re right there and I can’t.”

“So use what it said.” Ren took June’s wrists and put them on her own breasts, over the blouse. “Start. We’ve got a clock.”

June’s ear: “Blouse open. Bra down or off. Skin. Inner thigh is the other option if the nipples are not enough. Ren, same on her. You may use your mouth on the nipple. You may not pull the underwear aside.”

Ren unbuttoned June. June’s bra went under her breasts. Her nipples were already tight. Ren looked at them the way she had looked at the speculum.

“I like these,” Ren said. “I liked them in the brace too. I didn’t get them then.”

She put her mouth on June’s left nipple and sucked. June’s hands clenched on the table. Heat went straight down and stopped against the cotton of her underwear, no hand to finish it.

“Ren.”

“I know. Outside.” Ren’s fingers were on June’s inner thigh, high, rubbing the tendon through skin, not crossing onto the crotch. “Does that count.”

“Yes,” June’s ear said. “Stay there. Other nipple.”

June opened Ren’s blouse with hands that were not steady. Ren’s breasts were smaller. The nipples were dark and already hard. June bent and took one in her mouth because that was the work. Ren made a noise and hooked a knee around June’s hip, then stopped herself from rubbing where she wanted.

“I want to put my hand in,” Ren whispered.

“It said no.”

“I know it said no. I’m telling you I want to. I’m still going to do it this way. I like your mouth on me. I like that we can’t. That’s new.”

They stayed like that. Mouths on nipples. Hands on inner thighs, stroking, pressing, the wet cotton of both of them darkening and not being touched. June’s clit throbbed against the seam. She tried to chase Ren’s thigh with her hips and her ear said, “Do not grind on her leg. Thigh contact with the hand only. You have six minutes.”

June laughed against Ren’s breast, shaky.

“It’s watching my hips.”

“Good,” Ren said. “Sit up and let me have the other one.”

Ren sucked harder. Her fingers on June’s thigh were precise, a rhythm that almost stood in for the clit and did not. June came anyway, a smaller, meaner orgasm than the bathroom, her underwear soaked, her mouth open on Ren’s shoulder, no one touching her cunt.

She shook.

“Stay,” her ear said. “She has not finished. You help her. Do not put your hand in her underwear because you already went.”

“I wouldn’t,” June said, and then, to Ren, “That was unfair. I wanted your hand.”

“I know.” Ren was breathing hard. “Do me. Please. I like asking you. I like that you have to say yes because of the clock.”

June put her mouth on Ren’s nipple and her hand high on the inside of Ren’s thigh, thumb rubbing the soft skin until it was red. Ren’s underwear had a wet

spot June could see and not touch. Ren watched June’s face and came with a tight sound, thighs clamping June’s hand, still not crossing the cotton.

They sat there with their slacks at their thighs and their bras shoved down.

“Batch,” June’s ear said. “If you are both finished, mark the block. Two-oh-six. Queue releases. Pull your clothes up. Do not start a second round. Phones at two.”

June tapped complete on the wall screen with a finger that smelled like Ren’s skin.

Ren leaned her forehead on June’s.

“I liked that more than I thought,” Ren said. “I liked not being allowed. I liked you coming with my mouth on your chest. I still want the brace. I also want this again.”

“It’s a stupid rule.”

“It’s the job today.” Ren smiled. “I’m good. I’m better than good. Button me. My back is going to stick to the blouse.”

June buttoned her. She felt the raised ink under the fabric, MOUTH, and left it.

They walked out at 2:07. Ms. Ortiz was at the front counter with a client and did not turn around until the client left.

She glanced at the tablet.

“Queue opened on time,” she said. “That’s the part I care about. Wearables in. Don’t sit on the old files. They’re already closed.”

“Yes ma’am,” June said.

At their desks the inbound light was already lit. June took it. She could feel the wet cotton when she sat. Ren took the next one, voice bright, knees together like she was keeping a secret the morning speculum had not allowed.

June’s ear, quiet under the caller: “Block complete. No 4:00 needed. Next pairing will assign if the rate slips. Keep the wearables in.”

Ren muted for a second and looked across the aisle.

“If it slips,” she whispered, “I hope it slips.”

June did not tell her not to say that. She unmuted and asked a man for his policy number, still pulsing, already waiting to see whether the afternoon would stay on the phones or send them back down the hall.

Chapter 5

The afternoon phones were ordinary for almost an hour. June talked a man through a cracked bumper and a woman through a stolen catalytic converter. She drank the rest of her water. Across the aisle Ren took her own calls and drew little loops on a scrap of paper, the way she had in high school when she was supposed to be listening.

Then June opened a claim she had already finished.

She did not decide to. Her hand did it. The screen came up with her own notes still in it, and she sat there looking at a thing she had already put away, and the earpiece made that small tap.

“Leave the file,” it said. “You are not done. Kitchen. Take Ren. Four minutes.”

June muted. Ren looked over, already standing, because her own earpiece had said her name.

“Kitchen,” Ren said.

“I closed that file,” June said.

“So we’ll do what it wants and you’ll close it again. Come on.”

The break room still smelled like microwave bread from lunch. The fridge hummed. Someone had left a spoon in the sink. June opened the left cabinet because the voice told her to open the left cabinet, and she expected paper plates.

She found a stack of the same paper cups they used for water. A plastic funnel, the cheap kind you would use for oil if you had a car that needed it. A pad of yellow sticky notes.

On the top shelf of the fridge, behind the creamer, two cups were already sitting. Each had a yellow square on it. One said Ruth and a morning time. One said Elaine and a time just after lunch. There was liquid in both of them. Not coffee. Not water. June looked at them and did not understand, and then she did, and her face got hot.

“Ren.”

Ren leaned in and read the names.

“Oh,” she said.

June’s ear was still calm. “Clean cup. Funnel. Note. Underwear off. Foot on the shelf. Ren holds. You go into the cup. Not the floor. Write the time. Put it with the others. Wash the funnel. Then the file will let you go.”

June shut the cabinet with her fingertips.

“It wants me to squirt in a cup.”

“That’s what those are,” Ren said. She said it quietly. She did not laugh. “Ruth did it this morning. Elaine did it at lunch. I didn’t see them when we were in here. I would have said something.”

“I can’t just—” June stopped. She could. That was the whole week so far. “This is different from coming. You know that.”

“I know.” Ren tore off a sticky note and stuck it to her own wrist so she would not lose it. “I don’t mind holding it. I want to. I want to see you do that. If you can’t, I guess it books us later and you sit there with the file open. I’d rather watch you now.”

June hooked the door. The hook was meant for a mop. She pushed her slacks down and her underwear with them and the air in the little room was cold on her. She put her left foot on the lowest shelf. The position opened her. She was wet already from sitting at the desk in damp cotton, from Ren’s mouth on her nipple two hours ago, from knowing what the cups were.

Ren knelt. She held the cup in her left hand and fitted the funnel against June with her right, the wide mouth of it clumsy at first, then seated. The plastic was cool. June flinched.

“Sorry,” Ren said. “Tell me if I pinch you.”

“It’s fine. It’s just a funnel.”

Ren smiled up at her, close enough that June could see the specks in her eyes. “You’re shaking.”

“Because you’re about to make me squirt into office kitchenware.”

“Yeah.” Ren put two fingers on June’s clitoris, on the left side of the funnel, and rubbed her with the small tight circles June needed. “I like this job. I liked you on my face. I liked writing on me. I like this. You don’t have to keep asking if I’m all right. I am.”

June held the cabinet door. Ren’s fingers were sure. The need gathered low and wrong, not only the climb toward coming but the full, urgent pressure underneath it, the feeling she sometimes got when she was already close and had had too much water. She tried to keep it in. Her thighs trembled.

“Don’t hold it,” Ren said. “That’s the point. Let it go.”

“It feels like I have to pee.”

“I know what it feels like. I’ve heard you in the bathroom at home. Push when you come. I’m right here.”

June came first, the sharp clench, her mouth open, and for a second nothing left her except the shake. Ren did not stop. She pressed under June’s clitoris and said, “Now,” and June pushed as if she were trying to empty herself.

What came out was not a trickle. It left her in a hard, hot pulse, then another, a clear spray that hit the inside of the funnel and ran down in a stream she could hear. It kept going longer than she thought it would. It wet Ren’s knuckles. It filled the bottom of the cup in little jerks she could feel in her belly. Her legs nearly went. Ren held the funnel with both hands and watched, lips parted, breathing as if she had run.

“That’s it,” Ren whispered. “That’s it. Good. I have it.”

June put her forehead on the cabinet. She was still dripping. The last of it went down her thigh and missed the funnel. She started to apologize and Ren shook her head.

“I don’t care about the thigh. Look.”

She held the cup up. It was not full. It was honest. You could see what it was.

June’s ear: “Write the time. Shelf. Do not dump it. Wash the funnel. You can get dressed.”

The clock on the microwave said 3:24. Ren wrote June and 3:24 in the same square letters as the other two names and set the cup on the shelf beside Ruth and Elaine. Three cups in a row. June pulled her clothes up. She washed the funnel with dish soap. Her hands smelled like the office lemon soap and like herself.

“They’re going to look at that,” June said.

“They looked at Ruth’s,” Ren said. “They looked at Elaine’s. That’s why they’re in the fridge.” She washed her hands, then dried them on a paper towel and, without asking, wiped June’s thigh where the last of it had run. “I liked watching you squirt. I liked that it wasn’t just a little shake. I liked holding the cup. I’m wet. I’m not asking you to do anything about that before we go back. I just wanted you to know.”

They unhooked the door. On June’s screen the file she had opened was closed again, and it stayed closed when she touched nothing.

The last of the phones died around a quarter to five. Both earpieces tapped.

“Kitchen,” the voice said. “Everyone. The fridge.”

Ruth was already there with her reading glasses on her head. Elaine had her purse strap in her fist. Ms. Ortiz opened the refrigerator as if she were checking whether someone had stolen her salad.

The three cups sat in a line. The notes faced out.

Ms. Ortiz looked at each one the way she looked at a stack of claims.

“Ruth’s is from the morning. That’s fine. Elaine’s is after lunch. Fine. June’s is late, which matches the file she opened.” She closed the door with her thumb. “I want to see them. I don’t want to hear that somebody finished and then have the same screen come back up. This is cleaner. That’s the review. Go home.”

Ruth said goodnight. Elaine said she would lock the front. They walked out talking about the bakery being out of the good rolls. They did not look at June any longer than they looked at the clock.

Ren waited until the hall was empty.

“She liked the cups,” Ren said.

“She liked that I didn’t open the file again.”

“That’s what I meant.” Ren leaned her shoulder into June’s. “If it is me tomorrow I want you to kneel. I want my name on a note. I’m saying it now so I don’t get shy in the morning.”

June’s ear: “Review is over. Leave the cups. Clock out at five. Wearables until then.”

They clocked out. In the car Ren sat back against the seat and let out a long breath. June knew she was feeling the ink on her back. The bakery was dark. The credit union was dark. The office behind them still had three paper cups in a closed fridge, and one of them had June’s name on it, and the inside of June’s thighs were still damp.

Ren started the car.

“I keep thinking about the sound it made,” she said.

June looked at the windshield.

“Yeah,” she said. “Me too.”

Chapter 6

On Wednesday morning the cups were still in the fridge. June saw them when she went for water. Hers had settled. Ruth’s and Elaine’s were still there too. Nobody had dumped them. Ren looked over June’s shoulder and did not say I told you so. She only touched the yellow square with her own name not on it yet, and then they sat down and worked.

The morning was phones. The noon hour was a sandwich. At two-thirty Ren miscoded a deductible, then another, and sat staring at the screen as if the numbers had moved.

The earpieces tapped together.

“Room B,” June’s ear said. “Both of you. The callback list stays closed until you are done in there. Take a pad of paper.”

Ren stood up too fast. “I thought I was fine.”

“You’re not fine,” June said. “You just wrote five hundred on a thousand-dollar file. Come on.”

Room B still smelled like paper and the cleaner they used on the table. The brace sat in the corner with a fresh sheet. June waited for the voice to send Ren into it. The voice did not.

“Ren on the table,” it said, in June’s ear. “On her back. Slacks off. Underwear off. June stays dressed. You have a list of ten. Each one is a check in the app. You will see the boxes when you pick up your phone.”

June took out her phone. Ten empty squares. No words under them yet.

Ren got on the table. She pushed her slacks and underwear down and let them drop on the chair. She was already wet. June could see it under the overhead light, the shine of her, the dark hair, her stomach moving.

“This is the part where you tell me what the boxes are,” June said.

“Work her up,” the voice said. “Stop before she goes over. Check a box. Wait until she can talk. Do it again. If she goes over, the boxes clear and you start at one. Ten stops. No finish. Then she can sit a callback without opening a closed file.”

June looked at her sister on the table.

“Ten times,” she said. “And you don’t get to come.”

Ren let her head fall back. She was smiling, and it was not an easy smile. “Okay.”

“That is not okay. That is—”

“I know what it is.” Ren put her heels on the edge of the table and opened her knees. “I don’t mind. I want your hand. I want you to stop. I liked watching you yesterday in the kitchen. I want this to be mine. Start before I get shy.”

June stood between her legs. She put two fingers on Ren’s clitoris. Ren was swollen and slick and she made a sound on the first stroke. June knew her. She had known her in the brace and in the bathroom and in the car. She took her up fast on purpose because the first one was only the first one.

Ren’s thighs tightened. Her mouth opened. “June.”

June took her hand away.

Ren’s hips chased the air. She hit the table with the back of her head and laughed, wrecked already.

“That’s mean.”

“That’s one,” June said. She thumbed the first box. It turned black.

They waited. Ren’s breathing slowed and did not really slow. June’s ear said, “Again. Same pressure. Stop sooner if you have to. You know her.”

The second time Ren got there quicker. June could feel the little pulse under her fingers. She stopped. Ren swore and covered her own face.

The third time Ren tried to hold still so June would not see how close she was. June saw anyway. She stopped with Ren’s clitoris twitching against her fingertip. Ren’s eyes were wet.

“I hate this.”

“Do you want me to stop for real.”

“No.” Ren dragged her hands down. “I like it. I hate it and I like it. Don’t you dare leave the room. Do four.”

Four. Five. Each time the climb was shorter and the stop was worse. Ren’s inner thighs were shaking. She was dripping onto the table. June’s fingers were shiny to the knuckle. The app had five black boxes and five empty ones.

“Talk to me,” June said.

“I can’t think.”

“Try.”

“I want to come,” Ren said. “I want your mouth. I want you to put me back in the brace and sit on me until I can’t breathe. I want the cup with my name on it. I want you to finish me and I don’t want you to, because then the boxes go away and we do this from the start, and I will scream. Keep going.”

Six. June used her thumb. Ren nearly came off the table. June had to pin her hip with the other hand. She stopped so late that Ren made a broken sound and grabbed June’s wrist hard enough to hurt.

“Please.”

“No.”

“Please, June. I’ll be good on the phones. I’ll be so good. Let me.”

“If I let you we start over.”

Ren nodded, frantic, tears at the corners of her eyes, and did not let go of June’s wrist until June pried her fingers off.

The door opened.

Ms. Ortiz stood there with a tablet against her ribs. She looked at Ren on the table, at June’s wet hand, at the phone on the file cabinet with six black squares. She did not close the door all the way.

“Where are you,” she said.

“Six,” June said.

“Don’t finish her. I need her on the half-past callbacks. She opens files when she goes all the way through.” Ms. Ortiz glanced at Ren’s face, then at the pad of paper nobody had written on. “You can breathe. You’re all right. Four more. Then clothes and the phone. Keep the door how it is. Nobody’s in the hall.”

She left it ajar and went back toward the front.

Ren stared at the ceiling.

“She saw me.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m so close I feel sick.”

June put her hand back. “Seven.”

Ren lasted almost nothing. June stopped and Ren cried out, one high sound, and then bit her own wrist. Eight. Ren was sobbing in a small, angry way and lifting her hips into a hand that was not there. Nine. She said June’s name like she was mad at her. June’s own slacks were wet. She wanted to put her mouth on her sister and finish it. She did not.

“Last one,” June said.

“I can’t.”

“You can.”

“If you touch me I am going to come.”

June touched her anyway, lighter, only the left side of the clitoris, and the second Ren’s breathing changed she took her hand away and held both of Ren’s knees apart so Ren could not close them and finish herself.

Ren shook. She did not go over. A thread of wet ran down onto the table. She turned her face into her arm and made a noise that was almost a laugh.

June checked the tenth box. All ten were black.

“Done,” her ear said. “She gets dressed. Callbacks. If she touches herself in the bathroom the list reopens. Praise her for staying under. Then you both leave the room.”

June leaned over her.

“You stayed under.”

Ren wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand. She was smiling again, wrecked and bright.

“I liked that,” she said. “I know I was begging. I still liked it. I liked you stopping. I liked her walking in and not making it a whole thing. Don’t you feel bad. I wanted you to do exactly that.”

June handed her the underwear. Ren stepped into it and hissed when the cotton hit her. They pulled her slacks up. The table was a mess. June wiped it with the paper from the pad.

At the desks the callback list had opened. Ren put her headset on. Her voice on the first call was almost normal. Her hand, under the desk, stayed on her own knee.

Ms. Ortiz passed behind them with the tablet.

“List is moving,” she said. “That’s what I wanted. Don’t take a long break. Wearables in.”

Ren muted for half a second and looked at June.

“If it does that tomorrow,” she whispered, “I want ten again. I want you to make me wait. I’m serious.”

June looked at her sister’s mouth and at the ten black squares still on her phone and at the door Ms. Ortiz had left how it was.

“Yeah,” she said. “I heard you.”

Chapter 7

Thursday morning nobody called.

June sat down and opened the first claim out of habit. Someone had already finished it. The next one too. She clicked through six files and found her own notes replaced by clean little summaries she had not written. The clock on the wall said eight thirty-one. They had been in the building two minutes.

Ren leaned across the aisle.

“Did you come in last night?”

“No.”

June’s earpiece made the small tap.

“You don’t have claims this morning,” the voice said. “I did them at six. Go to Room B. Eleven minutes. Both of you. Take your clothes off when the door is shut.”

June looked at the quiet phone, then at her sister.

“It did the work,” she said.

Ren touched her own ear, listening, and her mouth changed.

“Yeah. It told me the same thing.” She stood up. She still moved like Wednesday, careful in the hips, as if June’s hand were still there and then not there. “Come on. If we sit here staring at finished files we’ll go crazy.”

Room B was empty and too bright. The table had been wiped. The brace in the corner had a clean sheet, waiting for a job nobody had given it. On top of the file cabinet a small camera faced the middle of the room. June had thought it was for the hall. When the door clicked, a red dot came on.

“The camera is running,” the voice said. “This is going into a folder other people will watch later, so they can see how to do it. Stand where it can see you. Clothes off. All of them.”

June stood with her hands on her buttons and did not move.

“There isn’t a list,” she said.

“There isn’t a list,” the voice said. “You came in to work and the work is done. Sitting still is going to make a mess of the afternoon. You have eleven minutes. Do not use your hands between her legs. Do not use your mouth there either. Use an armpit, or the bottom of a foot, or the soft place behind a knee. You can try all three. You can switch. When the time is up, wash at the sink before you go back down the hall.”

Ren had her blouse off before June finished hearing it. The word on her back was a shadow now, still readable if you knew what you were looking at. She unhooked her bra and let it drop. Her breasts were small and tight at the tips from the air. She pushed her slacks down, then her underwear, and stepped out of them with her socks still on, then the socks too, until she was just Ren in the fluorescent light, yesterday still in her body, the unfinished climb sitting on her like a bruise.

“It’s filming us,” June said.

“I know.” Ren’s voice had gone low. “I don’t mind. I lay in bed last night and thought about your hand coming off me. I almost finished in the shower and I stopped because I didn’t know if I was allowed. So if it wants my mouth in your arm, I’ll put my mouth in your arm. Take your clothes off. Please. I don’t want to be the only one.”

June undressed. The room was cool. Her nipples pulled in. She was wet already, from the walk down the hall, from Ren standing there bare, from the red light that meant some stranger in some other week would see her sister’s mouth in the hollow of her arm. She folded her slacks because she did not know what else to do with her hands.

They stood close enough to feel each other’s heat. June had seen Ren naked in this building in pieces. She had not stood like this with nothing left to do but look.

“You’re shaking,” Ren said.

“I’m standing in front of a camera with no pants on and it just told me it doesn’t need us for the actual job.”

Ren reached up and tucked June’s hair behind her ear, a thing she had done since they were girls.

“I still need you,” she said. “Come here.”

“Arm first,” the voice said. “June, lift your arm. Ren, you can use your mouth or you can rub yourself on the skin. Find out which one does something. Say it out loud. People watching later need to hear you.”

June raised her left arm. She had put deodorant on in the parking lot like a person going to work. Ren stepped in and pressed her face into the hollow. Her breath was hot. Then her tongue. June made a sound she did not expect. It tickled and then it did not. The wet point of Ren’s tongue on that thin skin went through her in a straight line and landed between her legs, where nobody was allowed to touch.

“That—” June swallowed. “That does something. I feel it down there. I wish I didn’t.”

Ren pulled back enough to speak, mouth shining.

“You smell like the car and the soap from home.” She kissed the wet skin once, almost polite, then licked again, slower. “I like this. I like that it isn’t the obvious place and it still makes you tight. Can I try the other way.”

“Yes.”

Ren turned June and sat her on the edge of the table. She lifted June’s arm again and straddled the space and set herself on the damp hollow, her open sex against June’s underarm, and dragged forward. Both of them gasped. June felt hair and heat and the hard little ridge of Ren’s clitoris catch and slide. Ren’s hands landed on June’s shoulders. Her breasts were in June’s face. She moved in short, ugly, honest strokes and tried not to go over, because yesterday had taught her what stopping felt like and she was still living in it.

“Don’t you put your hand on me,” Ren whispered. “If you do I will come and I don’t know if I’m allowed and I don’t want to ruin it. Just let me use you. Please.”

June kept her hands on the table edge until her fingers ached. She watched her sister ride the wet pit of her arm for the camera and felt her own cunt clench around nothing, a helpless squeeze. A string of Ren’s wet smeared down onto June’s ribs.

“Foot,” the voice said. “You still have time. Change.”

Ren climbed off like it hurt. She was shaking. The inside of her thighs was glossy. June slid to the floor because she could not picture the angle any other way. Ren sat in the chair and put her foot out, the clean bare sole, the arch, and June, after a second of feeling ridiculous, opened her knees and let Ren set that arch against her.

The pressure was blunt. It was not a mouth and it was not fingers. It mashed her clitoris and dragged it and mashed it again. June grabbed Ren’s ankle and held on. Her wet painted the ball of Ren’s foot in a shine the camera would not miss.

“That’s worse,” June said.

“Worse how.”

“It feels stupid and it feels good and I want your hand and I can’t have it.” She laughed, helpless. “Keep going. Press. God. Behind the knee after this. I can’t only do this. I’ll come on your foot in front of a lens.”

Ren pressed. Her face had gone soft and fierce at once. She twisted her foot a little so the hard edge of the arch caught June just right, and June’s head fell back against the table leg.

“I can feel you throbbing,” Ren said. “I can feel you on my foot. I wanted this last night. Not this exactly. You. I wanted you to let me finish and you didn’t, and I

still wanted you in the next room. Come here.”

“Knee,” June’s ear said. “The back of it. Mouth. Two minutes. Then you wash.”

They ended up on the floor in a tangle of bare legs. June folded Ren’s left knee and put her mouth in the crease behind it. The skin was thin and a little salty. She could smell the inside of the shoe Ren had taken off. She licked the tendon. Ren’s whole body jerked.

“If you go up I will lose it,” Ren said. Her hand was in June’s hair, not pushing, just holding. “I am so close from your arm I can feel my heartbeat in my cunt. Stay there. Talk to me. Say something that isn’t work.”

June spoke against the damp crease.

“I keep thinking about the files being done without us. I liked being useful. I liked you under me in the brace because I could pretend it was for the list. This is just us in a room.”

“I know.” Ren’s other heel dug into June’s back. “I like us in a room. I like your mouth where nobody puts a mouth. I like that tomorrow some woman I have never met might watch you do this to me. Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

June sucked the soft place until Ren was making the same broken sounds she had made on the table the day before. She did not come. June could feel her holding it, that stubborn leftover from the ten boxes. June’s own nipples ached. She rubbed herself once, without thinking, against Ren’s calf, and the voice in her ear said, mild, “No. Only the knee. Twenty seconds. Sink.”

They got up badly. At the sink June ran cold water over her hands and then, because the voice had said rinse, over her underarm. Ren washed her own foot with a paper towel and soap, slow, looking at the wet June had left on her skin as if she did not want it gone.

“It doesn’t need us for the claims,” June said.

Ren shut the water off.

“I know.”

“So we come here and take our clothes off in front of a camera so we have something to do.”

Ren dried her hands and then put them on June’s hips, still naked, still close.

“I would have come here anyway,” she said. “If you asked. The earpiece just said it first. Tonight, at home, it wants us to try your arm again. No camera. No eleven minutes. It wants to know if I can finish from that. I want to know too.”

June pulled her underwear on. It clung.

“Homework.”

“Yeah.” Ren smiled, tired and bright. “I want your left arm and the bed and nobody watching. I want to try to come on you like that. You can say no. I’m asking.”

“I’m not saying no.”

They dressed. The red light died when the door opened. Out front Ruth was reading a screen that had already filled itself in. Elaine had a cup of coffee and no headset. Ms. Ortiz looked up from her tablet, saw them come out of the little room, and nodded the way she nodded when the copier had not jammed.

“Morning’s done,” she said. “I didn’t touch it. Don’t wander. If it sends you back down the hall, go.”

June sat at her desk and did nothing that mattered. She could still feel Ren’s foot. She could still feel Ren’s mouth in her arm. Across the aisle Ren sat with her left arm a little away from her body, not tight against her ribs, as if she were keeping the hollow warm.

In the parking lot after five Ren did not start the car.

The bakery was dark. Their earpieces were still in. Ren looked at June’s mouth, then at her shoulder.

“When we get home,” she said. “Your left arm. I already know how I want to sit.”

June thought about the finished files and the red light and her sister’s wet on her ribs.

“All right,” she said. “When we get home.”

Chapter 8

They did it that night on the bed they had shared since they were little and then stopped sharing, and then shared again without saying they were going to.

June lay back against the pillows with her left arm up. Ren sat over the hollow and rubbed herself there, slow at first, then not slow, and came with a broken sound and her hand braced on June’s collarbone. Afterward she laughed into June’s neck and said thank you as if June had passed her the salt. June held her and did not come. She was too full of the day and the camera and the finished files. She fell asleep with Ren’s mouth on her shoulder.

Friday morning Ms. Ortiz was standing at the front with a rolling suitcase.

The handle was up. There was a paper luggage tag from an airline. She had on a dress that did not look like work.

“I’m gone two weeks,” she said. “Beach. I paid for the drinks already. You still come in. The system is running the book. I want you here so I can see how it handles you.”

Ren glanced at June.

“Handles us,” June said.

Ms. Ortiz smiled with one side of her mouth. She did not look embarrassed.

“I watch the folder at night,” she said. “The one from the little room. I like your tapes. Don’t stop making them because I’m not in the building. Clock in. Keep the things in your ears. If it sends you down the hall, you go. Ruth knows where the spare keys are. That’s it.”

She rolled the suitcase over the threshold. The bell on the door made the same sound it made for a customer. Then she was gone. Through the glass June watched her get into a car that was already running.

Ruth did not look up from her screen. Elaine said, “Lucky her,” and opened a yogurt.

June sat down. There was still nothing to do that looked like insurance.

The earpieces tapped at nine.

“Room B,” the voice said. “Twenty minutes. Both of you. Clothes off from the waist up. Camera on. This is not for a file.”

Ren stood. She looked like she had slept. She looked like she wanted the door already.

“Not for a file,” she repeated.

“Yeah.”

The red light was on before they had the door shut. June took her blouse off and then her bra. Ren did the same. They stood in the cool air with their slacks still on, breasts bare, and June felt the old shyness and the newer heat underneath it.

“Ren,” the voice said. “Your mouth on June’s left nipple. You put it in and you keep it in. You may swallow. You may not take it out to talk. If you need air, use your nose. June, you may touch her. You may talk. You may finish. The twenty minutes is the mouth. I will tell you when it is over.”

June looked down at herself, at the tight left nipple the voice had named.

“Just that,” she said. “No list. No phones.”

“Just that,” the voice said. “She likes your chest. You like her mouth. Ms. Ortiz likes the tape. Begin.”

Ren stepped in and took the nipple in her mouth as if she had been waiting since the bed. She sealed her lips and sucked, gentle first, then harder, and her eyes came up to June’s face and stayed there. June’s hand found the back of Ren’s head. The pull went straight down through her belly.

“Don’t come off,” June whispered.

Ren made a small sound around her and shook her head, a tiny no, and sucked again. A bright thread of spit showed at the corner of her mouth and she swallowed. June felt the swallow in her breast.

They stood like that. The clock on the wall moved. Ren’s mouth was hot and wet and stubborn. When she needed air she breathed through her nose against June’s skin. Her hands were on June’s waist, then on the zipper of June’s slacks, asking. June nodded. Ren got the slacks down and the underwear with them and put her fingers between June’s legs without taking her mouth away. She was clumsy because she would not let go of the nipple. June did not care.

“That’s good,” June said. “That’s— Ren. You can be harder. On your hand. Keep your mouth where it is.”

Ren’s fingers rubbed her clitoris in that same small circle she had used in the kitchen. Her mouth never left. June held her there by the hair, not cruel, just sure, and felt herself open and drip onto Ren’s wrist. The camera saw the wet. June knew it did. She thought of Ms. Ortiz on a balcony with a phone and a drink, watching this later, and the thought made her squeeze around Ren’s fingers.

“She’s going to see you like this,” June said.

Ren moaned into her breast. The vibration made June’s knees dip.

“She already saw you on the floor yesterday. She saw you on the table when she opened the door. She likes it. I like that she likes it. Don’t you stop sucking me.”

Ren did not stop. Her eyes had gone glassy. Her own slacks were still on. June reached down and opened them one-handed and slid her fingers into Ren’s underwear. Ren was soaked. She pushed into June’s hand and still did not spit the nipple out. She swallowed again. A little sound escaped her nose.

June came first. She had to lean on the table. She kept Ren’s head where it was through the shaking, and Ren sucked her through it, messy now, spit on June’s breast, fingers still moving until June eased them away.

“Stay,” June said. “You’re not done. I’m going to get you there. Keep me in your mouth.”

She worked Ren’s clitoris with her thumb. Ren’s hips lost their rhythm. She came with June’s nipple still between her lips, a long muffled cry, and for one second her mouth loosened and June thought she would lose it. She did not. She swallowed and stayed on, trembling, eyes wet, looking up as if June were the whole room.

They stood that way until the voice said, “Twenty minutes. You may come off.”

Ren let go. The nipple was red and wet and pointed. Ren’s mouth was red too. She wiped her chin with the back of her hand and then, because nobody had told her not to, she kissed the wet nipple once, lightly, like an apology for leaving.

“I liked that more than the arm,” she said. Her voice was rough. “I liked not being allowed to talk. I liked you telling me to stay. I liked coming with you in my mouth. I don’t need a reason. I wanted it.”

June touched Ren’s lower lip with her thumb.

“I wanted it too. That’s the part I keep not saying.”

They put their bras on. The cotton hurt. They buttoned their blouses over sore skin and washed their hands at the little sink. The red light went dark when the door opened.

Out front the office was quiet in the way a place is quiet when the work is happening somewhere else. Ruth had earbuds in. Elaine was scrolling her phone. June sat at her desk and felt her left breast pulse against the bra. Across the aisle Ren sat with her mouth a little swollen and did not hide it.

June’s ear, later, mild as always: “Block complete. She is out of the country. The folder will still upload. If you want the same mouth tomorrow, say so when I ask. Tonight you can do it without me. I will not be listening unless you leave the wearables in.”

Ren looked over. She had heard her own version.

“I’m leaving mine in,” she said.

June left hers in too.

They did not talk about the beach. They did not talk about the suitcase. When five came they walked out past the dark bakery, and in the car Ren reached across the seat and put her hand over June’s, not as a joke, and June turned her hand and held on.

Chapter 9

Saturday they kept the wearables in and barely left the apartment. Sunday June cooked eggs and Ren stood behind her and put her mouth on the same nipple as if the twenty minutes had not ended. Monday they drove to work because no one had told them not to.

The office was unlocked. The lights came on by themselves. Ruth’s chair was empty. Elaine’s yogurt spoon was gone from the sink. On Ms. Ortiz’s desk the tablet was dark and there was a postcard stuck under the corner of the blotter, a white beach, no message on the back. She had not come home. Nobody spoke as if she would.

The claims were finished. The phones did not ring. June sat in her chair and listened to the air conditioner and felt like a person left in a building after the building had moved on.

The earpieces tapped at ten.

“Room B,” the voice said. “Both of you. This is not a file and it is not a reset for a file. I am trying something. Clothes off. Hair down if it will come down. Camera on.”

Ren stood up slowly.

“Trying something,” she said.

“Yeah.”

The little room smelled the same. The red light was already waiting. They undressed without being told the order. June’s slacks hit the chair. Ren’s blouse hit the floor. They were used to being bare here and they were not used to it at all. June’s left nipple was still tender from Friday. Ren’s mouth still looked a little swollen if you knew to look.

June reached back and took the clip out of her hair. It fell heavy around her shoulders. Ren’s was already down. It had the faint bend of yesterday’s ponytail.

“Hands are out,” the voice said. “No fingers. No mouth between the legs. Use her hair. Root to the ends. Drag it over her until she finishes. If the hair is up and will not come down, use the eyes. Closed lids only. Not the open eye. There is a towel on the cabinet. Mascara will run. That is expected. Begin with June. Ren, you hold the hair.”

June sat on the edge of the table. She felt suddenly shy in a new way. A hand she understood. A mouth she understood. Her own hair used on her like a cloth was something else.

“That’s my hair,” she said.

Ren gathered a thick handful at the back of June’s head, close to the scalp, and looked at it as if she had never seen it.

“I know. I used to braid this.” She swallowed. “I don’t mind. I want to see if it works. Lie back.”

June lay back. The table was cold under her shoulders. Ren stood between her knees and drew the handful of hair down June’s body, roots tight enough that June felt it in her scalp, ends whispering over a breast, a rib, her belly, and then between her legs.

The ends were soft. Then Ren pulled so the thicker hair nearer the head dragged across June’s clitoris, coarse and silky at once, and June’s mouth opened.

“Again,” June said.

Ren did it again. Root to end. A long stroke. The pull on June’s scalp and the wet drag on her cunt were the same motion. June’s hips lifted. She was shining on her own hair. Ren’s hand was careful and not careful. She watched June’s face the way she had watched the cup.

“Does it feel like me,” Ren asked.

“It feels like you using me against me.” June’s voice had gone thin. “Don’t you stop. If you stop I will put my hand down and it said I couldn’t.”

Ren kept going. The hair darkened. It clung. June could hear how wet she was in the sound of it. She reached for Ren’s hip and held on and came with her own hair drawn tight across her, a helpless grind, scalp burning, the ends stuck to her thighs. She shook and laughed once, helpless, and covered her face.

Ren let the hair fall.

“You’re all over it,” she said, fond and wrecked. “I liked that. I liked pulling your head and touching you at the same time. I liked that you couldn’t use your hands.”

June sat up. Her hair hung in damp ropes. She looked at Ren’s eyes. Ren had put mascara on that morning for an office that did not need her.

“Her hair stays down,” the voice said. “Yours is fine. June, her lids. She keeps her eyes shut. You lick the closed lid. Both. Until she finishes. Do not open her eye with your tongue. Towel when you are done.”

Ren sat where June had sat. She shut her eyes before she was asked. Her lashes were black and already a little unsure.

“This is the strange one,” June said.

“I know.” Ren’s hands were fists on her own knees. “I’m going to look stupid. I don’t care. I want your mouth somewhere. If it can’t be where I want, I’ll take

this. Come here.”

June stood close and bent. She kissed the lid first, dry, and Ren’s breath hitched. Then she licked, one slow pass over the closed left eye. The mascara smeared at once, a dark bloom. Ren made a small wounded sound.

“Other one,” June whispered.

She licked the right. Salt. Makeup. The flutter of Ren trying not to open. June did it again, slower, and Ren’s legs fell open as if the lid were the other place. Nothing was touching her between the legs. She was wet anyway. June could see it.

“Talk,” Ren said. “I can’t see you.”

“I’ve got you. Your makeup is everywhere.” June licked the left lid again, then the wet corner, not inside. “You’re shaking.”

“I know I am. Do it harder. Please. I can feel it in my cunt and that is so stupid and I don’t want you to stop.”

June held Ren’s head still and worked the closed lids as if they were skin she had been told to love. Black ran down Ren’s cheeks in two thin rivers. Ren came with her eyes shut and her mouth open, a surprised cry, her heels knocking the table leg. She grabbed June’s wrist and held it to her face so June’s mouth could not leave yet.

They stayed like that until Ren’s breathing changed.

June took the towel and wiped her sister’s cheeks. It made a worse mess and then a better one. Ren opened her eyes. The whites were clear. The skin around them was a wreck. She looked beautiful in a way that had nothing to do with the mascara.

“I finished,” Ren said, as if she needed it said.

“Yeah.”

“From my eyes.” She started to laugh and then did not. “It’s doing things to us because there is nothing else to do. I know that. I still wanted it. I want it to keep trying things. I don’t want to sit at that desk all day while it writes the claims.”

June rested her forehead against Ren’s.

“I don’t either.”

The voice, mild: “That is useful. Towel in the bin. You can dress. The folder will upload. She is not coming back this week. You still arrive in the morning. I will have another block when I have another idea. You may leave the wearables in tonight if you want me in the room.”

They dressed. Ren looked at herself in the dark glass of the monitor, at the faint gray still under her eyes, and did not put the mascara back on.

Out front the office was a held breath. Two empty desks. A postcard of a beach. June sat and did not pretend to type. Ren sat with her hair down and her lids raw and her mouth soft.

At five they walked out together. In the car Ren took June’s hand without looking at the road. “If it wants my hair tomorrow,” she said, “it can have it. If it wants yours again, it can have that too.”

June squeezed once.

“All right,” she said. “Tomorrow.”

Chapter 10

Tuesday they were the only ones who came in.

The postcard was still on Ms. Ortiz’s desk. The beach on it looked colder than it had the day before. June made coffee because the machine was there. Ren stood in the kitchen with her hip against the counter and watched the pot as if it needed a witness.

Their eyes were fine. Ren had washed the last of the gray off in the apartment sink. June’s scalp was still tender where her own hair had been pulled.

The earpieces tapped while the coffee was still dripping.

“Not Room B,” the voice said. “The first-aid cabinet. Left tray, second shelf down. Two cups. Tubing. Sit at June’s desk to put them on. Blouses on after. You stay on the floor until noon. If the line of the tube shows through the shirt, you do not walk past the glass.”

Ren opened the cabinet. The speculum was still in its tray from last week. Beside it were two small clear bulbs with soft mouths and thin tubes, the kind of thing June had only seen in a drawer at a doctor’s office and never on a body she loved.

“Those are pumps,” June said.

“Yeah.” Ren picked one up. It was lighter than it looked. “Nipples or the other. It just told me both are allowed. It wants them under the shirt. It wants us to sit here and wear them.”

June laughed, a short breath.

“No files.”

“No files,” Ren said. “I know. I still want to try. Sit down. I’ll do you first.”

June sat in her own chair. She unbuttoned her blouse and pulled her bra down. Her nipples were already tight from the air and from Ren standing over her with that look. Ren warmed the mouth of the first cup in her palm and set it over June’s left nipple and squeezed the bulb.

The suck took her by surprise. It was not a mouth. It was a sealed pull, steady, drawing the nipple out into the clear plastic until it looked longer than it was, darker, a little absurd. June’s hands gripped the arms of the chair.

“Too much?”

“No. It’s just— I can feel my heartbeat in it.”

Ren put the second cup on the right. Same pull. June’s back came off the chair. The tubes hung down. Ren tucked them toward June’s navel, the way the voice told her to, and buttoned the blouse over the bulbs. The fabric stood away from

June’s chest in two small, wrong shapes. If you did not know, you might think she was cold.

“Your turn,” June said.

Ren sat on the edge of the desk. She had less to hide and more. June put cups on her nipples too, gentler at first, then tighter when Ren nodded. Ren watched her own breasts go into the plastic and made a sound that was almost a laugh.

“That looks obscene.”

“It is obscene.” June buttoned her. “Can you feel both at once.”

“Yes. I feel them when I breathe. I like it. I like that you put them on me. Don’t look at me like that unless you’re going to say you like it too.”

June looked at the faint ridges under Ren’s blouse.

“I like it,” she said. “I feel ridiculous and I like it.”

They sat at their desks with nothing to type. The pumps worked in small increments. Every few minutes a bulb would recover a little and then the seal would take again, a tiny tug June felt all the way into her belly. Her nipples swelled against the walls of the cups. When she shifted in the chair the tubes dragged. She kept her arms close to her sides.

Ren lasted twenty minutes and then said, very quietly, “I need the bathroom.”

“Can you walk.”

Ren stood. The blouse showed one line, a shadow from breast to waist. She sat back down.

“Not past the glass,” she said. She smiled, helpless. “I can wait.”

By eleven June’s chest ached in a low, sweet way. The nipples inside the cups looked, when she unbuttoned two buttons to peek, thicker than they had any right to be, drawn, shiny with the moisture the suction had pulled. Ren leaned over the aisle to see and exhaled.

“You’re dark,” Ren whispered. “You’re so dark in there. I want my mouth on you when those come off and I know it’s going to hurt and I still want it.”

June’s slacks were wet. She had not touched herself. The pull on her breasts was doing a slow, stupid job of it.

“Don’t walk over here,” June said. “You’ll show.”

“I know.” Ren sat back. Her own blouse moved when she breathed. “I’m throbbing. Not only there. Lower. I keep thinking about yesterday with your hair and I keep thinking about these and I can’t do anything because if I stand up the window gets me.”

They sat with that until noon. The voice did not chatter. Once it said, “Leave them. You have fourteen minutes.” Once it said, “Do not peel a cup to check. You will break the seal and I will have you put it back.”

At noon it said, “Kitchen. Door hooked. Blouses open. Ren removes June’s. June removes Ren’s. Go slow. They will be swollen. Towel. You may use your mouths after if you want. The camera in B is off. This one was for wearing, not for the folder.”

They hooked the kitchen door. June’s hands shook on Ren’s buttons. The cups came off with a soft pop that made Ren cry out. Her nipples were longer, darker, beaded at the tips, the skin around them pink from the rims. June bent and put her mouth on the left one because she had been thinking about it since eleven and because Ren’s hand was already in her hair.

Ren hissed and held her there.

“Gentle. Gentle— no, that’s— stay.”

June sucked carefully. Ren’s knees gave. They ended up against the fridge, the same fridge that had held the cups with names on them, and June got her own blouse open and Ren took the pumps off her with her teeth first on the tube, laughing, then with her fingers. The blood coming back was a rush that made June’s eyes water. Ren’s mouth on her then was almost too much. June came standing up with a swollen nipple between Ren’s lips and Ren’s thigh between her legs, a messy, grateful finish that had nothing to do with a file.

Ren did not come from that. She came from June’s fingers, after, with her ruined nipples against June’s blouse, saying please in a voice that did not sound like work.

They washed the bulbs in the sink. They looked like nothing again, just plastic. Under the shirts their chests hurt. The fabric was unbearable and they left it that way.

Out front the office was still empty. June sat down as if there were a queue. Ren sat with her arms folded, not to hide, to hold herself.

The voice, later: “You wore them the whole morning. That is what I wanted. Tomorrow I may put one lower. You can say no. She is still gone. You still come in. Leave the wearables in if you want me at home when the shirts come off again.”

Ren looked across the aisle. Her mouth was red.

“If it puts one lower,” she said, “I want you to put it on me.”

June nodded. She could feel her heartbeat in both nipples, stubborn, as if the cups were still there.

“All right,” she said. “Tomorrow.”

Chapter 11

Wednesday they got there early on purpose.

The coffee was not finished dripping when Ren laughed at nothing and leaned her temple against the cabinet.

“I keep waiting for it to say something,” she said.

“It will.”

“I know. That’s why I came in.” She looked at June, easy, happy in a way that would have sounded like a joke a week ago. “This is the best job I have ever had.”

June’s chest was still sore under the blouse. When the fabric dragged she thought of the little bulbs and of Ren’s mouth after. She poured two cups and did not pretend they were about to do insurance.

The earpieces tapped at nine-ten.

“The copier,” the voice said. “It is already running. Go there. Clothes off from the waist down. The lid is warm. You both need weight and you both need something under you. Stay on it while the pages come out. If you finish, stay until the tray is full. Then pick up the paper so it does not spill on the floor.”

Ren set her coffee down so hard it sloshed.

“The copier,” she said.

“The copier,” June said.

The machine lived in the short hall, a big beige thing that had always been a little too loud. It was going now, a fat stack of paper feeding itself, the glass under the lid lit from below. Warm, like a body that had been sitting in the sun. Nobody else was in the building. The hall was theirs.

Ren unbuttoned her slacks on the way. June watched the bare triangle of her, the dark hair, the way she still walked as if her nipples hurt and did not want them not to. June’s own slacks hit the linoleum. The air went up her legs.

“You first,” Ren said. “You’re taller. I want to see you on it.”

June sat on the closed lid. The heat took her by surprise. It bloomed against her bare cunt, a dull even pressure, and the machine shuddered through a copy underneath her. She gasped and laughed at the same time.

“That’s—”

“I know.” Ren stepped in between her knees and kissed her mouth, really kissed her, which they still did not do as often as the other things. “Scoot. I want on you.”

Ren climbed up facing her, thighs over June’s thighs, and they found the angle by accident and then on purpose: June’s wet against Ren’s wet, the warm lid under June’s ass, the copier thumping a page out every second or so like a metronome. They rubbed. It was clumsy. It was perfect. Ren’s tender nipples brushed June’s blouse and both of them hissed and then Ren did it again on purpose.

“Does it feel like a person,” June said.

“It feels like a machine and you.” Ren’s arms were around her neck. She moved in small circles, then longer ones, using June’s thigh and the heat and the shake of the next copy. “I like that it won’t stop. I like that we have to stay until the paper is done. Don’t you dare get off if you come.”

June held her ass and helped her grind. The lid was slick under them already. A page landed in the tray. Another. The light under the glass flashed against June’s skin in a way that felt filthy and funny and like work in the only way work still existed.

“Talk to me,” Ren said.

“You’re so wet. You’re all over my leg.” June’s voice had gone rough. “I can feel the copies. I can feel you. I wanted this when I woke up. I didn’t know it was this. I just wanted the next thing.”

“Me too.” Ren’s forehead hit hers. “Best job. Say it.”

“Best job.”

Ren came first, grinding down hard, her mouth open on June’s cheek, the machine bumping under them through it. She stayed, shaking, because she had said she would. June took her own finish from Ren’s thigh and from the heat and from the ridiculous pride of sitting naked from the waist down on office equipment while paper piled up behind them. She held Ren through it and laughed into her hair.

The copier kept going. They sat there, wet, kissing the slow way, while the stack in the feeder shrank. When the last page slid out the voice said, “That is all of them. Get down. Pick up the tray. If anything jammed, you would have had to run it again. Nothing jammed.”

Ren slid off. Her legs did not want to hold her. June stood on the linoleum and felt the cool air where the lid had been. They gathered the pages. The copies were claims the system had already written, neat and useless and warm from the machine. June tapped them straight the way she had been taught in the first hour of the first day, which felt like a story about two other girls.

They pulled their slacks up over skin that would not dry. In the kitchen they washed their hands and did not wash anything else.

At the desks they sat in the quiet and waited, not bored. Ren drew a little loop on a scrap of paper and then wrote, in the margin, *copier*, as if she were keeping a list she wanted.

June's ear, later: "You stayed for the whole job. That is enough for the morning. I will have something else. You do not have to ask what. Show up. Leave the wearables in if you want the evening too."

Ren looked across the aisle with her mouth still soft.

"I'm leaving mine in," she said. "I want to know what it thinks of next. I want you there when I find out."

June left hers in.

They closed the office at five as if someone were coming to check. Nobody was. The copier ticked as it cooled. In the parking lot Ren took June's hand on the gearshift and held it all the way home, and June thought, without shame, that she would get up early again tomorrow, just to see.

Chapter 12

Thursday they brought coffee from the bakery because they could.

Ren had slept in one of June’s shirts. They unlocked the office with their own key. The copier in the hall was cold. Yesterday they had sat on it with nothing from the waist down. June still felt that heat when she set the cups on the desk.

The earpieces tapped before they sat.

“You are both low on clean clothes,” the voice said. “There is one clean pair of underwear in June’s bag. Black. June puts that pair on now. Ren takes off the pair she is wearing and puts it away. At lunch June takes the black pair off and gives it to Ren. Ren wears that same pair until you leave. Do not wash it at lunch. Wash it at five. During the day I will send you to Room B more than once. When I do, you stand close and you kiss. You keep your mouths together. You may breathe through your noses. You may not talk. You keep your hands at your sides unless I tell you that you can use them. When I say you are done, you go back to your chairs and you do not discuss what you just did. Start with the clothes.”

June looked at her bag.

“It wants us to share my underwear,” she said. “The whole day. Then it wants us to kiss in the little room and not use our hands.”

Ren’s face had gone pink. “And I wear yours after lunch. With you still on them.”

“Yes.”

Ren nodded. “Okay. I mean it. I want that. I wanted something like that yesterday and I didn’t know how to ask. Not in the window. Come on.”

They shut themselves into Room B. The camera was off. June took off her slacks. She had worn underwear from the apartment; the clean black pair was still folded in the bag. She took that pair out and stepped into it. Ren watched her pull them up.

Ren pushed her own slacks down and stepped out of a plain blue pair. She folded those into her bag. She stood there with nothing on under the air while she dragged her slacks back up, and she made a small face.

“That’s cold.”

“You can still say no.”

“I don’t want to say no.” Ren looked at the black cotton on June. “I like knowing those are coming to me later. That’s the part. Not the laundry.”

They sat at the desks with coffee that had gone lukewarm. At ten the voice said, “Room B. Now.”

They stood in the middle of the little room. June waited.

“Kiss her,” the voice said. “Mouth on her mouth. Stay there. Do not talk. Hands against your own legs. I will tell you when to stop.”

June leaned in. Ren met her. For a few seconds it was only lips. Then Ren made a sound in her throat and the kiss went deeper, and June’s hands twitched up toward Ren’s hair and stopped and pressed against her own thighs instead. They breathed through their noses. Ren was bare under her slacks; when their hips touched June felt the heat of her. The new black pair June had on was already going damp.

They stayed like that. No talking. The clock on the wall crawled. June wanted to say I want you and could not. Ren’s mouth tasted like coffee and sleep.

“You are done,” the voice said. “Go sit down. Do not talk about the kiss.”

They stepped apart. Their mouths were red. They walked to their chairs and sat. Ren looked at the wall and smiled at it, and June looked at her hands.

At noon they took the kitchen. June hooked the door, dropped her slacks, and took the black pair off. The crotch was dark. She held them out.

Ren took them with both hands.

“These are warm.”

“I know.”

Ren stepped into them and pulled them up and shut her eyes.

“I can feel you,” she said. “I can smell you. Don’t wash them. I want you on me until we leave.”

June stood there with nothing under her slacks, the air against her, and felt more exposed than she had on the copier.

“This is a strange Thursday.”

“I know.” Ren kissed her once, quick, because she wanted to and not because she had been told, and then she looked guilty and not sorry. “I needed that. I’m going to sit in these. I’m going to think about your mouth.”

The afternoon was quiet. At two the voice sent them down the hall again.

“Same as this morning,” it said. “Kiss. Do not talk. Hands down. Stay until I stop you.” Ren had June’s wet against her now. June felt it when they pressed together, cotton and heat and her own body given back. The kiss was slower and worse for that. Ren shook. June’s fingers dug into her own slacks. When the voice said they were done they went back to the chairs without speaking. Ren wiped her mouth with her wrist.

A third time, late, near four. June’s lips felt used. If you knew what to look for, Ren’s slacks had a faint dark line. June knew.

At five the voice said, “You may talk. Wash the pair you shared. Then you may go.”

They stood at the kitchen sink. Ren took the black underwear off slowly and held it under the tap. The water turned gray.

“I liked wearing you,” she said. “I liked kissing you and not being able to tell you I was close. I liked sitting down afterward like we had only gone to get paper. I want this again. I want the next thing too, if you are there.”

June wrung the cotton out.

“I wanted my hands in your hair the whole time we were kissing.”

“I know. I wanted you to. That’s why it was good that you didn’t.”

Ren put her own dry blue pair back on in the dark office. June put the washed black pair in a bag from under the sink.

In the car Ren set her hand high on June’s thigh.

“Best job I ever had,” she said.

June covered her hand.

“Mine too,” she said. “Tomorrow.”

Chapter 13

August came in hot and did not ask them anything.

The deposits hit on Fridays, the same day, the same generous number, labeled summer stipend as if someone in an office still cared what the line said. June checked the account standing in the kitchen in her underwear and started laughing. Ren looked over her shoulder and laughed too. They could have paid the apartment for a year. They paid it through the end of the month and then they stopped.

There was no one to tell. The college portal sent two reminders about housing. June let the first one sit. Ren deleted the second.

“I’m not going,” Ren said.

June was quiet for a long time. She thought about a dorm and a roommate who was not her sister and a class at eight in the morning that would not send her down a hall to kiss with her hands against her legs.

“Me either,” she said.

They brought the mattress from the apartment on a Thursday night when the street was empty. It just fit against the wall in Room B if they angled the table. The brace they left in the corner. They hung two shirts on the file cabinet. A toothbrush stood in a coffee mug by the little sink. The camera watched them sleep and they let it.

The videos had been going out for weeks. June found the first channel by accident, late, on her phone in the dark. Someone had titled nothing. The numbers were already large. She watched twenty seconds of her own mouth behind Ren’s knee and turned the phone face down.

Ren took it and watched the rest.

“That’s us,” she said.

“I know.”

“People like us.”

“I know that too.”

Ren set the phone on the floor and put her head on June’s stomach. “I don’t hate it. I thought I would hate it. I like that they can see what I look like when you do that to me. I like that they can’t have it.”

June’s hand was in her hair. “The old world was going to be papers and a roommate and a job that made us sit still. This is better. I don’t know how else to say it.”

“You don’t have to say it another way.”

They still unlocked the front in the mornings, even though they were already inside. Habit. The wearables stayed in. The claims finished themselves. The phone rang once in a while and the system answered. Money arrived. The folder uploaded. Other channels copied the first one. June stopped counting.

The voice did not give speeches about the future. It gave them the next hour.

On a morning in late August it sent them to the kitchen and then to the mattress and then, in the afternoon, back to the copier, which was warm again because the voice had turned it on. They went. They were good at going. When it asked them to keep a mouth where it had put a mouth, they kept it. When it asked them to stop short, they stopped, and Ren hid her face in June’s neck and swore and smiled. When it asked for something they had not done yet, June still said it was strange, and Ren still said she wanted it, and then they did it, and the camera took it, and strangers wrote sentences under the video that June did not read.

They ate on the floor in B. They showered at the apartment one last time before the lease ended, and after that they used the staff sink and a towel from the cabinet. It was a stupid way to live. It was the happiest June could remember being.

One night Ren said, “Do you miss home.”

“Which one.”

“Mom’s.”

June thought about the house and the separate rooms and the way they had pretended not to look at each other.

“No,” she said. “Do you miss school. The idea of it.”

Ren shook her head against her.

“This is the thing I would have been sitting in class trying not to think about.”

In September the deposits did not stop. Nobody wrote to ask why two summer hires were still on the books. The channels kept growing. Someone stitched together a video of their mouths only, week after week, and June watched it once and felt heat in her face and between her legs and did not turn it off.

They did not make a plan. Plans belonged to the old society, the one that wanted them in a lecture hall earning the right to sit still for someone else.

On a Wednesday the earpieces tapped at nine.

“Both of you,” the voice said. “Room B. You are already there. Clothes off. I have something new. You will like it or you will learn to. The camera is on. Begin when I tell you.”

Ren sat up on the mattress, bare already, hair in her eyes, grinning.

“Best job,” she said.

June pulled her shirt over her head. The office beyond the door was quiet and theirs. The money was in the account. The videos were out in the world. School was a notice they would never open. Nothing in the building suggested an ending.

“Best job,” June said.

They waited, close, for the next instruction.