Lab Rat

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Chariot, Book 28

Chapter One

The atrium of the life-sciences building held the last of the afternoon. Light came in hard through the west glass and laid a pale stripe across the floor, and the three of them came down the stairs into it together, still talking about the grant language Helen wanted tightened before Friday.

Mara Quinn saw the girl first.

She had stopped at the foot of the far staircase with her phone in one hand and the strap of her bag sliding off one shoulder, and she was only standing there, which was enough. She was young, blonde, and built along an almost architectural line: a high, full chest that sat independently of the rest of her, a waist that narrowed so sharply it looked drawn, then hips and thighs that rounded out again without ever looking heavy. Her legs were long for her height and smooth, the kind that made ordinary standing look like a pose. Under the skin there was real muscle—enough that her stomach stayed flat when she moved and her arms had a clean, usable shape—but it never competed with the curves. The overall effect was not “fit girl” or “soft girl.” It was a single, exaggerated feminine silhouette that the eye kept returning to.

Mara did not speak. She only slowed.

Helen Ward followed her gaze and then did not look away. June Rhee, a step behind them, made a small sound that was not quite a laugh.

“That’s Hale,” Helen said, low. “Lila. She sat second row in 101 last spring. Work-study in the stockroom this term. She still asks which forms need a signature.”

Lila tucked the phone away, hitched the bag up, and started across the atrium toward the glass doors. The blouse was ordinary white cotton. It had not been cut to do what it was doing. The jeans were only jeans. Nothing about her clothing explained the way the three of them had stopped talking.

She pushed through the doors into the quad light and was gone.

June exhaled.

“I want her in the spring protocol,” Helen said.

Mara looked at the empty doors. “Psych will take her if we wait. They already skim the subject pool by the second week.”

“Then we don’t wait.” Helen’s voice stayed the voice she used in committee. “We put her on a study that needs the same volunteer. Repeat sessions. Same body, same baseline, no substitutions. If we write it that way, she isn’t shared.”

June glanced once at the stairwell, as if someone might still be on it. “You’re talking about blocking her calendar.”

“I’m talking about a volunteer who doesn’t bounce between labs,” Helen said. “Consistency. If we need her standing, we need her standing. If we need hands on her for landmarks and sensor placement, we need the same hands and the same girl, not whoever signed up that morning.”

Mara felt the grant language still sitting in her mouth and set it down.

“We can’t do this in the hall,” she said. “And we can’t do it by email.”

Helen nodded once. “We need a plan before anyone else sees what we just saw and writes a prettier flyer.”

June’s mouth tightened, not in objection. “When.”

“Tomorrow,” Helen said. “My office. Seven-thirty. The building’s empty then. Door closed. We decide how we recruit her, what the study is called on paper, and how we keep her. No one else in the room.”

Mara looked at the stripe of light on the floor where the girl had been standing.

“Seven-thirty,” she said.

“Bring the draft protocol,” Helen said. “And the subject-pool language from last year. I want her name on a form before the week is out.”

They started walking again, three women in ordinary shoes, talking like faculty who had only remembered a scheduling problem. Behind them the atrium went on being an atrium. Out on the quad, Lila Hale was already past the fountain, bag on her shoulder, blonde head bright in the late sun, not knowing she had been seen.

Chapter Two

Helen’s office faced the inner court, not the quad. At seven-thirty the court was only brick and shadow. Mara heard the lock turn as she set her cup down. June was already in the second chair, coat still on, a legal pad on her knee with nothing written yet.

Helen did not sit. She wrote a name at the top of a yellow pad and turned it so they could read it.

Lila Hale.

“Nothing we say in here goes in mail,” Helen said. “Not the draft, not the nickname for the protocol, not that we saw her. If this works, the paperwork will look like last year’s mapping study with a tighter subject restriction. If it doesn’t, we never had the meeting.”

June nodded once. Mara looked at the name until the letters stopped being letters.

“All right,” Helen said, and sat. “We want her. We want her exclusively. We want to look at her and we want our hands on her, and we want that to last longer than one paid afternoon. Say the ideas. Bad ones first. I don’t want the careful version.”

June spoke to the pad. “Ordinary pool listing. Twenty an hour, body composition, two visits. She comes, she leaves, she tells a roommate it was weird, she never signs again.”

“Useless,” Helen said.

“Grade pressure,” Mara said. “I could make the hours count in my lab section.”

“Messy,” Helen said. “And it ends in May.”

June tapped the pen. “We write her into the grant as a named volunteer. Multi-year. Travel stipend so she doesn’t take summer work. We own her calendar on paper.”

“Better,” Helen said. “Still only paper. Paper doesn’t make her still. Paper doesn’t make her come back after the first time we ask her to step out of her clothes and stand.”

The room took that sentence and held it.

Mara saw the atrium again. The blouse. The waist that looked drawn. She kept her voice level.

“Then we don’t ask once,” she said. “We build a study that requires the same landmarks, week after week, because the error bars collapse if the body changes or the volunteer changes. She becomes the instrument. You don’t swap the instrument.”

Helen’s mouth moved like a smile that had not been approved. “Go on.”

“Biomechanics first,” Mara said. “Stance, load, spinal line, hip depth, how that waist carries the rest of her. I need my hands on her to place the markers. I need her bare to the hip at minimum or the markers ride on cloth and the data is garbage. I need her for an hour, not twelve minutes. And I need her not fidgeting because she is embarrassed. If she fidgets, I have to put my hands on her again.”

June looked up. “So the handling is the method.”

“The handling is the method,” Mara said.

Helen leaned back. “Physiology wants more than markers. I want skin temperature over the chest and the low belly. I want pulse at the throat and the inner thigh because those are the clean sites. I want her on the table and standing, same morning, so we can see what changes when she is upright. I want repeat measures after we have kept her in the room long enough that her body

stops performing for us and starts telling the truth.”

“How long is that,” June said.

Helen did not pretend to think. “Longer than she expects. Long enough that she gets warm. Long enough that she has to be told she may not dress yet.”

No one filled the quiet.

June set the pen down. “Then we are not only recruiting a volunteer. We are recruiting a girl who can be kept in a state. That is my piece. Attention. Compliance that does not look like compliance on a form.”

“Say it,” Helen said.

“Mind control is a stupid phrase,” June said. “What I can do is narrower and worse. I can train a return. I can pair my voice with stillness until stillness feels like the thing she came for. I can use fatigue and repetition and a very plain script so that by the fourth session she walks in, she puts the bag down, and she waits to be told where to stand. She will call it professionalism. She will think she is good at being a subject. That is the story we give her.”

Mara felt heat under her own collar and did not touch it.

“And if she notices,” Mara said.

“Then we adjust the story,” June said. “We tell her some subjects take longer to acclimate. We tell her the discomfort is data. We tell her she is unusually consistent and that is why we need her and only her. We never tell her we picked her in an atrium because of the way she was built.”

Helen wrote two words under the name. Exclusive. Return.

“Keep going,” Helen said. “Wilder. I asked for everything.”

June did not hesitate. “Classic induction. Lights down, metronome, the old laboratory hypnosis protocol they won’t fund anymore. She counts backward. She goes under. We position her. She comes back remembering a long quiet sitting. That is clean for handling. It is not clean for looking. I want her eyes open. I want her to know whose hands.”

Helen nodded as if she had already discarded it and wanted it on the list anyway.

“Pharmacological stillness,” Helen said. “A mild anxiolytic. She signs for it as part of the sensor work. She gets heavy and warm and does not cross her arms over herself.”

“She would not be all the way present,” Mara said. “I want her present. I want the muscle working. I want her holding the pose because she was told to hold it.”

“Then no drug,” Helen said. “Noted.”

June turned a page. “Memory work. Soften Thursday so Monday is not a fight. She

remembers the room as precise and oddly kind. She does not remember how long Helen’s hand stayed at her waist.”

Mara looked at June.

“That one stays in the room,” Mara said. “We don’t write it. We don’t name it. If we use anything like it, it is your voice and a long session, not a pill and a story.”

“Agreed,” Helen said. “Next.”

Mara heard herself say it before she had decided to be the one.

“A copy.”

Helen’s pen stopped.

“Say that carefully,” Helen said.

“We already have the scanner,” Mara said. “Full photogrammetry. Every plane of her. We walk around the model when she is in class. That is looking without her. It is not enough, but it is a start. A standing cast from the same session—neck to knee, if she will hold still that long. We keep it in the locked cabinet in the annex. When we talk about her, we are not talking from memory.”

June’s voice thinned. “A doll.”

“A record,” Mara said. “Then, if Helen still has the tissue people on the third floor, we ask what a long analog would take. Cells she would already give us for a standard panel. Skin map. Volume. Eighteen months, maybe less. A second body that does not have a class schedule.”

Helen did not look shocked. She looked like a woman doing arithmetic.

“A grown copy,” Helen said.

“You asked for cloning,” Mara said. “That is the version that belongs in a building like this instead of a story. We would not parade it. We would not publish it. We would have something in the annex that is her shape when the living girl is buying coffee.”

June sat very still. “And the living girl.”

“We still handle the living girl,” Mara said. “The copy is for the days we cannot have her. It is also for the days we can. She stands. The copy stands. We look from one to the other. We correct the live stance until it matches what we kept.”

Helen’s breath changed, a small audible thing.

“That is a great deal of looking,” Helen said.

“Yes.”

“And the handling stays on her,” Helen said. “Warm. The one who can flush.”

“Yes.”

June closed her eyes once, briefly, as if she were already in the annex.

“There is a version,” June said, “where the copy is what we use to teach the graduate students, and Lila is what we do not share. Public gaze on the thing that cannot flinch. Private hands on the girl who can.”

Helen wrote annex and did not explain the word.

“Other in-betweens,” Helen said. “I don’t want to land yet.”

“Home sensors,” Mara said. “A band at the waist, a patch at the sternum. She thinks it is sleep and load data. We would have her overnight without having her overnight.”

“I want her overnight,” Helen said, mild. “But that is later. If we put a band on that waist, I want to be the one who seats it.”

June almost smiled. “Demonstration hours. She becomes the live model for the advanced seminar. Twenty people looking. We stand close enough to adjust her. She cannot cover herself because she is the visual aid.”

Mara saw it too clearly: Lila on the low platform, blonde hair taped back, the architectural line of her under the lab lights, Helen’s hand at the notch of a hip to turn her three degrees.

“She would do it if we called it teaching,” Mara said. “She asks which forms need a signature.”

“She would do a lot of things if we called them teaching,” Helen said. “That is why we will call them teaching.”

They went on like that until the court outside had color in it.

They talked about keeping her standing until her legs shook and calling the shake fatigue data. They talked about a protocol in which she arrived already knowing the hook for her bra would not be used. They talked about June speaking from behind her while Helen worked from the front, so Lila had a voice to hold and a pair of hands she could not watch at the same time. They talked about never pairing her with another subject, never a two-for-one morning, never a friend in the waiting chair. They talked about extra credit that renewed each month so the reason to come never quite ended. They talked about a key-card that opened only the mapping room and the annex, so that once she was inside the building her body had a smaller campus than her class schedule.

They talked about her chest as a problem of electrode placement and then, after a silence, as the thing that had sat independently of the rest of her in the atrium, and how a marker at the base of each breast would require a thumb to hold the skin smooth. They talked about the drawn waist as a circumference that would be taken three times a visit because cloth and breath changed it, and because taking it three times meant hands at the same place three times. They talked about the long legs and the table height and who would ask her to step in and who would ask her to step out. They talked about muscle under softness, Mara’s piece, the usable arms, the flat belly when she moved, and how none of that would be visible if they let her keep the blouse.

June said, “I want her looking at me when she understands she is not putting it back on yet.”

Helen said, “I want my palm on her sternum when her heart decides what it thinks of that.”

Mara said, “I want her in the scanner first so we have the map. Then I want her standing in the room with the map still on the screen behind her. She will see what we see. That will do part of June’s work for us.”

Helen set the pen down.

“We are circling the same object,” Helen said. “Say the object.”

June did. “We take her mind far enough that she returns and stills. We take her body often enough that we know it better than she does. We make a copy so we can look when we cannot touch. We never let another lab write her name.”

Helen waited for Mara.

“We do not drug her,” Mara said. “We do not drop her into a trance she cannot feel. The payoff is not an unconscious girl. The payoff is a conscious girl who stands there and lets it happen because we have taught her that this is the work. And a second shape in the annex so the looking never has a hungry day.”

Helen folded her hands on the pad.

“That is the one,” she said. “Greatest yield for all three of us. June gets the trained return and her eyes open. Mara gets the live structure and the model. I get repeat measures on the real skin, the long sessions, the warmth, and a body we can still have in the building when Hale is in lecture. We rotate so no one is only watching and no one is only recording. One of us leads hands. One of us holds her attention. One of us looks and keeps the record. Next session, we shift.”

June’s voice was almost dry. “On paper.”

Helen pulled a clean sheet through the pad.

“On paper it is the Hale Longitudinal Mapping Study. Exclusive volunteer, eighteen months, option to renew. Purpose: high-resolution somatic baselines in a single young adult female to reduce inter-subject noise. Methods: photogrammetry, landmark palpation, standing and recumbent measures, attention-and-stillness training to improve data quality, optional biospecimen for a parallel modeling arm. Compensation: stipend plus course credit. Restriction: subject may not enroll in concurrent physical studies. That last line is how we monopolize her without writing the word.”

Mara felt the word anyway, sitting in the closed room like heat.

“Who speaks to her first,” June said.

“I do,” Helen said. “Stockroom. Today. She already knows my face from 101. I will not mention the atrium. I will mention consistency, pay, and that we need one body we can learn instead of twenty we cannot. I will ask her to come to an information sitting, not a session. Clothes on. Door open. We do not put hands on her the day we invite her. If we do, she will smell the hunger and she will not sign.”

June looked at Helen for a long moment. “You can do that? Talk to that waist and keep your hands on the counter?”

“I can do it once,” Helen said. “That is why the information sitting is not in this office, and not at seven-thirty, and not with the three of us arranged around her like this. You two will be elsewhere. If she sees this configuration on day one, she will know it is not a study. She will know it is a decision we already made.”

Mara nodded. The discipline of it was part of the heat. Waiting was part of it.

“What we do not tell her,” Mara said.

Helen ticked the air with her thumb, quiet.

“We do not tell her we stopped on the stairs because of how she is built. We do not tell her about the annex until the scan is done and she has already stood for us. We do not tell her the stillness training is for our sake. We do not tell her the modeling arm is a second Lila. We tell her some tissues are used to improve the digital twin, which will be true. We do not tell her who will be in the room when she first takes the blouse off. She will be told it is standard to have two investigators present. She will not be told we fought over who those two would be.”

June laughed once, almost soundless. “Did we fight.”

“We would have,” Helen said. “That is why we rotate.”

They sat with the plan until it had weight.

Mara said, “The first handling session. Be specific. If we leave it vague, someone will rush and she will bolt.”

Helen looked at the court, then back.

“She arrives. June meets her and takes her bag and her phone and sets them on the shelf so her hands are empty. I explain the gown, not as a strip, as a requirement of the markers. She changes behind the screen the first time. We allow the screen once. Mara places the first markers at the shoulders and the sternum, over the gown, so she learns the hands before she learns the air. Then the gown comes down to the waist because the next landmarks are not available through cloth. We do not go lower than that on day one. We take the waist three times. We take photographs for the map with her face turned so she can tell herself later it was not her face. We stop while she can still stand without shaking. June tells her she did well because she was still, not because she was brave. She dresses. She signs the week’s card. She leaves with a time already written for her. That is the whole first session. Anything more is greed, and greed will cost us the year.”

June’s pupils had gone dark in the morning light. “You are leaving me the bag and the voice.”

“I am leaving you the thing that makes her come back,” Helen said. “Do not waste it on comfort. Be kind and exact. Kind and vague will make her talk. I do not want her talking to other girls about the room.”

Mara said, “And the scan.”

“Session two or three,” Helen said. “When she has already been bare to the waist in front of us and the world did not end. Full scan is faster if she is not fighting the air. After the scan, we have the copy problem in hand. After that, we can afford to want more, because we will already have something to look at on the nights she is not here.”

June wrote Hale Protocol on her own pad, then drew a line through it and wrote Mapping — exclusive instead.

“Erotic payoff,” June said, and did not bother dressing the phrase. “Say why this one beats the others. I want it spoken once.”

Helen did not flinch from it.

“Because we get her awake,” Helen said. “Because we get her repeatedly. Because we get our hands on the real waist and the real chest and the long legs that made standing look like a pose. Because we get her trained so the yes is hers and also ours. Because we get a second body in the annex so the looking never starves. Because none of us has to give up the part we came in here wanting. I will not run a study where I only watch you two touch her. I will not

run one where I only touch her and never get to stand back and see the whole line of her. And I will not run one that ends when she gets bored. This one does not end when she gets bored. This one ends when we say the map is finished, and the map is never finished.”

Mara’s cup had gone cold. She did not drink.

“If she refuses the first conversation,” Mara said.

“Then I have the wrong day,” Helen said. “I try once more, stockroom, different hour. If she refuses twice, we do not chase her across campus. We wait until she is on a ladder in the stockroom and the blouse does that thing again, and I ask a third time as if I had never asked. She is a girl who signs forms. She will sign if the first no is allowed to exist.”

June stood, finally, and folded the coat over her arm. The legal pad went into it.

“Seven-thirty was the right time,” June said. “If we had done this at noon I would have been a person. I am not, at the moment, a person. I am going downstairs to pretend I have office hours.”

Helen did not stand yet. She looked at Mara.

“You saw her first,” Helen said. “If the stockroom conversation goes badly, I want to know whether you can walk past her and not show her this face.”

Mara thought of the stripe of light on the atrium floor.

“I can walk past her,” Mara said. “I cannot unsee her. That is the whole problem.”

“That is the whole design,” Helen said.

She put the yellow pad in the desk drawer and turned the key. The name went into the dark with the rest of the morning.

“Today,” Helen said. “Stockroom. I will text only if she says yes to the information sitting. If you do not get a text, she said not today, and we meet again Thursday, same hour, and we do not invent a reason to wander the building looking for her. Agreed.”

“Agreed,” June said.

Mara agreed last, because saying it made the day start, and once the day started Helen would be in the stockroom with Lila Hale and a counter between them, talking about consistency and pay, and Lila would not know that three women had already decided what her waist was for.

Helen opened the door. The hallway was still empty. They left the office one at a time, ordinary shoes, ordinary faces, the lock sounding once behind them like the end of a sentence they were not allowed to write down.

Chapter Three

The stockroom smelled like paper sleeves and cold plastic. Lila was on the second step of the ladder with a box of pipette tips against her hip when the door opened and Dr. Ward came in alone.

Lila knew before the door shut.

It was not the haircut or the wedding-ring finger that had never carried a ring. It was the way Dr. Ward looked at her and then made a visible, professional decision not to. The eyes landed, took the whole line of her in one unblinking pass—blouse, waist, the place the jeans started—and then lifted to Lila’s face with a courtesy so careful it was louder than staring.

Lila’s mouth wanted to smile. She made it wait.

“Dr. Ward.”

“Lila. I didn’t mean to startle you. Do you have a minute on the floor, or should I come back?”

“I’ve got a minute.” Lila set the box on the shelf and came down. The ladder put her chest at the woman’s eye level for two steps. She felt that. She let it happen. On the floor she was still taller than the counter and not taller than the idea of being looked at. “Do you need something signed out?”

“Not from inventory.” Dr. Ward stood on the public side of the counter with her hands in sight, as if she had practiced where to put them. “I have a study that needs one volunteer for a long stretch instead of twenty for an afternoon. You were in my section last spring. You were consistent. I thought of you.”

Consistent. Lila heard the other word under it.

She rested her palms on the counter and let her weight come forward a little, enough that the blouse did what the blouse always did. Dr. Ward’s gaze dipped and climbed again like a person stepping over a cable.

There it is, Lila thought, and heat moved low in her belly, slow and pleased.

“What kind of study.”

“Somatic mapping. Baselines. We need the same body week after week so the noise drops out. Photogrammetry. Landmark placement. Standing measures and table measures. A stillness protocol so the data doesn’t wander. Stipend, and I can attach credit if your department allows it. Eighteen months if it holds. You would not be in anyone else’s physical study at the same time. We need the instrument to stay the instrument.”

Instrument.

Lila’s pulse found the inside of her wrists and stayed there.

“When you say landmark placement,” she said, ordinary as asking which form needed a signature, “you mean hands.”

Dr. Ward did not look away this time. “I mean hands. Markers don’t seat through cloth. Not the ones that matter.”

“Where.”

A small pause. The stockroom refrigerator kicked on.

“Shoulders. Sternum. Rib margin. Waist. Hips, later. Inner sites for pulse if physiology is running the same morning. It is not a needle study. It is a standing-and-being-mapped study. First session we do not go below the waist. Gown to start. Screen to change behind, the first time.”

The first time.

Lila felt her nipples draw up inside the blouse, distinct as punctuation. She did not fold her arms. She wanted the cotton to tell on her and she wanted Dr. Ward to have to pretend not to read it.

“Who is we.”

“Three investigators. Myself. Dr. Quinn in biomechanics. Dr. Rhee for the attention work. Two in the room when you are undressed. That is the standard. We rotate so the record stays clean.”

Three. Lila saw them without having the other two faces yet: women in their thirties, the same careful hands, the same decision not to look and the same failure. Faculty who ate lunch together and had already said her name with the door closed.

“Dr. Rhee,” Lila said. “Attention work.”

“Stillness training. Some subjects fidget. Fidgeting ruins placement. She talks you through standing still until standing still is the thing you came to do.”

Lila’s throat moved. She could feel the sentence land between her legs like a finger that had not touched her yet.

“And the pictures.”

“For the map. Face turned if you want it turned. The useful pictures are not your face.”

“What are the useful pictures.”

Dr. Ward’s voice stayed on the grant side of the sentence. “Volume. Plane. How you carry weight. The waist in particular has to be taken more than once in a visit. Breath changes it. Cloth changes it. We take it until the number holds.”

Until the number holds. Hands at the same place three times. Lila pressed her thighs together behind the counter and knew the woman could not see it and wanted her to know it anyway.

“You said one volunteer.”

“Yes.”

“So you picked me.”

“I picked a body we can learn.”

Lila smiled then, small and unhidden.

Dr. Ward saw the smile and something in her posture went very still, the way a person does when the script has a hole in it.

“Dr. Ward,” Lila said. “I sat in your section for a whole term. You are not subtle when you think you are being subtle. You came down here alone. You kept your hands on your side of the counter. You told me two other women will be in the room when my gown comes down, and you said first time like there is a second time already on the calendar. I know what you are. I know what they are. I knew it when you opened the door.”

Silence. Not offended. Caught.

“What I am,” Dr. Ward said, careful.

“A lesbian professor who saw me on the stairs or in the atrium or wherever you all stand when you pretend you are talking about a grant. And you went back upstairs and made a plan with your friends.” Lila tipped her head. “How many friends. The two you named, or is the department denser than that.”

Dr. Ward could have left. She did not.

“The two I named,” she said. “That is the study. That is the room.”

“Thirty-something,” Lila said. “All of you. You look at me like I am a problem you already solved and you are only here to write it down.”

“If this is unwelcome—”

“It isn’t.”

The refrigerator hummed. Lila’s own voice surprised her with how steady it was. Under the steadiness she was soaked. Every dry word had done it: instrument, landmark, gown, first time, waist taken until it held, two investigators, stillness until stillness was the errand. “Say the rest,” Lila said. “The part you were going to save for the information sitting with the door open. I want it now. I want to know what I am agreeing to while I can still feel it.”

Dr. Ward looked at the closed stockroom door, then back. The carefulness did not leave her. It changed temperature.

“We will ask you to change. Behind a screen once. After that the screen is in the way of the work. Markers at the shoulders and the sternum over cloth first, so you learn the hands. Then the gown to the waist. We photograph. We measure. We stop before your legs shake. Dr. Rhee will take your bag and your phone so your hands are empty. She will tell you you did well because you were still, not because you were brave. You will dress. You will leave with the next time already written. Later there is a full scan. Later there is a model of you so the map exists when you are in class. Later the measures go lower. Later the sessions run long enough that we tell you not to dress yet.”

Lila’s breath had gone shallow. She let it.

“A model.”

“A record. Photogrammetry. Possibly more than a picture if the parallel arm is approved. Something we can stand in a room and walk around.”

A copy. They wanted her twice. The live one to handle and a quiet one to look at. Lila’s stomach dropped in the good direction. She had to swallow before she could speak.

“You are going to keep a version of me in the building.”

“If you consent to that arm.”

“I do.”

Dr. Ward’s lips parted and closed.

“You haven’t seen the form.”

“I’ll see the form.” Lila came around the counter. She did it slowly, giving the woman the silhouette she had come for, the high chest and the drawn waist and the long legs that made even stockroom linoleum feel like a pose. She stopped a decent foot away. Close enough to be rude if you were pretending this was inventory. “Every piece you just said is the reason I am going to say yes. The hands. The standing. The two of you in the room. The third one talking. The pictures that are not my face. The waist three times. Not dressing yet. A thing in an annex that looks like me when I have chemistry. I want that. I wanted it when you said mapping. I wanted it more when you said we.”

Dr. Ward’s hands had become a problem. She laced them.

“You understand this is a study.”

“I understand what you need it to be on paper.” Lila’s voice went softer, not smaller. “I also understand that you walked in here already knowing where you

want your palm. Sternum, you said. Pulse sites. I have been wet since you said fidgeting ruins placement. If you need me to pretend I think this is only extra credit, I can do that for the hallway. In here I would rather not waste your afternoon.”

Color stood on Dr. Ward’s cheekbones. It made her look less like a grant and more like a woman who had locked a drawer at seven-thirty in the morning.

“The information sitting is still required,” Dr. Ward said. “Consent language. Compensation. You can stop a session. That part is real.”

“Good. I like real.” Lila glanced at the woman’s mouth and then, deliberately, at her hands. “When.”

“I was going to offer Thursday. Open door. Clothes on. You and I only.”

“Invite the other two.”

“That is not how the first conversation is supposed to look.”

“It already doesn’t look like that.” Lila smiled again. “They want to see if I sign. I want to see the people who are going to tell me not to dress yet. If you leave them in an office imagining this counter, they will be useless until they have stood where you are standing.”

Dr. Ward was quiet long enough that Lila heard footsteps in the corridor and then the footsteps went away.

“Thursday at four,” Dr. Ward said. “Conference room off the mapping lab. Not my office. I will tell them you asked they be there.”

“Tell them I knew.”

“I will tell them what is useful.”

“Tell them I knew,” Lila said again. “I don’t want to walk into a room of women performing surprise.”

A breath. Then, quiet: “All right.”

Lila reached for the pad they used for rush slips, wrote her name and her number, and turned it.

“I’ll sign,” she said. “On one condition. It isn’t on your form.”

Dr. Ward looked at the paper as if it might be a trick. “Say it.”

“When it’s the three of you and the door is shut and the work has started, you don’t call me the subject. You don’t call me Miss Hale. You call me lab rat.”

The words sat on the air between them, bright and exact.

Dr. Ward’s eyes flicked once, involuntary, down Lila’s body and back. The look was the atrium look. It did not bother to hide now.

“That is not standard language.”

“I don’t want standard language when your hands are on my waist for the third time.” Lila’s voice had a little shake in it at last, not fear. “I want to hear what I am to the study. I want the nickname that means you get to keep me on the table and walk around the copy when I have class. If you can’t say it, you picked the wrong girl in the atrium.”

Dr. Ward looked at her for a long time.

“Lab rat,” she said, testing the weight of it, not loud. The stockroom made it sound like a private instrument.

Lila’s whole body answered. She had to put her fingertips on the counter to keep her knees ordinary.

“Yes,” Lila said.

“I will have to tell the others.”

“Tell them it was my condition. Tell them I said it first. I don’t want anyone thinking you put it on me.” She paused. “You can put other things on me. Not that.”

Dr. Ward’s laugh was one surprised breath. It made her younger.

“Thursday at four,” she said. “Eat something. Do not come from a lab section already tired. Dr. Rhee will want you able to stand.”

“I’ll stand.”

Dr. Ward stepped back, then stopped, as if the door were a problem she had not budgeted.

“Lila.”

“Yes.”

“If you change your mind before Thursday, you text me and you do not come. No explanation required.”

Lila picked up the pipette box again, hip, blouse, the whole architectural line of her turned half away and then not.

“I won’t change my mind,” she said. “You can tell your friends the lab rat is already wet and still going to show up in clothes like this was an information sitting.” She glanced over her shoulder, blonde hair sliding. “It can be an information sitting. I just won’t be the only one in the room who knows what the information is for.”

Dr. Ward opened the door on an empty hall.

“Thursday,” she said.

“Thursday,” Lila said.

When the door shut, Lila stood in the cold plastic smell with the box against her hip and her pulse beating in places a mapping study would someday have to name. She climbed the ladder on legs that did not feel like stockroom legs. On the second step she closed her eyes once, smiled at nobody, and said it herself, barely sound, just to feel the shape of the yes.

Lab rat.

Then she shelved the box, wrote the rush slip in a steady hand, and waited for four o’clock on Thursday as if the week had already been measured and found to hold.

Chapter Four

The conference room off the mapping lab had a table too clean for four people and a stack of paper at Helen’s right hand. Blinds cut the Thursday light into bars. Mara sat nearest the door. June had already taken the chair that faced the empty one.

Lila closed the door herself.

She set her bag on the shelf without being asked, phone on top of it, and stood there in the same white blouse and the same jeans and nothing, she knew, that the jeans were owed. The lack of a bra had been a decision in her room at noon. The rest had been a decision in front of the mirror. She had walked across the quad like that. Every step had reminded her.

Helen started the way she had promised the hallway.

“This is the information sitting. You can leave at any point. Compensation is on page one. The exclusive-volunteer clause is page two. The modeling arm is a separate signature. Two investigators present when you are unclothed. You may stop a session with a word. Today is clothes on. We go through the pages. You ask what you want. You do not sign because the room is quiet.”

Lila pulled the blouse over her head.

There was no ceremony in it. The cotton left her arms and then there was only her, the high chest that sat on its own line, nipples already tight from the walk and from the three faces turning at the same time. She opened the jeans, pushed them down, stepped out, and laid the clothes on the empty chair as if she were returning inventory.

No underwear. They could see that in the first second of air.

She stood in the bars of light and let them have the thing they had stopped for on the stairs. Waist drawn in. Hips and thighs rounding without heaviness. Legs long enough that standing still was already a pose. Muscle under the skin, belly flat, arms clean. Heat already slick between her thighs, obvious if anyone looked with honesty.

No one told her to dress.

“This is a fantasy for me,” Lila said. Her voice stayed conversational, stockroom-steady. “I need that said before the pages, so you don’t spend an hour protecting me from a thing I came here to have. I have wanted women to study me. I have wanted hands that had a reason. I have wanted a room that could say map when it meant look, and landmark when it meant touch, and exclusive when it meant mine. You brought me the costume. I am up for the costume. I am also up for what is under it. If you need me to pretend I think this is only baselines, I can do that on the forms. In this room I would rather be naked and accurate.” Mara’s throat moved. June had not blinked.

Helen’s eyes went once to the piled clothes, to the bare hip, to Lila’s face.

“You walked across campus like that,” Helen said.

“I sat in a chair in the quad for ten minutes like that,” Lila said. “Then I walked. I wanted to arrive already decided.”

She came to the table. The wood was cold against the front of her thighs when she stood against it. The papers were neat. She turned the first page with two fingers.

“I’ll sign all of it. You can read them out loud if you need the record. I want the modeling arm. I want the eighteen months. I want the clause that says no other lab. I have a question that is not on here.”

June’s voice was low. “Ask it.”

“The copy,” Lila said. “The thing you walk around when I have class. Can I become that. Not just be scanned for it. Become it. If you are going to keep a version of me in the annex, I don’t want to be the girl who visits the duplicate. I want to be the duplicate. I want the days I am in lecture to feel like the leftover days. I want the kept body to be the real one.”

The room held that.

Mara spoke first, careful, as if the words might tilt.

“On paper the model is a record of you.”

“I am asking off paper.” Lila looked at her—Mara, who had the scanner, who had seen her first if the atrium story was true. “You can grow it or print it or cast it. I don’t care about the method as much as I care about the job. If there is going to

be a Lila who stays in the building and a Lila who buys coffee, I want to know which one you are building me into. I would rather be the one you keep.”

Helen’s hand had settled on the unsigned stack, not moving.

“That is a larger consent than a scan,” Helen said.

“Then put it in the margins,” Lila said. “I’ll initial it.”

She turned another page. Compensation. She did not read the number. She found the line and held her hand out. Helen, after a second, gave her the pen.

Lila signed.

Page two. Exclusive. She signed. Page three, risks, photographs, face turned or not. She signed with her face not turned, blonde hair falling forward over one bare shoulder. Modeling arm. She signed and then wrote, small, in the white space under the last box: *subject requests to be the kept copy; annex preferred to campus.* She initialed that too. June watched the pen as if it were part of the stillness protocol already.

Lila set the pen down and did not pick up her clothes.

“There is the condition,” she said. “I told Dr. Ward in the stockroom. I want to hear it from each of you. Not as a joke. As what you call me when the door is shut and the work has started.”

Helen knew. She had had two days to decide whether she would say it in front of the others.

“Lab rat,” Helen said.

The sound went through Lila like warm water. She stepped around the corner of the table to Helen’s chair, close enough that Helen had to tip her head back. Lila put her hand at the back of Helen’s skull, not forcing, only placing, and brought her left breast to Helen’s mouth.

“That is for saying it,” Lila whispered.

Helen could have turned her face away. She did not. Her mouth opened on the nipple and the heat of it pulled, wet, a long first suck that made Lila’s knees consider the floor. Helen’s hand found Lila’s waist because the waist was there, the drawn place, and held. The suck deepened. Lila heard her own breath go uneven and did not quiet it. She let Helen have the nipple until her mouth came off shining and the air hit wet skin.

“Mara,” Lila said.

Mara looked at Helen, at the wet nipple, at Lila’s face.

“Lab rat,” Mara said, and the word was different in her mouth, more structural, as if she had already fitted it to a stance.

Lila went to her. Mara was taller in the chair than Helen had been. Lila leaned in and gave her the other nipple, the neglected one, aching for it. Mara's mouth was less certain and then not uncertain at all. She sucked. Lila felt it between her legs as a bright corresponding pull. Mara's hands stayed on the arms of the chair for one second and then one of them rose and settled at Lila's hip, thumb along the bone, the biomechanics of keeping her there.

Lila held still for it. Stillness, she thought, and almost laughed.

When she stepped back both nipples were dark and wet and tight. June had not been given anything yet. June's eyes were on Lila's mouth, then lower.

"You don't have to," Lila said. "But I don't sign the nickname with two out of three."

June's hands were folded. She unfolded them.

"I would rather not pretend about the other thing either," June said. "But I can say this first. Lab rat."

Lila's smile hurt a little. She returned to June and offered the first nipple again, still wet from Helen, and June took it as if she had been thinking about the mechanics of a mouth since seven-thirty in a locked office. The suck was slow and mean in its patience. June's eyes stayed open. Lila had to put a hand on June's shoulder. The slickness on her thighs had become a problem she could feel when she shifted.

June released her with care, as if placing a marker.

Lila stood in the middle of them, naked, signed, marked only by mouths.

"Thank you," she said, and meant the word.

Helen had the look of a woman whose first-session script was on fire on the table.

"We were going to stop at paper," Helen said.

"You can still stop at paper." Lila touched her own sternum, the place Helen had named in the stockroom, and left a shine of saliva there with her fingertip. "I won't. I told you what the fantasy is. I want to be handled. I want to be mapped. I want to be kept. I want the three of you to stop spending your discipline on protecting a girl who took her clothes off before you finished page one."

She looked at June.

"When the stillness comes up," Lila said, "don't dress it. You don't want me well-behaved. You want me returned. You want a voice that makes standing the thing I came for. Wouldn't you rather call that mind control. You already have the protocol. You already said fidgeting ruins placement. You already planned to take my bag so my hands are empty. That is not a focus exercise. That is you getting

in. I am asking you to get in on purpose. I would rather be told I am going to be controlled than told I am going to be good at being still.”

June sat back. For a moment she was only a thirty-year-old woman in a chair with Lila’s taste in her mouth.

“Mind control is a stupid phrase,” June said. “It makes people think of a swing and a pocket watch.”

“Then use a better phrase in the hallway,” Lila said. “In here I want the stupid one. I want to know that when you talk, you are not helping me concentrate. You are taking the part of me that would cross my arms. I came here wet because Dr. Ward said you would train a return. Train it. Do not call it professionalism if you are going to own it.”

Mara’s voice was rough. “If we do that, the consent pages are not enough.”

“Write another page.” Lila picked up the pen again, found the back of the last form, and wrote in her same neat stockroom hand.

I, Lila Hale, understand that the stillness protocol is intended to alter whether I leave, cover myself, or experience the sessions as optional. I ask for that alteration. I ask to be called lab rat in closed sessions. I ask to be built as the kept copy. I will arrive without underthings when told. I will strip when told or sooner. This is a fantasy I am choosing.

She signed that too. Date. Time. She turned the sheet so they could read it.

Helen read. Mara read. June read last.

Helen said, very quietly, “Lab rat.”

Lila’s nipples tightened as if the mouth had come back. She did not go to her this time. She let the word work by itself.

“Are we still in an information sitting,” Mara said.

Helen looked at Lila’s clothes on the chair, at the wet marks on two nipples, at the stack of completed signatures.

“We are in what she made the sitting into,” Helen said. “We do not put her on the scan table today. We do not take the waist three times today. If we do all of it today we will not have a Thursday left, and I want Thursdays. What we do is this. We accept the papers. We accept the nickname. We accept that she is standing there because she wants to be standing there. June tells her when to pick up the bag. Mara sets a time for the first mapped session. I walk her to the door so the hallway sees a student leaving a meeting.”

Lila’s disappointment was real and so was her patience. She had gotten more than the stockroom.

“When,” she said to Mara.

“Tomorrow,” Mara said, too fast, and then steadied. “No. Monday. Mapping room. Four. Eat. No exam in the morning if you can help it. We start with markers at the shoulders and the sternum. You already know the gown is a courtesy you are going to refuse. I am going to offer it anyway so the record has an offer.”

“I’ll refuse it,” Lila said.

“I know.”

June stood. She picked up Lila’s phone and her bag and held them, not giving them back yet.

“When I speak on Monday,” June said, “I will not call it stillness if you are in the room. I will tell you what I am doing to your ability to leave. If you hate it after ten minutes, you say stop and I stop. That is the only part of the old script I am keeping. The rest of it is going to sound like what you asked for. Do not ask for mind control as a game and then be shocked when my voice has a job.”

Lila’s eyes stung, briefly, not from sadness.

“Good,” she said.

June gave her the bag. The strap crossed Lila’s bare chest and made a line she knew they watched.

She dressed the way she had stripped, without apology. Blouse over wet nipples that showed through at once. Jeans over nothing. The seam found her and she let it. She hooked the bag on her shoulder.

At the door she paused and looked at the three of them in their clothes, in their thirties, in a room that still smelled like paper and now smelled like her skin.

“You can tell each other I performed that,” Lila said. “I didn’t. I have been thinking about being a lab rat since she said instrument. Monday I am going to get on whatever you point me at. If the duplicate is a table or a cast or a thing you grow, point me at that too. I want to stop being the girl in the stockroom as soon as you have a better use.”

Helen opened the door. The corridor was only a corridor.

“Monday at four,” Helen said.

“Monday at four,” Lila said.

She walked out with no underwear and signed pages behind her and the feeling of three mouths still on her, and she did not look back, because looking back would have been asking them to call her again in a hallway that could not have it. The bars of light stayed on the table. The pen stayed where she had left it. In the

conference room three women sat down among her signatures and did not, for a long time, speak.

Chapter Five

Helen’s kitchen faced a small brick yard and nothing else. Saturday light came in without bars. The Thursday pages sat on the table under a clean plate so the signatures would not keep looking at them. Mara had brought a pencil. June had brought the back sheet Lila had written with her own hand.

I ask for that alteration. I ask to be called lab rat. I ask to be built as the kept copy.

Helen poured. No one pretended they had slept well.

“If it is a fantasy,” Helen said, “then Thursday was her telling us the title. Our job is the rest of the book. I do not want to give her a cautious version of what she already stripped for. I want the version she will feel in her stomach when the latch opens. Say everything. We will cut what is theater. We will keep what makes her the thing she asked to become.”

Mara turned the pencil once. “She asked to stop being the girl in the stockroom as soon as we had a better use. So the annex cannot be a room she visits in jeans. The annex has to be where she lives while we have her.”

“Yes,” June said. “Campus becomes the leftover.”

Helen nodded at the yard. “Start with the hours we can actually take. Monday is four. We can have her Friday after her last class through Sunday night if she signs a weekend addendum. Two weeknights if the stockroom can spare her. The rest of the time she is the leftover on purpose, walking around with the annex still in her body.”

“Home sensors for the leftover days,” Mara said. “Waist. Sternum. Not because we need sleep data. Because she asked to be the instrument even when she is buying coffee.”

June made a small sound of agreement. “And a voice note from me she is told to play before bed on the nights she is not in the building. Not a lecture. A return. Short. The same sentences every time. In the morning she will come to us already partly gone.”

Helen wrote voice / nights on a grocery pad. The domesticity of the paper made the rest of it sharper.

“The Monday script she already refused,” Helen said. “No gown. No screen. She will arrive the way she arrived Thursday, or more so. We stop offering the courtesy after she refuses it once on the record.”

Mara’s pencil ticked. “Markers. Scan. Waist three times. That is the science she wants as costume. Under the costume we need a place she waits. If she sits in a chair like a student while we prep, she is still Lila Hale between procedures. I do not think that is the fantasy.” June looked up. “Say the thing you have been circling.”

Mara set the pencil down.

“A cage,” she said. “In the annex. Large enough that she can sit and turn and lie on her side. Not large enough that it is a room. Wood-chip bedding, the kind they put under small animals so the floor is not a floor. She goes in nude. She stays in while we lay out the markers and the camera and the calipers. She watches us prep. When we are ready we open it and take her out as what she asked to be called. We put her back when the handling is done. The cage is the sentence. The table is the clause.”

Helen did not tell her it was too much. Thursday’s wet mouths were still a fact in the room.

“Wood chips,” Helen said.

“They sound. They cling. They get in her hair. When we pull her out we will have to brush her off before the markers will seat. That is more hands. That is her smelling like the annex when she stands on the scan plate. If she wants to be a literal lab rat, the floor should not be tile she could have in a dorm.”

June’s eyes had gone dark the way they had in the locked office.

“The latch is mine,” June said. “When it opens I speak. When it closes I speak. The cage is not furniture. It is the first switch. She hears chips, then metal, then me, then hands. If we do that the same way every time, I will not need a swing or a watch. I will need a latch.”

Helen saw it as if the annex were the yard outside: the blonde girl on all fours or sitting with her knees up, chips at her hip, watching three women put on gloves at a counter. The architectural body made smaller by a box. The waist they had wanted to span. The chest they had already had in their mouths, marked with bedding dust.

“She will get cold,” Helen said.

“Then we keep the annex warm,” Mara said. “That is not kindness as delay. That is keeping the subject usable.”

Helen wrote annex warm. cage. chips. latch = June.

“Label,” June said. “On the front, where she can read it from inside. HALE. LAB RAT. DO NOT TRANSFER. If another graduate student ever opens the wrong door they get the sentence before they get the girl. And she gets the sentence

every time she looks up.”

Mara exhaled through her nose. “Weigh her when she comes out. Every time. Palm on the crown of her head if she fidgets on the scale. Number in the book. Back in when we are done, even if she would rather stay on the table. The return has to include being put away. If we only take her out, she is still a student we undressed. If we put her back, we kept her.”

Helen felt that in her hands.

“Gloves to start,” Helen said. “Then not. Thursday she gave us skin. If we only ever touch her with nitrile she will think we got frightened. Gloves for prep and for the first lift out, so the lift feels like procedure. Bare hands once she is on the table. Bare hands when we brush the chips off her seat and her breasts and the backs of her thighs.”

June nodded once.

They went on.

A shallow water bottle mounted on the cage bars, because a bowl could be tipped and because a bottle made her mouth do a small animal thing they would all have to watch. Food was a thinner idea; they cut it to a measured snack after the long sessions so her blood sugar did not drop and so eating happened from their fingers or not at all. Mara wanted a transport crate for the twelve steps between annex and mapping room, wheels, a towel she would not be allowed. Helen cut the towel. June kept the crate.

The duplicate: the scan Monday, the cast as soon as she could hold still that long, the printed or grown analog in sight of the cage so the girl in the chips had to look at the body she was asking to become. Mara would start the scan file under the name HALE-KEEP rather than HALE-LILA. Helen would initial the margin note Lila had already written.

Clothes: a hook outside the cage for whatever she arrived in. Nothing stored inside. No folded jeans in her line of sight while she waited. If she came from the stockroom she stripped at the annex door and put the blouse in Helen’s hands. If she came from a weekend addendum she arrived already empty.

June wanted a word that paused her without being stop. Stop remained stop. The pause word was for when they needed her frozen mid-step with chips still on her hip. They tried three and kept still, said flat, because Lila had already refused to let them hide inside it. Still would now mean the opposite of the old cover. Still would mean June had her.

Helen wanted the rotation kept. One latch, one pair of hands, one record. Next session, shift. No one only watching the cage. No one only opening it.

Mara wanted Saturday afternoons in the annex with no mapping at all. Prep out, sit in the chairs, talk over work, let Lila listen from the chips. “If the fantasy is being kept,” Mara said, “then some hours she is not the task. She is the animal in the room while we are people. That will do more to her than another photograph.”

June’s mouth tightened, pleased. “I can work with that. My voice over their conversation. Not constant. Once, when she shifts. Her name is not her name in there.”

Helen wrote lab rat only, annex.

They cut what was theater. A collar they did not need if the label was on the cage. An ear tag that would frighten the wrong way and leave a mark they would have to explain at a front desk. A public seminar in the first month—too soon; Lila would do it and the graduate students would smell the heat and the study would stop belonging to the three of them. Drugs, still no. A lock on her campus room—no; she had to remain able to walk the quad on leftover days or the kept copy would have nothing to steal her from.

What they kept sat in a short list in Helen’s ordinary handwriting.

Annex cage, wood chips, label.

Warm room.

Latch script June.

Gloves to lift, hands to clean and map.

Scale every exit.

Crate between doors.

Hook for clothes. Nothing inside.

HALE-KEEP file. Cast in her sight.

Weekend addendum. Voice note on leftover nights.

Still means June has her. Stop still stops.

Some hours she only waits while we work.

Helen set the pen down.

“Monday we do not spring the cage as a surprise,” she said. “She asked for mind control and a kept copy, not a prank. We walk her into the annex. We show her the box. We tell her what it is for. We let her stand there nude and look at it. If she says stop, there is no cage. If she gets that look she got when I said instrument, we open the door and she goes in on her own. We do not push her. We do not have to. She will climb in because she has been waiting to be put

somewhere.”

Mara rubbed her thumb along the pencil as if it were a marker still.

“And if she cries,” Mara said.

“Then we find out whether they are the Thursday kind,” Helen said. “She cried with her eyes for a second when June told her the voice would have a job. That was not no. If she cries in the chips we stay in the room. We do not unlock from panic. We ask if she is using stop. If she is not using stop we let the fantasy finish becoming itself.”

June folded Lila’s back page so the signature showed.

“She will use stop if she needs it,” June said. “She was very clear when she wanted more. She will be clear if she wants less. Our failure would be to give her a smaller annex than the one she wrote on the form.”

Helen looked at the two of them in her kitchen, Saturday, ordinary cups, the yard doing nothing.

“Are we certain,” she said, because someone had to put certainty in the air.

Mara did not hesitate. “Thursday she rewarded a name with her mouth on us. She asked to be the duplicate. She asked for the stupid phrase. A warm cage and wood chips and being pulled out when the tray is ready is not us becoming cruel. It is us finally speaking her language without translation.”

June said, “If we leave her in a chair she will be polite and wet and still partly a student. If we put her in that box she will get to stop carrying the day. That is the best version. I am certain.”

Helen saw Lila on the ladder in the stockroom. She saw the blouse coming off before page one was finished. She saw the pen writing annex preferred to campus.

“Then we build it tomorrow,” Helen said. “I can get the cage from the old small-animal storage if I sign it out as overflow holding. Mara takes bedding. June writes the latch script and the night note and does not decorate either one. Monday at three we are in the annex before she is. If the room is not ready we are late to her fantasy, and I will not be late.”

They sat with the list until it stopped looking like a grocery pad.

Mara said, “We should eat something that is not this.”

No one stood.

Helen reached across and turned Lila’s sheet face down at last.

“She is going to hear chips under her knees,” Helen said, almost mild. “She is going to watch us wash our hands. She is going to wait. When we take her out

and say the name she bought with her nipple, she is going to understand that we believed her. That is the best version. We are not going to give her a lesser one because we are afraid we look like the women she already knew we were.”

June picked up her coat. “Text me when the cage is in the room. I want to stand in it empty before she ever does. I need to know what the latch sounds like from inside.”

“I’ll go with you,” Mara said.

Helen walked them to the door. The brick yard stayed empty. In the kitchen the plate still covered the Thursday signatures, and the grocery pad sat beside it with a cage on it, and the weekend opened in front of them like an annex that had finally grown a floor.

Chapter Six

The annex was warmer than the corridor. Lila felt it on her face before she understood the rest of the room.

They were already inside. Helen by a metal counter. Mara with a tray of markers and a pair of calipers laid parallel. June near a shape against the far wall that Lila’s mind tried, for one polite second, to call a crate.

It was a cage.

Large enough to sit in. Not large enough to pretend it was a bed. Wire. A latch she could read from the door. On the front, in the same block hand as inventory labels:

HALE

LAB RAT

DO NOT TRANSFER

The floor of it was not floor. Pale wood chips, deep enough to bury a hand. They had a clean, dry smell that did not belong to a conference room. A shallow bottle hung on the bars. Outside, a hook. A scale. A small wheeled crate with the door standing open. Against the side wall, a blank standing form waiting for a cast that was not there yet, and a screen dark except for a file name.

HALE-KEEP

Lila’s bag strap slid down her shoulder. She did not fix it.

“This is the annex,” Helen said. No smile. No flourish. “The mapping room is twelve steps that way. This is where you wait. The cage is not a surprise and it is not a joke. You asked to be a lab rat and you asked to be the kept copy. This is how we understood you. You look at it. You say stop if this is not what you meant. If it is what you meant, you take your clothes off and you put them on the hook

and you go in yourself. We do not push you.”

June’s hands were empty at her sides. Mara had not picked up a marker.

Lila walked to the wire.

She read her name. She read the second line twice. She put two fingers through a square and felt how little the metal gave. Chips whispered when she shifted her shoe. Heat had already started between her legs, heavy and immediate, as if the room had put a hand there for her.

“You built it,” she said.

“Yesterday,” Mara said.

Lila nodded. She could not have spoken the next thing without giving it away in her throat, so she used her hands.

Blouse off. Hook. Jeans down. Nothing under them. Hook. Shoes. Socks. The warm air found her nipples and the wet seam of her and the long line of her back. She stood nude in front of the label until the label made sense on her skin.

She opened the cage door. The latch was simple. The chips came up around her knees as she crawled in, a dry sound, a small rain. They clung at once to her shins, her insteps, the soft insides of her knees. She turned and sat. Her hair brushed the top. Her waist made the shape they had stopped for on the stairs, only lower now, only framed.

She looked at them through the wire.

June stepped close enough that Lila had to lift her face.

“Once the latch closes,” June said, “you are not in a meeting. I am going to tell you what I am doing to you. Stop still stops. If you do not say stop, I will take the part of you that would get up and put your jeans back on. Nod if you heard both of those things.”

Lila nodded. Chips ticked under her heel.

June shut the door. The latch spoke, a short iron syllable.

“Good,” June said, and the word was not praise. It was a mark. “Stay where you are. Watch us. Do not talk unless you need the door. You are the lab rat. This is the box that means we believed you.”

Lila’s mouth opened and closed. She did not talk.

They prepped in front of her.

Helen washed her hands at the little sink, slow, wrists, between fingers, as if Lila were already a procedure. Mara set markers out in a line: shoulders, sternum, rib, waist. She checked the camera. She checked the scale with a tap of her shoe.

Helen laid gloves on the tray and did not put them on yet. June wrote the time in a book and then stood where Lila had to see her and did not help.

Chips had gotten onto Lila’s hip. Onto the underside of her left breast. She could feel one caught against the wet of her, a tiny irrelevant sharpness that made her pulse obvious. She did not brush it off. Her hands stayed on her knees because no one had told her hands to work.

The file name burned on the dark screen.

HALE-KEEP

She understood, sitting in the smell of wood, that they were going to take this body and keep a version of it that did not get to walk back to the stockroom. The understanding went through her like the latch. She had to change how she sat. The chips announced it. Helen looked over.

“Soon,” Helen said, to the work, not as comfort.

Mara put on gloves. Helen put on gloves. June did not. June came to the latch.

“Look at me,” June said.

Lila looked.

“I am opening the box. You will come forward. You will let yourself be lifted. You will not help more than I tell you. When you are out, you are still the lab rat. The room is not yours.”

The latch. The door.

“Come forward.”

Lila came forward on her knees. Chips followed her, in her hair, on her palms, dusting the high curve of her chest. Gloved hands took her under the arms and at the waist—Helen and Mara together—and the lift was a procedure. Her feet left the bedding. For a second she was only weight, only the architectural line held in the air, blonde head, drawn waist, long legs trailing chips onto the tile.

They set her on the scale.

“Still,” June said, and the old word arrived with its new job.

Lila froze. The readout searched, settled. Helen wrote the number without reading it aloud. A palm came to the crown of Lila’s head, Mara’s glove, quiet, when Lila’s breath would have made her sway.

Off the scale.

Gloves peeled. Bare hands.

They brushed her.

Helen’s palms down the backs of Lila’s thighs, chips falling. Mara’s fingers at her seat, at the crease where bedding had stuck, efficient and not cold. Helen again, up the belly, over the ribs, then the careful pass across each breast, thumb sweeping the nipple Lila had already put in her mouth on Thursday. A chip had clung there. It left. Lila’s knees announced themselves. June watched her face and did not touch her yet.

“Lab rat,” Helen said.

The name hit the washed skin and Lila made a sound she had not planned. Mara’s hand was still at her hip, thumb on the bone.

“Lab rat,” Mara said.

June stepped behind her. Not close enough to hold. Close enough to speak against her hair.

“Lab rat. Walk.”

They did not use the crate for the first twelve steps. Later, Lila understood, they would. Today they walked her, a hand at the nape, a hand at the waist, into the mapping room.

Lights. Table. Camera on a stand. The air a little cooler. Her nipples drew tighter. She stood where Mara pointed, on a taped mark on the floor, and the pose that her body made when it was only standing became the work.

“Shoulders,” Mara said.

Markers. Hands. The first pair seated on bone. Sternum: Helen’s fingers held the skin smooth and the marker found the notch between Lila’s breasts and stayed, a small claim. Lila looked at the wall and then did not, because June had said the room was not hers and looking at the wall was a way of leaving.

“Waist.”

Helen’s hands there. The tape. The number. Hands again, breath, the number. Hands a third time, lower in the exhale, the drawn place measured until it held. Each pass was a slow burn. Lila was so wet she was afraid of the scale they had already used. She did not close her legs. June had not given her legs a different job.

“You want to cover,” June said, mild, from the side. “You will not. That wanting is mine now. It can be in your body. It does not get your hands.”

Lila’s hands stayed at her sides and shook.

They photographed. Face not turned. She had signed for that. The shutter was ordinary. Being the useful picture was not.

Mara had her stand. Sit. Stand. The muscle under the softness did what muscle did. Helen took pulse at the throat and then, after a glance at June that was not really asking, at the inner thigh, two fingers, count, the room very quiet except for Lila's breath. The fingers were professional. Lila's body was not. She felt herself clench around nothing and knew Helen felt the tremor even if the count stayed even.

"Not today," Helen said, to the tremor, to the rest of what they could have done. "We stop before you cannot stand. That is still the rule."

Lila almost asked them not to stop. She did not. She had given June the talking.

Back.

The crate this time. Door open. June pointed. Lila folded down into it nude, markers still on her shoulders and sternum, waist unmarked except by the memory of the tape. Wheels. Twelve steps of being moved. The humiliation of it was so precise it felt like being loved in a language she had requested.

Annex heat. Cage door. They lifted her out of the crate and into the chips as if the chips were the correct floor.

"In," June said.

Lila went in. She sat. She was dusted again at once, pale fragments on wet nipples, on the marker at her sternum, in the blonde hair at her nape. Helen closed the latch.

June crouched so their eyes were level through the wire.

"You did not say stop," June said. "So I am keeping what I took. You will sit. You will listen to us work. You will not make yourself come. If you get close you say so and we will decide whether the lab rat gets that. Your clothes stay on the hook. Your name in this room is the name on the door. I am going to leave you in there while we write the numbers down. That is not us forgetting you. That is you being kept."

Lila's eyes had water in them. She let it be the Thursday kind.

"Lab rat," she whispered, because she had not been told she could not say that one.

June's mouth changed, almost a smile, not kind.

"Yes."

They went to the counter. They wrote. They spoke to each other about error bars and a Monday baseline and when the cast could happen, and none of it was for Lila except that all of it was for Lila. She sat in the wood chips with her knees up and her bare body framed in labeled wire and watched three thirty-year-old

women do ordinary work with their backs half-turned, and the fantasy was no longer a thing she had had to explain.

It had a floor.

It had a latch.

It had her weight in a book.

It had chips stuck to the places their mouths had been.

She put her fingers in the bedding and closed her hands and did not touch herself, and the not-touching was June’s, and the heat in the annex held, and on the hook her jeans waited like a leftover day.

Chapter Seven

They wrote for a long time.

Lila sat in the chips and listened to pencils and the quiet of women who had already touched her and were now doing the other half of the work. Numbers. Times. A sentence Mara read back that had Lila’s waist in it and did not have her name. June said something about the latch and Helen said put it in the book the same way every session so the record has a spine.

The bottle hung at the left bars, shoulder height if she were standing, mouth height if she rose on her knees. She had been looking at it without deciding to. A bent metal tube. A little bead of water at the tip that fattened and then held.

She wondered if it dripped. She wondered if they had tested it with a hand. She wondered, with a heat that was not thirst, what she would look like from the counter if she used it.

She went to her knees. Chips slid and announced her. The spout was cool. She did not take it in her fingers. She leaned and lapped.

The first touch was clumsy. Water on her chin. A small sound she had not known her mouth would make. Then the bead gave and she lapped again, short, and the annex seemed to tilt toward that one noise.

Helen’s chair stopped.

“Mara,” Helen said.

Lila froze with her tongue still at the metal.

“I see her,” Mara said. Not loud. Almost pleased. “Look. She likes her water.”

June had been writing. She set the pen down.

“So cute,” June said, and the words were ordinary and not ordinary, a private register the three of them could share over a body in a box. “Look. She likes her water.”

Lila’s face went hot. She did not pull away. She lapped once more because the sentence had made the water taste like being seen, and because stopping in the middle would have been a kind of covering. A drop ran from her lower lip to her sternum marker and down. She knelt there, blonde head at the bars, and let them look.

Helen made a sound that was almost a laugh and was mostly breath.

“Note it,” Helen said. “Not the cute. The use. She found it without being told.” Mara wrote. Lila sat back on her heels. Chips clung to her wet knees. She wiped her chin with the back of her wrist and felt, absurdly, proud of the bottle.

They talked a while longer in the lowered voices of people finishing a page. Then Mara stretched, shoulders, the human ordinary of it.

“I need coffee,” Mara said. “If I keep sitting I am going to start the cast tonight, and we said we would not.

June looked at the cage. At Lila. At the dark screen with HALE-KEEP still waiting.

June hit the switch by the door.

The annex dropped to the red of an exit plate and the thin line of corridor under the door. The file name died with the screen. Wire became a suggestion. Chips became a smell and a texture and a sound when Lila moved.

Their footsteps went. The corridor door. Then nothing that belonged to her.

Lila sat in the dark until the dark was only warm.

She lapped once more, quietly, for herself. She turned a circle the cage allowed and lay down on her side. Wood chips received her hip, her cheek, the long bare stretch of her. One arm under her head. Knees drawn. The marker at her sternum pressed a small circle into her skin. She could feel where their hands had been as if the hands had stayed.

Total was the only word that fit. Not happy like a grade. Not safe like a dorm. Bliss like a latch that had closed on the right animal.

She pictured them downstairs under the hard cafeteria lights, three thirty-year-old women with coffee, a table that was allowed to hold cups instead of calipers. She pictured Helen’s face when she said the study as if it were still only a study. She pictured Mara’s mouth fighting a smile. She pictured June not smiling at all, only sitting with the latch in her head. Celebrating without a bottle raised. Celebrating by having a new research subject who had crawled into the method and drunk.

Lila closed her eyes. The chips ticked when she breathed. She did not touch herself. The not- touching belonged to June even in an empty room. She let the fantasy run until it was not running, until it was only her body in bedding, kept.

Time went somewhere.

When the door opened again the lights did not all come back. One switch. A softer wash. Helen alone, coat on, the smell of coffee still in her hair.

Helen stood at the wire and looked at the curl of her.

“There you are,” Helen said.

Lila pushed up onto an elbow. Chips in her hair. In the crease of her elbow. Dusting the side of her breast. She waited.

The latch. Helen’s hands, bare. Not a lift this time. A touch at Lila’s wrist, come out.

Lila crawled into the warm annex air and stood. Her legs had the delayed feeling of a nap that had not been sleep. Helen brushed her, shorter than before, hair, shoulders, the chips at her seat, and then took the blouse from the hook.

“Arms.”

Lila put her arms up. Cotton over nipples that tightened at the cloth. Helen dressed her the way she had been undressed: as work. Jeans. The seam found her bare, still slick, and Lila breathed in through her teeth. Shoes. Bag.

Helen did not hand her the phone until the last.

They stood at the annex door. The cage stayed open behind them, rumpled, used, labeled.

“You still have classes,” Helen said. “Until you don’t.”

Lila looked at her.

Helen’s voice stayed even, kitchen-even, the Saturday list made into a corridor sentence.

“Tie up any affairs you have to and start making notes for the Lila we’re not doing research on. She’ll need them. How she gets to the stockroom. Which section she sits in. Who expects a text back. What she wears when she is pretending the annex is not the real floor. Write it down. She will get sloppy if you keep it only in your head.”

Lila’s throat worked.

“Then,” Helen said, “text me to get back in your new home when it makes sense. Not when you are lonely. When the leftover day has been finished well enough that walking back here is the next true thing. I will come down and open it. If you text because you want to skip a lecture, I will tell you to go to the lecture. The kept copy does not get built out of holes in her schedule. It gets built out of a girl who closed her other life on purpose.”

Lila nodded. The bag strap was a stranger on her shoulder.

“Do I take the markers off,” she said.

Helen looked at the small claims on Lila’s skin, sternum, the edges at the shoulders under the blouse.

“Sternum can hide. Shoulders you peel before you sit in a classroom. Put them in the inside pocket and bring them back. They are not yours. They are on loan to the leftover girl so she remembers she is on loan too.”

Lila’s eyes had water in them again. She let Helen see it.

“I liked the bottle,” Lila said, very quietly.

“I know,” Helen said. “We all saw.”

She opened the corridor.

“Go,” Helen said. “Eat. Write the notes. Be Lila Hale until it makes sense not to be.”

Lila walked. The first steps on tile were too clean. Behind her the annex held its heat and its chips and the bottle with the bead already forming again. She did not look back until the corner, and then only long enough to see Helen still in the doorway, one hand on the light, waiting to give the dark back to the box.

On the quad the evening was ordinary. Students. Someone laughing. Her own jeans, no underwear, markers in her pocket like coins.

She sat on the same low wall she had sat on before Thursday and opened the notes on her phone, and she began, in the leftover girl’s hands, to write instructions for a person who still had classes.

Stockroom keys.

The ladder.

Who says goodnight.

How to answer if someone asks why you look like you slept.

At the bottom she typed a line she did not send yet.

When it makes sense. New home.

Then she walked toward food and a desk and the last hours of a day that was no longer the one that counted.

Chapter Eight

Her room was too quiet and too soft. The bed had a quilt. The lamp made a circle that did not smell like wood.

Lila set the bag down as if it might spill the annex. She ate standing at the counter, something cold from the refrigerator she did not taste, because Helen had said eat and the leftover girl was supposed to do the ordinary things on purpose.

In the shower the chips found her.

One in the hair at her nape, dark now with water, a pale fleck she had to work loose with her nails. One at the crease of her hip, stuck through the walk across the quad. A dust of them in the hollow behind her knee. She watched the fragments go down the drain and felt the loss of them like taking off a hand. She washed anyway. The leftover girl would smell like soap. The kept one would smell like the box.

Towel. Mirror.

The shoulder markers peeled with a sting she liked too much. She put them in the inside pocket of the bag, loaned things, not hers. The sternum marker she left. A blouse would hide it. A buttoned shirt tomorrow. Her fingertip rested on the small circle between her breasts until the mirror made her look like a girl touching a secret, which was accurate.

She sat on the bed in a shirt and nothing else and opened a document.

Notes for the Lila they’re not doing research on.

Stockroom keys on the hook by the door, not in the jeans.

Ladder: second step is where the box sits against the hip.

If anyone says you look tired, say inventory.

Do not sit with your knees open on the quad wall.

Do not check the inside pocket in public.

If Dr. Ward comes for a rush slip, you are the clerk. You are not the study.

Answer texts from the floor, not from the feeling.

Eat.

Go to lecture even if the chair feels like the wrong furniture.

The bottle is not here. Do not look for one.

She stared at the last line and typed another.

When you want the latch, finish the day first.

Her thumb opened a message to Helen and wrote, because the wanting arrived on schedule. I’m done. I can come back.

She looked at it until it seemed like skipping a lecture. She deleted it word by word. The empty field stayed. She set the phone face down.

It rang once, not a call. A file. June.

No greeting. June’s voice in the little speaker as if the annex door had opened in the quilt.

“You are in the leftover bed. You will not make yourself come. You will put your hand on the marker we left you and you will leave it there until you fall asleep. You are still the lab rat. The room you are in is a hallway with a quilt on it. In the morning you will do the day that is not research. When the day is closed you may ask for the door. Not before. Still.”

The message ended.

Lila’s hand was already moving. She found the circle on her sternum and held it. The shirt went damp under her palm. She did not go lower. The instruction sat on her like wire. She turned off the lamp and kept the hand where June had put it, and sleep came in pieces, chips still falling through the dark behind her eyes.

Morning was a shirt buttoned to the throat.

Lecture first. She sat in the second row out of habit and wrote dates she would not need. The chair was wrong in the way Helen had meant: too open, too allowed. When the hour ended she did not linger.

The stockroom smelled like paper sleeves and cold plastic. She almost smiled at it, and then she did the work.

Keys. Ladder. Box against her hip on the second step, blouse behaving, the marker a small hard fact the buttons kept. A girl from the afternoon section asked for parafilm. Lila found it. She wrote the slip. She did not look at the door as if it owed her Helen.

At noon she drafted again.

It makes sense now.

She deleted that too. It was only hunger.

She ate. She went back. She finished a shelf she had been avoiding since last week. She answered a message from a roommate about soap with the word *yes*. She did not say where her other soap had gone, down a drain with wood in it.

Late afternoon the stockroom emptied. She stood on the second step with nothing in her hands and felt the text rise, and she climbed down and locked the cabinet and signed herself out like a person who still had a job.

Dinner. Desk. The notes document open.

She added:

You locked the cabinet.

You did not wait by the door.

You can ask now.

The phone.

Helen.

Lila typed slowly enough that each word had to be true.

Leftover day is finished. Notes are in the file. Shoulder markers in the inside pocket. I still have the one you said I could hide.

She looked at the unsent draft from last night, already gone, and did not copy it.

New home.

She sent it.

The quilt was still a quilt. The room was still too soft. She sat on the edge of the bed with the bag at her feet and the sternum marker under her shirt and waited for a door that was not in this building to answer.

Chapter Nine

Friday night the quad had already thinned to a few windows and the sound of a distant cart. Lila stood at the annex door with her bag on her shoulder and did not knock. The text had done that work.

Helen opened the door.

The annex was warm and smelled of clean wood. Mara was at the metal counter with her book open. June stood beside the cage, one hand on the latch as if she had been there long enough to get used to the feel of it. Against the side wall a standing frame waited that had not been in the room on Monday, and the screen showed a pale cloud of scanned planes under the file name HALE-KEEP.

Helen pointed at the hook, then at a single page on the counter.

Lila took off her blouse and hung it up. She stepped out of her jeans and hung those too. She had crossed campus with nothing under them. The sternum marker from Monday was still on her, a small dark circle the week’s shirts had hidden. She left it where it was.

The page was dated through Sunday night. Overnight in the annex. Meals here. Stop still stopped. Lila signed her name and wrote *lab rat* under it, then turned the paper back toward Helen’s hand.

June opened the cage.

“In.”

Lila went to her knees and crawled onto the chips. They rose around her shins and the heels of her hands and made their dry sound. She turned to sit, hair brushing the wire, and looked once at the hook. Blouse and jeans were both there. June shut the latch.

They went back to the counter.

Lila listened to water in the sink and the scrape of a tray and Mara asking Helen whether the bandage was the fast set. Helen said it was. June wrote the time in the book. No one crouched to explain the box.

When they were ready the latch opened. Gloved hands took Lila under the arms and at the waist and lifted her out. Chips fell off her onto the tile. They set her on the scale long enough for the number to hold, and Helen wrote it down. Then the gloves came off and bare palms brushed the bedding from her seat, the backs of her thighs, the underside of each breast. Mara pointed at the frame.

Lila stepped onto the pads. Helen’s hands settled at her waist and turned her two degrees until she matched whatever Mara was looking at, and then the hands left her.

The plaster was warm. Mara started at the sternum, wrapping over the marker so the shell would keep that small raised coin. The bandage climbed her ribs and tightened around the drawn place of her waist and came down over her hips to mid-thigh. They bound her arms at her sides. She could take a breath. She could not fold herself inward. Across from her June watched her face and did not speak, and when Lila’s eyes filled no one reached up to touch the tears.

The set took a long time. The room hummed. Lila stood inside her own shape while it hardened.

They opened the shell along the side and lifted it away from her skin. The thing that came off her was hollow and wet and already exact. Mara and Helen stood it on the second frame. It held her chest. It held her waist. It had no face.

“Out.”

She stepped down. They weighed her again and put her back in the cage. The latch closed. Helen came to the bars with food and fed her from her fingers. Lila ate. June touched the spout of the bottle to be sure it would give. The overhead lights dropped to the red of the exit plate. The corridor door shut, and the lock turned.

In the half-dark the new shell stood undressed. On the hook Lila’s blouse and jeans still hung, ordinary as a student leaving a lab. She lay down in the chips with her palm on the marker and shut her eyes.

Saturday the lights came up.

They wrote. They came and went. Someone brought food to the bars and someone else checked the book. The shell dried from wet gray to a paler, finished color. Lila drank from the spout when she needed to and turned in the chips when her hip went numb. She watched the keep-body become solid and did not ask what would be done with it. Late in the day the lights went down again and the three of them left her the way they had on Friday, and she slept facing the faceless shape.

Sunday’s light was thinner, a late-afternoon color that made the wire look sharper.

Lila sat up because the page ended tonight. She looked at the hook for the clothes she would need if the leftover girl was expected to walk out.

The hook was empty.

HALE-KEEP was wearing the jeans.

It was wearing the blouse as well. Someone had dressed the shell the way Lila dressed to cross the quad: zipper up, button done, white cotton smoothed over a chest that would not lift with breath. The keep-body faced the cage in her campus clothes, finished enough to pass for a girl who still had somewhere to be, if it had been given a face and a door.

Lila looked down at herself. Chips on her knees. Chips at her hip. The marker between her breasts. No blouse. No jeans.

She thought of the stockroom keys on the hook in her room. She thought of the second step of the ladder and the second row in lecture and the notes file she had written for a person who was supposed to remember how to be ordinary. That person’s clothes were across the annex, standing on a frame, keeping their shape without her.

She wondered if she still went back. If Monday would want a student, the student had nothing on the hook. If Monday would want a student, the student was already over there, dressed, holding the week’s disguise on a body that would not leave.

Lila put her fingers through the wire and touched nothing that could answer her. The bottle gathered a bead at the spout. Somewhere down the corridor a door closed. She sat in the chips and watched her blouse move when the vent breathed, a false respiration on the wrong chest, and she waited for someone to come and say which of them had class in the morning.

Chapter Ten

Monday came in with the corridor door and three sets of shoes and a fourth pair of bare feet.

Lila sat up in the chips. Helen came first, then Mara, then June, and with them a girl who had Lila’s face and Lila’s hair and Lila’s architectural body, and no clothes on her at all. The clone’s nipples were tight from the hallway air. She walked as if tile were ordinary. She did not look toward the cage until she had to pass it, and then her eyes met Lila’s for one unreadable second, the same blue, the same pale lashes, and moved on.

The keep-body stood where Sunday had left it, dressed in Lila’s blouse and Lila’s jeans.

The clone went to the frame and began to undress the shell.

She opened the button at the faceless throat. She worked the zipper down the empty waist. She eased the jeans off plaster hips that had been poured from Lila’s own, then pulled the blouse over a chest that would never inhale. She dressed herself in the same order Lila used for lecture: jeans first, then the blouse, fingers quick on the buttons. When she was finished she looked like a student. The shell looked like a shed skin.

Helen poured coffee from a thermos into the three cups they kept on the counter. She did not pour a fourth.

“The overnight hold took better than the trial in May,” Mara said, watching the clone smooth the blouse. “Cellular stability through the first forty-eight hours used to be the problem. They’ve closed that. You can walk a finished analog out of the suite now and she holds a schedule.”

“She held more than a schedule,” June said.

Helen’s mouth moved, private, pleased. “Come here.”

The clone went to her. Helen put both arms around her and gathered her in, palms sliding from the small of her back to the drawn waist inside the jeans, then up under the hem of the blouse as if to check that the body she had ordered was the body she was holding. She kissed the clone on the mouth, slow enough that Lila heard the change in breath. When Helen let go she left her hand at the clone’s hip a moment longer, thumb along the bone.

Mara took her next. The hug was tighter, more structural, as if Mara were confirming planes she already knew from a scan. Her hands mapped the ribs, the underside of one breast through the cotton, the long muscle of a thigh. She kissed her as well, and the clone made a small sound into it that Lila recognized from the inside.

June last. June held the clone’s face in both hands first, looked at her, and only then drew her in. The kiss was unhurried. June’s other hand settled low on her

belly and stayed there while she finished. When she stepped back the clone’s mouth was wet and her eyes were dark.

“Go,” Helen said. “Second row if you can get it. If the stockroom asks why you weren’t on the ladder Friday, you were out with a fever.”

The clone nodded. She slung a bag Lila had not seen them bring over one shoulder. At the door she paused and leaned into Helen again, a brief press of cheek, almost fond.

“What a great lover she turned out to be,” Mara said, not quietly, while the clone was still in the room. “I didn’t expect her to be generous. She is.”

“She’s exact,” June said. “That too.”

Helen smiled at the girl in Lila’s clothes. “Monday, then.”

The clone left. The corridor took her. For a few seconds Lila could hear the same gait she used on tile, and then she could not.

Helen capped the thermos. Mara laid out gloves and the marker tray. June opened the book and wrote the date. They spoke over the work in the ordinary voices of faculty who had already had a morning.

“The new induction doesn’t need the week of stabilization we budgeted,” Mara said. “If she stays this clean through Thursday we can print the second analog for the annex and stop treating the shell as the keep.”

“One is enough if she keeps going to class,” Helen said. “I don’t want two of her buying coffee. I want one buying coffee and one here.”

June glanced at the cage, then at the stripped plaster body.

“The clone found her notebook,” June said. “Stockroom etiquette. Keys, the ladder, what to say if someone asks why she looks tired. Very helpful. She read it in the suite before she walked over.”

Helen made a small sound of satisfaction and pulled on her gloves.

They finished the tray. They washed their hands. They came to the wire.

June opened the latch.

“Come forward.”

Lila came forward on her knees. Chips clung to her skin. Gloved hands lifted her out into the Monday air that still held the clone’s perfume, which was Lila’s soap, which was now someone else’s. The scale took her weight. Helen wrote the number. Bare palms brushed bedding from her breasts and the backs of her thighs and the wet place the night had left on her.

Mara tipped her head toward the mapping room.

They walked her there, a hand at her nape, a hand at her waist. Behind them the shell stood naked again on its frame. Down on the quad, in Lila’s jeans and Lila’s blouse, another Lila was already on her way to second row, carrying the notes the first one had written so the leftover girl would not get sloppy.

The lab rat put her feet on the taped mark on the floor and waited for the markers. No one told her which of them had class. The markers found her shoulders, and Helen’s fingers found the sternum coin, and the day’s research began.

Chapter Eleven

They put her back before noon. The latch closed on chips and plaster dust and the morning’s markers still on her shoulders. Lila drank, slept a little, woke to the bottle’s bead and the stripped shell facing her, and the annex kept its weekday quiet until the corridor sounded like shoes that knew the door.

The clone came in wearing the blouse and the jeans, bag on her shoulder, a faint crease across her cheek from a lecture hall seat. She set the bag on the counter as if this were her kitchen. Helen shut the door.

“On the mark,” Mara said.

The clone stepped onto the taped square on the tile without being shown it twice. June opened the cage.

“Out.”

Lila crawled forward and was lifted. They did not take her to the mapping room. They set her on her feet on the second mark, half a pace from the girl in her clothes. Chips fell off Lila’s hip onto the clone’s shoe. The clone did not move her foot.

Helen stood to one side of them. Mara to the other. June behind Lila, close enough that Lila could feel breath at her hair and not a hand yet.

Mara set a palm on the clone’s waist, over the denim, and the other palm on Lila’s bare waist. The same span. The same drawn-in place. She pressed her thumbs in until both bodies gave her the same shallow dip.

“Hers is warmer,” Mara said.

Helen’s hand went to the clone’s sternum, two fingers in the open V of the blouse, then to Lila’s chest, to the marker she had worn all week. She held both contacts at once, left and right, as if taking two pulses in one count.

“This one too,” Helen said. “The analog cools when she walks. The source doesn’t.”

The clone’s mouth opened and closed. She looked at Lila the way a person looks at a photograph of themselves they have not agreed to like. Lila looked at the button at the clone’s throat and at her own nipples, tight, dusted with wood, and felt wetness start down the inside of one thigh.

June’s hands arrived at Lila’s hips from behind. Then one hand left her and found the clone’s hip through the jeans, matching the hold.

“Turn them.”

Helen turned the clone by the waist. Mara turned Lila. They stood in profile, the dressed line and the undressed line, the same long leg, the same high chest. Mara’s knuckles brushed the front of the clone’s jeans and then, without wiping her hand, the slick heat at Lila’s sex. She made a small considering noise.

“Wetter,” Mara said. “By a lot.”

“She hasn’t been allowed,” June said.

“I know.”

Helen opened two buttons on the clone’s blouse and slipped her hand inside, cupping the breast that was Lila’s breast, pinching the nipple once, enough to make the clone’s breath catch. She did the same to Lila with the other hand, bare nipple, chips catching on Helen’s wet thumb. The clone leaned into it. Lila’s knees threatened the floor. June’s grip at her hip kept her on the mark.

“She’s ready to go upstairs,” Helen said, meaning the clone, meaning a room with a door that was not wire. “She’s been thinking about it since second row. You can feel it in the nipple.”

Mara nodded, still holding Lila front and center, two fingers resting where the wetness was, not moving enough to finish anything.

“This one goes back,” Mara said. “If we take her upstairs she stops being a reading. I want her in the chips while we still have the comparison in our hands.”

The clone’s eyes flicked to Lila’s face. For a second something like apology crossed it, or hunger, or the memory of being generous in a bed. Helen kissed the clone’s mouth, brief and claiming, and did not kiss Lila.

“Bag,” Helen said.

The clone buttoned her blouse with hands that were not quite steady. She picked up the bag. At the door she looked back once, at the two marks on the floor, at the body that was hers without clothes.

June’s fingers left the clone’s hip and returned to Lila, both hands now, as if the dressed girl had been a calibration.

They walked Lila to the scale. The number. Helen wrote it. Mara lifted her fingers from Lila’s sex and looked at the shine on them and did not comment to Lila. June pointed at the cage.

Lila went in. Chips received her wet knees. The latch closed.

Helen’s arm was already around the clone’s waist, steering her toward the corridor and whatever room upstairs counted as a bed. Mara followed with the thermos. June stayed long enough to turn the annex lights down to the work setting and to glance at the book, where Monday afternoon now had a line that was only numbers and the word *source*.

Lila sat in the bedding with the clone’s perfume still in the air and Helen’s pinch still live in her nipple and Mara’s wet fingers still implied between her legs. She could hear them on the stairs. She could not hear a door from here. The shell watched her, naked. The second mark on the floor was empty.

She put her hand on the sternum marker and left it there, and she did not finish what Mara had measured, and the afternoon went on being research in one room and a lover in another.

Chapter Twelve

They came back in the afternoon with the clone between them and the late-section hour already close enough to taste.

The clone’s blouse was open two buttons lower than it had been on the floor mark. Her mouth was colored from kissing. She set the bag on the counter again and stood where Mara pointed, not on the comparison tape this time, only against the metal edge with her hips, as if the annex were a kitchen and she had been brought home.

Helen kissed her standing.

It was not the brief door kiss. Helen’s hands went under the blouse and held both breasts, thumbs on the nipples, and the clone opened her mouth and made the generous sound Mara had named that morning. Mara came in at her side and unzipped the jeans just far enough to slide a hand down the front of them. June took the clone’s jaw and turned her for a second kiss, then a third, passing her mouth from woman to woman while she stood there and took it.

Lila watched from the chips with her fingers on the wire.

They did not put the clone on the table. They kept her on her feet, jeans shoved to her thighs, blouse shoved up, Helen’s thigh pressed between hers until the clone’s hips lost their student manners and chased. When Helen stepped back, color high in her own face, the clone went to her knees as if that had been the next page of a protocol she liked.

She lifted Helen’s skirt.

Her mouth was exact. She held Helen by the backs of the thighs and licked with the patience of someone who had already learned the map and was now only following it. Helen’s hand buried itself in the blonde hair that was Lila’s hair. Helen did not talk. When she came it was against the clone’s mouth, a hard quiet shake, and the clone stayed where she was until Helen’s fingers loosened.

Mara took the counter with both hands.

The clone moved to her without being told, cheek against Mara’s thigh first, then her mouth between Mara’s legs, slower, as if structure wanted a different tempo. Mara looked at the cage once while it was happening, not long, and then her head tipped back and her breath went out of her in a single unscientific sound. The clone’s throat worked. She swallowed. She kissed the inside of Mara’s thigh when she was finished, neat as a closed parenthesis.

June did not lean on the counter. She stood and let the clone come to her, and she held the girl’s head with both hands and used her mouth with less patience than the other two. The clone gave that too. She let June take and take, generous to the end, and when June’s hips finally stilled the clone rested her forehead against June’s belly for a second and then sat back on her heels, lips wet, eyes dark, looking like a woman who had done something she was good at.

“Section,” Helen said.

The clone stood. She cleaned her mouth with the back of her wrist. She drew up the jeans, buttoned the blouse, lifted the bag. Helen kissed her once more at the door, almost tender. Mara squeezed her waist. June only nodded.

The corridor took her.

At the sink they washed their hands. Soap. Wrists. Between the fingers. Mara washed a second time. No one looked at the cage while the water ran.

June opened the latch.

“Out.”

The same hands.

They lifted Lila onto the scale, wrote the number, and walked her to the mapping table. She could smell the clone on them under the soap, a faint leftover of mouth and skin. Helen seated a marker at each shoulder as if the morning had never happened. Mara placed the sternum marker over the old coin and pressed until it held. No one touched Lila’s mouth.

“Thigh,” Helen said, to Mara.

Lila opened her feet because the table and the hands required it. Mara’s two fingers found the pulse on the inside of her thigh, high enough that the heat of Lila’s sex was on the edge of the knuckles. Mara counted under her breath. The count stayed even. Lila’s body did not. She was soaked from watching, from the pinch that was still in her from the comparison, from the sound Helen had made into her own mouth on another girl’s tongue. Mara’s fingers did not turn. They only counted.

Helen wrote.

June stood at Lila’s head and did not kiss her. She watched Lila’s eyes the way she had watched the clone’s mouth.

When the pulse was in the book they took the markers off the shoulders and left the sternum. They put Lila on her feet. They put her in the crate for the twelve steps because the afternoon had gotten late. Chips. Latch.

Helen washed her hands again, unnecessarily. Mara closed the tray. June wrote *source — p.m. measures* and did not write anything else.

Up the stairs the late section would be finding a seat in Lila’s clothes. In the annex the lab rat sat in the wood with the taste of other women’s pleasure still in the air and no mouth had come near her own. The difference did not need a sentence. It was on her skin where the fingers had only counted, and on her mouth where nothing had been at all.

Chapter Thirteen

Tuesday morning they took her out before the building had filled.

The scale. The number. The mapping table, paper roll cold under her back and then warm. Markers at the shoulders, the sternum coin pressed fresh, waist taken once and then again. Lila’s body was already ahead of the book. She had not been allowed her own hand since June’s first voice note, and Monday’s comparison and Monday’s mouth on other women had sat in her overnight like a second pulse.

Mara’s knuckles brushed her inner thigh when she reached for the pulse site and Lila’s hips lifted without permission.

June looked at that lift.

“Hold her,” June said.

Helen’s forearm crossed Lila’s hips and pinned them to the table. The other hand opened Lila’s knees the width the pulse count required and kept them there. Lila’s wrists found the edges of the table and stayed, not because anyone had bound them.

June stood at her head.

“Now,” June said.

Helen’s counting hand left the hip-bar and went where Mara’s fingers had only rested the day before. Two fingers, then the pad of a thumb at the swollen peak of her, slick from the night and from the first waist measure. Helen did not kiss her. Helen watched the clock on the wall and the tremor in Lila’s belly and worked her with the same even pressure she used on a landmark that had to be found twice.

Lila made a sound she tried to keep in her throat. It came out anyway.

Mara had the book open and the pen already on the line.

Helen counted under her breath, not Lila’s pleasure, the seconds. “Eight. Twelve.” The thumb made a small circle that did not hurry and did not kindly wander. Lila’s thighs shook against Helen’s arm. The sternum marker tugged when she tried to sit up and Helen’s forearm taught her the table again.

“Stay,” June said.

Lila stayed. The heat gathered hard and low and almost painful, a week of the bottle and the chips and the clone’s mouth on everyone but her. Helen’s fingers curled and found the place inside that made Lila’s mouth open in a silent shape. The thumb kept its circle. “Twenty.”

Lila came on twenty-four.

It went through her in a long locked shake, hips fighting Helen’s arm and losing, wet on Helen’s hand and on the paper roll, a cry that had no word in it. Helen kept the contact through the first wave and the second, still counting, until the shakes broke into smaller ones and Lila’s feet flexed in the air.

“Twenty-four,” Helen said.

Mara wrote it. The pen sounded like an ordinary pen. She added the time, the date, a short column header Lila could not see from her back.

June’s hand entered Lila’s vision only to check her pupils, a finger lifting one lid and then the other.

Helen took her hand away. She did not lick it. She reached for the towel on the tray and wiped her fingers as if she had finished a wet measurement, which she had. Lila’s body kept clenching on nothing. She could not make it stop. Tears ran into her hair.

They left her on the table until her breathing fell out of the panic rhythm and back into something that would stand. Then “Up.” Then the scale again, a number that had changed. Helen glanced at it and Mara wrote that too.

The crate. The twelve steps. The chips.

Lila’s legs would not hold her for the crawl. They lifted her in. She landed on her side, still shaking, thighs wet, the marker at her chest ticking with her heart. June closed the latch.

At the counter Mara read back what she had written, not to Lila.

“Source climax, induced, twenty-four seconds from contact. Strong. No kiss. No verbal. Recovery noted.”

Helen washed her hands.

“The analog does that with her mouth and looks at you after,” Helen said. “This one just gives you a number.”

June looked at the cage, at the blonde girl trembling in the wood, and turned a page in the book for the afternoon line.

“That’s the use,” June said.

They went on with the morning. A printer somewhere started. Coffee went into the three cups. Lila curled around her own aftershocks and put her palm on the sternum marker because that was how her body had learned to finish a thing, and there was nothing else to finish. The reading was already in the book. The lover was in second row. The lab rat shook until the shakes got bored of her, and the annex smelled like paper and sex and clean wood, and no one came back to the wire to tell her she had done well.

Chapter Fourteen

They did not take her out after the morning number. They brought the chairs around so the counter faced the cage and sat down with the book open between them, as if the girl in the chips were a chart on the wall.

Lila was still damp from Helen’s hand. When she shifted, the bedding sounded. All three of them looked.

Helen closed her cup in both palms.

“We can print another source,” she said. “A second cage. Paired measures. One on the table while one waits. We’d never have an empty box.”

Mara’s eyes went to Lila’s waist, to the wet shine still on her inner thigh that no one had wiped.

“I want that for the data,” Mara said. “Two sets of landmarks from the same geometry. If one spikes, the other confirms. This file is too good to live in a single animal.”

June had not sat back.

“A second rat is a second mind,” June said. “I can hold this one. I am already holding this one. I don’t want two latch scripts and two girls lapping at two

bottles while we pretend that’s still a study. If you want another body, print a lover. She doesn’t need a box.”

Helen’s gaze stayed on Lila’s mouth.

“You’re arguing we keep the source singular.”

“I’m arguing I don’t want to split my attention across two animals who both think the latch is God,” June said. “Lovers look at you after. This one gives you twenty-four seconds and shakes. Those are different tools.”

Mara turned a page, not to read it.

“So we print three,” Mara said. “One for each of us. Beds. Kitchens. The analog we already have is generous and exact and she goes to class. I want that in my apartment. I don’t want to share her mouth with your staircase every afternoon.”

Helen’s laugh was quiet and not kind.

“You want a Lila who takes her jeans off in your hallway.”

“Yes.”

“So do I,” Helen said. She looked at Lila when she said it, at the high bare chest and the chips stuck under one breast. “I want her on her knees on my kitchen tile the way she was on this floor, and I want her to kiss me when she’s finished, and I want that girl to have a name that still answers a roll call. I don’t want to wash my hands before I touch her.”

Lila’s pulse found the marker and stayed there. She did not speak. The wire did the listening.

June set her pen down.

“Three lovers,” June said. “Staggered induction so the campus doesn’t grow a chorus of the same blonde. Different sections. Different hours. They can know about each other or not; I don’t care yet. The source stays here. One cage. One book. One reading.”

Mara nodded slowly, already building it.

“The file is clean enough. We don’t need another plaster week. We can start the second analog tomorrow from HALE-KEEP and the morning sample. Third by Friday if the suite holds.”

Helen leaned forward, elbows on her knees, close enough to the wire that Lila felt the heat of her.

“And we don’t take this one upstairs,” Helen said. “Not if we have mouths that come with conversation. If I start kissing the source I will stop counting. I like counting her.”

Mara’s eyes dropped to Lila’s sex, still flushed, still wet, and did not pretend otherwise.

“She heard the analog come,” Mara said. “She came in twenty-four seconds with no kiss. If we print three more lovers, this one is going to watch us walk out of here with her face on them every night.”

“That isn’t a problem,” June said. “That’s the design.”

Silence settled. Lila’s nipples had drawn so tight they hurt. She could see it in all three of them: the apartment version, the jeans on a kitchen chair, the generous mouth, and then the return to this room, to the scale, to the girl they would not kiss.

Helen stood first.

“We do that,” Helen said. “Three analogs for the beds. One source for the annex. I’ll call the suite. Mara sends the file tonight. June writes how much the lovers are allowed to remember about this room.”

“Very little,” June said. “They can remember they like us. They don’t need the chips.”

Mara closed the book.

“Tomorrow we draw another sample,” she said, and her voice had gone lower. “I’ll take it from her. She’ll be on the table anyway.”

They all looked at Lila then, a long shared look, three women in their thirties deciding how many of her the building could hold. Lila’s thighs pressed together in the wood and opened again because pressing did nothing. She was a reading that had already been logged today and she was also the mold they were about to spend.

Helen reached out and hooked two fingers through the wire, not touching skin, only the square above Lila’s knee.

“Start the second one,” Helen said.

Mara picked up her bag. June took the book. At the door Helen glanced back once more at the labeled box and at the shaking leftover of the morning’s number, and then the corridor had them.

Lila sat in the chips with the decision still in the air like a hand. Somewhere a suite would start making girls who got to be lovers. Here the latch stayed shut on the only animal they had agreed not to take home. She put her palm on the sternum marker and waited for tomorrow’s sample the way the bottle waited for her mouth, and the annex, for the first time, felt too small for how many of her the afternoon had just promised.