Gifted

by Brent Clark Palmer
The Chariot, Book 26

Chapter One

Haley’s dorm room had the kind of late-August heat that made the window unit rattle like it was thinking it over. Four mattresses and two extra comforters had been dragged onto the floor in a sloppy square. The overhead light was off. A string of cheap paper lanterns threw warm gold across the cinderblock wall and the pile of hoodies by the door. Someone had brought pretzels. Someone else had brought a bottle of something pink that tasted like melted candy and not much else.

They were in pajamas that were not quite costumes and not quite clothes. Haley in a washed- thin tank and shorts. Priya in a matching cotton set the color of milky tea. June in an oversized shirt that kept sliding off one shoulder. Mira in a plain gray tee and dark sleep shorts, sitting cross-legged at the edge of the pile with her back against the bedframe, hair still damp from the hall shower.

It had started the way those nights always started. Classes. A professor who talked to the slides. Who was hooking up with whom on the third floor. Then it drifted, the way it does when the room gets quiet enough and nobody wants to be the first to sleep.

June was painting Priya’s toenails a careful, shiny red and talking without looking up.

“I’m just saying. Everybody acts like bodies are this big mystery until they’re suddenly not. Then it’s all jokes.”

Priya flexed her foot. “You started it. You asked if anyone here had ever seen a clit that wasn’t their own.”

Haley snorted into her cup. “That’s not how you asked it.”

“It is exactly how I asked it.”

Mira had been quiet for a stretch. She was usually quiet in a group until she decided she wasn’t. She set her cup down on the carpet with a small, precise sound.

“Mine’s not like yours,” she said.

Nobody laughed. The lanterns made a soft ticking against the wall.

Haley looked at her. “Okay.”

Mira’s mouth did a small thing that wasn’t quite a smile. “I mean it isn’t shaped like the pictures. It isn’t small. I used to think I was going to have to explain it every time I took my clothes off for the rest of my life. Then I stopped taking them off for people.”

Priya’s brush paused over June’s little toe.

June said, carefully, “You don’t have to—”

“I know.” Mira’s voice stayed even. “I’m telling you because we’re on the floor in a room that smells like pretzels and I don’t feel like carrying it by myself tonight.”

Haley felt the heat in her own face before she felt anything else. She was suddenly aware of her knees, of the thin cotton of her shorts, of how close all of them were.

“Can we see?” Priya asked, and then winced at her own speed. “Sorry. That was— I meant, only if you want.”

Mira looked at each of them in turn. She had the kind of face that made people assume she was younger than she was: small mouth, dark eyes, a faint crease between her brows like she was always doing a problem in her head. She hooked her thumbs in the waistband of her shorts and paused.

“If anybody makes it a joke I will put my clothes back on and go to sleep in the closet.”

“Nobody’s joking,” Haley said.

Mira nodded once. She lifted her hips and pushed the shorts and the underwear beneath them down together, only as far as mid-thigh, and then she sat back against the bedframe again and let her knees fall a little apart.

For a second Haley’s brain did the ordinary inventory. Dark hair. The ordinary folds. And then the part that was not ordinary sat there in the low light, already thicker than Haley had any reference for, the hood pushed back from a glans that was blunt and flushed and frankly *there*, like a fact. It was not fully hard yet. It didn’t need to be. Even half-quiet it had weight. It lay a little to one side against her, a dense, tapered shape the color of her inner lip.

June made a sound that was not a word.

Priya whispered, “Oh.”

Mira didn’t cover herself. She watched their faces the way she watched lab results.

“That’s the glans,” she said. “Same tissue as the head of a penis. Same erectile bodies underneath, just arranged differently. Most of the organ is inside. What you’re looking at is the part that ended up outside.”

Haley’s throat felt tight. “How—”

“How big.” Mira’s tone stayed almost academic, which somehow made it worse. “When it fills, the glans is about four inches. A little more if I’ve been thinking about it. Thick as a pipe. I measured it when I was sixteen because I thought I

was losing my mind. I wasn’t.”

Priya had set the nail polish down without capping it. A small red bead sat on the bottle’s rim.

“Can it— does it get like that from nothing? Or only if—”

“Blood,” Mira said. “Same as anyone. The corpora fill. The hood can’t cover it once it’s up. It used to scare me in the shower. Now it just happens.”

June’s voice came out thin. “Does it feel like…”

“Like a clit,” Mira said. “Just more of it. The nerves didn’t get smaller because the tissue got larger. If anything it’s worse. Better. I haven’t decided.”

Haley realized she had leaned in. She sat back an inch, then didn’t.

Mira looked at Haley’s hands, then at Priya’s, then at June’s. “You can touch it if you want. I’d rather you did it on purpose than keep staring like it’s going to jump.”

Priya laughed once, helpless. “I don’t know where to start.”

“Start at the hood,” Mira said. “It’s still skin. It just doesn’t do the job anymore.”

Priya wiped her fingers on her pajama pants as if that would help and then reached. Her first contact was two fingertips, very light, along the side of the shaft where the skin was taut and warmer than the room. Mira’s breath changed. Not a gasp. A careful inhale, held.

The glans stirred. It thickened in a slow, visible pulse, lifting a degree off her thigh.

June whispered, “It’s doing it.”

“That’s the point of touching it,” Mira said, and her voice had gone a half-step lower.

Priya’s fingers traced up. She found the ridge under the glans and stopped there, not quite circling. Mira’s hips made a small, involuntary adjustment against the carpet.

“It’s smooth,” Priya said, surprised. “I thought—”

“You thought it would feel like something else. It doesn’t. It’s mucosa and a lot of vessels.” Mira swallowed. “You can hold it. It won’t break.”

Priya wrapped her hand around it.

The sound Haley made was embarrassing. She pressed her lips together.

In Priya’s grip the thing filled with a steadiness that was almost rude. Four inches was not an exaggeration. It rose into Priya’s palm thick and blunt, the

glans flaring a little as it came up, a deep, even color, the slit at the tip a small shining line. Priya's fingers didn't meet around it. She stared at her own hand as if it belonged to someone else.

"Jesus," June said softly.

Mira's eyes had gone unfocused for a second. She blinked it back. "The tunica is the same white coat that keeps a penis from expanding sideways forever. So it gets long and it gets hard and then it stops. That's why it looks like that. Engineering, not magic."

Haley found her voice. "Is that why? I mean— were you born like this?"

"Mostly." Mira's breath hitched when Priya's thumb moved, just once, across the underside. "Androgens in utero. Enough to tell this part of me to keep going. Not enough to change the rest. I had bloodwork when I was twelve because a pediatrician got nervous. Nothing dangerous. Just this."

June had come up onto her knees without seeming to notice. "I heard that. In that seminar last spring. The one with the terrible slides. She said the clitoris and the penis start as the same bud and the only difference is how much androgen shows up. She said enlargement happens. I thought she meant a little."

Mira looked at her. "You remembered that?"

"I remember weird things," June said. Her ears were pink. "I didn't think I'd see it."

Priya hadn't let go. She wasn't stroking, exactly. She was holding, learning the heat of it, the way it sat in her hand with a living weight. A shine had gathered at the tip. It caught the lantern light.

Haley said, "Can I?"

Priya glanced at Mira. Mira nodded.

The handoff was clumsy and oddly formal. Haley's fingers were cooler. Mira made a small sound on contact, then pressed her head back against the bedframe and let it happen.

Haley had touched her own body a thousand times. This was not that. The shaft was firm in a way that announced itself, a dense inner core she could feel through the skin. The glans was hotter, slightly giving, and so sensitive that Mira's thigh jumped when Haley's thumb found the underside again.

"There," Mira said. "That's the frenulum analog. Don't mash it. You don't have to."

"I'm not," Haley said, and she wasn't. She was barely moving. It was enough. Under her hand the last of the swelling completed itself, a slow, thick arrival,

until the whole of it stood off Mira’s body with a slight upward curve, flushed dark, the hood a useless little collar at the base.

June reached without asking this time. Mira didn’t stop her. June’s touch was different— fingertips only, mapping the flared edge of the glans as if she were afraid of leaving a fingerprint. Mira’s stomach tightened. A thin wet line ran down onto Haley’s knuckle.

“That’s just—” Mira started, then had to stop and start again. “That’s the same fluid. Vestibular. It doesn’t mean I decided anything. It means you have your hands on a lot of nerve endings.”

“We know,” Priya said, and she didn’t sound sure she knew anything.

They were all too close now. Knees touching. The pink bottle forgotten. Haley could smell Mira’s soap and the heat coming off her skin. She could see the pulse in Mira’s throat. She could see, when she looked down, that Mira’s nipples had drawn up under the gray shirt.

June’s voice was almost not a voice. “Does it feel good when we just… look at it?”

Mira’s laugh was short and shaky. “Yes. That’s the humiliating part. I used to hate that. I don’t tonight.”

Haley’s thumb made another small pass, not quite on purpose. Mira’s hips lifted a fraction and came down again. The glans flexed in Haley’s hand, a single thick kick.

Priya sat back on her heels, flushed to the collar of her pajama top, staring as if she had been dared not to blink.

“I didn’t know it could look like that and still be—” She searched. “Still be that.”

“It’s still that,” Mira said. “It’s just honest about how much tissue there is.”

Nobody moved to put anything away. The window unit rattled. Somewhere down the hall a door slammed and then the building went quiet again.

Haley kept her hand where it was because taking it off felt like it would be louder than leaving it. June’s fingers rested at the base now, not stroking, just present. Priya had her arms around her own knees and her eyes very bright.

Mira looked at the three of them, at their mouths, at the color in their faces, and didn’t close her legs.

“You can keep doing that,” she said, softer. “I’m not going to last if you get serious. I’m just telling you so nobody’s surprised.”

Haley swallowed. “We’re not— we don’t have to—”

“I know.” Mira’s gaze dropped to Haley’s hand and stayed there, fascinated in the same shameful, shameless way as the rest of them. “I’m not asking you to

finish anything. I only wanted you to see it when it was true.”

The lanterns ticked. The glans shone in the gold light, thick as she’d said, fully itself now, and none of them looked away.

Chapter Two

Nobody reached for their phones. The nail polish skin had started to dry on the bottle’s rim. Mira’s gray shirt was still on. Her shorts were still caught at mid-thigh, and the rest of her was just there in the lantern light, the glans standing off her body with that blunt, even thickness, a little wet where Haley’s thumb had been.

Haley took her hand away because her palm had begun to shake. The air felt cooler on her fingers than it should have.

Priya said, “Does it go down if we stop?”

“Eventually.” Mira’s voice was steady again, which made the flush across her cheekbones look like a separate fact. “Not fast. Once it’s full it likes to stay full. That’s the corpora. They don’t empty on a schedule just because you’re embarrassed.”

June was still on her knees. She had tucked her hair behind both ears as if that would help her think. “Does it hurt? Standing like that.”

“No. It’s heavy. That’s different.” Mira glanced down at herself the way another person might check a watch. “If I walk around the room it moves. I used to tape it down for gym. I don’t anymore.”

Haley sat back on her heels. Her tank had ridden up. She left it. “You measured it when you were sixteen.”

“Ruler against a textbook. Very scientific.” Mira’s mouth tipped. “Four and a quarter at the time. It’s been about the same since.”

Priya made a quiet, incredulous sound. “And you just… live with that in jeans.”

“I live with it in everything. Jeans are honest, at least. They tell you the shape.”

June’s gaze kept dropping and lifting, dropping and lifting. “When you said the nerves didn’t get smaller.”

“I meant it.” Mira met her eyes. “The glans is packed. The underside especially. If you press there I feel it in my teeth. I’m not saying that to be dramatic.”

Haley’s pulse was high in her throat. She could still feel the heat of it in her hand, the way it had kicked once and then held. She looked at Mira’s face and not at the rest of her and then she looked at the rest of her anyway.

“I want to try something,” Haley said.

The room waited.

“I want to get on you. Facing you. If that’s— if it works like that.”

Mira’s breath went out through her nose. Not a laugh. Something closer to relief. “It works like that. You’ll have to take me in. I’m not going to fit without you helping.”

Priya whispered, “Haley.”

“I know,” Haley said. She was already pushing her shorts down. The carpet was rough under her knees. She got one leg free and then the other and left the shorts in the pretzel bag’s shadow, underwear with them. She felt exposed in a way that had nothing to do with the tank still hanging on her. Mira watched her without comment, only lifting her own hips so June could tug the caught shorts the rest of the way off.

Mira’s shirt stayed. Haley liked that. It made the rest of it look decided instead of staged.

Haley climbed into Mira’s lap carefully, a knee on either side of Mira’s thighs. They were close enough that Haley could see the faint crease between Mira’s brows and the shine at the corner of her mouth. Between them the glans stood up against Haley’s stomach first, a thick, hot line, and Haley had to rise up on her knees to get above it.

“Hold it for me,” Haley said.

Mira wrapped her own hand around the base. Her fingers looked small on it. She angled it. Haley reached down and found the blunt head with her fingertips, set it where she was already wet from twenty minutes of looking, and sank a little.

The first pressure made her mouth open. It was thicker than she had allowed herself to picture, a steady, stretching occupancy that did not pretend to be anything else. She took it in inches, breathing through it, one hand on Mira’s shoulder. Mira’s other hand settled at Haley’s waist and stayed there, not pushing.

“That’s— God,” Haley said, and then she didn’t say anything because she had to concentrate.

Priya had both hands over her mouth. June had gone very still.

Haley sank the rest of the way. When her body met Mira’s the glans was seated deep enough that Haley felt it as a full, occupying heat, the flared head a distinct pressure inside her. She was shaking. Mira’s eyes had gone dark and unfocused again.

“You can move,” Mira said, almost gently. “I can feel you. You’re—” She stopped, swallowed. “You’re tight around it. That’s the whole report.”

Haley laughed once, helpless, and then she did move. Small at first. The slide was slick and specific. Every lift dragged the underside of that thick shaft along her, and every settle put the glans back against a place that made her thighs jump. Mira's hands tightened at her waist. Their foreheads almost touched.

"Does it feel like I thought it would," Haley managed.

"I don't know what you thought." Mira's voice had frayed. "It feels like you're on me. It feels like my whole clit is inside you. I can't— Haley—"

Haley rocked harder because the sound of her own name did something to her knees. The lanterns smeared. She could hear Priya breathing. She could hear June say, very softly, "She's taking all of it."

Mira's hips lifted to meet her. The gray shirt bunched between them. Haley got a hand under it without meaning to and found Mira's ribs, then the small weight of her breast, the nipple already tight. Mira made a broken noise and turned her face into Haley's neck.

"I'm going to," Mira said against her skin. "If you keep— I'm going to."

"Good," Haley said, and she meant it. She was already close from the looking, from the thickness, from Mira's breath on her throat. She ground down and stayed there, circling, and the glans kicked inside her the way it had kicked in her hand.

Mira came first, a hard, full-body clench that Haley felt from the inside, Mira's mouth open against her shoulder, silent for a second and then not. The shaft flexed and flexed again. Haley followed it down, the pleasure arriving in a bright, shaking sheet that made her grab at Mira's hair and hold on. She came around that thick, occupying shape and heard herself make a sound she would think about later.

They stayed like that, breathing. Haley's thighs were trembling on either side of Mira's.

June said, almost to herself, "Okay."

Haley lifted off slowly. The glans left her with a wet, obscene little reluctance and stood back up at once, shining, still fully hard, a thread of Haley on it in the gold light. Mira looked down at herself as if confirming a hypothesis.

"It doesn't care that I just came," Mira said. Her voice was wrecked and oddly pleased. "I told you. The corpora keep their own hours."

Priya had taken her hands down from her mouth. Her matching set was wrinkled. "I need a second."

June did not need a second. She pulled the oversized shirt off over her head in one motion and kicked free of her underwear with the graceless urgency of

someone who had already decided. She was flushed from the throat down. She looked at Mira.

“I want it the other way,” June said. “Facing away. If you can do that.”

Mira nodded. She was still catching her breath. “Turn around. I’ll hold it again.”

June climbed over her with her back to Mira’s chest. Haley shifted aside to give them the square of comforter. From where Haley sat she could see all of it: June’s spine, the tuck of her waist, Mira’s hands coming around to steady her, and then Mira guiding that thick, wet glans up between June’s legs.

June reached down and found it. “It’s slippery.”

“That’s Haley,” Mira said, and June made a startled laugh that turned into a caught breath as she started to lower herself.

The angle made it look even thicker. Haley watched the blunt head press, pause, and then be taken, June’s body opening around it by degrees. June’s hands planted on Mira’s knees. She went down until she was seated, her head tipping back onto Mira’s shoulder.

“Oh,” June said. “Oh, that’s— Mira, that’s deep like this.”

“I know.” Mira’s mouth was against June’s temple. “Don’t drop all at once. Use your legs.”

June did. She lifted and came down again, and the wet sound of it filled the little room. Mira’s hands spanned her hips. From behind, Mira could only move in short, thick nudges, but it was enough; June’s mouth had fallen open and stayed that way.

Priya, still dressed, whispered, “Look at it when she comes up.”

They looked. On each lift the shaft appeared again, flushed and shining, and on each drop it vanished into June. Haley felt an answering ache between her own legs, used and not done.

June found a rhythm that made Mira’s breath stutter. “I can feel the head,” June said. “When I sit. It’s— it’s right there.”

“That’s the glans,” Mira got out. “That’s the part with everything in it. You’re putting your weight on it.”

“Is that bad?”

“No.” Mira’s laugh broke. “Do it again.”

June did it again. Her thighs shook. Mira’s arm banded around her waist and held her down through a long, grinding settle, and June came with a high, surprised sound, one hand flying back to grab Mira’s hair. Mira followed her with a lower noise, hips working up in small helpless pulses, the glans flexing inside June the

same way it had inside Haley.

They sagged together. June stayed seated on her, panting.

Priya, staring, said quietly, “This is fun.”

June laughed against Mira’s cheek, wrecked. “Don’t say it like that.”

“It is, though,” Priya said. Her ears were red. “I didn’t think a slumber party did this.”

June lifted off with a wince and a sigh. The glans sprang back up, slicker than before, darker, still stubbornly itself. Mira let her head fall against the bedframe and looked at the ceiling lanterns as if they might offer a measurement.

Priya stood up on her knees and unbuttoned the top of her set with fingers that were not steady. The cotton whispered. She got out of the rest of it without making a speech of it and then she looked at Mira, bare now, pretty and flushed and trying to be matter-of-fact.

“You’re the life of the party,” Priya said. “You know that, right?”

Mira turned her head. Her smile was tired and real. “I brought pretzels.”

“You brought that.” Priya nodded at the standing glans. “I want you on me. I want to be on my back. Missionary. Can you do that without it folding or whatever it does?”

“It doesn’t fold.” Mira sat forward. “It isn’t cartilage. It’s erectile tissue with a coat. If I put my weight on you it’ll stay pointed where I point it.”

“Then point it,” Priya said.

They rearranged the comforters. Priya lay back with her hair fanned on Haley’s extra pillow. Mira moved over her on hands and knees, the gray shirt still on, hanging. The glans dragged along Priya’s stomach, leaving a wet track, and Priya looked down the length of her own body at it with an expression Haley would remember: shock and hunger in equal parts.

Mira took herself in hand and set the head against Priya. “Tell me if it’s too much.”

“It’s going to be too much,” Priya said. “Do it anyway.”

Mira pressed in.

Priya’s knees came up at once. Her hands found Mira’s back under the shirt. The thick slide made her gasp on every inch, and Mira went slow because Priya was tighter than the angle wanted, breathing through it, eyes wide on Mira’s face. When Mira was in to the base Priya’s mouth trembled.

“That’s all of it,” Mira said. “That’s four inches of glans and shaft. You’re holding it.”

“I know what I’m holding.” Priya’s voice had gone thin. “Move. Please move.”

Mira moved. The missionary rhythm was different—longer strokes, the blunt head drawing almost out and then filling Priya again, the wet sound of it steady as the window unit. Haley sat near Priya’s shoulder. June sat near her hip. They watched Mira’s body work, the small concentrated frown, the way her mouth opened when Priya lifted to meet her.

Priya came first this time, suddenly, with her heels locked at Mira’s back and a broken “Mira —” that made Mira bury her face in Priya’s neck and drive in short. Mira came after her, shuddering through it, the shaft pulsing where they were joined. Priya held her there and came again on the aftershocks, smaller, surprised into it, laughing once against Mira’s hair.

After that they did not so much decide to stop as run out of the ability to start again immediately. Mira eased out. The glans shone, still thick, a little less fiercely upright than it had been an hour ago, but not down. Not anywhere near down.

Haley found the extra comforter and pulled it over as many knees as it would cover. June shut off the nearest lantern so the room went down to one warm bulb and the red eye of the window unit. They settled in a clumsy pile in the square they had made: Mira on her back in the middle because that was where she had been all night, Haley along one side, June along the other, Priya half sprawled across Mira’s hips as if she had a job.

Priya’s hand found the glans in the dim. She closed her fingers around it loosely, not stroking, just containing the heat and the remaining stiffness.

“I’m keeping it under control,” Priya murmured.

Mira’s laugh was barely there. “Is that the official position?”

“Somebody has to. It keeps trying to be the tallest thing in the room.”

June’s eyes were already closing. “Don’t squeeze it.”

“I’m not squeezing it. I’m holding it. There’s a difference.”

Haley put her forehead against Mira’s shoulder. She could smell all of them, soap and skin and the sweet leftover of the pink bottle. Mira’s shirt had ridden up. Under Haley’s hand Mira’s stomach rose and fell in a slowing rhythm.

“You okay?” Haley asked, almost not a question.

“I’m okay.” Mira sounded far off and present at the same time. “I’m going to be sore in a way I don’t have a word for. It’s a good sore.”

Priya’s thumb rested along the side of the glans, idle. It gave one late, tired flex in her grip and then quieted, still thick, still warm, no longer insisting. Priya made a small satisfied sound, as if a problem had been correctly filed.

The window unit rattled. Somebody’s foot found somebody else’s calf and stayed. Mira’s breathing evened. Priya’s hand stayed where it was, loosely faithful, and the four of them went down into sleep in a tangle of comforters and bare knees, the lantern light thinning, the room finally as ordinary as a dorm room was allowed to be after a night like that.

Chapter Three

Haley stood in the hallway long enough for someone to pass her with a laundry basket and give her the look people gave you when you were clearly negotiating with a door. The building smelled like dryer sheets and old carpet. Three nights of ordinary classes had not done what she had hoped they would do. She still felt Mira in the muscles of her thighs when she took the stairs too fast.

She knocked.

Mira opened the door in a worn navy shirt and shorts, hair up in a clip that was losing. Behind her the room was the usual double: two beds, two desks, a mini-fridge with a magnet from the campus clinic. A girl Haley did not know was cross-legged on the nearer bed in an old swim-team T-shirt, a textbook open on her knee, highlighter in her teeth.

Mira’s face did a small, private thing when she saw Haley. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Haley kept her voice down because the hall had ears. “I was wondering if I could spend the night.”

The girl on the bed took the highlighter out of her mouth. She had light brown hair in a messy knot and the kind of calm that suggested she had already run this scene in her head.

Mira glanced back. “That’s Madison. Madison, Haley.”

“The slumber party,” Madison said, not unkindly. “Yeah. Come in before Mrs. Okonkwo does her rounds and asks why you’re loitering.”

Haley stepped in. Mira shut the door. The click sounded louder than it was.

“I can go to the lounge,” Madison said, already marking her page. “Or I can stay. I’ve seen it. We talked about it the first week. I’m not going to perform shock.”

Haley looked at Mira.

Mira’s ears were pink. “She walked in when I was changing. There isn’t a graceful version. We had a whole conversation about homologous structures over instant oatmeal.”

Madison lifted one shoulder. “I asked if it got in the way. She said only in jeans and in her head. Then I asked if it worked. She said yes. That was the discussion.” She tipped her chin at the far bed—Mira’s, by the gray throw and the stack of library books. “You can use mine if you want the one that isn’t covered in paper. I’m not precious about the sheets. I am precious about being left in the dark like I’m twelve.”

Haley let out a breath she had been holding since the stairwell. “You’re very… direct.” “I live in eight-by-ten feet with a person who has a four-inch glans,” Madison said. “Direct is cheaper than dancing around the furniture.”

Mira rubbed the back of her neck. “You don’t have to stay, Haley. You can still change your mind. Nothing happened in the hallway.”

“Something happened three nights ago,” Haley said. “That’s why I’m in the hallway.”

Madison closed the textbook. “I’m going to put on headphones and face the wall until somebody says my name. If you need me to leave the room entirely, say so now.”

Haley shook her head. “You can stay. I think I wanted the door closed more than I wanted an empty building.”

Mira’s mouth softened. She reached out and hooked two fingers in the hem of Haley’s sweatshirt, a small question. Haley nodded. They crossed the narrow aisle to Madison’s bed, which was made with the military neatness of a person who shared space on purpose. Mira sat first. Haley stood between her knees and took her own sweatshirt off, then the tank under it. The room’s air was cool on her skin. Madison, true to her word, had turned toward the cinderblock wall with her headphones on, one ear still slightly uncovered, the honest kind of privacy.

Mira pushed Haley’s shorts down herself this time. Her hands were sure in a way they had not been in the lantern light. Haley stepped out of them and climbed onto Madison’s quilt, and Mira pulled her own shorts off and sat back against the pillows.

It was already up. Not fully—Haley could see that—but thick enough that the navy shirt could not hide the line of it. Mira tugged the shirt up and off and then there was nothing in the way: the blunt glans, the dense shaft, the hood that had given up being a hood.

Haley wrapped her hand around it the way she had in her own room and felt it fill the rest of the way in her fist, a slow heavy pulse, until it stood the height she remembered, hot and specific.

“I thought about this in statistics,” Haley said.

Mira’s laugh was quiet. “I thought about you in the shower and had to wait for it to go down before I could put pants on. Madison made oatmeal louder on purpose.”

From the other bed, without turning, Madison said, “I did. The pipes in this building are thin. So are the excuses.”

Haley kissed Mira because she had not done that last time, not properly. Mira made a small sound into her mouth and her hips lifted into Haley’s hand. Haley stroked once, twice, just to feel the coat of it, the way the skin moved over the packed tissue, and then she rose up and set the head against herself.

She was wet from the walk down the hall. That should have been embarrassing. It wasn’t. She sank onto Mira with her hands on Mira’s shoulders and took it in the same thick, stretching slide, slower this time because she knew what she was taking. Mira’s head tipped back against Madison’s headboard.

“That’s it,” Mira whispered. “That’s— Haley, sit. Just sit.”

Haley sat. The glans lodged deep, a blunt occupying pressure that made her eyes close. She stayed there, full, breathing, and then she began to move in small circles because the underside of that shaft found her immediately.

They did not talk much for a while. The bed frame gave a soft complaining tick. Haley leaned down and put her mouth on Mira’s throat, then her mouth, then the place under Mira’s ear that made Mira’s hands clamp at her hips. Mira met her from below in short, thick lifts. Haley came first, biting the sound into Mira’s shoulder, clenching around the thing inside her until Mira followed with a low broken exhale, the shaft kicking in pulses Haley could count.

They stayed joined, shaking.

Madison’s voice came from the wall, headphones off now. “Are you done being polite, or do I have to keep staring at painted cinderblock?”

Haley lifted her head. Mira was flushed to the chest, still inside her, still hard.

“You can turn around,” Mira said.

Madison turned. She looked at them the way she had looked at the textbook: assessing, not unkind, a little pink across the nose. Her eyes dropped to where Haley was still seated on Mira, to the wet shine at the base of the shaft, and stayed there a second too long to pretend otherwise.

“Yeah,” Madison said. “That’s the thing we discussed over oatmeal.”

Haley eased off. The glans sprang back up, slick, unapologetic. Haley sat back on her heels on Madison’s quilt, breathing, and watched Madison look at it as if she were being given a second chance at a first impression.

Madison swung her legs off her own unused pillow and stood. “You’ve got to let me have a turn.”

Mira blinked. “Mads—”

“I’m not asking you to write me a pamphlet. I’m asking you to let me get on it before I spend the rest of the semester imagining the sound this bed just made.” She glanced at Haley. “You know how it works now. Don’t let me do it stupid.”

Haley’s laugh came out unsteady. “Okay.”

Madison pulled the swim-team shirt off and pushed her shorts down without ceremony. She was compact, strong through the shoulders, a pale appendectomy scar like a private footnote. She climbed onto the bed and looked at the standing glans with her bottom lip caught in her teeth.

“Facing her,” Haley said. “It’s easier to control the depth. Hold it at the base so it doesn’t slip. It’s thicker than it looks when you’re above it.”

Madison wrapped her hand around it. Her eyebrows went up. “That’s a pipe. You weren’t being poetic.”

“I don’t do poetic,” Mira said, strained. “That’s anatomy.”

Haley moved in behind Madison, close enough to set her hands at Madison’s waist. “Up on your knees. Put the head where you want it. Don’t drop. Let your legs decide.”

Madison notched the blunt glans against herself and hissed through her teeth at the first pressure. Haley felt the tremor go through her.

“Breathe,” Haley said. “It’s just a lot of the same tissue. It doesn’t get sharper. It just stays.”

Madison sank an inch, then another. “Oh my God.”

“I know.”

“That’s— Mira, that’s in me.”

“I know that too,” Mira got out. Her hands were fists in Madison’s quilt.

Haley guided Madison’s hips down in increments, talking low, the same way she would have talked someone through a steep trail. “That’s halfway. The head is the widest part. Once you’re past it you can sit. There—there. That’s it.”

Madison took the rest of it in a long, shaking settle and then she just stayed, mouth open, staring at Mira’s face as if Mira had become a new kind of roommate.

“Move when you want,” Haley said. “Small. You’ll feel the underside if you tip forward.”

Madison tipped forward. The sound she made was startled and greedy at once. Haley kept her hands at Madison’s waist and felt her find a rhythm, awkward for three strokes and then not, the wet slide of it filling the little room. Mira watched Madison with a dazed, almost scientific wonder, as if this were data she had not budgeted for.

“You’re doing it,” Haley murmured. “That’s all it is. You’re just on her.”

Madison laughed, breathless. “This is a terrible study habit.”

“Worse than oatmeal,” Mira said, and then her voice broke because Madison sat down hard and stayed, grinding, and Mira’s whole body arched.

Haley reached around and put her fingers where Madison needed them, light, learning Madison by the way she jolted. Madison came with her forehead dropped to Mira’s, a bitten- off sound, her body locking around the thick shaft. Mira came under her in a helpless series of flexes, hands sliding up Madison’s back, holding on.

They collapsed sideways in a clumsy heap on Madison’s neat quilt, which was no longer neat. Haley ended up along Mira’s other side, a hand on Mira’s stomach, feeling it rise and fall. The glans shone between them, still substantial, slowly losing its fiercest height.

Madison, after a minute, said into Mira’s collarbone, “We’re not sleeping in my bed. I have a quiz at eight. I need the psychological fiction that this mattress is innocent.”

“My bed, then,” Mira said.

They got up like people who had forgotten how legs worked. Mira pulled the gray throw back. They fitted themselves into the narrower twin by negotiation: Mira on her back in the middle because that was becoming a habit, Haley along the wall, Madison on the outside with one leg thrown over both of them. The clip had come out of Mira’s hair. Haley took it off the pillow and set it on the desk without looking.

Madison’s hand found the glans again in the dark, less containing than Priya’s had been, more idle, as if she were checking that it was still a real object.

“It’s going down,” she whispered.

“Give it an hour,” Mira said. “It has a union.”

Haley smiled against Mira’s shoulder. The hall outside went quiet. Madison’s breathing slowed first, then Mira’s. Haley lay awake just long enough to feel both of them warm against her, the last thick heat of Mira under Madison’s loose fingers, and then the three of them went under together in Mira’s bed, tangled, the textbook still open on the other mattress like a witness that had decided not

to take notes.

Chapter Four

The hall bathroom was already breathing steam when Mira pushed the door with her shoulder. Six heads. White tile the color of old teeth. A drain that never quite committed. Someone had left a plastic caddy on the bench with a bottle of store-brand conditioner standing in it like a sentry.

June was already there.

She had a towel around her and her hair clipped up, and she was standing at the second hook as if she had arrived one minute earlier on purpose. She looked at Mira and did not say good morning. She did not say anything. She set her towel on the hook beside Mira’s and waited.

Mira’s stomach went tight in a way that had nothing to do with the walk down the hall in flip- flops. She hung her own towel. She pulled the navy shirt off over her head and stepped out of her shorts and the rest of it, and the air of the room found her at once, cool along her back, and then not cool at all because she could feel June looking.

It was quiet this morning. No voices from the stalls. No one humming off-key under a farther head. The pipes knocked once, far away.

Mira walked to the last head on the right, the one with the decent pressure. She turned it. Water hit her shoulders, too hot, then right. She stood under it with her eyes closed for a second and when she opened them June was there, still silent, stepping under the same spray as if the other five heads had ceased to exist.

June took the soap from Mira’s caddy without asking.

She started at Mira’s throat. Both hands. Slow. The soap was plain and thin and it made June’s palms slide. She worked it across Mira’s collarbones and down over her chest with the unhurried attention of someone washing a thing she meant to keep. Mira’s nipples drew up under that care. June passed over them twice, not teasing, claiming, and Mira had to put a hand on the tile.

June still did not speak.

She soaped Mira’s arms, one and then the other, fingers traveling the inside of each elbow as if there might be a mark she needed to find. She turned Mira by the hips and did her back, the long downstroke from the nape to the small of it, thumbs pressing in just enough to make Mira’s breath change. Water ran over both of them. June’s breasts brushed Mira’s shoulder blade and stayed there a moment, warm, and then June crouched.

Mira looked down.

June soaped her thighs with both hands and worked inward. When she reached the glans it was already filling, thickening under the water in that slow, inevitable way, the hood sliding back because it had no choice. June washed it as if it were the reason she had gotten out of bed. She lathered the shaft from base to the blunt head, careful under the ridge, rinsing with her cupped palm, and the thing rose into her hand to its full height, four thick inches of flushed, wet glans standing off Mira in the steam, heavy as a fact.

June rinsed her. She used her hands like cloths. She turned Mira again and let the spray take the soap down Mira's stomach and off the standing shaft in clear sheets. She pushed Mira's wet hair off her forehead with two fingers, looked at her face, and still said nothing.

Mira's pulse was in the glans. She could feel it beat against the air.

June checked the door.

It was a small movement: head turned, eyes on the frosted glass and the empty bench and the five unused heads. No footsteps in the hall. No squeak of wet flip-flops. June listened for a full second longer than courtesy required, and then she put Mira's back to the tile.

The wall was cold. Mira hissed. June was already lifting one of her own thighs, already reaching down through the water to find the shaft and point it. She set the blunt head where she wanted it and looked at Mira's mouth instead of at the door.

"Stay," June whispered, the first word, and then she took it.

The slide was sudden and slick from the water and from June. Mira's shoulders hit the tile. June sank onto her in two long, determined motions, until she was seated to the base and the glans was buried in her to that thick, occupying stop. June's forehead dropped to Mira's. Water ran between their mouths.

"Don't you come yet," June said, still quiet. "I didn't bring you in here for you."

Mira nodded. She did not trust her voice. June's body was hot around her, tighter for the standing angle, and every breath June took squeezed the shaft.

June started to move.

She used the wall. She used Mira's hips. She lifted and came down with a wet, explicit sound the shower only half hid, and she kept the rhythm she wanted, not the one Mira's legs were asking for. When Mira's hands went to her waist June put them higher, to her ribs, and held them there.

"Like that," June said. "You stand. I take it."

Mira stood. The tile printed her shoulder blades. June rode the thick glans in short, grinding drops that put the head against the same place again and again,

and her mouth opened on a sound she bit off and then did not bother biting. Steam made a halo of her hair. She looked down between them once, at the place where she was stretched around Mira, at the base of the shaft appearing and disappearing, and her laugh came out shaken.

“Look at you,” she murmured. “My whole morning. Right here.”

Mira’s thighs shook. She locked her knees. June noticed and liked it; she could tell by the way June’s fingers tightened at her nape.

“You don’t get to fold,” June said. “I checked the door. You can last.”

A pipe knocked in the wall. Both of them froze. Footsteps passed in the hallway outside and faded toward the stairwell. June listened with her body still full of Mira, eyes on the frosted glass, and when the building went quiet again she started moving harder, as if the scare had been a gift.

Mira felt herself gathering against her will. The underside of the glans was a bright, continuous line of sensation. She turned her face into June’s wet hair.

“June—”

“Not yet.”

June reached down and touched herself while she took it, two fingers working in the water above the buried shaft. Her breath went ragged against Mira’s ear. She kept the rhythm with her hips and did not let Mira set any part of it. When she came the first time she did it almost silently, a hard internal lock around the glans, her teeth on Mira’s shoulder, her body shaking under the spray. She did not get off. She hung there through it and then she started again, slower, meaner in the nicest way, using the thickness while she was still sensitive.

“Again,” June whispered. “You’re still up. I can feel you still up.”

Mira was still up. The corpora did not care about hall bathrooms. She held the tile and let June take what she had come for. June’s second climb was longer. She talked through it in fragments, not dirty, just true.

“That’s the head. Right there. Don’t you dare go soft.”

“I’m not,” Mira got out. “I can’t.”

“Good. Stay a prize. Stay exactly like that.”

June’s foot slipped on the tile and Mira caught her by the thigh and held her on it, seated deep, and June came that way, fuller, with a sound that would have carried if anyone had been at the other heads. She pulsed around the shaft and kept Mira there until the shaking thinned, until she had taken the last of what she wanted, and only then did she put her mouth to Mira’s ear.

“Now you.”

Mira lasted three more strokes. She came with her head back against the tile and June still on her, the glans kicking hard inside that tight heat, a helpless flexing that made June hum like she had been paid. Water sheeted off them. Mira’s knees tried to go. June kept her upright with her own body and did not let the shaft slip free until Mira’s breath had gone uneven and small.

June eased off. The glans sprang back into the spray, flushed, shining, still thick, dripping water and June. June looked at it the way she had looked at it in the lantern light, except now she had soap on her wrists and a red mark on her lip from her own teeth.

She soaped Mira again, briefly, between the legs, a proprietor’s rinse. She soaped herself. She turned Mira under the head and washed the tile-print off her shoulders with her palms.

Only then did she speak at a normal volume, as if the room had been returned to them.

“I could get used to this.”

Mira swallowed. Her voice came out rough. “The shower or the standing.”

June shut the water off. The sudden quiet made the drain sound loud. She reached for their towels and put Mira’s around Mira first, tucking it at the chest, the shaft still obvious under the terry, a blunt line the towel could not civilize.

“Both,” June said. She kissed the corner of Mira’s mouth, light, almost polite. “Don’t schedule eight-a.m. lectures on days I wake up early. I’ll find you.”

Mira nodded. She did not trust a longer answer. They dressed in the steam with the other five heads still dripping, unused, and when they opened the door the hallway was only a hallway again: fluorescent light, a bulletin board about flu shots, somebody’s forgotten sandal. June walked Mira as far as the corner of the corridor, fingers briefly hooked in the hem of Mira’s shirt, and then she let go and went the other way toward her own room as if they had only shared soap.

Mira stood there one extra second with the wet heat of the wall still on her back and the thick, rinsed weight of herself against her thigh, and then she went to class with her hair dripping onto her collar, every step a reminder of how carefully she had been washed.

Chapter Five

The library’s automatic door breathed cold air over Mira and let her in. Someone had taped a sign to the scanner about fines. The first floor was all printers and the soft collision of backpacks. Mira adjusted the strap on her shoulder and told herself she was here for the chapter on methods and a quiet table and nothing else.

Priya was at the top of the main stairs.

She had her hair in a low knot and a yellow highlighter behind her ear and the look of a person who had been waiting without appearing to wait. When she saw Mira she smiled with just her mouth.

“Come sit next to me and study with me.”

Mira stopped on the landing. “Hi to you too.”

“Hi.” Priya tipped her head toward the second floor. “I already walked the stacks. Come on.”

Mira followed her past the reference desk and the row of computers where a boy was asleep on his keyboard. Priya did not take the open tables under the windows. She led Mira down a side aisle of bound journals, then left, then into a bay where the shelves made a three-sided room and a single long table sat against the wall with two chairs already pulled out on the same side. A window high up let in a white, unused light. Nobody else was in the bay. The nearest occupied table was around the corner, a murmur of pages.

Priya set her bag on the far chair like a claim. “Sit.”

Mira sat. Their shoulders would touch if either of them leaned. Priya unpacked with neat economy: the shared textbook, a spiral of notes, two pens, a sleeve of dry crackers she did not open. Mira got out her own notes from Tuesday’s lecture and tried to make her hands look like a person’s hands.

Priya angled the textbook so they could both see the diagram. “Okay. Dr. Lang said the cohort study only works if the exposure is measured before the outcome. You wrote that she contradicted herself on the smoking slide.”

“She did.” Mira found the line in her notebook. Her voice came out even. “She said prospective first, then she used a retrospective example and called it the same design. It’s not.”

“So if the question on Friday is ‘identify the design,’ we write prospective and we don’t use the bus-driver example.”

“We don’t use the bus-driver example.”

Priya nodded, satisfied, and drew a small star in the margin. Their knees were almost touching under the table. Mira could smell Priya’s shampoo, something cheap and apple. She could also feel, with the traitor precision of the last week, the slow interest starting between her legs, the glans beginning to thicken inside her shorts because Priya was close and the bay was quiet and her body had learned a new curriculum.

They went on for a page and a half. Confounding. Selection bias. Priya read a sentence aloud in a whisper so they could argue about the wording. Mira

answered. It was almost ordinary.

Priya set her pen down.

“Shorts off.”

Mira looked at her. “What?”

Priya did not smile this time. She looked at Mira’s mouth, then at the aisle, then back.

“You heard me.”

Mira’s face went hot so fast it felt like a sound. She glanced at the gap in the shelves. A shadow moved two rows over and kept moving. The table hid them from the chest down if nobody came into the bay.

“Priya. We’re in the library.”

“I know where we are. Shorts off. Leave the shirt. Put your bag across your lap after if you need a story.”

Mira sat with the sentence in her mouth and then she did it because the alternative was sitting there with the sentence and the thickening and Priya’s eyes. She unbuttoned. She lifted her hips an inch and pushed the shorts and the underwear down together, past her knees, and let them rest at her ankles like a secret that had failed. The chair was cold. The air of the library found her at once. Under the table the glans rose the rest of the way in a slow, heavy lift, standing off her into the dim, thick as Priya already knew, the head already flushed.

Priya looked down through the gap between table and laps. Her breath changed.

“I couldn’t wait to feel you again,” she said, still in a study voice. “Last time I had you in me. This time I’m stroking it.”

Her hand went under the table without any theater. She wrapped her fingers around the shaft and Mira had to lock her jaw. Priya’s palm was dry at first, then not, because Mira was already showing that thin shine at the tip. Priya settled into a pace that did not look like a pace from above: her opposite hand turned a page. Her shoulder stayed still. Under the wood her fist traveled the full thick length, base to the blunt glans and down again, a firm, unhurried stroke as if she were underlining.

“Read the next section,” Priya murmured.

Mira looked at the textbook. The words had become shapes. “Internal validity is the— Priya —”

“Internal validity is the degree to which we can say the intervention caused the change.” Priya’s thumb crossed the underside of the head, once, precise. “Say

it.”

“Internal validity is the degree to which we can say the intervention caused the change.”

“Good. Don’t lift your hips. The chair squeaks.”

Mira did not lift her hips. She sat there with her shorts at her ankles and Priya’s fist working her under a table in the health-sciences stacks, and the glans kicked once against Priya’s wrist. Priya made a small pleased sound and kept the same stroke.

Pages turned. Priya read in a soft, carrying-enough whisper, the way people read when they are allowed to be here.

“‘A loss to follow-up of more than twenty percent threatens—’” Her hand twisted on the upstroke. Mira’s mouth opened. Priya did not look at her. “‘—threatens the integrity of the conclusions.’”

Mira came like that, suddenly, with her nails in her own thigh under the table edge. The shaft flexed hard in Priya’s grip. A wet sound, very small, happened in the quiet. Mira’s breath broke.

Priya leaned an inch closer, eyes still on the paragraph.

“Shhhhhh.”

Mira swallowed the rest of it. Her eyes watered. Priya stroked her through the clench and did not stop when it peaked, only lightened for three pulls and then found the full pace again, the glans oversensitive and still standing, still packed.

“That’s one,” Priya said, almost kindly. “Lang is going to ask about follow-up. Keep listening.”

“I can’t—”

“You can. You’re still hard. I can feel the coat of it. It doesn’t get to decide we’re done because you made a noise.”

Priya read. She stroked. When footsteps entered the next aisle she froze with her hand wrapped hot around Mira and her face arranged into scholarship until the footsteps left, and then she started again as if the interruption had been a comma. Mira shook. The second climax arrived slower and meaner, a deep pulling that made her drop her forehead toward the book. Priya’s other hand came up and turned a page over Mira’s hair.

“Shhhhhh. That’s two. Breathe through your nose.”

Mira breathed through her nose. She could smell dust and apple and herself. Under the table she was slick to Priya’s wrist. Priya used it. She talked in the language of the chapter and in the other language at the same time.

“‘Confounding occurs when a third variable—’ God, you’re thick today. ‘—is associated with both the exposure and the outcome.’ Don’t close your knees. I need room.”

“Priya.”

“I’m here. I’ve got it. Let it happen.”

The third one took Mira’s voice out of her. She came silently this time because Priya’s “shhhhhh” was already at her ear, a warm ribbon of sound, and Priya’s fist was tight under the ridge where Mira had said the nerves lived. Mira’s whole body tried to fold forward. The chair did not squeak. That felt like an achievement and like a loss.

Priya kept reading. She kept her hand moving, slower now, milking the aftershocks out of the standing shaft with an almost academic patience. Mira’s thighs jumped. She put both palms flat on the table to remember she had arms.

“I think that’s the look,” Priya said quietly, glancing at Mira’s face at last. “That’s folding.”

Mira nodded. She could not make a prettier answer. The glans was still up in Priya’s loose fist, wet, flushed, a little less fierce, twitching when Priya’s thumb idly mapped the slit.

Priya held it that way while she wrote a single sentence in the margin of Mira’s notes, neat as a tutor.

Don’t use the bus-driver example.

Then she let go. She sat back. She pulled a packet of tissues from her bag as if they were highlighters and cleaned her hand, then Mira, brisk and private, and tugged Mira’s shorts up for her when Mira’s own fingers fumbled. The button was difficult. Priya did that too.

They sat there for a minute in the white window light, looking like two people who had studied.

Priya closed the textbook.

“I’m here when you need me,” she said. Her voice had gone ordinary again, which somehow made it worse. “We can do this at lunch too.”

Mira stared at the closed book. Her legs did not feel like they belonged to a person who had a Friday quiz. “Lunch.”

“The union has those booths by the vending machines. Nobody sits in the last one after one o’clock.” Priya tucked the highlighter back behind her ear. “You don’t have to come find me. I’ll find you. Same as today.”

Mira swallowed. “You’re going to ruin Public Health for me.”

Priya’s mouth tipped. “Lang ruined it first. I’m just giving you a reason to review.”

She stood, slung her bag on, and left the bay with her notes under her arm like a person with a study plan. Mira sat until she could trust her knees. Then she stood too, the thick, spent heat of herself still obvious against her thigh inside the shorts, and she walked out past the sleeping boy and the sign about fines with Priya’s last sentence sitting in her like a second syllabus.

Chapter Six

Madison locked the door with her foot and dropped her keys in the bowl.

“New rule,” she said. “After dark in here, you don’t cover it. Shirt if you’re cold. Nothing on your legs. I’m done watching you tape yourself into shorts like the room is a public hallway.”

Mira stood between the beds with her backpack still on one shoulder. The window unit ticked. Madison’s textbook was already open on her desk, highlighter waiting, as if this were another item on a list that included oatmeal and the quiz at eight.

“That’s the rule,” Madison said. “Not a speech. You live here. It lives here. At night it gets to breathe.”

Mira looked at the door.

“I locked it,” Madison said. “Shorts off.”

Mira set the bag down. She unbuttoned. She pushed the shorts and the rest down and stepped out of them and then she was just her shirt and the rest of the truth, the glans already thickening in the cool air because being told had done half the work. It lifted off her in that slow heavy way, the hood giving up, until it stood the height Madison had taken on her own quilt, blunt and obvious between the two narrow beds.

Madison looked at it the way she looked at a sink full of dishes: claimed.

“See? It was already trying. Sit. Study. I’m not starting anything until I finish this page.”

Mira sat on her own bed. The throw was rough under her bare seat. She opened Public Health and did not read it. The shaft rested against her thigh, then didn’t, rising by degrees until it pointed into the room like a third piece of furniture. Madison highlighted a sentence. The pipes in the wall knocked once.

The knock at the door was not the pipes.

Three taps, official. A voice through the wood, cheerful and trained.

“Health and safety. It’s Reese. Two minutes.”

Mira reached for the shorts.

Madison did not move from her chair. “Leave them. It’s a smoke-detector check, not a tribunal.”

“Madison—”

“It’s after dark. Rule stands. She’s seen worse in this building. I promise.”

Mira’s hand stopped. The glans gave a traitor pulse, as if the knock had been a hand. Madison got up, checked Mira once—shirt hem, bare legs, the thick standing line of her—and opened the door.

Reese was mid-twenties and compact in an RA lanyard, tablet under her arm, hair in a practical braid. She had the face of someone who had already asked six rooms about candles and illegal hot plates. She stepped in on the word *detector* and then she saw Mira on the bed.

She stopped talking.

Mira did not cover herself. There was nowhere to go that wouldn’t be a confession. The shirt stopped at her hips. Everything Madison’s rule had put on display stayed on display: the flushed glans, the dense shaft, the fact of it in the overhead light.

Reese’s eyes went there, held, and came back up with visible effort.

“Hi,” Mira said, because somebody had to.

Reese shut the door behind her without being asked. That was the first interesting choice. “I’m—sorry. I should have waited for you to say come in. I do the hall in a circuit. Window locks, detectors, no coil burners.”

“Detector’s fine,” Madison said. “Window’s fine. No coil burner. New nighttime

arrangement, which is why you’re looking at that.”

Reese looked again, shorter this time, and then she didn’t pretend she hadn’t. “Okay.”

“She needs time at night to breathe,” Madison said, easy as oatmeal. “You can’t keep that in jeans fourteen hours and then also keep it in sleep shorts and then act surprised when the person attached to it can’t think. After dark it stays out. That’s the room rule. I’m the roommate. I’m not running a club. I’m running a double.”

Reese’s mouth opened and closed. She glanced at her tablet like it might have a checkbox for this.

“Is this… medical?” she asked Mira. “I’m asking because I have to know if I write anything down, and I don’t want to write the wrong thing.”

“Congenital,” Mira said. Her voice came out thinner than she wanted. She kept her knees from closing. Closing would have been a lie. “Androgens in utero. Same erectile tissue, different assignment. It fills. It stays filled. The rule is new. The anatomy isn’t.”

Reese nodded once, slow. The RA training was still on her, but something else had sat down beside it. “I’m in a student research group. Sexual differentiation and tracking—blood flow, homologous structures, measurement over time. Volunteer demos. No photos. No course credit pressure. We have a hard time finding anyone who can show the thing we’re describing without a diagram from 1949.”

The room hummed. Mira felt the shaft tick against her own stomach.

Reese kept her eyes on Mira’s face, mostly. “I’m not writing you up. I’m asking if you’d come by the lab and let us track it. On the spot is unfair. I know that. I’m asking anyway because if I walk out and send you an email you’ll think I was being polite.”

Madison leaned against her desk, arms folded, watching Mira the way she watched the door locks.

Mira looked at the tablet, at the lanyard, at Reese’s throat. She thought of the ruler and the textbook at sixteen. She thought of Lang’s slides and Priya’s hand under the library table and June’s soap and Haley’s knock. The research group was a different kind of door.

“I’ll come,” Mira said.

Reese’s breath left her. “Yeah?”

“Yes. Tell me when. I’ll show up.”

“Thursday. Fourth floor of Hensley, room 412. After four. You can bring someone if you want.” Reese’s gaze dropped once more, helpless, to the standing glans, and she did not apologize for that either. “It looks… stable. That’s a useless word. I’m going to go check 3B’s detector before I say another useless word.”

“3B has a candle they swear is unscented,” Madison said.

“I know 3B.” Reese opened the door, then looked back at Mira, not at the rest of her. “Thursday. Thank you.”

The door shut. The lock turned under Madison’s hand.

Madison crossed the narrow aisle without taking the long way. She put one knee on Mira’s bed and looked down at what the inspection had not put away.

“See,” she said. “I told you this new rule would be a good thing.”

She pushed Mira back by the shoulder. Mira went. The Public Health book slid to the floor. Madison hooked a hand around the thick shaft as if she were taking back a borrowed pen, stroked it once from base to the blunt wet head, and then she stripped her own shorts off with the other hand and swung a leg over.

“Stay out,” Madison murmured. “That’s the whole policy.”

She notched the glans against herself and sank, a steady determined take that seated her to the base in three breaths. Mira’s hands found Madison’s hips because the rule had not said she couldn’t hold on. Madison was already moving, using the height the night air had given it, the extra stiffness the knock had left behind.

“She looked,” Madison said, riding. “You saw her look. Thursday you’re going to walk into a room of clipboards with this thing up because you sat in air for an hour. That’s not my problem. That’s the point.”

Mira’s laugh broke into a sound. Madison put a palm on Mira’s stomach and kept the pace she wanted, the roommate pace, practical and deep. The headboard tapped the wall in a rhythm 3B could have reported and wouldn’t.

“Say the rule,” Madison said.

Mira swallowed. “After dark I don’t cover it.”

“Again.”

“After dark I don’t cover it.”

Madison sat down hard and stayed, grinding, and came with her forehead against Mira’s, a bitten yes, her body locking around the shaft. She did not get off. She waited through Mira’s answering clench, the thick flexing inside her, and only then eased up enough to let the glans slip free and stand back into the room, shining, still under the rule.

Madison rolled onto the sliver of mattress left and pulled the throw over both their legs and no higher.

“Thursday you can wear pants down the hall,” she said into Mira’s shoulder. “Not before. Lights are still off. It still gets to breathe.”

Mira stared at the detector on the ceiling, the one Reese had not even needed to check. The glans cooled in the air and did not go down. Somewhere a door opened and closed on Reese’s circuit. Madison’s breathing evened into the satisfaction of a policy that had already paid rent.

Mira left the shorts on the floor.

Chapter Seven

Hensley 412 had the kind of fluorescent light that made everybody look like a form. A long table. A paper-covered exam bench against the wall. A locked cabinet with a handwritten label that said SUPPLIES. The blinds were already down.

Three women stood up when Mira came in.

Reese she knew. The lanyard was gone. In its place a plain badge on a clip: RESEARCH ASSISTANT. The other two were new. One had a clipboard and a pencil behind her ear and the tired posture of a person who lived in this room. The other had a camera bag on the chair and both hands visible, as if that mattered.

“Mira,” Reese said. “This is Nadine. She runs the protocol. That’s Tamsin. Measurements and log.”

Nadine was older than the rest of them by a few years, graduate-student older, hair twisted up with a pen. She did not look at Mira’s jeans first. She looked at Mira’s face and then she smiled like a person who had practiced smiling.

“Thank you for coming. You can sit. You can also leave. Both are allowed in the first five minutes with no paperwork.”

Mira sat on the chair that was not the exam bench. Her backpack stayed in her lap. Thursday hallway air was still on her. Madison’s rule had ended at the stairwell; the jeans were doing their honest work again and failing at it. She could feel herself already interested inside the denim, a thick, stupid loyalty to being looked at.

Tamsin unzipped the camera bag.

Mira’s eyes went there.

Reese saw it. Her mouth tightened. “I said no photos.”

“You said what we say to volunteers in the hallway,” Nadine said, still even. “The tracking protocol is image-assisted. Stills at each measurement. Short clips of handling so we can timestamp fill and detumescence. Faces can be cropped in the log. Nothing goes on a shared drive with a name. You can refuse the imaging and we do calipers only, which gives us worse data and I will not pretend otherwise.”

She slid a form across the table. Two checkboxes. MEASUREMENT. IMAGING.

Reese looked at Mira, not at Nadine. “You can say no. I asked you on the spot. That was on me.”

Tamsin kept her hands out of the bag. “If you say no I put it away. I’m not here to hunt you.”

The clock on the wall jumped a minute. Mira thought of the ruler and the textbook at sixteen. She thought of Reese in the doorway with the tablet. She thought of becoming a specimen on purpose instead of a rumor by accident.

She checked both boxes. She signed.

Nadine's pencil ticked once, a small sound of legitimacy.

"All right," Nadine said. "Then we do this like science and not like a dare. Step behind the screen. Shirt can stay if you want it. We need the pelvis clear. When you come out you sit on the edge of the bench. Feet on the step. You can stop any time. Stopping ends the session, not the friendship, not the hall."

Mira went behind the screen. She took the jeans off and the rest off and left the shirt on because the shirt had become a kind of sentence. When she came out the three of them looked, all at once, and then they tried not to do it all at once.

It was already up.

Not fully. Enough that the shirt hem did nothing. The glans stood off her into the white light, thickening in the walk from the screen, the hood already out of the job. Tamsin made a sound that she turned into a cough.

Nadine pointed with the pencil, professional and not. "That's the glans. Visible portion of the organ that is, in typical assignment, mostly internal. Corpora cavernosa filling. Same white- coat constraint as a penis, which is why you get length and girth instead of a sphere. We knew that. Knowing it is not the same as standing in 412 looking at it."

"You can say you need a minute," Reese said.

"I don't need a minute," Mira said. "I need you to start before I change my mind about the camera."

Tamsin nodded. She set a phone on a small tripod at three-quarter angle and a second camera in her hands. The red record dot came on like a pulse.

"Baseline still," Tamsin said. "Then tape."

Nadine put on gloves. The snap of them was loud in the locked room. She took a soft measuring tape from the tray and stepped between Mira's knees as if Mira were a diagram that had agreed to be warm.

"I'm going to touch you now. Length from the pubic attachment to the tip, unstretched first. Then stretched to resistance. Then midshaft girth. Then glans length and width for the index. Say if a point is painful."

"It isn't painful," Mira said. "It's loud."

Nadine's gloved fingers lifted the shaft and laid the tape along it. The touch was nothing like Priya's fist and nothing like June's soap and it did the same work

anyway. Mira watched the centimeter marks because looking at Nadine’s mouth was worse.

“Unstretched erecting—call it filling—eleven point four centimeters,” Nadine said. “Tamsin.”

“Got it. Still. And clip.”

The shutter was small. The video kept watching. Nadine stretched the shaft gently to resistance and Mira’s hips tried to follow the tape.

“Stretched, twelve point six. That’s your four-and-a-quarter in honest light.” Nadine’s thumb had to brace under the glans to keep the tape true. The glans flexed against the glove. Nadine’s breath went out through her nose. “Girth.”

The tape went around. Nadine’s gloves were powdered and still they caught. Midshaft, thick as Madison had said in a different voice. Nadine read the number like it might behave if she was calm enough.

“Girth eight point nine. Glans length five point two. Width three point eight. Index well past thirty-five. We can stop calling it borderline in the write-up.”

Reese was supposed to be on log. She had not written anything in twenty seconds. Her pen sat against the page hard enough to dent it.

“Blood flow next,” Nadine said. She did not take her hand away. “We need a timed fill to full rigidity and a clip of the change. Tamsin, stay on the shaft. Reese, clock.”

“How do you time fill if it’s already—” Reese started.

“It isn’t full,” Mira said. She could hear her own lecture voice from the floor of Haley’s room and hated how useful it was. “That’s three-quarters. The corpora have more. If you want the coat tight you have to—handle it.”

Nadine looked at her. The professionalism thinned by a visible degree. “May I.”

“That’s what I signed.”

Nadine wrapped her gloved hand around the shaft and stroked the way a person strokes when they have written a protocol about it and then met the protocol in a room. Steady. Base to the blunt head. A twist at the ridge that she had not written down. The glans darkened in the fluorescent light, filling, lifting, the last of the slack going out of it until it stood off Mira’s body in a thick, packed line and Nadine’s fingers no longer met.

“Full,” Nadine said, and her voice had lost a floor. “Time.”

“Forty seconds from first stroke,” Reese said. “I think. I was watching.”

“You were watching,” Tamsin said, camera still up. “Don’t stop, Nadine. I need ten seconds of stable rigidity. Circumference again at peak.”

Nadine measured again. The tape trembled. Mira’s thighs were open on the paper because closing them would have moved the shot. She could feel the wet at the tip, a shine the lights made obscene and official at the same time.

“Homology for the log,” Nadine said. She was still holding Mira. She seemed to have forgotten that the sentence did not require a hand. “Glans to glans. Corpora to corpora. The hood is a failed prepuce. What you’re seeing is not a novelty. It’s an androgen dose with a calendar. Mira, if you can, say in your words what you feel when it’s packed like this.”

Mira swallowed. Tamsin’s lens was a black, polite circle.

“I feel the coat,” Mira said. “I feel the nerves under the ridge. I feel that you are measuring me and my body does not care that your badge says research.”

Nadine’s stroke had not quite stopped. It had become the small correcting motion of keeping the shaft upright for the frame. That was enough. That had always been enough.

Mira’s stomach tightened. “Wait—”

“Hold still for the still,” Tamsin said.

“I can’t—if you keep—”

Nadine looked down at her own glove as if it had betrayed a method. She did not let go fast enough. The third pass of her thumb under the glans was an accident only in the sense that the protocol had not named it.

Mira came with her hands on the edge of the bench and her mouth open and no sound for a second, then a broken one she bit into her shirt. The shaft kicked in Nadine’s grip, thick flexing pulses the camera caught in full because Tamsin did not lower it. A wet line ran over the glove and onto the paper. Mira’s knees tried to close and hit Nadine’s hips instead.

Nobody spoke in the decent way.

Tamsin whispered, “I have it,” and then looked like she wished she had whispered something else.

Reese had written a jagged line that was not a word.

Nadine kept her hand still through the last clench, not stroking, just containing, the way Priya had contained it in the dark for a different reason. When Mira’s breath started again Nadine looked at her face first.

“That wasn’t in the script,” Nadine said. “Are you—do we stop.”

Mira’s laugh came out wrecked and short. “You have the clip. If you stop now I walked over here to be almost data.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Don’t stop the log,” Mira said. “You can stop touching me for a minute. I can’t sign a form with my legs like this.”

Nadine took her hand away. The glans stayed up in the white light, shining, kicking once in the air as if the glove were still there. Tamsin took three more stills because that was her job and because she wanted to, and those two facts sat in the room together without anyone separating them.

Reese found her voice. “We can crop the orgasm out of the teaching set.”

“No,” Nadine said, too fast, and then she heard herself. She looked at Mira. “Unless you want it out. For the internal tracking file it’s a response. For any slide deck it comes out. That’s not a discussion. That’s the line I can still draw.”

“Internal file,” Mira said. “You can keep what happened. I’m not going to pretend I don’t know what this thing does when a person holds it.”

Nadine stripped the wet glove, bagged it, put on a new one like ritual. She finished the last measurements with a lighter touch and a face that kept slipping. Tamsin filmed the detumescence that did not come. Five minutes. Ten. The shaft lowered a degree and then thought better of it under three women’s eyes.

“It doesn’t clock out,” Mira said. “I told Reese that.”

Reese finally wrote something useful. *Persistent rigidity post-orgasm. Air exposure. Audience.*

Nadine stepped back. Her new glove was clean and her voice was almost hers again. “That’s the session. Thursday next if you still want time-series. Same room. Same option to bring someone. Same form, already signed, you can revoke imaging in writing.”

Tamsin shut the red light off. The silence after the camera was worse than the camera.

Mira got behind the screen and put the jeans on over a body that had not agreed to be civilian. The denim was an argument she lost at the zipper. When she came out Nadine was labeling a card in small letters.

VOLUNTEER 07. TRACKING. IMAGING Y.

Reese walked her to the elevator. They did not speak until the doors opened on the fourth- floor hallway and the building became a building again.

“I should have told you about the cameras in the dorm,” Reese said.

“You should have.” Mira watched the floor numbers. “I would still have come. That’s the part I don’t like saying out loud.”

Reese nodded once. The doors opened on one. “If your friends ask what it was, you can tell them it was official. That’s true. It was also not only official. That’s

also true.”

Mira walked back across campus with the card of the afternoon under her shirt like heat: tape numbers, a red record dot, Nadine’s glove, the sound she had made in a room that had forms. In the double, later, Madison would want the rule and the story. Haley would want the door. June would want the soap. Priya would want the log.

None of them would have a badge.

Mira kept her jeans on until the sun went down. Then she took them off because that was the other protocol she had already signed, and she sat on her bed in the shirt and the air and waited for the lock to turn, still up, still measured, still on file.

Chapter Eight

The sun went down at 7:12. Mira’s jeans came off at 7:13 because Madison was standing there with a spoon in her oatmeal, waiting, and the rule did not have a grace period.

By 7:20 Mira was on her own bed with Public Health open and her shirt pulled down as far as a shirt would go, which was not far enough. The glans had come up in the interval like it kept a copy of the schedule. It stood into the room, thick and idle, while Mira highlighted *loss to follow-up* and tried to be a person with a quiz.

Madison ate oatmeal and watched the door the way a landlord watched weather.

The first knock was Haley’s. Mira knew it before Madison opened the door: two taps and a pause, the same as the night she had asked to sleep over.

Haley saw the rule in practice and stopped on the threshold with her mouth already open for a greeting that had assumed shorts.

“Oh,” Haley said. “You’re—it’s dark.”

“That’s when the law happens,” Madison said. “In or out. The hall is a hall.”

Haley came in. She shut the door with her back. She looked at Mira’s face and then, helplessly, at the standing shaft, and the look was the door-knock look: private, already a little wounded by the existence of other people.

“I was going to ask if you wanted to study,” Haley said.

“She’s studying,” Madison said. “You can see the book. You can also see the rest of the municipal property.”

The second knock arrived before Haley had picked a place to stand. June did not wait for *come in*. She came in on the hinge with a bottle of the hall soap in her hand like a calling card.

“I woke up early yesterday and you had a lecture,” June said to Mira, and then she saw Haley, and then she saw Madison’s oatmeal, and then she saw the rule, and her eyes narrowed in a way that was not about soap. “Why is she here first.”

“I live here,” Madison said.

“I meant Haley.”

“I knocked,” Haley said.

“I don’t knock in the morning,” June said. “That’s the point of mornings.”

Mira turned a page she did not read. “If this is a line, I need numbers.”

Priya did not knock. Priya texted *down the hall* and then opened the door because Madison had not locked it after June, and Priya walked in with her spiral notebook and the expression of a person arriving at a meeting that had started without the agenda.

She took in the room: four women, one textbook, one roommate spoon, one bottle of soap, one bare-legged Mira, and the glans standing there like the only attendee who had read the minutes.

Priya shut the door. She locked it.

“No,” she said, to the room at large. “Absolutely not. I had lunch. I had a booth. I had a plan for 8:30 that did not include a quorum.”

June set the soap on Mira’s desk with a click. “She’s not a booth.”

“She’s also not a pet you rinse when you feel spiritual,” Priya said.

“She’s not a spreadsheet,” June said.

“She’s not your girlfriend just because she kissed you on a comforter,” Madison said to Haley, who had not claimed that and flushed anyway.

Haley’s voice went up. “I didn’t say girlfriend. I said I knocked. That’s more than some people did.”

“I live here,” Madison said, louder. “I wrote the rule. I feed the detector. I listen to 3B’s music. Household rights. After dark it stays out and I don’t stand in the aisle asking permission to sit on my own roommate.”

“That’s feudal,” Priya said, and her voice went up too. “You don’t get a monopoly because your name is on the housing portal.”

“Watch me.”

Mira’s highlighter squeaked. Nobody looked at the book.

June pointed at the shaft as if it were exhibit A and also hers. “I washed her. I stood her on tile and I told her not to fold and she didn’t. That is not nothing. You

don’t get to oatmeal- policy that out of existence.”

“You used a communal shower like it was a chapel,” Priya snapped. “I kept her quiet in a library. I know what she sounds like when she is trying not to sound like anything. That is data.”

“Don’t say data,” Haley said, and now she was loud too. “She isn’t your lab. She came to my room first. She let me on her first. That has to count or nothing counts.”

“First is not a constitution,” Madison said.

“Neither is oatmeal.”

They were all standing. The double had never been meant for a legislature. Mira sat on the bed with her knees apart because the alternative was comedy of a different kind, the glans flushed and rising a degree every time someone said *her* like a pronoun with a hand already in it.

“Could you,” Mira tried, “not yell at the organ. It thinks yelling is for it.”

“It is for it,” June said.

“That’s what we’re saying,” Priya said.

“That is not what I’m saying,” Haley said.

Madison set the empty bowl down hard. “Then say what you are saying, in order, or get out of my room and petition the sun.”

They did not get out. They all started at once.

June: “Mornings and washing—”

Priya: “Lunch and review and I already told her—”

Haley: “Nights she wants a person, not a policy—”

Madison: “Nights are mine to host—”

The volume went up the way water went up when too many hands were in the same sink. Mira’s name bounced off the cinderblock. 3B thumped the wall once, a review from the neighbors. The glans kicked. Mira put the textbook over her face and then took it away because she could not breathe through confounding variables.

A different knock cut through it. Official. Three taps.

Reese’s voice, dry as a write-up. “This is the RA. You are audible in the stairwell. Open the door before I use the key and make it worse.”

Madison unlocked it because the alternative was a report. Reese stepped in in the lanyard and stopped exactly as she had stopped the first time, except now the

room was a small riot and Mira was already the rule.

Reese shut the door. She looked at the five of them. She looked at the standing shaft. She looked tired in a way that was not only about 3B’s candles.

“I could hear the words *monopoly* and *pet* and *booth*,” Reese said. “I am off the clock in six minutes and I am still, unfortunately, in this building. Also I have a tracking file with her measurements in it and a clip I am not discussing in a hallway, so if this is a allocation fight I would like to be allocated.”

Priya stared. “You want a turn.”

“I want Thursday,” Reese said. “I also want not to lie to myself about Thursday. I stood there with a pen and I dented the page. That is my petition.”

June made a noise of betrayal. “The clipboard girl.”

“The RA,” Madison said. “Who has a key.”

“Don’t start with the key,” Reese said. “I will put the key in the bowl and argue like a person.”

She put the key in the bowl. It sat next to Madison’s keys like a bad metaphor.

Haley sat down on the end of Mira’s bed because her legs had given up the moral high ground. “This is insane.”

“It’s a double,” Madison said. “Insane is when you try to do this in a triple.”

Mira looked at Reese. “You told me it was official.”

“It was official,” Reese said. “It is also me in your doorway again, which I did not put in the consent form. I’m asking for a piece. I’m asking in front of them so nobody gets to say the RA snuck.”

Priya flipped her notebook open like a gavel. “Fine. We write it down. If we don’t write it down somebody is going to be in this room at 2 a.m. with soap and a feeling.”

“I have a feeling now,” June said.

“We know,” four voices said, not together and not apart.

Priya stood at the desk because it was the closest thing to a podium. “Madison keeps after- dark uncovering. That’s infrastructure. Nobody puts shorts on her in this room after sunset. Agreed.”

A scatter of reluctant yeses. Mira did not vote. The glans, unconsulted, stayed up.

“June gets early showers when the hall is empty,” Priya went on. “Not every morning. That’s how people get expelled.”

“Three mornings,” June said.

“Two,” Madison said.

“Two,” Reese said, “and you check the door like a person who has seen a write-up.”

June pointed at Mira, then at the soap. “Two. And I take the shirt off when I wash her. I don’t work around cotton.”

Haley’s head came up. “The shirt stays if she wants it.”

“The shirt,” Madison said, looking at Mira’s hem as if it had been a loophole all along, “was mercy for temperature. This is a town hall about her body. She doesn’t get a podium. Shirt off.”

Mira blinked. “That’s not a sentence a person just says.”

“It is tonight.” Madison held out a hand, palm up, not unkind and not asking twice. “You heard the volume. They need to see what they’re filing claims on. I need them to stop pretending this is about study habits. Off.”

Reese’s mouth did something complicated. “She can refuse.”

Mira looked at the five of them. She looked at the detector. She pulled the shirt over her head and dropped it on the textbook.

The room changed temperature.

There was nothing left to negotiate around. Mira sat fully nude on her own bed in the overhead light, the thick glans standing off her into the argument like a microphone, her mouth set in the dry line she used for homology and for this. Haley made a helpless sound. June’s fingers flexed on the soap. Priya forgot her next bullet. Reese, who had already seen it in 412, still went pink, because 412 had been gloves and this was a bedspread.

Madison gestured, gracious as a host. “There. Exhibit A. Continue.”

Priya had to clear her throat. “Haley gets first knock two nights a week if Mira wants the knock. Not a claim on the organ. A claim on the door.”

“I want the door,” Haley said, quiet now, staring. “I also want—look at her. I can’t do policy while she looks like that.”

“That is the entire problem,” Reese said.

“Lunch booths stay Priya’s if Mira walks in,” Priya said, pushing, professional and failing in real time. “Thursdays after four are Hensley. Imaging already signed. I want a copy of the numbers.”

“No,” Reese said.

“Then you don’t get Monday,” Priya said.

“That’s not how IRB works.”

“This isn’t IRB,” June said. “This is a dorm.”

Madison clapped once. “And in this dorm I am going to sit on her before 3B files a noise complaint about theory.”

“You can’t just—” Haley started.

Madison was already moving. She hooked a hand around the shaft in front of all of them, a landlord’s hello, and Mira’s breath punched out of her. The glans flexed in Madison’s fist, wet at the tip under the light.

“I can,” Madison said. “Watch the infrastructure work.”

She did not bother with a speech. She pushed her own shorts down, climbed into Mira’s lap facing her, and took the blunt head in with the unhurried nerve of someone who had already done the oatmeal version of this conversation. Mira’s hands went to Madison’s waist. Madison sank until she was seated, fully nude Mira under her, the shaft buried to the base while four other women stood in a carpet aisle that had never been designed for witness.

June said, very reasonably and much too loud, “That was not your turn.”

“It’s my bed,” Madison said, and started to move.

Priya actually laughed, one startled bark. “Unbelievable.”

“It’s a little believable,” Reese said, and then closed her mouth like a tablet had fallen on it.

Haley sat frozen at Mira’s ankle, close enough to feel the bed rock. June set the soap down so she would not throw it. Priya wrote *Madison / occupancy / bad faith* and then gave up and watched the place where Madison rose and the thick wet shaft showed and vanished.

Mira’s head tipped back. “If you are going to fight,” she got out, “fight quieter. That’s— Madison—that’s the ridge—”

“I know where the ridge is,” Madison said. “I live with it.”

June arrived on the mattress from the other side as if the treaty had a minority report. She kissed Mira’s mouth while Madison rode, possessive, and put a hand on Mira’s breast because the shirt was gone and the pet policy had a clause about skin. Haley made a wounded sound and then put her forehead against Mira’s bare knee, which was not a vote and was also a vote. Priya stood with her notebook forgotten and her thumb rubbing the same page. Reese stayed by the door with the lanyard and the look of a person who had come to assign slots and had been assigned a problem instead.

Madison came first, practical, biting Mira’s shoulder so 3B would get less material. She stayed seated through it and looked at the room over Mira’s hair.

“Amendments after I get up,” she said, breathless. “Not during.”

“During,” June said, and when Madison lifted off, shining shaft springing back into the committee’s air, June was already swinging a leg over, facing away, taking it in one determined sink that made Mira gasp and grab the sheets.

“Mornings,” June told the wall, riding, “and this. Say it.”

Mira, wrecked and almost laughing, said, “Two mornings. Tile. Door check.”

“Good prize.”

Priya threw the notebook on the desk. “I am not standing here like a librarian.”

She climbed onto the bed from the side—there was no side left—and put her hand where June would allow it, on the wet base of the shaft when June lifted, stroking what the angle gave her, her mouth at Mira’s ear.

“Lunch,” Priya whispered, furious and precise. “Shhhhhh if you have to. Don’t you fold before I get a turn that is actually mine.”

Reese, from the door: “This is still audible.”

“Then come here and muffle it,” Madison said, collapsing into the one sliver of pillow.

Reese stared at all that bare skin and the thick occupied shaft and the RA training that had nothing left to do. She came off the door. She sat on the edge like the edge was a decision. Mira reached for her because the shirt was gone and there was no podium and Reese’s mouth when it finally found hers did not feel like Hensley 412.

June came with her hands on Mira’s knees, a broken pleased sound, and lifted off only when her thighs gave out. The glans stood back up into a room that had stopped pretending this was about fairness.

Priya took her in facing her, sinking with a hiss, and did not last long because she had been ready since the lock turned. Mira came under her, accidentally on purpose, the shaft kicking while Priya shushed her against her mouth and failed to shush herself. Haley, last and soft about it, did not climb on so much as crawl into Mira’s lap after Priya moved and take it slowly, facing her, the first-night angle, and Mira held her like the door.

Reese did not ride her. Reese wrapped a hand around what Haley was not occupying—there was nothing Haley was not occupying—and then, when Haley shook apart and slipped aside, Reese looked at Mira for the question.

Mira nodded.

Reese took the glans in her fist first, as if the camera were still on, and then she sat down on it with a helpless sound that was not in any protocol, fully dressed

lanyard bouncing against Mira’s bare chest, and the absurdity of that made Mira laugh into Reese’s shoulder until the laugh turned into another clench. Reese came quietly, professionally undone, forehead to Mira’s, and said, very small, “Thursdays. And I knock.”

“Everyone knocks,” Madison muttered from the pillow. “New amendment. Except me. I have keys.”

They spilled into a pile that the twin bed refused to host and hosted anyway: Mira on her back in the middle, fully nude, the shaft still up and shining and ridiculous, five women breathing like they had run for office and won a mess. Priya reached out and held the glans loosely, librarian to the end.

“I’m keeping it under control,” Priya said.

“That’s not control,” June said.

“It’s a working group,” Reese said.

Haley’s voice was muffled in Mira’s neck. “Is the yelling over.”

Mira stared at the detector. Her shirt was on the textbook. Her shorts were a previous life. She was sore in the good way and smiling at the ceiling like a person who had been measured and scheduled and washed and hosted and still not asked the only question that mattered, so she asked it herself, dry as tape.

“If 3B knocks,” she said, “somebody else can explain the rule.”

Madison patted the standing shaft once, fond and proprietary, and left her hand there among Priya’s fingers.

“Nobody else is getting a piece tonight,” Madison said. “The committee is closed. Lights stay off. It still gets to breathe.”

The room, at last, laughed, a low wrecked laugh that did not need a gavel. Mira’s body stayed the agenda. The agenda, for the moment, stayed out.

Epilogue

June had the hall bathroom first, two mornings, door checked, soap already in her hand. She washed Mira under the last head like a creature she meant to take to a fair and also like a person she would have kissed on the mouth in any weather. Mira stood and let her. The glans filled in June’s palm because that was what it did when it was handled as if it were the reason for soap.

“Eat when we get back,” June murmured, rinsing the shaft with a cupped hand, prize-bright in the steam. “Don’t give me the I-have-class face. You have a stomach too.”

Mira said, “I have Lang at nine.”

“You have eggs at eight-forty. I already told Madison.”

They dressed Mira in the things that could stand the walk and not the truth. June walked her to the double, fingers in the hem, and peeled off toward her own door as if they had only shared water.

Madison had the eggs. Haley had the toast. The plate was on Mira’s desk because Mira’s lap, after dark, was a different kind of furniture, and the sun was still up enough for jeans. Haley buttered. Madison salted. They did not ask Mira what she wanted. They had learned she would say *fine* and then forget to chew.

“Sit,” Madison said. “Open.”

Mira sat. Haley put toast in her mouth. Madison followed with eggs. It should have been funny. It was funny. It was also the only reason Mira had eaten before noon in a week. The jeans were already losing. Haley glanced down at the thick line fighting the zipper and made a small sound and then put the rest of the toast in anyway.

“Quiz Friday,” Haley said. “I’m quizzing you while you swallow. What do you not use on the design question.”

Mira, chewing, “The bus-driver example.”

“Good queen,” Madison said, dry as the detector. “Now the other half. What threatens internal validity if you lose people.”

“Follow-up. More than twenty percent.”

Priya arrived without knocking because the treaty had given her a key after the night of the committee, a development 3B would have loved to report. She had Mira’s Public Health draft in her bag and three sentences already rewritten in a hand that was not Mira’s.

“You mixed prospective and retrospective again in paragraph four,” Priya said. She set the paper next to the plate. “I fixed it. You can copy it in your handwriting tonight so Lang doesn’t grow a brain. Say thank you.”

“Thank you,” Mira said.

Priya looked at her mouth, then at the zipper. “Lunch. Last booth. Don’t be late. If Reese’s Thursday runs long I will come to Hensley and take you out of the building myself.”

“That’s kidnapping,” Reese said from the doorway, lanyard on, because Thursdays started in the hall now. She had a granola bar in one hand and the look of a person who had stopped pretending her job and her file were cousins. “It’s also fine. She eats this on the walk. Nadine pushed us to 4:10. Tamsin wants detumescence numbers that we are not going to get.”

Reese put the bar in Mira’s other hand. Mira had become a person that other people loaded like a pack animal and a princess at the same time. She stood.

Haley kissed her cheek. Madison pointed at the jeans.

“Those come off at 7:12. Not 7:14. I’m not debating daylight savings with a glans.”

“You kind of are,” Mira said.

“Go.”

Lang’s lecture happened to someone. Mira sat in the chair and the jeans and the leftover heat of June’s soap and wrote the words *cohort* and *exposure* while the shaft held a private class against the denim. She did not have a feeling about that. Feelings required a gap. The day did not have gaps.

Priya’s booth at 1:10 had the textbook already open to the page Mira would be tested on. Priya’s hand was already under the table before Mira had finished sitting. Shorts off was a lunch amendment now, bag across the lap, Priya’s fist working the full thick length in that same unhurried underline while she read the chapter aloud.

“‘Confounding occurs when—’ stay still— ‘a third variable is associated with both.’” Priya’s thumb crossed the ridge. “You’re going to define that on Friday in complete sentences. Say it while I do this.”

Mira said it. She came into Priya’s palm halfway through selection bias and Priya shushed her without looking away from the page, then kept stroking because folding mid-review was how people failed Lang and also how this particular specimen gave data.

“One more,” Priya whispered. “Then you get the sandwich I bought you. Queen first. Then the rest.”

Mira had the second one with her forehead above the diagram of a study design. Priya unwrapped the sandwich for her afterward and fed her the first bite because Mira’s hands were not trustworthy yet. The glans stayed up under the table, shining, stupid, faithful. Priya wiped it as if she were wiping a pen.

“I put your name on the group project,” Priya said. “You will not write a word. You will read what I wrote so you can speak if Lang points. That is not charity. That is me not watching you drown because five people are using your body as a transit system.”

Mira nodded. She did not locate a feeling. She located the sandwich.

Hensley 412 at 4:10 was gloves and the red dot and Nadine’s tape. Tamsin said “baseline still” like a greeting. Reese stood where she could see Mira’s face and the shaft both, which was not in the protocol and was no longer being hidden.

Nadine measured. Eleven point four, then the stroke to full, twelve point six, girth that made Tamsin’s breath click on the audio they were not supposed to

care about. Mira sat on the paper in the shirt they still allowed her here and nothing else, a volunteer number and a girl, and when Nadine’s correcting thumb lingered under the glans Mira came again without meaning to, a short hard kick the camera ate whole.

Nadine bagged the glove. “Response recorded. Eat something before you leave my lab. You look like a beautiful chart that forgot it has blood sugar.”

Reese walked her out with a hand at the small of her back and a second granola bar. In the elevator Reese kissed her once, official and not, and said, “I knocked this morning. You were already in soap. I’ll knock tonight.”

“Madison will bill you in keys,” Mira said.

“I know.”

7:12. The jeans came off in the aisle. Madison did not watch the clock so much as become it. Mira’s shirt followed because the committee had ended mercy for temperature on nights when the whole working group was in attendance, and they were: Haley with flashcards, June with the soap she no longer needed and brought anyway, Priya with the rewritten paragraph, Reese with the lanyard dropped in the bowl.

Mira stood nude between the beds while they assembled her evening like a stall at a show. Haley held the flashcards at eye level so Mira would not look down. June smoothed Mira’s hair. Priya sat on the desk and read the corrected paragraph aloud and made Mira repeat the thesis. Madison put a bowl in Mira’s hands and did not let her set it down until it was empty.

The glans stood through all of it, thick as the pipe they had stopped comparing it to because comparisons were for people who still needed language. It flushed when Haley praised a right answer. It flexed when June’s knuckles brushed it passing the soap from hand to hand. It dripped when Priya said *good* in the voice she used for internal validity. Reese watched it like a file that had gotten up and learned to live in a double.

“On your back,” Madison said, after the bowl. “She has a quiz in her head and a body that will not store both.”

They used her in the order the treaty had almost written down and then ignored whenever the bed required ignoring. Madison first, household, seated and sure, talking about the detector as if the detector were a chaperone she liked. June after her, facing away, washing Mira’s throat with her mouth because the shower was closed after dark. Priya third, shushing, still asking for the definition of confounding while she took the shaft to the base. Haley fourth, facing her, the knock turned into a grind, flashcards fallen on the floor. Reese last and still a little astonished to be last, lanyard somewhere on the carpet, measuring nothing

with her body except how full Mira was and how little of Mira was available for a private thought.

Mira came when the glans came. That was the honest mechanic. She did not have time, in the stack of them, to climb down into a feeling and name it. Queen was the plate and the rewritten sentences and Haley’s thumb wiping egg off her mouth. Specimen was the tape and the red dot and Priya’s notebook and Reese’s dented page. Prize pig was June’s soap and Madison’s rule and the way they kept her sleek and fed and out in the air so the thing they had organized a government around could be seen, and taken, and seen again.

Under all of that the shaft kept the only diary. It felt June’s rinse. It felt the zipper’s losing fight. It felt Priya’s underline and Nadine’s glove and the paper of 412 and the flashcard light and Madison’s sitting-down authority and Haley’s careful sinking and Reese’s mouth saying Thursday against her skin. It felt the throw at last, and Priya’s loose containing fist, and Madison’s heavier hand over that fist, and June’s fingers at the base, and Haley’s breath on Mira’s knee, and Reese’s forehead on Mira’s bare shoulder.

“Lights,” Madison said.

The overhead died. The window unit ticked. 3B’s music tried a verse and gave up.

Mira stared at the dark where the detector was. She waited for a conclusion to arrive in the place people kept conclusions. Nothing came up except the next small pulse in Priya’s grip, thick, simple, fed, scheduled, washed, measured, passed-forward through Friday’s quiz on a paragraph someone else had saved.

“She’s quiet,” Haley whispered.

“She’s full,” June said.

“She’s going to sleep,” Priya said. “If she wakes up and tries to rewrite paragraph four I will end her.”

Reese’s laugh was only air. “Thursday she can be data again. Tonight she can be this.”

Madison patted what they were all, in their way, holding.

“After dark it breathes,” she said. “That’s the whole policy. The rest of you are just the staff.”

Mira slept like that: no time left in her for a feeling that could sit up and speak, and under the staff’s hands the glans, which had never needed time, feeling everything.