The Amish Girl at Westhaven (2026)

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Chariot, Book 34

Chapter 1

Paige Miller came through the glass doors of the Westhaven Women's College Health Clinic at ten. The air inside was cold and smelled like antiseptic. She stopped on the mat with the letter folded in both hands.

She was nineteen and five feet tall. The white organdy cap was pinned close to her head. The dress she had sewn at home came to her ankles, gray and plain, and the black boots were laced to the calf. She had not been in an English building alone before this morning. At home she had never bared more than her wrists and her ankles. Bathing was done quickly, under a lamp, and even her sisters had not seen her without her shift. She had never put her hand between her legs. She would not have known what to do with it if she had.

The scholarship letter had said the screening was required before classes. Her father had put his hand on her shoulder and told her to go with God.

The lobby was bright. Two girls in college sweatshirts sat on a bench with a magazine. A tall blonde in a lab coat stood at the end of the counter with a clipboard. Her name tag said Roberta Ellis, Peer Tutor. Behind the desk a woman with a gray bun and glasses was typing. Other girls waited in the chairs, dressed, looking at their phones or at nothing.

Paige crossed the tile. Her boots sounded loud to her.

"Paige Miller, ma'am. Ten o'clock. The gastrointestinal consultation. For the scholarship."

The woman looked up, found the name, and nodded. "Paige Miller. First screening. We'll start you now." She pulled a metal bin from under the counter and set it on the desk with the lid open. "Clothes in here. All of them. Cap, dress, underthings, boots. Fold them. Then up on the platform in the corner. Arms at your sides. Feet apart. Dr. Harlan will be out when she's finished with the girl ahead of you."

Paige looked at the bin, then at the lobby. Her face went hot. "Here? With everyone?"

"Yes." The woman was already back at the keyboard. "Ms. Landry, if you need anything. Don't hold the line, dear. We've got the morning booked."

The two girls turned a page. Roberta Ellis made a mark on her clipboard and said something to a nurse who had come up to the counter. No one had lowered her voice.

This cannot be right, Paige thought. At home a woman's body was for her husband, and only after the wedding. She had no husband. She had no name for the drop in her stomach, or for the warmth that came under it, low, where she

had never touched. It frightened her that the warmth was there at all. She held the letter tighter. Complete the screenings or the place went to the next girl. She could not call her father and say she had stopped in the lobby because she was ashamed.

She set the letter on the desk. Her hands had started to shake.

She lifted them to the cap. The pins were small and she had to feel for them. One, then the next. She set them in the bin so they would not be lost. When the organdy came off, her hair fell to her shoulders. The air touched the back of her neck. She had not had her head uncovered in a public room since she was a little girl. She put the cap in the bin and did not look at the bench. What would Mamm say, she thought, and the thought did not stop her fingers.

The dress buttoned down the front. She undid the buttons from the collar. At the third one she felt the cool on her chest, above the slip. She kept going because the schedule was waiting and because her father had told her to make them proud. The dress slid off her shoulders and dropped around her boots in a ring of cloth. She stepped out of it. One girl on the bench moved her feet so Paige could get the hem clear of her shoes. "Sorry," the girl said, and went back to the magazine.

Paige folded the dress the way she had been taught, sleeves in, and laid it in the bin. Then she bent and unlaced the boots. Her hands were clumsy. She got them off and set them side by side, socks tucked inside. The tile was cold under her feet. She was still in the slip, and already the floor was wrong. She had not been barefoot in front of anyone outside her own kitchen.

She took the slip by the hem and pulled it over her head. Her hair caught and she had to free it. Underneath was the cotton bra and the cotton panties she had sewn herself, the last of what she was allowed to have against her skin. She folded the slip and put it with the dress. Her nipples had tightened under the bra. She did not know why. The warmth low in her belly tightened with them, a small secret ache, and she was horrified that her body had done it in a room full of English girls who had not even looked up.

Roberta Ellis looked over. Her eyes went from Paige's face to her feet and back to the clipboard. She did not say anything. The nurse at the counter laughed at something on a form.

Paige reached behind and unhooked the bra. The straps came down her arms. Her breasts were small and they lifted when the cloth left them. The air made her nipples draw tighter, almost sore. She held the bra a second longer than she needed to. Her free arm started up to cover herself and she put it down. Ms. Landry had said arms at her sides. She folded the bra and set it in the bin.

The panties were last. She pushed them over her hips and down her legs and stepped out. Between her thighs the hair was dark and untrimmed by anything but nature, and under it she was wet. She had felt the wetness start when Ms. Landry opened the bin. She had never been wet like that. She had never touched the small place that was pulsing now, and she had no honest name for it that she was willing to say in this room. A thin line cooled on the inside of one leg. She wanted to wipe it and did not. She folded the panties small and put them in the bin with the rest.

Her hands twitched at her sides. Cover yourself, she thought. That was the whole of what she had been taught. She did not cover herself.

Ms. Landry closed the lid. "Platform."

Paige turned. The platform was a low circle in the corner, a foot high, with a lamp over it that was already on. She walked to it past the waiting chairs. Her breasts moved. The wetness on her thigh moved with her. She felt obscene and she felt the warmth answer that, which was worse. A senior with a wrapped wrist glanced up, nodded the way a person nods in a hallway, and looked back at her phone.

Paige stepped onto the platform. The surface was smooth and cooler than the tile. She set her feet apart and her arms at her sides the way she had been told. The lamp was bright on her stomach and on the hair between her legs. She could feel the air on her nipples and lower, on the wet skin, on the small hooded place she had never put a finger to. It pulsed once, hard enough that she felt it in her knees. She did not close her legs. Standing with them open felt like a sin she was doing on purpose, and the scholarship letter was on the desk under Ms. Landry's elbow, and she stayed.

Ms. Landry did not get up. "Date of birth."

"July twenty-second, two thousand and seven."

"Last meal."

"Bread. This morning. And an apple on the bus."

"Scholarship hall is East, when they release you. You can say if anything hurts. Otherwise stay as you are."

"Yes, ma'am."

Her voice came out small and the cadence of home was still in it. Saying the date while the lamp was on her made her face burn down her neck and into her breasts. She felt another slip of wetness leave her and catch in the hair. She could not wipe it. Her hands were at her sides. Dat would not know where to look, she thought. Mamm would tell her to dress. Neither of them was here, and the ache did not care.

A nurse came through with a tray. She looked at Paige the way she might look at any girl standing where she was supposed to stand. "New student? You're fine." She went on down the hall.

Roberta Ellis finished her note. Her eyes passed over Paige again, bare feet, bare breasts, the shine on her thigh, and she turned the page on the clipboard. One of the girls in sweatshirts laughed at something in the magazine. The printer behind the desk started.

Paige stood under the lamp. The bin was closed on the desk. Her cap was in it. Her boots were in it. She had never been seen like this, and her body was wet from it, and she did not know the word for the want under the shame. Dr. Harlan had not come out yet. The tile beyond the platform was empty, and she did not step down.

Chapter 2

Paige stepped down from the platform. The tile was cold again under her feet. The wetness on her thigh had cooled and then warmed, and she had not wiped it. No one had told her she could use her hands.

Ms. Landry came around the desk with a clipboard and did not look at her body. "Exam room three. Keep your arms down."

Paige followed. Her breasts moved when she walked. In the hall two staff members stood in an open doorway, one holding a folder, talking about the mixer on Friday. Paige stopped because she could not pass. They finished the sentence. One of them shifted the folder and stepped back. "Go on." Paige went on. A nurse at a chart looked up, saw her, and looked down again.

Exam room three had pale blue walls, a padded table with fresh paper, a tray of instruments, and a lamp on an arm. The blinds were half drawn. Dr. Elena Harlan stood by the table pulling on pale blue gloves. She was in her fifties, with silver in her dark hair and a white coat over a blouse. Nurse Olivia Carter, younger, brown-haired, was laying out gauze. Both of them were dressed. The room smelled of antiseptic and soap.

"Paige Miller," Dr. Harlan said. "Gastrointestinal screening. Sit on the table."

Paige climbed up. The paper crackled under her. She sat with her knees together and drew her hair forward over her breasts. It did not cover much. Her feet hung. She could feel the wet paper where she had sat.

Dr. Harlan looked at the clipboard. "Lie back. Knees up, feet flat, heels close to you. Then let the knees open. I need the abdomen and the external exam."

Paige lay back. The paper stuck to her shoulder and to the damp under her. Her breasts settled. Her nipples pointed up and stayed tight. At home she had not sat with her ankles uncrossed if anyone was in the kitchen. She drew her knees up. For a moment she held them together. Then she let them fall. The air went between her legs at once, onto the wet and onto the small place she had never touched. She looked at the ceiling.

Nurse Carter angled the lamp down. The light sat on Paige's stomach and on the hair and on the pink under it. "Hold there."

Dr. Harlan stood between her knees. Gloved hands rested on the inside of her thighs and moved them a little wider. Not a push. Just set. "I need you to say what you feel as we go. Cold, pressure, wet, a pull. Whatever it is. Olivia writes it down."

Paige's voice was thin. "The air is cold. On all of it."

"All right." Dr. Harlan pressed two fingers above the hair, then in a small circle beside the navel. "Here?"

"Soft. It doesn't hurt." Paige swallowed. "Lower, it pulls."

Nurse Carter wrote. "The mixer is in the quad, Elena. Live music. The a cappella group."

"I saw." Dr. Harlan's fingers moved down to the skin just above the hair and stopped. "Paige. The pull. Where."

Paige shut her eyes. She did not have a word she had ever said for it. In the community school someone had whispered one once, in a biology hour, and she had not repeated it. The place was pulsing under the light. Her face burned. "The small part. At the top. I don't... I haven't touched it. It sparks."

"Clitoris," Dr. Harlan said, for the chart. She waited.

Paige had to use it. "My clitoris. It sparks. It's aching." Saying it made it jump. She felt the jump, and she knew they could see it.

Nurse Carter's pen moved. "Sarah from admissions is bringing the peach cobbler again. She said so this morning."

Dr. Harlan nodded. Her fingers traced the outer edge of one lip and drew it a little aside, only enough to see. The glove came away wet. "Moisture?"

They were on the cobbler. Paige had to answer into it. "Wetter. It slipped out when you moved that. I can hear it when I breathe."

"Amount," Nurse Carter said, still pleasant, still not looking up from the line she was writing.

"A trail. Down. It's on the paper." Paige's knees started in. She did not decide it. Dr. Harlan's hands were already there, one on each thigh, and set them back where they had been. No one told her she had done wrong. The hands stayed a moment and left.

"Internal," Dr. Harlan said. "Any tightening."

Paige stared at the lamp arm. Her eyes were wet and she was angry that they were, because the anger did not stop the rest of it. "Yes. Inside. It closes and lets go. I don't know why. I was not raised to be open like this." Her hips shifted once and stopped. "When you had the glove on me I thought I was going to ask to touch it."

"Hands on the paper," Nurse Carter said. She capped the pen and uncapped it again. "Did you see the sculpture reception? Tomorrow night, in the art building."

"I might stop by," Dr. Harlan said. She had already dropped the gloves in the bin. "External exam is done. Baseline is in."

Paige kept her hands on the paper. The no was only the instruction, and then they were somewhere else. Her clitoris still pulsed. The wet tickled where it had run into the cleft. She did not close her knees. She had not been told she could.

Nurse Carter hung a clear bag of warm solution on the stand by the table. The tube swung and settled. Dr. Harlan took a slim nozzle from the tray and set it on a square of gauze. Neither of them told Paige to change position.

"The dining hall has the gluten-free line now," Nurse Carter said. "Finally."

"About time." Dr. Harlan checked the valve. "Library hours are still short on Sundays."

Paige lay with her knees up and apart. The lamp was still on her. The bag hung where she could see it. No one had said she could bring her legs together, and she did not.

Chapter 3

Dr. Harlan picked up the nozzle. "On your left side. Face the wall. Right knee up toward your chest, and hold it."

Paige rolled. The paper stuck to her hip and came with her. Her breasts shifted. One nipple dragged the sheet. She drew the right knee up and held it with both hands, then remembered her hands were supposed to stay down and moved them to the table. The position opened her behind. Cool air went there. She had never had anything at that place. Her face pressed toward the wall.

"I can feel how open it is," she said. "I'm ashamed of it."

Nurse Carter squeezed lubricant onto the tip. "Elena, they moved the freshman orientations to Tuesdays."

"I saw the grid." Dr. Harlan set the tip against her. "Breathe out, Paige."

It went in. Slim, cool, a stretch she had no memory to set beside. She made a small sound. "It's in. Cold. I can feel the length of it."

"Good." The valve clicked. Warmth started, low and thin. Dr. Harlan laid one gloved hand on Paige's belly, under the navel, and left it there. "Flow is on. Say what changes."

Paige watched the wall. "Warm. Low. Not much yet."

The bag made a soft sound overhead. Nurse Carter looked at the mark. "Quarter. Tuesday is better for me. Wednesday is the staff meeting."

The hand on Paige's belly felt the swell before Paige said it. The skin under the glove rounded. "It's more. Heavy. My stomach is pushing into your hand." She had to keep going. They were on the meeting. "In front it's worse. The place I said before. My clitoris. It pulses when the water moves."

"Half," Nurse Carter said. "Roberta Ellis is leading the peer-tutor group again. I put her on the roster."

"I signed it yesterday." Dr. Harlan's hand stayed where the swell was. "Cramps?"

"No." Paige's voice had gone rough. "Tight. I can see it if I look down. It's round. And I'm wetter in front. It's dripping while this goes in. I don't know why the front answers."

The last of the bag ran. The hand on her belly rose with it. Paige held the table. A sound came out of her and stopped. "It's all in. I'm full. Please. The front. May I touch it? Just once?"

"Hands on the table," Nurse Carter said. She wrote the line. "The lab wants the blue-top tubes from Monday."

"Noted." Dr. Harlan closed the valve. The nozzle stayed. "Hold starts now. Five minutes. Keep it in. Keep talking."

Paige held. Her belly was hard under the hand that had not left it. Every breath pushed the fullness against that palm and against the small place in front, the one she had never touched. "No cramps. Pressure. My legs are shaking. I'm wet. I can hear it." A moan got out. She bit it off. Her eyes stung. The shame did not make the pulse stop.

The door opened a few inches. A technician looked in with a clipboard. "Dr. Harlan? Can we move the two-thirty to three? Volleyball has the room."

Paige was in the middle of a sentence. Dr. Harlan did not turn. "Three is fine. Copy the note to the drive."

"Thanks." The technician nodded toward the table, the way a person nods in a hall, and shut the door.

The room was quiet again except for the clock and Paige's breath. She still had the sentence. "It's pressing on everything. My clitoris is throbbing. I almost made another sound. I want my hand there. I don't have a name for what the want is."

"Two minutes," Nurse Carter said.

Dr. Harlan checked the watch and left her hand on the round of Paige's belly. "Thursday lunch still on?"

"Thai place. I booked it."

Paige stared at the wall. The water did not move. Her body did. A little clench in front, then another, around nothing. Wet tickled down toward the paper. She did not rock. She had not been told she could.

"Four," Nurse Carter said. "Last minute. What is the peak."

"Everywhere." Paige's voice cracked. "The belly. The hold. In front. I can't stop the shaking. I don't know what it is going toward. I'm not allowed to touch it, so I won't."

Dr. Harlan looked at the watch. "Five. Hold is done." She took her hand away. "Nurse Carter will walk you to the bathroom. The door stays ajar. We still have to see that you empty."

Nurse Carter helped her sit. The fullness shifted and Paige caught the edge of the table. Her belly stayed round. Wet ran on the inside of her thigh. She got her feet on the floor.

They were already on the lunch menu again, the vegetarian plates, whether to walk or take the path behind the library. Paige went toward the small door on bare feet, one hand under the swell, the other not where she wanted it. The

bathroom door was open a hand's width. She had not let go of the water yet.

Chapter 4

Paige came back through the bathroom door. Her belly was soft again. The wet between her legs was not. Nurse Carter was still in the doorway with the clipboard, and she moved aside so Paige could pass. Dr. Harlan had a new pair of gloves on. A slim metal probe lay on the tray, with a wire running to a box.

"Up on the table," Dr. Harlan said. "Hands and knees. Knees apart."

Paige climbed up. The paper crackled under her palms. Her breasts hung, and her nipples met the sheet when she set her hands. The touch went straight down. "Like an animal in the barn," she said, and hated that she had said it.

"A little farther apart." Dr. Harlan waited. "Now the back. Down a little. I need the angle."

Paige did it. Air went over the wet. A bead left her and hit the paper, one small sound. She kept her head down.

Nurse Carter passed the probe. "We're on the last box of wipes."

"They ship tonight." Dr. Harlan slicked the tip. "Paige. Cold first, then whatever else. Start when it starts."

The tip touched her in front and went in. She had never had anything there. Her arms locked. "Cold. It's stretching. I don't know this. It's going deep." She heard herself. "It's in. I'm holding it. I can hear the wet when I breathe."

"Speculum set too," Nurse Carter said. "The sophomores used three last week."

"Add it." Dr. Harlan turned the probe a fraction. Paige's hips moved and stopped. "There. What changed."

"It gripped. Then let go. The place in front jumped. My clitoris. It's aching, and I can't reach it like this."

The probe began to hum, low. Paige's eyes opened on the paper. "It's buzzing. Inside. It goes to the front. I want to push back on it."

Dr. Harlan set the box on the tray and looked at the form Nurse Carter was holding. The form was out at arm's length. She rested her forearm across Paige's lower back, the way she would rest it on a counter while she read, and leaned in to see the line. Her weight settled. Paige took it. The hum went on under the weight. "Inventory app is supposed to flag this," Dr. Harlan said.

"It didn't." Nurse Carter turned the page. "Vibrating probes are low too."

Paige had to speak under the arm. "Stronger now. There's a spot. When it hits, my clitoris jumps. My nipples are dragging the paper." She pushed back once, small, onto the probe and into the arm that was using her. No one told her to stop. No one told her to do it again. Dr. Harlan shifted her weight to the other

foot and kept reading.

"Double the next order," Dr. Harlan said. She clicked the box up. The hum thickened. Her forearm stayed where it was.

Paige's voice broke. "It's too much. I'm clenching on it. Wet is running past my knee. I don't know what it's going toward. Please. I need—"

"Flag the probes before we leave," Nurse Carter said.

"Already on the form." Dr. Harlan checked the box. "Ten seconds. The peak."

"Everything." Paige shook under the arm. "It's in me and in front and I can't hold the sound. I'm going to—"

The hum stopped.

The sound she made was short and angry. The probe was still in her. Dr. Harlan's arm was still across her back. Wet answered anyway, a fresh slip down her thigh onto the paper. Her arms shook. She did not know the name of what had not happened.

Dr. Harlan straightened. The weight left. She drew the probe out and set it on the tray and peeled the gloves off. "Probe phase is done."

Nurse Carter wrote the last line. "I'll put the wipes on the same order."

Paige stayed on her hands and knees. The paper under her was wet. The ache in front had nowhere to go. No one had told her she could get down.

Chapter 5

"You can sit," Dr. Harlan said.

Paige got down off her hands. Her arms shook. The paper stuck to one knee and tore. She sat on the edge of the table and put her knees together. The pressure landed on the place that had not finished, and she opened them again. No one had told her to. The ache was worse closed.

Nurse Carter held out a cloth. "Wipe, if you want. Then I need it back."

Paige took it. She had not put her own hand there before, not really, not like this. She pressed the cloth between her legs. The ache jumped so hard she made a sound. Wet came off on the cotton. "It jumped," she said. "When I wiped. It's worse."

"Noted." Nurse Carter took the cloth and dropped it in the bin. The air was on her again.

Paige kept her hands on the table. "May I finish it? Now. It hasn't stopped."

"No." Dr. Harlan slid a printed sheet across the paper. "Tonight. In your room. External only. Read me the lines."

Paige looked at the sheet. Her face was hot. The word was there in type. She had to say it. "Nude. The lamp on. Fifteen minutes. I speak the whole time. I touch the clitoris and the labia, outside only, and I say what it does. Upload by midnight." She swallowed. "Back here at ten. Bring nothing."

"Good." Dr. Harlan signed the chart. Nurse Carter was already on the dean's list, which names were confirmed, whether the Thai place took a reservation. Neither of them told Paige she had done well.

Ms. Landry set the metal bin on the counter and opened it. The cap was on top. Then the dress, the slip, the bra, the panties, the boots.

"Dress," Dr. Harlan said. "You can go when you're laced."

Paige stepped down. Her legs were unsteady. She took the panties and drew them up. The cotton settled on the wet and on the swollen place, and she was not to pull them off. She stood a moment with that pressure and then reached for the bra. The cups met her nipples and she hissed. Slip. Dress, buttoned from the hem up, the plain gray closed over all of it. The cap last. She found the pins in the bottom of the bin and set them the way her mother had taught her. Her hair was hidden. The boots took time. When she stood, she looked like the girl who had come in at ten. The cotton between her legs was soaked, and every small shift pressed it where the probe had left her.

Nurse Carter checked the clock. "Card is on the sheet. Midnight for the file."

Dr. Harlan had gone back to the list.

Ms. Landry walked her down the hall. The lobby was the same. The platform in the corner was empty, the lamp still on. One of the girls in sweatshirts was still on the bench. She turned a page and did not look up. Paige passed the desk. The bin was already back under it. The glass doors opened on bright September sun, brick paths, girls in jeans. The card was in her hand. The cotton pressed with the first step out. She had not started the log.

Chapter 6

Room 214 was at the end of the hall. Paige locked the door behind her and set the card on the desk beside the letter. She had eaten in the dining hall without tasting it. The cotton under the dress was still damp from the walk.

She put the lamp on its brightest and propped the phone on a stack of books. The sheet had said the camera facing her. She sat on the bed, looked at the frame, and tilted the phone down until her face, her breasts, and her knees were all in it. Then she got up and undressed.

The cap first. Pins on the dresser. Hair down. Dress, folded. Slip. Bra. The panties came away wet from her. She folded them with the rest and put the pile on the chair. The room was cool. Her nipples tightened. Between her legs she was already slick, and the small place was still swollen from the morning.

She sat on the bed, back to the wall, and pressed record. The red light came on.

"This is Paige Miller. Day one of the home protocol. I am nude. The lamp is on. The time is eight forty-seven."

Her hand rested on her stomach. She had never done this. Nurse Carter had taken the cloth away before she could learn it. She moved her fingers down through the hair and opened her knees so the phone could see.

"The air is on me. I am already wet. My labia are slippery. I am going to touch the clitoris. I have not done it before."

One finger, light. It was too soft and still it jumped. She gasped and had to say it. "It jumped. A spark. I am circling it. Slow. It is swelling under my finger. More wet is coming. I can see it on the sheet."

She did not know the pressure. She tried a little more. Her hips moved. She thought of her mother and took her hand away, and the ache made her put it back. The sheet had said the whole time.

"I stopped and I started again. It is warmer. My nipples are tight and I am not touching them. Inside there is a flutter, the way it was on the table. I am not to put a finger in. I am only on the outside."

The circle got smaller. Her thighs shook. She heard herself. "Harder now. It feels larger. I cannot keep my legs still. I do not know what it is going toward. I am afraid. I am not stopping. The time is not done."

It broke over her. Her knees came together on her hand. A sound came out that she had not planned, high and short, and her hips jerked against her own finger. Wet soaked the sheet under her. She shook and could not talk. When she could, the light was still on.

"Something happened. I shook. I cried out. There is wet on the sheet and on my hand. I do not have a name for it. I am afraid to touch it again. It is still twitching. I am guilty. I did it because the sheet said to. The fifteen minutes are done."

She stopped the recording. Her hand was still between her legs. She was crying and she was not sure which kind.

The lock turned. Emma came in with a coffee and a key, a red-haired girl in a hoodie, and stopped when she saw the bed. Paige pulled the sheet to her waist. It did not cover her breasts. The phone was still propped on the books.

Emma set the coffee on her own desk. "You're in the middle of the upload."

"It is required," Paige said. Her voice was rough. "I did not know you would be back."

"I live here." Emma sat on her bed and opened a laptop. "Desk is yours until it sends."

Paige looked at the frame. Her face was flushed. Her hand was wet. She lowered the sheet enough to reach the phone, opened the link on the card, and put the file on. The bar started. She did not get the dress. Emma typed. The cotton pile sat on the chair, cap on top. The bar filled, slow, and Paige stayed on the bed, bare from the waist up, the wet sheet against her, until it said sent.

Chapter 7

Paige took a seat at the back of Health Sciences 101 with her notebook against her chest. The cap was pinned. The dress came to her ankles. Under it the cotton was damp from the walk, and the place she had touched the night before was still sore. Thirty girls in jeans and sweatshirts filled the rows. Roberta Ellis sat in the front with a clipboard, lab coat on, the same girl from the clinic desk.

Dr. Kessler set a remote on the podium. Silver bob, navy jacket. "This morning is this week's home logs. You will see and hear them. Take the markers down. The protocol requires the name and the camera, so both are on the file."

Paige's stomach dropped. She had sent it. The bar had said sent.

The screen lit. It was her bed, her face, her breasts, her knees. Her voice came into the hall, small and from home.

"This is Paige Miller. Day one of the home protocol. I am nude. The lamp is on. The time is eight forty-seven."

Pencils moved. A girl in the third row opened a laptop. No one laughed. Paige had been waiting for laughter. The quiet made her face burn, and under the dress the ache woke, which was worse.

On the screen her hand went down. "The air is on me. I am already wet. My labia are slippery. I am going to touch the clitoris. I have not done it before."

Dr. Kessler put a red dot on the hand. "Swelling starts there. Write that."

Paige pressed her thighs together. The cotton pressed back. She watched her own finger circle. The recorded voice said it jumped. A girl two rows ahead sipped coffee and did not look away from the screen. Roberta made a mark and did not turn.

The tape went on. Paige heard herself say she had stopped and started again. She heard the flutter. She heard the harder circle, and the fear, and that the time was not done. Her recorded breath broke. The sound she had not planned filled the hall, short and high. On the screen her knees closed. Dr. Kessler paused it there. Mouth open. Hand caught. Sheet wet.

"Paige Miller. Back row. What did the jump feel like, before that."

The room stayed on the screen. Paige had to answer in it. "A spark. Then it got larger. I could not keep still." Her voice shook. "Then I shook. I did not have a name for it."

"Good. Sit as you are."

A girl near the front raised a hand. "Is the talking why it happened?"

"Yes," Dr. Kessler said. "The verbal line keeps the response on the file. Next slide is the pathway. Scholarship students stay for the half sheet."

She left the paused frame up. Paige could not stop looking at it. The cotton was soaked. She was ashamed that the room had not been shocked, and that her body had answered the notebooks. She did not have a sentence for that. Roberta turned once, found her, nodded, and faced the podium again.

When the hour ended, the girls packed up. One said, passing, "Her lines were clear. I'll need that on mine." No one smirked. The screen went dark.

Dr. Kessler held out a half sheet. Roberta stood behind her with the clipboard. "Wednesday. This room. You undress in the hall and come in nude. Platform at the front. You speak, the way you did on the file. Roberta keeps the time."

Paige took the paper. "I understand."

"Ten minutes early," Roberta said. "I'll be at the door."

Paige put the half sheet in the notebook. The hall outside was full. Girls with backpacks, a laugh about lunch, the ordinary noise of the building. The cotton pressed with every step. Wednesday was written on the paper, and she had not said what the quiet had done to her.

Chapter 8

Roberta was at the door of Lecture Hall 3 with the bin. "Ten minutes. Clothes in here. Then in."

Paige undressed in the hall. Cap, pins, dress, boots, slip, bra, panties. She folded each piece and set it in the bin. The linoleum was cold. Her arms came up and she put them down. Roberta opened the door.

The class was already talking. Mixer on Friday. The dining hall out of the soup they liked. Notebooks were open. Dr. Kessler stood at the podium. The platform at the front was the same low circle as the one in the clinic lobby. Paige knew the height of it under her foot.

"Up," Dr. Kessler said. "Arms at your sides. Feet apart. Baseline first."

Paige stepped on. The wood was cool. The light was on her breasts and on the hair between her legs. She was wet from the hall. She had not touched herself since the file. "The air is cold. My nipples are tight. I am wet on one thigh. My clitoris is throbbing. They can see it. I want my hands up, and I am not putting them up."

"Sensor," Dr. Kessler said.

Roberta crouched with a small pad. Her fingers were warm on the inside of Paige's thigh, close enough that Paige felt the nearness before the adhesive. One fingertip grazed the outer lip while she smoothed the pad. Paige's hips moved.

"There," Paige said. "Her finger. Next to it. It clenched. More came out."

"Write the hip," a girl in the second row said.

"Yes," Dr. Kessler said. "Paige. The circle from the file. Slow. Speak while you do it."

Paige put her right hand down. She was clumsy. She had done this once, on a bed, with a phone. Her finger found the swollen place and circled. The wet sound was in the room. "It is immediate. Sensitive from the log. A spark up my stomach. Inside flutters. Nothing is in me. I am dripping on the wood."

Her hips moved again. The girl wrote it. Someone else underlined. Roberta watched the pad and not Paige's face. The quiet was the same quiet as Monday, and it made the circle harder to keep slow.

"Faster now," Paige said. "My legs are shaking. They are writing, and it is worse because they are writing. I am close. I do not know if I am allowed to finish."

"Hands at your sides," Dr. Kessler said. "Hold there."

Paige took her hand away. It shook in the air and then went to her thigh. The ache stayed, sharp, with nowhere to go. A fresh slip ran down her leg onto the

wood. She made a short sound and stopped it. In the rows, bags zipped. A girl asked another about lunch. Dr. Kessler clicked the remote.

"Sensor data tomorrow," she said. She held out a paper. "Library group, noon, health session. You stay as you are for it. You may step down."

Paige took the paper and read it on the platform, still bare, hands still down. Then she stepped off. Roberta did not offer a cloth. The class went out around her, talking about the soup.

In the hall she dressed. Panties first. The cotton sat on the unfinished throb and she did not pull it away. Bra. Slip. Dress. Cap last, pins in. Roberta closed the bin. Paige walked out with the paper in her notebook. The cotton pressed at every step, and Wednesday's class was over.

Chapter 9

Paige left the hall dressed. She had taken her clothes out of the bin and put them on, and Roberta had shut the empty bin and carried it back inside. The cap was pinned. The notebook was under her arm, with the half sheet in it. The cotton sat against the ache from class and pressed on her with every step. The sheet said the library group met at noon, and that she was to stay as she had been on the platform. She had dressed anyway. The doors opened onto a quad full of girls going to lunch, and she could not make herself cross it with nothing on. She told herself the instruction started when she sat down with the group. The dress got her across the grass. She was ashamed of how glad she was of it.

The library was cool. It smelled of paper and of the cleaner they used on the stairs. Five girls had the long table by the windows, laptops open, paper cups, chapter four marked with a strip of notebook paper. Sarah looked up and saw the cap.

"There you are. We waited on the pelvic page so you could be here for it. The chair at the end is free, if you want it."

Paige set the notebook down. Her face was hot before she had undone a button. "The sheet from class said I was supposed to stay undressed. I put my clothes back on in the hall. I couldn't walk across the quad. I know it isn't what they wrote."

Sarah glanced toward the doors, then at the textbook. "Well, you're here now. The figure on this page shows the outside, the labia and the clitoris. We'll need to look at you while we read, or the drawing doesn't help. Take the time you need."

She turned the book so the figure faced the empty chair.

The pins were small in Paige's fingers. She set them in a row on the chair and laid the cap flat so it would not crease. Her hair fell to her shoulders. No one at the nearer tables looked up. A printer ran behind the circulation desk. She unbuttoned the dress and stepped out of it, then the slip, then the bra. Air from the window found her nipples and drew them tight. The panties were last, still a little damp from the hold in class and from the walk over. She folded each piece onto the chair and set the boots underneath. Then she sat. The wood was cool against her bare skin and shocked her more than taking the dress off had. She kept her knees together until there was no honest way to keep them there.

"A little wider, if you can," Sarah said. "We can't match the drawing otherwise."

Paige opened her knees. The cool went between her legs at once. She had been wet since the platform, and the dress had not cured it. A bead left her and ran down to the chair. She felt it reach the wood. One of the girls looked from the figure to Paige and back, pencil still in her hand.

"On the page the hood sits higher."

Paige's voice came out thin, and home was still in it. "Mine is swollen. They had me take my hand away this morning, and it didn't go down. The chair is cold. I'm wet on it."

"I'll put that under the figure," Sarah said, and turned the page.

They read. Paige sat with her hands on the edge of the table, breasts bare in the light from the window, and listened to a paragraph about a signal traveling a nerve. Whenever someone glanced down to check the drawing against her, the small place jumped. She did not cover it. After a while a girl asked, eyes still on the text, whether the pulse stayed the whole time or only came when somebody looked.

"Both. It jumped just now, when you asked."

The extra reading was not in the textbook. Sarah looked at the call number, then at the laptops, then at Paige, and was plainly sorry about it. "The supplement is on hold at the reserve desk, past the stacks. The rest of us already have it on our screens. Would you mind going for the paper copy? It shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

She wrote the call number on a slip and held it out. Paige took it. She stood, and she kept her arms down. She did not cover her breasts. She did not cover the hair between her legs. The slip of paper was in her right hand.

The carpet was soft, and the aisle between the tables was not. Between the long tables a girl looked up, saw her, and went back to a line she had highlighted. The stacks were narrower. The air was still. She felt her breasts move, and the wet cooling on her thigh, and then she was at a counter with a person on the other side of it.

The librarian wore glasses and a sweater with the college mark, and she had a stamp in her hand. A girl in a hoodie waited at Paige's shoulder with a different slip. Paige set hers on the counter. "Paige Miller. I need the chapter four supplement for health sciences. They said it was on hold."

The woman turned to the shelf behind her. Paige stood on the public side of the desk, bare, hands down, the girl in the hoodie close enough that Paige could hear her shift her weight. The book was thin. The librarian stamped the card and put it in Paige's hands. Her eyes stayed on the card. "Two hours. Please don't take it out of the building."

"Yes, ma'am."

She held it against her breasts on the way back, which only told her what the book did not cover. The return felt longer than the going. At the table the seat was wet where she had been. She sat, opened her knees again, and slid the book

to Sarah, who thanked her as if she had only gone for a pen.

They finished the section. Cups were gathered. Sarah closed her laptop. "If you can write down what you felt before you get dressed, that would help. They want it with the sensor note tomorrow."

Paige wrote it in her notebook. The pulse had stayed. It had been stronger when she was asked. She had been wet on the chair. She had walked to the reserve desk with nothing on. Then she dressed. The panties settled on the damp and on the throb no one had told her she could touch. The dress closed over it. The cap last, pins in, hair hidden. She looked like a girl who had been studying.

Emma was standing in the middle of 214 when Paige opened the door. One bed was gone. The frame, the mattress, the extra blanket. Where it had stood, the floor was a pale clean rectangle. Emma had her arms folded. She was in a hoodie and shorts, her hair down, and she looked annoyed in an ordinary way.

"They came at one," she said. "I was in the room. Two women from housing and a man with a dolly. I told them they had the wrong door." She held out a paper. "They had a work order with both our names on it. Shared rooms on the protocol list are being cut to one bed. They said someone has to be able to see the whole room from the door at night, and that two beds block the view. I told them that was nonsense. They took it anyway. Yours. Mine was the one against the wall."

Paige read the paper standing in her cap. Four lines, a work-order number, and a name she did not know at the bottom. One bed. No second frame would be issued. Under that, a line she had to read twice. The protocol student was to be undressed in the room whenever her roommate was home.

"Where am I supposed to sleep?"

"There, with me. I asked if I could take a spare from the hall at the end. They said no." Emma rubbed her forehead. "I'm not happy about it. I have a class at eight, and that bed is not wide. But I'm not going to put you on the floor."

Paige set the cap on the desk. Emma was home. The paper said undressed when her

roommate was home. She took the dress off more slowly than she had in the library, then the slip, the bra, and the damp panties, and folded them on the chair. She stood bare in the smaller room and felt foolish, and the ache answered the foolishness, a warm pulse she wished would mind itself.

Emma got into the bed still in her hoodie and shorts and held the blanket up. Paige lay on the inside, against the wall. The mattress dipped. There was nowhere for her hip to go but against Emma's. Emma shifted to get the blanket over both of them, and her thigh came across Paige's, warm, the cotton of the shorts against the wet. She did not move it off. Paige hoped her breath had

stayed quiet.

"It's from today," she said. "Class this morning, and then the table. They had me open my knees so they could match a drawing. I walked to the desk like that and said my name.That's why I'm swollen.Ever since they took my hand away."

Out in the hall someone laughed, and a door shut. "Tell me in the morning," Emma said. "If I start asking now, neither of us is going to sleep." She reached up and turned the lamp off. In the dark the thigh was more particular. Paige kept her hands on her stomach. The cap was on the desk. The empty place in the floor lay between the bed and the door. Emma's breathing evened out. The ache stayed against the warmth of her, unanswered, and the room was too small to call it anything but what it was.

Chapter 10

The email came in the late afternoon. Emma read it off her phone while Paige stood by the desk in nothing but her skin, the housing paper still under the lamp. "Roberta wants the library note checked in person. Lounge at seven. She says you should be undressed, and she'll write down the pulse. It's for the group project."

Paige looked at the door. The hall had been noisy since dinner. "In the lounge? People walk through there all evening."

"That's what she wrote." Emma put the phone in her pocket. "I'm coming. It's my project too."

At seven Emma opened the door and waited. Paige stepped out bare. The carpet was rough under her feet. Someone had music on behind a door. A girl in a towel came out of the bathroom, said "Hey," and went on down the hall without stopping. Paige kept her arms at her sides. The air was cooler than the room, and her nipples tightened, and the ache that had been with her since the platform woke under it.

The lounge had two couches, a low table, and a vending machine against the far wall. The windows showed the quad going dark. Roberta was already in the armchair, lab coat on, the notebook from class open, a pair of gloves on the table. She looked up and nodded the way she had at the platform.

"Thank you for coming down. I need to see whether the note from the library matches. Pulse constant, stronger when asked, wet on the chair. If you can sit, and open your knees, I can look while we go through it."

Paige sat on the couch. The cushion was cool. She opened her knees. Emma sat at the other end with a pencil and did not look across. Roberta leaned forward, glanced at the notebook, and then at Paige.

"The note says swollen. It still is. And you're wet. Has the shaking from the recording happened again?"

"No." Paige's voice was thin. "In class they took my hand away. I was close. The ache is still there. It has been since yesterday."

"All right. I'm going to put a hand on your stomach first. Tell me if the ache moves."

The glove was warm. Roberta pressed lightly, above the hair, and left her hand there. Paige felt the pulse jump lower, where the hand was not.

"It moved. Down. To my clitoris. It jumped when you pressed."

"Inner thigh next." Roberta's fingers came down the inside of Paige's leg and stopped short of the wet. Paige's hips shifted. She made herself say it. "Close. I can feel how close. More came out."

Roberta kept her hand where it was. "What they want written down is the clitoris itself. I can put a finger there, the way you did on the recording, or I can stop at the thigh. Which do you want?"

Paige looked at the notebook in Emma's lap. Emma was writing the time and not looking up. The want was sharp and shameful, and the answer had to be a whole sentence. "I want you to. For the note. And because I want it. No one else has touched it."

"Tell me when it changes." Roberta's finger found the swollen place and circled, slow, the pressure Paige had used on the bed and not quite the same. Paige's breath caught. "It jumped. It's larger under your finger. Warm through the glove. I'm wetter. I can hear it."

The lounge door opened. A girl in a sweatshirt came in with coins in her hand, looked at Roberta's notebook, and went to the vending machine. The motor turned. Crackers dropped. "Night," she said, to the room, and left. Roberta's finger had not stopped. Paige had to keep talking with the door still swinging.

"She didn't look at me. Your finger is still going. It's worse. My legs are shaking. The shaking from the recording is coming. I don't want you to stop."

Emma's knee was against Paige's knee from the way they were sitting. When Paige's thighs tried to close, they met that knee and stayed open. Emma did not move her leg. She wrote. Roberta's circle stayed small.

It happened. A short sound, not the one she had planned. Her hips jerked against the glove. Wet came onto Roberta's hand and onto the cushion. She shook, and she could not talk, and then she could.

"It happened. I shook. Your finger was on my clitoris. I got the cushion wet. It's tender now. I don't have another name for it."

Roberta took her hand away and wrote the time under Emma's line. She peeled the glove off. "That's what they asked for. I'll type it into the project tonight."

Emma closed the pencil in the notebook. "We should go back before the hall fills up."

They walked. The same carpet. A door opened and shut. In 214 the one bed was still the only bed. Paige lay on the inside, against the wall. Emma got in wearing the hoodie and shorts and pulled the blanket up. Her thigh came across Paige's hip, the cotton against the wet, and against the place the glove had been. Paige was tender there. She did not put her own hand on it.

The notebook was on the desk, the last line unwritten. Emma reached for the lamp. Out in the hall, the vending machine turned over once and went quiet.

Chapter 11

The notice was on the desk when Paige woke. Emma had already read it. Saturday, health fair on the quad, a screening booth under the white tent. Paige was to undress at the tent, stand the morning slot with her feet apart, and say what she felt while she was looked at. Emma was to write down what Paige said. The slot was one hour.

Paige put the dress on. She put the cap on. She had not been able to cross the quad bare on Wednesday, and she could not do it now. Emma carried the canvas bag. They walked through girls in sweatshirts, a yoga class already on the grass, the smell of coffee from a urn. Behind the tent flap Emma held the bag open. Paige took the cap off and put it in. Then the dress, the slip, the bra, the boots, and the panties. She folded nothing. Emma did. The fair was loud on the other side of the canvas. Paige stood bare with her arms at her sides and was wet before she went out.

The sign over the rope said Health screening demonstration. Paige Miller. Students may watch and write. The platform was a low wooden square. Dr. Kessler stood at the rope with a clipboard. Roberta was already up, lab coat on, gloves in her hand.

"Paige will tell you what she feels," Dr. Kessler said to the girls at the rope. "Roberta is keeping the time. You may write. You don't have to."

A woman with a nutrition pamphlet lifted her hand. "Are the sheets at the next booth free, or do we sign for them?"

"Free," Dr. Kessler said. "Take one."

Paige stepped up. The wood was warm from the sun. She set her feet apart. Her nipples tightened in the open air. Between her legs she was already slick, and she had not been touched. Emma stood at the foot of the steps with the bag, pencil ready, and did not tell her to do anything.

The first examiner was a nursing student in gloves. She came up the steps and said, "I'm going to press on your stomach, and then I'm going to open the labia so I can see. Say what changes."

Her hand was warm on Paige's belly. Then she parted the hair and opened Paige with two fingers. The air went in. Paige looked at the rope and made herself speak. "Her fingers are opening me. The girls at the rope can see. The air is cold on my clitoris. It's pulsing. I'm wet down my thigh."

The nursing student wrote, circled once with a gloved fingertip, and stepped down. On the grass the yoga class changed poses. Nobody at the rope laughed.

Roberta came up beside her. She kept her voice low enough for Paige and for Emma's pencil. "The project still wants the clitoris written down, the way we did on the couch. I can put a finger there again, or I can leave it. What do you want?"

Paige heard the coffee urn and the yoga teacher counting. The answer was a whole sentence, and the rope could hear it if she was not careful. She said it anyway. "I want you to. For the note. The shaking hasn't happened since the couch. I want it to."

"Tell me when it changes." Roberta's finger found the swollen place and circled, slow. Paige's hands stayed at her sides. "It jumped. Larger under your finger. I'm wetter. I can hear it on the wood."

The woman with the pamphlet came back to the rope. "Those sheets are free? The ones about iron?"

"Free," Dr. Kessler said. "The box is on the left."

Roberta's finger had not stopped. Paige waited until the woman turned away. "Your finger is still going. It's worse because she asked about the sheets and not about me. My legs are shaking. The shaking from the couch is coming. I don't want you to stop."

Emma wrote. She did not look up from the page. A girl at the rope wrote too. The circle stayed small.

It happened. A short sound. Her hips jerked against Roberta's hand. Wet struck the wood and ran down her thigh. She shook, and her knees softened, and Roberta's other hand was on her waist so she did not sit down. When she could talk, the yoga class was still counting.

"It happened. I shook. Your finger was on my clitoris. The girls at the rope were there. I'm wet on the wood. It's tender. I don't have another name for it."

Roberta took her hand away and said the time. Emma wrote it. The slot was not over. Paige stood with her feet apart, bare, the sun on her breasts, the cap in Emma's bag at the foot of the steps. A girl asked her friend if the coffee was gone. The friend said the urn was still half full.

Chapter 12

Dr. Kessler looked at her watch and said the hour was done. Emma opened the bag at the foot of the steps. Paige dressed there, with the coffee urn still going and the yoga class packing up. Panties first, over the wet and over the place Roberta's finger had left tender. Slip, bra, dress. Cap last. She looked like a girl who had been to a fair. The cotton pressed on her all the way across the quad.

The phone rang on the path. Dat. She stopped under a tree and answered, and Mamm was on the line after him.

"The cap is on," she said. "The screenings were routine. Nothing you need to worry about. Tell the boys I miss them. I'm still your daughter. I love you."

Her voice stayed steady. Under the dress a bead ran to her thigh while she said it. She did not tell them she had stood bare on a platform, or that she had shaken with girls at a rope. She hung up. The cotton was wetter than it had been at the steps.

Emma was already in 214, the fair notes on the desk, a blank line at the bottom. The housing paper was under the lamp. Paige took the cap off and set it on the desk. Emma was home, so Paige undressed, dress over the chair, the rest after, the damp panties last. She stood bare and felt foolish, and the ache answered it.

"I didn't get the last sentence," Emma said. "What did you say when it happened?"

Paige sat on the bed. Emma's thigh came across hers, the cotton of the shorts warm against the wet, the way it had been the other nights. "I said it happened. I shook. Roberta's finger was on my clitoris. The girls at the rope were there. I got the wood wet. I don't have another name for it."

Emma wrote that. Then she set the pencil down. "I can make you shake a different way. With my mouth. You've been pressed up against me every night since they took the bed. If you want it, lie back."

Paige looked at the thigh, and at Emma's face, which was ordinary and a little flushed. She wanted it. She was ashamed that she wanted it. "I want it. I don't know what you mean to do."

"I'll show you." Emma waited until Paige lay back against the wall, knees open. She moved down the bed and put her mouth on the swollen place.

Paige made a sound and caught the blanket. The tongue was softer than the glove and warmer, and it did not circle the way a finger did. It licked, slow, then stayed. "That's your clitoris," Emma said against her, the words warm. "What I'm doing is pussy licking. Pussy is the word for all of this, the wet and the lips and the clitoris. Say it."

"Pussy licking." Paige's hips moved. She had not meant them to. "Your mouth is on my pussy. It's wetter. It's going to be the shaking."

"If the shaking comes all the way, that's an orgasm." Emma licked again, longer. "You had one on the couch. You had one on the platform. This is the same thing, from a mouth. I can do this every night before we sleep. Some nights you could help me fall asleep the same way. Your mouth on me. Not tonight, unless you want it. Tonight is you."

Paige heard the word and lost it and heard it again. Orgasm. Emma's tongue stayed on the clitoris, and the shaking came up faster than it had on the wood. "I'm going to. An orgasm. Please don't stop the pussy licking. I want it every night. I don't know how to do it for you yet. I want to learn."

Emma did not stop. The orgasm broke over Paige with Emma's mouth still there. She shook, harder than on the platform, and her hands stayed in the blanket, and a sound came out of her that the room was too small for. When she could talk, Emma was still between her knees, cheek on her thigh.

"It was an orgasm," Paige said. "From pussy licking. I'm wet on your mouth. It's tender. I want it before sleep. And some night I'll try, so you can sleep."

Emma kissed the inside of her thigh and came up the bed. Paige lay with her knees open and the new words in her mouth, and the ache already coming back, small, under the tenderness.

Chapter 13

The pause letter came on a Thursday. Dr. Harlan had signed it. No logs, no demonstrations, no clinic, until the fall. Paige read it twice at the desk and thought of the garden at home, and of Mamm, and of sitting in meeting with the cap on and no one asking her to speak.

Emma came in from the shower with her hair wet and the letter already known. "I called my parents. They'll be in Europe. The house in the Back Bay is empty except for the woman who comes twice a week. I bought the tickets. We leave Saturday."

Paige looked at the letter, then at Emma. "I thought I was going to Pennsylvania."

"You can call them from the train. Tell them you're with me for the summer. They'll like that you're not alone." Emma set a bag on the bed. "Two seats. The overnight car only had a single bunk left. We'll share it."

Paige called from the path behind the dorm, where the reception was better. Dat answered. Mamm took the phone after. Paige said the term was finished, the screenings were done, and she was going to Boston with her roommate because the roommate's parents had asked. The cap would stay on. She loved them. She did not say the bunk. She did not say what she had asked Emma for at night. Her voice stayed steady. When she hung up, Emma was at the door with both bags.

The train was north of the city before the light went. A porter showed them the compartment and the one bunk, narrow, with a shelf above it and a hook on the door. He said he would be in the corridor if they needed anything. Emma thanked him. Paige hung the dress on the hook and set the cap on the shelf. The slip and the bra and the panties followed, folded on the shelf beside it, because the bunk was too small for a pile. She stood bare in the rocking room and felt the old foolishness, and under it the want.

Emma was in a tank top and shorts, sitting on the bunk with her back to the wall. Paige went to her knees on the blanket. The train made the floor move. She had to hold Emma's knee to stay where she was.

"Do you want pussy licking?" she said. "Before sleep. Regularly. The way we said. Every night, if you want it."

Emma looked at her, then opened her knees. "Yes. Regularly. Start."

Paige drew the shorts down. Emma was warm and already wet. Paige put her mouth on her, the way Emma had shown her the place on her own body, and had to learn the difference. She licked. She said it against the wet, because the saying had become part of it. "Pussy licking. Your clitoris. Tell me if the mouth is right."

"Slower. Stay on it." Emma's hand rested in Paige's hair, not pushing. In the corridor the porter's cart went by, cups and a low apology to someone in the next compartment. Paige did not stop. Her own pussy was wet against her heel. She did not touch it.

"I'm close," Emma said. "Stay. That's an orgasm. Don't lift your head."

It came through Emma's thighs and against Paige's mouth, a shudder, a sound she kept small. Paige licked until Emma's hand loosened. Then she wiped her mouth on the back of her wrist and stayed on her knees, because Emma had not told her to get up.

Emma shifted over and patted the bunk. "Here. Against the wall. The porter knocks at six."

Paige lay where she was put, bare, knees bent so they both fit. Emma pulled the blanket up and turned the lamp off. The dress moved on the hook when the train took a curve. Paige's mouth still tasted of her. The pause letter was in the bag under the bunk, and the ticket in Emma's pocket was Boston.

Chapter 13

The pause letter came on a Thursday. Dr. Harlan had signed the bottom. No logs, no demonstrations, no clinic, until classes started again in the fall. Paige read it at the desk with the cap still on. She thought of the garden at home, and of Mamm’s hands in the beans, and of sitting in meeting where no one would ask her to open her knees or say what she felt. The cotton under the dress was dry. She had not been bare since the morning, and only because Emma had gone to the registrar.

Emma came in with her hair wet from the shower and a paper bag under her arm. She had already seen the letter. It was on the college site. She set the bag on the bed and sat on the edge of it, tank top, shorts, a towel around her neck.

“I called my parents last night,” she said. “They’re in Europe until August. The house in the Back Bay is empty except for the woman who comes on Tuesdays and Fridays. I told them I was bringing you. My mother said there was a room, and then she said the guest room bed was in the attic and not to bother. We’ll use mine.”

Paige looked at the letter in her hand. “I thought the pause meant Pennsylvania. Dat will be cutting the back field. Mamm will want me in the kitchen.”

“You can call them. Tell them you’re with me for the summer, so you’re not traveling alone.” Emma took two tickets out of the bag and set them on the blanket between them. “Saturday. Two seats as far as New Haven. The overnight car only had a single bunk left. I took it. We’ll share.”

Paige picked up her ticket. Her name was printed on it. Boston, South Station, morning arrival. She had never been on a train that had a bunk. “The bunk is one bed.”

“Like this one. Narrower. A porter in the corridor if we want coffee.” Emma rubbed her hair with the towel. “Pack the gray dress and the cap and whatever you pray out of. I’ll pack the rest. If you want to tell them before we go, the path behind the dorm is where the phone works.”

Paige went down with the phone and stood where the laundry vent blew warm air. Dat answered on the second ring. She could hear the truck.

“The term is finished,” she said. “The screenings are done. I’m going to Boston with my roommate. Her parents asked. I’ll be looked after. The cap will stay on. Tell Mamm I love her. Tell the boys I miss them.”

Mamm took the phone. She asked if the roommate was a decent girl, and if there would be a church. Paige said Emma was decent, and that she would find a meeting if there was one. She did not say the bunk. She did not say that at night she went to her knees and asked to use her mouth. Her voice stayed level. A girl

from the end room walked by with a basket and nodded. Paige nodded back, the cap pins tight against her scalp, and said she loved them, and hung up.

Emma was at the door with both bags when she came up. “They all right?”

“They think I’m safe.” Paige took the smaller bag. Her hands were steady. Between her legs she was not. “I didn’t tell them about the bed.”

“You don’t have to.” Emma locked the room. The pale rectangle where the second bed had been was still on the floor. “Train’s at four. We’ll eat on it.”

They sat in facing seats until New Haven, the dress smooth under Paige’s hands, Emma’s knee against hers when the car swayed. Emma talked about the street, the garden behind the kitchen, the river a few blocks over. Paige answered when she was asked. She watched the towns go dark. At New Haven a porter in a gray jacket took the tickets and showed them down a narrow hall to a door with a number on it.

The compartment was small. One bunk, a shelf above it, a hook on the back of the door, a window with the shade half down. The porter set the bags on the floor and showed them the switch for the lamp.

“I’ll be in the corridor until midnight, and again at five,” he said. “Coffee at six if you want it. Knock if the shade sticks.”

“Thank you,” Emma said. “We won’t need anything.”

He shut the door. The train started. Paige hung the dress on the hook and put the cap on the shelf, pins in a row. The slip, the bra, and the panties went beside the cap, folded, because there was no chair. She stood bare with one hand on the wall. The floor moved. Her nipples tightened in the cooled air. She was wet, and she had been wet since the phone call, and she had not touched herself.

Emma sat on the bunk in the tank top and shorts, back to the wall, and looked at her. Paige went to her knees on the blanket. She had to hold Emma’s knee. The train did not keep still. “Do you want pussy licking?” Paige said. The words were still new in her mouth, and she said them carefully. “Before sleep. Regularly. Every night, if you want it. I can do it here. I can do it in the house. I want to.”

Emma’s face was flushed from the heat of the car, and ordinary. She opened her knees. “Yes. Regularly. Every night. Start now. Slower than you think.”

Paige drew the shorts down and set them on the shelf with her own clothes. Emma was warm. The hair there was darker red than the hair on her head, and she was wet enough that Paige’s mouth found it at once. She licked, a long stroke, and then stayed where the clitoris was, the way Emma had told her on the other night with a finger on Paige’s own.

“Pussy licking,” Paige said against her. “Your clitoris is under my tongue. Tell me if the mouth is wrong.”

“It isn’t wrong. Stay on it. Don’t lift your head to talk.” Emma’s hand came into Paige’s hair and rested. Not a push. A place to be. “You can say it when you need air. Then go back.”

In the corridor the porter’s cart rattled. Cups. A low voice asking the next compartment if they wanted water. Paige kept her mouth on Emma. Her own pussy was against her heel, swollen, untouched. She breathed through her nose and licked, slow, the way she had been told. Emma’s thigh trembled once and went still.

“Air,” Paige said, and took one breath. “I’m wet. I’m not using my hand. Your pussy is on my mouth. I’m going back.”

“Good. A little harder now. The cart’s at our door. Don’t stop if he knocks.”

He did not knock. The cart went on. Emma’s hips rose a fraction and settled. Paige sealed her mouth over the clitoris and sucked, lightly, then licked again because Emma’s fingers tightened and that had meant stay.

“That’s it,” Emma said. Her voice was lower and still steady. “I’m close. If it comes all the way, that’s an orgasm. Keep the pussy licking through it. Don’t decide you’re finished.”

Paige stayed. The orgasm moved through Emma’s thighs and against her tongue, a shudder she felt in her teeth, a sound Emma kept in her chest. Wet came into Paige’s mouth. She licked until the hand in her hair loosened and Emma’s stomach stopped jumping. Then she wiped her mouth on the back of her wrist and remained on her knees. Emma had not told her to get up.

The train took a curve. The dress swung on the hook and touched Paige’s bare shoulder.

Emma moved over, toward the window, and patted the mattress against the wall. “Here. On your side. Knees bent, or we won’t both fit. The porter knocks at six. You don’t get up before that unless I do.”

Paige lay where she was put. The wall was cool on her breasts. Emma pulled the blanket over them and turned the lamp off. Her arm came around Paige’s waist, under the blanket, and stayed. Paige’s mouth tasted of her. Between her own legs the ache was bright and unused. She did not put a hand there. Emma’s breath evened against the back of her neck. The shade clicked. Outside, the corridor was quiet, and the train kept north.

Chapter 14

The porter knocked at six. Paige was against the wall, bare, Emma’s arm still across her waist. The dress moved on the hook when she sat up. Emma said they had twenty minutes. Paige washed her face in the little basin. The taste of the night was still in her mouth while she pinned the cap. Panties over the ache, then the slip, the bra, the dress. She looked in the narrow glass and saw a girl going to a city.

South Station was louder than the quad. Brakes, a voice on a speaker, coffee, people pulling bags past them. Emma had both suitcases. Paige carried the smaller one and kept a hand on her cap when the crowd pressed. Outside, the air was warm and smelled of the street. Emma raised a hand for a cab.

“Back Bay,” she said to the driver. “Marlborough. I’ll point at the house.”

Paige watched the buildings go by, higher than any she had stood under. Emma’s hand rested on her knee, over the dress, and stayed there. The cab stopped at a brick house with black shutters and an iron gate. Through the side fence Paige could see a garden, green, empty, a table with two chairs.

“My parents are in France until August,” Emma said, unlocking the door. “Mrs. Keene comes Tuesdays and Fridays. She won’t be here today. Leave the bags. We’ll walk before it gets hot.”

The hall was wide and cool. Stairs went up. Paige set her bag down and took the cap off in the dim after the street. She hung it on the hook by the door, beside Emma’s sweater. Emma saw her do it.

“Public Garden is three blocks,” Emma said. “I brought a blanket. You can pray later if you want the garden out back. It’s quiet.”

Paige pinned the cap on again. They walked. Cobbles, window boxes, a woman in a suit who nodded at Emma and went on. The gates were iron. Inside, the grass was bright, and a lagoon had boats shaped like swans with people sitting in them. Emma led her off the path to a lawn with shrubs around it. Two women were on a blanket with their phones. A mother went by with a stroller. A couple stood on the path, laughing at something on the man’s screen. All of them had clothes on.

Emma spread the blanket and sat. She held out her hand.

“Cap,” she said. “Then the rest. Fold them. I want the sun on you.”

Paige looked at the two women, and at the couple, and at Emma’s hand. She took the pins out and set the cap in Emma’s palm. Her hair fell. She unbuttoned the dress and stepped out of it, then the slip, then the bra. The air found her nipples and drew them tight. The panties last. She was wet from the cab, and the walk had kept her that way. She folded each piece and put the pile in Emma’s lap,

boots to the side. Then she stood bare on the blanket, arms at her sides, the sun on her stomach and on the hair between her legs.

“Sit,” Emma said. “Knees apart. You’ll roast if you fold up.”

Paige sat. The blanket was warm. She opened her knees and set her hands on the blanket beside her thighs. The breeze went between them at once, cool on the wet, and her clitoris jumped. The couple on the path turned their heads toward the lagoon. Their eyes stayed on the boats.

“The boats run until four,” Emma said. “We can do them another day. The Common is through those trees if you want a longer walk tomorrow. Mrs. Keene leaves milk. She doesn’t cook.”

Paige’s voice came out thin. “The breeze is on me. On my breasts, and between my legs. I’m wet on the blanket. Those women are on their phones. The couple is watching the boats.”

“Good.” Emma leaned back on her elbows, dress smooth, sandals crossed at the ankle. She talked about a bakery on the next street, and about the river, and about a key under the mat if Paige came back alone. A jogger went by on the path. The mother with the stroller stopped to point at a swan boat, and the child pointed, and they moved on. A bead left Paige and ran to the blanket. Her hands stayed where she had put them. The sun sat on her nipples until they ached, and the ache lower down stayed bright from the night, unused.

One of the women on the other blanket laughed at her phone. Emma smiled at the sound.

“You can say if you need to move,” Emma said.

“My hands are on the blanket. If I move one of them I’ll shake, and then they might look.”

“Then leave them.” Emma reached over and took a leaf out of Paige’s hair. Her fingers brushed Paige’s ear and went back to the blanket. “We’ll sit until the shade hits us.”

They sat. Emma named a church with a white steeple two streets over, and said the service was at ten if Paige wanted it. Paige said she might. Her thighs trembled once, and she set them still. The wet cooled and warmed again when the breeze changed. The couple left. The two women stayed, clothed, turned toward each other. Paige was the only bare person on the lawn. The city went on past the gates. Emma’s voice stayed easy.

When the shade from the shrubs reached the edge of the blanket, Emma stood and brushed grass from her dress. She held the pile out.

Paige dressed sitting down. Panties over the wet. Bra, slip, dress, buttons. Cap last, pins in, hair hidden. The cotton pressed on her when she stood. Emma folded the blanket and took her hand, and they walked toward the iron gate. The swan boats were still on the water. The lawn was behind them, and the house was three blocks ahead.

Chapter 15

Lila and Sophie were on the front step at noon. Lila had her auburn hair in a clip. Sophie was taller, her dark hair down, both of them in summer dresses and sandals. Lila hugged Paige before Emma had the door all the way open.

“She told us you were coming for the summer,” Lila said. “We were glad. Emma gets grim when she has the house to herself.”

Sophie hugged her too. “Newbury Street. A booth, if they have one. I’m hungry.”

Paige had the cap on and the gray dress buttoned to the throat. She took her bag from the hook. Emma locked the door. The four of them walked in the shade of the street trees, Lila talking about a bakery, Sophie answering, Emma’s arm through Paige’s.

The restaurant was dark wood and white cloths. A man at the door knew Emma’s name and put them in a corner booth. The cloth fell to the carpet. Paige sat between Emma and Lila. Sophie sat across. The waiter poured water, took the order for drinks, and left. Emma waited until his back was turned.

“Before the food,” she said. “In a place like this, with a cloth this long, one of us goes under the table and licks the host until the meal is over. That’s how lunch goes when it’s friends. The waiter won’t look down. Lila and Sophie have been the one on the carpet.”

Lila turned her water glass. “We have. It’s nothing. You’re the one today. Emma’s the host. We’ll keep talking. You don’t have to come up for any of it.”

Sophie smiled at Paige. “The scallops are the reason to come here. You’ll hear us order them.”

Paige looked at Emma. Emma nodded at the cloth. Paige slid off the seat. The linen brushed her cap, then her shoulders, and she was on her knees in the dim under the table, carpet under her, Emma’s sandals in front of her, Lila’s ankles crossed to one side, Sophie’s shoes across the way. A laugh came from another table, muffled by the cloth. Paige lifted Emma’s skirt. Emma opened her knees and drew her panties aside.

Above them, Lila said the blue room at the Gardner had been rehung. Sophie said the gift shop had a card of the staircase. Emma’s hand came down and rested in Paige’s hair.

Paige put her mouth on her. Emma was wet, salt and warm. Paige licked with her tongue flat, then narrower, where the clitoris sat under the hood. Her hands held the outside of Emma’s thighs. Her own dress pooled around her knees, and the heat between her legs wet the cotton while she worked. She kept her mouth where Emma’s fingers, light in her hair, had set her.

The waiter’s shoes stopped at the edge of the cloth. Ice moved in a glass.

“Three,” Emma said. Her voice was the voice she used for a waiter. “Scallops twice, and the chicken. We’re fine for water.”

He said of course. The shoes went. Paige’s tongue stayed on Emma’s clitoris. Emma’s thigh tightened under her palm, eased, tightened again. Plates arrived, three of them. A knife clicked. Lila said the peas were sweet. Emma ate. Once she shifted in the booth, and the shift pressed Paige’s mouth closer, and Paige took her deeper, lips sealed, tongue moving.

“You were right about this place,” Emma said to Sophie. Her hand firmed in Paige’s hair. “Paige. Harder. I’m close.”

Paige sucked. Sophie asked whether the boats would run next week. Emma’s stomach jumped against Paige’s forehead. A small hum left her, the sound of someone pleased with a plate. Wet came against Paige’s tongue. Paige licked through it, steady, until Emma’s fingers loosened and the hum had gone back into the talk about Saturday and the weather. Lila said the afternoon would be clear. Paige rested her cheek on Emma’s thigh. The cotton between her own legs was soaked. Emma’s hand petted her hair once, slow, and stayed.

Chocolate was ordered, three plates. The talk moved to a landing on the river and whether Sophie’s cousin would want the extra seat. Under the cloth Paige knelt with her mouth against Emma, licking when Emma’s hips asked for it, still when they did not. The cap was warm. The carpet had a pattern she could feel with her knees.

When the check was paid, Emma drew her skirt down and touched Paige’s shoulder. Paige climbed back onto the seat beside her. Her mouth was swollen. The front of the gray dress was dark where she had knelt on her own wet. Emma smoothed her hair and set the cap straight. Lila was still talking about the landing. Sophie looked at the bill and said she had cash.

They stood. The corner was behind them, then the row of tables, then the foyer, where the door let the street in. Lila hugged Paige on the sidewalk.

“Emma’s lucky. Saturday, if you want the boats.”

Sophie said the light would be better after two. They walked with Paige between them, dresses moving in the warm air, the taste of Emma on Paige’s tongue, the city bright on the white of her cap.

The grind is on me. “Seats” is the same clipped order as the library chapter, and “the width of what she had used” asks you to translate. People in a lobby say whole sentences. If a thing is not in the room, it does not get a line.

Chapter 16

The theater was six blocks from the house, a brick front and a lit marquee. The film was a French one Emma had named at breakfast. Lila and Sophie waited under the marquee. Sophie had a small paper bag that rattled when she hugged Paige. Inside, the lobby smelled of popcorn and floor polish. People stood with tickets. A woman sold candy behind a glass counter. The doors to the seats were open, and an usher was taking stubs.

Emma stopped beside the candy counter and opened her purse. She took out a scarf, and in the scarf a large black dildo, smooth, with a wide base. She held it low, between their bodies, so the counter hid it.

“Before a long film, the guest uses this in the women’s room, so she can sit through the picture,” she said. “Lila and Sophie used one at home. That’s why it’s you. We’ll wait by the door. Use it until you come. Then wash your hands and give it back to me.”

Lila looked at the purse, not at the people in line. “We did, before we left the apartment. The last stall has a lock. We’ll stand at the door.”

Sophie nodded toward the corridor past the counter. “Go ahead. We’ll get the tickets torn when you come out.”

Paige took the dildo. It was heavy, and the tip was already slick. She walked to the women’s room with the cap still pinned. A woman at the sink dried her hands and left. Lila and Sophie came in after Paige and stood at the outer door, where they could see the corridor. Paige went into the last stall and turned the lock.

“The popcorn line is long,” Lila said. “We can get a bag on the way to the seats, or skip it.”

“Skip it,” Sophie said. “I want a seat in the center of a row. If we sit on the aisle, people hit your knees when they go by.”

Paige set one foot on the rim of the toilet and braced a shoulder on the partition. She lifted the dress and the slip and took the panties down to her knees. She was wet. She pressed the head of the dildo to her pussy and eased it in. It was thick. She breathed out and took it deeper, until the base met her. When she rocked, the base rubbed her clitoris. The sound of it stayed in the stall. Her nipples tightened under the bra. She rocked in short strokes, the dress bunched at her waist, the cap still on.

“Emma said this one has white subtitles,” Lila said. “I can read white.”

“Good,” Sophie said. “The last French film had yellow ones, and I missed half the jokes.”

Paige shut her eyes. The shaft moved in her, and the base tapped her clitoris, and the two of them kept talking about candy and which row to take. Her thighs shook. She pressed the base flat against her clitoris and came, a breath caught in her throat, her pussy gripping the shaft, wet on her fingers. She stayed there until the grip eased. Then she drew it out and stood with one hand on the partition.

She wiped herself with paper and pulled the panties up. The dress fell back to her ankles. She unlocked the stall, washed the dildo and her hands, and held the toy out. Emma wrapped it in the scarf and put it in the purse.

“We can go in,” Emma said. “The usher is still at the door.”

They handed over their stubs and walked into the dark. The seats were red. A few people were already sitting. The screen showed an advertisement for candy. Emma sat on the aisle. Paige sat beside her, the cotton wet against her pussy, Lila and Sophie on her other side. The purse rested on Emma’s lap. The lights went down. Paige folded her hands over her lap. The first words of the film came up in white at the bottom of the screen.