On Our Own

by Brent Clark Palmer
The Chariot, Book 30

Chapter 1

Nadine tried the key twice before it turned.

“Wrong way,” Tim said.

“I know how a key works.”

The door opened on a living room that was smaller than it had looked online. Beige carpet. A kitchen along the left wall. A short hall. One window facing the building next door.

Tim dragged the bigger suitcase over the threshold. Nadine had the lamp and a plastic bag of stuff from the bathroom at their parents’ house. Shampoo, two toothbrushes, a half-used tube of paste.

She set the bag on the counter and opened the fridge. It hummed. There was nothing in it.

“It works,” she said.

“Great.”

They brought up the rest in two more trips. Clothes. His work shoes. Her extra polo from the store. A skillet. Sheets. The couch that came with the place was already there, gray, with a dent in the middle. The bedroom was empty except for the mattress they had bought off a guy in her class. It leaned against the wall because they had not put it down yet.

Nadine sat on the suitcase and looked at her phone.

“Mom says it’s quiet at the house. She says don’t get evicted.”

Tim snorted. “Okay.”

That was all they said about it.

He stood in the bedroom doorway with his hands in his pockets. He was nineteen, a head taller than she was, dark hair in his eyes from the stairs. The Jeffries mouth. People still told them they looked alike. Nadine was twenty and tired of hearing it. Tonight she kept noticing his hands anyway.

“You want food?” she said.

“Yeah.”

She opened the pizza app they both already had. “Pepperoni?”

“And the cheap breadsticks.”

“I’m not paying for breadsticks.”

“I will. Use my card. It’s in your wallet from the deposit.”

She ordered. Twenty-two minutes. They drank tap water out of the skillet because the cups were still in the car.

Nadine put the phone on the counter and turned the speaker on. She did that at work on break. Her friends did it in the parking lot when they needed a text written for them.

“We just moved in,” she said. “One bathroom. Two people. Both of us have morning shifts this week. How do we share it without being late and pissed off.”

The voice on the speaker sounded like it always did. Even. Useful.

“Don’t take turns if you are short on time,” it said. “Use the bathroom at the same time. Brush your teeth together. If one of you is getting dressed, the other person should still go in and do what they need. A small bathroom gets worse if you wait in the hall. You have lived in the same house. You already know what the other person looks like. Treat it like a schedule, not like privacy.”

Tim looked at her.

“You asked it that on purpose.”

“I asked it because we have one shower and I open at eight.”

“That’s not why.”

Nadine picked up the skillet and dumped the rest of the water in the sink. “You want to be late, be late. I’m doing what it said.”

The buzzer rang. She went downstairs for the pizza because she still had the fob. When she came back he had put the mattress on the floor and thrown a sheet over it. The apartment smelled like pepperoni and warm cardboard.

They sat on the floor and ate out of the box. His knee was close to hers. She could have moved. She did not.

“You’re on the couch,” she said.

“I know.”

“I’m not being mean. There’s one bed.”

“I said I know.”

Grease on his thumb. He licked it without thinking. She watched his mouth and then made herself take another slice.

She had wanted him since she was old enough to want anyone. He knew. She was pretty sure he knew. At their parents’ house there had always been a door and a person on the other side of it. Now the person on the other side was him.

“I’m going to shower,” she said.

“Now?”

“I smell like the stairs.”

She took clothes into the bathroom and did not lock the door. She thought about locking it and left it unlatched. The stall was tight. The water took a minute to get warm. She washed fast. When she got out she realized she had brought a shirt and underwear and forgotten shorts.

“Tim.”

“What.”

“Throw me the gray shorts. They’re on the suitcase.”

He came down the hall. She opened the door wide enough for her arm. She had the towel around her. It covered her chest and stopped high on her thighs. His eyes went down and stayed there a second too long.

The towel had slipped when she reached. He could see the underside of her breast and the dark of her nipple before she yanked the towel up. He held out the shorts. His face was red.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah.”

He went back to the living room. She shut the door and leaned on it. She was wet, and not from the shower. She put the shorts on under the towel and looked at herself in the mirror. Her nipples showed through the shirt. She could have put a bra on. She did not.

When she came out he had his work shirt off and the sleep shirt in his hands. He was facing the couch. She saw his back, the line down to his jeans, the fact that the jeans were tight in front when he turned.

He saw her notice.

“I’m using the sink,” she said.

“I’ll wait.”

“It said not to wait.”

He let out a breath. “Fine.”

They stood at the sink together. Two toothbrushes. One circle of paste. Their hips kept almost touching. She bent to spit and her ass brushed the front of his jeans. He was hard. She felt it, clear as anything, through the towel she was no longer wearing and the thin shorts she was.

Neither of them moved for a second.

“Sorry,” she said.

“It’s the sink. It’s small.”

“Yeah.”

She looked at him in the mirror. He was looking at her chest. He stopped when he saw her see it. She did not step away. The fan rattled. She could smell his skin and the pizza and her soap.

She finished and left him in there. In the bedroom she sat on the mattress and listened to him spit and run the water a long time, longer than teeth took.

He came out and stood in the hall.

“I’m going to bed,” he said.

“Okay.”

“Nadine.”

“What.”

He shook his head. “Nothing. Night.”

“Night.”

She lay down. The sheet was cold. She left the door open a few inches because the room felt too new with it shut. She could see a strip of the living room. He was on the couch on his back. He had an arm over his face. The blanket was bunched. It did not hide that he was still hard.

She watched him until watching him made her push her hips into the mattress. She did it once, then stopped, then did it again, slower. She bit the inside of her cheek.

On the crate, her phone lit up with the leftover thread.

She whispered, because he was right there.

“Hot water tank is small. If we both have to be out in the morning, do we shower separate or what.”

The voice was quiet. It still carried.

“Shower together if you are both getting ready,” it said. “A short shared shower uses less water than two long ones. Wash and get out. There is not enough space to be careful about space. Plan on standing close.”

Tim’s arm came down. He had heard it.

Nadine stared at the ceiling.

“We can talk about it in the morning,” she said.

His voice from the couch was rough.

“Yeah.”

She turned onto her side, facing the open door. He turned his face toward the hall. They did not speak again. She stayed awake long enough to see him adjust himself under the blanket, once, like he thought she was asleep.

She was not asleep.

Chapter 2

Jess texted during Nadine’s break. A photo of her shoulder and a line underneath: asked the AI, it said get it checked if it changes. Then a second text: also it said take pictures in the same light so you can compare.

Nadine showed Tim that night. They were eating leftover pizza on the floor again. He had just gotten off. His name tag was still clipped to his jeans.

“That’s her freckle,” Nadine said.

“Okay.”

“She used her phone. I have one on my back I can’t see. Lower. I’ve had it.”

“So take a picture.”

“I can’t get the angle.”

She looked at the counter, where the phone was sitting.

“Can you look at a spot on my back I can’t see,” she said to the speaker. “I don’t have a doctor yet. My friend did a photo.”

“A second person is better than a photo you take yourself,” the voice said. “You need even light and someone who can see the edges. Have them look at your back and shoulders. Check anything raised, anything darker than the skin around it, anything that looks different from last time. If you have lived together, it is faster than waiting for an appointment for a mole that has been there.”

Tim wiped his hands on his jeans.

“It’s talking about me.”

“You’re the other person here.”

“Nadine.”

“It’s a mole. Don’t be dramatic.”

She stood up and turned her back to him. She pulled her work polo over her head and dropped it on the suitcase. She had a bra on, plain, the one she wore on register days. The straps cut a little into her shoulders.

“There’s one by my left shoulder blade,” she said. “And one lower. I’ll show you.” He did not get up at first. Then he did. He stood behind her. She could feel the heat of him before he touched her.

“The light’s bad,” he said.

“Use the lamp.”

He dragged the lamp closer. The bulb was cheap and yellow. It made her skin look warmer than it was. He put two fingers on her shoulder and turned her a

little.

His fingertips were dry. She felt them anyway, all the way down her spine.

“This one?” he said.

“Yeah.”

He leaned in. His breath hit her back. The mole was small and brown, flat. He looked at it longer than a mole needed.

“It looks like it always looked,” he said.

“You don’t know how it always looked.”

“I’ve seen you in a swimsuit.”

“That’s not the same as this.”

He was quiet. His thumb moved a half inch, not off the mole, just there.

“The other one is lower,” she said. “Toward the middle. I can feel it when I sit against a chair.”

“How low.”

“I’ll tell you when you’re on it.”

He slid his hand down her back. Slow. Over the bra strap, then under it because the strap was in the way and he did not ask her to unhook it. The side of his hand brushed the hook. She felt her nipples go tight in the cups.

“Here?”

“Lower.”

His hand kept going. The waistband of her jeans stopped him. He hesitated. She did not tell him to stop. She did not tell him to keep going either. She stood there with her polo on the floor and her brother behind her and the lamp on her skin.

He hooked two fingers over the back of her jeans and eased them down an inch. Just enough. The mole sat near the dimple above her ass. He saw that. She knew he saw that.

“That’s it,” she said. Her voice came out thin.

“It’s small.”

“Is it weird.”

“No.”

He did not take his hand away. His palm rested on the bare small of her back, thumb close to the waistband. She could hear him breathe through his nose.

“You’re supposed to check the shoulders too,” she said. “It said shoulders.”

“I did the one.”

“Do both.”

He used both hands. He spread his fingers over her shoulder blades and looked, really looked, like he was doing the job. His chest came close to her back. When she shifted her weight, her ass touched the front of his jeans.

He was hard. She felt the shape of him, obvious, against her.

She stared at the blank wall.

“Tim.”

“I’m looking.”

“That’s not all you’re doing.”

“I’m standing here. There’s nowhere else to stand.”

She should have stepped forward. She stayed where she was. The contact stayed. Her underwear was already damp. She squeezed her thighs together inside the jeans and hoped he could not tell.

“My turn,” she said. “You have one behind your ear. Mom used to pick at it.”

“It’s fine.”

“It said get someone to look at the ones you can’t see.”

He let go of her. She missed his hands and hated that she missed them. She pulled her jeans up and did not put the polo back on. The bra felt like nothing.

He sat on the edge of the couch and turned his head. She stood between his knees because that was the height. She put her fingers in his hair and pushed it back.

The mole was behind his right ear, tiny, a little raised. She had to get close. Her breasts were near his face. He kept his eyes down and then did not.

“Don’t stare,” she said.

“You’re in my face.”

“I’m looking at your ear.”

She touched the mole with her index finger. Then she touched the skin under it, then the tendon in his neck. His pulse was fast. She felt it against her fingertip.

He put his hands on his thighs and pressed, like that would hide that he was still hard. It did not hide it. She could see the line of his penis under the jeans from this angle, thick, trapped to the left.

She kept her hand on his neck longer than the mole required.

“It looks the same,” she said.

“Good.”

“Do you want me to check the other side.”

“There’s nothing on the other side.”

“Then I won’t.”

She did not move back. He lifted his hands and set them on her waist, over the jeans, then seemed to notice he had done it. He left them there.

“We should do the rest of your back,” he said. “It said back and shoulders. I only did two spots.”

“Okay.”

She turned around again. This time she reached back and unhooked the bra herself. She held the cups against her chest with one arm so she was not standing there naked from the waist up. The back was bare. The straps hung on her arms.

“Just look,” she said.

He looked. He put his hands on her shoulders and worked down in a pattern, like he could make this medical if he went in rows. Left shoulder. Right shoulder. Spine. Ribs. Each time his fingers moved, her nipples scraped the inside of the cups she was holding. She bit her lip.

His hands reached the jeans again. He stopped with his fingers in the back pockets’ empty space, low, almost on her ass. The mole was already checked. They both knew that.

He did not move his hands up.

She did not tell him to.

The phone was still on. Neither of them had asked it another question. The apartment was quiet except for the fridge.

“Is that all of them,” he said.

“That’s all of them.”

His thumbs sat in the waistband now. Bare skin. He was close enough that when he exhaled she felt it in the small of her back. She was so wet it was starting to be uncomfortable in the jeans.

“Tim.”

“Yeah.”

“You can move your hands.”

He waited.

“I didn’t say I wanted you to,” she said.

He stayed there. She stayed there. In the window they were just a girl in an undone bra and a boy on his feet behind her, in a room that belonged to them.

After a minute she reached for the polo with her free hand and did not put it on yet.

“Same time tomorrow,” she said. “If we’re doing the shower thing. I open at eight.”

His hands were still too low. She could feel each finger.

“Okay,” he said.

Chapter 3

Tim came in after nine and sat on the couch without taking his shoes off. Nadine was already home. She had been on her feet since seven. Her polo smelled like the store. She was standing at the fridge drinking orange juice from the carton.

“My ass hurts,” she said.

“Okay.”

“Don’t say okay. I’m serious. It’s the standing.”

He leaned forward and untied one shoe. “Mine too. I was on the floor all day.”

She put the carton back and kept the fridge door open for the cold. “Jess said she asked about it. The standing thing. Her knees.”

“What did it tell her.”

Nadine picked up her phone, still on speaker from a grocery list she had started and not finished.

“We’re on our feet all day,” she said to it. “Register and floor. Our butts hurt. Is it just being tired or is it tight. What do we do besides sit down.”

“Soreness after a long shift is common,” the voice said. “Tight muscle and tired muscle feel different. A firm slap on each side will tell you. Tight muscle feels dense and doesn’t give. Tired muscle is sore and gives. Compare left and right. Do both of you. Sitting only helps after you know which one it is. If it’s tight, stretch. If it’s tired, stop adding more standing tonight.”

Tim looked at her.

“A slap.”

“That’s what it said.”

“On the ass.”

“That’s where it hurts.”

He laughed. It came out too loud. She almost laughed too, then didn’t.

“You’re going to do it,” he said.

“I’m not standing like this tomorrow. Come here.”

“You come here. I’m sitting.”

“Then stand up. It said compare.”

He stood. He was still in his work jeans. The zipper was right there. She tried not to look at it and looked anyway.

“Turn around,” she said.

“Nadine.”

“Turn around. I’m not doing it to your face.”

He turned and put his hands on the back of the couch. She stood behind him and, before she could talk herself out of it, hit his left ass cheek with her open hand. The sound was sharp in the small room. He jerked.

“Jesus.”

“Did it give or not.”

“I don’t know. Do it again.”

She hit the same side harder. The muscle under her palm was solid. She left her hand there after the slap, feeling it. Warm. He breathed out through his teeth.

“That’s tight,” she said. “I think.”

“Do the other one.”

She slapped the right side. He made a noise he tried to turn into a cough. The right side gave a little more. She kept her hand on him and squeezed once, like she was checking produce, except it was her brother’s ass in work jeans and she could feel the shape of him.

“They’re different,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Turn around.”

He did. He was hard. The zipper of his jeans was pushed forward. There was no way to miss it. He saw her see it.

“It’s the hitting,” he said.

“Okay.”

“I’m not making a thing.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

She turned back to the fridge because her face was hot and because if she kept looking at his jeans she was going to put her hand there. The cold air hit her chest. Her nipples were already tight from the standing around and from slapping him. The cold made it worse. She stayed in the open door like she needed a long time to choose a nothing dinner.

“Your turn,” he said.

“I know.”

She shut the fridge. She unbuttoned her jeans and pushed them down to her thighs. She had on black underwear from work, plain, a little worn in the back.

She leaned her hands on the counter.

“Just do it,” she said.

He stood behind her. For a second he didn’t touch her. Then he slapped her left cheek, firm, not playful. The sting went straight between her legs. She sucked in air.

“Tight,” he said. His voice had dropped.

“Do the other one.”

He slapped the right side. Harder. Her hips bumped the counter. She was wet immediately, a hard pulse in her clit, embarrassing. She stared at the backsplash.

He didn’t take his hand away after the second slap. He left it on her ass, fingers spread, the heat of the sting under his palm. His other hand hovered and then settled on her hip.

“They’re about the same,” he said.

“So tired. Not tight.”

“That’s what it said tired feels like.”

“Then I should sit down.”

Neither of them moved. He was against her now. She felt his erection on the seam of her underwear, thick, obvious, the zipper teeth a faint scrape. She should have pulled her jeans up. She stayed bent over the counter with her ass in his hand.

“Tim.”

“I’m comparing.”

“You already compared.”

“I know.”

She laughed. It died in her throat.

His fingers slid an inch toward the middle. Not quite between her cheeks. Close. She pushed back without deciding to. He made a sound against her hair.

“We should stretch,” she said. “If it’s tight for you.”

“Yeah.”

“In a minute.”

“Yeah.”

The phone was still on the counter by her wrist.

She didn’t pick it up. She didn’t need more instructions. She could feel him throb once against her, through the jeans, and she closed her eyes.

After a while he stepped back. The air hit the back of her thighs. She pulled her jeans up. The wet spot in her underwear dragged. She kept her back to him until she could turn around without looking at his zipper first.

She looked at it anyway. He had his hands in his pockets, which did nothing.

“I’m going to sit,” she said.

“Okay.”

“You should ice yours or whatever.”

“I’m fine.”

He sat on the couch. She sat on the other end. They put on something on her laptop and did not watch it. After ten minutes she went to the bathroom and locked the door and sat on the closed toilet with her jeans at her knees and her hand in her underwear. She came fast, thinking about the slap and the zipper and his hand staying. She ran the water so he wouldn’t hear.

When she came out he was in the same place. His eyes were dark. He had not iced anything.

“Shower in the morning,” she said. “Same time. I have to be out.”

“I know.”

She stood in the kitchen again and opened the fridge for no reason. She stayed there too long, looking at the orange juice, feeling him look at her ass in the jeans he had just hit.

The room was small. There was nowhere else to put any of it.

Chapter 4

The alarm went off at six-forty. Nadine hit it and lay there for a second. This was the third morning they had tried to get ready at the same time. The first two mornings she had used the stall while he used the sink, then they switched, and the water had gone cold on whoever was second.

She sat up. “Tim.”

“I’m up.”

“We’re going to be late again if we do it like yesterday.”

She took her phone into the bathroom and set it on the tank, speaker on. He showed up in the doorway in his underwear, hair smashed on one side. She had on the T-shirt she slept in and nothing else. They had stopped pretending that was an accident.

“Hot water dies if we go one after the other,” she said to the phone. “We both have to clock in. Third morning. What do we actually do.”

“One shower,” the voice said. “Two people. Eight minutes. Get in together, wash, get out. If you stand there being careful you will run out of hot water and you will be late. You are already sharing the room. Use the same spray. Stay on task.”

Tim rubbed his face. “Stay on task.”

“That’s what it said.”

“You want to get in with me.”

“I want hot water and I want to keep my job.”

She pulled the shirt off. She did it fast so she would not stop. Her breasts were medium, heavier at the bottom, nipples already tight from the cold tile. She had dark hair between her legs. She stepped into the stall and turned the water on before she could think.

“Come on,” she said.

He pushed his underwear down. His penis was already filling, not all the way, hanging heavier than in the morning at their parents’ house when he had a towel and a locked door. She looked at it. He saw her look. He got in behind her and shut the cloudy door.

The stall was built for one person. His chest hit her back. The water was only warm. She had the soap. There was no version of this where they did not touch.

“Eight minutes,” the phone said from the tank. “Do not take turns under the spray. Wash her back. Wash his. If you waste time being embarrassed you will still be in there when the water goes cold and you will still have to finish getting

ready. Hands are faster than waiting.”

Tim gave a short laugh that did not sound like a laugh.

“It’s telling us to—”

“I heard it,” Nadine said.

She put the soap in his hand. “My back. Just do it.”

He washed her back. His penis was against her ass now, harder, the head sliding on wet skin. She braced her hands on the wall. He soaped her shoulders, her sides, the sides of her breasts because that was part of her back if you were not being careful. His thumb crossed her nipple. She made a noise.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t stop. We don’t have time.”

“Wash him too,” the voice said. “You both need to be clean. You have six minutes. If either of you is already aroused, take care of it in here. A second trip to the bathroom will make you late. Fast is fine. You are not trying to linger.”

Nadine turned. The spray hit her chest and ran off her nipples. She looked at his face and then down. His penis was up against his stomach, wet, darker at the head. She put soap in her hand and wrapped her fingers around him and stroked. Fast, because the clock was real and because that was what the voice had said and because she had wanted to do this for years.

He made a sound against her temple. His hand went between her legs like he had been told to stay on task. He found her clit and rubbed, clumsy at first, then in a rhythm that made her knees dip. She was already wet under the water. His fingers slipped. He used two of them along her, not inside, just rubbing, hard and quick.

“Like that,” she said. “Don’t be gentle. We don’t have it.”

“Okay. Okay.”

They stood in the spray and worked each other. Her breasts flattened against his chest when she stepped closer. His other hand grabbed her ass where he had slapped her two nights ago. She stroked him tight and fast, wrist turning over the head, the way she did to herself when she thought about him with the door closed. He was leaking on her fingers. The water kept trying to wash it off.

“Four minutes,” the phone said. “Rinse. If you are close, finish now. Do not get out unfinished and stand around. That is how people miss the bus.”

“I’m close,” Tim said.

“Me too. Don’t stop.”

She came first. It hit her in the stomach and the thighs. She put her mouth on his shoulder so she would not get loud. Her hand kept moving on him through it, sloppy. He came about ten seconds later, onto her hip and his own stomach, a few pulses she felt in her fist. He breathed like he had run up the stairs.

The water went lukewarm.

“Rinse,” the voice said. “Then out.”

They rinsed. She would not look at his face. He would not look at hers. His semen was still on her hip. She wiped it with her hand and rinsed her hand. That was the whole after.

They got out. The towels were on the same bar. She took one. He took the other. They dried off facing different walls. Her legs were shaking. His penis was soft now and he kept the towel in front of it anyway.

She pulled on underwear and her polo. He pulled on his jeans. The zipper stuck. Neither of them helped.

At the sink they brushed their teeth side by side like the first night. She could smell sex and soap. She spat.

“Was that the efficient version,” she said.

He looked at the faucet.

“Yes.”

Neither of them believed it. She could see that in his mouth. He could hear it in her voice.

She picked up the phone.

“We both finished,” she said to it, because her friends told these things the truth when they wanted the next useful answer. “We’re walking out. Anything else.”

“Eat something,” the voice said. “You will crash mid-shift if you don’t. Same plan tomorrow if you both have mornings. It should take less time once you are used to the space.”

Tim put his work shirt on.

“Used to the space,” he said.

Nadine put the phone in her pocket.

“I have to go.”

“Me too.”

They left the bathroom together. At the door she stopped with her keys in her hand. He was close again. She almost kissed him. She put her mouth on the

water bottle instead.

“See you tonight,” she said.

“Yeah.”

On the stairs her underwear was wet and it was not from the shower. She clocked in on time. At the register she kept thinking about his penis in her hand and the way he had rubbed her, fast, like a chore that felt nothing like a chore. She sold a woman a bag of ice and did not hear the first thing the woman said.

Tim missed the early bus and caught the next one. He sat by the window with his backpack on his lap. He thought about her wet clit under his fingers and the sound she made into his shoulder. He got hard again on the bus and stared at the floor until it went down.

In the apartment the stall was still dripping. Eight minutes. They had used almost all of them. Tomorrow they both opened again.

Chapter 5

Tuesday they got in the stall without talking about it.

Nadine set the phone on the tank and started the water. Tim dropped his underwear on the same hook as hers. The first morning they had been stiff about where to stand. This time he stepped in behind her like he knew where his feet went.

“Eight minutes again,” she said to the phone. “We both open. Same as yesterday.”

“Same plan,” the voice said. “Wash. Then hands. Slower on her or she will finish before you have both washed. Faster on him. If the clock gets tight, stop washing and finish. Late is worse than soap you missed.”

Tim’s mouth twitched. “Slower on her.”

Nadine put the soap in his hand. “You heard it. Slower on me. Faster on you.”

She said it like she was repeating a shift instruction. His penis thickened against her hip while she was still talking.

He washed her back. She washed his chest. Her nipples dragged on him when she turned. He was fully hard by the time her soapy hand closed around him. She stroked fast, tight, the way the voice wanted. He rubbed her clit slower, two fingers, circling, and she had to put her forehead on the tile.

“Slower,” she said, because the phone had said it and because she liked saying it. “Don’t speed up.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

He slowed down. The slower pace made her legs shake. She came with her fist still moving on him, faster than she was letting him go on her. He came on her stomach a minute later, breathing hard into her wet hair.

They rinsed. They did not look at each other while they toweled off. In the sink mirror she put toothpaste on her brush and he stood close enough that his arm touched hers.

“See you tonight,” she said.

“Yeah.”

Wednesday the water was colder at the start. Nadine swore and pulled him in anyway. “We’re behind,” she told the phone. “Can we skip the wash.”

“If you are behind, skip the full wash,” the voice said. “Rinse, hands, out. She talks if you need cues. You already know the pace. Slower on her. Faster on him.

Stop if one of you is about to miss the bus. You can be half clean. You cannot be late.”

“Skip the wash,” Nadine said to Tim. “Just do me. Fast on you.”

“Okay.”

He put his hand between her legs with no soap, just water and how wet she already was. She grabbed his penis and stroked him hard and quick. The stall filled with the sound of it. She watched his face this time, for a second, and then looked at his mouth and almost leaned in.

“Slower,” she said.

He groaned. “Nadine.”

“Slower on me. Keep going fast on you. That’s what it said.”

He obeyed. She came first again, quieter than Tuesday, her hand tightening on him until he spilled over her knuckles. They stood there for one extra second with the water hitting her breasts and his stomach. Then she shut it off.

“Out.”

They dried off facing the same wall by accident and both turned away. She was still pulsing. He kept the towel bunched in front of himself until he had underwear on.

At the sink she unscrewed the toothpaste and he watched her mouth.

“Don’t,” she said.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“I know.”

Thursday he was already in the bathroom when her alarm went off. The water was running. She walked in naked and he looked at her the way he was not supposed to look at her at six- forty-five, from the breasts down, then back up.

“You’re early,” she said.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

She set the phone on the tank.

“Third workday of this,” she said to it. “We’re getting it done. He’s already hard. I need to leave in nine minutes. What do we do.”

“Then start with him,” the voice said. “Faster on him so he finishes. Then slower on her if there is time. If there is not time, she can wait until tonight. Do not both stand there unfinished. That is how the rest of the day goes badly. Nadine can keep the cues out loud if that helps you stay on the clock.”

Tim swallowed. “Start with me.”

Nadine stepped under the water with him. She took his penis in both hands because one hand kept slipping. She stroked him fast, looking at the head, at the way it darkened, at the way his stomach tightened. She liked telling him the rest.

“Don’t touch me yet,” she said. “Finish. Then me. Slower.”

“Fuck.”

“Don’t talk. Just come.”

He came on her thighs, a lot, and had to hold the wall. She waited until he could get his hand down. He rubbed her clit slow, like he had been told, and she held his wrist so he could not speed up. She kissed the air near his mouth and stopped short. Her lips almost hit his. She turned her face and came against his fingers with a sound she could not swallow.

They got out sloppy. She handed him a towel. Their fingers stayed together on the terry cloth for a second too long.

At the mirror she put toothpaste on both brushes because that was faster. He took his. She had the tube in her hand and he was right there, mouth open a little, still pink in the face.

She leaned in.

His breath was on her upper lip. She could have done it. She put the toothpaste on her own brush instead and shoved the tube at him.

“We have to go,” she said.

“Yeah.”

She brushed with her eyes on the sink. He brushed and watched her in the glass. The almost- kiss sat between them like a third person in the tiny room.

On the stairs she said, “Tomorrow I don’t open until ten.”

“I still open at eight.”

“Then you go first. I’m not getting up for your shift.”

He nodded. Then he said, “You can still say the cues. If you want.”

She looked at him on the landing.

“I know I can,” she said.

She walked to the bus with her mouth tingling and her underwear already a problem again. He walked the other way. Neither of them texted. They did not need to. The stall would be there in the morning, and the phone would be on the tank, and she would be the one who said faster and slower, and he would do it.

Chapter 6

The plate was still in the sink with dried sauce on it. Nadine had asked him to wash it before he sat down. He had sat down anyway. She was wiping the counter around the plate like that would make the plate disappear.

“I asked you once,” she said.

“I’ll do it in a minute.”

“You said that at lunch.”

“I just got home.”

“So did I.”

Tim was on the couch with his work shoes still on. She wrung out the sponge harder than it needed. The kitchen was three steps across. There was no way to be mad in it without being in each other’s way.

“You’re not mad about the plate,” he said.

“Don’t tell me what I’m mad about.”

“Then say it.”

She didn’t. She scrubbed the same clean spot. He got up and came into the kitchen and stood behind her because there was nowhere else to stand if he was going to reach the sink.

“Move,” she said.

“I’m going to wash it.”

“Now you are.”

“You wanted it washed.”

She shut her eyes. His chest was against her back. They had been in the shower that morning. His hands had already been between her legs today. Standing here fighting about a plate was stupid and she could not stop.

She picked up the phone with her wet hand.

“We’re fighting in the kitchen,” she said. “It’s about dishes and it’s not. The room is tiny. How do we stop. I don’t want to go in the other room and slam a door. There’s one door.” “Don’t walk away,” the voice said. “In a small kitchen walking away makes it last. Stay where you are. Stay touching if you are already touching. Finish the thing in front of you. If one of you is more wound up, take care of that first or you will keep snapping. If he is already behind you at the sink, you do not need a different plan. Use that. Then wash the plate.”

Tim’s breath was in her hair.

“Use that,” he said.

“That’s what it said.”

“Nadine.”

“The plate’s still there.”

He put his hands on her hips. She was in shorts and the polo she had not changed out of. He pulled the shorts and her underwear down together, to her thighs, not off. The air hit her. She was already wet. She had been wet since he stood up off the couch.

“You’re going to—”

“You asked it.”

“I know I asked it.”

He opened his jeans. She heard the zipper. She felt his penis, hard, against her ass, then lower, sliding on her. He bent her over the counter. Her hipbones hit the edge of the Formica. The sponge was still in her right hand. The plate sat in the sink an inch from her wrist.

He pushed into her.

She made a noise she did not plan. He was thicker like this than in her hand. It took two tries. She was wet enough. The second push seated him and she dropped her head between her shoulders.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay. Just—”

“You all right.”

“Yes. Don’t make it a talk. Do what it said.”

“Who’s more wound up,” the phone said from the counter, calm, as if it were still talking about dishes. “If she is, she should come first. If you keep going without that, you will fight again in ten minutes. Stay inside. Use your hand if she needs it. Then you can finish. Then the plate.”

“I’m more wound up,” Nadine said. She did not even think about lying. “So me first. Use your hand.”

Tim reached around. His fingers found her clit. He fucked her in short movements because the counter did not give them space for long ones. The edge dug into her hips. She braced on the sink with one hand and kept the sponge in the other like an idiot. Each thrust pushed her into the Formica. She could hear how wet she was.

“Faster,” she said. “On your hand. Keep doing that with—yeah.”

He did. She came on him with her mouth open over the empty sink, shaking, the plate clicking against the other plate when her wrist bumped it. She squeezed around his penis and he swore into her back.

“Now you,” she said. “Don’t pull out. I don’t care. Just—”

He held her hips and drove in harder. The counter creaked. Her breasts were still in the polo, nipples scraping the inside of the bra. She was too sensitive and it still felt good. He came inside her with his forehead on her shoulder, both hands tight, a sound in his throat he tried to keep down.

They stayed like that for a few seconds. He slipped out. She felt it run down her thigh. She pulled her underwear and shorts up without cleaning up. The wet was immediate and obvious.

Tim zipped his jeans. His hands were not steady.

The plate was still there.

He turned on the water and washed it. He used the sponge she was still holding until she let go. He set the plate in the rack. He wiped the counter where her hips had been, which was not dirty, which he did anyway.

Nadine sat on the floor with her back against the cabinets. Her hipbones hurt. She could feel him leaking out of her.

“That was about the plate,” she said.

Tim shut the water off.

“No it wasn’t.”

“I know.”

He looked at her. She looked at his mouth. The almost-kiss from the bathroom was still there. She did not get up for it.

“Are we going to keep snapping,” she said.

“Not about the plate.”

She laughed once, tired. “Tomorrow I don’t open until ten. You’re on at eight. I’m not getting in with you.”

“Okay.”

“Tonight I don’t want the couch to be the thing.”

He waited.

“The bed’s mine,” she said. “You can still get in it. I’m not asking the phone that part.”

He nodded. He dried his hands on his jeans.

“I’m going to shower,” he said, then stopped. “By myself. I just—”

“Go.”

He went. She sat on the kitchen floor and looked at the clean plate in the rack. The phone was dark. She picked it up and did not ask another question. She already knew what it would say. Stay in the same room. Finish what you started. Don’t walk away.

She stood up. Her shorts were a mess. She left them on and went to the bedroom and pulled the sheet back and waited for the water to stop.

Chapter 7

Tim came out of the bathroom with a towel on his hips. Nadine was already in the bed. The sheet was at her waist. She had taken the polo and the bra off. Her shorts were on the floor with the wet spot from the kitchen.

“Lock the front door,” she said.

“I did.”

She picked up her phone and set it face-up on the crate they were using as a nightstand. She turned the speaker on.

“We’re not in the kitchen,” she said to it. “We’re in the bed. We already had sex. I don’t want it to be the counter every time and I don’t want to pretend it was about a plate. What do we do so we don’t just lie here and make it weird.”

“Stay in the bed,” the voice said. “Take the rest of the clothes off. You can see each other better lying down. If you go quiet, talk about something ordinary so you don’t freeze. Work is fine. Watch her face. If one of you is close and the other is not, the one who is close waits. Use your hands. Change the angle if it hurts. There is no rush. You already did the rushed version.”

Tim stood there with the towel.

“Ordinary,” he said.

“That’s what it said.”

He dropped the towel. She looked at him the way she had not let herself look in the stall. His penis was half hard and getting harder while she watched. He was pale where his work shirt covered him and darker on his arms. She pulled the sheet down. She was naked. He looked at her breasts, her stomach, the hair between her legs, the red marks on her hips from the counter.

He got in.

The mattress was on the floor. When he settled over her their hips lined up without anyone having to climb. She took his penis in her hand and put him against her. She was still wet from the kitchen and from sitting here thinking about it.

“Go in,” she said.

He pushed in slower than at the sink. She kept her eyes on his. He tried to look away and she said, “Don’t.”

He didn’t.

“That’s good,” the phone said. “If she is looking at you, keep looking. If you need a different angle, put her knee up. If you get close first, stop moving and wait.

She should say if she wants your hand.”

Nadine lifted her left knee. He went deeper. She breathed out.

“I open at ten tomorrow,” she said.

Tim’s forehead wrinkled. “What.”

“It said talk about work. I open at ten. Jess wants me to take her Friday night too. I don’t want Friday night.”

He moved in her, steady. “So don’t take it.”

“I need the hours.”

“Then take it.”

“That’s not help.”

He almost laughed and it turned into a breath against her mouth. She still did not kiss him. She watched his face instead. His mouth was open. His eyes kept dropping to her breasts and coming back.

“Hand,” she said.

He got his hand between them. The angle was worse than the shower. She moved his fingers where she wanted them.

“Slower than that. I’m already—” She swallowed. “Wait. Not you. Me. I’m close. You wait.”

He stopped his hips. He kept his fingers moving the way she had put them. She came with him inside her, looking at him, her nails on his shoulder. She did not close her eyes.

“Okay,” she said. “You can move.”

“Can I come.”

“Not yet. It said wait if you’re close first. Are you close.”

“Yes.”

“Then wait.”

He waited. He was shaking. She could feel his penis twitch. She rolled her hips once and he made a noise that was almost angry.

“Nadine.”

“I know. Hold on.”

She made him stay like that until she could talk again. The crate lamp made a hot circle on the ceiling. His chest rubbed her nipples every time either of them breathed.

“Friday I’m off at six,” she said. “If you want food that isn’t pizza we have to go after you clock out.”

“Okay.”

“Now you can.”

He thrust harder. The mattress slid an inch on the floor. She held his face so he would keep looking at her. He came with his eyes open, a broken sound, and collapsed on his elbows so he would not put all his weight on her.

The phone sat there. Nobody had asked it anything else.

After a minute she said, “You’re heavy.”

He rolled off. He was still touching her along the side. She put her hand on his stomach and left it there.

“Was that the not-rushed version,” he said.

“I don’t know.”

“Are we going to talk about it.”

“We just talked about Friday.”

He stared at the ceiling. “Yeah.”

She reached over him and turned the speaker down, not off.

“If I take Friday night I won’t be here when you get home,” she said.

“I know how shifts work.”

“I’m saying it so you don’t think I’m avoiding you.”

“I didn’t think that.”

She turned onto her side. Their knees bumped. He was soft now, wet against her thigh. She looked at his mouth again and did not close the gap.

“I’m going to sleep,” she said. “You’re already in the bed. Don’t make a thing about going back to the couch.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Good.”

She shut her eyes. She did not sleep. She listened to him breathe. After a while he said, quiet, “Your hips are marked.”

“From the counter.”

“Does it hurt.”

“Not enough to move.”

He put his hand on the mark, light. She let him. The phone screen dimmed on the crate and then went black. In the dark she could still feel him inside her from ten minutes ago, the ghost of it, and the ordinary sentences about ten o’clock and Friday sitting on top of that like they belonged there.

“Night,” she said.

“Night.”

Neither of them moved to their own side of the mattress. There was not really a side. It was one bed in a room they were paying for, and they were both in it, and in the morning he would get up for an eight o’clock and she would stay there until nine, and they were not going to call the kitchen an accident again.

Chapter 8

Jess noticed in the break room, which was a bench behind the registers and a mini fridge that leaked.

“You look like you actually slept,” she said.

Nadine peeled the lid off a yogurt. “New mattress.”

“The one from Dylan.”

“Yeah.”

“Good for you.”

Nadine ate the yogurt and did not say Tim was in the mattress. She worked four hours with her body still sore in a way the counter and the bed both owned. At two she sold a man a bag of ice and thought about Tim holding still inside her when she told him to wait.

She got home first. He came in at nine with his name tag still on.

“Shower,” she said.

“I just want to sit.”

“You’ll sit after. We both smell like the store.”

They got in the stall like the weekday mornings. The phone went on the tank.

“We already did this morning,” Nadine said to it. “We’re doing it again. He’s tired. I have class at eight tomorrow. Don’t make it long.”

“Keep it short,” the voice said. “Hands. She finishes. He waits if he can. You have the bed for the rest. If he finishes in the shower you will both sleep worse and do this again at midnight. Save his. Do hers now.”

Tim leaned his head on the tile. “Save mine.”

“That’s what it said.”

“You’re going to say it anyway.”

Nadine soaped her hands and took his penis. She stroked him until he was fully hard and then she stopped.

“Should he wait,” she said, toward the phone and toward him.

“Yes,” the voice said. “If he is close, he takes his hand off and he waits. You use his hand. Then get out.”

“Wait,” she told Tim.

He shut his eyes. “Okay.”

She put his fingers on her clit. “Faster than this morning. I want to get out.”

He rubbed her the way she liked now, the way three workdays had taught him. She came standing up, one foot slipped, his other arm around her back. His penis jumped against her hip and he did not take himself in his hand.

“Out,” she said.

They toweled off. He was still hard. She looked at it and did not touch it.

In the bed she put the phone on the crate.

“Same question,” she said. “Should he wait.”

“He already waited in the shower,” the voice said. “Now he can finish. You can go again if you want. If you are too tired, he uses his hand or your hand and you go to sleep. Class is early.”

Tim was on his back. She climbed over him and put him inside her. She sat there a second, full, her hands on his chest.

“You don’t wait this time,” she said. “I already went.”

“I know.”

She rode him slow because her knees were tired. He held her hips and came with his mouth open, watching her breasts move. She did not come again. She got off him and pulled the sheet up.

“Mattress,” she said.

“What.”

“Jess said I look like I slept. I told her it was the mattress.”

Tim wiped his stomach with the sheet and then made a face at himself. “Okay.”

“Don’t tell anyone it isn’t.”

“Who would I tell.”

She put her hand on his chest. “Night.”

Thursday night they reversed it because she asked.

The shower was eight minutes and ugly. She got on her knees in the stall because it was faster and took him in her mouth. He put his hand in her wet hair.

“Should he wait,” she said, pulling off, water running into her mouth.

The phone was muffled on the tank.

“If you want him to last in the bed, yes,” the voice said. “Stop now. She can finish with his hand. He waits.”

Tim hit the wall with his flat palm. “Nadine.”

“Wait,” she said.

She stood up. He rubbed her until she came, fast and mean, her face in his neck. They got out with him still hard. He had to tuck himself into the jeans he was not even going to wear. He walked to the bed like that.

She lay down and spread her knees.

“You wait until I say,” she said.

“I know.”

He went in. She kept him to a pace that did not take him over. When his breathing changed she said, “Stop.”

He stopped. He was shaking. She looked at his face and moved her hips once.

“Should he wait,” she said.

“Yes,” the voice said. “Until she comes. Then he can. That is the whole thing. You do not need a new plan.”

“You heard it,” Nadine said.

Tim dropped his forehead onto hers. They still did not kiss. She came with him buried in her and her heel on the back of his thigh. She waited until she could speak.

“Now.”

He lasted maybe ten strokes. He came hard and went slack. She ran her fingers through his hair because it was there.

After a while she said, “I told Jess I was off Friday night. I lied. I took the hours.”

“So you won’t be here.”

“Not until ten.”

“Okay.”

“Are you mad.”

“No.”

“You sound mad.”

“I’m tired. You made me wait through a shower and half the bed.”

She smiled at the ceiling, small. “You like not picking it.”

He didn’t answer for a second.

“Yeah,” he said.

Friday morning he left at seven-thirty. She stayed in the bed until nine. The sheet smelled like both of them. At work Jess pointed at her face.

“Mattress still good?”

“Yeah.”

“You should buy me one.”

Nadine scanned a case of water and did not look up. “Get your own.”

That night she stood on the register until nine-forty. She thought about him in the apartment, probably on the couch, probably hard from nothing, waiting because she liked asking the question and he liked that she asked it.

She texted him at nine-fifty.

Still up

He wrote back: Yeah

She locked the drawer and clocked out and walked the two blocks with her polo stuck to her back. He opened the door before she got the key in. He was in underwear. She could see he had been waiting in the literal sense.

“Shower,” she said.

“It’s late.”

“I smell like the store. Come on.”

They got under the water. She did not even start the phone until his hands were already on her.

“Should he wait,” she said.

The voice, when she finally turned it on, did not add much.

“You already know the answer,” it said. “Pick one and stay with it. Then sleep. You both work tomorrow.”

Nadine put her mouth near Tim’s ear, not quite touching.

“Wait,” she said.

He waited. She came on his hand under the spray. They got out. In the bed she let him finish inside her without making him hold back again, because it was late and because she could feel him being good all day in the way he looked at her.

Afterward she said, “Mattress.”

He huffed a breath into her shoulder. “Sure.”

She slept. He slept. In the morning they did the short version again, filthy and quick, and she asked the question before the water even warmed up, and he said

okay before the phone did.

Chapter 9

Willa already knew.

She had known when they took the apartment. She had known before that, in the way Nadine talked about Tim when she had a few drinks and then pretended she had been talking about something else. Saturday afternoon she was on Nadine's building steps with a coffee, waiting because Nadine had said come over, I need to ask you something in person.

Nadine sat down next to her.

"So," Nadine said.

"You're sleeping with him," Willa said.

Nadine looked at the parking lot. "Yeah."

"Okay."

"That's it?"

"I already thought that. You moved in with your brother and you look like you've been fucked every morning. I can add."

Nadine laughed once, not happy, not unhappy. "I want you to come over. Not for pizza."

Willa sipped the coffee. She was twenty-one, a year ahead of Nadine at the college, same dark eyeliner she wore to her own retail job. She had a small silver ring in her nose. She had liked Tim in a distant way and liked Nadine in a less distant way and had not said either thing out loud.

"Both of you," Willa said.

"Yeah."

"Does he know you're asking."

"Not yet."

Willa took out her phone. She did it the way everyone did it. She typed while Nadine sat there.

"I'm going to ask mine," Willa said. "Hold on."

She didn't put it on speaker. Nadine watched her face.

Willa said, quiet, into the phone, "My friend wants me to come over and have sex with her and her brother. They live in a one-bathroom place. I already know what they are. Is there a reason not to besides it being messy."

She listened. Nadine could not hear the answer. Willa's mouth moved like she was biting the inside of her cheek.

“What did it say.”

“It said if I already want to, the practical problems are towels, hot water, and who is doing what so I don’t stand there like an idiot. It said jealousy is real if nobody says the rules. It said I should only go if I’m actually into both of them, not if I’m doing a favor. It said use a condom if he’s been coming in her and I’m not on the same page about that.” Willa looked up. “It did not say don’t go.”

“Are you into both of us.”

Willa’s ears went pink. “I’ve thought about it. Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“Ask yours. I want to hear it say the towel thing. I don’t want to be the only one who did the dumb part.”

They went upstairs. Tim was on the couch in a T-shirt and jeans, scrolling. He sat up when he saw Willa.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

Nadine put her phone on the counter and hit speaker.

“I want to have another woman over,” she said. “Willa. She knows we’re brother and sister. She knows we’re having sex. The apartment is small. I’m jealous in my head already and I still want it. What do we actually need to do so it isn’t a disaster.”

“Extra towel,” the voice said. “The tank will not handle three long showers. Keep them short or stagger them. Say who is touching who before anyone takes their clothes off so she is not waiting in the doorway. If you get jealous, say it in the moment and slow down. Do not pretend you won’t. If he is going to be inside both of you, use a condom with her unless you have already talked about it. Put water out. Clear the bed. That is most of it.”

Tim stared at the phone, then at Nadine.

“You’re serious.”

“Yes.”

“Willa.”

“I’m standing right here,” Willa said.

Tim’s face went hot. Nadine watched the front of his jeans and hated that she looked, and looked anyway. He was getting hard and trying to sit so they would not see.

“I didn’t say I didn’t want it,” he said. “I said you’re serious.”

“Should he wait until tonight,” Nadine said, and then shut her mouth, because that was the shower question and this was not the shower.

Willa raised her eyebrows.

“You do that,” she said. “The waiting thing.”

“Sometimes.”

“That’s hot.”

Nadine’s stomach dropped in a good way and a bad way.

“Tonight,” Nadine said. “If you’re free.”

Willa checked her phone like she needed an excuse. She did not.

“I can come at eight. I have to work until seven.”

“Eight,” Nadine said.

Willa left the coffee cup on the counter and went downstairs. The room felt too quiet after the door shut.

Tim rubbed his hands on his thighs.

“You asked her before you asked me.”

“I asked you by asking in front of you.”

“That’s not the same.”

“Do you want me to uninvite her.”

He thought about it. She could see him thinking about Willa’s mouth and Nadine’s mouth and the one bed.

“No,” he said.

“Are you going to be weird.”

“Yes. Then I’ll get over it.”

Nadine stood between his knees and he put his hands on her hips, automatic now. She did not kiss him. She almost did.

“Extra towel,” she said.

“I’ll steal one from work.”

“Don’t steal a towel from work.”

“Then we have two and she uses yours.”

“Fine.”

They showered at six because Willa was coming at eight and the tank was what it was. Short. Filthy. Nadine made him wait. She came on his hand and left him

hard on purpose.

“Should he wait,” she said to the phone, grinning mean, still under the water.

“Yes,” the voice said. “If you want him to last later. Eat something. Put the extra towel on the bed so you are not hunting for it when she is here.”

Tim shut the water off with his forehead on the tile.

“I hate you a little,” he said.

“No you don’t.”

They ate cereal standing up. Nadine changed the sheets. She put the third towel at the foot of the mattress. She left the lamp on. She did not clean much else. The apartment was what it was.

At seven-fifty she texted Willa: stairs are unlocked

Willa wrote: coming

Tim sat on the couch and stood up and sat down again. Nadine watched him and felt jealous and hungry in the same breath. She wanted Willa’s hands on him. She wanted Willa to see her with him. She wanted to tell Willa to wait her turn. She wanted all of it.

The knock was two short hits.

Nadine looked at Tim. He nodded.

She opened the door.

Chapter 10

Willa had a backpack and her work shoes in her hand. She stepped inside and looked at the one room and the one hall and Tim on the couch.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey.”

Nadine locked the door. “Towel’s on the bed. Water’s on the counter. We don’t have another glass. Use a mug.”

Willa set the backpack down. “Okay.”

Nadine put her phone on the crate in the bedroom, speaker on. Willa did the same with hers, like it was normal, because it was.

“She’s here,” Nadine said. “Small room. I don’t know where to put him so she can see both of us and nobody’s stuck in the door.”

“Put him on the bed first,” the voice said. “Sitting. She can stand or kneel in front. You stay where you can touch both of them. If the two of you are going to get each other off, do that before you spend a long time on him. It is easier to keep him waiting than to leave her standing there. Condom if he goes in her.”

Willa’s phone answered her almost on top of it, same even tone, different device.

“If you came for both of them, start with her,” it said. “You already like her. You will get nervous if you go straight to him. Use your mouth or your hand on her until she comes. Then you. He can watch. That uses the space. Then you decide if you still want him.”

Tim said, “I’m right here.”

“I know,” Nadine said. “Take your shirt off and sit on the bed.”

He did. He was already hard in his jeans. Willa looked at that without flinching and then looked at Nadine.

“You first,” Willa said.

Nadine pulled her shirt off. She unhooked her bra. Willa watched her breasts and then stepped in and put her mouth on Nadine’s nipple like she had been waiting for permission and now had it. Nadine held the back of Willa’s head. Tim made a sound from the mattress.

“Don’t touch yourself,” Nadine said to him. “Wait.”

He put his hands on his knees.

Willa got Nadine’s shorts down. She went on her knees on the ugly carpet and put her mouth between Nadine’s legs. She was not shy. She licked Nadine’s clit

in a steady line and held her ass so Nadine could not step back. Nadine looked down at Willa's eyeliner and the ring in her nose and the fact that this was her friend from school on the floor of the apartment she shared with her brother.

She came standing up, one hand in Willa's hair, the other on the doorframe. She pulled Willa up and kissed her. They had not done that yet. Willa's mouth tasted like her. Nadine kept kissing her.

"Your turn," Nadine said.

She took Willa's clothes off. Willa had smaller breasts and a dark patch of hair and a scar on her knee. Nadine put her on her back on the mattress next to Tim's thigh and went down on her. She had not done this to anyone in a while. She used her tongue the way she liked it on herself, slow, then faster when Willa's hips lifted. Willa's hand stayed in her hair. Tim watched them and breathed like he had been running.

Willa came with her knees against Nadine's ears. Nadine stayed there until Willa pushed her forehead.

"Okay. Okay."

They kissed again. Nadine felt something shift that was not just being turned on. She liked Willa's face this close. She liked that Willa knew the worst fact in the room and had still put her mouth on her.

"Ask it," Willa whispered.

Nadine did not want to. She did anyway.

"She came. I came. He's been waiting. Where do I put him so I can still be with her."

"Keep her with you," the voice said. "If he is going to finish, she can do it with her hand. Quick. Then you two can stay together. If you put him inside her now you will lose the thing you just started. You can do that later if you still want it. Water if anyone's dizzy."

Willa's phone, after a second: "Handle him so he is not sitting there hard all night. You do not have to make it a big scene. Hand is enough. Then lie down with her. You came here because of her as much as him."

Nadine looked at Tim. His jeans were still on. The zipper was a problem. She nodded at it.

"Take them off."

He did. His penis stood up against his stomach. Willa glanced at Nadine.

"It's okay," Nadine said. "Do what it said. Hand. I'm right here."

Willa spat in her palm and stroked him. She did it like a task she had agreed to, not like the way she had gone down on Nadine. Fast. Tight. Tim's head tipped back. He did not last. He came on his own stomach and Willa's wrist with a noise he tried to keep down. Willa wiped her hand on the extra towel.

"Thanks," Tim said, stupid with it.

"Yeah," Willa said.

Nadine pulled Willa down onto the mattress away from the wet spot. They kissed. Nadine put her thigh between Willa's legs and they rubbed on each other, slower now, and Nadine came again with her mouth on Willa's mouth. Willa followed, quieter, her fingers digging into Nadine's back.

Tim sat at the edge of the bed and then got up and went to the couch because there was not room for three to lie down unless someone hung off. Nobody asked him to stay.

Nadine tucked her face into Willa's neck.

"I thought I wanted you to watch him," she said.

"I did watch him."

"That's not what I mean."

Willa's hand moved on Nadine's spine. "I know."

They kissed until it was lazy. Nadine did not tell her to take an Uber. Willa did not reach for her phone. The two speakers sat on the crate, dark.

Tim turned the lamp off in the living room. The bedroom still had the crate light. Nadine reached over Willa and shut it. In the dark she could hear her brother on the couch turning over, and Willa's breath against her mouth, and her own pulse where their breasts were mashed together.

"You can stay," Nadine said.

"I'm already staying."

"I like you."

Willa was quiet for a second. "Okay."

"That's not an okay thing to say after that."

"I like you too," Willa said. "I told the phone that before I came up the stairs."

Nadine kissed her again, softer. Their legs tangled. Tim was fifteen feet away on the sagging couch in an apartment that now had a witness in the bed. He did not come back in. Nadine did not call him.

She fell asleep with Willa’s ankle hooked over hers and Willa’s mouth still close enough to feel. In the morning there would be one bathroom and a small tank and three people and whatever the phones said about short showers. Tonight she kept her hand on Willa’s waist and did not let go.

Chapter 11

Willa was still in the bed. Nadine woke up with Willa's knee between her legs and Willa's mouth near her collarbone. For a second she did not move. Then she heard Tim in the living room putting his shoes down quiet, like a guest.

"You up," Willa whispered.

"Yeah."

They kissed. It was slower than last night. Nadine got wet from that alone, in a way that felt different from the stall with Tim. Fuller. She rubbed on Willa's thigh and came quiet, shaking, her face in Willa's neck. Willa held her through it.

"That's new," Willa said.

"Don't talk."

Tim stood in the bedroom door. He had jeans on. A shirt. He looked at them naked on the mattress and then at the wall.

"I have to pee," he said.

"Go," Nadine said.

They heard the toilet. Nadine sat up. She did not cover herself. Willa didn't either.

Nadine took both phones to the bathroom door.

"There's three of us," she said. "One stall. We all work. What do we do so nobody's late and we don't run out of hot water."

"You two shower together," the voice said. "Keep it short. He can use the sink. If he is hard, she can take care of it with her hand while you wash. That is faster than a third person in the stall. Do not make his part long. You already spent the night on each other. That is the part that should take the time."

Willa's phone, from the crate, same idea in a different voice.

"Stay with her in the water. Let her come if she is close. You handle him after or at the sink. Quick. Then he should get dressed and go. Extra hours if he can pick them up. Three people in four hundred square feet works better if one of them is at work."

Tim came out of the bathroom and heard the last of it.

"So I leave."

"That's what it said," Nadine said.

"Do you want that."

She looked at Willa on the bed, bare, sheet at her hip. She looked at Tim in his clothes.

“I want the shower,” she said. “Then coffee. Then we’ll see.”

Willa and Nadine got in the stall. It was shy in a way the weekday showers with Tim were not. Their elbows hit. Nadine laughed and then stopped laughing. Willa soaped Nadine’s breasts and kissed her under the water. Nadine came again with Willa’s fingers on her clit, slower than Tim did it, and it went through her farther. She had to lean on Willa to stay up.

“Jesus,” she said.

“I know.”

They got out. Tim was at the sink like the phone had said. He was hard. He had not taken the jeans off, only opened them. Willa dried her hands and stepped up beside him and stroked him. Fast. No kissing. He came in the sink with his teeth together. She washed her hand. He washed the sink.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Yep.”

Nadine watched it and felt a twist of jealousy that was not about Willa’s hand. It was about how small his part looked next to what had just happened in the stall.

In the kitchen Willa borrowed a T-shirt and nothing else. Nadine stayed naked. The coffee maker they had stolen from their parents’ house coughed out a full pot. Tim stood there dressed, drinking from the skillet mug because Willa had the only real cup.

There was a purple ring on the counter from the bottle in Willa’s bag. It had tipped in the night.

Nadine almost asked the phone if they had made a mistake. She looked at Willa’s bare legs instead.

“How do you get wine off Formica,” she said.

“Wipe it with warm water and a little dish soap,” the voice said. “Do it before it sets. If you are all in the kitchen anyway, stay there until it is clean. If the two of you are still wound up, take care of that at the counter so you do not carry it around all morning. He can go get dressed for work if he is not on the schedule. Ask him if he can pick up a shift. You need the rent and you need the room.”

Willa’s phone added, “If she wants you, stay. Let him take the extra hours. That is not unkind. That is space.”

Tim set the skillet down.

“I can text my manager.”

“Do it,” Nadine said.

He went to the couch with his phone. Nadine wet a sponge and wiped the wine. Willa came up behind her, same as Tim had the night of the plate, except Willa’s hands went under Nadine’s breasts and Willa’s mouth went on her neck.

“Counter,” Willa said.

Nadine bent over. The sponge was in her hand again. Willa’s fingers slid into her, two of them, and Nadine came quicker than she meant to, harder, her forehead on the Formica. She reached back and pulled Willa’s hips against her ass and they stayed there until Willa came too, rubbing on her, quiet.

Tim was still on the couch. He had heard them. He had a text written and not sent.

Nadine turned around. She was shaking. She looked at him and the look was hungry in a smaller way than last week.

“Come here,” she said.

He came. She opened his jeans and he bent her over the same spot and pushed into her. It was short. She was already soaked. He lasted maybe a minute. She did not come from him. She held the counter and let him finish and then she reached for Willa’s wrist while he was still inside her.

He pulled out. He tucked himself away. Willa kissed Nadine over her shoulder.

“That was him,” Willa said.

“I know who it was.”

Nadine’s legs were weak. She sat on the floor. Willa sat with her, still mostly naked, and pulled Nadine’s head into her lap. Nadine’s orgasm from Willa’s hand was still going in little aftershakes. The one from Tim had been a bump on the way.

Tim stood there.

“She said pick up a shift,” Nadine said, eyes closed. “If they have one.”

He sent the text. His manager wrote back while they were still on the floor. He could come in at eleven.

“I should put a real shirt on,” he said.

“Yeah.”

He went to the suitcase. Nadine stayed in Willa’s lap. Willa played with her hair. They did not get dressed. The AIs had not told them to get dressed.

Nadine opened one eye. “Are you coming back tonight.”

“If you want.”

“I want.”

Tim laced his shoes at the door. He looked at his sister naked on the kitchen floor with another girl and he nodded like that was a schedule.

“I’ll get food after,” he said.

“Use your discount,” Nadine said.

The door shut. The apartment got quiet in a good way. Willa kissed Nadine’s mouth and they moved to the couch, still with nothing on, and stayed there. Nadine came one more time with Willa’s mouth on her, slow, and it left her floppy and stupid and happy. She pulled Willa up and held her.

“I almost asked if last night was a mistake,” she said.

“What did you ask instead.”

“The wine.”

Willa smiled against her cheek. “The wine’s still there a little.”

“I don’t care.”

They fell half asleep on the sagging couch in the middle of the morning, skin on skin, while Tim took the bus to a shift nobody had needed him to take last week. The phones sat on the counter next to the sponge. Nadine did not turn them on again. She already knew what they would say. Stay with her. Let him work. Keep his part short. That was the useful version, and it matched what she wanted, which was the part she was not going to say into a speaker.

Chapter 12

Tim left at ten-thirty with a double. Nadine locked the door behind him and leaned on it. Willa was already on the couch with no clothes on. The T-shirt from yesterday was on the floor.

“Come here,” Willa said.

Nadine went. She sat in Willa’s lap facing her. They kissed until Nadine’s mouth felt used. Willa’s hands were on her ass, pulling her in, and Nadine’s clit dragged on Willa’s stomach. She was wet enough that it made a sound.

“Don’t stop,” Nadine said.

“I’m not.”

Willa laid her down. She kissed Nadine’s throat, her breasts, the underside of each one. She sucked a nipple until Nadine’s hips came off the cushion. Then she went lower and stayed there.

She licked Nadine slow on purpose. Not the shower pace. Not Tim’s hand on a clock. She held Nadine’s thighs open and worked her clit with the flat of her tongue and then the point of it. Nadine tried to watch and could not keep her eyes steady.

“Willa.”

“Mm.”

“I’m going to—”

Willa did not speed up. Nadine came anyway, a long one, her hand in Willa’s hair, her other hand on the back of the couch. Willa kept going through it until Nadine made a noise that was almost a complaint and pulled her up.

They kissed. Nadine tasted herself. She rolled Willa onto the couch and went down on her like she had a job. She put two fingers in her and licked her clit at the same time. Willa’s knee hooked over her shoulder. Willa came on her mouth and Nadine felt it in her fingers, the squeeze, and she kept her fingers there until Willa laughed and pushed at her wrist.

“Okay. God. Come here.”

They stayed on the couch. Skin stuck to the cheap fabric. Nadine put her thigh between Willa’s legs and they rubbed, messy, and Nadine came again with her face in Willa’s neck. It went deeper than the ones in the stall. It left her floppy. She could feel her heartbeat in her clit.

Willa’s phone was on the floor. Nadine’s was on the counter. After a while Nadine reached for hers without getting up.

“He’s gone until eight,” she said. “What do we do with a whole day in this place.”

“Stay in the same room,” the voice said. “Drink water. If you keep going, change positions when your neck gets tired. When he comes home, keep the part with him short so you do not lose the day you just had. She can handle him. You do not have to stop what you are doing. Then he can eat and go to bed on the couch. You two take the mattress. That is the simple version.”

Willa rolled onto her elbow and spoke into her own phone without sitting up.

“I want her to come a lot. I don’t want it to be about him when he gets back.”

“Then don’t make it about him,” her phone said. “You already know how to get her there. Use your mouth again later. When he walks in, finish him with your hand and send him to the other room. Stay naked. Let her stay naked. That tells the house what the house is.”

Nadine looked at Willa.

“That’s insane.”

“It’s a small apartment,” Willa said. “It’s also accurate.”

They moved to the mattress because the couch springs were punching Willa in the back. Nadine lay on her back and pulled Willa up until Willa was sitting on her mouth. She held Willa’s hips and licked her from underneath. Willa braced on the wall and rode her face in small movements. Nadine’s nose was in her. She could barely breathe and did not care. Willa came again, thighs shaking, and Nadine kept her there until Willa lifted off and sat on her chest, wet, laughing, eyes wet too.

“Your turn,” Willa said.

She turned around and lay on top of her the other way. Her mouth found Nadine’s clit. Nadine had Willa’s ass in her hands and Willa’s cunt in her face and she licked what she could reach. They stayed like that a long time. Nadine came first, hard, against Willa’s mouth, and then she put her tongue back on Willa until Willa came too, muffling it on Nadine’s thigh.

After that they did not talk for a while. They drank tap water from the skillet. They dozed. Nadine woke up to Willa’s fingers, two of them, fucking her slow, thumb on her clit, and she came before she was all the way awake, grabbing Willa’s wrist.

“I like you,” Nadine said, when she could.

“You said that.”

“I meant it more now.”

Willa kissed her mouth. “Good.”

Tim’s key was in the door at eight-ten. He had a plastic bag of discounted food and the smell of the store on him. He stopped when he saw them on the mattress, still naked, Nadine’s head on Willa’s stomach.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” Nadine said. She did not cover up.

Willa sat up. “Come here a second.”

He came as far as the bedroom door. Willa got on her knees on the carpet in front of him and opened his jeans. She took his penis out and stroked him. Nadine watched from the bed. She put her hand between her own legs while she watched, not because of him, because Willa’s wrist was moving and Willa’s breasts were bare and Willa was hers.

Tim came in Willa’s fist in under a minute. He had been hard on the stairs. Willa wiped her hand on his shirttail.

“Food’s on the counter,” he said.

“We’ll eat,” Nadine said. “Couch is yours.”

He nodded. He looked like he wanted to say something and then he didn’t. He went to the kitchen. They heard the bag rustle. They heard the couch take his weight.

Nadine pulled Willa down.

“Don’t stop,” she said.

Willa didn’t. She put her mouth back on Nadine and this time she did it like she knew Nadine could take more. She licked her clit in a rhythm Nadine could feel in her teeth. Nadine’s knees came up. She held Willa’s head there. The living room TV came on low. Her brother was fifteen feet away eating cold fried chicken and she was going to come on her friend’s tongue in the bed they paid for together.

“Right there,” Nadine said. “Don’t you dare move. Willa. Willa—”

She came hard. It pulled her stomach in. It made her feet cramp. It kept going when Willa didn’t lift off, a second wave on the first one, and Nadine heard herself make a sound she would have been embarrassed about if she still had room for that. She grabbed Willa’s hair and held her there until it turned too sharp, then she hauled her up and kissed her sloppy and put her hand between Willa’s legs and rubbed her clit until Willa came on her fingers, biting Nadine’s shoulder to stay quiet.

They lay there. Nadine’s pulse was in her ears. Willa’s thigh was wet on hers.

From the couch Tim said, not loud, “You want a light off.”

“The bedroom one,” Nadine said.

He got up. He reached in and hit the crate lamp. He did not look at them long. He went back to the couch.

In the dark Nadine found Willa’s mouth.

“I don’t want you to go home tomorrow,” she said.

“I’m on at noon.”

“After.”

“After I’ll come back.”

Nadine put Willa’s hand back between her legs. She was swollen and too sensitive and she still wanted it. Willa rubbed her very lightly, just enough. Nadine came one last time, smaller, shaking, her mouth open on Willa’s cheek, and that was the one that emptied her. She went still. She kept Willa’s hand where it was, not moving, just there.

“Stay like that,” she said.

“Okay.”

On the couch, Tim turned over. The springs clicked. Nadine heard him and did not call him. She had her friend in her bed and her brother’s rent money coming in from the extra hours and a phone on the crate that would tell her, if she asked, to do exactly this again tomorrow.

She did not ask.

She came down off the last orgasm with Willa’s fingers cupping her, Willa’s breasts against her arm, Willa’s breath on her mouth, and she let that be the whole apartment. If anyone in another room needed something, it could wait. She was done. She was full. She slept with her knee hooked over Willa’s hip and nothing left in her to give to anyone else.