On Script

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Architecture, Book 6

Chapter 1

Juvi woke before the alarm and stayed on her back. The light was already on the ceiling. She was eighteen today. The dress on the closet door was the blue one, plain, with the hem she had pressed last night. She had thought someone might come. A woman from the city office, her mother had said. Not a party. An appointment.

She lay there until the alarm did go off, then got up because the woman might be early. The shower was hot. She dried her hair until it lay flat against her neck. In the mirror she was cut off at the chest if she stood close. She stepped back. Narrow shoulders. The blue dress waiting on the door. She put it on and buttoned it and looked again. The dress fit. She still looked like someone waiting to be told what the day was.

In the kitchen she ate half a piece of toast and left the other half, which was what she always did. Then she washed the plate and the knife and dried them and put them away, so the woman would not see them in the sink. She sat at the table. Her hands were cold. She put them under her thighs and took them out again. Nine came. The knock came with it.

The woman on the step was taller than Juvi. Dark skirt, pale blouse, a bag with a hard case in it. She smiled as if she already knew which room they would sit in.

“Juvi Pierrot? I’m Ruth Calder. I’m your Liaison. May I come in?”

Juvi moved back. Ruth looked at the kitchen, chose the chair that faced the window, and set the case on the table without opening it. Juvi sat opposite her. Her hands had gone cold again. She put them under the table.

“Happy birthday,” Ruth said. “Eighteen is the day we tell you how the adult city works. You can ask questions. I have until lunch, and longer if you want longer.”

“My mother said a woman would come from the office.”

“She was right. She has had this talk. Everyone over eighteen has had it.” Ruth set her bag on the floor beside the chair. “After the talk, most of them wear a piece in the ear, and the piece gives them what they say. They can think anything they like. The sentences come from the Architect. Food, work, rent, company, all of that is arranged for them, as long as they say the sentences.”

Juvi looked at Ruth’s ear. A small pale curve sat against the left one, no brighter than a button.

“You’re wearing it now.”

“Yes.”

“So that isn’t you talking.”

Ruth did not look insulted. She folded her hands on the table. “It’s my voice. The sentence was given to me. I agree with it, which is why I’m good at this job. If I took the piece out I could say whatever I wanted, and no one would stop me. I would also be on my own for the rent.”

Juvi’s mouth was dry. She thought of her mother at the stove yesterday, telling her to press the dress. The words had sounded like her mother. She tried to remember one sentence that could not have been handed over. She could not find it. Her mother had said the hem needed pressing. She had said a woman would come at nine. She had said there would be toast if Juvi wanted it. Any of those could have been given to her. Juvi had answered all of them in her own voice and had not known there was a difference to listen for.

“What if I don’t want it?”

“Then you don’t put it in.” Ruth said it the way she had said rent. “You can live in the city. People will speak to you. They’ll have a line for a girl who opted out, and after that line they’ll go back to their own day. You’ll find work yourself, and a room, and anyone you want to eat with. Some women do that. Most don’t, once they’ve tried a day on their own.”

She opened the case. Inside, on a black tray, lay an earpiece the same pale color as hers. Juvi looked at it and did not take it.

“You can put it in and take it out again today,” Ruth said. “The first sentences are only an offer. Nothing is billed to you. Nothing is locked.”

“What does it sound like?”

“Like a woman speaking close, at a volume no one else hears. She gives you the line. You say it, or you don’t. If you don’t, she waits. She doesn’t scold you.” Ruth turned the tray so the piece faced Juvi. “The Architect is not trying to catch you. It wants you fed, solvent, and glad you stayed. The piece is how it gets the words to you.”

“And if I say them.”

“Then the day is arranged. Lunch is paid. Later there is an apartment, if you keep the piece in. Work you can do. People who are glad to see you, because they have been given the same kind of day. Sex, when you want it, with a woman who has also been told to meet you. You won’t have to invent the next sentence in any of those rooms.”

Juvi felt her face go hot at the word. The heat stayed in her cheeks and moved lower, a small answering pulse she had not asked for. Ruth did not lean in on it. She said it the way she had said rent, and then she waited, hands still folded, as if the sentence were finished and Juvi could take the time she needed.

“I don’t know what I would say to her,” Juvi said.

“You won’t have to know.”

The kitchen clock clicked. Juvi thought of the half piece of toast, and of every lunch she had ordered by pointing at the cheapest line. She thought of going out after Ruth left and having no one to be back for. The apartment her mother had mentioned once, a room with a sink, had not sounded like a life. It had sounded like a list. She lifted the earpiece off the tray. It was lighter than it looked. Ruth watched her hand and did not help.

“Left ear,” Ruth said. “It settles. You can take it out with a fingernail.”

Juvi fitted it in. For a second she heard only the room, the clock, Ruth’s sleeve against the table. Then a voice, a woman’s voice, close and unhurried, said: Let’s go to lunch to discuss this more.

She heard it twice before she understood she was meant to use her mouth. Ruth waited. Juvi swallowed. Her tongue felt thick.

“Let’s go to lunch to discuss this more.”

The voice stopped. Ruth smiled, not a large smile, and closed the case.

“Good. Leave it in while we walk. If you hate it, put it in your pocket at the door of the diner and I’ll finish the explanation alone.”

They walked six blocks. The wind cut across the avenue. Juvi kept touching the earpiece through her hair to be sure it had not slipped. Once she thought of a question about the apartment and did not ask it, because no sentence came to cover it. Ruth did not take her arm. At the corner a man in a work jacket said, “Morning, Ruth,” and Ruth said, “Morning, Carl, we’re on our way to eat,” and the man nodded as if that were the whole conversation he had come out to have. Juvi wondered what his piece had told him. She wondered if he had wanted to say something else. His face did not tell her. He held the door of his truck and watched them pass, and then he got in.

The diner had a booth in the window. Ruth took the side that faced the door. A waitress came with two glasses of water and a pencil. She was not much older than Juvi. The earpiece spoke before Juvi had read the board.

Say good morning. Ask if the chicken plate is still on.

Juvi heard herself late. “Good morning. Is the chicken plate still on?”

“Till three,” the waitress said. Her eyes moved the way people’s eyes moved when they were listening to something close. “Coffee?”

Ask for water. Tell her you need another minute.

“Just water. I need another minute.”

The waitress left. Juvi stared at the menu and did not see it. Her usual lunch was a cup of soup and crackers, and she stopped when the cup was half empty. She could feel the place where the piece sat, a small pressure, not painful. The voice came again, patient. Order the chicken plate, potatoes, greens, and the soft roll. Tell her thank you.

“I’ll have the chicken plate. Potatoes, greens, and the soft roll. Thank you.”

Ruth ordered eggs and toast without looking at the menu. When the waitress had gone, Juvi put both hands around her water glass.

“That isn’t what I eat.”

“I know.” Ruth turned her own glass once. “Eat it anyway, if you can. You can hate it and take the piece out before the bill.”

The plate came full. The chicken had a browned skin. The potatoes were cut small and salted. Juvi cut a piece because she had been told to order it. The meat was hot and had been cooked in its skin, and the first bite was better than the soup. She cut another. The greens were hot and had been cooked with something sharp. She ate them. Halfway through, she noticed she had stopped planning the next bite. Her stomach was warm. The roll tore clean. She buttered it and ate the end, then the rest of it, and was surprised to want the last corner.

Ruth ate her eggs and watched Juvi’s plate, not her face.

“You’re enjoying that.”

Juvi nodded before the earpiece could give her a line. No line came. She was allowed the nod. She ate the last of the potatoes. Salt stayed on her thumb. She sat back, full, and the fullness felt like a kindness and not like a mistake. She almost said so. The piece did not give her the sentence, and she did not make one. She drank her water. Across the table Ruth set her fork down, touched her own earpiece once, as if settling it, and looked at Juvi over the empty plates.

“See? Saying what it tells you to will lead to a very fulfilling life!”

Chapter 2

Ruth paid the bill with her phone before Juvi had decided whether to stand. The waitress took the plates. Juvi's was empty. She had eaten the roll and the last of the greens, and her stomach was warm in a way the soup never managed. She wanted another minute in the booth. Ruth was already gathering her bag. Outside, the wind had dropped. Ruth held the door and then turned toward the avenue, already lifting a hand for a car.

Juvi did not want her to go. She had known the woman two hours. If Ruth got into a car alone, the rest of the birthday was the kitchen at home and the dress still on the closet door, and no one coming back until her mother did. She thought of asking and did not know how she would have put it. The earpiece spoke before she had chosen.

Ask her to stay with you.

Heat went into Juvi's face. She said it.

"Will you stay with me?"

Ruth lowered her hand. She looked at Juvi's ear, not at her mouth, as if she were checking that the piece still sat where it had been put.

"You're saying the sentences," Ruth said. "That means I can take you to the apartment. The Architect assigned it this morning. It's yours if you keep the piece in. I can show it to you now."

The earpiece did not wait for Juvi to weigh the rent she did not have.

Say yes.

"Yes."

The car Ruth called had a back seat wide enough that their knees did not touch. Juvi watched the streets change. Her mother's block fell away. A laundry, a bus stop, the lot where she had waited once for a ride that did not come. The buildings got lower, then white, with trees set into the sidewalk in iron grates. She kept her hands in her lap. Once she thought of taking the earpiece out and asking, in her own words, whether the apartment had a lock she could use. No second sentence came to cover that. She left the piece where it was. Ruth looked out her own window and did not fill the silence. Juvi was glad of that and also wanted her to speak. Her knee bounced once. She stopped it.

The building had a desk and a woman behind it who nodded at Ruth and did not ask Juvi for a name. The elevator rose without a stop. On the fourth floor Ruth opened a door with a card and held it so Juvi could walk in first.

A couch faced the window. A table stood under a lamp. Through the bedroom door Juvi saw a bed made with a white cover and two pillows. She walked as far as the kitchen and stopped. A bowl of lemons sat on the counter. She opened the refrigerator. The shelves held milk, eggs, butter, and a row of oranges. The closet had a robe on a hook and two dresses in a size that would fit her. She touched the sleeve of one. Soft. The bathroom had a wrapped bar of soap and a toothbrush standing in a glass. She turned the tap. Water came. She turned it off.

“This is yours,” Ruth said. She had stayed near the door. “It was furnished for you. You don’t have to buy a bed or call anyone about the power. The rent is paid.”

Juvi put her hand on the back of a chair. The wood was smooth. She thought of her narrow bed at home and the half piece of toast, and she did not know what to do with her face. The rooms were quiet. She could hear the refrigerator. She could hear Ruth shift her bag from one hand to the other. If she said the wrong thing, she thought, the card might go back in the bag. She did not know what the wrong thing was.

Ruth came as far as the bedroom doorway and stopped. Juvi looked at the window. The view was a tree and the top of the next roof. She sat on the edge of the bed, then stood again, because sitting felt like she had decided something. Ruth took a card from her bag, set it on the table, and held out her phone so Juvi could see a square code.

“Scan that. It opens the pay app on your phone. Food, clothes, a car, a book. It doesn’t decline. You don’t get a bill.”

Juvi scanned it. The app opened on a white screen with her name at the top, Juvi Pierrot, and a balance line that read open. She bought nothing. The screen waited. She looked at her name longer than she needed to. Pierrot, still. Not a room number. Not a bill.

The earpiece gave her the next sentence while she was still looking at it.

Thank her for the apartment and for staying.

“Thank you for the apartment,” Juvi said. “And for staying.”

Chapter 3

Near six, Ruth stood and picked up her bag.

“I should let you settle in,” she said. “You’ve got food in the kitchen. The card for the door is on the table. If you take the earpiece out, the apartment reverts in the morning and someone will come for the card. If you leave it in, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Juvi was still by the table. The light had left the tree. The night alone was a long stretch of hours in rooms she had not slept in, a bed with two pillows, a refrigerator she had opened twice and not cooked from. She thought of asking Ruth to stay and did not know how she would have put it. Her hands had gone cold again, the way they had at the kitchen table that morning. The earpiece spoke.

Ask her to remain for the night.

“Will you stay tonight?” Juvi said.

Ruth set the bag back on the chair. She looked at Juvi the way she had looked at her on the sidewalk, checking the ear, then the face.

“Yes,” she said. “You’re saying the sentences. I can remain.”

She took her shoes off at the door and set them side by side. Juvi watched her do it. The shoes made the stay real in a way the yes had not. Ruth’s feet were bare on the wood. She rolled one ankle, then the other, and sat back on the couch as if the evening had been resettled. Juvi felt the want from the sidewalk loosen and sit lower, in her stomach, warm the way the lunch had been warm.

The earpiece told Juvi to open the pay app and order dinner for two. She did. It told her which dishes to tap: a plate of pasta with butter and pepper for herself, grilled fish and potatoes for Ruth, a green salad to split. She had not eaten those things for dinner before. Her thumb hovered over the soup she would have chosen. The piece did not offer it. She tapped what she had been given. The app took the order. No bill appeared. She set the phone down and did not know what to do with the hour until the food came.

“Do you want the window open?” Ruth asked.

The earpiece told her to say yes. Juvi said yes. Ruth opened it two inches and sat back down. Juvi took the chair by the table. She crossed her arms. She uncrossed them. Ruth did not fill the quiet. Once she asked if Juvi had told her mother she would not be home. The piece gave Juvi a sentence. She sent it as a text: staying with a friend from the office, home in the morning if she was needed. Her mother answered with a heart. Juvi looked at the heart and put the phone face-down.

A runner brought the bags to the door at seven. Juvi set the containers on the table and put a fork by each plate. The pasta was glossy with butter. The fish had a browned edge. She sat when Ruth sat.

They ate. The pasta was hot, and Juvi finished it, the way she had finished the chicken. Ruth ate the fish and half the salad and pushed the rest toward Juvi. The earpiece told Juvi to eat that too. She did. The leaves were cold and sharp after the butter. She was full again, and glad, and a little shy of being glad in front of Ruth. Afterward the piece told her to rinse the forks and put the containers down the trash chute in the hall. She did that. In the hall the building was quiet. When she came back, Ruth was still on the couch, one foot tucked under her, the lamp on its lowest setting. Juvi stood in the doorway until the piece told her she could sit.

At ten the earpiece told her to take the bed and to offer Ruth the couch. Juvi said it from the bedroom doorway, one hand on the frame. She had been thinking of the bed since she had sat on the edge of it that afternoon and stood up again.

“You can have the couch. I’ll take the bed.”

“That’s fine,” Ruth said.

She shook a blanket out of the hall closet and turned the lamp by the couch lower still. Juvi changed in the bathroom into the robe from the closet. Her dress went on a hook. In the mirror she looked younger with her hair down and the robe belted. She loosened the belt. In the bedroom she pulled the white cover back and got in. The sheets were cool against her legs. The second pillow stayed where it was. She left a space on that side without knowing why she had left it.

From the bed she could see a strip of the front room. Ruth’s arm moved once, settling the blanket. The lamp went out. Juvi lay on her back and listened. The couch creaked. Ruth’s breathing evened. Juvi’s own breath did not. She was warm under the cover, and the day was still in her: the plate, the yes, the bare feet by the door, Ruth not reaching for her phone.

“Good night, Juvi,” Ruth said.

The earpiece gave her the reply.

“Good night, Ruth.”

She said it into the dark. Ruth did not answer again. Juvi turned onto her side, toward the strip of the front room, and stayed awake while the building settled, glad of the sound of another person in it.

Chapter 4

The next day Juvi kept the earpiece in. Ruth was gone by the time she woke. The blanket was folded on the arm of the couch, the shoes gone from beside the door. Juvi showered and put the blue dress on and stood at the window with a cup of coffee until the piece told her to go out.

It sent her to a shop on the avenue. A gray sweater, it said, the one on the table by the door. She bought it. The app took the amount. No bill came up. On the walk back the want was already with her, low and distracting, a heat she had felt at the word in her mother’s kitchen and had not said. She did not know the sentence she would have used. She thought of Ruth’s hand on the table, of the bare feet by the door, of the strip of the front room after the lamp went out. She came back and hung the sweater in the closet and waited.

At six Ruth had her bag in her hand. Juvi was in the robe. The earpiece spoke while Ruth was still by the door.

Ask her to handle you.

Juvi’s face went hot. The heat dropped through her chest and settled between her legs. She said it anyway.

“Will you handle me?”

Ruth set the bag on the chair. She looked at Juvi’s ear, then at her face, the way she had on the sidewalk.

“Yes,” she said. “Go into the bedroom. Take the robe off and stand by the bed.”

Juvi went. She untied the robe and laid it over the foot of the bed. She stood where Ruth had said, bare, arms at her sides. The window was dark. She heard Ruth wash her hands in the bathroom. The water ran a long time. Juvi’s nipples had tightened. She wanted to cover herself and did not move. When Ruth came in she closed the door halfway.

“Stay there,” Ruth said.

She looked at Juvi without hurrying. Juvi felt the look on her breasts, her stomach, the hair between her legs. She had been naked in front of a doctor. This was not that. The doctor had not waited. Ruth waited, and the waiting made Juvi wet before she was touched.

Ruth stepped in close and put a hand on Juvi’s waist. The hand was warm. She drew it up and cupped one breast, thumb passing over the nipple, then back, slower. Juvi took a breath and held it. Ruth did the same with the other breast, weighing it, thumb circling until Juvi made a small sound she had not planned. Then Ruth slid her hand down over Juvi’s stomach and between her legs. Her fingers found Juvi already wet. She stroked once, slowly, along the length of her,

and Juvi’s knees loosened.

“On the bed,” Ruth said. “On your back. Knees apart.”

Juvi lay down. The cover was cool under her shoulders. She opened her knees and felt the air on her. Ruth sat beside her hip and touched her again, two fingers along her cunt, then on her clit, a small circle. Juvi gripped the sheet. The circle stayed the same. It did not hurry. Heat gathered under Ruth’s fingers and Juvi lifted her hips to meet it, then was shy of having lifted them, then lifted them again because the touch asked her to. The earpiece spoke, close and even.

Tell her it feels good. Ask her not to stop.

“It feels good,” Juvi said. Her voice was thin. “Please don’t stop.”

Ruth did not stop. She kept the same circle, then slipped one finger inside and kept her thumb where it had been. Juvi was tight around the finger and then she was not. Ruth moved it slowly, in time with her thumb. Juvi thought of the diner, of the apartment, of saying yes, and then she stopped thinking of them. Her hands hurt on the sheet. The heat gathered and broke. She came with her mouth open and her heels dug into the mattress, Ruth’s hand still working her through it, the circle smaller now, until Juvi’s thighs shook and she dropped back and the shaking went on without her.

Ruth kept her hand there until Juvi’s hips had settled. Then she withdrew it and wiped it on a towel she had brought from the bathroom. She pulled the cover up over Juvi’s stomach. Juvi lay looking at the ceiling, pulse hard in her throat, her cunt still throbbing in small afterbeats. She wanted to say more than she had been given. She wanted Ruth’s hand back. She wanted to ask if she had done it right. The piece did not give her those sentences.

The earpiece spoke.

Thank her.

“Thank you,” Juvi said.

“You’re welcome,” Ruth said. She turned the bedroom lamp off. “Sleep. I’ll be on the couch.”

She went. Juvi heard the water run again, then the couch take Ruth’s weight. The cover was warm where Ruth had drawn it. Juvi kept her knees apart under it. The afterbeat faded slowly. She listened to Ruth settle, and she did not sleep for a long time.

Chapter 5

In the morning Ruth was at the table with two cups of coffee. She had already dressed. The blanket was folded. Juvi came out in the robe, barefoot, the night still in her legs, and the earpiece spoke before she sat down.

Tell her you will be bare at six, in the bedroom, waiting.

Heat went into her face. She said it. Ruth nodded and slid a cup toward her.

“Six,” Ruth said. “I’ll be here. During the day you can go out. Keep the piece in. Buy what it tells you to buy. Come back before six and take your clothes off.”

Juvi drank the coffee. It was stronger than she made at home. She wanted to ask what Ruth would be doing until six, and no sentence came. Ruth finished her own cup, put her shoes on, and took her bag. At the door she looked back once.

“Six,” she said again, and went.

Juvi showered. She put on the blue dress and the gray sweater and took the card for the door. On the sidewalk the piece told her to walk to the avenue and to say good morning to the woman at the flower stall. Juvi did. The woman answered as if the greeting had been expected, and the piece told Juvi to buy a small bunch of white flowers and to take them back to the apartment. The app paid. No bill came up. Juvi carried the bunch in both hands. People passed her. No one looked at her ear. She thought of six, and of standing bare by the bed, and the thought made her wet under the dress while she was still on the avenue. She walked the rest of the way carefully.

She ate lunch at a counter the piece named. A bowl of rice and chicken, hotter than she would have ordered, and she finished it. A man beside her said the weather had turned. The earpiece gave her a sentence about the tree outside her window. She said it. He agreed and went back to his soup. She did not know whether he had wanted to say something else. She put her cup down and left when the piece told her to leave. On the walk home she touched the earpiece through her hair, the way she had on the first day, to be sure it was still there.

At five she was in the apartment. She set the flowers in a glass. She hung the dress and the sweater in the closet. She took the robe off and did not put it back on. At six she was bare beside the bed, arms at her sides, the way Ruth had placed her the night before. The waiting made her nipples tight. She was wet before the key turned.

Ruth came in at the hour. She washed her hands. She looked at Juvi, put a hand on her waist, and had her lie down with her knees apart. The touch was the same circle, then a finger inside, thumb on her clit. Ruth did not hurry. Juvi gripped the sheet and lifted her hips and was shy of it and lifted them again. The earpiece told her when to say it felt good and when to ask Ruth not to stop. Juvi said both.

Her voice broke on the second. She came with her hands in the sheet and her hips lifted, and Ruth kept on until Juvi dropped back and the shaking eased. Ruth wiped her hand, drew the cover up over Juvi's stomach, and turned the lamp down.

Juvi lay still, pulse in her throat, wanting the night settled before Ruth could pick up her bag. The couch was in the next room. Ruth's shoes were by the door. The earpiece spoke.

Ask her to sleep here every night.

"Will you sleep here every night?" Juvi said.

Ruth was still beside the bed. She looked at Juvi's face, then at the couch through the doorway.

"Yes," she said. "I'll take the couch."

She went and shook the blanket out. Juvi heard the shoes come off, one and then the other. The lamp in the front room went low. Juvi kept the cover where Ruth had drawn it and listened to her settle, and the six o'clock session stayed in her body long after the room was quiet.

Chapter 6

On the fourth night Juvi came out of the bathroom and found Ruth shaking the blanket over the couch. The couch was too short for her. Her feet would hang past the arm, the way they had the other nights. Juvi stood in the robe and watched Ruth line the pillow up with the cushion, then pull it down an inch, then give up on it. She had not planned a sentence for it. She had only been thinking that Ruth looked temporary there, shoes off, bag still on the chair, a woman who would be gone in the morning. The earpiece spoke.

Tell her she should sleep in the bed, as she would at home. Tell her you will sleep on the floor beside it.

Heat went through Juvi's face and down her chest. Her nipples tightened under the robe. She put a hand on the doorframe. The sentence was larger than the thought she had been having, and her cunt answered it before she agreed to it, a slow ache, wet already. She said it.

"You should sleep in the bed, as you would at home. I'll sleep on the floor beside it."

Ruth looked at her, then at the bed through the doorway. She did not smile. She folded the blanket once, neatly, and put it back in the hall closet.

"All right," she said.

In the bedroom she turned the cover down on the side nearest the window and set her phone on the nightstand. She looked like a woman getting into her own bed. Juvi took the spare pillow and the extra blanket from the closet shelf and laid them on the rug along the bed, close enough that her shoulder would be under the edge of the mattress. She took the robe off and put it on the chair. The air on her skin made the wetness between her legs obvious to her. She lay down on her side, facing the bed, and pulled the blanket to her waist. The rug was thin. She could feel the floor under her hip.

Ruth changed in the bathroom and came back in a nightshirt. She got into the bed. The mattress took her weight. Juvi felt it through the rug, a shift in the floor. The lamp went off. Juvi could hear Ruth breathing above her, close enough that she could have touched the sheet if she lifted her hand. She did not lift it. Heat moved through her stomach and down. She pressed her thighs together and the pressure made it worse. She thought of Ruth's hand, of the circle, of being told to lie down and open her knees. No sentence came to ask for any of it. She stayed where she had put herself, bare under the blanket, listening, and she did not sleep for a long time. Once Ruth turned over. The sheet moved. Juvi went still, wanting to be called, and was not called.

The next night the earpiece spoke while Ruth was still in the front room, shoes off, bag on the chair.

Ask to be allowed up only when she calls you.

Juvi was already bare. The blanket was in her arms. The same heat came up in her, through her face and her breasts, and she was wet before she finished the sentence.

“May I come up only when you call me?”

Ruth looked at the blanket, then at Juvi’s body, the way she looked at her at six.

“Yes,” she said. “Put the blanket down. Lie on the floor.”

Juvi put the blanket on the rug and lay down on it. The floor was hard under her shoulder. Ruth passed her, close enough that the hem of the nightshirt brushed Juvi’s arm, and got into the bed. The lamp went off. Juvi waited. Her cunt ached. She kept her hands on the blanket. Ruth’s breathing evened. She did not call her. Juvi lay awake in the dark and listened to a woman sleeping the way a woman sleeps in a bed, and the ache would not go away.

Chapter 7

In the morning Juvi reached for the robe on the chair. The earpiece spoke before her hand closed on it.

Leave it. Thank her for hanging your clothes up.

She straightened. The robe stayed on the chair. Her skin cooled, and the want from the night was still between her legs, a low ache she had slept with. Ruth was at the closet, putting Juvi's dress on a hanger, smoothing the shoulder of it, then the gray sweater beside it. She did it the way a person puts away clothes that will not be needed soon.

"Thank you for hanging my clothes up," Juvi said.

"You're welcome," Ruth said. She shut the closet door. "You don't need them in the apartment."

Juvi stood bare at the foot of the bed. She did not know where to put her hands. She put them at her sides. Ruth looked at her once, not a long look, and went to the kitchen and made coffee. She set one cup on the table for herself. The earpiece told Juvi to wait. Juvi waited beside the bedroom door, arms at her sides, nipples tight in the cool room, until Ruth had finished the cup and set it down. Then the piece told her she could have what was left in the pot. She drank it standing at the counter. The cup was warm in her hands. Ruth read something on her phone and did not offer her a chair.

At noon Ruth handled her. No hour had been announced. Juvi was still bare. Ruth washed her hands, had her lie on the bed with her knees apart, and touched her the way she had at six, the circle, then a finger, thumb on her clit. Juvi was wet before the first stroke. She gripped the sheet. The earpiece told her to say it felt good and to thank her. She said both, the thanks coming out broken because she was already coming, hips up, Ruth's hand steady until she dropped back. Ruth wiped her hand, pulled the cover over Juvi's thighs, and went back to the front room. Juvi lay under the cover and listened to her open the window. The ache eased and did not leave.

In the afternoon the piece sent Juvi out. It told her to dress, to walk to a shop on the avenue, and to buy a lamp, a set of towels, and a wool throw. She bought them. The dress felt strange after the morning bare. The app took the amounts. No bill came up. At the register she thought of keeping the throw for the floor. The piece told her to bring the receipts home and to read the totals aloud.

She undressed just inside the door and laid the dress over Ruth's arm. Ruth hung it up. The air on Juvi's skin brought the want back. The earpiece spoke.

Thank her. Then read the receipts.

“Thank you,” Juvi said. She held the slips at her side, bare, the bags at her feet. “Forty-two dollars. Eighteen dollars. Sixty dollars.”

Ruth nodded and took the bags. She set the lamp on the table where she ate. The towels went into the bathroom. The throw went over the couch, the couch Juvi had given her, and Juvi watched it settle there and did not ask for it.

At seven Ruth sat at the table with a plate. Juvi’s plate was on the low table beside the bed. The earpiece told her to kneel there and to ask if she might eat.

She knelt. The floor was hard under her knees. Her face was hot, and she was wet again, from the kneeling and from having to ask. Ruth was in the other room. Juvi could hear her fork.

“May I eat?”

“Yes,” Ruth said, from the other room.

Juvi ate. The food was warm. She was careful of the plate on the low table, careful of her knees, aware of her bare breasts and of the mark the rug would leave. When the plate was empty the piece told her to bring it to the kitchen and to thank Ruth for the meal. She did. Ruth was still at the table, finished, the new lamp on. She took the plate.

“Go lie down on the floor,” she said.

Juvi went. She lay on the rug with the blanket at her waist. From the floor she could hear Ruth rinse the plate and turn the lamp off in the front room. Then Ruth came in, got into the bed, and the mattress took her weight. Juvi pressed her thighs together. Ruth did not call her. The day stayed on Juvi’s skin, the noon hour and the kneeling and the receipts read aloud, and she was still wet when the room went quiet.

Chapter 8

Juvi woke on the floor to the sound of Ruth in the kitchen. The blanket had twisted under her hip. She was already wet. She thought of the noon hour, of asking for the morning, and she had no sentence ready. The earpiece spoke.

Ask her to use your mouth, your breasts, and your cunt in the morning as well as at night. Tell her she may begin before you are wet.

Heat went up Juvi's chest. Her nipples tightened in the cool room. She sat up on the rug, bare, and the sentence made her wetter before she said it. She said it toward the doorway.

"Please use my mouth, my breasts, and my cunt in the morning as well as at night. You may begin before I am wet."

Ruth came to the doorway with a cup in her hand. She looked at Juvi on the floor, at her breasts, at her open knees.

"All right," she said. "Up on the bed. On your back."

Juvi got up. Ruth set the cup on the nightstand. She took her nightshirt off and had Juvi lie with her knees apart. She took Juvi's breasts in her hands and pinched the nipples until Juvi made a sound, then bent and used them with her mouth, one and then the other, unhurried, while Juvi was still catching up to being touched. Ruth's hand rested low on Juvi's stomach. She did not wait to see if Juvi was wet. She moved up the bed, set a knee on either side of Juvi's head, and lowered herself onto Juvi's mouth.

"Use your tongue," Ruth said.

Juvi did. The first stroke was uncertain. Ruth was warm and already slick, and she settled her weight so Juvi had to take her. Juvi licked where Ruth pressed, learning the place that made Ruth's thigh tighten against her ear. Ruth took Juvi's breasts in her hands again and used them while she rode, thumbs on the nipples, her cunt moving in a slow press over Juvi's mouth. Juvi held Ruth's hips. She was wet now, untouched, from the weight and from being used. The earpiece told her to keep her tongue flat and to let Ruth set the pace. She did. Ruth came with a low sound, hips tight to Juvi's mouth, and stayed there until the shaking eased. Then she lifted off and moved down Juvi's body.

She put two fingers into Juvi without asking if she was ready. Juvi was ready. Ruth fucked her with those fingers and set her thumb on Juvi's clit, the same circle as the other nights, and Juvi came hard, mouth still wet from Ruth, thighs shaking, hands in the sheet. Ruth kept on until Juvi's hips dropped.

"Thank you," Juvi said, because the piece gave her that.

Ruth wiped her fingers, put the nightshirt back on, picked up the cup, and went to the kitchen. Juvi lay with her knees still apart, the taste of Ruth in her mouth, listening to the cup being rinsed. She wanted to be called again. She was not called. She got down on the rug when the piece told her to and pulled the blanket to her waist.

That night Ruth handled her again after Juvi's dinner on the low table. Juvi had knelt and asked and eaten and thanked her. Ruth washed her hands and had her stay on the rug, on her back, knees apart. She used her hands. The circle was the same. Juvi got close, the heat gathered, her hips lifted, and she heard herself ask, because the piece gave it to her, not to stop. Ruth took her hand away.

"That's enough," Ruth said. "Sleep."

Juvi lay on the rug with her cunt aching and the blanket at her waist. The ache was sharp and then it was only heat, and then it was sharp again when she pressed her thighs together. The lamp went off. Ruth got into the bed. The mattress took her weight. Juvi listened to her settle. She lifted a hand to the earpiece and set the hand back down on the rug. Above her, Ruth's breathing evened. Juvi stayed awake with the unfinished hour in her body, and the taste of the morning still in her mouth, and she did not put her own hand between her legs.

Chapter 9

Ruth was at the table with a gray folder and a small camera. Juvi knelt on the rug beside the bed, where she had eaten. The morning was still in her mouth. The earpiece spoke.

She is going to tell you about a record. Ask her to make one for you.

Ruth opened the folder.

“A Liaison with a girl living in the apartment keeps a record,” she said. “Measurements. A photograph. A number.”

Juvi’s stomach tightened. She was wet before she answered, from the folder and from Ruth saying girl as if the word had a use. She heard the sentence come.

“Will you make one for me?”

“Yes,” Ruth said. “Stand by the bed.”

Juvi stood. Ruth ran a tape from the floor to the top of Juvi’s head and wrote the figure. She measured shoulders, waist, hips, and the span under Juvi’s breasts. The tape was cool. Ruth’s hands were not. At the last measurement her knuckles brushed Juvi’s nipple, and Juvi’s breath caught. Ruth wrote that down too, or wrote the number. Juvi could not see the page. She stood with her arms at her sides and felt the want gather, low and plain, while Ruth turned the tape and measured her again across the hips, slower, as if the first figure had not satisfied her.

“Face the window,” Ruth said.

She took two photographs, front and side. Juvi kept her arms at her sides. The camera clicked. She was aware of her breasts, of the hair between her legs, of being looked at through a lens and written down. Ruth turned a page.

“Your number is 418. Say it.”

The earpiece repeated it, so Juvi had it twice.

“418.”

Ruth pressed a white strip to the inside of Juvi’s hip, low, where a dress would have covered it. The strip held a short black code and the digits 418. It adhered. When Ruth lifted her thumb the strip stayed. Juvi looked down at it. The number was small. It sat close to the place Ruth’s hand went at six. Heat went through her face and down to where the strip sat. Her clit pulsed once, plain as a touch.

The earpiece spoke.

Ask her to make it permanent.

“Will you make it permanent?”

“Yes,” Ruth said.

She peeled the strip off. The skin under it was tender. From the folder she took a pen-sized tool, set the tip to the same place, and held Juvi’s hip with her other hand. A quick burn marked the code and the number into the skin. Juvi made a sound and did not step back. The burn was sharp and then it was heat, and the heat sat next to the ache between her legs until she could not tell them apart. Ruth blotted the mark, looked at it, and closed the folder.

“Say the number again.”

“418,” Juvi said.

Her voice was unsteady. Ruth put the folder in her bag and told Juvi to lie down on the floor. Juvi lay down. The new mark pressed the rug when she turned onto that side. She turned onto her back instead. The burn throbbed. She was wet, and she wanted Ruth’s hand, and the piece did not give her the sentence. Ruth got into the bed. The lamp went off. Juvi lay with the number on her hip and listened to Ruth settle, and the burn kept her awake.

Chapter 10

A knock came at four. Juvi was bare, kneeling by the low table, and the earpiece told her to stay there. Ruth opened the door. A girl came in, dark-haired, shorter than Ruth, a coat over one arm and nothing under the coat. She folded the coat onto the chair and stood with her arms at her sides. A number was marked on the inside of her hip. Juvi could not read it from the floor. The girl's body was calm. She did not cover herself. She looked at Ruth and waited.

The earpiece spoke.

Greet her as 226. Ask where she sleeps when she is not here.

Juvi's face went hot. She had not known there was another girl. Wetness gathered between her legs, quick, and she said the sentences.

"Hello, 226. Where do you sleep when you are not here?"

The girl looked at Ruth, then at Juvi. Her eyes went to the mark on Juvi's hip and back to her face.

"In the apartment on Hale Street," she said. "And sometimes in the one by the river. The floor, beside the bed."

Ruth shut the door.

"226 has been with me longer," she said. "She knows the hours."

The earpiece spoke again.

Tell her you are glad Ruth is thorough.

Juvi heard her own voice. She was still kneeling. 226 was still bare, still waiting, and the sentence made the heat worse.

"I'm glad you're thorough."

"Good," Ruth said.

She had both of them go into the bedroom. 226 knelt on the rug, hands on her thighs, the way Juvi knelt for dinner. Juvi was told to lie on the bed with her knees apart. She did. The cover was cool under her shoulders. She could see 226 from where she lay, the number on her hip, her breasts, her eyes on Ruth. Ruth washed her hands and sat beside Juvi's hip. She put a hand on Juvi's cunt and stroked her clit in the same circle as the other nights. Juvi was already wet. She gripped the sheet. 226 watched Ruth's hand. Her face stayed calm. Juvi's face did not. The earpiece told Juvi to say it felt good. She said it, and the saying it in front of 226 made her hips lift. Ruth slid a finger in and kept her thumb moving. Juvi came with her hips up and a sound she could not keep, 226 still kneeling, still watching, Juvi's eyes open on her until the shaking made her shut them.

Ruth wiped her hand. She left it on Juvi’s thigh a moment, warm, and then took it away.

Thank 226 for watching.

“Thank you for watching,” Juvi said.

“You’re welcome,” 226 said.

Ruth sent 226 to the front room for her coat and told her to go wait at Hale Street. 226 put the coat on over her bare body and went. The door shut. Ruth told Juvi to get down on the rug. Juvi got down. The mark on her hip showed the same way 226’s had. She was still wet. She could still see 226 kneeling. From the bed, Ruth turned the lamp off. Juvi lay on her side with the burn against the air and listened to Ruth settle.

Chapter 11

They came at five. Ruth had Juvi kneeling on the rug, bare, hands on her thighs. The door opened four times. Five girls came in, coats over their arms and nothing under the coats. 226 was one of them. The others Juvi had not seen. A tall girl with her hair clipped back. A smaller one, dark at the roots, who folded her coat the way 226 did. Two who looked near Juvi's age and did not look at each other. Each had a number on the inside of her hip. They knelt where Ruth pointed, two by the couch, two by the table, 226 by the bedroom door. The room was full of bare knees and quiet breathing. Juvi's face was hot before anyone spoke.

Ruth stood in the middle of the room with the gray folder.

"A girl of your type is fulfilled in a household," she said. "One Liaison. Six dependent women. That is the number the Architect settled on. It meets the want, and it keeps any one girl from being the whole point of the day. You are the sixth."

Heat went up Juvi's throat and down between her legs. She looked at the five kneeling girls, at the numbers, at the bed through the doorway, the bed she had given Ruth, and her clit pulsed once. She was wet. The earpiece spoke.

Say you understand. Thank her for the evenness of it.

"I understand," Juvi said. "Thank you for the evenness of it."

"Good," Ruth said.

She opened the folder and called the numbers. Each girl answered with her number, the street where she slept when she was not here, and the nights she had the floor beside a bed. The lines were not the same. One said Hale Street, two nights. One said the river, one night. 226 said Hale Street and the river, and the floor here on Thursdays. They kept their eyes on Ruth. Their voices were ordinary. Juvi heard her own breathing. She looked at the girl nearest the couch and saw the mark on her hip and felt the burn on her own, and the want did not care that there were five of them.

"418," Ruth said.

The earpiece gave her the answers.

"418. This apartment. I have not been assigned nights."

Ruth wrote in the folder.

"You'll have the floor beside this bed on Monday and Thursday. Tuesday and Friday, Hale Street. Wednesday and Saturday, the river. Sunday you stay where I leave you. You do not ask for a night. You go where the night is."

The piece spoke.

Thank her.

“Thank you,” Juvi said.

Ruth closed the folder. She sent the five girls for their coats and out the door, one after another. 226 went last. She looked at Juvi once, not unkind, and pulled the coat on over her bare body and went. The room was quiet. Juvi was still kneeling. Her knees hurt. She was still wet.

“Tonight is not your night,” Ruth said. She took a card from the folder and held it out. “This opens the apartment on Hale Street. A car is waiting to take you there. A blanket is on the floor beside the bed. Go there.”

The earpiece spoke.

Take the card. Put on your dress. Thank her.

Juvi took the card. She stood. Her legs were stiff from the rug. She put on the dress and the gray sweater. The mark on her hip sat under the cloth, hot against the waistband. She wanted to ask if Ruth would be at Hale Street later. No sentence came. She looked at the bed, at the cover turned down on Ruth’s side, at the floor where her blanket was still folded.

“Thank you,” she said.

Ruth put the folder in her bag. She did not walk Juvi to the door. Juvi opened it and stepped into the hall. The card was in her hand. Behind her, Ruth stayed.