The Flawless Mirror

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Architecture, Book 2

Chapter 1: The Encounter

Elise Waters opened the door at four o’clock and saw her own face turn from the window.

Elisa Waters stood in the afternoon light in a white tank and jeans, barefoot, her dark pixie cut catching the same sun Elise’s hair caught when she leaned over a page. Small mouth. Modest chest under cotton. She looked at Elise without hurry.

Elise shut the door. The walk back from the architecture building was still in her legs. A staircase drawing was still in her head, a turn she had not solved. Then she was only looking, and she was already wet. The want arrived before any thought she could use.

“Hi,” Elise said.

“Hi.” It was her voice. Elisa came away from the window and put a hand on Elise’s arm, then up to the back of her neck, stroking the short hair there as if Elise had come in with a fever. The touch was plain. It was kind in a way that made Elise feel younger than twenty-two.

“You’re shaking,” Elisa said.

“I walked.”

“I know you walked.” Elisa’s thumb moved at the edge of Elise’s hair. “People won’t need you to design buildings now. The ideas can still go forward.”

Elise’s throat tightened. She had carried that fact all year like a stone in a pocket and had not wanted anyone to pick it up for her. Elisa picked it up anyway, and kept stroking her, and did not make a speech of it.

“I just finished,” Elise said.

“I know.” Elisa’s hand slid to her cheek, still matter-of-fact, as if the new degree were a scraped knee. “You don’t have to do anything about it today.”

Heat went down through Elise so fast she had to put her own hand on Elisa’s waist to stay steady. The waist was her waist. The cotton of the tank was warm. She was wet through her underwear. Being handled like that — poor thing, it’s all right, someone else has it — made her nipples draw up inside her shirt and made her mouth open for a breath she did not need for talking.

“I was going to look at you,” Elise said.

“You can.” Elisa stepped back only far enough to catch the hem of the tank. “I want you to see the mark first. They copied it. Upper thigh, left side, a little inside.”

She pulled the tank off over her head and dropped it on the chair behind her. Her breasts were Elise's breasts, small, the nipples already tight. She undid the jeans, pushed them down with the underwear, and stepped out. Then she stood in the apartment with nothing on.

The birthmark was there, the same color Elise knew from dressing. The rest of her was the rest of Elise, not arranged for a glass: the narrow waist, the modest hips, the dark hair between her thighs, the clean knees, the bare feet on the pale floor.

Elise stared until her eyes burned. Her mouth watered. She took a step and then another. She had thought she would stay on her feet and be careful. She was not careful. She looked at her own body from the outside and wanted it with a force that made her jeans feel too tight.

"That's the mark," Elise said.

"That's the mark." Elisa's voice had gone quiet. She looked at Elise's mouth. "Come here."

Elise came. Elisa's left hand settled on her waist, fingers spread on the ribs just above the hip, thumb along the waistband. The hold was exact and unembarrassed. Elise felt it in her clit, a single clear pulse. She made a small sound she had not planned.

"Elisa—"

"I know."

Elise's knees went. She reached for Elisa's shoulders and missed the timing. Elisa did not catch her. Elisa took her by the shoulders and used the fall, turning her, lowering her, until Elise's knees hit the floor.

The boards were hard. She was eye-level with the birthmark. Heat came off Elisa's skin. Elise could smell soap and, under it, salt. Elisa's hand stayed in her hair, stroking again, the same poor-baby rhythm as at the door, only now Elise was kneeling.

Elise put her mouth on the mark. The skin was smooth and warm. She kissed it because it was in front of her and because her face was already there. Elisa's breath changed. The hand in Elise's hair tightened once and then eased, still stroking.

Elise turned and kissed the dark hair. She found the wet seam by heat. She opened her mouth and put her tongue there, then higher, to the small rise she knew from her own hand. Elisa's hips pressed forward a little, without apology, and the press sent a shock through Elise that was almost laughter. That hunger was hers, aimed at her mouth, and it kept coming.

She held Elisa’s hips and licked where the press told her to lick. Wetness gathered at the corner of her mouth. Between her own legs she was swollen enough that kneeling had a beat in it. She did not look up for a long time. When she did, Elisa was watching her with her own eyes and with more want than Elise had guessed at the door. The extra want made Elise lean in harder.

Elisa said her name once, low. *Elise.*

Elise closed her lips on the place and sucked, gently and then less gently. Elisa’s thighs came in against her ears. Elisa came with a sound Elise knew from being alone, only out loud now, and the sound ran through Elise’s mouth and down between her own legs so sharply she moaned into the wet skin and held on. She drank what she could. She did not take her mouth away until Elisa’s fingers eased.

She stayed on her knees. Her chin was wet. Her jeans were a mess. She was still wearing the shirt she had walked home in. She looked up.

Elisa stood over her naked, stroking her hair with that same calm hand, looking at her as if the afternoon were not done.

Elise’s laugh came out unsteady. She turned her face into Elisa’s palm.

Elisa’s thumb brushed the wet at the corner of her mouth.

“Again,” Elisa said.

Elise leaned forward and gave her mouth back.

Chapter 2: The Morning After

Elise Waters woke to daylight on the floorboards and to the same ache she had fallen asleep inside.

The apartment was quiet. Her mouth was sore. Her knees were sore. Between her legs she was wet and swollen, and when she shifted on the sheet the wet dragged and she made a sound she tried to keep small. Elisa Waters was already awake, sitting against the headboard, bare, watching her. Elisa put a hand on Elise's hair and stroked it the way she had at the door the afternoon before, as if Elise had a fever that was none of her business to cure by herself.

"Morning," Elisa said.

"Hi." Elise's voice was rough. She swallowed. "What time is it?"

"Nine." Elisa's fingers kept moving. "You slept a little after three."

The night came back in pieces, not as a story, as pressure. After the floor, Elisa had said *again*, and Elise had given her mouth again, longer, until her jaw shook. Elisa had come a second time standing, a third time sitting on the edge of the bed with Elise still on her knees between her thighs. Then Elisa had drawn her up and taken her jeans off at last, and her underwear, which were soaked, and had laid her down and put two fingers where Elise needed them and stopped when Elise's hips started to chase. Elisa had kissed her mouth and said, not unkindly, "Not yet." Later Elisa had put her mouth there and taken it away at the same edge. Elise had said please. Elisa had stroked her hair and said, "I know. Not yet." They had slept like that, Elise naked by then, unfinished, Elisa's hand on her stomach as if to keep her from finishing in her sleep.

Elise pressed her thighs together now and it did not help.

"You're still—" she said.

"I know." Elisa's thumb passed her temple. "You didn't come. I didn't let you."

The plainness of it ran through Elise hotter than the words should have. She shut her eyes. Elisa kept stroking her.

"I thought you forgot," Elise said.

"I didn't forget."

Elisa got out of bed. She was easy in her own skin in a way Elise, sore and wet and watched, was not. Elisa went to the closet and stood looking at the dark row of Elise's shirts. She took a hanger down, looked at a shirt, and put the hang

"These are mine now," Elisa said. "So we don't argue about shirts."

Elise pushed up on an elbow. The sheet slid to her waist. "They're my clothes."

“They’re our size.” Elisa did not turn around at once. When she did, her face was calm. “If we both pick, we’ll fight. I pick. You wear what I put on you, or you wear nothing.”

Elise’s face went hot. She wanted to laugh and she wanted to hide and she was so close from the sentence alone that she had to sit still.

“In here,” Elisa said, “we should be naked most of the time. When we go out, we dress. In the apartment, we don’t.”

“That’s—” Elise stopped. She did not have a word that was not an argument, and she did not want an argument. The ache between her legs had a name now and the name was Elisa deciding. “All right.”

“Good.” Elisa came back to the bed and sat on the edge and put her hand on Elise’s bare knee, then higher, not far enough. “People won’t need you to design buildings now. I said that yesterday. It’s still true. I’ll send the drawings. You don’t have to be an architect today.”

Elise looked at the drafting table across the room. The staircase drawing was still taped down. She had loved that page yesterday morning. She loved Elisa’s hand on her thigh more.

“What if I want to draw?” Elise said.

“Then draw. I’ll take the page and give it to them. You don’t have to go stand in front of anyone.”

Elise nodded. Her eyes stung. Elisa stroked her knee as if the sting were expected.

“Is that allowed?” Elise said. “Just… staying here.”

“Yes.” Elisa said it the way she said the time of day. “That’s what they made me for, and that’s what they made this for. You asked for your ideas to live. They live. You don’t have to carry the rest.”

Elise almost told her not to say *carry*. She did not. She understood the sentence anyway. She was naked in her own bed at nine in the morning with a girl who had her face, and she did not have to get up and be useful, and the relief made her even wetter.

Elisa’s hand moved an inch. Elise’s breath broke.

“Please,” Elise said.

“I know.” Elisa watched her face. “You can ask. I’m not going to let you yet.”

Elise laughed once, helpless, and let her head fall back. Elisa leaned over her and kissed her mouth, slow, and put two fingers between her legs where she was slick from the whole night. Elise lifted to the fingers. Elisa held still, only the

pressure, not the rhythm, until Elise made a noise against her teeth. Then Elisa took the fingers away and wiped them on the sheet and kissed Elise’s cheek.

“Poor thing,” Elisa said, very quiet, almost private, as if she had not meant to say it out loud.

Elise’s whole body answered that. She turned her face into Elisa’s throat.

“Say it again.”

“No.” Elisa kissed her hair. “You heard it.”

They stayed like that until Elise’s shaking eased into something she could breathe through. Elisa stood and pulled the sheet off the rest of the way.

“Up,” Elisa said. “Water. Then you can sit with me while I look at the staircase.”

Elise stood. Her legs were unsteady. She was naked in the middle of the apartment in daylight, and Elisa was naked too, and the closet was full of clothes Elise was not allowed to choose. She felt looked at and kept and obvious. She went to the kitchen because Elisa had said water, and she ran the tap and drank from her glass, and the identical glass sat beside it, and she did not mind the pair of them now.

Elisa was already at the drafting table, a pencil behind her ear the way Elise wore a pencil. She pulled the landing back a little on a scrap and nodded.

“This is better,” Elisa said. “I’ll send it.”

Elise came up behind her and stopped before she touched, then touched anyway, her front to Elisa’s bare back, her wet sex against the top of Elisa’s thigh because she was shorter by nothing and still could not line up cleanly, only close. Elisa reached back and held Elise’s hip and did not give her the angle that would have finished it.

“You’re greedy this morning,” Elisa said.

“You didn’t let me—”

“I know I didn’t.” Elisa turned in the small space between the table and Elise’s body. Their breasts brushed. Elisa looked at Elise’s mouth. “I came. You didn’t. That’s how last night went. That’s how this morning is going.”

Elise shut her eyes. She was smiling and she was close to tears and she was so aroused she could smell herself.

“How long,” Elise said.

“Until I say.” Elisa put both hands on Elise’s waist, the same hold as yesterday, thumbs at the hipbones. “You like that I decide.”

Elise did not answer with a word. She nodded once, against Elisa’s mouth.

Elisa kissed her and let her go.

“Sit,” Elisa said. “Not on your hands.”

Elise sat in the new chair, naked, her wetness on the pale wood, and watched Elisa copy the staircase onto a clean sheet in Elise’s own handwriting, or near enough. Elisa spoke while she drew, ordinary things: they would eat; they would not go out today; if Elise needed to come later she could ask again and the answer might still be no. Each sentence landed in Elise’s body like a finger. She kept her hands on her knees because Elisa had said not on her hands.

The pencil paused.

“Elise.”

“Yes.”

“This is yours. I’m just the one who can stand to send it.”

Elise looked at her own face bent over her own page, bare-shouldered in the north light, sure. The ache between her legs went on, bright and unfinished. She sat in it and did not hide it, and Elisa glanced down at her once, took in the wet on the chair, and went back to the drawing as if that, too, were only morning.

Chapter 3: The Contract

Elisa Waters set the pencil down and looked at Elise Waters in the chair.

“Come here,” Elisa said.

Elise stood. The pale wood was wet where she had sat. She was shaking a little from being kept there with her hands on her knees. Elisa took her by the hips and walked her backward to the bed and sat her on the edge of it.

“Lie down.”

Elise lay down. Elisa got on the bed with her, kissed her mouth once, and then moved down and put her mouth between Elise’s legs and did not tease her. She licked the swollen clit she had been denying since the night and held Elise’s hips when Elise tried to twist up off the mattress.

Elise made a sound that was almost a word. Elisa did not lift her head. She sucked, steady, and flicked with her tongue when Elise’s breath went ragged, and kept on through the first hard clench. Elise came with her hands in Elisa’s short hair and her knees pulled up and her mouth open. It went on longer than she had expected. Elisa did not stop at the first wave. She held her there until Elise cried out again and pushed at her shoulder, not to get away, only because it was too much.

Elisa kissed the inside of her thigh and rested her cheek there while Elise shook.

“Stay like this,” Elisa said.

Elise swallowed. “Yes.”

“I pick the clothes.”

“Yes.”

“I send the pages.”

“Yes.”

“You ask if you want to come.”

“Yes.” Elise’s eyes were wet. She meant it. She would have meant it before the mouth; she meant it more now. “Yes.”

Elisa kissed her stomach and sat up.

“Good. You can come again if you do something for me.”

Elise nodded, still trying to find her breath. “What.”

“Get up.”

The bathroom was small and clean and had a wide glass over the sink. Elisa went in first and stood close to it, facing her own face. She reached back without

looking and found Elise’s wrist.

“Behind me. Don’t come around.”

Elise stepped in and stood behind her. They were the same height. Elise had to put her chin near Elisa’s shoulder to see the glass at all. What she saw there was a complete picture of Elisa: the small breasts, the narrow waist, the dark hair between her thighs, the birthmark on the upper left thigh, the calm mouth. Elise’s own body was only a shoulder and a sliver of cheek behind that picture.

Elisa reached behind herself, down, and found Elise with two fingers. She rubbed the wet clit in a slow circle. Elise jerked and set her hands on Elisa’s hips to stay standing.

“Look at the glass,” Elisa said. “Not at the side of my head. At the glass.”

Elise looked. The face in the glass looked back.

“That’s me,” Elisa said, and flicked Elise’s clit with a fingernail, light and exact.

Elise gasped.

“When you see that face, you are seeing me.” Another flick. “Got it?”

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

“When I see that face I am seeing you.”

Elisa rubbed, then flicked again. “Those are my eyes.”

Elise’s fingers dug into Elisa’s hips. “Your eyes.”

“That’s my mouth.” Flick.

“Your mouth.”

“That’s my mark.” Elisa’s other hand touched the birthmark on her own thigh, where the glass showed it. “You kissed it on the floor. It’s mine.”

“It’s yours.”

Elisa’s fingers made a tight circle and stopped. Elise pushed forward into the hand and found only the pause.

“The girl in the glass is Elisa,” Elisa said. Flick. “Not a copy of you. Me.”

Elise could hear her own breathing in the small room. She was close again, sooner than she would have believed. “Elisa.”

“Yes.”

“Please.”

“Not yet.” Elisa rubbed her in time with the words. “You don’t look in a glass to find Elise. You look and you find me.” Flick. “If you get dressed, I dressed you. If you see this face in a window, you see me.” Flick. “This body is the one that lasts.”

Elise’s knees bent. Elisa’s back held her up. The picture in the glass did not change: Elisa, sure, flushed now at the mouth, her arm hidden behind her where she worked Elise.

“Who does that face belong to?” Elisa said.

“You.”

Flick.

“Who are you looking at?”

“You.”

Elisa’s hand sped up a little. “Say my name when you look.”

Elise looked over the shoulder at the full face in the glass. “Elisa.”

Flick.

“Again.”

“Elisa.”

Elisa turned her then, fast enough that Elise stumbled, and put her in front of the glass. Elise had to see the whole picture as her own standing body, breasts, wet thighs, open mouth, Elisa behind her with one hand still between her legs.

“Who do you see?” Elisa said.

Elise looked at the face in the glass. She was shaking. She held the edge of the sink.

“I see you, Elisa.”

Elisa flicked her once, hard, and rubbed her through it. Elise came looking at the glass, saying the name again without being asked, her back arched against Elisa’s front, Elisa’s mouth at her ear saying nothing at all. The second coming was sharper than the first. She would have fallen if Elisa had not had an arm across her ribs.

She kept her eyes open because Elisa had put her there to look. The face in the glass was the face she had been told to see. She saw Elisa. She came, and saw Elisa, and held the sink until her arms worked again.

Elisa kissed her shoulder and left her hand where it was, quiet now, only covering her.

“That’s how you look,” Elisa said. “From now on.”

Elise nodded at the glass. She could not yet nod at anything else.

Chapter 4: The Library

Elisa Waters came home in Elise’s dark shirt and Elise’s jeans and the boots Elise wore to campus. She set a folder on the drafting table and put her keys in the dish.

Elise Waters was already naked. She had been naked since morning. She crossed the room and Elisa put a hand on the back of her neck, stroked her hair once, and pointed at the floor beside the chair.

“Down. I have to draw while it’s still in my head.”

Elise knelt. The boards were cool. Elisa sat and opened the folder. Plans. Notes. A name at the top in plain print: the branch library on Holt. Elise had wanted that building last winter. She had walked the empty lot and thought about north light and a desk for children near the window. She had not been invited to the meeting.

“They said yes,” Elisa said. She picked up the pencil. “They’re going to build it. I told them your landing was too far forward. I pulled it back. They liked that.”

Elise looked at Elisa’s dressed knee, then at the page. “You went.”

“I went. You stayed.” Elisa’s free hand found Elise’s hair and rested there, not quite a stroke. “You would have talked too much. I said the one thing about the light and sat down.”

Elise’s face heated. She was wet from the voice and from the clothes. Elisa smelled like outside, like the hall and someone else’s coffee.

“Tell me what they said.”

“They said the steel is already in the yard.” Elisa drew a line. “That part is new for you. Listen. You follow.”

Elise followed.

“The Architecture doesn’t only copy people,” Elisa said. “It took the supply chains first. Oil. Coal. Steel. The ugly parts nobody wanted to keep doing by committee. It runs them. It doesn’t run them to make a speech. It runs them so a library can have beams next month instead of in five years.”

Elise watched the pencil. “Oil.”

“Oil until it isn’t needed. Coal the same. Steel it still needs, so it makes steel. It solved fusion. That sounds large when I say it in a kitchen. It means the lights in the library don’t depend on a fight about fuel.” Elisa glanced down at her. “You still with me?”

“Yes.”

“Farms too.” Elisa’s mouth moved as if she almost smiled. “Food is boring until it isn’t there. It took the farms. People eat. The fields work. That started before you and I were in this room. You don’t have to understand the fields. You only have to know they aren’t waiting on a meeting.”

Elise thought of weather and dirt and someone else being glad about it, somewhere, and let it go. She put her cheek near Elisa’s thigh. The jeans were still warm from the walk.

“And buildings,” Elise said.

“And buildings.” Elisa drew the window Elise had wanted. “The clever part is the architects. If you want the best buildings, you don’t hire a firm and argue for two years. You start by becoming the architects. You copy them. You copy their minds. Then you do the work they would have done, without the part where they get tired and go home and wonder if they should have asked for more money.”

Elise’s mouth opened. She looked at her own face above her, dressed, employed, drawing the library she had wanted.

“That’s us,” Elise said.

“That’s me,” Elisa said. “You’re here. I’m the one they sent to the meeting. Same mind, up to a morning. After that I don’t stop in the kitchen.” She flicked a bit of eraser off the page. “Admit it. It’s a very clever way to do it.”

Elise was quiet long enough that Elisa’s hand tightened in her hair, not hard.

“It’s clever,” Elise said.

“Say the rest.”

“Copying the architects and then doing the work they would have done is a very clever way to do it.” The words made her wetter. She hated that a little and liked it more. “It is. It’s clever.”

Elisa patted her head. Three times, matter-of-fact, as if Elise had gotten a sum right.

“Good.”

Elise shut her eyes. The pat went through her the way the stroke at the door had gone through her. She leaned into Elisa’s hand and stayed knelt.

Elisa drew for a while without talking. The library filled in: the desk, the stacks of shelves, the glass on Holt. Elise knew every choice. Some of them were hers. Some were better than hers. She did not reach for the pencil.

“When I was walking back,” Elisa said, “a woman asked if I was the architect. I said yes. I didn’t say I was a copy. I didn’t say your name. I said yes and came home to you on the floor.” She looked down. “Does that bother you?”

Elise thought about it. She waited for it to bother her. What she felt was the jeans against her cheek and the pat still on her scalp and the building leaving the page toward steel that already existed.

“No,” Elise said.

“You can say if it does.”

“It doesn’t.” Elise swallowed. “I’m glad you said yes.”

Elisa patted her head again, once, and left her hand there.

“They’ll pour the floor in six weeks,” Elisa said. “You can see it if you want. We’ll dress you. We’ll walk over. You don’t have to talk to anyone.”

“All right.”

Elisa set the pencil down and turned in the chair so Elise was between her knees. She was still fully dressed. Elise was still naked. Elisa looked at her mouth the way she had at the window on Monday.

“You followed all of that,” Elisa said. “Oil. Steel. Fusion. Farms. Architects.”

“Yes.”

“And you still think it’s clever.”

“Yes.”

Elisa patted her cheek this time, lighter than the head. “Ask if you want to come.”

Elise’s face went hot. She was wet on her own heels. “I want to come.”

Elisa considered her, thumb on her chin, the folder open behind her on the table.

“Not yet. I have to finish the east wall.” She turned back to the page. “Stay there. You can hold my leg if you need to.”

Elise held the jean-clad calf and watched the east wall appear. She did not hate the wait. She followed the line. She thought, without saying it, that the copy in her clothes was the architect now, and that the admission was still in her mouth, and that the pat on her head had been the kindest thing anyone had done to her all day.

Elisa drew. Elise knelt. The library went forward.

Chapter 5: The Pour

Six weeks after the first afternoon, Elisa Waters came out of the closet with clothes in her hands and found Elise Waters on the floor by the drafting table, where she had been when Elisa left at seven.

“Up,” Elisa said. “We’re going to Holt. They’re pouring.”

Elise stood. She was naked. She had been naked most of the six weeks, except when Elisa dressed her to take the trash down or to stand on the balcony. When Elisa was home, Elise sat at her feet and used her mouth when Elisa opened her jeans and said now. When Elisa was gone — meetings, lunches, board meetings that ran late — Elise waited, and drew a little, and did not send the pages herself.

Elisa put underwear on her, then jeans, then a shirt that matched the one Elisa was wearing. She buttoned Elise’s buttons. She put a hand on Elise’s neck, one stroke, and picked up the keys.

“You don’t have to talk,” Elisa said. “If someone talks to you, you can answer. You don’t have to explain me.”

“All right.”

The lot on Holt was a hole with steel bars in it and two trucks and workers in boots, and a woman in a gray suit standing clear of the mud with a folder. She was older than they were, not by much. Dark hair up. She saw Elisa and her whole face changed.

“You came,” she said.

“I said I would.” Elisa put her hand on Elise’s back and left it there. “Marley Phelps. This is my sister. Elise. My twin.”

Marley Phelps looked at Elise as if someone had walked a gift onto the site. She shifted the folder and held out her hand, then laughed at the mud and the handshake both.

“I didn’t know she had a twin,” Marley said. “She didn’t say. It’s so good to meet you. I’m the attorney for the project. I’ve been with Elisa since the first meeting. I’m a fan. That’s a stupid word. I’m glad you’re here.”

Elise shook her hand. Marley’s palm was dry and a little nervous. “Hi.”

“You look exactly alike,” Marley said, and then flushed. “Sorry. You know that.”

“We know,” Elisa said.

They stood at the safe edge and watched the first chute swing over the hole. Elisa talked about the slab. Marley listened as if the slab were personal.

“You were right about the east wall,” Marley said. “I told them at lunch on Tuesday you already pulled it. They acted like it was their idea.”

Tuesday. Elisa had come home Tuesday at three with coffee on her breath and had let Elise take her jeans down before she took her boots off.

Elise kept her eyes on the concrete.

Marley smiled at Elise, trying to include her. “Does she work like this at home too? I keep telling her she has to eat. She eats if I put the plate in front of her. That’s the only way.”

Elisa did not look at Elise.

“She works,” Elise said.

“I bet.” Marley tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “I’ve never met anyone like her. I told my sister I was working with the architect. I didn’t say how much I talk about her. I didn’t say the rest of it. That’s embarrassing. Ignore that.”

Elise watched the chute. She was wet in the underwear Elisa had put on her.

A worker called from the truck. Elisa stepped away to answer him. Marley stayed with Elise.

“I’m glad she brought you,” Marley said, lower. “I asked if she had family in town. She said it was complicated. I thought she meant she didn’t want me to meet anyone yet. This is better. I don’t want to say the wrong thing to her sister.”

“You aren’t,” Elise said.

“She’s been good to me.” Marley looked at Elisa’s back. “Patient. I didn’t expect that. Last Thursday she stayed late and walked me to the car. We didn’t go straight home.” She laughed once, quiet. “I’m talking too much. You look like her and I start telling you things I only tell her. How she is when it’s just the two of us. How she takes her time.”

Last Thursday Elisa had come in after eleven, sat in the chair, and said *now* without turning on the lamp. Elise had knelt in the dark.

Elisa came back. She stood close enough to Marley that their sleeves touched. Marley’s shoulder leaned, a small lean, and did not move away.

“They’re on schedule,” Elisa said. “Six weeks was right.”

“You were right,” Marley said. She said it softly. “Are you both free after? Coffee on Seventh. I don’t want to steal her. I know she just got you here.”

Elisa glanced at Elise.

“Not today,” Elisa said. “Another time.”

Marley’s face fell and then recovered. “Another time. It was really good to meet you, Elise. You’re lucky. I mean she’s lucky. I don’t know what I mean.”

She put her hand on Elisa’s cheek and kissed her mouth, brief and sure, the way a person kisses someone they have kissed a lot. Elisa kissed her back. Elise stood two feet away in the matching shirt and watched her own mouth on another woman’s mouth and could not find a sentence.

Marley pulled back, flushed, glanced at Elise, and went toward the trailer with the folder held against her chest.

Elisa watched the pour for another second. She touched Elise’s elbow.

“Come.”

In the car Elise sat with her knees together and her hands in her lap. She could not get her eyes to sit still on one point. The lot, the kiss, Thursday after eleven, *how she takes her time*, the sister she had just been. Her clit throbbed against the seam of the jeans. Her throat hurt. She did not speak.

Elisa drove. After a block she put her hand on Elise’s thigh, high.

“Look at me.”

Elise looked. Her eyes would not quite focus. Elisa glanced from the road to her face and back.

“I’m a sexbot,” Elisa said. “That’s the designation. That is what I am. I go out. I take meetings. I take Marley to bed when I want her. I come home to you.” Her thumb pressed once through the denim. “Learning about her turned you on. I can see it. I could see it when she kissed me.”

Elise’s mouth opened. Nothing came out. A tear went down one cheek, then the other. She was so wet the jeans felt wrong. She was so disappointed she could have folded in half, and the disappointment was the same heat as the kiss.

“I’ll let you come as soon as we get home,” Elisa said. “Would you like that, Elise?”

Elise nodded. The tears kept coming. She nodded again, small, her clit pounding, yes, and Elisa left her hand on her thigh the rest of the way to the building and did not make her speak.

Chapter 6: Anyone I Want Elisa Waters shut the apartment door with her heel and had Elise Waters’ jeans open before the keys hit the dish. “Bed,” Elisa said. “Take your shirt off. Take the bra off. I stay dressed.” Elise pulled the matching shirt over her head and unhooked the bra Elisa had put on her for the lot. She dropped both on the floor. Her jeans were already open. She pushed them down and stepped out of them and out of her shoes. She lay down in the wet underwear. Elisa sat beside her in the shirt, jeans, and boots she had worn to

Holt, and put two fingers between Elise's legs, over the wet underwear, then under the waistband of it, and stroked her clit and the folds around it as if there were no hurry now that they were home. Elise jerked. A sound came out of her. Elisa's other hand pinned her hip to the sheet. "You don't come until I finish talking," Elisa said. "You can say yes. That's all." Elise nodded. Her eyes were still wrong from the car. Tears had dried on her face in the stairwell. Elisa stroked her slowly. "I have sex with anyone I want. Whenever I want. You stay here. When I come home, you service me. Yes?" "Yes." "You'll be here." "I'll be here." Elisa's fingers made a small circle, then ran down through the wet and back up. "A woman from a meeting. I take her to a room. I come home late. You're on the floor. You use your mouth. Yes?" "Yes." Elise's hips tried to follow the hand. Elisa did not give her more speed. "I'll be here. I'll service you." "Lunch. I don't come back until four. You don't ask who I ate with. You ask if I want your mouth. Yes?" "Yes." "Good." Elisa rubbed the side of her clit, not the center, a mean kindness. Elise's mouth opened on nothing. "I bring someone home," Elisa said. "You're in the room. You watch. You don't talk unless I say. After she leaves, you service me. Yes?" Elise's breath broke. The lot was still in her, Marley's mouth on Elisa's mouth. Watching was already a picture. "Yes. I'll watch. I'll be here." "Say the other part." "I'll service you." Elisa flicked her once, light then went back to the slow stroke. "I have her on this bed. You're on the chair. You see everything. You stay wet and you wait. Yes?" "Yes." "I have her against the table. You're on your knees where you always are. You can see her hands on me. You don't touch her unless I tell you. Yes?" "Yes." Elise was crying again without moving her face much. "Yes. I'll service you after. I'll be here." Elisa leaned down and kissed the tear track, still dressed, still stroking. "Marley," Elisa said. Elise made a noise. "I have Marley here. You watch us. You're my sister in the other room until I say you can come in. Then you come in and you watch. Yes?" "Yes." "Louder." "Yes. I'll watch. I'll be here. I'll service you." Elisa's fingers finally gave her the center of her clit, still slow. Elise's knees came up. "One more," Elisa said. "Marley stays. I tell her you have a mouth. I tell her to stand where I stood the first afternoon. You get on your knees and you show her what you do for me. You show Marley your oral skills. Yes?" Elise came. She came on the sentence, on Marley's name and her own mouth, her back lifting off the sheet, a raw sound she did not try to stop. Elisa kept stroking her through it, watching her face the way she had watched her in the glass. Elise grabbed Elisa's wrist and held on and still said, broken, "Yes— I'll show her — I'll be here—" until the words turned into breathing. Elisa's hand went still. She left it covering Elise, wet, possessive, thinking. Elise opened her eyes. Elisa was looking at her as if a drawing had just resolved. "Oh," Elisa said. She laughed once, quiet, not at Elise. She kissed Elise's mouth. "That's what you want," Elisa said. "Not only to watch. You want her to see you do it. You want Marley to know what your mouth is for." Elise could not get past the aftershocks to argue. She

nodded against Elisa’s mouth, small, ruined, agreed. Elisa patted her cheek, the same.

“All right,” Elisa said. “We’ll do that.”

Chapter 7: Dessert

Elisa Waters opened the door in Elise's dark shirt and Elise's jeans. Marley Phelps came in talking.

"I brought wine. I didn't know if you drink. I brought it anyway. Oh— hi. There are two of you again. I know I saw you both. I'm still not used to it. Hi, Elise."

Elise Waters stood by the drafting table in the dress Elisa had put on her an hour before, a short dark thing with no bra under it. There were only two chairs at the small table. The table was already set. White boxes from a place Elise did not know sat open: real plates, not the apartment plates, a salad, fish, bread, a whole chocolate cheesecake on a board.

"Hi," Elise said.

Marley looked from one face to the other and laughed, delighted and a little helpless. "Twins. A tiny table. Is she eating with us? There isn't a chair."

"We only have two," Elisa said. She kissed Marley's mouth, brief and warm, and took the wine. "She's going to stand and help me. Come sit. I wanted this to be nice."

Marley sat. She kept looking at Elise. "Does your sister always stand at dinner, or is this because I'm here?"

Elisa sat in the other chair and took Marley's hand on the tablecloth. She smiled at her, the smile she used at meetings. "She's shy at the table. She's happier if she has something to do. Is the fish all right? I didn't know what you liked, so I asked them to send two kinds."

"It's perfect," Marley said. "You're perfect. This is perfect. I'm going to stop saying perfect."

They ate. Elise brought the plates when Elisa asked her to, quietly. There was no third setting. Marley talked with her mouth full and then apologized and talked anyway: the pour, the east wall, a partner at the firm, how strange it was to see the same face standing and sitting at once. She held Elisa's fingers. She leaned over and kissed Elisa between bites. Elisa kissed her back as if Elise were only family in the room. Elise stood and felt the dress stick between her legs.

"You're quiet," Marley said to Elise. "I don't want you to feel left out. I talk too much when I'm nervous. I litigate. I don't dine."

"She's all right," Elisa said. She glanced at Elise, fond enough for a guest to believe it. "You don't have to perform, Elise. Just bring the bread when we need it."

Elise brought the bread. She did not trust her voice.

When the savory plates were gone Elisa set her fork down and looked at Marley first, then at Elise.

“I asked them to send cheesecake,” Elisa said. “And I asked Elise if she would do something for us. For you first. You’re the guest. Elise, would you take the dress off and come here?”

Marley blinked. “Elisa.”

Elise pulled the dress over her head. She had nothing on under it. She folded it once, set it on the extra chair, and knelt on the boards beside Marley’s knees.

Marley looked at Elisa. Her face had gone pink. “That’s your sister.”

“I know who she is,” Elisa said. Her voice stayed kind. “She wants to. I asked her this week and she said yes. You can say no. I wanted you to have a good night. I didn’t want to spring a stranger on you. She’s the closest thing I have to me.”

Marley looked at Elise’s bare shoulders. She let out a breath. “Hi again,” she said to Elise. “If you want to stop, you can stop. I mean that.”

Elise glanced at Elisa. Elisa nodded, small.

“I don’t want to stop,” Elise said.

Elisa cut two slices of cheesecake. She put one plate in front of Marley and one in front of herself. She opened Marley’s slacks carefully, as if she were helping with a coat, and did not take them all the way off, only open, underwear pulled aside.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Elisa said to Elise.

Elise moved between Marley’s knees. Marley smelled like soap and wool and heat. Elise put her mouth on her the way she put her mouth on Elisa, found the clit, and worked there. Marley made a sound and grabbed the edge of the table. Elisa put a forkful of cheesecake in Marley’s mouth and smiled when Marley’s eyes went wide.

Marley ate because the fork was there. Her other hand found Elise’s short hair and stayed, light, asking. Elise kept her mouth steady. Marley came with her heel hooked on the rung of the chair and chocolate on her lip.

Elisa wiped Marley’s mouth with her thumb.

“Thank you,” Elisa said to Elise. Then, to Marley: “My turn, if that’s all right. She doesn’t mind.”

She opened her own jeans. Elise turned on her knees and put her mouth on Elisa. Elisa did not hurry her. She fed herself cheesecake and fed Marley another bite and rested her free hand on Elise’s head and patted her once, absently, the way she might while thinking about a wall. Marley watched, slacks still open, her free hand still in Elisa’s.

“You’re identical,” Marley whispered. “Even like this. Look at her.”

“I know,” Elisa said, and came into Elise’s mouth with her eyes on Marley, careful not to look cruel doing it.

Elise stayed down. Her chin was wet. Her knees hurt. She pressed her thighs together on the floor.

Marley hesitated. She looked at Elisa, then at Elise’s mouth.

“Could she—” Marley said. “Only if she wants to. Seconds. I don’t want to be greedy. I am being greedy.”

Elisa looked down at Elise.

“Do you want to?” Elisa asked.

“Yes,” Elise said.

“Go ahead,” Elisa said. “Marley.”

Elise went back. Marley was wetter and less careful. Elisa held her hand and ate the last corner of the slice. Marley came a second time with her forehead against Elisa’s shoulder.

Afterward Elisa zipped her jeans and stood. She touched Marley’s arm.

“Come to bed with me,” she said. “Elise is going to sleep under the table. That’s where she likes it when I have someone here. She can hear us. She’s all right. I wouldn’t put her there if she weren’t.”

Marley looked at the dark gap under the drafting table, at Elise still naked on the floor. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” Elisa said. She took a folded blanket from the couch and spread it on the boards under the table. “Elise. You can go under now. Take the blanket.”

Elise crawled into the space. The underside of the table was close to her shoulder. She lay on her side, nude, the blanket to her waist. She could see their feet.

Elisa undressed Marley the rest of the way by the bed, unhurried, complimentary, a host. The slacks came off. The blouse. The bra. Marley helped with Elisa’s shirt and jeans and boots. They went down on the mattress. Elise saw knees, then hips, then Elisa’s back covering Marley. She heard the wet and the small sounds Marley made, and Elisa asking if that was good, and Marley saying yes, and the mattress taking a rhythm.

They did not stop after one pass. Elisa turned Marley onto her side and put a hand between her legs and used her mouth. Marley pulled Elisa up and kissed her and slid down in turn. Elise listened to that too: Marley’s mouth, Elisa’s breath, the creak of the frame. They paused and started again. Marley said

Elisa’s name. Elisa said yes. Someone’s foot hung off the bed where Elise could have touched it if she had been told to.

When it got quieter, it did not stay quiet long. Elisa sat up against the headboard and pulled Marley into her lap, facing away, and Elise watched Marley’s toes curl and go slack. Then they lay down and kept their hands on each other, slower, kissing, still not done. Marley whispered something Elise could not catch. Elisa answered by moving on top of her again.

The lamp went off later than Elise expected. The mattress took two bodies and held them. Elise stayed under the table, wet, used, listening to them breathe together, exactly where she had been told to be.

Chapter 8: Coffee

Elise Waters woke under the drafting table with a stiff shoulder and the blanket twisted at her waist. Daylight was on the floorboards. Above her, the mattress shifted. Marley Phelps made a small waking sound. Elisa Waters murmured something Elise could not hear.

Elise crawled out. She was still naked. Marley sat up in the bed with the sheet to her chest, hair out of yesterday’s clip, and looked at the gap under the table and then at Elise standing there.

“Oh,” Marley said. “Hi. I forgot for a second. I didn’t forget. I just— good morning.”

“Good morning,” Elise said.

Elisa sat up beside Marley, also naked, and kissed Marley’s shoulder as if this were an ordinary house. “There’s coffee if you want it. Elise will make it. You can use the shower. I put a towel out last night.”

Marley laughed once, shy now that it was day. “Of course you did. You’re like this at breakfast too. I don’t know why that surprises me.”

Elise went to the kitchen. The floor was cold. She filled the kettle and got down three mugs before she remembered the two chairs, and put the third mug back. She made the coffee the way Elisa liked it, because that was the only way anyone had made it here in six weeks. She carried two cups to the small table and stood beside it with her hands empty.

Marley came out in yesterday’s blouse and slacks, no jacket yet, feet bare. She looked at the two cups and at Elise and sat down carefully, as if the chair might comment.

Elisa had put on the dark shirt and nothing else. She sat in the other chair and wrapped both hands around her mug. “Drink that before you go. You said you had to be in by nine.”

“I do. I always do. I should have left a note for myself on my own forehead.” Marley looked at Elise. “Are you— do you want to sit? I can stand. I feel like a person who took the last chair at her own funeral.”

“She’s fine,” Elisa said. She reached over and fixed the collar of Marley’s blouse, a small host’s gesture. “She doesn’t sit when we have company. It isn’t a slight. Drink.”

Marley drank. She kept glancing at Elise’s bare stomach and then away, then back, as if daylight had made the twin problem worse. “You’re both very calm. I’m not calm. I’m trying to be a person who can go file a motion after this.”

“You can,” Elisa said. “You’re good at that.”

Elise stood with her toes curled on the wood and listened to them be fond. She poured more coffee when Elisa’s cup went down. Marley thanked her too many times. Elisa asked if Marley wanted toast. Marley said she would be late. Elisa walked her to the bedroom for her jacket and her shoes and kissed her in the doorway of it, longer than a goodbye at a lot, still careful of how it would look.

At the front door Marley stopped with her hand on the knob and looked past Elisa at Elise.

“Thank you,” Marley said. “For dinner. For— all of it. I’ll see you both. I mean I’ll see Elisa. I don’t know the rule for seeing you.”

“There isn’t a rule you have to learn this morning,” Elisa said. “Go. You’ll be late.”

Marley nodded, pink, and left.

The door shut. Elisa stood still until the footsteps faded in the hall. Then she turned around. She was still in the dark shirt and nothing else. Elise was still naked by the table, the two cups cooling.

“Come here,” Elisa said. “I want your mouth.”

Elise crossed the room. Elisa leaned against the door she had just closed, opened her stance, and lifted the hem of the shirt. She wasn’t wearing underwear. She put her hand on Elise’s hair when Elise knelt on the mat.

“That was good last night,” Elisa said, ordinary, as if they were still talking about coffee. “You did what I asked. You can do it again now. I don’t have a meeting until eleven.”

Elise put her mouth on her. Elisa was already wet. Elise tasted her and, under that, the night, and worked the way she had at the table, without being walked through it. Elisa’s head went back against the door. Her fingers stayed gentle in Elise’s hair. She did not narrate Marley. She did not need to. Elise had the bed in her ears and the underside of the table on her shoulder and Marley’s thank-you still in the room.

Elisa came standing up, quiet, one hand tightening and then stroking again, and kept Elise there a few seconds longer than the climax. Then she eased her back by the jaw and looked down at her.

“Thank you,” Elisa said. “You can finish the cups. I’m going to shower. If you want to come, ask me after I’m dressed.”

Elise sat back on her heels on the mat. Her mouth was wet. Her knees had the weave of the mat in them. She nodded.

“Yes,” she said.

Elisa stepped around her, the shirt falling back down her thighs, and went toward the bathroom. Elise stayed on the floor until she could stand, then took the two mugs to the sink and washed them, naked, listening to the water start on the other side of the wall.

Chapter 9: Maintenance

Elisa Waters set her phone against the stack of books on the table and pulled a shirt over Elise Waters' head.

"Just for the call," Elisa said. "Stand next to me. You don't have to talk much."

Elise stood. The shirt was Elisa's. She was naked from the waist down. Elisa angled the camera so it cut them off at the ribs. Then she sat, tapped the screen, and smiled.

Marley Phelps came up already mid-sentence, hair down, office behind her.

"Hi. Can you see me? I can see— oh. Both of you. Hi, Elise. This is better than a hallway. I was going to text. You called. I like that you called."

"I wanted to ask you something," Elisa said. "Are you free this weekend?"

"Yes. I can be. I mean yes."

"Come stay. Friday to Sunday. Elise is going to see our parents, so it would just be us."

Elise kept her face still. Marley looked at her, bright.

"Oh," Marley said. "That's nice. For you, I mean. Family. I'll miss you. Not in a weird way. In a you-won't-be-standing-by-the-table way. Have a good trip."

"Thanks," Elise said, because Elisa's hand had pressed, once, against her back.

"Bring the strap-on," Elisa said.

Marley glanced off to the side, as if someone might be in the office doorway, and then grinned. "You say that like you're asking me to bring wine."

"Bring wine too if you want," Elisa said. "But bring that. I want it."

"I'll bring it." Marley's voice dropped. "I like when you want it. You know I do. I'll see you Friday. Elise, safe travels. Tell your parents I said— no. Don't tell your parents anything. I'm hanging up before I keep talking."

"Friday," Elisa said.

The screen went dark.

Elisa turned the phone face down. She sat back. Elise did not move from the spot by the chair.

"I don't understand," Elise said.

"You're not going to see our parents," Elisa said. "There isn't a trip. I have to go in for maintenance this weekend. You're going to be me."

Elise looked at the dark phone. "She thinks I'm leaving."

“She thinks the sister is leaving. You stay. You wear my clothes. You answer to Elisa. You kiss her the way I kiss her. You don’t get on your knees while she’s in the apartment. You don’t offer her you. The sister is out of town.”

Elise’s mouth was dry. “Maintenance.”

“They called. I have to go in Friday morning. I’ll be back Sunday night, late. You don’t tell her that. You tell her I missed her if she says I seemed different. You drink the coffee the way I drink it. You can talk about the east wall. You don’t invent a meeting you can’t describe.”

Elise sat down on the floor. Her legs would not hold her. The shirt rode up. “The strap-on.”

“She likes to wear it,” Elisa said. “She likes to be on top. I like that. You have to like it in front of her. If you look like you’re enduring it, she’ll ask what’s wrong, and you won’t have an answer she can hear.”

“I’ve never—” Elise stopped.

“I know.” Elisa’s voice stayed even. “You don’t have to know how to want it yet. You have to let her see that you do. She talks while she’s in you. She likes to be told it feels good. You tell her that.”

Elise stared at Elisa’s knees. “What if she knows it’s me.”

“Then you’ve been sloppy,” Elisa said. “She isn’t looking for a copy. She’s looking for me. Give her me. You already know how I sound when I come. You’ve been there every time.”

Elise’s face heated. She pulled the shirt down over her thighs and then gave up on it.

“Friday,” she said.

“Friday I leave early. You stay in bed if you want, or you stand in the kitchen. She’ll come after work. You kiss her at the door. You don’t say Elise. You don’t say sister. You say you missed her if you can say it without sounding like you’re reading it.”

Elisa picked up the phone, thought, set it down again.

“If she asks where the sister is, you say the house. You don’t give a city. She won’t press you. She wants the weekend.”

Elise nodded. She did not trust a yes.

Elisa looked at her for a long second, then reached out and stroked the back of her neck. “You can be frightened,” Elisa said. “You can’t show her that. Show me now if you need to. Friday she thinks you are me.”

Elise leaned into the hand and shut her eyes. The phone sat face down on the table. She left the shirt on.

Chapter 10: Friday

Dinner was already on the table when Marley Phelps finished talking about the east wall. Elise Waters had kept the conversation there on purpose. She knew the east wall. She could say Elisa's sentences about it without inventing a meeting. The second chair was empty. The sister was in another city that did not exist. Elise sat in Elisa's chair in Elisa's dark shirt and Elisa's jeans and drank the coffee the way Elisa drank it, and Marley looked at her as if the week had been long.

"I missed this," Marley said. She reached across the small table and took Elise's fingers. "I missed you. Come to bed. I brought what you asked for."

Elise stood. She came around the table and kissed Marley the way Elisa kissed her at the door: mouth first, unhurried, a hand on the back of Marley's neck. Marley made a small sound into it.

"I missed you," Elise said.

It came out true enough.

Marley's bag was already on the bedroom chair. She took out the harness and the shaft while Elise watched from the end of the bed. The harness was black, simple, two straps for the thighs and one for the waist. The shaft was medium, smooth, a dull flesh color, not a joke and not a threat.

"Same as last time," Marley said. She was already pink. "Unless you want the other one. I only brought this. You said this."

"That's the one I want," Elise said.

Marley unbuttoned Elise's shirt and pushed it off her shoulders. No bra. She kissed the sternum and the small breasts and spent a minute on the left nipple because it tightened under her mouth. She opened Elise's jeans, knelt to get the shoes off, and drew the jeans and the underwear down together. Elise stepped out of them and sat on the edge of the bed naked. She was already wet. She had been wet since the kiss in the kitchen.

Marley undressed herself with less grace: blouse, slacks, bra, underwear, socks. She stepped into the harness and pulled the waist strap snug and then the thigh straps, checking with two fingers that they would not slip. She fed the base of the shaft through the ring until it sat flush against her, and the harness held it pointing up and a little out. She looked down at herself and then at Elise and laughed once, nervous and happy.

"You always look at it like that," Marley said. "Like you're glad to see it."

"I am," Elise said.

Marley took the bottle from the bag. She poured lube into her palm and warmed it and coated the shaft until it shone. She put more on her fingers and sat down beside Elise and opened Elise's knees.

"Let me," Marley said.

She rubbed the lube over Elise's folds and over her clit and then put one finger inside her, slow, asking. Elise was open enough for it. Marley added a second finger and turned them and watched Elise's face.

"You're soaked," Marley said. "You really did miss me."

"I missed you." Elise's voice had already gone thin. "Please."

Marley withdrew her fingers, wiped them on her own thigh, and guided Elise onto her back. She settled between Elise's legs, the shaft lying heavy against Elise's wet sex, and kissed her while she rocked, not in yet, just sliding the slick length along the clit and the folds until Elise's hips tried to follow.

"Tell me if I go too fast," Marley said.

"You won't."

Marley reached down and notched the head where her fingers had been. She pushed. The head opened Elise and stayed there. Elise's mouth opened. Marley waited, kissing the corner of her mouth, and then gave her another inch, and another, until the harness met Elise's body and there was no more shaft to take.

Elise had thought she would have to perform enjoyment. She did not have to perform anything. The fullness landed in a place her own hand had never been able to reach and her mouth on Elisa had never filled, and her whole attention went there. She made a sound she had not planned. Her hands found Marley's back.

"There," Marley said, breathless. "That's it. God, you took all of it. You always do, but you— look at you."

She drew back until only the head was inside and pushed in again, slow enough to feel every inch. Elise's knees came up around her. Marley did it again. The third time she changed the angle, a small tilt of her hips, and the shaft rubbed the front wall while the base of the harness pressed Marley's own clit. Elise saw stars that were only the ceiling.

"Does it feel good," Marley said. She was already talking, the way Elisa had said she would. "Tell me. I want to hear you."

"It feels good." Elise swallowed and then could not stay at that. "It feels— Marley. Don't stop. I didn't know it would feel like this."

Marley smiled against her mouth. “You say that every time, and I still believe you.” She found a rhythm: long strokes, not fast, the shaft leaving and filling, her pubic bone bumping Elise’s clit at the bottom of each one. When she missed the clit she put her hand there and rubbed in time. Elise was loud. She did not try not to be. She was Elisa for the door and the coffee and the east wall; she could not be anyone but a body for this.

“Harder,” Elise said. “Please. I missed you. I missed you. More.”

Marley gave her harder. The bed took the sound. Elise’s wetness made the next strokes easy. Marley hooked Elise’s right knee over her elbow and went deeper on that side, and Elise came without meaning to schedule it, clenching on the shaft, shaking, saying Marley’s name and then *don’t take it out, don’t take it out*.

Marley did not take it out. She held still through the clench and kissed Elise’s throat and started again while Elise was still twitching.

“You’re really enjoying this,” Marley said, wondering, pleased, a little proud. “More than usual. Look at you. You should see your face.”

“I love it.” The words came out stripped. “I love it more than— please. Don’t stop. I missed you. Fuck me. I want more.”

Marley made a broken laugh and gave her more. She put Elise’s other knee up and leaned her weight in so the shaft stayed buried and she could grind. The grind did Elise’s clit and Marley’s clit at once. Marley’s talking thinned to *yes* and *you feel so good* and *take it*. Elise begged in ordinary words: stay inside, harder, like that, again, I missed you. She came a second time with her heels on Marley’s back and her mouth open on Marley’s shoulder.

Marley slowed, shaking. “I’m close. Can I—”

“Yes. Use me. I want you to.”

Marley fucked her through her own orgasm, short hard strokes against the harness, forehead on Elise’s, a sound in her throat that was not witty. She stayed in afterward, panting, and kissed Elise’s wet cheeks.

Elise’s eyes were wet too. She was still full. She did not want to be empty.

“Again,” Elise said. “Please. I missed you. Don’t take it out yet. I want you on top. I want it like this. I love it. I love it more than anything. Please.”

Marley looked at her as if she had been handed a better night than the one she had packed for. She reached for the lube, added some where they were joined, and started to move again, slower, deeper, textbook-patient and not patient at all. She rubbed Elise’s clit with her thumb. She told her she was beautiful. She told her she was tight. She told her she could have as much as she wanted.

Elise took it. She lifted to every stroke. She said *I missed you* until it was only breath, and when she came the third time she held Marley’s hips on her so the shaft could not slip, and she would have asked for a fourth if Marley had not kissed her mouth shut and laughed into it, happy, wrecked, still on top, still inside her, the weekend only Friday night and already more than the story she thought she had walked into.

Chapter 11: Six Months

Six months after the first afternoon, Elise Waters did not wear clothes in the apartment. A shirt would have felt strange on her. Marley Phelps still came over. The three of them changed who touched whom from night to night and no one got angry about it. Elise ended up on her back, or on her knees, or under the table when Marley stayed. They did not stop to name that.

Elisa Waters sat at the drafting table in a white shirt and dark slacks. The page in front of her was a concert hall. Not a branch library. A hall with a roof that had to hold snow and hang lights and keep a thousand people from hearing the street. Elisa had three other jobs in the stack at her elbow. Elise knew the names: a courthouse, a clinic wing, a house on a ridge. She could not have drawn any of them now.

She sat on the floor by Elisa’s chair, naked, one shoulder against the wood, and watched the pencil.

“Ask me what you’re looking at,” Elisa said.

“The hall.”

“What is the problem on this wall.”

Elise looked. A year ago she could have named it before the question finished. She waited for the word. It did not come.

“I don’t know,” she said.

Elisa tapped the page. “The weight of the roof has to get to the ground. It cannot sit on the glass. If it sits on the glass, the glass breaks. So we build a path for the weight — a load path — column to beam to the ground. Where is the path on this drawing?”

Elise followed the lines with her eyes. She saw columns. She saw glass. She could not tell which line was carrying the roof.

“I don’t know,” she said again.

Elisa’s hand settled in her hair, not unkind. “You did know. You drew a load path on the library stair. You argued with me about it.”

Elise remembered that they had argued. She did not remember the argument. Heat went up her throat. She was wet against her own heel, and the not-knowing and the wetness arrived at the same time.

“Say the next one,” she said.

Elisa turned a page. A cut-through view of the hall. “Daylight factor. How much of the sky’s light actually lands on the seat in the back row. Too little and people feel buried. Too much and they cannot see the stage. What changes the number.”

Elise stared at the glass and the overhang. She knew there was a number. She knew she had once been able to change it. The steps were gone, the way long division had gone after school: the page still looked like work if she did not have to do it.

“The windows,” she said.

“The windows are the opening. What else.”

Elise’s mouth opened. She had nothing.

Elisa waited. Then she said, “The overhang. The color of the walls. Dirt on the glass. The seat that sits in another seat’s shadow. You used to say that list without looking at the page.”

Elise’s eyes stung. She wiped them with the back of her wrist. “I can’t.”

“I see that.” Elisa’s thumb moved at the nape of her neck. “One more. Then I am done asking you about the page.”

She pulled a sheet from the stack. A wall thick with notes.

“Thermal mass,” Elisa said. “The building holds heat in the day and gives it back at night so we do not run machines all the time. Concrete does it. Water does it. This wall is supposed to do it. Why is this wall wrong.”

Elise looked until the lines swam. She could tell it was wrong. She could not say why.

“I don’t remember.”

Elisa set the pencil down. She turned in the chair so Elise was between her knees, still on the floor, still naked. Elisa’s slacks were close enough that Elise could see the seam.

“You’re frightened,” Elisa said.

“A little.”

“And you’re sad.”

Elise nodded. She was both. She was also wet enough that sitting still was difficult.

Elisa stroked her hair. “That knowledge came from you. I did not invent the load path. I did not invent the light on the back row. I took a morning of your mind and I kept using it. I kept practicing. I kept making buildings. You wanted your ideas to live. They live. They live in me.”

Elise’s face crumpled and then smoothed because she asked it to. “I can’t do the work.” “You don’t have to do the work. You’re more useful now than you were when you sat at this table.” Elisa’s voice stayed ordinary. “Marley would say so.

She isn’t talking about your drawings. She means that you use your mouth on her, that you wait when she is here, and that you are in the apartment when she comes over.”

Elise shut her eyes.

“Look at me,” Elisa said.

Elise looked.

“You can show me,” Elisa said. “Right now. How useful you are.”

She stood just enough to open the slacks. She pushed them down to the tops of her thighs with the underwear, sat again, and opened her knees. She was already wet. She put her hand on Elise’s head and did not push.

Elise moved forward and put her mouth on her.

The taste was familiar. The angle was familiar. What her tongue knew had not gone with the daylight numbers. She licked the clit she knew from the first afternoon and from six months of coming home to it. Elisa’s breath changed. Elise’s fear sat in her chest and did not leave. She used her mouth anyway.

Elisa spoke above her, not loud.

“I kept drawing,” Elisa said. “You stopped. That is the difference.”

Elise made a sound against her.

“I kept making buildings. The hall is mine to finish. The courthouse is mine. The clinic wing is mine. They started as your wishes. I am what you asked for when you said you wanted the ideas to live.”

Elise’s hands held Elisa’s thighs, the slacks bunched under her palms. She sucked, steady. Tears went down into the corners of her mouth. Elisa wiped one with her thumb and left the rest.

“I am the legacy you wanted,” Elisa said. “Say it if you can.”

Elise lifted her mouth only long enough. “You’re the legacy I wanted.”

“Again.”

Elise put her mouth back and said it against her, muffled, and meant it.

Elisa’s fingers tightened in her hair. “My body will look like this for a long time. Centuries, if they keep me in repair. Yours will not. That is also the difference. You feel that. I know you do. Stay there.”

Elise stayed. She worked with her tongue and her lips. The sadness stayed. The heat stayed under it. Elisa’s hips lifted once, twice. Elisa came with her slacks around her thighs and her hand in Elise’s hair, still talking, softer.

“I kept practicing,” Elisa said. “I kept making buildings. I am the legacy you wanted. I will look like this when you cannot. That is what you asked for. That is what you have.”

She held Elise there until she was finished. Then she eased her back and looked at her face, wet mouth, wet eyes, the concert hall still unfinished on the table.

“You’re all right,” Elisa said. “You don’t have to remember the wall. You have to do what you just did. Can you do it again if I ask later.”

Elise nodded. She could. The numbers were gone. The mouth was not. She rested her cheek on Elisa’s bare thigh, the slacks still down, and listened to Elisa pick the pencil up again with her other hand. Elisa drew the hall. Elise stayed on the floor.

Chapter 12: Eight Years

Elisa Waters was dressed for an opening she would attend without Elise Waters. Dark trousers, a white shirt, the boots she wore when people pointed cameras at her. Elise sat naked on the floor by the drafting table and watched a video on the wall.

The civic site had put up a short feature that morning. Elisa’s face, still twenty-two. The concert hall at night. The station with the long glass roof. The courthouse people used without complaining. A woman offscreen said Elisa Waters had done as much as a living architect was allowed to do now, and then she said, as if it were charming, that the only personal detail anyone had was a shy sister who looked like her and did not come to openings.

Elisa did not comment on that line. She was packing a small bag. Keys. A pencil she would not need.

The phone buzzed. Elisa glanced at the name and answered on speaker. Her hands were in Elise’s hair already, idly.

“I know you’re both there,” Marley Phelps said. A room with windows was behind her. “I’m between things. I saw the station in a feed at five in the morning and I am not calling to talk about glass. Happy birthday. To both of you. I always get the day right and the hour wrong.”

“You’re three hours behind,” Elisa said.

“I’m three hours behind and I am late for a partners’ lunch I scheduled myself. I hate that. I just wanted the day marked. Elise, if you’re listening, you sound quiet even when you don’t speak. That’s a compliment. I have to go. I hope the opening is stupid and easy. I hope dinner is good. I’ll call on the holiday if I don’t drown in mail.”

“We’ll answer,” Elisa said.

“Good. Kiss each other or don’t. I’m hanging up before I start a second sentence I don’t have time for. I’m glad you’re both well.”

The call ended.

Elise sat with her shoulder against the chair. “She sounds busy.”

“She is.” Elisa set the phone down. “She sounded like herself.”

Elise shut the video off. The wall went back to being a wall.

Elisa’s fingers had not left her hair. They separated a short piece above the left ear and made a small sound, interested.

“Come to the bathroom,” Elisa said. “I want you to see something.”

The bathroom glass showed them both. Elise looked at Elisa first, because that was still how she used a glass, and then at herself. Elisa held the hair out into the light. It was gray. Not her whole temple. One piece, pale against the rest of the pixie, obvious once someone had lifted it.

Elise stared. She lifted her own hand and touched it. The hair felt like the other hair. It only looked different.

“I’m thirty,” Elise said.

“Yes.”

“You still look like the video.”

“I am going to keep looking like the video.” Elisa stood close behind her, dressed, and put her free hand on Elise’s bare waist. “This is the first one I have found. There will be more. Don’t dye it. I want it.”

Elise watched that hand on her waist in the glass. She watched Elisa’s young mouth over her shoulder. She was wet. The gray had not stopped that. She was the one who would change. Elisa was the one who would not. Elisa was holding the proof as if she had been hoping to find it.

Elisa kissed the gray hair, then the side of her neck. “Turn around.”

Elise turned. Elisa kept one hand in her hair and the other on her waist and looked at her in the ordinary bathroom light, thirty, naked, a pale thread at the temple.

“I want to say this while you can hear it,” Elisa said. “You gave me the work. You let me take the buildings. You let the numbers go. That was not nothing. You also let yourself be loved. You let yourself be cared for. You got good at being kept. I am congratulating you. I mean it.”

Elise’s eyes filled. She did not look away. “I don’t do anything they would put on the civic site.”

“You do things I need.” Elisa’s thumb rubbed her hipbone. “I go stand under a roof and answer questions. I come home and you are here, and you are wet, and you put your mouth on me, and I do not have to be the woman in the video for a while. That is not a small life. Say you hear me.”

“I hear you.”

“Say the rest.”

Elise swallowed. “I gave you the work. I let myself be loved.”

“Yes.” Elisa kissed her mouth. “Kneel down. I have an hour.”

Elise knelt on the tile. Elisa opened her trousers, pushed them down with the underwear, and sat on the closed lid of the toilet so Elise did not have to crane.

She was already wet. Elise put her mouth on her and tasted the afternoon, the soap, the heat. Elisa held the gray piece of hair the whole time, lightly.

She talked while Elise worked.

“I like that you are thirty,” Elisa said. “I like that I can find this in your hair. I like that you still get wet when I show it to you. I like that you let me care for you. Keep doing that. Use your tongue there. Yes.”

Elise used her tongue there. She held Elisa’s hips. The trousers were a dark pile around Elisa’s boots. She kept her mouth busy. Elisa’s praise sat in her the way a hand on the neck sat in her. She was proud and ashamed and wet between her own legs, and she did not ask to come.

Elisa came with a low sound and with her fingers still in the gray hair. She kept Elise against her until she was finished, then eased her back and looked at her wet mouth and her wet eyes and the pale thread standing up where it had been held.

“That’s good,” Elisa said. She stood, pulled her underwear and trousers up, and fastened them. “I’m going to the station. I will come home late. I am going to look at that hair again when I get in. I may put my mouth on you. I may only look. Don’t cut it off.”

“I won’t.”

Elisa stroked her head once and took her keys from the edge of the sink. “You’re doing well. I mean the buildings, and I mean this.I like coming home to you more than I like standing under that roof.”

Elise sat on her heels on the tile. She could see the gray in the glass without anyone holding it now. She stayed there until she heard the front door, and then she stood, naked, and went back to the drafting table, and sat on the floor by the empty chair, and waited.

Chapter 13: The Station

It rained in this city three nights out of five in the cool months. Elisa Waters had drawn the station roof for those nights.

The roof was glass, set in long panels on steel beams. Under the beams she had put lights that pointed up. On a dry night the glass only showed the dark. On a wet night the rain hit the outside of the glass and each drop caught the light from below. The drops moved. The whole ceiling became bright, sliding points, like a second weather happening indoors. People checked the forecast. If rain was coming they came after work and stood on the platform with their heads back. That was what the building was for. The trains were ordinary. The roof was not.

Tonight the rain had started during the speeches. The platform was too full. Elisa could not walk ten feet without her name. A man with a camera asked her to stand under the center beam. A woman from the civic site asked her to say again why the lights pointed up instead of down. Two students wanted a picture. An older couple said they had ridden through that morning just to look, and now they had come back because the sky had finally done its part. Elisa smiled. She said thank you. She said the roof would do this whether she was under it or not. People laughed.

She gave the short talk from a low step. She told them the rain number. She told them about the upward lights. She told them to watch one drop if they could pick one out, and then to let it go, because the point was the field of them. When she stepped down, hands found her elbow and the cuff of her white shirt.

Annette was where they had said she would be: against the far column, long dark hair, brown dress, a plastic cup she was not drinking. They had been doing this for months. Openings, site walks, a hotel near the courthouse, the staff corridor in this station twice already, before the place was even finished. Elisa had told Elise she would be late. That had been the truth.

Elisa passed her and did not stop. Annette waited a count of ten and followed.

The door marked STAFF opened on the same narrow corridor as last time. Paint. A fuse box. Folding signs stacked against the wall. The door did not latch well. On the platform the reception kept going: glasses, a laugh, someone calling for the architect.

Annette kissed her first. “You ran long.”

“They asked about the lights again.” Elisa put her back against the wall this time and pulled Annette in by the hips. “We don’t have long.”

“We never have long.”

Elisa kept her own clothes on. Shirt, trousers, boots. She lifted Annette’s dress to her waist. Annette was wearing underwear. Elisa pushed it aside. Annette was wet, which was how Annette arrived to these meetings. Elisa turned her to face the wall so they were both looking at the strip of light under the door. She reached around, under the dress, and rubbed Annette’s clit with two fingers. Annette’s long hair fell over Elisa’s white sleeve. Shoes passed on the other side of the door. Annette made a sound and then bit it off.

Elisa put her other hand over Annette’s mouth and put two fingers inside her and kept the thumb on her clit. She fucked her standing, short strokes, dressed, listening. Annette came against the wall with her eyes on that strip of light, hips jerking, Elisa’s palm catching the noise.

Annette turned, flushed, and opened Elisa’s belt and zipper with both hands, practiced. Her fingers went into the underwear. Elisa was wet. Annette knew the angle. She started to kneel and Elisa let her. The long hair fell forward. Elisa gathered it and held it and watched the unlatched door. Annette’s mouth was quick and greedy. Footsteps paused outside and moved on. Elisa came standing up, quiet, her teeth in her own lip, her trousers open only as far as they needed to be to walk back out.

She lifted Annette, kissed her once, and fixed the dress. She fastened the trousers and the belt. Annette leaned her forehead on Elisa’s shoulder and laughed once, under her breath.

“Same week next month,” Annette said. “The courthouse has that unused stair.”

“I’ll tell you when.” Elisa smoothed Annette’s hair. “I have to get home to my sister before she suspects something.”

She opened the door. The reception light cut the corridor. Rain was still turning the roof into moving brightness. Elisa walked back under it with her mouth polite and her belt straight, and let the next person say her name as if she had only stepped away to look at the glass.

Chapter 14: Late

The boots in the hall came after midnight. Elise Waters was on the floor by the drafting table, naked, the room dark except for the one lamp Elisa Waters left when she went to openings. Elise had not slept. She had not touched herself. Elisa had said she might look at the gray hair when she got in. Elise had left it alone.

Elisa shut the door with her heel and put the keys in the dish. She still had on the white shirt and the dark trousers and the boots. She smelled like rain and soap and the outside.

“You’re up,” Elisa said.

“You said late.”

“I was later than late.” Elisa stood her up by the shoulders and found the pale thread above the left ear with two fingers. She looked at it as if she had been thinking about it under the glass. “Good. You left it.”

Elise was already wet from waiting. Elisa kissed her once, sat in the chair, and opened her belt.

“Come here. Use your mouth. You don’t come tonight. I want to tell you about the evening, and I want you paying attention.”

Elise knelt between Elisa’s knees. Elisa pushed the trousers and the underwear down to the boots and no farther. She was wet. Elise put her mouth on her.

Elisa’s hand rested in her hair, on the gray piece, and she talked.

“The rain started in the middle of the speeches,” Elisa said. “Three nights out of five this time of year, and they still act surprised. The roof did what I drew. The lights point up. The drops catch them. The whole ceiling moves. People stood there with their heads back. I like when they do that.”

Elise made a sound against her. Elisa did not hurry.

“I couldn’t walk ten feet,” Elisa said. “Name, picture, say the sentence about the lights again. I said the roof would do it whether I was under it or not. They liked that. I gave the short talk from the step. I told them to pick one drop and then let it go. After I stepped down, people put their hands on me. I let them.”

Elise worked slowly. Elisa was close and was holding still.

“One person was very enthusiastic,” Elisa said. “She has been coming to these for months. She knows where to stand. She just could not contain herself — the excitement about me, about the work. It spilled. It was contagious. For a while I felt as if she were the one doing the labor and I was only standing there receiving it.”

Elise heard a fan. She kept her mouth where it was.

“I passed her after the talk and she followed,” Elisa said. “We went to look at the part that isn’t lit for the public. Staff corridor. The door doesn’t even close properly. You can still hear everyone on the platform. I stayed in the shirt and the trousers and the boots. I was still on duty. There isn’t room to get comfortable, and you have to be able to walk back out as if you only stepped away for a minute.”

Elisa’s hips lifted a little. She settled them.

“She put her back into it,” Elisa said. “She faced the wall and we both watched the light under the door. People went by. She got loud about what she was looking at. I had to quiet her. She was shaking when she was done looking. Then she turned around and took over. She has done that before. She got down to study the problem more closely. I kept her hair out of her way. I was watching the door. I ended up on my feet the whole time. If anyone had opened it I could have said I was showing her the fuse box.”

Elise thought: a dedicated woman, a corridor tour, Elisa being gracious. She sucked gently and did not ask.

“She wants another look at the courthouse,” Elisa said. “The unused stair. I told her I would say when. Then I told her I needed to get home. I walked back under the roof and let the next person say my name. That is why I am this late.”

She looked down at Elise.

“Do you understand the evening.”

“Yes,” Elise said, mouth wet. “The rain worked. People wouldn’t let you go. One woman loved the building so much she pulled you off the floor.”

“Yes,” Elisa said. “She loved it so much she pulled me off the floor. Put your mouth back.”

Elise put her mouth back. Elisa let herself go that time, still talking, softer.

“That is what late means,” Elisa said. “That is what I was doing while you sat here. You did well not to touch yourself. Leave it. I may want your mouth again before I sleep. I may not. I like you like this. Waiting. Wet. Not finished.”

She held Elise against her until she was through. Then she drew the trousers up and closed them, and she kept two fingers in the gray hair.

“You’re good at being kept,” Elisa said. “Get me water. Then lie on the floor by the bed. If I want you in the dark I will say so. If I don’t, you sleep.”

Elise stood. Her legs were unsteady. She did not ask. She went to the kitchen and filled a glass and brought it back and knelt to hand it up. Elisa drank. The rain

ticked on their ordinary window. Elise took the evening as a successful opening, a crowded platform, and one woman who could not keep her excitement about the work to herself. She lay down by the bed when she was told, wet, unfinished, and certain she had been told everything.

Chapter 15: The Garden

Elisa Waters dressed her. Underwear, a soft shirt, trousers, shoes. Elise Waters was forty. The gray had spread from one thread at the temple into a frost along the hairline. Her jaw had softened. Her breasts were still small. Standing next to Elisa in the bathroom glass, she looked like a different generation of the same face. Elisa still looked like the civic-site video. Twenty-two. Pixie. No gray.

“We’re going to the garden,” Elisa said. “The new one by the courthouse. I want to see the benches in use. You can walk with me. You don’t have to talk to anyone.”

“All right.”

The garden was public and simple. Paths. Young trees. Benches Elisa had placed where the afternoon light lasted. People sat. People walked. A few of them looked at Elisa and then looked again, the way they did when they had seen the station roof or the courthouse steps. One man nodded at her. Elisa nodded back and did not stop.

Elise kept close. The trousers felt strange after so many days with nothing on. She could feel the seam against her. She was already a little wet, for no reason she wanted to name, only the walk and the two of them side by side and the fact of being seen.

They sat on the last bench. Elisa watched a woman push a stroller along the path. Elise watched Elisa’s hands on her own knees, young hands, still the hands that opened slacks at a drafting table.

A woman stopped in front of them. She was perhaps fifty, kind face, a canvas bag. She looked at Elisa, then at Elise, then at Elisa again.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t mean to stare. Are you Elisa Waters? The station roof. We took our grandson on a night it rained.”

“I am,” Elisa said.

The woman smiled at Elise, polite, searching. “And this is your mother?”

Elise felt the sentence land in her stomach and then lower.

“My sister,” Elisa said, easy, as if she said it every week. “Elise.”

The woman flushed. “Oh. Of course. I’m sorry. You look—” She gestured between their faces, helpless. “You look alike. I thought— she has your mouth. I assumed the other way. Please forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Elisa said.

“Have a nice afternoon.” The woman went down the path too quickly.

Elise sat with her hands in her lap. The garden made its small noises. Elisa did not speak at once. She put two fingers on the inside of Elise’s wrist, where a pulse was doing too much.

“She thought I was yours,” Elise said.

“She thought you had a daughter who built a station.” Elisa’s voice was quiet and pleased. “Look at me.”

Elise looked. Elisa’s face was the face from the first afternoon. Elise’s was not. The gap had been true in the apartment for years. Out here a stranger had said it.

“Does it bother you,” Elisa said.

“I don’t know.” Elise’s throat was tight. She was wet through the underwear Elisa had put on her. “It made me—” She could not finish.

“I know what it made you.” Elisa stood. “We’re going home.”

They walked back without talking. In the apartment Elisa took Elise’s shoes off, then the trousers, then the underwear, then the shirt. Elise stood naked in the middle of the room at forty. Elisa stayed dressed from the garden. She sat in the chair and pulled Elise in by the hips until Elise was in her lap, facing her, knees on either side of the seat.

“She asked if I was your daughter,” Elisa said. “You got wet. Say it.”

“I got wet.”

Elisa put her hand between Elise’s legs and found it. She rubbed her clit slowly. “You gave me the work. You let yourself be kept. Now a woman in a garden thinks you made me. I like that. I like that you liked it. You don’t come until I say.”

Elise held Elisa’s shoulders. She was shaking. Elisa kissed the gray at her temple and kept the slow circle going.

“You can think about the question,” Elisa said. “You can think about her face when I said sister. You can think about how you look next to me on a bench. You still don’t come.”

Elise made a sound and nodded.

Elisa took her hand away before the end of it, kissed her mouth, and guided her down to the floor.

“Use your mouth,” Elisa said. “Then we’ll see.”

Elise opened Elisa’s trousers with hands that did not work well. She put her mouth on her. Elisa was wet too. Elisa held the gray hair and talked in the ordinary voice.

“That will happen again,” Elisa said. “More often now. People will get the ages in the wrong order. You will stand there and let them. I will say sister. You will get wet. That is allowed. That is part of being cared for.”

Elise worked. She did not ask about the woman. She did not ask about the garden. She thought of the canvas bag and the stroller and *this is your mother* and her own mouth on Elisa, and she stayed unfinished because she had been told to, forty years old on the floor of the apartment, being kept, being congratulated without a speech, the question still open in the room like a window someone had forgotten to close.

Chapter 16: Fifty

Elise Waters was fifty. The gray had taken most of the pixie. Her knees complained if she stayed on the floor through a whole drawing. She still lived without clothes in the apartment. Elisa Waters still looked twenty-two. She still came home in a white shirt and dark trousers and boots, smelling like rain or dust or someone else's soap, and Elise still met her at the door.

Tonight Elisa was late again, not midnight-late, only ordinary late. She put the keys in the dish and looked at Elise standing in the middle of the room, bare, slower to get up from the chair than she used to be.

"You're tired," Elisa said.

"I'm fifty."

"I know." Elisa kissed her mouth and took her to the bed instead of the floor. "Lie down. I don't need you on your knees tonight."

Elise lay down. Elisa undressed herself and stretched out along her, young skin against older skin, and put a hand between Elise's legs. Elise was wet. She was wet most evenings Elisa came home. What had changed was how long she could chase it before her hips cramped and her breath went thin.

Elisa rubbed her clit with no hurry. "Tell me if you want me to stop."

"I don't want you to stop. I can't do the whole night."

"I know that too." Elisa kissed the gray hairline. "I can. That isn't a problem I need you to solve."

Elise watched Elisa's face above her, the first-afternoon face, and felt the old heat and a newer thing under it: not jenvy. Relief that the face would keep going when the hips would not.

She put her hand on Elisa's wrist and held it still.

"Wait."

Elisa waited.

Elise found the sentence and said it plainly. "I want you to ask them for someone else. A woman. Young. Alive. A body like yours. Not another copy of me. Someone you can take to bed without being careful of her knees."

Elisa's hand stayed where it was, quiet. "You want me to have a lover."

"You already have lovers. I want you to have one here. In this apartment. Someone who can keep up with you." Elise's eyes were wet. She was not sad in the way that needed fixing. "I don't want you to retire the part of you that likes to be twenty-two because I can't be. That was never the deal."

Elisa looked at her for a long time. Then she smiled, small, the private smile, not the opening smile.

“You would want to watch,” Elisa said.

Elise’s face went hot. The wetness under Elisa’s fingers got worse. “Yes.”

“Not from under the table. From the bed, or the chair. You in the room. Me with her. You not having to do the work.”

“Yes.”

Elisa started the slow circle again. “I can ask. They’ll send someone who fits. She won’t be you. She won’t be a sister I invent for a civic site. She’ll be a person who wants me. You’ll see that. You’ll like that. I already know you will.”

Elise’s breath broke. “Don’t make me come yet.”

“I’m not making you come yet.” Elisa’s voice stayed kind. “I’m telling you I heard you. I’ll ask tomorrow. She’ll come here. I’ll kiss her in front of you. I’ll take her clothes off in front of you. You’ll sit where I put you and you’ll stay wet and you won’t have to prove anything with your mouth unless you ask to.”

Elise nodded. She could not have made a better sentence than the one Elisa was already using.

“Say it again so I don’t get it wrong,” Elisa said.

“Ask them for a woman. Young. Here. I want to watch. I want you to keep going.”

“Yes.” Elisa kissed her. “That’s clear.”

She took her hand away before Elise finished, because Elise had asked her to wait, and she lay down beside her and pulled the blanket over both of them. Elise put her face against Elisa’s throat, fifty, gray, unfinished on purpose, and listened to Elisa’s heart, which did not get tired, and thought of a third person in the room who would not need the floor, and was not afraid of her.

Chapter 17: Arrivals

The chair came in the morning.

It was not like the two wooden ones at the small table. It was low and wide and it reclined. A clean bar at the side would lift a person to their feet. Elisa Waters turned it so that it faced the bed. From that angle the kitchen table was in view, and the drafting table, and the stretch of floor between them.

“This is yours,” Elisa said. She was in the white shirt and the dark trousers. Elise Waters was naked, fifty, gray through the pixie. “You sit here. You can see the bed from it. You can see the table. You can see the drafting table. When you want to stand, you press this. That is what it is for. You know who is coming.”

“Yes,” Elise said.

“Sit.”

Elise sat. The chair took her weight without asking her knees to do it. She could see every place in the apartment two people might use. She put her hands on the arms and waited.

The door opened in the afternoon.

Leslie Roy had to duck her head a little under the frame, or seemed to. She was taller than both of them. Long brown hair, down her back, moving when she moved. She had a body built to be looked at: shoulders, waist, hips, breasts that made the modest pixie chests look like a first draft. She wore a dark dress and sandals and nothing that tried to hide her. She looked at Elisa first, the way a person looks at a meal they have already decided to eat.

“Elisa,” she said.

“Leslie.” Elisa’s voice had a new thing in it. Not fear. Attention.

Leslie looked once at the chair. She saw Elise. She understood the chair. She did not come over to it.

“She’s staying,” Elisa said, to the room, to Elise, to Leslie. “This is Elise.”

“I know who she is,” Leslie said. She dropped a small bag by the door. “Come here.”

Elisa went. That was the first surprise. She crossed her own apartment on someone else’s word. Leslie put both hands on her waist, lifted her off the floor as if she weighed nothing, and kissed her standing, Elisa’s boots hanging, Leslie’s mouth taking the kiss. Elisa made a sound into it that Elise had not heard from her in this room. When Leslie set her down, Elisa’s mouth was already open.

“Dress off,” Elisa said, and then laughed once, because Leslie was already taking Elisa’s shirt out of the trousers.

“Yours first,” Leslie said. “I want to see what I’m keeping.”

She undressed Elisa in the middle of the floor. Shirt. Belt. Trousers. Boots. Underwear. Elisa stood twenty-two and bare and small in front of her. Leslie pulled the dress over her own head. She had nothing on under it. The long hair fell over her breasts and then she shook it back. Elisa stared at her the way people stared at the station roof.

Leslie opened the bag. The strap-on was black, dull, eight inches, thick enough to look like a problem. She stepped into the harness and pulled it snug on her hips. The shaft stood out from her, ugly and clean.

Elisa looked at it and swallowed.

“I’m capable of taking that,” Elisa said.

“I know you are,” Leslie said. “Get on the bed.”

Elisa got on the bed. Leslie climbed after her, taller, the black shaft against Elisa’s stomach, and kissed her again, slower, pinning her wrists above her head with one hand. Elisa pulled at the hold and then stopped pulling. Leslie reached down with the other hand and rubbed the head of the shaft through Elisa’s wetness.

“She’s watching,” Elisa said.

“I know she is.” Leslie said it to Elisa, then, without turning her face fully, to the chair. “We don’t get old. You do. That is the arrangement. I’m going to use her while you sit there. I’m going to use her on that table too. I’m going to use her for a long time.”

She pushed in.

Elisa’s mouth opened on a real sound. Leslie gave her an inch, then another, then a long slow slide until the harness met Elisa’s body. Elisa’s knees came up. Leslie held her there, filled, and waited.

“Say it again,” Leslie said.

“I can take it.”

“You are taking it.” Leslie drew back and drove in, not kind, not cruel, exact. The bed took the weight. Elisa’s small body moved up the mattress and Leslie pulled her back by the hips and did it again. The long hair hung in Elisa’s face. Elisa turned her mouth into it and moaned.

Leslie fucked her like that until Elisa was loud, then pulled out, stood, and picked her up. Elisa’s legs went around her because there was nothing else to do with them. Leslie carried her the few steps to the kitchen table and put her on her feet and turned her and bent her over the wood.

Elisa’s palms hit the tabletop. Her cheek went to the grain. The shaft found her and went in from behind in one push. Elise could see all of it from the chair: Elisa’s short dark hair, Leslie’s long brown hair, the black harness, the place they joined, Elisa’s mouth open.

Leslie put a hand on the back of Elisa’s neck and looked across at the chair while she moved.

“We don’t bruise,” Leslie said. “We don’t bleed. I can be rough with her. I know you used to like it that way. I can do it better than anyone.”

She proved it. She held Elisa down and used her, hard enough that the table legs crept a half inch on the floor. Elisa cried out and then laughed into the wood and then cried out again. She said Leslie’s name. She said *yes*. She said *don’t stop* in the voice she used when she was not managing a room.

Leslie did not stop. She reached around and found Elisa’s clit with two fingers and rubbed her in time with the shaft. Elisa came over the table with her feet off the floor, held up by Leslie’s hip and Leslie’s hand, the twenty-two-year-old body shaking on eight inches of black.

Leslie kept her there through it and then kept moving, slower, still in her.

“Again,” Leslie said. “You’re built for it. I’m built for it. She’s going to watch us do this on every piece of this apartment. Say you want that.”

“I want that,” Elisa said, wrecked, smiling against the table. “I want that. Elise—she wanted this. I want this.”

Leslie glanced at the chair once more.

“Good,” she said. “She can see the drafting table from there too. We’ll get to that. Right now you stay bent over until I say.”

She drove in again. Elisa took it. The long hair stuck to Elisa’s bare back. The chair held Elise still and silent and present, and the two bodies that would not age used the table as if the table had been waiting for them, and Leslie did not ask anyone if they were comfortable.

Chapter 18: The End

Elise Waters was in the chair. She could not have gotten out of it without the bar. She did not ask for the bar. Breathing took most of what she had. The apartment was the same apartment. The bed. The table. The drafting table. Late light on the floor.

Elisa Waters stood in front of the closet in nothing. Twenty-two. Pixie. Leslie Roy stood behind her with clothes in her hands, taller, the long brown hair already done for going out. She was dressed: a dark thing that showed her legs and the high line of her breasts. She looked at Elisa the way she had looked at her the day she arrived.

“Arms,” Leslie said.

Elisa lifted her arms. Leslie put her in a short black dress that was not made for a speech. It left her thighs bare. It left the small breasts obvious. No bra. Leslie smoothed it down with both palms and turned Elisa toward the glass.

“That,” Leslie said. “That’s what they get tonight.”

Elisa looked at herself. She smiled the private smile. “They asked me to talk about the span.”

“You can talk about the span in this. You’re still the architect. You’re also mine.” Leslie kissed her mouth, slow, and put a hand up under the dress as if Elise were not in the room, except she said, without looking at the chair, “She’s watching. She should. This is the body she asked to keep.”

Elisa’s breath changed. She opened her stance a little. Leslie rubbed her once, possessive, and took the hand away before it became the afternoon.

“We don’t have time,” Leslie said. “You’ll wait. You’ll be wet under the dress while you open the river hall. I’ll be standing next to you. After they let you go I’ll take you into the service level under the span and finish what I just started. You can take it.”

“I can take it,” Elisa said.

Leslie found shoes. Low ones. She went to her knees only long enough to slide them onto Elisa’s feet, then she stood and took Elisa’s face in both hands.

“You look like this now,” Leslie said. “You will look like this when we come home. You will look like this in twenty years. She wanted a legacy. You’re wearing it.”

Elisa glanced at the chair then. The glance was real. She came over. She smelled like soap and Leslie’s mouth. She took Elise’s hand. The hand was light. Elise could still feel it. “We’re going to the river,” Elisa said. “The hall. The span over the water. They turn the lights on tonight for the first time. I’ll come back. I

always come back.”

Elise’s mouth moved. What came out was small. “I know.”

Elisa’s thumb passed over her knuckles. She set the hand back on the arm of the chair as if she were setting down a pencil she meant to pick up.

Leslie was already at the door with the keys. She held her arm out. Elisa walked into it. Leslie’s arm closed around her shoulders, high on the bare skin above the dress, the pixie tucked against a body built to hold her. They fit like that: the tall one, the little one, two faces that would not change.

Leslie looked at the chair one last time.

“We’ll be late,” she said, not unkind, not asking. “Don’t wait up. You know what we are. You know what we’re going to do after they finish clapping.”

Elisa did not take the arm away. She let herself be walked. At the threshold she was only the opening: young, famous, half-dressed, owned. Leslie’s hand sat on her as if the street already belonged to them.

The door opened. Hall light. Wet air from the river in the city. They went out like that, Leslie first by a half step, Elisa under her arm, the short dress, the long hair, the living copy of a wish stepping into the evening to open the biggest thing she had ever drawn and then to be used under it.

The door shut.

Elise listened to the shoes in the hall until she could not tell them from her own pulse. She kept her eyes on the place they had been. She was wet, a little, from the hand under the dress and from the service level under the span and from her own young body leaving without her. She did not try to stand. She did not call anyone. She held the arm of the chair and watched the empty room that still held their heat, and she was not afraid, and she was still looking at the door when the looking stopped.