Tending to Nothing

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Chariot, Book 4

*Tending to Nothing**

Chapter 1

Late Light

The last of the volunteers had already loaded their tools into the backs of trucks and cars. Engines turned over one by one and the gravel lot emptied until only Meredith’s dusty gray Tacoma remained, parked under the sycamore that marked the far edge of the community garden.

Kiki stayed.

She was on her knees in the third raised bed, the one that still needed the last of the late lettuce thinned. The soil was warm under her palms even though the air had begun to cool. She worked carefully, pinching the weaker seedlings at the base and setting them aside in a small pile for the compost. Her hands were small and quick. Dirt had already worked itself under her short nails and into the creases of her knuckles.

Meredith was two beds over, moving down the row of young tomato cages with a roll of soft twine. She did not look up when the last car left. She simply kept tying, her movements unhurried, the same steady pace she had kept all afternoon.

Kiki finished the lettuce and sat back on her heels for a moment. The light had gone the color of weak tea. Long shadows stretched from the tool shed and the rain barrels. Somewhere beyond the chain-link fence a dog barked once and then stopped.

She stood, brushed the knees of her jeans, and carried the thinnings to the compost bin. When she came back, Meredith was still working.

“There’s still the far bed,” Kiki said.

Meredith glanced over, then returned to the twine. “You don’t have to stay.”

“I know.” Kiki already had the hand fork in her fingers. “It’s not finished.”

Meredith did not argue. She only nodded once, a small movement, and kept tying.

They worked without speaking for a while. The only sounds were the soft pull of roots leaving soil and the occasional scrape of Meredith’s boots on the path between beds. Kiki moved down the last row of beets, loosening the soil around the shoulders of the roots so they would not split when the time came to pull them. The air smelled of crushed leaves and the faint metallic scent that came up from the soil after a warm day.

Once, when Kiki reached the end of the row, she looked up and found Meredith watching her. The older woman’s face was calm, sun-lined, expressionless in the way of someone who had spent most of a life outdoors. She did not smile. She simply held Kiki’s gaze for a second longer than necessary, then turned back to the tomatoes.

Kiki felt the look the way she felt most things: as a small, clean pressure in the center of her chest, followed by the quiet urge to be useful. She wiped her hands on her thighs and went to the tool shed for the watering can.

The can was heavy when full. She carried it with both hands, the metal bail pressing into her palms. Meredith met her at the tomato bed and took the can from her without comment. Their fingers touched for a moment on the handle. Meredith’s hands were larger, rougher, the nails cut straight across. She watered the base of each plant slowly, letting the soil darken in expanding circles.

“You’re good at this,” Meredith said after a time. Her voice was low and even.

Kiki shook her head a little. “I just like finishing things.”

Meredith gave a short sound that might have been agreement. She handed the empty can back. “There’s one more barrel if you want to fill it.”

Kiki went. The path between the beds was narrow. When she passed Meredith she felt the brief warmth of the other woman’s body, the clean smell of sweat and tomato leaves. She filled the second can and brought it back. They watered the rest of the tomatoes together, moving down the row in an easy rhythm that required no discussion.

By the time the last plant had been watered the light had thinned to a soft gray. The first true cool of evening settled over the garden. Kiki’s arms ached in a pleasant way from carrying the cans. She felt the ordinary satisfaction of a task completed and the quieter satisfaction of having stayed when she could have left.

Meredith coiled the remaining twine and set it on the edge of the bed. “That’s enough for today.”

Kiki nodded. She gathered the hand fork and the small pile of discarded seedlings and carried them to the shed. When she came out again Meredith was standing by the Tacoma, brushing dirt from her palms.

“I’ll lock up,” Meredith said.

“I can help.”

“I know.” Meredith looked at her for a moment longer. “Go on home, Kiki. It’s late.”

Kiki hesitated, then nodded. She walked to her own car, a small silver hatchback parked near the gate. The seat was still warm from the day. She sat for a moment with the door open, listening to the quiet click of the padlock on the tool shed and the sound of Meredith’s boots on the gravel.

She drove the familiar streets home with the windows down. The air moving across her arms felt good. Dirt still marked her wrists and the cuffs of her shirt. She could smell the garden on her skin—soil and green stems and the faint trace of Meredith’s soap or shampoo, something plain and clean.

The house was lit on the lower floor when she pulled into the driveway. John’s office window glowed behind the half-closed blinds. She sat in the car for another few seconds after turning off the engine, then got out and went inside.

The kitchen smelled faintly of the dinner he had made and already put away. A single plate waited on the counter under a clean dish towel. John came out of the hallway as she was setting her keys down. He was tall and thin in the soft way of someone who spent most days at a desk. His glasses sat a little low on his nose.

“Hey,” he said. “Long day.”

“The far beds needed finishing.” Kiki slipped off her shoes. “I stayed to help Meredith.”

He nodded. “There’s leftover chicken if you want it.”

“I’m okay. I might just shower.”

“All right.”

He did not ask anything else. He stood there for a moment longer, one hand resting on the back of a kitchen chair, then gave her a small smile and went back down the hall toward his office. The door closed with its usual soft click.

Kiki stood alone in the kitchen. The house was quiet except for the low hum of the refrigerator and the soft, intermittent sound of keys from the office down the hall. She looked at the covered plate, then turned away from it and walked toward the bathroom, already unbuttoning the cuffs of her dirty shirt as she went.

Chapter 2

Water and Shade

By two o’clock the heat had settled over the garden like a held breath. The air above the gravel paths shimmered. Even the leaves of the sycamore looked tired.

Kiki worked in the bean row with two other women, tying the climbing vines to the lengths of twine that ran between the posts. Her shirt clung between her shoulder blades. Sweat traced slow paths down the small of her back and

disappeared into the waistband of her jeans. She kept her movements neat and small, the way she always did when the temperature rose, conserving effort without seeming to.

Dottie was at the far end of the same row. She wore a wide-brimmed hat and a loose sleeveless shirt that showed the soft fullness of her arms. Every so often she laughed at something one of the others said, a low, easy sound that carried in the still air. When she bent to pick up a dropped stake, the back of her shirt rode up and showed a pale strip of skin above her waistband.

One by one the other women finished their sections and began packing their things. A truck pulled out. Then a sedan. The gravel lot grew quieter. By three-thirty only Dottie and Kiki remained in the bean row, and one older woman who was still watering the far beds with a slow hose.

Dottie straightened and pushed the hat back on her forehead. Sweat had darkened the hair at her temples. She looked down the row at Kiki and smiled.

“You’re still going,” she said.

Kiki nodded, tying off another vine. “Almost done.”

“Come sit for a minute. You’re going to cook out here.”

Kiki finished the last tie, then followed Dottie to the heavy wooden picnic table that sat under the sycamore. The shade was imperfect—patches of hard light still fell through the leaves— but it was better than the open beds. Dottie dropped onto the bench with a soft exhalation and reached for the water jug someone had left on the table. She drank, then held it out.

Kiki took it. The water was no longer cold, but it felt good going down. She set the jug back and wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist.

Dottie watched her do it. “You’ve got dirt right there,” she said, and reached out without asking. Her thumb brushed the side of Kiki’s jaw, light and matter-of-fact, removing a small smear of soil. The touch lasted only a second. Then her hand fell away.

“Thanks,” Kiki said.

“You’re welcome.” Dottie leaned back on her hands and looked out over the garden. “I like how you work. You don’t rush, but everything gets finished.”

Kiki shrugged one shoulder. “I just don’t like leaving things half done.”

“I know.” Dottie smiled again, the same open, unforced smile. “It’s nice.”

They sat without speaking for a little while. The older woman with the hose finished and coiled it near the shed. She called a goodbye across the beds. Dottie lifted a hand in answer. Then the last car left, and the garden was quiet except

for the faint tick of cooling metal somewhere in the lot and the sound of a single bee working the remaining blossoms on the squash plants.

Dottie stretched her legs out under the table. Her knee rested lightly against Kiki's. Neither of them moved away from the contact.

"You want to help me check the irrigation lines before we go?" Dottie asked. "The ones on the west side keep clogging."

"Okay."

They stood. The shaded air felt cooler for a moment, then the heat returned as soon as they stepped back into the open. Dottie carried the small toolbox; Kiki brought the spare emitters. They moved down the west beds slowly, Dottie crouching to examine each connection while Kiki handed her whatever she needed. Sometimes their fingers met on the same fitting. Sometimes Dottie reached across Kiki for a tool and her breast brushed lightly against Kiki's arm. Each time it happened she murmured a soft "sorry" that did not sound particularly sorry, and kept working.

At the last bed Dottie sat back on her heels and wiped her forehead with the hem of her shirt. The movement exposed the soft lower curve of her belly for a moment before the fabric fell again.

"That should do it," she said. "Thanks for staying."

"It's fine."

Dottie looked up at her. The hat threw a soft shadow across the upper half of her face, but her mouth was still visible, slightly parted from the heat. "You always say that."

Kiki did not know what to answer, so she only gave a small nod.

They walked back to the picnic table together and packed the tools into the toolbox. Dottie closed the lid and rested her hands on it for a moment.

"Same time Thursday?" she asked.

"I'll be here."

"Good." Dottie reached out once more, this time brushing a loose strand of hair away from Kiki's cheek with the backs of her fingers. The touch was brief and ordinary. "You get home safe."

Kiki nodded again. She walked to her car. The steering wheel was hot enough that she had to use the edge of her shirt to turn it. She sat with the door open for a minute, letting the trapped heat escape, then started the engine and pulled out of the lot.

The drive home was short. When she stepped into the kitchen the house was still and cool from the air conditioning. John’s office door was closed. A note in his handwriting sat on the counter next to a covered bowl.

Made extra rice. Help yourself.

Kiki read it, then set it back down. She was still dusty, still marked by the day’s heat and the light pressure of Dottie’s fingers on her face. She stood for a moment in the quiet kitchen, listening to the low hum of the house, then went to shower before the light outside finished leaving the windows.

Chapter 3

Seed Tables

The seed library lived in the back half of the garden shed, in three tall metal cabinets and a long plywood table that had been painted white years ago and was now soft with use. By nine in the morning the air inside already held the smell of dry paper, dust, and the faint sweet must of old envelopes.

Kiki arrived with coffee in a dented thermos. Meredith was already there, sleeves rolled, sorting a cardboard box of last year’s tomato packets into even stacks. Dottie came in a few minutes later carrying a folding chair and a paper bag of pastries. Trisha arrived last, quiet as usual, and set a legal pad and two pens on the table without speaking.

They worked through the morning in a loose rhythm that required little discussion. Meredith called out the variety names in her low, even voice. Dottie wrote them on fresh envelopes in her round, clear handwriting. Trisha checked the old inventory list against what actually remained, making small marks in the margin of the legal pad. Kiki opened the brittle packets, counted the seeds into small piles, and brushed the empty envelopes into a growing heap for the compost.

The shed stayed warm even with the door propped open. Dust moved in the shafts of light that came through the high windows. Sometimes Dottie hummed under her breath.

Sometimes Meredith asked for a particular packet and Kiki placed it in her hand. Their fingers touched only long enough for the transfer. Trisha watched more than she spoke, her dark eyes moving from the list to the table and occasionally to Kiki’s hands as they counted.

Around noon they stopped. Dottie passed the pastries. They ate standing or leaning against the edge of the table. The talk was ordinary—whether the Sungold seeds had held their viability, whether next year’s budget would cover new row covers. Kiki listened more than she spoke. When Dottie offered her the last pastry she shook her head, then accepted it when Dottie insisted with a soft

push of the bag toward her.

After lunch the work slowed but did not stop. The afternoon light shifted across the floor. Meredith’s voice grew quieter as the hours passed. Dottie’s comments came with longer spaces between them. Trisha’s silence became something almost solid in the room, a steady presence that made the small sounds of paper and seed seem louder.

At one point Kiki’s back began to ache from leaning over the table. She straightened and rolled her shoulders. Trisha looked up from the legal pad.

“You can sit,” she said. It was the first full sentence she had offered all afternoon.

Kiki shook her head. “I’m all right.”

Trisha held her gaze for a moment, then returned to the list. The look was brief and without expression, yet Kiki felt it the same way she had felt Meredith’s look in the garden days earlier—as a clean pressure that made her want to keep working carefully and well.

By four the cabinets were nearly full again, each envelope labeled and dated and set in its proper place. The leftover seeds that were no longer viable had been set aside in a single box. The table was clear except for the legal pad and the empty coffee thermos.

Meredith closed the last cabinet door and rested her hand on it for a second. “That’s the bulk of it.”

Dottie stretched her arms over her head until her shoulders made a soft sound. “We should do the flower section another day. I’m cooked.”

Trisha gathered the legal pad and pens. She did not say whether she agreed or not. She only looked once more at the ordered cabinets, then at Kiki, and gave a small nod that might have been approval or simply acknowledgment.

They locked the shed together. The sun had dropped behind the trees at the edge of the lot. The air outside felt cooler after the long hours in the closed space. Dottie touched Kiki’s arm lightly as they walked toward the cars.

“Thank you for staying the whole day,” she said. “It goes faster with you here.”

Kiki nodded. “I wanted to finish it.”

Meredith was already at her truck. She lifted a hand in a brief goodbye and drove off first. Trisha followed a minute later in her dark, unremarkable sedan. Dottie lingered only long enough to make sure Kiki’s car started, then pulled out behind the others.

Kiki sat for a moment with her hands on the wheel. The day had been long and ordinary and complete. Her fingers still carried the faint dry scent of old paper

and seeds. She drove home through the early evening traffic, the sky turning a soft, dusty blue above the roofs.

The house was quiet when she stepped inside. The kitchen light was on. A single plate sat in the drying rack. John came down the hall as she set her keys on the counter. He had already changed into the soft shirt he wore in the evenings.

“Hey,” he said. “You were gone a long time.”

“We finished the seed inventory.” Kiki slipped off her shoes. “It took the whole day.”

He nodded. “I saved you some of the stew, but it might be better tomorrow.”

“That’s fine. I’m not very hungry.”

“All right.”

He stood there a moment longer, as if there might be more to say, then only touched her shoulder lightly with the tips of his fingers and went back toward the living room. The television came on at low volume a minute later.

Kiki remained in the kitchen. The clock on the stove read 7:12. She looked at it for a second, then turned and walked down the hall to shower the long day from her skin.

Chapter 4

The Porch

Meredith’s house sat at the end of a short gravel drive, a small single-story place with faded green siding and a deep front porch that faced west. Kiki pulled in just as the last hard light of the day was leaving the tops of the trees. She had three leftover trays of seedlings on the passenger seat—ones that had not found homes during the weekend distribution—and Meredith had said she would take them.

Meredith was already on the porch when Kiki stepped out of the car. She sat in one of the two wooden chairs with her boots off and her bare feet flat on the painted boards. A glass of water rested on the small table beside her.

“You didn’t have to bring them tonight,” she said.

“They would have dried out in the car.” Kiki carried the trays up the steps. “Where do you want them?”

“Around the side is fine. Against the wall where the hose reaches.”

Kiki set the trays down carefully in the narrow strip of dirt between the house and the fence. When she came back onto the porch Meredith nodded toward the empty chair.

“Sit for a minute. You’ve been on your feet all day.”

Kiki sat. The chair was worn smooth. The air had begun to cool, but the porch boards still held the day's heat. They watched the light leave the yard without speaking. A single cricket started somewhere near the steps and then stopped.

After a while Meredith shifted in her chair and pressed the heel of one hand into the muscle above her opposite shoulder. The movement was small, almost private.

"Long day," Kiki said.

Meredith gave a quiet sound of agreement. She worked the muscle for another few seconds, then let her hand fall.

Kiki watched the line of Meredith's neck and the way the shoulder stayed slightly raised even after she stopped rubbing it. The urge to be useful rose in her the same way it always did— clean, immediate, without examination.

"I can do that," she said.

Meredith looked at her. The porch light was not yet on. In the blue dusk her face was hard to read.

"You don't have to."

"I know." Kiki was already standing. "Where's better—here or inside?"

Meredith considered for a moment, then pushed herself up from the chair. "Inside. The light's better."

The front room was small and spare. A low couch, a single armchair, a table with a stack of seed catalogs. Meredith left the overhead light off and turned on a floor lamp in the corner. The light was warm and limited. She sat on the edge of the couch and pulled her shirt over her head in one matter-of-fact motion, leaving her in a plain sports bra. The skin of her shoulders and upper back was lightly freckled from years of sun.

Kiki knelt on the cushion behind her. She started with the shoulders, using the heels of her hands the way she had learned years ago from a roommate who had studied massage. Meredith's muscles were dense and slow to release. Kiki worked steadily, without hurry. The only sounds were the soft friction of skin and the occasional low breath Meredith let out when a particular knot gave way.

After a time Meredith's head tipped forward. Kiki moved her hands higher, thumbs along the base of the skull, then down the long muscles on either side of the spine. The sports bra strap sat in the way. Meredith reached back, unhooked it, and let it fall forward without comment. Kiki continued as if nothing had changed.

The air in the room was quiet and close. Outside, full dark had arrived. Kiki's knees had begun to ache from the position, but she did not shift. She kept the

pressure even and attentive. When her hands finally stilled, resting lightly on Meredith's shoulders, the older woman did not move away.

A full minute passed.

Meredith spoke without lifting her head. "There's more that needs taking care of."

Her voice was the same low, even tone she used in the garden.

Kiki's hands remained where they were. "All right."

Meredith turned on the couch so that she was facing Kiki. She was still bare from the waist up. In the limited light her breasts were full and soft, the nipples already slightly raised from the cooler air of the room. She looked at Kiki for a long moment, then simply opened her knees.

Kiki understood the request the same way she understood every other request that day—as something practical that needed doing, something she could do well. She shifted forward on her knees and settled between Meredith's thighs. The denim of Meredith's work pants was rough against her bare arms. She unbuttoned them carefully, then the zipper. Meredith lifted her hips just enough to help. The pants and underwear came down together and were left around one ankle.

The smell of Meredith's body was clean sweat and skin and the faint remaining trace of the day's outdoor work. Kiki did not rush. She placed her hands on the tops of Meredith's thighs and simply looked for a moment, the way she might look at a row that needed careful finishing. Then she leaned in.

She began slowly, with the flat of her tongue, learning the shape and the heat. Meredith's hand came to rest on the back of her head—not pressing, only present, the weight of it steady and warm. The fingers did not tangle in her hair. They simply stayed. Kiki worked with that same steady attention she brought to every task that mattered to her: thorough, unhurried, responsive to the smallest change in breath or tension.

Meredith was quiet. Her breathing deepened and occasionally caught, but she did not speak. The hand on Kiki's head remained almost still. Once it tightened briefly when Kiki found a particular rhythm; once it stroked once, slowly, from the crown of her head to the nape of her neck, and then returned to its resting place. Time became the simple measure of Meredith's body answering and Kiki's continued care.

When Meredith finally came it was with a long, controlled exhalation and a single hard tremor that moved through her thighs and up into her torso. Her hand pressed once, firmly, then eased. Kiki stayed where she was until the last small aftershocks had passed and Meredith's breathing had leveled again. Only then

did she sit back on her heels.

Meredith looked down at her. The expression on her face had not changed much—still calm, still unreadable in the low light—but her eyes were darker and the lines around them had softened.

“Thank you,” she said.

Kiki nodded. She could still taste Meredith on her tongue. Her own body felt quiet and used in a way that was not unpleasant. She helped Meredith draw the pants back up. Meredith refastened the sports bra and pulled her shirt on. Neither of them spoke while this happened.

At the door Meredith turned on the porch light. The sudden yellow glow made the yard look smaller.

“Drive careful,” she said.

“I will.”

Kiki walked to her car. The night air felt cool against the parts of her face that were still warm. She started the engine and pulled out of the gravel drive. The roads home were mostly empty. When she reached the house every window was dark except for the small blue light of the router in the living room. John’s office door was closed. She did not open it.

She locked the front door behind her, set her keys on the counter in the dark, and went down the hall to the bathroom to wash her face and hands before sleep.

Chapter 5

Residual Evening

The next day passed in ordinary pieces. Kiki worked a short morning shift at the small bakery two towns over, the one that still paid her under the table for weekend help. She came home in the middle of the afternoon, showered the flour from her arms, and spent an hour weeding the narrow side bed that ran along the fence. The work was light. Her body felt quiet and a little heavy, the way it sometimes did after a long, focused effort the night before.

John’s office door stayed closed until six. When he came out he had already changed into the soft gray shirt he wore around the house. He found her in the kitchen rinsing the lettuce she had cut from the side bed.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey.”

He opened the refrigerator and stood looking into it for a moment. “I can make eggs and the rest of that rice.”

“That works.”

They moved around the small kitchen without getting in each other’s way. John set a pan on the stove. Kiki dried the lettuce and put it in a bowl. The window over the sink was open. Evening air moved the curtain a little. Somewhere down the block a lawn mower started and then stopped.

They ate at the table. The only sounds were the quiet scrape of forks and the low tick of the cooling stove. John asked if the bakery had been busy. Kiki said it had been steady. He nodded and took another bite of rice. Neither of them reached for more conversation. The silence was not strained. It was simply the shape the room took when neither of them filled it.

After the plates were in the dishwasher John went to the living room and turned on the lamp beside the couch. Kiki followed a few minutes later with a glass of water. She sat at the far end of the couch, legs drawn up, and watched the muted news without really seeing it. John had a book open on his lap, one of the thick paperbacks he read in the evenings. His reading glasses sat low on his nose.

At one point he looked over.

“You all right?”

Kiki turned her head. “Just tired.”

“Okay.”

He went back to the page. After a while his hand rested on the cushion between them, palm up, an old habitual invitation that asked for nothing. Kiki looked at it for a few seconds. Then she placed her own hand lightly over his. Their fingers did not interlace. The contact stayed loose and warm and limited. After a minute she gave his hand a small, absent squeeze and took her own back so she could adjust the pillow behind her shoulder.

The news cycle repeated. John turned a page. Outside, the last of the light left the tops of the trees across the street. Kiki’s body remembered the weight of a different hand on the back of her head, the particular stillness of the room the night before, the clean taste that had lingered until she brushed her teeth. None of it needed naming. It simply sat in her as a quiet physical fact while the ordinary evening continued around it.

A little after nine John closed the book and stretched.

“I’m going to turn in.”

“I’ll be there in a bit.”

He stood, touched the top of her head once with his fingers as he passed, and went down the hall. The bedroom door closed with its soft, familiar click. Kiki stayed on the couch a while longer, glass of water balanced on her knee, listening to the small sounds of him moving around the room and then the

quieter sound of the bed taking his weight. When the house had settled into its night stillness she rose, turned off the lamp, and followed.

Chapter 6

Under the Tree

The afternoon had been heavy with heat again. By the time the last of the other volunteers left, the light under the sycamore had gone thick and gold. Kiki and Dottie were the only two still in the garden. They had spent the final hour moving the last of the harvested squash into crates and carrying them to the shaded side of the shed.

Dottie dropped onto the bench at the picnic table and pushed her hat off. Her hair was damp at the temples and the back of her neck. She reached for the water jug, drank deeply, then held it out.

Kiki took it and drank. The water was warm, but it cut the dust in her throat.

“Come back to my place for a bit,” Dottie said. “I’ve got actual cold drinks and the air conditioning works. We can unload these last crates from my car and be done.”

Kiki looked at the sky. The light was already softening. “All right.”

Dottie’s apartment was on the second floor of a small brick building ten minutes from the garden. The air inside was cool enough to raise the fine hairs on Kiki’s arms when they stepped through the door. Dottie set the two crates on the kitchen counter and opened the refrigerator.

“Sit,” she said. “You look like you’ve been in a kiln.”

Kiki sat at the small table. Dottie put a glass of iced tea in front of her, then one for herself, and dropped into the opposite chair with a soft groan of relief. She stretched her legs out until her bare foot rested lightly against Kiki’s ankle. The contact was casual, warm, and she left it there.

They drank without speaking for a minute. The only sounds were the low hum of the air conditioner and the soft clink of ice in the glasses. Dottie watched Kiki over the rim of her glass, her expression open and faintly amused.

“You always stay until the work is actually finished,” she said. “Most people start packing up the second it’s allowed.”

Kiki shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t mind.”

“I know you don’t.” Dottie smiled. “It’s one of the things I like.”

She stood, collected the empty glasses, and set them in the sink. When she turned back she rested her hips against the counter and looked at Kiki for a longer moment.

“My shoulders are wrecked from those crates,” she said. “You feel like helping with that before you go?”

Kiki nodded and stood.

Dottie led her into the small living room. She pulled her sleeveless shirt over her head as she walked and dropped it on the arm of the couch, leaving her in a simple beige bra. She sat on the edge of the couch and reached back to unhook it without ceremony, then let it fall forward and set it aside. Her breasts were full and soft, the skin marked with faint red lines from the bra straps.

“Just the shoulders and the neck to start,” she said. “You’re good at this.”

Kiki knelt on the cushion behind her the same way she had with Meredith, but the atmosphere was already different. Dottie talked while Kiki worked—small observations about the day, a story about one of the older volunteers who always forgot her gloves, a low laugh when Kiki found a particularly tight place near the base of her neck. Her body responded more openly: she sighed, she leaned back into the pressure, she reached up once and briefly covered Kiki’s hand with her own to adjust the angle.

After a while she tipped her head back until it rested against Kiki’s collarbone.

“That’s good,” she said softly. “You’re really good at taking care of people.”

Kiki kept her hands moving. The praise settled in her the same way useful work always did— quietly, with a clean sense of having done something right.

Dottie shifted after another few minutes, turning so that she was half-facing Kiki. Her eyes were warm and a little heavy. She reached up and brushed a strand of hair from Kiki’s cheek with her thumb, the same gesture she had used under the tree days earlier, only slower now.

“Come here,” she said.

Kiki moved. Dottie guided her with light hands until Kiki was kneeling on the floor between her open knees. The position was familiar and not familiar at the same time. Dottie watched her face while she unbuttoned her own shorts and pushed them down along with her underwear. She kicked them free and then simply opened her thighs wider, one hand resting on the back of Kiki’s neck.

“Just take care of me,” she said, voice low and fond. “The way you do everything else.”

Kiki leaned in.

This time the service was warmer, more guided by voice and by Dottie’s hands. Dottie talked in soft fragments—telling her when something felt especially good, murmuring approval when Kiki adjusted the pressure or the angle, once laughing quietly under her breath when Kiki’s thoroughness made her hips lift. Her

fingers stroked through Kiki’s hair, not directing so much as accompanying. She kept looking down at her, and every time Kiki glanced up she found Dottie’s open, pleased expression waiting.

The room stayed cool from the air conditioning, but heat built between them in a different way than it had on Meredith’s couch. Dottie’s responses were fuller, more freely given. She came with a low, drawn-out sound and both hands cradling the back of Kiki’s head, holding her there through the long pulse of it and the smaller ones that followed. Even after the last tremor she kept her hands where they were for a few more breaths, thumbs moving slowly against Kiki’s scalp.

“Good,” she said finally, voice still soft. “You’re so good.”

Kiki stayed until Dottie released her. Then she sat back on her heels. Her mouth and chin were wet. Dottie reached down and wiped her face gently with the side of her thumb, the same practical tenderness she might have used to remove a smear of dirt in the garden.

“Thank you,” Dottie said.

Kiki nodded.

They did not hurry the aftermath. Dottie pulled her shorts back on but left the shirt off. She poured two more glasses of iced tea and they sat on the couch for a while longer, not speaking much. Dottie’s bare foot rested against Kiki’s leg again. The contact remained easy and present.

When Kiki finally stood to leave, the sky outside the window was fully dark. Dottie walked her to the door and touched her cheek once more, lightly.

“Drive safe.”

“I will.”

The roads home were quiet. When Kiki unlocked the front door the living room lamp was off. John’s office door was closed and no light showed beneath it. She stood for a moment in the dark entryway, the taste of Dottie still faintly on her tongue, the cool of the apartment still on her skin. Then she locked the door behind her and went down the hall to wash before bed. The house remained still around her.

Chapter 7

Waiting

The garden had emptied earlier than usual. A low bank of clouds had come in from the west and the light had gone flat and gray by four. One by one the others had packed their tools and left. By four-thirty only Kiki and Trisha remained.

Trisha was at the far end of the compost rows, turning the pile with a long-handled fork. She worked without hurry and without looking up. Kiki finished tying off the last of the tomato vines and stood for a moment with the unused twine in her hands, waiting to see whether Trisha would stop.

Trisha did not stop.

Kiki walked the length of the path and set the twine on the edge of the nearest bed. She picked up a second fork from the shed and began working the opposite side of the same pile. The only sounds were the soft wet give of the compost and the occasional metallic scrape of the tines against a buried stick. Trisha did not speak. She did not acknowledge Kiki's presence with more than a brief glance that carried no surprise.

They worked until the pile had been fully turned. When it was finished Trisha drove the fork into the ground and left it standing. She wiped her hands on her jeans and finally looked at Kiki fully.

"You're still here," she said.

Kiki nodded.

Trisha studied her for a few seconds in the flat light. Then she said, "I need to stop at my place before I head home. You can follow if you want."

It was not phrased as a question. Kiki only nodded again.

Trisha's apartment was on the ground floor of a quiet complex five minutes from the garden. The living room was sparsely furnished: a low couch, a single chair, a table with nothing on it but a glass of water. The blinds were drawn halfway. The light inside was dim and even.

Trisha closed the door and locked it. She set her keys on the table and turned to face Kiki. For a long moment she simply looked at her. The silence stretched until it became its own kind of instruction.

Kiki waited.

Trisha walked past her into the short hallway and into the bedroom. She did not tell Kiki to follow. After a few seconds Kiki did anyway.

The bedroom was as spare as the rest of the apartment. A bed with a plain gray coverlet, one nightstand, a chair in the corner. Trisha stood at the side of the bed and pulled her shirt off over her head. She wore no bra. Her breasts were small and high, the nipples already tight in the cooler air of the room. She unbuttoned her jeans next and pushed them down along with her underwear, stepping out of them without ceremony. Then she sat on the edge of the bed and opened her knees.

She did not speak.

Kiki crossed the room and knelt on the floor between Trisha's bare feet. The carpet was thin. She could feel the hardness of the floor through it. Trisha's hand came to rest on the top of Kiki's head, fingers spread, not stroking, only placing a steady, specific weight there. The touch was different from Meredith's resting presence and different from Dottie's warm accompaniment. It felt like a claim that required no words.

Kiki leaned in.

The service this time was almost silent. Trisha's breathing changed, deepened, occasionally caught, but she made almost no other sound. Her hand remained on Kiki's head, the pressure increasing or easing by small degrees that told Kiki everything she needed to know about angle and rhythm and pressure. When Kiki found the exact place and pace that drew the strongest response, Trisha's fingers tightened once, hard, and then stayed locked there, holding her exactly where she was.

Time narrowed to the heat of Trisha's body, the precise instructions of that hand, and the growing tension that had no outlet in voice. Kiki's own world reduced to the work of her mouth and the weight of being kept in place. She did not rush. She did not vary anything once the right rhythm had been found. She simply continued, steady and exact, while Trisha's thighs began to tremble on either side of her shoulders.

When Trisha came it was with a single sharp, controlled breath and a long, rigid arch of her back. Her hand pressed down hard enough that Kiki's neck muscles burned with the effort of staying exactly where she had been put. The tremor ran through Trisha's body in one continuous wave and then another smaller one. Only when the last of it had passed did the hand on Kiki's head ease and then lift away completely.

Kiki sat back on her heels. Her jaw ached. Her knees ached. The taste of Trisha filled her mouth. She looked up.

Trisha was watching her with the same dark, still expression she wore in the garden. After a moment she reached down and touched the corner of Kiki's mouth with her thumb, removing a small wetness there. The gesture was brief and without softness.

"You can go," she said.

Kiki stood. Her legs felt unsteady for the first few steps. She walked back through the quiet living room and let herself out. The evening air was cooler than it had been when they arrived. She sat in her car for a full minute before starting the engine, hands resting on the wheel, the residual pressure of Trisha's hand still present on the top of her head like a memory of weight.

The drive home took longer than usual because she did not hurry. When she unlocked the front door the house was completely dark. No light showed under John’s office door or the bedroom door. She locked the door behind her, set her keys down without turning on any lights, and went to the bathroom to wash. The quiet of the house settled around her as she stood at the sink, and she let it.

Chapter 8

Saturday Distance

Kiki left the house at eight-thirty in the morning while John was still in the shower. She wrote a short note and left it on the counter under the edge of the fruit bowl.

Garden most of the day. May be late.

The Saturday crew was smaller than the weekday one. Meredith assigned rows without much discussion. Kiki took the long bed of late carrots and worked it slowly, loosening soil, thinning where the tops had crowded, setting the discarded seedlings in a neat pile for the compost. The morning was clear and cool. By eleven the sun had climbed high enough that the backs of her arms began to pink.

Dottie arrived just before noon with a paper bag of sandwiches and a second bag of ice. They ate under the sycamore with two of the older volunteers. Conversation stayed with the work —whether the carrots would size up before the first real heat, whether the irrigation timer needed replacing. When the others left to resume their sections, Dottie remained on the bench a little longer, her knee resting against Kiki’s.

“You’re doing the whole row alone?” she asked.

“It’s fine.”

Dottie looked at her for a moment, then nodded and stood. “I’ll take the far end. We’ll finish it faster.”

They worked the carrot bed together through the early afternoon. The talk between them was light and infrequent. Sometimes Dottie passed a tool. Sometimes her shoulder brushed Kiki’s when they reached for the same cluster of tops. The contact stayed ordinary and warm. By three the bed was finished and the discarded seedlings had been carried to the compost.

Most of the remaining volunteers packed up and left. Meredith checked the tool shed, locked it, and lifted a hand as she walked to her truck. Trisha had not come that day. The lot emptied until only Kiki’s car and Dottie’s remained.

Dottie leaned against the fender of her car and drank from her water bottle. “I’ve got a few trays of starts that need to be moved to the cold frame at my place,”

she said. “If you want to help it would go quicker.”

Kiki looked at the angle of the light. It was still full afternoon. “All right.”

The cold frame sat along the south wall of Dottie’s building. They carried the trays up the stairs and then back down again, arranging them inside the low wooden box and lowering the glass lids. The work was simple and took less than an hour. When it was finished Dottie unlocked her apartment and held the door open.

“Cold drink at least,” she said. “You’ve been outside since morning.”

Kiki stepped inside. The air conditioning felt almost cold after the long day of sun. Dottie poured two glasses of iced tea and they sat at the small table the same way they had before. The afternoon stretched. Dottie talked in her easy way about a possible bulk order of cover- crop seed and about one of the older volunteers who had started leaving handwritten notes on the tool shed door. Kiki listened and answered when it was required. The light at the window moved from gold to a softer blue.

At some point Dottie reached across the table and brushed a fleck of dried soil from the edge of Kiki’s wrist with her thumb. The touch lingered a second longer than the cleaning required. Then she sat back again.

They did not move into the living room. The time stayed in the kitchen, in ordinary conversation and the slow drinking of tea and the comfortable silence that settled between sentences. When Kiki finally looked at the clock on the stove it read 6:47.

“I should go,” she said.

Dottie walked her to the door. On the landing she touched Kiki’s upper arm once, lightly, and let the hand fall.

“Thanks for the help today.”

“You’re welcome.”

The drive home took the usual twelve minutes. When Kiki pulled into the driveway the sky had gone the deep blue that comes just before true dusk. The living room lamp was on. John’s office window was dark.

Inside, the kitchen showed the clear evidence of a full day lived without her. A single plate and glass sat in the drying rack. The note she had left that morning had been moved to the side of the counter and weighted with a clean spoon. The frying pan John used for eggs had been washed and put away. A light in the hallway had been left on.

John was on the couch with a book. He looked up when she set her keys down.

“Long day,” he said.

“The carrot bed and then some starts at Dottie’s.” Kiki slipped off her shoes. “Did you eat?”

“Earlier.” He marked his place with a finger. “There’s still some of the pasta salad if you want it.”

“I’m all right.”

He nodded. His eyes moved over the dust on her jeans and the pink on her arms, then returned to her face. The look held no question that required an answer. After a moment he opened the book again.

Kiki stood in the kitchen a little longer, drinking a glass of water at the sink. The house felt the way it sometimes did when she returned after a long absence that had not been dramatic —simply in stasis.She set the glass in the rack beside the one that was already there and went to shower the hours of sun and soil from her skin. Behind her the soft sound of a turning page continued in the living room.

Chapter 10

Ordinary Redirection

John came out of the office a little after five-thirty. Kiki was at the kitchen counter rinsing the two mugs from the morning and setting them in the dishwasher. The day outside had gone flat and gray again. A light rain had started and stopped twice since noon, leaving the sidewalks dark.

He opened the refrigerator, looked in for a moment, then closed it.

“I was thinking we could just make something simple and eat in the living room,” he said. “There’s that series you said you wanted to finish.”

Kiki shut the dishwasher and dried her hands on the towel. The phone in her back pocket had already buzzed once twenty minutes earlier. She knew what the message contained without looking again.

“I told Meredith I’d come by after dinner,” she said. “She has the new row-cover order and wants help measuring the beds before it gets too dark.”

John stood with one hand still on the refrigerator door. His expression did not change much. He only nodded once, a small downward movement of the chin.

“How long do you think?”

“An hour, maybe a little more. Measuring and then cutting the first lengths if there’s time.”

“Okay.” He let go of the refrigerator handle. “I’ll just eat here then.”

“I can eat with you before I go,” Kiki said. “It won’t take long to make something.”

“All right.”

They moved through the steps of an early dinner. John filled a pot for pasta. Kiki cut a tomato and half a cucumber and mixed them with oil and salt in a small bowl. The rain began again, soft against the window over the sink. Neither of them turned on music or the television. The only sounds were the pot beginning to simmer and the quiet rhythm of the knife on the cutting board.

They ate at the table. John asked if the bakery had needed her that morning. Kiki said it had been slow. He nodded and finished his plate. When he stood to clear the dishes she rose as well, but he shook his head.

“I’ve got it. You’ll want to get over there while there’s still light.”

Kiki hesitated, then picked up her keys from the counter. She slipped on the light jacket that hung by the door. At the threshold she looked back. John was at the sink with his back to her, rinsing the two plates under running water.

“I won’t be late,” she said.

He did not turn around. “Drive safe.”

She closed the door behind her and stood for a second on the small front step. The rain was only a mist now. Meredith’s truck would already be at the garden. The measuring tape and the notes for the row covers would be waiting on the passenger seat. Kiki pulled the jacket tighter and walked to her car. Behind her the kitchen window stayed lit, and the shape of John at the sink remained visible for a moment longer before she started the engine and pulled away.

Chapter 11

Two Currents

Dottie arrived first, just after six, carrying a cardboard box of seed packets that needed to be divided for the weekend distribution. She stepped inside with a quick, familiar smile and set the box on the kitchen table.

“Meredith’s coming too,” she said as she shrugged off her jacket. “She’s got the row-cover measurements and wants to double-check them against the actual beds before we cut anything. I told her it was fine to meet here.”

Kiki nodded and took the jacket from her. “John’s in the office. He’ll probably stay there.”

“That’s fine.” Dottie already looked at ease in the space. She moved to the sink and washed her hands, then dried them on the towel that hung from the oven handle. “You have a little time before she gets here?”

“Yes.”

Dottie turned from the sink and leaned her hips against the counter. The kitchen light was warm on the soft curves of her face and the open collar of her shirt. She studied Kiki for a moment with that easy, unhidden pleasure she never bothered to disguise.

“Come here,” she said.

Kiki crossed the small distance. Dottie reached out and rested both hands on Kiki’s waist, thumbs moving once in a slow arc over the fabric of her shirt. The touch was warm and proprietary in the lightest way.

“You’ve been running around all day,” Dottie murmured. “You always are.” She leaned in and brushed her mouth against the side of Kiki’s neck, not quite a kiss, more an acknowledgment of skin. “I keep thinking about the other night. How careful you were. How long you stayed with it.”

Kiki’s breath shifted. She did not speak.

Dottie’s hands slid up under the back of her shirt and settled against bare skin. “I’d like that again before Meredith gets here. If you’re willing.”

“I am.”

Dottie smiled against her neck. “Of course you are.”

They moved to the living room. Dottie left the lamp off; the light from the hallway was enough. She sat on the couch and drew Kiki down with her, arranging them so that Kiki knelt on the floor between her open knees. The position had become familiar. Dottie unbuttoned her own jeans and pushed them down only far enough, then guided Kiki forward with a hand at the back of her head.

“Just like before,” she said softly. “Nice and thorough. I like when you take your time.”

Kiki settled into the work. Dottie’s voice continued above her in a low, fond stream—small sounds of approval, quiet instructions when she wanted more pressure or a slower rhythm, once a soft laugh when Kiki’s consistency made her hips lift off the cushion. Her hands stayed in Kiki’s hair, stroking, occasionally tightening when something felt particularly good. The living room remained quiet except for those soft spoken fragments and the wet sounds of Kiki’s mouth.

“That’s it,” Dottie breathed. “Right there. You’re so good at this. You know that?”

Kiki did not answer with words. She adjusted exactly as directed and kept the rhythm steady. Dottie’s thighs tightened on either side of her shoulders. The hand in her hair pressed more firmly. When Dottie came it was with a longer, richer sound than she had made the first time, her body curling forward over Kiki’s head for a moment before she settled back against the couch cushions,

breathing hard.

She kept one hand on Kiki’s cheek while the aftershocks passed, thumb stroking once near the corner of her mouth.

“Thank you,” she said, voice still low. “That was exactly what I needed.”

Kiki sat back on her heels. Before either of them could speak again, headlights swept across the front window and then went dark. A car door closed. Footsteps climbed the short walk.

Dottie buttoned her jeans with unhurried fingers and smoothed her shirt. “That’s her.”

Kiki stood, wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist, and went to open the door.

Meredith stepped inside carrying a rolled set of papers and a measuring tape. She nodded once to Dottie, once to Kiki, and set the papers on the kitchen table beside the seed box.

“I won’t stay long,” she said. “Just need to confirm the lengths against the sketch.”

Dottie stretched her arms above her head and gave a soft, satisfied sigh. “I’m going to get some water and then look at those seed packets. You two can use the table.”

She moved into the kitchen. Meredith remained where she was, looking at Kiki in the way she had in the garden—calm, unhurried, as if simply assessing whether something still needed finishing.

“You have a few minutes?” Meredith asked.

“Yes.”

Meredith glanced toward the hallway that led to the guest bathroom and the quieter back of the house. “Somewhere with better light than the porch.”

Kiki understood. She led the way down the hall. Behind them she could hear Dottie opening a cupboard and the soft clink of a glass. The guest bathroom still carried the faint memory of steam and tile from the previous visit, but Meredith walked past it and into the small spare room that held only a bed, a chair, and a low dresser. She turned on the single lamp.

The light was limited and warm. Meredith closed the door with a quiet click. She set the measuring tape on the dresser, then pulled her shirt over her head in the same matter-of-fact motion she had used on her own porch. The sports bra followed. She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at Kiki.

“The same way as last time,” she said. Her voice was even, almost quiet. “No rush.”

Kiki knelt. The carpet here was thicker than the tile of the guest bath. Meredith’s hand settled on the back of her head with that familiar, resting weight—present, steady, not guiding so much as accompanying. The service unfolded in the same slow, nearly wordless register as it had on the porch. Meredith’s breathing deepened by degrees. Occasionally her fingers flexed once against Kiki’s scalp when a particular pressure landed correctly. Otherwise she remained remarkably still, receiving the care with the same focused patience she brought to every long task in the garden.

Time stretched. The sounds of the house continued beyond the closed door: the faint movement of Dottie in the kitchen, the distant intermittent click of John’s keyboard from the office at the other end of the hall. None of it entered the room in any way that required attention. The only things that mattered were the heat of Meredith’s body, the exact weight of her hand, and the steady work of taking care of her until the quiet, controlled release finally moved through her in one long, contained wave.

Meredith’s hand pressed down through it and then gradually eased. When the last of the tremor had passed she sat in silence for several breaths before she spoke.

“That’s enough. Thank you.”

Kiki sat back. Meredith reached for her shirt and dressed with the same economy of motion. She did not look at herself in any mirror; there was none in the room. She simply stood, picked up the measuring tape, and opened the door.

In the kitchen Dottie was sorting the seed packets into two smaller boxes. She looked up when they entered and gave Kiki a small, knowing smile that carried no question. Meredith unrolled the papers on the table and began checking the numbers against the notes she had brought. The three of them stood around the table for another twenty minutes, speaking only about lengths and quantities and which beds would need the heavier grade of cover.

When the measurements were confirmed Meredith rolled the papers again and nodded to both of them.

“I’ll cut the first set tomorrow.”

Dottie closed the lid on her box of packets. “I’ll bring these to the shed in the morning.”

They left within a few minutes of each other—Meredith first, then Dottie, who paused at the door long enough to touch Kiki’s wrist once with her fingers.

“You’re something else,” she said quietly. Then she was gone.

Kiki closed the door and locked it. The house settled into its usual night sounds. From the office the keyboard continued for a little while longer and then went silent. She stood in the kitchen for a moment, the taste of both women still present.

Chapter 12

Nude Service – Meredith

Meredith texted just after five.

Still have the row covers to cut. Could use another pair of hands. Come when you can.

Kiki finished the short task she was doing at the kitchen counter, left a note for John on the edge of the stove, and drove the familiar route to the end of the gravel drive. The sky had the soft, colorless look it took on before evening. Meredith’s truck was already parked in its usual place.

The front door stood open. Kiki stepped inside and found Meredith in the main room with the long roll of white fabric spread across the floor and the measuring tape clipped to her belt. She was barefoot. The air in the house was warmer than outside; the windows had been closed against the earlier rain.

“Thanks for coming,” Meredith said without looking up. “Hold this end while I mark.”

Kiki knelt and held the edge of the fabric taut. They worked in silence for a while, measuring, marking with a soft pencil, cutting along the lines with heavy shears. The only sounds were the whisper of the fabric and the occasional metallic snip. When the first set of panels was finished Meredith sat back on her heels and rolled her shoulders.

“It’s warm in here,” she said. “You can take your shirt off if you want. I already did.”

She had. Her sports bra was the only thing above her waist. The freckled skin of her shoulders and chest looked damp at the edges from the closed-in heat of the room.

Kiki pulled her own shirt over her head and set it aside. The air moved across her bare arms and the small planes of her back. She was smaller than Meredith in every way—narrower shoulders, narrower ribs, the simple lines of a body that had always taken up little space. Meredith glanced at her once, the same calm assessment she gave a finished bed of seedlings, then returned to the fabric.

They cut the remaining panels. When the work was done Meredith gathered the pieces into a neat stack and set them on the table. She stood for a moment with her hands on her hips, looking at the empty stretch of floor where the fabric had

been.

“That’s the last of it until the next order.” She reached back and unhooked the sports bra, letting it fall forward and then tossing it onto the chair. “Come here.”

Kiki rose and crossed the short distance. Meredith’s hands settled on her waist, large and warm, thumbs resting just above the hip bones. She did not pull or direct. She only held her there for a few seconds, feeling the shape of her.

“You’re warm,” Meredith said.

“So are you.”

Meredith’s mouth moved in what might have been the beginning of a smile. She let go with one hand and unbuttoned Kiki’s jeans, then the zipper. Kiki stepped out of them when they fell. The underwear followed. Meredith’s eyes moved over her without hurry—the small breasts, the narrow waist, the clean line of the hips—and then she nodded once, as if something had been confirmed.

“On the bed,” she said. “I want to take my time.”

The bedroom was dim. Meredith did not turn on a lamp. She lay back against the pillows and guided Kiki between her thighs with the same steady hands. When Kiki would have settled lower, Meredith stopped her.

“Not yet.” Her voice stayed low. “Just stay there for a minute.”

Kiki waited, kneeling, her bare legs folded beneath her. Meredith’s palms moved slowly over her shoulders, down her arms, back up along her sides. The touch was thorough and unhurried, the same quality she brought to checking the moisture under a row of new plantings. When her thumbs brushed the undersides of Kiki’s breasts, Kiki’s breath caught once. Meredith noticed and repeated the motion, slower.

“Sensitive,” she murmured, almost to herself.

She spent a long time like that, learning the small body in front of her with her hands while Kiki remained still and open to the examination. Only when the touching had gone on long enough that Kiki’s skin felt heightened and aware did Meredith let her knees fall wider.

“Now,” she said.

Kiki lowered herself and began. The absence of clothes changed the feeling of the service in small, specific ways. Meredith’s bare thighs framed her shoulders completely. The hand that settled on the back of her head rested against bare skin instead of fabric. Every shift of Meredith’s breath moved through a body that was fully available to be felt. Kiki worked with the same steady attention as before, but the contact was closer, more complete. She could feel the heat of Meredith’s stomach against her forehead when she pressed in. She could feel the

exact moment a muscle trembled under her palm where it rested on Meredith’s hip.

Meredith remained quiet for a long while. Her hand kept its resting weight, occasionally stroking once from the crown of Kiki’s head to the nape of her neck and then returning. When she spoke, the words were sparse and practical.

“Slower.”

Kiki slowed.

“There. Stay.”

Kiki stayed.

The room grew darker as the last of the evening left the window. Meredith’s breathing deepened by degrees. Her free hand found Kiki’s bare shoulder and held it, fingers spreading over the small joint as if to keep her exactly in place. The climax, when it arrived, moved through her in a long, controlled wave that lifted her hips and then settled them again. She kept Kiki there through every pulse of it, the hand on her head firm and unmoving until the final tremor had passed and her body had quieted.

Only then did the pressure ease.

Kiki rested her cheek against the inside of Meredith’s thigh for a few breaths. Meredith’s fingers moved once through her hair in a single, slow pass.

“Good,” she said.

They did not speak while Kiki rose and found her clothes. Meredith remained on the bed, one arm behind her head, watching her dress with the same calm attention she had given the earlier examination. When Kiki was clothed again, Meredith sat up and reached for her own shirt.

At the front door she touched Kiki’s bare forearm once, just above the wrist.

“I’ll see you at the garden.”

“Yes.”

The drive home was dark. The house lights were low when Kiki unlocked the door. John’s office was closed and silent. She stood for a moment in the entryway, the residual heat of Meredith’s hands still present on her waist and shoulders, then locked the door.

Chapter 13

Seed Library Night

The message from Meredith came in the middle of the afternoon.

Remaining flower packets need sorting and dating. If you have the evening free, we can finish it at my table.

Kiki replied that she did. She left the house at five-forty while John was still closing out a spreadsheet in the office. She told him she would be at Meredith's working on the seed library and that she would be back later. He nodded without looking up from the screen.

The drive took the usual twelve minutes. Meredith had left the porch light on. Inside, the main room had been cleared so that the long table could take the full spread of envelopes and the open inventory binder. Two folding chairs sat at either side. A single lamp threw a circle of light across the work; the rest of the room stayed in soft shadow.

Meredith was already seated, sleeves rolled, pencil behind one ear. She glanced up when Kiki came in.

"Coffee on the counter if you want it. It's still hot."

Kiki poured a cup and sat. The work began without further talk. Meredith read the variety names and the years written in faded ink. Kiki checked each packet against the binder, discarded the ones that had passed viability, and wrote the new date on the ones that remained. The envelopes made small dry sounds as they were opened and closed. Outside, the last of the daylight left the windows.

They worked through the first hour without rising. When Meredith finally stretched, the chair creaked.

"We're making progress," she said. "There are more of these than I remembered."

Kiki only nodded and kept writing. The pencil felt familiar in her fingers. The quiet of the house settled around the circle of lamplight. Occasionally Meredith's bare foot brushed against hers under the table and neither of them moved away from the contact.

By eight the main vegetable packets were finished. They started on the flowers—zinnias, cosmos, the various salvias. The names were longer. The handwriting on the older envelopes was harder to read. Meredith leaned closer whenever Kiki held one up to the light, her shoulder against Kiki's for the time it took to decipher a smudged year. The contact lasted only as long as the task required, yet it kept happening.

At some point Meredith stood and refilled both cups without asking. When she sat again she left her chair nearer than before. Their knees touched and stayed touching. The work continued.

Nine o'clock passed. The binder pages filled with new marks. The discarded packets formed a small drifting pile at the edge of the table. Meredith's voice had

gone lower with the hour, the words spaced further apart. Kiki’s answers became shorter to match. The lamp hummed faintly. Beyond the windows the night was full and still.

A little after ten Meredith closed the binder and set the pencil down.

“That’s enough for tonight. The rest can wait.”

Kiki looked at the remaining stack. It was smaller than when they had started, but not finished. She did not argue. Her shoulders had begun to ache from leaning over the table, and the second cup of coffee had gone cold.

Meredith stacked the sorted envelopes into a single box and set it on the floor. When she straightened she rested one hand on the back of Kiki’s neck, the same resting weight she used when she wanted Kiki’s full attention. Her thumb moved once against the side of Kiki’s throat.

“You should go,” she said. “It’s late.”

Kiki stood. The place where Meredith’s hand had been felt cooler when it was gone. She carried her cup to the sink, rinsed it, and left it on the board. Meredith walked her to the door. On the porch the night air was sharp after the closed warmth of the room.

“Thank you for the evening,” Meredith said.

“You’re welcome.”

The roads home were nearly empty. When Kiki turned into the driveway the house was dark except for the small blue router light visible through the front window. She locked the car and climbed the steps. Inside, the air held the settled quiet of a place that had already gone to sleep. John’s office door stood open onto blackness. The bedroom door was closed.

Kiki set her keys on the counter without turning on a light. She stood for a moment in the middle of the kitchen, letting the shape of the dark rooms settle around her, then walked down the hall and opened the bedroom door with care. John was a still length under the covers, his breathing even and deep. She undressed by feel, left her clothes on the chair, and slipped beneath the sheet on her side of the bed. The mattress took her weight with a soft sound. John did not wake. After a while her own breathing slowed.

Chapter 14

Nude Service – Dottie

John closed the office door at twenty minutes past eight. The tapping of the keyboard started a few moments later, then settled into its irregular rhythm.

Kiki was folding the last of the clean dish towels when Dottie knocked once and let herself in. She carried nothing this time. Her cheeks were still pink from the night air.

“I was already out,” she said. “Figured I’d stop rather than text. You busy?”

“No.”

Dottie smiled and came further into the room. She looked at the closed office door, then at Kiki, then at the thermostat on the wall.

“It’s warm in here.”

“I can turn it down.”

“Or you could just get out of those clothes. I’m going to.”

She pulled her sweater over her head as she spoke and draped it over the back of a kitchen chair. The tank top underneath followed. She reached behind her back, unhooked her bra, and added it to the small pile without any change in expression. Her breasts settled heavily. She watched Kiki the whole time, waiting.

Kiki undressed the same way she had learned to do most things around Dottie—directly, without ceremony. Shirt, bra, jeans, underwear. She left them on the chair beside Dottie’s. The air moved across her skin and she felt the small, automatic tightening of her nipples.

Dottie made a low, pleased sound in her throat.

“I like when you’re just like this in your own house,” she said. “Come on. Living room.”

They sat on the couch. Dottie took the corner and drew one leg up. Kiki sat near the middle, close enough that their bare thighs touched. For a while they only talked—about the delayed compost delivery, about whether the new volunteer schedule would hold, about a leak in one of the rain barrels that Meredith had asked someone to look at. While they spoke, Dottie’s hand rested on Kiki’s knee, then higher, then drifted in slow, absent patterns along the inside of her thigh. The touch never became insistent. It simply stayed.

At one point Dottie laughed at something and shook her head.

“You’re sitting here naked in the middle of your living room while your husband works down the hall, and you’re still carefully answering my questions about rain barrels.” Her fingers traced a small circle on Kiki’s skin. “I don’t know anyone else like you.”

Kiki didn’t answer. Dottie’s hand continued its slow movement.

After another few minutes Dottie shifted her weight and winced.

“Pinched something in my hip yesterday hauling those bags. It’s been nagging ever since.” She looked at Kiki. “You mind if I put you to work on it?”

“No.”

Dottie turned and stretched out along the couch, one leg bent, the other resting against the back cushions. She guided Kiki with a light hand until Kiki was kneeling on the floor beside the couch rather than between her legs. The angle was different. Dottie lifted her hips just enough for Kiki to help her slide the leggings and underwear down and off. Then she settled again, open, and reached for Kiki’s wrist.

“Use your mouth on the front of the hip first,” she said quietly. “Where it’s tight. Then you can move lower when it loosens.”

Kiki did as she was told.

The new position changed everything about the contact. She was higher along Dottie’s body at first, mouth working against the dense muscle at the front of the hip and the soft crease where it met the thigh. Dottie kept talking—soft, specific, sometimes almost conversational.

“A little harder. Yes. You’ve got it. Christ, your mouth is warm. Keep going right there while I tell you about the leak—no, don’t stop, I can talk and feel this at the same time.”

She did talk. About the rain barrel, about the fitting that needed replacing, about how Meredith had already ordered the part. The words mixed with lower sounds of pleasure whenever Kiki’s mouth found a place that made the muscle release. Every so often Dottie’s hand would stroke over Kiki’s bare back or settle briefly in her hair before returning to the couch cushion. The keyboard down the hall continued its distant, uneven pattern.

When the hip had loosened, Dottie’s hand guided her lower without interrupting the sentence she was in the middle of. Kiki went. The talk continued for a while longer, growing more fragmented, until it finally fell away into breath and the small, helpless movements of Dottie’s hips. Kiki kept the rhythm steady. Dottie’s hand found the back of her head and stayed there, not pressing hard, just resting with the kind of weight that meant she did not want any change.

The climax came in a long, rolling wave that pulled a deep sound out of Dottie and made her thighs close briefly around Kiki’s shoulders before opening again. She held her there through the whole of it and the smaller aftershocks that followed, fingers moving in slow, grateful passes through her hair.

When she finally let go, she looked down at Kiki with heavy, satisfied eyes.

“Come up here.”

Kiki climbed onto the couch. Dottie pulled her in against her bare chest and simply held her for a while, one hand stroking the length of her spine. Neither of them spoke. The house stayed quiet around them. Eventually Dottie pressed a kiss to the top of Kiki’s head and sighed.

“I should go before it gets ridiculous.”

She dressed slowly. Kiki remained on the couch, still naked, the throw draped loosely across her lap. At the door Dottie turned back and looked at her for a long second.

“You’re a gift,” she said, very softly. Then she left.

Kiki listened to the car pull away. She stayed where she was, the living room lamp still on, the office door still closed, the taste of Dottie still in her mouth. After a while she stood, gathered the two piles of clothes from the kitchen chair, and turned off the light. She walked down the hall carrying both sets in her arms, past the office, and into the bedroom dark.

Chapter 15

Nude Service – Trisha

Trisha’s text came at 7:09.

Need to drop off the soil test results. Five minutes.

Kiki unlocked the front door and left it ajar. John’s office door was closed. She waited in the kitchen until she heard the car door and then the short climb of footsteps on the front steps.

Trisha came in carrying a thin manila envelope. She set it on the counter without comment and looked at Kiki for a long moment. Her expression gave nothing away.

“The back room,” she said.

Kiki led her down the hall past the closed office and the guest bathroom. The small second bedroom at the end had been used for storage and the occasional guest; a single bed, a dresser, a chair, a narrow window that looked onto the side yard. Kiki turned on the lamp on the dresser. The light was limited and left the corners dark.

Trisha closed the door. She set her keys on the dresser beside the lamp and turned to face Kiki.

“Off.”

Kiki undressed. She placed each piece of clothing on the chair without folding them into a neat stack this time. When she was bare she stood in the circle of light and waited. Trisha’s eyes moved over her with the same unhurried

thoroughness she gave a row that needed correcting. She walked once around her, still fully clothed, and stopped behind her. For a while there was only the quiet of the room and the faint awareness of the rest of the house beyond the door.

Trisha's voice came from behind her shoulder, low and even.

"On the bed. On your back."

Kiki lay down. The coverlet was cool against her bare skin. Trisha stood at the foot of the bed and looked at her for another long stretch of time. Then she unbuttoned her jeans, pushed them down along with her underwear, and climbed onto the mattress. She straddled Kiki's chest, knees planted on either side of her ribs, and looked down at her face.

One hand settled on Kiki's forehead, fingers spread, holding her head still against the mattress. The other hand braced against the wall above the headboard. She shifted forward until the angle was exact.

There were no further instructions.

Kiki lifted her mouth and began. The position was different from every previous time—her head pinned, her body stretched out beneath Trisha's weight, the limited range of movement forcing a precise, upward rhythm. Trisha remained almost completely still above her. The hand on her forehead adjusted the tilt of her face by millimeters when something needed correcting, then locked again. The only sounds were the soft wet noise of Kiki's work and the controlled change in Trisha's breathing.

The concentration in the room was absolute. Trisha watched her the entire time, eyes dark and unblinking. When the right pressure and pace had been found she held Kiki there without mercy or variation, the weight of her hand and the cage of her knees making any adjustment impossible. Kiki's world reduced to the ache in her neck, the heat and weight above her, and the single task of continuing exactly as she had been set.

Trisha came with almost no sound—only a sharp, held breath and a hard shudder that traveled through her thighs and into the hand pressing on Kiki's forehead. She kept her there through it, unmoving, until the last of the tremor had left her body. Then she lifted away, restored her clothing in a few efficient motions, and stepped off the bed.

She picked up her keys.

Her footsteps moved down the hall. The front door opened and closed.

Kiki remained on her back on the bed for a short while after the car had gone. The lamp still burned. Her clothes lay in a loose pile on the chair. Eventually she sat up, dressed, turned off the lamp, and left the room. The hallway was dark.

She locked the front door, stood for a moment with her hand on the knob, then walked back through the quiet house toward the bedroom.

Chapter 16

Regular Hours

Monday

Kiki left the house at 5:50. John was still at the kitchen table with a bowl of leftover rice and the laptop open beside it. She told him she was going to Meredith’s to help finish the bed measurements for the new irrigation layout. He nodded and said he would probably work late anyway.

Meredith’s place smelled of wood and the sharp green of cut tomato stakes. They worked at the kitchen table with the sketches spread out, measuring and noting the lengths in pencil. After the last number was recorded Meredith stood behind Kiki’s chair and rested both hands on her shoulders. Her thumbs pressed slowly along the top of the shoulder blades.

“You’re tight here,” she said.

Kiki sat still while Meredith worked the muscle. After a few minutes Meredith’s hands moved to the sides of her neck, then down under the collar of her shirt. She did not ask Kiki to stand or undress. She simply kept going, deeper, until Kiki’s breathing had changed. Then Meredith’s voice came, low and close to her ear.

“Come to the bedroom when you’re ready.”

Kiki followed. Meredith had already taken off her shirt and bra. She lay on her side on the bed and waited. This time she wanted Kiki behind her, one of Kiki’s arms under her neck, the other hand free to travel. She guided Kiki’s mouth to the back of her neck first, then lower, along the line of her spine, while her own hand reached back to keep Kiki’s hips pressed against her. The service, when it finally shifted between her legs, happened with Kiki curled around her from behind. Meredith kept one of Kiki’s hands pinned under her own against the mattress and used the other to control the angle of Kiki’s head. She spoke only three times— small corrections of pressure and speed—then went quiet until the long, controlled release moved through her. Afterward she kept Kiki’s arm around her for several minutes, neither of them speaking, before she finally said that Kiki should go before it got much later.

Kiki drove home at 9:40. The house was dark. She undressed in the bathroom by the light of the nightlight and slipped into bed. John shifted once but did not wake.

Wednesday

Dottie asked her to come by after the short bakery shift. When Kiki arrived Dottie was in the middle of cooking—onions already soft in the pan, garlic waiting on the board. She handed Kiki a knife and asked her to finish the chopping while she poured two glasses of wine. They cooked side by side. Dottie kept brushing against her on purpose, hip or shoulder or the back of her hand, and each time she did she made a small sound of satisfaction. Halfway through the sauce she turned the heat down, wiped her hands, and looked at Kiki.

“I want you on the counter,” she said. “Right here. I’ve been thinking about it since Monday.”

She lifted Kiki onto the edge of the counter, pulled her jeans and underwear off in one motion, and spread her knees. But she did not go down on her. Instead she stepped in close and guided Kiki’s hand between her own legs, inside her leggings, while she leaned in and kissed her neck and talked.

“I like feeling how wet you get just from being told what to do,” she murmured. “Keep your hand there. Just like that. I want to cook the rest of this while you’re touching me.”

She went back to the stove. Kiki stayed on the counter, legs open, one hand working slowly inside Dottie’s clothes while Dottie stirred the sauce and told her in a low, conversational voice exactly how good it felt and what she expected next. When the sauce was finally simmering Dottie turned around, pulled Kiki’s hand free, and replaced it with her mouth. She took her time, talking between slow passes of her tongue, until Kiki came with her fingers tight in Dottie’s hair and her heels pressing against the cupboard doors. Then Dottie stood, wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist, and nodded at the floor.

“Your turn. On your knees while I finish cooking.”

Kiki knelt on the kitchen tile and took care of her while the sauce bubbled quietly on the stove. Dottie kept one hand on the wooden spoon and the other on the back of Kiki’s head, stirring and guiding at the same time, her voice soft and almost amused as she told Kiki when to slow down and when to take more. She came standing up, thighs trembling against Kiki’s shoulders, and only then turned the burner off.

They ate the pasta twenty minutes later at the small table. Dottie kept one bare foot hooked around Kiki’s calf the entire time. Kiki left a little after nine. John had already gone to bed. She stood in the kitchen for a while drinking a glass of water before she followed.

Friday

Trisha did not text. She was simply waiting in the gravel lot when Kiki locked the garden shed at the end of the day. She gave a short upward nod of her chin

toward her car and nothing else. Kiki followed her to the small apartment.

Inside, Trisha pointed at the low wooden bench she kept near the window.

“Sit there. Facing me.”

Kiki sat. Trisha stripped efficiently, then stood in front of her, close enough that Kiki’s knees brushed the outer sides of her thighs. She took Kiki’s hands and placed them on her own hips, holding them there for a moment so the grip was clear. Then she stepped in, guided Kiki’s head with both hands, and kept her exactly where she wanted her. The angle was upright, almost severe. Trisha’s fingers stayed locked at the back of Kiki’s skull, controlling every small movement. She made almost no sound. When she needed a change she simply adjusted Kiki’s head with her hands and waited until the new pressure was correct. The climax arrived in a single hard, silent wave that forced her weight forward onto Kiki for several long seconds before she stepped back.

She dressed without speaking. She paused long enough to look at Kiki once, still seated on the bench, and then left her to find her own way out.

Kiki drove home in the full dark. The living room lamp was on. John was reading. He looked up when she came in, took in the hour and the state of her clothes, and marked his place in the book with one finger.

“Long day?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “There’s food in the fridge if you want it.”

“I’m fine.”

She sat on the other end of the couch for a few minutes. Neither of them reached for the other. After a while John closed the book and said he was going to sleep. Kiki stayed where she was after he left, listening to the quiet of the house, until she finally rose and turned off the lamp.

Chapter 17

Overlap

Dottie arrived just after seven with a paper bag of food and a half-finished bottle of wine.

“I ordered too much again,” she said, setting everything on the counter. “Help me eat it.”

Kiki began taking out plates. Dottie moved through the kitchen as if she had been doing it for months—finding glasses, opening the correct drawer for forks, leaning against the counter while Kiki divided the containers. They had only started eating when another set of headlights crossed the window.

Meredith came in carrying the printed volunteer schedules for the next month. She nodded to both of them, accepted the glass Kiki poured, and sat down at the table without ceremony. John's office door stayed closed. The low hum of his laptop fan was the only sign of him.

They ate together in the kitchen. Talk stayed with the garden: who had stopped showing up on Thursdays, whether the compost delivery would land before the cold nights started, which of the late tomato plants were still worth the water. Dottie carried most of the conversation. Meredith corrected details when they were wrong. Kiki refilled glasses and cleared the empty containers. Under the table Dottie's bare foot rested against hers. Meredith's knee pressed steadily along the outside of her other leg.

When the food was gone they moved to the living room. Dottie claimed the corner of the couch and pulled Kiki down so that Kiki's back rested against her chest, one of Dottie's arms draped loosely around her waist. Meredith took the armchair and spread the schedules across her lap. The television remained off. The floor lamp threw a single warm circle of light.

Dottie spoke quietly against Kiki's neck.

"You're quiet."

"Just listening."

Dottie's thumb moved in a slow arc under the edge of Kiki's shirt, resting against bare skin. "You feel good like this."

Meredith glanced up once, took in the way they were sitting, and returned to the papers. A few minutes later she held out a page and the pencil.

"Check the Thursday names. Your handwriting's clearer than mine."

Kiki leaned forward to take them. Dottie's arm adjusted but did not let go. Kiki made the small corrections and handed the sheet back. When she settled again, Meredith's eyes rested on her a moment longer before dropping to the next page.

The evening continued in that shape. Dottie kept Kiki against her, hand moving occasionally under the shirt in slow, absent strokes. Meredith worked through the schedules, asking for a name or a date now and then. The closed office door at the end of the hall felt farther away than the length of the house should have allowed. The living room belonged to the three of them for the hour.

At one point Dottie turned Kiki's face and kissed her—unhurried, open, without any attempt to hide it from the rest of the room. Meredith watched for a second, then looked back down at the paper as if it were simply another piece of information.

A little later Meredith set the finished schedules aside and stood.

“I need a few minutes.”

She looked at Kiki, then toward the hallway. Kiki understood and rose. Dottie let her go with a final slow drag of her fingers across Kiki’s stomach.

In the small second bedroom Meredith closed the door and turned on the lamp. She did not undress completely. She simply unbuttoned her jeans, pushed them down far enough, and sat on the edge of the bed. One hand settled on the back of Kiki’s head with the familiar resting weight and guided her down between her knees. The other hand braced against the mattress.

There were almost no words. Meredith adjusted the angle of Kiki’s head once with her fingers, then kept her there with steady pressure while Kiki took care of her. The service was controlled and exact, the same quiet intensity Meredith always brought to it. When she came it was with a long, held breath and a single hard tremor that traveled through her thighs. She kept Kiki in place until the last of it had passed, then released her head and rested her hand there for another moment before letting go.

“That’s enough,” she said.

Kiki sat back. Meredith restored her clothing, smoothed the front of her shirt, and opened the door. They returned to the living room separately.

Dottie looked at Kiki’s mouth and gave a small, private smile but said nothing. Meredith gathered the finished schedules. The three of them stayed in the living room another twenty minutes while Dottie finished the last of the wine and Meredith checked one final date. At ten-thirty Meredith stood and said she was leaving. Dottie followed a few minutes later, pausing at the door only long enough to kiss Kiki once, softly, and rest her forehead against Kiki’s for a second.

After both cars had pulled away, Kiki stood in the middle of the living room and listened to the house. The office fan was still running. She carried the empty glasses to the kitchen, left them in the sink, and turned off the lamp. The house was quiet again.

The air in the bedroom grew cooler in the deep part of the night. Kiki lay on her side of the mattress. The space between her back and John’s back remained wide enough that neither offered the other any heat. His breathing was a low, rhythmic draw of air that lifted the edge of the coverlet and let it fall. He did not shift.

When the gray light at the window finally settled into morning, Kiki opened her eyes. She did not stretch. She sat up, letting the sheet pool around her waist, and placed her bare feet flat on the hardwood. The floor was cold. She stood, leaving the shallow shape of her weight on the mattress, and walked down the hall.

The air in the kitchen was perfectly still. The single blue light of the router glowed against the baseboard, turning the edge of the refrigerator door an icy color. Kiki turned on the small bulb beneath the microwave. She opened the canister of coffee. She leveled the grounds into the paper filter, tapping the plastic spoon against the edge once. She poured the water. The machine engaged with a sharp click, followed by a low hum, and then the slow, intermittent hiss of hot water.

She stood in the center of the kitchen while it brewed. She did not cross her arms or lean her hip against the counter. She simply watched a smear of dried water on the stainless steel rim of the sink.

A while later, John came down the hall. He wore the soft gray shirt he always wore on weekends. His bare feet made a flat, padding sound against the wood. He paused at the threshold of the kitchen.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning."

He moved to the cabinet above the machine. When he reached up for a mug, his forearm displaced the air near Kiki’s shoulder. There was no physical contact. He poured his coffee, the liquid falling in a dark stream, the steam dissipating before it reached the ceiling.

"I need to run the end-of-month spreadsheets today," he said to the wall above the sink.

"Okay."

"I'll probably just stay in the office."

"All right."

He turned and walked back down the hall. The office door closed with its familiar, soft click. Soon after, the uneven tapping of the keyboard began.

Kiki poured her own mug. She carried it into the living room and sat in the center of the couch. The morning sun cleared the trees across the street, sending a pale, rigid rectangle of light across the carpet. In the air above the coffee table, a suspension of dust drifted, entirely governed by the faint, invisible currents of the room.

Kiki watched it. The refrigerator in the kitchen cycled off, leaving the house to the quiet, distant sound of the typing. She held the warm ceramic in both hands and waited for the day to require s

omething of her.