The Willing

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Chariot, Book 35

Tracy stayed after the lecture because she wanted another look at Dr. Seigel without the rows of faces between them. The room smelled of dry-erase ink and the wool of coats. Dr. Seigel had talked for fifty minutes with her sleeves rolled, one hand opening and closing around a pen, and Tracy had watched the hand more than the diagram. On the stairs up to the third floor her bag knocked her hip. She was warm under the cardigan. She told herself she was going to ask about the lecture.

The door was open. Dr. Seigel's jacket hung on the back of the chair. The late sun sat on the blotter and on the fine skin at her wrist.

"Tracy. I'm here until five."

"I didn't get it," Tracy said. She sat because her knees had gone unreliable. The bag stayed in her lap, a weight she could hold. "You said a person who knows more has better intuition. I keep thinking the opposite. If I don't know a thing, the first answer is the true one. After I've learned it, I'm only repeating the lesson."

Dr. Seigel set the pen down. The click was small. Tracy felt it low, which was absurd, and which she did not examine.

"You can mean it and still be guessing. You haven't done it enough times to know what you do. You only know what you think you'd do."

"I hear that. I can't see it."

Dr. Seigel looked at her for a moment, the look she used when a student was close to the point and about to step around it. "Then we'll use this room. I'm going to ask you something. Don't improve it. Don't decide what you ought to say to me. Answer."

Tracy nodded. Her mouth was dry.

"What would you do if I told you to take your clothes off and stand here naked?"

The heat went up her throat so fast she heard it in her ears. She could smell her own shampoo, and the paper on the desk, and the faint clean scent of Dr. Seigel. The answer was not a thought. It was already in her mouth, and it frightened her because it was happy.

"I'd do it."

"When?"

"Now." Her voice came out smaller than she wanted. "I'd take my clothes off for you."

Dr. Seigel did not smile. The not-smiling made Tracy wet. "Then do it."

Tracy stood. Three buttons, and then she had to look up, because the want and the room had arrived at the same second. “In here?”

“Shut the door. Put your clothes on the chair.”

The door sound was ordinary. Her hands were not. The cardigan came off and held the warmth of her arms. The white shirt was thin. She had worn the beige bra because it was the one in the drawer, and under Dr. Seigel’s eyes it felt like a confession of not having expected to be seen. Dr. Seigel stayed in the chair. Tracy wanted her to stand. She also wanted the watching, the pen still, the attention gathered and not spent.

“If you’d done this on a dozen afternoons,” Dr. Seigel said, “do you think you’d be slower, or surer? Would you know what you wanted from it, instead of finding out while the shirt is in your hands?”

“I don’t know.” The shirt was already off. The air was cool on her stomach. Her nipples had tightened under the cups, and the tightening was its own small shock.

“You don’t. Keep going.”

The clasp stuck. She hated the stick, and then it gave, and the bra slid down her arms. Cool air on her breasts. She looked at the chair instead of at Dr. Seigel, laid the bra on the shirt, and heard her own breath. The skirt zipper was loud in the small room. She stepped out of it. The shoes. The socks, because she would not stand in socks for this woman. Her thumbs found the underwear. She was wet enough that the cotton clung, and the cling told her the answer in the chair had been true before she stood. The cloth came down, caught for a second at her thighs, and was off. She stood with her arms at her sides. The carpet was thin under her feet. She could feel the wet cooling on her.

“I can’t picture the version where I’ve done this before,” she said. “I don’t know if I’d want it more. I don’t have another afternoon to put next to this.”

“Come here.”

Three steps. Dr. Seigel stood, and Tracy smelled soap and wool and the warm skin at her throat. She wanted to lean in. She did not.

“Turn around once. Then face me.”

Tracy turned. The turn showed her the door, the chair, her own clothes, and then Dr. Seigel again, close enough that a sway would have touched her.

“If you want me to stop, say stop.”

“I don’t.”

The hands came under her breasts. Warm. Careful. They lifted the weight and let it settle back into the palms, and Tracy's breath broke on the settle. Thumbs passed over her nipples. The touch was light and it went down her stomach in a line. She did not step back. She wanted the thumbs to stay.

"You knew they were sensitive," Dr. Seigel said. Her voice had not changed. That was the part Tracy would think about on the stairs. "You didn't know you'd hold this still for me."

The hands moved down her ribs. Tracy felt each finger. At her waist they pressed, at her hips they pressed where she gave, and her stomach tightened so hard she was embarrassed by it. Dr. Seigel waited the tightness out, as if it were a fact she had expected. "Turn."

Tracy turned. Both hands took her ass. The squeeze was firm, then gone, then back, higher, lower. A thumb pressed into the muscle at the side and Tracy made a sound she did not choose. Her hips tipped forward. She was slick enough that her thighs slid. She pushed back into the palms because the palms were warm and because Dr. Seigel had asked a question about what Tracy would do, and this was the answer continuing. Dr. Seigel felt the push. She did not name it. She let go, and the letting go was worse than the hold.

"Face me."

Tracy did. Flushed, nipples stiff, mouth open, wet on the inside of one thigh.

"Yesterday you could have told me you'd be ashamed and leave," Dr. Seigel said. She was close enough that Tracy felt the words on her mouth. "Today you stayed, and you pushed into my hands. That's all this hour can tell you. It can't tell you what you'd do if you knew my hands. Come back tomorrow. Same time. Take your clothes off again. I'll handle you again. Then you'll have a second afternoon to set beside this one. This one is mostly shock, and wanting."

Tracy nodded. She wanted to be handled again now, and she did not say so, because Dr. Seigel had already given the hour its end.

"Get dressed. I have a meeting at five."

The underwear stuck where she was wet. The bra rubbed her nipples. She buttoned the shirt wrong and had to do it over, and Dr. Seigel watched the correction without helping. When the cardigan was on, Tracy still felt naked under it. The print of the hands was on her ass. Her mouth tasted like the breath she had been holding.

"Thank you," she said. It was too small. It was also the truest thing she had said all week.

"Tomorrow. Don't practice your answer on the way home. You already gave it."

The hall was empty. She took the stairs with one hand on the rail. Across the quad the underwear clung, and her breasts moved in the bra, sore in the good way, and she knew she would be wet before she was asked. She did not know whether that was knowing more. She knew she wanted Dr. Seigel's hands again, and the voice that had not changed while it took her apart.

Tracy was outside the office at three-fifty-five. She had bought the red silk that morning at the shop on College and had put it on under her clothes because she wanted Dr. Seigel to see it. On the stairs the skirt was already half unzipped. She did not remember unzipping it. She was wet before she knocked.

Dr. Seigel was at the desk, jacket off, a pen in her hand.

"You're early."

"I didn't want to wait in the hall."

"Shut the door."

Tracy shut it. The room was warm. She set her bag down and took the cardigan off without being told. She folded it onto the chair. Her fingers went to the shirt. She was looking at Dr. Seigel's mouth.

"I haven't asked you anything."

"I know." The shirt came open. The red bra showed, a small bow at the center. "I thought about it last night. I don't think I'm guessing, and I don't think I'm deciding. I woke up knowing I would take my clothes off in here at four. It doesn't feel like a choice."

She pulled the shirt off. Her nipples were hard under the silk. The walk had rubbed them.

"Leave the bra a moment."

Tracy stopped, hands behind her back. The pose opened her chest. She held it because she had been told to.

"You wore that for me."

"Yes."

"Did you own it yesterday?"

"I bought it this morning. I told the woman I needed something that would show."

"Turn around."

Tracy turned. The open skirt showed the bra, the matching underwear, and the damp mark she had felt in the stairwell. She wanted Dr. Seigel to see it. She was ashamed of that, and the shame did not dry her.

“Take it off. I want to see what you bought, and then I want it gone. While you do it, don’t tell me what you meant. Tell me what your body is doing. The meaning is what we’re checking. It isn’t evidence.”

Tracy’s face heated. She unhooked the bra and let it slide down her arms. “My nipples are hard. The silk rubbed them on the walk.” She set the bra on the shirt. The skirt came off. She pushed the underwear down, held it because it was new and wet, and put it with the rest. “I’m wet. I was wet on the stairs. My legs are shaking.” She had not worn socks. She stood with her hands at her sides. Cool air on her breasts. Wet on the inside of one thigh.

“Better. Come here.”

She went around the desk. Dr. Seigel stood. Tracy smelled soap and the skin at her throat and wanted to put her face there. She did not say so. She had been told the want was not the evidence.

Dr. Seigel took her breasts underneath and lifted. A thumb crossed each nipple. Tracy’s breath shortened.

“Say the fact.”

“They’re sensitive. The left one more. I want your thumb to stay.”

“The second sentence is you. I’m not measuring you yet. More swollen than yesterday, or less surprised. Those can look the same until I check.”

The hands moved over her ribs, her waist, her hips, pressing where she gave. When they came to her ass she stepped her feet apart.

“You moved them.”

“So you could reach.”

“Yesterday you didn’t know where to put them. That was a person guessing. This is a body that has been handled once. Turn your hips back if you need to. Don’t explain it.”

Dr. Seigel squeezed, both cheeks, then one at a time. She held the left longer. Tracy pushed back into the hand. The other hand came around and rested low on her stomach, the heel of it just above the hair. Tracy’s clit throbbed. She almost called the throb a want, and stopped.

“I’m going to touch your clit. I want to see how swollen it is. If you need me to stop, say stop. Otherwise don’t narrate yourself. I’ll tell you what I find. You tell me if the finding is wrong.”

“I don’t want you to stop.”

“Feet wider. Hold the desk.”

Tracy held the desk. The wood was cool under her palms. Two fingers parted her. There was no drag. She heard her own breath and the wet sound of being opened. Dr. Seigel set the pad of one finger against her clit, pressed lightly, and took the finger away to look. Tracy's hips followed the finger. She did not apologize. Dr. Seigel had not asked for an apology. "It's out. Not all the way. I'll judge it against my hand. Tell me if the pressure is too much. Don't tell me what it means."

She drew the hood back and set two fingers along the length, base to tip. Tracy felt herself against those fingers and locked her elbows.

"About the end of my finger. Thicker than yesterday would have been. Swollen. I don't know if this is as swollen as you get. That limit isn't yours to declare. It's mine to find, if you come back."

She stroked once, slowly. Tracy's mouth opened. Her hips jerked. A sound came out that was not a word. Dr. Seigel stroked again and stopped, fingers resting on either side, close enough that Tracy felt the heat and not the stroke.

"Is this as far as it goes?"

Tracy shook her head. It took her a moment.

"No. It gets bigger if you keep going. Harder. It isn't finished."

"Good. That was a fact. The girl who bought the silk can say she has no choice. I can't use that. I can use this." Dr. Seigel took her hand away. Tracy swayed and caught the desk. "I'm not going to bring you off today. If I do, I only learn the end, and you get to call the end yours. Come back tomorrow at four. We'll see whether you can still give me a fact when you're closer."

Tracy stayed on the desk until her legs held her. She was breathing through her mouth. Her thighs were wet. She wanted the finger back. She did not ask. Asking would have been the girl again, and Dr. Seigel had just set that girl aside.

"I knew before I knocked," she said. "I bought the underwear. I was wet before you touched me."

"You knew what you hoped. I know what my hand found. Those are different. Get your clothes."

Tracy went to the chair. Her hands were shaking. She picked up the underwear. Dr. Seigel came around the desk.

"I'll help. You'll put them on wrong if you rush, and then you'll be thinking about the twist instead of what I measured."

She knelt and held the underwear open. Tracy stepped in. Dr. Seigel drew them up, settled them, and tucked the silk where it had twisted. The wet cloth went back against her clit. Tracy shut her eyes. Knuckles brushed her while the

waistband was straightened. She made a small sound.

Dr. Seigel stood and held the bra. “Arms.”

Tracy put her arms through. Dr. Seigel hooked it, adjusted the straps, and fitted her breasts into the cups. Her thumbs brushed the nipples. She buttoned the shirt from the bottom, got one wrong, and undid two to fix it. The skirt. The zipper. The cardigan over Tracy’s shoulders. The bag in her hand.

“Go back to the dorm. Eat. Don’t spend the night deciding what the afternoon meant. Wear what you’d wear to class. If you want the red again, wear the red. Be here at four. I’ll ask for the facts again. You can keep the story. I won’t be using it.”

Tracy opened the door. The hall was cooler than the office. The silk clung, wet, the whole way to the dorm. On the stairs she tried to get back to the sentence she had brought: there is no choice, only this. It would not hold. What held was the length of Dr. Seigel’s finger, and the instruction not to say what she meant.

Tracy knocked at four in jeans, a gray T-shirt, and a sweater. Under them was the red silk. She had stood in the dorm with the beige set in one hand and the red in the other, and she had put the red on because she wanted Dr. Seigel to see that she had chosen it. On the quad she had tried to decide whether the choosing counted. She had not settled it. She was wet before she reached the third floor. The silk clung when she climbed the stairs.

“Shut the door.”

Tracy shut it. The room smelled of paper and the wool on the chair. She put the bag down and pulled the sweater off. Her hands wanted the shirt next.

“You’re undressing before I’ve asked.”

“You told me to come at four and take my clothes off. Asking was the first time.”

“Leave the jeans. Sit.”

Tracy sat. The sweater was warm in her lap. The T-shirt was thin. The red bra showed at the neck. She did not tug it up. She wanted Dr. Seigel to see it and not mention the wanting.

Dr. Seigel looked at the clock, then at her face, then at the red. “Yesterday you said it wasn’t a choice. Only the undressing. I want to put that next to an experiment. In the eighties a physiologist named Libet timed the moment people noticed they meant to move a hand. They watched a dot race around a clock. They flexed a wrist when the urge came, not when anyone told them. Afterward they said where the dot had been when they first felt the urge. Electrodes on the scalp were already picking up a slow shift over the motor cortex, about half a second before the wrist moved. The urge they reported came later, about a fifth

of a second before the movement. So the change he could record ran ahead of the moment they were willing to call a choice. Some people say the feeling of choosing is a late notice. Some say you can still cancel in the short time after you've noticed and before the hand goes. I don't need you to pick a side. I need you to tell me, while I touch you, whether you decided or caught up. It ends with you coming. I stopped yesterday. I'm not stopping today. If you come, that is a fact. It is not a story you get to keep."

Tracy's face heated. The lecture voice, aimed at her clit, made her shift in the chair. "I wanted it yesterday when you stopped."

"That's you again. Say the fact."

"I was swollen. You stopped. I didn't come. I still wanted to."

"Two of those I can use. Stand up and finish undressing. Tell me if you decided to stand or noticed you were standing."

Tracy stood. "I noticed," she said, and then was not sure. She had also wanted to, the moment she was told. The T-shirt came off. The red bra was warm from her skin. She unhooked it. Her nipples tightened in the cool air. She put the bra on the chair. Jeans, then the underwear. The silk was damp. The dark spot showed when she laid it on the bra. Her thighs were wet. She did not know if showing the spot was a decision. She wanted Dr. Seigel to look at it, and she did.

"Come here. Hold the desk."

Dr. Seigel stood at her side. One hand took her left breast. The other rested low on her stomach. Tracy could smell the soap on her wrist. She wanted to turn her face into it. She held the desk.

"I'm going to pinch your nipple and flick your clit at the same time. Clear, and together, so you can't honestly tell me later which one you answered. After each one, tell me what came first. The touch, the want, or your hips. If you can't separate them, say so. We do this until you come. You don't have to hold still at the end. You do have to keep talking as long as you can. The sentence you brought, about no choice, stays outside. I'm checking the hips."

"All right."

Dr. Seigel drew the hood back and set a finger against her clit. Her other hand took the left nipple. She waited. Tracy's arms shook from bracing. She was slick. She could hear herself breathing.

The pinch and the flick landed together. Tracy gasped. Her hips jerked forward onto the finger. The want was in the jerk. She could not find an edge between them.

“I don’t know which was first. The touch and the jerk. I already wanted it when I made the noise.”

“Try not to move your hips. Feel my hands. Don’t chase them.”

She did it again, firmer. The pinch held a second longer. The flick came up. Tracy’s hips jerked anyway. Heat went up her chest. She was ashamed, and the shame made her wetter, which she would not have said out loud if she had not been told to give the fact.

“I tried. I’d already moved. I felt myself decide not to after it happened.”

“That’s what those subjects describe. The notice came late. Again.”

A third. A fourth. The spacing changed, so she could not brace for a count. On the fifth, the right nipple, and the flick upward. Her knees bent. She was wet enough that the flick made a small sound. Dr. Seigel’s finger was slick. Tracy wanted her to keep it there and also wanted to have stopped, so she could still be the woman who had decided.

“I can feel that I meant not to move. I can’t get that in before my hips go. I’m more swollen than yesterday. You can feel it.”

“I can.” A slow stroke, not a flick. Tracy’s whole body followed it. She made a sound into her own shoulder. “Yesterday you knew you got more swollen if someone kept going. Today the pair arrives before you can say you want it. Telling yourself not to move doesn’t stop the move. On Monday you might still have said you were choosing each answer. You’ve had four that say the choice is late. The girl who says she has no choice is guessing. Your hips are not guessing.”

“Does that make it less mine?”

“It makes the account late. The orgasm will be late too, if you try to own it before it happens. Again.”

Closer together. Tracy stopped trying to refuse. Her nipples were sore and stiff. Each pinch went down her stomach to the finger on her clit. She was close enough that her thighs trembled. Dr. Seigel spoke in the voice she used at the board, and the voice made it worse, because Tracy had wanted that voice before she had wanted the hands.

“Intuition, in that lecture, isn’t a guess from nowhere. It’s recognition. You’ve seen this often enough that your body knows it before you can list the signs. You got wet on the quad. You showed me the underwear. You held the desk before I told you where I’d touch. You didn’t need a fresh judgment. The judgment is what you add after, so you can still be a person in the story.”

“So I’m not deciding.”

“You’re not deciding each flick. You may have decided to come back. In this room, you’re clear. That’s what I wanted from the third time. Not your theory. Your timing.”

Three quick pinches with the flick, a pause, a slow circle on her clit while the nipple was rolled instead of pinched. Tracy put her forehead on her wrist. She could smell her own skin. Her hips answered the next flick before Dr. Seigel finished the sentence she had started.

“I’m close.”

“Don’t perform it. When did you want it, compared with the touch.”

“Inside it. When you pinch, I’m already coming toward your hand.”

“Then this is the last set. Come when you come. Don’t announce it to make it yours.”

Pinch and flick. Tracy cried out. Again. Her thighs shook and she pushed onto the finger. The third was harder, the pinch held, the flick sharper, and she came on it. A hard pulse, then another, her clit jumping under the finger, the nipple caught and bright. She said, “It’s now, it’s your hand,” and then she could not get a sentence out. Dr. Seigel kept the finger there and did not flick again. She held the nipple until the pulses eased. Tracy shook through the last of it, wet on her thighs, wet on the hand, her forehead stuck to her wrist. Dr. Seigel let both go. The air on her nipple was almost too much.

Tracy stayed on the desk. She wanted to be told she had done well. She also understood, through the aftershocks, that doing well was not what had been asked.

“Whenever you can.”

Her voice was rough. “I didn’t decide to come. I knew it would be that one. The knowing and the coming were the same. I chose to be here. After that I was finding out.”

“Better than yesterday. Yesterday you had a clean story, and it was early. Today you have a refusal you missed and an orgasm on my hand. That doesn’t settle free will. It settles what you can honestly say. You can say you walked here. You cannot say you ran the jerk. Get used to that split. I’ll be using it.”

She helped Tracy stand. The nipples were red. Between her legs Tracy was swollen, and a small aftershock went through her when her thighs brushed. She wanted Dr. Seigel to put the finger back for the aftershock. She did not ask.

“Stay there. I’ll get your clothes.”

Dr. Seigel wiped her hand, brought the underwear, and knelt with it open. Tracy stepped in. The silk went back against her, wet where she was wet. The bra was

hooked carefully. Thumbs brushed the sore nipples as the cups were fitted, and Tracy hissed. The T-shirt went over her head. She got the jeans on once she could stand on one foot. She put the sweater on herself. Her hands were not steady.

“I have a department meeting at four tomorrow. If you want a fourth time, I’ll tell you in the morning. We can see whether the refusal works any better once you know you can’t count on it. Or we stop. Stopping was available before the first pinch.”

“I want the next one.” Tracy heard herself. She was sore and still wanting, and the want did not feel like a fact Dr. Seigel would accept. She said it anyway. “I know the difference better than I did an hour ago. I don’t think the difference is going to change what I do.”

“It often doesn’t. People who’ve read Libet still move their hands. Go back to the dorm. Eat. If you’re sore, that’s the pinches. It’ll fade. Don’t spend the night rewriting the order so the refusal comes first. It didn’t.”

At the door Tracy stopped. Her mouth was dry. “When you did them together, was that so I couldn’t tell them apart, or because you wanted them to be one thing?”

“Both. If I only flick you, you can call it sex, which you already know how to describe. The pinch makes it too much, and you still move toward both. I wanted them arriving together. You can decide later whether that was elegant. The decision will be late. That’s fine. I already have the hips.”

She went down the stairs slowly. The left nipple hurt against the cup. The silk was wet. She was already waiting for a text that had not been sent, and under the waiting she was angry in a way she did not want to lose. Dr. Seigel had taken the orgasm and called it timing. Tracy had come anyway. On the landing she put her hand on the rail and said, quietly, that the next room would have other people in it, and that she would not move. She did not know yet if she believed herself. She knew she was going to try.

Tracy locked the dorm door and did not turn the lamp on at once. The quad light came through the blind in strips. She took the sweater off, then the T-shirt. The red bra was warm. When she unhooked it, the left nipple hurt where Dr. Seigel had held it, and the hurt went down her stomach. She stood in the jeans a moment with the bra in her hand, then took the jeans off and the silk. The underwear was still damp. She set it on the chair instead of in the hamper, because she wanted to see the mark in the morning and because that want was the girl again, the one Dr. Seigel had said she would not be using.

She turned the lamp on and stood in front of the mirror on the closet door.

The body in the glass was flushed across the chest. The left nipple was redder than the right. There was a faint pressure-mark at the side of her ass where a thumb had pressed. Between her legs she was swollen. She could see that without touching. The hair was damp. Her clit, if she shifted her hips, was still out enough to catch the light. Yesterday Dr. Seigel had measured it against her finger and said it was about the end of that finger, thicker than the day before, and not finished. Tracy had known the not-finished part from other rooms. Dr. Seigel had taken the knowledge and called it a fact she could use. The other rooms had not survived the sentence.

Tracy put her hands on her thighs so they would not go between them. If she stroked herself, she would be playing with a body she had just been told was not hers to narrate. She would come, and then she would have a story: I wanted it, I finished it, it was mine. Dr. Seigel had stopped her yesterday so she would not get that story. Today she had come on the third flick, and Dr. Seigel had kept the finger there until the pulses eased, and then had said the orgasm was timing. Tracy had walked to the office. She had not run the jerk. Standing in the mirror, she could still feel the order. Touch, hips, the words after. The words were what she had been calling Tracy.

She looked at her own face. The face wanted to be looked at by Dr. Seigel. That was the story. The breasts did not want. They had been lifted, weighed in the hands, the left one more sensitive. The ass had pushed back because it had been handled once and knew the reach. The clit had swollen under a finger and jerked when she had meant not to move. None of that required the girl who bought silk to prove she already knew herself. The silk was on the chair. The body was in the glass. Dr. Seigel had asked for the second.

Tracy turned sideways. The waist, the hip, the place the hand had rested low on her stomach. She remembered the heel of that hand just above the hair, and her clit throbbing once as if the hand had already arrived. In the office she had almost called the throb a want, and had stopped. Here, alone, the stopping was harder. Her fingers flexed on her thighs. She did not move them. If she was not the individual in the story, she was the swollen, sore, wet thing Dr. Seigel measured, and what that thing would do was wait. It would be wet before it was asked. It would hold the desk. It would give the fact and leave the meaning. It would come when the hands said, and it would not announce the coming to make it its own.

She faced the mirror again. Her mouth was open. Her nipples had tightened from the looking, and from the left one still being sore. She said, out loud, to see if the sentence would hold without Dr. Seigel in the room, “Left nipple red. Clit out. Wet. Not for me to finish.”

The sentence held. The girl who wanted to touch herself did not disappear. She stood behind the sentence, late, the way the refusal had been late. Tracy left her hands on her thighs until the urge to stroke dropped from a demand to a heat she could carry. Then she turned the lamp off and got into bed naked, on her back, legs apart so her thighs would not press her clit into a decision. She did not put the silk on. She lay in the dark with the soreness and the wet and the order of the afternoon, and she did not rewrite it so the refusal came first. Dr. Seigel had told her not to. The body, for once, did what it had been told.

The text came at ten-forty, while Tracy was in a library carrel with a methods article she had not finished.

Department meeting at four. Come. Sit in the back. I'll need you for the copies.

She typed Yes. Under the table her clit throbbed once, as if the message had been a hand. She closed the article. At noon she went back to the dorm and changed into the skirt. The red silk was on the chair where she had left it. She put it on. It was damp before she left the room. She did not tell herself a reason. On the stairs she was already wet, which was what the body did before it was asked.

The conference room was too warm. A woman Tracy did not know pointed her to the empty chair against the back wall. Eight faculty sat at the long table. Dr. Seigel sat on the near side, second from the end, a folder in front of her, a pen beside it. She did not turn when Tracy sat. Tracy put her hands on her knees. The silk clung. She could feel the left nipple, still sore, against the cup. She did not cross her legs. Crossing them would have pressed her clit, and she was not here to finish herself.

For twenty minutes they talked about a search, a lab renovation, and whether the graduate methods course should move to the fall. Dr. Seigel spoke twice, both times about the calendar. Her voice was the voice from the board, and from the office while Tracy had been holding the desk. Tracy's face heated at the sound of it. She kept her hands on her knees. She was wet. That was a fact. She did not make a sentence out of it.

"Tracy. The copies are here. One to each person, and a set at the end for the minutes."

Tracy stood. She came down the side of the table. Her skirt brushed her thighs. The folder was at the edge, in front of Dr. Seigel, where she would have to come in close. She smelled the soap on Dr. Seigel's wrist before she was beside her. Her clit throbbed. She did not name the throb a want.

"Beside me," Dr. Seigel said, as if she were only making room. She shifted her chair a hand's width. The woman on her other side was reading the renovation page and did not look up.

Tracy stepped in. The table came to her hip. She bent for the folder. Dr. Seigel's left hand met her at the breast as if to keep her from knocking the water glass, and the pinch came through the blouse and the silk, the left nipple, the sore one. The right hand was already under the skirt. Fingers found the silk, wet, and the flick landed with the pinch.

Her hips went forward into the hand. She felt the touch and the jerk in the same second, and the jerk was first. Her breath stopped and came out wrong, loud enough that she turned it into a cough. The woman with the renovation page finished her sentence. A second flick, smaller, while the pinch held, and Tracy's knees loosened. She was slick against the silk. She got the folder up against her chest. The hands were gone. Dr. Seigel was looking at the agenda. Her face showed nothing Tracy could use.

"Start with Dr. Pell."

Tracy walked. The first copy stuck to her thumb. Dr. Pell took it and nodded without looking at her face. The next woman did look. Tracy said nothing. The silk had shifted. Her left nipple hurt in the cup, a bright sore point, and the hurt ran down to where the flick had been. Her face was hot. At the end of the table she set the last set down and missed the corner of the blotter. She fixed it. Pressing her thighs together put pressure on her clit. She stopped pressing.

She went back to the wall chair. Sitting down met the cushion against her, and she had to kill a sound. No one was watching. Dr. Seigel had already gone on to the methods course. Tracy put her hands on her knees and felt them shake. She was wet enough that she was afraid the skirt would show it when she stood. She did not stand.

The order was the same as the office. Touch, then hips, then any words she might have found. She did not find them. She had coughed so the table would have a sound. The cough was hers. The jerk was not. Eight people had been in the room, and none of them had changed the order. She was swollen and sore and wet, and she had not announced it to make it hers.

She stayed until the meeting ended, because leaving would have been a second event for the table to notice. Faculty gathered papers. On the way out Dr. Seigel passed the back chair and set a spare copy on the empty seat beside her. She did not touch Tracy. Tracy could smell her.

"Five is cancelled. You were needed here. If you want to say what your body did, come at four tomorrow and say that. Leave the story in the dorm."

Tracy looked at the copy. The spring calendar. She nodded. She did not trust her voice. Dr. Seigel went out with Dr. Pell, already talking about the renovation. Tracy waited until the room was empty. Then she stood. The silk clung. On the way down she kept one hand on the rail and the other on the folder, and she did

not put either hand under her skirt. Left nipple sore. Clit out. Wet. Not for her to finish.