Bob

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Chariot, Book 5; Vulpes Parvaes, Book 44

Chapter 1

The train had been climbing steadily since morning. Outside the small frosted window of the sleeper car, the Rockies rose in hard blue ridges under a pale November sky. Lila sat on the edge of the narrow bunk with her knees drawn up, scrolling through messages she wasn't answering. Her short curly dark-blonde hair was still slightly flattened on one side from sleeping against the window. She wore an oversized sweater and nothing underneath. The sweater hung off one shoulder and made her look even smaller than she was.

She was twenty, cute in the particular way that made people smile without knowing why— soft mouth, round cheeks that still held a little baby fat, a short, compact body with narrow shoulders, a tiny waist, and the kind of full, high little breasts that looked almost too pretty for the rest of her frame. Her hips flared just enough to give her an adorable pear shape when she stood. She hated how easily she blushed.

The shower down the hall was free. Lila grabbed her thin cotton robe, her bottle of travel shampoo, and the tiny bottle of body wash that smelled like green apples. She padded barefoot through the quiet corridor, the train rocking gently under her feet.

The shower compartment was barely big enough to turn around in. She hung the robe on the hook outside the stall, stepped under the weak spray, and let the hot water run over her shoulders and down her back. Her curls darkened and tightened against her neck. She washed quickly, humming under her breath, completely unselfconscious in the small steamy space.

The impact threw her sideways.

The entire car lurched with a metallic scream. Lila's shoulder slammed into the plastic wall. The water cut off. Lights flickered and died. Somewhere ahead of her came a long, grinding roar of metal tearing. The car tilted hard to the left and kept going. She hit the floor of the stall on her hands and knees, naked and dripping, as the world turned over.

When the motion finally stopped, everything was wrong. The shower stall was on its side. Cold air poured through a ruptured seam in the roof. Lila's ears rang. She tasted blood where she'd bitten her tongue.

Voices shouted outside.

She tried to stand and slipped. Her bare skin squeaked against wet plastic. Someone was forcing the damaged door. A gloved hand reached in, found her upper arm, and pulled.

Lila came out of the wreckage completely naked, wet curls plastered to her cheeks and neck, water and a little blood running down her collarbones and

between her breasts. The cold hit her like a slap. She instinctively tried to cover herself, one arm across her chest, the other hand low, but the man who had pulled her free was already turning away, shouting to someone else.

There were five of them—local volunteer search-and-rescue, all in bright orange jackets and radio harnesses. Two were working on a bleeding passenger further down the crumpled car. One was on a radio. The woman who seemed to be in charge took one look at Lila, registered the lack of injuries, and made a rapid decision.

“She’s mobile,” the woman said. “We don’t have anything left. Every blanket and spare layer is already on the critical ones. We move in five.”

Lila’s teeth had started to chatter. “I—my clothes are—”

“Inside a car we can’t get back into right now,” the woman said, not unkindly. “You’re the least of our problems. Stay close and keep moving. Hypothermia will hit you faster than you think.”

No one offered a jacket. No one even looked for one. The two men nearest her glanced once at her bare body—high little breasts tight from the cold, the neat dark-blonde triangle between her thighs, the way she was trying to make herself smaller—and then their eyes moved on with the same professional urgency they gave everything else.

Lila stood barefoot on cold gravel and broken glass, arms crossed hard over her chest, and watched the group prepare to leave the wreck.

They started walking within minutes.

The trail down toward the nearest town was steep and uneven. Lila’s bare feet found every sharp stone. Her wet curls dripped icy water down her back. The cold tightened her nipples into stiff, aching peaks and raised fine goosebumps across every inch of her exposed skin. She walked with her arms crossed and her shoulders hunched, but there was no real way to hide. Every time she slipped, she had to throw her arms out for balance and the men behind her got a clear view of everything.

No one spoke to her about it.

After the first twenty minutes the initial emergency focus began to ease. The group spread out slightly along the trail. Lila could feel the exact moment when her nudity stopped being an urgent medical detail and became simply a fact the group had decided not to revisit. The woman in charge walked ahead. The two younger men kept glancing at her when they thought she wouldn’t notice—quick, helpless looks at the bounce of her small breasts or the flex of her ass as she climbed.

Lila’s face burned hotter than the rest of her.

She kept walking, bare feet numb, curls dripping, the cold air moving freely between her legs with every step. No one had touched her. No one had said anything cruel. They had simply looked at the situation, made a practical choice, and then allowed that choice to become normal.

By the time the first roofs of the town appeared in the valley below, Lila understood that she was going to walk all the way in like this.

And that none of them were going to be the first to change it.

Chapter 2

They reached the edge of town just as the last gray light was leaving the sky.

Lila’s feet were cut and numb. Her short curly dark-blonde hair had dried into tight, disordered ringlets that stuck to her cheeks and the back of her neck. Gooseflesh covered every inch of her. She walked with her arms crossed tightly over her small breasts, hands tucked into her armpits, but there was no real way to cover herself. The cold air moved freely between her thighs with every step.

The rescue team led her straight to a large Victorian house set back from the main street behind a black iron fence. Lights glowed warmly in the windows. A tall woman in her mid- forties opened the door before they knocked. She had the calm, assessing face of someone used to being obeyed.

“This is the one without identification,” the team leader said. “Mobile, no serious injuries, but she’s been exposed for hours. We didn’t have anything left to put on her.”

The mayor’s eyes moved over Lila once—taking in the bare feet, the tight nipples, the way she was trying to make her body smaller—and then she nodded.

“I’ll take responsibility for her tonight,” she said. “Come inside, both of you.”

The house was warm. The sudden heat made Lila’s skin prickle and burn. She stood on the polished wood floor of the entryway, dripping slightly, and tried not to look at anyone.

A second figure appeared at the top of the stairs.

Antigone was twenty and startling. She stood nearly six feet tall in socked feet, long-limbed and straight-backed, with dark hair pulled into a clean ponytail and a face that was both beautiful and severe. She looked down at the small, naked girl in the entryway the way someone might look at an unexpected package left on the porch.

“She’s the derailment survivor?” Antigone asked.

“Yes,” the mayor said. “No ID, no clothes, and the clinic is already full. She’ll stay here until we can sort things out. I’m putting her under your supervision.”

Antigone came down the stairs slowly. She circled Lila once, not touching her, just looking. Lila felt the inspection like heat on her skin. Her arms tightened over her chest.

“How old are you?” Antigone asked.

“Twenty,” Lila whispered.

“Same as me.” Antigone’s voice was practical, almost dry. “You’re shaking. Come to the kitchen.”

She did not offer a robe or a towel. She simply turned and walked, expecting to be followed. Lila hesitated only a second before trailing after her on sore feet, acutely aware of the way her bare backside and the soft bounce of her small breasts were visible to anyone behind her.

The kitchen was bright and warm. Antigone pointed to a spot near the old iron stove.

“Stand there.”

Lila stood. The heat from the stove felt almost painful on her cold skin. Antigone leaned against the counter, arms crossed, and studied her with open suspicion.

“My mother is soft-hearted,” she said. “I’m not. You’re an unidentified stranger who just walked into our house naked. People in your situation run the moment they get clothes and a chance. I’m not interested in having to chase you down or explain to the sheriff why the little survivor disappeared.”

Lila opened her mouth, then closed it again.

Antigone continued, calm and precise.

“If you want to stay here, you’ll earn it. You can sleep on the rug by the fireplace in the living room. That spot is warmer than the floor and it’s where the dog used to sleep, so it’s the only place I’m offering. You will keep the kitchen clean, the floors swept, and do whatever other small work I give you. You will stay exactly as you are—uncovered—until I decide you’ve earned something to wear. If you complain, argue, or try to leave, the arrangement ends and you can take your chances with the sheriff’s office storage room.”

She tilted her head slightly.

“I’m being clear so you don’t misunderstand. Clothes are a privilege you haven’t earned yet. Warmth and a place to sleep are things you can work for starting now. Do you understand the terms?”

Lila’s face was burning. The urge to cover herself was almost overwhelming, but her arms stayed where they were. Something in Antigone’s height and the matter-of-fact way she spoke made protest feel useless.

“Yes,” Lila said quietly.

“Yes, what?”

Lila swallowed. “Yes… I understand.”

Antigone gave a small, satisfied nod.

“Good. There’s a bucket and brush under the sink. The floorboards along the back hallway need to be washed. You can start there. When you’re finished I’ll show you the rug.” She walked out of the kitchen without looking back.

Lila stood alone for a moment in the warm light, naked, curly hair still disordered from the wind, small body marked with cold and scrapes. Then she knelt, pulled the bucket from under the sink, and began to fill it.

Behind her, the house settled into the quiet sounds of evening. No one came to offer her a towel.

She had been given the terms.

She had accepted them.

Chapter 3

The hallway floorboards were old pine, dark with age and scarred by a century of boots. Lila scrubbed them on her hands and knees under the hard white light of a single overhead bulb. The soapy water turned gray almost immediately. Her small breasts hung and swayed with every forward push of the brush. The cut soles of her feet stung. Her short curly hair kept falling into her eyes; she had to stop every few minutes to push it back with a wet wrist.

Antigone sat on a wooden chair at the end of the hall and watched.

She did not speak much. Occasionally she pointed out a spot Lila had missed. Once she stood, walked over, and nudged Lila’s knee with the side of her foot so that she would move three inches to the left. The casual contact made Lila’s skin jump. Antigone’s expression never changed. She simply returned to the chair and continued observing the naked girl working on her floor.

After two full hours Antigone finally said, “Enough.”

Lila sat back on her heels, breathing hard. Her palms were wrinkled and pink. Suds clung to the soft insides of her thighs and the undersides of her breasts.

Antigone stood.

“Come.”

She led Lila into the living room. A wide brick fireplace took up most of one wall. The fire had burned down to a deep, steady bed of coals that threw a warm orange light across the room. In front of it lay a thick, faded rag rug, the kind

made from old braided fabric. It was large enough for a big dog to stretch out on.

Antigone pointed.

“Lie down.”

Lila lowered herself onto the rug. The fabric was rough against her bare skin but held the heat of the fire. She curled onto her side, knees drawn up, arms crossed over her chest, and tried to make herself small.

Antigone sat down on the floor beside the rug, back against an armchair, long legs stretched out. For a while she simply looked at the fire. Then she reached over and rested her hand on Lila’s bare shoulder.

The touch was proprietary and absent-minded. Antigone’s palm moved in slow, automatic strokes—down Lila’s upper arm, across the narrow blade of her shoulder, back up to the nape of her neck where the short curls were still damp. She scratched lightly behind Lila’s ear with two fingers, exactly the way someone scratches a dog that has settled at their feet.

Lila went very still.

Antigone kept petting her.

“You’re warmer than you look,” she said quietly, speaking more to the room than to Lila. “Bob Barker used to lie right here. Big stupid golden retriever. He’d press against my leg the same way you’re doing.” Her hand slid down Lila’s side, following the curve of her waist, then settled low on her hip and stayed there, heavy and warm. “It’s exactly like having him alive again.”

Lila’s face burned. She kept her eyes on the coals.

Footsteps approached from the hallway. The mayor paused in the arched doorway, a mug of tea in one hand. She took in the scene without surprise: her tall daughter on the floor, the small naked college girl curled on the old dog rug, Antigone’s hand resting on her as if it belonged there.

“She’s settling?” the mayor asked.

“She worked,” Antigone answered. “Didn’t complain. That’s more than I expected.”

The mayor smiled, mild and approving.

“I’m glad you’re getting along with your little friend. It’s good for the house to have someone again.”

Antigone’s fingers absently stroked the soft skin at the crease of Lila’s thigh.

“I’ll make sure she behaves,” she said. “If she wants to keep living indoors she’ll learn the rules fast enough.”

The mayor nodded as if this were the most reasonable arrangement in the world.

“Mountain logic,” she said simply. “Better than leaving her to the sheriff’s storage room.” She took a sip of tea. “Don’t stay up too late.”

She left.

Antigone remained where she was for another twenty minutes, petting Lila in long, slow passes—shoulder, back, hip, the outside of one bare thigh—while the fire settled. Lila’s body gradually stopped trembling. The heat and the repetitive touch made her limbs heavy. She hated how easily the tension left her.

Eventually Antigone rose in one smooth motion.

She returned from the kitchen with two ceramic bowls. One held clear water. The other held a thick beef stew, still steaming. She set both bowls on the floor at the edge of the rug. “Eat. Drink. Then sleep.”

Lila pushed herself up on one elbow. The position made her breasts shift and catch the firelight. She looked at the bowls, then up at Antigone.

Antigone was already walking toward the stairs.

At the doorway she paused and looked back. Her voice was calm, almost affectionate.

“Good night, Bob.”

Then she turned off the main light, leaving only the glow of the coals, and went upstairs.

Lila sat naked on the old dog rug in the quiet house, the two bowls in front of her, Antigone’s final casual pat still lingering on her skin. Outside, the mountain town had gone dark. Inside, the rules of the house had settled over her as completely as the fire’s heat.

She lowered her head and began to eat.

Chapter 4

Lila woke to a hand shaking her bare shoulder.

“Get up. Now.”

Antigone’s voice was low but sharp with urgency. Lila blinked against the gray morning light coming through the living-room windows. She was still on the rag rug, curled on her side. The fire had gone out. Her body felt stiff and cold.

Antigone was already dressed in jeans and a soft gray sweater, hair pulled back in a clean ponytail. She looked wide awake and faintly panicked.

“Mother expects breakfast in bed in twelve minutes,” she said. “You’re still lying there like a lump. Move.”

Lila pushed herself up onto her knees, automatically crossing one arm over her small breasts. Antigone made an impatient sound and tugged her wrist away.

“None of that. There’s no time. Kitchen. Now.”

She herded the naked girl down the hall with a firm hand between her shoulder blades. Lila’s bare feet slapped against the cold floorboards. Her short curly hair was flattened on one side and sticking up wildly on the other.

The kitchen was chilly. Antigone started issuing rapid orders while she filled the kettle.

“Two slices of sourdough, toasted darker than you think is right. Butter all the way to the edges. Two soft-boiled eggs—six minutes, not a second more. Coffee with a splash of milk, no sugar. Tray is in the bottom cupboard. Cloth napkin folded in a triangle. Go.”

Lila scrambled. Her small breasts bounced as she hurried between counter and stove. Every time she bent to open a low cupboard, she felt Antigone’s eyes on the exposed line of her backside. Once, when she reached too far for the butter dish, Antigone casually nudged her hip aside with a knee the same way someone moves a dog that is underfoot.

“You’re in the way.”

When Lila stood on her toes to get the coffee mugs, Antigone reached past her, chest brushing Lila’s bare back, and took them down herself. As she withdrew she gave Lila’s curls an absent little ruffle, exactly the way she might have ruffled Bob Barker’s ears.

“Eggs,” she reminded her.

Lila’s face burned. She kept working, hyper-aware of every jiggle and sway of her body. The kitchen smelled of coffee and toasting bread. Antigone leaned against the counter with her arms crossed, watching, occasionally pointing.

“Darker. I said darker.”

When the tray was finally assembled, Antigone inspected it with narrowed eyes, then gave a short nod.

“Acceptable. Carry it. And don’t you dare cover yourself on the stairs. Mother’s already awake—she’ll see you anyway.”

Lila lifted the tray. The porcelain rattled slightly in her hands. She climbed the stairs naked, tray held in front of her, while Antigone followed close behind. At one point Antigone’s hand settled on the small of her back to steady her, thumb brushing idly across bare skin.

The mayor was sitting up in bed against a pile of pillows, reading glasses on, a book open on her lap. She looked up and smiled as if the sight of a naked, curly-haired college girl carrying her breakfast tray was the most natural morning scene in the world.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” she said to Lila. Then, to Antigone: “She’s being helpful already.”

Antigone took the tray and set it carefully across her mother’s lap.

“She’s learning,” she said. There was quiet pride in her voice. “Still needs supervision, but she didn’t drop anything.”

The mayor buttered a piece of toast.

“Good. It’s nice having a little friend in the house again.”

Antigone’s hand found the top of Lila’s head and rested there, fingers lightly stroking her disordered curls while the mayor began to eat.

“I’ll keep working with her,” Antigone said. “By the end of the week she should be reliable enough to stay indoors without constant watching.”

Lila stood naked beside the bed, hands at her sides, the cool air of the bedroom tightening her nipples, and felt Antigone’s fingers continue their slow, proprietary petting. Neither mother nor daughter seemed to find the arrangement anything other than sensible.

Outside, the mountain town was waking up. Inside the Victorian house, Lila’s second day of earning her place had officially begun.

Chapter 5

The mayor ate with neat, unhurried movements, the tray balanced across her lap. She buttered another corner of toast, took a bite, and glanced at Lila over her reading glasses.

“The sheriff called early this morning,” she said. Her voice was calm, civic, pleasantly informative. “He’s trying to identify you. There’s a terminal in the next town that can reach the federal missing-persons database, but it’s older and they only keep it staffed certain days. He’ll drive over once they give him a window—probably later this week, maybe next.”

Lila’s stomach tightened.

Before she could speak, Antigone’s hand clenched in her curls.

“No.”

The word came out sharp. Antigone stepped closer to the bed, still keeping her fingers in Lila’s hair as if the contact itself were an argument.

“Mother, you can’t. Not yet. I just got her. She’s only starting to learn the house. If they take her away now she’ll be gone and I’ll have nothing again.” Her voice rose, losing its usual dry control. “I need her. Tell him to wait. Tell him she’s fine here. Tell him anything.”

The mayor set her toast down and wiped her fingers on the napkin. She looked at her daughter first, then at the small naked girl standing beside the bed with Antigone’s hand still buried in her short curly hair.

When she spoke, her tone was perfect—measured, responsible, the voice of a woman who took her duties seriously.

“Of course the sheriff has to follow procedure,” she said, primarily for Lila’s benefit. “We can’t just keep an unidentified young woman indefinitely without making every reasonable effort. That would be improper.”

She paused, took a sip of coffee, and then continued in the same even register, though her eyes were now on Antigone.

“At the same time, these rural terminals are unreliable. Requests get delayed. Paperwork sits. People fall through the cracks more often than anyone likes to admit—especially when they’re adults and there’s no urgent family pressing the issue. It’s unfortunate, but it happens.”

Antigone’s grip in Lila’s hair slowly loosened. The panic drained out of her shoulders as the real message landed. She let out a quiet breath through her nose.

“So she can stay,” she said. It wasn’t quite a question.

The mayor gave a small, noncommittal smile and returned to her eggs.

“We’ll do everything we’re supposed to do,” she said. “And we’ll see what comes of it.”

Antigone understood. The hard line of her body eased. She looked down at Lila, and the fierce, almost stricken expression from a moment earlier softened into something warmer and openly possessive. Her hand began moving again, stroking Lila’s curls in slow, rhythmic passes, then sliding down to cup the back of her neck.

“Good,” she murmured, mostly to herself. “That’s good.”

Lila stood very still under the petting. Her heart was still beating too fast from the sudden threat of being identified and removed. Yet underneath the fear something stranger and more confusing had bloomed. Antigone had sounded genuinely distraught at the thought of losing her. The tall girl had said *I need her* like it was the most obvious fact in the world.

No one had ever spoken about Lila that way before.

The mayor finished her coffee and set the cup on the tray.

“Take the dishes down when I’m done,” she told Lila mildly. “And Antigone—make sure your little friend has another full day of work. Idle hands are never helpful.”

“She won’t be idle,” Antigone said. Her fingers kept carding through Lila’s hair, gentle and proprietary. The earlier panic had completely vanished, replaced by calm certainty.

Lila’s face was hot. She kept her eyes lowered, naked in the soft morning light of the bedroom, and felt the slow stroke of Antigone’s hand like a claim being renewed.

In a twisted, quiet way, she felt desired.

Chapter 6

The day stretched long and physical.

Antigone kept her moving. Lila scrubbed the downstairs bathroom on her hands and knees until her shoulders burned. She carried split logs from the shed to the back porch, arms full, bare breasts pressed against the rough bark. She swept the long front porch with a broom that was slightly too tall for her, short curls bouncing with every stroke. Whenever she slowed, Antigone’s voice came from whatever chair or doorway she was occupying.

“Keep going.”

Sometimes the tall girl treated her exactly like the dog she kept comparing her to. Once, while Lila was on all fours wiping baseboards, Antigone walked past and gave a short, sharp whistle. When Lila looked up, startled, Antigone pointed to the next section of wall without a word. Another time she set a bowl of water on the floor near the heating vent and told her to drink when she got too warm. Lila hesitated only a second before lowering her head.

But the dog treatment began to blur into something else.

In the late morning Antigone decided Lila was too dusty from the porch. She filled a basin with warm water, took a clean washcloth, and ordered her to stand still in the middle of the kitchen. Lila stood with her arms at her sides while Antigone washed her. The cloth moved efficiently over her shoulders and back, then down her chest. When it passed across her left nipple, Antigone’s fingers pinched lightly through the wet cloth—quick, testing, not quite clinical. Lila’s breath caught. Antigone glanced at her face, then did the same to the other nipple, watching the small pink tips tighten.

She said nothing about it.

She simply continued downward, washing Lila’s stomach, her hips, the soft insides of her thighs. When the cloth moved between her legs, Antigone’s touch slowed. She wiped thoroughly, parting Lila slightly with two fingers so the cloth could reach every fold. The contact was lingering enough that Lila felt heat rise in her face and, more confusingly, lower down. Antigone’s severe, beautiful face remained calm, almost thoughtful, as she finished the task and tossed the washcloth back into the basin.

“Better,” was all she said.

Lila’s skin stayed hypersensitive for a long time afterward. Every time Antigone passed close enough to correct her posture or point out a missed spot, Lila found herself hoping—quietly, shamefully—that the tall girl would touch her again.

She served the mayor lunch on a tray in the small sunroom at the back of the house. The mayor thanked her absently and asked Antigone whether “the little friend” was proving useful. Antigone, who was eating a sandwich while leaning against the doorframe, reached out as Lila passed and gave one of her nipples a light, almost affectionate pinch.

“She’s coming along,” Antigone said.

The mayor only nodded and turned a page in her newspaper.

By late afternoon Lila’s body ached from work, but the ache was mixed with a low, steady current of awareness. Antigone was startling to look at—tall, long-limbed, with the kind of sharp, symmetrical face that belonged on magazine covers, made even more striking by how little she seemed to care about it. When she touched Lila, even carelessly, it felt like being singled out by someone who did not single people out.

Lila had never experimented much. A few awkward nights with boys who had been more eager than skilled. Nothing that had ever made her feel looked after. Antigone’s hands, when they landed on her, carried a strange combination of ownership and care that she kept replaying in her mind.

Dinner was more formal. The mayor and Antigone ate in the dining room. Lila carried plates, refilled water glasses, and stood back against the wall between tasks the way Antigone had shown her. Once, when she set down the salad bowl, Antigone’s fingers brushed the underside of her bare breast as if by accident. Another time, as Lila leaned to clear a plate, Antigone’s palm settled briefly on the small of her back and slid just low enough to graze the upper curve of her ass before falling away.

Neither woman commented.

After the meal Antigone walked her back to the living room and pointed at the rug.

“Same place. You’ve earned it again.”

Lila sank down onto the braided fabric, muscles trembling with fatigue. Antigone sat beside her for a few minutes, as she had the night before, and stroked her hair in long, slow passes. Her hand drifted lower once, tracing the line of Lila’s spine all the way down until her fingertips rested at the top of the cleft of her ass. She left it there while she spoke quietly about the next day’s work list.

Lila closed her eyes.

In the quiet of the house, with the tall girl’s warm hand resting on her bare skin, she let herself slip—just a little—into the fantasy that this was her place now. That she was kept. That the severe, beautiful girl who pinched and washed and petted her might do it again tomorrow.

She fell asleep still feeling the ghost of Antigone’s touch between her legs from the washcloth, and the newer, heavier weight of her hand at the base of her spine.

Chapter 7

It was deep in the night when the touch came again.

A warm hand settled on Lila’s bare shoulder and gave her a gentle shake. She stirred on the rug, blinking against the near-darkness. The coals in the fireplace had sunk to a dull red glow. Antigone was crouched beside her, long dark hair loose for once, wearing an old flannel nightgown that reached her knees.

“You’re cold,” Antigone whispered. “I can feel it on your skin. Come upstairs. Mother said it would be all right.”

Lila pushed herself up slowly. Her body ached from the day’s work. She followed Antigone through the quiet house and up the stairs, bare feet silent on the wood. Antigone’s room was at the end of the hall. It smelled faintly of clean laundry and the cold mountain air that leaked through the old windows. The bed was large and already turned down.

Antigone lifted the covers.

“Get in.”

Lila slipped between the sheets. The flannel was soft and already warm from Antigone’s body. A moment later the tall girl climbed in after her and pulled the blankets up over both of them. She settled on her side and drew Lila back against her, one long arm draping over Lila’s waist. The cotton of the nightgown was slightly rough against Lila’s bare back and bottom. Antigone’s breath stirred the curls at the nape of her neck.

For a while neither of them spoke. The house creaked softly around them.

Then Lila, very quietly:

“Do you still think I’ll run away if you give me some clothes?”

Antigone’s hand rested flat on Lila’s stomach. She was silent long enough that Lila started to regret the question. When she finally answered, her voice was low and even, without its usual dry edge.

“I might be a mountain girl, but I know how the world works. People leave when they get the chance. Especially people who look like you.” Her thumb moved once across Lila’s skin. “I don’t really think you’re a dog either. I know the difference. But I do think you’re my pet. Mother taught me there’s a difference between those two things, and that some people are better off when someone stronger decides the rules for them.”

Lila’s heart beat harder against Antigone’s arm. She shifted slightly, pressing back into the taller girl’s body.

“How do you know that about me?” she asked. “That I… like it.”

Antigone’s breath brushed her ear.

“I’m not experienced. I’m not some expert. But I can tell. Your skin goes pink whenever I tell you what to do. You get quiet in a way that isn’t fear. Mother told me years ago that some people get turned on by being good for their betters. By handing things over. She also told me it turns certain other people on to *be* the better.” A small pause. “She was right about me. I like it. I like having you like this.”

Lila closed her eyes. The honesty in Antigone’s voice made her stomach tighten with something that wasn’t only embarrassment.

Antigone’s hand stroked slowly up and down her side.

“Do you like it here?” she asked.

Lila was quiet for a few seconds, listening to both of their breathing.

“It’s an unexpected adventure,” she said at last. Her voice came out smaller than she intended. “I keep thinking I should be more upset than I am. But… I’m enjoying myself. More than I probably should.”

The words hung in the dark.

Then Antigone’s hand left her waist, drew back, and came down in a single firm, open- handed spank across the center of Lila’s bare ass. The sound was sharp in the quiet room. The sting bloomed hot and sudden.

Lila’s whole body jerked. A helpless, startled groan pulled out of her throat—higher and more open than any sound she had meant to make. Heat flooded between her legs so fast it almost frightened her.

Antigone left her palm resting on the warm, stinging skin.

“I was right about that too, Bob,” she murmured, and there was a low note of satisfaction in her voice.

She pulled Lila a little tighter against the flannel nightgown, tucked her chin over the top of Lila’s curly head, and let out a long breath.

Neither of them spoke again.

Lila lay awake a while longer, ass still smarting, body pressed to the long warm line of the girl who had just claimed her out loud, and felt the last of her resistance begin to loosen in the dark.

Chapter 8

Antigone woke her with two fingers under the chin.

“Up.”

The room was still dim. Lila slipped out from under the covers, the cool air tightening her skin. Antigone was already sitting on the edge of the bed in her flannel nightgown, long hair loose down her back. She stood without another word and walked to the bathroom. Lila followed.

Antigone stopped in front of the old claw-foot tub and raised her arms slightly.

“Take it off me.”

Lila stepped close. The flannel was soft from years of washing. She gathered the hem and lifted. Antigone bent forward a little to help the gown clear her head, and then she was bare. She was even taller without clothes—long-legged, high-breasted, with the clean, severe lines of someone who had never bothered to soften herself. Lila folded the nightgown carefully and set it on the closed toilet lid.

Antigone pointed at the tub.

“Warm, not hot. Use the cloth, not your hands, unless I say otherwise.”

Lila ran the water, tested it twice with her wrist the way she had been taught for the dishes, then stood aside. Antigone stepped in and sat, knees drawn up. Water lapped at her midriff.

“Start with my shoulders and back. Firm pressure. I don’t like being dabbed at.”

Lila wet the washcloth, soaped it, and began. Antigone’s skin was smooth and pale. Lila worked in steady circles, rinsing as she went. When she reached the lower back, Antigone spoke again.

“Lower. And slower.”

Lila obeyed. The cloth moved over the upper curves of Antigone's ass. Antigone shifted forward slightly, giving her more access, and Lila washed her thoroughly there without being told a second time. The only sound was water and the soft drag of the cloth.

"Now the front. Breasts first. Don't be shy about it—I'm not."

Lila brought the cloth around. Antigone watched her face while Lila washed each breast, lifting slightly to clean underneath. When the cloth passed over a nipple, Antigone's breath changed almost imperceptibly. Lila felt heat rise in her own cheeks and kept her eyes on her work.

"Between my legs," Antigone said. "Be careful and be thorough. I want to feel that you did it properly."

Lila's hand hesitated only a second. She parted Antigone's knees a little wider with gentle pressure and washed her with slow, deliberate strokes, rinsing the cloth often. Antigone's hand settled on the side of Lila's neck while she worked—not guiding, just resting there, thumb moving once against the hinge of her jaw. When Lila finished, Antigone gave a short nod.

"Good. Drain it and dry me."

Lila held the towel open. Antigone stepped out and stood still while Lila dried her shoulders, arms, breasts, stomach, and the long length of her legs. When Lila rose from drying her feet, Antigone was looking down at her with an expression that was difficult to read—part assessment, part something warmer.

"Clothes are on the chair. Dress me."

The bra first. Lila had to stand very close to settle the straps and adjust the band. Antigone made her smooth the cups into place with both hands. Underwear next, then jeans, then the soft gray sweater. Each piece felt like another small claim being fastened into place. When Lila finished, Antigone glanced at herself in the mirror and gave a single satisfied nod.

"Breakfast. Both of us. Same standards as yesterday, but I want the eggs over-medium instead of soft-boiled, and the coffee stronger. Don't make me correct you in front of Mother."

Downstairs Lila worked naked in the cool kitchen while Antigone sat at the table with a book, occasionally looking up to watch. The mayor came down in a robe, accepted her tray with quiet thanks, and remarked that the house felt more orderly already. Antigone only said, "She's earning her place," and sent Lila back for the pepper.

The rest of the day was harder than any that had come before.

Antigone gave her the master bathroom to clean to a higher standard than the day before— grout, fixtures, the outside of the tub. She had Lila hand-wash two of her bras and three pairs of panties in the bathroom sink, then hang them carefully on a small drying rack. She made her strip the sheets from both beds and carry them to the washing machine in the unfinished basement, then remake the beds with hospital corners. Every task came with precise instructions and the expectation of near-silence.

Throughout it all the touches continued, now without any pretense of accident.

When Lila's posture slumped from fatigue, Antigone corrected her with a firm hand on her lower back or a light pinch to one nipple that made Lila's breath hitch. Once, after Lila finished scrubbing the kitchen floor on her hands and knees, Antigone had her stay in that position while she inspected the work, walking a slow circle around her. She rested a bare foot lightly on the small of Lila's back for a moment, as if testing her stillness, then removed it and told her she could rise.

In the afternoon Antigone sat in the living-room armchair with her laptop. She pointed to the floor between her feet.

"Sit. Back against the chair. I want to feel you there while I work."

Lila obeyed. Antigone's calves framed her shoulders. One of Antigone's feet eventually settled in Lila's lap, and Lila, after a brief hesitation, began to warm it with both hands the way she had warmed her feet the first morning. Antigone's fingers drifted down now and then to stroke her curls or rest against the side of her neck. The contact was proprietary and almost gentle.

Lunch was served in the sunroom again. Dinner was more formal. By the time Lila cleared the last plates her arms trembled with tiredness and her skin felt permanently flushed. Antigone walked her back to the living room, but instead of pointing at the rug she simply said, "Upstairs tonight. You've been good enough."

In the bedroom Antigone undressed without help this time and slipped under the covers. She held them open.

Lila climbed in. The tall girl's body was warm. Antigone pulled her close, one hand settling low on Lila's ass where the faint tenderness from the previous night's spank still lingered, and let out a long breath against her hair.

"Tomorrow will be harder," she said quietly. "You'll manage."

Lila closed her eyes, cheek against Antigone's collarbone, and nodded once in the dark.

She was beginning to believe she would.

Chapter 9

Lunch was served in the sunroom.

Lila moved quietly between the small table and the kitchen, bare feet silent on the floorboards. She set down plates of scrambled eggs, toast, and sliced apples, then stepped back against the wall the way Antigone preferred. The mayor ate at a measured pace. Antigone sat across from her, long legs crossed, eyes following Lila every time she entered or left the room.

After a few minutes the mayor set her fork down and looked at her daughter.

“You’ve made a real little friend out of our stray,” she said. Her tone was mild, almost approving. “She’s learning faster than I expected. The floors are cleaner. The beds are made properly. She doesn’t cover herself anymore unless she forgets.”

Antigone gave a short nod.

“She’s trying.”

The mayor’s gaze moved to Lila, who stood with her hands behind her back, small breasts rising and falling with her breathing.

“You might want to reward her,” the mayor said. “Something simple. Positive reinforcement works better than people think, especially with the eager ones.” She wiped her fingers on her napkin and glanced at Antigone. “Come here, Lila.”

Lila stepped forward. The mayor reached out, took her lightly by the wrist, and guided her to stand between them at the side of the table. With the same practical calm she used when explaining a town ordinance, the mayor took Antigone’s hand and placed it between Lila’s legs.

“Here,” she said. “Not too high. The small peak at the top—yes. That’s the place. Light circles first. She’s already warm, so you won’t need much. Press a little firmer when her breathing changes. You’ll feel it.”

Antigone’s face remained severe, but her eyes were intent. She adjusted her fingers exactly as her mother indicated. Lila’s whole body went rigid. A small, startled sound escaped her before she could stop it.

The mayor released Antigone’s hand and sat back.

“She’s yours. See if you can make her finish. It’s useful to know how.”

Antigone looked up at Lila’s flushed face.

“Stay still,” she said. “Hands at your sides. Don’t close your legs.”

Lila obeyed. Antigone began with slow, deliberate circles, watching every flicker of expression the way she watched whether a chore had been done correctly. When Lila’s hips twitched, Antigone put her free hand on her lower belly and held her in place.

“I didn’t say you could move.”

She kept the same steady rhythm, occasionally changing pressure or speed with a small experimental adjustment. Lila’s breathing grew shallow and uneven. Her hands clenched at her sides. The wet sounds of Antigone’s fingers against her became audible in the quiet sunroom. The mayor continued eating her toast, glancing over only now and then with mild interest.

Antigone’s voice stayed low and even.

“You’re getting tighter. I can feel it. Stay open for me.”

Lila’s thighs started to tremble. A helpless, high noise caught in her throat. Antigone pressed a little firmer and rubbed in tighter circles, eyes fixed on Lila’s face with focused curiosity. The orgasm hit Lila in a sharp, almost painful wave. Her knees buckled; Antigone’s hand on her belly kept her upright while she shook through it, making small broken sounds she couldn’t swallow. Wetness slicked Antigone’s fingers and the insides of Lila’s thighs.

Antigone slowed, then stopped, but left her hand cupped against her.

Lila stood swaying, eyes wet, chest heaving.

The mayor finished her coffee and set the cup down with a soft click.

“Good,” she said. Then she looked directly at Lila. “Tonight you’ll touch Antigone the same way. Until she finishes. It isn’t a request.”

Lila’s voice came out barely above a whisper.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Antigone finally withdrew her hand. She wiped her fingers slowly on the soft skin of Lila’s inner thigh, then gave the same spot a light, proprietary pat.

“Back against the wall,” she said. “We’ll finish eating.”

Lila returned to her place, legs still unsteady, the mayor’s instruction settling over her like another rule she already knew she would obey. Antigone picked up her fork again, calm and faintly pleased, and the three of them remained in the sunroom while the last of lunch went cold on the plates.

Chapter 10

The house had gone quiet.

Antigone sat on the edge of her bed in the flannel nightgown, bare legs hanging over the side. The only light came from the small lamp on the nightstand. Lila stood in front of her, still naked, short curls disordered from the long day, hands clasped loosely in front of her stomach.

“Come here,” Antigone said.

Her voice was softer than usual.

Lila stepped between her knees. Antigone took her wrists and guided her hands to the hem of the nightgown.

“Up.”

Lila lifted the soft fabric. Antigone raised her arms and the gown came off in one motion. She set it aside, then lay back against the pillows, long body pale in the lamplight. She opened her knees a little and looked at Lila.

“The same way I touched you,” she said. “Slow. I want to feel that you’re being careful with me.”

Lila climbed onto the bed and settled on her knees between Antigone’s legs. Her hands were unsteady. She started the way the mayor had shown them earlier—light circles, almost tentative, finding the small peak and staying there. Her touch was clumsy at first, too gentle, then a little too firm when she tried to correct it. She kept glancing up at Antigone’s face for any sign she was doing it wrong.

Antigone watched her through half-lidded eyes.

“That’s it,” she murmured. “You don’t have to be perfect. Just keep going.”

Lila bit her lower lip and focused. She moved in slow, earnest circles, the way someone practices a new chore they badly want to get right. Her other hand rested lightly on the inside of Antigone’s thigh, steadying herself. The room was so quiet that the soft, wet sound of her fingers seemed loud.

Antigone’s breathing gradually changed. Her stomach tightened. One of her hands came down and covered Lila’s, not to redirect her but simply to feel the motion.

“Look at me,” Antigone said.

Lila lifted her eyes.

Antigone’s voice was low and roughened.

“Tell me you’ll do this whenever I want. Wherever I want. No arguing. No asking why. Just yes.”

Lila’s hand never stopped moving. Her cheeks were flushed, eyes wide and shining.

“I will,” she whispered. “Whenever you want. Wherever you want. I promise.”

Something in Antigone’s expression broke open.

Her head tipped back against the pillow. A deep, helpless sound left her throat—higher and more unguarded than any sound Lila had heard from her

before. Her long legs tensed on either side of Lila’s body. She came hard, hips lifting off the bed, one hand still pressed over Lila’s as if afraid the contact might disappear. The orgasm rolled through her in long, visible waves, leaving her shaking and open-mouthed, eyes wet at the corners.

Lila slowed but did not pull away until Antigone’s hand gently stopped her.

For a while the only sound was their breathing.

Antigone reached down, cupped the back of Lila’s head, and pulled her up so they were face to face. Her usual severity had thinned into something rawer and quieter.

“Again,” she said, barely audible. “Say it again.”

Lila rested her forehead against Antigone’s.

“Whenever you want,” she repeated softly. “Wherever you want. I’ll do it. I want to.”

Antigone closed her eyes and let out a long, uneven breath. She drew Lila down against her bare chest, one arm wrapping tightly around the smaller girl’s back, legs tangling with hers under the covers. Her hand found Lila’s curls and stayed there, stroking slowly.

Neither of them spoke after that.

The lamp stayed on for a long time, throwing soft light across the bed where the tall mountain girl held her naked pet and, for the first time, allowed herself to look completely undone by her.

Epilogue

The general store smelled of coffee, dry goods, and the faint metallic tang of the old wood stove in the corner. Afternoon light slanted through the front windows in long dusty bars. Antigone stood at the counter with a small basket over one arm, calmly naming items while the shopkeeper marked them down. Lila waited half a step behind her and to the side, barefoot on the worn floorboards, wearing only one of Antigone’s oversized flannel shirts with the sleeves rolled up. The shirt hung to mid-thigh and was left unbuttoned low enough that the soft inner curves of her breasts showed when she moved. No one in the store commented. They had already grown used to the mayor’s daughter and her quiet little companion.

Antigone reached back without looking and rested her hand at the base of Lila’s neck, thumb stroking once through the short curly hair in an absent, habitual motion. Lila leaned into the touch the way she had learned to do.

The bell over the door jingled.

A man in a dark jacket and travel-dusty boots stepped inside, blinking against the dimmer light. He approached the counter with the careful politeness of someone who did not belong to the town.

“Afternoon,” he said to the shopkeeper. “I’m looking for information about a young woman. She was on the train that derailed up the mountain a couple weeks back. Small, dark-blonde curly hair, about twenty. She was never accounted for at the clinic or with the other passengers. Name might be Lila. Anyone around here take her in or see her?”

The shopkeeper shook his head slowly, genuine confusion on his face.

“Can’t say I know anything about that. We had the injured come through, sure, but no one matching that description stayed in town that I heard of. Sheriff would be the one to ask, but he already put the word out and nothing came of it.”

The man nodded, disappointed but unsurprised.

“Appreciate it. Just covering every stop.”

While the two men spoke, Antigone turned her head and looked straight down into Lila’s eyes.

Lila did not freeze. She simply stepped closer and moved behind Antigone’s taller frame, pressing her cheek lightly against the back of Antigone’s shoulder, one small hand curling into the fabric of her jacket. From the front of the store she was almost completely hidden. Antigone’s hand found hers without searching and held it there, steady and open, while she continued to face the counter as if nothing unusual were happening.

The man thanked the shopkeeper again, glanced once around the quiet store, and left. The bell jingled a second time, then fell silent.

Only then did Lila ease out from behind Antigone. She looked up.

Antigone’s expression was calm, almost soft. She lifted one hand and brushed a curl away from Lila’s cheek with her knuckles, then left her fingers resting there.

Lila rose onto her toes.

Antigone bent to meet her.

The kiss was quiet and unhurried—no urgency, no performance for anyone who might still be watching. Just the settled certainty of two people who had already decided what they were to each other. When they parted, Lila stayed close, forehead nearly touching Antigone’s collarbone, breathing her in.

Antigone’s voice was low enough that only Lila could hear it.

“Stay close, Bob."

She paid for the groceries, took the basket in one hand and Lila’s fingers in the other, and led her back out into the mountain afternoon. The door closed behind them with a soft final click.

No one in the store thought to mention the little barefoot girl in the oversized shirt again.

She had already been claimed.