Friend Meat

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Chariot, Book 2

Friend Meat

Chapter 1

The Saturday market always smelled like money spent carefully.

Claire Stephens followed Amity Banks through the narrow aisles of the small luxury market on the edge of their neighborhood, the same way she had every other weekend for the past eight months. Their gym bags sat in the trunk of Amity's car. They had already done the early class together—weights, then a long incline walk—and the residual heat of it still lived in Claire's thighs and the small of her back. The shared ritual had become automatic: train hard, then reward themselves with things that cost too much and tasted better for it.

Amity was half a head taller, dark hair pulled into a low knot that never seemed to fray. She moved with the easy confidence of someone who had already decided the day would go exactly as she wanted. Claire, blonde and more compact, kept pace a step behind, the way she always did when they shopped. Her own body felt solid and clean after the workout—breasts firm against the soft cotton of her blouse, the heart-shaped curve of her ass still faintly warm from the leg press. She liked the feeling. It made the expensive little purchases feel earned.

They stopped first at the balsamic counter. Amity held a small bottle up to the light, swirling the thick, almost black liquid.

"This one is twenty-five years," she said. "I want it for the next time I do the pork belly."

Claire nodded, already reaching for her card. Their arrangement was simple and unspoken: they took turns treating. Today was Claire's turn. She liked the clean arithmetic of it. Two professional women in their first homes, both still single, both making more money than they had ever expected, spending some of it on each other in the quietest possible way.

They moved on to the truffles. Amity spoke with the woman behind the glass about season and origin while Claire let her eyes drift over the rest of the market. Soft lighting. Quiet classical music. Couples murmuring over cheese. Nothing that prepared her for what came next.

Amity touched her elbow.

"Come look at something."

The butcher shop sat at the far end of the market, half-hidden behind a tall glass wall and a discreet curtain of heavy linen. The sign above the entrance was small and gold: *Maison de Chair*. Amity pushed the curtain aside as if she had done it before.

Claire stepped through and stopped.

Three young women stood on low, padded platforms behind the long marble counter. They were naked except for thin silver tags clipped to their left ears. Their skin had been oiled until it caught the light. One was brunette, soft-hipped, standing with her hands lightly clasped behind her back. The second was smaller, red-haired, weight shifted onto one leg. The third was blonde, taller, her posture perfect, eyes lowered.

Claire’s mouth went dry.

Amity walked straight to the counter as if the display were no more remarkable than the truffles. The butcher, a calm woman in her forties with rolled sleeves and a clean white apron, looked up and smiled in recognition.

“Ms. Banks. Good to see you again.”

“I wanted my neighbor to see the selection,” Amity said. “Claire Stephens. We’re just looking today.”

The butcher nodded once and turned her attention to Claire with professional politeness. “First time?”

Claire managed a small sound that was almost a yes.

The butcher gestured toward the three women. “All locally sourced. Raised specifically for table. The brunette is twenty-six, very good fat distribution, excellent for slow roasting. The redhead is leaner—better for higher heat if you prefer a quicker cook. The blonde is our current premium. Firm muscle, balanced marbling. She’s been reserved twice this month. Both parties released the hold after the private appraisal. Still available."

Claire could not look away from the blonde. The woman’s breasts were full and high, the same firm shape Claire saw in her own mirror after the gym. Her stomach was flat. The neat triangle of pale hair between her legs had been trimmed short. When the blonde shifted her weight, the soft fold of her sex caught the light for a second and Claire felt an unmistakable pulse of heat low in her own body.

Amity was watching her.

“Most of my clients prefer to take them home and roast them themselves,” the butcher continued, voice even, almost conversational. “Very much like a suckling pig, only larger, of course. You truss the arms and legs, insert the apple or the traditional citrus, baste with herb butter or oil. Low and slow, usually. Internal temperature is the important part. You want the meat to stay tender, especially the finer cuts.”

She glanced at Claire’s face and added, almost gently, “The vaginal fillet is considered the prize by many. Delicate. Absorbs seasoning beautifully. Some people serve it separately as a first course.”

Claire’s cheeks burned. She could feel the exact place between her legs where she had grown wet. The cotton of her underwear was already damp against her. She pressed her thighs together once, carefully, and prayed Amity had not noticed.

Amity had noticed.

They stayed another ten minutes. Amity asked calm, practical questions about hanging time and resting periods after cooking. The butcher answered every one. Claire stood slightly behind Amity’s shoulder and tried not to stare at the blonde’s quiet, lowered eyes. Once the woman on the platform looked up and met Claire’s gaze for half a second. There was no fear in it. Only a soft, practiced patience that made Claire’s stomach turn over.

When they finally stepped back through the linen curtain into the ordinary market, the air felt cooler and thinner. Claire’s heart was still beating too hard.

Amity did not speak until they reached the car.

“You’re quiet.”

Claire opened the passenger door and sat. The leather was cool through her skirt. “I didn’t know places like that existed.”

“They do.” Amity started the engine. “Not many. But they do.”

They drove the short distance home in silence. Claire watched the familiar streets slide past and felt the slow, insistent throb between her legs that refused to fade. Every time the car took a corner she was aware of the soft pressure of her own breasts against the seatbelt, the way her ass settled into the seat, the wet heat that had nothing to do with the gym.

Amity parked in front of their neighboring houses and turned off the engine. She did not get out immediately.

“You can tell me if it was too much,” she said.

Claire shook her head once. “It wasn’t too much.”

Amity studied her face for a long moment. Then she smiled, small and private.

“Good.”

They climbed out. Claire walked the short path to her own front door carrying the bag with the twenty-five-year balsamic and the small packet of truffles. Inside, she set everything on the kitchen counter, locked the door, and stood very still in the middle of her quiet house.

Her underwear was soaked.

She went upstairs, peeled the damp fabric down her legs, and sat on the edge of the bed with her knees apart. When she touched herself she was slick and swollen. The image of the blonde on the platform rose immediately—oil-slick skin, lowered eyes, the neat pale thatch between her thighs. Claire came hard and silently with two fingers pressed deep, Amity’s calm voice still somewhere in her head describing the proper internal temperature for a slow roast.

Afterward she lay back on the cool sheets and stared at the ceiling.

She had no idea how she was going to look Amity in the eye at the gym on Monday.

But she already knew she would.

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Chapter 2

Three days later the Monday evening class felt longer than usual.

Claire kept her eyes on the mirror while she moved through the final set of hip thrusts. The gym was quiet at this hour—just the low thump of bass from the speakers and the occasional clink of plates. Amity worked two stations over, taller frame folding and unfolding with clean precision, dark hair in the same low knot she always wore. Every time Claire glanced sideways she caught the long line of Amity's spine, the easy strength in her legs, and the memory of the market rose unbidden: oil-slick skin, lowered eyes, the calm voice describing how the vaginal fillet absorbed seasoning.

Claire's own body answered before she could stop it. A slow, warm pulse settled between her legs. She finished the set, sat up, and pressed her thighs together on the bench for a moment longer than necessary. The firm weight of her breasts shifted against the sports bra with the movement. She had chosen the tighter one today without thinking about why.

Amity appeared at her shoulder, towel draped around her neck.

"You're quiet again."

Claire managed a small smile. "Just tired."

"Liar." Amity's voice stayed low, almost private. "You've been somewhere else since Saturday."

They walked to the parking lot together the way they always did. The evening air was cool against the sweat on Claire's neck. She unlocked her car, then hesitated with the door half open.

"Do you want to come over?" she heard herself say. "I opened the balsamic. Seems wrong to drink it alone."

Amity's mouth curved. "Give me twenty minutes to shower. I'll bring the rest of the cheese."

Claire drove the short distance home with the windows down. The pulse between her legs had not faded. She showered quickly, pulled on soft gray leggings and a loose white tank that clung a little when she moved, and left her hair damp. By the time Amity knocked, Claire had set out the good glasses and the small board with the aged balsamic and a few slices of the soft cheese they had bought together.

Amity stepped inside smelling of clean soap and the light citrus lotion she always used. She had changed into dark jeans and a black sweater that made her look taller still. They settled on the low couch in Claire's living room, knees angled toward each other, the board between them.

For a while they talked about ordinary things—Amity's upcoming presentation at work, the new instructor at the gym, whether the neighborhood association would finally fix the streetlight at the corner. Claire felt the conversation the way she felt the wine: slow, warming, inevitable.

Amity set her glass down and leaned back.

"I've been thinking about your birthday."

Claire's fingers tightened slightly around the stem of her own glass. Her birthday was three weeks away. She had not mentioned it.

"What about it?"

"I want to give you something better than the usual dinner." Amity's voice stayed easy, almost casual. "Something you'll actually remember."

Claire tried to laugh. "You're already spoiling me with twenty-five-year vinegar."

"That's not what I mean."

The silence that followed was not uncomfortable. It simply waited. Claire felt the soft fabric of the tank top shift against her breasts when she breathed. She was suddenly, sharply aware of the heart-shaped curve of her own ass against the couch cushion, the way the leggings clung to the place where her thighs met.

Amity watched her the way she had watched her in the market.

"You liked looking at them," she said quietly. "The girls."

Claire's cheeks warmed. She did not deny it.

"I could arrange something," Amity continued. "A private morning at a better shop than the one we visited. Full inspection. Appraisal. Display for a few hours if you wanted. Completely safe. You would be the one on the platform this time. Just for the experience. No one would actually take you home."

Claire's breath caught. The pulse between her legs sharpened into something wet and unmistakable. She pressed her knees together and felt the soft pressure of her own flesh.

"You're serious."

"I am." Amity's dark eyes stayed steady. "You don't have to decide tonight. But I saw your face on Saturday. And I saw the way you walked to the car afterward. I think part of you already wants to know what it feels like to stand there."

Claire looked down at her own hands. The tank top had slipped slightly; the upper curve of one breast was visible where the fabric gaped. She did not adjust it.

"What would they do?" she asked, voice low.

“Measure. Handle. Talk about your cuts the way the butcher talked about the blonde. You would be oiled. Displayed. Customers would look. Some might ask questions. A few might request a closer inspection.” Amity paused. “You could stop it at any time. I would be there at the end of the day with your clothes. We would leave together.”

Claire’s mouth had gone dry. She reached for her glass and took a longer drink than she needed. The balsamic’s dark sweetness lingered on her tongue. She could already imagine the cool air of a different shop against her bare skin, the clinical touch of unfamiliar hands on the firm weight of her breasts, the quiet discussion of how her ass would roast, how the soft folds between her legs would be considered the prize.

Heat flooded her face and the place between her thighs at the same time.

Amity’s voice softened further. “You don’t have to answer now. Think about it. If you say yes, I’ll make the arrangements. If you say no, we never speak of it again.”

Claire stared at the board between them, at the glossy surface of the balsamic, at the pale cheese. Her body felt too warm inside the soft clothes. She could feel how wet she had become simply from listening.

“I want to think about it,” she said.

Amity nodded once, as if that answer had been expected. She did not push. They finished the cheese in quieter conversation—work, the gym schedule for the rest of the week, nothing that touched the offer again. When Amity finally stood to leave, she rested a hand lightly on Claire’s shoulder for a second longer than a normal goodbye required.

“Sleep on it,” she said. “There’s no rush.”

After the door closed, Claire remained on the couch. The house felt larger and quieter than usual. She carried the glasses to the kitchen, rinsed them, and went upstairs without turning on more lights than necessary.

In the bedroom she stripped slowly. The tank top peeled away from her breasts; they felt heavier than usual, the nipples already tight. She pushed the leggings down and stepped out of them. The heart-shaped curve of her ass was warm under her own hands when she turned to look in the mirror. Between her legs she was slick and open.

She lay back on the bed and touched herself the way she had on Saturday night, two fingers sliding easily through the wetness. This time the images were different. She was the one on the platform. Amity was somewhere at the edge of the room, watching. Unfamiliar hands turned her, measured the firm weight of her breasts, spread her for appraisal, spoke calmly about the quality of her meat.

Claire came with her free hand pressed over her mouth, hips lifting off the mattress, the word *display* still echoing somewhere in her head. Afterward she lay still and stared at the ceiling the way she had three nights earlier.

She already knew what she was going to say.

She just needed a few more days to let the wanting settle all the way into her bones.

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Chapter 3

The shop Amity had chosen sat three streets farther into the better part of the district. The sign was smaller, the glass darker, the linen curtain heavier. Claire stood on the sidewalk in the soft gray dress Amity had told her to wear and tried to keep her breathing even. Her heart had been climbing since the moment she locked her front door.

Amity arrived two minutes later, taller frame easy in a dark coat, and touched Claire’s elbow once.

“Still want to do this?”

Claire nodded. The word yes felt too large for her mouth.

Inside, the air was cool and faintly scented with something clean and herbal. A woman in her late thirties met them at the counter. She introduced herself as Elise, spoke with the same calm professionalism Claire remembered from the first market, and led them through a side door into a private appraisal room.

“Ms. Banks arranged the full morning sequence,” Elise said. “Inspection, measurements, oiling, then a few hours on the main floor display if you’re still comfortable. You may stop at any point. The tag on your ear will be temporary and unmarked.”

Claire’s fingers found the hem of her dress and worried it once. “It’s only for the experience.”

“Of course.” Elise’s smile was polite and practiced. “Many women come through for exactly that reason on a birthday or anniversary. We treat the request with the same care we give a serious buyer.”

Amity stayed near the wall, arms loosely folded, watching. Claire felt the weight of that gaze like a second set of hands.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Elise said.

Claire reached back and drew the zipper down. The soft gray fabric loosened and slid from her shoulders. She stepped out of it, then out of the simple underwear she had chosen because it felt less deliberate than lace. The cool air of the room touched her bare skin and her nipples tightened at once. She kept her arms at her sides and tried not to cover herself.

Elise’s eyes moved over her with professional interest.

“Good muscle tone. Gym work shows. Breasts are excellent—firm, full, high. The shape of the hips and the seat will present very well on a platform. May I?”

Claire nodded.

Elise’s hands were warm and sure. She cupped the weight of Claire’s left breast first, lifting it slightly, thumb brushing the underside where the flesh was heaviest. Then the right. She turned Claire gently by the hips and ran both palms down the heart-shaped curve of her ass, spreading the cheeks for a moment to assess the muscle beneath the soft outer layer.

“Beautiful density,” Elise murmured. “This will roast evenly. Very little waste.”

Claire’s face burned. A slow, unmistakable slickness had already begun between her legs. She felt it gather and threaten to show.

Elise continued without comment. Measuring tape around the bust, the waist, the fullest part of the hips. Notes spoken quietly into a small recorder. Fingers testing the firmness of Claire’s thighs, the give of her calves. When she reached the soft folds between Claire’s legs she parted them with two careful fingers and examined the pink inner flesh as calmly as she had examined the rest.

“The special cut is particularly fine,” she said. “Clean, well-kept, good color. Buyers will notice.”

Claire’s knees weakened. She locked them and stared at a point on the far wall while Elise’s fingers withdrew. The air felt colder against the wetness she had left behind.

Amity’s voice came from the wall, low. “You’re doing well.”

Claire could not answer.

The oiling came next. Elise warmed a light, unscented oil between her palms and worked it into Claire’s skin from the shoulders down. Every slow stroke left Claire glossier, more reflective under the soft overhead lights. When the oiled hands passed over her breasts the nipples drew tighter. When they slid between her cheeks and briefly forward through the wet heat of her sex, Claire’s breath left her in a soft, involuntary sound.

Elise did not comment on it. She only finished the oiling, clipped a thin silver tag to Claire’s left earlobe, and gestured toward the door that led to the main display floor.

“Platform three is ready for you. You may stand however you feel most natural. Hands behind the back is traditional, but not required. I’ll check on you every half hour.”

The main floor was larger than the first market Claire had visited. Four low platforms stood behind a long marble counter. Two were already occupied by other women—one brunette, one with short dark hair—both oiled and quiet. Claire stepped onto the third platform. The padding under her bare feet was cool. She settled her weight, clasped her hands lightly behind her back the way she had seen the others do, and lowered her eyes.

Amity remained on the customer side of the counter for a few minutes, speaking quietly with Elise. Then she caught Claire’s gaze, gave a small nod, and stepped back toward the curtain.

“I’ll be close,” she said. “You’re safe.”

The first browsers arrived within twenty minutes.

A couple in their forties paused in front of Claire’s platform. The man studied her breasts with open appreciation. The woman asked Elise about age and gym history. Elise answered in the same calm tone she had used in the private room. Claire kept her eyes down and felt the oil shift on her skin every time she breathed. The couple moved on without requesting a closer look.

The second visitor stayed longer.

A man in a well-cut suit stopped directly in front of her, hands in his pockets, and looked her over from the silver tag to her bare feet. Claire felt the weight of the examination settle between her legs like a physical touch. He asked Elise whether the special cut had been evaluated. Elise confirmed that it had, and that the quality was high. The man requested a private moment with the merchandise.

Claire’s heart slammed once against her ribs.

Elise glanced at her for permission. Claire managed the smallest nod. Elise stepped onto the platform, turned Claire slightly, and spread her thighs with practiced hands so the man could see the oiled, flushed folds of her sex. He leaned closer, not touching, and made a low sound of approval.

“Very nice,” he said. “If I weren’t already committed to a different girl for next month I would take her today.”

He straightened, thanked Elise, and left. Claire’s legs were trembling when Elise released her. The slickness between her thighs had become obvious; she could feel it coating the inner skin.

Elise wiped her hands on a clean cloth and spoke softly. “You’re holding beautifully. Most first-timers need a break by now. Do you want water or a few minutes off the platform?”

Claire shook her head. Her voice came out thinner than she expected. “I’m all right.”

“Good. I’ll leave you for a while. The afternoon traffic is usually lighter until three.”

Elise moved away to speak with a new customer near the front. The other two women on display remained quiet and still. Claire stood alone on her platform, hands still clasped behind her back, oil gleaming on the firm curves of her

breasts and the heart-shaped swell of her ass. Every so often a shopper passed and slowed. A few looked longer than others. None requested another private inspection.

Time stretched. The cool air of the shop moved across her wetness every time she shifted her weight. She kept her eyes lowered and tried to remember that this was only theater, only a birthday gift, only an experience she could end whenever she wished.

Her body did not seem to believe her.

By the time the clock on the far wall reached two-thirty, Claire’s thighs were slick and her nipples ached from the constant tight peak they had held for hours. She had begun to imagine, against her will, what it would feel like if one of the browsers actually produced a card and asked to take her home. The thought sent a fresh pulse of heat through her that left her light-headed.

She was still standing that way—oiled, displayed, half-convinced the next person through the curtain might be the one who bought her—when Elise returned to check on her again.

“Still comfortable?” Elise asked quietly.

Claire swallowed. The truth felt dangerous in her mouth.

“Yes,” she said.

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Chapter 4

The light in the shop changed as the afternoon deepened.

Claire noticed it first in the way the oil on her skin caught a warmer tone, then in the quieter rhythm of footsteps beyond the counter. The earlier browsers had been curious. The ones who came after three were more deliberate. They lingered. They asked Elise longer questions. They looked at Claire the way people looked at something they were already measuring against their own plans.

She kept her hands clasped behind her back and her eyes lowered the way she had been shown. The position left her breasts open to every glance—firm, full, gleaming under the soft lights. The heart-shaped curve of her ass felt permanently on display. Between her legs the slickness had never really faded; it only gathered and thinned and gathered again each time someone stopped in front of her platform.

A woman in a cream coat spent nearly ten minutes discussing Claire's measurements with Elise. She asked about resting time after a slow roast, about how the special cut held seasoning, about whether the muscle tone would stay tender under higher heat. Elise answered every question with the same calm precision. Claire felt the words move across her bare skin like another set of hands. When the woman finally stepped closer and requested a private look, Elise again glanced at Claire for silent permission. Claire gave it.

Elise's fingers parted her cleanly. The woman studied the flushed, open folds for a long moment, then nodded once.

"She's lovely," the woman said. "If my husband weren't set on the redhead we saw last week I would take her this afternoon."

She left her card with Elise "in case the situation changes." Claire watched the small white rectangle disappear into Elise's pocket and felt a slow, confusing drop in her stomach that had nothing to do with relief.

The serious buyer arrived just after four.

He was older than the others, silver at the temples, coat expensive and understated. He did not speak at first. He simply stood in front of Claire's platform and looked at her the way Amity sometimes looked at a bottle of wine she already intended to buy. Elise waited beside him, quiet.

When he finally spoke, his voice was low and certain.

"How long has she been on display?"

"Since late morning. Birthday arrangement. Experience only."

He made a small sound that might have been disappointment. “Shame. The breast meat is exceptional. The seat is perfect. And the special cut looks outstanding even from here.” He turned his head slightly toward Elise. “May I?”

Again the silent question directed at Claire. Again the small nod she could not seem to refuse.

Elise stepped onto the platform, turned Claire by the hips, and opened her for him with the same professional care she had used all day. The man’s gaze was heavier than the others. He did not rush. He examined the pink inner flesh, the way it glistened, the clean shape of her. When he finally spoke again his voice had dropped even lower.

“I would take her today if she were available. Full price. No negotiation.”

Claire’s pulse hammered in her throat and between her legs at the same time. For one suspended second she imagined Elise simply saying yes. She imagined the silver tag being replaced with a permanent one. She imagined leaving the shop in this man’s possession instead of Amity’s.

Elise’s answer was polite and final. “She’s not for sale today. Experience only, as arranged.”

The man held Claire’s gaze for a moment longer—she had lifted her eyes without meaning to —then inclined his head.

“If she ever becomes available, call me first.”

He left his card as well. Elise slipped it into the same pocket as the earlier one. Claire remained open for several seconds after the man had gone, legs still parted, oil and her own wetness shining under the lights, until Elise gently released her and stepped back down.

“You’re shaking,” Elise said quietly.

Claire could not answer. Her thighs trembled. The place between them felt swollen and obvious. She was no longer certain whether she wanted the next customer to be the one who finally bought her or the one who finally let her step down.

The remaining hour moved in a strange, stretched quiet. A few more people passed. One couple asked about her age and gym history. Another woman simply stood and looked for a long time without speaking. No one else requested a private inspection. Claire stood through all of it with her hands still behind her back and her body open to every glance, the earlier almost-purchase replaying in her mind on a loop.

At five-thirty Elise returned with a soft robe over her arm.

“Display hours are finished. Ms. Banks is here.”

Claire’s legs felt unsteady when she stepped off the platform. The robe settled around her shoulders, warm against the cooling oil on her skin. Elise removed the temporary silver tag with careful fingers and set it aside. Claire followed her through the side door into the same private room where the morning had begun.

Amity was already waiting, taller frame relaxed against the wall, Claire’s gray dress and underwear folded neatly over one arm. She looked Claire over once—oiled, flushed, still visibly wet between the thighs—and something soft and knowing moved through her

expression.

“How do you feel?”

Claire’s voice came out rough. “I don’t know.”

Amity stepped closer. She did not touch her yet. “Tell me.”

“There was a man.” Claire swallowed. “He wanted to buy me. He said the special cut looked outstanding. He left his card. For a minute I thought Elise might say yes.”

Amity’s dark eyes held hers. “And how did that minute feel?”

Claire’s answer was barely audible. “I was terrified. And I was wetter than I’ve been all day.”

Amity nodded once, as if the confession were exactly what she had expected. She held out the underwear. Claire stepped into it; the soft fabric clung immediately to the slickness between her legs. The dress followed, zipper drawn up with slow care. Amity’s fingers brushed the back of Claire’s neck as she finished.

“You did beautifully,” Amity said. “Every single person who looked at you wanted you. Including the one who almost took you home.”

Claire’s throat tightened. “Part of me wanted him to.”

“I know.”

They left through the front of the shop. The evening air felt almost cold against Claire’s still- oiled skin. Amity’s car was parked half a block away. Claire sank into the passenger seat and closed her eyes for a moment while Amity started the engine.

Neither of them spoke until they were nearly home.

Claire kept her gaze on the familiar streets and felt the deep, complicated ache between her legs that had nothing left to do with the platform. The almost-sale sat in her chest like a second heartbeat. Relief was there—real relief that she was going home in her own clothes. But underneath it lived a quieter, sharper disappointment she did not yet have language for.

Amity parked in front of their neighboring houses and turned off the engine. She did not reach for the door.

“Still the best birthday present?” she asked softly.

Claire turned her head. In the dim light Amity’s face was calm, patient, certain. “Yes,” Claire said. The word felt true all the way down. “It’s the best present anyone has ever given me.”

Amity’s mouth curved, small and private.

“Good. Then we’re just getting started.”

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Chapter 5

Two weeks altered the shape of ordinary things.

Claire noticed it in the way her body remembered the platform every time she stood too long in front of her own mirror. She noticed it in the gym when Amity's gaze lingered a second past casual. She noticed it most on the Saturday they returned to their usual routine—early class, then the slow reward of spending money on each other.

They had chosen a quiet restaurant with white tablecloths and a short seasonal menu instead of the market. The kind of place that felt like a celebration even when there was nothing specific to celebrate. Claire wore a soft cream blouse that sat close against the firm weight of her breasts; every shift of her shoulders reminded her how exposed those same breasts had been under the shop lights. Amity sat across from her in a dark green sweater, taller frame relaxed, dark hair loose for once.

The first half of the meal stayed light. They talked about a difficult client Claire had closed the day before, about the new set of resistance bands Amity wanted to try, about whether the streetlight at the corner had finally been fixed. Claire felt the conversation the way she felt the wine—smooth, warming, threaded with something neither of them named.

Amity set her glass down and looked at her for a longer moment than the conversation required.

"I'm up for the promotion."

Claire's attention sharpened. "The director role?"

"Yes. They told me yesterday. It's not official until the board signs off, but the recommendation is strong." Amity's mouth curved, small and controlled. "I'm hosting a dinner at my house in three weeks. Bosses, the full board, a few of the senior partners. Something elegant. I want you there."

Claire felt a quiet lift in her chest. "Of course. I'd love to come."

Amity nodded once. "It would mean a lot. You're the only person I completely trust in a room like that. And I might ask you to help with a few of the final details the day of— flowers, timing, the small things that make a house feel ready. Nothing complicated."

"Anything," Claire said. "Just tell me when."

They finished the meal in a softer register. The undercurrent of the birthday display moved between them without either of them touching it directly. Claire felt it in the way Amity's eyes occasionally dropped to the open collar of her blouse, in the way her own thighs pressed together under the table when a

memory of oil and cool air and unfamiliar hands rose without warning. She was still wet more often than she liked to admit. The almost-sale from the serious buyer still lived somewhere behind her ribs, equal parts relief and a quieter wanting she had not yet sorted into language.

When the check came, Amity took it before Claire could reach.

“My turn,” she said.

Claire walked home beside her under the early evening light. Their houses stood next to each other the way they always had. At the low fence that separated the two front paths Amity paused.

“Three weeks from Saturday,” she said. “Seven o’clock. I’ll text you the details as they firm up.”

Claire nodded. “I’ll clear everything.”

Amity’s gaze held hers a moment longer. “I’m glad you’ll be there.”

Then she turned toward her own door.

Claire let herself into the quiet of her house and stood for a while in the entryway with her coat still on. The invitation sat in her chest like a warm stone. She was already imagining the evening—Amity moving through her own rooms with that tall, composed grace, the low voices of people who held her career in their hands, Claire herself present as the one familiar, steady thing.

She hung her coat, climbed the stairs, and undressed slowly in the dim bedroom. The cream blouse slipped from her shoulders. She watched in the mirror as her breasts settled, firm and full, the nipples already tight from nothing more than the residual charge of the afternoon and the memory of being looked at. When she stepped out of her underwear the fabric was damp.

Claire lay back on the bed and touched herself with the same unhurried care she had used every night since the display. The images that rose were the platform, the serious buyer’s voice, the way Elise’s hands had opened her without hurry. She came with her face turned into the pillow, hips lifting, the ordinary promise of helping her friend still soft somewhere behind the sharper pleasure,

The Dinner

Chapter 6

Claire arrived at half past five carrying the arrangement of white roses Amity had asked for.

The house already smelled of butter and thyme and something richer underneath. Amity opened the door in a black dress that made her look taller than usual, dark hair smoothed back, eyes calm in the way they only became when she was managing something important. She took the flowers with a quiet thank-you and set them on the console table in the entry.

“Everything’s nearly ready,” she said. “The table is set. Wine is open. I just need to finish the last of the sides once the main arrives.”

Claire followed her into the kitchen. The large oven was already on, low and steady. A roasting pan waited on the counter, lined and ready. Two bottles of the twenty-five-year balsamic stood open beside a small bowl of mixed herbs and a bottle of pale oil.

They moved through the final details together the way they had moved through markets and gym floors—efficient, mostly quiet, occasionally speaking only to confirm a placement or a timing. Claire adjusted the height of a candle. Amity checked the temperature on the oven again. The doorbell had not yet rung.

At six-forty the call came.

Amity answered on speaker while she finished drying a glass. A man’s voice, professional and apologetic, filled the kitchen.

“Ms. Banks, this is Maison de Chair delivery. I’m sorry to report your order has been delayed. There was an accident on the access road. The girl is safe, but we won’t be able to reach you before nine at the earliest. Possibly closer to nine-thirty.”

Amity’s hand stilled on the towel. “You’re telling me the meat girl I reserved won’t be here before the first course is finished.”

“Yes, ma’am. We’re doing everything we can. I’ll update you the moment we’re moving again.”

Amity ended the call and stood very still with both hands flat on the counter.

Claire had gone motionless as well. The words *the girl* and *meat girl* hung in the warm air of the kitchen. She understood exactly what had been scheduled to arrive, and exactly what was no longer coming in time.

“Amity.”

“They’re going to be here in twenty minutes.” Amity’s voice stayed level, but the edge underneath it was sharp. “The board. My bosses. Everyone. I cannot serve

them a dinner without a main course.”

Claire’s mouth went dry. “What do we do?”

Amity turned. Her dark eyes moved over Claire the way they had moved over her on the platform weeks earlier—measuring, certain, already deciding.

“I need you to take her place.”

The kitchen went very quiet.

Claire felt the words land in her chest and then lower. Heat flared between her legs so fast it made her light-headed. She opened her mouth and closed it again.

Amity stepped closer. “There isn’t time to find anyone else. You already know what the process feels like. You’ve stood for it. You’re the only person in this house I can ask.”

Claire’s pulse beat hard in her throat. She looked at the waiting pan, at the oil, at the herbs, at the low glow of the oven. Her body had already answered—nipples tight against the soft fabric of her blouse, the familiar slickness gathering between her thighs.

“You’ll oil me,” she said. It was not quite a question.

“Yes.”

“And put me in.”

“Yes.”

Claire’s voice came out thinner than she expected. “All right.”

Amity did not smile. She only nodded once, as if the practical matter had been settled, and reached for the buttons of Claire’s blouse.

They undressed her together in the warm kitchen. Blouse first, then the simple bra. Amity’s fingers brushed the firm undersides of Claire’s breasts as the fabric came away. The skirt followed, then the underwear that was already damp. Claire stepped out of her shoes and stood bare on the cool tile while Amity moved the roasting pan closer to the edge of the counter.

The oil was poured into Amity’s palms and warmed between them. She started at Claire’s shoulders and worked downward with slow, thorough strokes. The scent of the herbs rose as she mixed them in—thyme, rosemary, a little crushed garlic, salt. Every pass of her hands left Claire glossier. When Amity’s palms cupped and lifted the weight of her breasts, thumbs brushing the tight nipples, Claire’s breath stuttered.

“Stay still,” Amity murmured. “I need you even.”

She turned Claire by the hips and oiled the heart-shaped curve of her ass with the same careful attention, fingers sliding once between the cheeks and then lower, through the wet heat that had nothing to do with the oil. Claire's legs trembled. Amity's voice remained steady and practical.

"The board likes their meat cooked a little more than the usual recommendation. I'll keep the temperature moderate and give you longer. You'll be tender."

Claire could only nod. The kitchen lights felt too bright. She could hear the faint sound of a car door closing outside—early guests, or the first of them.

Amity finished the oiling, wiped her hands, and reached for the small bowl of remaining herbs. She pressed the mixture into the softer places: the undersides of the breasts, the crease where thigh met body, the open folds between Claire's legs. Claire made a small sound she could not stop. Amity's fingers lingered there a moment longer than the seasoning required, spreading her gently, checking.

"You're ready," she said.

Claire's voice was barely audible. "Amity—"

"I know." Amity met her eyes. "I've got you."

She helped Claire step into the roasting pan. The metal was warm from sitting near the oven. Amity guided her down onto her side, then adjusted her—knees drawn up slightly, arms positioned, the traditional apple set carefully between her teeth. The last of the oil was brushed over her hip and the outer curve of her breast.

Amity leaned down and spoke close to her ear, voice low enough that only Claire could hear.

"You look perfect."

Then she rolled the pan forward, slid it into the waiting heat, and closed the oven door with a soft, final sound.

Claire heard the footsteps move away across the kitchen tile. A moment later the front door opened and Amity's calm voice rose in greeting as the first guests came in from the evening air.

The heat around Claire began to deepen.

The Dinner

Chapter 7

The heat built in slow layers.

Claire lay on her side inside the closed oven, the apple firm between her teeth, oil and herbs sealing her skin. The first wave was only a deepening warmth across her hip and the outer curve of her breast. The second reached the softer places Amity had seasoned most carefully. She kept her eyes closed and listened.

Footsteps moved through the house. The front door opened and closed. Amity's voice rose and fell in easy greeting. Glassware chimed. Someone laughed once, low and polite. The party had begun without her.

Four minutes after the oven door closed, Amity's phone rang again in the kitchen.

Claire heard every word.

"Ms. Banks, this is delivery. The road is clear. We're three streets away. The girl will be at your door in five minutes."

Amity's answer was calm and immediate. "Bring her to the side entrance. I'll meet you there."

The call ended. Claire's pulse beat hard against the warm metal of the pan. The original meat girl was coming after all. She was already inside the oven, and now there would be two.

She heard Amity cross the kitchen, open the side door, and speak in low, efficient tones. A second set of footsteps entered—lighter, bare. Soft instructions. The sound of oil being poured again, of hands moving quickly over another body. The professional girl had been partially prepared during the delay; Amity only needed to finish and adjust for the second pan.

Ten minutes later both ovens were at work.

The heat around Claire continued to deepen. The apple remained between her teeth. The last clear sounds she registered were the quiet movements of Amity in the kitchen and the distant rise of conversation from the front of the house. After that the warmth took everything.

When the timers sounded, Amity opened the first oven and drew Claire's pan out onto the waiting trivet. She checked the color at the hip and the firmness of the thigh, then opened the second oven and removed the professional girl. Both were finished to the same careful standard.

She had already prepared the long wheeled serving cart. She transferred the two women onto it side by side—Claire placed slightly forward, the apple still in place, skin deep golden, herbs visible in the creases of her body; the professional

girl beside her, slightly leaner, more uniform in color.

Amity rolled the cart into the dining room and brought it to a stop in the center of the table.

The guests looked up.

“I have something special tonight,” Amity said. Her voice was steady. “Two, in fact. The girl I ordered arrived later than planned, so I prepared a second. One of them is a close friend who stepped in when I needed her. I think you’ll find the difference interesting.”

She carved with clean, unhurried strokes, beginning with Claire.

“The breast is excellent. Firm. Even. She trains. You can taste it.”

A senior partner near the head of the table accepted his plate and studied the slice. “The color is beautiful. And the friend, you said?”

“Yes. Claire. We’ve been neighbors for almost a year.”

A woman from the board leaned forward. “May I request a portion of the special cut from the friend? I’ve heard it can be quite different when the girl isn’t raised for it.”

Amity nodded. She turned Claire carefully, parted the seasoned folds, and removed the delicate fillet with precise strokes. The meat was flushed and tender. She placed it on the board member’s plate as a separate small serving.

The woman tasted it first, slow and thoughtful.

“Oh. That’s remarkable. Sweeter than the commercial girl. More personal somehow.”

A second request followed almost at once. Then a third. Amity portioned the special cut from Claire until only the surrounding meat remained, then continued carving the thighs and the heart-shaped curve of the seat, distributing them according to preference. Guests compared the two women openly—Claire’s denser muscle and richer flavor against the professional girl’s more delicate, consistent texture.

One of Amity’s direct bosses lifted a fork.

“You took a real risk putting your friend on the menu. It paid off. This is the best meat I’ve had all year.”

Amity inclined her head. “She was perfect for it.”

Plates were passed. Wine was poured again. Conversation moved between the promotion, the quarterly numbers, and the ongoing comparison of the two roasts. Someone asked for a second taste of Claire’s breast meat. Another requested the last of the special cut that had been set aside. Amity served both without

hesitation.

By the end of the main course the platter was nearly empty. The professional girl’s remaining pieces were later wrapped and refrigerated. Claire had been almost entirely consumed.

When the last guests left after midnight, Amity closed the front door and returned to the dining room. She stood for a long moment looking at the empty platter and the two carving boards.

Then she turned off the lights.