

JESSI LEWIS

## The Milkmaid

“C’MON, LADIES. It’s not fun for me either,” Marina called. “Bend over and touch your toes.” The wet nurses complied, their rumps rising up in a line of mottled curves. The lights weighed on them, all nude except for cotton underwear.

Marina walked down the row and pulled on each right buttock, looking for paraphernalia hiding in between. Sixty-four bare backs reflected massive ceiling lights. The padded floor was stained in the corners but soft underfoot.

The women’s bodies trembled, so Marina moved faster down the line. In the fluorescent light of the milking room, it was easy to see anything plastic or foil-covered sticking out against skin.

She called out, “Okay.” As her Milkers all rose again, their hips flexed, she saw their taut muscles, their dimensional moles and their scarred stretch marks, their smoothness and their roughness, their old wounds and their fading green bruises all roll back to the standing position.

One of Marina’s requirements as Head of Staff was to consider these sixty-four women’s bodies every morning at seven a.m. Meanwhile, staff members searched the sleeping cubbies at the end of the barn to look for any goods not permitted. Tam and Lori moved slowly in lavender scrubs as they remade beds and looked through small handbags. At cubby 18, they extracted and bagged a collection of granola bars. It was nearly impossible for anything to go unnoticed since the sleeping quarters were cubicle sections open to the rest of the barn. Marina couldn’t believe that her Milkers even tried. She sighed, then returned to her list and the waiting line of women in front of her.

“Ana—Milk 38—your fat content has risen,” she said. The woman in front of her stiffened.

Ana was twenty-six, from Oklahoma, with a prior background in hair dressing and a childhood in Mexico City. She had come with the waves of people over the last three years. Her baby had died of malaria at two months, so her milk was in a steady stream already. With this attention on the line, she was immediately embarrassed, eyes jumping from Marina’s green scrubs to the other nude women.

“I think it’s the food here. It’s rich.”

“Is it maybe a lack of cocaine as well?”

“That certainly helps,” Ana said, and the other women nodded.

“Angela S.—Milker 58—your hair is changing color. Are you consuming your daily protein? Vitamins?” She looked down at her list, which already answered the question, then raised her eyes with faux scrutiny.

Angela S., twenty-eight, from Maryland, shrugged with apathy. She had an unknown job past, which meant she had probably worked under the table for cash. Sometimes this meant a Milker had been a prostitute, farmhand, or cook. Marina had always assumed that Angela S. had been a farmhand because when she raised her arm to speak, her shoulder muscles were obvious.

“Early gray runs in my family, ma’am,” Angela S. said, hand raised. “I’ll be a skunk in three years.”

A Milker down the line said, “Dye that shit.”

The others nodded, smiling thinly though. They all knew hair dye was not qualified for use during milking.

Marina recognized this Milker—the speaker with snappy eyes. This was the one who had come in raging on rum, throwing chairs, biting at the staff. She had calmed, but now there were bits of snorts and half laughs between them all. The other Milkens liked her, possibly too much.

Marina made a note. More laughter played along the line.

“Rosa—Milker 22—since you’ve voluntarily spoken up, have you desired alcohol in your last week here?”

“Once or twice,” Rosa said easily. “But who doesn’t under these lights?”

They all looked up to the ceiling of piping as the fluorescence spoke back down to them. One of the Milkens gave a little wave upward.

“Have you experienced any continued symptoms of fever?”

“No,” Rosa said.

“Shaking?”

“Nope.”

When Rosa lost her baby during a bout of alcohol poisoning, she had no one in her life to help her dry out. Staff members in the facility stayed overnight to check her vitals and keep her hydrated. They also encouraged her hormones and applied the nozzles to her breasts to draw forward milk for a babe that did not exist.

“Well, then we can probably start storing your milk. It’s been quarantined long enough.”

“So, you mean I’ll get a paycheck now?” Rosa said, leaning forward. Her chest swung with her. She had globular breasts that somehow maintained shape despite an onslaught of milk. Everyone in the line turned their heads discreetly to watch Rosa’s chest swing.

“Once you repay for the company’s kindness. Remember your contract.”

Marina turned to go down the list, but Rosa raised her hand again.

“Why do you lock the doors at night? You don’t trust we’ll stay?” she asked, not waiting to be called on. Marina turned back to her, unsure of what tone to use. Rosa waited.

“It’s part of working with addicts. The unfortunate part. Leaving is allowed with permission and contractual agreement. Our product is at stake. Does this make sense?” Marina replied.

Rosa nodded slowly, squinting in the light. Marina moved onward. She didn’t mark anything in her notes. If she didn’t mark, the question wasn’t important. “Let’s go to Amber—Milker 18—you are showing body weight gains. In the last four weeks you have gained nine pounds and three ounces. This is unacceptable.”

Milker 18 blinked four times. Amber had lived too long on dumpster dives in a suburb of Boston. Often, Milkers like Amber, who came from hunger, didn’t know how to handle the situation, how to curb nutrition, how to work off calories on the ellipticals at one corner of the warehouse. They had never paid attention to their bodies before except for want and need.

“I’ve noticed myself, ma’am,” Amber said, and she quivered.

“Please note, a fifteen-pound gain is grounds for a reconsideration of contract.”

“Yes. I’ll—I will lose it. I just never lost my baby weight. So, I can’t seem to get back to before. Before this.”

She hiccupped. Her cheeks ran. For a few seconds nobody knew what to do. Marina wrote down notes. Then Milker 22—Rosa, again—broke rank and walked up the line to Amber, wrapped her arms around her, and pressed Amber’s forehead to her bare chest.

Marina was relieved that Rosa was the one who did this and not her, but this relief was irritating. She didn’t want to know her Milkers more than she already did. She didn’t want to be emotionally invested in them or how they saw her. It was already hard to smile while considering their joints, teeth, and hair. She just had to keep her job. To live in it and thrive in it. That was it. That’s what she had learned in the last three years.

“Okay, thank you for your kindness on the line. I understand Amber, Milker 18; just return to protocol. You have three weeks to balance your weight back to a normal BMI.”

Amber nodded, leaving a wet sheen on Rosa’s collarbone.

“You are all here because you have had or have lost a child,” Marina said louder. Eyes shot back to her. A few of the women nervously rubbed their hips. “We are creating a legacy of wet nurses. You are helping people with your bodies in a way that nobody else can. You are true women.”

Amber raised her head from Rosa’s chest.

“Aren’t you?” Marina called.

“Yes,” they murmured. Sixty-four voices poured over the floor.

“Good. I thought we’d have some changes today.” She leaned down to two shopping bags at her feet. These were products she had squandered for two weeks. Every once in a while, she’d get lucky and come across a pop-up pharmacy that wasn’t yet ransacked. Luckily, she was never looking for the restricted items—antibiotic ointment and Band-Aids. “Magazines that are only about five years old,” she called. Somebody cheered. “And an array of nail polish, chemical free.”

She opened the bags to show glints of products and corners of pages. There was more excitement, some clapping. Nothing seemed to change. Even as more babies died in the womb from malnutrition, even as it became more difficult to walk outside at noon, and even as the rain became permanently absent, women still loved products.

“So, we have a milking, then we have calisthenics, then we have a beauty break. Sound good?”

“Yes ma’am,” they said, not quite in unison. The Milkers broke the line and walked down to the opposing end of the barn to their assigned seating.

While one end of the barn was living quarters—one bunk for each Milker—the other end consisted of sixty-five chairs.

The reconfigured dental chairs were reclined back. Each Milker knew how to pull down the tubing from the back wall and attach the triangular nozzles to their breasts. Each knew to lean back and let the suction work at a slow, gentle pace. Sometimes the staffers helped. Marina did not. She watched until every Milker was seated, until the screen on the opposite wall played a movie. Those who wanted to watch put in buds. Those who didn’t talk or read, their heads turned from the screen.

Milker 23 in the twenty-third chair waved a hand awkwardly. Marina

checked her notes before walking over. She seemed to know their breasts better than their names.

“Yes, Cynthia—Milker 23—what can I help you with?”

Marina came up close to the chair where Cynthia was leaning back and tried to discern exactly how dilated this Milker’s eyes were. Hers were deep and coiled.

“I heard news from my husband that my son is missing,” Cynthia said, her voice hard.

“During a phone call you heard this?”

“Yes, ma’am,” she said. Cynthia was from Ohio. She had a pleading look. As she spoke, the nozzles pulled her milk in a constant stream up through the tubing and into the greater piping system in the ceiling. Marina imagined a glistening, pure river traveling the stretches of pipe along the roof. The ceiling often sloshed and gurgled.

“Your husband is not caring for your son, though,” she said, making careful eye contact with Milker 23. “We have a requirement that all children after birth are not the responsibility of the Milkers or their significant others.”

“I know—I know. He was adopted by a family in town—in Akron—and they’ve moved. I put him up for adoption when I lost my job. Don’t know what I was doing.”

“Cynthia—Milker 23—I can’t help you. Your son is no longer your prerogative. For better or worse, making milk is your prerogative. Understood?”

Cynthia stared at her and Marina walked away. She knew that this was when her monstrous side came out. But this was her job.

Her job was what was keeping her alive. Marina had somehow managed to become used to the scrape of life now. She lived on lentils, regularly drove through a food riot on Parker Street, and nodded at the desperate digging in the dumpsters for food. She had been one of them for a month when she was twenty-one, just long enough to see what it was to be hungry in the heat. She remembered that so well—sleeping in a burnt-out house with no roof, the pine trees of the yard crumbling in the dryness. Sometimes she drove past that place still.

Now she’d grown up and worked her way up from orderly. Her drive into work through neighborhoods of wandering hunger gave Marina a faith in what she was doing. Faith in her paycheck, in those lentils, and in the product of her Milkers. With failing markets and

crumbling farmland dried up in a scorching sun, the world had returned back to what it knew well: Mother's Milk.

"Rosa—Milker 22—don't unhook until the machine gives you the okay light," she said as a beeping sounded. Rosa ignored the request and jumped down to the ground.

"What did you say to Cindy?" Rosa asked.

There was a gentle fall of sobs behind Marina, but she didn't turn to look. Instead, Marina headed out through the oversized metal door, swiping through with her ID card.

"Respond to me," Rosa called. "It's her baby, her son."

Marina ignored her and the door slammed behind her. She had a meeting to go to. She called them The Grays. They were three men—corporate heads—who did a check every three business days on the product and the Milkers. They gathered in a conference room that overlooked the barn through a two-way mirror, waiting for Marina to arrive. She hated these meetings.

She stood outside the door to the conference room for three seconds, gripped her notes with one hand and pushed hair behind her ears with the other. In this moment, she wondered if they could hear her breathing on the other side. Then the door opened, and the elder of the three stood with his hand on the doorknob.

Yes, they could hear her.

"Hello, Marina, how are you?"

The room was as it always was—bald and official. Orderlies had brought in bowls of trail mix. Marina sat down across from her three bosses and looked at the candies and peanuts in glass bowls. She had never taken any during a meeting, but always waited until the end to empty one small bowl into her pocket and take it home.

"Marina? How are you?" the oldest Gray repeated, as though measuring her response time. As though she would have to bend over for him to look for drugs soon.

"I'm fine, Greg, how have you been?"

"We were just talking about how lovely a product you have coming out of here. The fat content is perfect—nutrient-driven. People drink this stuff, and they are rejuvenated."

In chairs on either side of Greg, Miles and Carter nodded together in their suits.

"That's lovely to hear," she said, and she meant it. She wrote "rejuvenated" on the top header of her notes.

“We were watching your heifers down there, and they are looking nice and fit.”

At the use of the term heifers, Marina looked at each of the men for their reaction, for a cough of surprise. Instead, they were looking over her shoulders through the two-way, to the barn down below. She turned around to watch too. The women were still pumping while watching the movie, their streams of milk ascending to the ceiling, then through to the containment area on the other side of the far wall.

“I noticed you all are taking in a higher percentage of nonpasteurized. Why this change?” she said, knowing that she wasn’t really supposed to ask questions like this. At the same time, she knew it was also important to come across as overly driven and dedicated. She should want to know stuff like this. This was her job; it was all she had. Marina would hold on to it with her teeth if she had to.

Greg shook his head, but Miles answered, nodding. He was young. If she remembered right, he had a wife and twins. He had barbecues under a shaded pool house. He could probably still afford air-conditioning and probably still ran it on high even when the local government called for an energy-saving summer.

“We have found that unpasteurized product, when purchased by the right crowd, can sell like champagne. At the price of expensive champagne.” He coughed. “Back when those grapes were around, of course. Anyway, it puts cow milk to shame. People are having Mother Milk parties. Spas are having specialty days for self-cleansing that ends with a shot of this stuff. Your Milker, Carrie O’Connell, Number 4, I think? Milker 4 sells out because a health guru has claimed online that it has the property of the fountain of youth. Can you believe that? You have a walking bank account down there.”

Marina made impressed sounds and quickly checked her notes. Carrie O’Connell—Milker 4—in her late twenties became significantly addicted to pain medication. The baby passed from complications one month after birth. Never left the hospital. Carrie had checked in to be a Milker the next day. She had a certain confusion about her. After quarantine, testing of the milk, and behavioral analysis, she became a regular supplier like everyone else, and she was so comfortable in this, when the machine pumped away at her breasts, she commonly fell asleep.

“Right—I had heard about some celebrity taking it too far. I didn’t think it was specifically one of my girls’ product.”

“Well, I imagine,” Carter said, the quieter of the three, leaning

forward, “it’s because you keep your heifers at such high standards. Milker 4 is just the beginning.”

Marina realized that she knew nothing about Carter at all. Greg raised a hand for silence and Miles dug for some candy.

“Marina, what can you tell us about their progress here?” Greg said.

“I have nothing new since your last visit. They leave once a month for a weekend if they choose to pump solo and go through a full screening again. Their milk isn’t accepted for a week to be certain they’ve been clean. You can talk to Walt Riley in containment if you want the recent details on that, but there isn’t much to tell. Fewer of them are going home since pumping without acceptance means that they aren’t getting pay. I have six girls making their way through community college. Two taking online master’s degrees. All while pumping. Somebody got a high school diploma and they all got an extra piece of cake.”

“This is a genius setup,” Carter said. He watched the Milkers over her shoulder again. Marina realized he was watching Rosa.

“I’ve had some problems with raised fat content. They come in here and eat shakes and nuts. This can overwhelm some of them. The majority of these girls come from rough backgrounds, so this is kind of a wild expectation, you know—to value their bodies as a livelihood. In a nonabusive way, I mean.”

“Any morale issues?” Greg asked. He fixed the pin on his tie.

“No,” she said, looking back over her shoulder to Rosa. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

THE NEXT DAY, the buttocks rose, the numbers were the same, and the girls sat through a showing of a 90s action movie most people had forgotten. The Milkers ignored it for the most part since the array of magazines had brand new quizzes without any marks. There was a required midweek creaming where the staffers and Marina worked together down the line to soften up nipples. The Milkers clasped their hands behind their heads and had a dime of cream applied to their aureoles. Marina noticed that their nipples were varying sizes and shapes, some wide, some more three dimensional, occasionally darker in color, sometimes pinkened. She was surprised by Rosa’s because they were small and deeply colored, more so than anyone else on the line.

“What’s so damn funny about my nipples?” Rosa asked, breaking her thoughts.



“Nothing, dear,” Marina said, pausing a moment to look into Rosa’s face. “I was just wondering how many nipples I’ve seen by this point.”

“I bet I’ve seen more,” Rosa said, unblinking.

Marina continued to the next nipples, Milker 23. Hers were stretched from the weight of the milk.

“My son is missing still,” the Milker said as Marina tried to remember this one’s name.

“Right. The adoptee, yes?”

“Yes. It was in the adoption agreement that we would know our boy and see him three times a year.”

“That’s an unusual arrangement.” Marina applied the cream, cold to warmth.

“We were good friends with the couple who took him in. We were.”

“Am I going to have to take away your phone privileges?”

The Milker looked hard at her and Marina suddenly remembered that her name was Cynthia. And that Rosa called her Cindy. She liked that name. It was her mother’s, but she drowned the thought.

“It’s my right to speak to my husband. I need more money to help him find our son. He’s thinking of hiring someone to find them.”

“You signed a contract that gave up your rights. You signed a contract that stated that if you had any prior debts, those would be placed on hold during your time here. You know we have an agreement with the federal government. If you leave your contract, you will no longer have this protection. And,” she looked at her clipboard, “it seems like this agreement is really important for you. There is no reason why you should be the one worried about your kid when you are the one keeping away your family’s debts. Understand?”

“He’s my child. That’s good enough reason.”

“He is not your child. You have no child.”

Marina looked down at her clipboard, then up again. The Milker pursed her lips.

“My body is still producing milk for him, though. I have the evidence. In my body, I know, I owe a child my milk. Do you not know what I’m trying to say?”

“Cynthia—Milker 23—you need to pretend. You need to pretend your child died.” She paused. There was something in her next sentence that would taste bitter. “When they took him away to make sure he was breathing? Pretend his lungs didn’t open. Pretend, or your situation here will change.”

“I won’t.”

“You will have no phone option for three weeks.” Marina wrote this down and moved forward. The rest of the line was milling around before their weekly yoga class. Cindy dropped her eyes.

MARINA SHOULD HAVE predicted what was going to happen next. Over the next few days, Rosa was talking more often on the phone and using all of her monthly credit at once. She was getting tenser in their daily rituals and was now looking Marina in the eye more closely, as though hoping for something hidden or looking for the zipper on her costume.

Meanwhile, Cynthia was starting to deflate. Her voice went quiet, then disappeared.

Then only a week into her phone curfew, on a Tuesday, she simply refused to milk and lay on the floor of the warehouse, her breasts against the cool padded floor spreading their two small puddles. Rosa tried to get her to stand, but failing, she fell to her knees and held Cynthia’s hands in her own, her tears rolling down her friend’s bare back and trickling along her shoulder blades. When Marina came over with the orderlies to force Cynthia up onto a stretcher, Rosa was praying softly under her breath. Naked, as always, she crossed herself. Another Milker passed her by and touched her hair. Another kissed her cheek.

The staff had called the local cab company. They contacted Cynthia’s husband, who could not come for her, so they agreed to send her to a woman’s shelter in Columbus until he could get the means to take care of her again. When Milker 23 left, she still wasn’t able to stand on her own.

“I need to talk to you right now,” Rosa said, breasts swaying as she turned to watch Cynthia’s stretcher go. It was against protocol to allow a Milker privacy from the rest, but Milker 23’s departure from the facility seemed to be bad karma on its way for Marina. So she agreed, and they went into one of the quiet rooms, usually slated to be a cell for one of the new girls trying to get over addiction before supplying milk. Rosa had spent some time in there, actually, when she was hallucinating, bent in half, sheets wrapped around her legs.

“What can I help you with?” Marina said as they both sat cross-legged on the cold floor. One of the orderlies brought in Rosa’s lunch—soy and ground nuts with raisins in a mild cinnamon flavoring. They served

it often. Marina passed it to Rosa, who set it on the floor a few feet away.

“You don’t get it. Cindy’s son was put into foster care. The adoptive family didn’t tell her. The less he’s checked on, the more likely he is to disappear from there and end up in a much worse place.”

Rosa’s look was serious, as though she knew what this worse place was like.

“That’s a shame.”

“Yes, it is a shame,” she said, pulling her crossed legs in tight.

It made Marina happy to see that their yoga class was working.

“You took away her phone privileges. Now her son is long gone. Her husband can’t handle himself. You expect her to climb out of this? It’s her kid.”

“Every woman in here has had a kid.”

“Yeah, and you broke one of ’em.”

“I didn’t break anything. The system broke Cindy—Cynthia—Milker 23. If she can find the will, now she’ll be able to go get her son, who she clearly can’t be away from. We let her out of her contract. She’s done with us. Depression causes sour milk.”

Rosa laughed bitterly at this while Marina sat straighter.

“She’s out of the contract and all of the caveats, huh?”

“The promises and demands of it, sure,” Marina said. She considered standing so she could look down on Rosa. “That’s the way you get through here, girl. You work the system.”

“Sure, sure. And I heard about Special Edition 4. This place is getting sicker every day.”

“What do you mean?”

“Carrie. Her milk is selling like crazy out there. Special Edition. Originally, our milk was just meant for children who were allergic to everything. Right? Isn’t that what you still tell recruits it’s for? While multimillionaires store it up for parties? For breast milk mustaches. Old, rich men drink our nutrition to live longer.”

“I know only what I’m told,” Marina said, looking at her clipboard out of habit. The term “rejuvenating” was scrawled across the top sheet of milk scheduling.

“What are you told?” Rosa asked.

“Kids who are increasingly allergic to the environment tend to not be wealthy. This place”—she looked up to the lights—“this product requires money. One group finances the other.”

Rosa looked at her.

“You’re still in debt,” Marina said.

“Always and forever.”

“Let’s change that, Rosa. I can talk to The Grays—the boys. Our CEOs. See if they’d market one type as having a different effect. It clearly works. Your milk could be energizing, invigorating. Whatever trendy descriptive terms they come up with. Hell, your milk could support brain activity. I’d negotiate up the price of”—she looked down at Rosa’s chest—“your product. And you could have more reason to be here, less of a moral issue.”

“Money doesn’t get rid of moral issues.”

“Maybe, but it will get you out of here, free and clean of debt, faster.”

“What do you care about my debts?” Rosa said, and Marina knew she had a point. It was important to remain impartial, and yet here she was. But there was something important in Rosa’s possibility. She thought of The Grays referring to heifers. If Rosa was more valuable, Marina would be too.

“I would like to see you gone. You are too vibrant to be in here,” Marina replied, though she knew that the greater the value of milk, the harder it would be for the Milkers to someday leave. She passed Rosa her lunch. Rosa just frowned.

“I can’t stomach anything here. This lunch always tastes like garden dirt.”

Marina tried some from the wooden paddle spoon that came with lunch and chewed a bit, brushing pieces of it from her lips. The taste wasn’t appealing, but the weight of healthy protein-rich food hitting her stomach caused a surge in her system. She instinctively dug the spoon in again, but clamped her lips.

“It does taste a bit like dirt, and nuts though, protein, good stuff. That’s the thing, Rosa. If you can stomach this deal, if you can take it on, then you’ll never have Cynthia’s problems. At least—at least you will have food,” she said. Rosa looked at her carefully, but Marina kept talking, “Hell, you could even help people like Cynthia if you play this right. If you can stomach this food and work to bring your body up to an even more efficient production speed, you’ll get the treatment. We are in an awesome moment for wet nursing. Feels like the end of the world out there, but not in here.” Marina pointed to the padded walls.

They were talking too long. She noticed that Rosa’s chest had started

to slowly leak milk along the crests of her nipples. Rosa did not wipe them clean.

“Aren’t you thousands in debt?” Marina asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Over sixty thousand dollars. Tried to buy a house, then there was another crash. Mom got sick. Then my brother. Tried to live on credit cards. Now I live here with suction cups on my boobs.” The words came out between gasps.

“Stop crying, Rosa.”

She didn’t.

“I’m giving you a way out, Rosa. Don’t you want out? You just have to rise to an occasion. You understand?”

Marina was starting to believe her own words. It suddenly felt as though this was really a hope for her Milker. Marina held up the lunch bowl on her hand like a waiter between tables.

“Rosa, you must have a remainder of family out there?”

She nodded at last.

“They need you too, don’t they? They could use some help—some funds? They are probably out there killing themselves for canned potatoes right now.”

She nodded again.

“Then you know what it is you have to do. Just stomach this.”

Marina held up the meal to Rosa’s face. Rosa did not look down to the bowl at first but eyed Marina instead. It hurt for a second, to see her glossy eyes, but Marina held the food higher. She knew what she was doing.

“Eat it, girl. And we’ll get you all fixed up.”

Rosa continued to look at her. Marina dug into the food with the spoon and held it up.

“C’mon,” she said. “It will make you feel better, to just care for your body and let the rest drift. C’mon. Let the rest drift.”

Rosa took the spoon and bit down.

“That’s it,” Marina said as she pet her hair and watched the grit disappear between Rosa’s lips, her jaw hinge open again, the obedient widening of her throat as the food slid. She chewed, and Marina smiled.

“That’s right. I’ll get it settled.”

Marina left work that day only after gathering data on Carrie O’Connell’s milk production and sales. She worked on the presentation well into the morning in her little apartment. The Grays were coming, and she was going to have to present this idea to market Rosa’s product.

It helped that Rosa was beautiful. This would be the easiest part of the sale. She was even beautiful in her production staff photo, so Marina included it on the last slide because she knew The Grays. She knew what worked.

When she woke to her alarm, the sun was driving between the blinds and pressed on her back. This day—this six a.m. tea, this confiscated granola bar, this drive through the car lot side of town to the warehouse—this morning was pregnant.

Even the normal ration day food riot on this side of town, where grocery stores were emptied and fires were set, even those angry crowds seemed calmer, more adjusted. Without complaint, the milling hungry parted to let Marina's car rumble through. When she waved to get them out of the way, a woman in full riot wear—goggles, bandana, and tightly cut hair—stepped aside politely and watched her go.

Marina got to work, arriving to a scrubbed parking lot and warehouse doors. In the prep room, she found the staff scrubs hanging on their hooks. Here she noticed the smell of stomach and dirt. And the coloring. She pulled back her scrubs, then checked each set on the neighboring hooks. Bodily fluid had been sprayed across the fabric, something yellow and gritty. And then she knew. She knew that Rosa had released her stomach on everything.

That was what made Marina run, though she knew in her belly that she was too late.

A night is a long time.

She slid her card for access to the door, her fingers struggling to aim the edge. The warehouse opened with familiar lights. The great gray of soft floor. The empty milking chairs.

And that was it. Marina met emptiness. The yellow lights bore down on everything.

An orderly walked by—Lori. She was in plain clothes, turning to each corner as though a Milker would be huddled there, hiding.

“Lori,” Marina said, “what happened?”

“I think they opted out of their contracts.”

“What? How can they? So many of them were just getting over—Why would they?”

“They ripped apart one of the workout machines and broke the back doors open with it,” she said, her eyes giving off a cold amusement. “Also, they broke down the staff entry doors and got into the prep area. They tried to get into the milk storage side too, but the alarms stopped

them there. So at least there's still milk—their milk.”

“This is crazy. Each one was—satisfied. This was a really balanced group. I was good to them,” Marina said. Lori nodded. It was annoying how Lori had learned not to argue, yet Marina needed argument. She needed someone to point a long finger at her face. She needed someone to say, “No, of course they weren't satisfied. Who was happy here?” But nobody would say this.

“Who convinced them it was a good idea to leave?” she asked.

“The security footage shows Milker 22 instructing the others.”

“Who, Rosa? Do you mean Rosa?”

Lori stared at her.

“I think so? Is she Milker 22? The girl who cried over Milker 23? Yeah—that's her. The one who runs to help the crying ones.”

“That's impossible,” Marina said, though she knew of course that it was possible. “Everyone's gone?”

“All but one.” She pointed to a middle chair where a woman was leaning back. Marina couldn't believe she had overlooked her. For the first time, the fabric floor mat seemed unstable under Marina's feet.

“Milker 4?” she said, and Carrie O'Connell sat up slightly. Her eyes focused.

“Yes, ma'am?” She had an accent that had never been obvious before.

“Where did they go?”

“They left out the back door. Covered the broken edge in a bedsheet.”

“You stayed?”

“My milk is valuable. I heard about it. My milk,” she said, leaning back again, “is the finest.”

“It is,” Marina said. “Do you know where they went? Where could they even go and get breakfast?”

Carrie O'Connell did not respond.

“You're leaking, Carrie,” she said, and Marina moved to apply the nozzle more closely to the center of her Milker's nipple. Her fingers came back with a thin touch of velvety white. Before this she had always done her job as well as she could—she'd never lost a Milker, never pissed off staff, never felt herself wonder over the milk and its taste. But now, her job was on the edge of a cliff. The only thing that could save her was the value of Carrie's milk. Marina licked her fingers and there was the taste—melon and cow's milk, ricotta smoothie. She paused and sucked in a breath.

She had to reevaluate and fast. This was her job—her only way to

avoid joining in on that food riot on the way here. She thought again of the woman in the gear, the grocery store boarded up but still open, selling mostly cereal, protein powder, and expired chips. She thought of her Milkers running past in their stolen scrubs, jogging down the street into the heat of noon. Dry roads under bare feet.

Marina would have to be careful now, more cautious than she'd even been when she'd come in here for her first interview, when the warehouse had just opened up. One of The Grays had interviewed her with six others, hiring people as long as they had no criminal record.

Marina didn't want to be an orderly again—she had an apartment now, she had a cabinet of food. To keep these things, she'd had to know her product and sell the hell out of it. The last Milker was the only way to maintain this.

She would sneak into the milking containment room and fill a thermos the next day.

Milker 4's breasts and nozzles watched her. Marina held her breath, palms out as though she needed to catch herself. She tried to decide when she would call The Grays. How much they would lose from this. How fast they could replace their Milkers. How Rosa could even leave when she'd been promised a purpose. A purpose—that had been everyone's goal before the can shortages, before the market stumbled, before their lives had stretched into this relentless, cloudless season.

Marina looked up. Carrie had fallen asleep, her breasts still slowly releasing fluid. An air bubble from the nozzle moved gently through the tube of Carrie's product, up into the rafters and into the greater system of lactic plumbing over their heads. There was a gurgling up there, the sound of small waves in a sea much shallower than before.