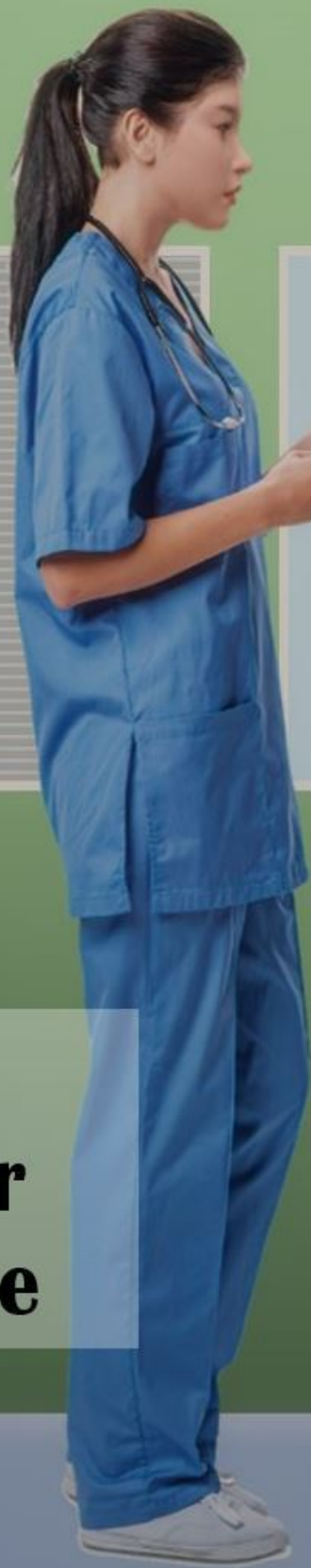


The Debt Proxy 2: Mirabilis



**By
Badger
Therese**

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Chapter 1: Priscilla in the Morning (February 21, 2019)

The lights, as they had every morning for the last six months, came on at 7:30 that Thursday in February 2018.

Priscilla had been sleeping fitfully for some time before that, and she opened her eyes wide with mild relief once the gloom of three emergency lights had been dispelled by illumination as bright as daylight.

Naked under her sheets, she rolled to her back, her hand drifting to her pubic hair, a thick black triangle that she trimmed only when told to do so.

Through the bars four feet to Priscilla's left, an Indian girl named Dani stirred, rolled, sighed out.

Four feet to Priscilla's right, through another barrier of bars, a redhead named Whitney sat up and rubbed her face.

Priscilla sensed the actions of her neighbors but trained her eyes only on the ceiling, smooth plaster with a single LED set within it, and she squinted at the brightness. The light helped her wake up, and she needed to get things done quickly now, as every morning.

Female Cageroom 32 – usually referred to by the efficient F-32 – held 20 girls in 20 cages, and at this moment, they exhibited varying degrees of discipline, of energy, of enthusiasm. Everything from a cheery “Hey, Brook!” to underbreath curses broke the stillness in the first moments of artificial dawn.

Priscilla swung her legs stiffly over the edge of her bed, easing her feet down to the blue linoleum floor, D-cup breasts bouncing as she took the two steps to her toilet, emptying into the porcelain bowl, going to wash her face, to look into her mirror, to make sure she was still Priscilla, and she was still here. Five foot eight inches tall, she had thick black hair that grew to her shoulders, dark eyes and, at the moment, tender breasts. She reached up to cup them, raise and lift them, lower them gently. She'd be starting her period in

three or four days at most, and pain the week before it started had been a constant since she was in her early teens.

“Five minutes, beds up, final cleaning now,” came the warning, in a woman’s recorded voice, echoing from the room’s loudspeaker, and Priscilla moved to her bidet, straddling it, reaching up to the dispenser set into the wall to soap her hand, letting the warm water and her fingers work together to clean her vulva and anus.

More talking. Someone sang a snippet of a popular song, someone laughed.

“Wake up, baby, or you’re gonna be late again,” someone said to her neighbor.

Priscilla made her bed, tucking in her sheets and the blanket, securing the pillow before she angled the frame up against the wall, hooking the catches to hold it in place.

“One minute,” came the final warning.

Priscilla and her 19 neighbors, moving until now independently in their tiny cells, stepped in near unison to the fronts of their enclosures, looked up at the pairs of cuffs affixed to the bars over their heads, one for the right hand, one for the left, and all reached up and pressed their wrists against the catches embedded in the cuffs’ hinges, and the cuffs closed with quiet but unyielding clicks.

Next came the feet, the task familiar enough to Priscilla after six months that she didn’t need to look any more than did the rest of the girls, spreading her legs and pressing her ankles against the catches.

Eighty times around the cageroom, cuffs clicked, 40 times around wrists, 40 times around ankles, 20 girls being secured in place at the fronts of their cages, none late on this particular morning, all cuffing themselves obediently to await the invasion of the morning inventory pass.

“BZZZT,” announced the loudspeaker, its meaning clear: if you hadn’t cuffed yourself by now, you were late. And if you were late, punishment was possible. Not inevitable. Not

even likely. But possible. And punishment was unpleasant enough that getting cuffed on time was a no-brainer.

The girls, stretched out like 20 female X's, were allowed to talk at this point in the morning routine, and talk they did, about dreams they'd had, about possible assignments, about the sort of office intrigue that could be safely shared.

Faces protruded between the bars, as did breasts, the occasional thigh or knee, most of the toes.

"I had another fairy godmother dream," announced Kennedy, across the aisle and a few cages to Priscilla's left.

"Did she rescue you this time?" asked, Brianna, her neighbor.

"No, just laughed at me, like always."

"Hey, Priscilla, sleep okay?" asked Doria, the black girl caged directly across from her.

"Until the last hour or so, yeah," Priscilla replied, rubbing her nose on the bars beside her face.

"You get a day off today, don't you?" Doria asked.

"I'm not sure," Priscilla said. "Dr. Morrow and Dr. Bank are gone 'til next week, but they didn't put a hold on me."

"Both gone?" Doria queried.

"Yeah, on vacation."

"Are they vacationing together?" Doria laughed.

"Charter boat fishing," Priscilla said. "Off Turks and Caicos. They timed it for my period."

"Seriously?" Doria demanded, and though she could not raise her shoulders in surprise or spread her hands out, the expression on her face said it all, reminding Priscilla that this was too much information, that she had erred.

Priscilla was simply another body here. Not even a name, just a female form to be used, tested, examined, stimulated, penetrated, watched. She wasn't even Priscilla. Her

name here for all official purposes, for interactions with staff, for all references to herself, for every one of the multiple daily records entered into the vast databases of Atlanta General Female Laboratory and Services (AGFLS for short) was 14067.

Priscilla stood out, however, and not just because of her build, or the way her eyes creased when she was amused, or aroused, or annoyed, or the full bloom of her wide hips and narrow waist and thick, tapered thighs. On the day she was tricked by her mother and her debt-ridden stepfather into signing up here – six months and a lifetime ago – she was found to possess an attribute of significant value to this organization, a vagina of exceptional quality.

In summary, every inch of the eight and a half inches of her female sheath had been designed by nature to deliver maximal gratification to any penis driven into it.

From her thick, pink lips, half hidden behind unkempt pubic hair, to the depths that waited just outside her cervix, Priscilla's vagina was endowed with both a heavy band of gripping muscle and a deliciously soft lining, an organ that embraced every penis with what might be called aggressive tenderness. When she lay passively, her visiting males quickly settled into variations of the same urgent rhythm, driving all the way into her, pulling out until only the tip of the organ stretched her lips, then pushing back in to savor every fold and crease of her internal essence, pulling back out and pushing back in, fast, hard and desperate, until the inevitable moment when the rich coupling cream emerged, spitting out in jet after jet, always filling Priscilla's chalice to capacity and beyond, thick white fluids invariably spilling out between shaft and vaginal mouth.

And if Priscilla tightened, if she were instructed to squeeze her partner, or she did so of her own accord, even the best-trained and most disciplined males struggled to refrain from completion, eyes wide with panic, jaws slackening, thrusts involuntarily redoubled until semen was delivered moments later to the lab subject's engorged chamber, and in quantities that might be described as unnaturally voluminous.

It was not just the physical attributes of Priscilla's girlhood that stood out, however, for she was also endowed with a mind that was quick in many ways. In her previous existence, she had been a full-scholarship undergrad at Georgia Institute of Technology, where she was about to enter her senior year and, in nine more months, graduate with a bachelor's degree in architecture. Her brain's capacity to absorb, integrate, and return information was matched by a sexuality that was always at least robust, but often fierce as well, the research female making no effort to hide her taste in partners or penises, or to mediate her responses once she'd been paired up. With every filling of her sex, her body tensed, her legs widened to the limits of her bonds, her pelvis rocked, and her throat issued grunts in time with the insertions. Meanwhile, the liquor of coupling flowed like heavy water from her organ, coating any rod brought to bear within it, subsequently flooding her vulva, the tight spaces between shaft and hole, her anus and his scrotum.

Because the unique properties of Priscilla's reproductive organ couldn't be studied independent of her mind, therefore, that mind also required care and monitoring, meaning the two men with the greatest interest in her vagina had to include the whole girl in their investigative regime.

An unusual collegiality had therefore developed between Priscilla and the two scientists focused on her: Dr. Frank Morrow, Chief of Anatomical Directives, and Dr. Douglas Bank, Special Projects Researcher.

She was still just a number here, of course, subject to the same policies of confinement, restraint and discipline as all the other female research inventory. But because her disposition was critical, she was also indulged, at times, in ways that other research females were not.

How did her state of mind, the researchers might ask on a given afternoon, impact the flow of her lubricant? What, once they knew her mood from day to day, could they anticipate in terms of her eagerness to be penetrated, her enthusiasm around a rod, the quality of her orgasms?

In fact, it might be safe to say that Priscilla was a full member of the team, a third researcher, albeit junior and in a tightly-restricted capacity, given she was invariably brought to the lab naked and in chains.

Junior, yes, but for her own reasons, she was as interested as they in the habits and capacities of her vagina, in its responses to stimuli under different conditions, in its ability to lubricate, grip, climax, spasm, recover and reset; in its capacity to be used repeatedly, generating serial pleasures for both herself and the males brought to her day after day.

Often enough in the last six months, she had proposed valid new ideas for stimulating her sex organ, innovative techniques for bringing herself to orgasm, guidance on how quickly she could be penetrated and pleased again.

Indeed, she gave to the studies in ways no one else involved in the project did, or could, for she pushed herself, and allowed herself to be pushed, to the limits of her sensory tolerance. Particularly during ovulation, she might be heard crying out for a procedure to stop, for the stimulation to end, for her weary clitoris to be granted a pause, and sometimes, mercy was given, but more times than not, it was withheld, when the findings were more important than her urgent pleas, and in those moments, her protestations would eventually go wordless, just long, drawn out howls, or a series of staccato gasps of orgasmic horror that would sound like torture to the uninitiated.

Priscilla, it should be said, possessed a strong pair of lungs, and a capacity for both volume and nuanced expression, even when in distress, and these attributes had not gone unnoticed.

And yet she would return, willingly, eagerly, day after day, to cooperate anew, to suffer the simultaneous joys and indignities of such use, and in this way, ultimately, to further science.

And was this not as valid an area of study as any other? While the lab concerned itself with many other topics – reproduction, anatomy, lactation, pharmaceuticals and

supplements, the psychology and physiology of arousal – was orgasm not of unique importance?

Orgasm had arrived for mammals as a mere happy accident, a ruse of evolution designed to get creatures to do that which they might not otherwise do. All beings love pleasure. Fewer love parenthood. But the two had marched together, inseparably, until only the last few generations, when clever human beings had at last found ways to isolate the orgasm as a force unto its own, to at last acknowledge the validity – the morality – of doing so. Yes, there had always been masturbation, and withdrawal, and other forms of non-reproductive relief, but such were until the very recent past frowned upon, denigrated, punished. The word alone, masturbate, was created as a three-syllable condemnation, its uncertain roots traced variously to words like disturb, confuse, dishonor, defile.

Now, in many quarters of the modern world, the orgasm had been rehabilitated, redeemed, elevated to sacrament, the experience pursued, enjoyed and celebrated for its own sake, reproduction a quaint, forgotten byproduct with no bearing on the pleasure that had once been its inseparable handmaiden.

The instruments of orgasm had been growing daily as well, new devices, systems, stimulants, words and pictures brought to the campaign, but the pairing of penis and vagina remained one of the surest paths to a climax of the first order, and vaginal quality had always been of primary importance where orgasmic quality was concerned.

And was not vaginal quality therefore a key to human progress, the female sheath's improvement as a climax-giving home for the penis comparable to other signposts on the inexorable march toward perfection? As critical as a hotter fire, a rounder wheel, a surer arch?

Not only could orgasms get stronger, a brave new generation of researchers had declared, orgasms *must* get stronger. For such is the quintessence of modern human striving, all of us with any sense working toward that ever more sweeping rush of endorphins, of oxytocin and prolactin,

of an entirely natural reward that costs nothing, that can be accomplished alone or in concert with others, that does not ruin lives, but enhances them.

And is it thus not logical that a female in possession of an organ particularly suited for delivering optimal orgasms should be studied, examined, tested, brought to climax – willingly or not – in order to understand the source and character of her vaginal prowess, and ultimately to make more such vaginas?

And if that girl is taken captive in the course of settling someone else's debt, and her nether capacities are quickly thereafter discovered, is it not entirely appropriate that she be kept for that express program of study, that she be caged and bound and secured daily to beds and tables and examination chairs?

And then, given the nature of the work, should the relationship between herself and her captors not be somewhat close? Even cordial? Even nurturing?

So when Dr. Morrow, the elder, offered to take Dr. Bank, his protégé, on a charter fishing tour in the Caribbean, the intimacy of their relationship with the girl was such that they felt compelled to explain things to her, to go over the particulars of when they were leaving, when they'd return and, in response to her questions, where they were going and what they'd be doing there. Normally, the females confined to the laboratory were not privy to details of the staff's personal lives, but where the doctors were concerned, bringing Priscilla into their confidence seemed to make sense.

It wasn't something anyone else needed to know, however. Revealing the depth of her relationship with high-ranking research professionals would only annoy her peers, and it might provoke lower-ranking workers as well. Even an entry-level handler had enough power over the research girls that he or she could make things unpleasant for someone putting on airs.

So Priscilla needed to cover her tracks, quickly.

“I overheard them talking about a charter fishing trip,” Priscilla said. “And one of them said Turks and Caicos. So I sort of pieced it together. I’m not sure they’re timing it for my period, but that’s sort of a guess.”

All lies, of course, even the last sentence. In fact, the trip had been planned for months to take place the second week of February, but once Priscilla had fallen into their possession and they had ascertained her cycle, phone calls were made, tickets refunded and reissued, the trip pushed back ten days.

“Maybe they’ll catch some—” Doria said, her last word unspoken as soon as the door opened and two female staffers entered, the one in a blue jumpsuit pushing the box that held the inventory probes, the other, in red, assisting. All talking ceased at that moment, as it always did. The morning inventory pass was to be conducted in silence, as befitted any important event here.

The two females worked methodically, quickly, starting at the first cage on their left.

“Anything we need to know about?” the woman in red inquired, and she reached down, between the gap in the bars, to spread the girl’s vaginal lips.

“No, Ma’am,” replied the female, and the box was wheeled up and put into position, the arm at its front set in the cage door’s access slot and between the girl’s knees, and pushed upwards. Two black pegs, made of smooth glass and positioned at the tip of the arm, entered the girl’s anus and vagina while she grunted and twisted her pelvis, either by reflex or to find the least unpleasant angle for the violation.

As the rods were gathering data – temperature, tightness, and a spectroscopic analysis of each chamber’s molecular contents – the second woman pulled out a pen and scanned the stamp tattooed into the girl’s flesh at her hip. The pen beeped first with a successful scan, the inventorying machine beeped second with its own success, and all the data went together into the lab’s giant, digital brain, from whence it would be accessed to determine the day’s assignments.

A small screen set into the machine provided a summary of its findings, and the woman in blue glanced at it to make sure there wasn't anything that required immediate attention.

Satisfied at the first cage, she eased the probes out of the female's chambers, and her colleague sanitized them with a quick spray and a disposable wipe.

The worker pushing the box backed her machine up and headed to the next female while the other employee freed the first girl to be sampled, pushing the buttons that opened her wrist and ankle cuffs.

While talking was forbidden among the research females during inventory, they weren't expected to remain completely silent. As the probes collected data from within each girl's body, she was allowed to vocalize, within reason. She might issue a few quick grunts, or a gasp, or an "oh, oh, oh," and most of Priscilla's neighbors availed themselves of the privilege this morning, some merely sighing, some crying out as their two private doors were forced open and made to yield their secrets. A careful listener might detect pain in their cries, or pleasure. Or both.

Priscilla's vulva and clitoris were always a little less sensitive in the last few days before her period, but the inventory pass provoked her as much as anyone else, and she uttered a quick "ahh!" as the two probes entered her body and did their work, and her hands, cuffed high above, clenched into fists, and her toes curled, and the muscles in her back and buttocks tightened, and then it was over, the probes withdrawn, the summary readings consulted and adjudged normal, the more detailed analysis zipping off wirelessly to the central server, and finally, her cuffs opened.

While the inventorying was still underway, two more red-suited female staff members entered, the first pushing a cart laden with plastic-wrapped breakfast loafs, slipping one insipid block of full nutrition on the floor, just inside the bars of every cage. The second staffer unlocked the doors of the first three uncuffed females and escorted them, unrestrained, to the three shower cages at the end of the room, locking them in

and supervising them as they bathed, handing towels through the bars, escorting them back to their cages.

Getting the girls chained this morning fell to a male staffer, and he entered as the last two girls were drying off, and he went as usual to the place beside the showers where every girl's restraints hung on a pair of pegs set into the wall.

Within days of her arrival at the lab, Priscilla, like all the girls here, had been carefully measured for restraints, not just the circumference of her wrists and ankles, but their general shape, the width and depth of bone and flesh. Her height was taken into account as well, the length of leg and arm, the distance from wrist to ankle when she stood, and her restraints were thereby customized. On the wall next to the shower, two pegs protruded beneath plaques reading 1 through 20, each corresponding to the cage of the same number, and the female kept therein. Priscilla's cage number was 12, and her chains hung from peg number 12, and the number 12 was as much a part of her identity as her five-digit name.

At present, just a single restraint unit hung beneath number 12, called a full restraint, or just a full for short. It comprised a chain about the length of Priscilla's leg, with ends that joined to the middle link of a pair of handcuffs and the middle link of a pair of shackles. Any girl put in her fulls could sit and stand, could walk, could use the toilet, could raise and lower her bed, could even shake hands and, if given permission, masturbate. But she couldn't run, she couldn't raise her hands above her breasts, she couldn't fight, or resist being taken to whatever place in the building was expecting her. All in all, the fulls were considered by the lab to be the best way to keep their more than 300 research females compliant, and to do so humanely and, in a sense, comfortably.

This morning, like most, the process ran like clockwork, the girls inspected and washed and returned to their cages, where they ate breakfast and were chained to wait for their assignments.

Priscilla, after she'd been bound, had anywhere from 15 minutes to another hour to kill, and she never knew which it would be. But once someone came for her, she would have

no more than three minutes to get her things in order and pass through her cage door. Tardiness was, of course, a punishable offense.

After she'd been put in her restraints this morning, Priscilla, as was often the case, went back to her toilet, back to her bidet, and then to the complete assemblage of her earthly possessions, a stack of games, books, papers, pens, drawings and diagrams under her sink.

The lab was generous in this regard, providing supplies and ordering games and reading materials at the whims of their female charges. It might have been in the facility's best interests not to humor Priscilla so freely, however, for the girl was busy with things she should not have been doing. A careful examination of her papers, of the neat ink drafts she had created – every line perfectly straight, every corner exactly 90 degrees – might uncover not the random doodlings of a girl ripped from a demanding architectural program with one year to go, but instead might more look like something specific, something not being undertaken with the best interests of the lab in mind.

This morning, after her toilet and a few more words with her neighbors, Priscilla fished out her supplies from beneath her sink, lowered her bed and climbed upon it. Drafting in chains was not simple, but it could be done, and Priscilla had developed her own approach in the last six months. First, she set her things in the middle of her bed. Then, she would turn, lower herself, scoot to the head of her bed, pull up her legs and cross her ankles, the steady rattle of metal restraints unavoidable. Next, she would position her middle chain to the left, running its length around her left thigh, coiling the excess in a neat pile beside the toes of her right foot. And finally, she would get to work on whatever it was she chose to pursue. It might be the perusal of this month's *Modern Architect*, or this week's edition of *News Age*, or the next book by Joy Pallor, who wrote two dozen smart, sexy mysteries before she died. Or Priscilla might spend a little time on some architectural rumination, adding a wall here, a door there, a neat inscription.

If you asked her what she was doing, she would claim to be designing administrative offices for the Panzerine, an assemblage of German ruins she found fascinating, and which lacked an onsite building from which excavation, visits, inquiries, and funding could be managed. She found the work relaxing, she might say, a distraction from the demands of a full day in the lab. And that certainly seemed true this morning, the girl mapping out from memory the rough, circular foundations of the ancient granary before she drew several very straight walls nearby, one or two with doors, but with no windows, which might be considered odd.

As on all weekday mornings, while the girls waited in their chains, reading, chatting, playing games or, if they had the money for postage, writing letters, the lab's teams placed bids on each girl.

Punishment was given precedence over all other assignments, and this morning, two girls from Priscilla's cageroom would be going there first. All in the cageroom knew of this, from the girls themselves. Discussion of punishment was not encouraged by the lab, nor was it specifically prohibited, and this might be called a strategic policy on management's part. Invariably, the girls broke rules, fell short, disobeyed, argued, and by the end of the day, any female whose transgressions were severe enough to earn her a visit to the punishment room was notified of same. But she would not go immediately. Instead, she would finish out her day's work, return to her cage, have dinner, visit with her neighbors, and anticipate. And, invariably, she would share the details of her impending sentence, what she had done or was alleged to have done, whether she thought it was just or not, how she might alter her behavior to avoid this fate next time, and what might be done to her. She would speak of things sometimes with tears, sometimes with resignation, sometimes with impressive stoicism, but she would talk, and that was paramount.

And afterwards, after she had gone and had it done, she was just as free to talk, to describe at whatever level of detail she preferred the particulars of her suffering, her

response, the noises she made, the things said to her and said about her, how it felt or didn't feel.

And the other girls would attend, closely, for all such accounts had power, both as articles of morbid curiosity, and as vocational guidance. Each female's singular role, after all, was to live in this place, to obey, to be used and, like any employees, to satisfy their managers and avoid their wrath; or to endure their wrath should it become inevitable. Knowledge, then, was essential in this last regard, and the knowledge benefitted both the lab and the girls.

If the culture that had been built at Atlanta General Female Laboratory and Services possessed a backbone, a foundation, a third rail, this was it. Punishment did not kill. It didn't even injure. Instead, it delivered anything from a few minutes to a few hours of unpleasantness, and that was enough. Regardless what path the girls had followed to arrive here – selling themselves to benefit a parent, choosing this over prison, signing up voluntarily to escape poverty, or being tricked, as Priscilla had been – they were here now, and their obedience served all.

Within 20 minutes of the chains being put on, the red-jumpsuited handlers, both male and female, began arriving. There was camaraderie here, of course, inevitable among people in daily contact, even if one group held almost all power, the other essentially none.

“Hey, 13088,” said handler Cecilia at the bars of cage number 16, which held a girl Priscilla knew as Brook.

“Hey, Ceci,” said Brook, closing her magazine, sliding off her bed and, with a surprising deftness given her chains, lifting and latching her bed. “Where to today?”

“First to get some blood drawn,” Cecilia replied, “then back to orgasm.”

“How long will I be out?” Brook inquired, her voice perched somewhere between anticipation and apprehension.

“I don't know,” Cecilia said. “Maybe the rest of the day.”

And so it went over the next hour, Priscilla observing from her bed while one girl after another was brought from her cage to her day's assignments, making small talk with her handler, chains ringing with every step.

Sometimes, no one placed a bid for a girl, and her chains would come off, and she'd be left to her own devices all day, amusing herself in her cage, reading or drawing, chatting with anyone else left behind or, if allowed, masturbating.

With Drs. Morrow and Bank gone, and Priscilla nearing the start of her period, there was a chance no one would have need of her this day, her hope growing for that outcome as the handlers came and went, taking other girls.

But a little after 10, when all but one other cage had been emptied of its occupant, a handler named Bruce appeared at Priscilla's cage door.

"Ready to go, 14067?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir," she said, sliding off her bed with a ring of chains, gathering her things, sliding them under her sink. "Where are we going?"

"Administration, the biggest meeting room," he replied.

"What's going on there?" Priscilla asked a little nervously. Going to administration could be easy, or it could be unpleasant. The worst thing about it was you didn't know which it would be until it was over.

"Cassock is doing a presentation to the bigwigs," Bruce replied.

"Cassock?" Priscilla repeated, raising and latching her bed.

"They're a punishment contractor," Bruce said, unlocking Priscilla's door. "They want our business."

"What do they need me for?" Priscilla asked, nervousness growing as she shuffled out of her cage.

“I guess to show the brass how they do things. They brought in a bunch of equipment.”

“I’m going to be put on it?” Priscilla asked, following Bruce to the cageroom door while she contemplated a day of at least mild suffering, or possibly worse.

“Probably,” Bruce said, his tone neutral, because what was done with Priscilla after he brought her upstairs to administration was of no concern to him. “They asked about you specifically. They wanted to know if you could clearly vocalize.”

“What does that mean?”

“They needed someone who had a good scream, and I said you did.”

Chapter 2: Harper Hears a Knock (October 5, 2012)

Late on a Saturday night in October 2012, a light but persistent tapping at Harper Sutton's door roused her from her couch.

She'd been binge-watching season 2 of *Profit & Peril*, and the interruption startled her. Living for less than a month as the first and still only tenant of a converted paper mill in Savannah, Georgia, she wasn't expecting company – or the presence of humans at all within a quarter mile.

She crossed the polished concrete floor, peered through the peephole, saw a familiar face, unlocked the door and pulled it wide.

“Lydia?” Harper said, speaking the name as a question not because she wasn't sure about the visitor's identity, but because Lydia's appearance was utterly unexpected.

The rolling suitcase in Lydia's hand only deepened the mystery.

“Hey, Harper,” Lydia said with a quick glance behind her. “Can I come in?”

Harper answered by stepping back and looking puzzled, and Lydia wheeled her bag in, turned and immediately pushed the door closed.

“Hi,” she said simply, smiling in an unhappy way. “How have you been, Harper?”

“Good,” Harper said. “What are you doing here?”

The question was blunt, but so was Harper. Almost six feet tall, armed with blonde hair she kept cut at the neck, and not given to small talk or frivolity, she preferred to keep uncertainty to a minimum. Nor was she particularly sentimental. She did not offer Lydia a hug, and Lydia did not seem to expect one.

“I heard you'd moved in here,” Lydia said. “I was hoping I could visit. Are you alone?”

“Yes,” Harper replied. “Why are you here?”

The women stood, staring mutually. It had been more than two years since they’d last laid eyes on each other at Tater Max, where Harper had been a manager and Lydia served. Despite an age different of more than eight years – Harper was 30 now, Lydia almost 22 – they’d worked comfortably together, found rapport, cried when the place closed.

And both were hard to miss, Harper for her height and her severe blonde hair, Lydia for her overall presence.

Almost as tall as Harper, at 5 foot 8, Lydia’s ethnicity was hard to pinpoint. In fact, some might make guessing at it a parlor game. Her skin stood at the midpoint of the spectrum between lily white and pure ebony, her hair thick and black and slightly wavy, her face a mix of white, but with a wide African nose. The polite patrons of Tater Max would study her and whisper to each other. The less polite – and this happened often enough – would simply ask: “What are you?”

“I need a place to stay,” Lydia said.

“How long?” Harper asked.

“I’m pregnant,” Lydia said.

“You’re keeping it?”

“Yes, I am,” Lydia replied, speaking of a serious thing with the same tone she discussed all matters: a child’s slightly petulant timbre, the slow, deliberate voice of an eight-year-old girl with a stopped-up nose asking for as much cake as everyone else got. Whether a conscious affect or a trait adolescence didn’t kill, it worked for her. It got attention. The voice wasn’t something you’d expect, given her appearance, and it drew people.

“When’s it due?” Harper asked.

“The spring,” Lydia said. “March or April.”

“Are you asking to stay until then?”

“Would you mind?” Lydia said with her saddest smile.

“Yeah, I would mind,” Harper said flatly. “I was planning to live here alone.”

Lydia winced, looked up, changed the subject.

“God, Harper, how did you get this place?” she inquired, eyes wandering.

This had been a factory’s third floor, and it still looked more like that than a home, for it was mostly open space, some 2,000 square feet, the only enclosed part in the back corner where a bathroom had been constructed, the white-painted, ceiling a good 20 feet high, held up by a row of I-beams that bisected the space. Windows ran floor to ceiling on one side of the home, panes two feet square and set into an aluminum framework, looking out onto blackness at the moment.

Harper had done her best with it in the four weeks since she’d arrived, arranging a bedroom space against the wall next to the windows, complete with a bed, two dressers, a mirror, a large rug, and a clothes rod against the wall. There was a kitchen and breakfast nook against the opposite wall, with tables, a refrigerator, a range and a cabinet. There was a small office space adjacent, with a desk, chair and laptop. The living room was defined by another large rug, a coffee table, a couch and an easy chair facing a hi-def screen mounted on the wall, where Profit & Peril was still playing, the volume medium.

“I got a deal on it, as the first tenant,” Harper said. “And I’ve got plans for a commercial space across the alley. But you can’t stay here.”

“How about just one night?” Lydia said.

“I don’t have a spare bed.”

“I can sleep anywhere,” Lydia said. “I’ve got a yoga mat.”

“What’s going on?” Harper demanded, drawing herself up, lifting her shoulders and setting her hands on her hips. She knew she’d just made a fundamental negotiating error, offering a specific objection instead of simply continuing to say no. Increasing her physical presence was her

only recourse, but it was a weak gesture at the moment, given she was without makeup, and barefoot, in black shorts and a white bra straining around her ample breasts. Lydia's bargaining position was certainly not harmed by her attire, a gray skirt, a white silk shirt, a gray blazer, black wedges. She looked more like someone flying to a business meeting than a pregnant girl begging to couch surf.

"Well," Lydia said, this time with a grimace. "I'm pregnant. And things aren't working out."

"What's up with the dad?" Harper inquired.

Briefly, almost imperceptibly, Lydia's face betrayed raw panic, but she recovered quickly, and she looked into Harper's eyes and affected glibness.

"There are some things we're trying to settle," Lydia said.

"Have you talked to a lawyer?"

More panic. Blind, wide-eyed panic. And then words uttered through a veneer of casual regret, face recast accordingly.

"No, not sure I'll go that route," Lydia said.

"You're terrified," Harper said, stating what was to her, obvious.

Chapter 3: Bad News for the Inglewoods (February 24, 2020)

In the end, it wasn't enough.

Madison Inglewood was well-named. And she was pretty. Very pretty. She had a good voice, for both speaking and singing. She was funny. And clever. She knew her way around a slew of video production tools, from Mapgraph to PictureMe to Director's Chair. She'd published dozens of 30-second Bunji clips, of her dancing, getting bitten by her cat, singing the infectious chorus of "Time and Time Again." She made full music videos, loaded with her whimsical interpretations of the day's most popular songs. She got thousands of views and hundreds of kudos for her take on "Monsieur DeBrief." The foundation of her craft, however, was her commentary – thoughtful, concise clips of her opinions, ideas, beliefs, analyses, regarding everything from celebrity breakups to the immaturity of her peers, with a smattering of political commentary, and even a little science. Bee stings were a topic of one monologue after she was stung, and she explored not just the pain, but the science behind it, the chemistry and the culture of inflicting pain on an enemy to change their behavior.

She was sassy, irreverent, popular, and she had hundreds of followers beyond her immediate peers.

But it wasn't quite enough. For every girl who made \$10,000 a month as an adolescent influencer, a cultural icon, the clever voice of her generation, there were a million Madison Inglewoods, laboring, laughing, dreaming, and falling short. She made money now and then – \$151 in her best month, when she was but 16 – and she vowed to herself it would continue, and grow. The next month, she made \$87. Then \$16.

It would have been better had she made nothing, because then she might have concentrated on something else. There were plenty of opportunities for a teen girl in Macon, Georgia, perhaps even some that would have helped her

overcome the similar failure of her parents to live to a coherent plan.

And fail they did.

Like their only child, Dan and Mary Inglewood were dreamers. But at 45 and 43, respectively, they should have known better than to stake all their hopes on a patent infringement case against Dan's former business partner.

It took 10 years, and exactly \$981,281 in legal fees, incurred by both plaintiff's and defendant's counsel, to settle the matter once and for all, in favor of everyone but Mr. and Mrs. Inglewood. Thanks to a little judicial mercy and a few insufficiently-entered legal expense reports, the amount the Inglewoods were responsible for was cut to an even \$811,000.

An impossible sum, even though they were given 10 years to pay it off. At a very compassionate 3 percent interest rate, compounded monthly, it came to just under \$8,000 per month.

Impossible.

They couldn't pay half that, even if Mary returned to nursing and Dan found a job in engineering management and exploited that patent, which thankfully he still maintained full right and title to.

Even if they sold their cars and biked to work, ate ramen noodles for every meal, sold the home and moved into public housing, the math wasn't there. And the consequences for failure to pay were dire: contempt of court, further legal action, incarceration.

Some dreams conclude with a mouthful of teeth.

The Inglewoods lost their case on a brisk Monday afternoon in February, 2020, and they moved efficiently through the stages of grief: Denial that night that lingered into the next morning, both Dan and Mary checking their phones and emails for the message they were certain would come, that there'd been a mistake and the judge had meant to rule in their favor, or at least that no money was due. Anger picked up around lunch Tuesday, was still seething that night, and they

slept poorly. By Wednesday evening, they were bargaining. They called their lawyer, who informed them apologetically that Dan's ex business partner probably wouldn't be interested in reducing the fees in exchange for full rights to one or more new patents Dan was thinking about pursuing. The spreadsheet, with its rows and columns of numbers, was equally unhelpful, no matter how Dan and Mary adjusted things, cut, imagined. Thursday afternoon was depression, a black, conjugal mood they took with them to bed and attempted to work through via rage sex, a messy, wrestling affair in which Dan came twice and Mary not at all, and afterwards, she was the first to cry. Acceptance began Friday morning, the utter grimness of what they faced being worked through piece by piece. They would lose the home. They would trade in the two cars and their attendant payments for a single used vehicle, paid for with cash. They would work as many jobs as it took, and if they went to jail in the end, they would survive.

And Madison, 18 years old and a senior in high school, would have to find her own way as soon as possible. There would be no help with college, probably no bedroom once the house was gone.

To their credit, the Inglewoods kept their angst to themselves through the week. Not that they had to work that hard on it. Madison was not actively monitoring her parents' journey through devastation. She was working on a new music video, carousing with friends, living the life.

They came to her Saturday morning to break the news, Mary knocking on her door a little after 11.

There was no answer, and we may assume the parents were well aware of the perils of pushing open the door of a teenage girl without first getting asked in, so Mary pulled her cell phone out of her back pocket and texted her daughter, explaining that they were just outside the door and they needed to talk.

"C'mon in, it's open!" Madison shouted, and Mary grabbed the knob, Dan following, the parents entering somberly while Madison stared at her screen, headphones on,

head bobbing, light brown hair swaying against her shoulders, hands scrabbling over her keyboard.

She looked up, sensed her parents' mood immediately, raised her eyebrows and pulled off her headphones, tapping at her keyboard to save her project and end the playback.

What was she working on? She kept her screen turned away from the door, because there were sometimes things on it she didn't want anyone to catch her looking at. But today's project was innocent: a visual interpretation of Butch & Masters' "Talk at Mee," with animals moving their mouths to the lyrics

"Hey, what's up?" she asked.

"Hey, Madison," said Mary.

"Hey, Madison," said Dan.

"Oh my god, did Nanna die?" she asked.

"No," said Mary. "But we need to talk about something else."

"Yeah?"

"You know about my lawsuit," Dan said.

"Inglewood vs. Peterson et al," Madison said cheerily. She had spent some time going over the case with her parents, got halfway through producing a video project discussing it before her parents realized what she was up to and shut it down. "Another setback?"

"We lost," Dan said.

"Lost what?" Madison asked.

"The case," said Mary.

"And so you'll appeal, right?" Madison said, quickly slipping into her own version of denial. The case had been the backdrop of her home life since elementary school. It was like a fourth member of the family.

"It's over," said Dan. "There's nothing really to appeal. This is all coming from Mr. Blakesley. He doesn't

advise us to put any more into it. Chances are better than even we'll lose again, and that will add to the fees."

"The fees?" Madison said.

"We have to pay the lawyers," Mary said.

"You mean Mr. Blakesley?"

"The Peterson lawyers too," said Dan.

"Wait, what?" Madison said. "You have to pay them what?"

"That was part of the judgement," Mary explained. "Over eight hundred thousand in legal fees we have to pay. Eight thousand a month."

"You have to pay a lawyer that didn't work for you?" Madison exclaimed, trying to work her mind around this stunning new data point. "A lawyer that worked against you? And made up all that crap about you?"

"We do," said Dan.

"Well, just don't pay them," Madison advised. "They should be happy with winning."

"If we don't pay, we go to jail," Dan said.

"When?" Madison demanded, panic in her eyes.

"It's only if we don't pay," Mary said.

"Are you gonna pay?" Madison inquired.

"We have to," Dan said. "But it's going to take everything we've got."

"Everything," Mary added. "Our cars, the house, savings, your college fund, retirement, life insurance. And even then ..."

"Even then what?" Madison demanded.

"The numbers don't look good," Mary said. "And then we go to jail."

"Keep fighting then!" Madison shouted, leaning forward in her chair. "You have to appeal! Let me make that

video about it! People will see it and—”

“Madison,” Mary said firmly. “This is how it is. We lost on Monday, and your dad and I have been working through it all week. Everything’s going to change now. We can’t put you through college. We can’t help with college at all. We’re going to get a smaller place. Way smaller. We probably won’t have room for you.”

“No,” Madison said, her expression going flat, and she put on her headphones and turned up the volume to a deafening level and squinted at her screen, peered up over it at her parents with an impatient scowl to let them know they were no longer needed, and she returned to her project.

As her parents had, Madison worked steadily through the stages, except for depression, which lasted two weeks and involved crying, shouting, and weeping over her parents’ misplaced optimism, oblivious selfishness, legal incompetence.

And then, three weeks later, on the first day of spring, came acceptance; and with it, a quiet resolve to do what she could.

Her social media accounts were not the answer. She understood that now. A job straight out of high school wouldn’t do either. Even if she gave every penny of her meager earnings to her parents, keeping only enough for food, healthcare and a few scraps of clothing, she would put hardly a dent in her parents’ crushing new debt. The image of her parents being rounded up and dragged to jail haunted her. How was it done? Did SWAT teams surround the home in the dead of night? Would they toss in tear gas, or those flash-bang bombs? Or would Mr. and Mrs. Inglewood simply drive to the prison and turn themselves in? Would they ask Madison to drive them? Would they ask Madison to drive them to separate places, his & hers jails, like their his & hers beach towels?

As desperate women have through the ages, she thought of prostitution. She would never walk the streets of Macon, of course. But could she operate a discreet practice? Find a gentleman pimp? Or could she dance at one of those

places and maintain some semblance of virtue? Were there occupations where a pretty girl could sell her sexuality without giving all of it up? Waiting tables at certain kinds of restaurants, perhaps?

Through the rest of March and into April, she searched the web, browsed, followed a link, came back and followed the next link, punched in search terms, explored. And sometime in mid-April, Madison Inglewood learned that there was another way a young lady could use her body to make money.

Chapter 4: Harper and the Frightened Girl

“Huh?” Lydia said, as if she hadn’t heard.

“You’re terrified,” Harper repeated. “Scared shitless.”

Lydia looked at Harper with round, hopeless eyes, as if staring up from the bottom of a well, and she swallowed, and she smiled a broken smile, and she laughed, nervous, high-pitched, fooling no one.

“Well, you know how boys can be,” she said.

“Does he know you’re here?” Harper asked.

“No.”

“Can he find you here?”

“No.”

“How did you find me?”

“I saw you at the gym,” Lydia said, her expression evolving again, to a you-caught-me-but-what-can-I-say? vibe.

“When was that?” Harper inquired. “I didn’t see you.”

“I didn’t go in,” Lydia said. “I was waiting outside.”

“When?” Harper demanded, shaking her head. “I don’t remember seeing you there.”

“A couple of weeks ago. I was in a cab.”

“Waiting for me specifically?”

“Sort of,” Lydia replied. “Yeah.”

“Wait,” Harper said, folding her arms, tilting her head, raising her eyebrows. “You staked me out at the gym? In a cab?”

“And I followed you home,” Lydia confessed with another nervous laugh. “Or to the drive out front, anyway. So I got dropped off here tonight, and I walked around a little, until I found your car, and I walked up the stairs and knocked.”

“Is your phone on?”

“No,” Lydia said.

“Why did you turn off your phone?” Harper asked.

“Well, I wasn’t needing it right then.”

“You turned it off because he knows how to find you with it,” Harper stated flatly.

“Can I stay the night?” Lydia inquired. “Just one night?”

“What then?”

“I leave.”

“Why don’t you leave now?”

“It’s late.”

Harper sighed. “I could drive you anywhere you need to go. The bus station? The airport?”

“You really don’t want me here,” Lydia observed with an involuntary pout, her tone not petulant at all, merely defeated. Like a little girl accepting that she’s not loved.

“It’s not about you, it’s about me,” Harper said. “You were the best of my crew, hands down. But that doesn’t mean I want you living with me.”

“I’ll just leave, then,” Harper said, turning to wrap her hand around her rolling case.

“And go where?” Harper said.

“Down the stairs,” Lydia said. “You could use an elevator here, by the way.”

“They’re working on it,” said Harper. “And where after you go down the stairs?”

“I don’t know,” Lydia said. “Down the street.”

“You can have the couch,” Harper said, glaring at the floor. “And tomorrow we get you where you need to be.”

“Yes,” Lydia agreed. “Thank you.”

“Now I’m gonna rewind a show I was watching, and do the last half an hour,” Harper said, moving back to her couch, a black overstuffed display model she’d bought at a steep discount a month before. “There’s beer in the fridge. And other stuff.”

For a long time – two to three minutes – Lydia stood, watching the show, watching Harper watch the show, glancing at the kitchen and the refrigerator, looking down at her rolling case, as if to make sure it hadn’t wandered off.

At last, she moved, slowly, stepping to the wall at her right, dragging her bag behind her, setting it on its back, unzipping it and pulling things out, glancing back at Harper on the couch, who was too engrossed in her show to care about what Lydia was doing.

Lydia, crouching, let her knees fall to the concrete floor, slipped off her wedges, rose up on her knees and pulled off her blazer, folded it and set it down, unbuttoned her shirt and laid it over her blazer, stood, unbuttoned and unzipped her skirt and stepped out of it, pulled off her bra to expose a pair of small breasts, and she picked up her things and walked in nothing but a pair of white panties to the clothes rod next to Harper’s bed.

“Can I borrow a few hangers?” she inquired.

“Yeah, help yourself,” Harper replied without turning from the TV.

Once she was done arranging her clothes, Lydia went to the kitchen, opened the fridge, leaned over and reached in, grabbing a bottle of Franzel Light, rummaging around in a tray for a bottle opener, removing the cap, searching for and finding the trash can, moving to the couch and settling topless on it, the bottle raised to her mouth just as a commercial began.

“I hardly ever drink,” Lydia said after she swallowed. “Special occasion.”

“I’m not judging,” Harper assured. “You warm enough?”

“Yeah, it’s hot in here.”

“The floors are heated.”

“So, what’s this show?” Lydia asked without any apparent enthusiasm.

“Profit & Peril,” Harper replied.

“What’s it about?”

“People who start small businesses and try to make it work,” Harper replied. “Tonight it’s about llama veterinarians in Idaho.”

“Those llamas are sort of cute.”

“Yeah,” Harper said. “Three got this bronchial infection.”

“You watch it all the time?” Lydia asked dubiously.

“I’ve been watching the second season since right after lunch.”

“And you’re enjoying it?”

“It drags a little at times, but there’s a lot of good advice,” Harper said. “They go over the money, how to estimate if you’re going to make it way before you actually start turning a profit.”

“You’re starting a business here, right?”

“I’m fulfilling a lifelong dream. I always wanted to own my own company.”

“What is it?”

“A franchise. Beast Factory.”

“What’s it do?”

“Custom stuffed animals. Sixteen varieties, 47 skins, tail options, horn options, wings.”

“You’re going to make them?”

“No, my customers will,” Harper said. “Parties, families, parent and a kid. Anyone. They pick their animal, the

skin, the options – and machines make it while they watch. They get to push the buttons.”

“Machines?”

“That’s the factory part.”

“Isn’t it expensive?”

“You finance,” Harper said. “I’m pre-approved, so once I have the space ready in a few months, I take out the loan and get busy.”

“Where’s the space?”

“The building across the alley, I’ve got a contract on the first floor, and ...” Harper glanced at the TV. The show was back on, but the focus was on a sick llama, and she stood and went to the windows. “You can see the corner of the building from here,” she said, motioning Lydia to join her. “They keep a few floodlights on.”

Lydia stood, took a few steps toward the windows, paused.

“What are you afraid of?” Harper asked, laughing before her face grew suddenly tense. “Wait ... him?”

Chapter 5: Madison Inglewood Digs Deeper

Madison Inglewood, a high school senior desperately searching for a way to enter the next phase of her life, if not rescue her parents from destitution at best, prison at worst, learned that a girl with the right DNA could make a decent living for the minor inconvenience of conceiving and giving birth to a live baby.

It might be said that Madison, over the span of a few days in mid-April 2020, stopped being a child, stopped being an adolescent, and entered adulthood.

Nothing outwardly had changed. She still went to school, where she was still progressing toward graduation with a high B average. She still socialized, flirted, dated chastely. She still spent much of her free time in front of her PC, and still even made a video or two. But they were simpler projects now, just a few minutes spent pontificating on the odd colors of a new bikini line, or celebrity romance. It was in her mind alone that the real changes were taking place, for much of her PC time was now spent researching things with all the seriousness of an adult, and as her awareness of certain matters grew, so too did her curiosity, for this was an altogether fascinating realm of commerce.

The breeding scenarios were as varied as the individuals produced. There were single women who wanted children without the demands of bearing them. There were gay and straight couples who wanted a child but couldn't conceive. There were families looking for a new member from another ethnicity. Mixed race in general was becoming something of a thing.

On the other side of the equation, there were surrogate mothers inseminated from a test tube, women who had embryos implanted, and plenty of women who took the seed the old-fashioned way.

And then, there were the businesses that helped out, finding healthy women and attractive sperm donors and

bringing them together, and linking would-be parents to resulting life.

Finally, there was a whole infrastructure dedicated to bringing the woman to term, specialists who handled nutrition, house calls, every phase of pregnancy up to and including the actual delivery, both of the child from the mother's womb, and of the child to their new home.

And then, there were firms that did it all, selecting the male and female, bringing them together, managing gestation and delivery, finding and vetting parents, dealing with the finances and paperwork. Full-service breeding facilities, they were called, and it was this model that intrigued Madison most, because it was the simplest from the mother's perspective, and it was also rumored to be the most lucrative. But it was also the most difficult to learn about. Madison found carefully-crafted corporate pages, and cheerful but vague statements about the wonders of birth and the joys of family, and then nothing. No details of the money in play, the policies or terms, the path one took to sign up, the life of a breeding female.

She zeroed in on the "Contact Us" webforms which, along with blanks for her name, age, and email address, asked if she was looking for a child or was interested in helping create one.

She filled in a few of the forms she'd found, out of curiosity. Maybe she'd get an informative reply or two back. Maybe she'd even get something interesting enough that it would merit a blog post, a monologue, a scientific exposition – not that any of that would serve any purpose other than a few minutes' amusement among the members of her limited audience.

Madison didn't talk to her parents about her research, or the things she was considering doing. In fact, she and her parents didn't discuss much of anything at all as early spring brought the first warm days to Macon, Georgia. All of them were adjusting to new realities in their own ways, Madison wrapping up school and researching and keeping to herself while her parents took their own steps.

In a sense, Dan and Mary Inglewood were becoming adults as well, or returning to an adulthood they had set aside while they waited like children for something to be handed to them, through forces they could not control and did not fully understand.

Ironically, it was in the aftermath of her parents' failure that Madison reached a new level of respect for the couple.

She'd always considered them beautiful, and earlier in life, that was enough. Her mother's soft brown hair, the cat-like eyes she'd given to her daughter, the narrow waist and heavy bust, the full lips – these were all a woman needed to make her way through life, Madison had thought. And her father was both handsome and brilliant-looking, his ability to invent matched by thick black hair and a goatee and a solid physique.

But now, it was not their looks but her parents' character that took center stage in Madison's mind. During the day, they worked; Mary had returned to nursing, accepting a part-time job without benefits or predictable hours because there was a good chance it would progress to full-time soon. Dan, meanwhile, had taken a role with a firm that had been courting him for years, which involved better pay and the managing of people, the latter something he'd always avoided. Often at night, the two would get out their laptops and go over things at the dining room table, crunching numbers, consulting spreadsheets, doing the math, revising budgets. There was the occasional bright spot, it must be said. The liquidation of retirement accounts and Madison's college fund meant they could meet all their obligations for the next six months, until the end of summer, meaning they could put the house on the market for top dollar and wait for a buyer willing to pay that amount. To their credit, they made no efforts to conceal their deliberations from Madison, and sometimes they spoke grimly, but sometimes they joked, amused by their own black humor, and the daughter found her parents' laughter as beautiful as their faces, both because it came from two familiar and comforting voices, and because it represented hope, and perseverance, and a strength she hadn't appreciated until now.

What Dan and Mary thought of their daughter at this juncture was more difficult to say. At 18, she was an adult, and she seemed to be managing her life well enough, so there were regular check-ins, but they were perfunctory – just a few words at her bedroom door or over dinner when the family ate together.

Madison said nothing about her breeding curiosities, nor did her parents ask the questions that might have elicited a confession on that score.

And so the girl proceeded without interference, searching websites, submitting requests for information, growing in curiosity, and getting answers that only increased her intrigue, facilities replying to her submissions not with more information but with requests for more information from her.

“Dear Madison,” read a typical reply in mid-April. “Thank you for your inquiry about being a potential breeding female. If you’re still interested, please follow the link below and fill out the questionnaire. Note that you must answer ALL questions. Your responses will be held in strictest confidence.”

Madison followed the links she was sent, and she made her way quickly through the first few questions, until a dozen lines in, she was blushing and covering her face with her hands, because what they wanted to know about her, and what they wanted her to do, was well beyond anything she could imagine doing for or revealing to anyone, much less total strangers on the other side of web form.

For weeks, she did nothing, so personal was the scrutiny. But they were not only invasive. Madison also found them titillating, for reasons she could not put her finger on. Something about the institutional format of the instructions and the interrogations spurred her imagination to unexpected places, and more than once, the imprecise visions conjured by the breeding surveys aroused her, stirred her, delayed her sleep while she rolled to her back, pushed her covers down, pushed her hands inside her panties, massaged her vulva, slipped out of them, pulled off her t-shirt and worked at herself, at her vulva and breasts and nipples and anus, propelling herself

slowly, methodically, and with exceeding pleasure, to a shaking, gasping orgasm. Or two. Or three.

Indeed, Madison Inglewood was a healthy girl, with the usual range of interests in matters reproductive. Or perhaps not completely usual. Perhaps a little beyond usual.

And this was why she refrained, for weeks, from answering those surveys. Because by all appearances, she was a regular kid, just another teenager whose pursuits included school, and socializing, and lacrosse, and family. And she didn't want anyone knowing otherwise, even faceless strangers who promised discretion.

But by early May, with her parents huddled night after night over spreadsheets and bills, she understood that she had no choice in the matter. Fill out the form, answer the questions, follow the instructions, or find some other way to make money. She could try some alternate route to the same thing, freelancing as a breeder, perhaps, advertising herself on the open market, hoping to link up with parents and a male and a manager who would all work together to ensure her safety and dignity and eventual payment.

Or she could answer some questions. Interesting questions. Intriguing questions. And she could do some things. They weren't terrible things. They weren't terrible questions. They were even – once you were able to guess at the necessity of asking them, and you were ovulating and thus feeling a little more adventurous than normal – arousing questions. Answer the questions, do the things, and hope you did well, and hope your discretion would be respected.

So on the first Tuesday afternoon in May, Madison came straight home from school, on a day when both parents would be at work until at least dinnertime, and she stripped off everything and sat at her desk, a towel beneath her vulva, and she popped open her laptop and followed the link she'd been sent.

Chapter 6: Lydia Confesses

Lydia, wearing nothing but white panties, froze on her way to the window, her feet in mid-stride.

“Are you that afraid of him?” Harper inquired, standing at the window, waiting to show Lydia the home of her future business.

Lydia smiled weakly and cupped her hands around her breasts.

“No,” she said. “I just don’t want strangers to see me topless.”

“The only thing out the windows is the river, way down there, and the marsh on the other side of it,” Harper said. “No one’s gonna see you.”

Lydia moved forward cautiously, the floor-to-ceiling windows mostly as black as the night sky, but once she reached the panes and looked where Harper’s finger was pointing, a single floodlight was visible, directing its beams from the upper corner of a four-story building, illuminating the structure’s red brick walls and its arched windows and the cracked sidewalk and the weed-strewn pavement.

“It needs a lot of work,” Harper acknowledged. “But the rent’s super cheap, especially the first two years while I refurbish and get up and running.”

Lydia, hands still wrapped around her bare breasts, turned away and moved back to the couch, sitting down.

“I need to tell you something,” she said.

“What?” Harper said, joining her on the couch and clicking off the TV.

“I’ve got some money,” Lydia said. “Enough that I could probably help you some.”

“So you could buy a plane ticket,” Harper asserted.

“It’s not in that form,” Lydia said.

“How much did you steal?” Harper asked.

“I didn’t steal it.”

“How much did you take from your boyfriend, then?”

“I haven’t counted it yet.”

“He knows you took it?”

“It was just stacks of it,” Lydia said. “Okay? Bundles, wrapped up, in his gun case in one of the spare bedrooms, and he left and forgot to lock it. He didn’t say not to look in there if the door was open. He didn’t say anything about it. So I was in there, pedaling my Domo, and saw that the case was open, and when I was done, I looked in, and there’s cash in bundles. Twenties. Lots of twenties, in stacks.”

“How many stacks?”

“I don’t know, dozens,” Lydia replied.

“How many twenties per stack?”

“At least hundreds, maybe two hundred, if I had to guess.”

Harper looked up while she did the math. “Four thousand dollars,” she observed. “Per stack.”

“Yeah, wow. I took five. It didn’t seem like he’d miss five.”

“Where is it now?” Harper asked, and Lydia cut her eyes toward her rolling suitcase, and Harper had her answer. “Let me see it.”

Lydia went to her suitcase, unzipped it, reached behind a set of clothing and pulled out a white grocery bag, and she returned and handed it to Harper, who retrieved the five stacks of newly-minted twenties, each tightly-banded in white paper, and she fanned the first bundle in front of her face, her hair swaying against her ears with the whir of the bills.

“Looks real,” she said.

“So that’s all I took, and I put it in my gym bag, and I put it in my locker at the gym. And I—”

“You still go to the gym?” Harper interrupted.

“Yeah, I go to Uptown now. It was closer to where we lived.”

“Continue,” Harper said, handing back the bag.

“That’s it,” Lydia said, turning back to her suitcase, stuffing the bag of cash in behind the clothing. “I kept it at the gym earlier today, and now it’s here, and I took it and left because I didn’t think it was going to work out. So this is sort of like child support.”

Harper eyed Lydia suspiciously, convinced parts of the story had been left out, but not interested in pursuing the matter further tonight.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m going to bed. That’s my bedroom.” She gestured toward through the cavernous space toward her bed. “This is my whole house. There’s the kitchen. That’s the living room, and you get the couch. The bathroom’s back there, and the space past it, to the back wall, I’m not sure what I’m doing with it yet.”

Harper went to her bed, reached under and pulled out two thick blankets, grabbed the second pillow from the head of her bed, brought it all back to Lydia.

“In the morning, you fold these and put them back under my bed,” Harper said. “After I wake up, that is. And when I want you to do something, I’m just going to tell you, and if you don’t do it, I’m going to give you one more chance, and if you don’t do it again, I’m going to kick you out. And I’m going to put it all in a contract. Because I’ve got no time for mystery. We’ll just say what we’re thinking until you don’t live here anymore.”

Lydia took hold of the bedding, but Harper wasn’t ready to release it yet. She looked at the girl, raised her eyebrows, and waited.

“Okay?”

“Yes,” Lydia said. “Okay. And thanks.”

The women took turns in the bathroom, but their preparations for bed were otherwise independent of each other, and even as the lights went out, Harper flipping off the lamp by her bed, Lydia flipping the switch on the floor lamp next to the couch, there was no exchange of pleasantries, no “good nights,” simply the shuffling of two female bodies under their covers and, soon enough, Harper’s steady breathing.

Lydia, lying on the couch and staring at the blackened ceiling, didn’t even attempt to sleep for the first hour, wide awake and working through things, apparently. Done with that, she finally closed her eyes, but still the sleep would not come, and after another hour had passed, she reached her right hand under her panties and massaged her clitoris and vulva, an act almost devoid of sexuality, simply the rhythmic stimulation of a sensitive place until, 10 minutes later, her quiet breath came short and fast and her legs tensed and, briefly during orgasm, kicked. Done with that, she brought her fingers to her mouth, licking them clean, and rolled over, all the wet release of her pleasure soaked up in in the crotch of her panties.

Her soundest sleep came after that and lasted a good two hours, but around 4 that morning, she was up again, eyes wide open and trained on the black girders above her head, lit faintly by a night light near the bathroom door. She would close her eyes but no sleep would come. She would roll over, but still no sleep. She sat up, rubbed her face, stared at the windows, lay back down, sat back up, waiting for the day to begin, and it broke slowly, transitioning from black to dark gray to a little lighter gray, a little lighter, and finally the pale blue sky of Savannah in October could be made out, and she slipped to the bathroom but didn’t flush, her bare feet making no sound against the warm concrete.

This morning, hers was a wraithlike presence in this home where she wasn’t wanted, her movements all but silent, her presence undetected by the sleeping Harper. She did not make coffee nor search the kitchen for food, nor open the fridge. She paced, went to the window to look upon the slow progress of the Savannah River, flowing black and rich on its way to the Atlantic Ocean some 20 miles downstream. She looked at the great green expanse on the other side of the river,

where farmland and wilderness checkered themselves toward the horizon, the water a clear demarcation between industry and emptiness.

Did Lydia find the view beautiful? Did whatever had arrested her sleep yield to the glories of breaking day over water and nature?

She returned to the couch and placed her head in her hands, waiting.

“You up?” came the voice of Harper from her bed, and Lydia straightened her back and turned but did not smile.

“I’ve been up awhile,” she said.

“Sleep okay?” Harper asked.

“Not really,” Lydia replied, adding quickly, “New place. I always have trouble with that.”

Harper had slept nude, as was her custom, and she didn’t bother dressing as she headed to the bathroom, her upright breasts bouncing, her mound shaved bare.

“I didn’t flush,” Lydia warned.

“Just pee?” Harper asked.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, that’s fine,” Harper said, in that way defining another of the rules of their living together, for as long as it would last.

Still naked, Harper came next to the kitchen.

“You still drink coffee, right?” she asked, pulling ground coffee from the fridge.

“Yeah, but not as much as I used to. Doctor said not to overdo it. But I need something.”

The morning continued in that vein, Harper slipping into panties, the two abiding this impromptu partnership, drinking coffee and having breakfast on the couch, talking about their time at Potato Max, the memories eliciting an

occasional laugh from Lydia as the bright morning blazed through the generous gallery of windows.

Only when Harper retrieved her laptop to survey the day's news did the tenor of the morning change.

"It's gonna hit 75 today," Harper announced. "No rain."

Her laptop chimed with a steady stream of the news that slides in unbidden from the right side: celebrity updates, the usual round of pronouncements from the Sunday morning political shows, international disasters, and a pair of local murders.

"They found two women's bodies," Harper said, clicking open the story. "Damn. Wow."

"Where?" Lydia asked, a sudden pall in her face, the hint of a new panic.

"Einkhorn Street," Harper said. "I'm not sure where —"

The rest of Harper's words would never be spoken, cut short by a thin, eerie whine from the throat of Lydia, as if there were another woman somewhere deep inside her, screaming.

Harper shut her mouth and looked at the wide-eyed girl on the couch beside her.

"What's wrong?" she demanded. "Lydia, damn, what's wrong?"

Chapter 7: Madison Takes a Test

The first questions were easy enough.

Sitting naked at her desk, her laptop before her, a dark blue towel beneath, and her curtains drawn, Madison Daisy Inglewood started by agreeing to keep the questions on the form confidential, and to follow all instructions to the best of her ability, and to answer honestly. Next, she provided her full name, her birthdate, her address, and both her biological and actual gender, female for both, but that pair of questions made her curious. Could a biological female still breed if he identified as male?

Yes, probably, unless he was doing hormones or something.

She was asked if she'd ever born a child, had ever gotten pregnant, ever had an abortion.

No on all counts, she wrote.

The next set of questions got a little more personal: her age when she first menstruated, how heavy her periods were, how long they lasted, how regular.

Everything about her monthly cycle seemed excessive, she believed, and she held nothing back. She was excessively regular, even down to the time of day, often in the afternoon every fourth Tuesday. Her periods were excessively heavy on the second and third day, sometimes requiring a new tampon every few hours. More than once, she'd stained her sheets overnight, and had barely dodged disasters at school several times.

The next round of questions covered that other aspect of her cycle, ovulation. Could she tell when she was ovulating, was it regular, was there discharge, did she notice elevated arousal then?

Was there anything else interesting about that time of month?

Again, the girl was frank, her answers bordering on what felt to her like obscenity. Indeed, her fingers, when they weren't punching in her answers, drifted down between her legs, toying with the dark brown pubic hair that grew thick and natural over her mound, or playing absently at her slit, where the wetness was starting to gather.

Yes, she confirmed, she always knew when she ovulated, a slight pain on the left or right side of her loins followed by a thick, maddening plug of juice, oozing out between her lips and into her panties, teasing her with inconvenient sensations while she sat in class, rode the bus home, tried to do homework, ate dinner with her parents.

The survey was relentless in its persistent unfolding of her secrets, for next it wanted to know about her sexuality, and she sucked in her breath and directed her eyes to the screen and her hands to the keyboard.

“Estimate the number of times you orgasm from the start of one period to the start of the next.”

Madison bit her lip before she typed “45.”

“How often do you orgasm during sex with a partner, and how often during masturbation?” she was asked, answering “0” for the first, “45” for the second.

“Have you ever been vaginally penetrated for sexual pleasure?” she was asked next, and she pondered the question for a moment before she typed “Yes.”

Finally came the portion of the questionnaire she'd anticipated with a mix of intrigue and scandal – she was to masturbate while she followed instructions and answered questions.

“Masturbation Exercise,” read the heading at the top of the web form, followed by this preamble: “You will need about 30 minutes to complete the Exercise. Make sure you have privacy, and can easily reach your sex organ throughout the exercise. It is recommended that you perform the exercise seated at your desk, in an office chair, with your computer or keyboard on the desk, and not in your lap. You will need a rod

at least six inches long and one inch in diameter, to insert up your vagina during the exercise. Make sure it is clean, and it is comfortable for you to use. Because a release of fluid is normal during the exercise, you may want to sit on a cloth or towel. Your last orgasm should have been between 24 and 48 hours ago.”

After the instructions appeared a list of numbered steps. Madison scrolled down to the first one:

1. Lean back and examine your vulva, also known as the exterior female genitalia, which includes your lips, clitoris and vaginal opening. Describe what you see and feel in the field below, providing as much detail as you can.

Madison did as she was told, touching and describing her light pink inner labia, her wide outer lips, her slightly swollen clitoris, and the wet opening she saw when she spread her gates.

In further steps of the exercise, she was instructed to lightly masturbate her clitoris, to stimulate the rest of her sex organ, to insert the rod up her vagina, to describe her physical and mental reactions. She performed the exercise diligently, pushing about two thirds of the rod in before it started to hurt for some reason, describing her reactions to it and to everything else with clinical detachment even as her arousal grew and the towel beneath her dampened.

Finally, some 35 minutes later, she was instructed to orgasm, and to summarize that event, and after she drove the rod shallowly within her and stroked her sex and shook and grunted, she offered a closing narrative, describing her techniques for bringing herself to that final pleasure, and describing how it felt, and then she was done, hitting “Submit” quickly, without checking her answers, without giving herself the chance to back out, and as soon as she was finished, as soon as the “Thank You For Your Submission” screen popped up, she felt a doubt that quickly moved to shame and horror.

What if this was all a fraud, somebody’s perverse idea of taking advantage of women for their own amusement?

Worse, what if this was blackmail material, her sexual confession brought back to her with a list of things she must do to keep it private?

She pulled on her clothes, stood in the middle of her bedroom staring at her bed, went back to her PC to study the breeding company website.

No, while there was a dearth of information, what was there seemed legitimate. There was a phone number, an address, a brief history, a founder. If she felt abused by these people, she could write about it, blog about it, complain to the authorities. And, so what if what she'd just submitted got published to the world? It was just words, not video or a voice recording. No one would see her touch herself or hear her gasp. She could deny she'd written it – if it was even worth denying. Girls masturbated, after all. So did boys. So she masturbated and wrote about it. Big deal.

By the time her parents got home, she was settled down enough to have gotten a start on school assignments. Finishing high school was a must, no matter what happened to her afterwards. If she ended up homeless, at least she wouldn't be a homeless high school dropout. She had five weeks of classes and exams to go. Graduation was Saturday, June 13. She wouldn't miss it.

The next week, Madison did two more questionnaires, for labs in Florida and Alabama. One asked her to masturbate, but the other asked more personal questions, about her religious beliefs, her feelings about homosexuality and conception outside marriage, how she got along with her parents.

By the conclusion of the third questionnaire, she felt at first as though she'd gained some vocational knowledge, a sense of what the labs wanted.

No, she corrected herself, she knew what they were interested in, but she had no idea what they wanted. She'd taken her first questionnaire on May 5. Now it was May 13, eight days later. And she'd heard nothing from the first lab.

She went to bed that night not in a panic of indiscretion, but in despair instead. Shameful despair.

The first lab obviously didn't want her. Something she'd confessed had turned them off. She imagined the person who read questionnaires there laughing at her answers, the description of her sex organ and menstrual cycle and pathetic little bout of masturbation. Hopefully the woman reading it just deleted it and didn't tell anyone else about the girl in Macon with the weird pussy or the weird way she jacked off or the weird, clinical way she described everything. Hopefully she forgot Madison's name as soon as she hit the delete button.

Hopefully it was a she.

So the next afternoon, when Madison checked the mail and found a letter-sized box there addressed to her, with no return address, she was both surprised and terrified.

Was it from the first lab? What was it? And what if her parents had gotten to the mail before her today?

Really, she didn't know the answer to that last question. She hadn't told them anything about her breeding idea, and she didn't want them to know until there was something definite to go on. And she certainly didn't want them knowing about the questionnaires, about her answers, the things she'd had to do.

She headed straight to her room, using her nails to tear open the box, finding within a letter addressed to her, a small, empty vial, several swabs and small envelopes, another, smaller box.

"Dear Madison," the letter read. "We have received your survey responses, and would like more information. Please provide a saliva sample in the enclosed vial and seal it with the cap provided. Please insert the swab in the envelope marked 'V' up your vagina and seal it in the 'V' envelope. Please insert the swab in the envelope marked 'A' up your anus and seal it in the 'A' envelope. Enclose all samples in the box provided, include a current picture of yourself, and ship from any Pack-It store. Shipping costs have already been paid."

Madison, her optimism coming in waves after a week of despair, carried out the instructions immediately, printed out the selfie she'd taken for her blog homepage, and put everything in the smaller box, each item fitting neatly in its little cardboard compartment.

“Going to library,” she texted to her mom. “Home by dinner.”

She tossed both boxes into her book bag, hopped on her bike, and rode east to the Pack-It store. Then she headed west to the library, because in this matter at least, she didn't want to lie.

Only when she sat down and opened a textbook did she realize that her hands were shaking. Why? It took her a few minutes to figure it out.

Someone had read her survey responses, and found them good. Her sexuality wasn't shameful. It was acceptable, to a total stranger. Something about that aroused her.

If they liked her samples, and her picture, she would be hearing from them again, she knew. She wanted to hear from them again.

Chapter 8: Two Murders

Lydia, still issuing a quiet, terrified whine, leaned forward on the couch and put her face in her hands.

“What’s going on?” Harper demanded again.

“He did it,” Lydia said.

“Who did it?”

“Saq’al and Mims,” she said. “He killed them.”

“Wait, wait,” Harper said. “What are you talking about?”

“Because of me.”

“Start from the start,” Harper said.

“Bollte did it.”

“Who’s Bollte?”

“My boyfriend.”

“And what did he do?” Harper said.

“He killed those two girls. Saq’al and Mims.”

“Who are Saq’al and Mims?”

“The two dead girls,” Lydia said, leaning back and staring at the ceiling with her hands on her mouth, her wet eyes on something far above the ceiling and its girders.

“The article didn’t give their names,” Harper said, looking at her laptop to be sure.

“It didn’t need to,” Lydia said, turning to face Harper, dropping her hands. “Einkhorn Street. That’s where they lived.”

“These two girls,” Harper said. “Mims and uh ...”

“Saq’al.”

“She’s what ... Afgan?”

“She’s dead,” Lydia said flatly.

“How do you know?” Harper demanded, the first hint of panic in her voice.

Lydia turned away, sighed out, put her hands in her face again.

“I just do,” she said.

“Start from the start,” Harper said. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s because of the money,” Lydia said. “Or well . . . it’s because of a lot of other things too. But the money is the reason he killed someone.”

“I’m not seeing the connection,” Harper said.

“I was gonna spend it on us,” Lydia said with involuntary petulance, her voice breaking, her eyes tearing up. “Like, matching rings, or a trip. I was gonna surprise him. And maybe I’d spend some on myself too, okay? But he loved me, he should have been okay with that. And then he gets home, and I make him dinner while he’s washing up, and we sit down, and he says, really casually, ‘Hey, Baby, anyone come over today?’ And I knew exactly – exactly – why he was asking that, and it was like my stomach was gone, like I didn’t have a body anymore. Or I was all electric. It’s hard to explain, but when you—”

“Continue,” Harper said.

“Okay. So I said, really calmly, you know, like it was a normal conversation, ‘I don’t think so, but I was at the gym this afternoon, so maybe someone did. Like Benoit. Doesn’t he have a key? Benoit?’ And I know he knew it was me, and I knew he cared, because he just smiled at me, and five minutes later, he said, ‘Hey, let’s drive over to Tybee, tonight, and drink on the beach.’ And I just said ‘Sounds nice, I’d love that,’ and I knew that would be it, I was gonna die.”

“He kills people?” Harper asked.

“I think so,” Lydia replied. “He says he helps people with investments, so he keeps really strange hours and he can’t talk about his work because of confidentiality, but I don’t think it’s true. These people come over, and they’re definitely not

the investment type. And sometimes he yells on the phone, in the driveway, but I can hear him from upstairs, through a closed window. And there was this bloody shirt once, and he —”

“Bloody shirt?” Harper said.

“It wasn’t his. It was in a bag. I looked in it. My god, the smell. I just walked away. I figured it was his business.”

“How long have you been with him?”

“Almost a year.”

“And you’re already pregnant.”

“Yeah,” Lydia said. “He wanted a kid. So I thought I was safe, with that in me.”

“Was he abusive?”

“Not at all,” Lydia said. “Well, not that much. A little short-tempered, maybe, a word now and then, but—”

“How did you get out of the trip to Tybee Island?” she asked.

“Animal mode,” Lydia replied. “It’s what I call it. I knew he knew that I took it. But I knew he didn’t know I knew why he wanted to take me to Tybee, because I didn’t show it. I knew my life depended on not showing it, so I went into ... maybe you’d call it acting, but it came from somewhere deep inside. Animal mode.”

“And?”

“I told him I needed to get a necklace he gave me, from my locker. I wanted to wear it to the beach.”

“You got in the car with him, then?”

“Yeah, but just to the gym. He pulled up, I went in, called a Porteau, got my stuff, went out the back, the Porteau picked me up.”

“How did you call the Porteau?” Harper asked.

“Phone app.”

“You gave them this for the destination?”

“No, Salamander’s,” she said, referring to a Tex-Mex restaurant three blocks away. “I wasn’t sure what this address was.”

“So he knows that’s where you went,” Harper said.

Lydia winced, paused. “I don’t know about that,” she said, unconvincingly.

“He knows,” Harper said, and she looked at Lydia’s rolling bag, and her clothes. “Wait, where’d you get the suitcase?”

“From the gym.”

“Your locker?”

“Yeah.”

“How did you keep a suitcase in your locker?”

“It’s a big locker,” Lydia said. “Bollte got me the deluxe membership.”

“You had a rolling suitcase there?”

“And a suit,” Lydia said, gesturing toward the place where she’d hung her clothes the night before.

“You knew this was going to happen,” Harper asserted, as the pieces started falling into place. “It’s why you stalked me.”

“I wasn’t positive. But I saw it as a possibility. I guess maybe . . . I took the money as a test. I’d take it, and give it back one way or another, and maybe keep a little, and he’d say he always knew, and we’d laugh, and then it would be fine between us. But no, I stole from him, and I guess that made me like anyone else who steals from him. They have to die. And now those two girls.”

Lydia wept into her hands, a deep, anguished series of hoots while Harper looked on patiently.

“I didn’t really stalk you,” she said at last. “And I tried to find you on Look!, but you don’t have an account anymore.”

“I closed it,” Harper said. “Too distracting.”

“But following you from the gym was my last option.”

“Why was your head going there? Why did you think you were gonna run?”

“Bloody shirt,” Lydia explained. “Some other things. Rules about going out. At first it seemed like he was just being protective about the baby, but I felt like it went beyond that.”

“That’s the real reason you stole his money,” Harper asserted.

Lydia looked away, her silence an assent, before she offered an excuse.

“It’s sort of like child support.”

“How many guns does he have?”

“He’s a collector,” Lydia said.

“How could you have ended up with someone like this?” Harper inquired. It was a pointed question, and it was meant to be. Lydia was one of Harper’s most reliable servers, even as a teen, and in the two and a half years since the closure of Potato Max, the girl should have gotten further than this, somewhere different from this.

“Long story,” Lydia said. “Short version is we met at a party, he complemented my skin color.”

“Is he Black?”

“Why are you asking that?” Lydia inquired.

“For no reason other than he liked your skin color,” Harper replied impatiently, not about to be accused of being racist. “Which suggests his skin is a similar color.”

“It’s not,” Lydia said. “He’s Aryan.”

“Aryan? Not Caucasian?”

“He liked to call himself Aryan.”

“Like Nazi Aryan?”

“I don’t know.”

“White then,” Harper said.

“Yeah, totally white.”

“It used to bother you when people asked about your skin,” Harper recalled.

“Really?” Lydia said, surprised.

“Yes, really,” Harper said. “You hated it when people brought it up at Potato Max.”

“Okay, I guess I did. But I was there to bring them dinner, not talk about my genetic history. And, I don’t know, I used to be a little embarrassed. Now I see it as a strength. And you can thank Bollte for that. Maybe he wanted to kill me in the end, but he always loved my skin.”

“What do you want from me?” Harper asked.

“To stay here. Until I have the baby.”

“Why me?”

“Because he doesn’t know about you. And you seem like a good choice.”

“Why do you think he killed those girls on Einkhorn?”

“To send me a message.”

“What message?”

“That I’m next,” Lydia said.

“So he’ll kill you if he finds you,” Harper said. She wasn’t asking a question.

“Probably,” Lydia conceded.

“And he’ll kill me if he finds you here,” Harper said, stating the obvious.

Lydia opened her mouth, her throat rattling as she breathed in, her eyes revealing a new terror.

Harper leaned back. She was good at disaster, at looking at overwhelming problems and working on solutions. She’d recognized that skill in herself long ago, in her early teens, when the disasters were things like boys and fights with

her mom, and she'd cultivated the skill ever since. It would help when she ran her own business.

But this wasn't a business problem. The girl sitting next to her was another kind of challenge altogether. Still, Harper had habits, and they were hard to break just because the objective was survival and not mere profit.

"We have to destroy your phone," Harper said.

"Yeah."

"You can't leave this place, ever, until you have the baby."

"Yes."

"We need to get you out of town. Maybe in a few months. I can drive you to the airport. Not here. Atlanta. The Atlanta airport."

"I've got nowhere to go."

"Aren't your parents in Minnesota?"

"Yeah, but if I show up there, he'll kill me, and them too."

"What if he tries to kill them now?"

"He won't," Lydia said.

"He just killed two girls," Harper noted. "According to you."

"My parents are respectable. If someone murders them, there's going to be a big deal over it."

"What about those girls then?"

"They weren't respectable. They were bitches. I hated them."

"You seemed upset a minute ago."

"Yeah," Lydia agreed. "I was upset that he killed them. But they won't be missed."

"Seriously?" Harper said. "What was their story?"

“I mean, I’m sure it wasn’t their fault,” Lydia said. “I know they, when they were kids ... they both got ...”

Suddenly Lydia was crying again, into her hands, weeping plaintively, the tears flowing, her body shaking.

Comforting weeping friends wasn’t really one of Harper’s things, so she leaned back on the couch, folded her arms and watched Lydia cry.

“Drugs,” Lydia said between gasps. “Who gets high when they’re 12 unless their life sucks?”

“They were 12?” Harper said with alarm.

“Yeah,” Lydia said. “Well no, not now. But 20 years ago they were, probably. I didn’t know their ages. But they’d tell stories. Like they were proud of it. Mims would say something like ‘I was smoking pot when I was 12, and Sa’qal would say ‘That’s nothing, I was already doing red crack at that age,’ and they’d go back and forth.”

“They were Bollte’s friends?”

“Girlfriends of his, um, associates. Or, really, I think they showed up when they got paid to show up. I think they were sort of, you know, ladies of the evening.”

“Ladies of the evening?” Harper said with a laugh. “That’s what you call them?”

“I don’t know,” Lydia said. “Other people called them whores, or hookers. It wasn’t nice.”

“You hated them, though.”

“We had words now and then,” Lydia said. “But that doesn’t mean they deserved to die.”

“But why them?”

“Bollte thought I liked them.”

“Okay,” Harper said flatly. “He’s a complete psycho, then.”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“How sure are you he killed them, though?” Harper inquired, looking down at her laptop. “It doesn’t give a cause of death, just says they were found dead. Maybe it was a gas leak. Or murder-suicide. Or it might not even have been them.”

“Nine-five percent chance it was them, and he did it,” she said, sniffing, her voice calming and returning to a semblance of its usual petulant tenor.

“If it wasn’t them, you leave,” Harper said.

“And go where?”

“Wherever you want,” Harper said. “You’ve got money.”

“I can’t buy a plane ticket with cash.”

“I’ll buy it for you, and you reimburse me,” Harper said.

“He’ll find me,” Lydia said.

“Just go back to him and say you’re sorry.”

Lydia gave her opinion of that proposal with her face, a wide-eyed rush of terror.

“If it was those two girls,” Harper ventured, “we call the cops, and they arrest him, problem solved.”

Lydia shook her head.

“He owns the cops.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s the way he put it,” Lydia explained. “He only mentioned it once. We got pulled over for speeding, and he got out of the car and talked to the cop and the cop left and never wrote a ticket, and he bragged that he owned them.”

“You know how to pick ‘em,” Harper said.

“You’re not the first person to make fun of me,” Lydia said, her voice at its most simpering.

“Really?”

“Yeah, really,” Lydia said. “Everyone could tell what he was, except me, apparently.”

“So you’re stuck here,” Harper said, “until we find out it wasn’t those girls, and then you leave and go somewhere where he can’t find you.”

“What if it was them?”

“You stay,” Harper said, adding immediately, “You’re going to have to pay rent.”

“Sure. And I could help with your new, um, business. What did you say you’re doing?”

“Beast Factory.”

“It sounds cute. I could help with that.”

“You can’t leave,” Harper said. “Until we know you’re safe, you can’t walk through that door. And you’re going to have to cover all your expenses.”

“I can do that,” Lydia promised, nodding hopefully. “And there’s one thing I didn’t mention.”

“What?”

“The money.”

“I know about the money,” Harper said.

“Other money. You can make money off the baby.”

“How?”

“By selling it.”

Chapter 9: Madison Gets an Invitation

A week after she'd sent in her saliva, her anal and vaginal swabs, her picture, Madison heard back from the first lab, in another letter without a return address that she quickly opened in the privacy of her bedroom.

“Dear Madison,” it began. “Thank you for your interest. We have received and examined your samples and other materials and consider you a strong candidate for a professional breeding program. If you are still interested in signing up, we would like to offer you a confidential tour of our facility.

“We have to date bred and placed hundreds of promising children with loving parents and, as you can imagine, maintaining our high standards requires a strict regimen that takes into account the gestator's pre-conceptive health, maximizes their receptiveness and fertility, protects theirs and the child's well-being after conception and through delivery, and ensures the gestator's recovery and preparation for further conception. As such, should you sign up, you will be welcomed into a strict regimen that may require some adjustments. During your visit, you will be subject to the same regimen. Breeding candidates and other visitors should therefore be prepared to disrobe and accept restraints for the duration of their visit.

“If a tour is still of interest to you, please refer to the accompanying sheet for scheduling instructions. We hope to see you soon!”

The letter was signed by Sissy Glanville, Recruitment Director, in blue ink. Madison looked at the signature edgewise to confirm it bore the ridges of an authentic signature, and not something copied on.

And again, her hands were shaking. She had been adjudged good enough to make babies, partial copies of herself, that other people would want. Her genes, her picture, her swabs, had somehow attested to something about her she wasn't sure she would otherwise have believed. She was good

enough. She was no influencer, no voice of her generation, no star. So she might have failed at the only thing she'd ever really worked at. And now her parents were failures too. But the proof she wasn't a universal failure was as real as the sheet of paper in her hands. She stood in the middle of her bedroom and stared at the letter and suddenly it seemed very far away, and a single tear ran off the end of her nose and splashed onto the sheet and smeared Sissy's blue ink signature, and that's when Madison realized she was crying.

The accompanying sheet provided the website URL where Madison would go to schedule her tour. Try to set it for a date when she wasn't menstruating, she was told. She might be given the option of signing up at the end of the tour, the sheet informed her, so she'd want to have her affairs in order. She would be required to sign a confidentiality agreement before the tour started, and it would include severe civil penalties for any breach. It reiterated the warning that breeding candidates would be required to undress and wear restraints during the tour. And in a passage she read and re-read, it asked her to bring complete information on the financial accounts where her signup fee would be deposited.

At first, she thought they were talking about something she would have to pay. But no, this would be a deposit. If she stayed, if she signed up as soon as the tour was over, they would pay her. Or her parents.

She would need her parent's bank account number. She would need a ride to the facility. She would need to schedule the tour for a day when one of her parents was free. It was time to get them involved.

Chapter 10: Lydia's Business Idea

"Say that again," Harper implored.

"People will pay very good money for a baby like this," Lydia said. "Mixed race. Pretty mom. Bollte's not half bad either."

"Other than him being a psycho," Harper said flatly. "But no, I'm not going to sell a baby."

"I'm not asking you to," Lydia said. "It's legal, and it's what I'm planning to do. It's my right. I'm just asking you to support me until he's born, and then I'll pay you for your trouble."

"Lydia, I'm not—"

"You're trying to go into business, right?" Lydia interrupted. "This is legit."

"Who do you sell it to?"

"Parents," Lydia said. "Decent people. It's adoption."

"Why are they paying, then?" Harper asked.

"There are always fees. You don't just show up and walk out with a child."

"How much are we talking about?"

"Wide range," Lydia said. "Twenty-five. Fifty. Seventy-five."

"Thousand?"

"Yeah, thousand."

"Why are they paying that much?" Harper asked, leaning back and narrowing her eyes at Lydia.

"They want to be parents, okay?" Lydia said. "But as long as they're being parents, why not get something impressive? Designer?"

"Designer?" Harper echoed with a skeptical chuckle.

“My name for it,” Lydia said. “I’ve been looking into this ... for awhile. There’s a huge demand for the racially ambiguous. For people like me.”

“Why?” Harper said.

“Andolou N’beki, Freeman Caster, Nicole Chestwick, Ingmar de Masque, Niceties,” Lydia said, rattling off the names of, respectively, an inventor, athlete, model, politician, and pop music band, all mixed-race and widely admired.

“That doesn’t mean—” Harper blurted, stopping herself to soften her tone before she resumed, “your baby’s going to ... do that.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Lydia said. “Kids don’t come with guarantees. Everyone understands that. But there’s cachet here. I’ve looked it up. It’s a trend. Love your kids, and you get what you get. But if you can start with this ...” Lydia gestured toward herself. “You’re one step ahead.”

“I—”

“Look it up for yourself,” Lydia said. “Don’t take my word for it. Just search, um, racially ambiguous. Ethnically mixed. Whatever terms you can think of. This is legit, and you’ll make money on it if you want to, and so will I.”

“What are you proposing, then?” Harper inquired.

“Fifty-fifty,” Lydia said. “Whatever we get, I’ll split it with you.”

“What about the cash?” Harper said, gesturing toward the bag.

“That’ll pay for my ongoing expenses,” Lydia said. “And I can be reimbursed from the proceeds, once the parents pay.”

“Food and rent won’t be reimbursed,” Harper said. “Only baby expenses.”

“Okay,” Lydia said.

“How do we handle prenatal?” Harper said. “You’ve got six months of checkups you need to do. You need

ultrasounds.”

“There are people who do house calls. Ultrasounds. Checkups.”

“That’s gonna be expensive,” Harper said.

“It’s not,” Lydia said. “They’re like us. Living in the shadows. Some of them got—”

“I’m not living in the shadows,” Harper said curtly. “You are. I’m starting a business.”

“Are you going to let me help?”

“No, I’ve got this,” Harper said. “And you can’t leave this room.”

“I just want to have the baby,” Lydia said. “After that, I don’t care.”

“You think he’s going to find you, eventually?”

“Yes.”

“And kill you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does that bother you?”

“I don’t know,” Lydia said, speaking with a strange dispassion. “I thought yesterday was going to be my last day on earth. But it’s today and I’m still alive. Animal mode, okay? Sometimes, when animals panic, they come up with the best plan. Not always, but sometimes. This might be the best plan for me.”

As she conversed, Harper’s mind flipped back and forth, from the immediate practicalities to the more urgent, more frightening matters before her.

“Maybe it’s the best plan, maybe it isn’t,” Harper said. “Maybe you can just go to another town. In another state.”

“I’ve got no options,” Lydia said. “As soon as I give my social anywhere, or my real name, he’s going to find me.”

“You know this for a fact?” Harper inquired. “He has these abilities?”

“He’s shown me things. He was bragging. Trying to impress me. He asked me to name any friend, so I gave him the name of a girl from high school who moved to South Dakota, and he had her pulled up in five minutes. Address, bank account, social, everything.”

“Then he’ll find you here.”

“Not if I keep my phone off and don’t do anything.”

Harper leaned forward, settled her face into her hands again, breathing deeply as she pondered.

“Okay, I’m pissed,” she said calmly.

“Huh?”

“I’m pissed,” Harper said. “At you. I’m pissed at you. You had a problem, and you made it my problem, without my permission, and there’s nothing I can do about it, because if I kick you out, you’re dead, and I’m probably dead too.”

“Why are you dead?”

“Because he’ll find out you were here and he’ll come for me too.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?” Harper demanded, voice rising. “You’re saying he killed two of your friends, and—”

“Not really my friends.”

Harper turned to stare at Lydia, her eyebrows raised as part of a “did you really just say that?” expression.

“Okay, sorry,” Lydia said.

“So I’m going back to problem-solving mode,” Harper said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not pissed. Pissed and scared. And I’m going to stay pissed. At you. Directly at you.”

Lydia pulled her arms in and tucked in her legs and allowed her spine to bend, the overall affect one of shrinking, of metaphysical reduction, as if shame alone could pare a woman’s corporeal mass down by a third.

“So I’ll look up what you were talking about,” Harper said. “And if it’s bona fide – and I’m not convinced it is – and if it’s bona fide, I’ll pursue it. As a side interest. Because this is not a business I’m getting into. And if we find some parents, you go there. You go to wherever they are, and now you’re their problem.”

“Agreed.”

Harper rose, went to the door, grabbed the doorknob. The door was original to the building, industrial-grade, of reinforced steel, with a steel jamb, a solid doorknob, and two sturdy deadbolts, an original and a new one the landlord had installed. Outside the door ran a walkway, reachable only by two flights of exterior stairs, or a large freight elevator that was currently broken.

“This is the only way in or out, unless we break a window,” Harper said, giving the doorknob a tug.

“Do you have a gun?” Lydia asked.

“No, I don’t have a gun, and I don’t want a gun,” Harper said. “If it gets to the point people are shooting at each other in here, at least one of us is probably already dead.”

Lydia leaned forward and wrapped her arms around her belly, as if trying to surround the life growing within her with all the protection she had.

“I feel like the windows are safe,” Harper said, gesturing to the broad bank of windows at her left. “These look out on the river and the marsh. It’s one of the reasons I agreed to rent here. Northern exposure so the sunlight’s never direct, but it gets very bright.”

“How easy is it to see in?” Lydia asked.

“Does your boyfriend own a boat?”

“Not yet.”

“During the day, you can’t see through the windows at all from outside,” Harper said. “At night, probably not either, not much. The boat would have to be three stories tall.”

Lydia seemed moderately reassured.

“You can sleep on the couch until I get you a bed,” Harper said. “And you’ll be paying for that.”

“Okay.”

“Give me your phone,” Harper said.

Lydia stood, went to her suitcase, fished out her phone, handed it over.

“I’m going to toss this in the river,” Harper said.

“Well, that’s dramatic,” Lydia noted.

“It’s necessary,” Harper shot back. “I’m going to shower and dress and go work in the shop, and you’re going to stay here, and I’m going to work on things I need to do, and you can watch TV quietly, and that’s it. You’re not using my laptop, you’re not going out. You can read Faraday’s if you like business news, I have a subscription and the last month’s issues are on the shelf under the TV.”

“Thanks.”

And so began the uneasy partnership of Harper Sutton and Lydia Roberson, a partnership born of crisis and fear and necessity.

In the coming days, the identities of the two deceased women on Einkerhorn Street were verified, and they were indeed the two Lydia had named, and she wept anew over people she never really cared for nor had much in common with. Murder-suicide is what the police called it. Mims, in a jealous rage over an unnamed male, had shot Sa’qal through the heart, then turned the gun on herself, shooting herself neatly through the temple. There was evidence of a struggle between the women, the news said, of a fight that had overturned furniture and left both women with bruises and cuts, but Lydia expressed the conviction, choked out through sobs, that Bollte had done the damage, torturing them to verify they knew nothing about Lydia’s whereabouts before executing them, then staging his crime to look like something else.

Frightening as everything had become however, with this new wrinkle in Harper’s life, it had by outward

appearances no impact on her daily routine over the coming weeks. She started the days with a shower, made it down to her shop by 8:30 on weekdays, 10 on weekends, continued to improve the future home of Beast Factory across the alley. The space was a mess, floor and walls showing years of manufacturing-related abuse. The floors needed filling in and smoothing, the walls needed to be patched or, in several places, completely rebuilt. Windows were broken, or still whole but set into rusted frames. Carpet, paint, and adequate lighting were months off. As she labored, Harper learned along the way about building renovation and restoration, turning a former factory space into a place of happy respite, the future site of birthday parties, parent-child bonding events, teen hobbies. Working with contractors, she learned about plumbing, electricity, linoleum and gypsum, how to anchor walls into solid concrete, how to build a room secure enough to meet the standards required by Beast Factory, Inc., which was very particular about how its proprietary equipment would be secured.

And Harper, after that initial round of fear-fueled anger, simply incorporated Lydia into her routine. She researched the breeding and delivering of babies, found that it was indeed a young but growing industry, as yet mostly unregulated and thus wide open for both abuse and entrepreneurship. Determined to pursue the latter angle, and profit off it in the meantime, she worked up a detailed contract with Lydia, specifying the money each would receive upon the baby's adoption, with financial terms heavily in Harper's favor.

The first financial event was immediate, Lydia handing over a thousand dollars of her ill-gotten cash as an initial deposit against which the first round of expenses would be paid, from food to new furniture. Harper, mindful that the bills might be traced, did not spend them, simply stored the money in her dresser for the time being, using her own funds and her credit cards to pay for things.

Three weeks after Lydia had disrupted her life, Harper felt she knew enough about things to place her first advertisement, and she and Lydia spent two more weeks on it

before she was satisfied with the message. The three sites she chose to run the ad offered space for a 40-character headline, and she used up all of it in ads that started running the second week of November 2012: “Beautiful Mixed-Race Child, Due in April”

Beneath the headline, she published an offer with hers and Lydia’s best prose: “The beautiful mother has been gifted with genes from central Africa, Sweden, Ireland and Incan Peru. The father is Northern Europe Caucasian. Together, their DNA will bring into the world a beautiful new human being, with dominant Dark Continent traits but seasoned with the Old Country and a little New World mystique as well. Fees negotiable. Sex not yet determined. Placement requires an interview and full vetting.”

Was there a chance Bollte might see the ad? Yes, but there were hundreds of children on the lists with comparable traits, and Lydia was certain she’d never specified her own background to him, beyond acknowledging a mix of African and European heritage. The Incan blood was an afterthought, something she had to rack her brain for under Harper’s probing. A great grandmother had a Peruvian father, Lydia recalled being told, and he had claimed to be of Incan descent, which was good enough for the purposes of the ad.

The ad linked to anonymous, numbered accounts Harper had set up on each site, and prospective parents had to use the same system, so that no one would know who anyone else was until things had progressed.

Nevertheless, in the first few days after the ad first ran, Harper found herself looking over her shoulder more often than usual, scanning the alleys and the corners outside her home and future shop for a blond, well-built man. She found herself shopping for food at the grocery store at odd hours – very early or very late – and avoiding anyone who even remotely resembled the pictures of Bollte Lydia had in her purse.

She still went to the gym, and she still shopped for the supplies she needed for the do-it-yourself aspects of the shop

project, but otherwise, she stayed close to home, living cautiously, fearfully.

Lydia was doing far worse, swelling and vomiting, eating well and keeping most of it down but suffering a variety of the angsts that would attend, predictably, fear and a great deprivation of freedom while one prepared to birth a new life.

And so it was inevitable, perhaps, that on the day before the first ads ran, Harper would return home from the shop and find something odd, and disconcerting: a little flake of mud against the wall near the front door. It looked like river mud, and it certainly hadn't come from her foot.

Could Lydia had done that? Would she have snuck out? Even if she'd limited her trip to the muddy bank of the Savannah River, reachable through a break in the trees, she might have been seen. The fences around the old paper plant were not impermeable, nothing there to prevent anyone's entering, poking around, looking for a familiar face.

Bollte knew Lydia had been dropped off a few blocks away, Harper was sure of that. What if he cruised this area regularly, driving down a side street now and then, using his abilities to learn that people were living here again – or at least one person? He could find Harper's name, and probably learn after a little more digging that she'd worked at Potato Max the same time Lydia did. What happened next would be inevitable.

Harper didn't confront Lydia, didn't say anything to her after she noticed the mud, passing by the girl as she sat on the couch watching a sitcom. But the next time Lydia went to the bathroom, Harper dropped to her knees, studied the mud, confirmed to her satisfaction its river origins.

Still, she did not confront her pregnant tenant, however. Instead, she devised something a little more elaborate. She wrote "CAUGHT YOU" on a sheet of paper and, the next time she left, she wedged it outside, between door and jamb. That night, the sheet was still there, as it was the next three nights. But on the fifth night, it had been dislodged, lying a few feet from the door against the wall,

drifting there after the door had been opened. Surely Lydia had seen it.

There was no telltale mud this time, only a pregnant girl, huddled on the couch, watching TV.

There was no conversation this time either. Harper simply went to her car to retrieve the things she knew she'd need when this moment came: A heavy drill, cement screws, a steel plate bearing a steel ring, 30 feet of chain, and padlocks.

The work was quick, and wordless. Harper drilled four holes into the concrete floor by the wall, screwed the plate into place, padlocked the chain to it, fastened a padlock to the other end of the chain, coiled the chain there and stepped away.

Lydia watched.

The next day, before Harper left to run errands and work at the shop, she stepped to the end of the chain, picked it up so it rattled, and looked expectantly at Lydia, sitting at the kitchen table with coffee.

“Really?” Lydia said with a pout.

“Yes, really,” Harper said.

Lydia, wearing black sweatpants and a stained white t-shirt, moved resignedly, stopped, watched as Harper wrapped the chain around her left ankle and padlocked it tight.

Lydia stepped back to the table, the chain clinking behind her, and returned to sipping her coffee, looking no happier nor any sadder than she had before.

She still had the run of the place – she could reach the kitchen, the living room, the windows closest to her, the bathroom. She just couldn't get anywhere near the front door, and certainly not pass through it.

As soon as Harper returned late that afternoon, the chain came off, but anytime she was away, Lydia was tethered.

If Lydia didn't like it, she could leave. Both women knew that. Lydia didn't leave. Nor did she seem to grow any happier with things.

The first response to Harper's baby ad arrived in late November. Harper, sitting on her bed with her laptop while Lydia watched TV, opened the message and sucked in her breath.

"Hi, I will pay \$150,000 for a healthy child," read the terse message. "But I will deal only with a licensed corporation, and will require complete paperwork, adoption records and the payment of government fees."

Harper replied quickly that she was indeed a full corporation, let Lydia know a large offer was on the table, and the next day, she registered a new firm with the state of Georgia: Sutton Mirabilis, with a business purpose she listed as conception and adoption.

Chapter 11: Madison Asks for a Ride

It took Madison four days to speak to her mother about scheduling a visit to the breeding agency. The delay wasn't due just to Madison's hesitation. Mary Inglewood had been remarkably busy of late, working odd shifts at two clinics, trying to keep the household together when she wasn't working, running errands, and managing the home's finances.

But on the last Monday in May, Mary was there at her laptop in the kitchen, still in her scrubs, when Madison got home from school. She didn't look up as her daughter passed behind her to get a drink from the fridge, so Madison had to break the silence herself.

"Mom?"

"Hey, Maddie."

"Mom, I've got something to go over with you."

"What's that?"

"I'm talking to a place that does breeding."

"Breeding what?" Mary asked without turning away from her PC.

"People," Madison said. "Babies."

"What are you talking about with them?"

"Working there. Sort of."

"That's great," Mary said. "What would you do there?"

"Be a mom."

"What are the hours?"

"I guess ... full time," Madison said. "Or sort of more than full time. You live there."

"Do you have the job yet?"

"No, I need to go tour it first. So I need a ride."

“Okay, when?” Mary said, eyes fixed on a column of numbers.

“When can you go?” Madison asked.

“I’m sometimes free on Mondays.”

“June 15?” Madison asked. “Right after I graduate?”

Mary opened her calendar, blocked out the date.

“Okay,” she said.

“Mom, do you understand what I’m talking about?”

“You’re interviewing for a job at a nursery?” Mary said, returning to the spreadsheet.

“No, I’m interested in signing up as a breeding female, at an agency.”

“A breeding agent?” Mary said absently.

“No, Mom,” Madison said. “A breeding female. As in, I would get pregnant there, and I’ll have babies, and they’ll sell them, and the money’s amazing.”

Mary’s hands stopped tapping across her keyboard, but she didn’t turn, just kept staring at her PC screen, frozen.

“Mom?” Madison said. “Mom?”

For a long time in the Inglewood kitchen, there was silence, broken only by the squeak of Mary’s chair as she turned to regard her daughter.

“Maddie. No.”

“I’m an adult,” Madison said. “It’s my decision. I just need some help.”

“You want to be bred?” she asked. “That’s what you want to do?”

“No, it’s not my first choice,” Madison said. “But my first few choices aren’t going to work out, obviously, and I’m about to graduate from high school and there’s a pandemic raging, but this seems like something I can do.”

“Get pregnant?” Mary said.

“And have the baby,” Madison said. “Or, babies.”

Mary leaned back, sighed, looked at her lap, the defeated gesture of a woman coming to grips with her failure as a parent, her only child a fledgling on the edge of the nest, flexing a beautiful pair of wings she had no idea how to use.

“This sounds like a cry for help,” Mary said at last, looking up into Madison’s eyes for the first time.

“A cry for help?” Madison echoed in a tone just shy of outrage. “I ... I have no idea what you even are talking about.”

“I get it, Maddie,” Mary said. “This is normal. Your dad and I have been waiting for you to ... do something. You’re mad at us. You’re furious. That’s normal. And this is your way of getting back at us. We’ve ... things happened ... and we’ve stolen your dreams. And now you’re lashing out. It’s normal. We don’t have any money for a therapist, but maybe Dad and I could sit down with you, and—”

“Oh my god, Mom, no!” Madison exploded. “I’m, like ... okay, yeah, I’m ... I don’t like it. Yeah. And I still sort of don’t get how it all happened exactly for you and Dad. But mainly ... mainly I’m just trying to figure things out, and this is something people do, and it’s okay, it’s normal. I’ve studied it, and I’ve been talking to these places, and one is really interested in me. They like my, um, DNA, and they want me to do a tour, and then I might sign up.”

“How did they get your DNA?”

“I sent it to them in my saliva.”

“How?”

“In this little vial thing. Like a plastic container.”

“You mailed it to them?”

“Yeah, through Pack-It. Postage paid. Nothing’s cost me anything.”

Mary waved her hands, trying to move past the tangent.

“Okay,” she said, “how do they get you pregnant? Do you know that?”

“Well, no,” Madison admitted, the color rising in her cheeks. “No ... because some things are confidential. If I do the tour, that will be confidential too. So they don’t just tell you everything right now. But when we get there, they should explain that. I’ll ask them. Definitely.”

“Do you think it’s done naturally?” Mary inquired with a slight smile, the smile of a mother who has found a thin ray of hope, the argument that will turn her daughter back from madness, return her to a viable path.

“Naturally?” Madison said, and perhaps she knew what her mother was suggesting, but she wasn’t going to offer more than she had to. There was something in the girl’s eyes, however, that Mary should have noted. Something that wasn’t horror, or shame. Something that was, perhaps, intrigue. Curiosity.

“Naturally,” Mary said, pressing what she must have thought was still her advantage. And, as a nurse with considerable medical experience and training, she was on home turf here. “Where the semen is delivered to your reproductive organs with a penis.”

“Oh, yeah,” Madison countered, and the blush was gone, because she knew what her mother was trying to do, and she was adjusting on the fly to it, adjusting as well to realities she hadn’t really pondered in detail yet. “I mean, probably. But these places are very professional. They’re an agency. And what’s really popular right now is ethnically amorphous. So I would be, um, probably, you know, with someone of a ... different ethnicity. Or race.”

“You’ll be having intercourse with total strangers,” Mary said. “That’s what you want?”

Is that indeed what Madison wanted? Is that why she was doing this? Her next words, born of anger, also bore considerable truth. And courage.

“No, Mom,” she replied curtly. “I don’t know how it’s done, but I don’t think it matters. They have to put semen in there somehow, since that’s how you get pregnant. And either way is fine. If I have to be with a guy, okay. I’m not going to be ... squeamish.”

“Have you ever had sex before?” Mary asked.

“No, I have not,” Madison replied. “And I have no reason to lie at this point. Obviously. But I’m not afraid of it. I just haven’t found the right person, I guess.”

“What if you don’t like it?”

“Like what?”

“Sex.”

“What if you don’t like working until 2 in the morning?” Madison shot back. “It’s something you do because you have to.”

“Working late and sex are two completely different things.”

“Well, yeah,” Madison agreed. “But we all do what we have to, don’t we?”

“Working late makes me tired the next day, and I drink coffee,” Mary said. “Having sex with strangers can give you trauma you never forget.”

“I think I can deal with that just fine,” Madison said.

Mary laughed at something. Her daughter’s bravado, perhaps. Or naivete.

“The money’s good,” Madison said. “Really good.”

“How much?” Mary said.

“I don’t know,” Madison said. “It depends on a few factors. But they like youth. And I have good genes, thanks to you and Dad. And the money will all go to you. I’ll want you to have it.”

Mary shook her head, clearly none of this even remotely palatable, comprehensible.

“How about we just do the tour together?” Madison said. “If I don’t think it’s right for me, I’ll walk away.”

“What are they going to show you?”

“I don’t know,” Madison said. “I guess how it all works. And, um, oh ...”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I’ll have to, um,” Madison stammered, “I’m not sure, like, change clothes or something ...”

“What do you mean?”

“It just said I would have to undress,” Madison said. “So I’m not sure what I’ll be wearing for the tour.”

“Alright,” Mary said evenly, clearly not understanding that there was a good chance Madison would be doing the tour naked.

“And um,” Madison continued, “there’s restraints.”

“What are you talking about?” Mary said, her voice suddenly resonating with a new level of concern.

“It’s strict,” Madison said, and her right hand rose to her hair, reflexively, and she twirled it around her finger, the way she always did when she was nervous. “It has to be, to make, you know, the best, like, kids.”

“Do you understand what restraints are?” Mary asked.

“Well, yeah,” Madison said, forcing her hand back to her side. “It could be, I guess, a lot of things. But yeah. Um, rope, maybe.”

“Handcuffs,” Mary said. “That’s what I’m thinking of.”

“I don’t know,” Madison replied. “It didn’t say that. It just said restraints. So we just show up. Okay? We just show up, and as soon as it gets weird, we leave.”

“Where is it?”

“Savannah.”

“Savannah?”

“Savannah, Georgia. Out by—”

“I know where Savannah is,” Mary said.

“You seemed confused.”

“No, it’s just that I thought it was local.”

“No, it’s in Savannah,” Madison said. “It’s a big place on the Savannah River. They have a website.”

“What’s it called?”

“Sutton Mirabilis,” Madison said. “They’ve been there since, uh, 2012. Eight years in business.”

“Sutton?” Mary said.

“Sutton,” Madison said. “It’s named after the founder, Sutton.”

“That’s his first name?”

“No, the founder’s a woman. Harper Sutton.”

Chapter 12: Priscilla, Volunteer

Priscilla, bound hand and foot as she left Female Cageroom 32, felt her stomach lurch.

“Why do they need someone who can scream?” she asked Bruce, her handler.

Bruce probably knew the reason, but he’d already said more than he should have to Priscilla – one of the hazards of daily interaction between staff and research females.

“I don’t know,” he said blankly. “They just asked if you had a strong voice.”

“And you think I do?” she asked, shuffling beside him down the hall.

“I’ve heard you enough times during orgasms,” he said. “It’s loud. Even outside the door.”

“So I’m going up to administration to be masturbated?” Priscilla asked hopefully.

“Well, no, I don’t think that’s the only thing they’re going to do to you,” Bruce said.

He was taking her to the administration elevator, the exclusive car with blue tile floors and dark wood paneling. It was the only passenger elevator that ran to the lab’s administrative offices on the sixth and seventh floors. It was also the only elevator that went to B2, which Priscilla assumed was a subterranean parking garage.

“Have they already started?” Priscilla asked.

“You mean, the demonstration?”

“Yes. Have you seen what they’re doing?”

“No, they were still setting up the equipment,” Bruce said.

“What kind of equipment?”

“Disciplinary,” Bruce said simply, stopping at the administrative elevator and hitting the up button.

“What kind of disciplinary?” she asked.

“There were some things I’ve never seen before,” he said. “Kind of creative.”

The elevator door opened and Priscilla followed him in.

Priscilla fell silent as the car rose – fourth floor, fifth, sixth – stopping at the seventh, the top floor.

The doors parted, but Priscilla held back until Bruce took her upper arm and guided her out.

Priscilla turned to study the floor, as she always did, whether she was anxious or nervous or excited.

Down the hall to the right lay the four offices of the lab’s top executives – the CEO, chief of operations, chief financial officer, medical director. Priscilla had never met any of them, or been to their offices, but she heard the spaces were palatial. She was still looking that way when Bruce led her left, past a door marked Labserv-1, which housed the lab’s central brain, its primary data repository and processing systems. Further on lay a large kitchen and dining area, visible through a glass door. Then, more offices, some closets, a few small pens. Although research inventory would rarely be kept up here, no floor was without at least a few spaces to temporarily confine or store the males and females used by the lab.

A pair of ornate doors awaited in this direction, behind which lay several conference rooms and a multimedia theater. Bruce brought Priscilla through the entrance and toward an open door to the left, where she could hear voices, laughter.

Things quieted as soon as they entered the room, the arrival of a naked, chained girl always demanding mouth-clamping attention, particularly a girl who looked like Priscilla.

There were two dozen people here, seated at the table or standing next to chairs, and Priscilla recognized about half of them. But her focus was not on the people. It was on the far end of the room, where the blinds had been drawn over a pair

of large windows and a large framework of metal stood beside a vinyl floor sign, six feet tall, bearing the logo of Cassock Corporation and below it the words “Advanced Correction, Research & Training” against a backdrop of abstract red and black shapes.

Nowhere on the sign did the word “punishment” appear, but it didn’t need to. The functions of the equipment arrayed in that part of the conference room were easy enough to guess at, most of the implements obviously for holding a female body still or inflicting unpleasantness on it.

Priscilla was still trying to ferret out the styles and motivations of some of the more esoteric devices when Bruce introduced her to a woman seated at the head of the table.

“14067,” he said quietly, and he pulled out a pen and scanned the tattoo embedded into the back of Priscilla’s shoulder, and the pen beeped and he exited without another word, because staffers at his level were meant to be seen and not heard by members of the lab’s highest echelons.

The woman had turned in her chair to regard Priscilla as soon as she’d entered, and Priscilla recognized her immediately. She was Gwen Beales, the chief of operations, a woman whose broad mandate included everything from keeping the naked girls warm enough to feeding and controlling them. She bought the chains and racks and beds and tables, she managed the building, she hired and fired and brought on new inventory. Stamping an identifying tattoo in four places on every girl’s body was her responsibility. Maintaining obedience was as well, and Priscilla had heard her name invoked more than once by staff when a girl got out of line.

“Beales,” they would say. Never “Gwen.” As in “Can you let Beales know the girls are a little antsy this week?” or “41, I will turn you over to Beales herself if you won’t cooperate!”

For all her power, she was a surprisingly short woman, her face round, her eyes squinty, her black hair in a practical, all-business bowl cut.

Priscilla guessed her age at late 50s as the woman looked up at her and her face contorted into the kind of smile indicative of sourness. Lemons, perhaps.

“14067,” she said. “How do you do?”

“Hello, Ms. Beales,” Priscilla said.

“Oh, have we met?” Beales inquired.

“I don’t think so, but I’ve seen your picture,” Priscilla replied.

“Please, call me Gwen,” she said. “And since it’s just you here today, we’ll be addressing you as 67.”

“Sure, Gwen, thank you,” Priscilla said.

Beales smiled again, stood and, in a surprisingly familiar gesture, reached up to wrap her hand around Priscilla’s bare shoulder.

“This is 67,” she announced to the room, and the eyes there flickered between the person with the most authority, and the person here who was, objectively, the most interesting. “Our guest needs to put a girl on some of their equipment, and they asked for a sensitive female, so 67 is our volunteer.”

Priscilla’s face registered not the slightest irony at Beales’ choice of words. Volunteer?

“67, tell us a little about yourself, please.”

Priscilla turned to the woman, trying to gauge her intent. Was she being ironic? Snide? Did she really want this bound and naked example of female inventory to introduce herself to a roomful of clothed executives, workers and salespeople?

Priscilla’s hesitation lasted no more than a fraction of a second, however. The floor is mine, she told herself, and what I do with it is up to me. Take what you’re given, and ask for more. Always. It’s a form of resistance. Yielding to commands, agreeing, saying yes, these weren’t compliance. They were done only to avoid punishment.

Take what you could.

“I’m 14067,” Priscilla said, eyes sweeping the room, locking on other eyes here and there with a confidence she had to develop after she’d arrived. “I got here in August, and—”

“Of this year?” Beales interrupted.

“Yes,” Priscilla said. “Six months ago.”

“You’ve had some college,” Beales observed. Could she tell, or did she know more about this girl than she was letting on?

“Yes,” Priscilla agreed. “Three years.”

“How did you end up with us?”

“Debt proxy,” Priscilla said, using two words to sum up an experience 10,000 words could not begin to capture.

“And how are you liking it?” Beales inquired.

“It’s been an adjustment,” Priscilla said without hesitation, prompting quiet laughter.

“What track are you on?” Beales continued.

“I spend most of my time in vaginal studies,” Priscilla replied. “With Dr. Morrow and Dr. Bank.”

“They’re both deep-sea fishing this week,” Beales said with an eye-roll, to more laughter. “What about you interests them?”

“You’d have to ask them for a complete answer,” Priscilla said, “but I’m very tight, I think, and really soft, and they’ve said that’s a good combination.”

“If anyone’s going to unlock your secrets, it’ll be those two,” Beales said, nodding, lowering her hand from Priscilla’s shoulder. She turned to an overweight man in a suit and tie standing near the Cassock Corp. display at the other end of the room. “Alright, now I’m going to turn you over to our visitor, Mr. Lloyd.” Beales motioned him to step forward before she sat, and he did his best to oblige, rounding the table and easing his body between attendees until he was standing directly in front of Priscilla.

“Hello,” he said quietly, almost gently, offering his hand, and Priscilla reached toward him as far as she could in her chains and took his hand and squeezed it tightly, and he waited until she let go to grin at her. His face was round, pleasant, his smile genuine, his thick black hair standing out like a shelf above thick black eyebrows. Something about him reminded her of a TV preacher.

“Ready to begin?” he asked.

“How much is this going to hurt?” Priscilla asked, not making any attempt to keep her voice down.

“Most of the time, not at all,” he replied, and he stepped backward, using his smile and not his hand to bid her walk after him, and she obeyed, for she had no other choice, following in the broad wake he carved among the audience there, many of whom studied Priscilla carefully as she passed, at her four stumps and her breasts and her unkempt pubic hair and, after she’d passed, at the way her rump bounced and lifted, first on the right, then on the left, with every step.

As they neared the Cassock display, Priscilla’s eyes wandered, first to the windows and their blinds, framed with a hint of the sunlight she rarely saw, and then to the equipment again, this time from the closer vantage point where she could survey the particulars – the posts and beams and rack, the little cages and cuffs and chains, the stand with its tools, and the things that frightened her the most for some reason, the one or two pieces of equipment that were alive, electric, with dimly flashing lights.

“Alright,” said Lloyd, placing his hand on her shoulder, turning her gently to face the gathered throng, and Priscilla tore her eyes from the display to look at her audience. Along with Beales, there were about a dozen people she recognized, either through personal interaction or by picture, or reputation. There was the red-suited head of the handlers and her male assistant, who focused on administration and management but would chain girls or take them to assignments when the handler crew was stretched thin. Several more in red were, Priscilla guessed, leads on handler teams. Most of those unknown to Priscilla wore ties or business casual, people

Priscilla imagined were part of Beales' operations team, or visitors, or members of finance. If the lab bought whatever Lloyd was selling, there would certainly be a cost involved, Priscilla knew. Others there, dressed for business in dark jackets, power ties, or pleated close-the-deal skirts, were probably outsiders, consultants or partners or customers, invited to the meeting because their attendance might be helpful to the lab.

Naturally, there were staff from the punishment room itself, three females and one male, all in the dreaded gray. She'd knew them all, and had endured personal dealings with them more than once.

There was also a member of the medical staff, a young woman in blue scrubs, with a stethoscope in her pocket. Why was she here? Priscilla wondered.

Priscilla used to care about networking. Less than a year away from graduating, she knew she needed to meet people, form professional relationships, get her name out there, and she was not above using her inherent advantages to do so. She looked good when she dressed up, put on makeup, blew out her hair. People looked at her when she walked into a room. As a summer intern at Zagbert & Wright, she noticed that some men smiled nervously, fiddled with their ties when she sat down and crossed her legs. She kept it professional, and she issued a few mild rebukes when conversations veered toward the unprofessional.

"So, a girl like you must get dates all the time," one of the partners had said in their first meeting, to which she'd replied with a smile, and a question: "What was your inspiration for the windows on the Baker-Falmouth building?"

Some questions stung, however, particularly those about boyfriends. She'd had sex, but it was hard to enjoy when the partner wasn't staying inside her long enough to give her relief, and when there was no connection, just a quick fuck and then, when the next call came, another request to fuck. She didn't ask for things. She was too yielding. That had been part of her problem. It was why she'd ended up here. She was doing her best to correct it now.

Networking. Could she network here? Strange as it sounded in the current context, it couldn't hurt to be polite, compliant – to impress people, to be seen and spoken of favorably.

“Welcome, everyone!” Lloyd shouted with a mild southern accent, drawing himself up to his full height and smiling as he surveyed the room. “I want to thank each and every one of you for being here, and in particular Gwen Beales, who invited me in today.”

Lloyd rubbed his hands together.

“For those who haven't met me yet, my name is Tim Lloyd, vice president of sales at Cassock Corporation. Now, before I get into what we do and how we do it better than anyone else, some quick housekeeping. Gwen's given us the floor until 2 today, but we'll cover the meat and potatoes of our presentation first thing, and then we'll break noon to 1 for lunch, so I hope everyone will stay with us. And then after lunch, we'll take care of any final questions and go from there.”

Lloyd rubbed his hands together again, a gesture that, Priscilla sensed, indicated a changing of gears, the shifting to a new topic.

“Now,” he continued, “my kids are curious about what I do, just like any kids. And I answer them without a moment's hesitation. ‘Daddy, what do you do?’ they ask me. And I'll say, ‘I make people better.’ That's what I do. I make people better.”

Lloyd gestured toward the equipment, turned back to his audience.

“The Cassock Correction System is not retributive, is not punitive, is not mean. It is designed – engineered is the word we use – to improve performance, using precisely the amount of aversive stimulation required to change behavior. No more, no less, long term. Our goal is to reduce the three D's – disobedience, disposition, and distraction – down to nothing. Within a month of implementation, if this lab sees average results, incidents of disobedience will decline by 35

percent, there will be 55 percent fewer errors caused by distraction, and you will notice a marked improvement in disposition.” Lloyd laughed. “And no, we can’t give you numbers on that last axis, but you’ll know when it happens. And I’m speaking from experience. As the proud father of a teenaged daughter myself, I can assure you’ll notice. A few less eyerolls, a few less sighs ...” Lloyd paused, folded his arms and stared up at the ceiling, doing his best impression of a girl wearied almost to death by the idiocy of her parents, all adults, the world. As the laughter grew, he stomped his foot, rolled his eyes at the ceiling again, sighed audibly.

“Does anyone enjoy that?” he said, returning to his original persona of middle-aged salesman. “Now, can anyone quantify that? No. But you’ll know when there’s less of it, and you won’t miss it.”

He turned toward Priscilla, still standing at the table beside Beales, and he rubbed his hands.

“Now, 67 and I are going to work together this morning to demonstrate the Cassock Correction System. The Cassock Correction System. The first lesson: It’s not as complicated as it sounds. There are in fact three simple themes, what we call the ABC’s of the system: Aversive doesn’t have to mean painful. Behavior is a river. Calibration before, during and after. Everyone with me so far?”

He looked out across the room, at the people standing and those sitting, paying special attention to Beales, before he looked at Priscilla.

“Have you been punished here?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said plainly, evenly.

“How often?”

“A few times.”

“What did you do the last time?”

“I masturbated.”

“That’s not allowed?”

“I did it when I wasn’t supposed to,” Priscilla clarified. “At night in bed, and they found out about it during inventory the next morning.”

“How were you punished?”

“They took me to the punishment room,” Priscilla said, looking sideways at the gray-suited man and woman who’d ushered her through the ordeal, “and hung me for an hour.”

“Hung?” Lloyd repeated, mock concern in his eyes.

“By my wrists, from the ceiling,” she said. “Just my toes touching the floor.”

“How were you restrained when you were brought down to the room?”

“Like this,” Priscilla said, raising her hands, her chains rattling.

“And then your wrists were tied over your head?”

“Yes.”

“So you had to be unchained to be tied?”

“Yes. My wrists were unchained, and I was tied up, and then my ankles were unchained.”

“Did anyone check your vitals while you were hanging?” he asked. “Before, or after?”

“You mean heartbeat, blood pressure?”

“All of the above. Breath, demeanor, anything like that?”

“No.”

“Did you feel the punishment was fair?”

“Well, it’s what was done,” Priscilla said. “I was warned about it. It’s been done to other girls for the same thing. So yes, it was fair.”

“What if you’d been hung for half an hour?” Lloyd said. “Would that have made you refrain from masturbating?”

“That would have worked,” Priscilla replied.

“Fifteen minutes?” he persisted. “Would you masturbate at night if it meant 15 minutes of hanging?”

Priscilla looked at Beales, and Beales looked back up at her. Lab rules were vague on this kind of thing. Complaining, or proposing changes, or questioning a policy, led to changes every now and then, but were usually ignored. It could, however, sometimes lead to punishment, so Priscilla had learned that it was best to get a feel for things before going out on a limb. Beales was in charge here, and Priscilla didn't know the woman. Would she take immediate, vengeful offense at even the merest hint of dissatisfaction? Or did she expect a sincere back-and-forth today?

“Be honest, 67,” Beales said, smiling. “Tell Mr. Lloyd whatever you consider true.”

“I didn't like being hung,” Priscilla said. “At all. So 15 minutes would have been enough. More than enough.”

“What if your punishment was, say, three minutes of hanging? Would it be worth it, to masturbate, if you only got three minutes of hanging?”

“I don't know,” Priscilla said. “I don't like getting in trouble. So I probably still wouldn't have done it.”

“So what you're saying,” Lloyd began, raising his voice to a boisterous pitch, smiling as he spoke, “is that a simple reprimand would have been as effective as being hung.”

“Yes,” Priscilla said, nodding. “I think so.”

“Is that true for every girl here?” Lloyd asked. “Would a reprimand prevent every girl from masturbating in her bed at night?”

“Probably not,” Priscilla said, to laughter. “No.”

“Very good,” Lloyd said, bouncing on his toes with enthusiasm. “Imagine if 67 received a reprimand for each infraction, because that's all it took, while the girl next to her received an hour's hanging every time she broke the same

rule, because anything less provided no correction. It would be fair, but it would look outrageously unfair.” Lloyd brought his hands together. “But is the system as it exists now not also outrageously unfair? This poor girl suffered for an hour, unnecessarily, because that’s what other girls here need. Is that not completely unfair?”

Lloyd paused, scanned the room.

“So, how do we make it both look fairer, and *be* fairer? Is it impossible?”

No one offered an answer.

“Perfect fairness is impossible,” he said. “But it can be striven for, if that’s what we want, and at Cassock, we do.”

Lloyd turned, swept his hand toward the equipment arrayed behind him.

“One of the secrets is variety. We hang, but that’s just a small part of our repertoire. We do so many things, an evaluation of fairness is impossible. Not everything we do is painful, or uncomfortable. But all of it is calibrated. We are not one size fits all. Every female is calibrated, as soon as we start the contract. And reward is a component of the system. That may sound strange, but it works. Even during punishment, cooperation is essential, and females who cooperate reap benefits.”

Lloyd rubbed his hands, smiled.

“I’m speaking in generalities and concepts now, and the Cassock system is very specific, and very concrete. So let’s get the demonstration going.”

People shifted in their chairs, stirred on their feet, seemed to redouble their attention, and Priscilla knew why. She was about to be used, placed on the equipment and watched and, possibly, listened to. People found it interesting. *She* found it interesting. Frightened as she was, she was also ... curious.

“67 and I are going to roleplay a little,” Lloyd said, laughing again. “For whatever reason, she’s been having a bad

day, and she's been found breaking the rules left and right, each time a little worse than the time before."

Lloyd stepped back among his equipment, pulled a long chain off the stand, returned to Priscilla's side, and she looked at the chain in his hand, a loop for the wrist and a handle to grip at one end, a black plug at the other.

"So first, we need to get her to correction," he said. "And I'm using that word intentionally. Correction. Not punishment. Not pain. Correction. If it doesn't correct, what use is it? So that's what we'll call it, if we're signed up here. The name will change, but the location won't. It will still be in the same place here, downstairs. It's actually a pretty decent spot. But we'll call it the Female Correction Room. Correction. And we'll swap out or upgrade most of the equipment."

He stretched the chain between his hands.

"This is what we call a transport restraint," he said. "It can be used in conjunction with the chains 67 is wearing, and when she gets to her first correction station, she remains on it while her chains are removed and she's set up for her first procedure, and it makes things simpler, and more secure."

Lloyd held up the end of the chain that featured the plug.

"This goes up her anus," he continued. "Once it's inserted, you push the button in the base, and that expands the section of the plug inside her, so she can't remove it."

Lloyd demonstrated, the plug emitting a small click as the first few inches of the shaft expanded to triple its original size, clearly too large to pass through Priscilla's opening without severe discomfort.

"Now, 67, it looks like you've masturbated again last night," Lloyd said sadly, "and you didn't get permission. So I'm here to walk you down to the correction room. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes," Priscilla replied absently, her eyes focused on the end of the chain. She'd held things in her anus, of course,

on nearly a daily basis. Anal monitors were the most common intruders. They could sense a girl's temperature, her mood and stress, her heartbeat, the tightening of her vagina, her orgasms. But this device was longer and thicker, and it locked. The monitors, on the other hand, didn't change size after they'd been inserted.

“Alright, bend over for me, hands on your knees, so I can get you leashed.”

Priscilla, with a last look at the plug, bent, chains ringing against her feet and the carpet as she rested the heels of her hands on the top edge of her kneecaps, waiting.

Lloyd didn't waste any time, touching the tip of the plug to her anus and then working it inside her, slowly forcing her entry open, driving the rod into her rectum, and she gasped once, as she often did when something was put into that hole. Or either hole, really.

“Okay so far?” he asked.

“Yes,” Priscilla said to the floor.

“Good,” Lloyd said. “Now, I'm going to lock it. It shouldn't hurt, but most girls can feel it, and they say it's startling the first time or two it's done, so I'm checking in with you. Ready to have it locked?”

“Go ahead.”

Lloyd pressed the button, the plug expanded in Priscilla's rectum, and she grunted and twitched, but she didn't lurch, didn't remove her hands from her knees, didn't cry out.

“Outstanding,” Lloyd said, slipping the loop around his wrist, tightening his fingers around the handle. “A very normal reaction. 67, first impressions?”

Priscilla straightened slowly, gazing around the room again, showing no response to this incomprehensible violation. The people in this room, all dressed, all professional, looked back at her. Was this an indignity? A shame? They'd already seen her naked and in chains. They'd already gazed on her breasts and nipples, looked at the hair between her legs and, if they cared to study it, the slit of her genitals behind it. By that

standard, a rod locked in her bowels was simply more of the same.

“I can feel it,” she said lightly. “It’s a little weird, but it doesn’t hurt.”

“Would you prefer it to the chains you’re wearing?”

“Hard to say,” she admitted. “Maybe, once I got used to it.”

Lloyd pulled a second leash off the stand and handed it to a woman in a business suit, seated at the edge of the table closest to him.

“Pass this around, please,” he said. “Go ahead and press the button, right there.”

The woman took the restraint a little cautiously.

“It’s been sanitized,” Lloyd assured. “We’re very particular about that.”

The woman smiled and pressed the button, and the end of the restraint plug burgeoned to an intimidating width, and she stared at it with alarm, no doubt imagining something like that lodged within her. Priscilla, getting a reminder of what she at present held, looked at the plug with guarded concern.

Lloyd reached into his pocket, pulled out a piece of metal in the shape of the Cassock logo, a smaller piece of metal dangling from it, and handed it to the woman.

“Here’s the key,” he said. “Put it all the way into that little hole, turn it clockwise until you hear a click.”

The woman did as instructed and the plug clicked quietly, its girth immediately shrinking down to its original size. She passed the leash to the man sitting beside her, and he followed her example, expanding the plug, unlocking it, passing it on.

“The only difference between what you’re looking at and what I’ve put 67 on is power,” he said. “There’s no juice in that model, but there is in hers.”

Lloyd held up his hand, the leash swinging between his wrist and Priscilla's body.

"This is what we call the business end of the leash," he said. "A loop for the wrist, but there's a handle here too, and it's more than just another thing to hold on to."

Lloyd lowered his hand and gazed somberly at his audience.

"Nine times out of 10," he said, "or 99 times out of 100, a girl will go to correction the way she's supposed to. But sometimes, I don't know, she'll wake up on the wrong side of the bed. Feeling her oats is the way my grandad used to put it. She'll dig in her heels, she'll stop, she'll pull away. Say a few words and most girls'll straighten up. Promise a little more correction and that can fix things. But if you have to use this feature – and this is absolute last resort – if you have to use it, though, the handle gives you some additional leverage – what we call a corrective stimulant."

Lloyd raised the handle again, his thumb hovering over a pair of red buttons.

"This first button is the safety," he said. "It has to be pushed down for the second button to work."

He pushed the first button down until it clicked.

"Once you've set the first button, the second button can be used," he said.

Priscilla, who had turned to look at him, tensed up and raised her hands until her chains went tight, in a gesture of futile self-defense.

"Don't worry, Honey, I'm not gonna zing you right now," Lloyd said, true empathy in his eyes, but then he smiled, and one might guess Priscilla's fear served his purposes. Clearly, just a dry exposition on the properties of the anal leash had her terrified, and no doubt willing to obey any command.

"Tap the button and it delivers a jolt to a very sensitive place on the body. Hold the button down and you grow the charge over the next 10 seconds, exponentially. One tap should

be enough, but if you have to, keep pressing. No one's gonna make it past the fifth second, and as soon as she's been brought back into line, you raise your thumb and it stops."

"I'd like to see a demonstration," Beales said with a smile

"Someone always does," Lloyd said, and he turned to the woman in the business suit seated closest to him. "Can you back up just a little?"

She rolled her chair back.

"Alright, 67, step up to the table," Lloyd said, leading the girl forward by her leash. "Palms flat, here and here."

Chapter 13: Introducing the Cassock Cool-Down Stock

Priscilla, wincing with a pain she wasn't feeling yet, bent, placed her hands flat on the table, her chains rattling against the edge, and she was looking down at her thumbs when a sudden, biting pain ripped through her anus, vanishing as quickly as it had arrived, gone before she could react.

"Oh!" she shouted, hopping up on her toes and twisting to look at Lloyd, who was staring back innocently, his thumb still over the second button.

"That was just a tap," he said. "If I—"

"67, impressions?" Beales said.

"It hurt," she said, still eyeing Lloyd warily. "Just for a second."

"You'd do what you were told if that was the alternative?"

"Yes," Priscilla assured. "Absolutely."

Lloyd tapped the safety button to release it and Priscilla breathed in, recovering. It wasn't really that painful, but it was a strange sensation in a strange place, and Priscilla wanted it to stop as soon as she'd felt it. And it could have been worse, if Lloyd had kept pressing. She understood that. She wouldn't want it any worse.

"Alright, 67, ready to continue our roleplay?"

"Okay," Priscilla replied noncommittally. Sweat was beading up on her forehead, the glow of fear. She turned her head to the side and wiped her mouth and nose on her shoulder.

"Now, let's take you to the first station," Lloyd said, giving the leash a light tug, and Priscilla turned, one foot shifting as she almost lost her balance, and she followed him to an ominous-looking sort of scaffold, with pads, springs, metal rods and leather cuffs arranged in ways that left Priscilla baffled.

“This is the patented Cassock cool-down stock,” Lloyd said. “Literally patented. You can look it up. It’s a highly versatile system for positioning the female for correction, training, examination, or any other purpose. You can use it to help her regain control if she’s having an episode, for example. If you’re at a point where she is verbally compliant but emotionally overwrought, and not quite ready for correction, the cool-down can be the best option. In fact, that was its first purpose, and how it got its name, but we kept making tweaks to it, and now it’s the backbone of our correction system. In the proposal on Ms. Beales’ desk, we recommend 30 of these for the correction room, three more outside every female cageroom.”

Lloyd pulled Priscilla’s leash taut, guiding her to a small space in the middle of the scaffold.

“Wrist here,” he said, pointing to an opened belt beside her hip, and Priscilla positioned her left hand as instructed and watched as he closed and tightened the belt. As he worked, the leash dangled from his wrist, swinging against the metal scaffolding, the sound not unlike the chain the wind swings into a flagpole.

“Other wrist,” he said, and she complied, her hands now doubly restrained, both chained and belted. The leather was cool, pliable but unyielding, the buckle made of worn brass.

“Her original chains don’t have to come off,” Lloyd noted. “If she was handcuffed behind her back, a few adjustments to the setup and we’d be able to belt her like that.”

Lloyd pointed to an open belt near the floor. “Foot there,” he instructed, kneeling with a grunt to secure her left ankle.

Without being told to do so, Priscilla positioned her other foot beside its belt and was bound in.

“Obviously, 67 is doing her best to comply, which isn’t always the case,” Lloyd said, rising to his feet with another grunt. “But there’s also just one of me. The cool-down stock is meant to be operated by two staff people, each with

their own role. One operator is responsible for overall compliance, normally by using the leash or some other stimulant, and the other focuses on getting her in her belts.”

Lloyd slipped his wrist out of the leash and looped it over a hook toward the front of the stock, a little peg that had obviously been created for that purpose, and he looked at one of the red-suited staffers.

“May I ask you to remove her chains?”

The woman hopped up and took off Priscilla’s original restraints, leaving her secured only by the four leather cuffs, the leash that curved around her hip as it ran from her anus to the hook.

She looked out at her audience, and they looked back, their eyes flickering from one place to another, to her bound flesh, to the device that held her, and to her eyes often enough. Why would they look at Priscilla’s face, into her own eyes, with everything else to wonder at? the girl asked herself.

“The most important feature of the cool-down is the give,” Lloyd said, and he stepped in front of Priscilla and smiled at her. “67, go ahead and take it for a spin.”

“I’m not sure I’ll go very far,” she deadpanned, prompting laughter.

“Oh, that’s right,” Lloyd deadpanned back, clearly expecting this response from Priscilla. “Wheels are extra.”

After the laughter subsided, he turned back to the trapped girl.

“Shake my hand,” he said.

Priscilla reached and, to her surprise, met only minor resistance, lifting her hand to meet Lloyd’s, and she took it firmly in hers for the second time that morning.

“Touch your face,” he said after she released his hand.

She raised her hand halfway to her mouth before the machine’s resistance halted her. She wasn’t stopped cold, however; it was more a gradually increasing resistance that eventually overwhelmed her. Were she stronger, she could

have almost reached her chin at least, she believed. It wasn't like being held by chains and brackets. It was more like being held by another purpose.

"I've got her set on minimal resistance," Lloyd said, and he stepped over to a steel, eye-level, foot-long bar at her right bearing a set of buttons and sliders.

"No plug, no electricity," he announced, waving his hand over the bar. "Everything is completely mechanical."

"67, impressions?" Beales inquired.

"It's more comfortable than chains," she said. "The resistance is sort of strange, though. Almost human."

"Move," Lloyd said. "Test it out."

Priscilla picked up her legs, one at a time, as if walking, the stock yielding easily until she tried to lift her knees to her chest, at which point it gently stopped her.

"You can use these during punishment?" asked one of the gray-suited punishment crew.

"Correction," Lloyd said. "Yes, we recommend 30 for the correction room."

"Why that many?"

"Maintenance," Lloyd said, smiling cryptically, before he explained, "a key component of the Cassock Correction System is what we call weekly maintenance. Regardless of behavior, every female spends 30 minutes in correction per week. You've got more than 300 girls here, so depending on how we schedule it, there will be times where every unit is occupied."

Lloyd turned to the bar with its buttons and sliders.

"Keep moving," he said, putting his thumb against a large slider at the bottom of the bar, gradually pushing it upward, provoking a steady clicking that seemed to come from every joint in the stock.

Priscilla stirred, her motions growing increasingly limited, until she was held nearly frozen.

“This is the resistance tab,” he said. “We recommend you keep it at the maximal freedom setting until you need her held still for a procedure, or to help her regain control.”

“I’d like a demonstration,” Beales said. “Can you activate her leash again?”

Priscilla quietly sucked in her breath, and Lloyd nodded.

“We recommend corrective procedures be done on the stricter settings,” he said. “Now, watch carefully, because this always blow peoples’ minds the first time they see it.”

Lloyd tapped two of the buttons on the control bar, one and then the other, and Priscilla felt the device shifting, catches loosening. Lloyd stepped behind her, grabbing the bar her left-hand was cuffed to, raising it, repeating the process with the right, and as her arms were raised over her head, the rest of the machine following suit, lifting her body and opening her legs, and after 30 seconds of effort, a series of clicks and the sliding of greased metal against itself, Priscilla had been put on garish display, her body stretched and spread and immobilized, almost no give in the machine now, no way to cover or protect herself, her nipples aroused and hardened, her black hair parted, her pink lips clearly visible, and she winced and gasped and looked out at her audience, all of them looking back at the spectacle with varying degrees of shock, or curiosity, or approval. Beales, in particular, seemed unperturbed by what was being done to one of the items in her female inventory, and Priscilla began to suspect that the sale was already done, the decision made. Beales had summoned Lloyd not to try to finish the deal, but to make it look like he was selling. The purpose of the meeting, though, was to notify key members of the lab population that this was how things would be.

With nothing but her wrists to support her not inconsequential weight, Priscilla found herself short of breath, her ribs rising and falling as she drew in quick, shallow gasps.

Relief, such as it was, came a second later when Lloyd stepped before her and used his foot to kick out a pair of small

pads beneath her toes, allowing her to push up on them and catch her breath.

“The cool-down has adjusted on the fly to 67’s size,” he said. “While I was putting her in what we call full display mode, it was taking her dimensions into account.”

Lloyd slapped the rod running to Priscilla’s right hand, the vibration passing through the scaffolding and into her body.

“Injury during mode alterations is impossible,” he insisted. “The female’s safety on the cool-down has been mandatory through every design improvement. But it is a complicated device, and we don’t sell it without a manual, and we provide complete training to every operator.”

“67, impressions?” Beales said.

“The pads for my feet help,” Priscilla said, pushing up and taking another deep breath. “But it’s very ... restricting.”

“The girls will be put on this for punish—for correction?” asked a man in a suit, leaning against the wall.

“It’s the core of our system, but not the only approach we use,” Lloyd replied. “They can be corrected in other ways. And the stock can be used for purposes other than correction.”

“Show us how you correct on the stock,” Beales said.

“Let’s start with something simple,” Lloyd said, turning back to his equipment, pulling a cane off the rack. “You can’t reach everything while she’s being held on it, but the derriere is exposed in almost every mode.”

Lloyd stepped to the side of the stock, demonstrating the accessibility of Priscilla’s rear with three soft taps, the wood making a soft sound against her rounded flesh.

“Proceed,” Beales said.

“Give her a real lick?” Lloyd queried.

Beales nodded a little impatiently, and Lloyd drew back the cane and applied it with solid force, popping

Priscilla's bottom once, and more than one pair of eyes in the room closed with the sound of the smack.

Priscilla shook reflexively against the stock and stuck out her lower jaw but made no sound, staring back into the room impassively.

"Now the leash," Beales said.

"Yes," Lloyd replied, lifting the end of the leash off its peg, and he looked at the medical worker.

"Donna, can you give her a quick once-over?"

The girl rose, pulling her stethoscope out of her pocket and looping it around her neck.

So she was a nurse, then, Priscilla concluded. Were she an actual doctor, Lloyd wouldn't have addressed her by her first name.

"Alright, 67, I'm going to need you to bear with me," Lloyd said, passing his wrist through the loop and pushing the first button on the handle, moving out of the way so the nurse could step behind Priscilla, and she warmed the stethoscope with a few passes of the metal against her hip and pressed the still-cool stainless steel against Priscilla's back.

Priscilla grimaced with anticipation, involuntarily tightening her anus around the plug.

"The leash wasn't our creation," Lloyd said, thumb hovering over the second button. "It was developed by a breeding company that manages a lot of females in an environment that has to be kept very secure, but we've made some tweaks to it since then. And believe it or not, most of the girls prefer it to chains. Even visitors will opt for it if chains are the only other choice."

"A breeding company?" Beales said. "Which one?"

"We're not allowed to name it," Lloyd said. "But let's just say they're in another city in Georgia, on a river, that might be known as the Savannah River."

Chapter 14: Bollte Appears

It began when Harper Sutton registered her new conception and adoption firm. Or maybe it began that day before, in late 2012, when someone offered \$150,000 for the first production of said firm, the mixed-race child of Lydia Roberson.

One way or another, Harper Sutton was looking at the world differently now. She was also looking at the old factory space differently.

What if this old abandoned factory by the river, some of it newly repurposed as residential space, some as light commercial, could be further repurposed, as a place where girls like Lydia could stay while they waited to give birth? Gestating women – gestators, Harper called them in her mind – didn't seem to need much. As 2012 rolled over to 2013, Lydia seemed to have found peace with her lot, watching TV and reading within the confines of Harper's spacious apartment, accepting her chain without complaint, without resistance, any time Harper needed to leave.

Even if future breeders weren't hiding from a murderous ex-boyfriend, it might make sense to restrict them somewhat. They were carrying something worth, almost literally, its weight in gold in their wombs, after all. A chain around the ankle was a little extreme, perhaps, but maybe a secure space could be set up, where passage in and out was constantly monitored. That would be the tradeoff – I will house you, Harper would promise, I will feed and protect you and find a buyer and give you a cut of the proceeds, but you will have to follow my rules. You will have to stay safe. No drugs, no alcohol, no fucking around. You will have to stay here. And really, then, was a chain around the ankle such a terrible thing?

But then, how does one recruit girls who have been interracially knocked up? Interracial. That was going to be Harper's focus. Right now, it was in vogue, and there was money there. Good money. But how often would a girl with a mixed-race baby just show up on her doorstep, as Lydia had?

Never, Harper knew. Never. You could advertise for girls who knew they were bearing such children, but that was probably a long shot too.

Or you could handle the conception part of the process as well. Recruit for girls who weren't pregnant yet, who wanted to be part of a lucrative opportunity, and select the fathers herself, based on ideal racial makeup.

Beast Factory was going to occupy a small corner of the largest building on the old paper mill site. The rest of the four-story space would go to other businesses. Had new leases been signed? Was it too late for Harper to reserve additional space there? Or all of the building?

In late January, Harper got her first neighbors, an older couple who resided in the apartment immediately adjacent hers.

She wondered if they were going to rent commercial square footage there as well, but they didn't seem to be working on that here, or much of anything else. She saw their car parked by the stairs a few times a week, saw them get out of it once, but they kept to themselves, didn't even acknowledge her as she passed by. That was just as well. A conversation would lead to questions, and questions would lead to a request to look at her shop across the alley, or even her home, and she didn't need anyone poking around, seeing Lydia, noticing the chain coiled against the wall, coming over to borrow sugar when she wasn't there and Lydia couldn't get the door. They didn't seem to have much furniture, made very little noise, other than a few thumps on the very thick wall between the two units.

Harper maintained a steady patter over email with a half dozen parents interested in the baby. One couple offered \$50,000, another \$75,000, and she told each politely the bidding was far higher than that, and one dropped out, and the other came back with \$155,000. There were also a few offers she dismissed out of hand, one for half a million from someone who had chosen the name "fetishola" and insisted on picking up the child anonymously, no questions asked, the cash in a briefcase.

“Not sure what your deal is, but no, never,” Harper wrote back.

Meanwhile, Lydia continued to grow, her belly protruding, her breasts swelling. One night after dark in February, Harper invited a freelance medical technician up, and the woman brought an old ultrasound on a cart, ascending on the newly-repaired elevator, and Harper didn't ask any questions, just put Lydia in a blonde wig and heavy makeup and glasses, called her Shirley and said she was a cousin from out of town. Lydia herself spoke little, but she didn't need to. The ultrasound answered all the questions. Lydia and her son were both doing well, the boy growing nicely, due sometime in mid- to late April.

By the middle of March, with the offers approaching \$200,000, Lydia wincing and smiling every time the baby kicked, and no sign of the vengeful father, the woman were beginning to speak optimistically about the future, guessing that Bollte had given up, or couldn't find her if he was still looking. Harper proposed that Lydia change her name and move far away as soon as the baby was born, and perhaps Bollte would never track her down.

The women had settled on a 60-40 split of the proceeds, Harper getting the larger share. That put Lydia in the running for \$80,000 pre-tax, a good three years' worth of income at Potato Max.

Harper was beginning to believe this side venture was the one with the most promise, and she spent more time on her PC, researching the business and talking to parents, and less time working on the shop across the alley. And when she did spend time there, she looked at it with two sets of eyes, one pair concentrating on the practical matters of patching and plumbing and paint colors, the other more visionary, imagining this as the reception area of a larger enterprise with the rest of this floor and maybe even the next floor up involved as well, where a few girls stayed while they waited to give birth. Maybe they'd get pregnant here too, one way or the other.

Harper was in the latter mode in late March 2013, simply standing in the middle of her shop and imagining how it might be set up for reception, when something behind her made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

“Hey,” said a man’s voice.

She whirled to find a man at the shop’s unlocked door, holding it partway open, looking at her apologetically.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you,” he said, smiling disarmingly.

He was as handsome as his pictures, blond-haired and athletic, dressed in jeans and a thick white t-shirt.

“No, you’re fine,” Harper said. “I just wasn’t expecting anyone.”

“You opening a business?”

“Eventually,” she said. “But we’re not quite there yet.”

He looked around the poorly-lit space, wires dangling from the ceiling, white blots of dried plaster on the gray drywall. “So I should come back tomorrow?”

Harper laughed, sincerely. Bollte was utterly charming, very likeable, and Lydia’s instant attraction went from incomprehensible in Harper’s mind to completely understandable.

“Can you give me until next Wednesday?” Harper said back.

Bollte laughed, a warm, embracing laugh. Except that he was a murderous psychopath, his genes were every bit as good as Lydia’s. What made him go dark? A handful of twisted genes, or childhood trauma? Harper hoped it was the latter.

“What’s it going to be, a restaurant?” he asked.

“No, a store, I think,” Harper replied. “I’m thinking stuffed animals. Was there anything I could do for you now, though?”

“Well, yeah,” he said sheepishly. “This’ll sound a little weird, but I’m doing a favor for some people. They’re trying to find their daughter.”

“Oh, that’s a shame,” Harper said. “When was she last seen?”

“Early October,” he said. “A few blocks from here, at night. Her name’s Lydia.”

“I really hope nothing bad happened to her. This isn’t the best part of town.”

“I’ve got a picture,” he said. “May I show it to you?”

“Sure,” she said, and he let the door close behind him, stepped up and reached into his back pocket to pull out a creased picture of Lydia, and Harper leaned forward and nodded and knew everything was ruined, that she had just signed her own death warrant, and Lydia’s as well. Two more women’s bodies would be found, one of them extremely pregnant, one of them older and blonde and not pregnant, and the police would call it another murder-suicide.

“She’s pretty,” Harper said. “I really hope you find her.”

“So, you’ve never seen her before?”

“I haven’t,” Harper said.

“She might be pregnant,” he said.

Harper looked at the picture again, as if trying to add 25 pounds to the girl’s weight, a rounded belly.

“Sorry,” she said. “But is there a number I can call?”

“No, I’m just asking around. I’m pretty sure she’s long gone.”

“Yeah,” Harper agreed. “I hope she’s okay.”

“Is that your car across the alley?” he asked. “The Rounder?”

“Yeah,” she said, because if he already knew it was hers, lying would only make things worse. But the truth was

bad too.

“I had one a few years back,” he said. “Transmission wasn’t that great.”

“It does the job,” Harper said. “I needed something a little bigger, for the work here.”

“Okay, I’m sorry for the interruption,” he said. “Let me leave you to it. It’s been nice to meet you.”

“Very nice to meet you too,” she said, smiling, watching him step out through the glass door, watching him cross the alley and pass her car, looking at it just long enough to memorize her license plate.

She stayed within the space, standing stock still, watching him make his way to a large SUV parked several spaces from hers, and he got in, backed out, vanished, and as soon as his car was out of site, Harper fled the store, raced across the alley and up the two flights of stairs, dashing into her apartment and bolting all the locks.

“We’ve got to leave!” she shouted, startling Lydia from a nap on the couch, the chain rattling as she sat up. She’d taken to wearing nothing of late, the heat of late pregnancy, as well as the size that came with it, making clothing a burden she didn’t need.

“Wha—” she said.

“He found us!” she said. “He’s coming back!”

“Who?”

“Bollte!” Harper screamed. “I talked to him in the shop! Get up and get dressed and get your shit, we’ve got to leave, now!”

“And go where?”

“Anywhere! And get the cash! All of it!”

“Wait,” said Lydia, as Harper knelt at Lydia’s feet, opened the padlock and tossed the chain against the wall. “Is he with you?”

“No, he drove off,” Harper said.

“So he’s gone,” Lydia said.

“He’s coming back!” Harper said, rushing to her bedroom, pulling a suitcase out from under the bed, lifting and opening it, running to her dresser, pulling out a handful of clothes.

“When is he coming back?” Lydia asked, voice breaking with terror. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him nothing, I didn’t need to! Get your suitcase out and put whatever you want in it. If you don’t pack it it’s gone forever!”

“How do you know he’s coming back?” Lydia shrieked.

Harper stopped, stared at Lydia, held up a fist.

“He saw my car,” she said, sticking up her index finger. “He’ll get my name from that.”

A second finger went up.

“He’ll find out I live here.”

Another finger.

“He’ll find my adoption company.”

Fourth finger.

“He’ll see I used to manage Potato Max, when you worked there, but I told him I didn’t recognize you when I looked at your picture, and he’ll know I was lying.”

Thumb.

“And then he’ll come here. He’s probably parked a block away, looking everything up his phone right now! And if we’re still here, we’re both dead.”

Lydia’s hands went to her belly, and she looked down at it, and she wailed with the sorrow of a woman who has already lost her child, her whole body shaking with misery and fear.

“Pack!” Harper screamed. “Maybe we can get away!”

Still wailing, Lydia went to her suitcase against the wall, opened it, knelt before it, the bag with the cash still there, most of the bills unspent, most of her clothes kept here too. She pulled on a pair of maternity panties Harper had bought her, a pink maternity warmup suit, a pair of sneakers, and she went to the clothes rod and pulled her suit down and returned to her suitcase and shoved everything in and closed it and stood.

Harper was closing her own suitcase when the knock came, a polite three taps on the reinforced steel door.

Chapter 15: Arguments in the Car

“Harper Sutton,” Mary repeated.

“She owns it,” Madison said. “Sutton Mirabilis. It’s sort of a cool name, and she’s been in business longer than just about anyone else.”

“Can we call her first?”

“Mom, it’s this huge company, I don’t think she just talks on the phone.”

“How big is it?” Mary asked, her doubts perhaps softening, slightly.

“They have this big building on the Savannah River,” Madison said. “And they’ve had hundreds of babies there.” Madison opened her bookbag, pulled out a slip of paper and wrote down the URL. “Look it up here. There’s not a ton of information, but you’ll see her picture, and a contact form. That’s how I got in touch. You probably shouldn’t contact them that way, though. But if you take me to the tour, you can go too. I’d like to have you there.”

Mary looked down at the floor again, crossed her arms, the picture of a woman trying to pull herself far enough out of the well of financial despair to be an adequate mother to her child. The two had shared very few words over the last few months, and now they were talking, at least. About important things, too, even if Madison’s ideas were completely outlandish.

“Okay,” she said. “Go ahead and make an appointment.”

“June 15?” Madison said. “You can get me there?”

“And back,” Mary said.

“And back, right,” Madison agreed. “Thanks, Mom.”

After a few more exchanges with Sissy Glanville, the breeding agency’s recruitment director, Madison had lined up hers and her mother’s visit, scheduled to begin at 11 a.m. Monday, June 15. Madison still wasn’t clear on all the details,

however, so while she prepared for final exams, went with three girlfriends to prom, passed her tests and graduated as expected, she traded a few more emails.

“Hi, Sissy,” she wrote, “Is it okay if my mom does the tour with me?”

“Sure!” was the one-word reply that showed up two days later.

“Okay,” Madison replied in her next email, sent that same afternoon. “And are there policies for us both, about what we wear, and restraints?”

Three days passed this time before Sissy’s next reply: “Yes, you’ll both need to disrobe, and you’ll both be given restraint options.”

Madison had tried. She’d done her best to get a complete picture of how things would be during the tour for her and her mother. Apparently, it was supposed to be secret, or Sissy would have said more. So they’d just have to wait and see exactly what “disrobe” meant, and what “restraint options” meant.

Regardless the uncertainties, first thing on the morning of June 15, a weary Mary Inglewood and a pleasantly unsettled Madison – both uninformed about important things – piled into Mary’s old compact and headed east for the two-and-a-half hour drive to Savannah.

Mary was dressed for business, a light gray skirt and matching blazer. It wasn’t until they were past Macon city limits that she glanced at her daughter and hissed with alarm.

“You’re going like that?” she said.

“Like what?” Madison replied.

“You’re wearing ... gym clothes?”

Indeed, Madison had dressed casually for this momentous day, in sneakers without socks, navy gym shorts with white piping, a pastel green t-shirt. Her makeup was as carefully applied as always, however, dark eyeliner and shade,

and her favorite pink lipstick. But the rest of her was dressed for a picnic, or the beach.

“What’s wrong with this?” Madison asked.

“You can’t go to an interview dressed like that!”

“This isn’t an interview,” Madison protested. “It’s a tour.”

“This is your first meeting with them,” Mary said. “Don’t you want to make a good impression?”

Madison was silent, torn between her certainty these clothes were more than adequate, and the reflexive self-doubt anyone suffers when questioned by a parent.

“I can turn around,” Mary offered. “You can call them and say we’ll be a little late.”

“No,” Madison said without hesitation. “I don’t want to do that.”

The next tranche of silence was broken five minutes later, by Mary again.

“Can I tell you what Dad and I think?” she began.

“Sure,” Madison replied, somehow inflecting to one-syllable answer to make it sound more like “not really.”

But Mary forged ahead.

“We don’t think you really want to do this,” she said. “We think it’s a sort of acting out.”

“Acting out?” Madison repeated. “Like, a temper tantrum?”

“More sophisticated than that,” Mary said. “You’re very bright. So there’s going to be some nuances to it. But I think you’re self-sabotaging.”

Madison laughed with a timbre between true amusement and something darker – bitterness, perhaps. Contempt.

“Why, exactly, do you and Dad think I’m self-sabotaging?”

“Because you know as well as Dad and I do that this isn’t a good idea. You don’t really want to do it, so you’re going to make sure it doesn’t work out.”

“Mom, I—”

“I’m not trying to be mean, I swear,” Mary said softly. “I just want you to know ... when it doesn’t work out, that it’s for the best. That you didn’t really want it, even if you thought you did. That you’ll find something else, that’s—”

“It’s already working out,” Madison said sharply. “They know ... what they need to know about me. The tour, if anything, the tour is me interviewing them. If I don’t like it, we leave. Right then.”

Madison’s voice was rising as she spoke while she continued to process her mother’s words and what they meant about how her parents perceived her. It stung. And she didn’t need to be hearing this right now, today, now, at the eleventh hour.

“And what I’m wearing doesn’t matter at all,” Madison continued. “It’s coming off. As soon as we get there, probably, we’ll have to—”

“We?” Mary said.

“For the tour,” Madison said.

“Your tour,” Mary said.

“Do you want to go on it too?”

“Of course.”

“Well, that’s the policy then,” Madison said. “We both have to disrobe.”

“And wear what?”

“I’m not completely clear on that.”

“Well, you’ll have to wear something.”

“I’m not completely clear on that.”

“They can’t make you tour in the nude.”

“I’m not clear on that,” Madison said again. “I asked in a few emails, it seems like something they want you to find out once you get there.”

“You sound willing to do this,” Mary said.

“Do what?”

“Let strangers take off your clothes and parade you around.”

Madison laughed again, all bitterness this time.

“You are...,” Madison began after she’d reclaimed her voice, “you are trying to make this sound like the worst thing possible. You’re just ... I feel like you ... and Dad ...”

Her voice trailed off.

“Me and Dad what?” Mary said.

Madison held her peace.

“Me and Dad what?” Mary said, louder and more sharply.

“Okay,” Madison said, drawing in her breath. “I’ve done a lot of thinking about this. So I’m going to just say it. Okay?”

Mary held her peace now.

“Okay?”

“I can’t say okay to something,” Mary said, “until I know what you’re going to say.”

“You won’t know what I’m going to say until I say it,” Madison countered. “But you’re not going to like it.”

Mary passed a truck, engine whining and rumbling because the old car really wasn’t up to speeds like this for any length of time, and for a minute or two, that was all the noise one could hear within the vehicle.

“Go ahead,” Mary said at last in a tone that said “Please don’t go ahead.”

“You and Dad have no idea what I should be doing,” Madison began. “You think you know. Or you think you know

what I *shouldn't* be doing. But you don't even know how to live your own lives, so now you're looking at me, and just—”

“We don't know how to live our own lives?” Mary interrupted.

“Well ... obviously not.”

“How do you figure?” Mary asked, her voice icy now.

“Really, Mom? We have to go through that again?”

“You're talking about the lawsuit?”

“Of course.”

“You're still so young, so there are things you don't know, about—”

“Oh, I know enough,” Madison barked. She was expecting her mother to fold under her withering but necessary criticism, but Mary was fighting back, for some reason, and Madison wouldn't have it. “You lost. Period. You lost. And you're probably going to prison. And ... you totally failed as parents. You spent 10 years doing nothing but waiting for some bogus thing that was never going to happen, while all my friends' parents were just doing normal jobs, and I have nothing while everyone else is going to college, and so really, I am not interested in your advice. Okay? I don't want any advice from you or Dad. If I'm going to mess up my life, I'll do it on my own.”

Mary breathed in, but no words came, so Madison went in for the kill.

“And I'm sure I can't mess it up any worse than I would listening to the two of you.”

Nothing but breathing, from the tragic nose and mouth of Mary Inglewood, a sound overlaid against the hiss of four old tires rolling against the gray asphalt of Interstate 16, which at the moment was another tragic sound.

Mary sniffed, once, and she took one hand off the steering wheel to pass the back of her thumb beneath each eye.

That's when Madison noticed that her mother had applied makeup, every bit as carefully as Madison had. And the suit she'd put on – she never wore that suit. It was her best, but it was old, Madison knew, and it had gotten tighter through the years. Mary hated wearing it. She'd put it on for her daughter.

Mary cared. She was doing her best, with what little she had. And somewhere in the back of Madison's mind, the concept of regret was stirring among the synapses. If she could have, maybe she would have taken back her words. But her emotions were still too raw. No apology was going to emerge from the back office machinations of the girl's mind. There would be no sorry, not today.

She did not remain speechless, however, settling on half an olive branch after another five minutes of brooding travel.

"I'm just asking for support, okay?" she said softly. "As in trust. As in, trust me. Just be there for me today. Let them do their rules. If I have to undress, I can deal with that. If there's some kind of ... handcuffs or something, that's okay too. No one ever died because they got handcuffed. And if you can't take it, you can just ... you can go back to the car, and wait for me, and once I'm done, I'll meet you there. But they're a big company, and established, and very professional. I've done some emails back and forth, and looked at things, and I gave them my DNA, and things, and they seem like all normal people. So, if you can go inside, I'll want you there, on the tour. That would be supporting me. But it's okay if you can't ... if you can't go in there. But just support me, either way."

Mary said nothing back, but she didn't sniff or wipe her eyes again, and perhaps she saw what her daughter had said as a bridge, a gift, the means by which she could redeem herself, at least a little. For so it often is with people, the deep and roiling waves of complex relationships being settled, over and over, with a few castoff words, a little verbal flotsam that people rope and wedge together to give themselves something to rest upon.

Because it must be lived with other people, life is profoundly difficult. All life. All lives. There is nothing admirable about withdrawing. Hermits, ascetics, monks, are other names for failure. Live in the world with the other creatures of the world; muddle through; that is courage, and heroism.

Mary and Madison had said all they could say, and so the last 45 minutes of the drive were done in virtual silence. They laughed at a van painted in 70's psychedelia. They reminisced briefly about a trip to the Tybee Island beach when Madison was 10 and refused to wear a top. Otherwise, they drove alone with their thoughts.

Chapter 16: Bollte Comes Back

As soon as she heard the knocking, Harper's demeanor shifted, from panic to a sort of frozen serenity, and she walked to the door that way.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hey, I'm that guy you talked to a few seconds ago," came the muffled words from the other side.

"Oh yeah, hi!" Harper said, peering out the peephole, turning to stare at Lydia, who was holding her hands over her mouth, eyes wide with terror.

"Sorry to bother you again," he said, "but I had one more question for you."

"Sure, maybe I can help you," Harper said. "What did you need to know?"

"Well, I've got a second picture of that missing girl I should have shown you," he said. "Can you take a look? It's her with blonde hair, and she might have bleached it again."

"Can you hold it up to the peephole?" Harper said. "I'm not really decent right now."

"It would be easier to show you in person," he said.

"Can you come back in about 15 minutes?" she said.

"It'll just take a second," he said. "I can slide it through the door if you open it just a crack."

"Hey, can you just come back a little later?" Harper said. "Just give me 15 minutes."

And with that, the ruse was over, and the apartment shook and echoed with three thunderous bangs, Bollte smashing the side of his fist into the steel surface.

"Open the door, bitch!" he screamed, pounding again. "Open the door, you goddamned bitch!"

"I'm calling the police!" Harper screamed in return, and she did indeed pull her phone out of her pocket, but she

didn't dial, the futility of the gesture obvious to her a moment later when Bollte's voice boomed through the metal barrier.

"You do that," he said, following up the words with laughter, and then another bellow of rage, a sort of "Auuggghhh!", and another thump against the door, but this one weaker, followed by his voice again, but strange, more animal-like, more urgent, a choked-off "Fuckfuckfuckyou!"

Harper looked frantically about her apartment, as if searching for some new exit she hadn't noticed until now. A back door, a ladder to the ceiling, a secret hatch in the floor.

Nothing.

She went to the windows.

Yes, this was the only option. The windows. They weren't designed to open, but they could be smashed through. They could be broken out, and they were big enough to allow the passage of a woman's body, even a pregnant woman's body. There would be a 20-foot drop, of course, from the factory's third floor to the ground below, a landing spot of weeds and shrubs and broken concrete, and Lydia would lose the baby, no question. But she might at least live, if nothing vital were broken by the fall. Harper believed she could sustain the drop in one piece, or if she couldn't, maybe she could crawl away. Maybe to her car. She ran to her dresser to grab her car key. If she could make it to her car, and one foot was still functional enough to press on the gas, and she could get Lydia in it, they would both live at least a little longer. Maybe she could run Bollte over. He'd be appearing at the bottom of the stairs, running to his car, and she could intercept him with her front bumper.

Keys in her left hand, she looked at her bed, paused, ripped at it with her right, tearing off the sheet. It wasn't long enough to get them to the ground, but it could get them closer to it, if she could tie it to something and shimmy down it. If Lydia could shimmy, she might yet keep her baby, and be whole enough to run with Harper to the car, and to enjoy at least a few more minutes of safety, of life.

Harper kicked at one of the window panes closest to the floor, once, twice, her foot not breaking through. Lydia was right behind her, clearly not knowing the plan yet and not caring. She would stay beside Harper until she was safe. Or dead.

Harper drew her foot back to kick at the window again, stopped, turned and stared at the door.

There had been no pounding, no shouts of rage, nothing. Had he already gone to the ground beneath the windows, anticipating their flight? Or, even now, was he preparing to break in? Harper squinted through the windows at the blue, springtime sky, watching for a male body while she worked through the ways he might reach the window. With a ladder from below, or with a rope from above.

Maybe he'd gone to his car to get more equipment. A crowbar. Explosives. Or maybe he was simply standing outside the door, waiting for them to open it and make sure he was gone, and he'd pounce.

Each possibility was terrifying in its own way.

Harper crept softly back to the door, Lydia close behind her, and peered through the peephole.

Nothing. No one.

She turned, leaned against the jamb, and her left leg began shaking. Just her left leg. Whether she put all her weight on it, or leaned right and lifted her left foot, the leg kept quivering.

She pulled her cellphone out of her back pocket, stared at it while her hand shook, put it away, pulled it back out, finally started tapping.

"Who are you calling?" Lydia asked.

"The police," Harper said.

Lydia's eyes went wide, but she didn't try to stop the call. Merely watched.

"Hi," Harper said as soon as the line was answered. "There's been someone yelling outside my door. Can you

check it out? No, I don't know why they're yelling, but I don't feel safe. They're banging on my door, too. No, not right now, they stopped. But I think they're still out there. Is my phone sending my location? Okay, yeah, the old paper plant. I'm Harper Sutton. I'm renting here. I'm on the third floor. Apartment 2. Just have them knock when they get here. Thanks!"

Harper hung up, stared at her phone, held her breath, and waited.

Lydia, breathing for two, continued to inhale.

Somewhere, from perhaps a half mile away, the distinct howl of a police siren echoed. Was it coming their way? It got louder, louder again, so loud then it must have been on the old factory property, and Harper exhaled and pulled Lydia to her chest and shook with desperate tears.

They might still be doomed. If Bollte had fled, he'd be back. They'd have to move, change their names, watch their backs. But at least they'd probably survive the day.

But what if Bollte were still waiting outside the door when the cops showed up? Surely they wouldn't stand by while he executed his former lover and his former lover's protector.

Would they?

The siren grew so loud it sounded like it was in the apartment with them, and then it fell silent, and the women waited by the door, Harper with her back to the wall, her arms around Lydia.

Harper could sense footsteps on the landing outside the door, then a muffled voice. Someone was talking on the radio, possibly, indistinguishable words punctuated with an electronic buzz.

Harper let go of Lydia, peered out the peephole, could see nothing, stepped away from the door.

"What's going on?" Lydia asked.

“I have no idea,” Harper said, but she was suspecting the worst. The cops and Bollte were talking now, figuring out how he could kill the women behind the door without getting the officers into trouble.

Finally, a tap sounded, light but insistent, against the door.

“Yeah?” Harper said, peering through the peephole, surprised to see female cop there, her dark hair tied into a bun.

“Savannah Police,” said the woman.

“Is he still there?”

“Who?” the woman’s voice inquired.

“The guy who was trying to kill us.”

“Yes,” the officer replied. “Open the door.”

“Not if he’s still out there!”

“He can’t hurt you. Will you please open the door, Ma’am?”

“No!”

“We need to talk to you,” the officer said. “If you refuse to open the door, we’ll have to break it down.”

Lydia screamed, sharp and piercing, and staggered to the couch, huddling at one end, waiting for death.

“How many people are in there with you?” the officer demanded, and as Harper peered through the peephole, the woman drew her revolver and held it up with both hands.

“Why do you have your gun out?” Harper shouted.

Lydia screamed again.

“I’m hearing someone scream,” the woman said. “We don’t know what’s going on in there.”

Another police siren howled, a half mile and growing louder.

“That’s Lydia,” Harper said. “She’s screaming because she’s scared. And she’s pregnant!”

“Who else is in there?”

“Just the two of us. Me and Lydia.”

“Are you armed?”

“No, Ma’am,” Harper said.

The officer was still holding her gun, and Harper continued to stare, spotting just the shoulder of another cop, male.

“Where’s Bollte?” Harper demanded.

“Bollte?”

“The guy who was banging on our door.”

“His name’s Bollte?” the cop asked. “You know him?”

“I met him earlier today. He’s known Lydia longer than that.”

“Why was he bothering you?”

“Because he’s a psycho.”

“Open the door, please,” the cop said.

“Not while he’s out there.”

“He can’t hurt you,” the officer said. “Open the door.”

“How many of you are there?” Harper asked.

“Just two right now.”

“More on the way?”

“Yes,” the woman said, staring at the peephole.

“Why are more people – more police – coming?” Harper asked.

“Crime scene,” the woman said.

“Where is he, then?”

The woman’s gaze shifted, left and down, and Harper paused, considered, turned to look at Lydia, and unbolted and unlocked her door.

As soon as she pulled it open, the female officer and her taller male partner stepped back, both their guns drawn.

The siren of another police car had grown to a deafening pitch as it entered the old plant property and drew near. Somewhere farther away, a third siren echoed, this one the distinctive wail of an ambulance.

Harper looked back at Lydia, just a pink lump on the couch now, shaking with silent sobs. Harper eased her head beyond her doorway, looked down and right, into the wide-open eyes of Bollte, his face upturned, smiling.

He was flat on his back. Under his right arm, an arrow's shaft and fletchings protruded. The arrow had passed through him, the steel tip sticking out between two ribs under his left arm. After he'd fallen, apparently, a second arrow had been launched from point-blank range, the archer standing directly above him to finish the job. His heart had stopped almost immediately, Harper guessed, because there was very little blood, just red, fist-sized spots where the first arrow had gone in and come out, nothing at the point above his heart.

"Did you do this?" the woman asked.

"Of course not," Harper said, looking back into her apartment.

"Lydia, you okay?" she asked.

Lydia didn't reply, didn't move, so Harper stepped back and knelt by the couch, reaching her arms around the pregnant girl, whose wet eyes were open, seeing nothing. Not unlike Bollte's, although she was still alive, and he wasn't.

"He's dead, right?" she asked, staring at Harper's neck. Was she in shock? Relieved? Heartbroken?

"Yeah, he is," Harper said. "Someone took him out."

"Who?"

"No idea," Harper conceded. "Someone who hated him. I'm sure there was a long list. But we're gonna live."

Harper allowed herself a couple of shaking sobs before she rose, her face returned to remarkable serenity, her

hand on Lydia's shoulder.

"You just stay here, okay?" Harper said. "There's no reason to look at him."

"Is it bad?"

"No, it's really not. But you don't need the memories. It's just arrows through the chest, though."

"Arrows?" Lydia repeated.

"Arrows," Harper said. "Like, bow and arrow. One went all the way through."

"Maybe that was the last sound he made," Lydia ventured with a strange emotionlessness. "He sounded mad, but maybe it was ..."

"Yeah, good chance."

"When will they take him away?"

"I don't know," Harper said, lowering her voice and turning her eyes to the open door, where the first two officers had been joined two more, peering warily at both Harper by the couch and the corpse on the landing. The ambulance continued to wail, now from the edge of the property. "Could be hours. And in the meantime, we're gonna have a lot of shit to deal with. We just need to tell them everything. Everything. Don't volunteer any information, but if they ask, we tell the truth. Okay?"

"Okay."

Harper rose, went to the door.

"Please stop there, Ma'am," the lady cop said. Her gun was holstered and the ambulance was no longer wailing, and Harper was done with what had been, by her standards, the worst panic of her adult life. Now it was back to business, negotiating challenges she was much more comfortable with, getting this inconvenience over and done with. That's all it was now: an inconvenience. A dead body someone else needed to cart away, and some questions she and Lydia would need to answer.

“Can I shut the door?” Harper asked, peering at the two new cops, who looked back at her curiously.

“We’d like it to stay open,” the woman replied. “It’s a nice day for an open door.”

“I’ve got a pregnant girl on that couch,” Harper said, pointing. “She’s due next month. And the last thing she needs is this kind of stress.”

“Was he the father?” the woman asked, gesturing toward the corpse.

“Are you asking as part of an investigation, or just out of curiosity?”

The cop turned, answering by ignoring the question, stepping to the railing and leaning over to look at something below. “We’re up here,” she shouted to someone. “Stairs over there, and there’s an elevator around the corner.”

Harper looked at the rest of the cops.

“If you need me, just knock,” she said, rapping against the iron door jamb to demonstrate, and she shut the door and went back to the couch, satisfied she’d made her point, and she flipped on the TV, and sat down, and stroked Lydia’s hair.

“How’re ya feeling?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Lydia said without moving.

“That’s normal,” Harper said. “But everything you’re doing, you’re doing for two, and stress isn’t good for you or the boy. Let’s watch TV.”

Lydia slowly worked her way upright, looking at her belly to make sure she hadn’t delivered at some point in the last few minutes, looked up at the TV, where Harper had found a show about a home makeover. At present, a woman was using a sledgehammer to smash out an interior wall.

“It’s just ...” Lydia began, as if speaking to herself. “Who did it?”

“That’s for the cops to figure out,” Harper said.

“But what if one of his friends thinks it was us and decides to get revenge?”

“Did he have any friends you’re worried about?”

“I don’t know,” Lydia said. “Everyone I knew were his business associates, I guess. He told me ...” Lydia’s throat closed briefly, and her eyes teared up, and she waved at her face and continued. “He told me ... I was the only real friend he’d ever had.”

“I’m sorry,” Harper said.

“I blame his mother. She married this asshole when he was young, and then his stepdad ...” Lydia’s voice trailed off.

They went back to watching TV, but now and then, Harper would rise up, open her door, glance through it, let it close. The crowd outside was growing. There were plainclothes officers there now, two or three. Detectives, Harper guessed. And then there was commotion over the media. It must have been a slow news day, because Harper could hear what she guessed were multiple reporters, from the paper and the TV station, shouting questions from the ground, getting terse answers from the landing, being told not to come up the stairs.

The elderly man who’d moved in next door got involved at one point, shouting excitedly with a heavy foreign accent at the police.

“How zees happened?” he shouted. “Who the killer of these poor man?”

“Sir, please step back,” said a male cop. “Step back. We’ll need a statement a little later. Please go back into your apartment until we knock.”

“Statement?” the man said, sudden rage in his voice. “Yah, I tell you all. All thing!”

“You know who did this, Sir?” one of the cops asked.

“Yes, of course. Criminal! Criminal all over! They kill! All the time. Sheesh! God help us! I give statement now! Sheesh!”

“We’ll let you know when we’re ready for your statement,” the cop replied patiently. “Please wait in your home until we knock.”

“Sheesh, they come for me next, holy shit. I tell you everything! I blow the ceiling off all the crime in this whole fuckeeng country.”

“Yes sir.”

“Amerika!” the man shouted with disgust, and his door slammed, his adventure in the home of the brave not going so well on this particular day.

In late afternoon, someone tapped lightly against Harper’s door.

“It’s open!” she shouted.

A black man in a light gray suit pushed the door open and stepped in, not closing it behind himself, and Harper motioned him to the chair.

Lydia, still seated close to Harper on the couch, turned off the TV, and the man introduced himself as Detective Carl Mercer, and he pulled out a notebook, and started firing off questions.

He made quick work of the backstory, the women answering honestly, without elaboration, about Lydia’s relationship with Bollte, her fear of him, her pregnancy, her decision to flee to Harper’s, and her time since, including their plan to place Lydia’s baby with an adoptive couple.

He didn’t, to Harper’s relief, ask about any money she’d taken from Bollte, and although he made a circuit of the apartment after asking Harper if he could do so, he didn’t ask about the chain coiled against the wall. If he’d asked about the two women who’d died the night Lydia fled, Harper would have said what she knew, but that didn’t come up either. She wished it had. Regardless their individual character, the women deserved justice.

The focus of the interview, not surprisingly, was what had happened today, and Mercer was remarkably thorough,

asking repeatedly for their best guess of the time of each incident they described, particularly when he'd yelled.

If Mercer was here to corrupt the investigation or cover up whatever role the Savannah Police had played in Bollte's criminal enterprises, he was doing a good job indicating otherwise, his determination to understand the exact nature of Bollte's death obvious.

In the middle of a question, one of the cops appeared at the door, rapped on the jamb.

"Carl? Hey, Carl?"

"Yeah?"

"Got something you need to see."

Mercer stood, stepped through the door while Harper and Lydia looked at each other, mystified.

Five minutes later, Mercer returned, holding a compound bow gingerly by the string, staring at their faces.

"Either of you recognize this?" he asked.

"No, where'd you find it?" Harper asked.

"Someone tossed it off the edge of the landing," he said. "I think they were trying to get it into the river, but it didn't go that far. We found more arrows there too."

"The same arrows?" Lydia asked.

"They match."

The questions continued for close to another hour, but Mercer eventually ran out of things to ask, and he left and let Harper shut the door.

The body was gone by nightfall, the police soon thereafter.

After dinner, Harper stepped out on her landing, looked down to see a female reporter bathed in light, speaking into a microphone, Harper's building behind her. Harper was squinting at the scene when a man's voice to her left startled her.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Do you live here?”

Harper turned to find a tall, gaunt young man regarding her in the half light of the landing’s dingy emergency lights.

“Yeah?” she said, a little sharply.

“Sorry, kinda dark up here,” he said. “I’m K.C. Hernandez, with the Savannah Gazette. I was sort of curious about what happened here.”

“A guy died,” Harper said.

“How?”

“Ask the cops.”

“Who was he?” he asked.

“You don’t know that yet?”

“All I know is white Caucasian male, and he was murdered.”

“Okay,” Harper said.

“Do you know who it was?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you gonna tell me?” he persisted.

“Not if you’re gonna tell people I told you.”

“I won’t tell,” he promised.

“First name was Bollte,” she said. “B-O-L—”

“Bollte Lippincott?” he said with surprise.

“You knew him?”

“I knew of him,” Hernandez said. “He was officially a successful businessman, but rumors said he was plugged into some shit.”

“Criminal?”

“Yeah,” Hernandez said. “This is big. Who killed him?”

“No idea.”

“How’d he die?”

“Ask the cops,” Harper said. “But there’s something else you should look into.”

“Yeah?”

Sa’qal Benege and Mims Callow,” Harper said quietly.

“The murder suicide,” Hernandez said. “Last fall. Weird story.”

“It might have been two murders,” Harper said.

“Wait. You think it was Bollte?”

“Maybe.”

Harper turned, headed to her door.

“Thanks,” Hernandez said.

Harper shut and locked the door, watched a little more TV with Lydia, and the two women went to bed, both exhausted.

But Harper could not sleep. Something was bothering her. It wasn’t just her near-death experience. It was something else she couldn’t put her finger on until the next morning broke through the wall of windows.

As soon as Lydia stirred and sat up, looking around blearily, Harper was beside her on the couch.

“Sleep okay?” she asked.

“I guess,” Lydia replied.

“We need to talk about something,” Harper said. “It bothered me all night.”

Lydia’s eyes widened with fear.

“With Bollte dead, there’s nothing to keep you here,” Harper noted.

“I don’t want to leave,” Lydia said.

“I’m worried, though,” Harper said.

“Where would I go?”

“That baby’s worth a lot of money,” Harper noted.
“More if I don’t get my share.”

“You think I’d run out?”

“I don’t think you will, I don’t think you won’t. I just think it’s a possibility.”

“So?” Lydia inquired, her mouth in a pout.

“I need to chain you at night too.”

Lydia didn’t say yes, didn’t say no, just continued to pout, and the matter was settled, and that night, it was simply done, Lydia sitting naked on the couch at the end of the day, Harper stepping over with the long chain, wrapping the end around Lydia’s left ankle, padlocking it, and going to bed.

Chapter 17: Rules of the Tour

Madison mounted her phone on the dashboard for the last 10 minutes of the drive, and Mary scowled at it, not accustomed to getting around with electronic assistance. But once they left the interstate, she referred to it regularly as she navigated a run-down commercial street, a road between forest and swamp, another zone of civilization consisting of apartment blocks, self-storage businesses, shops, and small restaurants, and finally their destination, a half dozen beige buildings, the largest a four-story structure with a narrow row of windows along each floor. The property was surrounded by a black, wrought iron fence, with a black and white “Sutton Mirabilis” sign wired to it, serving as the only indication of what was here.

Mary slowed uncertainly, pausing where the fence curved away from the street to make a narrow entrance, a sliding gate at the end, currently closed.

“Pull all the way in,” Madison urged. It was 5 minutes to 11. If her mother got confused or went to the wrong place, they could be late. Madison didn’t see her wardrobe as of any consequence, but punctuality was important to her.

Mary pulled in, greeted by a steel box with a button, a speaker, a camera, and she rolled down her window, the steam of Savannah in late spring billowing into the car, and she pushed the button.

“May I help you?” inquired the box, speaking with a female voice.

“Yes, I’m Mary Inglewood,” she said.

“Mom, give them my name,” Madison said.

“I’m with my daughter, Madison Inglewood,” Mary added. “Madison Inglewood.”

“Pull forward when the gate is completely open, park in one of the blue spaces to the left, and go to the door that says ‘Visitors’.”

The gate lurched, stopped, slid again, parting to give Madison and her mother a view of a plain but well-kept company grounds, green lawns and neat curbs defining the spaces around each building.

Mary went left, toward a parking lot containing several dozen vehicles, and she parked her car in one of the blue spaces and turned it off.

“It seems very secure,” she said.

“Yeah,” Madison agreed, pushing open her door, quickly spotting the nearby glass “Visitors” door on the ground floor of the tallest building. “It’s this way.”

Madison paused, looked up, noticed that the building she was headed to was joined to the structure beside it with a third-floor catwalk, a blonde woman looking down from there, a phone pressed to her ear.

Madison made her way briskly to the door, Mary a distant second, and she pulled it open and held it for her mother and took in the room here.

It was a large space, bright, with light coming both from fluorescents and a wall of windows to the left. There were several dozen fabric-covered chairs in three neat rows, and a reception desk in the far corner where woman sat, typing on her PC.

Madison headed toward her.

“Madison Inglewood?” the receptionist inquired.

“Yes, me and my mom, Mary,” Madison said. “We have an 11 o’clock appointment.”

“I’ll let Sissy know you’re here,” she said, and she looked at Mary. “Did you want to take the tour too?”

“Yes,” Mary said in her bravest voice.

The woman fished two forms out of her desk, clamped them to a pair of clipboards and held them up. “Grab a pen, fill these out and sign them, and then someone will come get you.”

Madison and Mary accepted the forms, pulled pens from the cup on the woman's desk, and turned toward the rows of chairs.

Mary made her way haltingly, and seemed to be struggling to pick a seat, and it occurred to Madison that her mother was nervous for some reason.

Incongruous as the comparison was, Madison was reminded of the time her mother went with her to a middle school sleepover and stayed for a half an hour while the girls watched TV and gossiped and laughed. Madison was a little shy, but Mary was much more so, huddling in a chair and smiling weakly at the goings on before she left to meet Dad for dinner. Somehow, this was like that, another Madison thing where Mary was trying to fit in, poorly.

This wasn't a party, though, not a sleepover, and the people in charge here were adults, closer to Mary's age than Madison's. But Madison was more adventurous than Mary, that was obvious. Madison was more curious, too. Unlike her mother, Madison wanted to know things, know what went on here, know how it worked, fill in the gaps her imagination couldn't complete. Her imagination had been busy nonetheless, working with what it had, tormenting her mildly for days, and particularly on the drive. She wasn't at her wettest time of the month, ovulation having occurred two weeks prior, but the creations of her mind had her lubricant flowing lightly in the car whenever she wasn't arguing with her mother, and she could feel it now, her panties almost uncomfortably wet between her legs.

She sat down, and Mary settled in beside her, and she looked at the receptionist, taking comfort in her cold professionalism. The woman was in her 30s, dressed for business, a bright scarf around her neck. This was probably the best person who could have greeted them, Madison thought, and her mind wandered to what would have been the worst person. Slutty would have been bad. Or a creepy guy. Yes, that would have been worse. One of those guys with his hair slicked back, older and slightly overweight, leering at Madison

and speaking with a Jersey Shore accent and trying to sound cool. Or leering at her mother.

Ugh!

The chief purpose of the form, besides absolving the company of any responsibility should things not go as well as expected on the tour, seemed to be the protection of trade secrets. All of it could have been summed up by the sentence “I will never tell anyone about anything that happened here,” but there were a great many more words than that to define “tell” and “anyone” and “anything that happened.”

Madison filled in her name, address and birthdate on the lines provided, waited for her mother to finish, and walked both forms back up to the desk. The woman looked them over and typed something on her PC, and within a minute or two, the door behind the receptionist’s desk opened with a loud beep, and a woman appeared, smiling, her white teeth in severe counterpoint to her dark black skin.

“Madison?” she said.

“Hi,” Madison said, standing. Mary rose as well, dropped her phone, bent to retrieve it, rose again.

“I’m Sissy,” she said, motioning them to join her at the door. “And you must be Mary.”

“Hello,” Mary said, offering her hand, and Sissy took it, turned to Madison and shook her hand, and used a badge to get back through the door, which opened with another jarring beep.

They entered a short hall with doors to the left and right, and Sissy opened the first one and led them into a room that looked like a medical examination clinic, with a chair in the middle, a sink and cabinets, a table and chairs.

“You must be very proud of Madison,” Sissy said, easing the door shut.

“Well ... yes,” Mary said, clearly not expecting this to be the first thing said. “She just finished high school on the A/B honor roll.”

“Oh, congratulations!” Sissy said, beaming at Madison. “But getting in here is no small shakes either.”

“Getting in here?” Mary repeated.

“Getting a tour,” Sissy said. “Madison is in the top one percent.”

“One percent ... of ...” Mary prompted.

“For every 100 who reach out, only one girl gets this far,” Sissy explained. “Madison’s DNA has a lot of strong markers, she’s got exactly the look we wanted, and she did great on the masturbation survey. Can you please both undress?”

Madison immediately grabbed the hem of her t-shirt and began yanking it up.

“Undress,” Mary said.

“Yes, for the tour,” Sissy explained. “You did want to join Madison on the tour, correct?”

“I did,” Mary agreed doubtfully.

“You’ll both need to be nude, and then I’ll do a quick exam and we can go over restraint options.”

Madison exhibited none of her mother’s reservation, setting her t-shirt on the table, unclasping her bra and pulling it off, her C-cup breasts spilling forward, swaying as she crouched to unlace her sneakers, her sense of victory tempered only slightly by sympathy when Mary asked quietly, “Is there somewhere I can hang my suit?”

“Right there,” Sissy said, pointing to a pair of hooks on the door.

Mary moved glacially, still undoing the last buttons of her blouse when Madison had finished, standing naked, her nipples thick with arousal, her dark pubic hair hiding a slit just as stirred up, a light sheen spreading across her pink, vibrant labia.

“Climb up on the chair and let’s have a look,” Sissy said, pulling on a pair of surgical gloves.

Madison complied, sitting down on the noisy paper, spreading her legs and raising her feet into the stirrups, looking at the ceiling as Sissy slid her chair in position, parting the girl's lips, touching her anus.

"This is mostly a contraband check," Sissy explained.

"Contraband?" Mary echoed. Her coat and blouse had been hung, she'd kicked off her heels and pulled down her stockings, and was pushing down her skirt as she regarded Sissy.

"We observe what's called hygienic standard A," Sissy said. "No drugs, no liquor, no meds, and definitely no semen."

"People try to bring in semen?" Madison asked, lifting up on her elbows.

"You'd be surprised," Sissy said. "Are you ovulating?"

"No, that was a few weeks ago," Madison said, fighting not to blush, because she knew why Sissy was asking.

"Okay, hop off," Sissy said, turning to Mary, who looked completely lost in just black bra and panties.

Madison standing aside and quietly observing, tried to see things from her mother's perspective, a difficult chore for which she had little practice. But she somehow managed to refrain from rolling her eyes and sighing. In response, Mary seemed to see in Madison something of a role model, her nonchalance inspiring the woman to slip off her bra, drape it over a hook, push down her panties and stuff them into a jacket pocket, and she turned with a wan smile and heavy breasts and went to the examination chair, staring at the ceiling as Sissy, with a fresh pair of gloves, poked around between the woman's legs, examined her shaved mound and vulva, spread her lips, and found her contraband-free.

"Thanks, all done," Sissy said, and she stood, pulled off and tossed her gloves, washed her hands, and turned back to the two visitors, the younger waiting nude and confident for further instructions, the older exhibiting the stress of violated

modesty as she slid off the exam chair, her back bent, her eyes creased with anxiety.

She was well built though, Madison thought. Her breasts, smaller than Madison's, were just as upright, her nipples larger than the daughter's, but responding the same way to the clinic air. Mary's ass was fuller, round, Madison noted with a little envy. This was perhaps something people with their genes earned with impregnation.

"Are we getting something else to wear?" Mary asked.

"No, you'll be naked for the tour," Sissy said. "Now, I can—"

"Why naked?" Mary asked.

"Would you rather not take the tour?" Sissy said, clearly not interested in justifying facility policies.

Mary turned to Madison with a face on high alert. Her daughter had implied this might happen, but the immediate reality was here now, and she was struggling.

Again, Madison stepped up with an air of breezy confidence.

"It's up to you, Mom, but I'm ready. And I'd like you to be there."

"Okay," Mary said, croaking the word. "That's fine. I'll go."

"Good," Sissy said. "Now, restraints."

Mary's eyes went wide again, and she looked to her daughter, and Madison did not disappoint, remaining firmly in control, waiting with aplomb for whatever it was Sissy said next.

"I can put you both in full chains," Sissy said, "or I can leash you by your anuses or vaginas."

Chapter 18: Mother Number Two

Lydia carried her first child to term, a son she didn't presume to name, delivered on April 21, 2013, exactly a month after someone slew his father with a compound bow and the kind of steel-tipped arrow one uses for target practice.

The child was brought forth the usual way, weighing in at a robust 8 pounds 11 ounces, and he delivered to the world a new palette, dark blue eyes, yellow-tan skin, dirty blond hair. Not just an infant. A statement. An assertion. An affront, for anyone affronted by a nameless new race.

Lydia wept the first time they put him in her arms, because he was beautiful, and he was hers for now, and he bore traces of a dead man she'd loved before she'd learned to fear him.

Harper had gambled well. In the last month of gestation, several parents had attempted to commit her to a contract: \$275,000. \$295,000. \$310,000. Acting on the hunch the child would command more out of the womb, she waited until he was born, took his picture and shared it, and the opening bids rose to \$400,000. Then \$425,000. \$455,000.

The winning bid: \$495,000.

Lydia nursed and nurtured the child for his first three months, until the transfer was made in a hotel conference room rented for the purpose, lawyers in attendance on both sides as he became the son of a very Caucasian, very ecstatic, very Southern set of parents, who hugged the weeping Lydia, who hugged the stoic Harper, who even hugged the lawyers before they embraced the child in turn and made the mother and her agent a good bit wealthier than they had been before. Harper's pre-tax was close to \$300,000. Lydia's \$150,000 after expenses, and she also still held some of Bollte's cash when she got on the plane to reunite with her parents.

It must be noted that the infant, before his legal adoption, spent his first months under peculiar circumstances.

As soon as Lydia returned from the hospital, she went back on the chain, but she didn't stay on it. By mutual agreement, Harper had a cell built at the other end of her apartment, and three weeks into Lydia's brief life as a mother, it was ready for her and the boy, and she passed into it with a pout but no further complaint.

It was roomy enough, with plumbing and a bed and crib and its own TV and a view of the windows, and even though the front and side consisted of bars, and Harper sometimes called it a cage, it served its purpose as a home, protecting Harper's investment until the deal was closed. If the child was troubled by his mother's restraint and confinement, he kept it to himself.

Nor did Lydia seem to mind or hold any grudges, burying her face into Harper's shoulder at the airport as they said goodbye, and making vague promises to return, although that seemed in Harper's mind to be unlikely, for various reasons.

Meanwhile, it turns out, Harper had birthed something else with those few stray words to a journalist on her landing.

That tall, dark reporter had indeed looked into the deaths of Sa'qal Benege and Mims Callow, and discrepancies arose immediately between what he found and what the police had said. Neighbors the cops never bothered to interview had seen and heard things that didn't line up with a murder-suicide. The gun used in the killing had vanished with no logical explanation. An officer drawing a city paycheck had a house on the beach in Tybee that he couldn't explain. Two detectives and a patrolwoman were indicted. Three cops were fired. The chief resigned. To Harper's relief, Detective Mercer seemed to have steered clear of the temptations. He even got a promotion in the midst of the upheaval, to master detective.

The Savannah underworld had its own reckoning following the death of one of its luminaries, dead bodies turning up here and there, new groups competing for the city's vice markets, the less-corrupted police rounding people up as quickly as they could build cases.

And Beast Factory would never be. Before the deal had closed on Lydia's child, Harper had placed an option on the rest of that four-story building, and begun looking for funding on turning all of the structure into her new firm, begun in crisis, consummated with flying colors six months later, envisioned going forward as an early entrant in the nascent industry of designer children.

Funding turned out to be remarkably available, if mysterious. Within days of placing an option on the old factory building, the holding company tasked with liquidating the property had heard from a firm interested in what might be going on there. A breeding and adoption firm seemed to match their portfolio aspirations and, a week after Lydia's baby had joined his new family, Sutton Mirabilis had leveraged itself into just over thirty million dollars, with a laughably modest 5,000 dollars due monthly for the first two years, payments ramping after that gradually, the whole amount plus annually compounded interest of 5 percent not due for two decades.

Who were the lenders? Harper never met them in person, never talked to anyone on the phone, just traded emails with a rotating crew of lending officers and underwriters, all representing a company that called itself Global Solutions MBK, which had no website nor any other immediately uncoverable internet presence. Not that Harper had the time to do much digging. Her first order of business was finding her next breeder, preferably a healthy, fertile girl with good genes who had not yet conceived but who needed something to do, who would accept semen from whatever male Harper selected, and for whom a six-figure payout was worth at least nine months of confinement and restraint.

Because, of course, that would be non-negotiable. Breeding for Sutton Mirabilis was not a chore, a job, an occupation. It was a way of life, and that way of life would be lived in a cage, or at the end of a chain, from before the seed was planted until the baby had been handed over, the money paid.

In fact, the question had come up multiple times with the first round of prospective parents. Where did the mother

live? they would ask. What was she doing while the baby grew within her? Was anyone monitoring her, managing her, keeping tabs?

“She lives with me 24/7,” Harper would reply. Some kept pushing, and Harper didn’t sugarcoat her answers. “The mother is kept secure,” she said to one couple. She was even more direct with other parents: “The mother is kept either under my direct supervision, or secured by her ankle to a chain set into the floor.”

“That’s strange,” said one mother, and Harper never heard from her again. The rest accepted that detail without further comment or question, and continued to bid.

Harper advertised widely for her next breeder, stating the terms plainly, and was immediately inundated with responses. The challenge turned out to be weeding out the vast majority of non-viable contenders: the women in their 40s who’d just gotten divorced, the girls who needed a place to live after a stint in prison, the females who admitted they couldn’t work at anything else because of a disease or disability. A surprising number of inquiries were made by parents trying to find their daughters something to do other than live at home or take drugs.

Harper replied to most with a polite form letter that said they didn’t, regrettably, match what she was looking for, but three girls emerged as viable candidates, and she flew all three to Savannah at her expense, sat down with them for hours-long interviews, showed them the cage and the new deadbolt on her apartment door (requiring a key from either side), showed them the chains they would wear outside the cage, explained that insemination would be done naturally, and hoped that at least one would hang in there.

Two remained interested, and Harper urged the black girl, Avery, to keep in touch after she settled on the blonde girl, London, from Florida. “Beach pretty” is how Harper thought of London, her hair in a ponytail the day they met, dark eyelashes and eyebrows, blue eyes. Mix her with Pakistani, Harper thought, for Harper’s mind was turning ever more frequently to the expected issue of any two ethnicities,

and this one was intriguing. Dark Indian, or dark Pakistani. That would be interesting.

London was 20 and trying to figure out what she wanted to do with her life. She'd been to college, had done well, but dropped out, partly because of the cost, partly because she couldn't settle on a major. A gap year in which she could meditate and ponder while she brought a new life into the world – and walked away with enough money to go back to school – was for her a dream come true, and it was her enthusiasm as much as anything else that tipped the scales in her favor.

Once they'd reached agreement in early July, Harper was in a hurry to get things rolling.

London's cycle was fairly regular. She'd started her period June 30, meaning she'd be fertile around the middle of the month, and Harper didn't want to lose the chance of getting her pregnant at the first opportunity, so she paid for another plane ticket, flying London from her home near Miami on the afternoon of July 6th, and she greeted her at the airport with a professional handshake, drove her home, sat her down to sign a stack of paperwork drafted this time by lawyers, and far more sophisticated than the document she'd concocted herself that Lydia had signed. There were medical contingencies, fiduciary stipulations, things about war, famine and pestilence. There was even a short discipline clause in the new forms, just the wearing of handcuffs in her cage for a few hours or up to a day as the consequence for anything from disrespect to resisting restraints.

After she'd signed it all, London stood, smiled a little tightly, picked up the pink bag she'd flown with, a carry on small enough to fit under her arm, and she followed Harper to her new home, striding through the cage door without hesitation. She turned to watch Harper swing it closed, put the key in the lock, bolt her in. After a brief pause, she went to her bed, sat down, the bag beside her.

Harper peered in at her new female and decided now was as good a time as any to address matters that hadn't been covered yet, in the interview or the contracts. The bed stood

against the bars, meaning the females were no more than a foot apart during the conversation.

“Dinner will be around 6:30,” Harper declared. “I’m still learning about ideal diets, but the focus will be on lean proteins, a good mix of fruits and vegetables, limited carbs. I’ll be doing chicken tonight, doing a lot of fish and chicken overall, maybe red meat once or twice a week.”

“Sounds good,” London agreed.

“And then, you can tell me what you like. Some cravings can be good for you, some bad, so we’ll work on that together.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay, clothes,” Harper said.

“Yes?” London replied. She’d shown up casually, in sandals and jeans and a loose sweatshirt. Given the size of her bag, she probably hadn’t brought much else.

“Any clothing I have to buy you comes out of your proceeds,” Harper said, reciting a clause from the contract. “So if you need something, let me know, but you’ll be paying for it in the end. And it needs to be within reason. You’ll be staying here, so you won’t be dressing up.”

London laughed, apparently amused at the idea of wearing high fashion here.

“I brought a week’s worth of bras and panties, a tablet, and not much else,” she said, patting her bag. “A few t-shirts, some socks.”

“You can wear whatever you want, or nothing, if you want to save your clothes,” Harper said. “The last girl was naked most of the time, especially toward the end of her pregnancy. And I tend to keep things warm.”

“Okay,” London agreed, a little dubiously. “I can do laundry, right?”

Harper gestured toward the washer and dryer, standing against the wall near the bathroom. “I can chain you if you want to take care of it. Or I can do the wash, I don’t care.”

“Do you already have chains?” London asked.

“I bought a few things,” Harper said. “Things for your ankles and wrists. We can try them out at some point, before you leave your cage.”

“Okay,” London said, reaching back to tighten her ponytail.

“Now, partner.”

“Have you found someone?”

“I’m talking to a few people,” Harper said. “I’m thinking Asian subcontinent.”

“You mean India?” London said.

“Yeah, that or Pakistan.”

“What kind of people are they?” London asked, and one might be able to tell she was struggling to keep her voice even.

“First generation American,” Harper said. “Two brothers who run a hotel, a guy in college.”

“And they’re cool?” London said.

“What do you mean?” Harper asked.

“Well ...” London began, and now her anxiety was showing.

“I’ll be here,” Harper promised. “They won’t do anything they’re not supposed to do.”

“You’ll be here while I let them ...”

“Yeah, natural insemination, and I’ll be supervising,” Harper said, repeating another term made clear in the contract. “Artificial is way more expensive, and I think natural works better anyway.”

“Really?” London said, a little doubtfully.

“More semen,” Harper explained. “I’ve done enough research that I’ve got some trade secrets now, and this is one of them. So, by the way, this is covered by the confidentiality agreement you signed.”

“Understood.”

“Do you want to know about it?”

“Yes.”

“Guys release a lot more semen in a vagina than they do into a tube,” Harper said. “And girls produce more lubricant when they’re with a guy, and lubricant is good for the sperm. And for the guy, too. The more he likes your vagina, the more semen he makes, the more sperm comes out. And then, you need to orgasm, after he’s deposited. That’ll help draw it into your uterus, and that’s important, and you need a penis for the best orgasm.”

London looked up at Harper, leaning against the bars, and seemed to be trying to appear comfortable while Harper went through the science of a very personal act.

And Harper wasn’t done yet. There were things that hadn’t been discussed she needed to know, and talk about.

“You orgasm, right?”

“Yes,” London said.

“During sex?”

“Sometimes.”

“Do you have any trouble producing lubricant?”

“Usually not,” London said.

“But sometimes?” Harper persisted.

“It depends on the guy, and if I’m ovulating.”

“Do you masturbate?”

“Sometimes,” London confessed.

“How often?”

“A few times a week, I guess.”

“Can you do it once a day?” Harper asked. “At least?”

“Well ... okay,” London said, her hesitation obvious.

“It’ll boost your hormones, and help you get wetter during sex,” Harper said. “And your chance of pregnancy goes up with all that. There are studies that prove it. Girls who masturbate more have a higher probability of early conception, and we both want you pregnant as soon as possible.”

“Okay.”

“And you need to orgasm after he ejaculates,” Harper continued. “Preferably more than once.”

“Okay.”

“Did you bring anything to stimulate yourself with?” Harper inquired.

“You mean ... something for ...”

“A dildo, a vibrator, anything,” Harper said. She wasn’t going to dance around any of it. This was straight business for Harper. London was here, taking up space in her apartment, and in a cage she’d had built at no small expense, because of her potential as a conceiver, a gestator, a mother. London had come to the role with a set of vital equipment, tools she was born with and needed to use properly. If her job required a hammer and screwdriver and power saw, that’s what Harper and London would be talking about, and there would be no embarrassment, no hesitancy. And so must it be for the equipment London brought to this particular enterprise: a vagina, a uterus, fallopian tubes, a clutch of eggs, one dropping each month. They were just implements here, and Harper would talk about them that way, and London needed to do the same.

“I didn’t really bring anything for ... doing that ... to myself,” London stammered.

“What do you want?” Harper asked.

“Well ...”

“This is on me,” Harper said. “You tell me what to order and I’ll buy it, my expense.”

“Okay ...” London said. “I guess maybe, you know, a ...”

“Dildo,” Harper said.

“Yeah, that too.”

“Big, small, medium?” Harper said.

“Medium.”

“That’s not the first thing you were going to say,” Harper noted.

“Yeah, well ...” London said, blushing and struggling to continue. “Anal.”

“An anal plug, right,” Harper said. “Average size?”

“Yes,” London said, nodding, and one might imagine that until this moment, her preference for anal stimulation had been the darkest of her secrets, something she’d never told anyone, never planned to tell anyone.

People might judge. People might think her strange, unsavory. But Harper’s matter-of-fact approach had drawn out her secret. If London’s anus was another tool in box, another path to a wet vagina and a slot ready for a Pakistani penis, Harper would put it to its best, highest use.

“Anything else?” Harper said. “A vibrator for your clitoris?”

“Yeah, I’ll try that.”

“Anything for your nipples?”

“What do you mean?” London asked.

“Cups or clamps,” Harper said. “Some girls like them.”

“I’ve never used anything like that.”

“I’ll put in an order,” Harper said. “Use what you like, and we can try a few more things if you don’t get pregnant this time.”

“Okay,” London said. “Sure.”

Chapter 19: A Partner is Found

Had things progressed as they should have, Priscilla van Dross, on this Thursday morning in late February 2019, would have been sitting in class – an advanced design course, for example, or something on environmental design and integration. She would have been clothed, no doubt. Her name would have been Priscilla.

Instead, 14067, as she was known, was nude and spread wide on what was called a cool-down stock, a Cassock Corp. product being peddled to Atlanta General Female Laboratory and Services. She was not the center of attention, however. The contraption that held her was. A collection of rods, gears, springs, buttons and leather belts designed to hold a female in a variety of positions, it was a cornerstone of the Cassock offering.

Now, two dozen of the facility's managers, workers, researchers and partners were witnessing the device's effectiveness as demonstrated by Cassock salesman Tim Lloyd. Priscilla was there as a prop, as the female stand-in for all the girls who would eventually be put on this and subjected to the Cassock Correction System, a system designed to inflict no more discomfort than necessary, its goal the optimal performance and obedience of each female as she participated in the lab's essential studies.

At present, in addition to enduring what was called full display mode, Priscilla was at present holding the end of a leash in her anus, a device meant both as a simple restraint and as a corrective tool, for it was designed to deliver stimulation at whatever intensity the female seemed to require.

At the urging of lab operations chief Gwen Beales, Lloyd was about to demonstrate a stimulation setting a little higher on the leash's range. How the tool affected a female was something, surely, most of the people in the room wanted to see.

As Lloyd stood behind and a little to the right of Priscilla, her leash in his hand, a nurse named Donna had

stepped forward and pressed a stethoscope to Priscilla's back, just behind her heart.

So all this might have been of great concern to Priscilla, her naked body hung and splayed and about to suffer a painful indignity. Oddly enough, however, her primary interest at this moment was on the windows behind her, a pair of them with the blinds drawn. If she had an opportunity, she would peek through them, to see what they looked down upon, to get a sense of what lay beyond the lab's walls in this direction, what sort of fence ran along the property's edge, if there were a street, shops, businesses, homes. They were in a conference room on the building's highest floor, after all. One could see a great deal from here.

"67, ready?" Lloyd asked the girl, thumb hovering over the second button.

"Yes," Priscilla replied stoically.

Lloyd pressed the button.

"Ah!" Priscilla shouted after the first moment of stimulation, and her body tensed, her hands balled into fists and her breasts swung and bounced as she strained at the unyielding leather cuffs around her ankles and wrists. "Auhh!" she shouted again, her voice as strong and powerful as advertised. "Oww! AUUGGH! EEEEEEE!"

Her last sound was a high-pitched scream – truly a resounding effort – before Lloyd released the button, the pain vanished, and she hung, limp and panting.

Her next sensation was the stethoscope, being pressed against her back again, the nurse listening to the sounds of a female in post-distress.

"Vitals slightly elevated," Donna reported.

"67, how are you doing?" Beales asked.

Priscilla pushed her toes against the little platforms under her feet, raised her head, straightened her back.

"I'll survive," she said.

“How did it feel?” Beales asked, continuing with an ironic tone: “Will it help keep you girls in line?”

“It will,” Priscilla promised. “It really hurt.”

Priscilla sensed fingers at her anus, felt the leash plug contract to its insertion size, felt it leave her rear, and she exhaled in relief, her ribs falling before they rose again.

Was this abuse? Torture? Trauma?

The psychological impact of pain depends invariably on its context, and from that perspective, no, what had been done to Priscilla was none of the above. In the last six months, she had accumulated a wealth of evidence that the profound stimulations she was subjected to – both pleasurable and excruciating – would be applied clinically and professionally, would end soon enough, and were being done for an arguably reasonable purpose. One might legitimately question if anything done in this facility qualified as valid, but Priscilla was beyond that concern, and was therefore able to process the sensations of lab work the way a patient remembers the pain of a medical procedure. A shot hurts. Deep tissue massage hurts. Physical therapy hurts. Very few people suffer post-traumatic stress from those things, because they’re necessary. So is being denied an orgasm for an hour, being punished corporally, having your anus shocked for a demonstration, because they are all being done with the same degree of care and necessity. Since the summer, Priscilla had learned to suffer, to finish suffering, and to think no more on it.

Lloyd set the leash in the sink, squeezed sanitizer on his hands, rubbed them together and stepped before Priscilla.

“Along with correction, a female on the stock can be examined,” he said, turning to Priscilla, lowering his hand to her vulva and casually spreading her lips, inserting a finger up her vagina as she grimaced and clenched her hands. “She can be penetrated for training or disciplinary purposes, she can be ___”

“Penetration with a penis?” one of the women asked.

“Yes,” said Lloyd, tapping the inside of Priscilla’s thighs. “The legs are held wide enough in this mode to allow standing penetration.”

“Chloe, get us a penis, text me when you find one,” Beales said to the head of the handlers, and Chloe stood up immediately and left the room.

“You can also store a female on this between procedures on the table,” Lloyd said. “There’s a fixture for waste.”

“Let’s see that,” Beales said.

“Think you can produce some urine?” Lloyd asked.

“Probably,” Priscilla said, and Lloyd stepped to the table and picked up a chrome pipe with a cup on one end, a plastic canister on the other, and he latched it to the side of the stock and swung it into position below Priscilla’s vulva.

“Go ahead, 67,” Lloyd said.

This was not the first time Priscilla had been ordered to urinate, either to provide a sample or to check her flow during or after arousal, but being told to do it in a conference room, in front of a business meeting of two dozen people, was a first.

She looked down at her black triangle of pubic hair, pushed her feet against the pads, concentrated, and after 10 seconds of relaxation, felt her bladder opening, and a thin amber stream rolled out between her legs with a soft hiss, shooting forward, then down, filling the bottom of the canister before she’d exhausted her supply.

“We don’t recommend storing a girl on the stock for more than an hour,” Lloyd said, unlatching the device from the stock, “or correcting her on it for more than two hours. But the unit is designed to hold up to three hours of production before it needs to be swapped out.”

Lloyd returned the device to the stand, retrieved a paper towel from among his presentation supplies, stepped up to Priscilla and wiped her.

“Matt,” Beales said, looking at her phone, “we’ve got a penis on the way, get her ready.”

Lloyd sidled out of the way and a male in red, the handlers’ assistant manager, rose immediately and stepped up before Priscilla, looking briefly into her eyes before he reached down between her legs, spread her lips and stroked her opening.

She was already wet, her lubrication flowing inevitably in response to any stimulation between her legs, whether anal or vaginal, and regardless where she was in her cycle. So Matt had only to retrieve a little nectar, spread it across her clitoris, and begin circling.

Again, Priscilla clenched her hands and grimaced, her response to this latest intrusion at first indistinguishable from the others, from being tormented on the leash or touched by Lloyd.

But after a few moments of practiced dallying from the hand of Matt, Priscilla was drawing in her breath, pulling at the straps around her wrists, tilting her pelvis up as far as she could in her bound state. Her efforts were not necessarily to be brought to orgasm, it should be said. She was not trying to press against Matt’s fingers to achieve a final release. Instead, stimulation was its own reward for her. Deprived of academic pursuits, her objectives had grown far more carnal in the last six months. Anytime her clitoris was lightly brushed, she enjoyed the sensation while she sought more pressure, and if the pressure grew, she would grunt with female need while doing everything in her power to increase the speed of the manipulation. Nor was a frantic rate of clitoral tapping entirely satisfactory, for then she would want the accompaniment of insertion, of an object pushed through her slot and into the nether regions of her body, thrust in and withdrawn, over and over, while she built up at her own pace to orgasm.

And so it was, after a few short minutes of increasingly rapid masturbation but nothing more, that Priscilla fixed her eyes on the conference room’s open door, waiting, and when a new male arrived in Chloe’s custody, someone she hadn’t seen before, a few years older than she

perhaps, his ankles bound together with a short chain, his wrists cuffed behind his back, his bare penis semi-erect, she looked at him furiously, no shame in her eyes or hesitation in her drawn mouth as her vagina swelled and leaked and her clitoris sang under Matt's agonizing attention.

Beales wheeled around in her chair to regard the newcomer, smiled as he looked uncertainly around the room.

His eyes went to Priscilla first, of course, but he quickly looked away, as if out of respect for her privacy – a quaint but admirable concern, given her privacy had already been deprived of anything resembling respect.

With no such concerns, Priscilla's eyes wandered all of him, but with special attention to his middle, and to the member that hung there, a thick, long rod that seemed to be growing from the tip first, the increasing weight of its circumcised head forcing it to hang down at 45 degrees for the moment.

Why was it growing erect? Was being led nude and chained to the seventh-floor conference room a source of arousal? Was there something about Chloe, and her authority over the rest of the handlers, that made him tick? Was being led into a room full of dressed businesspeople a sort of stimulation for him? Or was that girl the cause, at the opposite end of the room, stretched out in all her glory, thick hair down to her shoulders, thick hair around and above her female door, nipples roaring from a pair of heavy, raised breasts, pink lips exposed for those who looked carefully enough, and a man in a red jumpsuit beside her, mechanically stroking the enflamed flesh a few inches from her hole?

This new boy had barely looked at her. And yet, even as Beales greeted him, stood and put a hand on his shoulder, had him say a few words to the gathered dignitaries, something else seemed to be on his mind, for his penis continued to swell, lifting, throbbing, lengthening, almost threatening those closest to him with its flared head, its veiny insistence, and the moisture already gathering at his own small opening.

He was introduced as 02519. Like the girls, the boys all had five-digit names, but all their names started with 0. What was his given name? Priscilla wondered. What had he been called a week ago?

Like Priscilla, he was here for debt, he said, but she got the sense he hadn't been tricked. The debt was his own, he said, school loans that had piled up and couldn't be paid back with any job available to him. What had he studied?

He looked like her, Priscilla decided. He looked like he could be her brother. The same thick black hair on his head, albeit shorter cut. The same dark eyes and thick black pubic hair, growing in a ring around the base of his penis, which was now at full attention, straight and angled slightly up.

He was fit, healthy. He'd probably been athletic. She imagined him throwing frisbees at Mueller Park, and immediately wished she'd spent more time there, more time everywhere, but she hadn't appreciated what she'd had until it was lost.

His voice was husky, a little rough, as if he spent a lot of time shouting at concerts, or football games.

He'd arrived six days before, he told Beales, had been in orientation until last night, when he'd been assigned a general population cage.

"When was your last orgasm?"

"Tuesday, I think," he said, a little quietly, clearly still getting used to the kinds of things people asked about here.

"You were on restriction?" Beales asked.

"Yes," he said. "During orientation."

"How was that done?" Beales inquired.

"I had to wear something over my, um, over my penis," he replied haltingly.

"How did you orgasm Tuesday?" Beales asked.

"Supervised masturbation," he blurted.

"So 14067 will be your first vagina?" she said.

“Pardon me, Ma’am?”

“That’s 14067, helping demonstrate a stock system,” Beales said, pointing to the waiting girl, who was still being attended by the assistant manager, but not the way she wanted, his fingers barely brushing her vulva now, touching her hole and the coursing fluid there, moving back to lightly press her angry clitoris. “Mr. Lloyd is with Cassock Company, and he’s told us the stock our female is on works for intercourse, so we’ve agreed to call his bluff.”

“Ye ... yes, okay,” the boy stammered, his eyes going wide as he looked again at Priscilla, and this time his gaze lingered, because she was not just one of the room’s more peculiar attractions, she was also the girl he was about to drive his penis into. And, judging from the state of his organ, it was just as furious for the relief of being swallowed as the girl’s chamber was for swallowing.

“Go ahead, Chloe, get them together,” Beales said, returning to her seat, and the manager touched the boy’s bound right arm, weaving him and his penis through the attendees.

Lloyd, hovering closely as Chloe brought the boy up to Priscilla, seemed pleased to observe that the base of the male’s penis was a few inches lower than Priscilla’s female opening.

“I assume we want full insertion?” Lloyd asked, looking at Beales.

“Yes,” she said with a dismissive wave, making clear this was always how it was done, that penises were to be buried to the hilt whenever brought to bear against vaginas.

“In that case, we’ll need to fine-tune her height,” Lloyd said smugly, stepping to the control bar, and with a few taps on the topmost button, the device creaked slightly and Priscilla jerked as she dropped, looking down as her breasts bobbed and her vulva drew within a few inches of the male’s tip.

“Better?” he asked, looking at Chloe.

“Yes, perfect,” she said, and she touched the boy’s arm, and he understood and stepped up to the bound female, staring at her nipples with obvious diffidence while his penis exhibited nothing but entitled rectitude.

Chloe urged him forward until the hips of the male and the female were touching, his penis between her legs, the top of the shaft pressing against her wet, splayed vulva.

The boy had been summoned for but one purpose, to prove or put the lie to Lloyd’s claim that a girl could be effectively penetrated while stretched on the stock. Were Priscilla’s legs truly spread wide enough for him to assume a suitable position? Would this peculiar mode of coupling facilitate a natural insertion, the male filling the girl’s hole completely? How would thrusting work? Would the sensations for both boy and girl be as satisfactory as with other forms of intercourse? Would all the surfaces of his rod receive equal attention from her female walls? Would her sheath adapt to this angle of penetration, registering pleasure and continuing to pump out the soft honeys of female arousal?

Would the two, as a shorthand for everything else, orgasm? Would the girl find herself capable of relief even while stretched naked before a room full of dressed businesspeople? Would the boy find himself capable of thrusting with enough vigor that he would be able to deliver his cream to her pink hole, even while bound hand and foot and still adjusting to the way things were done here?

The only way to know was to do, so Chloe reached down, wrapped her hand around the base of the boy’s penis, and angled it upward, working the tip in between the girl’s lips and guiding it all the way up into the chamber.

And indeed, this premise of the stock had now been fully established before the gathered throng, because the boy did indeed get all of his penis into the girl, and the coupling was, further, satisfactory to both, as adjudged by the reactions of both participants.

Priscilla’s eyes went wide, as they often did when her sex organ was being pleurably reamed, and her mouth

opened wide, and her lower jaw jutted, and she looked into the eyes of her partner with an angry hunger.

For his part, the boy whose name she did not know reacted to the embrace of her vagina with what might be called shock. Or stress. Or pain. No one had warned him that the girl in this room possessed, by certain, objective standards, the finest female reproductive organ at the facility, and now that it had welcomed him in and wrapped itself around his member, he had another challenge to deal with, a sensation of ridiculous pleasure, of pressure both aggressive and exceedingly soft.

Immediately, he pulled back, sliding half his penis out of the girl's hole before he thrust forward again, grinding against her doors and her aching clitoris.

Although his hands were chained behind him, there were many parts of his body that remained unbound and quite capable of assisting the process here. His legs, for example, his abdomen, his buttocks, the weight of his torso.

And he used them all, his entire frame dedicated to feeling this girl, savoring her hole and every square millimeter of its tightness with leaden-eyed determination, pushing up into her again and again.

Those witnessing the demonstration, who unfortunately could not feel what the boy was feeling, or what the girl was feeling, sat mutely, witnessing what might have looked to them like just another standard incidence of coitus, the boy thrusting as boys do, the girl receiving as girls do, the couple shaking and stirring together to their limits of their restraints, and altogether proving the suitability of the Cassock cool-down stock as a means to hold a girl still for penetration.

Even when the orgasms came, those in the conference room might not have sensed the profound import before them. An orgasm was an orgasm, after all, and these two came in due course, first the boy, and he groaned apace, "uh, uh, uh," as his legs alternately bent and tensed, his penis forced up the girl in time with each shot of cream into her vault.

And then it was her turn, and she growled, literally growled through her climax, and she again made fists, and

again pulled at her leather cuffs, and there was enough give in the device that she was able to bow herself a little, contract somewhat, her knees and elbows flexing, the stock creaking against her exertions, and she shook and wailed, and her uterus extended and squeezed, and her vagina pulsed and spasmed around the rod, forcing every drop of semen upward through the boy's urethra and out his tip and into her hidden places, and finally, the two went slack, Priscilla suspended only by her arms as her legs crumpled and her toes slipped off the little platforms, the boy doing his best to remain locked within her, his penis still hard but softening and slowly dropping from her slit.

They were looking into each other's eyes now (where else should one look?) when Lloyd broke the spell, wryly.

"Have I made believers out of anyone?" he asked, prompting laughter. Humans find sex amusing, often enough, when they're not the ones doing it, and Lloyd clearly understood this about his audience.

"Thank you, Mr. Lloyd," said Beales. "Yes."

"A small detail we're very proud of," Lloyd said. "Did everyone notice the way the stock creaked during her orgasm? That's not a flaw, it's a feature. Our prototypes creaked, but our first release model didn't, and the labs that got the prototypes first complained. They liked the creak. It told them when their females were climaxing, and how hard. Every girl has her own sound signature on the stock, and anyone who spends much time supervising in-stock orgasms will learn who's cumming when."

Chloe stepped away, her work finished here, and all eyes were on Lloyd, who had launched into the next segment of his presentation, something about a lab in Kansas. As long as the male and female kept their voices down, no one would care what they were doing, no one would complain if they talked a little.

"What was your degree in?" Priscilla whispered urgently as Lloyd droned on.

“What?” the boy replied just as quietly, brow furrowed in confusion, studying her face. Yes, she could talk. He could probably be forgiven for thinking otherwise. Nothing up to this point indicated she was anything more than a vagina, with a body attached only by necessity. The presence of a mind seemed to startle him.

“What did you study in college?” she said.

“Oh,” he said. “You really want to know?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Linguistics.”

“Where?”

“Northwestern,” he replied, and he furrowed his brow again. Should he ask her the same question? Could she be not just a vagina, not just a girl’s body and a girl’s mind, but someone who’d gotten higher education?

“You?” he ventured, bravely.

“Architecture, Georgia Tech, until a year ago. I was nine months from graduating.”

“Cool,” he said, searching for something else to ask, looking up at her bound wrists. “How long are they going to keep you on that thing?”

“I don’t know,” she said indifferently. “We’ll break for lunch, and then the presentation ends at two, so it shouldn’t be that much longer.”

“Does it hurt?”

She pulled at the straps, the device yielding slightly.

“It’s not terrible,” she said. “There’s some give to it.”

She looked at the black tattoo on his shoulder, one inch by two inches, a barcode and a five-digit number she needed to memorize: 02519

“Did it hurt when they stamped you?” she asked.

“Like a bastard. All four times.”

“What’s your name?” Priscilla asked quietly, surveying the room. “Your real name?”

“Nick.”

“Hi, Nick,” Priscilla said, pausing before she committed a second punishable offense. “I’m Priscilla.”

“Hi, Priscilla,” Nick said. “You’ve got the best pussy I’ve ever felt.”

“How many have you felt?”

“Five.”

“That’s not that many,” Priscilla observed.

“No, it’s completely different. Really, really good.”

“Thanks,” she said. “That’s why I’m here.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re studying it,” Priscilla said.

“Cool,” Nick said. “Wanna go steady?”

Priscilla bit her lip to keep from laughing.

“Can I kiss you?” he asked.

Priscilla answered with a smile, and they exchanged a quick, almost platonic kiss, closed mouth to closed mouth, but Priscilla felt it, felt something, and she made fists with her bound hands again, and struggled against the stock, because she wanted to put her arms around him. She was kissing him, after all. It was only natural.

“I’ll ask for you,” she said quietly. “Sometimes they’ll let me have a boy I want.”

“I just got here,” he said. “You think they’d let me, um ... work with you?”

“They just did,” she said. “And I’ve only been here six months. So I’m still sort of a rookie too.”

“You’re not a rookie.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” Priscilla whispered. “You lasted long enough to make me cum.”

Chloe was back now, and she touched Nick's arm in a way that didn't require elaboration, and he smiled at Priscilla, and she smiled back, and Priscilla looked at his penis as he backed away, satisfied to see that it was still soaked with cum and lubricant, and she could feel but could not see her own sex organ, two days of built up ejaculate oozing out of her hole and dripping onto the carpet beneath her.

She watched him until he'd been escorted from the conference room. Yes, he reminded her of herself, of the face she saw in the little mirror over her sink. She'd been told she was pretty – or beautiful, often enough – but she couldn't see it. She could see the beauty in the boy, though.

Really, she didn't think much of herself. Raised by a selfish, insecure, emotionally unstable single mother, Priscilla had learned to yield, to give in, to go along, because to do otherwise was to bring upon herself a cascading battery of unpleasantries – belittlement, guilt and, worst of all, her mother's self-pity, the woman collapsing on the couch and lamenting, volubly, her failures as a mother, a woman, a human being. Even while Priscilla was living on campus, the woman had kept in constant touch, requiring near-daily phone calls in which she would decry the state of her life and Priscilla's imperfect loyalties.

Had Priscilla been manipulated? Was Mrs. Lamore, her mother's name after she married Hoyt earlier in the year, keeping her daughter emotionally hostage for her own purposes? Priscilla was here, as female lab inventory, because Hoyt and Mrs. Lamore had conspired to put her here, to settle his debts. And that was unforgivable. Ironically, though, their collusion had afforded Priscilla the first appreciable span of life completely free of her mother's influence, and it had given her time to think about many things, including her own disposition. Was Priscilla not also to blame? Was shrinking acquiescence, which she had always considered a necessary virtue, instead a flaw?

And was the revenge that she contemplated, that she was actively working toward – hopeless as it seemed – a potential form of redemption?

Briefly, Priscilla allowed her mind to wander to the girl who had taken another path in her youth, an opposite path, a path that, to Priscilla's mind until now, had been wrong, selfish, evil.

Mackenzie, Priscilla's younger sister, had never given in, was simply not wired to adapt to her mother's instability, was not wired for decency either, drinking and skipping class and having sex with older boys and getting caught and refusing to apologize.

Priscilla had done what she could to get the girl to conform, and her fights with her sister over loyalty and obedience were embedded, grainily, among her earliest memories. The fights progressed, became horrible with time, two girls with limited emotional and logical capacity responding to an unbridgeable gulf by calling each other the worst names they could think of, sometimes coming to blows, pulling hair and pounding backs and weeping and storming off.

The sisters had never been close. The open conflict became rarer as the years passed, but merely yielded to a colder version of the same thing, as they spoke less and less until that day in April 2016 when Mackenzie, age 16, vanished, utterly gone, nothing but a note in red marker on her bed consisting of two words, the first tragically misspelled: "Goodbuy, bitches."

Priscilla, finishing her freshman year in college, took the news with neither surprise nor much grief, despite her mother's wailing sorrow.

Maybe Mackenzie had been right all along, Priscilla wrong.

If she was still alive, Mackenzie would be 19 now. An adult. Her birthday was on September 3, and Priscilla had remembered it with a start at some point during that day, when she awoke in her cage, or when she was chained to the examination chair, or at night as she went to sleep, or all three. Three weeks into her time at the lab, one might think she

would have had other things to cry about, but that night, she wept over Mackenzie.

Lloyd's voice was growing louder, and Priscilla turned to see him moving toward her as he continued to speak.

Priscilla only half heard his spiel, the other labs and clinics and breeding facilities where their products and services had been implemented, invariably with outstanding outcomes: more efficient operations, improved performance, declining infractions.

"Okay, it's almost noon," Lloyd announced. "Who's hungry?"

Nods and a few "I am"s confirmed that his audience was ready for a meal.

"What should I do with our female?" Lloyd asked, looking at Beales.

"You can unstrap her," Beales said. "She'll be having lunch with us."

"How do you want her restrained?" he asked.

"I'm sure you've got something that'll do," Beales deadpanned.

"I can put that least back up her anus," Lloyd offered.

"Did you bring a vaginal restraint?" Beales asked.

"I did," Lloyd confirmed.

"It won't interfere with her research value?" Beales asked.

"As long as she doesn't pull against it, not at all," Lloyd said.

"And it'll hold a vagina after it's received semen?"

"I guarantee it," Lloyd said.

"And if it slips out of her anyway, and she decides to pursue greener pastures, you'll be responsible for retrieving her?"

Priscilla looked at Beales, uncertain if the woman was being serious or not.

Lloyd went with humor, as did most of the attendees. Perhaps it was the reference to “greener pastures” people found funny, and they laughed.

For Priscilla, however, the words stung.

“I’ll round her up,” he promised, “and I’ll take care of her correction too.”

“67, if Mr. Lloyd’s little leash slips out of your front chamber, do you promise to stay put until we can get you on something more secure?”

“I do,” Priscilla replied.

“And you’ll give us your honest opinion about being leashed by your vagina?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Fair enough,” Beales said, smiling broadly at Lloyd. “Put her on it, and if it’s still up her when we’re done with lunch, we might add a few of those to our order.”

Chapter 20: Toys in the Mail

“Dinner’s ready,” Harper announced on the evening of London’s arrival. “Hungry?”

London, engrossed in a news feed on her tablet, paused it and raised her eyes. “Yeah,” she said. “I was as soon as you started cooking.”

“Do you want to have dinner in your cage?”

“So the alternative would be ...?” London prompted.

“We can try out your chains,” Harper replied, “and if they fit and you’re okay with them, you can come to the table.”

“Okay,” London said, nodding.

Harper went to her bedroom, pulled handcuffs and shackles out of her top dresser drawer, returned.

“Ankles, wrists,” she said, holding up the corresponding restraint.

London, in jeans and a t-shirt, her sandals and her sweatshirt folded in the corner of her cage, slid off her bed.

“Come to the port in the door, and put your hands through it,” Harper said.

London obeyed, watching as the cuffs were applied, then slid her bare feet up to the lower port and allowed Harper to chain her ankles together.

“How do they feel?” Harper asked.

“Fine, I guess,” London said with a laugh. “I’ve never been chained before, so I don’t have anything to compare it to.”

“Not too tight?”

“No,” London said.

“Put your hands through the port again.”

London obeyed and Harper tugged on the cuffs, right, left, right again. Satisfied they wouldn't slip off, she unlocked the door and led the way back to the kitchen.

"Make your own plate," she said.

London picked up a plate with her left hand, picked up the tongs with her right, barely managed to get a chicken breast on it. Learning from that experience, she set her plate down to scoop up rice and steamed broccoli.

Except for the occasional clink of London's chains, the meal progressed in an ordinary way, the women making small talk as they ate, London complimenting the cooking.

But once the girl was back in her cage and her chains were off, it was back to business.

"What time of day do you masturbate?" Harper inquired, standing at the bars.

"Anytime, I guess," London said, cheeks turning a faint pink..

"You're done with your period, right?"

"Pretty much," London said.

"Okay, how about now, then?" Harper said.

"You mean ..." London began.

"Masturbate," Harper said, speaking the word more as a command than a suggestion.

London rose from the bed, slipped off her jeans and a pair of white panties, revealing a triangle of surprisingly dark pubic hair, neatly trimmed over her mound. It was the first time Harper had seen the girl's vulva, and she studied it professionally. Not that there was much to judge. Although London's lips were a little pronounced, everything fell within the normal range, Harper believed. Her mates wouldn't care, regardless. London was pretty and she had a vagina. Nothing else would matter.

London's first bout of supervised pleasure hardly seemed to fit the name, for it was a dry, passionless affair, the

girl rubbing her clitoris mechanically while Harper watched from the other side of the bars, the whole event taking about 10 minutes and ending when London issued a few quiet gasps, her legs shook, and she squeezed her breast over her shirt.

Girls can fake orgasms, of course, so when London got up to wash her hands, Harper peered at the off-white sheets where she'd been sitting, noticed the oval of wetness, concluded that the girl had at least been sufficiently aroused. Is there a way to make sure a girl has truly climaxed? Harper wondered. Heart rate might tell the tale. Better yet, something that tracked the inner workings of the reproductive array, that could sense the contractions of uterus and vagina.

London, finished at the sink, slipped back into her panties and jeans, returned to her bed, and gazed off, her face in profile to Harper, her expression grim, no post-orgasmic glow. But what new job doesn't come with challenges, unfamiliar things, tasks that force one to contemplate one's role from new perspectives?

Certain people weren't meant for certain jobs, and this was a precarious moment in the partnership. The idea of spending at least nine months, and maybe more, with no responsibilities, might sound pleasant, even idyllic, but in practice there were hardships, the first and most obvious that London had in theory the run of the world the week before, but now was limited to a single apartment, and usually just the portion of that apartment bounded by two solid walls and two walls of bars. She had windows she could peer out, the tops of trees across the river she could see, but that wasn't the same.

Would London ask to be freed?

And if she did, would Harper oblige?

The contract had been written heavily in Harper's favor, and rightly so, given the sacrifices Harper was making, her investment of time and resources. Per the terms, she had the power to cage, chain and punish London, to keep 80 percent of the proceeds from the eventual sale, and to decide with almost unilateral authority when the agreement could be negated.

So, no, Harper probably wouldn't grant freedom if London asked, particularly if she pled for release merely because she was uncomfortable, embarrassed, inconvenienced.

At the same time, Harper didn't want demurrals. The best womb belonged to the happiest girl. Harper didn't have any research on it, but she didn't need it. On this she was certain.

And so Harper, not given to sentiment or the touchy-feely side of things, lingered at the bars.

"That was okay?" Harper inquired.

"Yeah," London blurted, a little abruptly. "Sure."

"You're good?" Harper persisted.

"I am, I promise," London said, offering a disarming laugh. "It's a lot to adjust to, but I'm fine. I'm glad to be here."

"Okay," Harper said. "I want open communications, both ways. You let me know what should change, I'll let you know, and then we'll see. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"So I'm going to watch a little TV, and then lights out at 11," Harper said. "You're welcome to join me."

"You mean, out on the couch?"

"Yeah, chained again," Harper said.

"What are you watching?"

"Probably news, and a business show if it's interesting."

"Sure."

Harper had put London's chains on a table next to the dryer, and she retrieved them, secured London and let her out, and the females watched TV from the couch until London started yawning a little after 10:30. Harper took that as her cue, returning the girl to her cage and turning out the lights.

The rudiments of a routine began emerging the next day, a Saturday. Harper was up at 7, London a little after that.

Harper stayed nude until after her shower, but the more modest London remained in shorts and a t-shirt except when she was bathing in her own shower. Harper brought breakfast and lunch to London's cage, but let her out for dinner. Upon returning to confinement, London understood her expectations without being told, and she pushed down her shorts and panties, sat on the bed as she had the night before, and worked her way through another perfunctory session of relief, concluding with another round of gasps and shakes and another, slightly larger lubricant oval. Afterwards, London watched TV with Harper until she yawned and went back to her cage.

Sunday was a virtual repeat, except that Harper left her apartment for the first time since London had arrived. She needed groceries, and some time outside. She needed to get construction started on her building too, so after she returned home and made lunch for London, she went into the building – her building now – to dream.

Harper made her first complete tour of the building's second floor, all as much in shambles as the first had been. Everything was ragged here, floors, ceilings, walls. Everything would have to be reworked, repainted, refinished.

The first floor would be reception, offices, storage, interview rooms. This next floor up would be where the girls were kept, and the logistics were overwhelming. Harper believed she could manage, at most, 40 girls here, meaning 40 cages, a sizeable chunk of space if Harper had them built at about the size of the unit in her apartment. She'd need a kitchen up here, a large pantry, a clinic. She would need offices here as well. She'd need electricity, and plumbing for 40 cages – sink, toilet, shower – and a complete refit for whatever space became the kitchen and cafeteria.

Where would breeding be done? They'd probably need a separate lab for that. Or several labs. Would the cages be open, just bars between each girl? What if they fought? Managing one girl at a time was doable, but if you had 10 or 20 in the same room, the emotional dynamics went up exponentially. She'd need isolation cells, and a broader range

of discipline options. A day in handcuffs wasn't going to change anyone's attitude, any more than stern words or a reprimand. Harper had managed enough girls to know that. Something corporal probably made sense. A few quick pops on the rear and the girl would go back to her cage. But that would mean another room, for spankings.

She would need chains for 40 girls.

And she would need help. A lot of it. Dieticians, cooks, medical specialists, someone who could do ultrasounds. She'd need security 24/7, and bookkeepers, and someone to do hiring and firing.

Just finding breeding girls was close to a full-time job in itself.

With Beast Factory, she was looking at a half dozen part-time assistants to help with birthday parties and father-daughter gigs.

This was a world away from that.

And then, what about males? She could just bring them in as needed, but what if she could assemble a population of ethnicities – dark African, Subcontinent, Aboriginal, Native American, Asian, Caucasian – and keep them here? They'd have to be caged, of course, just like the girls. More securely than the girls really. No one was going to freelance here. Every pairing would be designed by Harper alone – that was something she would not delegate. Let a boy free for five minutes and he'd be up the first vagina he came across. And a boy in mere chains could still fuck. No, the genitals themselves would have to be secured in some way when there was any risk of unauthorized coupling.

As she walked the echoing second floor space, lit only by emergency lights and a bank of windows on the river side wall, Harper realized she was going to need the third floor, and probably some of the fourth, at least. That 30 million dollars, which seemed an overwhelming sum a month ago, had shrunk considerably in her mind during her brief tour today.

Harper returned home across the alley, checked on London, went to her laptop.

First order of business: Build. Find a general contractor who knew how run a big project, who could construct a new enterprise within a four-story shell. Someone who'd done large office spaces.

No.

Someone who'd built prisons, for that's what this would be. Not a place for punishment, however. Every inmate would be sentenced to pregnancy, and paid well when she or he was done.

But yes, in some ways, it was like a prison, Harper had to acknowledge to herself, and for the first time, the thought of female convicts as breeders seemed palatable. There were plenty of innocents in prison, girls who'd made one mistake or followed the orders of their fathers or boyfriends, and just needed a second chance. Find them the day their sentences ended and they walked free and needed a job. Interview and vet. Check references, and court papers. They were already used to chains and cages. They'd do fine here. And this time, they'd be getting paid for their troubles.

By dinner time Sunday, Harper had roughed out the general plan for the building. Forty female cages, 20 male cages, and all the other spaces and functions she could imagine. Kitchen, mating, supplies, offices, meeting rooms, clinics, punishment.

What about visitation? She couldn't ask her females to simply say goodbye to everyone in their life for years. Prisons allowed visitors. She should probably plan for that as well. It's not something she'd talked about with London, but the girl had parents. Siblings possibly, too.

After dinner, London completed her nightly round of supervised masturbation with what Harper sensed was a little more passion, a little more arousal. As before, she was bare only from the waist down, but she groaned this time as she rubbed herself, she slid a finger or two up her vagina, and there was a single cry in addition to the gasps of orgasm. And

London had left more than a neat oval of lubricant this time, her juice forming a sort of trapezoid on the sheets. She didn't dress immediately after this time either, returning to her bed and her tablet to air out.

The exercise complete, Harper went back to her laptop. There would be no TV tonight. A close second to building was finalizing things with her first male.

So far, her conversations with the Pakistani donors had been completely anonymous on her side, and very guarded. She had advertised for sperm donors, had found several local men with the right ethnic background who'd signed up for their own reasons, and she had connected with them. She had said nothing, however, about the details, about the need for them to come to her apartment and have sex with a girl caged therein. How would they react to that? If they thought they were going to ejaculate into a tube and leave, they were in for either a very rude or a very pleasant surprise, depending on their worldview. What religious mores might they bring?

But Harper was not inclined to share freely the nature of the work. She had seen how the media could pick up a tidbit of truth and blow it up, for better or for worse. Telling local men Harper needed them to come to her business and have sex with a female stranger and leave could lead to notoriety, publicity, scandal, and it's a problem that would likely crop up again and again.

If she could find males comfortable with the proceedings, swear them to secrecy – and keep them for a time – problem solved.

The things Harper had ordered for London arrived that Monday afternoon, in a large, carefully wrapped box, and Harper brought it to the bars and tore open the lid, and London watched with feigned detachment as the products were brought forth.

First there was a light blue, battery-operated toy, with a thick rod for Harper's vagina and a vibrating clitoral simulator. There were a half dozen dildos in a variety of sizes

and colors. There was a simple vibrator London would press against her clitoris when she didn't want penetration. There were a few small nipple clamps. And there were three anal inserts, small, medium, and an adjustable toy coated in a thick, pliable plastic. This last device was of particular interest to Harper. A ring dangled from the base, for some reason, and it featured a small keyhole. Her eyes went wide as she twisted the base and, with a series of steady clicks, the tip expanded to an intimidating girth.

"I didn't know it could get this big" Harper said apologetically. "I just bought it on a whim, in case you wanted something adjustable. But do they really think any girl could fit this into herself?"

"You don't expand it until after it's in," London said, eyeing the device with something beyond mere professional interest.

"You're familiar with this, then?"

"I never owned one," London said. "But I've looked them up."

"What's the point?" Harper asked.

"It won't slip out, so you can wear it awhile," London explained. "And it stimulates the bowels, not just the anus."

"Anything here you want to try now?" Harper inquired, returning the toy to its original, narrower girth, and setting it back in the box.

London paused before she answered: "Yeah. That one."

She slid off her bed and pushed down her shorts and panties. She didn't stop there, however. This time, she removed her t-shirt and bra as well, the first time Harper had seen her completely naked other than briefly during showers.

London's breasts were somewhere between B and C-cup, with small pink nipples that, at this moment, were fully extended, protruding almost a quarter inch from the surrounding flesh. Clearly, she was aroused in a way Harper hadn't witnessed before. Harper passed the anal plug through

the bars, gazing quickly at the opening to London's sex organ. Were the girl's lips also a little more extended than usual, a little brighter pink, a little wetter? Behind London's black pubic hair, it wasn't easy to tell, but Harper believed she could see a difference.

This was important, she reminded herself. She needed to be able to sense a girl's arousal level quickly, through as many cues as possible. Mechanics could sense the readiness of a machine for work by its sound. Those who managed animals could detect their suitability for a chore, for giving milk, for running or breeding, with a quick glance. Harper needed to develop similar skills when a human female was the object of concern.

Still standing, London – with only the slightest self-consciousness – put one foot on her bed, arched her back and reached behind her, grimacing as she slid the plug up her anus. Once it was inside her, she bent, struggling to manipulate the base to enlarge the plug. Obviously, this was something she wanted done.

“Do you need help?” Harper inquired

“Would you mind?” London replied a little breathlessly, without shame.

“Sure,” Harper said.

London slid her knee off the bed, stepped to the bars, turned and bent, and Harper knelt to work at the device.

Expanding it while it was embedded in the girl was a little more complicated than manipulating it free of her body, but Harper managed with trial and error to turn the base by degrees, paying attention to cues from the girl as she progressed and the tool issues a series of muffled clicks.

“Uh,” London groaned as Harper filled her rectum, London's tone somewhere between pain and pleasure. “Ohhh.”

Harper assumed that London would pull away when she'd been stretched enough, so when she stayed in position, hands on her knees, bottom against the bars and grunting quietly, Harper continued.

“Okay,” London finally choked. “Okay, yeah.”

Harper stopped expanding the device and moved her gaze down to London’s heavy vaginal lips, the signs of the girl’s arousal obvious from this perspective, her flesh bright pink, full and splayed away from her opening, a stream of lubricant flowing along her slit.

“Are you going to lock it?” London asked quietly.

“Why?” Harper said.

“So I can’t take it out.”

“You want it to stay in?”

“Yeah,” London said, speaking a quick, clipped syllable.

“How do I do that?” Harper inquired.

“There should be a key.”

Harper checked the box, found an envelope she assumed was a sales sheet, but when she picked it up, she felt a small piece of metal.

With London still waiting patiently at the bars, Harper tore open the envelope, peered in and found the key, a slender rod with a few ridges along the shaft. She raised it to the keyhole in London’s plug, inserted it, turned it clockwise first, found it wouldn’t budge, turned it counterclockwise until something within the mechanism clicked, and she removed the key and set it aside and tried to twist the base, finding it unyielding.

“Okay,” Harper said, “it’s locked. How does it feel?”

“About like I expected.”

“And that’s a good thing?”

“Yes,” London said. “I like it.”

“What’s the ring for?” Harper inquired.

“A chain,” London said, and she stepped away from the bars and turned, straightening with a grimace and a quiet

gasp. Again, there appeared to exist a thin line between pain and pleasure.

“Why a chain?” Harper said.

“Or a tether,” London said. “Something to keep me where you want me.”

“Wait,” Harper said with surprise. “It’s a functional restraint?”

“It can be,” London said, and twisted so she could reach back and tug on the ring, and she grimaced with every pull. “It’s supposed to be for kinks, but this definitely isn’t coming out until you unlock it. So you could ... use it for that.”

“Let me see,” Harper said.

London returned to the bars, turned and bent, and Harper reached up, giving the ring a yank, first gently, and then with a little more force.

London grunted but remained still.

“And it feels okay?” Harper said.

“Yeah,” London replied huskily, straightening. “I sort of like it.”

Harper turned to look at Lydia’s old tether, still lying coiled against the wall.

Chapter 21: Cautious Cruelty

“The chain I used for the last girl reaches most of the apartment,” she ventured.

“We can try it,” London said. “It’d be easier than handcuffs.”

“This and just shackles, then,” Harper proposed.

“Yes,” London replied, nodding.

Harper stared at the device, her mind working.

“What about being leashed by your pussy?”

“Why?” London said.

“As an alternative,” Harper said. “You can still go without handcuffs, but if you didn’t want something up your butt.”

“It might hurt,” London said.

“It’d probably be designed differently,” Harper said. “Not something that gets big at the tip. Maybe it gets a little bigger all along its length. Or, I don’t know, puts out pegs all around it.”

“Pegs?” London said nervously.

“I’m just brainstorming,” Harper said. “Short pegs. They’d have to be long enough to hold it inside you, so there would probably be a little pain, but nothing terrible.”

“Okay,” London said noncommittally.

“You want me to unlock it?” Harper said.

London didn’t say yes or no, just backed up to the bars, and Harper inserted the key, turned it both ways before she successfully released the lock and turned the clicking base until it was small enough to remove.

“I’ll let you take it out,” Harper said. “And keep it clean.”

London didn't remove it however. She straightened, turned, regarded Harper with a pair of half-closed eyes and sharpened nipples, and she raised her eyebrows, and Harper understood her unspoken plea.

"Yeah, do it now if you want," Harper said, and she remained by the bars while London sat down heavily on her bed, the plug still buried within her, and she crossed her legs and went to work, massaging her vulva, circling her clitoris, pushing two fingers into her vagina, bending to stare at her sex, focusing on that, oblivious to anything else, including Harper standing just a few feet away. There was nothing mechanical, perfunctory, about this session, London summoning all the passion for herself that had been missing before. There was an energy now, a playfulness.

Indeed, the girl seemed to be teasing herself, pushing herself to the edge of orgasm, her thighs shaking before she stilled her hand and panted, denying herself that final pleasure, only resuming after she had composed herself somewhat, at which point she renewed her efforts, pushing herself to the edge of climax again, stopping, panting, pausing, resuming, repeating the pattern a half dozen times until her whole body shook and she shouted once with relief and aching pleasure.

After she recovered and finished breathing, she slid stiffly off the bed, leaving two puddles on the sheets, each an irregular shape, about an inch from each other. Apparently, she had moved once during the session, leaking, rising, settling back down in the throes of arousal, producing another round of lubricant, each larger than anything she had released before.

With the chore complete, London sat still for a long moment, eyes closed, breathing in and out, before she went to the sink to remove her plug, washed it, went to the toilet to wipe her vagina, returned to her bed and lay flat on her back, legs raised, staring at the ceiling.

"I'll get dinner started," Harper said, backing away from the bars.

London looked briefly at her, looked back at the ceiling, something unknown working its way through her

mind.

Eventually recovered from her ruminance, London was still nude but back at her tablet by the time Harper went to restrain her for dinner, carrying only her shackles to the cage.

“Just these and the chain, right?” Harper queried.

“Yeah,” London said, moving to the bars, allowing her ankles to be bound before she shuffled over to the sink, grabbed the plug, passed it through the bars, turned and bent, presenting her anus, and Harper knelt, put the tip against London’s rear hole and pushed it in, slowly, carefully, while London sighed and lifted up on her toes.

Once it had been fully lodged within the girl, Harper twisted the base, noticing for the first time that faint numbers had been cast into the circumference of the part that turned, and she expanded the tip until the dial hit 23 and London grunted and said “Okay.”

Harper stared at the base of the plug, pondering, mind whirring, immediately arriving at the sort of professional inspiration that has driven American commerce since before the birth of the nation. A moment of sudden insight, of risk-taking. An experimental whim.

In Harper’s case, the insight had to do with the body before her.

The flesh, she knew, reports pain well before there is injury. One can squeeze, pinch, penetrate, shock, stretch and not injure. One can provoke cries of distress without doing harm. Proceed with caution, with full awareness of the risks. But yes, proceed.

So Harper continued to twist, pushing the plug’s unyielding tip one more size up, to 24, then to 25, to 26, and London reacted with a deep groan and the frantic pivoting of her hips. The girl, however, did not pull away, did not beg to have her restraint set back a notch or two, and the movements at her middle could be interpreted more than one way. Yes, perhaps her gyrations were a natural reaction to intolerable pain, but there was something else in the gestures: a thrusting,

Harper thought, a driving of the vagina toward a goal. And even as Harper watched, the vulva flamed up, the clear fluid thickened between her lips, and the girl offered pants that Harper recognized as her signature of deep arousal.

Satisfied that her gamble had paid off, Harper inserted the key, locking the plug, and she rose, moved to Lydia's old chain and uncoiled it, moving back to the cage and unlocking the door.

London, adjusting to Harper's cautious cruelty, exited her confinement with at least a semblance of composure, breathing heavily but still mostly rational, and she stopped, turned, and allowed Harper to padlock the chain to the ring.

No words were spoken through the process, nor were any needed. The new arrangement was simple enough.

That's not to say London communicated nothing, however. As Harper secured the girl, she manually checked the pink flesh around the girl's front hole, spreading the lips, noting that London was wetting herself heavily now, her lubricant flooding her slot, pearling up on her clitoris, dampening her hair.

That Harper would take this liberty, would examine London's sex without asking permission, was understood between the females, without any need for discussion. London was in direct possession of this essential breeding tool, of course, but as long as London was under contract, Harper also enjoyed full rights to the equipment.

Dinner was also mostly wordless, the keeper and the kept enjoying salmon and salad and rice and asparagus, and if sitting with the painfully enlarged plug inside her troubled London at all, she kept that to herself.

After dinner, the girl helped clean up as usual, the tether swinging behind her, chiming against the concrete floor, dangling between her bound heels as she stood naked at the sink and scrubbed pans. But back in her cage with her shackles off, her plug still in and locked but released from the chain, London reported to her bed without hesitation, her whole being clearly set on carnal needs.

“Do you want to clamp your nipples?” Harper asked.

“I’ll ... yeah, I’ll try it,” London said tightly, and Harper pulled out a pair of the small devices and London, hands shaking with arousal, applied them clumsily to herself, sighing as the metal teeth bit into her flesh.

“Oh,” she whispered quietly, to herself. “Oh ... fuck.”

Without further preamble, the girl performed the day’s second exercise, groaning through nearly half an hour of teasingly intermittent masturbation while Harper watched. She wasn’t there to make sure the girl got the chore finished this time, however. That was a given. Instead, she was there to pay attention to the girl’s sexual responsiveness, to the sounds she made as she neared and succumbed to climax.

No, a breeding female was not just a vagina to be plugged with sperm, Harper realized as she observed the exercise. Every girl would bring her mind to the project, and every girl’s mind was different. The lubricant gushing from London’s female hole, creating a puddle big enough this time that it extended past her rear, beyond her bouncing thighs, confirmed the power of certain forms of stimulation to her reproductive prowess. For London, pain meant higher arousal, more honey, a more welcoming home for the penis – and thus a stronger male orgasm, more sperm, and a wetter trail for that sperm to traverse.

Harper had tried anal toys, nipple clamps, the rest of the gallery of female pleasuring devices, and found her tastes rather simpler than London’s. Steady pressure on the clitoris and vulva tended to do the job. Other girls would like other things. To succeed at this, then, she’d have to experiment, treating each female as a unique individual, trying things, monitoring vaginal engorgement and wetness and the erection of nipples and clitorises, and working up a profile for each unique breeder. Those who did best under mild stimulation would receive that. Those who ascended to maximal arousal under torture would be tortured.

She’d gotten lucky with London. Not every girl would respond as forcefully to the first thing that was tried on them.

Four days later, on a sweltering mid-July Friday, and two days before London was scheduled to ovulate, Harper was no closer to finding a suitable mate for her. In fact, she was further away. None of the three subcontinental males she'd been corresponding with had come through. The more information she shared about the conditions under which they'd be depositing sperm, the less regular were their emails. One begged off for London's first ovulation because of his schedule, explaining he'd be working all weekend at the hotel. One simply went silent after Harper told him mating would be done in a cage with her to supervise. The third only emailed late at night, after midnight, and Harper suspected there was a wife or girlfriend who wouldn't have approved of the scheme. After a few nights, those emails ceased as well. Guilty conscious, perhaps. Or the other woman found out.

Not one to be distracted from one urgent matter by stress over another, Harper spent that afternoon in the future home of her business, walking each of the four floors with a tape measure, making notes as she mapped out spaces, trying to imagine what would go where, seeing in her mind's eye girls in cages, girls in chains or on leashes, girls being brought to a room where they'd be prepared, stimulated, tortured, if necessary, and then penetrated and fertilized, where they'd groan out and cry out and released to go back to confinement. The kitchen and pantry could go on the third floor, with a dumbwaiter to bring the food down. Her office would be on the first floor. There would be a security room, with cameras pointed at everything. There would be storage, visitation, other offices. She'd need a second elevator, both very secure.

She was back on the second floor, staring from one end of the space toward the other, when a voice behind her nearly made her faint.

"Hello," he said simply.

Harper whirled around, wide-eyed, the memories of another man who had come into this place uninvited and unannounced flooding her mind.

"Sorry, sorry," he said, and his eyes went wide and he took a step back toward the stairs. "It was open downstairs. I

called out, no one answered, so I came up.”

He was tall, handsome in a peculiar way, dark skinned and mostly African-American (but not entirely just that, Harper could tell) and he wore long, loose ringlets instead of an afro. He was dressed casually, black basketball shorts, a light pink t-shirt, black sneakers.

Harper put her hand over her heart, breathed in.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I just wasn’t expecting anyone.”

“You’re Harper Sutton, right?”

“Yes,” she said, making no effort to conceal her puzzlement. She’d never seen this male, had no idea who he was.

“And this is where it will be?” he queried, looking around the space.

“Where what will be?” she asked, humoring him politely as she began to suspect he was in the wrong place. He seemed harmless, though. She could usually tell about people. Harmless. Charming, even.

“Sutton Mirabilis,” he said “Right?”

“Well, yeah,” she said. “A lot of work to do yet. How did you know?”

“I put my name in at a few donor sites,” he said. “And your—”

“Why?” Harper interrupted.

“Why did I volunteer to be a donor?”

“Yes,” Harper said. “Why?”

“It pays a little,” he said, adding with a polite chuckle, “for something that’s kind of fun.”

“How did you find out about it?” Harper asked. “I’m curious about what people know.”

“I got something in the mail,” he said. “A few months ago.”

“In the mail?” she said. “You mean, email?”

“No, mail,” he said. “It said I might want to think about it.”

“From who?” Harper queried. “What did it look like?”

“It was just a letter,” he said. “I might still have it, but it was just from some company. The name meant nothing to me.”

“What did it say?” Harper persisted, truly perplexed by the existence of a firm sending random direct mail letters. Had she been mistaken about the size of this market? Was she competing in an industry of titans, firms that could send letters to every household in America as they searched for the perfect male and female breeders?

“I don’t remember what it said,” he admitted. “Something about how companies were out there that would pay a lot for you to ... contribute ... you know. And it had a link, so I went there and created an account, and the people were cool.”

“Wow,” Harper said. “I’d like to see that letter, if you can find it.”

“Okay.”

“What do you do now?” she asked.

“Everything,” he replied. “A little carpentry, a little music, I bartend.”

“Jack of all trades,” Harper said, nodding. “What’s your background?”

“Born in St. Mary’s, public schools there and—”

“Genetic background, I mean.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said a little reluctantly. “African, obviously. Native American. Japanese on my grandfather’s side.”

Harper stared at him approvingly, almost hungrily.

Yes.

This wasn’t subcontinent.

It was better.

“What’s your name?” she asked, stepping toward him.

“Archie,” he said, offering his hand, taking hers firmly. “Archie Yamamoto.”

“Yamamoto?”

“Yamamoto,” he repeated. “It’s Japanese.”

“You’re what I’m looking for,” Harper said.

“Really?” he said.

“Yes, absolutely,” she said. “They’re not all clamoring for you?”

“Not exactly,” he said, nodding ironically. “They love the name, and then they see my picture ...”

“They’re idiots,” Harper said. “How did you find me?”

“Somebody mentioned you on one of the sites.”

“Who?” Harper asked.

“No idea. It was just a group chat, and someone listed a few company names in the Georgia area, and yours popped up as being in Savannah, and I’m living in town now so I looked you up. You’re two blocks away from my place, so I just walked.”

“When can you start?”

“Well,” he said, crossing his arms, “I’m free most of this weekend. Tending bar Saturday night is all.”

“And you understand what this involves?”

He smiled, said nothing, probably not wanting to be presumptuous.

“It’s done naturally,” Harper said. “In a cage, where I keep my girl. And I supervise.”

Archie raised his eyebrows, but he didn’t turn away, didn’t excuse himself and back down the stairs.

“She’s blonde,” Harper continued. “And very pretty.”

“And she’s ... on board with this?”

He smiled a little uncertainly, and Harper knew that if she said know, Archie would leave. No, he was no Bollte. His charm indicated a decent human within.

“We agreed to everything up front,” Harper said. “It’s all spelled out in a contract she signed.”

“Okay,” Archie said, awaiting further instructions.

“Let me take your picture, and get your email address,” Harper said, pulling out her phone, aiming it at him, snapping a few shots as he stared and continued smiling. “And then come back at 8 tonight. We’ll be done with dinner by then, and you can sleep over.”

“Sleep over?” he echoed.

“Yes, in her cage,” Harper said. “Both of you. I’ve got bedding for you. And you do it as many times as you can. As many times as you both can. Until you have to leave Saturday.”

“If she likes my picture,” Archie qualified.

“That’s irrelevant,” Harper said, studying the images on her phone. “I just want her to know who’s ... coming.”

Archie smiled, amused.

“This does not sound like a bad thing,” he said.

Harper laughed, put her hand on his arm – a rare gesture for the normally reserved woman, but his arrival was like a windfall – a miracle, even.

“I’ll have a contract for you,” she said. “Just the usual terms. You have no rights to the baby, you do what I say when you’re mating, and you get \$1,000 up front. I’ll give that to you when you leave tomorrow. Cash. And another \$5,000 when the parents pay.”

Archie smiled again. This was well above market standards, a weekend bonus – financially and otherwise – he was clearly not expecting.

“Last orgasm?” Harper asked.

“Yesterday afternoon,” he replied.

“Okay,” she said. “But two days would have been better. Here’s my card.”

She tore a sheet from her notebook, handed him a pen.

“Give me your contact information,” she said.

“You want my package,” he said.

“Package?” Harper repeated.

“Some of the services put it that way – records, DNA, education and professional history.”

“I didn’t know about that,” Harper said. “Can you send me what you put together?”

“Sure, as soon as I get home.”

“Okay, let me point out my apartment to you.”

They went outside and Harper gestured in the direction of the stairs and the elevator to her place, then to the landing and her door.

“See you at 8 tonight,” she said with another handshake, and she watched Archie leave the property and hustle across the street before she locked up her building and went back to her apartment.

“I found you a mate,” she announced to London, who was sitting on her bed, clothed in just panties and a bra, looking at her tablet.

She looked up, apprehension obvious.

Harper pulled out her phone, showed London his picture.

“His name’s Archie,” she said. “He’s polite. He seems very nice. And I’ll be here the whole time.”

“When is he getting here?” London asked, peering behind Harper, as if expecting to find him standing there.

“I told him to come back at 8,” Harper said. “And he’ll be spending the night with you.”

“In here?”

“Yes,” Harper said. “I want him to do it as many times as he can.”

London looked away, toward her toilet, her face invisible to Harper but the rest of her body conveying all the information necessary. She wasn't looking forward to this. Repeated sex with a stranger wasn't something she'd done before, or ever wanted to do. She was afraid of the unknown here, and there were a lot of unknowns.

Dinner was a somber affair, London again opting for shackles and being chained by her anus, but without the undercurrent of arousal of previous evenings, and when Harper returned the girl to her cage and unchained and unlocked the plug, there was no lubricant in her front opening, no sign of arousal in the flesh around her hole, no swelling of clitoris.

“I'm going to leave your shackles on until he's locked in with you,” Harper said, pulling out her phone to check the time. “It's 5 'til, so you might want to start masturbating.”

“Yeah,” London said flatly. “Can I see his picture again?”

Harper tapped her phone, held it up, and London peered at it and smiled and grimaced, as if trying to convey to the image how nervous she was.

London turned away from the bars, went to her bed, sat with her legs crossed, in her traditional position for self-pleasure, and she even made a half-hearted attempt at stimulating herself, but she might as well have been rubbing her shin for all the excitement it seemed to cause her.

“I'm really nervous, sorry,” she said sheepishly to Harper, who was still hovering just outside the bars.

“It's normal,” Harper conceded.

“Did you get that information he was going to send?” London asked, as if hoping it hadn't come in, Archie wasn't qualified, or wasn't even real.

“Yes,” Harper said. “It showed up right before dinner.”

London frowned. “Do you have any lubricant, in case I can’t ...” she stammered.

“I don’t,” Harper said. “None of the brands I looked up are conducive to conceiving, and some actually kill sperm.”

London winced.

“No pressure,” Harper said. “Think of tonight as a trial. It’s okay if it doesn’t work.”

A light tapping sounded from the front door, but it might have been bombs going off for the way London reacted, with a wide-eyed start.

“Two minutes early,” Harper said.

“Wait, wait,” London begged, and she immediately rolled to her back and pulled the plug out of her anus, hopped to the sink and rinsed and washed it, and handed it through the bars to Harper.

“I’d rather he not see it,” she said quietly.

Harper tossed the plug under her bed, went to the door, opened it to find Archie there, smiling nervously. No, not nervously. Guiltily.

He’d showered, shaved, his long black hair fuller. He’d put on long gray pants, a black golf shirt. He’d dressed to impress, Harper thought with amusement, putting on clothes he’d have to remove to actually do the job.

“Come in,” she said, motioning him through the door. “Let me introduce you to London.”

Chapter 22: Archie Arrives

Archie's eyes zeroed in on the girl in the cage as soon as he'd crossed Harper's threshold.

London, obviously tense, if not terrified, stood naked at the door of her prison, her feet bound together, her pubic hair in dark counterpoint to the rest of her body.

As Archie neared, London mustered a half-smile, and she reached her left hand up to the nearest bar.

"Archie, this is London," Harper said with a hint of formality, consciously imposing a minor business convention over the moment. "London, Archie."

"Hi," London said simply, her right hand drifting to her middle in a vain, unconscious attempt to hide her sex.

"Hello," Archie said, eyes wandering the girl's body. "It's nice to meet you."

"Okay," Harper began emphatically, drawing both pairs of eyes. "Archie, before you do anything, I need you to sign that contract I mentioned."

"Sure," he agreed gamely, and he followed Harper to the kitchen, where a pair of identical documents were waiting, two pages each, and he read one of them cursorily, obviously seeing paperwork as a brief delay in the evening's main event, and when Harper handed him a pen, he signed both copies readily, and stood.

"I'd like you to undress now," Harper said. "You can put everything against the wall there."

Archie stepped toward the assigned location.

"And once you're nude, I'm going to let you into London's cage, and I'll lock you both in and take off her shackles."

Harper looked at London. The girl looked back, nodding, before she redirected her gaze toward Archie, who was pulling his shirt over his head, unfastening his belt.

“And then, you both do whatever you want,” Harper continued, “up to the point of ejaculation.”

Archie bent to untie his shoes.

“Foreplay is fine. Oral, fondling, kissing, anything you want that works. London, I want you as naturally wet as you can get, and Archie, you need to be aroused for a good 15 minutes at least before you release, but 30 minutes would be better.”

Archie, shoes off, pushed his slacks down, pushed down a pair of tight black boxers, revealing a large penis that was growing even as Harper watched.

“Ejaculation is at full insertion. Nothing creative here. Base of penis against vulva. And she needs to orgasm after you. Her first orgasm happens after you’ve released.”

Naked, Archie turned to Harper, nodding, waiting.

Harper went to the door of the cage, inserting and turning the key as London stepped back.

“Okay,” Harper said, motioning to Archie, who’d been waiting from a polite distance, and he stepped forward, penis straight out and bouncing, and passed through the cage door.

London’s eyes were fixed shamelessly on the boy’s penis, but her eyes were less lustful and more assessing at the moment. During the imminent process, this part of Archie was going to be pushed into her body, moved within her until it throbbed through orgasm, and she needed to know what to expect.

Archie stood just inside the door, glancing briefly at it when Harper shut and locked it, and he backed away slightly to allow London to step up to have her chains removed.

Freed, the girl turned, swallowed, attempted another smile that was more a grimace than anything else.

“How do you wanna start?” she asked, and before Archie could answer, she was moving forward, toward him and his penis, her body answering his arousal with at least a

little of her own, her nipples at full extension, her jaw clenched.

Archie answered her question wordlessly, by reaching up and putting his hands around London's shoulders. It was a subtle gesture, more intimate than a handshake, but not sexual. Brotherly, almost.

London smiled, a little less nervously, eased a little more forward, raised her face, and Archie lowered his hands to hers, grabbed them, pulled them, drawing her forward until their mouths touched.

What if there was no chemistry here? Harper wondered. What if something was off? Smells you can't even detect consciously could ruin things, she knew. What if London couldn't lubricate, and Archie couldn't enter her, and he lost his erection, and the couple sat in humiliated misery until she let Archie out of the cage and sent him home?

This would be an ongoing concern, Harper realized. Nothing was guaranteed when a male and a soon-to-be fertile female were brought together. But surely there was more she could do to improve the odds. She needed a full understanding of any breeding girl's complete sexual makeup. What aroused her, got her wet, got her nipples and her vulva swollen? She'd only learned by accident of London's preference for anal stimulation because London had admitted it – reluctantly. She was going to need to ask. Or better yet, test. Put every girl through a thorough a battery of tests. Stimulate, arouse, titillate, and observe.

Had anyone ever done this, studied the elements of female arousal scientifically?

Harper returned her attention to the couple in the cage, relieved to see that they seemed to be making their way through, at least by Harper's reckoning. Both mouths were open now as they kissed, Archie's still-firm penis was pressed against London's hip, and the girl reached down and tapped it gently with two fingers before the fingers wrapped themselves around the shaft, the hand stroking the penis, and the business aspects of their impending session fell away and passion took

over, mouths opening wider, arms pulling bodies closer, bodies pushing against each other in a slow rhythm.

London was the first to edge back, disentangling herself, pulling her mouth away, but looping her fingers around Archie's as she led him to her bed, and Harper remembered that she was supposed to be timing the duration of Archie's erection, and she pulled out her phone. Five minutes had already elapsed, she estimated.

The pair lowered themselves to the bed, London first, lying on her back with her legs spread and raised, and Archie crouched between her feet, lowering his mouth to her vulva and kissing it, licking it briefly before he rose up on his knees, arced forward, settled onto the girl, raised his hips and reached down to open her sex.

As the bodies drew close, Harper could no longer see either partner's sex organs, but the moment of penetration was obvious, Archie's gradual descent transitioning to a quick, intense finish, and as his buttocks rose and fell once, twice, a third and fourth time, London stiffened and widened her spread, her eyes wide with shock, and she rocked her pelvis in time with Archie's thrusts.

"Last as long as you can," Harper urged, and Archie nodded but did not otherwise acknowledge the request. He was propped up on his arms now, staring down at London, hips working steadily.

After five minutes of penetration, the tenor of London's breath altered, and now it was her turn to receive guidance from the woman on the other side of the bars.

"London," Harper said, "no orgasm until after he ejaculates."

London looked up at Archie in unspoken panic, and her meaning was clear: hurry.

"Archie, it's been long enough," Harper said, staring at her phone. The boy had lasted 18 minutes. "Cum now if you need to."

This was complicated. This was dynamic. There were a lot of things, Harper realized, well outside her direct control. Sex as it was usually practiced was for pleasure. Sex for conception was different. Not night-and-day different, fortunately, but different in important ways. Introductions had to be done properly. Intercourse had to be prolonged. Orgasms had to be managed.

Harper had considered none of this until now, and as she watched Archie bounce against the girl, heard his breath grow quick and shallow, heard him issue the five hard, staccato grunts that Harper knew matched the ejections of seed-laden semen into London's wet chamber, she counted herself lucky. And when London writhed beneath Archie and shrieked frantically, Harper knew she'd been doubly fortunate. Despite her utter lack of preparation or specialized knowledge, things had been accomplished.

Hundreds of millions of tiny individuals were now doing their own frantic work, tails whipping, bodies propelled upstream – 200 million microscopic but dedicated employees of Sutton Mirabilis, each doing their best for the company, laden with a unique blend of African, Native American and Japanese DNA, each desperate to fold it into the DNA coiled up in one of London's blonde European eggs.

The couple were kissing again as they exited the throes of sexual release, and Harper gave them their time, watching as taut muscles relaxed, panting breaths slowed, London lowered her legs to the bed.

“Okay,” Harper said after what felt like an adequate intermission, “Archie, pull out and let me have a look.”

Archie, face registering mild surprise, withdrew his wet, softening penis from London's hole and rose to his knees, and London, who knew Harper well enough to not be surprised, rolled toward the bars, grabbing them to hold herself steady as she lay on her side with her leg raised. Harper knelt, peering at London's front opening, reaching in to spread the girl's lips, noticing with dismay the thick clot of semen oozing forth. How many sperm wallowed here, outside London's vagina, with no hope of reaching their destination? Was there,

somewhere here, lost in the soft whiteness, the best swimmer, the best genetic complement to London's egg?

Harper let go of the girl, went to wash her hands, retrieved a pillow and several thick blankets, passed them through the bars to Archie, and he spread them out on the floor next to London's bed, but he didn't seem to want to go to sleep just yet, and he sat down on the bed, and London rolled to her back, lifted her knees and put her hands behind her head.

"So what do you do?" she asked, looking up at him, her smile ironic now, not shy or awkward.

"A little constructions," Archie said. "I work at a bar, I do some art, some music."

"What's the bar?" London asked, rising up on her elbows, a lilt in her voice, and she slung her head to the side and smiled broadly. This was a side of London Harper hadn't seen before. A flirty side. A girly side. The side she kept in reserve for boys. It had just appeared, this element of the girl's personality, when the right boy had appeared. Harper had seen it many times before. Most girls had this in them, waiting. Not Harper, though. She was the same for everyone.

"It's kind of a dive," Archie said.

"What's it called?" London demanded.

"Swampy's."

"Swamis?" London said, looking puzzled.

"Swampy's," Archie said. "As in a swamp. Swampy's."

"Oh, Swampy's!" London said, laughing out loud. "Is it named after someone? Someone named Swampy?"

"No, it's just a name," Archie said. "Or, we have a mascot. Or a spokesperson. Or, I don't know what you call him, but his picture is on the menus, on the walls."

"What does he look like?" London asked.

"He looks like an alligator," Archie said. "Gator head. But he dresses nice. Coat and tie."

London giggled.

“Do you know how to make an armored truck?” she asked.

“What’s that?” Archie replied.

“It’s crazy popular in Florida,” she said. “You have to use Old Ironsides bourbon, and then—”

“Okay, I’m going to leave you to it,” Harper interrupted. “You both good?”

Archie and London looked at her. Obviously, both of them were good.

“London, stay on your back as long as you can,” Harper said. “I’m going to watch TV until 11, but you two do it again anytime you want. Anytime. Do you think you’ll be able to go again tonight?”

Archie looked at London, and she looked back enigmatically. No, Harper wasn’t going to get an answer at this point.

“Do you need to be here?” Archie asked. “If we do?”

“No,” Harper said. “But make all the noise you want. And keep track of it. I’d like to know how many times it happens.”

London and Archie continued their banter as Harper went to the couch, turned on the TV, the volume low as she surfed for something to take her mind off her own loneliness.

A little before 11, the voices from the cage quieted, turned to whispers, then turned to grunts, and Harper looked over to confirm that things were happening again, Archie mounted in reverse over London, licking her vulva while she did her best to suck his penis, her mouth forced wide, eyes wide as well.

How much of his precious semen was Archie pulling out of London’s hole with his tongue? Harper wondered, but she decided to let nature take its course, the couple doing as they pleased to each other until Archie turned back around and London spread her legs and was mounted and, after at least 10

minutes of the rhythmic burdening of bed springs, Archie grunted through his second orgasm of the night, after which London took her turn, squealing with pleasure under the male's pounding attention.

Harper turned off the lights at 11, said nothing more to the couple, slept until three, when she was awakened briefly by Archie's grunts and a quiet panting whine from London.

There was no intercourse that morning, just breakfast and a little light banter before Harper went to work, checking email, refining her floorplan, doing the myriad other things required to get a business off the ground.

Archie and London stayed nude, and they talked quietly and kissed, but even after lunch, nothing had happened, so Harper broached the topic as she collected their lunch plates.

She suspected she knew the problem, but she wanted to be sure.

"Are you planning anything else before Archie has to leave?" she asked.

London, sitting on the bed with her legs drawn up, looked at her knees.

"I'm kind of sore," she said.

"Not surprising," Harper said. "Think you can take it at all?"

"Not for 15 minutes," the girl replied.

"How about for two or three?" Harper inquired.

"Yeah, maybe," London said, wincing as if Archie's penis was already moving inside her swollen sheath.

"Okay," Harper said. "I have an idea for a workaround."

The boy and girl both looked at her quizzically, waiting for an explanation.

"Archie, you start in me," she said. "And when you're close, you move to London's vagina."

London sucked in her breath, and Archie smiled dazedly.

Harper waited. Either this would work, or it wouldn't.

Finally, Archie looked at London, raising his eyebrows.

He was game, obviously, but he wasn't going to do it if London demurred.

"That's okay," London said, looking at Harper. "But ... how, exactly?"

"I'll be outside the bars, on hands and knees," Harper explained, looking at the couple, waiting for an objection. When none came, she grabbed the hem of her t-shirt.

"Ready?"

Archie smiled, but Harper was looking at his penis, not his mouth, and it was growing. Somehow, just the concept of doing it this had aroused him.

Harper continued to undress as she strode to her bed, slipping out of her t-shirt, pushing down her shorts and panties in one quick motion, unhooking her bra.

She returned to the cage, the male and female looking at her with male and female variations of curiosity. London had seen Harper nude, of course, so it was what Harper was about to do that must have intrigued the girl most. Archie, meanwhile, was eyeing Harper's mound, and his interest was most likely more practical, focusing on questions about her vagina – if it would be wet enough, what it would feel like, if it would get him close enough to orgasm that he could indeed finish with just a few more minutes inside London.

Harper, not one for ceremony, for flirting, for preamble, turned, dropped to her knees, put her feet through the bars, spread her legs and reached between them to masturbate.

"I'll let you know when I'm ready," she said, rubbing her clitoris, her back raised, and in another minute, she gave the signal. "Okay."

Archie, with a squeeze of London's hand, took his leave, kneeling behind Harper, and she looked back and spread her lips.

He grabbed himself at the midpoint of his shaft and aimed his tip at Harper's opening, pushing in, driving forward, stretching her, filling her chamber.

Harper gasped quietly but held still, rear pressed against the bars, allowing Archie to do the work, and he moved slowly in and out of her vagina, pacing himself, and Harper turned her mind to practical questions. Even now, she was processing.

Fertilization would not be a one- or two-day operation monthly, she realized. Just because a girl wasn't ovulating didn't mean she could take it easy. She needed to be able to take heavy usage on her fertile days, which meant regular conditioning all month.

Yes, London should have been doing more than masturbation, Harper realized. She should have been required to penetrate herself regularly, using something at least as thick as a penis.

How often? At least once per day, maybe multiple times, Harper concluded. How much time per session? Five minutes, 10, 30? It would vary girl-to-girl, of course, but every girl should get at least a daily conditioning session, with maybe a break for a few days during her period.

How would you know how much conditioning a girl needed? Trial and error, Harper concluded. Assessment and careful record-keeping. There was a world of science here she had barely begun to understand.

"Ow," Harper protested. Archie was getting a little more passionate as his work progressed, and he'd gone in sideways, jabbing into her left vaginal wall.

"Sorry," he said, slowing his pace again.

Harper sighed, raised her back and lowered it. This felt good, she admitted to herself.

How long had it been since she'd held a penis? Three years, four? How long since her last orgasm? A week or two?

And why so long, on both counts? Was starting a business really that vital? Was succeeding entrepreneurially more important than anything else, even this small pleasure?

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"Closer," Archie said.

"London, you'll be ready to take him soon?"

"Yes," London replied, not very convincingly. She was lying in bed, on her back, legs spread, waiting.

"Are you wet?" Harper asked, her voice coming a little jerkily as Archie's thrusts shook her and her breasts swung.

"A little," London replied.

"Okay," Harper said, "I'm putting out enough lubricant that you should have what you need, at least at the start. Archie, wait as long as you can to move to London."

"Okay," he said, clipping his words. "Is it okay ... if I go a little faster?"

"Go ahead," Harper replied. "Just put it in straight."

Archie picked up the pace immediately, doubling the rate of his insertions, pulling out everything but the tip before pushing back into Harper's body with piston-like intensity.

"Ah!" Harper shouted.

Archie slowed.

"No, keep going," she said, "you're fine, keep going."

Archie grunted through another dozen thrusts, withdrew from Harper's vagina, and stood a little clumsily, as if his wet penis had taken on considerable weight while it was inside Harper. He raised one knee to London's bed, clambered over her, and both of them laughed about something as he lowered his penis to her raw hole and pushed it in, slowly.

“Ohhhh,” London groaned. She was wincing as Archie dropped his body against hers, angling her pelvis away, driving her nails into his flanks as if she were about to push him away.

Harper, standing now, observing in the nude, ignoring the sensation of coupling fluids dripping from her hole and down her thighs, was worried.

This might be the session that got London pregnant, she thought to herself, but only if Archie was able to finish with his penis lodged deep in the girl. What if she pushed him out, or twisted her pelvis away just as the semen was leaving his tip?

London was here to get pregnant. London was getting a free ride for the next year, plus a potentially large payout at the end, and all she had to do was let herself be penetrated for a few critical days every month.

Harper would find the boys, the boys would do what boys do, and London would lie still and let it be done. Sometimes she would orgasm, a fringe benefit on top of everything else. And sometimes it would be a little uncomfortable. Not agonizing, certainly. Just a little unpleasant.

Deal with it, Harper thought, almost saying the words out loud. London, hold still and let him finish. Hold your pelvis still, get your fingernails out of his hips, and lower your hands. This is your job. Deal with it.

And if you can't let him do it properly, I'll tie you. Either lower your hands and hold still, or accept restraints. Or just accept restraints, regardless. Any girl might push away at that critical moment, angle her hole away, dislodge the penis and waste that precious seed, the one sperm that would have made that perfect mixed-race, six-figure child splashing uselessly against her anus, the sheets, the insides of her thighs.

No, the risk is unacceptable. In exchange for being housed, fed, pampered, entertained, you get tied down a few days a month, because that is your job. Maybe you like it, maybe you don't. That's the nature of any job.

In another minute, Archie was done, a fourth delivery of cream into London's body consummated, but Harper's mind was elsewhere. She had a business to create. She had a vision.

Chapter 23: The Beginning of a Peculiar Tour

“Can you say that again?” Mary requested.

“For tour restraints,” Sissy said, “I can chain you, or leash you by one of your chambers. It’s up to you.”

Mary swallowed, and now Madison seemed slightly uncomfortable.

“Chains,” Mary said.

“Leashes,” Madison said simultaneously.

Sissy looked at both females, raising her eyebrows.

“Can we have different restraints?” Mary inquired.

“Yes, I can make that work,” Sissy said dubiously, making clear she preferred them restrained similarly for the tour.

“What do you suggest?” Madison inquired.

“The chains are more restrictive,” Sissy began, “but the leash is more invasive. Most girls choose the leash after they’ve been with us a few days, though.”

“Does it hurt?” Madison inquired.

“Some girls will report slight discomfort,” Sissy conceded, “but they’re designed to fit.”

“And if we do the leash,” Madison said, “it goes up our ... rears?”

“Up your anus, or vagina,” Sissy said. “We can restrain you by either hole.”

“Can we see it?” Madison said. This was, she thought, an obvious request. While she was amenable to having something put into her body there, she needed to examine it first. What female wouldn’t?

“Which one would you like to see?” Sissy queried, turning to the cabinet.

“Both,” Mary said softly, her answer surprising Madison. Was this another example of motherly support, the woman prepared to have either of her most sensitive places filled if it would help Madison get through this? Or was she trying to appear compliant while she worked through what was happening?

“For family tours, we need everyone fastened to each other,” Sissy said, opening the cabinet door, revealing an array of chains, leashes and tethers. “And then, one of you needs to be put on a leash that I can hold.”

“What does that mean?” Mary inquired.

Sissy chose to show rather than tell, and she pulled out a length of chain with a black plug at either end.

“If you go with the leash, I’ll put one of these plugs up each of your anuses,” she said, “and then I’ll need to put a second leash up one of your vaginas.”

Madison already had a sense of how things worked here, that getting females pregnant required care, and security. But she was horrified on her mother’s behalf, and Mary’s demeanor wasn’t easing things. The woman, standing naked next to her daughter, and now having alarming new things being asked of her, was looking at Sissy with an expression beyond mere shock or fear. Disbelieving humiliation might have been the most accurate term.

“I’ll do it,” Madison said in her calmest voice. “You can leash me there. I mean, in both places.”

Sissy smiled at the girl. This was, it seemed, the kind of cooperativeness they were looking for.

“Okay,” she said, “any more questions?”

“I’m good,” Madison said.

“How long will the tour take?” Mary asked, forcing out the words.

“About 90 minutes,” Sissy replied. “You’ll be done before lunchtime.”

Sissy looked at the mother and daughter, and when no more questions were forthcoming, she raised the two ends of the chain.

“Madison, I’ll get you on first,” she said. “Can you bend over, elbows on the table?”

Madison obeyed, staring at the table’s dark woodgrain and hoping for her mother’s sake she didn’t look too uncomfortable, wasn’t blushing too fiercely.

Sissy stepped behind her and touched the tip of the leash plug to her anus, and Madison arched her back and lifted up on her toes, holding her breath as she awaited the not completely unpleasant sensation of having her anus penetrated and stretched.

“Ah,” she sighed once as Sissy pushed the device within her.

“Now, I’m going to enlarge the tip, so you can’t remove it,” Sissy said, twisting the base as the girl tensed up and extended her calves to their limit.

“Okay, you’re locked on,” Sissy said, a small click emanating from the device. “Mary, your turn.”

Madison’s mother laughed, her mirth indicating another transition, from shocked disbelief to absurdist wonderment. And yet she took her place at the table beside Madison, bending with her elbows set, waiting and trying not to tense up. When the leash plug found its mark, her mouth and her eyes both opened wide, but she held still as Sissy penetrated her and secured the restraint within her.

Madison was first to straighten, looking at the wall as she focused on this new sensation. It was strange, yes, and not pleasant, but it was better than being chained like a criminal. She looked at her mother, who was also rising up, straightening, adjusting to this peculiar new reality.

Sissy went back to the cabinet and pulled out another chain, this one with a plug at one end, a loop for the wrist at the other.

“Turn toward me, Madison, and spread your legs.”

Madison obliged, moving slowly, deliberately, well aware of the chain that swung against the back of her thigh and from there to her mother's anus.

Sissy knelt before her, positioning the leash for insertion.

"Can I see it first?" Madison asked.

"Sure," Sissy replied, rising, holding out the rod, and Madison took it.

It was, she guessed, about the size of an average penis, or maybe a little bigger, thick and at least six inches long. Its black surface featured what looked like dozens of small nubs all along its length.

As Madison studied the device, Mary stepped close, the chain between them swinging against their calves, dropping almost low enough to brush the floor.

"How does it work?" Madison asked.

"Once it's put up your vagina, I'll press the base, like this," Sissy said. The rod clicked and every nub extended from the surface, dozens of little pegs designed to embed themselves into Madison's vaginal walls, to fix the rod within her unmovably.

"Maddie, you can't let them put that in you," Mary protested.

"Mom, it's fine," Madison assured before turning to Sissy. "Go ahead, I'm ready."

Sissy knelt, peering at Madison's sex, and the girl reached down and pulled her vaginal lips apart, eager to get the leash inserted and locked before her mother could throw up any more objections, and possibly get them both tossed out before the tour even got underway. Showing her displeasure with her mom's protectiveness by storming away – the first choice of adolescent girls the world over – was no longer an option.

Sissy seemed to understand Madison's urgency, raising the rod to the girl's hole, and Madison bent to watch

her own impalement, tightening her jaw but not vocally indicating any discomfort. Mary, resigned for the moment to one inevitability after another, hovered but did not intervene. Legally, Madison was an adult, and if she were going to make poor choices and endure abuse, she would have to suffer the consequences herself. Bound as the two were to each other, anything done to the girl would have to be witnessed by the mother, of course. Small consolation, but better than nothing.

“Okay so far, Madison?” Sissy inquired.

“Yes,” the girl said. “It didn’t hurt at all.”

“You’re very wet,” Sissy said. “Are you ovulating?”

“No,” Madison said. “Not for another week.”

No more needed to be said. It wasn’t just ovulation that could get a girl’s lubricant flowing, of course. Anal stimulation could do it. Nudity in an unusual setting might work for some girls. Offering to have her vagina pierced by a restraint might arouse a female now and then. Or simply being here, in a place where by necessity the sexuality was completely open, a place she had been imagining, and preparing to visit for weeks, and masturbating over – maybe that’s why her vagina was putting out enough honey to enable the rod’s easy, gliding insertion.

“Ready to have it locked?” Sissy inquired.

“Go ahead,” Madison said, and now she was nervous again, the muscles of her belly and buttocks in particular tensing up.

Sissy pushed the button in the base of the rod, and all at once, Madison’s sheath began receiving exponentially more stimulation than from just the rod, little pointed pegs digging into her feminine temple from the mouth of her slot to deep within, and she put her hands on her hips and dug her nails into her flesh and issued a soft, quiet sigh.

If she were alone and not bound to her mother and not about to take a tour that would determine her fate for at least the next year or two, she would have reached down and yanked her clitoris with all her might, because this was like

nothing she'd ever felt before in her young life, and it was not identifiably good nor bad, but profoundly compelling, like the sensation of being brought into another set of dimensions, the impact all the more pronounced in that it wasn't meant to be pleasurable or painful, just practical, just someone's idea of the best, most efficient way to restrain a female who was being shown through a secure facility.

Why not use the anus? Why not use the vagina? These were two features of the female body that were usually idle, and could be bound without interfering with walking, reaching, touching, hugging.

"Are you okay, Madison?" Sissy inquired, snapping the girl out of her reverie.

At the same time, Mary put her hand on her daughter's shoulder, and the girl laughed at herself.

"I'm good," she said. "Let's have a look around."

Mary squeezed and Sissy smiled and sidled to the door of the little room, drawing Madison's vaginal leash taut, and the girl followed, looked back at her mother as that tether went taut as well, to make sure she was coming, and she proceeded slowly into the hall, Mary taking deliberate steps behind her, and all of them headed toward a secure door with a small glass pane, reinforced with crisscrossed black wire.

The door responded to Sissy's arrival with a beep, and she pushed it open and drew the two females into an office area, a row of cubicles to the right, a line of offices and meeting rooms to the left.

A woman's face appeared from behind a cubicle wall, peering at the new arrivals, vanishing. Even as Madison prayed no males lurked here, one appeared, rising from within a cubicle, a cell phone pressed to his ear, his eyes surveying the trio.

Madison, naked before a man she didn't know, and embarrassingly albeit logically restrained, found herself unable to look at the scene from any but her mother's perspective. She could only imagine the woman's embarrassment, and she

didn't dare look back to catch her mother's eye. She remained sensitive to the place where they were joined, however, so looking wasn't necessary. If the leash went taut, she would know her mother had paused, had turned to flee, had fallen under the weight of profound dismay.

And yet, as she followed Sissy through the room and to another short hall and an elevator, the leash continued to swing behind her, tapping the insides of her thighs, assuring her that her partner in this little venture was close behind and walking normally.

Only when they boarded the elevator, arranging themselves with their backs against the wall and leaving Madison no choice but to look into her mother's face, did the girl realize that something entirely different was going on.

Her mom wasn't staring at the floor, pale-faced and bordering on an out-of-body degree of horror. Instead, she was looking at her daughter with an expression of victorious outrage.

Yes, Madison knew that look, and what it meant.

Have you changed your mind yet, Maddie?

Do you believe me now? Do you understand how ridiculous this whole idea is?

You've just been seen naked by a man you don't know, with chains hanging out of your vagina and anus. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine, but you're just a girl. I can only imagine the therapy you're going to need to get through what just happened.

Would you like to leave now?

Madison smiled at her mother, because this was funny. Neither of them, she concluded, was experiencing the tour on their own, because each was looking at things through the other's eyes.

Sissy hit the button for the second floor, and the elevator began to rise, and now Madison was second-guessing her smile, wondering what that looked like. Dazed horror? A teenage girl no longer completely in touch with reality?

“Where’s Harper Sutton’s office?” Madison inquired, her voice even, her eyes on Sissy’s, her demeanor very much that of a mature adult driven only by a determination to get all the information she could from this visit. Of course she was naked and bound. That’s the way things were done here. Big deal.

“She’s got an office on the first floor,” Sissy replied

“Will we get to meet her?” Madison asked.

“Probably not on the tour,” Sissy said. “But if you sign up, yes, for sure. She decides every pairing herself. She’s got a knack for it. She can look at any two people and know what they’ll make, down to the melanin range.

“Pairing?” Mary said. No, she wasn’t done yet being a protective mom.

“Yes, between two partners,” Sissy explained.

“A boy and a girl,” Mary persisted.

“Not necessarily,” Sissy said. “We don’t assign gender based on reproductive roles. Two girls might pair up, two boys.”

“But it’s done naturally, I understand,” Mary said. “So Madison will have to—”

The door opened, but Mary held her place on the elevator.

Let her have her say, Madison thought. We’ve already been through this, and it won’t dissuade me any more than it did last time.

“Yes,” Sissy agreed, edging toward the elevator door, Madison following tentatively, not wanting to get in a tugging match with her mother, in which no one would win. “We’ve found that the best probabilities of fertilization happen when it’s done naturally.”

Mary drew in her breath, going in for the kill now: “Will we meet any of the boys – boys or girls – who will be putting their penises up Madison’s vagina?”

“They’re on the third floor,” Sissy said. “We’ll go up there next.”

“How many do you have?” Madison said, inflecting her voice on purpose just a little, just enough to sound intrigued, or even excited.

“Twenty,” Sissy replied. “One in every cage.”

“Are we going to visit them?” Madison asked.

Sissy was continuing to edge out of the elevator, so Madison took another step toward her, and at last Mary yielded to the inevitable, pushed away from the elevator wall and moved through the door.

Madison gazed around, finding nothing to see here but numbered doors to the left and right along a white hall, a dark blue carpet underfoot, bright fluorescents above.

This was Madison’s world. The girl understood that. Even without knowing what lay behind each door, she already felt at home. She smelled something, rich, carnal. She heard voices. Somewhere, behind one or more of the doors on this hall, girls were talking. Someone laughed.

“Did you say cage?” Mary said once the three females had collected themselves in the hall.

“Yes,” Sissy said without a hint of apology or diffidence. “Each breeder is assigned an individual cage.”

“A cage,” Mary repeated.

“Yes, a cage,” Sissy said. “Let me show you one of the girls’ rooms.”

Leash in hand, she turned to the door on her right, marked with a black 5, and pushed it open, leading the two females with her into a room that looked, on first impression, like a woman’s prison.

There were 20 cages here in two rows, facing each other, each relatively spacious, with a bed, a sink and shower, a small area with a curtain that Madison assumed was a toilet. The back wall was solid, the fronts and sides comprising bars. Most of the cages were occupied, and it was when Madison

looked at the inmates that the comparison with a prison broke down.

First, every girl here was nude, a whole spectrum of black, white, brown and yellow bodies, all unclothed. Next, there was a cheeriness here that Madison was certain women's prisons lacked. The room had quieted with the arrival of the visitors, but there was still conversation, teasing, someone protesting "Don't say that!" The back wall of every cage was decorated, with posters, hand-drawn pictures on construction paper, children's art, a riot of images and colors and words. "Love" appeared more than once.

The girls were in a variety of attitudes, one tapping a tablet on her bed, several leaning against the bars to chat with each other through them, one girl showering, one doing pushups. Three girls were indisputably pregnant, Madison noticed, their bellies swelling, one not far from delivery. No prison wanted its female inmates getting pregnant.

As she passed, Madison looked into the eyes of the inmates, and some looked back, a few smiling, none with any hint of resentment, or envy. Here by agreement, they had found their place, found their peace. They had a home, a purpose, a financial incentive. They had a job: have sex until they got pregnant.

If anything, Madison envied them.

The final confirmation that this was no place of punitive incarceration appeared toward the middle of the room, on the right. A girl with blonde hair had dropped to her hands and knees, her bottom pressed against the bars, and her brown-skinned neighbor was ... tending to her ... from her own cage.

Madison studied the couple, the incomprehensible slowly coming into focus.

Yes, one girl was licking the other girl's ... anus.

Why?

Was it lovemaking? Raw sex? Something else?

The girl being licked certainly didn't seem to be suffering the throes of passion, Madison quickly concluded. She wasn't bucking, rocking, groaning. She was holding her position, staring at the floor and staying still, until she caught sight of the visitors and looked up.

"Hey, Sissy!" she said, pulling her hair aside to regard the three women at the front of her cage. The girl behind her raised her eyes but otherwise continued licking.

"Hey, Yanni," Sissy said back. "Still bothering you?"

"Not, it's not as bad," she said. "But I got leashed three times yesterday, and I'm going back today, so I asked Rana to do it preemptively."

"Sweet of you, Rana," Sissy said.

The brown-skinned girl raised her eyes and pulled her mouth from Yanni's rear briefly.

"Just being neighborly," she said before returning to Yanni's hole.

"Look up," Sissy said, pointing to a wide black trail set into the ceiling, running from one end of the room to the other.

Madison and Mary tore their eyes away from the girl being licked to study the ceiling.

"At night, we run a simulated moon between the cages," Sissy said.

"Why?" Mary blurted, her voice suggesting a degree of mystification bordering on hopelessness. She wasn't just asking about the moon, obviously, but that's all Sissy spoke of in her answer.

"To get everyone in the same cageroom on the same menstrual cycle," Sissy explained. "It's not the only thing we do. We also require hormone sharing, and we try things in the diet. But girls who see the moon regularly tend to adjust their ovulation to the full moon, so we give them the moon's cycle to look at every night, and we think it helps. Most of the girls here are due to have their period in a week, and in the other

room, they're ovulating in about a week. So in here, tonight it will be a half moon waning, and in the other room, it's half and waxing."

"They're on different schedules?" Madison inquired. She wasn't trying to seem interested to show her mother up, at least not at this particular moment. She was sincerely curious.

"Yes, can you guess why?"

Sissy looked at Madison, looked at Mary, got blank stares from each.

"If all our girls ovulate at the same time of the month, we'll exhaust our semen supply," she explained. "A male takes two days to produce a maximum charge, and we've only got 20 here, so if we're asking our 20 males to impregnate 40 females in one or two days, some girls are going to get half a load."

"Half a load," Mary echoed.

"Of semen," Sissy explained. "Madison, your file said you're starting your period soon?"

"Probably tomorrow," Madison said. "I tend to be very regular."

"We'd probably be putting you here then," Sissy said.

"Which space?" Madison said, and her eyes went round, because this was a tangibility she hadn't anticipated, a sudden, palpable link to a future that until now had been a possibility at best, an unlikely possibility.

"Cage 6 just came open," Sissy said, gesturing toward a space on her left, a square plate with the number 6 bolted to the bars, a blank rectangular plate beneath it. Was this where her name would go? She looked at the other cages, noticed names there – Rana and Yanni, Cynthia and Sara, Chantrelle and June and Wilhelmina, and then her eyes went back to the unoccupied cage. It was just like all the rest, a single bed, a sink and shower and private toilet, and then empty shelves where her things would go, an empty back wall where ... something would go. Posters? Drawings? Madison's mind was

whirring. There was no closet, of course, because all the girls were kept naked.

Were the boys as well? The idea of 20 nude boys in cages struck her as deeply evocative, and she tightened her vagina around her restraint and almost doubled over under the stimulation.

“We’ve got two unoccupied cages in the other room,” Sissy said. “We’re down to 37 gestators right now, and we’re trying to get back to full population ASAP.”

Sissy drew Madison’s vaginal leash just barely taut, and the girl understood and followed to the far end of the cageroom, looking back to make sure her mother was keeping up. The woman’s feelings were impossible for Madison to gauge now, her face a study in blankness, her sentiments regarding this enterprise a mystery. Shocked horror? Numbness? Resignation? Or a growing regard for her daughter’s willingness to think outside the box?

And this was certainly outside the box.

Chapter 24: To the Third Floor

With Sissy in front, the mother and daughter passed through a door and into a small cafeteria with a dozen or so seats, a buffet line to the right, the opening of a dumbwaiter behind it.

“Dinners are almost always done in here,” Sissy said. “Lunch a lot of times too. Within limits, our breeders eat what they want.”

Through a door on the opposite side of the cafeteria, Madison could hear the voices of a second set of females, concluding that this must hold the cages of the other girls, those a day or two from ovulating, the simulated moon that passed overhead almost full tonight.

“Why were those girls licking each other?” Mary asked.

Madison looked at her mother. The woman’s face was still unreadable, but her eyes were aimed at Sissy. Of all the things Mary had seen and experienced this morning, this was presumably the one item that stuck out to her.

“The leash, or the breeding peg too, can cause irritation on days when a breeder has to hold either one for extended periods, or get put on it a few times,” Sissy explained, “and getting oral attention from a neighbor provides a little relief. Saliva helps. The girl’s own vaginal lubricant can too, if she’s producing. Most of the girls swear by it.”

“It’s required?” Mary asked.

“Not at all, but most will do it for each other when asked,” Sissy said. “The boys help each other out too, in certain ways. And we encourage it with the gestators, because it also helps with hormone exchange.”

“Hormone exchange?” Mary repeated.

“To keep the breeders on the same cycle,” Sissy explained. “It’s done informally between the cages, but we also have a room where scheduled exchanges are done.”

Now Madison had new images to ponder, new mental concepts to add to the very physical concepts of her restraints, gently tugging at and tormenting her sensitive holes.

Could she lick another girl's anus? That would require some getting used to. But could she have her own anus licked?

Yes.

And then, she was forced to imagine the boys, not just caged in the nude, but tending to each other in some way. What were they doing?

And what was a breeding peg?

Within half a minute of Sissy's last comment, Madison's vagina had achieved a frustrating new level of arousal. The girl could feel herself pumping out a fresh rivulet of lubricant around the maddening leash rod, could sense the swelling of her lips, the hardening of her clitoris, the engorging of her genitals around the rod. And she could see with her own eyes her nipples, bursting forth from a pair of raised breasts.

Could she masturbate? Could she achieve orgasm with a few quick, discreet passes of her fingers against her vulva, a little thrumming around the base of her vaginal restraint? Could she do it standing up, walking?

Madison was certainly no stranger to quick, upright masturbation, a regular habit of hers in the shower on her insatiable days, when her first thought after orgasm was when she'd have her next orgasm. On such days, when her parents were home, the shower was her refuge, a place she could retire to privately without being questioned, a place – once the water was running – where she could groan and sigh without being heard.

“Let's cross the hall,” Sissy said, leading the females toward the door and back to the cageroom.

Now, Madison thought to herself. Just a few quick, furtive taps on her sex, and this aching need could be resolved. She'd never tried to walk during climax, but if she had to, she would. A few shakes, a quick little gasp – she could feign a

sneeze if Sissy seemed suspicious – and she could continue the tour without the burning, pussy-shaped distraction between her legs.

What would her mother think?

At the moment, Madison did not care what her mother thought. She and her mother were in the same physical place, and that was it, for they were occupying it with very different minds.

As they passed back through the female cageroom, Sissy saying hi to a few of the girls, Madison dropped one hand to her middle, to the hair across her mound, to the clitoris that hair concealed, and she squeezed, she pinched, she prodded and pushed, and yes, perhaps her gait faltered, perhaps she shuddered slightly, perhaps her vagina twitched, sending shivers through the links of her genital restraint and to Sissy's wrist, because as soon as they were back in the hall, Sissy turned to the girl.

“I know this can be a little stimulating,” Sissy said, “but I need you to not do that, so you can give us your full attention.”

There was no accusation in Sissy's tone, no disapprobation, certainly no disgust. Just a point of order: please don't masturbate.

And there was no shame in Madison's response. Her logic was moving more quickly than her instinctive shame this morning. Wasn't masturbation the price of admission here, a complete record of her self-induced pleasure something they had to see before they knew if she was worthy?

“Okay,” Madison said. That's all. Bound anus to anus to her mother, caught masturbating, that was all she was inclined to say, because it was all that needed saying, and it was the only word her disposition inclined her to say: “Okay.”

Yes, it was a breach of protocol, apparently. But how much of a breach? Madison had been admonished, had moved her hand from her genitals, and was ready to continue the tour.

It was not so simple for Sissy, however.

“I’m going to need to ring you here,” the tour guide said, and she drew the two females to a place along the wall where rings had been nestled, a dozen at least in a row, and she pulled a small padlock out of her pocket and secured the end of Madison’s leash to the nearest ring, and from there she stepped to a door marked “Supplies/Storage” and passed in.

“What’s going on?” Mary asked quietly.

“I’m not sure,” Madison replied, turning carefully in her restraints to face her mother, the vaginal leash draped against her thigh, the anal leash wrapped around her other leg.

“What were you doing?” Mary asked. “She told you to stop doing something.”

“Masturbating,” Madison said. Again, it was the only word that was required, a word that Madison had never in her memory spoken to either of her parents, but now it needed to be said, and she said it, and it was done, and Madison didn’t care.

Mary could have said many things at this moment, could have corrected her daughter for trying to pleasure herself in a professional setting, for daring to touch her private parts during what was – while it was many other things – also at least in part a job interview. Her next words, however, were issued without judgment, were the words mothers have spoken throughout history to daughters considering new opportunities, new challenges.

“How are you doing, Maddie?” she asked quietly.

“I’m good,” Madison replied, just as quietly. “It’s not what I expected, at all. But it makes sense.”

“You can see yourself doing this?” Mary asked.

“I can,” Madison replied without hesitation.

Any further mother-daughter heart-to-heart was cut short by the reemergence of Sissy from the storage room, and she stepped up to the leashed females, a pair of handcuffs looped over one finger.

“Madison, can you put your hands behind your back?” Sissy inquired.

Madison’s eyes went wide only for the briefest of moments, as she realized what was about to happen.

But yes, this made sense as well, and she obeyed, and she looked at the far wall as Sissy bound her wrists together, each cuff issuing a series of quiet clicks as it was tightened.

Done securing the girl, Sissy released the leash from its ring and continued the tour, bringing her two charges to a door that said “Visitation.”

“We maintain what we consider a very liberal visitation policy,” Sissy said, resuming her regular cadence, no indication in her tone that she was embarrassed by what she’d just had to do to Madison, no sign that she was put out by the girl’s indiscretion. “Saturdays, Sundays and Tuesdays, 2 to 5 in the afternoon.”

Sissy pushed open the door.

The room was simple, with bare white walls and 10 posts set into the floor, each three feet tall and topped with a ring. A blue square about 6 feet on a side had been painted around each post, and on the far wall, a large window looked into a waiting room with chairs and an elevator door.

“Visitors come up on a separate elevator, and wait in there until the person they’re visiting has been secured,” Sissy said, pointing through the window. “Visits may last up to an hour.”

Madison took this new information in with perhaps a little less aplomb than her other tour discoveries, for in this room she had to imagine not just herself, but her parents as well, interacting. And what were the posts for?

Her mother beat her to the question.

“They’re secured?” she asked.

“Yes, each breeder is assigned a post, and we ask visitors to stay within their square.

“And they’re secured ... to the post?” Mary persisted.

“Yes, by the anus or vagina, or chains if they want that. But most choose the leash here, for obvious reasons.”

Obvious reasons, Madison thought. Hugging?

“Visitors stay clothed?” Mary asked.

“Yes, they may,” Sissy said. “But it’s not required, and some are here for conjugal visits, so clothes wouldn’t make sense.”

Before either female could inquire further, Sissy tugged Madison’s leash and drew them back to the door, into the hall and through another door that read “Hormone Exchange.”

This was another simple room, Madison noted, bare walls and what appeared to be 10 stations for ... something. There were belts and cuffs and little posts with more cuffs, dangling from them. Obviously, it was a place where girls were secured, but how? In what position?

“Once we pick a new gestator’s ovulation target calendar, she’s brought in here and paired up with a dominant breeder.”

“Dominant breeder?” Mary echoed.

“Some girls are more resistant to cycle changes than others, so when we want a new girl to get on cycle, we pair her with one of them.”

Madison was still staring at the restraints, trying to ferret out their purpose, when pressure on her vaginal leash told her it was time to go.

She turned and winced, the stimulation to her sex organ becoming unbearable, particularly now that she could do nothing about it, and her juice leaked out around the rod in her vagina, and she couldn’t even wipe. All she could do was make fists, so she did that.

In another few steps, Sissy brought them into the biggest room on the floor, and Madison found it exponentially more complex than the last room, at least a dozen different kinds of stations here, examination chairs and beds and upright

racks and spaces marked out on the floor and walls, with leashes and chains and cuffs fixed to everything. The room also held a table with a pair of PCs, and along one wall, two sinks, two toilets and three small cages.

“We’ve tried to accommodate every breeding profile,” Sissy said, “while keeping the process as standardized as possible.” She pointed to the end of the room at the left.

“Gestators start there, in what we call the stimulation queue,” she said. “They’re brought together with semen partners in the main part of the floor, there, and post-copulation is done on the other end.”

Madison studied the features of the room furiously, trying to picture herself in here, making her way through the room, left to right, having a profoundly intimate thing done to her while other girls were having the same thing done and the rest were waiting, or finished.

She could make little sense of it before the leash again went taut, and she tore her eyes away and followed Sissy into the hall, her mother close behind.

“Now, maintaining order,” Sissy said, stopping in the hall for a moment. “With 40 females and 20 males when we’re at peak capacity, all of whom are expected to perform on schedule to a very high standard, you can imagine the dynamics here. Everyone’s going to have a bad day now and then, get short-tempered, say something they shouldn’t, hurt someone’s feelings, forget to follow a rule.”

Madison nodded. Mary stared.

“So this next room is where we address that,” Sissy said. “We have what we call an in-and-out discipline policy. When possible, you just come in, get a reminder, and go back to your mission.”

Madison smiled. Mission. Was that what people here worked on? A mission, to make babies?

“Does that make sense?” Sissy asked, and she took one step backwards, watching the women’s faces as she approached the next door, this one marked “Discipline.”

“It does,” Madison said.

“Yes,” Mary said quietly in a way that didn’t necessarily suggest agreement.

Sissy pulled open the door, stepping in, Madison following, Mary last.

Again, the room was partitioned into stations, but instead of visitation or breeding or the exchange of hormones, this room had another and very precise purpose immediately obvious to Madison, a space for the securing of bodies for the quick, efficient infliction of physical unpleasantness.

There were posts with rings, upright frames with cuffs and chains at each corner, cuffs and chains hanging from the ceiling, a few small cages, and an array of implements hung on a rack. Madison understood this room, and she studied it grimly until the tug within her vagina told her it was time to go.

“Any more questions at this point?” Sissy asked once they were back in the hall.

Neither mother nor daughter had any. In Madison’s case, at least, asking a question and having to listen to the answer would disrupt her own internal dialogue, a conversation in which one part of her mind was asking, “Well, what was that thing for?” and a second part of her mind was responding as best it could, with guesses: “Maybe what you saw goes around the girl’s wrists? Or her ankles?” But a third part of her mind could offer only the same summary judgment each time a question was raised: “We need more information.”

Sign up, all three parts of Madison’s mind concluded, and we will know all.

Sissy, leash in hand, drew the women back to the elevator, hit the up button, tugged them onboard.

“Our semen producers live on the third floor,” she said, tapping the button for that floor, “and our gestators will spend plenty of time there too. It’s got our health clinic, a full kitchen, and rooms where we do evaluation and training.”

The elevator opened and Sissy brought them into a small hallway. To the left stood a solid door that said, simply, "Semen." To the right was a door that said "Kitchen & Clinics."

"We'll go this way first," Sissy said, leading them to the second door. The implication of her words were not lost on Madison. They would be going through the other door eventually, the door marked with the word "Semen." Where the boys lived, she thought.

Sissy unlocked the door and brought them into another hallway of blue carpeting, this one with doors on either side, terminating in another hallway, set perpendicular to it.

Madison, preoccupied by what lay on the other half of this floor, and by the sensations in her vagina, paid little attention as Sissy opened doors to reveal more examination chairs, more rooms with chains and cuffs in peculiar distributions, more places where unknown processes were carried out on girls' bodies. The sounds and smells of food preparation wafted from the door marked Kitchen, but Sissy didn't bother showing them what went on there.

"Let's have a look at our penises," Sissy said, walking the females back into the hall with the elevator, and toward the dark marked "Semen."

"We are going to see people here, right?" Mary asked a little nervously.

"Yes, people," Sissy said. "People with penises."

"You don't call them males?" Mary asked.

"Some of them aren't males," Sissy said.

"How do you figure?" Mary inquired.

How do you figure?

Madison repeated the words in her mind. Where did that come from? A colloquialism, almost flippant, the woman speaking casually, comfortably, as if she'd forgotten she was naked, bound by her anus to the rear hole of her daughter, the

girl also secured by her vagina, and handcuffed behind her back for good measure, to prevent masturbation.

“Three of our gestators identify as male,” Sissy explained, “and two semen sources identify as female, including one with natural breasts and other female characteristics.”

“A hermaphrodite,” Mary repeated with surprise.

“Technically, I guess,” Sissy said, “but we don’t use that term. Her name is Rhonda, and if you ask her what she is, she just says Rhonda.”

“I’m sorry,” Mary said, apologizing for an affront to someone not even present, provoking another wave of surprise for Madison. Was her mother really that woke?

Sissy reached for the door, pulled it wide, stepped in, Madison and her mother following.

There was no antechamber here, no room in which the two visitors could prepare themselves for what greeted them. All lay immediately behind the door: 20 people whose greatest commonality was the ability to manufacture and deliver sperm.

There was the sight of nude bodies in cages, there was the sound of laughter, and something more guttural, more primal. And there was the smell.

Madison noticed the smell first, an undefinable essence, not good or bad, simply compelling, like poetry or a song or a sculpture, demanding attention without justification.

Madison’s mind next went to the certainty that, of all the places she had been in this building so far, this is where she wished to linger longest, to drink in the sensations, to exist, to be.

Today, apparently, she was late to the party.

Girls were already up here, Madison sensed with preternatural speed before her vision could resolve things down to fine detail.

There were already four females here. Or four gestators, rather, since one of them looked distinctly male, from his short-cropped hair to his heavy frame to his broad chest; indeed everything about him was male except for the place between his legs, where even as Madison stared, his hole was being worked with steady, grunting thrusts by a second male while four others stood nearby, watching, waiting.

The male with the vagina was on his back, legs wide, staring up at the male above him. From her vantage point just outside the cage, Madison could see the penis until the boy on top was all the way inside the other boy, at which point she could see nothing but male hips between muscled male thighs, and two sets of thick black hair. Neither of the males had bothered to trim his pubic hair, regardless what kind of organ it grew around.

Madison kept staring. Something was wrong. No, not wrong. Just unexpected. A piece of jewelry had been fastened to the male with the penis. Around his balls. And he wasn't alone. Every pair of testicles she could see was bound the same way. Why? To keep them separated from the body? Was that beneficial for sperm production?

Madison set the matter aside, continuing with her urgent assessment of the goings on of this place.

There were four vaginas here, Madison quickly noted as her mind reeled. Each seemed to have been brought up here for the same purpose, to host penises.

Two of the girls – and both looked to Madison like people who would agree they were girls, with long hair and full breasts – were also on beds, one on her back, one on her hands and knees, both wincing as they accepted steady thrusts from their partners. The fourth vagina belonged to a girl who was still getting things set up, standing with five people with five erect penises, talking and laughing quietly and, Madison believed, negotiating the order in which each male would be inserting his organ into hers.

“And then Ben third,” she was saying. “Pete fourth, Rhonda last.”

The overall logic of the male caging area sunk in even as Madison worked to comprehend what was happening.

The 20 cages were arranged in two rows of 10, each opening into an aisle between the rows. Each group of five cages also featured doors between them, and at the moment, all were open, the five bearers of penises in each section passing freely through the five cages, all gravitating toward the cages where the vaginas were, and for the express purpose, Madison quickly understood, of getting access to those vaginas.

They couldn't leave. Madison understood that too. Each vagina had been locked up with five penises, and each penis was expecting its turn, and each vagina, in accordance with some rule here, apparently, was expected to yield to the five penises, one after the other, wrapping itself around the first, and then the second, and then the one after that, and two more, five organs that would thrust and thrust in turn until each had arrived at their moment, at the time in which they would release five charges – or loads, as Sissy had put it – within their assigned vaginas, after which each chamber would surely be raw and swollen, and gushing obscenely with the fluids and creams and spirits of bare coupling.

Madison closed her eyes and clenched her fists and tightened her vagina around the little studded restraint, and she was glad Sissy had handcuffed her, because if her hands were free now, she'd be using both of them to pet and stroke and stretch and squeeze her clitoris in front of everyone here, including Sissy and her mother and the penises and the vaginas, and she would orgasm in no more than 30 seconds. She was certain of the time involved. Thirty seconds. She knew herself well enough in that regard.

She was glad she was handcuffed, and sad as well, because if her hands were free she'd be using both of them to pet and stroke and stretch and squeeze her clitoris in front of everyone here, including Sissy and her mother and all the boys and girls here, fucking with abandon, or waiting to fuck with abandon, and by doing that, she would invite herself to this

little party, her thick clitoris and her spasming pussy and her oozing vulva her complete RSVP.

RSVP.

It stood for something in French, but now her mind was searching for other words, English words, for which RSVP stood when applied to the parties in this room.

She needed to distract herself this way, desperate as she was, and helpless as she was to do anything about it.

R.S.V.P.

V: The V would have to stand for Vagina. Or Vulva.

P: Pussy. But you already have vagina or vulva. Pussy would be overkill.

R: What would R stand for? Raw. Red. Rabbit. No, all of those were dumb.

S: Sex. No, that was dumb too. Or obvious. Just obvious.

“Are they breeding now?” Mary asked.

Shit, really?

Mom, please, do you truly not get this?

“Breeding is done downstairs, in that room we saw,” Madison said sharply, speaking while Sissy was still drawing in her breath to answer. “No one’s fertile right now, so this is, what ... exercise?”

“Exactly,” Sissy said, looking with approving surprise at Madison. “We see breeding as a daily commitment, for all sex organs.”

Right Sized Vagina Please.

That’s it. RSVP. Right Sized Vagina Please. As in, bring your vagina, and if it’s not the right size before this little party starts, it soon will be. You’ll take every size we have here, and if it’s too big, that’s just too bad. You might groan, you might cry, but you’ll be the right size soon enough.

Sissy pulled Madison's leash down the aisle between the cages, and Madison followed with what might be called a burning sorrow, so hotly did she want things she could not have, and her head turned side to side, eyes focusing here and there, on penises of varying sizes and thicknesses and states of arousal, on faces of every known ethnicity and shade of the melanin rainbow and some unknown, until she was stopped short by an unexpected sensation in her anus. It wasn't pain exactly, more disconcerting than anything else, and she paused and turned to find that the leash between herself and her mother had gone taut, Mary standing frozen, eyes fixed on one place in one cage, where a girl who did not look entirely unlike Madison was splayed out on her back with her legs raised and her face upturned in shock while a penis explored her vaginal depths, sliding in, withdrawing, driving forward again.

Was this a vision? Was Mary seeing things not as they were, but as they might be, her daughter someday in this girl's place, receiving the same attention, while four more penises waited?

"Mom!" Madison might have barked, quite understandably, and she might have yanked her mother's chain, or stepped back to her and hoped there was enough slack in her vaginal leash so she could stand directly in front of the woman, get her attention, and sigh with annoyance.

But no, Madison merely stopped and gazed patiently at her mother and understood what the woman was thinking, for in this way at least, Mary was grasping things more quickly than her daughter.

And the conclusion was as simple as this: Madison would not be coming home today.

"Rhonda, this is Madison," Sissy said to one of the penis bearers, a tall girl with long blonde hair in a ponytail, rounded B-cup breasts, and a 7-inch penis sticking straight forward, waiting its turn with the girl who was now on the bed, legs spread, enduring the insertion of her first partner's organ.

“Hi, Madison!” said Rhonda, turning to the bars to regard the girl. “Any chance you’ll sign up?”

“Yes,” Madison said simply.

“Cool,” said Rhonda. “I doubt we’ll get to breed, though.”

“Why not?” Madison asked, the question sounding ridiculous to her only after she’d voiced it.

“We’re both white,” Rhonda explained, and she reached up to tug on her ponytail, and her breasts shook and her penis swayed and her eyes went down to the place between Madison’s legs, to make the meaning of her next words clear. “But I hope we get to exercise together.”

“I’d like that,” Madison said, not sure it was true. She’d never even made love to a male body. How could she have any idea what being with Rhonda was like?

“Paul, this is Madison,” Sissy said, and Madison looked up to see another staff member, his status made clear both by the fact he was dressed and he wasn’t caged. He was standing at the far end of the aisle, leaning against the bars and just supervising apparently, and easy enough to miss for Madison, given everything else happening here. It was he, she guessed, who’d brought the vaginas, and who remained to make sure things went forward as intended.

“Hey, Madison,” he said without stepping away from the bars. He could have offered his hand, of course, but she wouldn’t have been able to take it.

“Hi, Paul,” Madison said back.

“Any other questions?” Sissy inquired, looping back around, moving toward the entrance of the facility’s semen supply, which flowed from the tips of 20 penises, not all of them belonging to males, and some of them even now churning out the goods, as evidenced by a few deep, frantic grunts and the surprised, higher-pitched shouts of vaginal relief, as those providing a temporary home for the spitting rods suffered through their own orgasms.

“I have a question,” Madison said, tearing her attention away from the commotion behind her. “What’s on the fourth floor?”

“A lot of empty space, some storage,” Sissy said, “and some new technologies.”

“New technologies?” Madison echoed.

“It’s sort of secret,” Sissy said. “But let’s just say there might be alternatives to carrying a fetus for nine months.”

“Wow,” Madison said, mind whirring.

Back to the elevator they went, back to the first floor, back to the room where they’d undressed and been bound, and the leashes came out, the handcuffs came off, and Madison left her aching sex organ alone, and she and her mother put back on their clothes, Madison and Mary saying nothing, asking no more questions, communing not at all.

It was Sissy who spoke first.

“So, what did you think?” she asked.

“You put girls with five boys,” Mary blurted. “Or penises. But the girls ... or the vaginas ... had to take them all.”

“On non-breeding days, we walk four vaginas up to the semen cageroom, twice a day,” Sissy agreed without a hint of hesitation.

“They have to do it, then,” Mary said.

“Every vagina gets a turn about every fifth day.”

“And it’s required?” Mary persisted.

“It’s part of the requirements, yes,” Sissy replied.

“And there’s no ... protection?” Mary asked.

Sissy offered a pained smile, and Madison looked away. If there were a single moment when her impatience could have boiled over, this was it. Protection? Did she really think a condom had ever been seen here, felt here, worn here? Really, Mom? But still, the girl held her peace, looking at her

mother, back at Sissy, and ready to address far more important things.

Chapter 25: Madison Enlists

“Can I sign up no-ow?” Madison asked, her voice catching in her throat on the last word.

“You really want to?” Sissy said.

“Yes,” Madison said, and she looked at her mother again and raised her hand to her hair, where she twirled her index finger around a thick lock beside her ear. “But ... well, what’s the money?”

“After the signing bonus, it depends on production,” Sissy said.

“Signing bonus?” Madison repeated.

“We’ll pay as soon as you’re signed up and back in restraints. We ask that you get ready to be brought upstairs before it’s official.”

“How is it paid?” Madison asked.

“Did you bring your bank account information?” Sissy inquired.

Madison looked at Mary, and Mary nodded, and it was strange. They’d just ventured into an unimaginable world together, a place of nudity, of chains and cages and raw sex, and now they were talking about banking.

“Yes,” Mary said, reaching into her purse, drawing out the sheet with her information written on it. It had been folded into fourths, so she opened it.

“It normally takes about 48 hours for the money to show up,” Sissy said, peering at the sheet, turning to retrieve a folder from a drawer set into the table, pulling out a set of documents and handing them over. “Madison, these are yours, as the dependent, and Mary, here you go, parent/guardian. These are blanks we keep around, so we’ll need your names and the rest of your information filled in, and there’s a payment schedule on the last page you’ll need to initial.”

The two females took the forms, standing to read through them, leafing through the legalese, stopping on the

terms that seemed to deserve the most attention.

Mary was the first to reach the final page, and she gasped, deeply, throatily, as if working through her own sexual release.

“This says a hundred thousand dollars for an 18-year-old,” she said, showing it to Sissy.

“We pay top dollar for girls that age, but it doesn’t go down much until they hit their 30s.”

“You’re going to pay me a hundred thousand dollars?”

“We’re going to pay Madison,” Sissy said.

“I want it to go to my parents,” Madison said. “I can do that, right?”

“As long as your signature’s on the payment instructions, it can go to anyone you want,” Sissy said.

Sissy pulled out another document and slid it over to Madison, and she put her hands to either side of it, her arms straight, her neck bent, studying it before she took Mary’s folded sheet and transcribed the numbers from it into the blanks.

“Madison,” Mary said quietly. “Please don’t do—”

“I’m going to do this, Mom,” Madison interrupted, because for her, the money was an afterthought. She was going to stay here, in this place, with these people, *with these rules*, even if it paid nothing.

She made quick work of the financial document, signing it at the bottom with a little more of a flourish than usual, the “I” and the “d” in Inglewood both disproportionately large, the M in her first name also oversized.

“Madison,” Mary said again, stopping there, and the girl slid the form back to Sissy and looked into her mother’s eyes, and noticed they were wet, and she felt a catch in her throat that she didn’t want to see turn to tears, so she laughed.

“You’re gonna visit me, right?”

“Yes, yes,” Mary said, and she laughed too. “I think I knew this was going to happen.”

“What do you mean?”

“You,” Mary said. “You’re ... you know.”

“I’m what?” Madison said, not sure where her mom was going with this, if it was one final attempt to change Madison’s mind.

“We know you ... like feeling things.”

“Feeling things?” Madison said, sensing this was instead going to be an affirmation, but not one she necessarily wanted to hear, and the girl who seemed to be beyond embarrassment felt her cheeks redden slightly one more time.

“Your dad and I hear you in the shower.”

“Okay,” Madison said with a weak grimace and a self-conscious twirl of her hair. “Tell him I said bye. Tell him I love him.”

The two embraced, and both were sniffing as they filled in the agreements and Sissy slipped them into a folder and Mary, too overwhelmed to say more, gave her daughter another hug and turned away and left, closing the door quietly behind her.

“Okay,” Madison said, turning to Sissy, determined not to get emotional. “What now?”

“You need to strip,” Sissy said, “And let me restrain you. Leash up your rear again?”

“Sure,” Madison said flatly.

“And I’ll walk you to your cage, and you’re all set.”

Madison pulled off her t-shirt and bra, pushed down her shorts and panties, bent as she had before, held still as the restraint was pushed into her rear chamber, and she allowed Sissy to lead her back down the hall to the elevator.

Getting dressed, signing paperwork, filling out a bank form, giving her mother an emotional goodbye, had deadened Madison’s arousal.

But as soon as she was back in the elevator, naked and leashed, her carnal inclinations returned with a vengeance, fresh lubricant rushing over what had flowed before, her clitoris stirring, her mind replaying what she had seen upstairs.

“Can you wait a little longer?” Sissy inquired as the elevator rose to the second floor. Clearly, the recruiter had developed a fine-tuned ability to sense the state of the females she was leading.

“How long?” Madison asked, planting her hands on her hips, refraining for the moment from putting them where she really wanted them.

“We’re going to get you paired up for an initial assessment as soon as we can find a volunteer,” Sissy said.

“A volunteer?” Madison inquired.

“A penis,” Sissy explained.

“What’s he ... what’s it ... going to do to me?”

“Assess your vagina,” Sissy explained flatly.

“Wow,” Madison said quietly. “Where?”

“On the third floor.”

“In one of those rooms we saw?” Madison asked.

“Yes, an examination room.”

“How soon?” Madison asked.

“I was going to let you get settled in,” Sissy said, and when the elevator door opened on the second floor, she eased toward the hall, leash in hand.

“Can we go now?” Madison queried. “I’d like to ... get it done.”

Sissy stepped back into the elevator, hit the third-floor button.

“Wait,” Madison said as the elevator rose. “So, someone’s going to go inside me, right?”

“Yes.”

“Haven’t all of them already done that?” Madison said. “Aren’t they done with that ... for awhile?”

“They’ve only gone once,” Sissy said. “The morning session. Most of them can get an erection within a half hour of ejaculation, and can release again too.”

“So that’s what’s going to be done?” Madison said. “Releasing ... in me?”

“It’s not required for an assessment,” Sissy said. “But it usually happens.”

The door opened, the familiar smell of this floor wafting in immediately, growing stronger even as Madison followed Sissy into the hall and away from the penises, through the other door.

Although it had happened little more than an hour before, the tour Madison took of this part of the building had created few memories. She thought she must be going to a bedroom or a room with a mat, but Sissy brought her to neither. Instead, she walked the girl into one of the clinic rooms, the central feature of which was an examination chair. It was, of course, a chair unlike any other Madison had ever put herself on, however, for this piece of furniture was equipped with the same restraints she’d seen everywhere else, and she realized with a start that as she lost her virginity today, she’d be in chains.

“Climb on up,” Sissy said, and Madison obeyed a little stiffly, mindful of the plug in her anus and the chain swinging from it, which struck the metal parts of the exam chair with a startling clang.

Once Madison had gingerly positioned herself, she put her feet in the stirrups, watching dispassionately as her ankles were bound to it, next placing her hands at her sides so Sissy could manacle her wrists.

Once again, Madison was secured so her hands could not reach her vulva, so she could not give herself the pleasure she longed for, and she looked at her pubic hair and bit her lower lip.

Sissy pulled out her phone and tapped.

“I’m going to tell Paul to bring you a male,” she said. “Do you have any preference on penis size?”

“Medium,” Madison blurted. She didn’t know, she didn’t care. She just wanted something done between her legs.

Madison didn’t consider herself particularly romantic. When she and her friends talked about first times, and the ways it could go that would be best, she shied away from weekends in a secluded cabin, lovemaking before a fire. Sex was sex, she’d decided. As soon as the boy put his thing up you, that’s all that would matter, the warmth of the fire and the isolation of the cabin footnotes to the primary sensation. Or distractions.

But even she never envisioned anything quite this free of allure, bound to an exam chair in what felt like a well-lit doctor’s office, about to be penetrated by someone without benefit of even a proper introduction, others selecting him – or her – on the basis of penis size alone.

And when Sissy stepped between Madison’s thighs and bent to inspect the girl’s vulva, the moment took yet another diversion from the first time of her imaginings. No girl would include, in her fantasies of losing her flower, a preliminary examination by another female, but that’s what Madison was getting, Sissy spreading her lips, running a bare finger from her vaginal mouth to her clitoris, pressing the thick flesh around her hole, tapping her clitoris itself.

“You seem ready,” Sissy said.

“I think I’ve been ready,” Madison sighed, “since before I got here.”

“You’re doing great, by the way,” Sissy said, staring intently at Madison’s slot, as if speaking to the organ, and not to Madison herself.

And yet Madison replied, since her organ could not speak.

“Thanks,” she said with an air of dismissiveness.

“I’m being serious,” Sissy said, a little defensively. “We had a huge pool to choose from, and you’ve made the cut, over and over.”

“Really?” Madison said, truly taken aback.

“Most girls don’t make it past the DNA test. We’re very picky that way. And we lose a lot of girls when we give them the questionnaire, or tell them to describe masturbating.”

“How was it?” Madison said, shifting in her chair, chains rattling.

“How was what?”

“My description.”

“Of masturbating?”

“Yeah. I mean, was it what you were looking for? I did it the right way?”

“Oh, we don’t care,” Sissy said. “It doesn’t matter what you write, as long as you write something. Because of how we do things here, we need girls who are comfortable in their bodies. If you can’t talk about that, you’re probably not going to do that great in the breeding room.”

“I was sort of curious about that room,” Madison said. “I sort of wanted to see ... people in it.”

Sissy laughed and opened her mouth to speak, but the door swung inward and both of them turned to look. Paul, the staff member Madison had met earlier, walked in, leash in hand, followed by one of the males Madison recognized from the male cageroom. And he was a male, Madison confirmed, not just because of his semi-erect penis, but because of his broad chest and lack of breasts, his eyes, his black stubble.

And his penis too, now growing steadily erect.

“You signed up!” he said, a little ironically. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Madison choked, adjusting herself on her chair again, raising her pelvis and setting it down quickly, not wanting to be obvious about what she was expecting – or

desiring. To her dismay, the links of her anal leash swung against the end of the table, so the arrival of the boy to his place between her cuffed ankles was marked by jangling metal.

The boy didn't seem to mind the distraction. Or at least, his penis didn't, continuing to harden as Paul fastened his leash to a place Madison couldn't see at the end of the table.

"You're taking her leash out, right?" the boy inquired.

"Yeah," Sissy said, and Paul eased to the wall, and the boy stepped back to the limits of his leash, and Sissy moved in to unlock Madison's leash plug and remove it from her anus, and the boy looked away, and Madison appreciated the gesture but didn't care, and she looked back at his penis and his testicles and the collar that bound them and the chain that ran from his collar to Madison's examination chair, and the whole thing felt to her like dance, like choreography, four people moving in four ways so that two of them could move together in a very particular way, and Madison turned all her attention to the penis, which was like a fifth dancer, here to twist and pirouette with the sixth dancer, which was her pussy, and the fifth dancer looked good, and probably a little above average in her estimation, at least six inches long and tipped with a broad head, the shaft behind it thick and surprisingly complicated, veins and ridges and a dark ring around the middle.

Once Sissy had the leash out and set in the sink, she returned to Madison's side, spread the girl's vaginal lips and motioned the boy to step up, and he did so, his penis elevated with arousal, his tip inches from Madison's female opening.

"Wait," Madison said. "What's your name?"

The boy smiled. "Ryan," he replied.

"Nice to meet you, Ryan. I'm Madison."

"Hi, Madison."

"Can you go a little slow?" Madison said. "This is going to be a first for me."

“Virgin?” Ryan said, eyes wide with surprise.

“Physically, yeah,” Madison said.

Ryan inched closer, Sissy spreading Madison’s doors expectantly, Madison up on her elbows, watching the proceedings with a tight, nervous smile, her bound hands clenched at her sides, her toes curled.

The boy grabbed himself at the midpoint of his shaft and put his tip against Madison’s vulva, positioning it until the end rested against her wet hole, then pushing forward slowly, stretching the flesh around her sexual opening, forcing himself into her body while she rocked her pelvis and her mouth went wide with an unfamiliar and not entirely welcome sensation.

“You already did this once today,” Madison said quietly, forcing the words out.

“Yeah,” Ryan agreed with a quick sigh, his focus obviously on the way Madison’s vagina was enveloping, quarter-inch by quarter-inch, his thick rod. “An hour ago.”

“Uh ... oh,” Madison said, her eyes narrowed to slits as she watched herself move from virginity to the state that follows it. “They, uh, oh god, they brought ... them ... to you.”

“Yeah,” Ryan confirmed. “And it’ll happen again this afternoon.”

“Ow, ow, ow,” Madison grunted quietly.

“I think I’m feeling your hymen,” Ryan said, pulling his penis back and then easing it forward again, looking up as he concentrated on the sensations of Madison’s chamber.

“I thought I broke it,” Madison said, her husky voice now a little panic-stricken. “A year ago. With a dildo.”

“It’s deep,” Ryan said, looking down at his member, most of which was buried within Madison. “But I’m pretty sure that’s what I’m hitting.”

Madison raised herself as far as her bonds would allow, looking down at Ryan’s penis where it entered her body.

“What are you gonna do?” she asked.

If would have been fine with her if he'd said he was done, that he wasn't going to break her, wasn't going to rip her open. That outcome wasn't in the cards, however.

“Do you want him to shred you slowly,” Sissy asked, “or get it done with one thrust?”

“I don't know,” Madison said, almost pitifully. “What will feel, um, not the worst?”

“I'd have it done fast,” Sissy said. “It'll be over before you know it.”

Paul, suddenly interested, pushed himself away from the wall and stepped over, taking his place opposite Sissy, next to Madison's other hip, looking down at the place of union.

“Okay,” Madison said, closing her eyes and puffing out her cheeks, and she nodded and waited.

“Madison,” Sissy said.

“Yes, Ma'am?” Madison said, opening her eyes and looking at Sissy.

“Do you want him to break you with one thrust?”

“I do, yeah,” Madison replied, nodding before she closed her eyes back, puffed out her cheeks again, tightened all of her body.

“Go ahead,” Sissy said to Ryan.

Instead of simply pushing forward, however, Ryan pulled back until just his tip was between Madison's lips.

Nor did he simply thrust all of himself back up the girl's sheath. Instead, he pushed in slowly, pausing at the same depth as before, testing the girl's hymen with the sensitive flesh at the front of his organ.

Madison, frozen in fear, waited.

And finally, after another quick pull backward, Ryan pushed all of himself against the girl's tissue, ripping her maidenhead open and burying all of his rod inside her.

“Aahuah ... ahhh ... AHHH!” Madison cried, her voice growing in volume until, with her final shout, she was pulling at her wrist chains and pushing her feet against the stirrups, her heels white.

At this point, Ryan’s training showed. A less experienced male might have recoiled in fear, pulled his penis out of his partner’s vagina, apologized, done his best to comfort the girl.

But no, Ryan continued his journey in and out of the girl’s body, working diligently to ensure that all of her hymen had been removed, studying his penis to watch for the sign of success, quickly finding it there, Madison’s blood roiling out, coating his rod and her lips, running down in thin streams across his collared testicles.

Now he was pushing in and pulling out methodically, not with great grinding thrusts, not gently either, but Madison was no longer protesting. Even as her virginal blood continued to flow, a new mood had settled over the girl, and her lubricant coursed, and her little grunt of distress at each insertion of penis into her body was tinged with a sigh of pleasure as well.

This was a new thing for Madison, a new way to enjoy the familiar building to climax, and she focused on that, on the sensations within and just outside her vagina, on the pressing of Ryan against her clitoris, and the way the trip to release felt like an echo between her mind and the place between her legs, and she tried to think more on that and dwell less on the strangeness, on her restraints and the lights and the presence of two people, one on either side of her, and the blood, and the ebbing pain.

It was something new, however, that pushed her over the edge: the realization that Ryan was nearing climax, that her wet hold on his shaft was good enough to bring him to that condition. He was moving a little faster now, pushing in a little deeper, grinding against Madison’s clitoris a little harder with every thrust, and he was gasping now, quiet, rhythmic sighs that, the girl was certain, were the precursors to ultimate pleasure. Soon, the rod within would quiver, and the rod that had broken her would spit, filling her with a cream that she

knew was thick and white, and afterwards it would ooze out of her, she was certain, and with those thoughts her arrival became inevitable, and she shook her pelvis and groaned and yanked at her chains again and closed her thighs around Ryan's hips and cried out through a long, delicious orgasm, her vagina and uterus spasming around Ryan's manhood and giving him the final push toward his second orgasm of the day, and now his insertions within his partner went completely random, sometimes shallow and sometimes hard and deep, his leash striking Madison's table now and then, and he groaned as he drove into her another dozen times while his loins emptied their load into her welcoming chamber.

Sissy and Paul hovered above the site of union, both supervising as Ryan slowed his thrusts to complete stillness but remained deep within the girl.

Paul spoke first, looking at Madison: "Think you could get used to this?"

"Yeah," Madison said, nodding slowly, still in the afterglow of climax.

"Ryan, how was she?" Sissy asked.

"Deep," he replied, looking down at the base of his penis. "A little relaxed, but she really tightened up while she was being broken."

"Is that a normal reaction to pain for you?" Sissy asked.

"What do you mean?" Madison inquired.

"Do you tighten your vagina as a response to negative stimuli?"

"Oh," Madison said, shaking her head. "I ... I don't know. This is the first time I've been hurt while I was holding something."

"Well, loose is good too," Sissy said cryptically. "We can use that in the breeding room."

"Okay," Madison agreed uncertainly.

‘But you might have to suffer a little during the moments of truth,’ Sissy continued.

‘What does that mean?’

‘Ready to go to your cage?’ Sissy asked without answering Madison’s question.

‘Yeah,’ Madison said, gasping as Ryan removed his penis, still wet with lubricant, semen and blood.

‘Nice to meet you, Madison,’ he said, stepping back and waiting while Paul freed his leash from the table.

‘Yeah,’ Madison said absently, her attention focused on Sissy, who gave the anal leash a quick rinse and was returning to the exam chair with it.

Madison, demonstrating an impressive presence of mind considering what had just been done to her, raised her hips off the table and angled her pelvis up, wincing and sighing as Sissy pushed the leash plug back up her anus and locked it within her.

‘Is it starting to hurt?’ Sissy asked.

Madison turned to watch Paul and Ryan leave the room, turned back to Sissy. ‘Yeah,’ she said.

‘You’ll get used to it,’ Sissy promised. ‘And don’t be shy about asking one of your neighbors for help.’

‘You mean ... where they lick it?’ Madison asked doubtfully.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘All the girls say it helps.’

After her cuffs were unlocked, Madison slid stiffly off the table, unconcerned about the mess she’d made on the pad beneath her, and she followed Sissy out of the clinic and back to the elevator, the smell of the males as compelling as ever, but less puzzling, less perplexing. She’d had one, and he was good, and she felt like she’d gotten away with something, because what he’d put up the hole between her legs felt as illicit as underage drinking.

She stepped onto the elevator, nothing feeling normal here. She was naked, her nipples were still hard and exposed, her vagina was leaking semen and blood, and a chain ran from her anus to another girl's hand. But, oddly, this also felt like home. She had a purpose here, something she could do – something she'd already done, in fact: she'd saved her parents' home. And soon enough, she'd be making new life. More than one, probably. How much did that pay? She wasn't sure. But if she could leave this place in a year or two or five, with a little of the money they seemed to throw around freely, she'd be set.

Thinking of her mother, driving home alone, gave her a slight pang, until Sissy spoke and cleared her mind.

"You're going to be busy the next few days," she said.

"What will I be doing?" Madison inquired.

"More assessments," Sissy said. "We're going to study your orgasms, see what gets you tight, see what feels best to you, what makes you wettest.

"I'm supposed to start my period tomorrow," Madison said. "In the afternoon, probably."

"Some of it can be done during your period," Sissy said.

The elevator opened and they crossed the hall into the female cageroom, and Madison knew where she was going, as familiar with her destination as if she'd come this way a thousand times, and Sissy unlocked the cage door and opened it, and Madison stepped through, stopped so Sissy could lock the door.

"Bend over and let me get your leash out," Sissy said, and Madison obeyed and grimaced, and once the plug was gone, she turned and straightened, looking out of her new home and into 19 other pairs of disconcertingly staring eyes.

"This is Madison, everyone," Sissy said. "She's signed up to breed."

"Madison!" shouted a girl from the end of the room.

"Hey, Madison!" two girls shouted in unison.

“Oh my god, it’s Madison!” someone shouted, sounding for all the world as if she thought Madison was a celebrity, and the girls around her exploded in hysterical laughter.

Madison listened to the greetings with the awkwardly bemused smile of someone enduring a birthday chant at a chain restaurant.

“Thanks, everyone!” she said, looking through the bars at faces of every hue, a few as light as hers, a few as black as night. In the cage to her immediate right stood a girl in the darkest category, her hair in a short afro, her nipples black, her labia black as well, peeking out through her shaved vulva.

“Chantrelle,” she said with a grin.

“And I’m Josephine,” said the voice behind Madison, and she turned to regard a girl who looked either Native American or Japanese or both, her black pubic hair natural and thick. “Do you remember me from upstairs?”

“Kinda,” Madison said. “I wasn’t paying super close attention, because of my mom.”

“You looked hungry,” Josephine said, turning her eyes to Chantrelle. “She looked hungry. And her mom looked scared. But I knew you were gonna sign up.”

“How’s your ass?” Chantrelle inquired.

Madison twisted to look at her rear. “Normal, I guess.”

“Any pain?”

“Oh, you mean the leash?” Madison asked. “Yeah, it stung a little.”

“Would you like some attention?” Chantrelle asked. “You know we help each other with that.”

“Oh, yeah,” Madison said. “Sissy talked about it.”

“Wipe,” Chantrelle said, pointing to the enclosed toilet, “and then come to the bars, and I’ll make a believer out of you.”

Madison pushed aside the curtain, closed it behind her, sat down on the toilet, listened to the girl's voices as the noise in the room returned to a quiet roar, and she realized only now how badly she needed to pee, and she released noisily, watching as more than urine left her vulva, and she wiped everything once her bladder was empty, including Ryan's oozing semen, and as the tissue passed over her clitoris, she noticed it was still firm, and profoundly sensitive, and crying out for more attention, but with Chantrelle waiting, she stroked herself briefly without any intention of climaxing, then wiped her anus with a wince, and she flushed and emerged to find Chantrelle standing at the bars.

The two girls made eye contact but said nothing as Madison went to Chantrelle, turned and dropped to her knees and backed up, sliding her feet into Chantrelle's cage and pressing her bottom against the bars, angling her pelvis to make her rear opening easier to reach.

Chantrelle's tongue arrived a second later, licking lightly, bringing instant relief. The sensation was both a first in Madison's life, based on an utterly foreign concept, and strangely familiar, and she closed her eyes and concentrated on the quick, repeated strokes of Chantrelle's tongue, and on the coolness it brought, and when Chantrelle lowered her tongue slightly, to probe Madison's vaginal entrance, this new first thing also felt natural, and logical, and Madison arched her back to make her female slit easier to reach, and Chantrelle took advantage of the improved position to work her tongue into the girl's hole.

This was not lovemaking, however, something Madison understood when the tongue left her front chamber and, coated now with fresh lubricant and a trace of Ryan's semen, returned to her anus for another dozen quick licks, the wetness of coupling acting as a salve to Madison, bringing such relief to her burning hole that she sighed.

Too soon, Chantrelle's tongue was finished, nothing but a faint coolness there now.

"Ryan?" Chantrelle inquired.

“Yeah,” Madison replied huskily, still in position at the bars. “How did you know?”

“I’d know that taste anywhere,” Chantrelle said. “I get put with him a lot.”

“Uh,” Madison said by way of agreement, and she spread her thighs and lowered her hips and reached with one hand between her legs, spreading her lips to insert a finger, rubbing lubricant across her groaning clitoris, circling and pressing and grinding until she’d found solace there, in front of everyone, grunting and gasping through a new round of pleasure, at least as hard as the day’s first, and she thrust against the air like a male would during release, her fingers flying shamelessly across her slot, and she continued to pant and rock slowly after the orgasm was done, her eyes closed and her mind searching for meaning, for some conclusion, for a justification or excuse for what she had done, for what she had just become, for masturbating publicly, taking relief in a cage in front of a roomful of caged girls she didn’t know before today, but Madison could conjure no shame here, no embarrassment. Instead, her mind went repeatedly to the cages on the third floor, and the boys – and girls – there, and their penises, and the way it felt to be penetrated by one, and even if her period was going to begin tomorrow, she wasn’t sure how she’d make it more than an hour at a time without masturbating again, and she hoped that was allowed.

It was something she needed to ask about.

Chapter 26: A Leash to be Reckoned With

Priscilla had been stretched out on the cool-down stock for close to an hour, maybe more, and she was starting to get uncomfortable. The little shelves where she pressed with her toes weren't big enough, and it was making her feet hurt. Her wrists, secured with leather belts well above her head, were starting to ache, and there were dull pangs as well in her shoulders and elbows, in her back and neck. Her vagina was leaking semen, an irritation of another variety, because she wanted to do something about it. Wipe, perhaps. Or something else.

Her assignment was almost over, however, the morning demonstration and her part in it soon to conclude.

But before she could be let down from the stock, she needed to be put on some other manacle, some other form of restraint, and the form had been decided with no input from her: a vaginal leash.

It seems that Cassock Corp. had among its repertoire a mechanism for securing a female by her reproductive chamber, an implement ideal for times when she needed her feet and hands free and the services of her vagina weren't required. If there were any less obvious benefits of such a product, Lloyd would have to outline them, and the room waited as Lloyd retrieved the restraint from his stash of supplies.

"May we take a look before you insert it?" asked Gwen Beales, the lab's chief operations officer and the de facto chair of today's presentation.

"Of course," Lloyd said, handing the leash to the nearest attendee, a woman, and she scowled at the rod at the end of the three-foot chain, clearly uncertain of its workings. Or maybe she imagined being put on it herself. At the moment however, there wasn't much to be concerned with, the device merely a long, thick, pointed cylinder that appeared completely smooth.

“Push the button in the base,” Lloyd instructed. The woman complied, the rod clicked, and short pegs emerged all along its length and breadth, from the base to the tip. The woman almost recoiled as the rod’s means of securing itself within its wearer’s body became obvious.

The most engaged pair of eyes in the conference room, however, belonged to the girl whose sex was about to be stretched around the device, and Priscilla focused on the object from the place where she hung, the pain in her toes and the ache in her arms and shoulders forgotten for the moment.

Lloyd handed the woman a small key and pointed to the little hole in the base of the rod, and she inserted and twisted and the pegs retreated, and she handed the restraint to the man behind her, and she seemed glad to be rid of it.

The vaginal leash made the rounds quickly, a few of the men pushing the button to extend the pegs, none of the women, due to sympathy, perhaps, or the avoidance of an experience one doesn’t want, even vicariously.

Once the leash was back in Lloyd’s hands, he began narrating as he cleaned it with a disinfecting wipe.

“This is another product we developed in collaboration with a breeding facility that might or might not be located in Georgia,” he noted. “We worked confidentially with them, using our expertise in materials and manufacturing to create a tool to their specifications.”

Lloyd turned to Priscilla.

“Alright, 67, would you like to take a look before I put it up your vagina?” he asked.

“Yes,” Priscilla replied evenly, at peace with any step in the process that got her freed from the stock.

Lloyd lifted the restraint rod to her eyes, but before he demonstrated its securing properties, he turned back to his audience.

“Some girls want to see what’s about to be put inside them, and some don’t,” he said. “So you should always ask.”

Lloyd pressed the button and the pegs emerged and Priscilla's eyes went wide. The pegs were both longer and more pointed than she'd been able to tell from afar, each little nub like a tooth, as if designed to eat at its wearer from inside.

"Ready?" Lloyd asked, as a courtesy only, because if Priscilla said no, it was still going up her.

"Yes," she said, also as a courtesy.

Without warning, Lloyd reached between her legs to examine her readiness, parting her lips and sliding a finger inside her, and she gasped and pulled at her bonds, inevitable responses to stimulation at that part of her anatomy.

"Artificial lubrication usually shouldn't be necessary," Lloyd said, continuing to examine the girl. "If she's not still wet from her last procedure, a few strokes against her clitoris should get enough juice flowing to get the restraint up her."

Lloyd rubbed Priscilla's clitoris, and she grunted and strained at her straps again, the stock creaking with her efforts.

"Okay, she's ready," he said, bending to eye her vulva as he raised the rod, spreading her lips again to push the tip against her opening, and then sliding it slowly into her body while Priscilla looked down with a grimace.

"Does it hurt, 67?" Beales asked.

"No," Priscilla gasped.

"Let's see how she does when you lock it," Beales instructed.

This time, the little click – clearly audible as the leash was being passed around the room – was muffled by Priscilla's thick vaginal walls, so the audience had only the girl's face to go by in guessing when Lloyd had secured her. But her face was easy to read, a sort of urgent distress breaking forth in her eyes, in her open mouth, in the way her nipples hardened and she shook on the stock, body straining against her leather restraints.

"Uhhh," Priscilla groaned. "Uhhh."

“Normally, there’s not quite this much reaction,” Lloyd said, turning away from the writhing girl to address his listeners.

“Girls on 67’s track typically possess a lot of vaginal sensitivity,” Beales said. “67, impressions?”

“It doesn’t ... it doesn’t hurt,” Priscilla gasped. “But it’s a little ... I can really feel it.”

“Will it hold you?”

“As long as it’s locked,” Priscilla said breathily. She was starting to get used to it, all 120 ... no, 130 ... no, more pegs than that, each driving mercilessly into the soft, wet tissue of her female sheath, each acting in unison like a soldier on the single mission of ensuring that the rod stayed buried within her vagina until someone else, with a key, decided it should be removed. Until then, whoever put their hand through the leather loop at the other end of the leash was her master, her handler, her owner, for she would do anything for anyone who held it. Even the gentlest tug would send cascades of sensory overload through her loins, and from there to the rest of her being. A hard tug would make her faint, she was certain. And yet, her body did not entirely dislike this intrusion, her female tunnel tightening and squeezing, sensing and sampling, and once again, her honey flowed, and if the pegs were truly all soldiers united in the mission of keeping the restraint rod up Priscilla’s chamber, they would all be drowning right now.

Lloyd slipped the leash off his hand and let it fall, let it swing between Priscilla’s legs, and she winced at the minor tug as the restraint dropped and snapped against the floor, but she sighed with relief as Lloyd unbelted her ankles and let her stand on the floor, and once her hands were free, she executed her standard array of light, post-restraint calisthenics, spreading her arms wide, planting her hands on her hips, bending her elbows and pushing them behind her and, once Lloyd had reclaimed her leash, put it around his wrist and stepped to the side, she bent, touched her toes, breathed in, straightened and eyed Lloyd warily, mindful of the power he held over her.

“67, any temptation to explore life on the other side of the fence?” he inquired.

“No, Sir,” she quickly replied, turning to Beales.

“It doesn’t hurt?” Beales asked.

“No, Ma’am,” Priscilla said. “It’s really stimulating, though.”

“Can I show off our temporary holding post?” Lloyd asked.

Beales indicated approval with a curt wave of her hand, and Lloyd led the girl – leaving the leash mercifully slack – toward the shaded windows, where a post about a yard high had been set on a circular platform, and he padlocked Priscilla’s leash to it, securing it at the midpoint of the restraint, Priscilla’s vagina about 18 inches from the top of the post.

Once secured, she studied the post and the way she was bound to it, but she did not test its limits, did not step back to draw the chain tight. Instead, resigned to this new discomfort, she rested her hands atop of the post and picked her feet up cautiously, one at a time, still savoring this slight improvement in her freedom. The platform was cool against her soles, and slightly giving, and Priscilla guessed it had been topped with a vinyl pad. It was a feature so trivial as to be almost meaningless, given the post’s purpose, but she had trained herself over the last six months to appreciate even the smallest benefits. She tightened around the rod again, feeling every little nub along its length, continuing to wash it with her vaginal honey, sensing the persistent swelling of her clitoris, which she didn’t dare touch. The windows with their blinds were a foot away, close enough to touch, to peer through, if only she could move the shade out of the way.

“We recommend one to two posts in every room, and a few along every hallway,” Lloyd said. “When you need a girl to stay put while you deal with something else, put her on a post and she’ll wait.”

“Is orgasm possible on the leash?” Beales asked.

“I’m not sure there’s any place where an orgasm isn’t possible for a girl who’s determined,” Lloyd quipped to scattered laughter, “but for girls on the rod, the simplest answer is it varies. Some girls will experience no sexual feelings at all once it’s locked up their vaginas, and some will start squirming with frustration as soon as it’s being pushed in.”

“Which are you, 67?” Beales inquired.

“More the latter,” she said, to more laughter.

“Masturbate,” Beales said. “You have my permission.”

Chapter 27: Down Come the Blinds

Priscilla glanced at the woman to make sure she was being serious, and then turned to regard the nearest window, covered with a blind she desperately wanted to remove, and she lowered her right hand to her vulva and went to work, making the first quick circles around her clitoris.

“Anal monitor,” Beales commanded, and Georgie, one of the lab technicians, stepped around the stock and up to Priscilla, and drew a small black object out of her pocket.

Priscilla, recognizing an implement she was regularly required to wear, halted her attention to her sex organ and bent forward, both hands on the post, holding steady as the monitor was pushed into her anus, and she winced slightly, because the earlier demonstrations had rendered the hole very sensitive. Once it was in place, Georgie pulled out her phone and programmed it to receive the data sent by the probe, which tracked and broadcast every pertinent detail of conditions between Priscilla’s legs – vaginal tightening, blood flow to the organ, increases in pulse and breath, and the many signs of orgasm, from heightened vital signs to the spasming of the vagina and uterus.

There would be no faking here.

Georgie returned to her seat and Priscilla returned to her clitoris, rubbing and circling and – although she certainly intended to give herself a full orgasm – preparing to execute a non-sexual ruse that would win her a peek out one of those windows. To that end, the girl was about to become a highly demonstrative masturbator, a female who could not help but flail as she pushed herself to climax.

Her first efforts were not particularly interesting, however. Staring at the far wall, she worked methodically to carry out Beales’ command, stroking her vulva and her lips, tightening and relaxing around the restraint rod while she experimented, tapping it with her fingers, tugging the chain, quickly learning that very light pressure on the device provided pleasurable stimulation while more intense

manipulation was too much, and she settled into a steady rhythm while those in the room watched with anything from casual awareness to focused attention, some chatting quietly with each other, some unable to tear their eyes from the leashed, dark-haired female performing one of the most natural of behaviors in an exceptionally unnatural way. And yet, despite the circumstances, her buttocks tightened and relaxed the way any girl's would during standing masturbation. Her breasts rocked, up and down, side to side. Her lower jaw protruded. And as she got closer to orgasm, the leash that ran from her vagina to the top of the post began to swing, gently striking her inner thighs, rapping quietly against the post.

“Uh,” Priscilla said, her arm shaking with effort, her fingers picking up the pace of stimulation. “Oh.”

As Priscilla began to vocalize, more eyes turned to her, and the conversations ebbed. Female masturbation was interesting enough, but the methods of stimulation were usually done a few conventional ways, while every girl climaxed uniquely, and no two orgasms were the same for any girl. They'd already seen her arrive once, while stretched out on the stock, but her next turn would surely be different. And indeed it was.

“Mmmmm,” Priscilla grunted, pleasure competing with pain as her sheath gripped the studded leash rod. “Uh, uh, uh ...”

She began rocking her pelvis, her leash gyrating randomly, her arm shaking as her hand pounded her sex and the base of her restraint, and now her other hand left the top of the post, grabbing her breasts, first the left, then the right, returning to the post, moving to the blinds, to the post, back to the blinds, and at that moment, she nearly toppled, a terrifying prospect, for falling would force the leash taut and deliver unbearable stimulation to her vaginal walls, so she clawed desperately at the blinds to steady herself, grabbed and tugged, and down they came, clattering to the floor while the girl reached for something else, finding the top of the post again, grunting with guttural pleasure, nearly dancing as she pushed

herself one-handed through her orgasm and, at the same moment, she stared out the bare window, taking it all in, the green dumpster six stories below, the chain link and barbed wire fence that ringed the building and grounds, the industrial building and shops beyond the perimeter, the roads that served this part of Atlanta, and the neighborhoods beyond, streets and roofs and walls and an interspersal of trees that grew heavier the further one's eye moved toward the horizon, until all was a gray-green haze, and Priscilla, even as she groaned through an orgasm as true as any other, even as her female syrup leaked out around the vaginal restraint rod and soaked her lips, her hair and her fingers, even as the anal monitor passed its data through the air, reporting a bona fide female orgasm, the girl's uterus spasming and vagina clenching as sincerely as on any other occasion, Priscilla worked to memorize every feature of the scene beyond, for she had never looked at the world from this vantage point, and there was information there, essential information.

And then there was laughter at her expense, some of the men and women wresting amusement from a female who could masturbate with such abandon in a room full of dressed people, standing no less, bound by her vagina to a post, no less, ripping down the blinds as though they were the proverbial temple veil, no less.

It was not until at least a minute after the peak of her orgasm that Priscilla drew in her breath, removed her hand from her vulva, put both hands across the top of the post, slumped her shoulders, and turned sheepishly toward her audience.

“Sorry,” she said.

“The way they train these girls, I'm surprised she didn't do worse,” Beales said with obvious pride, heavy laughter ensuing, and Priscilla hoped that meant she wouldn't be punished, that her sexual enthusiasm would be forgiven this time. She was feeling light-headed, almost woozy – not uncommon after a climax – and getting another swat or another round with the anal leash wasn't going to help things.

“I assume her anal monitor picked up an orgasm?” Beales said, turning to Georgie.

“Yes,” she said, nodding and staring at her phone. “A strong one.”

“The vaginal leash does double-duty,” Lloyd said, stepping over to Priscilla with the key to the post. “Or even triple duty. It restrains the girl, of course, but it can also be considered a vaginal trainer. Most girls can’t help but tighten around it, and in our own tests, about half of females put on it an hour a day showed a measurable improvement in vaginal tone and control.”

Lloyd, still speaking as he released Priscilla’s leash from the post, added, “And some girls find it very arousing. Some don’t, but some do, so we recommend its use any time a leash-sensitive female is being brought to a procedure that requires arousal.”

“67, would you describe yourself as leash-sensitive?” Beales inquired.

“Yes,” Priscilla replied simply, following closely behind Lloyd as he approached the table, mindful of the leash, determined to keep it slack. Her anal monitor was still in as well, but it was smaller, it wasn’t held in with troubling little spikes, and she was used to it.

“How do you normally get your girls to lubricate?” Lloyd asked.

Beales nodded to Georgie, one of the blue-clad technicians, to provide the answer, although Priscilla certainly could have replied.

“It varies girl to girl,” Georgie said. “Some girls are almost always wet before they get to the lab, some start producing as soon as they’re chained to the table, and some we have to masturbate. A few need extra stimulation, at least when they’re not ovulating, so we’ll have their partners lick them, or tease them a little with partial penetration.”

“Which one are you, 67?” Beales inquired.

“67 is always wet,” Georgie blurted, to laughter.

It was true, Priscilla thought. If she wasn't already wet, she usually started wetting herself in her cage while she was being chained. It was a normal response, not unlike the drooling of Pavlov's dogs under the stimulation of a bell. Chains usually meant she was being taken to the lab, and the lab usually meant vaginal penetration by a male or by some other object, either of which typically brought pleasure and ended with an orgasm ... and sometimes more than one orgasm. And these were, furthermore, orgasms scientifically engineered to drive her to madness, her writhing limbs straining against her restraints while she screamed out, senselessly at times, sometimes with precise, coherent entreaties to her tormenters, that they please stop stimulating her, if only for the few seconds she needed to catch her breath; or that they stimulate her more, so she could at last climax; or that they put a larger or a smaller penis or stimulation rod up her vagina, just to break the excruciating monotony; or that they free her hand so she could finish things herself; or that they please, please, please, not force her to endure another orgasm after the one she had just had; or that they not kill her, which was, often enough, what she was convinced was about to happen.

They never listened, of course. But she never died, either. She came close, though. She sometimes fainted, and she was often brought back to her cage at the end of the day weak-kneed, woozy, slack-jawed and blank-eyed. The living dead, in effect, if it were normal for female walking corpses to be deceased everywhere except between their legs, where a swollen, tingling sex organ was still very much alive, leaking female nectar and, often enough, a very animated batch of sperm. Or two batches. Or more.

Because research subjects were on occasion brought to this room and expected to sit around the table for meetings or meals, the floor featured a half dozen or so anchor points where chains or tethers could be latched. Normally, it was shackles or an ankle chain that would be slipped into the floor bolt, but today, it was Priscilla's vaginal leash. The leash's leather loop wasn't designed for the floor bolts, however, so before she could sit at the conference table and join her

colleagues for lunch, Priscilla had to drop to her knees and study the problem, eventually finding a way to slip the leash into the catch. One of the handlers pushed the bolt closed and checked her work, tugging the leash both where it joined with the floor and, at the other end, where it remained embedded within her vagina. The girl grunted with discomfort as her restraint was disturbed, but once her leash had been secured, she was provoked no more, given a chair at the main table while about half the attendees had to settle into seats beyond the reach of the table, and when the cart arrived loaded with food, they set lunch on their laps.

The seating arrangement was not intended to compensate Priscilla's exertions or pains that morning, or the ongoing humiliation of being the only nude person at the meeting, or the only person in attendance who needed to be restrained. No, Beales wanted Priscilla there so she could continue talking to the girl.

"How is it feeling, 67?" Beales inquired once sandwiches and kettle chips had been handed out. Priscilla, in mid-chew and savoring this welcome respite from day after day of bland nutrition bars, nodded and smiled, pretending to hurry so she could answer, but not really hurrying at all.

"It's a little uncomfortable," she finally said after swallowing, washing it down with a swig of tea.

"Are we still monitoring her anus?" Beales asked, turning to the female staff member whose phone was pulling signals from the object in Priscilla's bottom.

"Yes," the girl replied, quickly pulling her phone from her pocket, setting it on the table and tapping it to life.

"She's still mildly aroused," the girl reported. "She's ... okay, she's tightening now ... and again ... yeah."

Trained as she was, not gripping the rod was an impossibility for Priscilla once the behaviors of her vagina were being discussed openly, and she could feel herself clenching involuntarily around it, almost stroking it with the walls of her sex.

“You’ve got a line of products for research use, don’t you?” a woman asked, looking at Lloyd.

“I’ve just been asked to discuss correction today,” Lloyd said, “but we do indeed.”

“Can the leashes be used for lab work?”

“Yes,” Lloyd replied, leaning back from his meal and rubbing his hands together. “They’re just as effective as chains for getting a girl to her research assignment. And we have been experimenting with chamber restraints that do double duty, that can monitor the girl’s anus or vagina while keeping her secure.”

Several of the staff expressed their approval of this approach, murmuring together, so Lloyd pressed on.

“A single insertion binds her and keeps tabs on her functions while she’s in transit,” he said. “Data runs right up to the loop in your hand, so you know where she’s at up until she’s on the table. We’ve done some studies. Time savings is three minutes per girl per day, so you’ll see hundreds of hours per year in time efficiencies over the year.”

The nodding of heads indicated support for the idea, and Lloyd smiled and winked at Beales, who kept her face blank.

“Do you work with males?” asked a man in the back.

“Absolutely,” Lloyd replied enthusiastically. “We’ve got restraints and correction systems designed specifically for the male anatomy.” Lloyd paused. “And the male mind. I know some people will disagree with me, but we’ve found that males and females respond very differently to the same stimuli.” Lloyd paused again, smiled. “Girls get wetter, boys get softer. So you’ve got to correct males very carefully, if at all.”

“Are you proposing anything for our males?” a woman asked.

“Mrs. Beales, in her infinite wisdom,” Lloyd replied without a trace of irony, “has suggested we see how we do with the females first.”

Lloyd's eyes searched the room, but with no more questions forthcoming, he leaned forward to continue lunch.

Near him, Priscilla squirmed and sighed, clearly stirred in a variety of ways by the restraint up her feminine hole.

“Another orgasm, 67?” Beales queried.

Was it really a question, though? No, it wasn't. Unless Priscilla had injured herself while masturbating at the post, there was no excuse for at least trying again.

But why? Why was Beales pushing her so hard? This would be her third orgasm, and it wasn't for research, and it wasn't for the demonstration. That all seemed to be finished.

“I think I can,” Priscilla replied honestly. If she couldn't have the rod removed, this might be the next best thing anyway, over-relieving her sex organ, driving it into a senseless stupor, too numb to feel anymore.

Priscilla raised the sandwich to her mouth with one hand, lowered her other hand to her middle and went to work, chewing even as she tapped and circled her raw but hardening clitoris.

There would be no flailing arms this time, no equipment being strained or blinds being ripped down. Never pausing in her enjoyment of the meal, she leaned forward, stared at the table, grimaced, rocked her pelvis and, within a few minutes, sighed through an orgasm of respectable power while all watched, for the spectacle was certainly rare, even to these people, of a girl lunching and masturbating to orgasm simultaneously.

“Georgie?” Beales inquired.

Georgie held up her phone, showing off the screen to prove that Priscilla had indeed climaxed again, although only a trained user of the anal monitor interface would know how to interpret it.

A few more questions were tossed Priscilla's way, about the kind of work she did in the lab, her previous life as a

college student, but most of the lunch conversation was directed toward Lloyd.

The Cassock Correction System was contracted on an annual basis, he explained, with renewal automatic unless either party decided to cancel. At the start of the term, the firm would deliver and install a complete inventory of equipment – leashes, rods, paddles, whips, clamps, cool-down stocks, cages, temporary holding posts and the like. The equipment was only a fraction of the offering, though. Cassock would bring in their own correction staff, trained strictly to the Cassock methodology. The lab’s current discipline crew would get first consideration on moving to Cassock employ, but that was not a guarantee, and Priscilla sensed a little nervousness among the four gray-clad staff in attendance. Existing staff would have to unlearn much of what they knew, Lloyd warned without looking at anyone in particular, and adapt to a completely new system, with a large “manifest,” as he put it, of correctionable behaviors. Speaking out of turn, addressing other research inventory by anything but their number, laughing inappropriately, complaining, touching one’s genitals without permission, even if it wasn’t masturbation – all of these would result in correction, and all for the greater good.

Lloyd promised that efficiencies would improve noticeably within weeks, as would staff morale, and the confidence of the girls themselves. A strict but predictable system was far better for all concerned, he asserted, than the lax but arbitrary system that he implied was now practiced at the Atlanta lab.

“What kind of training will the girls get?” one of the attendees asked.

“On the job, so to speak,” Lloyd replied. “We’ve found that reading from the manifest is 10 percent as effective as letting the females learn the system by living it. They’ll break a rule, receive correction, and share their experiences with the other females, and the system is picked up organically.”

The contract would begin with a “calibration,” Lloyd said, in which each girl would spend at least half a day in a

“stimulation lab” where her responses to various corrective techniques would be carefully tracked, with the goal that correction would be tailored to each girl. “What one girl finds maximally corrective will have no impact on the next female,” Lloyd said, “so the calibration process is meant to account for that.”

Each “correction event” would be counted, and up to five events per female per month would be covered under the contract, with events beyond that number billed separately.

Were Priscilla newer to the lab, or of a more anxious temperament, she might have found herself hoping Cassock would not be contracted, that they would not bring in their own battery of equipment, that they wouldn’t be given a financial incentive to catch the girls breaking the rules as often as possible.

It was all the same to Priscilla, however, one set of rules and one array of equipment interchangeable with the next. Dr. Morrow and Dr. Bank would protect her, for the most part, she believed. And if she got hung or spanked or beaten on occasion, she would survive.

“Everything you’ve shown us is for correction only, correct?” Georgie asked.

“That’s all Ms. Beales asked me to present on today, yes,” Lloyd replied with a deferential nod to the woman.

“But your products can be used in a lab setting?” Georgie continued. “They can be—”

“All the time,” Lloyd interrupted with enthusiasm. “We’ve got a comprehensive research line.”

“What about the things you’re shown us today?” Georgie asked. “The cool-down stock, for example. You said you can invert a female on it?”

“Of course,” Lloyd said. “One of our nameless breeding customers uses that feature all the time, after insemination. Would you like to see it?”

“Yes,” Georgie said, turning to Beales for her approval. Beales nodded and Georgie continued. “Sometimes,

we need to focus on the vagina, and having it positioned that way would make certain things a lot easier.”

“Let’s put 67 back on,” Beales said. “Inverted.”

“Of course,” Lloyd agreed.

Priscilla pushed as much of the remainder of her sandwich as she could manage into her mouth, swallowed without chewing enough, washed it down with tea, and slid her chair back to wait for the unlatching of her vaginal restraint.

As soon as the leash was freed from the floor, she stood and handed the end to Lloyd, following him back to the stock, unable to keep from tightening around the studded rod, no lunch before her now to keep her distracted from the constant stimulation.

“Lie down here, on your back,” Lloyd said, pointing. “That’s right, now raise your legs straight up, feet right under my hand.”

Priscilla obeyed while Lloyd, still holding her leash, made a series of one-handed adjustments to the device, the arms and the gears and catches creaking as the straps previously used to bind her wrists were lowered to just beside her feet.

Lloyd buckled in her ankles, checked the tightness, dropped her leash beneath her rear, returned to the controls and slowly, with a creaking of metal and the strain of leather straps, raised her until her hands could no longer touch the floor.

He motioned her to position her hands beside what had been her ankle straps, she obeyed, and he fastened each wrist, made a few adjustments to stretch her out, and at last removed her vaginal leash, stepping over to his table of supplies to set it down, not bothering to wipe it, its entire length glistening with her honey and the last traces of Nick’s semen.

Having the rod with its irritating little pegs out of her was more than equal compensation for being hung by her feet

and stretched tight, and Priscilla savored that relief, closing her eyes and sighing. For short periods, it almost felt good to be hung upside down, she had noticed before, her back relaxing and elongating, like something from advanced yoga.

Lloyd motioned to Georgie, and she stood up and walked to the bound girl.

“Hey, 67,” she said a little ironically. Priscilla and Georgie had worked together frequently over the last six months, developing a mutual trust, even respect. Georgie was here to get her job done, Priscilla had concluded, never taking pleasure from the power the job gave her over the lab’s naked charges, male or female.

“Hey, Georgie,” Priscilla replied.

“Can you spread her legs a little wider?” Georgie inquired, studying Priscilla’s vulva.

With another series of button presses, as elaborate as anything he had done so far, and another set of metallic groans, Lloyd forced Priscilla’s feet apart, widening her legs and making her sex organ easier to access and study.

Georgie, without any specific research objective at the moment, just went through the motions, reaching up to part Priscilla’s lips, to inspect the mouth of her vagina, to stroke her opening and finally to perform an initial arousal manipulation of her clitoris, rubbing, tapping and squeezing it.

Even now, after three orgasms, Priscilla reacted to being masturbated by making fists, arching her back, and straining at her bonds, the stock creaking in protest.

“Helpful, Georgie?” Beales inquired.

“Yes, we can use this position at times,” Georgie said.

“For inspection, or stimulation too?” Beales asked.

“Possibly both,” Georgie said. “Different girls will respond different ways to being hung like this, but some might do okay with masturbation.”

“Let’s see how 67 does,” Beales said.

Chapter 28: Burton Does the Honors

“You want her masturbated to orgasm?” Georgie said, looking back with surprise.

“After a medical contact report, yes,” Beales said, motioning to Donna, and Georgie went back to her seat and the nurse rose and stepped over to Priscilla, a clipboard in her hand, looking down at the bound female.

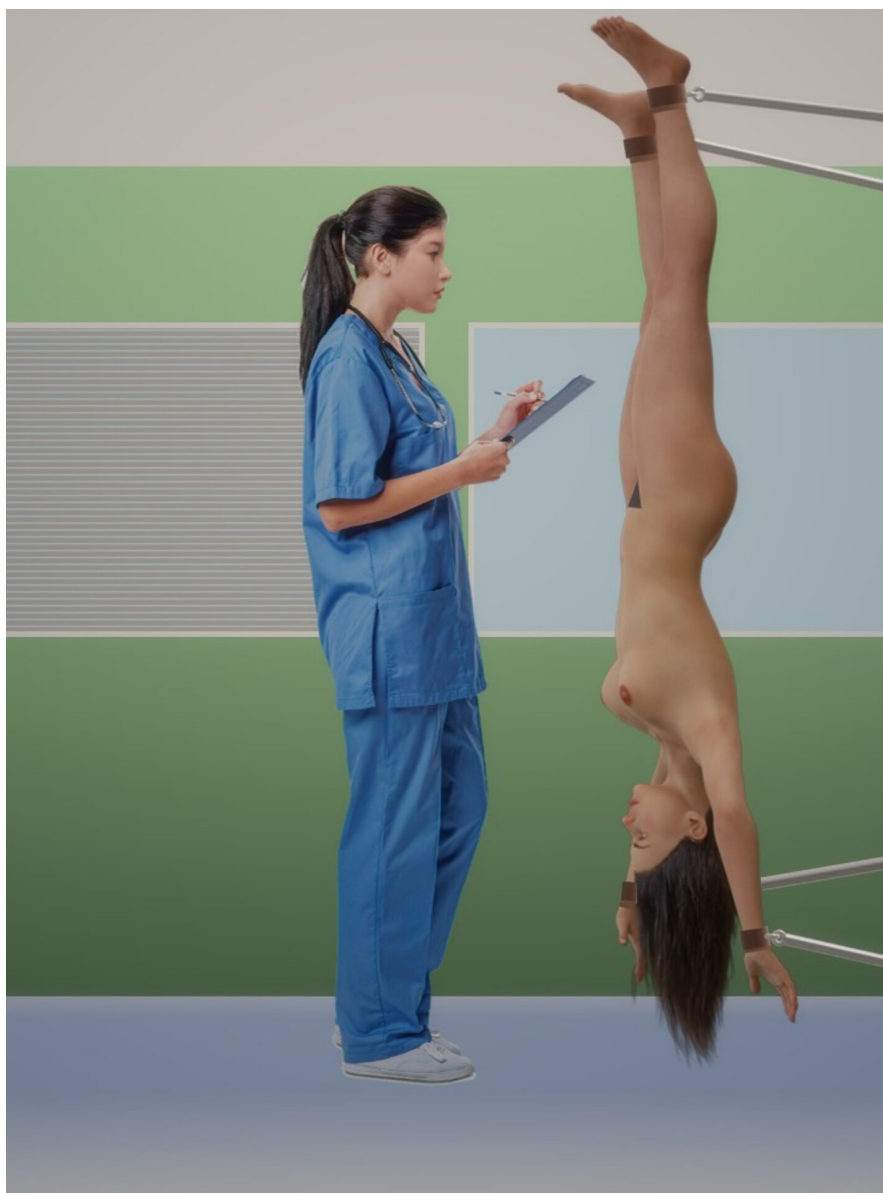


Illustration by 2Loose2Trek

“Full ID?” she asked.

“14067,” Priscilla replied, staring between Donna’s legs, and from there to the audience, watching dispassionately. What were they expecting? Another climax? Or a failed attempt? Would Priscilla, who had already orgasmed three times, struggle in vain to climax again? Would she provide entertainment even if she couldn’t? A girl in the throes of frustration could also be interesting, of course, thrusting her hips and grunting and tightening her belly and gasping, all to no avail.

But could she do it again? She had done as much, or more, on a good day in the lab, but they usually waited until she was ovulating to demand that of her, and she would be brought boys, and a variety of other stimulants, and she would be bound loosely, and not stretched upside down.

But then, the facility staff knew what they were doing, had masturbated Priscilla by hand or with a tool near weekly over the last six months.

“Reason for medical contact?” Donna asked, studying her form.

“I, um,” Priscilla said, pondering, searching for words. Shouldn’t Donna already know that? But the nurse seemed to be expecting an answer, and Priscilla had no reason to resist. “I’m here to help with a sales demonstration. Through sexual responsiveness.”

“How do you feel?”

“I’m fine,” Priscilla reported, to a few quiet snickers.

“Any shortness of breath, elevated heart rate or breathing, unusual pains?”

“No.”

“Next anticipated menstrual start date?”

“I think tomorrow.”

“Is there any reason you shouldn’t be stimulated?”

“No,” Priscilla said. “I’m good.”

Donna wrote the answers down on her form and returned to her seat.

“Georgie, who’s doing the honors?” Beales inquired.

Georgie turned to her left, raising her eyebrows at Burton, a black lab technician with a knack for mastering each female’s arousal idiosyncrasies, the peculiar pattern of stimulation that could warm a girl up and push her either to a groaning release or to frantic cries for mercy. Priscilla had known both agony and ecstasy under his ministrations. She was hoping for the latter now.

Burton rose, made his way toward Priscilla.

“Let’s get her done quickly,” Beales said. “Someone else needs this room at 2.”

“No pressure, Burton,” Georgie quipped, to laughter.

“Hey, 67,” Burton said

“Hey, Burton,” Priscilla replied, staring at his feet, her mouth set in a tense, straight line. Why was Beales asking all this of her? Why was she going to the trouble of a medical contact? Was there someone here Beales was trying to impress?

Burton wasted no time parted Priscilla’s lips first to get a sense of her condition, drawing forth some of her copious fluids to spread across her clitoris, then setting forth, a little tapping against her member, some circling, a thrum or two against her lips, more spreading, another withdrawal from her bank of lubricants, more circling and tapping.

Priscilla responded as she usually did, body tensing, lower jaw jutting out, breath quickening, nipples hardening, nails driving into palms.

It took seven minutes, Burton working the girl’s vulva with perhaps a little more vigor than usual, Priscilla getting worked up perhaps a little more slowly than usual, but once Burton had brought Priscilla to full arousal, it was just a matter of time, the lab subject shaking and gasping as she neared and then passed through orgasm, the stock groaning with the sounds unique to this girl’s relief, and Burton providing a few

strokes of aftercare before stepping back, satisfied with his work but still ready to defer to Georgie and the data generated by Priscilla's anal monitor.

"Yes," Georgie said, peering at her phone. "A decent one, too."

"Well done, Burton," Beales said, to light applause, and he turned and smiled and returned to his seat.

Beales stood, looked around the room. "Were there any more questions?"

Her tone was not of the variety that invited further queries, however, and the attendees seemed to get the hint, rising and talking quietly as they began shuffling out of the conference room.

"Good job, 67," Georgie said quietly as she slipped behind Priscilla.

"Thanks," Priscilla answered back, her voice a little shaky.

Georgie eased the anal monitor out of Priscilla's body, and Priscilla responded as she often did when her middle had been overstimulated, clenching and shaking, grunting quietly.

"See you in the lab," Georgie said.

"Yeah," Priscilla replied huskily to Georgie's exiting form.

Not everyone left, however. As Lloyd packed up, Beales and a man Priscilla didn't recognize talked quietly beside the table.

Priscilla wanted to be let down. She wanted to return to her cage. She was tired, and a little sore, and she wanted to be alone with her thoughts.

She also had some important things to add to her mysterious little drawings, and while she had gotten good at memorizing the features of the building that had held her captive for six months, she liked to get things on paper as soon as possible.

But for the moment, as Beales and the mystery man chatted quietly and Lloyd packed up his things, Priscilla was content to hang upside down, the blood staying concentrated in her mind. Something was going on here, she suspected, that might have to do with her.

She closed her eyes. Could she nap like this? Probably not, but she was going to try.

“67,” said the voice of Gwen Beales, and Priscilla stirred to find Beales and the man standing before her, her eyes at the level of their thighs. “I’d like you to meet someone.”

“Hi,” Priscilla said, bending her neck to look up into the man’s face.

He smiled back.

He was in his 40s, she guessed, dressed in blue chinos and an open-necked, white Oxford cloth button down. Somewhere, at some important organization, Priscilla guessed, he was a partner, a director, a leader. He didn’t bother dressing up for Beales because he didn’t need to. He must be as important as she.

“Ben Cooper,” he said quietly, as Lloyd bustled noisily with his things by the wall. “Nice to meet you, 67.”

“Oh, Ben Cooper,” Priscilla exclaimed. “Hi!”

If there was a celebrity in Priscilla’s world, this was it, a researcher par excellence, a man with encyclopedic knowledge of the female reproductive organ, and an engineer’s mind to boot. Cooper had developed dozens of technologies and devices for both examining and stimulating the female sex, and Priscilla had benefited from – and suffered under – his brilliance for six months. She’d first heard his name within days of being taken by the lab, when Morrow and Bank slipped one of their largest assessment gauges up her vagina.

It had been given an unlikely name, she thought, trying to remember. What was it?

“Okay, you did the Farmingham,” she said, her memory returning.

“Yes, I understand you’ve had some experience with it,” Cooper said.

“You know about that?”

“They sent me the readings, yes,” Cooper said, stepping back so they could look into each other’s eyes a little more evenly, Priscilla not having to bend her neck up so far. “Over 30.”

“They told me to squeeze,” Priscilla said, her tone mock-apologetic.

“Dr. Cooper wants to take a look,” Beales said without elaborating. Nor did she have to. What else would Cooper want to take a look at but Priscilla’s vagina?

It was interesting that they asked at all.

So they were going to pretend Priscilla needed to give her permission to be inspected. Bound upside down with her legs spread, masturbated and penetrated and forced to masturbate herself before an audience of dozens, what aspect of decorum would be violated if Cooper simply stepped up uninvited to have a look at the girl’s opening?

“Sure,” Priscilla said, because there was nothing else to say, and Cooper approached close enough that she could, if she wanted to, press her nose against his chinos. She could see the lump of his keys in his right pocket, the angles of his phone in his left. Did he have a penis? Strangely, the question of genitalia among the staff rarely occurred to Priscilla. Some of them undressed, of course, as part of their jobs. Georgie, for example, would sometimes provide her vagina when a male needed something to release into and the researchers didn’t want him using Priscilla’s slot. So Georgie’s genitals were a foregone conclusion. But for the staff Priscilla never saw naked, she couldn’t be sure. Did Dr. Morrow have a penis? Did Dr. Bank?

Someone was touching her vulva now, gently, but expertly, she could tell, pressing the outer lips, pinching and tugging on her inner labia, spreading them and stroking her hole, brushing and squeezing her clitoris, and finally exploring

the chamber itself, again expertly, fingers pressing against the walls, front, sides, back, exploring her soft firmness, uncovering her secrets.

“Impressed?” Dr. Beales inquired.

“Do you have any more like her?” Cooper asked.

“You know she’s one of a kind,” Beales said. “Unless you can figure out how to duplicate it. But you’ll need to be here for that.”

Cooper laughed.

“Why haven’t you told Morrow we’re talking?” he asked.

“Morrow and Bank don’t need to know,” Beales explained. “Unless you sign that contract. And then we can surprise them together.”

“You need to give me the reason you’re not telling them,” Cooper said, focusing on Priscilla’s clitoris now, tapping and stroking, and the girl responded by shaking in her bonds slightly, the stock creaking. “They’ll be my closest colleagues here. I need to understand any ... unusual dynamics.”

“It’s nothing like that,” Beales assured. “We just don’t want them being distracted until we get a deal done. You’re enough of a distraction five states away. How often do they send you their research?”

“Weekly,” Cooper deadpanned.

“If they were here instead of trying to hook swordfish off Turks and Caicos, you’d have one on each shoulder every minute you were in the building.”

Priscilla felt her lips being spread again, felt two fingers easing down into her vagina.

“Tighten,” Cooper said.

Priscilla obeyed, squeezing as tightly as she ever did, glad she wasn’t holding anything thicker, or spiked, or both.

“Roll for me,” Cooper said.

“Roll?” Priscilla replied.

“You don’t roll?”

“I’m not sure what it is,” Priscilla said. “I don’t know if I roll or not.”

“Tighten at the mouth first, relax there and tighten a little deeper in, all the way down your sheath.”

Priscilla did her best at the unfamiliar task, tightening the bands of her sex one by one, gripping the base of Cooper’s fingers, relaxing there, next squeezing his knuckles, then releasing and wrapping herself around his fingertips.

“Faster now, and more smoothly.”

Priscilla did her best to oblige, closing her eyes to focus on contracting from the opening to deep within, repeating, then doing it a third time down the fingers, a fourth.

“Okay,” Cooper said, removing his fingers and stepping to the sink.

“You’ve never been asked to do that before today?” Cooper said.

“No,” she replied.

“How did she do?” Beales inquired.

“A little clumsy,” Cooper said, “but if that was really her first time, she’s brilliant. And that can be trained. You can’t train what she was born with. It’s superb.”

“Are we getting your signature today?” Beales asked, a little breathlessly.

“Let me sleep on it,” Cooper said, drying his hands at the sink. “But it just became a little more likely.”

Beales tapped Priscilla’s thigh, an unexpected gesture, strangely intimate, the version of a heartfelt thanks given to a naked research female bound upside down.

“Lloyd, I’m sure you want your contraption back,” Beales said to the salesman, who had boxed up everything but the stock Priscilla was hanging from.

“At your convenience,” Lloyd said. “Are we any closer to a deal?”

Beales turned to Cooper.

“Yes or no?” she asked him.

“Yes or no what?” Cooper asked.

“Do we contract with Cassock?”

“It’s up to me?” he asked with wide-eyed surprise.

“If you sign, yes,” she said.

“In that case, yes,” Cooper said. “Our lab in Kansas orders from Cassock all the time.”

“University of Kansas?” Lloyd asked.

“Yes,” Cooper replied.

“One of our best customers,” Lloyd said. “And I’m sorry I’ve never made your acquaintance, Mister—”

“Cooper,” Cooper said, turning to Lloyd and offering his hand. “Ben Cooper.”

“It’s my pleasure, Mr. Cooper,” Lloyd said, pausing, his face registering surprise. “Wait ... *the* Ben Cooper? Kansas Ben Cooper?”

“I’m the only Kansas Ben Cooper I know,” Cooper said humbly. “The pleasure’s all mine.”

“An honor, Sir, an honor,” Lloyd said, reaching out to shake Cooper’s hand again, pumping vigorously. “Half of what we sell has your name somewhere on it.”

“Mr. Lloyd,” Beales said, “I’m sure you’ll keep Mr. Cooper’s presence here confidential.”

“I will,” Lloyd promised, face suddenly serious. “Of course.”

“And 67, you as well.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Priscilla said. “So no one here knows who he is?”

“A few,” Beales said. “Georgie guessed, but she knows how to keep secrets. But if you’re not involved in the research side of things, you’ve probably never heard of him. And he’s a little camera shy.”

“If anyone asks, I’ll send them to you,” Priscilla promised, turning to rub her nose on her upper arm, her hair brushing the inside of her elbow. She really wanted down now, she realized, wanted to be free, wanted to be back in her cage, where she could assign to paper the images that were at present stored with no small effort in her short-term memory.

Beales pulled out her phone, tapped a few commands into it.

“Thank you, 67,” Beales said.

“Of course.”

“Nice to meet you, 67,” Cooper said. “Maybe we’ll work together.”

“I would be like that,” Priscilla said.

“We’ll be building a special hall on the third floor, if he joins us,” Beales said, looking at Priscilla while her words were obviously meant for the researcher. “Cages to his standards, his own lab, specialized racks and discipline boards.”

“You drive a hard bargain,” Cooper laughed.

“Will you want to integrate the Cassock system into how you punish?” Beales asked.

“You mean, how we correct?” Cooper said ironically.

Beales and Lloyd both laughed.

“We’ve got a contract with them in Kansas,” Cooper said, “and I put girls on the stock he’s selling all the time. It really is a good piece of equipment, for research and correction.”

“How much corporal do you do?” Beales asked.

“Not as much as the rest of the department,” Cooper said. “We’ve got the luxury of a little more time, so we

emphasize stress positions and punishment kennels.”

“You don’t do much corporal?” Lloyd asked.

“If we’re in a hurry and it won’t interfere with the research,” Cooper said. “There are a lot of sensitive places on a girl besides her rear.”

“Yes, Sir, one hundred percent true,” Lloyd agreed.

“Thank you, Mr. Lloyd,” Beales said. “We’ll be in touch.”

“Yes, indeed,” Lloyd said.

Beales pulled out her phone, tapped on it, and she and Cooper exited the room, talking quietly.

“That man’s a legend,” Lloyd said, looking at the door.

“I’ve heard his name a few times,” Priscilla said.

Lloyd stepped over to Priscilla, touched her left foot near the strap that bound her ankle. It was just the two of them in the room now.

“How does everything feel?”

“I’m ready to get down,” Priscilla replied. “But I’m glad you’re using leather. Metal would hurt.”

“It’s a very high grade,” Lloyd said proudly. “Not quite Corinthian, but close.”

Lloyd pressed Priscilla’s right foot, near her heel.

“Color check,” he said. “We do that to make sure the circulation hasn’t been cut off.”

“I’m probably okay,” she said. “I can still feel everything. I’m just uncomfortable.”

“I can let you down now, if you’ll let me leash you again.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Which hole?” he asked.

“Anus,” she immediately replied.

“You’re not afraid I’ll turn it on again?”

“No, you don’t seem that mean.”

“You didn’t like the vaginal?” he asked, stepping to the sink to rinse the leash he’d used earlier.

“Too much stimulation,” she said. “It was fine for short periods, but it was really distracting when I wasn’t eating.”

“We tried to go with lots of short pegs,” Lloyd said, turning to face the girl as he washed his hands. “One hundred fifty, so none of them will tickle you too much.”

“One hundred forty-four,” Priscilla corrected.

“Where did you hear that?” he asked.

“I counted.”

Lloyd studied Priscilla’s upside down face for a moment before he dried his hands and rounded the stock, bearing the leash, standing behind her.

“Natural lubricant?” he asked.

“I’ve still got some, I think,” Priscilla said. “Sure.”

Priscilla grimaced as Lloyd parted her lips, pushed the anal plug into her vagina, stirred it around a few times, pulled it out glistening and pushed it into her anus, locking it deftly and dropping it, allowing it to swing against her back between her shoulder blades.

“What’s your real name?” he asked.

“14067,” she replied.

“Is that what your parents put on your birth certificate?”

“No,” Priscilla said. “But it’s my only name here.”

“What’s on your birth certificate?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I’m just curious,” Lloyd said, bending in front of Priscilla to free her wrists, first the right, then the left. “You

seem like a nice girl. You—”

“We’re all nice girls,” Priscilla interrupted.

“Of course, of course.”

“We all have real names, whether we seem nice to you or not.”

“Understood,” he said. “What’s yours?”

“Priscilla.”

“Pretty name,” Lloyd said, tapping buttons on the control bar, and catches gave way with a creak, and he slowly eased the girl down to the carpeted floor, and she sighed as the pressure on her ankles relaxed and her back had something to rest against.

Lloyd pulled out a pair of shackles, and as soon as he unbuckled the strap around Priscilla’s right ankle, he cuffed it to the left, opened that strap as well, bent to pick up Priscilla’s anal leash, and the girl sat up, slowly, almost groggily, rubbed her wrists, rolled over to her knees and rose shakily to her feet.

“You alright?” Lloyd asked, sidling next to her, hand out to grab an arm if she stumbled.

“I’m fine,” she said, laughing at herself. “Standing after a long session is always a transition.”

He led her to one of the rings on the other side of the conference table, padlocked her leash to it.

“Any idea how long it’ll be before someone comes to get you?” he asked.

“Five or 10 minutes, at most,” Priscilla said, and she turned, leaned her back against the wall and folded her arms beneath her breasts

“You did good today,” Lloyd told her, returning to the stock, and as he pressed buttons, the device slowly shrunk down, joints turning acute, metal groaning as it collapsed upon itself.

“Thanks,” she said simply. “But you did all the work.”

“I just talked,” Lloyd said humbly. “You had to ...”

His voice trailed off and the door opened, a female handler named Cecilia stepping in with chains.

“Hey, 67,” she said.

“Hey, Cecilia,” Priscilla replied, turning to face the woman, her anal chain jangling against the wall.

“What did they put you on?” Cecilia asked with surprise as she approached.

“A leash,” Priscilla replied, turning slightly. “Back there.”

“Is that one of their inventions?” Cecilia inquired, tilting her head toward Lloyd.

“Howdy,” was all he said, because there was no reason to waste his spiel on someone at Cecilia’s station.

Cecilia had Priscilla bound in four-points before she turned to Lloyd, and he stepped to the girl, and she bent with her hands on her knees, wincing slightly as he unlocked her plug and removed it, placed it in the sink for washing before he came back for his shackles.

“Bye, Lloyd,” Priscilla said at the door.

“67,” he said back.

Cecilia said nothing until they were in the elevator, then she turned to Priscilla, keeping her voice low as she spoke.

“Think they’re gonna do it?” she asked.

“Do what?”

“Contract with Cassock?”

“It depends on what—” Priscilla began, catching herself before she spoke the name of Ben Cooper.

“On what?” Cecilia demanded.

“I don’t know,” Priscilla lied. “I think on what it costs. Mrs. Beales is still negotiating that.”

“The torture people are freaking out,” Cecilia said with a wicked smile.

“Why?” Priscilla asked, well aware that acknowledging the forbidden term was punishable for her. They were not torture people. They did not torture. The gray-jump suited staff disciplined. They punished. Or in Lloyd’s euphemistic parlance, they corrected. Calling it torture, or calling the discipline workers torture people, meant an immediate trip to ... well, torture of course. Even staff could get in trouble for using the word. They wouldn’t get tortured, but they would get written up. Terminated for repeat offenses, even.

“They’re like anyone else here,” Cecilia said. “Once they learn things a certain way, they don’t want to change. And they’re all saying it’s going to be a huge hassle. A lot more torture, a lot more paperwork, this calibration thing at the start.”

“A lot more torture?” Priscilla prompted.

“Yeah, they have to look for anything, the smallest excuse to do it to you, and then you have to do this whole formal process where they do it to you while they record everything and compare it to your profile, like how much you moan, or how loud you scream, and what you say, and—”

“They don’t do anything like that now,” Priscilla blurted. She wanted Cecilia to stop talking, because the pains of lab work were best simply endured as they happened, and not otherwise discussed.

But Priscilla spoke the truth. As she hung, as she suffered the indignities of having her bottom paddled – or as she cried out for sexual closure, for that matter – no one cared about the volume of her protestations, the depth of her groans, the futile stirring of her limbs.

The elevator door opened and the females walked the rest of the way in silence to Priscilla’s cage, the captive girl watching absently as her chains were removed and Cecilia departed, closing her eyes on her toilet to revisit what she’d seen out the window, lowering her bed, grabbing her colored

pens and her paper, and only then noticing the small slip on the floor just inside her cage door.

She went to it, picked it up.

“Postal Account Balance,” it read. “\$93.99.”

It was a routine message. The friends and family of research subjects could contribute money to their loved ones at the facility, so said loved one could send them letters.

Priscilla’s balance had always been zero, and that was fine with her. Her father was long gone, her mother had betrayed her, and her sister had vanished two years ago.

But Priscilla remembered Mackenzie’s birthday: September 3, 1999.

9/3/99.

Priscilla studied the slip, her vision narrowing as she worked through the revelations: Mackenzie was alive, Mackenzie knew where Priscilla was, Mackenzie was saying hello.

And Mackenzie had almost a hundred dollars to give away. That was important too.

But where was Mackenzie? What did she want? A letter? To what address?

Priscilla bit her lip and fought back tears. Whatever else the number meant, she understood its core meaning: We’re still sisters.

As for the rest of it, Priscilla wasn’t as sure.

I love you? I’m going to get you out of that place?

Epilogue

Taking a break from the office on a beautiful late spring day, Harper Sutton went up to the broad, third-story walkway she'd had built between her home and the headquarters of Sutton Mirabilis.

From here, she could see the Savannah river to one side, and the growing line of stores and shops on the other, businesses springing up beyond the secure walls of her breeding compound.

A small, aging car was let through the gate, and Harper rested her arms on the railing to watch it part, watch two females emerge. From here, she could tell that the driver was older, the passenger younger.

This must be Madison Inglewood, she thought, here with her mother, to do a tour. She hoped the girl would sign up. From her DNA to her picture to her performance on the online tests, the girl was a fit for what the company needed. And 18, too, just out of high school and ideally youthful.

Harper watched them enter the breeding building, pulled her phone out of her back pocket and dialed.

"Hello?" said the voice on the other end of the line.

"Hey, Mom!" Harper said enthusiastically.

"Oh, Harper," said Mrs. Sutton. "I can talk for just a few."

"Okay, sure," Harper said. "How did your appointment go yesterday?"

"Oh, you know, those Mayo doctors aren't your brother," Mrs. Sutton mourned. "But they're saying they can get my retina back in place in two weeks."

"Are you going to do it?"

"Yes, I've had it scheduled," Mrs. Sutton replied. "I need both my eyes."

"Do you want me there?"

“Oh, no,” Mrs. Sutton said, laughing dismissively. “Michael is cutting his trip to Switzerland short to hold my hand.”

“Okay,” said Harper, voice a little flat.

“I told him he’s the only one who can get me through it,” Mrs. Sutton continued. “Some things require a doctor’s expertise.”

“Okay,” Harper agreed. “But if you ever need—”

“Oh, not you, sweetie,” Mrs. Sutton interrupted. “This just isn’t one of your strengths.”

Harper grimaced, watched the traffic, drew in her breath.

“Business has been great,” she said. “I’ve—”

“How much longer are you going to do that little baby thing of yours?” Mrs. Sutton interrupted.

“Probably until I retire,” Sutton said. “It’s doing really well. Last fiscal I made—”

“Michael’s practice,” Mrs. Sutton said. “Now that’s something to write home about. Have you seen the pictures of his new office?”

“Yes, I saw where you posted a bunch of them to Look!,” Harper said. “But my operation isn’t too shabby, if you—”

“We’ve been talking every day while he’s been in Europe,” Mrs. Sutton said with another interruption. “He tells me when to call, and I dial him to the minute.”

“That’s great,” Harper said.

Another car passed through the gate and into the parking area just below Harper’s vantage point, a sporty little red car.

“We’ve been talking about you, off and on,” Mrs. Sutton reported.

“You have?” Harper said, smiling for the first time since her mother had picked up.

“We’re both hoping you’ll find yourself,” Mrs. Sutton said. “I know it’s been hard, with your disadvantages, but—”

“What disadvantages?” Harper asked, voice growing a little weak.

“Oh, let’s not get into that right now,” Mrs. Sutton said.

Harper’s face twisted into a mask of blankness as she watched a black man exit this second vehicle. He looked vaguely familiar, and he looked up, spotted Harper, waved, she waved back, and he headed toward the place on the first floor where the stairs led upward.

“Hey, Mom, I think there’s someone here to talk to me,” Harper said. “Can I call you back?”

“Well, sure,” said Mrs. Sutton. “But I’ve got a lot going on the next week or two.”

“Okay,” Harper agreed. “Bye.”

She put her phone away, closed her eyes and leaned over the railing, looking briefly as if she were going to vomit.

She often looked this way after speaking to her mother. Something between them didn’t quite click. Maybe her mother felt it too.

Harper, well aware of how long it takes someone to climb the two flights of stairs to her home, spent another 30 seconds composing herself, and by the time the man reached the landing at her level, she had turned, was walking toward him.

“Ms. Sutton?” he said.

“Hey,” she said. “How can I help you?”

“Carl Mercer, Ma’am,” he said, and he offered his hand. “Savannah Police.”

“Oh, that’s right,” she said, her face breaking with surprise. “I knew I remembered you from somewhere. What’s

it been ... three or four years?"

"Bollte Lippincott was murdered right there," Mercer said, and he pointed to the place outside Harper's door where the body had landed, "in March 2013."

"Seven years," Harper said. "Has it been that much time?"

"It has," Mercer said humorlessly.

"And you're still looking for the murderer?" Harper said.

"I am," he said. "There's no statute of limitations on murder."

"Are you getting any closer?"

"That's why I'm here," he said.

Like any good detective, Mercer watched Harper's face, searching for an expression of unconscious fear, a pang of guilt around the eyes, a mouth set in a way that suggested an anxious knowledge roiling the mind.

He got nothing, of course. Harper knew what happened, and she knew Mercer knew, and the only thing in her face at the moment was the memory of an old but mostly forgotten afternoon of terror.

"What's your theory?" she asked.

"How well did you know the Fingles?" he asked.

"The Fingles?" Harper repeated, and again, her face remained blank.

"Your neighbors," he said.

"What neighbors?" she asked. She had no neighbors, unless you counted the businesses that had cropped up over the last few years on the edge of the old papermill property, and across the street.

"They lived over there," Mercer said, pointing.

"Oh, the old couple from Europe?" Harper said. "I never knew them, didn't even know their names. They moved

out years ago.”

“Three weeks after someone put a coupla arrows through Bollte,” Mercer said.

“Okay, yeah,” Harper agreed, closing her eyes as the image of the corpse popped into her mind. “I own that place now too, and I’ve expanded into it. They were the only ones who lived there besides me.”

“You never talked to them, have no idea where they moved to?”

“No,” Harper said flatly. “Why?”

“I can’t find them anywhere. I think they lived here under an assumed identity.”

“They must have been hiding from someone,” Harper noted, mildly interested in knowing that there’d been other intrigue here beyond an unsolved murder.

“So you own their place too,” Mercer said.

“Yup. Well, it’s my place now. But yeah.”

“You knocked a hole in the wall?”

“A big arched doorway,” Harper said.

“Did you notice anything strange when you got into their place?”

“No,” Harper said. “What do you mean?”

“A theory,” Mercer said, turning to rest his elbows on the railing. “One of many. But I think they might have been here for you.”

“What?” Harper demanded, voice rising an octave. “Why?”

“I have no idea,” Mercer conceded. “But if they wanted to keep an eye on you, what better place to live?”

“I didn’t even know them!” Harper protested.

“Just a theory,” Mercer said. “It was a solid wall between your place and theirs, right?”

“Of course.”

“Mind if I take a look?”

“You’re welcome to,” Harper said. “But I have no idea what you’re expecting to find.”

“I don’t either,” Mercer said, pushing away from the railing. “Not exactly, at least.”

Harper escorted Mercer into her home, which had come a long way since her first days there almost a decade before. Her humble kitchen had morphed into a setting fit for an executive chef, with six gas ranges, a large freezer, a French Provincial breakfast nook, China and copper pots and an oversized fridge. The living area had been raised and set against the windows, with oversized couches and a 95 inch hi-def television. The cage was gone, but the little bathroom was still there, behind an ornate wall that also hid the laundry room. The other half of Harper’s expanded home had been made into her bedroom, her fitness room, a master bath, two guest bedrooms, a media room.

Mercer barely glanced at the accoutrements, however. His focus was on the wall that had once served as an impermeable barrier between the two units, and he paced it from both sides, looking for something.

Not far from where the long tether had been set into the floor – long since removed – Mercer knelt, something attracting his attention.

“What do you think this was?” Mercer asked, pointing to a silver plate screwed into the baseboard, the kind of thing no one looks at twice, one of those obscure testaments to the fleeting infrastructures of the late 20th Century, telegraph yielding to telephone, TV antennae making way for coaxial cable, twisted copper supplanted by fiber.

Mercer pulled out a Swiss Army Knife, deployed a flat head screwdriver, twisted the screws at the two corners of the plate, pulled it back and let it fall silently against the deep shag Harper had installed five years before, and produced a tiny penlight and shone it into the space, reached in and pulled

out a dime-sized black disk, a pair of wires, black and red, unspooling as he yanked.

“Microphone,” he said, looking up at Harper.

Harper could feel her hair standing up at the back of her neck.

Mercer passed through the archway into what used to be the Fingle’s apartment, found another silver plate screwed into the floorboard, its position corresponding to the first, and he removed it, making a hole between the two halves of the home big enough for a fist to pass through.

“They were listening to you,” Mercer said, studying Harper’s face.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Harper said. “I hardly remember them. I don’t even know who they were.”

“They knew you, apparently,” Mercer said.

“But ... why ... who?” Harper said, suffering through a rare state of utter mystification.

“I think I found the wife,” Mercer said.

“Where is she?”

“I haven’t found her physically. But I think I found out who she is. There are some pictures from way back that look like the woman who lived here. She aged gracefully.”

“Where did you find the pictures?” Harper inquired.

“Old Olympic shots. 1970s. A girl from Czechoslovakia. She got the bronze.”

“What event?” Harper inquired.

“Archery.”

END