



Reluctant Press presents:

Bliss 2



Nick Lorange

AN 'ADULT TV' E-BOOK

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Bliss Part 2

By Nick Lorance

The Offer

Imagine my surprise when I was called to Madam Sofia's office. The call came during my gym period and I arrived in gym clothes for the meeting. An older man was seated across from Madam Sofia and leaped to his feet when I came in. "So this is her?"

"Yes."

"Little lady, did you know you're sitting on a gold mine?"

"I am sorry sir? I don't understand."

"I'm sorry. My name is Moe Greenwald, as in Moe's."

It clicked. "I must apologize, sir. I smashed your window and stole your food. You did receive the pies I trust?"

"Received, tasted, and had others including Miss Sofia taste them as well before you were called in. Peach, Dutch Apple, and walnut. Why walnut?"

"We did not have pecans at hand, so I made a pecan pie with walnuts instead. I hope you do not feel they were insufficient recompense--"

He waved his hand as if that didn't matter. "Kid, you are going to make me a ton of money so I forgive you. I'll let Madam Sofia explain." He waved at the headmistress. Madam Sofia motioned to a chair, and I sat.

"Mr. Greenwald has sampled your pies and at his request, so have I. Lady Charlotte explained that while you had basic recipes, you added ingredients you felt would make them better. That shows some skill. Mr. Greenwald wanted to know who had made them so he can make an offer."

"Offer?"

"What I thought was that I had to have the recipes, or have your girls here can make them to sell to me."

"My pies? But sir, those were gifts--"

He interrupted. "That delectable peach pie you made." He leaned forward. "It's like my mother's recipe, but it's a bit chewy and thoroughly delicious. I'll pay you ten thousand dollars up front for every recipe, or \$2.00 per unit if you make them."

"But the peach pie was easy, sir." I protested. "I simply used fresh white peaches rather than canned peaches or peach pie filling, with a recipe I found on a

site named home ec101 dot com for peach syrup." I explained. Peach syrup was made from whatever peaches were too old for preserves mixed with the necessary spices then boiled to a smooth consistency and canned to make the syrup, then raw uncooked unpeeled white peaches cut in eighths laid in the pan, then covered with the peach syrup and baked.

He nodded, getting the website from me. Then nodded. "You never answered. Do you want to make them or sell the recipes?"

I was confused. "Sir, I would give you the recipes for all of them to recompense you for the damages I have done to you."

"And I refuse. I can sell eight to ten pies a day combined, and that's 20 dollars a day or more. Since Madam Sofia told me you have somewhere between three or five years here. A minimum of \$140 a week, \$7280 a year. That comes to almost thirty-six thousand for the full term, and ten thousand more for each recipe at the end of your sentencing because I am not letting you leave the state without buying those recipes!"

I was stunned. He was willing to pay so much? "Let us set a firm figure, sir. I will sell you the recipes, and we can make the pies here if you supply the ingredients I request. The total would be \$26,000 so I can reimburse you for your pains."

"No. \$40,000 and not a cent less! And if they are made here a dollar and a half a pie extra!"

I felt like I was haggling in reverse. I agreed to stop him from bidding himself into the poor house.

With a smile he agreed, bowing to Madam Sofia, then departed to have the check cut. I looked to

Madam Sofia in the hope that some sense would come of it.

“Moe is a good businessman, Jessica. His offer was honest because he will make six times or more what he is offering even supplying the ingredients and paying to have the finished pies delivered. I have tasted your creations, and agree with him. What you can do is pay the students who are willing to prepare them say a dollar each, and expect that eight to ten to grow to twenty a week or more before the year is out.”

“I understand that, but I still feel like a thief.”

“Let it be, girl. Consider that you can live modestly for five years on what you will make before you leave.”

I sighed, and asked to be allowed to leave. I was just glad I hadn't told him I made quiche too!

The population dropped and rose as girls graduated or reached their sentences. Angela hugged me fiercely when she left, promising to write. It was odd, I only received three letters from my mother before my father sent such a scathing denial of my existence that I stopped writing. But thanks to only a few months here, I had four different girls that had gone on who wrote me weekly. Sara had gone first, becoming our teacher for paralegal training, then Matilda, Halley, Shannon, then finally Angela. Of them all only Sara was still nearby.

In fact the population plummeted, and we soon had more pinks than anything else, causing them to shift pinks into rooms with yellows. Those of us that still had partners remained where we were.

November

How the Pools Worked

I began to wonder what it was with the pools when Sarah came in grinning like a fool, towing Cynthia, one of the greens. Before everyone she spun the smaller girl around, and dipped her, finishing it with a kiss. The older girls were divided, some cheering like fools, the others groaning. As they were being congratulated, I watched Margaret, who wasn't cooking today, and Anna sighing and shaking their heads.

"Damn, now I owe her back rubs for the rest of my time here." Margaret moaned.

"I don't understand." I commented.

Margaret looked about, then motioned both of us to one of the empty tables nearer the door where there were no pinks. "When a new girl arrives, the older girls, the elder pinks and upward can enter a pool betting on who will take the girl's virginity here. We all know that unless you're very strong, everyone will fall eventually."

I nodded remembering. "So you all bet on us?"

"Don't feel bad dear!" Anna touched my hand. "We need something to amuse ourselves, and this hurts no one. You can resist--"

"Like Bella." Margaret laughed. "A couple of years before I arrived, this girl Bella left. Sloe eyed, sheer poetry in motion or so I was told. They bet on her and chased through her through all her years right up until she left a blue."

"She never faltered, and left here chaste as well." Anna quipped, and Margaret and I moaned at the pun. "If it hadn't been for Sonia it would have been de-

clared a dead issue. Sonia had arrived and fallen in less than a week. When she was apprised of the pools she put in her own bet, but she bet jewelry that Bella would not fall." Anna shook her head. "I lost my favorite earrings in that one."

I smiled ruefully.

Margaret leaned forward. "Let's take you for example. There were bets on which of the greens or blues will be your first, then on whether you would pick a yellow or pink, or whether you'd succumb to an already chosen couple. The odds vary from even; that you will take Anna for a lover, or one specific pink, up to ten to one, that you would seduce one of the teachers, like Coach Shannon, or end up with an already existing pair."

I blushed. I got along well with a number of the teachers, and as time had passed, they had shown such interests. But then I stopped herself. "A pink?"

The two women nodded. "It's even odds that you will seduce or be seduced by Tiffany."

I looked across the room. Tiffany seemed to feel my gaze, and she looked up, then away, blushing furiously. "Well she is cute, but-

"No buts." Anna said. She smiled sadly. "I hoped that we would be first together, but I had bet on you being with me only because I hoped you would not fall for her. You spend a lot of time with her, when she has problems with studies, or the way she was before the 4th of July Ball, you are the one she clings to for help. When you walk by deep in thought her eyes follow you like a lonely puppy." She patted my hand. "Even if you do, I will still love you for your kindness."

Realization

A few days later I understood what they meant. It was PE and we were at the pool. I had taken Coach Shannon's advice, and wore a wine red Catalina swimsuit. As I sat on the edge, kicking my legs idly I heard a low whistle from behind me.

Tiffany stood there shyly. Like me the pink swimsuits had made her look sickly, and a few days before I had made the same suggestion that the coach had. Her new suit was a fiery mix of ruby and salmon that ran in streaks edged with a pale almost orange red like tiger stripes.

"What do you think?" Tiffany asked me.

"Very becoming." I told her. She sat beside me in companionable silence, and we watched as others were doing laps. Someone came over, asking her to join them in the shallow end where they could splash water on each other, and duck another person without fear of accidentally drowning them. I was working in my head on my English composition essay, and soon zoned out.

Then came a scream. My head snapped around. The group with Tiffany had started to swim slow laps in the far lanes and someone was struggling in the water, then going under.

I was on my feet, diving into the water like a knife blade as I swam to her rescue. I reached the struggling girl, and it was only then that I knew it was Tiffany. Her face was raw with both pain and terror, both hands holding one leg. She'd gotten a cramp!

"Calm down!" I shouted, coming up from behind to wrap my arms around her below her own. She struggled against me but after a moment she relaxed, letting

go of her agonized leg, and went limp so that I could support her. I slid my arms up, cupping her chin in my hands as I swam on my back to the edge where others hoisted her out. I climbed out to join her, and almost went back in as she flung herself into my arms sobbing helplessly.

"I was so scared! It hurt, and I thought I was going to die!" I held her, whispering soothingly, and she finally relaxed, leaning bonelessly into my embrace.

"Is she all right?" Coach Shannon had come running when the tumult had begun, and pushed her way through the crowd.

"I think so, coach. It looks like she had a cramp in her leg." I lifted her face. "Are you all right, Tiffany?"

"Of course I am, now." She replied, smiling tremulously. "You saved me."

"I just reacted first." I told her.

"Because you care."

I nodded wordlessly, and went to change. It wasn't that I didn't like her; Tiffany was fun to be around and a good student. But was she someone I would love that way? I was undecided.

I spent the rest of the day focusing hard on study. But still it weighed on my mind. There were bets that Tiffany and I would seduce each other? The more I thought about it the more I considered why they might have thought so. Tiffany would play the girl to my boy if we sat and joked, touching my arm, bumping me with her shoulder, giggling as she looked away then back to me. If Tiffany were a real girl, I would have said she was flirting with me!

If she were a real girl...

With no last class thanks to passing my Home Economics final, I went to the kitchen and supervised the girls making pies. Madam Sofia had been correct; we went from eight pies a day average the first week up to sixteen now. I wondered if I should tell Moe about the quiches. Instead I went and made him some. I decided on a Quiche Lorraine, and followed it up with a Spinach and Mushroom one. There were four different types I had recipes for, and if he liked my fruit and nut pies, who knew?

I asked Lady Charlotte if I could take the advanced class.

December Yellow

Near noon I was told to report to Madam Sofia. I worried, wondering what I had done.

Madam Sofia smiled as I entered. "Jessica, please, sit."

Warily I walked over, sitting. She stood, walking around the desk to sit beside me. "My dear, you have surprised me. You have exceeded all my expectations. In the last months you have protected one from being injured, shown compassion to others, and studied everything placed before you. You are actually above your grade average. Far enough in fact that you are studying some subjects that would be perfect for a student in their second year of college." She leaned forward, touching my cheek. "You are to be commended, and rewarded." She stood, walking around the desk, and opened her top drawer. She drew out a choker in yellow. "If you will..."

I stood, standing like a deer in the headlights as Madam Sofia walked around behind me. I heard the lock click, felt the pink choker come free. She gently placed the new one, and I felt it lock into place. "My dear, You are doing so well!"

The one subject I always had problems with was Latin, and I found people reacted differently to me with the yellow band instead of a pink one. The girls in the class whispered to each other as I sat, taking out my textbook. Lady Cynthia our teacher came in and the class began.

"Jessica, oh my, congratulations on your promotion. All right, conjugate the verb 'to go'." I giggled helplessly, as did others. Lady Cynthia looked about confused. She reminded me of Margaret Dumont, who is unfortunately best known for her straight woman roles in seven Marx Brothers movies. She was so perfect for the roles because she never really understood the jokes.

"May I ask what is so funny?" She asked, causing another flow of amusement.

"I am sorry, Lady Cynthia. The other day a lot of us watched the movie Monty Python and the Life of Brian. There was one scene where Brian was writing 'Romans go home' on the wall when he is captured. But the Centurion said he had written 'you people who are Romans go to the house'. This is followed by a Latin lesson, and in the middle of it he has to conjugate the verb 'to go'."

She blinked. "I trust you are not comparing the teaching styles."

"Oh in no way, Lady Cynthia. You would have to threaten us with beatings or a sword to be as harsh."

Ramona behind me mumbled something giggling, and Lady Cynthia rounded on her. "What was that, Ramona?"

She stood, giggling. "And threatening to cut our balls off if we don't write it a hundred time fast enough."

Lady Cynthia blinked again. "It is nice to know my style of teaching is... sedate in comparison. Very well, Jessica, instead, we will have you conjugate the 'to listen'."

Desiree

Three weeks before Christmas Anna and I were called into Madam Sofia's office together. I didn't think we were doing anything wrong, but I was worried. "Come in ladies, and please have a seat." We did as we were bid, and gave her our attention.

Madam Sofia leaned forward, hands clasped on her desk. "What I am going to say next is not as punishment. You are both excellent students, and obedient. You never cause trouble and are always helping others. However for a few months at least, I will have to break you up into separate rooms."

I'm not sure who was more stunned. We looked at each other, and I knew my own pain mirrored that in Anna's.

"Now as to the reasoning. Margaret and Evelyn will be leaving this week, but I will be picking up a new student today. That means we have more pinks than we have chaperones. One of you must administer to Naomi, the other will bunk with this new student until one of the Greens is promoted."

Naomi was new, less than three months into her four year sentence. She had been punished by my count four times in that time, a record during my tenure here. I didn't think I would be able to control her, and having only been a Yellow for less than a month, I didn't think she would consider me very knowledgeable either.

Madam Sofia caught my expression. "No, Jessica, you will not be sharing a room with Naomi. She needs a firmer hand. I believe you can deal with her, however, Anna."

"So I will be dealing with this new girl instead?"

"Yes. Be here in my office in formal dress at four this afternoon, Jessica. Anna, I have the cleaning girls moving your things to Evelyn's room so Naomi will not have to change. I promise you both this will be sorted out in just a few months."

We nodded. "Very good. Go about your studies until then." We stood and asked to be excused. "Oh, one more thing, Jessica."

"Yes, Madam Sofia?"

"Moe called me. He enjoyed your different Quiche and wants to make an arrangement like the one he has for your fruit and nut pies. I told him that you had informed me that you can make, what is it, four types of quiche?"

"Five now. I also made some Armenian sausage in our last class."

"Well let's not tell him yet. You are going to be embarrassingly wealthy when you leave if we're not careful."

"Yes, Madam Sofia."

I stopped outside the door and threw my arms around Anna's neck. "I don't want to be separated!"

"Neither do I, love. But it's only for a few months."

"Don't care." I found myself pouting like a three year old.

"You will adapt." She lifted my face, and kissed me gently.

"Can we get together after classes?"

"Of course we can."

I shook my head, kissing her again. "As long as it's you and I."

"That's my love." She pecked me on my cheek. I have to go to Latin class."

"Remember to give Lady Cynthia that book."

She giggled. I had read a book entitled *Jingo* by Terry Pratchett in the Common room, and had gotten into one scene where a character was creating phrases like Julius Caesar's *Veni, vidi, vici.*' and became satirical with 'I visited, I caught an embarrassing disease, I ran away' as an example.

Finally it was after three and I was excused to get into my formal wear. I chose the salmon dress, using the garter clips that I was now allowed. The seams were nice and straight in the stockings, and I found myself standing in front of the mirror again. In all of these months I had worn the formal wear only a few times in public, thrice for dances, and the first day. But Anna and I had me in them an average of once a week for the first three months if only to teach me how to dress without assistance.

I saw the limo pull up to the main house. The slim boy wearing a pink choker followed Madam Sofia and the flurry of gowned girls. I went in, climbing the stairs and knocked on the office door. A few minutes later, Sasha and Elspeth brought her in.

Madam Sofia went through the admonishments and explanations, finally ending with "This is Jessica, who will be your roommate. She will get you settled in, Desiree."

"All right."

"The proper form of address in this situation is 'Yes, Madam Sofia.' I told the new girl. "You will address all students with blue chokers as Mistress, all teachers as Lady, and Madam Sofia as I have directed."

"I am sorry."

"The proper form is, 'I am sorry', with the proper honorific, followed by, 'and I will try to do better. This done while your curtsy.'" She looked confused. I wondered if I had been so confused. "Watch me, and learn." I caught the edges of the skirt, and curtsied. "Now give me a proper curtsy."

She did so, then repeated the apologies, both to me and to Madam Sofia.

"She has arrived late, so I would suggest expediting the nails and hair before going to your room, Jessica. She can go through the rest tomorrow. I will have Gwen walk her through the rest."

"As you would, Madam Sofia. May we be excused?" She nodded, and I led Desiree out.

"Whoa, shit--"

"Desiree, we are in private at this moment, and because you are new I will allow that faux pas. You are

the new girl, and it is my responsibility to assure that you follow the basic rules. I will not force you, but if you do not I will report it and you will be punished. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Mistress."

I found myself in the pedantic form, explaining the rules of dress decorum and cleanliness. Jasmine looked at the crew cut, sighing. "Nothing at all to work with! Well by February her hair will be long enough for extensions," She glanced slyly at me, "if I am allowed them. Until then it will have to be a wig." She brought Desiree into a room I had not seen; of course my hair was long enough not to need a wig. On the walls were racks of wig heads with everything from a bouffant 50s cut to a pageboy to a fall that looked like my own hair. I had found that except for the work of washing it, I rather liked having waist length hair. Jasmine had been teasing me for the last month about a character named Nathaniel in the Anita Blake series of books and was still trying to wheedle me into allowing ankle length extensions, but I was resisting.

"Now with her extensions Jessica's hair is waist length like this wig, but that is a bit of a pain to brush out every night. So let's go for shoulder length." She took down a platinum blonde wig. "Here."

Having never seen this part of the process, I watched, listening as Jasmine explained. After all I would have to help Desiree with this every day until she learned how to do it by herself. Salma who had just graduated to Green worked on her nails, explaining the colors to go with her formals, which I had been informed were Burgundy, Chartreuse, and Azure.

Once hair and nails were done, I took her to see Lady Beatrice for indoctrination. Finally we were done

and headed for the dormitory. I helped her change into a casual dress of light blue with flowers. Then it was off to the cafeteria. "You may dress in casual clothes at the moment. But if I see you in casual clothing later this week or after that, you had best have all of your homework completed and have it ready to show to me. You may study in this room, in the library, in the common room, or in the study room down the hall. You may also study if you do not have a class, or outside when the weather permits. If you do not do your homework, I will punish you. You will get to see someone punished soon enough."

Desiree was as pleased with the fresh whole milk as I had been. I informed her that a dairy farmer nearby had asked the Academy to board a dozen of his milk cows during the winter, and part of our payment was allowing us to use their milk. Madam Sofia had spoken with the local grocery stores, and there were some willing to sell the milk in half gallon or smaller jugs with a representation of the manor house with Academy Dairy below it. Moe had already contracted to buy our milk, buttermilk, butter and cheese excess beyond that.

Dinner was silent between us, though a number of the others came over to size up our newest member. Tiffany nudged me, then leaned over to whisper. "I'm betting you're her first." Which caused me to blush. As I took her on the tour of the grounds, I explained the duties. By dark we were in our room, and I cracked the books for my own studying.

"If you wish to ask questions please do. Since it is your first day, you can go to the common room and watch television or read as you will."

"Thank you, Mistress."

"We are alone here, Desiree. You need not be so formal. Besides, I am only a Yellow, only Blues are Mistress."

"All right, Jessica." She asked a few questions, mainly about the other girls she had met. "But you've been here only a few months? You look so... poised."

"Once you are comfortable, you will be just as poised. Tiffany arrived less than a month after I did and she is already very comfortable."

"What did she say that caused you to blush?"

I lifted the pen, looking at her. "When a new girl arrives, the older girls tend to bet on when you will break your fast." She looked confused. "When you will join those who make love to each other. Tiffany is betting that I will be your first." Her eyes grew wide, backing away hands out as if to ward off a blow. I stood. "Desiree?"

"No." She whispered. "Please..." She was against the wall, and I am sure that she would have burrowed through it if she could had made herself look away from me.

"Desiree? What is the matter?"

"Please." I stepped toward her, and she screamed. "No, Tommy. Please!"

I froze, and an instant later the door was flung open. Monica, one of the greens stared at us separated by the entire room as Desiree collapsed sobbing helplessly.

"Jessica?"

"It's all right, Monica, please, come in and leave the door open." Girls were gathered in the hallway, watching. I walked closer, kneeling in front of Desiree. I

reached out, but didn't touch her. "Desiree, open your eyes, look around. You are not alone with me, so no one can touch you without your leave before you are eighteen. None of us would do anything to harm you in any way." She shook her head, burrowing against the wall.

"What caused it?"

"She had asked about the pool. Tiffany had suggested that she had bet that I would be her first and she panicked."

"But the roommate is always the most likely!"

"That is true, Monica, but I think she fears I might force her." I looked into the hall. "Everyone, listen to me; for Desiree, there is no pool. We will treat her as a younger sister who needs our love and comfort, not our sex."

I took her in my arms, stopping her flailing fists. When I was younger I had tried to coax a feral kitten in, so I withstood her pummeling and clawing until she collapsed against me. I murmured soothingly until she was limp. Monica came over, and took her in her arms, and Desiree let herself be held. One by one most of the girls hugged her though a few gave me disgruntled looks.

One of the girls went to fetch Doctor Mary, who asked two girls to guide the weeping girl to the infirmary. I went to bed confused.

A week later Desiree returned. She was still skittish around all of us, but at least I could help with her training. She needed remedial tutoring badly in almost all of her schoolwork, and instead of handling her tutoring myself, I asked others to do so.

A few days later Tiffany was helping her with Latin. She had a much better grasp of the language than I did. I was walking by when I heard Desiree say, "Dance with a boy?"

"The dances are required, but you only have to dance once during each ball. Here," Tiffany stood, helping Desiree up. "You haven't been to many dance classes, so let's just do an elevator dance."

"Elevator dance?"

"You know; you're not going anywhere but you're still moving. Just sway, but don't move your feet too much." She hummed a slow song, holding Desiree in her arms. They shuffled about, Desiree burying her head against her partner, and I remembered when I had done the same thing for the new teacher. I sighed, walking on. Desiree would be all right. She'd found someone to cling to.

Destruction of a Mind

It came time to prepare for the ball, and like always the Academy fell into the flurry of girls getting ready. I assured Desiree was one of the first in the salon that Saturday afternoon just to insure that no one would tease her into another terrified episode. I needn't have bothered. Jasmine was so professional she was almost emotionless. She changed the wig for something that looked like the Princess in Sleeping Beauty, and worked on Desiree's make up so that she looked divine yet understated. Salma, who had decided to learn more in cosmetology changed out her nail polish for a mint green to complement the gown she would wear.

I went next and Jasmine became her own self again. "You know the Nathaniel look would be so you." She gushed. "Ankle length—"

"No, Jasmine. Even if you took it out tomorrow morning I would be tripping over hair that long."

"All right." She sighed. "Even a change in color would do. You have brown hair, but mouse brown? It looks so, drab."

"All right, you can tint it just a little just this once. But only a rinse."

"Really?"

"Really. It has to wash out when I shower afterward."

"Deal!" Jasmine got the tint ready, and as Desiree watched, I went from brunette to auburn. Both Salma and Jasmine thought it was beautiful and kept jokingly pestering me to let them use the dye that would have to grow out, but I just as jokingly resisted. There I was with my hair first in a French braid down my back then rolled into a spiraled bun only red headed this time. I looked in the mirror where Desiree looked like someone had hit her between the eyes with a red headed hammer. "What do you think, Desiree?"

"Beautiful, Mistress."

"Thank you. But remember. Here in the salon, we are in privy, and do not need the honorifics."

"Lovely, Jessica."

I hugged them both before taking Desiree back to the dorm. We passed Anna who paused, whistling softly. "Wonderful, love." She hugged me, twirling me away in a dance spiral. "I just wish you were better at the tango." She waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“Well there are going to be a few more years. Maybe you’ll get me to learn it before I leave.” I teased back.

“Maybe.” She kissed me gently, and went on her way.

I took out Desiree’s clothing, and began helping her dress. She had gotten a lime green corset to go with this dress and I assured her lacing was snug but not too tight before she went on to put on the overskirts then finally the gown itself. It hadn’t been that long since she arrived, so there were no needed alterations.

Now she helped me. My own salmon gown had been lengthened by an inch in the last month. I checked myself in the mirror, then moved behind Desiree, and we looked at the vision in the mirror.

“Jessica?”

“Yes?”

“I wanted to apologize.”

“For what?”

The first night, when I freaked.”

“We all have problems, dear, think nothing of it.”

“No.” She spun, holding my hand in both of hers. “My family life isn’t what you would call happy. My father is indifferent to anything that is not wholly masculine in the house. I have such a bad reading level because reading is what sissies do instead of going out and playing sports. I wanted go out for the swim team but only sissies swim or run track instead of playing football. I love computers but only sissies play with computers instead of playing sports like a ‘real’ man.”

"There have always been such people." I told her softly. "One day I can tell you of my stepfather."

"I would love to know I wasn't the only one." She whispered so plaintively. "My brother made it worse, though. I wasn't his younger brother, I was the 'faggot' that should never have been born. Or should bow subservient to a real man." She looked haunted again. "If you aren't a real man, there's only one use for you." She shuddered in memory

I hugged her. "We will help you, Desiree, just give us the chance." I moved away from her, "Ready?"

"But what if one of the men..."

"They will not." I told her. "No one will touch you in that way unless you wish it. If they try, Madam Sofia will bar them from coming ever again."

As the sun set I led her across to the mansion, where the ballroom was already set. I handed her off to the other pinks as I went across to the buffet line. The dessert section was dominated by my pies, half a dozen different fruit and nut pies divided into narrow wedges so the dancers could have more than one variety if they so chose. Then I checked the appetizer section. There were three types of my own sausages there, and I had not yet let Moe know that I was even making them. Only the Armenian sausages were caseless, like breakfast sausage, the other two were Basque and bratwurst. We had spent the last month experimenting, and these were the best. Not all my own, the spicing of the bratwurst had been suggested by Brunhilde, a girl of German descent that knew her grandmother's recipe for the dish, and gladly gave it to me. We had almost frozen our hands off making them, because everything from mixture to tools must be as close to freezing as it can be without freezing the meat itself, and it has to be

done twice, one coarse ground, then again in a fine grind as you stuff the skins. I had found that without some liquid and enough fat all you ended up with was hamburger or hot dogs.

I felt a touch, and turned. When I saw who it was, I curtseyed, smiling. "Mr. Benquist!"

"Please." He waved a hand as if wiping a chalkboard. "You know my name."

"As you will, Matthew."

"I wanted to make sure I got the first dance this time." The music began, a Virginia Reel, and I went into his arms.

"How have you been since I last saw you?" He asked.

"Very well, Matthew."

"And your friend?"

"We will more than friends in the fullness of time, and are content to wait." I watched Tiffany swirl by. "A moment, please." I broke away from him, going to the small chamber band we had. I spoke to Sasha who directed them. "Be sure to play a slow waltz soon, Mistress. Desiree did not have enough time to learn many dance steps." She nodded, continuing to play her cello.

I returned to Mathew and went back to the dance. "I am sorry, I was assuring that my new roommate would have a dance she could do quickly so she can sit out the rest of the evening if she wishes."

"New roommate?"

"Yes, a tragic tale I will not bore you with. The music ended, but I did not move away. "I owe you another dance because our first was interrupted." I saw a

hand tap Matthew, and told the young hopeful the same. He acquiesced, and as the waltz began I saw Tiffany hustling across the floor like a Desiree seeking missile. I was able to catch glimpses of the two shuffling around, deep in conversation, and smiled.

"That was her? I remember the other girl."

"Yes."

"So you have done your good deed for the day?"

"I am free for the rest of the evening, yes."

"I would not say free. Your dancing has improved."

"If you do not improve, you should find something else to do." I opined. "I have had some wonderful teachers in the past months."

We chatted. He lived about thirty miles away in another small town, and worked as a lawyer in business law; writing contracts, assuring the flow of goods needed for the industry for half a dozen counties.

"If you wanted to set up a business, say food processing, how would you go about it?"

"We would need more than one dance to work that out." He reached into his suit jacket, and handed me his card. "Let me know when you have some free time, and I will come to the Academy to discuss it."

"Thank you." I slid it down inside my bodice. He chuckled. "What was so funny?"

"A flat chested little girl stuffing something down her cleavage." We chuckled together as the music ended. "But for that you will have to hire me."

"That would be a problem, I have money, but until I am of age, I cannot access most of it."

“No problem. Just pay me a retainer. When you can access it we can work out how you can pay in full.”

“I wish I had thought of that. I didn’t bring any with me.”

“No worry.” He took out his wallet, and handed me a dollar bill. “An old friend of mine started me in the legal field, and he always allowed his friends to hire him by handing him a dollar as a retainer. Fold it twice.” I folded it in half then again. “Now hand it to me, and say, ‘here is your retainer’.” I did so. “There, I’m hired.”

Then a young man came, asking for the next dance.

Unlike my first dance where I only danced once, or during the second perhaps four times, I found myself partnered with almost a dozen different men that evening. Every time we would sweep across the floor, I looked for Desiree. It was almost nine when I noticed that she was not on the floor, nor in the seating area. I spotted Tiffany nibbling some food, and asked my partner’s leave to walk over.

“Have you seen Desiree in the last few minutes?”

She nodded, wiping her lips. “Some guy came by and asked her for a moment to talk. Her father, I think” I felt a chill.

Monica and Nancy were in the first alcove, whispering as they held hands. I went on. The next held Donna and a man also whispering. Dreading what I might find, as I approached the last. I could hear a man’s voice in a loud angry tone.

“But dad-” Desiree’s voice was pleading.

“Don’t ‘dad’ me! Tommy always thought you were queer, and I have proof in front of my eyes! Dancing with me dressed like a girl!”

“Please-” I heard a gasp, and entered. Desiree stood there, pain wracking her face as her father twisted her arm.

“Sir, you will release her this instant.” He spun, face ugly with fury.

“Back off you little fag.”

“Sir, I will ask you once more. Then I will report you to Madam Sofia and you will not like the outcome.”

He pushed Desiree hard enough to make her crumple to her knees. “Go ahead, cocksucker. I only came to see what they made of my son.” He stormed past me as I ran to the girl. I hugged her, whispering gently, patting her back and hair.

“Please, Jessica, I just want to go away and die.”

“Wait, I will let Madam Sofia know, then I will escort you to the room.” She nodded, and I hurried out. I made excuses across the room until I was able to find Madam Sofia, and told her what had happened. She agreed, and I went to collect Desiree, but she was not in the alcove. Frantic I sped from the hall, running toward the dorm.

Desiree was in our bathroom, wrists slit, bleeding into the toilet as if she had felt her life’s blood wasn’t worthy of the tub. I ripped strips from my inner skirt, and bound her wrists, screaming for help, Coach Shannon came running down the stairway to the second floor. She made sure I had stopped the bleeding, then ran across to the house. Less than ten minutes later Doctor Mary arrived with a full blown first aid kit, and

took over. An ambulance arrived, and both Doctor Mary and Desiree were loaded into it.

I knelt in the pool of blood she had left, and began to clean it up. My hair came undone as I frantically scrubbed, and it fell into the water as I worked. The dye began to bleed into the water, and it looked so much like blood that I began to clean it up as well. Anna and Tiffany found me there hours later, frantically scrubbing a perfectly clean toilet and floor as I cried.

Desiree never returned to the Academy. She would scream if anyone came near her, male or female, and was sent to an asylum nearby. I prayed she would get better, and felt nothing but loathing for the kind of man that would have tormented her so.

February 2003 Partnership

Spring again. I was dressed in the skirt blouse and blazer uniform when I arrived at Madam Sofia's office. Andrea had graduated, and had been replaced by Morgana, one of the new greens. "Is it ready?" I asked nervously.

"Yes." She smiled, coming around her desk to give me a quick hug. "Moe just arrived and is with Herself now."

"Wish me luck."

She laughed softly. "With your talent? I may be asking for a job when I get out of here."

"You and a dozen others." I replied. Morgana had been one of my helpers from the start. We were now producing almost a hundred pies a week and there

weren't enough students to keep that up for long. My repertoire had grown from half a dozen to almost fifteen different pies, and the people who frequented Moe's were demanding more and more. The demand for home made sausage, now five varieties, were almost as frantic.



She went back to her seat, put on a prim expression, and touched the intercom button. "Madam Sofia? Jessica is here."

"Please send her in, Morgana." She nodded toward the door, and I went to it. I grasped the handle, took a deep breath, then walked in, closing the door behind me.

Moe leaped to his feet, coming over to hold my hand. "There's my little mint on two feet." He hugged me, then ushered me to a chair. I sat, and he returned to his own.

Madam Sofia nodded to me. She knew what I was going to say, and her eyes twinkled. "Moe, Jessica has a proposal."

"She does?" His eyes widened. "Another pie or sausage? Just give the word and we'll start advertising it tomorrow!"

"No, Moe. I had another suggestion." Now that it came down to it, I was very nervous. How would he react?

"Well come on, don't leave me hanging!"

"Our production will soon reach the point that we cannot keep up with demand. There are not enough of us working on it to stretch much more."

"I knew we'd reach that point. I just didn't expect to reach it this soon."

"Yet I feel we cannot leave you 'hanging' as you said. I have been saving all of what you have been paying us except for the monies I have given to the girls helping me, so I have about two hundred thousand in the bank right now. I wish to give that money back to you."

“What!” He sat bolt upright in shock. “Listen little girl, I gave you that money and you’re not just giving it back to me!”

“I was going to use it to buy back the recipes, then ask you to assist me in starting a business instead. Opening a specialty food business to manufacture the products on a larger scale. I do not have enough to do this on my own, and doing so would undercut you locally, so I could not do so even if I wished to.”

He leaned back, and for once I saw the businessman, not the gourmand. “So you hand me that much, and ask me to foot the rest. Do you know how much that is going to cost?”

I nodded. “I have been taking business courses since our partnership began. I estimate one and a half a million dollars for property and equipment, with about thirty thousand a month for staffing, and twenty thousand a month for ingredients per month at start up. But I would hope we could make that back in the first year in profits.”

“Make it back? More like double our money in the first six months!” He said, leaning forward. “I even have the property we could use, an old meat packing plant near my diner with everything except for the ovens. I know the owner and he’s been trying to sell it for about a decade now. As for the cost I’ve made more than that just serving your pies before you branched into sausages! Why once we open the doors, you’ll be as famous as...” He tried for an example.

“Mrs. Lovett?” I asked gently, referencing the character from the movie and play Sweeney Todd. He began to choke, and I leaped up, patting him on the back. Then the choking became a roaring laugh.

“I was thinking of Mrs. Smith.” He finally gasped. “Don’t do that too often. My doctor tells me if I laugh more often than once a day I’ll have a stroke.” He settled back as I took my seat, chortling and repeating the name under his breath for almost five minutes.

“So you give me your money and become junior partner, we get it up and running in let’s say a month. You’re paid back in about four months, what then?”

“Oh I wasn’t just giving you the business, Mr. Greenwald.” I looked to Madam Sofia. “Madam, if you would?”

She nodded, touching the intercom button. “Bring it in, please.”

The door opened, and three girls came in pushing serving carts. Three of my best helpers, Erica Tanya and Anastasia, a combination of blue green and pink arranged the carts. I was going to miss Anastasia in a few months, she was counting down to only 90 days of her sentence.

On two there were pies including pot pies and folded dough pies of the Mediterranean style, on the last seven different sausages including two different patty types and three large meatloaves. We came over to the carts, and I motioned. “We have come up with only two different dessert pies we are not yet selling, mince and kiwi-strawberry. But in the meat pies we have expanded into ethnic pies; French, Italian, German, and Lebanese.” With the last I pointed at the folded pastry around lamb and vegetables.

“We have also been working on making single serving sizes of all of them. To that assortment we are adding both Shepherd’s pie and Taco pies, but only in single serving sizes.” I lifted one of the latter. “After all,

the only difference between Shepherd's pie and Taco pie is the seasoning and what vegetables you use." I handed him the pie, and a fork. He tasted it, savory meat with peas and carrots in a slightly hot taco sauce. The Shepherd's pie was diced turnips and potatoes both with a creamy blanket of mashed potatoes on the top. There was also a vegetarian Shepherd's pie, mushrooms, potato cubes and finely chopped broccoli and cauliflower, all vegan I assured him.

"Then we are adding not only breakfast sausage in links and patties, but also again more ethnic varieties. English Bangers, Lebanese, Syrian, even Israeli and Indian chicken sausages. All of these except the bangers are made kosher so the market can only improve.

"And using the sausage mixture alone, we thought of meatloaf. From left to right we have Meatloaf Pyrenees; basque sausage mix, Home style, just normal meatloaf, and Meatloaf Yerevan, named after the capital of Armenia."

As I watched with trepidation, he sampled at least a bite of everything, and my worries died as he again and again praised what we had done. He returned to his chair as the remains were sent out, no doubt so everyone would eat some of it before cleaning up. I had already earmarked slices of some of the pies meatloaf and sausages for my own consumption when we were making them.

"We will still produce some pies here, perhaps half a dozen of each once the production begins. And perhaps fifty pounds of assorted sausages and meatloaves, mainly that is so other girls can learn and profit from it.

"Now what I was going to suggest is local sales first of frozen and fresh pies and meats county wide; with a small kiosk in your diner for sales of fresh selections to

take away, along with samples of newer products. Once we have that market tightly wrapped we can go to production on the state level."

"I'd jump to state level right off the bat." He said instead. "Because by this time next year, I think you'll be producing for the whole southwest." He belched, excused himself, and took a sip of lemonade.

"I see it like this; we start manufacture immediately. I already have connections to deliver as far away as Flagstaff, and Phoenix in Arizona, Taos New Mexico, Denver Las Vegas and Dallas and some of your pies are already being bought whole to deliver that far away, both fresh and frozen. When the demand builds I'll have to hire some new drivers, buy a couple more trucks too."

"I have only one demand in all this, Moe." I leaned back. "Without the girls here I would never have been able to expand so enormously. I ask that any graduate from here that has helped in making our food, or creating one of these recipes be guaranteed a job."

He waved that off. "Is that all? I'd consider them a treasure!"

"Then we are agreed?"

"Except for the contracts between us it's a done deal. My lawyer Matthew Benquist would be glad to draw up the documents for us."

"Wouldn't that be a conflict of interest?" I asked. "I was considering hiring him as my lawyer for that very purpose."

"It would only be a conflict if one of us were arguing too hard for a better cut of the pie." He said, chuckling. "I know he's honest."

“Then there is the matter of my being a Juvenile. I won’t be legally of age until November.”

“Again no problem. He can contact your parents and get their agreement... Something wrong?”

I told him of my relationship to my mother and her husband. “If you told him I was starting a business that would make real money, he’d suddenly decide he’s loved me all along as he could get his hooks into it.”

“I’ll let Matt know about that problem. But until he can come up with a way around it, I’ll assume everything is already engraved in stone. Deal?”

“Deal.” We stood, and shook hands. He held my hand and pulled me into a bear hug.

“We’re going to become rich from this!”

Green

A week later I was again in Madam Sofia’s office. “Production won’t start for a few more weeks, but I felt you needed to get closer to the community as any good business woman would. Lady Catherine thought an internship would be best.”

Lady Catherine had suggested this? I had thought she hated me, constantly beating me over the head when I made mistakes with my accounting and suggestions for production of the dummy business she had created for me to operate. Business Administration had turned into hell for me, but I wasn’t giving up yet. “I can but try.”

“Well I have spoken with Homer Saunders who is manager of the local New Mexico savings and loan. I told him of your business proposal, and he wishes you to help out in the accounting department and assist

with the safe deposit boxes as well. You'll be paid a bit above minimum wage to start, but if you do as well at this as you have in cooking, he expects to pay you a beginning account's salary within the year. However there is one thing we must do first." She opened her desk drawer. "Stand, please."

I stood, and she came around behind me. I felt her working the lock, and my yellow choker came free. Then she put another one around my neck, locking it on instead. "You cannot leave the grounds as a Yellow; you knew that, didn't you?" I had not, and told her so. "But you can as a green or blue."

"Am I ready?" I asked in a whisper.

"Never more ready. I have been keeping track of your monies coming in from your various enterprises. Why have you never told the girls that when you were making fifty cents per pie, and a dollar per pound of sausage of your own, that you were really giving half of it to the girls who helped you make them?"

"I didn't want them to know." I admitted. "I lied to them, telling them that they individually were being paid more by Moe. I thought that would motivate them more."

"Good in all business. Morgana will take you into town and we will have four business outfits chosen for you. Once you have changed into one of them, she will drive you over to the savings and loan to meet Homer."

Morgana took me to the salon first. A professional look was needed.

Amber, who had taken over when Jasmine left, took out the extensions as my natural hair was halfway down my back already. She washed it, then blow dried

it. Then she created one of those swept up roll designs young professional women effect. Lady Danielle who taught sewing offered to have her class work on a suit made just for me that would be ready in a few days as an extra credit assignment, and I thanked her for the gesture.

Morgana drove the station wagon to Parisienne, a lady's clothing store. I thought the name pretentious, since there were no French designs there. But there was some fine work including some made by our own students. We settled on a rust pants suit with a bolero jacket and autumn brown blouse, A navy blue suit with skirt and robin's egg blouse, A pale lavender skirt-blouse combination with a matching jacket, and a wine red suit with wide flowing skirt and a pale red blouse. I chose to wear the navy suit and stayed in it when we departed the store.

The savings and loan was a small building with it's very own attached parking structure that swooped over it for the two upper parking areas. Morgana parked, and we went in.

Homer Saunders was almost my own five six and almost as big around. He had a jolly booming laugh and thinning hair he combed across the bald spot on his head. "I've heard a lot about you Jessica. Please, step into my office." He led us both in, and has us take seats across from him.

"Now I have spoken to Sofia about the business you and Moe Greenwald are starting. Is it true you created the recipes for those wonderful pies and sausages?"

"Not all of them but most of them, yes."

My wife loves your quiche; she orders a different one every time we go there, and she loves the Basque sausages.”

“I will tell Consuelo that, sir. The sausages you mentioned are an old family recipe from her great-grandmother. We are also introducing Basque and Armenian meatloaf.”

“Well with food like that I think the proposed factory is something of great value to the local economy. Moe has already sent in the loan papers, but I don’t believe you have handled such documents before. So I am going to have you work on the documentation for such a loan. In the future when the pair of you decide to expand, I want you to have a firm grounding in how and why loans are written the way they are.

“Next you will help with the accounting here in the building. Lady Catherine tells me you are an excellent student but have little hands on experience. I’ve asked Moe to name you as Chief Financial Officer, and most of the accounting you do will be for your own business. No better place to learn than by working on your own patch as it were.

“Last, if we are busy, you will be in charge of the safe deposit desk. That will only happen a couple of times a week. You will take the patron back, unlock their box, remove it from it’s cubicle, and either set it upon the table in the vault or take it to the small enclosure inside the vault. Once they are done you will return it to it’s location and return their key. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then I expect to see you tomorrow bright and early. You will only work five hours a day with an hour for lunch. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for the chance.” We shook hands and he walked us back out.

I took a deep breath as Morgana started the car. “What’s wrong, Jessica?”

“I feel like everything is moving too fast. I’m in a car with no brakes careening down a hill with San Francisco Bay ahead of me. Any second I expect to have that flying feeling you get when your car is airborne right before you hit the water.”

She chuckled. “At least you have something to go on to.” Morgana replied. “I came into the Academy pig ignorant, and except for getting my education I haven’t done squat with it.”

“If there comes a time you need something to do, let me know. I don’t see why any of our friends at the Academy should have to get a food service job unless that is what they want to do.”

She stopped at the traffic light, silent. As the light changed she rolled forward. “You mean that, don’t you?”

I gave an irritated snort. “Of course I do, Morgana. If it were not for the Academy I would be a petty thug learning how to strong arm little old ladies out of their purses, or worse. You know what the road camp is supposed to be like and a real prison would be a nightmare. Do you think those guys get a chance to learn a trade? My real father told me once that all you would learn in a Texas prison was how to stamp metal like license plates and how to clear fields for plowing, nei-

ther of which would get you a corner office in any business worth knowing about.

“Madam Sofia gave us a chance to get our shit together and we’ve used it. You think you’re incompetent, but she has you working in her office for a reason. You probably aced the typing test then proved efficient in managing an office. Don’t you think Mr. Saunders would hire you if he needed an office manager?”

She mulled over it as she hit the highway headed toward home. “Maybe. But how many businesses need an office manager that badly?”

“Well I know one that will need one before the end of the year.” I told her. “And who better to work with than someone I have known for a year and trust?”

We were silent for the rest of the trip.

Explanations

When we arrived I sought out Lady Catherine. She was instructing her half dozen student in the arcana of bookkeeping, and noticed my arrival almost as if she had known I would find her.

“Go to the next section and insert the entries there. I will be checking so make sure they are clear and legible!” Then she pointed toward the hall beyond. I nodded, walking back outside, then waited until she joined me.

“Another bunch of dunderheads.” She sighed, looking at me. “Was there something you needed to talk about, Jessica?”

“Two different people today mentioned your name and told me how much you had praised me, Lady Catherine.”

"I expect they were Madam Sofia and Homer Saunders." She said sighing. "Listen, I'm dying for a smoke. Can we have this conversation outside?"

I agreed, and we went out. She offered me a cigarette I refused (A luxury most of us did without or never took up) and lit up. "You were wondering why a bitch who called you every name but what you were given by man or god suddenly came down on your side, correct?"

I nodded.

"My father was a Marine Drill instructor. He told me the way to deal with your troops is to press them hard, make them think nothing they did was worth mention until the final day. On that day you would tell them they just barely passed by his lights, that if it fell in the pot they might-might prove worth his attention. Then when they faced real combat these unworthies would bust their humps to prove they were, and surprise even the meanest line dog." She blew a long line of smoke.

"You worried me at the start. So tentative, unwilling to take chances, even when it wasn't real money. I had to lean on you, lean hard to get you off your ass, and you have repaid every effort with victory. Now go out there, spit in their eyes, and prove me right." She crushed the cigarette daintily, nodded to me, then went back in.

New Arrangements

Anna and I had been returned to the same room when Carla made green, but we faced the sad truth that we were now a green and a blue sharing the same room. When a new student arrived, we'd be separated

yet again, this time for good. Less than a week after that meeting with Mr. Saunders we bid goodbye to our sharing a room. I am not sure which of us was more distraught. Since she was the senior partner, she received the single room when Siobhan entered our orbit, and we took what time we could on the side before Carol, another new student became Anna's roommate.

My new schedule was, arrive at the savings and loan at 9 AM every weekday, delivered by Morgana. Work on loan applications, do the books for J. Connors/Moe Greenwald DBA Bliss Specialty Foods, then occasionally on Thursdays and Fridays, escorting customers to the vault. I ate lunch from noon to 1 PM, and shared it with Maggie Jenkins and Shannon Styles, two of the tellers. They weren't sure how to deal with me at first; the facts of where I lived were abundantly clear to both within less than a week, so they knew my real situation.

Of course I was not approving loans. I merely gave the information on what they made and could expect to pay to Myra, the loan manager. I found out later that my own rules were more stringent than the savings and loan itself, a balance every good loan officer learns with time.

Then again doing the books or escorting customers until 3 when Morgana would pick me up. I would spend a few hours working on new recipes, supervising my workers, then perhaps catch some time with Anna before it was time for bed.

While I had yet to see the building, I was there in proxy for everything. Buying the building, having the health department survey it and order changes; the first deliveries of ovens and storage facilities. We had saved money because it had also been a sausage pro-

duction facility, so the old but usable grinders were still there. Then the arrival first of the staff then the ingredients. Finally the first shipments of Bliss Specialty foods to markets throughout the state.

Matthew came up with the best option for me; emancipation. Started originally for youth actors in Hollywood and stage productions, a number of them had ended up penniless when they grew into their teens and adult lives thanks to rapacious parents. It legally separated a juvenile from the disruptive parents, allowing them to go their own way without interference. It would take time as the laws in New Mexico and Texas were subtly different. But it would be completed in a few months and I wasn't worried.

April An Old Friend

I was busy working out why Moe had bought three new trucks yet only hired two drivers when Maggie came to interrupt. "There's a special request from the safe deposits, and Mr. Saunders wants you in his office."

Curious, I went to see him. I was wearing the black gabardine suit Lady Danielle had delivered. A Pink named Erin had made it for me. When I put it on I was stunned. I knew I was still a boy without 'augmentation' as some of the girls on hormones called it. But no one seeing me in that suit would have thought me male in any way. I knocked on his door, and at his call, I entered.

Norman Hope, a local lawyer was with him, and Mr. Saunders handed me a key. "Go down, open this box and bring it here."

"Yes, sir." I went out, then down the steps to the vault. Box 117 was a large one, and I took it by the handles and carried it back up.

The two men looked at the box. When Mr. Hope started to open it I made to excuse myself, but he waved off my request. "According to his will, if a girl from the Academy was working here, she was to be present."

I stood there as he reverently took out the envelope that sat on the top, opening it to read the letter enclosed. A bright object fell into his hand, and he held it while he read. "Homer, read codicil 1."

Mr. Saunders read the portion, then nodded.

"I think Mr. Penwald would want this young woman to have this." He held out his hand to me. I reached out, and he dropped a gold necklace into my hand. It had Tinkerbell hanging from it, also of gold.

"I don't understand, sir."

The lawyer handed me the letter. "Only codicil one relates to you." I opened it seeing LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT at the top. I went down to Codicil one.

"To whomever is working in the savings and loan when I pass, I ask that if one of Madam Sofia's girls is included, this necklace is my parting gift. If not, that it be conveyed to the Academy for Madam Sofia to dispose of. Assuming one is there, I have this to say:

"Greetings my sister.

"You probably will not know of me, but I was also a student in the Academy a few months ago. Just as you might have done, I foolishly committed a crime and was sentenced there.

“That was the making of what I will become, making me prove what and who I was to the world when I left. However while my memories of the place are bright, one act of mine was not. I knew another sister then named Bella. We were sent there a month apart, and Bella had been of a mind to study holy orders. As much as the common people see the Catholic church as a den of child molesters and perverts, Bella, or Father Damian as he is now known intended to correct that, at least in our local eyes.

“Knowing her as I did, I knew her will was adamant, the foolish crime of being drunk and disorderly crashing her father’s car into a lamppost was the last gasp of her misspent youth. I knew that if any could hold to a vow of celibacy, it would be her, and I bet accordingly. When she left still pure I came into possession of about half a pound of assorted gold and silver jewelry which is in this safe deposit box, and will at my request, be sent to the Academy and be distributed to the present students.

“My father had been wealthy, and passed on in my last year at the Academy. He had always been a firm believer in what Madam Sofia was trying to do. His sole admonition to me his errant son was that I do what I could to help her in that cause. I have and will do everything I can to aid her. I do not know if she will remember, if any remember me there as it has been mere months since I left, and no one knows what life God has given us. But I must make the attempt.

“I wish you my sister to be the messenger as the plinth at Thermopylae asks. Go tell Madam Sofia that I died obedient to her cause.

“And so I sign myself with the proudest name I have ever borne, even if it was only in passing.

“Love, Sonia.”

I blinked back tears, looking at a second envelope Mr. Saunders held out. “Please deliver this to Madam Sofia. Take the rest of the day off.”

I took it, wiping my eyes. “Yes sir. If I may, how did he die?”

“A plane crash. His private jet lost power on takeoff and crashed attempting an emergency landing.” Hoe said.

“I’ll tell Madam Sofia.”

First Morgana then Madam Sofia was worried that I had called in midday. I think they believed I was being kicked out of the building. Finally Mr. Saunders himself told them what had occurred. Morgana might have gotten a ticket if she had not been lucky, and we drove back to the Academy almost as fast.

We hurried upstairs, and Madam Sofia took the envelope, opening it with her letter opener. I moved to depart but she clucked her tongue once, pointing at a chair. I sat there silently as she read it, then gently folded the envelope closed. She touched the intercom button. “Morgana, come in here please.”

Morgana came in like a jack in the box popping out of the container. “Call Stromberg’s funeral home. Tell them the service will be held this Saturday and we will need cars for everyone here. All of the residents of the Academy. The burial will be here in my family plot instead of the cemetery as a last request. Tell the Sheriff’s department what is to occur, I do not want the grave diggers pilfering the house while they do their duty.

“Jessica go and tell Anna what has happened. She is the only remaining student from when our dear departed was here. Then begin at the barn and tell every

worker and teacher what has happened. Morgana will call all of the students we can contact as you do. The file is indexed by year, so 1996 to 2001." She waved mutely for us to go, and we left. As I closed the door, I saw Madam Sofia hold her head, and cry.

Reactions

The rest of the week was somber. Most of us there now had never met Sonia, but the reactions from our teachers when I told them was as if they had been gut shot. Each took it in their own ways, and some were surprising. Coach Shannon canceled all of the PE classes for the rest of the week. I heard howling as if a soul in torment were in her rooms, but she told everyone who tried to talk to her to begone. Lady Charlotte tried to continue teaching, but finally merely sat at her desk bawling like a baby. Lady Cynthia merely nodded, though she began having problems with the language she loved so much.

Lady Danielle dismissed her class, went to her rooms, and merely stayed out of sight. Pretty much everything but the necessary cleaning cooking and tending of the animals stopped.

Anna took it just as bad. She was tutoring Siobhan in English when I told her. She looked at me as if she was sure I was lying, then told Siobhan to leave her alone. Once we were alone, she collapsed against me crying, distraught. She admitted that she had been the one that won the bet as to who took Sonia's virginity. The first such conquest in her time here. The first love is always the one you remember best. I stayed to share her pain. I know both Siobhan and Carol did not understand, and I could think of no way to tell them why

I slept with Anna rather than sharing our rooms as was normal.

Saying Goodbye

Saturday dawned bright and crisp. I had spent two days, first finding a copy of a book by Elizabeth Moon, then an Anglican hymn on the net. I copied off what was needed, stapling the two pages together with enough copies for everyone. A string of limousines arrived right before noon, and we filled the cars. Fifty odd men and women were there already, fellow students from that time.

There was not an Anglican church in town, but Father Damian, the priest of the Catholic church presided as Sonia's final request.

"We gather today to say farewell to someone very special to us. Those who never met Marvin Penwald, or Sonia as she was known at the Academy are poorer for that lack, as we who did know her are made poor by her loss. She was a loyal and devoted friend, and even after this time we would spend time reminiscing about our shared time. We both in our own way have helped the Academy, and as his friend, I promise upon his grave that I will continue to do so.

"Martin always loved the hymns of his church, especially Billy Bragg Blake's Jerusalem, the battle hymn of the Anglican Church for over two centuries. When Elizabeth Moon wrote a series of science fiction books, he found the hymn he loved so much transformed for that universe. In fact when we both had too much to drink, he would sing both the old and new versions. At his request, both will be sung at his grave today. Let us pray."

We bowed our heads as one old friend said good-bye for them all. I held Anna to me as she cried. Each teacher had a group of their students gathered around.

All but Madam Sofia. She sat alone.

Then back into the cars, and we returned to the Academy.

Back on the northern edge of the property was a small lake and a family plot where five generations of Madam Sofia's family were buried. A new grave had been dug, the turned earth covered with the astroturf strips they use to disguise what we all know, that our lives will end, and others will witness that passing.

Our teachers carried the coffin to the grave, putting it on the platform, then stood back silently. Father Damian stepped forward, resting his hands on the casket. "Goodbye my sister." He turned, nodding.

It began softly, first only Madam Sonia Father Damian and a few of the teachers that knew the hymn singing. But one by one all of us joined in.

And did those feet in ancient time

Walk upon England's mountains green?

And was the holy lamb of god

On England's pleasant pastures seen?

And did the countenance divine

Shine forth upon our clouded hills?

And was Jerusalem builded here

Amongst these dark satanic mills?

Bring me my bow of burning gold

Bring me my arrows of desire
Bring me my spear: o clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire.
I will not cease from mental fight
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

Then the fictional verses. Only Damian and Madam Sofia sang at first but we joined in as we felt comfortable.

This for the friends we had of old
Friends for a lifetime's love and cheer.
This for the friends who come no more
Who cannot be among us here.
We'll not forget, while we're alive,
These hallowed dead, these deeds of fame.
Where they have gone, we will follow soon
Into the darkness and the flame.
Then we shall rise, our duty done,
Freed from all pain and sorrow here,
We'll leave behind ambition's sting
And keep alive our honor dear.
And they will stand beside us then
All whom we loved and hoped to see
And they shall sing, a glad AMEN

To cheer that final victory.

Bring me my bow of burning gold

Bring me my arrows of desire

Bring me my spear: o clouds unfold!

Bring me my chariot of fire.

I will not cease from mental fight

Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand

Till we have built Jerusalem

In England's green and pleasant land.

The gears hummed, and the coffin dropped from sight. One by one the teachers passed by, each dropping a rose into the grave. Anna went next, whimpering as she returned to my side.

Last went Madam Sofia. She held the red rose tightly enough that I saw blood dripping from her hand. I started forward, singing the last verse again, hugging Madam Sofia as she finally broke down and cried. I heard Anna's voice, felt her own arms hold the woman as one by one, teachers and students alike joined in.

I understood then why that verse, created for a fictional world meant so much to our teachers, and especially Madam Sofia. We like those characters shared something no one else would understand. We were sisters under our clothes until the last of us died.

Sonia's First Gift

Sofia's will, when probated, gave the Academy enough money to expand the property by almost fifty acres, and Madam Sofia had the new land turned into pastures and orchards. We would have to wait a few years, but soon we would have enough of our own fruit and nuts to help meet the demand of our business.

As for the jewelry, Anna broke down again as it was laid out for the students and those that had known Sonia to see. She picked up a pair of earrings, delicate spirals of gold and silver; the very ones she had lost in that bet long ago. They became her favorites yet again. All but a handful of necklaces and earrings were collected by those who knew her, and some of our newer students had something to remember by, as I did.

May Problems from My Old Home

The business grew apace, and my main worry was that all of the primary fruits and nuts in my pies were indigenous to the Northern hemisphere, which would slow production when they went out of season. We could switch to canned nuts or fruit, but the quality would suffer when we did, so we began a study to see if there were ethnic fruits and nuts to use instead, like kiwi fruit for example. We also explored the idea of finding the fruits and nuts needed but grown in the southern hemisphere. That is how we found that some varieties of peaches and pecans are grown in Australia Venezuela Chile and South Africa.

Matthew came to see me the first week of May along with Moe, and we went to Homer's office.

“How much does your stepfather know about cooking?”

I was surprised by the question. “I honestly don’t know. If you had asked about his eating habits I would say he thinks cooking is something women do when the cave man brings home the dead animal for the plate. After he’s done killing it and dragging it home it’s the woman’s job to prepare it. The only time I ever saw him cook was when he barbequed; Men’s cooking, he called it.”

“And does he know you had any interest?”

“He knew I sometimes helped my father when he cooked. I enjoyed watching and learning.” I grimaced. “Of course that was something only sissies did.” I remembered Desiree’s father with his litany of what ‘sissies’ did. “Why do you ask?”

“After your report about how your family reacted, I expected no problems. But I forgot to consider one thing; why would you suddenly decide to emancipate yourself?” He looked at me, smiling at the dawning understanding in my eyes. “He suddenly realized you must have something valuable. The suit for emancipation was stopped by a court order in Texas. Now I want you to get inside his head. What would he do?”

I considered. “First stop the proceeding and make sure it happens somewhere he can control. From what I have learned Texas has stricter laws than most of the country in a case like this. He would then have to find a way to have me transferred to that state. Probably he suddenly understood that I was being held in another state and try to get child welfare to transfer me there to get me closer to my loving family.” I sneered. “I wonder if he would have sent that last nasty letter if he had realized my true worth?” I put on a fake voice. “Oh

my poor child is being held in a nasty prison in another state far from his loving family! Please let him come home!'.

"Then he'd file suit to make sure all of my effects come home too, including my bank account, but they would be delivered to him instead of me to assure no foreign documents are there. Last, he would assure that any agreements I have made regarding my recipes would be declared illegal." I bit my lip. "That worries me most. All of our agreements so far have been oral." I looked to Moe. "My stepfather would prefer to lose the game with the one toss of the dice if he could assure that I was unable to win by merely waiting another year. The term 'Dog in a manger' fits him."

"Bravo." Matthew gave me a golf clap. "That is exactly what he has done. He is trying to have your sentence set aside, and have you delivered to the Texas state juvenile authorities. He has also asked that all of your documents be delivered to his care for pretty much the reason you've given. They also ordered all notebooks, especially of recipes be seized."

"So what? Texas sends a car to take me back to Texas and my papers, including my recipe book is in his hands." I mused. "Then of course he has to have any agreements I have made declared null and void. Maybe I should ask the judge; doesn't Madam Sofia hold *Loco parentis* of me while I am a student of the Academy?"

"Yes and no." Matthew told me. "She has the right to control your movements, visitors, schooling, and decisions about medical treatment. But she cannot sell your property without your family's permission or hold your monies in trust. As a juvenile, neither can you."

“Even if it didn’t exist when I lived there?” I asked.

“His lawyer will say you have to prove it.”

I considered the problem. “May I use your phone? And may I ask that the local judge be called?”

“Judge Loman?”

“Yes. I have a legal question.” I reached into my wallet, handing Matthew a dollar. “I would like to retain you again.”

“Done.”

Homer pushed across his phone, and I called the Academy. Morgana promised to do as I asked, and we waited.

The judge arrived first, after all it was only a block walk. I shook hands with the man in fond memory. He had done some much for me just by passing sentence. “I have heard you’ve made a name for yourself here.”

“That is my problem today, your honor. Would you mind waiting until Morgana gets here from the Academy?”

“Not at all.”

We waited as Matthew explained. “Your honor, we believe that the plaintiff in Texas, or his lawyer, knows of my client’s situation, where she is serving her sentence, and the conditions in the Academy. We also are alarmed that they have demanded the ‘return’ of the recipes she has created. We believe he is using these facts as an extra lever.”

The judge nodded, deep in thought.

Morgana finally arrived, carrying the loose leaf notebook that contained all of my recipes. I took them

reverently, rubbing my hands over the folder as if I were stroking a cat.

“Your honor, here is what I have achieved thanks to you.” I held up the book. “The basis of the business Moe and I have created. Now it is in jeopardy thanks to my stepfather.” I handed it to him. “I will let you decide, sir. I can destroy all of these, and the only copy remaining will be in my head. If I do that, Moe, we will have to wait until I am of age.

“I hate to ask Moe, but would you be willing to wait that long? And worst yet, would you be willing to take the loss of some of these recipes? I can’t guarantee I will remember every nuance of them.”

Moe looked at me, then nodded. “It’s your dream, Jessica. I can survive the loss because we’ll make it up in the end. Homer, the diner’s yours.”

“What!” I almost leaped to my feet. “You didn’t mortgage the diner! No, please...” I collapsed back into the chair wanting to scream my pain. I had destroyed him, and suddenly my pain turned to fury. No. That thieving monster my mother had married would destroy my life and Moe’s because he wanted a piece of the pie he didn’t deserve.

The judge sighed, handing the folder back to me. “I cannot in good conscience suggest that you destroy your hopes, Jessica. Nor do I feel Moe should be penalized because he has supported you. However I see no alternatives.”

“I do.” I thrust the book into Moe’s hands. “In front of these witnesses, I give these to you, Moe. I expect no recompense.”

“Jessica--”

“No!” I stood there quivering with both rage and sorrow. “I will not let my stepfather destroy you, to destroy us! When I reach my majority, I will be back. When I do, I will start again!”

“But any lawyer who has passed the bar will merely ask the court to order Moe to return the recipes. They will claim you gave them away under duress.” Matthew said.

“So we lose and he wins.”

“Wait, Jessica.” Judge Loman held up his hand. “Mister Benquist, you told me out of court as it were that there was an abusive letter sent by this ‘man’ to your client a few months after you arrived at the Academy. I agreed at that time to waive having it’s contents before my bench, but I think now is a good time to see it.”

I stared at Matthew. “Your choice, Jessica. We can scotch this entire farce by revealing the secret he wants to hold over your head.”

My location wasn’t a secret, but what kind of ‘school’ I went to was, sort of. He knew that we could use the letter my stepfather had sent against him, but by the same token blackmail works best when the one you coerce has a secret; like maybe being in a school where I would be dressed as a woman. I had never told my mother of the Academy’s rules, but my stepfather obviously knew and was using that to try to get me to return to my cage. We had agreed, primarily to spare me that pain, that we would not want to admit that.

“To hell with him, and to hell with destroying my dream because of him.”

Matthew opened his briefcase, taking out a sheet of paper that had been unfolded then stuck in a plastic sheath. He then handed it to the judge silently.

The judge took the letter, and read it. His face grew harsh as he read my stepfather's letter. "I had thought you were exaggerating, Mr. Benquist, but I see you were not." He tapped it. "Use this in my court. Jessica, I would suggest you dress in normal attire, but as good as you look, I'd suggest a suit like you're wearing right now. If you're going to the gallows, look good doing it." He gave me a smile. His own career as a judge would be on the line too; he had sentenced me to the Academy.

"If the Texas court agrees with him, I will sign a court order to stop your extradition and if necessary publish these letters to show your stepfather's greed outweighs his love of his child. Let them try to fight me after that!"

A surprising Ally

What came first surprised me. Two days after that meeting Morgana was turning toward the front entrance when I saw a car that made my blood run cold. "Stop the car!"

We almost kissed the dash as she slammed on the brakes. I pointed a trembling finger at the Volvo station wagon. "Does that belong to one of the staff members?"

She looked at the car blankly for a moment, then shook her head. "Some woman, Victoria Grady I think is her name... Jessica?" She touched my arm, and I noticed that I was having trouble breathing. Richard's mother. Why was she back in my life?

I went up the stairs, mentally hearing the drum beat of a military hanging as I went through the front door. Someone called me but I ignored them taking the stairs two at a time as I raced to Madam Sofia's office. I knocked on the door, and she bade me enter. Madam Sofia looked surprised to see me. "Have you already spoken to your grandmother, Jessica?"



"I am sorry, Madam Sofia, but she is not my grandmother."

Madam Sofia looked at me then sighed. "I know she is the mother of your stepfather, but she has asked permission to speak with you. I will deny her request if you wish."

I considered what Madam Sofia said; the woman claimed a family relationship that I had just denied. If I pushed it, she would deny it at my own word. For the first time in my life I felt what an adult might feel; that what happened next was my own decision, and it was heavy stuff. "Please call Matthew, and ask that he come here." I requested.

It took almost an hour before Matthew arrived, and I waited patiently. He finally arrived and I sent him in first as I waited. I could have left it for Matthew to deal with, but part of me demanded I face my accusers face to face. I sighed, then walked to the sitting room door. I knocked softly, then entered.

The two people looked at me as I entered. "Madam Grady, I am here at your request."

"Jessica--"

"No, Matthew. This is my own cross to bear. I asked you here only as a witness unless she does anything actionable." I looked at Madam Grady. "Madam?"

She looked as I remembered from my 12th birthday. She nodded, and I wanted to smile.

"You are James?" She asked. I nodded but stayed silent. The door opened and Shannon looked in.

"Tea, Jessica?" She asked.

"Please, Shannon. We waited as they prepared tea. I leaned forward as the silver tea service arrived.

"Madam Grady, would you wish sugar?" I asked as I poured.

"Yes please." I held up the tongs and she smiled. "Three, please." I dropped three cubes of sugar into her cup then poured tea over it.

"Lemon? Cream?" I asked. She accepted a wedge of lemon, but refused cream. I took three sugars with lemon with no cream. She smiled as we stirred our tea. "Madam, something I have done amused you?"

She held up her tea. "As a writer said, the first step to communication is sharing something. We share the way we like tea."

I nodded. "Sugar, Matthew?"

"No."

"Lemon?"

"Please."

"Cream?"

"No." I handed his cup across.

I nodded. We sipped tea as I removed the lids from the dishes beside the pot. "Scone? Cucumber sandwich Madam?"

She looked at the offering. "I have never understood the British penchant for cucumber sandwiches." She took one of the Blueberry scones.

"Matthew?" He took one of the sandwiches.

I took one of the sandwiches as well. "I think it is that tea is between dinner and supper. You serve cucumber sandwiches because the texture is like meat, but had little or no calories, so it does not ruin your appetite." I bit into the cucumber sandwich.

We spent several minutes merely enjoying our own version of an English tea. I poured a second cup for each of us, sitting back as I enjoyed the tea.

She set down her cup, hands folded on her lap. "I wish we could have started out our relationship like this."

"I am sorry, I do not understand, Madam."

She sighed, looking away. "I would rather you call me anything but Madam. Victoria, Vicky, Mrs. Grady, even bitch. But not Madam."

"As you will, Mrs. Grady."

She sighed. "I have not come for my son. I came of my own will once I found out where you were."

"As you say, Mrs. Grady."

The woman sighed again. "Having not spent time with you, I can understand why you don't believe me. If you would allow me to explain..." She stopped. "Why did that bother you?"

I sighed, sipping my tea. "When I was younger, I fought another boy at school. He was a bully and I didn't like him mistreating our classmates. It wasn't much of a fight, just some scuffling and a few punches thrown, but we were caught by a teacher. They sent us home with letters to our parents.

"My mother didn't handle discipline that well. She read the letter, ordered me to my room with 'wait until your father gets home'.

"I spent several hours coming up with my reasons for the fight. When he came in he waved them all away, asking if I had fought the boy or not. I admitted I had, then he said, 'I spent four years in the Coast Guard, and the first thing I learned was that whoever

was asking me what I had done didn't want explanations. It was did you do it, and only then why. The boss, be he an officer, a non com or just a normal boss only wants to hear no excuse. After they have decided on the punishment, they might ask why you did it. Not before'."

Victoria nodded. "All right. No excuse ma'am. Now may I explain why?" I nodded.

"My son is one of what they called the X generation. Do you know the term?" I shook my head. "It refers to the generation following the last of the baby-boomers, and that generation had a decent economy where getting to work fast wasn't important. I always thought it should have been called the Y generation, as in 'why should I try for work when the parents have enough to keep me going'. My son epitomized that generation. If I had not kicked him out of my house when he turned 20 he would still be there, battenning on me like a tick on a hound.

"When I heard he got married, I came to visit as you well know. I found my insipid son married to a colorless woman, and a young boy who for all I knew, would follow my son's dictates. I was unsure at your birthday party because you didn't resist when he snatched every present from you before you could open it. I saw that again he had found a way to line his own pockets at the expense of others.

"Do you remember what I said that day before I left?"

"You gave me a business card, and told me to call you if I needed help. But your son destroyed the card after I got it."

She nodded. "I wasn't sure, but anticipated that was what he would do. From then on, I sent you gift cards, but except for those usable at any store, none were redeemed. He always had a reason; you didn't like that game store, that kind of thing. But you never called, and I had distanced myself. Otherwise I would have heard a constant litany of everything I could do for you if I only got off my 'high horse' and just gave him the money.

"This continued for four years, then I was visited by a policeman, asking if you had come to me, since you had run away. I told them I had not seen or heard from you, then called Richard. He told me that you had run away after stealing several hundred dollars from your mother. A few weeks later when I called he told me you had trashed a store and been caught. That you had been sent to jail for it. He was vague about which state this had happened in, and I spent months calling the different Juvenile courts from Denver to Seattle. None had your name listed."

"The Academy has a special seal for the students." Matthew commented. "Unless the student asks to contact you, their whereabouts are secret."

"Thank you, sir. So it was as if you had dropped off the face of the planet. Then a Mr. Cartier visited me this last week. He works for your lawyer here, and he was asking about Richard, specifically about how interested he was in cooking. When I asked him why, he told me about you and where you were. That you had filed for emancipation because of the recipes you have created, and that Richard had moved to block it. I asked him to notify your lawyer, with a request that I meet you."

I nodded. I offered more tea, and she refused, sitting silent as I fixed another cup for myself.

“Your one surviving grandparent John and I struck up an acquaintance after that. Did you know your grandmother was a world class chef? And that your father could have made money hand over fist because he inherited that talent?”

“No, Mrs. Grady. I knew father did most of the cooking, and Grandmother Ludmilla always came with lots of snacks for me.”

“Your father was an excellent cook, James. His mother was constantly amazed by his ability. If he had ever written down any of his recipes, my thieving son would have had something to tie his lies to, but your father had a photographic memory. If he had ever made a dish, he remembered exactly how it was prepared, so there was no book of recipes to steal.

“I called him and he boasted about the recipe book you had ‘stolen’, and how he’d get it back. When I asked him what he would do if there was no such book, he chortled, telling me you’d have to prove it in court.”

She snorted. “So I gave Mr. Cartier a deposition reporting that fact. Any chance he had to steal your work is gone. It is, in a way, my apology for not supporting you when you needed it.” She leaned forward, picking up her purse. She drew out a slip of paper. “My address. When you get out of here, perhaps you and I could mend the fences we have?”

I took the paper, then stood. I wanted to cry, but I held it in. “One last thing, Mrs. Grady.” She looked at me curious. “Among the thing I was told I might call you, is grandmother an option?” I asked softly.

She looked as if she was going to cry, and we flung ourselves together, crying on each other’s shoulders.

The Trial

It went almost as the judge had described. Two Texas Department of Public Social Services officers; Highway Patrol would be what a lot of states would call them, arrived with a member of Juvenile services and my stepfather's lawyer. Peter Dalghren almost purred when he found the process of my extradition stopped by the judge's court order. While the child welfare rep fumed and ranted the judge merely tapped his gavel. "Mr. Benquist?"

"Your honor, there is a layer of this case that has not yet been seen in court. We feel that by revealing it, the State of Texas' demand for the return of James Connors will be seen as what it is; a brazen attempt by another court to force an excellent child to support a family that did not love him in return. I ask that James Connors be called to testify."

"James Connors is not in this court, your honor, how long must we wait to see him?" Dalghren waved his arm theatrically. He had given me a smirk from the aisle as he passed where Madam Sofia Moe and I sat, the only witnesses to the proceeding. I knew in an instant who had discovered my current situation. I felt her hand press lightly on my arm, and she gave me a smile. I stood and came forward.

"Objection, your honor. Where is the real James Connors?" He was sweating, because his case had just been cored like an apple.

"I agree, your honor." The Juvenile rep was on her feet. "I see no reason to subject this child to shame in such a disgusting manner." She, at least, was willing to accept that I was who I claimed to be.

“Objections overruled.” The judge looked at the woman. “I see by your actions that the bare bones of the child’s incarceration has been revealed to you, Ms. Carstairs. But how we deal with our juvenile offenders here in Mariposa County is not subject to debate with the state of Texas. This court is the one that sent the child to the school he now attends, and his actions there have proven the court’s rectitude. His appearance, dressed as he is, is his own choice.

“As for your objection, Mr. Dalghren, when accepting what would be revealed today, Mr. Connors requested that this court be closed, as it has been. The only loose lips in this room belong to you.”

I stopped at the witness seat, and the Bailiff swore me in. “State your name for the record, please.”

“James Andrew Connors.”

“Your witness, Mr. Benquist.”

Matthew stood.

“We can tell by your attire that you are not known as James at the school. Will you give the court that name as well?”

I took a deep breath. “I am known in this county as Jessica Connors. My name is also on a loan document as J. Connors doing business as Bliss Specialty Foods.”

“Objection! A Juvenile cannot sign a legally binding contract without a guardian’s permission!”

Matthew went to his desk. “I have obtained a copy of the loan document in question, your honor. While the witness is named, he has not signed it. Rather at the request of a local businessman and the further request of the loan officer himself, that name was added because due to an oral agreement between that business-

man and my client, this is not merely the purchase of intellectual properties, rather it is the beginning of a partnership between them. My client is aware of this, and accepted it. I have both loan officer and the businessman in question waiting to be called if necessary."

"Overruled. Continue."

Matthew looked to me. "Which name would you feel more comfortable being addressed by?"

I motioned toward my attire. "My mode of dress would confuse some, and they might call me she instead of he. I am not embarrassed by it. While under normal circumstances that would cause confusion in the record, I don't mind which I am called by. That will avoid all of the additional transcription the court recorder would have to do for all of the apologies." Both the judge and Matthew chuckled. I could see the court recorder's smile as she took the last down.

Matthew began at March the year before when I was arrested, and went through the sentencing and my incarceration. Then he went through what might have been called a day in the life.

"Your witness."

"You must be embarrassed by having to appear in court dressed this way James." Dalghren began. I held up my hand to forestall what he would have said next.

"My perceptions are not the same as yours, sir. I did not dress this way when I came to Academy, nor will I dress this way when I depart it. I do think however, that a black business suit which I wear once per week is more becoming than an orange jumpsuit." Even the Texas state troopers chuckled at that.

"But to force a boy to cross dress would be a devastating blow to his masculinity!"

“Again, your own perception, sir. The student and faculty of the Academy know what I am, as does this court. As to my own masculinity, I do not think the clothes make the man.”

He paused. “So you accept what we all know must happen at night-”

“Objection, your honor. What the council perceives to occur is not germane to this case.” Matthew said.

The judge looked at me. I gave a nod. “At the request of your client, I will overrule the objection. Answer the question, please.”

“Yes, your honor.” I looked straight at Dalghren. “I submit, sir, that being forced to study hard to pass my classes, to be dressed this way, and to help with farm animals is much better than backbreaking labor in the sun. That being able to sleep in a bed in comfort and safety is better than having to worry that a fellow inmate might feel an urge for some fresh meat. Being dressed as a girl, in my opinion, is a small price to pay for that safety.

“What you see as onerous, I see as the price of doing business.”

He stood there, unable to proceed. Ms. Carstairs raised her hand. “If I may, your honor?” Matthew sat, silent. The judge again looked at me, and I shrugged. He motioned for her to proceed. “James, this is an abominable punishment. Do you really feel you are treated well?”

“Both my lawyer and the Judge, at my request, have given me figures on the numbers of forcible sexual assaults reported in the local road camp either by the victim, the doctors, or the animals forcing them being caught in the act. They have also found such re-

ports for normal juvenile detention centers in your own state, Madam.

“Have you personally spent any time at all assuring that this does not occur there?” She stared at me as if her favorite bunny slippers had become wolves with real teeth. “To paraphrase the bible, I suggest you deal with the four by four post in your own eye before you try to remove the dust from mine.” She sat as if she were a marionette with its strings cut.

“But your family begs for your return, Jess- I mean James.” Dalhgren tried to continue.

“Your honor, my client and I discussed this.” Matthew stood, holding three copies of that damning letter. He handed one to the juvenile rep, another to Dalhgren, then one to the Judge. “I submit this letter into evidence, your honor-”

“Objection! This could have been forged!” Dalhgren shouted.

“Your honor, I have an expert witnesses, specifically Martin Gale of the Albuquerque crime lab and Mark Spellman of the city of Las Vegas Nevada waiting outside who will testify as to whose prints are on this letter. The envelope obviously has been handled by a number of people, but there are only three sets on the letter itself. My client’s, Lady Wanda, a teacher at the Academy, and one other. If my opponent persists, I will ask that his client submit to a fingerprint test, or failing that, merely call the local police and have the prints from his previous criminal record be used to verify them.”

The judge gave a small smile. “Well, Mr. Dalhgren? I will sustain your objection if your client voluntarily comes forward to subject himself for that request.”

Dalghren shook his head. "Objection overruled. Proceed."

"Now for the record, please give the provenance for this letter."

"When I first arrived at the Academy, I was allowed to send letters home with the provision that all such letters would be read both ingoing and outgoing, which is a common practice in any penal system. Madam Sofia made copies of my outgoing letters with the request that I keep all original replies. The first three were sent by my mother, and copies are on the table before my council. The last, which I did not reply to, was this one." I held it up.

"You refused to answer, why?"

"I couldn't think of any good that would come of replying, your honor."

"Please read it." I nodded.

"James,

"I don't know why you continue to bother us. You had a family and all the necessary things but you never were a man in my eyes. You were a disgusting little worm that expected everything and gave nothing in return. You ran away because I as a loving parent took the money you made from work, and the money you stole to pay for your own upkeep, and lost two jobs, one I had procured for you because of your own laziness. I for one am sick of dealing with you. They should have taken the afterbirth home instead of you; at least they would have given you something of worth.

"Do not bother writing again. Since your mother became pregnant with a real child of ours I have been the

one to collect the mail from the box. Any of your whining requests will be thrown away unopened. May you go to hell and leave us alone."

I stopped reading the scathing letter my stepfather had written denying my worth. It hurt as much now as when I had first seen it. I felt a lump in my chest and wanted to cry again

"The witness will resume the stand when we return. Miss Nolan, please take the transcript and have it copied for our friends from Texas. The court will recess for half an hour."

Madam Sofia and I sat with Moe waiting. Finally the judge came back with the court recorder, holding the typed pages. He held up one copy, setting it on his desk as he held the other out to his bailiff, who handed it to the lawyer. "Are there any further questions, Mr. Benquist?" Matthew shook his head. "And you, Mr Dalghren?"

"My client demands that all recipes created before her incarceration-" he paused as he realized he had called me 'her' but he forged on, "-are still legally the property of his family, as are all monies gained from them, as his father is the original creator of them."

"This is easy to deal with. Jessica?"

"Your honor, every recipe and their preparation were created since I came to the Academy."

"Sure." Dalghren saw at least some recompense. "May I ask the court to have the witness prove that?"

I sighed, then took a folded bill from my coat pocket. "Matthew, you were right." He stood walked over, and accepted the bill.

The judge smiled. "The record will show that the witness has asked her lawyer to represent her once again. Mr. Benquist?"

"Your honor, we both know what our learned opponent will try next. He will file an injunction ordering Bliss Specialty Foods to cease production until this matter is settled. We also know what he plans beyond that.

A business cannot survive if it cannot produce, and any business will fail in that case. All my opponent needs to do is merely ask for postponement after postponement. What he plans is that eventually my clients will be forced to settle out of court, giving him what he could not win in court. Having spoken with the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Financial Officer of the company, and the Loan officer at the Savings and loan, I can state for the record that we will not allow this to occur."

"And are they all here to state that for the record, council?" Dahlgren snarled.

Matthew smiled. "Will you fetch Homer, please?" The bailiff walked to the door, and returned with Homer. "Now will the CEO of the company rise?" Moe stood, glaring at the enemy lawyer. "And the CFO?" I stood in the witness stand. "Does my opponent wish it verbal? Or is this enough?"

I raised my hand, and the judge nodded to me. "Sir, we anticipated this, or rather my lawyer did. I will not give you a penny to stop this."

"Damn right." Homer snarled.

"At the request of my client, and with the assistance of local computer experts, we have been able to check the computer used by my client in her search for reci-

pes for her class at the Academy. That list of sites visited when she had logged in is here." Matthew held up a large folder.

"I have a deposition signed by James' Paternal Grandfather regarding his son's excellence as a cook, and to his photographic memory which would mean he never wrote them down. I have another from the mother of my opponent's client who swears that if he tried to boil water he would fail. There is more to her deposition, including her son's comments regarding what he would do if no recipe book existed.

"We also have depositions from almost thirty people from James' home town. Of them all, only one person ever accused James of being a thief; your client. A Mrs. Wagner reported the assault your client carried out, accusing him also of extortion. The manager of the Food-Rite store where he worked told of your client telling him James was incompetent to handle his own money, and again accusing him of both theft and extortion.

"The principal of the last school James attended there reported his conversation between your client and himself. He also reported that if James had waited a single week your client would have been investigated by Social services. Further, Hernando Lopez, the Custodian reported that he saved James' gear from being destroyed, and left money for him to allow his escape from your client's 'loving embrace'."

Matthew tapped the folder with his fingers thoughtfully. "What this record will show is an honest boy pressed beyond endurance by an abusive parent escaped that custody.

"In the event such a motion is filed anywhere in the country, these transcripts and the additional informa-

tion will be forward to them. I will also use these in filing a lawsuit claiming that the state in question is actively assisting in a harassing law suit by a ambulance chasing lawyer merely because the client is outside of their usual legal jurisdiction. I will assure that suit is widely publicized and this transcript will be part of that publicity along with copies of the letter, and the verification of it." He looked at me. "That is with the agreement of my client. He is not in any way discommoded by being dressed as a woman, and revealing that would in no way affect the outcome beyond making the State of Texas at present look foolish in the present case.

"That suit will hold you, your client and the State of Texas liable, and will be filed not here, but in Nevada, where I also am allowed to practice. I will merely replace the name of the state with which ever one does file the injunction."

"Your honor, the State of Texas holds our restraining order vacated at this time." Carstairs said. She glared at Dalghren. "As for you I'll see you disbarred, and if I had my way, horsewhipped!"

"So ordered." The judge looked benignly at Dalghren. "Now listen up. We will deliver this transcript to the court in Texas, along with my last order. You will also tell them from me that I will grant the emancipation request within 14 days. If they have a reason to deny it beyond the sad attempt of a faithless adult trying to steal from a child he denied, I for one, want to hear it.

"Since the court of Texas has removed their bar, the order of this court will be given as stated previously." The judge leaned forward with a smile a great white

shark would have been envious of. "The ball is in your court, councilor.

"Court is adjourned."

Two weeks later, by order of the court, I was declared emancipated. Homer brought me into his office where Moe, Matthew the Judge and Madam Sofia waited. As someone now legally allowed to sign a contract, I signed beside Moe's signature, and Homer opened a bottle of champagne. I asked if that was legal, after all it could be construed as contributing to the delinquency of a minor. But the judge pointed out that it was legal to give a child some small amount of alcohol as long as the reasoning was not in and of itself illegal. But after all I was legally an adult since my emancipation.

I was no longer legally a child.

I was a free person.

June Expansion

With my emancipation I saw the business take off like a homesick angel. While I had been excused from all classes except for my advanced accounting class, I did spend time working with John in making cheese, from the milking to the final product.

John Logan, as were all of the men working there, was once a student. During his time as a student he had learned how to make cheese and butter as a personal interest. He especially liked not normal cheeses made from cow's milk, but rather the soft cheeses made from sheep's milk. Between us we had come up

with cheese balls such as are made for the winter holidays using sheep cheese instead, and our first attempt to sell them, having Moe give free samples had caused them to be added to our production line within days. This I decided had to be divided between John and us, but John had merely asked for us to pay him for his service manufacturing the cheese itself, which was also added to our product line, though he did mention that a small herd of goats would not be considered amiss.

I had become a fixture at the Savings and loan. Maggie and Shannon Styles were fun to be with, though when they discussed their love lives, I felt out of touch. I have heard the locker room banter and let me tell you, women get more down and dirty than we ever did in those long ago classes. Out of deference to me my own love life was out of bounds.

The customers needing access to the vault for their safe deposit boxes soon were greeting me by name, and a number of them knew where I went to school. Most were indifferent to that fact, though all were supportive. Or should I say, most were.

Desiree's father Samuel Cabot was one customer, and when he found that I had been assigned, he would leave in a huff, stating usually at the top of his lungs, that no 'faggot' would touch his key until I had an AIDs test. The first time he did so I was so stunned that Homer told the other clients that no more safe deposit boxes would be pulled that day.

However the others waiting came down firmly on my side, and old lady Berwick, who had been a customer longer than I had been alive spoke for all of them when they told Cabot to 'find a homophobic bank' and to go away. Instead, he just began to come on a week-day when he knew I would not be doing that job.

The Attack

One Friday I was leaving early. Moe had wanted me to come by the production facility, as I had yet to even see it. He was going to drive me out, walk me through the plant, and discuss expanding into another building to be built beside it. I decided to wear my favorite black suit for the occasion.

I picked up my purse, checking my watch. It was right after noon and he would be there in just a few moments. I waved to Maggie and stepped outside into the wan sunlight, standing on the curb patiently.

“Are you Jessica?” I turned to the speaker. He was a young man perhaps early twenties. His silent friend was of the same age.

“Yes. May I help-” My reply was stopped when he punched me in the stomach. I started to collapse, but they caught my arms, dragging me into the parking structure. They dragged me into a dark corner where the friend grabbed my arm, slamming it up with brutal force between my shoulder blades.

The one that had struck me grabbed my chin, forcing me against the pain onto my toes. “This is for my brother David.” He kicked me in the crotch, and I screamed as only the grip on my arm held me on my feet. He slapped me back hand and forehand, and I could taste blood as the one holding my arm forced me to my knees.

I heard a zipper, and my assailant grabbed my hair, pulling me up forcibly even with the penis he displayed. “Now you’re going to suck me off like a good little whore. Like you made David do in that pervert home you live in. If you do a good job, maybe Bobby

Lee will fuck you like one." He prodded my face, but I refused to open my mouth. "Open up, bitch, or I'll knock your fucking teeth out!"



Even with him almost ripping out my hair and the arm I was now sure had been dislocated, I merely glared at him. He grinned, then I felt my nose break as he punched me. I knew the shoulder was dislocated now, the twisting sent agony running through my body as only that grip kept me from collapsing further. I screamed.

I felt him shove into my mouth and his accusations connected, David must have been Desiree. I remembered her pleas of 'Please no, Tommy' and realized that this must be Tommy.

I bit down like it was a hot dog.

He screamed, thumbs jamming into my jaw as he shouted for me to let go. His partner tightened his grip which sent fresh agony through my shoulder, and Tommy pulled away, then began pounding on my head as I screamed again. If this continued, he'd rip the arm off and be able to beat me over the head with it.

He paused as we heard sirens. "I have friends, and we know where you live and work, bitch." He dragged my head up until I was looking into his eyes again. There were three of him. I considered it wasn't fair when there were already two abusing me. "One word to the cops, and you're dead meat." He nodded to his friend, and I was thrown on my face as they started to walk away, intending to leave me in my agony. They suddenly stopped walking when I heard a sound that threw me back in time

It was the last good memory I had of my father. I was ten, and he was going to buy a shotgun because of a rash of walk in burglaries. He has wanted to buy a double barrel but the salesman had taken down a pump shotgun. "Charlie, look at this, Winchester 1897 trench gun in 12 gauge. "What you have with a burglar

is someone who wants to get in, get the money and get out. He's not there to fight, though this new guy might be that crazy. If he's crazy one load of double ought from this will send him to Jesus. And if he isn't crazy," he jacked the pump, making that sound anyone who has ever seen a movie remembers, "this will convince him to either rabbit or stand very quiet and thank the nice police man for his new bracelets."

They laughed and dad bought the gun. Two months later he was blindsided by a pick up truck and less than a week later, he died.

"Homer?" The voice brought me back to the present. "What are you doing with that scatter gun?"

"I am making sure two rapists don't walk out of the parking structure." Homer's voice came out as cold as the winter wind. "So you just stand there patient like."

"I really have things to do, old man. As for the bitch--"

"You kick her and I'm going to take your leg off at the hip. From here I can make both your abortions retroactive with one shell." The last was almost shouted as the siren came screaming into the structure followed by squealing tires. But there was another one coming closer from behind me.

"Hey, Dietrich! That old bastard's threatening to kill us! What do we have to do to get some justice here?"

"I don't know." A deep voice replied calmly. "Swallow glass shards? I wouldn't think about bolting, Bobby Lee Hewitt. Old man Saunders shot expert with that very gun during the Nam." The other siren came wailing in then stopped. A door slammed, and footsteps came from behind. "Ramsey, you take Bobby Lee over there, cuff him and search him. As for you

Tommy, kneel down, hands behind your head, ankles crossed.”

“Hey Deit, the whore propositioned us then said she’d scream rape if we didn’t fork over two bills. When I said no, she tried to bite it off! Ask Bobby Lee!”

“Only people I like get to call me Deit. As for that lie, Bobby Lee would agree with you if you said the desert had too much water, we both know that. So you do as I say or Homer will blow a hole through you big enough to read a newspaper.”

I heard someone walk toward me. I was back at the diner, the big officer was coming toward me-

I felt a gentle hand touch my shoulder, and I groaned. “Shit that’s dislocated, girl. Sorry, give me a moment.” The hand moved, then I felt him turn me over, blood ran into my throat and I choked, coughing. But he lifted until I was reclined with an arm across my back as another hand touched my chin.

“He sure did a number on you, girl.”

I opened my eyes. Funny, I didn’t know Deputy Dietrich had a twin brother, yet they were both looking down at me.

“Deputy Dietrich?”

“Hush child, there’s an ambulance on the way. And as I said, people I like call me Deit.”

The paramedics strapped the arm against my body until they could check the damage, and I was loaded onto a gurney angled up enough that I wouldn’t choke. One paramedic sat in the back with me as the driver peeled off down the main road. I had never been to the local hospital, but it was well appointed albeit small. A pair of nurses started to cut me out of the suit, but I

begged them to help me get out of it. I willing to let them shred the blouse, I'd bled all over the peach silk and I knew the blood would never come out, while the jacket would be all right with dry cleaning.

Rescue

I kept fading in and out. I remember arriving, and arguing about my clothes, then suddenly I was in a chair and an x-ray machine was taking a picture of my head. I was in a hospital gown, had they shredded my suit? I loved that suit! One of the techs said something, then I was suddenly in a CAT scan machine with a tube in my throat to allow me to breath. Then again like a film break I was in a gurney with a bag of IV fluids running into my arm. It was like watching a movie of an accident instead of the real thing.

Four nurses lifted me into a bed then removed the tube, and then suddenly I was alone. The lights had been turned off, and I could see the desert outside the window. It was already dark. How much time had passed? I was supposed to see Moe and go to the plant wasn't I? I tried to get up but the strapped arm screamed in agony. I felt so tired, and I was thinking of trying to find the call button when I faded out yet again. It was starting to become annoying.

I felt two sharp heated awls slam into my eyes and I started to scream when a hand slapped over my mouth. I was looking at some man I had never seen before, and he glared at me. "Shut the fuck up!" He snarled. He was in hospital scrubs, with a syringe in his hand. "I'm only giving you your pain meds." He bent over my arm.

Somehow I knew he was lying. Maybe because they always put meds in the IV instead of your arm these days. My left arm was immobilized by the strapping, and the right by the board they use when they put in an IV. I yanked the boarded arm, feeling the needle rip out as I threw it across my body. I felt the small nurse call button by luck more than anything else, and was able to push it before the man slammed me down on my back again. I felt the pillow ripped from beneath my head, then it was pressed against my face. I panicked, but neither arm would respond. I remembered the movie *Little Caesar* when Edward G Robinson says, 'is this the end of Rico?'

I didn't know if it was, but it was the end of me. I could picture dad waiting at the pearly gates. Would he recognize his son in three inch heels and a woman's business suit?

Suddenly there was the sound of something hitting a wall, hard, the pillow was gone, and a huge black man was standing over me. He looked like Dick Butkus done in 90% cacao chocolate. Someone you wouldn't want to meet on a bright thoroughfare, let alone a dark alley. The other man was crumpled against the wall

"Don't worry." The voice didn't fit. He sounded like someone who picked up birds with broken wings and took in stray kittens. He picked up the phone by the bed and dialed a number with one hand, then held it against his shoulder as he gently reinserted the IV while keeping a thumb down over the spurting vein in the other arm. "Yeah, security, someone tried to murder the patient in 402.

"How did I know? Maybe it's someone I don't know running around in scrubs with a bare syringe that gave me the clue." He looked at me. "I was coming

to check her like the chart says. I'll be here." He sounded like Sidney Poitier.

He hung up, taking a light from his pocket, putting it between his lips as he pulled out a gauze compress which he taped over the puncture in the vein while he held the thumb on it. "Now Miss Connors I'm going to check your pupils. The light might hurt or make you feel sick, but I have a bucket to catch it if it does."

"Sid...ney." I whispered.

"Sidney? That's new. Here it comes."

The light did hurt, but he only showed it in my eyes for a few seconds. He was right about the nausea too, but his hands held me as gentle as a father until I stopped. "Both pupils responsive." He made a notation. "Why did you say Sidney?"

"Sidney Poitier. Your voice, you sound like him."

He snorted. "At least you let me talk before you said the first thing to come to mind." He set down the pen. "How many fingers."

"Twelve."

He looked confused. "Twelve?"

"Out where your face is, there's only one face, but I have three hands with four fingers each closer in." He nodded making a notation. "What do people usually call you?"

"Well you have to figure that working as a trauma room nurse like I do normally, most people I see have been through hell. The first thing they see sometimes is this huge black monster and they invoke the name of our savior or call upon the Deity in prayer."

I pondered as he fluffed up the pillow. A pair of security guards came, dragging my assailant away. "So they say what, Dear God?"

"Or Jesus Christ." I nodded. He went on. "Now I know they have done it for the first nine hours, but you haven't responded verbally before. What is your name?"

"Jessica Connors."

"No, your real name."

"James Connors."

"Good. Now what do you remember?"

I remembered a screaming voice and pummeling fists. I tried to sit up but whether you realize it or not, every muscle is interconnected. I keened in agony as my neck muscles transmitted to the shoulders, and my left shoulder sent back, 'like hell I will!'

"Ease down, it's not important. Let's go from something less painful. What day is it?"

"Friday? Saturday?"

"Good enough. It's about two in the morning of Sunday. You've been in and out for over thirty-six hours. They were worried about brain damage or a coma."

"Am I better?"

"I am but a humble trauma nurse." He said it lightly, but there was an undertone of sadness. "I'd say you might be better, but what do I know?"

"You seem competent. Gauze and tape in your pockets for an emergency."

"Well first I was a boy scout, then a tour as a green beret medic will give you delusions of competence."

He answered. "I may be able to dig out a bullet or take out a tooth, do an appendectomy with a doctor on the radio, or set a leg but that doesn't make me proper material for a med school." He snorted. "The Montgomery GI bill may put away 2 for one for every dollar you do, but try helping your mama raise seven younger brothers and sisters. By the end of the month I could put away maybe sixty dollars when a decent med school costs almost fifty a day for lab and text books alone." He clicked his pen.

"No major damage I can detect. In about an hour someone will wake you again to check."

Please, what is your name?"

"Hiram Wheeling." He answered, "why?"

"Is there someone who can take dictation or shorthand? And a notary public?"

"Why?"

I motioned toward where the man had lay. "He may be only the first. I want to make a statement before the next one comes along."

"I'll check."

The Deposition

There wasn't anyone in the hospital, but calling the Sheriff's office got of all people Miss Nolan who arrived looking like her teenage sister without make up in jeans. Maggie from the savings and loan showed up as the notary, and almost broke my dislocated shoulder when she hugged me.

Slowly, I went through the attack from when I had been asked my name until Diet told me I could call him

by his nickname. I was having problems remembering names. I called Ramsey Sammie for some reason, and called Homer Homer Simpson. But when showed their pictures, I could tell Ramsey, Homer and Deit from my two attackers.

Miss Nolan typed it up efficiently, and I asked Hiram to witness as I signed.

“There.” I leaned back, relaxing for the first time since I had come to my senses. “Hiram, can I get some pain medication? My head is killing me”

He made a notation. “I’ll check with the doctor on call-”

“Hiram, you were one of the best. The Green Beanies! I’d trust you with my life.”

He smiled, making a notation. He brought out a bottle and handed me a pill. “Percodan. It’s a light-weight as pain meds go, but it will help you sleep.”

“What are you carrying it for?”

“My own meds. My leg never stopped hurting after my tour in Iraq.” He handed me a cup and I washed it down.

Maggie touched my uninjured shoulder, and Miss Nolan nodded fiercely at me. “Put the bastard away.”

Recovery

It took a long time to come back to health. They had reduced the dislocation, but my arm was weak for months afterward. The muscles had been torn badly and I would spend months with it strapped to my side or in a sling. The doctor was hopeful that I would recover, at least around me, but Hiram wasn’t so sure.

Blinding headaches as bad as any migraine had me whimpering many an evening, and my doctor refused to use any addictive pain killers for fear of having to wean me from them afterward.

It was only afterward that I found out what had happened. Tommy Cabot was charged with aggravated assault, attempted rape, and threatening murder. All except for the threat caught on video tape, Homer had heard the last. His assistant had only been charged as an accessory to the fact and for dislocating my arm, but even that would get him twenty years minimum.

Attempts to have the charges dropped fell on deaf ears, and only a change of venue transferring the case to Taos seemed to help them. Mr. Cabot's lawyer made one attempt to have me drop the charges by offering me two million dollars, but through my own lawyer, Matthew, they were told that I had already made a statement and had refused to retract it.

Cabot was pretty rich, and he retaliated. He was able to get the dairy farmer that had us boarding his cows to remove them, and almost all of the boarded horses went with them. Thugs from his construction sites would dog our trucks and the Academy's cars, and taunting men would shout obscenities at anyone who bought our products.

But while the town was named Bliss, it should have been named Valhalla. When the health department came out because of a rumor that one of our girls had AIDs, The same Mrs. Berwick who had championed my defense at the savings and loan stormed over from Moe's where she'd been having lunch to demand that they test her too. When one of the medics sent reminded her gently that you needed sexual contact to contract AIDs she replied, "Well hell, boy, if these girls

can catch it from a rumor, I don't want to catch it the same way!"

When every patron who was already there, and everyone who arrived as it was happening all lined up, the Health department withdrew. Attempts to block our products caused our online and mail order sales to skyrocket. We were the biggest story in the state, and it would only get worse.

Entourage

I left the hospital in a wheel chair, able to walk, but that was painful. I returned to the Academy in an entourage. That is the only description I could come up with, except maybe parade. When I rolled out the door to the Academy car half a dozen cars from Moe's old beater to two Sheriff's department cars were with it. The savings and loan was closed for the day so all of them could escort me home. I think I looked different from before. Tommy's punch had smashed my nose so badly they literally had to rebuild it. Everyone kept telling me it looked the same, but I never believed them, so I have this petite honker now.

Bail was finally set at a staggering 4 million dollars, which Cabot posted. Bobby Lee's was almost a million which his family couldn't raise. Tommy spent perhaps three week strutting around town boasting about how he'd 'shown me', then suddenly vanished. Without that support, Bobby Lee confessed and went to prison for fifteen years. He was murdered two years later by a fellow convict.

I knew, as did any who knew her that Madam Sofia's 'friends' had arranged it all. Proving it would be almost impossible.

I followed Spider Robinson's advice. Moe and I funded Hiram's trip to med school on the provision that he treat those of the Academy in perpetuity. A perfect way to spend money and have it deducted from your taxes every year, and especially to pay back someone who had saved your life and never lied about how bad it was.

November Consumation

Ever since my injury Madam Sofia had again allowed Anna and I to sleep together again. Summer fled past, the days scorching hot, the nights warm and balmy. One night two days after my birthday, I found myself spooned against Anna's buttocks. My cock was hard, and I could feel her breathing deepen as I slid between her cheeks. I froze, my arms around her, my hands filled with her breasts.

"Jessica." She whispered. She was still asleep, but I could feel her arching into my hands and cock. "Please, love me." She burrowed against me, her hands reaching back, touching my hips, her own rolling as if we were already consummating the act. "Please, fuck me."

"Anna." I whispered.

She froze, and I could almost see her eyes open in shock. She rolled over, and I felt her nudging me down there. Her hand encircled me, and I gasped. She leaned forward, and she kissed me gently. "Jessica," her hand moved smoothly on me. "Please."

She leaned in, and her kiss was more forceful. My own hand slid down, and she sighed as I gripped her firmly. I duplicated her own movements, our hands driving us forward in desire. "Anna."

“Please.” She whispered again. Her hand moving more forcefully. I moaned as her lips dropped to my neck, suckling gently. Her other hand dropped to my ass, a finger running gently around my rosette, then I almost screamed as I came. My own hand moved frantically on her shaft, the other hand duplicating her own actions. A finger entered her, and she sighed in pleasure as she moved back into my hand. “More.” She pleaded. I added a second finger, and she moved against them, fucking herself with my fingers. “More!”

I inserted a third, and she whimpered, then her own seed joined mine. She shuddered, holding me, as she came. Her eyes fluttered, and she sighed, molding herself to me. “Thank you.” She whispered. She lifted her face, then kissed me gently. Her hand came up, slick with my juices, then watching my face she began to lick her fingers. “So delicious.” She whispered.

She kissed me, her tongue probing my mouth. I tasted sperm, not only sperm, but my own. We pulled apart, and she took my hand up, looking me in the eyes as she licked her own from my hand. The feeling was so erotic; her eyes locked on mine as she licked my hand clean. Then she kissed me again. Her own sperm was sweeter somehow, and I found myself licking her mouth with my tongue, seeking more of that sweet taste.

We were both gasping as I moved back, eyes meeting. “Anna...”

“Hush.” She kissed me again, gently, lovingly. “Sleep my love. Happy birthday”

She curled up against me as we fell asleep again.

December Another Wager Won

The nights grew cooler, and Anna and I snuggled closer. It was cold enough to need a single blanket and we sometimes kicked it off when we began to play with each other. One evening we were bundled together, giggling when there was a tentative knock on the door.

We stopped, and Anna called, "Yes?"

The door opened, and Tiffany stood there. She looked a bit lost, and I sat up. "What is it, Tiffany?"

Instead of replying she walked over, and threw herself into my arms. I held her confused, seeing a look dawning in Anna's eyes. She shrugged, then both of us were hugging the girl.

She was sniffing against my chest, and I could barely make out a word in three. "Wanted you to come... Never even paid attention... So horny..." I lifted her face. "Elspeth told me it was common to place bets on when the pinks... you know."

"Yes I know about it." I told her.

"But did you know one bet was that we'd get together?"

"Yes."

"And you never even thought to ask me if I was..." She shrugged.

"I wasn't willing until last month, and I wouldn't have wanted to force you to do anything."

She looked at Anna. "Would you mind?"

"May I join in?" Anna asked.

“You mean... both of you?” Anna nodded. “Well, damn!”

I found out later that Anna had jokingly bet in the pool that we’d have a threesome with Tiffany, never anticipating that it would happen. We all got sick eating the desserts she had won for a six month period. I told her that once she got out, she should get a job in Vegas as a bookmaker.

April 2004 A New Home

Moe came to see me at the Academy, and I was happy to see him. It wasn’t like I didn’t see him as often as once a week, but we were celebrating.

He arrived in a new car with magnums of champagne, and the school took the day off except for necessary cleaning animal tending and cooking.

To great rejoicing Moe held the loan document we had paid off so early, and I lit it. We burned it in the fireplace of the ball room, and a lot of our supporters from town were there to celebrate with us.

“There’s one last thing everyone.” Moe told the crowd. Then he handed me a key.

“Very nice.” I joked. “But I don’t have a thing to wear that goes with it.”

He smiled softly, wrapping his arm around me gently. My shoulder had never really come back from the injury. “Madam Sofia and I looked at what’s going to happen on next Monday, and figured you needed something special to commemorate it.”

“Special?” I racked my brain. I knew John was going to start processing goat cheese and milk in quantity by then, but what did he mean?

Madam Sofia stood, walking over. “Turn around please, Jessica.”

I did so, and she unlocked my choker. I felt it being replaced, with a blue one!

“I’ve talked to the Judge, and he agreed. Your sentence is considered up on this next Monday. Until then, you will wear this choker instead.”

“Up?” I turned to look at her. “You mean...”

“Thanks to the good things you have done not only with yourself but every one of our students that you have helped to learn a worth while trade, your remaining sentence has been commuted.” She hugged me. “On Monday morning, you’re free to go.”

I stared at her, stunned.

“And we kinda hoped you’d stay in town.” Moe told me. “So we found you a present, though someone else actually bought it.”

“We?” I asked.

“Madam Sofia, myself, the workers. Hell.” He laughed. “The town council and every patron of our products in the state did.” He tapped the key. “That’s your new home.”

Home? Madam Sofia ushered me out of the building, and we drove across town to Moe’s diner. It had been replaced by a sleek modern building in the last year, but those train cars I remembered from before was still the main entrance. Behind it was the production facility with five trucks now. I had seen all of that finally after getting out of the hospital.

But we took the small road beside it. A mile down it was a small cottage on a half section of land with a small grove of cedar. Madam Sofia parked, and we sat staring as the engine cooled.

"Come, Jessica."

"I'm afraid, Madam, Sofia."

"Why?"

I plucked at the blouse I wore, the skirt. "I don't know if I can leave. If I could think of a way to have my sentence extended--"

"Stop right there." She turned. "Jessica, as I found out all those years ago, there is no walls that can contain you if you dream and strive for it. You know that from your own work, and the business you created. The only prison you can never escape is here." She tapped my head softly.

"You dreamed of making good food. At first just to prove you could do it. But when Moe offered you the chance to prove it to someone other than your teachers you leaped at that chance. When you could have kept it small, instead you asked those around you to help, and paid them for their services.

"Some of the girls that helped you were according to Lady Charlotte some of our worst cooks. But they learned how to make your recipes, and have been trying to expand from there. Where do you think that line of breads came from?"

Tiffany who had just been promoted to yellow had been teasing one of the new pinks, Martina, about her bread the first time she tried to make it. She had quoted a line from another of Elizabeth Moons books; "You don't make good bread by making it once, You make good bread by making a lot of bread."

Now after almost a year, Martina's breads had joined our production line.

I climbed from the car, and both Sofia and I walked up to where Moe and Homer stood waiting. The cottage was small, large enough for a family of three or four with a good sized kitchen and dining room, a cozy living room and two bedrooms.

I walked through it, then returned to the living room where I sat on the couch. "How much is this going to set me back, Homer?" I asked.

He looked confused, then shook his head. "We wanted to buy something for you, but someone else beat us to it. Remember when you delivered the letter to Madam Sofia last year? From the old student?"

"Of course I do."

"We told you only the first codicil of the will affected you, but we were wrong." He handed me a photostatted copy of the old will, and I looked at it.

"I had hoped that more of our alumni would stay nearby, but of all of them only Father Damian and I continue to live in this small town. I so miss having our number sit around to talk as friends will, so I leave this as my final bequest; the home I made my own after I left the Academy. Compared to the family properties dealt with before, it is small, but unlike that rambling estate here is where I was able to be myself and learn to enjoy life.

"To the next one of my local sisters who decides to make her home in this town, I leave this house, all of the furniture and my car, which has languished unused, as I never got a new driver's license.

“To that sister, fill this home with your own self. Become a new person as I did, and I hope you spend the rest of your life in quiet contemplation of the wonders we both shared in our own times at the Academy.”

“If you stay, it’s all yours.” Homer said. He stopped because I was crying, the paper hanging from my hand.

Proposal

We returned to the Academy, but I couldn’t find Anna anywhere in the buildings. I searched the grounds, finding her near the fence, gazing longingly out into the desert beyond.

“Anna-”

“Come to say goodbye?” She asked lightly.

I walked up to her, then put my arm around her waist. “No, I was wondering if you have any plans Sunday afternoon.”

“Of course I do.” She replied sharply. “I am going to do some knitting, maybe have dinner and watch TV.”

“I was wondering if you would attend the wedding instead.”

She looked at me as if I had grown two heads. “What wedding?”

“Ours.”

She turned, looking at me as if I wasn’t leaving except to go to the asylum where Desiree was housed. “You are out of your tiny little mind.”

"I am serious." I touched her face gently. "Will you do me the honor of marrying me, Anna?"

"But I have years before I'm free." She looked away, then back, tears in her eyes. "We'll never get a chance to spend time together except for visiting on occasion." She turned, holding herself as if it were midwinter. "Jessica, no, James. You will meet someone else before too long. You can forget the half-woman you spent time with while you were in prison, and live a long and fruitful life without her."

I hugged her from behind. "If you refuse, I will marry no other."

She turned, and we hugged in the gathering twilight.

Man and wife

We had a flurry of activity as Sunday approached. For the first time in a long time I was dressed in men's clothing, a Tuxedo rented for the occasion. Tiffany had been caught between being best man and maid of honor and we said to hell with it. She stood beside me as Best man in her ball gown in the small chapel of Father Damian's church. We had a full crowd, because word had been spread through town. Four deputies, all of whom I had met and considered friends were among them. The workers that had not been to the Academy, the friends from the savings and loan, Matthew, other men that had come to the dances, even old lady Berwick who, when asked if she would be our matron of honor, tittered like a schoolgirl and agreed.

The wedding march began, and my breath caught as Homer escorted Anna up the aisle. She was a vision in white silk and satin, veil hanging down to cover her

face. It had been frantically made by our fellow students, and looked marvelous.

I took her hand, and we turned to Father Damian, who made us man and wife. Our kiss was chaste, but I gave her a little half smile, both of our eyes telling the other that it would be the last innocent kiss for a long time.

The reception was at Moe's, and it was so large that I was worried about overcrowding. I asked Moe and he said the Fire Marshall had told him if we did something like this again, we'd have to put tables outside. He had passed this on when he and his family joined the celebration sitting not far from the head table.

I saw the pictures afterward, and wonder what everyone thought that day. The groom with hair reaching his waist dancing with the bride who was four inches taller before the heels so it looked like her younger brother was dancing with her.

We went to the room that had been set aside for us. I tried to pick her up and carry her across the threshold, but my left arm had never come completely back from the beating Tommy and Bobby Lee had given me. Anna laughed, dropping and throwing me over her shoulder, and carried me into the room amid the laughter of our sisters.

She set me down and we stood, lazily kissing. "There's something I want to do, my love." She whispered against my lips.

"What?"

"No one has ever been... back there. Will you make love to me?"

"Isn't that against the rules?"

“I don’t think Madam Sofia would complain.”

I nodded. She was a beauty, and she was all mine. I ran my nails up her back and she arched, breasts pressing against my chin. I leaned forward, and she sighed, holding me to her nipple.



I pulled back. "I'll have you know that I am a virgin too... Just not very good at it." She recognized the line from the movie *Hot Shots*, giggling as I helped her out of the gown. Her lingerie was all white satin, and she watched my eyes as I looked at all I had won. I leaned forward, and she moaned as I licked her nipples through the bra.

"Please, Jessica, James, whoever you are please my love, love me." I lowered her to the bed, then I peeled off her panties and bra, leaving the garter belt and hose on. Then I removed her shoes. "I don't want you accidentally wounding me." I teased, then I dropped, my mouth enfolding her hardness. She clutched my hair, frantically filling my mouth with her member as my fingers ran over her bottom, then centered on that one special spot.

"Please no more teasing. Get up here and make me your woman."

I climbed up, holding myself with my right arm as she reached for the light stand. There was a tube of KY jelly, and she smirked at me. "I told you Madam Sofia wouldn't complain." She squeezed out a generous portion, running her hand up and down my length, then took my left hand and lubricated my fingers.

I slid one in, and she sighed, lifting against it. "Two." She demanded and I obliged. She waited a moment, then demanded three. Finally she pulled my hand away, taking my member in her hand, aiming it. I slid forward, and popped in with almost no effort. She caught my arms, begging me to wait. "I want to revel in it, my love. Someone I love making me a woman."

We stayed there like a pair of living breathing statues. Then she slid upward, taking me all the way in. "Now fuck me, fill me with your meat, come inside me."

Love me!" We moved against each other, her hips circling, legs wrapped around me, hands running over my back, then clawing as I felt her orgasm. She kept moving, looking into my eyes, then she moved more demandingly.

"Come inside me, please!" She stiffened as I came, then her hands ran down my back lovingly as she pulled me down. "Oh, finally. Finally."

Free

The next morning breakfast was somber. Anna and I went to the dining hall as if it were a usual day for us, except that my hair had been cut to shoulder length, and I was dressed in men's clothing. Neither of us was even remotely hungry. We spent the meal clutching hands, wishing I wasn't going. The next day she would still be here, and I would be living in the cottage. Neither of us liked the idea of being separated.

I was told the car was ready, and couldn't bring myself to stand. I looked longingly into Anna's eyes, and saw the glistening tears there.

"James." I realized someone was calling me. It had been so long since someone called me by that name. I turned, and Madam Sofia was standing there. "Stand up, please, James."

She had me turn, and I felt the choker I had worn for so long removed. I rubbed my throat, looking at Madam Sofia, then at Anna. "Madam Sofia, please--"

"Life is learning when to move on, James. Anna?"

"Yes, Madam Sofia?"

"Stand and turn around."

“Madam?”

“Stand and turn around.” She did so.

Madam Sofia walked over, and lifted her hands to Anna’s neck. I heard a click, and she pulled away Anna’s choker. “Time to go, James. That goes for you as well, Anna.”

Anna turned to face her, rubbing her neck as I had. “As I said to your husband, life is moving on, my child. Judge Loman is commuting your remaining sentence as a wedding present. He wishes you both to be happy from now on.” Madam Sofia touched our shoulders, pulling us closer to each other. “Slowly, my children. Learn to love each other, and slowly grow to be happy.” She stood away from us. “Your car awaits.”

“But my clothes!”

“Already packed.” Madam Sofia said with a smile. “Now both of you run along, I have much to do.”

We walked hand in hand to the entry, and paused, looking down the steps to the limo where Thaddeus opened the rear door.

“I’m scared.” Anna whispered. “I don’t want to leave.”

“I know.” I replied. “But we can always visit.”

“Promise?” I nodded.

We walked down the steps, climbed into the limo, and left the Academy, prisoners no more.

2011 Epilog

Business was booming, and so much had happened in our lives since we left the Academy free.

Three months after we left, Samuel Cabot died, an apparent suicide. I call it that because no one knew he'd bought a pistol, and there was the remains of a VHS tape burned beyond recovery in his fireplace. I remembered the tape of Bridgett. I can picture some non-descript man, holding Cabot at gunpoint as he was forced to watch a tape of Tommy's introduction to that world, then putting the gun to Cabot's head and pulling the trigger. But I could never even begin to prove it.

With Cabot no longer forcing the situation, our old friends returned their animals to the Academy's care. David Cabot is still taken care of thanks to us. With no heirs remaining his father's businesses were sold off.

I celebrated my birthday with friends and family every year from then on. Sara and Matilda, who were now living together in town were there along with those both old and new friends from my time in the Academy, as was my new grandmother Victoria. Moe had closed the diner for that night, and we had our thanksgiving feast a week early. The prayer, led by Father Damian was answered with a heartfelt amen by one and all.

Matilda had missed her lover, and returned to Bliss not long after we left the Academy. One of her own quiches had been added to our repertoire and she became our head chef at the production facility and before long our twenty odd employees included a dozen of our alumni, our products were made not only with

love, but also by the very people that had helped me start it all. There are almost fifty now.

Five years ago Angela, or should I say Walter Carruthers came to visit with Frieda who had also been a student, leaving six months before I had arrived. They lived in Colorado Springs, and wanted Moe and I to go into partnership. Frieda was well versed in the cooking of her German grandmothers, and had already made a name for herself with a Gasthaus serving German cuisine when her long time love went to join her. Walter brought an Irish flair, and between them they had made a name for themselves with foods of both nations washed down with rich German or Irish style beer. They had even begun selling it in one and two gallon containers you could take home for that 'fresh from the tap' taste.

Both Moe and I agreed heartily, and soon passerby could take home beer home brewed and delivered to us from there. They also created picnic lunches where you could get German sausages with all of the properly made German side dishes, Fish and chips or corned beef and cabbage, Scotch Eggs and for the traditionalists fried chicken. One side dish Walter created was creamed spinach as good as Boston Markets', and we added it to our manufacturing.

That was the last deal we made together. Moe suffered a stroke, and was paralyzed for almost a year, then quietly passed on. He left the world a poorer place. I remembered what he said, and wondered if the laughter we shared had caused his death, but knew he was probably laughing it up in heaven.

He also surprised me from the grave. His wife had no business sense, and none of his children had been interested in the diner except as a guaranteed place to

eat. He left it to me. A lot of people wanted me to change the name, but it's still called Moe's.

Deit became Sheriff and is still a constant visitor. He especially likes the creamed spinach, which he claims is the only time he's enjoyed the vegetable. I made sure his wife Joan got a copy of the recipe, but he still claims I make it better.

Anna had tried looking for work for a few months, but she didn't feel comfortable around a lot of people. Finally she was hired by Madam Sofia as an administrative assistant about a year after we left. Anna now wears a golden choker, symbol of her status. I was asked many times to be the guest teacher for the home economics classes, and I've found so many that would follow in my footsteps.

One evening last year, Madam Sofia complained of a headache, asking that she be allowed to sleep in. During the night she went to her reward. I hope god has forgiven whatever allowed her to be brutalized, and counts what she has done for those of us who experienced the Academy as good works.

Madam Sofia left the Academy to Anna. Her instructions in her will were simple. 'Maintain order, and continue my work'. That is an easy order to obey.

If I had thought Sonia's funeral was packed, I was amazed by the turn out for Madam Sofia's. Every student except those that had failed or ended up sold overseas was there, and instead of a regular funeral, it was a remembrance ceremony with everyone, starting with the first telling of how they had met that remarkable woman. I was not the only success story, far from it. We had men, transsexuals, a cross dresser headlining a drag show in Las Vegas and a dozen that had gone for sexual reassignment.

All of those memories took two days for us to recount. I met people that had been among the first to serve there, but I still felt the sisterhood I did at Sonia's funeral.

Tiffany has remained Tiffany, the newest woman of that group, and showed up with Robert, her husband who had only heard of the Academy in passing. They had adopted, and Tiffany had gotten hormone shots so that she could nurse their new baby. Anna decided we needed a child of our own, if only to assure that Pamela, Tiffany's daughter, has someone to play with.

Looking back, I would change none of it, even that beating. We share too much for me to have wanted to miss even the most painful time. The postman complains when he has to deliver a pair of mail sacks with all the Christmas cards in them. He's just glad we deliver our cards to the post office.

I sit here in the cabin I named Sonia's Gift, finishing recording this so students in the future can see what their life can become with perseverance. Anna has found a young boy about four who was orphaned, and we're going to bring him home with us. My life when I turned 16 had looked like hell, but now I have loving friends, a new grandparent, a business, a wife that loves me and soon a child to raise with our love.

One life ends another begins. As Roger Miller said in his Sin City series, fair trade.

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