

The Cadet Regime

CHARLES RYDER

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Author's Note: All characters in this adult fiction story are at least 18 years of age

Artwork by 0formant0

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Also by Charles Ryder

“The New Government 1”

(Moderate, non-consensual content)

(34,887 words, rated 5-stars)

“The New Government 2”

(Moderate, non-consensual content)

(35,082 words, rated 5-stars)

“The Director's Downfall”

(Moderate, non-consensual content)

(35,062 words)

“The Humiliation of Catherine Hunter”

(Moderate, non-consensual content)

(35,300 words, rated 5-star)

“The New Government 3”

(Moderate, non-consensual content)

(35,300 words)

“Return to Mainland 1”

(Written jointly with Velvetglove)

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)

(18,800 words)

“Freya and the Amesbury's”

(Moderate, non-consensual content)

(35,062 words)

“State Orphanage 17”

(Moderate, non-consensual content)

(15,500 words, rated 5-stars)

“Stolen, Book 1”

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)

(16,900 words)

“Return to Mainland 2”

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(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content, rated 5-stars)

(19,000 words)

“Return to Mainland 3”

(Written jointly with Velvetglove)

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)

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“Owner to Office Girl”

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)
(22,000 words)

“Ascendancy”

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)
(104,000 words)
The 3 books of the New Government Trilogy

“Victoriana”

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)
(22,688 words)

“Repurposing Laura”

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)
(25,040 words)

“Prey For Him”

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)
(25,900 words)

“Society of Sadists”

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)
(25,000 words)

“Spanked and Disciplined”

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)
(20,500 words)

“Spanked and Disciplined Again”

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)
(21,000 words)

“Spanking Saves Souls”

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)
(20,000 words)

“Minority Rules”

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)
(17,000 words)

“The Purity Police”

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)
(17,000 words)

“The Humiliation of Naomi Sanderson-Hughes”

(Moderate to strong, non-consensual content)
(20,000 words)

Prologue

The interview room was cold and bright and smelled faintly of antiseptic. There were no windows, only one camera in the corner, blinking red. Alice sat straight-backed on the plastic chair, hands folded in her lap, knees together as instructed. Her school shoes were scuffed. Her blouse was still crisp. She hadn't cried yet. Across from her sat a woman in grey. The lady from cadets, that's all Alice knew her as. There was no insignia, no name badge, just a pen, a pad, and a thin lipped mouth that every so often made an insincere attempt to smile.

"Alice Morton. Age nineteen. Parentage: Helen and Samuel Morton, both currently detained under Article 14. Charges: Aggravated dissent. Dissemination of false political rhetoric. Encouragement of civic noncompliance."

The woman didn't look up as she read. Her voice was quiet, flat. Alice didn't speak.

"Academic record: satisfactory. No criminal record. Not affiliated with any known opposition cell. Not politically active."

The woman glanced up. Smiled again.

"But then, they never think they are. Do they?"

Alice opened her mouth, then closed it.

The woman continued.

"Tell me, Alice. Do you love your parents?"

A pause that lasted too long.

"Yes," Alice said.

"Why?"

Another pause.

Alice swallowed. "Because they're my parents."

The pen moved. A soft scratch on the white paper.

"Do you believe in what they stood for?"

Alice blinked. "I—No. I wasn't—"

"Do you disagree with the Prime Minister?"

That was faster.

"No."

"Do you believe that order is more important than individual freedom?"

Another hesitation. A longer one.

"Yes," she said at last.

The woman set down the pen.

"You're not being punished, Alice. You're being redirected. Reforged. This isn't retribution. It's protection."

Alice looked up. "Protection from what?"

"From becoming your parents, from being an irritant, from becoming a burden on the State."

Alice bit her upper lip in consternation.

"You'll report to the Cadet Rehabilitation Corps tomorrow morning at 06:00. Uniform will be issued. Tasks assigned. All service will be recorded for civic transparency and personal progress."

She slid a folder across the table.

"Read Chapter 3, Paragraph 2 carefully. Uniform standards are non-negotiable."

Alice touched the folder but didn't open it.

"You'll be visible, Alice. You'll represent. Your guilt is inherited, but your obedience will be your own."

The woman stood.

"You may leave."

Alice hesitated.

"Is there... Will I see them again? My parents?"

The woman produced her first genuine smile of the day.
“Not if you do well.”

The dawn over Eldham brought with it not just the light but also a scene that many in the village relished. Under the watchful gaze of the Union Jacks, the street was slowly coming alive, and not just with the usual hustle of the villagers starting their day, but with the sight of young female cadets scrubbing the streets clean. Alice, known mockingly in the village as "Lady Morton" due to her family's now-disgraced leftist leanings, knelt on the cold, wet cobblestones of High Street.

Her uniform, a symbol not of honour but of humiliation, a crisp, white shirt, very snug grey shorts, and a perfectly knotted sky-blue and yellow striped tie, marked her as one of the former privileged elite who had been brought low by the New Government regime. As she scrubbed, the locals made no secret of their enjoyment. The old man standing outside his butcher shop with a cup of tea in hand, chuckled to a neighbour.

"Look at them, finally doing an honest day's work. It's about time those lot learned what real work feels like."

The sentiment was widespread. The New Government had promised to level the social playing fields, and to many here, that meant seeing the former high-and-mighty brought down to earth, or in this case, down to scrubbing it. The sight of Alice and her fellow cadets, once part of the untouchable urban elite, now on their hands and knees cleaning the streets, was a vindication of the new order. Laughter and snide remarks followed the cadets as they moved along the street.

"That's it, scrub harder, Lady Morton," called out a young shop assistant, mimicking a lordly tone. The mockery was harsh but endorsed by nods and smirks from others. In this new Eldham, under the rule of the New Government, the cadets were less a symbol of national service and more a spectacle of national retribution. They were the morning's entertainment as well as a part of the village's routine, a daily reminder of how the mighty had fallen and how the New Government had won and how they had reshaped society.

Chapter 1

The morning really began with the anthem. Tinny and hollow, it spilled from the rusted speaker bolted to the post outside the bakery, as it did every day at 07:00 sharp. Union Jacks rippled above the shop fronts, and across the village square, people were already out, sipping tea, sweeping thresholds, pretending not to wait for the daily entertainment.

19 year old Alice Morton knelt on the tarmac outside the post office, scrubbing at a tar-stained patch with a harsh-bristled brush and a tin bucket of soapy water. Her sleeves were rolled up to her elbows. Her arms were red, raw. Her shirt, stiff, starched, gleaming white, clung to her shoulders in the damp morning air. Her tie, striped in the colours of the local area cadet organisation, sky blue and yellow, was tightly knotted and immaculately aligned, pulling at the high collar that chafed against her throat every time she bent forward.

She scrubbed without looking up. She had learned that much. Behind her, a pair of pensioners chuckled by the bench.

“Look at Lady Morton go,” one said. “Told you all she needed was a good brush and a bucket.”

“Should’ve made her clean the old war memorial. Her lot never respected it.”

“She’ll get to it. They all do, sooner or later.”

The Cadet Service had been introduced six months ago, officially described as “Reintegration for the Unprepared Youth of Dissident Lineage.” Unofficially, everyone knew exactly what it meant: make the daughters pay. Not in prison nor in court. But in full view so that everyone could see. She dipped her cloth clumsily into her bucket and it tipped slightly. Water sloshed over her bare knees.

“Missed a bit there, sweetheart,” called a voice from across the road, Shirley Dawes, from the hairdresser’s, smoking a cigarette and grinning wide.

Alice’s hands trembled as she righted the bucket.

“Don’t shake, now,” Shirley continued. “You’re not in drama school anymore.”

More laughter. A phone camera flicked on with a soft chime.

“Smile for the Grey Channel, darling,” someone said. “Might make Clip of the Day if you sniffle a bit more.”

Alice sniffled. But not for the cameras. Her knees hurt. Her fingers were aching. Her cheeks were burning. The knot of her tie dug into the soft skin of her throat. This was so far removed from her previous existence that sometimes it felt like a sort of surreal dream. She scrubbed harder, if only to show the ever-present cameras that she was trying her hardest. A young boy passed by with his mother and stared at her.

“Why’s the lady washing the road?” he asked.

“Because she used to think she was better than us,” the mother replied, with a slight sneer.

“Is she bad?” asked the boy, innocently.

“Not yet. But she was raised wrong. And now she’s learning.”

And that, of course, was the point. The work was only part of the punishment. The real purpose was display, ritual humiliation, watched and endorsed by the people whose lives, according to the New Government, had been made harder by the “liberal elite.” Alice’s mother had signed petitions. Her father had spoken at rallies. There was even a video of him calling the Prime Minister a “cartoon autocrat.” That clip had resurfaced during the early purges. Alice had been processed, and handed a uniform. And now she scrubbed.

“Bit slow today, aren’t we?” came another voice. A shop assistant with a clipboard and a Civic Youth pin. She looked barely sixteen.

“Pick up the pace, Cadet.”

Alice nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

The girl laughed. “Say it louder. You’ve got an audience.”

Alice grit her teeth and tried to keep her voice even.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The villagers nodded. Some smiled. A few even clapped. The Cadet Handbook called it service. The Ministry called it character restoration. The broadcast called it a brighter future for all. But here on the tarmac, with soapy knees and splinters in her hands, Alice knew what it really was. It was revenge. Revenge for perceived injustices that she and her family, especially her parents had been found guilty by the court of public trial and condemned.

Just exactly what she herself was guilty of was never fully explained. It seemed enough that she's been seen on various student rallies although no one in authority seemed to care much what she had or hadn't said on those marches. The point was that her parents had clearly been anti-New Government and therefore by extension so was she. Although in reality she was being punished, and very publicly punished, for the sins of her parents and those of her parent's friends.

She knew from bitter experience that every second of this humiliating exercise that she was struggling with was not only being watched by an amused, spiteful live audience but, and as if that wasn't bad enough, it was also being live-streamed from the drone that hovered disconcertingly close to her capturing both an image of her and the reaction from all around her. That piece of film and the stills from it would be watched later by an audience of millions.

People would pay to watch it on the Grey Channel. A monthly charge to watch her entire ordeal from start to finish or perhaps just a highlight reel. They'd pause and rewind and make their own stills for their own enjoyment and satisfaction and share them with others. The justification was that "this proves the system was working." The New Government had promised to bring "the traitors in our midst" to justice and that's exactly what they were doing. And that clearly resonated...

"Owowowwoow."

The sudden impact of a thin cane, expertly wielded by an experienced hand unexpectedly bit into the thin material of her skin tight shorts making Alice squeal in shock.

"Stop your daydreaming, cadet. There's still a lot of road that need scrubbing." Instructed the volunteer in her prim voice that wouldn't have sounded out of place at a garden party.

"Ohhhh...ow...sorry, ma'am."

Alice gasped out her apology. She wasn't even sure if she was meant to apologise for doing nothing other than pause for a second to ease her aching back but experience had taught her that it was better to be safe than sorry in any interaction with an official when she was dressed in her cadet uniform. Instead, to try and alleviate the tedium of her laborious chore she allowed her mind to drift again, but this time scrubbed more enthusiastically. Dipping her well-used brush back into the scummy lukewarm water by her side.

Chapter 2

Fenella Lancaster had once been described, by her family, her friends, teachers, and anyone who met her, as “*lovely*.” It wasn’t a compliment. It was a fact. She smiled at shopkeepers. She remembered people’s birthdays. She said sorry even when it wasn’t her fault. At 18, she had been studying drama at a minor London college, largely sheltered from the sharper edges of politics. She lived in a nice flat that her mummy and daddy had bought for her. She bought vegan cookies for her friends. She wore linen and knitted scarves and didn’t post very much online.

Her parents, however, did. Elinor and David Lancaster had been beloved icons of the theatre world. And then, as so many of their kind, developed into outspoken thorns in the side of the New Government. Their final play, “*The Silence Between Us*,” was described by Party media as “*an act of artistic terrorism*.” Within weeks, they were gone. Publicly arrested so that everyone watching that evening’s news would know that they were enemies of the State. They were never tried but presumably they were in some sort of government institution somewhere. Fenella, who had been at a rehearsal for *Twelfth Night* when they came for her, didn’t even get to collect her things.

Now, she walked in the midday sun with a grabber stick and a grey bin bag, picking litter along the kerb opposite Alice Morton. Her hair, once long and softly curled, had been trimmed to regulation length. Her shirt was gleaming white, so stiff it didn’t move when she bent. Her tie, yellow and sky-blue striped like Alice’s, was tight against her throat, pinching each time she looked down to collect a crisp packet or a plastic bottle.

She was red-faced, flushed from exertion, humiliation, and tears. Not sobbing. Not breaking. Just... crying, the way a child cries after falling, quietly, hopelessly, and with no one to comfort her. A boy on a bike rode past and jeered.

“Pick it up faster, theatre girl!”

Two women sipping at drinks nearby laughed, one raising her phone.

“She used to be on telly, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, now look at her, finally earning her keep.”

Fenella bent to grab a fast food wrapper, hands shaking. She nodded politely, automatically. Always polite, always *lovely*. She didn’t speak anymore, not unless instructed. Her voice had been mocked too many times, too posh, too performative, and too sorry. The Ministry said she was “emotionally excessive.” Her Obedience Rating had plateaued at 62%.

“Needs firmer structure,” her handler had written. “Potential for public resonance remains high. Recommend more street work.”

She had cried when she was first made to pick litter. Now she cried *less*, which meant she was “improving.” But she still flinched every time someone called her name—not *Fenella*, but Cadet Lancaster. She wondered, sometimes, if her parents were watching. If they were proud? Or ashamed. If they were even alive? Fenella’s eyes stung at the thought. Not from the wind, not from the sweat, not even from the dirt. But from the humiliation. It lived just behind her eyes now. Always ready. Always close.

She bent, knees trembling slightly, as she used the grabber to fish a crumpled, sticky paper bag from a flowerbed. Her hands ached from clenching the tool. Her shirt was immaculate, but soaked with sweat. Her tie choked her, snug under her throat, the knot unyielding. She was crying again. Quietly. Like always because as she was only too aware she was being watched all the time.

Behind her, boots scuffed against pavement. Slow. Deliberate. It was two men, old and sour-faced with flat caps and grubby old jackets. Watching her with the kind of smile that didn’t belong anywhere near a person’s suffering, but one that thrived in this new world.

“Oi, Red,” one of them called. “That one there, missed a bit. What’s the matter, never cleaned a gutter in Kensington?”

Fenella stood up at once. Straight-backed. Hands held behind her, heels together and eyes forward. The Regulation Posture for when engaged by a member of the general public, no matter what their age, sex or status.

"Good morning, sir," she said softly, voice wobbling but clear. "I apologise for the oversight. I'll correct it immediately."

"Very polite," the other man said, stepping closer. "Almost like she actually believes what she's saying."

They both chuckled. Fenella kept her eyes on the building across the street. She focused on the cracks in the stone, as if by concentrating she could drown out the present..

"What's your name, girl?"

"Cadet Fenella Lancaster, sir."

"Lancaster?" the first man said, feigning surprise. "Any relation to those luvvie traitors what did the play about how the country's a prison?"

"Yes, sir. They are my parents."

She said it automatically. She wasn't allowed to pretend otherwise.

"Ah," the second man said. "So you're why my granddaughter can't wear pink hair anymore. Cultural sabotage, was it?"

More laughter. One of them reached out and flicked the knot of her tie, making it jerk tight against her neck. Fenella flinched, but did not move. He took a firmer grip on it and yanked it downwards a little. Something that officially he wasn't supposed to do but he was an old man and who was going to deny an elderly gent like him something that he evidently took great pleasure in?

"You must miss the stage," the first one said. "You had the look for it, y'know. All that long hair. That... posture."

But even as he said it, the tone changed and took on a more threatening mood.

"Bet you were the star of the show, weren't you? Daddy's golden girl? And now you're out here picking up chip wrappers in front of real people."

Another tug on her striped tie, not so gentle this time. Fenella's lip trembled. She fought to speak.

"It is my honour to serve the community, sir."

"Look at that," the man said to his friend. "Didn't even crack. Well-trained."

"Go on, then," the other said. "Say it. Tell us you're grateful. For being corrected."

Her voice caught in her throat.

"Say it," he snapped with a more forceful tug that pulled her head forwards

"I... I am grateful," she whispered. "For the opportunity to correct my upbringing. And... and to earn the forgiveness of the people."

"Louder!"

"I am grateful, sir," she said, this time louder. Shaking. Weeping now. "Thank you for allowing me to learn. I...I will serve better."

They stared at her for a moment longer. Then laughed again.

"Good girl."

They walked away. Fenella remained standing. Shoulders trembling. Hot, bitter tears trailing down her cheeks. The grabber slipped in her hands. Her hands went automatically to her throat to remove and re-tighten her tie back to an acceptable standard. *A disorganised uniform was a disorganised mind* she remembered and would lead inevitably to some sort of corporal punishment. Once it was knotted to her satisfaction she bent down slowly and picked the grabber up. The wrapper was still in the gutter. She placed it gently into the sack. The tears didn't stop.

Chapter 3

Zoe was the daughter of a high-profile academic and a legal aid barrister both of whom were outspoken critics of the New Government, both arrested during the mass detainment of "intellectual destabilisers six weeks ago." Zoe herself had been studying art history at university, she was just one term in, when she was detained during a mandatory loyalty audit. Her family's name flagged red. Within a week, she was processed into the Cadet Force.

Zoe had always been fiery. Not disrespectful, but sharp-eyed, opinionated, impossible to intimidate. She'd been brought up by her parents to question everybody and everything. But this was one time that her fire hadn't helped her. It earned her a "Class 3" assignment: Domestic Personal Support, essentially glorified servant duty to approved citizens who had "contributed to the National Spirit." Many of these were elderly or infirm. Some, like her new hosts, were neither, just bitter and loyal.

Her placement was with the Wetherills, Mr Harold Wetherill a retired magistrate, lifetime New Government supporter and his wife, Iris a former educational specialist for the local council. Both were in their early 70s. He was tall and thin and walked with a cane. He was deeply opinionated and one of those people who was always right. He considered himself to be honest rather than cruel. She had a permanently miserable expression and always dressed as if she was attending church. She had a venomous temper and her speciality was remembering cadet infractions no matter how small.

Zoe stood at attention in the Wetherills' front hall, the smell of old people sharp in her nose. She'd been delivered that morning by an officious gentleman from cadets and she carried a small duffel bag of government-issued domestic supplies clutched nervously in her hands. The moment the door closed behind her, Mrs. Wetherill looked her up and down like inspecting a bruised apple. She was clearly unimpressed. She turned to her husband and said,

"This is what we get for our loyalty."

Mr Wetherill sniggered in his dry humourless way.

"Good grief, look at the state of her. She looks like a baby hippo squeezed into that uniform!"

Zoe blushed to the roots of her hair but didn't move. She'd been warned: Stand still and respond only when asked. Address them as *sir* and *ma'am*. Accept correction without protest. And sadly, the truth was that she was a little bit overweight and it was something that she was extremely aware of. Her parents had arranged courses for her to go to and diets to follow, but she was too busy and preoccupied to do either. And the people she normally associated were either too polite or too intimidated to mention it. The Wetherill's however weren't people that Zoe normally associated herself with.

"You're the barrister's girl, aren't you?" Mr. Wetherill asked, already sitting in his armchair. "The one who defended the city protestors?"

"Yes, sir."

"And your mother spent all her day trying to keep criminals out of prison?"

"Yes, sir."

"Perhaps their time would have been better spent looking after your health, you fat heifer?"

The question was asked in an entirely serious way, Mr Wetherill's expression didn't change in the slightest. And even before Zoe could formulate some sort of answer, his wife weighed in with her opinion.

"Looks like a clear case of parental neglect to me, Harold dear."

"That's true, although cadets will soon knock her into shape, no more chocolate or cakes for the hippo, I'd imagine." Replied her husband.

Both made that odd noise made by people to whom laughter was an unusual occurrence

"But now that you're doing housework the weight should simply fall off you?" Added Mrs Wetherill in a faux solicitous manner.

"And the good news is that while you're losing all that blubber, you'll be paying your debt to society as well. There's a certain symmetry in that I suppose?"

19 year old Zoe Mandel said nothing, but a solitary tear started to run down one plump cheek.

Her duties it seemed were going to be plentiful, polishing Mr Wetherill's shoes every morning while he offers feedback. Reorganising and dusting their vast bookshelf, then rearranging all the books in another different particular order before doing it all again. Preparing evening tea precisely at 16:45 with two sugars. Reading aloud from the Party's Daily Digest after supper. Cleaning the entire front step daily on her hands and knees with a toothbrush "to show she understands detail." They never say "please." And they never thank her.

And, worst of all perhaps, she sleeps in a tiny storage room under the stairs. With a rolled-up towel for a pillow and a folded fleece blanket that smelled of bleach and mothballs. Two hooks for her uniform screwed into a wooden beam above her head. There's no natural light or ventilation. The light switch is outside in the hall, controlled at the whim of the Wetherills. At first she'd resisted the order to kneel and then crawl into the welcoming space. She'd broken down and cried at the indignity of it.

But then Mr Wetherill had simply unhooked a wooden paddle that hung on another hook just by the door to the broom cupboard, taken a firm hold of her starched white collar and simply thrashed her backside with the horrible thing. She bucked and fought but he was surprisingly strong whereas her bulk was mainly fat and flabby muscle. In what felt like no time at all she was laying on her side and begging him to stop flaying her scorched buttocks.

Mrs Wetherill then took her by the ear and led her into her broom cupboard bedroom for the night, mocking her weakness and her "lack of backbone". The last thing she felt was one of the woman's shoes kicking her full in the backside as she crawled humiliatingly into the dark space, sobbing pitifully. The door closed behind her and the light from the dim bulb revealed her extremely basic sleeping arrangements. Even as she got her bearings the key in the lock turned and the light went out leaving her alone in the dark. Tears came. Not loud, just wet and steady, soaking into the cheap blanket beneath her cheek

Chapter 4

Leah Norwood had always been the sensible one. She wasn't a poet like her sister. She didn't argue on social media. She didn't cry at rallies or quote philosophers over dinner. Leah packed lunches. She ran errands for old people. She kept her mother's book shop open when it wasn't safe to do so. She was the girl you called when someone else was falling apart. She was sturdy and capable, someone you could rely on. Someone you could trust. She had never been in trouble with anyone.

And, ever the optimist, she never expected to be punished. Not really. She understood what was going on around her well enough and she certainly did not approve of the New Government in any shape or form. But right now they held all the cards. It wasn't always going to be that way, but right now the sensible move was to keep her head low and to not antagonise the authorities. That was how to avoid being noticed by them, surely that was obvious?

But then her uncle made an anti government speech. And then her mother hid a book. Leah knew about the speech, she could hardly avoid it, but then what could she do about it? But she knew about the novel. Her mother, a bookseller by trade, had found a banned book. A work from a few years ago that tried to warn everyone about the New Government when it first began making waves in the political arena. Warned how disreputable their leaders were, the underhand tactics that they already employed and how they planned to run the country as a virtual dictatorship.

The author had been very prescient and although he'd disappeared, his story hadn't and that's why it was banned. Leah's mother had secured a copy and hidden it away so that it could serve as a piece of history sometime in the future when the New Government was just a shameful memory. However her uncle's speech had brought attention to her mother's politics and then the inevitable visit from the police. It didn't take them long to find the incriminating evidence they were looking for. Her mother was hauled away along with the banned book and Leah?....And Leah hadn't reported it.

That was enough. She was spared prison only by the frantic attempts of her own solicitor and her mother's desperate pleading on her behalf. She couldn't avoid the Cadet Service though. She was consigned "until further notice" to her local branch in North Wessex. She was given a shower, a new uniform and a stark little bedroom, a cell to all intents. On the rickety wooden table pushed against the wall was the Cadet Handbook, her new bible. The blueprint regarding how her life was going to be led from this moment forward.

What it didn't tell her was later that evening, once she had dressed herself in the demeaning uniform complete with chokingly tight green and white tie, she'd be held over the edge of her own bed by a muscular older woman and then caned with stark ferocity by her colleague who, judging by the gleam in her eye and the smirk on her face, seemed to enjoy her work very much. That was for the crime of withholding evidence and "Failure to Disavow Familial Dissidence". She hadn't publicly denounced her father nor had she informed on her mother.

As she lay stretched out and squirming over her own bed with a pillow under her hips to raise her backside having her bottom well and truly striped by an obvious sadist she was made to apologise for her crimes over and over again until her voice started to crack. Afterwards as she kneaded her buttocks through the thin layer of grey cotton she was informed with a slight snigger that what she'd just received wasn't punishment. It was "justifiable physical correction." In the same way, Cadets wasn't a punishment, it was "an opportunity for her to atone for her sins", and therefore something she should be grateful for.

Now, she knelt on a dirty rubber mat in the middle of a public square, her hands bare and filthy, sorting scraps of rubbish into two bins labelled *reclaimable* and *unworthy* waste. Her starched white shirt was immaculate, her green-and-white tie knotted tight and high, and her face flushed with shame under the gaze of dozens of tiny eyes.

“She looks sad,” she heard one child whisper to her teacher.

“She’s meant to,” their teacher replied. “She’s done something bad and now she’s making amends for that bad behaviour. That’s how it works, girls.”

It was 09:45. Her third Sorting Verse was due. Leah took a breath. Her voice shook.

“What was thrown away can still teach me something. What disgusts me may cleanse me.”

All around her there were stifled giggles and smiles. Leah conceded that her high-pitched attempt at singing the silly verse may sound funny to spectators hearing it for the first time. But she was required to sing it four times an hour, every fifteen minutes of the hours that she was employed on her smelly, disgusting “job.” And as far as she was concerned the song had lost its amusement value many, many hours ago.

She placed a cracked spoon into the *reclaimable* bin and moved to the next item, a torn photo. A baby, reaching up toward the lens. There was ash smudged across the corner. Her fingers trembled. Behind her, a camera clicked. One of the teachers nodded approvingly. Leah was crying.

Chapter 5

That evening on The Grey Channel premium Fenella Lancaster was one of the highlights of the show. The entire episode was filmed by drone and then upload to the site. The sensitive Microphone captured ambient street noise, passing cars and idle chatter. But more importantly it caught the two old gentlemen and Fenella's conversation very clearly indeed. The viewer could hear her breathing in between the questions. Her voice was tight and tearful. The camera faced slightly downward, capturing every expression and nuance on her tearful face..

"Oi, Red, missed a bit. What's the matter, never cleaned a gutter in Kensington?"

"Good afternoon, sir. I apologise for the oversight. I will correct it immediately."

At the same time on the live feed, comments had already appeared:

"Polite under pressure. Good girl."

"Voice trembling already. She's feeling it."

"That knot is sharp. Love to see the collar bite when she straightens up."

The onscreen conversation carried on.

"Any relation to those luvvie traitors?"

"Yes, sir. They are my parents."

On the screen message immediately appeared.: *"Truthfulness Rating – 100%"**"Emotional Instability: Moderate – Satisfactory"*

"Go on then. Say you're grateful. Say thank you for being corrected."

While the camera concentrates on the clearly delighted old men, Fenella's tearful voice can be heard in the background.

"I am grateful, sir. For the opportunity to correct my upbringing. And to earn the forgiveness of the people."

The viewer comment feed sprang into vigorous action

"I actually believe her. That's rare."

"She's still too pretty. Needs more dirt."

"Tears came right on cue. Gold star."

"Can we get a side-by-side with her acting reel? The irony's delicious."

The on screen

metric

read,

"EMOTIONAL COMPLIANCE INDEX: 89% – Rising"

And followed that with

"Would you recommend this clip for National Youth Training Modules?"

The scene ends with the words:

"Good girl."

And the screen's message

Audible sob. No verbal response.

At the end an enthusiastic male voice tells the viewers what they want to hear

"Cadet Lancaster continues to demonstrate a deepening understanding of humility. The visible distress, paired with a strong vocal recovery, marks her as a cadet to watch. Her pain is not punishment—it is proof of her progress."

The show ended with a "journalistic scoop", the two elderly gentlemen Mr Jones and Mr Harvey interviewed together in a dingy living room. They're clearly proud of their morning's work. There's not a shred of doubt in their minds regarding their behaviour towards Fenella. As far as they're concerned Mr Jones and Mr Harvey are simply concerned citizens helping to put a girl that has strayed back onto the path of righteousness. Their favourite moment, they reveal, was when she started to cry. That proved that the system was working.

Chapter 6

Mark Grey glanced at his flickering screen and back to the printouts in his hands. The figures were good this month, very good. A lot of people were going to be very happy with the results that he was looking at. The Grey Channel had largely been his and Vanessa's idea. Backed of course by the Sandwell twins and their money. The four of them had started it from a small office in the city and now it turned over millions. He looked back at his screen just to check because he only half-believed it himself, almost 500 million last month alone

His official title was Director of Viewer Emotion & Impact Strategy. A flowery description which only meant giving people what they wanted to see. The Grey Channel was a commodity and finding out what people did and didn't want from it was his job. A job he was very good at. He used to be an advertising executive for political campaigns having first cut his teeth in TV ads. His area of expertise was converting emotional metrics into viewing figures

But the real trick of it was turning viewer discomfort into loyalty. Convincing ordinary citizens that watching guilt was service. That correction was kindness. That a girl's pain, properly packaged, could bring healing to a formerly disjointed nation. That watching videos of girls who'd transgressed, who in fact were enemies of the State and being punished for their sins was a cathartic release. And now rather than gather around the water cooler and gossip about last night's soap, ordinary people now discussed their favourite cadets and the various indignities they were made to suffer "for their own good"

Once the great viewing public were convinced of this it had become very easy to sell it. Mark believed that shame "must be cinematic to be effective". And as a result the Grey Channel's production values were very, very high. It employed the best technical people it possibly could to film and edit and produce its finished product. And this allied with the top class cinematic content that he invented on an almost daily basis meant that the finished product was hugely in demand.

It was quite expensive to produce but that wasn't the point. Despite the fact that some of the content was given away for free "so that every citizen could see how their hard earned taxes were being used", it was still money well spent. Because the money it made from selling most of the more salacious, entertaining film paid for everything a hundred times over.

The New Government and its favoured employees received all the content for free of course. It was due to its policies and rules that the conditions for The Grey Channel actually existed in the first place. Almost as soon as Mark pitched the idea the government representatives were on board. What better way to self-publicise a government eager to establish itself in the mind of its citizens? And especially for something it didn't have to pay for although it claimed it did?

The Grey Channel was branded as a government enterprise, another service provided by them. But it wasn't a service, it was government propaganda pitched at the highest level. It had 10m subscribers and had already made Mark and Vanessa rich, and the Sandwell twins ever richer. It also gave Mark what he wanted, ever-greater influence on the New Government and more power. Mark liked power. The Grey Channel was a labour of love for him. Not only did he enjoy the practical side of it, but the perks suited him very well too. On an internal memo he'd written the words

"When a girl cries on her knees and thanks the audience, you've created a nation of believers."

And he not only believed that wholeheartedly but he revelled in it too. The sight of cadets in their smart uniforms being spanked, caned and humiliated was always hugely exciting for him. He never tired of the spectacle and now he was being paid obscene amounts of money to think of new ideas and new ways to market his own perverse fantasies. The key though was that opponents of the New Government must be humbled publicly, stylishly, and repeatedly. The message had to be hammered home, if you oppose us, if you try to rebel against us, this could happen to you.

Teachers and university lecturers were instructed to show the videos, the more mainstream ones anyway, to their pupils and their students. The New Government knew that it was some of the most insidious propaganda available to them and it was not afraid to use it whenever possible. The regime

doesn't just survive through power, it thrives through spectacle, commerce, and emotional extraction. The Grey Channel was much more than a state media organ. It was a confessional market. And what makes it work so effectively is that it wraps its cruelty in purpose

Mark's power stemmed from the fact that the Grey Channel wasn't really a public service although it was always advertised as one. In reality its value as far as Mark and his co-founders were concerned it was not so much state media, as a private indulgence for the powerful. An exclusive space where guilt becomes luxury entertainment, and repentance was bought and sold. The people he met, the people who enjoyed his services were the true movers and shakers in the New Government. The financiers, the entrepreneurs, the obscenely wealthy people who lurked in the shadows of every government everywhere.

In all honesty most of them didn't care too much who had won the election just so long as they could exert influence over whoever got the most votes at the ballot box. Yes, there were some ideologically fixated who had financed the New Government's rise to power. Some who supported them although they were ambivalent about doing so, but the majority as Mark had discovered were interested in the aphrodisiac of pure unchallenged power. And as such they were relatively easy to manipulate, especially considering what he had to tempt them with.

Chapter 7

Marjorie Rockwell stood sheltering from the light but persistent drizzle under a hastily erected canopy. A folding table had been set up just past the bakery, beneath a Party-issued banner reading **A BRIGHTER FUTURE, TOGETHER!** in cheery red-and-white block print. Behind it stood a smiling woman in a dove-grey trench coat and high-heeled shiny black boots, the uniform of the Ministry of Civil Renewal. Citizens were gathering. The leaflets she handed out were glossy, full-colour, and uncomfortably cheerful. On the cover, a staged photo showed a line of young women, pristine uniforms, flushed cheeks, beaming smiles, brandishing brooms like rifles. Below it, the slogan:

“Cadets of The New Government: Helping build the Nation with Every Sweep!”

The real cadets, of course, were merely fifty feet away, on their knees in the tarmac gutter, Alice among them. No smiles, no poses. Just scuffed shoes, reddened knuckles, tear streaked cheeks, and the stink of dirty water and disinfectant. They scrubbed in silence. Over to one side Fenella and her group were litter-picking and further up the street a number of cadets were laboriously scrubbing graffiti from a concrete wall.

The young Party official clapped her hands, drawing attention.

“Friends of Eldham,” she chirped brightly, “this week’s *Citizen’s Bulletin* outlines the latest contributions of our National Cadet Service. Did you know over 1000 miles of road have been rehabilitated by our young pioneers?”

Murmurs of approval and a few claps. Someone took a selfie with the brochure, the cadets in the blurred background. Nobody asked what the word “rehabilitated” might mean although watching the cadets at work in their high street it simply meant scrub. Nobody thought to mention that scrubbing a tarmac road by hand was an entirely pointless gesture. That wasn’t the issue and subliminally at least they all knew it

“They serve with dignity,” the Party woman continued, “not as punishment, but as re-commitment. Their families may have failed them, but we will not. And they will not fail us.”

Alice dared a glance up. This was such absolute rubbish that she half-hoped that someone in the crowd might stand forward and point it out. Nobody did of course and just for a second the woman on the platform caught her eye. She smiled but the smile didn’t reach her eyes. It was a warning. Alice lowered her head quickly and resumed scrubbing. Scrubbing was safety, doing what she was told was safety.

“See them,” the official said, turning to the crowd. “Witness what a New Britain looks like. Strong, clean, and free of the filth of the past. We rise, *together*.”

People clapped, some edged nearer to the speaker knowing that she would probably be on the Grey Channel that evening and there they could witness themselves being good, upstanding citizens. The cadets meanwhile kept on scrubbing, polishing and picking litter in the rain, their crisp white shirts not quite so crisp any more.

Eventually Marjorie was finished, at least with her rhetoric. She called over an official from the Cadet service, a tall sparse looking man with an unfortunate haircut and whispered something in his ear. Within a minute he had seized Alice by the ear and brought her stumbling over to the raised dais.

“This lady says that you rolled your eyes at her while she was making her important speech, cadet. Is that true?” He demanded.

He twisted her ear painfully to hurry her along. This was one of those regular dilemmas that the cadets faced. Either deny what she was accused of, which was tantamount to accusing a State official of lying, or admit it and face the consequences. Although to be honest it was hardly a question, Alice daredn’t even speculate what the penalty of accusing a state official of absolutely anything might be. Instead she simply nodded,

“Yes, sir. That’s true and I apologise for my rudeness.”

There, she'd said it. All she had to do now was face the consequence, which although no doubt painful, would be far preferable to the alternative.

"Touch your toes."

Alice did as she was told feeling the tautness across her buttocks as her extremely snug shorts wrapped themselves around her protuberant buttocks. She held her breath as she heard the man's lithe cane split the air behind her and then,

Whoosh

The oh so familiar whistle and then crack as the springy Malacca wrapped itself around her backside, It didn't hurt for a second and then it really, really did. She exhaled the air she'd been holding in with a hiss of pain

Whoosh

"Ahhhh"

She groaned, the tears already sliding down her cheeks

Whoosh

"Owowoww!"

That one really stung!

Whoosh

"Ohhh...please..."

The cane tapped her on the hip.

"Up." Came the simple command. "Apologise."

Alice blinked the tears from her eyes and looked up at the supercilious young woman smiling at her.

"I...I'm very sorry, miss. It won't happen again, miss."

Alice watched as the woman drunk in her abject humiliation before turning and walking off without another word.

"Back to work, Morton. You'll work through your lunch break."

Alice sniffed miserably.

"Yes, sir."

Chapter 8

The sign at the entrance to the cul-de-sac read “Zone C—Civic Gratitude Quarter. And beneath that “ZONE C: Grateful citizen service area – all vehicles welcome. No tipping permitted. Labour is its own reward.”

Deepika Kapoor stood forlornly beside a stack of plastic buckets and state-issued microfiber cloths. Her uniform was spotless. Her face was not.

“Begin at bay four,” the official said, voice flat, already bored. “Thirty-minute rotations. Smile if spoken to. No eye contact unless invited. Remain pleasant.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Deepika, fully aware of the consequences any of those humiliating rules.

The first car was a gleaming black SUV with red trim and a decal on the rear window: *I PAY MY TAXES AND LOVE MY COUNTRY*. The owner sat on a nearby fold-out chair, sipping a takeaway coffee, live streaming her approach on a personal “Civic Channel” feed. Fenella recognized her vaguely—she’d once played Lady Macbeth in a school production. Now she held her phone out like a judge’s gavel.

“Don’t forget the rims, sweetheart,” the woman chirped.

Deepika dipped the cloth in warm soapy water and knelt. The suds felt gritty on her fingers. She worked in practiced silence, dragging the cloth across chrome, around the hubcaps, over the proud Union Jack bumper sticker. A man passed on the pavement and gave her a thumbs-up.

“Nice to see proper values back,” he called over.

Deepika smiled. Or at least, made her mouth move in the shape of one. By the third car, her knees were wet, and the soap stung where her skin had cracked. A child pointed at her from the backseat, wide-eyed. “Mummy, is she in trouble?” The mother laughed gently. “No, darling. She’s being useful.”

At the far end of the row, a banner flapped in the breeze. It read:

“FROM SHAME TO SERVICE: THE NEW GIRLS OF BRITAIN”

There was a little illustration next to the words—a cartoon girl in a tie and grey shorts, beaming beside a freshly washed car.

Deepika kept her eyes down. The woman sipped her latte slowly, legs crossed, a blanket across her knees though the morning was warm. She leaned slightly forward as Deepika rinsed the rear window, eyes alight with interest, the kind of relaxed satisfaction one might wear while watching a pianist sight-read a difficult piece.

“You missed a bit, love,” she said, voice syrupy. Not angry, entertained.

Deepika paused, cloth dripping, and nodded.

“I used to see you on the red carpet,” the woman continued conversationally. “That little indie film your mum directed, *Feral Grace*, was it? God, I hated it. All that whispery nonsense. But I *always* said you had your mother’s chin.”

She smiled, as if offering a compliment. Her phone buzzed. A notification:

“Your stream ‘Cadet Cleans for Queen and Country’ now has 134 viewers.”

She glanced at the screen, then at Deepika.

“Say hello to the good people,” she said brightly.

Deepika said nothing.

The cloth moved slowly across the glass. The woman smiled again. She sat back in her chair and took another sip, her gaze never leaving the girl in grey shorts and soaked sleeves. It was a fine morning. The government was doing its job. And Deepika Kapoor, daughter of traitors, was on her knees. All was right in the world.

“Speak up or I’ll call the supervisor over,” Chantelle demanded sweetly

Deepika looked up. The woman held her phone out like a microphone. There was a half-second of hesitation, just enough to make the moment hang, but not long enough to be punished. Then Deepika spoke, her middle-class voice clear and polite, shaped with careful sincerity:

“Good morning, viewers. It’s an honour to serve the citizens of Zone C today. I hope the car is to your satisfaction.”

She even managed a small, insincere smile. The woman gave a delighted laugh.

“See? Isn’t she lovely? That’s how these sort of people *should* be, humble and grateful for the opportunity to make up for the wrongs committed by their traitor parents.”

Chantelle Hope turned the phone back to herself, angling it for a flattering view of her own face.

“And that’s what *rehabilitation* looks like, folks. Civil, obedient, and hard-working.”

The live stream hearts fluttered up the screen and the comments increased.

“She’s got the look of her mum but none of the attitude.”

“Bet that cloth costs more than her old drama degree lol”

“Proper little state darling now, bless.”

Chantelle smiled to herself, when she had enough likes and comments she could sell the video to the Grey Channel and make herself a little well-earned money. What could be nicer than humbling people like this, people she hated, and getting paid for doing it?

Deepika returned to her work without another word. Her knees ached and the back of her neck was damp with sweat and shame. But her hands moved automatically, one smooth pass over the side mirror, another under the door handle. She’d been taught the cadence. Scrub. Rinse. Smile. Respond. Repeat.

Behind her, Chantelle leaned back in her chair, triumphant.

This wasn’t cruelty. This was order. This was *justice* being played out right in front of her and then filmed so that other right-minded people might appreciate it.

Chapter 9

The cadet system was thoroughly policed and regulated, however it relied a lot on a series of unpaid volunteer observers whose job it was to stand with a pad, a pen and a camera and record the day of a group of cadets, or even one specified cadet. Once that was done the observer then described all the information that he or she thought relevant to an official form. They were all of a standard and carried the name of the volunteer observer and the group or individual that she was studying that day

It noted the start and the finish of that day's work and even annotated particular events that the observer thought relevant. The idea of standing outside in the cold and the rain and recorded the tedious, back-breaking chores of cadets may have struck some as an imposition. However the Cadet Service never had any shortage of applicants and its waiting list was hundreds long. For some it was a matter of duty.

For example Mrs. Dorothy Winslow, a retired schoolteacher was fairly typical of one particular type of volunteer. In the old days she would have been described as a neighbourhood busybody but essentially harmless. Now she was Government Approved and wore the badge to prove it with a certain amount of pride. Like herself, her performance report was neat, fussy and precise.

Date: April 11

Subject: Cadet Fenella Lancaster – Performance Report, Morning Shift

Performance Reporter – Mrs Dorothy Winslow

Observations

"I arrived promptly at 07:00, as instructed, to oversee the assigned cadets for pavement-clearing duty along the southern stretch of Church Lane. Of the three assigned girls, I recognized one immediately: Fenella Lancaster, daughter of *those* actors, now finally made useful.

Fenella was slower than the others to begin. I made note that her sponge remained dry for almost two minutes after the whistle. When reminded, she looked at me and muttered 'Sorry, ma'am'—polite, yes, but with a hint of softness I found suspicious. A good cadet is brisk and silent.

At 07:23, she winced while scrubbing the curb near the bus stop. I advised her, firmly, that discomfort is not an excuse to slacken pace. She nodded, but I noticed tears. Public weeping may be tolerated, but not indulged.

At 07:45, schoolchildren began to gather across the street. I suggested Cadet Lancaster be directed to the more visible drain cover, directly in view of the school gates. A teachable moment for the **next** generation. She complied but paused briefly before kneeling. I reminded her of her family's crimes and suggested she reflect on them as she worked.

At 08:00, a Party courier drove past. Cadet Lancaster did not salute immediately. She was busy with her bucket, yes, but others managed it. Note: reflex training may be insufficient.

Summary:

Cadet Lancaster performs her duties adequately, but not with the zeal expected from someone of her background. Displays of modest distress appear calculated to evoke sympathy—dangerous in a figure of public re-education. I recommend reassignment to more publicly-visible duties and possibly a reminder session at the Moral Adjustment Pavilion.

Also, I would be more than happy to continue oversight next week. It is important that *we, the loyal*, keep a close watch on the reformation of the shameful few.

Mrs Winslow was a reasonable enough woman. She liked order and neatness, she believed fervently in the New Government and she considered that what she was doing was her good, Christian duty. The girls that she observed had stumbled from the path of righteousness, often through no fault of their own, and it was her job to help put them back on the path to forgiveness. She was in her own mind, doing them a favour. And she was doing her bit for the country. She would have turned down money for doing so had it been offered to her.

But not all volunteer observers were quite so selfless. Many of them were drawn by the opportunity to experience control over others lower on the food chain than themselves. Mr Reginald Bourne was a classic of his kind, late 60s, retired from his 40 year job in the Post Office was a mean embittered little man who achieved absolutely nothing of interest or even relevance in his long life. But the rise of the New Government, of which he was a very loyal member, had changed all that.

Or more specifically his volunteer work for the cadet service had changed all that. He was a short spindly little fellow with a weasely sort of a face that only his mother had loved. He was smug, spiteful and continually on the lookout for people he believed to be weaker than himself. An unpleasant sort of gentleman to be sure, but perversely the regime's dream citizen: eager, thorough, and utterly without mercy.

Here's his transcript:-

Date: April 13

Subject: Cadet Fenella Lancaster – Performance Report, Afternoon Shift

Performance Reporter – Mrs Reginald Bourne

It was my absolute pleasure to once again oversee the disciplinary activities of Cadet Fenella Lancaster, whose parents, as we all recall, stirred considerable unrest before their deserved detention. She arrived at 14:01, one minute late. I made sure to note it loudly and suggested she apologize to the flag before beginning. She did so, albeit with a pout.

Cadet Lancaster was assigned to brass polishing (bollards and drain caps). She began without enthusiasm. Her strokes lacked conviction. Her polish cloth was damp rather than wet—lazy preparation. I corrected her with a sharp rap of my walking stick on the curb and repeated the Party motto. She parroted it, though I suspect she didn't *mean* it.

At 14:17, she sighed audibly.

At 14:23, she dropped her rag.

At 14:40, she asked for water. I denied it, there was no request form.

At 15:02, she rubbed at her eyes and left a smudge on the brass. I made her redo the entire row.

Passersby seemed amused. One elderly woman took a photo. Several schoolboys laughed and called her "Stage Rat," a reference I approve of, given her family's theatrical sins. I deliberately asked a Party-approved street musician to play patriotic marches during her final hour. I noticed she flinched during "Rise, Reclaim, Rejoice." Possibly emotional attachment to the regime's triumph? Or shame? Either way, a reaction worth tracking.

No need for water breaks unless explicitly requested in advance and in writing. Encourage more public music during discipline details, very effective. Reassign Lancaster to early-morning poultry sanitation at the abattoir. The stench may humble her further.

I am, as always, available for future oversight.

Summary:

We must never forget that even pleasant young women can be traitors in waiting. It is our *duty* to ensure their loyalty is not just worn, but worked into them.

Yours in vigilance,

R. V. Bourne

Proud to Serve, Even in Retirement

Whereas cadet observation is a duty to Mrs Winslow, it's a pleasure to people like Mr Bourne. And as The Grey Channel has come to realise, the Mr Bourne's outnumber the Mrs Winslow's by a factor of 10, and so naturally their coverage is angled to meet that demand.

Chapter 10

Mary Elwood is 22, she's done her "gap year," 12 months travelling around Europe and now she's a second-year politics student at University. And therefore she's more aware than the average new cadet girl of the true political situation of the country. She's a little bit older and a little bit less naive. The university has changed in the short time she's been in it. For example the left-wing lecturers seemed to have been purged. Now she knew very few of them.

It was all so much more...regimented now. There was for example a siren in every room on campus which went off whenever some "important" piece of New Government propaganda needed to be listened to by all students and staff. But this time Mary didn't need a warning because she knew what was going to happen. Inside Lecture Hall D12, the professor paused mid-sentence and turned to the ceiling like the sound might explain itself. The room's wall-screen flickered. A message blinked, blood-red.

Verdict Announcement: National Broadcast – All Terminated Activity.

Everyone stood, everyone but Mary. She didn't need the broadcast to know what had happened. She could already feel it in her chest. Her father, Gregory Elwood the Shadow Minister for Civil Liberties who was currently on trial, had been found guilty. Two hours later, she stood in the administrative annex, her university ID snapped in half on the desk beside her. A woman in a Party uniform was offering her a choice. Not mercy exactly, clearly she need to be punished for the sins of her reactionary father.

"You may participate in Voluntary Cadet Reassignment, you'll be transferred to North Cadet Sector – Whitlow. It's an agricultural district. You'll perform civic labour, visible and instructive, and serve until you're deemed... reconciled."

Mary blinked slowly. She was still fairly shell-shocked by the earlier announcement regarding her father. It had been on the cards, but the stark reality of it had still shocked her. Leave her university in order to become a farm labourer in some God-forsaken village up north somewhere?

"And if I decline?"

The woman smiled in a distinctly humourless way. She tapped a folder. Inside were photos of her mother, her brother, her cousin in Leeds. Even some outspoken family friends. Clearly the State apparatus had done its work.

"Then I'm afraid that your family will continue to be punished. By other means."

The "other means" weren't specified but it didn't take a genius to work it out. She was given the statutory 12 minutes to pack. She took her mother's rosary, a scarf, and a paperback copy of *Civil Liberty and the State*, the one her father had annotated for her when she started uni. When the cadet van came to collect her, two students watched from a dorm window above. One of them lifted their phone. Mary didn't look up. But the lens caught her profile anyway.

The ride to Whitlow took six hours and thirty-two minutes, including one stop for "emergency sobbing." As the driver described it without a hint of sympathy

"Don't worry. They all get the shakes round Leicester. That's when it sinks in: it's real, and it's going to be your life for the foreseeable future."

He was clearly a man who enjoyed his job

Mary hadn't really cried yet. Not even when they handed her the Cadet Manual and made her read the first line aloud:

"Your body is a debt repaid in service."

She'd read it the way she read everything: clearly, precisely, with the steady diction of someone raised to believe words could be weapons, or shields. Now she sat in the back of a rattling transport van, flanked by two other girls in identical grey underclothes. One was asleep, head against the window. The other, dark haired and small was muttering something under her breath. Mary looked away. Outside, the land had changed. No more city scaffolding or suburban housing blocks. Just long rows of sloping mud fields, fences made from stone or wood and a watchtower blinking red on a hill.

Welcome to Sector Whitlow. Cadet Labour Hub 14:

They stripped her first. They always did that first to the new ones, it intimidated them of course, let them know how serious their situation was. And of course the staff enjoyed doing it, it was one of their little perks for being posted to this rural hell hole. And then her uniform. It hung from a metal hook, a crisp white shirt stiff as cardboard, white and green striped tie like a leash. The hair ribbon was forest green, slightly frayed at the edge. She tried to tie it like the diagram. She failed and was told to do it again and again until she succeeded.

When she stepped out into the sector yard, boots crunched on gravel beside her. Not hers. Cadets weren't permitted boots. She had well-polished black Mary Janes which although they matched her short white socks, made her situation seem all the more surreal. What sort of farm worker wore strap over shoes and skin-tight shorts not to mention collars and ties. But being no fool, Mary understood exactly why they were dressed so inappropriately. Discipline at Whitlow was much more important than productivity.

"Elwood?" barked a voice.

A woman approached. Broad shoulders. Blazer with green piping.

"My name's Miss Gannon. You'll call me by that name, is that understood?"

Mary nodded her assent and was rewarded with a stinging slap to her face.

"I asked you if that was understood, cadet?"

Mary staggered back a little, rubbed her face briefly and then stood to attention, though she'd never been trained how.

"Yes, Miss Gannon."

The woman looked her up and down critically for a few seconds before carrying on.

"You're a politics student. So you know what they say about symbolism."

Gannon's eyes dropped to the white of Mary's socks, already soaking from the water dribbling down her bare legs.

"So here's your first lesson in national symbolism. Here at Whitlow, mud is good. Mud is earned. When it's on your knees, it means you've been low. And that's exactly where we start."

She snapped her fingers. A drone zipped overhead, wings glinting.

"You're to be stationed in the hog pen for your first cycle. At least three days before confession. Smile nicely for the camera."

The rain hadn't stopped since dawn, and Mary's socks were soaked through before she even reached the hog pen. The boots weren't issued, cadets weren't permitted boots, just the standard Mary Janes, gleaming with mud now, and useless in slop and straw. She pushed open the rusted gate with her hip. Inside: stinking churn, low grunts from the pigs, the freezing breath of the North cutting through her stiff white shirt. Her tie, green and white striped, hung taut against her throat, soaked at the tip from where it had dipped into a trough earlier.

A Party camera drone buzzed above her, clicking. They always knew the best angles. Mud on the knees. Wet fringe clinging to her forehead. Her expression, a perfect balance between exhausted and contrite.

"Cadet Elwood," barked the Overseer from the barn door. "Tell the pigs why you're here."

She stood, wiping her face with one sleeve, and faced the camera instead.

"My name is Cadet Mary Elwood," she said, voice hoarse from cold. "I am here to earn back the trust my family betrayed. To feed those my father neglected. To serve, and be seen serving."

The overseer gave a slow, mocking round of applause. The pigs squealed as if they understood. Behind her, a cluster of local people in New Government raincoats watched from a viewing shelter, holding steaming mugs. One of them laughed.

"Proper little revolutionary, now, aren't you?"

Mary bowed her head. Another drone clicked. A tear joined the drizzle running down her cheek.

Chapter 11

It was barely past midday, but Mrs. Wetherill insisted that Zoe serve the afternoon tea early “because discipline means consistency.” Zoe had memorized the sequence already: tray, coasters, no clinking, sugar last, milk barely warmed. She carried the tea set into the sitting room, her stiff shirt digging into the tops of her arms with each step, collar tight, tie yanked to regulation length by Mr Wetherill just a few minutes earlier. Her glasses had slid down her nose slightly from sweat, but there was no pause allowed to adjust them.

The Wetherills sat like judges on either side of the fireplace. Mr. Wetherill had a newspaper open, but he wasn’t reading it. His eyes flicked over the top as she entered.

“Well, well,” he muttered. “The milkmaid returns.”

Mrs Wetherill giggled but didn’t look up as she gestured to the coffee table.

“Set it properly this time, girl. We’re not livestock.”

“Although the girl certainly looks like she belongs in a farmyard,” sniggered her husband maliciously.”

Zoe flushed as she bent to place the tray.

Mr. Wetherill chuckled darkly.

“Careful now. With that blouse stretched like that, the poor teapot might get nervous.”

His wife gave a high, false laugh.

“Really, Harold.”

“What? You’d think with that kind of build, she’d have learned to carry herself with a bit more... grace. But they never do. No deportment training in prison families, I suppose.”

Zoe froze for half a breath. The weight of her uniform had never felt more exposed. She wanted to pull at her shirt, hide herself, disappear into the floor. But she didn't. She simply straightened and asked respectfully,

“Shall I pour now, ma’am?”

Her voice was flat. That, too, was regulation.

“Yes,” Mrs. Wetherill said sweetly. “And try not to breathe too heavily. It’s very bovine and quite distracting.”

The tea poured in silence. The china clinked despite her best effort.

“Tell us,” Mr. Wetherill said casually, once she’d served, “Did your mother ever teach you anything useful? Beyond how to make excuses and write press statements, I mean.”

Zoe stood tall, eyes forward.

“She taught me critical thinking, sir.”

“Ah,” he said with satisfaction. “There’s the problem.”

Mrs. Wetherill took a sip and set her cup down.

“You’ll find we prefer conformity here. And if there’s one thing your lot needs more than humility, it’s shaping. You walk like you’re owed something. You speak like we should be impressed. And yet beneath that blubbery, blustering facade you’re just a little girl who needs taking in hand. Well, you’ve come to the right place you cheeky madam.”

“I’m not trying to impress you, ma’am.”

“Then do try harder. You’re failing at that too.”

Zoe blinked, once. She’d learned already that crying in front of them gave them joy. They liked it when she was flustered and reduced to tears. So she didn't cry. She stood there, perfectly still, arms at her side, heat behind her eyes, the shame clearly evident to seasoned sadists like the Wetherill’s. This may well have been Zoe’s first experience of domestic personal support, but it certainly wasn’t the Wetherill’s first experience of dealing with cadets.

Mr. Wetherill looked back to his paper.

“Send her to the back steps,” he said. “Get her scrubbing. That’ll take the pride out of her.”

Zoe bowed her head slightly.

“Yes, sir.”

As she left, Mrs. Wetherill called after her, voice still sickly sweet:

“And do something about that shirt, dear. You look like quite ridiculous. Although I imagine that you already know that.”

The back door creaked as Zoe opened it, stepping out into the cool afternoon air. The Wetherills’ garden was small and square, meticulously trimmed. Not because they tended it, but because every month, a Party gardening unit did it for them, a reward for decades of civic compliance. She stood at the edge of the step with the bucket and brush in her hands. The water was cold, already clouded with soap. The toothbrush floated slightly at the surface emphasising just how small and useless it really was.

“On your knees, girl,” came Mr. Wetherill’s voice from behind the screen door. “We want that concrete looking like marble. Don’t you dare leave a streak in it!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Zoe knelt down; the first touch of cold concrete on her knees was quite shocking. She adjusted her glasses with the back of her wrist, dipped the brush, and began scrubbing. The brush itself was comically small. Each stroke cleared a patch the size of a coin. And yet the surface stretched wide beneath her. Inside, through the glass, the Wetherills watched. They didn’t speak. They simply sipped their tea, content with the view.

As she worked, her arms began to tremble from the awkward angles she was required to adopt. The concrete scraped at her knees. The wet of the soapy water began to soak through her shorts. The bucket tipped over slightly, sending a stream down the steps, across her legs, dousing her pride. But she kept going because she simply had to. At one point, the door opened again. Mrs. Wetherill’s voice was clipped, as though she’d just remembered something important.

“Cadet Mendel,” she said, “repeat after me.”

Zoe paused and straightened as much as her kneeling position allowed.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I am not special. I am not clever. I am merely willing. And willing girls scrub.”

Zoe’s mouth was dry. She could feel the tears starting to well.

“Repeat,” came the sharper command.

She looked down at the suds on her hands, white against her skin.

“I am not special. I am not clever. I am... merely willing. And willing girls scrub.”

Mrs. Wetherill smiled faintly.

“Good girl.”

The door clicked shut again.

Zoe turned back to the step, bent over the patch she’d just cleaned, and started again. Her collar dug tighter into her throat with every stroke. The front of her shirt, stiff and bright this morning, was soaked and clinging.

Evening came without ceremony. No goodnights were said. No trays left out. Just the sound of the hallway light switch clicking off, and the final scraping of chairs as the Wetherills retired upstairs. Zoe waited a few minutes, kneeling on the hard tile outside the broom cupboard, just as she’d been trained. She counted to thirty. Then slowly, silently, opened the door. The cupboard was exactly as she’d left it. There was no heating. The walls were close. The darkness was total. She crawled in, curling on her side, knees drawn to chest. Her collar stayed buttoned. Her tie remained tight.

She could have loosened it, technically. No eyes here. No witnesses. But what if the Wetherill’s found out? What if they made a sudden unannounced inspection and found her wilfully disregarding their instructions. Zoe had no doubt that there’d be hell to pay and decided that it was simply safer to do as she was told. So she kept it tight and tried to get some sleep.

Chapter 12

The Sandwell twins, Ambrose and Celestine were extraordinarily wealthy even by the standards of the average backer of the New Government. They were in their late forties, very well educated, very clever and very dangerous. They were among the earliest people to back the New Government. They

weren't ideologically driven although their politics are broadly in agreement with those of the government. Rather they were bored, brilliant, and entirely lacking in any sort of empathy. They would probably have supported the opposition party if the cadet idea had originated with them.

They weren't particularly interested in power either. They already had enough thanks to their wealth and contacts to last a lifetime. However what they both wanted was the opportunity to exercise some of that power. And they did tend to think the same thing at the same time. They dressed in a similarly colour co-ordinated fashion and automatically finished each others' sentences. And they did have very similar...interests.

And when they were seen in public, which was quite a rare occurrence, they would always appear together as if they were man and wife rather than brother and sister. That said their public appearances were negligible. They never appeared on any sort of TV channel, not even their own. They never spoke with the press or attended public occasions. They had no need or indeed any sort of desire to extend their circle of friends and acquaintances beyond their own trusted little group.

And unusually among the super rich they were entirely ego free. They had no need to flaunt anything and certainly no need to impress. That's not to say they didn't have their hobbies of course. It was just that they had the money and the power to indulge themselves fully in their chosen interests, no matter how perverse or unusual. The twins were completely untouchable, insulated from the worlds of consequences by their wealth and their incredible collection of high-ranking individuals who were on their payroll.

One of their favourite, socially acceptable hobbies was collecting "restored artefacts", anything from pre-regime protest signs to the prison ID badges of former MPs. They had quite the museum, they both loved the tactile opportunities that collecting tangible things gave them. Their less socially acceptable interests were one of the very few things they both didn't exactly agree on. Ambrose enjoyed watching cadets during solo work, he found group scenes "emotionally diluted". Celestine on the other hand was particularly interested in the "repentance arc", cadets who begin defiant and end weeping in the rain. She liked to re-enact "notable moments" using the original cadets brought before her and film them for her own private collection.

Both enjoyed hand-selecting their particular footage and often kept their favourite images and films securely locked away for private viewing. And of course they regularly got to meet their favourite film stars. Celestine liked boyish looking cadets whereas Ambrose liked pretty, girly ones. Which was convenient because then their areas of special interest seldom if ever overlapped. They often liked to suggest images and ideas to their directors, most of which were taken up and acted on.

And although the Grey Channel was largely Mark and Vanessa's idea, The Grey Channel's aesthetic, its sterile beauty, emotional detail, and crisp, ritualistic pacing, was largely their doing. But in typical understated fashion the Sandwell name never appeared anywhere. That honour was given to Mark in honour of his brilliant idea and ability to drive the project forward. The three of them have never exchanged a cross word.

They often hosted exclusive annual parties for high-ranking subscribers called "*Evenings of Correction*." Guests were treated to unreleased footage, commentary tracks, and dramatic live readings of cadet reflection journals. They are the hottest tickets in town. Even those for whom the Grey Channel's subject matter is not really their thing are desperate to be seen there. An invite to "*Evenings of Correction*." Is evidence that one has made it, that one has penetrated an extremely small circle of the social elite.

Ambrose would circulate the room, always smiling, always happy to chat and perhaps put an overwhelmed guest at their ease. He spoke in his polite, clipped public school educated tones. He enjoyed words like contrition and legacy. Celestine invariably wore gloves to occasions like these and spoke softly which she imagined softened her image and diverted attention from what she knew she actually was, a cold-hearted sadist.

Once, as she was caning a 19 year old cadet for "persistent infringe uniform infringement" in other words having her tie too loose on two different occasions, she told her particular friend Roberta that she didn't believe in punishment. Rather she believed in education, visceral, persistent, intimate education.

That was what worked, that was what had proved to work she said as she unleashed the sixth stroke of her favourite Malacca cane right across the centre of the girl's striated backside.

Roberta nodded in agreement as she held another pretty young thing over her leather clad thighs, slapping and pinching the plump pair of buttocks that were presented so deliciously in front of her. Education rather than punishment was the Cadet Service way, everyone knew that. She glanced over to her side where three other girls stood in various stages of undress, crying and shivering and waiting their turn to go over her knee to be tenderised before being passed along to Celestine and her cane. The game had been going on for quite some time and showed no signs of abating just yet.

Chapter 13

The White Hart had a sign above the door: “*We Serve the Nation, Not the Nasties.*”

It was a very traditional pub, the way pubs used to be before the previous government had started to close them down claiming they were “hotbeds of white working-class disruption”. Now, the daughter of one of the people who’d organised, Fenella Lancaster knelt with a spray bottle and a squeegee, cleaning the pub’s large front windows as instructed. Behind the glass, inside the warm interior, a group of middle-aged men were already half a pint deep into the afternoon. One of them tapped his glass with a ringed hand and grinned.

“She’s got her mother’s cheekbones, doesn’t she?” he said.

The others laughed. not at the joke, but at *her*. Fenella felt it in the back of her skull. She wiped harder, clearing away invisible smudges as her reflection shimmered back at her, warped by the angle. Inside, the telly played a segment from **Britain Reclaimed**—a panel show where grinning hosts mocked “old liberal propaganda films” with laugh tracks and animated overlays. Her father’s face appeared briefly in an old interview clip. A boot graphic stomped it out. There was applause and the men in the pub raised their glasses.

“To the future,” one of them said. Another banged the window twice. Not to rush her, just to remind her that they were watching.

The pub door jingled as Fenella stepped in, clutching the spray bottle and cloth like a peace offering. The air was warm and thick with beer, wood polish, and that low hum of midday chatter that always died just a little when a cadet entered a room.

“Ah, the star of the window returns,” one of the men said, raising his pint in salute. “Did such a lovely job out there, we thought you might like to do the inside too. Consistency, you know.”

She nodded, the reflex automatic. Her shirt clung to her from the outside work, damp where soap had soaked through, her striped tie clung tightly to her throat like a noose. Her ridiculous, thin schoolboy grey shorts felt tighter somehow now that she was surrounded, no longer on public display, but enclosed, owned by these horrible, uncouth people with their beers and their tattoos.

“Start there,” said the elderly barman, pointing with a dishrag to the inside of the window that she’d just cleaned. “Make it sparkle.”

The window was already mostly clean. She could see the faint marks her cloth had left earlier from outside, ghostly fingerprints and streaks catching the low sun. But the cleanliness or otherwise of the pub’s windows wasn’t the point. As she bent to work, she could feel the eyes. Not loud. Not leering. Just *present*. Watching her. Not for mistakes. Just for the *fact* of her. For the pleasure of witnessing a Lancaster girl, once spotted at awards ceremonies, now scrubbing a sticky pub window while men nursed ales and bantered about football.

One of them set his glass down on the sill just as she was about to wipe it.

“Oops,” he said with a grin. “Am I in your way love?”

She paused, cloth hovering.

“No, sir.” She lied

He didn’t move it.

She cleaned around it. Laughter erupted around her, low and appreciative, cruel laughter. The girl was being put well and truly in her place.

“Her dad was the one who did that climate thing, right?” another man muttered. “Always banging on about diesel emissions. Well, here’s your own personal carbon tax, sweetheart.”

Fenella didn’t answer that particular, ridiculous comment. She knew better. Her silence was her only weapon now. It wasn’t much if she was being honest but it was just about everything she had. Her one method of showing even the slightest dissention, but still something.

“Didn’t he try and shut down this pub once?” Asked another in a slightly threatening, drunken fashion.

When she didn't reply he leaned forward and pinched her bottom painfully. Fenella squealed much to the amusement of his fellow drinkers.

"Answer him you stuck up bitch, demanded another man. "Aren't you supposed to answer our questions? Do you want us to report you?"

Fenella certainly didn't want that. Her bottom twitched involuntarily at the thought of having something forceful applied to it.

"No, sir. Sorry, sir". She replied respectfully.

"No, sir. Sorry, sir". Sniggered a third man doing a passable impression of Fenella's educated, middle-class accent.

She finished one panel and moved to the next. Behind her, someone snapped a photo. She heard the shutter. No attempt to hide it.

"Shame there's not a tip jar," someone joked. "I'd give her a tenner just to curtsy."

"You don't have to tip her to make her curtsy, Terry. Just tell her to do it. She's a servant after all isn't she? She's a servant of the people and we're people aren't we? Curtsy you cheeky little cow.

Sensing the mood changing, Fenella did as she was told to a certain amount of laughter and boozy cheers.

"Again but smile this time, I want to take a picture."

She repeated the action with a smile stitched onto her red, shameful face.

"Now fuck off, we're busy," said one of them giving her a resounding slap to the backs of her bare thighs.

She scurried away. Outside, people passed the pub, saw her through the glass now, saw the proud white shirt, the wet cloth, the flushed face. They smiled and nodded, taking it all in and clearly pleased with what they were witnessing. A world in order, just as the New Government promised them..

"Window's done?" called out the barman from the other side of the room, not looking up from his glass.

"Yes, sir," Fenella replied softly.

"Well, don't just stand there. Make yourself useful. Floors need sweeping. Tables need polishing. You see these lads?" He gestured toward the long oak table where the regulars sat. "Veterans of the cultural war, every one of 'em. You treat this place like a shrine."

There was a cheer and the regulars raised their glasses. They were all veterans of the cultural war and it was a war that they and millions of other working class people had won. Wasn't the sight of Fenella Lancaster scurrying around their pub in her cadet uniform doing her menial chores proof of that?

"Yes, sir."

A push broom was handed to her, old, splintered, the bristles already frayed. She moved toward the end of the room where the floor was sticky with yesterday's spilled cider and crushed peanuts. As she swept, the regulars began to lean back in their chairs, deliberately, legs extended, feet planted wide under the table.

She hesitated.

"Go on, then," one said, grinning. "We're not moving."

She crouched awkwardly, manoeuvring around their ankles, careful not to brush a leg, careful not to let her shirt ride too far up her back. Her cheeks burned. Someone dropped a beer mat as she passed, then another. She stooped each time to pick them up.

Halfway through, one of the men slapped the table twice.

"Cadet!"

She stood instantly, broom stiff in one hand, back straight. Eyes ahead.

"Yes, sir."

"You're one of the Lancaster girls, right? The ginger one from the papers?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell us, then. Were your parents traitors?"

A pause. Not of resistance, just enough time for her to gather her thoughts. The rule was clear; she was required to answer a direct question promptly, respectfully but above all, honestly.

"Yes, sir."

“Did they deserve what they got?”

There was another slight pause.

“Yes, sir.”

“And what do you deserve?”

Her voice was barely above a whisper, but steady.

“Whatever the New Government deems appropriate, sir.”

That got a chuckle from the men around the table. Not cruel laughter. Just... amused. The way one might laugh at a clever dog doing a trick.

“Good girl,” said the one closest to her, lifting his pint. “Now under the table. Let’s see how thorough you are with that broom.”

“Yes, sir.”

She knelt again. The floor was sour and damp, the pub’s afternoon warmth clinging to her skin. She could hear the creak of chairs above her, the wet sounds of mouths drinking, the casual murmur of a government-approved broadcast rolling in the background.

Chapter 14

Somewhere upstairs, a newsreader's voice droned from a bedroom TV.

"Tomorrow, Cadets will participate in the Honour Procession, celebrating two years of National Renewal. Citizens are encouraged to attend, and to bring tokens of appreciation for the girls who serve with such humility."

Zoe blinked, and then closed her eyes. She imagined what appreciation might feel like. Not applause. Not pity. Just the vague normality of being seen and not judged. Perhaps the Procession would be a good thing? At least she'd be outside and away from the horrible Wetherills for a time. She might even meet some of the girls from cadets that she knew. Whatever, she definitely needed a break from the daily grind of the Wetherill house.

The morning was colder than usual. Zoe noticed it in her knees first pressing against stone tile as she knelt to polish the Wetherills' hallway skirting boards for the second time that week. Her back ached. Her hands were cracked from diluted bleach. Her collar was pinching. She didn't complain. She never did, because what good would that do?. And then, at breakfast, the axe fell. Mr. Wetherill cleared his throat dramatically before reading aloud from a slip of red Party-issued paper.

"NOTICE: Cadet Z. Mendel will not be participating in the upcoming Honour Procession, having failed to demonstrate the appropriate temperament, humility, and ideological clarity befitting the occasion. This decision is final and requires no justification."

He set it down next to his teacup with a smile like it was just another piece of mail. Zoe froze in the kitchen doorway, her tray still held in both hands. She didn't understand at first. She thought maybe it was a mistake. Her name read out wrong. Or a different Zoe. Or someone else's form. Then Mrs. Wetherill laughed out loud.

"Oh, don't look so shocked, girl. You didn't think they'd let *you* march, did you? You're not exactly poster girl material are you, let's be fair? Look at the size of you! And those nasty spectacles! No, Mrs Wetherill and I thought it best if you didn't attend this year. You don't want to spoil it for everyone, do you?"

"I...I've done everything asked of me," Zoe said quietly. Her voice cracked in the middle, uninvited.

Mr. Wetherill raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, yes, you scrubbed and swept. You took orders. But you don't look grateful, girl. You look *resentful*. That's the problem with your kind. You serve like it's a sentence, not a privilege. You don't smile and you don't thank us nearly enough for all our hard work"

Zoe stared at the floor. Her throat tightened. Her eyes stung. She bit the inside of her cheek hard, but it didn't stop the heat rising.

"You were going to get your fancy sash and be clapped down the high street like a good little cautionary tale," Mrs. Wetherill added with mock sweetness. "Now you'll be here, with us, where you belong."

The tray in Zoe's hands began to tremble. One of the mugs rattled. She quickly set it down, turned, and tried to leave.

"Stop right there," Mr. Wetherill barked.

Zoe froze.

"Face us."

She did. Slowly. Her eyes were glassy now. Lower lip trembling. Mrs. Wetherill leaned forward in her chair, delighted.

"Oh, is she crying? *Is she?* That took longer than I expected."

Zoe's mouth opened, but no words came out. And then, finally, the tears came. Not quiet ones. Not the hidden, shameful streaks she'd fought off day after day. These were full, red-faced sobs that broke past every defence. Her hands clenched at her sides. Her breath caught in her throat. Her vision blurred completely. The Wetherills meanwhile just sat and watched her. There was no comfort, no shame, only a sort of ill-disguised glee.

Mr. Wetherill leaned back, folding his arms.

“Now *that’s* more like it. That’s what humility looks like. Get the camera, Iris, let’s get a picture of the silly fat bitch sobbing her eyes out. They love that sort of thing on The Civic Channel.”

Chapter 15

The whistle blew sharp and cold at 10:00 a.m. on the dot. By that time Alice was already kneeling. She'd learned not to wait. Her fingers, numb from the wind, gripped the brush tighter as she began scrubbing the edge of the war memorial. The rain wasn't heavy, but persistent, a steady mist that soaked through the starched cotton of her shirt. The sleeves clung to her arms in an uncomfortable fashion. Her tie, sky blue and yellow, had darkened to a dull grey near the knot.

A dozen children from the local school stood nearby under a canopy, chewing on boiled sweets and sipping hot squash. Their teacher, Mrs. Carrick, had explained the importance of today's demonstration. The subject was already printed at the top of their writing pads

"Visible remorse is the first step toward true civic belonging."

Alice scrubbed harder.

"Make it shine, Lady Morton," a confident boy called. "I want to see my face in it!"

There was a good deal of laughter but Alice didn't look up. She knew the rules. No talking unless spoken to directly. No eye contact with civilians unless explicitly required. No resting. No sitting. No adjusting the uniform without permission. The stone beneath her brush was already clean, but she kept scrubbing, slower now, just enough motion to avoid the overseer's cane across her thin grey shorts.

A drone buzzed nearby, low, deliberate. It hovered just behind her shoulder, the lens angled down as if anxious not to miss a second of her public humiliation. The red indicator light blinked once, just to remind her that she was being recorded and that every nuance of her behaviour was being saved in high definition and then relayed back to a film studio somewhere. Somewhere warm and dry, thought Alice miserably.

"Cadet Morton," came the voice of the overseer, Mr. Harvey today. She rose to her knees and turned to face him, following as he led her to a spot in front of the assembled audience sheltering under their canopy.

The tears were already threatening. Part of her didn't want to cry, to give them the satisfaction of knowing that they were getting to her. Put another part of her knew that she was expected to cry, to show contrition, to apologise. Otherwise how else could hundreds of thousands of ordinary people from up and down the country possibly know that the Cadet Service was effective and therefore they were having their justifiable revenge over their former superiors?

"Yes, sir," she said softly.

"Tell these pupils why you're here."

Alice swallowed but kept her chin up while she replied, promptly, respectfully and truthfully, just as the cadet rulebook demanded that she did..

"I'm here," she began, voice cracking almost on cue, "because my family spoke against the unity of the nation. Because they believed themselves above service and because they failed to see the truth."

"And you?" Asked Mr Harvey.

"I see it now," she whispered. "I see what they cost us."

One tear, then two. It was real, sort of. That was the trick, they didn't want fake grief. They wanted grief that you believed while it was happening.

A girl in the crowd asked, "Did your mum really say that our Prime Minister was a monster?"

Alice looked at the overseer.

"Answer her," he said.

She nodded. "Yes. She did. And she was wrong."

More silence. The kind that made her skin crawl with humiliation.

"Say you're sorry," said the same girl.

Alice looked her dead in the eye. "I'm sorry."

The girl smiled like she'd won something.

The whistle blew again.

Alice turned and hurriedly made her way back to scrubbing. The ugly concrete memorial wasn't going anywhere and she knew that she'd be made to stay there all night if necessary until she'd cleaned it to their satisfaction.

Later that afternoon the rain still hadn't relented, but the children were long gone, herded back to their minibus, their laughter replaced by silence. The war memorial gleamed. Alice had polished it until her fingers blistered inside the white cotton gloves, now transparent with rain. But still Mr Harvey hadn't dismissed her. She remained kneeling, soaking, the stone still beneath her. The drone shifted in front of her now, hovering low, barely a metre from her face. Its lens blinked red in rhythm with the beating of her pulse.

A small speaker crackled. Somewhere, someone behind a desk was watching. She could almost feel the breath of whoever it was on the back of her neck, deciding whether this moment was going to be used in that evening's broadcast.

"Recite your family record," the voice came. It was distorted and tinny but it was still one that couldn't be ignored.

Alice closed her eyes, rain streaking her lashes. Her voice was quiet but obedient.

"Father: Anthony Morton. Former MP. Charged with wilful disunity, misinformation, and subversion. Currently detained in Permanent Custodial Facility 12C."

"Mother?"

"Dr. Celia Morton. Academic. Former Chair of Comparative History at LSE. Charged with ideological incitement and cultural disloyalty. Status: reclassified. Education license revoked."

"Personal reflection?"

A pause. The drone moved in even closer in so that she could hear the motor whine.

"I should have known," Alice whispered. "I should have seen it in them. I should have spoken out sooner. They gave me everything except the truth."

There was silence on the line.

Then: "Continue cleaning."

No thanks. No dismissal. Just continuation.

She turned back to the monument, heart thudding against the starched wall of her shirt. The tie was choking now, a rope of identity that pulled tighter every time she bent forward.

As she scrubbed at the imaginary dirt, she imagined people watching her on screens. Penelope.Smile. ProperEndings. FaithfulMother22, all of the faceless people behind their pseudonyms. Laughing at her, nodding along with the narrative being pushed by the Grey Channel and its many imitators. All the hateful comments, all the smug complacent people behind those comments that she'd been made to read out during her reflection settings. Telling their daughters, "*See what happens when you inherit treason.*"

She was wet, cold and ashamed. But inside her, somewhere beneath the forced apologies and the empty repetition, was a. A room full of books and her mother's laughter. The way her father had once said, "Never be afraid to speak up." She bent her head lower, brushing harder. The tears came again, salt mixing with rain. They would probably love that she thought mutinously.

Chapter 16

Vanessa Collingwood, business partner of Mark Grey and co-inspiration for the Grey Channel was in her element. She was lying naked on her bed apart for an unbuttoned white shirt, her head propped up against a pillow and scrolling casually through her phone. Between her legs knelt a fully uniformed cadet, pretty, blonde Mary Ellwood was strictly straight and had never even considered licking out another girl, much less a mature 40 something woman. But here she was kneeling subserviently on a bed and doing exactly that.

It wasn't as if Mary had a choice in the matter. She'd already been caned several times by the irascible woman and she had been in the house for barely a week. Plus and this was a huge advantage, she wasn't labouring on a cold wet farm up to her ankles in pig shit and slurry. Instead she was in a spectacular, modern mansion perched on a cliff overlooking the sea. The woman sat above her casually scrolling through her phone was some sort of Party bigwig by the sound of things.

She didn't do very much but she seemed to be very, very rich anyway. The house was enormous and incredible on the inside. It clearly needed looking after and for that Miss Collingwood, as she liked to be known had a large staff of cadet girls, attractive blonde cadet girls Mary couldn't help but notice. She'd discovered, largely through the different colours of their ties that they were from all over the country. Clearly Miss Collingwood had serious connections if she could acquire so many cadets from so many different places.

She was a cruel woman, and that was really saying something in the country they lived in nowadays. She was clearly an aggressive, predatory lesbian who took great pleasure in subjugating the many pretty young things she liked to surround herself with. There wasn't a man on the scene, apart from her driver cum handyman, Mr Jackson. But she did have a partner, a younger black woman, Cassie, who was just as cruel and just as perverse as Miss Collingwood. Cassie carried her stick with her virtually everywhere she went.

It was in reality a long, lithe cane with a green leather loop for her wrist. It was not only a symbol of the black woman's authority in the house, but also a liberally used method of control. Not one day had passed without Mary feeling the intense sting of it as it was applied to the thin grey cotton of her shorts or the palms of her hands. And of course she wasn't alone. The crack of the cane or the deeper thwack of Miss Collingwood's leather paddle were very regular occurrences in the house.

There was a deep sense of discipline and repression. The cadets scurried about their business like so many cowed mice. One of the first things that Miss Collingwood had done when Mary had arrived from that hellish farm was to wash and bathe her and then attach a thin plastic collar around her throat. It wasn't tight or obtrusive, certainly not as tight and constricting as the starched, stiff shirt collars she was required to wear for almost every occasion. Indeed it was barely noticeable when she was in uniform.

But what she didn't know until it was too late was that the collar contained a very high-tec microphone which picked up every word she said with incredible clarity. The first time she discovered what the collar really was when she was called to the playroom by Miss Collingwood and Cassie and instructed to watch the giant screen in the far wall. There she could see herself carrying out her duties in ultra high definition. Which didn't surprise Mary in the slightest, as the modern house was riddled with cameras and gadgetry.

She watched for a while as she passed by other cadets, head down and carrying out their own chores until Cassie stepped forward and pressed a button,

"and what do you think of that mean bitch, Cassie? She caned me this morning for nothing...the cow."

Mary could feel the blood freezing in her veins. Oh God, they could hear everything too! No wonder the other girls hadn't replied to her questions. She had thought they looked scared, and now she knew why. Even before she could begin to apologise, Cassie had seized her by the ponytail and led her to an upright pillory in the corner of the playroom, making her crouch slightly before locking her hands and her

neck in it. Then Cassie had caned her, really caned her. Her earlier punishments had been love bites compared to this.

Full blooded strokes inflicted with Cassie's not inconsiderable strength soon had her howling for mercy, feet stamping and bottom squirming desperately to avoid the biting cane. She felt Miss Collingwood crouch by her side and then raise her chin with one finger.

"You belong to me now girl, at least until I tire of you and send you back to the farm, or anywhere else that takes my fancy. While you're here I strongly advise you to behave yourself and do as you're told. You're an enemy of the people and you need to be reformed like all the others. The difference is that now that I've decided to take a personal interest in you and your rehabilitation. And that means you must live up to my standards...or else. Do you understand me?"

Her slate grey eyes bored into Mary's. She could only nod her response and then add a hurried

"Yes, Miss C...Collingwood."

Vanessa smiled and stroked her cheek.

"There's a good little girl, I'm happy to hear that. Although Cassie isn't very happy which isn't surprising when you consider all the nasty names you called her. Anyway, she's going to give you another 10 strokes but this time with your shorts pulled down to your ankles. Which I'm afraid is only what you deserve."

"Nooo! Please...no"

Alice struggled frantically but it was to no avail. The muscular black woman behind her simply hugged her close and then unfastened her tiny shorts before slipping them down her legs where they rested around her ankles and prevented her kicking. Then Cassie stepped back before bringing the cane forward with a savage hiss. Even the little protection her shorts had offered was gone and the pain inflicted by the woman's cane was simply agonising. Mary howled and begged.

"Only nine more to go, cadet. After each one I want you to tell us your full name and why you're in cadets

Swiish!

"My name is Mary Frances Elwood," she said. "I am here to earn back the trust my family betrayed. To feed those my father neglected. To serve, and be seen serving."

Swiish.

"owowowwo"

"Again!"

"My name is M...Mary Frances Elwood, I am here to earn back the trust my family betrayed. To feed those my father neglected. To serve, and be seen serving."

Swiish.

Chapter 17

Chantelle Evans was quite pleasantly surprised by the sheer volume of feedback that she got from her uploaded Deepika video.

“Good to see her type being made to work for once!”

“Serve the bitch right.”

“That white shirt looks so good on a brown girl,”

So many people enjoyed it, that the Grey Channel bought it off her when it reached the required threshold of views and likes which was a nice little bonus. Her next clip however, a random cadet girl being made to lug heavy goods around a market stall didn't have a tenth of the views and very little feedback. So Chantelle decided to do a little research of her own and discover if it was the subject matter or the cadet involved that was the issue.

By checking the roster pinned up in the town square Chantelle found that by chance Deepika had been rostered to go in to the market the following day and decided to follow her there. It was a busy market day and the Asian girl was being worked hard by a stallholder there, a friend of Chantelle's. He was making her carry particularly heavy items from his van to his stall by hand, using the excuse that he had “forgotten” to bring his trolley.

Instead Chantelle watched as Deepika struggled towards her weighed down with a sack of potatoes slung over her shoulder. It was an opportunity too good to miss, the bookish, thin, educated middle-class Indian girl being used as a labourer in a market. Chantelle sniggered to herself as she pointed her phone at the perspiring cadet whose uniform shirt was now grubby and sticking to her with sweat.

“Not so high and mighty now, Cadet Kapoor?” She enquired with a malicious grin. “What do you have to say to all the people you and your sort took advantage of?”

She thrust the phone into Deepika's face preventing her from moving forwards. The strain of carrying the heavy bag etched on her pretty face.

“I...I'm sorry,” was all she could think of to say.

Still Chantelle wouldn't move instead she pushed the phone even nearer to Deepika's face just in time to catch the first plump tears rolling down her brown cheeks.

“Where are those bloody potatoes, girl!?” Demanded a gruff, uneducated voice from somewhere off camera which clearly startled Deepika. “Get a bloody move on you snooty little bitch!”

“Excuse me, m...miss,” stuttered Deepika, trying to edge around Chantelle as she blocked the narrow path between two stalls.

Chantelle didn't move, instead she kept filming and with a little despairing yelp the bag slipped slowly from Deepika's slim shoulder and crashed to the floor splitting the bag and spilling the contents all over the muddy earth. Almost at the same instant the aggrieved store owner, Mr Trotter appeared with a garden cane in his hand which he swept against the backs of Deepika's bare thighs with a loud crack. She squealed loudly and danced away trying to avoid Mr Trotter's wrath but he landed another couple of stingers before ordering her down on her hands and knees to pick up everything that she'd dropped.

The result was captured in high detail by Chantelle and to her pleasure she was the only one filming the amusing incident. Deepika Kapoor beloved daughter of an anti New Government film director having her bottom and thighs caned by a lout from a market while she scrabbled about in the dirt on her knees picking up potatoes and apologising.

“If only her traitorous mother could see her now,” breathed Chantelle into the microphone over the noise of Mr Trotter slapping Deepika's skinny brown legs for her.

Chantelle's instincts had proved to be correct. She followed the same plan as last time and uploaded the short video to her favourite Civic Channel. Within seconds her phone started to ping with messages.

“Silly bitch needs teaching a lesson!”

“Can u get her a job there full time?”

Deepika it seemed was a star in the making. She was becoming very popular. Chantelle had tagged her #deepikakapoor and #cadetdeepikakapoor and watched delightedly as it was reposted again and again by Deepika’s seemingly growing band of devoted followers. Once again her film was bought by the Grey Channel, and this time for more money than the first one and had even more views, likes and comments than the original.

Chantelle smiled and wondered if she ought to upload the aftermath of the market incident, the Indian girl on her knees in the privacy of the stall giving Bob Trotter the benefit of an enthusiastic blowjob. Not necessarily an expert blowjob, she was clearly too inexperienced for that, but an enthusiastic one because irascible old Mr Trotter had promised to “properly stripe her Paki arse for her” if she couldn’t make him cum in the next five minutes.

Chantelle had made her film, focussing on Deepika’s face as Bob’s impressive cock pumped in and out of her mouth and chartered the passage of the mixture of snot and tears that slid humiliatingly down her cheeks until with a slight groan he withdrew and ejaculated all over her pretty, brown face. As his seed dripped off her chin onto her no longer pristine white shirt Chantelle reminded herself to look for a sight like the Grey Channel that was just a little bit more... adult in nature.

The sites did exist, Chantelle had seen them on social media, stills of cadets being made to orally service or simply getting fucked by their masters and mistresses. The Grey Channel, easily the most popular subscription in the country liked to advertise itself as a sort of educational repository of how those guilty of offences against the state so that sort of thing was off limits as far as they were concerned. Not off limits personally of course, not off limits to its trusted “unlimited” tier, senior party members, donors, and friends it wished to influence.

All of these people could get access to everything the Grey Channel filmed. But there were also many other sites that had sprung up where private individuals, people like Chantelle could upload all sorts of things that while not specifically encouraged by the New Government, weren’t officially discouraged either. In the opinion of its political planners, keeping the opposition down by any means available to them was acceptable.

Chapter 18

Denise Holdridge went by the name of PatriotMum75. She was 60 years old, a retired school secretary and a part time moderator for the social network, “*Civic Homemakers*”. Her biography described her as

“Proud Brit. Proud Mum. Proud to see the nation cleaned up—one girl at a time. #DisciplineIsLove #NewBritainForever”

She was one of those people that always seemed to be involved in everything. She had lots of like-minded friends who were kind and generous to each other in that fake way that women in a groups sometimes have. But although they did have their personal differences they were all united by one thing. Their love for the New Government, and their absolute certainty that it was dealing with the previous regime and the daughters of its biggest supporters.

As they chatted and watched the Grey channel over a cup of morning coffee they liked to discuss how the New Government was “finally putting things right”. Or even better they’d take an afternoon out together and watch cadets being put through their paces. They liked to watch and offer loud advice to the observers or the Cadet management teams regarding the work ethic or the attitude of individual cadets who they did or didn’t approve of. Denise also liked to take snapshots for her personal use which she kept in a private folder labelled “Pride in Our Girls.” And, if she considered it necessary she’d write a stiffly worded letter to *Discipline Weekly* when a cadet is shown smiling

“Civic Homemakers “was supported by a small but devoted and growing audience of other women in her 50s and 60s. Denise added to it every day and tended it as if it was her baby. Her readership liked to share inspirational quotes like: “*Obedience is the seed of order*” over images of weeping cadets. And, once she’d discovered hashtags, she liked to use them as often as she could

#GratefulCitizen

#CleanGirlsClub

#TeaBeforeTreason

Her posts were invariably things like “Just watched Zoe M. this morning! She dropped the teacup! But bless her, she picked it up and *apologized twice*. That’s growth. That’s the system working. #TearsAndTies.” Or a **post** of a folded cadet uniform on a drying line.

“Washed and ironed a spare set for the Civic Depot. It’s the least I can do. #SupportOurScrubbers

Or a comment on a Grey Channel live stream which might say something like

“Some of these girls really do blossom under guidance. It’s what they needed all along. Why weren’t we doing this ten years ago?”

Denise Holdridge was already dressed in her decorous tartan skirt, party-blazer, and brooch of the Union Jack. She poured boiling water into two mismatched mugs, one marked “*Best Mum Ever*”, the other with a Civic Renewal logo she got for free after submitting a winning cadet photo to *Discipline Weekly*. She opened the blinds just enough. She liked the morning light on her begonias. She liked being able to see the front path. And right on time, there she was. A sturdy, ruddy-faced girl in a perfect uniform. Stiff collar, green and white tie tightly knotted. Holding a clipboard and a bucket like a nervous child Cadet Leah Norwood aged 20. Quiet. Clean. And for the next six hours, hers.

Denise watched over her glasses as Leah scrubbed the baseboards. The girl was careful, diligent. Denise liked that.

“You don’t need to kneel that low, dear,” she said cheerfully. “We’re not savages. But I suppose you know best now.”

Denise didn’t answer, she wasn’t supposed to unless directly asked.

“You’re a neat little thing,” Denise went on. “Makes you wonder what on earth your parents were thinking. Do you know I used to work in a school? Secretary to the Head. I could spot a troublemaker by how they held a pencil. And your lot...” she shook her head, “you never fooled me.”

Leah moved to the skirting under the bookcase.

“Oh, mind the files,” Denise said, placing a hand gently on a locked drawer. “That’s my collection. Just old Civic articles. And photos.”

Leah didn’t look up; she hadn’t been asked to discuss the point.

After a short break, tea for Denise, nothing for Leah, Denise didn’t approve of a girl who was on domestic, it was time for Recitation Practice, part of the Cadet Enrichment Scheme.

Denise printed out a list of state-approved slogans and stood behind Leah while she read them aloud, voice trembling slightly.

“I am grateful to serve.”

“Obedience is order.”

“Civic peace begins with personal duty.”

“Slower,” Denise instructed. “Mean it. You don’t want it to sound memorised, do you?”

Leah tried again, blushing a little at the implied rebuke,

Denise went to her drawer and took out her long wooden ruler. She tapped it meaningfully against her own palm before instructing Leah to hold out both her small hands in front of her, palms facing upwards. Denise was gratified to see tears already forming in the girl’s pretty, dark eyes.

“Let’s try again shall we, from the beginning?”

Leah took a deep breath and tried to slow her rapidly beating heart

“I am grateful to serve.”

Denise brought the ruler down smartly on Leah’s left hand making her squeal a little and bite her upper lip.

“Better dear, but not quite what I’m after. Let’s try again. I have plenty of time but I must insist that we get this sort of basic stuff right.”

“I am grateful to serve.” Repeated Leah and said with all the sincerity that she could muster.

“There. Lovely,” Denise said, beaming. “You’ll make someone very proud one day.”

The day carried on in much the same way, physical chores around the house interspersed with educational aspects where Denise checked how her cadet understood the petty rules and regulations that dictated so much of her life. Which in turn were interspersed with spankings, criticism and at one stage the application of the leather paddle to her already sore backside.

At the end of the day, and as per Civic Engagement Guidelines, Denise was entitled to a souvenir photo of the cadet’s visit. She took Leah out into the garden, had her kneel beside the roses, and took four photos, one smiling with her blazer on and then removed. And then one neutral in the same style.

“You can go now, dear,”

Denise said kindly and without further ado. What was the point of thanking a cadet for doing her duty? It would be like applauding a soldier for marching properly during squad drills. Leah rose, saluted, and left without a word. Denise watched her go and then stood in her garden for a long moment after. She checked the photo on her phone. Later that evening she would enjoy an amusing hour or so deciding which one to upload to “*Civic Homemakers*”, which one to masturbate to and then save to her private folder, “*Pride in Our Girls*.”

Chapter 19

Mark, Vanessa and the Sandwells were gathered around the round table in the sumptuous meeting room at Mark's city centre penthouse. The discussion, as befitted four very wealthy individuals was civilised, polite and centred on money and power. There was another person at the table with them, a representative from the New Government. Her Name was Marla Kennedy and it was rumoured she was the woman behind the throne in the New Government hierarchy. She was Nigerian by origin, tall, black and imperious. There were numerous stories circulating about her cruelty and her vicious temper.

Although when she wanted to be Marla was very charming and agreeable, and this was one of those occasions. Marla wanted something and the owners of the Grey Channel were the only people that could help her. Once the small talk was over and the drinks had been served by two very attractive cadets, Marla got down to business. First she praised the channel and its four owners, they were she said, accredit to the country and "living breathing examples of what benefits skill and ingenuity to the country."

Mark and Vanessa were both clearly appreciative, but the Sandwells, the veterans of many such meetings with all sorts of government figures over the years were a little more wary. Sending someone as influential as Marla Kennedy to the meeting was a clear indication that the New Government meant business.

"We've followed your successes over the past couple of years with interest," said the black woman. "It's been an inspirational journey."

Mark nodded. "Thank you."

"However, we have an idea that may well be beneficial for all of us."

Here it comes, thought Ambrose with a slight smile, an order hidden as a request.

"The cadet scheme has been a resounding success and long may that last. The figures regarding the control, the eradication almost of resistance among young people, especially ideologically confused young people can't be argued with. That, as perhaps your viewers could ascertain, is well in hand."

Celestine exhaled very quietly, she had thought for a minute that Kennedy had come to tell them that the government was about to abandon the cadet scheme and that their adventure was over, but apparently not. Vanessa caught her eye and gave a barely perceptible nod, clearly that thought had crossed her mind too. Marla must have caught it as well because she smiled showing her bright, white teeth.

"Rest assured we see the link between the New Government and the Grey Channel as an extremely valuable one that we certainly wish to maintain. However, as I mentioned earlier, we have an idea that may be advantageous to both parties. We think it would be beneficial to extend the cadet scheme."

Mark Grey blinked slightly as he digested the news.

"Extend it how exactly?" He asked.

"How old are the cadets? Asked Marla rhetorically.

"The youngest are 18, the older ones in their mid twenties," replied Mark.

"That's a very good grouping, just in time to catch the ones who didn't attend a school approved by us. However we have a plan. How about extending the scheme to take in all politically awkward women from say 22 upwards? That would increase your pool of available... talent and would support what the New Government is trying to do."

Mark felt his heart thump. My God! Imagine the possibilities? The political enemies of the New Government rounded up into schemes specifically designed to neutralise them. He made himself focus on the rest of what Marla was saying.

"And while I'm clearly no expert and I couldn't possibly imagine telling you good patriots how to do your job. It strikes me that perhaps having to distinct and separate channels run by you but with our complete backing might well prove to be extremely fruitful for both our organisations."

Celestine leaned across and whispered something into her brother's ear. Mark rubbed his hand down his chin appreciatively. Ever the pragmatist, Vanessa asked a question.

"What about the ones already imprisoned?"

Marla smiled.

“That’s a very good question. First of all we prefer the term “detained for their own safety.” And in answer to your question we would call an amnesty and release every female political prisoner...but only if she agrees to enrol on a course for adults similar to cadets, but with its own distinct, but humiliating identity. The government is quite prepared to leave all those details in your evidently capable hands.”

Mark had to prevent himself from applauding. Christ, what an idea! Not only did the government get the kudos from releasing its political enemies, it got to keep a tight grip on them and also get paid for the privilege.

“The financials remain the same presumably? It’s a very expensive scheme to administer and if we go ahead with this, it will be at least twice as expensive.” Asked Celestine.

Marla looked around rather pointedly at the spectacular apartment and at the incredible views of the city skyline. She smiled again but with rather less humour.

“We think we deserve 20% rather than the 10% we’re getting.”

Ambrose glanced enquiringly at Mark and Vanessa on the other side of the table. He didn’t bother to check with his sister, he already knew what she thought. Both nodded, they automatically deferred to the Sandwells when money was involved, as most people soon learned to.

“We’re happy to shake hands at 12.5 plus specific benefits.”

Vanessa looked at Mark incredulously. Shit, the Sandwell’s were trying to negotiate with the New Government! A number of seconds ticked by. Mark licked his lips nervously; Marla Kennedy certainly didn’t look like a woman that could be fucked with. He looked straight at her, willing her to...

“15% and let’s talk about those specific benefits, I’m intrigued.”

Mark stood up to shake the black woman’s hand and called for champagne. It looked as if another chapter in his life was about to begin.

The End