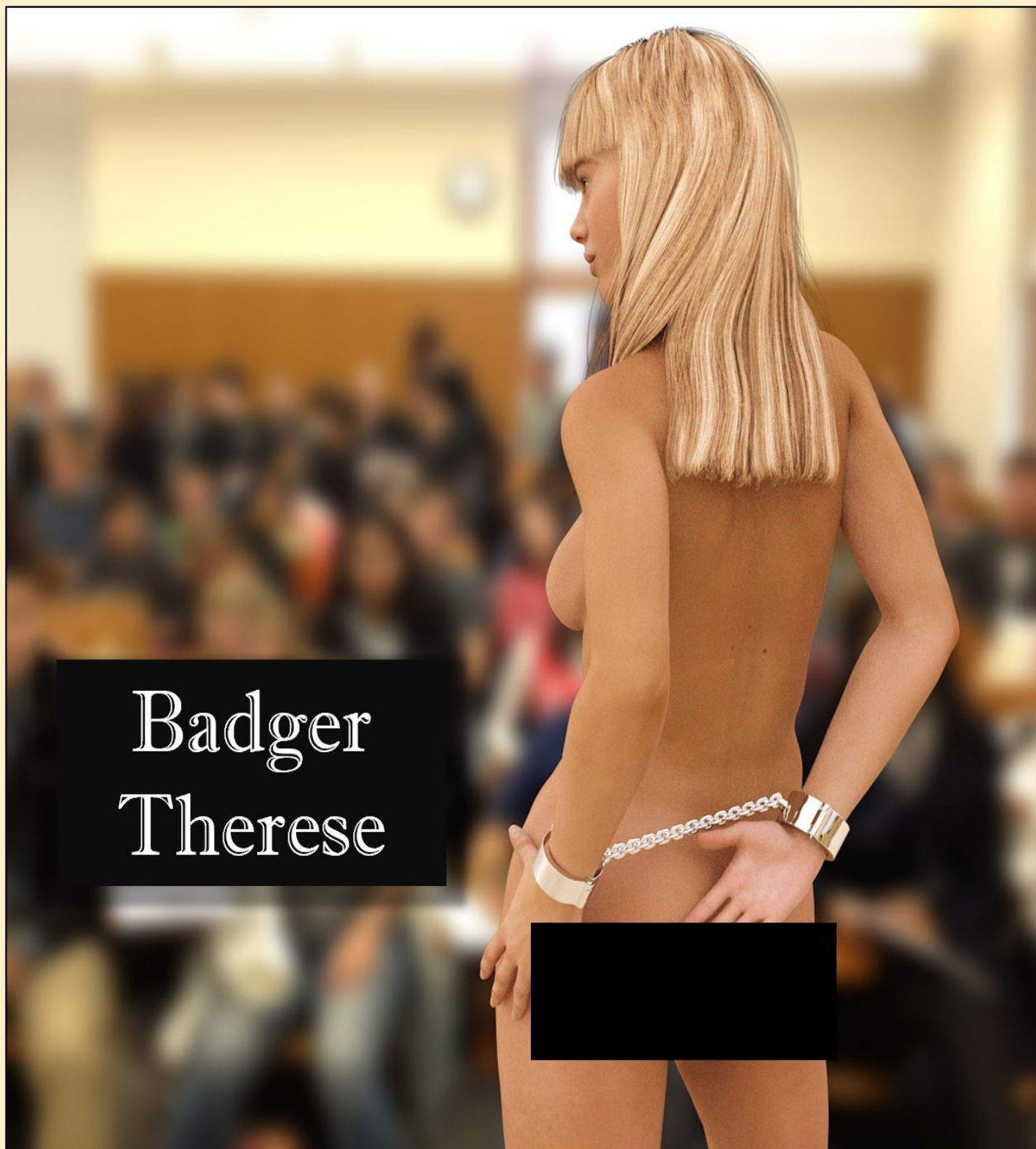


Female, Recreational II: Kenneled



Badger
Therese

Female, Recreational II: Kenneled
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(uncensored image appears at Chapter 55)
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Chapter 1: A Meeting with Ormek

Hannah, working feverishly to solve what seemed to be an intractable problem in differential calculus before the lights went off, heard the bump of the elevator, immediately knew who it was and why she was there.

“Hannah?” Laura queried, still out of sight. If Hannah were on the toilet or otherwise indisposed, it was understood that she could ask Laura to come back in a few minutes. But she was neither, so she raised her eyes from her book and the pencil-scrawled sheets of paper scattered across her desk.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

Laura rounded the corner, standing at the bars of Hannah’s cage.

“How are you doing?”

“I’m not sure how to solve a problem,” Hannah said, rising to stand, nude and unembarrassed before the woman. Denied clothing except when she left the house or certain guests were over, she’d grown used to a state of dress that, less than a year ago, was unimaginable. “I’ll be better when I can get through it.”

“Are you looking forward to seeing Allain?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said, her face brightening. After a long, difficult spring semester, Allain would be returning from medical school, staying for much of the summer with his family, and with the girl they euphemistically called their subject, Hannah. There would be dinners at the club, picnics with friends, hours in pools. And she would service him, gladly, whenever he wanted, or even when he didn’t want.

And she and Allain had made plans, tentative so far, to go camping. It was something Hannah had never done and very much wanted to do, even though she knew that federal campgrounds had strange rules, about how she was monitored, where she was kept at night.

“He mentioned you every time he texted me this week,” Laura said. “I know he misses you a lot.”

“He’s seen me almost every other weekend,” Hannah observed, with a modesty she knew Laura and the rest of the family found endearing. “I’m sure he’s tired of me.”

Laura laughed, and moved on to the real reason for her visit.

“While Allain is here,” Laura began, “you will not be meeting with Ormek.”

“No, Ma’am,” Hannah agreed.

Dr. Ormek Petrosyan, the father of Allain and Athena, the husband of Laura, visited Hannah in her basement cage two or three times a week, always at night, to discreetly avail himself of her services.

Their “meetings,” as Laura called them, were always preceded by a visit from Laura. Often enough, as tonight, she restated the rules, already very familiar to Hannah:

“You’ll serve him as you always do.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah agreed.

“You won’t speak to him, or touch or kiss.”

“No, Ma’am, of course not, Ma’am.”

“There is no reason you would ever need to mention this to anyone else.”

“Oh no, not at all, Ma’am.”

“Expect him in about 15 minutes.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said, glancing at the little clock on the table against the wall, under the wide barred windows set high. Looking there, she could see the sky during the day, the stars at night.

It was almost 11.

Laura stepped back to the elevator and, to Hannah’s dismay, turned off the light.

She sat on her bed and stared into the darkness, lit only by a nightlight near the elevator, toward the random furniture beyond the bars she rarely used: a couch, an old office chair, a table, a recliner.

She attempted to work the problem in her mind again, but without her notes and the details of the challenge before her, she was lost.

Why did it matter, though? How would solving one more problem in differential calculus change anything? She was property, bought for a ridiculous sum, as much for her face as for her body. Allain loved to show her off, to take her into a room where no one knew him. They’d see her face, her shape, and her collar – the thin, light gray metal around her neck, without a keyhole, meant to be as close to permanent as her fillings – and they’d know she was his. His property, his girl, his slave. People could look at her and know someone had paid a great deal for her – maybe Allain,

maybe someone else, and it didn't matter. She was on his arm. That's all that mattered.

She was property. That was the big truth. The facts, that she was smart, that she was devouring knowledge, that she was beginning a path toward a bachelor's degree in physics – these were small truths, illusions she was creating for herself to hide who – what – she really was.

She shook her head, rubbed her face and chided herself. She would not give in to doubt, she told herself. She was doing what she had to do, regardless the ultimate outcome.

She glanced at the clock again – 11:10. Ormek would be arriving soon, and she wasn't ready for him. It was understood that she would be wet when he appeared at her bars. He would not need to do anything to arouse her, to get her lubrication flowing. How she wetted herself was her business. Touching, masturbating, thinking, fantasizing, whatever.

She pulled her legs up, spreading her thighs, and put her right middle finger against her vulva. She was ovulating, the thin honey she produced that time of the month waiting for her.

She ran her finger from her opening to her clitoris, circled the little knob briefly, and thought about Ormek – the way he felt, the way he used her, the way he had looked at her during dinner tonight – and her hole was ready.

Something was changing between them, subtly. Maybe it was the fact Allain was coming home, and they both knew their time together, sporadic and fleeting as it had been, was drawing to a close, at least temporarily.

At dinner, she told a joke, at Ormek's expense, and had apparently gotten away with it.

Athena had been talking a great deal, about two friends in conflict, until Laura interrupted: "Athena, please finish your dinner, so you and Hannah can get through your homework."

"Eat like your father drives," Hannah admonished.

Athena laughed immediately and hysterically. Hannah's irreverence, particularly when it was expressed toward other family members, was a source of constant joy for Athena.

Her reverie ended when the elevator bumped. Hannah went to the bars.

Ormek appeared in the gloom and Hannah studied his outline, confirming that he was fully erect. His penis – like his son's – was thick and long, and it stuck straight out when he was aroused.

For the most part, they obeyed Laura's rules, but there were small things they did, a sort of ritual that had evolved since their first time together, last fall, that violated the spirit of Laura's instructions while following the letter. Or vice versa.

Ormek could not see well in the dark, it seemed. Perhaps it was true, or perhaps it was pretense, but after several sessions in which he seemed unable to find her through the bars, she took to standing up against them, pressing her front against them, allowing Ormek to reach out, until he found her belly, his hands rising from there to her ribs, stopping when he reached her breasts, squeezing softly, his fingers moving to her nipples. He would pinch them, pulling them away from her body, as if he could confirm her place in the cage only by doing so.

The first time he did it, Hannah waited in silence, enduring the discomfort until he let go. The second time, a few nights later, she uttered a short gasp, because what he was doing hurt, or almost hurt. As soon as the breath left her body, he let go, and Hannah understood that he was training her. He wanted her to make a noise. He wanted to hear her voice, even if it was nothing more than a wordless sigh, an "ahh."

Tonight, in accordance with the custom, Hannah offered her body at the edge of her cage, and his hands found her hips, her belly.

Instead of rising to her breasts together, however, something new happened: one hand dropped to her mound, exploring her there. It had been almost three weeks since she'd tended it, and the golden pubic hair had grown thick.

Ormek's hand cupped the triangle of fur, pressed a finger against her clitoris, then against her lips, then neared her opening. She spread her legs reflexively, breathing in when a single finger arrived at the door to her chamber.

She grabbed the bars and angled her pelvis forward, expecting to be penetrated. Perhaps Ormek had gotten permission from Laura to touch her this way tonight. Perhaps he was breaking the rules. Either way, there was nothing to be said. Hannah was here to cooperate.

But as soon as it had arrived at her sex, the finger was gone, Ormek's hands tracing their usual path up her belly, across her ribs,

stopping at her chest.

She braced as her hardened nipples yielded to Ormek's control, each between a thumb and forefinger, being drawn forth, breasts extending beyond the bars, being stretched out.

She waited until his little torture had brought her to the threshold of pain, and then she groaned, quietly, and he released her, her breasts dropping and bouncing in the darkness.

It had occurred to Hannah to propose something new, that would make things easier for both of them, but until tonight, when the rules seemed more flexible, she'd refrained.

She whispered into the darkness.

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Would you like me to get my chair?"

"Why?" came the voice.

"I'll use it. To hold myself in position."

"Yes," Ormek said, more a breath than a word. She knew he didn't understand, and she didn't need him to. She moved through the darkness to her desk, picked up the chair and carried it back to her place by the bars, setting it so she could brace herself as she bent to receive Ormek's attention.

"Yes," Ormek sighed again, understanding now.

Yes, he could see.

In the past, Hannah had put her hands on her knees, or grabbed the bars to stay in place when Ormek's thrusts came fast. Often enough, he'd push hard enough to force her away from the bars. She'd step forward to maintain her balance, slide off his penis, quickly step back to take him back into her body.

Hannah, believing with at least a part of her mind that a support would make things go more efficiently, grabbed the chair with one hand, steadying herself as she reached between her legs, parted her lips and waited for the arrival of Ormek's tip.

Holding her vaginal mouth open with two fingers, she used the other two to guide him into her slot.

With a quick twist of his hips, accompanied by a quiet grunt, Ormek buried himself inside her sheath, his shaft opening her completely, tip exploring her depths.

“Yeah,” Hannah said quietly, both hands on the chair, bracing herself.

He drove into her a dozen times, moving each time straight up until the end of the thrust, when he made a small circle with the base of his penis, stirring Hannah’s insides. The tag that hung from her collar, a small piece of metal that said “Hannah” and “Female, Recreational,” and listed her Federal ID number, bounced rhythmically, ringing faintly with each thrust.

“Is the angle okay like this?” he asked her, so quietly she almost missed his words. They weren’t supposed to talk, but she’d spoken, and now he had.

They weren’t professing their love for each other, Hannah reassured herself. They weren’t exchanging pleasantries, or even talking about the weather. They were discussing the practical details of bringing their sex organs together. Surely Laura couldn’t fault either of them for that.

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah whispered.

And then, lost in arousal and this new thing that was happening with Ormek, that started when he pressed his palm against her unshorn muff, she added, so quietly someone standing behind Ormek wouldn’t have heard her, “With the chair, I can bend a little further down, and I think that helps you go deeper.”

Normally, Ormek would spend 15 minutes inside her, moving slowly, drawing out his time with her, making full use of the hole he’d bought – with his own money, his wife’s family’s money, a bank loan – 10 months ago. But this was another thing that was different tonight. Even before she’d finished speaking, just a few minutes into their meeting, his penis quivered inside her, as it always did as his orgasm neared, and she heard his breath come sharply and felt his member swell, and she knew with his next series of deep thrusts he was baptizing her organ now, obscenely, hot jets of semen roaring from his tip and into her.

Ormek reached through the bars, grabbing her hips and grunting, and Hannah rose up, on her toes, improving her position in a way that he seemed to like as he released.

He thrust in her again and again, until his energy waned.

Finished now, he stayed within her, his penis slowly softening, and then it was gone, eased out of her opening.

Hannah, always wearier than she thought she should be after Ormek’s visits, straightened, stretched, and looked through the darkness

toward her bed, ready to masturbate and surrender to sleep.

She returned her chair to her desk, reminding herself that she should always do that. Athena was usually the first person she saw in the morning, coming to her cage to chain her and bring her upstairs for breakfast. But whether it was Athena or Laura coming for her, neither needed to see a chair where it shouldn't be.

She moved to the toilet to wipe off the excess of Ormek's passion, her mind registering something strange in the room beyond her cage.

A male form, in silhouette, stood where Ormek had been.

"Oh!" she gasped, realizing after a brief moment of instinctive terror that the form belonged to Ormek. He hadn't left yet. Why? He always left as soon as he was done.

"Sir?" Hannah asked quietly from her toilet.

"Sir?" she said again, rising, moving toward his naked shadow, an indefinable excitement welling up within her.

"Sir?" she said a third time when she reached the bars.

Still, he said nothing, so she put her hands through the bars, touching the place on his right side just beneath his ribs.

She had never touched Ormek before during their meetings, anywhere but his penis, and then only to guide him into her opening.

She needed to touch, to make sure he was there, that she wasn't hallucinating; to make sure he was still conscious, that his skin hadn't gone cold, that he wasn't incapacitated by the things that can happen to people. But her hands lingered, not just feeling him, but touching him, brushing him, caressing him with the backs of her fingers, the flats of her fingernails.

So it was her fault when he sighed and pressed forward, his own arms through the bars, reaching out to her, embracing her.

Kissing her.

This was the forbidden fruit. Everything else might be excused, rationalized, justified. But not kissing.

She should have pulled away. Ormek would have understood. He would have left, and she wouldn't have been guilty of something very wrong. But she sucked his tongue into her mouth, put her arms around his shoulders, leaned into the bars and felt his penis coming to life again, hardening against her thigh.

Only now, as she imagined the next things that might happen, all of them impossible, did her rational mind engage. Nothing could come of this

without great risk, to both of them. She relaxed her arms, dropped them to her sides, pulled her mouth away and whispered, so quietly even God could not hear, “No, Sir.”

“Uh?” Ormek replied, still lost in whatever place he had decided, with her help, to go.

“No, Sir,” Hannah said again, leaning back until Ormek’s arms yielded. She turned, went to her bed, pulled down the covers and lay down.

She stared at the wall and listened until Ormek was gone, the bump of the elevator telling her she was alone again.

She rolled to her back, pushed the covers off and spread her legs, reaching down to her vulva to masturbate.

Normally, the orgasm after she’d been with Ormek came hard and fast, but there were too many things to think about. In the knowledge that cumming would help her sleep, however, she continued to work at it until relief came, a small, quick explosion through her body and mind, bed squeaking beneath her as she writhed, hips rocking.

Chapter 2: Plans with Jessica

Hannah slept soundly, as she always did after she masturbated, but she woke with the uneasy feeling something wasn't quite right. She looked up at the windows, saw the first light of gray and went to her toilet.

Only as the urine left her body did she remember what was bothering her. Something had happened with Ormek. Something strange, and yet entirely predictable. They had kissed, in violation of Laura's explicit and oft-repeated instructions. They had talked. They had touched. Worst of all, she had been an equal participant, until the end. Maybe it was all her fault.

She could hear the house coming to life, the almost inaudible thud of footsteps, two stories above, water rushing through the pipes hidden in walls.

Some of the thumps, surely, were Ormek's.

Did he love her?

Hannah chased the thought from her mind before it had fully formed. If there was love here, it was not the love of storybooks and romance novels and girls' dreams.

And if she were to defy convention and love someone, it must be Allain.

She heard the bump of the elevator and started. Perhaps it was Ormek, come to apologize. But what if it were Laura, who always smiled, even when she was being cruel? What would she say if Ormek told her their slave had tried to seduce him? It wasn't true, but that wouldn't matter. How much time would she spend being punished at the clinic for this? Surely she'd get more than the six units she'd received last time.

To her relief, it was Athena's voice that rang out from the elevator.

"Decent, Hannah?"

"Hey, Athena, yeah," Hannah said, stepping to the bars, wondering if Athena knew, somewhere in the back of her mind, what her father was doing to their girl.

Athena rounded the corner, her eyes brighter than usual.

"Guess who's ready for you?"

"Who?" Hannah asked.

"Jessica."

"Oh," Hannah said. "I thought she'd given up on me."

“No, she just needed to figure some things out.”

“Okay. When?”

“Tonight, if Mom says okay.”

“It’s a week night.”

“It’s summer.”

“Yeah, but your parents like things to quiet down early during the week.”

“How long are you going to keep her awake?” Athena asked, smiling mischievously.

“What’s that question supposed to mean?”

Athena moved to the pegs along the wall under the windows, pulled off Hannah’s shackles.

“Just, if you think you’re going to keep her up all night doing her, maybe I should let her know beforehand.”

“It doesn’t take that long,” Hannah said.

Athena’s face fell, and Hannah regretted her words. Athena was sensitive about her lack of sexual experience, and any reminder of it tended to bother her.

“But I’m sure you knew that,” Hannah said, attempting a recovery. Athena just stood there, staring at her, shackles draped over one hand.

“Uh, virgin here,” she said.

“I keep forgetting,” Hannah said, studying Athena’s face. The girl brightened and Hannah, relieved, scowled ironically. “So, are you going to chain me, or just stand there?”

Athena knelt, applied Hannah’s shackles, unlocked her cage door.

“Is she coming down here?” Hannah asked as she shuffled after Athena.

“No, it will be in your bedroom.”

“Okay.”

“I’m going to tell her you got all excited when I mentioned it.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, joining Athena on the elevator.

“So, you know, fake it when she gets here.”

“I won’t be faking it,” Hannah said.

“You’re a lesbian?”

“Uh, no. I like boys. But girls are okay too.”

“So, you like her, right?”

“Yes.”

“You like her as in, you dream about her at night?”

“No,” Hannah admitted. “I don’t dream about anyone at night. I dream about numbers at night.”

“But you’re going to be able to do this?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just do your thing, okay? I mean, you know how important this is, right? This will be her first time.”

“I’ll do my thing,” Hannah said. “If she likes it, she likes it. She might hate it. And that will be her problem. And I guess yours.”

“Goddam, fuck you,” Athena said. “Thanks for giving it all you’ve got.”

“I always aim to please,” Hannah replied without a hint of apology in her voice, just before the elevator opened into the kitchen.

Ormek was at the counter, back turned, putting something on his plate.

“Good morning, Hannah,” Laura said, gliding into the kitchen in her bathrobe.

“Good morning, Ma’am,” Hannah said, accepting a kiss on the cheek from the woman. Everything was normal. She wasn’t in trouble.

“Fill your plate, Hannah,” Laura said, pointing at Ormek. “If Dr. Petrosyan doesn’t take it all.”

Hannah tried to laugh in a sincere way, picked up a plate and stood next to Ormek.

“Good morning, Sir,” Hannah said quietly, politely.

“Good morning, Hannah,” Ormek said, as he always did in the morning. He never kissed her in the kitchen, or anywhere else, and he didn’t this morning, simply moving toward the table.

Darcy, the Petrosyan’s maid, a free woman, had put something together with eggs and sausage the night before, and it smelled as good as anything she ever made.

Hannah scooped some out, added fruit to her plate, grabbed coffee and took her seat at the table, in the chair that was always covered with a thick blue towel, so she wouldn’t leak onto the silk.

Hannah glanced up at Ormek, saw he was studying her.

He quickly turned his gaze to his plate, and after 30 seconds of profoundly difficult silence, Athena arrived, and then Laura, taking their

seats, continuing a conversation about Athena's class schedule for her senior year. She was trying to decide between what she called "college calculus" and "calculus for dummies." If Hannah could continue to tutor her as well as she had in the last school year, Athena believed she could take on the tougher course. But she still had doubts.

That wasn't what Athena wanted to talk about, however, and as soon as Laura seemed satisfied with Athena's answers about school, Athena moved on to the main topic.

"So, uh, can Jessica spend the night here? Tonight?"

"It's a weeknight," Laura observed.

"Well, it's with Hannah," Athena said. "Jessica thinks she's ready."

Laura looked at Hannah. It was understood that Hannah would mate with Jessica whenever the girl was ready. More generally, Hannah was encouraged – but not required – to serve anyone the family assigned her to. So Hannah's interests were always taken into account, and Hannah knew Laura was looking at her to gauge her interest in Athena's friend. If Hannah seemed uncomfortable, or just not particularly interested, Laura might refuse permission.

Hannah returned Laura's gaze evenly. If they wanted her to be with Jessica, that was fine. More than fine, because it would mean a night in her bedroom instead of downstairs in her cage.

Allowing Hannah to service Jessica had in fact been discussed more than once since Jessica had first broached the subject with Athena, soon after Hannah's purchase. Nothing had happened, but it wasn't due to reluctance on Hannah's part.

"Is she serious this time?" Laura asked.

"She's always been serious," Athena said. "It almost happened in March, you know, but then Hannah got her period early, and then Jessica had to study that time in April, and she's had to figure out some things too. She's not sure if she's a lesbian, or bi, or whatever. But she wants to try it now, with Hannah."

"Will she want dinner?" Laura asked.

"Yes, Ma'am!" Athena replied enthusiastically.

The matter was settled, then, and Hannah felt the first wave of butterflies, something she always wrestled with when she was about to be paired with a new partner. But especially Jessica. Jessica was Athena's best

friend. If things went badly, there could be repercussions beyond just her relationship with that girl.

Ormek cleared his throat. "Is it okay with Jessica's mother?" he asked.

Hannah looked at him. Why did he care? Virtually all decisions about Hannah's use were left to Laura.

"Yes, Daddy," Athena replied emphatically. "We've talked about it. She's totally cool."

"And her father?"

Laura looked at Ormek, and then at Hannah, her eyes piercing, as if she were seeing things behind things, in a way no one else could. At that moment, Hannah found her eyes terrifying.

Why was Ormek butting in? Was he jealous? Was he jealous that Athena's friend was going to get Hannah tonight?

Yes, Hannah realized with a sudden horror. Last night was not over. Things had changed, and Ormek couldn't hide the fact. At this moment, he was being extremely stupid. Especially for a doctor. And why? They couldn't do anything tonight anyway, Hannah knew. Ormek never came to her the night before Allain returned home. The possibility that she would still be holding Ormek's seed when she was with Allain was simply not an option. So Ormek was jealous not of losing out on Hannah's services tonight, but simply of knowing her mind and body would be engaged with someone else. And a girl at that.

Hannah wanted nothing more than to be gone from the table, her nudity in front of the family a minor concern, the exposure of what she and Ormek had done last night a roaring terror. Mustering all her presence of mind, she looked up from her plate, first at Ormek, then at Laura, smiling indulgently, smiling the same way she would have smiled yesterday, before the kiss. Ormek was unpredictable at times, and he was expressing an unexpected concern, and he would have to be heard. Hannah tried to say with her smile that she appreciated his interest in her life, and the welfare of Athena's friend.

"Jessica's mom says her dad's fine with it," Athena said. "It's not like he's that involved in stuff like this. But I can have him call you and Mom today if you want."

Ormek waved his hand and looked down at his plate, defeated; possibly knowing too late he had been a fool. In front of Hannah. In front of

his wife.

Athena was spending the day with friends, her vague plans involving the mall, someone's pool, a movie at someone's house, and Hannah felt a slight twinge of jealousy until she remembered that Allain was returning home tomorrow, and she would have all the time she could want, with Allain and his friends, some in medical school like him, and all at a different, and mostly superior, maturity level to Athena and her friends.

After breakfast, Hannah stayed upstairs, preparing Allain's room for his return and washing Laura's delicates, something she had a knack for and only she was allowed to do. Darcy didn't seem to mind handing that chore over.

After lunch, Laura brought Hannah back to her cage to study and rest.

"Are you looking forward to meeting with Jessica tonight?" she asked as she removed Hannah's shackles.

"Yes, Ma'am, I am."

"Do you enjoy your time with Ormek?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I do," Hannah said. It wasn't the first time Laura had asked that question, and Hannah always answered the same way. It was a silly question, really. What was there to enjoy? Turn around, bend over, accept him into her body, wait for him to finish, and go bed. She liked the feel of his penis, of course, but because of Laura's rules, there wasn't anything beyond that.

Until last night.

She had enjoyed last night. She shouldn't have, but she did.

"Would you tell me honestly if you didn't want to be with someone?" Laura asked. This was another common question, and Hannah's common answer was always a variation of the words she spoke today: "I'm not sure, Ma'am. I like helping. I'm glad to be with anyone you approve of."

Laura beamed and stepped up to the bars.

"Lift your face to me," she commanded.

Hannah obeyed and Laura pressed her lips to Hannah's, her hands reaching through the bars to squeeze Hannah's shoulders.

It wasn't the first time Laura had kissed Hannah on the lips, but there was something different about it – firmer, more urgent – and it surprised the girl. Laura stepped back, smiled again and was gone, leaving

Hannah to ponder a life – almost a year after it had begun – that still seemed very strange.

She went to her desk, returned to her studies and immediately solved last night's intractable calculus problem – not the first time a good night's sleep enabled her to make progress in confusing math. Then she read biology, saving the novel for last: *Madam Bovary*, whose themes had become suddenly more relevant.

At a little after five, she showered, shaved her legs and under her arms, and shaped her pubic hair into a neat strip. She did it as much for Jessica as for Allain, but she remained doubtful Jessica was going to go through with it this time. She seemed to be one of those people who preferred to lust platonically, hinting at what she wanted to do but never quite getting it done.

Well aware that Jessica could be showing up at any moment – or never – Hannah went to her bed, grabbed her novel and read no more than another page or two before the elevator bumped.

No one spoke, so Hannah watched, not surprised when Jessica appeared, alone. Jessica never warned Hannah when she was there, possibly because she wanted to catch Hannah doing something.

"Hey, Jess," Hannah said. Her butterflies fluttered briefly before they settled. She considered Jessica a friend. Even perhaps a dear friend. They'd argued, they'd had their moments, but Hannah tutored her along with Athena often enough, had been to dinner with her family, had socialized with her. There was nothing to fear, Hannah reassured herself.

Jessica just stood there, at the bars, staring. She was in jeans, the perfectly fitted kind you could get only after an expert measurement and skilled tailoring. Her blouse was white, of loose-fitting silk, the kind of fabric that rippled poetically in a breeze. Her belt was lime green, and she was in her best black heels, something she'd ordered from Italy and talked at length about the first night she wore them.

Wordless, locking eyes with Hannah as Hannah watched from her bed, Jessica reached up, to the top button of her blouse, undid it, smiled nervously, undid the next button

Was Jessica taken by the moment, filled with a desire that made clothing impossible, or was she acting out something she'd seen on TV? Suspecting the latter, Hannah did her best not to smile indulgently, indeed not to feel indulgent at all. Dismissive as she'd been with Athena this

morning on the elevator, the girl was right – this was important. Jessica was handing her something precious and vulnerable – a piece of her innocence. With a careless word, a hint of contempt, she could scar Jessica for years.

“Do you have to do what I say?” Jessica asked, her voice barely a croak, fingers pausing at the third button down.

“I do,” Hannah said, pretending she did. She knew she really didn’t, and Jessica probably knew as well, but Hannah rose obediently from her bed and went to the bars.

Jessica was red-haired and freckled, with a round face and gray eyes, and she was beautiful, Hannah thought, but not with the kind of beauty Hannah possessed, the beauty that caught boys’ eyes as soon as they looked. You had to study Jessica’s eyes, her mouth, to get past the insecurity and awkwardness. Then you saw a girl who was becoming a woman, who would earn her share of lovers, male or female or both, once she knew what she wanted.

“Undress me,” Jessica said, her face reddening subtly.

Hannah, guessing Jessica had decided a solo striptease wasn’t what she wanted to do after all, approached, reached through the bars and slowly worked her way down the buttons of Jessica’s shirt, pulling it up and out of her pants to get the last two buttons undone.

“Turn around,” Hannah said.

Jessica turned and Hannah slid the shirt down from her shoulders, let it flutter to the floor at Jessica’s feet, reached up and undid the clasp of her bra. It was a surprisingly ordinary bra, a Margo, something you bought in packs of three at Target.

Hannah noted the label – 35D – and knew that as Jessica gained the confidence that came with age, her breasts would help. Boys would see her chest, once she’d figured out how to flaunt it, and want to talk to her because of what they saw there.

Often enough, boys were ridiculous. So were men. So were doctor men.

Hannah pushed the bra forward and Jessica slid it down her arms, turning back to Hannah, her breasts swaying, rising up weightlessly despite their size.

In her heels, Jessica was Hannah’s height, and Hannah stepped to the bars, reached through and pulled Jessica toward her. Briefly, the

memories of the other things that had happened here filled her mind, and she chased them away and concentrated on the girl before her.

They'd kissed once before, soon after Hannah's purchase, a deep kiss, intense but brief, ending when Jessica pulled away, tears in her eyes.

Hannah had put her mouth on dozens of other mouths since the last kiss, and her memory of that moment had faded, but she knew something was different – more urgency, or more confidence, or probably more of both – than her last kiss with Jessica. Their lips had barely touched before Jessica's tongue was inside Hannah's mouth, exploring, licking her teeth, penetrating her as if trying to lick her soul.

Jessica sighed and Hannah pressed against her, their breasts touching now, and she lowered her hands from the small of the girl's back to her front, to her belt, fumbling briefly before she opened it.

Hannah continued working, unsnapping Jessica's pants, lowering the zipper, and she slid her hands inside the waistband. Stripping the pants off completely would require Jessica's cooperation, so Hannah leaned back and looked at her, wondering what Jessica believed should happen next.

"Do you have a key?" Hannah asked.

"No, Athena has that."

"Is she coming down here?"

"Why?" Jessica asked, her face betraying the disappointment of a spell broken by annoying practical matters.

"How are you going to get into my cage?"

"I'm not getting in your cage."

"Upstairs now?"

"Yes."

"Well, you have to let me out then."

"I have the key," Jessica said, and she shoved her hand into her pocket, pulling out the key that opened the door of Hannah's cage, the cage beside hers, and the door between the cages.

"What key does Athena have, then?" Hannah asked.

"For your . . . for the chains, that, that, go on your . . . feet."

"Okay," Hannah said, working through the complicated logistics of the moment, wondering if Jessica had thought everything through, if Athena had to go over the steps in detail.

"Do you know what to do next?" Hannah asked.

“Yeah,” Jessica replied, and she turned to the wall where Hannah’s restraints hung. Then she stopped, turned back to Hannah. “First, pull off my pants.”

The moment was rapidly deteriorating from tender first experience to farce, but as long as Jessica didn’t know it, Hannah wouldn’t let on. She knelt obediently, reached through the bars and worked Jessica’s jeans over her bottom, down her thighs, bunching them up at Jessica’s knees.

Jessica kicked off her heels and worked the jeans past her feet, standing before Hannah now in nothing but a pair of light blue string panties, a delicate lace finish around the top and over her mound.

“Panties too?” Hannah asked.

“Yes,” Jessica croaked.

Hannah complied, trying her best to remove them slowly, seductively, angling the sides down one at a time, exposing Jessica’s hips, her hairless vulva, her soft pink lips, no doubt freshly shaved for Hannah.

Once the panties were at Jessica’s ankles, she stepped out of them, looked at the ceiling to recall the next step, went to the wall and grabbed Hannah’s shackles.

It wasn’t the first time Jessica had shackled Hannah, and she did it quickly, competently, cuffs just tight enough that they couldn’t be removed.

She unlocked the cage door and, leaving her clothes where they’d fallen, escorted Hannah to the elevator.

“You’re going upstairs naked?” Hannah asked.

“Yes,” Jessica said. “You do it all the time.”

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed, “but I’m a slave.”

They stepped into the elevator and Jessica hit the button for the second floor, where the bedrooms were.

“Pretend I’m one too,” Jessica said, turning toward Hannah, smiling with a combination of awkwardness and determination.

Hannah looked down. “Where are your chains?”

“Just pretend.”

“I’m joking,” Hannah said.

“I know.”

“What if someone sees you?” Hannah asked.

“It’s just Athena here,” Jessica replied. “Or Laura might come home. I don’t care about either of them, or Darcy either.”

“But you would care about being seen by Ormek? Or Allain?”

“Yes.”

“If you’re a slave, it doesn’t matter if you care,” Hannah observed.
“Everyone sees you.”

The thought that someone wanted to pretend to be a slave, without understanding the full nature of that life, distressed Hannah for reasons she didn’t understand.

Chapter 3: In Hannah's Bedroom

They reached the second floor and Jessica walked out first, no hesitation and no reluctance, as far as Hannah could tell. Athena was waiting for them, seated in the large area that the elevator opened onto, where the family kept their pool table, their books, their games. She held a magazine in her lap, something about celebrities, and she smiled at the girls, looked into Hannah's eyes and dug a key out of her pocket.

"Don't take them off until she's in her room," Athena said, looking back at her magazine. "You remember the combination?"

"Yes," Jessica said, her voice forced and faint. What had for Hannah become routine – and at times a chore – was of profound significance for her friend, she reminded herself.

"Mom and Dad don't know this is happening now," Athena told Hannah.

"What do they think is happening now?" Hannah asked.

"Just that we're hanging out, or whatever."

"If they ask, I'll have to tell them," Hannah said.

"Fine, bitch," Athena retorted, and she looked up scowling. But she knew the rules as well as anyone: Lying by a slave – even a small, casual lie – was a serious offense that could lead to hours of punishment.

Hannah, amused by Athena's annoyance, laughed and turned toward the hall where all the bedrooms lay, including the one that was hers, where she was allowed to sleep a few times a week, where she sometimes entertained and serviced. Like her cage, it locked, with a combination on the doorknob that Hannah wasn't supposed to know but had quickly figured out was Athena's four-digit birthdate. Inside was a queen-sized bed, all Hannah's clothing, a desk and two chairs, a private bath, and two barred windows that looked out onto the back yard of the home – the pool, the garden, the trees and the paths.

She'd used her own money to decorate her room, buying posters of Einstein, Newton, a techno-punk band she liked called Little Third, a collage of the solar system that hung from the light under her fan.

It was Hannah's favorite place in all the world.

She wondered why it mattered what time she and Jessica were together, realized that Laura and Ormek were expecting it to happen at night, and might not approve of a tryst in the afternoon. And, Hannah

guessed, Jessica couldn't wait. She wanted Hannah now, before she lost her nerve, and she was embarrassed about that.

In the hall, beyond Athena's sight, Jessica touched Hannah's shoulder, tentatively, as if wondering if she were real, or if any of this were real.

Hannah's bedroom door stood open. They entered together, Jessica shut the door and knelt to remove Hannah's shackles.

She put them and the key on Hannah's dresser, and turned to her, face in a sudden despair of uncertainty and doubt.

"I love you," Jessica said, and she did not smile. Her face was all pain, her mouth open, her eyes wet and desperate.

Hannah looked at her friend. She told Allain she loved him all the time, and he told her the same thing, and it was understood what it meant.

This wasn't understood. This was a girl being sucked into the quiet, deceptively beautiful maelstrom of human ownership, a world that had consumed people who were far older and more mature.

If Hannah said "I love you" back, without complete sincerity, or if Hannah did mean it but Jessica didn't believe her, this afternoon could quickly spiral into disaster. What was supposed to be pure sex could easily turn into hours of therapy, with a less than even chance that Jessica would leave the house in despair, all the blame on Hannah's shoulders.

"I have always loved you," Jessica continued, raising her hands to her face, muffling the next words in her cupped hands. "From the moment I first saw you. You . . . you made me gay."

Now Hannah had something to respond to. "No I didn't. No one can make someone gay."

"You did," Jessica said, less emotional as she argued. "I wasn't a lesbian, and then I met you, and that was it."

"It was already there," Hannah said. "I just brought it out in you." She moved to the bed, put the pillows against the headboard, sat down and drew her knees up.

Jessica turned, studied Hannah for a moment.

"This isn't all I want. With you right now. What I really want, you can't give."

"What do you want?"

"You."

“You have me,” Hannah said, pretending not to understand. “I’m here.”

“Not just like this,” Jessica said, and she waved her arms around the room and, to Hannah’s surprise, she laughed. “Not just in here. I want you with me. Always.”

“No one can be with someone always,” Hannah said. “You have to go to work, and do your things.”

Still staring at Hannah, Jessica moved to the bed, sat down at the foot, on the edge.

“Okay,” she said.

Whatever teen angst was troubling her seemed to have passed. Jessica was a complicated girl, her family wealthier by far than the Petrosyans, thanks to an inheritance and several lucrative businesses her parents ran. She was quicker at her studies than Athena, but there was a distraction there, something – or many somethings – that seemed to trouble her.

Now, they had arrived at that most awkward of moments between two people who had agreed explicitly to have sex for the first time: how to start. Clearly, Jessica had no idea, and Hannah wasn’t certain either. She didn’t want to do anything to draw out the torment again.

“Have you ever thought of me?” Hannah asked cautiously. “Like, what we would do?”

“Yes,” Jessica replied. “God yes.”

“What did you imagine?”

Jessica blushed, beet red this time, and she stared again, into Hannah’s eyes, then down her body, to her feet.

“Licking,” she said. “Do you lick?”

“Between your legs?”

“Yes.”

“You know I do,” Hannah said. When it came to Hannah’s sexual practices, at least when she was with other slaves, there were no secrets in the Petrosyan household.

“Okay,” Jessica said simply. “So you would do that? To me?”

There would be no spontaneity, Hannah realized with a little disappointment. She was going to have to guide Jessica through everything.

She slid off the bed, pulled the covers down, moved the pillows into position, and then she sat beside Jessica at the foot of the bed, so close

their bare hips were touching.

“Can I kiss you before that?” Hannah asked.

Jessica, for the first time since she'd come to Hannah that day, smiled, sincerely, with gratitude. She turned, eyes half closed, looked at Hanna's mouth, leaned in, and their lips touched again, just a light kiss, but it lasted almost a minute before Jessica pulled away, leaned back, parted her legs, put her hand at her vulva and touched.

“I'm wet.”

“That happens,” Hannah observed.

“Are you wet?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. When she ovulated, she was always wet.

Hannah stood, moved to the head of the bed, patted the sheets and the pillow. Jessica stood, looking increasingly at ease, and slid obediently into position, flat on her back, arms by her sides, kicking at the sheets and comforter until they were hanging off the foot of the bed, then lying straight and still, legs together.

Hannah angled down beside her, kissed her again, moved her hand to Jessica's mound and touched, lightly, her fingers brushing Jessica's vulva, gliding against her clitoris.

Jessica understood, parted her legs, and Hannah turned her attention to Jessica's opening, first massaging all of her slit, then putting one finger, then two, up her vagina, then bending, leaning, until her lips were against Jessica's pink folds, her tongue against Jessica's clitoris.

“You're doing it,” Jessica observed quietly.

“Yeah,” Hannah replied, raising her mouth, not sure what else to say.

“It's the only thing I've ever wanted for the last five years.”

“Since you were 13?”

“Yeah.”

“But not from me.”

“No,” Jessica agreed. “Not even from a girl, necessarily. But you became the embodiment of it. The embodiment. Ever since I met you. Totally.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, returning her mouth to Jessica's opening, not sure she wanted to be the embodiment of everything Jessica had ever wanted since she'd achieved puberty.

Jessica was indeed wet, her fluid leaking out across her lips, coating Hannah's tongue when she licked the girl's soft opening.

"Oh, my god," Jessica whispered, her voice breaking on the last word, as if she were about to cry again.

Guessing this was going to go on awhile and wanting a better angle, Hannah removed her mouth from Jessica, drew herself up on her hands and knees between Jessica's thighs and returned to servicing the girl on all fours.

For her part, Jessica seemed to have moved past the pleasure of oral sex as an existential event, and was beginning to approach it more practically, rocking her pelvis, widening the spread of her thighs and grunting to indicate when things felt particularly good.

She had almost no taste, Hannah noticed, even when she put her tongue deep inside the girl's sheath, where the secret flavors of a girl usually resided.

"Both?" Jessica whispered.

"Huh?" Hannah asked.

"Do you ever do both? At the same time?"

Hannah rose up from Jessica's middle to ponder her question, slowly understanding it.

"Me on top?"

"No," Jessica said, and Hannah knew she must have imagined this, being on top, licking a girl while she was licked, but she couldn't ask for it that way.

Hannah stood beside the bed, let Jessica scoot out of the way, then took her place on her back, lying still, legs spread.

Jessica moved cautiously over her, the mechanics of positioning her sex organ over another girl's mouth proving more complicated than she'd imagined, Hannah guessed. She looked down at Hannah sheepishly as she searched for the right place to set her knees, eventually placing them beside Hannah's shoulders.

Hannah raised her mouth to Jessica's vulva, but the girl's opening was too high.

"Can you scoot forward just a little?" Hannah asked. "Knees next to my elbows, then move back."

Jessica quickly complied and Hannah engaged, starting with her tongue against Jessica's clitoris, running it up her slit to her opening,

driving it in and tasting the fluid her organ was steadily pumping out.

Jessica spasmed, her whole body jerking quickly, briefly, as if she were about to cum and didn't want to yet, and then her mouth was against Hannah's organ, her tongue exploring Hannah's private places with the clumsiness and enthusiasm of an obsessed novice. What she lacked in experience she made up with pure energy, her mouth working every part of Hannah's folds, her tongue darting here and there like a child in a playground, licking her hair, her clitoris, her lips, her hole.

Brought to heat by Jessica's devoted attention, Hannah groaned out and rocked her hips, pressing against Jessica's mouth, realizing with surprise that Jessica might be able to make her climax.

No sooner had she considered the possibility than the force began building within her, starting at her middle, working up her spine to her brain and back down to her pussy, exploding there.

"Oh god, oh god," Hannah grunted, taking the Lord's name in vain, as she often did during ecstasy.

She writhed and groaned for close to a minute while Jessica sucked her relentlessly, and then she collapsed, all her muscles calm, eyes on the ceiling but not seeing it.

It was her plan to relax briefly, and then to return the favor, servicing Jessica to climax.

Jessica, however, had other ideas, removing her vulva from its position over Hannah's face, turning with surprising speed.

Before Hannah was completely aware of Jessica's position, the girl had assumed missionary, mouth on Hannah's cheek, hips between Hannah's thighs, thrusting into the gap instinctively, as if she had a penis and was pushing it into Hannah's body.

"Did I make you cum?" Jessica asked, panting against Hannah's cheek.

"Yes," Hannah whispered. "Yes, you did."

"Did I make you cum?"

"Yes," Hannah repeated. "Yes, it was really good."

"I felt you move. I could tell. It was real. It was real."

Jessica continued to pant, and then she squeaked with what seemed to be profound emotion and Hannah looked up into her friend's face and saw tears there, one in each eye, which rolled down her nose simultaneously and splashed onto Hannah's neck.

Hannah reached up, stroked Jessica's hair, tried to soothe the girl. Mostly recovered from her own release, she returned to worrying about her fragile friend, still wary of doing something to her that would ruin the afternoon, if not their relationship.

"It's your turn," Hannah said.

"For what?"

"To cum."

"I won't be able to."

"Huh?" Hannah blurted.

"I can't," Jessica stammered, "without . . . without . . . something inside me."

"Did you bring anything?"

"God, no," Jessica said, draping herself over Hannah now, mouth inches from Hannah's ear.

"Does Athena have something?" Hannah asked.

Jessica spasmed again, raised her face up, arched her back and stared into Hannah's eyes with an expression of deep offense.

Hannah silently cursed herself. She was just trying to solve a problem, the way she would with a fellow slave. Jessica wasn't a fellow slave, and asking her to get her friend's dildo, if one even existed – Hannah didn't know; Athena's sexuality was mostly a closed book to her and everyone else in the family – was apparently the worst sort of faux pas.

"I was joking," Hannah lied.

Jessica believed her apparently, laughed, kissed Hannah again, hard, on the lips, clambered off to sit on the side of the bed.

"I made you cum," she said.

"Yeah," Hannah agreed for the third time. This seemed to be the thing Jessica most wanted out of this afternoon's tryst.

Jessica rose, went into the bathroom, her urine splashing noisily into the toilet.

"Do you still want to stay the night?" Hannah asked, rising, going to the bathroom door, crossing her arms and leaning against the jamb to wait her turn at the toilet.

"Yeah," Jessica said. "You'll let me spend it with you?"

"Yeah. Did you think I would say no, since I already came?"

"I don't know," Jessica said. "I don't know what the rules are. You're done using me, so maybe you don't want me anymore."

“I didn’t use you. You can’t even say that.”

Jessica just looked up from the toilet, smiling.

She flushed and stood, and Hannah took her place, finished and stepped back into her room.

“I’ll let you stay the night if you don’t say I used you.”

“A night in Hannah’s lair . . .” Jessica said, her voice trailing off.

“It’s not my lair. It’s my room.”

Jessica, satisfied apparently with what she had done with Hannah, or not wanting anyone but Athena to know, stepped to the dresser and picked up Hannah’s shackles. Her back turned toward Hannah, she set them down, picked them up again, turned toward her.

“This seems weird,” she said.

“What?”

“Putting . . . these back on you.”

“You’ve done it probably 20 times,” Hannah observed.

“But now . . . after . . . it seems weird.”

Hannah just stared.

“Does Allain chain you?” Jessica inquired.

“All the time,” Hannah said. “You’ve seen him do it.”

“Will they always chain you?”

“I don’t know. It’s up to Laura.”

“Does it seem weird?”

“I don’t know what’s weird anymore,” Hannah said. “It’s just how it is.”

Hannah, wanting to conclude her time with Jessica before another difficult topic was broached, slid to the edge of the bed, turned and swung her legs up expectantly.

Jessica got the hint, picked up Hannah’s chains and moved to the bed, kneeling to apply them, looking away as soon as they were on, rising quickly and heading to the door.

She tapped the combination and they passed through the door together, crossing the hall to Athena’s room. Athena had retrieved Jessica’s clothes from the basement and laid them out neatly on her bed. Jessica put them on, leaving Hannah, as usual, the only naked female in Athena’s room.

Athena, normally inappropriately nosy about what Hannah did, particularly when she did it with other slaves or with Allain, asked not a

word about what happened in Hannah's bedroom. The girls listened to music, gossiped about their friends, talked about celebrities. Hannah, sheltered until she was taken from her mother less than a year ago, still struggled to keep up with conversations about social topics, but she was beginning to learn the who's who of an adolescent girl's world – the men and women famous only for being beautiful, the musicians, the bloggers and videographers, the actors and actresses.

Over dinner, Ormek seemed to have made peace with the fact Hannah was sharing her body with someone else. He spoke warmly to Jessica about her summer and her parents, asked Hannah about her current assignments, joked about Athena's taste in music.

Laura, always full of gentle questions meant to elicit information for her own purposes, asked enough about the girls' day – where they had gone, what time they'd arrived home – that she knew Hannah and Jessica had already been together. At least, it was obvious to Hannah that Laura had figured it out. If Athena and Jessica suspected Laura knew, they didn't let on.

The most important topic of the evening however was Allain, who was due back from medical school the next afternoon. They'd be going out to dinner, meeting friends, celebrating Allain's successful year. And she and Allain would be camping. Hannah was as excited about his return as anyone in the family.

After dinner, all three girls returned to Athena's room to play Monopoly, with very little actual playing being done, in favor of explaining the game to Hannah, who found both its premise and rules peculiar. Hannah, sitting on the floor, legs crossed, shackles tucked under her feet, was made the banker because of her talent with numbers, but she never remembered to pay anyone \$200 at Go, even herself.

"I know you're pretending to forget so you can embezzle," Athena said.

"Where would I hide the money?" Hannah asked, raising her thighs, rocking on her bare bottom to prove that nothing was under her.

They were just killing time, Hannah knew, until things quieted down enough that Jessica could accompany her to her bedroom without seeming too eager.

That time seemed to arrive at 9:45, when Laura came into the room, first making small talk, then getting to the point.

“You’ll be spending the night, Jessica?” she asked.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Jessica replied. “If that’s okay?”

“Yes. Will you want your own room?”

“Uh,” she stammered, looking at Hannah, “I don’t think I will. Hannah—”

“Of course,” Laura interrupted. “You know our routines?”

“Yes,” Jessica replied, blushing slightly. “Athena’s explained everything to me. She gave me the combination.”

Hannah knew that Laura’s questions were part of a ritual, something done at houses where a female subject might occasionally be shared with visitors. If the scheduled partner had changed their mind, this was their chance to exit gracefully. No one Hannah was mated with, free or slave, had ever decided to make other plans, but the ritual could not be neglected.

Hannah was not offered a chance to excuse herself, at least not now. Her chance to speak against mating with Jessica had come earlier, and she’d expressed her willingness.

“Very good,” Laura said, exiting the room, the day clearly over in her mind.

They put away the game, declaring Jessica the winner, then Athena walked with them to Hannah’s room, glanced at the bed, surely noticed that it had been made hastily after the afternoon’s session, and she gave each girl a hug and left, shutting the door.

Jessica didn’t ask Hannah to undress her this time, nor did she do a striptease. She simply slid her clothes off, found a spare hanger in the closet to put her shirt and jeans on, laid her bra and panties out on Hannah’s dresser, turned to remove Hannah’s shackles, setting them next to her underwear.

She flipped off the light, the room illuminated only by the dim glow of a nightlight Hannah had bought with her own money, a cobalt crescent moon.

Hannah stood beside her bed, wondering what Jessica would do now, what she would want. The girl’s body, black in the dim blue light, answered immediately, moving to Hannah, stopping just before her. She

wrapped her arms around Hannah's waist, pressed in, nipples touching, mouths engaged.

They kissed for at least a minute, maybe two, before Jessica pulled her mouth away to whisper into Hannah's ear:

“Did you like cumming?”

“Yes.”

“Want to again?”

“Always,” Hannah replied, not quite honestly, but she thought it's what Jessica wanted to hear, and she didn't see a reason to be completely truthful.

“But now it's your turn,” Hannah said. “I want to try.”

Jessica sighed into Hannah's ear before she spoke again, her voice louder now, not at all seductive: “You're too good for these people.”

Chapter 4: A Slap in the Dark

“What?” Hannah asked, embracing Jessica in the darkness of her bedroom.

“You’re too good for these people,” Jessica repeated.

Jessica had hinted before at this, at her dissatisfaction with the Petrosyans when it came to Hannah. When it was just the two of them, she’d offer thinly-veiled suggestions that they didn’t appreciate their female enough, that they didn’t give her enough freedom, that they didn’t trust her enough.

Hannah had always treated the words as a minor distraction, something to be ignored, and she was prepared to do the same thing tonight.

“No, they’re too good for me,” she whispered.

Jessica stiffened. Clearly, this wasn’t the answer she was looking for.

“0328,” Jessica whispered.

Hannah knew what the number meant, but she’d learned that being a slave meant not letting on that one knew things one shouldn’t know.

“Okay,” she said, feigning puzzlement.

“Do you know what it means?” Jessica asked.

“It’s a number, I guess,” Hannah said. “The price of something?”

“Your combination. The combination to your door.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Try it.”

“Try what?”

“Try the combination. You’ll see.”

“No.”

“You don’t want to make sure it’s right?”

“No.”

“You don’t want to be able to leave?”

“And go where?”

Jessica pulled away from Hannah, took her hand and led her to the bed, where they both sat, Jessica against the pillows, cross-legged, Hannah across from her, the two female bodies facing each other, blue-gray in the faint illumination of Hannah’s nightlight.

“I have a plan,” Jessica whispered.

Hannah was silent, beginning to suspect what Jessica intended, realizing with a growing sense of fear that this could be far more complicated than mere adolescent angst. Deescalate and dismiss, she told herself.

“Ooh, what’s your plan?” Hannah asked, trying to sound extremely stupid.

“I want you.”

“You have me.”

“All the time.”

“Make a bid for me,” Hannah said. “Maybe the Petrosyans will sell me.”

“No!” Jessica whispered harshly in the dark. “You know what I mean.”

“I don’t,” Hannah said, somewhat honestly.

“I have almost twenty thousand dollars.”

“Congratulations,” Hannah said. “That’s a lot more than I have.”

“I can get a car, too.”

“Okay.”

“Two nights from now. I’ll be waiting for you. On the street. At 1. In the morning.”

“Stealing a slave is a felony. And when we’re caught – not if – when we’re caught, I’ll be tortured for a week.”

“We won’t be caught.”

“Your parents will get you the best lawyers, and you’ll get probation, probably,” continued Hannah, who paid attention to the news when it came to matters like this. “Because they’ll blame it all on me. No one will get me a lawyer, and it wouldn’t matter if they did. And then, I’d be sold, to God knows who, probably—”

“No no no . . .” Jessica groaned, her voice breaking. “Listen. Listen. I’m going to—”

Hannah leaned back to give her left arm ample space to swing, and she brought her open palm against Jessica’s cheek, the smack loud enough that it would have been heard by anyone eavesdropping on the other side of the door.

“Oh my god,” Jessica sighed, raising her hands to her face, her spine bending, gray form collapsing on itself. “Oh my god. Oh my god.”

Hannah sat and waited, deep misgivings fighting with the belief she had done the only possible thing. Or, the least terrible thing, probably.

It wasn't until Jessica began weeping, gently, shoulders shaking in the darkness, mattress shaking with her, that Hannah's heart began to break for her friend. It was enough to be young and in love. To be in love with a slave was an especially difficult thing. Jessica didn't want sex, Hannah realized, chiding herself for taking so long to figure it out. Or not just sex. She wanted a girlfriend, a lover, a partner. Eventually, maybe, a wife. She wanted the connection, to everything, that only another, equally devoted human being could provide. A slave could not be that person. Particularly an expensive slave.

Slowly, Jessica regained her composure, no doubt churning through what had happened, and trying to understand. Hannah could almost hear the gears whirring. When Jessica looked up, Hannah could tell despite the darkness her eyes were clear, and she seemed to be ready to move on.

"I could report you," she said.

"Go ahead," Hannah replied.

"What would you tell them?"

"About what?"

"About why you slapped me."

"I'd say I was mad. Because you beat me at Monopoly."

Jessica's first peal of laughter was so loud Hannah was afraid she'd wake someone, but then she covered her mouth, subduing her mirth with considerable effort.

"You wouldn't tell them I had a plan to help you escape?"

"Of course not."

"Why not?"

"It would be a huge mess. For both of us."

"What would they do?"

"You mean for slapping you?"

"Yeah."

"Punish me."

"How?"

"I don't know."

"Have you ever been punished?"

"Yes."

"What did they do?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I want you to talk about it."

"No."

"It's all I want."

"I thought you wanted sex."

"I want you."

"You have me," Hannah noted.

"We've already had this conversation."

"Because you keep saying the same things."

"What did they do to you?"

"Stress restraints. They tased me. They put me in a box. They beat my rear."

"God, why?"

"I lied."

"Who did you lie to?"

Hannah fell silent.

"Who?"

"I'm not going to say."

"Okay, fine," Jessica whispered. "My face still hurts."

"I didn't hit you that hard."

"I've never been hit like that. By anyone. Ever."

"You're welcome."

Jessica laughed again. "You are . . . like nothing . . . I ever imagined. When I think about things that happened, in the last few years, I try to remember when it was, and then it's you. I know when it happened because I can remember if it was before I met you, or after."

"Okay," said Hannah. "That's interesting. What do you want to do now?"

"You want to know what I've always dreamed about?"

"Yes."

"Just going to bed with you. I mean, just lying in bed with you. Like we did it all the time. I'm on my side, and you're on your side behind me, and you have your arm around me. And . . ."

Jessica's voice broke, her emotions once again getting away from her.

". . . and . . . I'd feel your breath against my neck."

She was shaking the bed again, bent over like an old woman, hands on her face, weeping and sniffing.

Hannah, despairing anew over Jessica's raw emotions and the way they kept erupting, put her hand on the girl's shoulder, slid forward, embraced her, applying just enough pressure to push her to her side.

Jessica, almost doll-like in her passivity, allowed herself to be moved, to be lain, to allow Hannah to pull the covers over them both, to lie within the curve of Hannah's body.

Hannah put her arm around her friend's waist, palm flat on her belly and, without intending to, sighed out, warm breath against Jessica's neck, in her hair.

Jessica sniffed again, issued a quiet "oh, oh," put her hand over Hannah's and seemed to be, for the moment, at peace.

But there sometimes comes a moment, when two people are in bed together, that things are suddenly understood to be in a new place, without any need for an exchange of words. Hannah felt Jessica's body tense, her hand close around Hannah's, and the hands together slid it up Jessica's body, across her ribs, to her right breast.

Hannah knew what it meant and slowly, gently, squeezed the round flesh, put her fingers on either side of Jessica's hardened nipple, pinched, stroked, and pressed her thighs and belly against Jessica's bottom and back.

Jessica pressed back against Hannah and Hannah rose up on her elbow, lowered her mouth to kiss Jessica's ear, her cheek, her mouth, then bent around the girl to put her mouth on her nipple, grown long enough now that she could suck it into her mouth and torment the tip with her tongue.

"Auhhh," Jessica moaned, more an animal sound than the voice of a girl. It was what Hannah had been waiting for. She wanted her friend to stop thinking, to stop pining, and just accept and succumb.

Still suckling, Hannah rolled Jessica to her back and clambered on top, her own arousal growing, her syrup wetting her inner lips. She moved her mouth back to Jessica's, kissing hard, almost violently, mouths open and breathing into each other. Jessica raised her thigh until it bumped against Hannah's vulva and Hannah rubbed up and down against it, leaving a wet trail.

Hannah, ready to taste Jessica again, wondering if she would still have almost no flavor, pulled her mouth away from Jessica's and turned, slowly, until they were joined together as they had been earlier, each girl's

mouth at the other's sex opening, each girl's tongue exploring the other's wet hole.

Jessica's licks this time were more focused, less urgent, just slow, deliberate strokes from Hannah's clitoris to the mouth of her vagina, then back.

Hannah, as she often did with her partners, male or female, varied her approach and paid attention to the response – a grunt, a sudden twitch of the pelvis, widening of the legs, arching of the back. The magic seemed to occur when she took Jessica's clitoris between her teeth and rubbed it with her tongue.

"No, oh god no," Jessica whispered, as if clutched by a desperate terror. Her climax began with an involuntary bucking, shoulders and back and hips bouncing against the bed, so violently Hannah had to grab Jessica's thighs to keep from being thrown off.

Jessica, once her own pleasure was complete, focused on Hannah, and with another minute or two of attention – aided by Hannah's own rocking and thrusting – Hannah panted through a mild but very pleasant orgasm.

The girls held their position another minute before Hannah untangled and returned to the previous arrangement, curled around Jessica's body, arm draped over her waist.

"I made you cum again," Jessica boasted quietly.

"I made you cum," Hannah countered. "You said I couldn't."

"I was lying. I just didn't want you to try until tonight."

Hannah laughed in Jessica's ear. "Are you going to sleep now?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"God, yes."

Chapter 5: A Mild Punishment

With the first light of dawn peeking through the windows, Hannah stirred, half-opened her eyes, remembered she was in her bedroom, and she wasn't alone. She listened in the darkness for Jessica's steady breathing, slid quietly off the bed to urinate, returned to her room without flushing and wished she were alone. If Jessica weren't here, she'd open her blinds and look into the backyard, and then she'd turn on her lights and hope someone noticed and let her out so she could go down to breakfast.

If she had a coffee maker, she'd do that, too. She would request one, she decided. Or buy one, with the money she'd earned for doing certain things.

Or, if the laptop the Petrosyans had bought her to take her college tests on worked for something other than that, she'd open it and turn it on. But there was no access to the internet, and Hannah wasn't allowed email, and there were no tests to take yet.

So for now, with nothing else to do, she sat in the middle of the floor and tried not to think about how bored she was. If she'd remembered to bring her math book up from her cage yesterday, she could go into the bathroom and work on that. She should have remembered.

She glanced at Jessica, visible in the growing light, flat on her back, her face in profile. She was complicated, tormented, but she was also dear, and Hannah decided that she liked Jessica more now than she had before. Overall, Jessica was good at sex. Bad at emotions, but good at sex.

Hannah looked away, listened for some stirrings from the house. Ormek and Laura should be rising soon.

"Why are you there?" Jessica asked groggily.

"Did I wake you?"

"No, I've been awake."

"No you haven't."

"How do you know?"

"If you were, you would have known I got up and peed and sat on the floor so I wouldn't wake you up."

Jessica sat up halfway, fell back onto her pillow, laughed and rose again, sliding across the bed, breasts bouncing as her feet struck the floor and she moved to the toilet.

"Is anyone else up?" Jessica asked.

“I don’t think so. Want to go downstairs?”

“Yeah,” Jessica said. “I’ll meet you down there.”

Hannah stood and went to the bathroom door.

“Stop doing that.”

“What?”

“Stop trying to get me in trouble. You know I can’t leave without you.”

Jessica flushed, sidled past Hannah and went to her clothes, smiling at Hannah as she pulled everything on.

She moved from the closet to the dresser, picked up Hannah’s shackles.

“I’ll never get used to this.”

Hannah stepped to the middle of the room, not interested in another conversation about rules.

“I’ll be telling Laura to change the combination,” Hannah said, holding still to be chained.

“Why?”

“Because I might know what it is.”

“You’re going to tell them I told you?”

“Of course not. And you didn’t tell me.”

“What are you going to say?”

“Exactly what happened. That I accidentally glanced at it when you were punching it in, and I saw that the first two numbers were 03, and I thought it might be Athena’s birthday, 0328.”

Jessica stood and stared into Hannah’s eyes, an unexpected anger in her expression. “That’s not what happened. And you know it.”

Hannah reached out, touched the side of Jessica’s breast through her shirt and bra.

“When they touched me here, with it, I fainted. I screamed the other times. But on that one, I fainted.”

A slight glimmer of tears appeared in Jessica’s eyes as she worked through Hannah’s meaning.

“You didn’t deserve it,” she insisted quietly.

“It doesn’t matter,” Hannah replied. “It was done, it can be done again, and if you don’t stop being stupid, it *will* be done again.”

Jessica wheeled around on the heel of her black Italian pump, pounded on the combination and opened the door.

So they'd finished their time together with a fight, Hannah thought. It was something that happened often enough, to true lovers. And there were other ways they could have finished that would have been worse.

Jessica stormed across the hall to Athena's door, rapped twice, crossed her arms and studied the floor. Hannah shuffled up beside her, wondering if Jessica was going to make a scene, if she might end up saying or doing something that would get Hannah into grievous trouble after all.

Hannah could hear Athena's bed shake, footsteps toward the door, and it opened but Athena didn't appear, and Hannah could tell by the creak of the bed that she'd lain back down.

Jessica moved to Athena's desk, Hannah closed the door and went to Athena's bed. Athena was completely covered, even her head, so Hannah pulled her towel from underneath the bed, spread it out and sat down beside Athena's feet.

"Are you going back to sleep, Ma'am?" Hannah asked, her tone somewhere between respectful and mocking.

"Make me coffee," Athena grumbled. "I'll come down in a few."

Once they reached the kitchen, Jessica was content to play lovers again, hovering beside Hannah as she made enough coffee for everyone, pulled out the bacon and found a muffin mix.

"Stir with this," she said, handing Jessica a whisk.

Jessica took it from her, but she turned toward Hannah, not toward the bowl, and she put her arms out and hugged Hannah fiercely, squeezing the air from her lungs.

"IloveyouIloveyouIloveyouHannahLoughbridge," she said desperately, without a breath, then she stiffened and pushed Hannah away.

"Good morning, girls," Laura said, rounding the counter, looking down discreetly to ensure Hannah had been chained.

"Hi, Laura," Jessica said, blushing.

"Good morning, Ma'am," Hannah said, not remotely embarrassed.

Ormek appeared a few minutes later, followed by Athena, and they had breakfast together in the family dining room, the five of them, Hannah beside Jessica, all of them speaking of everything except what, if anything, Hannah might have done for Jessica last night. Laura, who routinely asked Hannah if she'd orgasmed with the other slaves they brought to her, clearly

didn't think it was a topic that should be discussed when a free girl was involved.

"Allain's already texted this morning," Laura said. "He should be home by three."

She looked at Athena, but Hannah knew the words were meant mostly for her, that she and Allain would be given privacy for their reunion, and that Laura followed the same ritual prior to each of Allain's arrivals.

"I've got to run some errands this afternoon," Laura said. "Athena, what will you be doing before dinner?"

"Jessica and I were going to the mall," Athena said. "To get her some bras that don't suck."

Jessica, blushing, scowled at Athena, and Hannah knew the shame was real, that Athena had admitted to knowledge of Jessica's underwear, which meant she had probably seen it somewhere other than on Jessica's body. Which meant that now Laura and Ormek could fairly conclude that, at some point yesterday, Jessica had been parading around their house in her underwear, if not nude.

Would Jessica say anything to Athena? Surely they'd talk once they were alone. Athena would need to know at least whether Hannah had served satisfactorily, even if she didn't ask for details. Would Jessica tell her friend she shouldn't say revealing things in front of her parents?

"Well, Hannah, that means you'll be the only one here to greet Allain," Laura said, as if she was surprised that would be the case.

"Where shall I wait for him, Ma'am?" Hannah asked.

"Downstairs."

Hannah had been hoping she would be allowed to wait in her real bedroom for Allain, as she sometimes did, but the assignment to her cage didn't surprise her. The rules about when she stayed upstairs, when down seemed to be completely arbitrary, decided by Laura based on some algorithm only she knew.

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said brightly, as if it made no difference to her where she was kept today.

"Ma'am?" Hannah added.

"Yes, Hannah?"

"I accidentally noticed when Jessica was typing in the combination to my door upstairs. I didn't mean to, and I'm very sorry."

"What did you see?" Athena asked.

“Just the first two numbers, and then I looked away. Zero and three. So I thought it might be Athena’s birthday. 0328.”

Athena snorted.

“When did you see it?” Laura asked.

“This morning, when we were leaving my bedroom,” Hannah said.

“Why did you look?”

“I’m not sure, Ma’am,” Hannah said. “I don’t have an excuse.”

“Looking was wrong, even if it was an accident.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Laura paused, looked at the wall, swallowed. “You’ll keep your restraints on until Allain gets home, and I’ll let Darcy know to adjust your lunch.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Jessica, given the job of escorting Hannah down to her cage, walked her to the elevator in the kitchen while Athena went up to shower.

“You didn’t have to say anything,” Jessica whispered as soon as the elevator door closed.

Hannah made no attempt to hide her impatience.

“There’s a thing called surreptitious possession, and it’s a very bad thing,” Hannah said. “If they find out a slave has a key – even if she never uses it – it’s considered an escape attempt. If she knows a combination, it’s the same thing.”

“I never would have told that you knew the combination.”

“But if you did,” Hannah said, “they’d ask me if I knew, and I’d have to say yes, and then the punishment would be much, much worse.”

They crossed the basement from the elevator to Hannah’s cage door, and she stepped in and went to her desk to get her books.

Jessica clanged the cage door shut and locked it. Hannah sat down on her bed, crossed her legs as comfortably as her shackles would allow, opened her book in her lap and looked up at Jessica.

“You really have to wear those all day?” Jessica asked.

“Until Allain gets here,” Hannah replied.

“What did Laura mean, about adjusting your lunch?”

“Darcy usually makes me a sandwich at lunchtime when I’m down here. Today, I’ll just get bread.”

“How much?”

“Like, two or three slices.”

Jessica glared at Hannah, trying to fathom a system whose workings were still mostly mysterious to her.

“And you’re happy with that? With how this works? You really want to stay with the Petrosyans?”

“The chains make no difference in here,” Hannah said, raising her feet. “I’m not going to need to run. And the lunch thing is totally meaningless. We’re having dinner at the club tonight.”

“It’s the principle,” Jessica protested.

“Yes, it is the principle,” Hannah agreed. “I broke a minor rule. I need minor punishment.”

“My invitation stands. I can get you out. I can make you free.”

“I can slap you again, too,” Hannah said.

Jessica raised her hand to her jaw.

“Tell your parents to buy you a slave,” Hannah said. “Manage her successfully for a year. And then we can talk about how things should be.”

Jessica looked at Hannah, as if trying to figure out if she was being serious.

“How often do they punish you?”

“A few times a month.”

“How? Stuff like today?”

“Yeah, mostly.”

“For what?”

“Laura’s overheard me talking to Athena, you know, the way we do, and she said I wasn’t being respectful enough. And one time she told me to take a shower, and I did math instead and forgot, and I made everyone late.

“Do they ever take you to the room upstairs?”

“The mean room?”

“Yeah, that room.”

“No, I’ve never been punished there, but Allain showed it to me once. Have you seen it?”

“Athena took me up there. I almost threw up.”

“It’s really not that big of a deal,” Hannah said. “Going there is an option, if I just want to get it over with. I might even do that someday.”

She was ready for Jessica to leave. They were done, Hannah felt, with any meaningful interaction, and Hannah had studying to do, now.

Once Allain arrived, books would take a back seat to other things.

To make her point, Hannah flipped to the page she was working on. She thought Jessica would speak again, maybe even ask for a hug or a kiss between the bars, but the next sound she heard was the bump of the elevator.

Until Jessica matured a little more, their relationship would remain fraught, Hannah knew. She hoped Jessica wouldn't ask for another night with her, at least not anytime soon. If she did, Hannah could refuse, but that was risky too. Jessica was dangerous no matter what Hannah did about her. Failing to report her escape plan was a crime, but Hannah dismissed the offer as nothing more than the random babbling of an angst-ridden teen, insignificant unless Hannah made it significant.

She glanced at her clock – 8:50 a.m. She could get a great deal done in the six hours before Allain showed up, and she set to work, barely pausing until the elevator bumped again and she noticed it was noon.

Darcy appeared with her cart and a plate, three pieces of dark bread in a stack.

Hannah stood, went to the bars and accepted the food through a port set into the bars.

“I'm sorry,” Darcy said.

“For what?” Hannah asked, returning to her bed, shackles rattling.

“I wanted to make you a decent sandwich.”

“This is fine,” Hannah said. She knew Darcy was fishing for information. She wanted to know why Hannah was being punished. Laura wouldn't tell her, and Hannah certainly wouldn't either.

“How many days will lunch be adjusted?” Darcy asked.

“Why don't you ask Laura?” Hannah said.

Darcy smiled, knowing she'd get nothing out of Hannah this morning.

“When do you want your cage cleaned?”

“You can do it now,” Hannah said, and she set her bread down on her desk and went back to the port.

The port – a slot about a foot wide set waist-high into the bars – featured brackets to hold Hannah by her wrists, and she slid her hands through and allowed Darcy to tighten until she was securely restrained.

With Hannah fastened in place, Darcy unlocked all the cage doors – the one leading into Hannah's cage, the one that opened into the cage beside

Hannah's where guests were sometimes kept, and the door between the cages, which would be left unlocked overnight if Hannah and her guest wanted to pass the time together.

Darcy went to Hannah's sink and toilet, wiped everything down and turned to her bed, pulling off the comforter, then the top sheet, rolling them up and tossing them separately onto the floor.

"Do you sit on a towel when you masturbate?" Darcy asked.

"Sometimes," Hannah said, keeping her voice even. "I didn't last night. Why?"

"There's a lot of staining in the middle, and up near your pillow too."

Hannah considered the condition of her sheets to be entirely Darcy's problem, but Darcy felt otherwise, and routinely voiced her objections. Darcy was free but not otherwise due particular respect, and Hannah invariably met her complaints head on.

"The middle is Ramone's semen," Hannah said, forced by the brackets to face away from Darcy, toward the windows, where the sky was bright and blue. "And I sat near my pillow two nights ago to masturbate."

"You really squirted," Darcy said.

"I'm ovulating," Hannah said. "And I spent awhile on it."

It was a half-truth, of course. Literally. The stain near Hannah's pillow was at least half Ormek. Maybe Darcy knew, or suspected, but it was none of her business, and Hannah would certainly never tell the truth about that.

"I can get you a better towel to lie on," Darcy said, stepping to the hooks beside the shower to grab Hannah's three towels – the two she used after showers, and the one Darcy kept hoping she'd put on her bed. The third was never used, so she was changing it on principle alone.

"I'm not going to put a towel down for sex," Hannah said.

"Will you when you masturbate?"

"I've told you it's not soft enough," Hannah said. "I like how the sheets feel."

"Yeah, they're silk," Darcy noted. "And some of your stains aren't coming out."

"I don't care."

"Your guests care."

"How do you know?"

“They should.”

“They don’t,” Hannah asserted. “It’s dark when we’re in bed, and they’re here for me, not the sheets.”

“How long have you been ovulating?”

“Three or four days.”

Darcy went to her cart, grabbed two thermometers from a cup on the middle shelf and stepped up behind Hannah.

Hannah, staring straight ahead, opened her legs as far as her shackles would allow and bent slightly. Darcy pushed the thermometers up her anus and vagina, the first to check overall temperature, the second to measure the heat in her sex organ, which tended to run warmer when she ovulated. Most of Hannah’s management fell to Athena, but this was usually one of Darcy’s chores.

“You need to hold the one in my vagina,” Hannah said.

“Can you tighten?” Darcy asked, struggling to wrap a fresh sheet around Hannah’s mattress.

“Not that much,” Hannah said, leaning back and looking down. “It’s about to drop out.”

Darcy sighed and stepped over to Hannah and Hannah leaned back and opened her legs wide, allowing Darcy to push the thermometer back up her sex and hold it in place. The rectal thermometer beeped first, but Darcy waited until the vaginal instrument had sounded to remove them both, read them and return them to the cup. A sheet taped to the wall beside her cage held data about Hannah’s cycle, and Darcy recorded the new figures.

“99.7 anal,” Darcy said. “One hundred, even, vaginal. That’s a little hot, even for you.”

Darcy finished Hannah’s bed, changed the sheets in the other cage, ran a vacuum over the carpet and locked all the cage doors back.

“Allain texted from St. Bart half an hour ago,” Darcy said, releasing Hannah’s wrists. “He’s making good time.”

“When does that put him home?”

“2:30.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Darcy left the basement, taking her cart with her, and Hannah retrieved her lunch of bread alone and sat on her freshly-made bed to dine.

Chapter 6: Allain Arrives

She returned to her books, studied until 1, then reveled in a long, hot shower. As far as she knew, she was the only one in the house, its 25 rooms all for her alone, an unimaginable luxury a year ago, when she was living with her destitute mother in a destitute efficiency apartment, before the creditors lost patience and took everything, including Hannah.

Hannah's best makeup was in her bedroom upstairs – another reason she wished she could have been kept there – but she had the basic materials in her cage to make herself up adequately, lining her eyes, applying lipstick, and a little color on her cheeks, putting a gentle wave in her hair with a brush and curling iron.

And then she was done, waiting, trying to distract herself with textbooks that had suddenly become far less interesting. Her eyes moved from her book to the clock: 2:15. 2:23. 2:34.

At 2:37, she heard the sound of the garage door opening, then footsteps on the floor above, and the unmistakable sound of Allain's rolling bag.

She stood, paced restlessly, to her bars, back to her bed, to the bars again, listening for the sound of the elevator.

Their reunions always started off the same, something she had learned to enjoy, and by the time the elevator bumped, at 2:48, her vagina was thoroughly wetted, the fluid coating her lips, one drop falling to her inner thigh.

Allain was nude, as she knew he'd be, his penis as hard as it ever was, his face hard too, with a lust that put all of him into a different place, another world, unreachable by any means other than the place between Hannah's legs.

No words were ever spoken in the first moments of his return. She simply grabbed the bars with both hands, spread her legs to the limits of her shackles and angled her pelvis toward him. He took his penis in one hand, reached down to spread her lips with the other, bent his knees and quickly thrust himself all the way up her welcoming sheath.

"Oh," Hannah moaned quietly, an expression of pleasure as she was impaled, and pain as well. His penis was as big as any male's she held on a regular basis, and having it driven in at this angle meant discomfort, at least at first.

“Hmmmm,” Allain grunted in reply, driving into her over and over again, a dozen thrusts, two dozen, looking into Hannah’s eyes, his own eyes half-closed, mouth a tight, straight line under the power of profound pleasure.

Hannah looked up at his face, down at their grinding sex organs, back up to his flat belly, firm chest, taking him in, loving him with all of her body and, at this moment, all of her mind.

His orgasm began building at 2:53, Hannah confirmed with a quick glance at her clock. His thrusts and groans both came faster, and he drove deeper, his tip pounding Hannah’s cervix, forcing more cries from her, pain and pleasure rolling over her in hybrid waves.

Once he began squirting, his rhythm changed again. He still drove in hard and deep, but he barely pulled out, determined to bury his semen as far as it would go up Hannah’s soft chamber.

Only after he was finished, grunting and buckling with the aftershocks of an overwhelming climax, penis still firm and lodged securely in Hannah’s body, did he really seem to see her.

“Hey,” he said, putting his arms through the bars, embracing her, kissing her hard on the lips.

“Hey,” she replied, holding her pelvis still but leaning back to look at him again, all the way up and down. “I’ve been going crazy waiting for you.”

“You know I hurried.”

“Did you skip lunch?”

“No, but I did a drive through, ate and drove.”

“Thank you.”

“Why are you shackled?”

“I got in trouble.”

“What did you do?”

“I saw Jessica do part of the combination on my bedroom door this morning. I saw the 03, guessed it was 0328, since that’s Athena’s birthday, and I told your mom. I shouldn’t have looked.”

Allain laughed, allowed his still half-firm penis to drop out of her chamber, followed by a long string of semen and lubricant that dropped to her left thigh and foot.

“Mom’s rules,” he said, rolling his eyes. “So, what was the punishment?”

“Shackles in my cage until you got home, and adjusted lunch,” Hannah replied, without an eyeroll or sarcasm or any other indication that her punishment was inappropriate in any way.

“Adjusted lunch?”

“You know,” Hannah said. “She’s done it before. Just bread instead of a sandwich or whatever.”

“Huh. What kind of bread?”

“This dark wholegrain stuff. Darcy brought me three slices.”

Allain laughed again, but it was an awkward laugh, the laugh of someone confronted by one of the inescapable peculiarities of simultaneously owning and making love to another human being. The older one got, the easier it became, Hannah had noticed. It was relatively simple for Laura, effortless for Allain’s grandmother.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Wanna go to the kitchen for a better lunch?”

“No,” Hannah said firmly.

“Why not?”

“Because your mother didn’t say I could,” Hannah replied.

Allain opened his mouth, and Hannah knew he was about to protest, to argue that he could interpret his mother’s rules, that they could be bent, but it wasn’t something Hannah wanted to talk about.

“And because I want to cum,” she said, looking into his eyes again.

He smiled, that easily distracted, reached into his pocket for the key to her cage, released her.

She followed him across the room, shackles ringing faintly against the carpet.

“Jessica was over last night?” he asked.

“Yes,” Hannah said, following him onto the elevator. He hit the button for the second floor, where the bedrooms were, and turned to her, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” Hannah said again. “Finally.”

“How was she?”

“I came.”

“Did she cum?”

“You’ll have to ask Jessica.”

“That means yes.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Hannah corrected. “It means you’ll have to ask Jessica.”

“Seriously? You’re not going to tell me?”

“No. It’s none of your business.”

Allain stared, that look in his eye that said he still didn’t know what to make of Hannah, that she was strong and unbending in ways he couldn’t sort out.

“Are you jealous?” Hannah asked.

Allain laughed, sincerely this time, and he stepped toward Hannah, pinned her shoulders to the wall of the elevator and pressed himself against her, his penis, already firming up again, putting a line of fluid from her belly button to her clitoris.

“Not at all,” he sighed.

The elevator opened, and they began the second phase of what had become their reunion ritual. Now it was Hannah’s turn, and it was understood without ever being stated that she was in charge.

She reached down to Allain’s penis, wrapped her hand around it and tugged gently, leading him through the elevator door, through the lounge with the great chairs and pool table and bookshelves, down the hall to his bedroom.

His door was open, his rolling bag pushed beside his desk, the clothing he’d driven home in – t-shirt, gym shorts, loafers – tossed on the floor in front of his dresser.

He pushed the door closed as they passed through it, secured with a combination Hannah didn’t know, and she released him so he could turn to his dresser and grab the key to her shackles.

He knelt, unchained her, set everything on the dresser, stood and allowed her to grab him again, pulling him by his stiffened member to his bed, where she leaned over and pulled down his sheets with her free hand, quickly clearing the space where she would take him.

“Lie down, on your back,” she commanded, pointing his penis toward the middle of the bed, then letting it go.

He was in position quickly, flat on his back, looking at her, muscles on his belly tight, mouth tight again, face a mask of lust.

Hannah clambered over him, swung her left thigh over his hips, grabbed his penis and angled it up with one hand, spreading her lips with the other, descending on it and taking it into her body with a grunt.

On her hands and knees, she alternated between moving her body up and down his shaft, and holding almost still, the only motion the flicking of her hips rapidly, the stimulation impossibly intense.

She enjoyed Allain for almost 10 minutes, grunting and gasping, before she was ready to reward herself.

“Aaiiiieee!” she cried.

“Ohjesusohsesusohjesusforgivemeohgodohgodogod!”

The orgasm wracked her body for 30 brutal seconds, but she remained engaged with Allain after she was done, milking him slowly, moving gently, maddeningly, until his whole body went tense and he delivered his second charge of semen into her chamber, moaning and bucking under her, thrusting and squirting and crying out.

She remained on all fours over him even as the waves of pleasure subsided, gyrating in a shallow arc against his wet, softening penis, allowing it to drop out of her body.

“Are you tired?” she asked, because Allain had closed his eyes.

“No,” he replied quietly, smiling, eyes still closed, “just trying to make this moment last.”

“It’s forever,” Hannah said, because he seemed to like it when she spoke gibberish. “This will never end.”

He opened his eyes, reached up to stroke her upper arms, pressed his middle against her again, his soft penis against her vulva, a pleasant alternative to being pierced.

“I love you, Hannah,” he said, speaking his own form of gibberish.

“I love you too, Allain,” she said, with all the sincerity she could muster. And it was true, as far as such a thing could be true.

“Why did you ask about Jessica?” Hannah asked, ready to move on to the next thing. She sat down hard, returning some of his semen to his belly, forcing another grunt, and she put her hands on his shoulders, holding him against the bed, staring into his eyes.

“Just curious,” he said. “Hasn’t she had a crush on you since . . . since you moved in with us?”

Hannah laughed at his choice of words, one of the many euphemisms the Petrosyans used in place of what really happened, that she was stored in a tiny cage, displayed in the nude in a showroom, her price recorded on a chip in her back, that she was inspected, tested, sold to the Petrosyans for \$1.5 million, and finally brought to their home in chains.

“Yes,” Hannah said, “but she’s going through things. I think she’s girl crazy.”

“And you’re the girl?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, without any pride. “This month. Or this year, I guess. It’s been almost a year. She’ll move on, though. Now that we’ve finally done it. She’s probably already moved on.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s complicated,” Hannah said, reminding herself she needed to tread lightly. “She wants things from me I can’t give. She wants—”

“She wants to marry you?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, and she clambered off Allain and moved to the edge of the bed, putting her feet on the floor, looking down at her toes.

“Does that freak you out?”

“Does what freak me out?”

“That someone wants to marry you? That a girl wants to marry you?”

“No, of course not,” Hannah said. “She’s got a crush. She’s infatuated. It’s something people get through”

“What if I wanted to marry you?”

Hannah looked back at Allain, still lying flat, unreadable face turned toward her. It wasn’t the first time he’d mentioned marriage, but always casually, always curiously, as if just wanting to get her reaction.

Such things happened, of course. All the time. Owners married their slaves. People bought slaves to marry them. People fell in love with other people’s slaves, and the slaves would be freed, and the stories were sometimes deeply touching. But for a family of the Petrosyan’s stature, it would be a scandal. Allain would forever be the doctor whose family bought his wife for him, the doctor who could do no better than a slave girl, a girl bought for sex, forced to mate with anyone she was assigned to, who sweated and grunted obediently through carnal release day after day and, most likely, enjoyed it, would always enjoy it, whose base passions would never be tamed. She would always be a reckless temptation to every male – and female too, mostly likely – she encountered and fancied.

Hannah looked at the dresser where her shackles waited.

“I’d say you weren’t thinking clearly,” she said at last.

“I just want to know,” Allain said, laughing, rising up on his elbow, putting his hand on Hannah’s shoulder, squeezing. “What would you say?”

“How could I say anything but yes?” Hannah replied softly, rising, allowing Allain’s hand to drift down her arm to her fingers. She went to the toilet to urinate, wiping her fluid and his semen, then setting her chin in her hand.

Allain was, Hannah realized, offering her a freedom as illicit as Jessica’s. One was illegal. One was in impossibly poor taste.

But it was more than that, too. She tried to imagine herself as Allain’s wife, fulfilling her roles the way Laura did, respectably, politely, quietly. For some reason, the idea filled her with revulsion. Not because of Allain. Not because she didn’t want to live free and well. It was something else, and she didn’t know what.

She looked up from her place on the toilet, saw Allain in the bathroom doorway, standing nude, penis completely soft, studying her.

“How was Ramone?” he asked.

“The same as always.”

“How many times did they bring him over?”

“You mean, since the last time you were here?”

“Yeah.”

“Three.”

“Okay,” Allain said quietly, and Hannah knew it wasn’t okay.

“I’m doing everyone a favor,” Hannah said.

“What do you mean?”

“The Abercrombie girls don’t take care of him. They all have jealous boyfriends I think, so he’s kind of getting neglected.”

“No,” Allain said. “I’ve heard those girls go to him almost every night.”

“Who are you hearing that from?”

“Athena.”

“How would she know that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe she’s lying. Athena’s evil.”

“I know,” Allain agreed. “But she occasionally speaks the truth.”

“She told you it was every night?”

“Yes,” Allain said. “Yes.”

“Uh . . . periods?” Hannah countered.

The argument had become so ridiculous she was about to burst out laughing, but she knew this was a sticking point for Allain, a constant

source of pain. Boys were fantastically stupid about certain things. He and his father both.

“Raven?” Allain continued.

Hannah looked at her hand, counting out the days from memory, one night with Raven per finger.

“Five.”

“Okay.”

“If you want to be jealous,” Hannah said, “be jealous of Raven. I’m in love with her, and if she proposed to me this afternoon, I’d marry her tonight. Same day.”

“So that’s three plus five,” Allain continued, humorlessly. I’ve been gone since two Thursdays ago – 14 days. So that leaves six nights. Who else?”

“Well, Jessica. Just the once.”

“Five nights, then.”

Hannah, still on the toilet, leaned back and looked into Allain’s eyes, because she was going to leave out critical information, and she needed him to believe.

“The rest are what your mom calls masturbation nights,” Hannah said, speaking the truth, more or less.

“And you’re alone?” Allain asked.

“Well, yeah, that’s the idea. I mean, sort of. Some nights, your mom comes down at bedtime and gives me some – you know – some . . . dildos. And then she leaves. And I use them – or use one, anyway – and I wash them and she takes them back the next day.”

Allain offered her a shocked smile. “How long has that been going on?”

“Since March, I guess. Three months.”

“Did you ask for that?”

“It was by mutual agreement.”

“Something every night then? A person, or a dildo or whatever?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “Just about. That seems to be the understanding.”

Allain just stared.

“What?” Hannah inquired sharply, and she flushed and stood so she wasn’t looking up at him.

“You cum more than I do.”

“When we’re apart, maybe,” she agreed. “I don’t know what you do at your school. But not when we’re together. Oh, and not as much during my period. There were a few nights, right after you left, where I didn’t do anything.”

“Okay,” Allain said. “So, what else do I need to know?”

“About what?”

“About what’s been going on since Christmas.”

“You’ve been back, like, every two weeks.”

Allain grabbed the bathroom doorjamb with one hand, raised his other hand to his forehead, as if trying to squeeze away a migraine.

“I haven’t really been back,” he said. “You know what it’s been like. I show up, we’re together, then I study, we do something with the family, and I study. There are things going on here I haven’t even wondered about. But now I’m going to be here a month, and I feel like a stranger. It’s all I could think about on the drive up this morning.”

“Ask me anything.”

“I’m not even sure what questions to ask. Tell me what you think matters.”

“I’m taking classes. I’m working on a degree in physics.”

“Well, I know that,” he said with a mock scowl.

“I finally got that IUD put in.”

“When?”

“Last week. Ten days ago, I guess.”

“Who did it?”

“No one you know. A nurse or something at that clinic where I go.”

“Did you spend the night?”

“Yeah, one night. They did some tests and things. But they didn’t torture me this time.”

Allain looked away, and Hannah could tell she’d embarrassed him and regretted her words. Why did she bring it up? She wasn’t sure.

“Trust me, you haven’t missed much,” she quickly added. “Except when you’re here, my life is fantastically boring. I study and . . .”

“And?”

“And I do what I’m told.”

“You don’t have to be with Ramone,” Allain said sharply, staring at her. Had her little jibe about torture prompted him to find something to criticize?

“It’s up to you,” Allain continued. “Athena said that’s been made clear to you. By Mom.”

“No,” Hannah said firmly. “It’s optional, but it’s implied I should say yes. No one asks me if I want to do something they don’t want me to do. So if they ask if I want to be with Ramone, I say yes, because I assume that’s what’s expected, and I don’t ask why. Maybe it’s just, just that they want me to . . . stay in practice. For you.”

Hannah thought her words might be helping. Allain was far simpler to deal with than Jessica, she realized. And she’d had almost a year to understand how he thought.

“And it’s just him . . . visiting . . . for the night. Sometimes they don’t bring him over until after dinner. And then Athena takes him back home first thing in the morning. We don’t spend the day together. We don’t go anywhere together.”

Allain looked at the floor, and Hannah could tell he was feeling embarrassed now, about being jealous of a slave.

“For a month, it’s all you and me,” Hannah said, and she walked up to Allain, stopping just as her nipples touched the skin at his chest. “Do you have any idea how happy that makes me?”

Allain looked into her eyes again, drinking her in, gratitude and relief in his face. For now, for this brief moment at least, the question of Ramone was resolved.

He pulled her to him, hugged her and kissed her hard, as lovers do when it’s not a prelude to sex.

She moved her mouth to his ear, ready to follow through on the most important item of her agenda.

“I want to go to Guadalupe.”

“So that’s your choice?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“There’s a ridge you can be on, to see everything. I’ve never been that high. And they have a spring, and places where you can sit in water way up the mountain. And you can see all the stars at night.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll line it up today.”

He kissed her again, turned toward his dresser, pulled out a pair of swimming trunks.

“Will anyone else be going?” she asked.

“You remember Fernando? And Beatrice? Here in March?”

“Yeah,” she said. Of course she remembered them. Fernando and three other classmates of Allain’s had stayed at the Petrosyan home at various points during spring break, and Hannah had serviced all of them, a not-uncommon courtesy for visitors among the slave-owning class. Did Beatrice know? Probably.

“They said they were interested, if we stayed in Texas. And Beth and Buck were up for it. Ned maybe. They’re all nice.”

Are any of the others . . . subjects?”

“No, they’re all in school.”

“You can be a subject and be in school,” Hannah said curtly.

“You know what I meant,” Allain said, kneeling to put her shackles on. “Why did you ask? Do you want us to bring one?”

“I don’t care.”

“Ramone?”

Hannah laughed, a single hoot of shocked amusement, and when Allain stood, she grabbed his jaw and shook it, as if trying to make him shut up.

“Have you looked up the rules there?” he asked, leading her out of his bedroom and to the elevator.

“Yeah. They’re kind of strict.”

“Like what?”

“I have to check in when I get there, and I have to stay in this place at night.”

“You’re okay with that?”

“It’s fine. I want to go.”

Chapter 7: Leaving for to Guadalupe

After 90 minutes, before they'd even reached I-20, Hannah realized the trip to Guadalupe Mountain National Park was, quite possibly, her worst idea ever.

The problems started before the trip began, when Laura insisted that Hannah wear her full restraints for the seven-hour drive: handcuffs, shackles for her feet, and a chain that joined them together. Secured like that, she couldn't even touch her face unless she was seated and bent over.

Hannah accepted the news stoically, but Allain protested bitterly, and Hannah knew the reason, although he never stated it to her: he wanted her to be comfortable on the long drive, of course, but he also wanted his friends to see her, as much as possible, as an equal, as someone who was bright and studious, not just a sex slave.

No, Laura insisted, she needs to be kept secure until she's registered at the park, just like on any other trip.

The van pulled up to the Petrosyan's house at 7:30 on a hot morning in early July, Allain and Hannah and all their things waiting on the driveway. Hannah, who had been wearing chains regularly for almost a year now, felt deeply self-conscious in them as the van arrived and parked.

She had been allowed to dress, thankfully, but in just white panties, a narrow blue wrap around her hips, and a second, matching wrap around her breasts. She was barefoot by choice, a pair of flip-flops resting atop her things.

Fernando, a year ahead of Allain in medical school, was the driver, and he and his girlfriend Beatrice, a medical student in Allain's class, smiled at her and waved from the front seats as they parked. Hannah attempted to wave back, raising her hand as far as her chains would allow, trying to see through the tinted windows to spot the other three she knew were there: Beth, Buck and Nina, three people she'd never met. Ned couldn't make it, but Nina, Beatrice's cousin, had signed on at the last minute. All Hannah could see were dark shapes moving in the van's back seat, which made her nervous.

Fernando turned off the engine and Beatrice bounced out, hugging Allain and then Hannah. If she was surprised by Hannah's restraints, she didn't show it.

“How have you been, Hannah?” Beatrice asked. Beatrice’s family was wealthy enough to have owned several slaves, and that made Hannah more comfortable around her. People unaccustomed to the ownership of humans tended to gawk or become too curious, asking awkward questions and trying to make conversations that didn’t go well.

Unable to hug Beatrice properly, Hannah kissed her on the cheek and assured her, “I’ve been fantastic.”

The van’s side door slid open, she heard a male voice say something, a female voice reply, and then a girl blurt, “She’s not wearing enough,” before someone else shushed her.

Hannah pretended not to have heard the comment from inside the van, but she knew one of the girls – Nina or Beth – was talking about her with disapproval, and her humiliation went immediately from mild to profound.

But she had been in more humiliating situations, she reminded herself. She would not be bowed today. It might even be said that she could not be bowed, that she had successfully navigated – and amused herself, often enough – in the labyrinthine world of existing as property, by figuring out what she could get away with under a wide variety of situations.

So after Beatrice guided her to the van and helped her in, her shackles too short to allow her to step in on her own, she smiled at the three occupants in the back seat, bent and offered her manacled right hand to each of them, repeating their names. “Hello, Beth, nice to meet you; Hi, Buck, the pleasure’s all mine; Good day, Nina.”

Beatrice eased Hannah into the seat behind the driver’s seat, put her seatbelt on and left the van to help Allain and Fernando load their things into the back.

“You’re going like that?” Beth asked.

Hannah twisted in her seat and smiled.

“You mean chained, or in my underwear?”

Beth stared, said nothing.

“Both, then,” Hannah said. “Both. Kind of the rules.”

“Those are weird rules,” Beth said.

Buck, sitting in the middle seat between the two girls, laughed nervously. “Beth says whatever’s on her mind,” he observed.

Hannah looked back again, studying Beth, who was in green plaid shorts and a red Hawaiian print shirt. “So do I. Your clothes don’t match.”

All three laughed, even Beth. But she also blushed, and Hannah knew she'd at least partway settled the score.

"So what would you be wearing," Beth asked, "if you could wear anything you wanted?"

"I'd be naked," Hannah replied immediately, to more laughter, particularly from Buck, who wasn't sounding nervous anymore.

"Will you be naked at Guadalupe?" Beth asked.

"Yes," Hannah replied. "If I'm told to be. Or they let me."

The commotion with the luggage at the back of the van concluded, and Fernando and Beatrice took their seats in the front. Beatrice turned and smiled at Hannah, her eyes dropping quickly to see if Hannah was wearing panties under her narrow wrap. Allain sat in the seat next to Hannah, a gap between them wide enough to allow passage to the back seat. Hannah had hoped to be immediately beside Allain, so he could touch her leg, brush her foot with his. This was another disappointment.

Fernando started the van and they left the Petrosyan's neighborhood in silence.

Once on the highway leading out of town, Beth was the first to speak.

"Your girl's kind of rude."

"What did she say?" Allain asked, looking first at Hannah with a smile, then twisting in his seat to look at Beth.

Beth just waved her hand, not wanting to repeat the insult.

"She's like that," Allain said. "We're still getting used to it."

Buck laughed again, and then there was more silence, and Hannah looked out the window and tried to imagine what it was like for someone to go on a camping trip with a slave girl they'd just met. Fernando and Beatrice had grown up with slaves, and probably Nina too, but Buck and Beth, most likely not, she guessed. Or not, at least, with sex slaves.

There was a distinct difference – and not just in price – between a girl bought primarily to do labor, and a girl bought primarily to serve with her body.

To the uninitiated, Hannah had noticed, she was a source of both fascination and anxiety. She knew she was beautiful, because people told her she was, whether made up to look like the models in the best magazines, or sans makeup, as she was this morning, when her thick blonde hair, bright blue eyes and lithe body spoke for themselves.

Because the way she looked – her very appearance – was someone else's possession, it was both ethereal and a thing one could buy and sell, and it disoriented people.

Usually, strangers would say nothing on the rare occasions where they could get close enough to speak to her – at church, at dinner, among Allain's friends. Maybe they were afraid she'd just ignore them. Or scream at them to get away.

Or insult them.

Like she'd insulted Beth.

Beth had reached out. Stumblingly, but it was an opening, and Hannah had closed the door on her without giving her a chance.

No one was talking, so every time Hannah moved, her chains rattled, filling the van with its only sound other than the whoosh of the road.

Allain and Beatrice were looking at their phones. She guessed the three behind her were too. Why wasn't anyone talking?

Hannah was the problem, she realized with horror, quickly coming up with a working theory: Beth wanted to camp with her friends, but she didn't want to camp with a sex slave, for any number of valid reasons. Surely, she'd said as much, to Fernando, to Beatrice, probably to Allain as well.

But here Hannah was, in the middle of the van, chains clinking, blonde hair and bare shoulders and tapered thighs catching the morning light, a strange being whose incomprehensible existence had sucked all the social light from the gathering; six friends who didn't know what to say to each other because the seventh friend was a slave.

Hannah bit her lip and stared out the window, fighting back tears. This trip was her idea. It was her trip! Hers and Allain's. Everyone else was a guest. How dare anyone not want her there?

Thirty minutes after they'd left the Petrosyan's, Hannah longed to be home, with her books, in her cage, alone.

She imagined wailing. She was the youngest one here, still a teen, her 19th birthday a few months ago. She was the least educated. She was a slave. Nothing was expected of her. If she cried, Allain would ask her what was wrong, Fernando would pull over and, if she proved inconsolable, they would turn around and take her home, their weekend plans ruined.

Instead, Hannah remembered who she was – who she truly was, inside herself – and she came up with another approach. With the homes

and restaurants thinning on the outskirts of Fort Worth, Hannah turned to Allain and whispered, “I need coffee.”

“Fernando,” Allain said immediately. “Hannah’s gotta have coffee.”

“Oh, thank God,” Beth blurted. “I thought I was the only one. Can we please stop?”

Fifteen minutes later, everyone but Beatrice was drinking something hot and caffeinated from the drive-through window of the last convenience store before the entrance ramp to I-20.

Hannah, who had become expert at navigating these kinds of physical challenges, turned in her seat to face Allain, leaned over and pulled her chains tight, bringing the coffee to her mouth with both hands. In this position, her chains were visible to everyone behind her, and she decided not to care, in the same way that other people with disabilities – missing limbs, facial scars, portwine stains – didn’t seem to care.

As she’d suspected, all three of the van’s rear occupants were tapping on their phones when they weren’t sipping, but Hannah glanced back and Beth seemed to sense Hannah’s eyes on her and looked up, expressionless. She was petite, olive-skinned, possibly Indian or black or Hispanic or all three, with a wide nose but otherwise Caucasian features, her hair in loose curls down to her shoulders. She was all business, Hannah guessed, there to get things done, even on vacation, not inclined to suffer the presence of a girl who’s only purpose was to have sex. Her eyes were a little hard, a little pained, and Hannah wondered about her history, what suffering she had witnessed, or experienced. It was something she wondered about everyone she met. That, and how much they would sell for. She put Beth’s value at \$500,000, a third of Hannah’s price. Maybe less. On account of her hard eyes and her apparent intolerance for nonsense. Being owned was, inherently, nonsense.

“What do you do?” Hannah asked.

Beth laughed, perhaps a little condescendingly, which was to be expected.

“Hasn’t Allain told you?”

“Let’s pretend he hasn’t,” Hannah replied. “Let’s pretend he hasn’t told you what I do either.”

Buck, eyes on Hannah now, slipped his phone in his pocket, as people do at movies or concerts when the show begins.

“I’m in my second year of medical school,” Beth said, sipping her coffee and looking at her phone.

“What kind of medicine?”

Beth looked at Hannah, not condescending exactly, but not fully engaged either.

“I’m going to go into endocrinology.”

She looked at her phone again.

“What kind of endocrinology?” Hannah persisted. She sensed Allain’s eyes on her. She’d always been on, if not her best behavior, good behavior at least around Allain’s friends, but she knew he was always wondering if that would end at some point.

Beth smiled indulgently. “What kind do you recommend?”

“Internal.”

“Why?” Beth asked, her phone and coffee cup fixed in her lap.

“Well, are you interested in pediatrics? Or reproductive endocrinology? I’m thinking not.”

“Why are you saying that?”

“Just because you seem serious.”

“Allain said you’re smart,” Beth said. Hannah wasn’t sure if it was just a compliment, or confirmation that Hannah’s guess was correct about her field.

“I’m not,” Hannah said. “I just read a lot in my spare time.”

Nina laughed. “That’s just what a smart person would say.”

“Allain said you’re taking college courses,” Beth said.

“I am.”

“Do you go to a school?”

“No, it’s all online.”

“What are you studying?”

“Physics”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you majoring in that?”

“What should I be majoring in?”

“I don’t know.”

“Or do you mean, why would a . . . a . . . girl like me . . . bother with college?”

Beth drew one leg up, her heel on the seat, and Hannah knew she'd made Beth uncomfortable again, and didn't care.

"It's okay," Hannah said. "People ask me that all the time. And I always say the same thing. It's better to know than not to know."

Nina laughed.

Beth smiled and seemed reconciled with Hannah, at least for the moment. Hannah turned toward Nina to study her. Like her cousin Beatrice, she was big, solidly built, with a round face and the friendly eyes of someone who was living an easy life. Nina's hair was dyed green and coiled on top, a popular look of late borrowed from an animated children's movie character, a fairy who led armies of mutant insects against humans. She knew Nina was 20 and had taken off a year of school but didn't know why.

There was a brief silence, broken when Buck asked Fernando about someone that Hannah gathered was a professor at the medical school, whom Fernando knew and Buck was thinking about taking a course from.

Buck was compact, maybe an inch shorter than Hannah, but solidly built, with a broad chest and the bony, chiseled knees of someone who ran regularly. He was in gym shorts and a t-shirt emblazoned with a bottle of what Hannah guessed was a European beer. She guessed he was comfortable drinking and playing soccer on the weekends with his friends, but his eyes were bright blue and intense, his forehead high, black hair cut short, and she sensed a determined intelligence he was proud of, but that could put people off, that made him hard to know.

Beginning with Buck's question, the conversation meandered through other aspects of medical school, Hannah sometimes attending, sometimes ignoring. She longed to be a real student, who could walk to class and hear from instructors in person and ask and answer questions. She wasn't sure she would learn more quickly that way, though. She was always working ahead in her online classes.

Two hours into the trip, her coffee gone, she was ready for another distraction.

"I need your phone," she said quietly to Allain. He tapped it to put it into the secure mode reserved for her.

"Whatcha gonna do?" he asked.

"News, and then play *Katzink*."

"How far are you?"

“One of my cats just got her first monopoly, but another got arrested for catnip, and one got fired for scratching his boss.”

Hannah turned in her seat, facing forward to read the news, with a focus on items involving the subject industry – statistics, proposed legislation, high-profile escapes and thefts, abused slaves who ended up getting freed, business and technology trends, the perpetually faltering abolitionist movement – before she concentrated on her game, passing another 90 minutes before it was generally agreed people needed to pee and get lunch.

Chapter 8: On the Road to Guadalupe

Going to the bathroom was one of Hannah's most hated aspects of travel, and when they pulled up to a ragged convenience store just off the Interstate near Althomb, she knew she'd be relieving herself in a basic privy.

Hannah put on her flip-flops, took a wad of tissue and a paper towel from Beatrice, and shambled out of the van to follow Allain to an outdoor cage, walled on three sides, with a solid canvas screen in front bearing the usual instructions and warnings: "Subject Facilities: Subjects Only. Do not leave subjects unattended. Penalties for misuse per Texas Statute Section 114 Part F 82.12."

They were in an unfamiliar part of the state, scrub and desert and a vast horizon, punctuated here and there with mountains, some gray and distant, some closer, taller, of faded blue and green.

The closer mountains were Guadalupe, Hannah knew, and she looked at them and wondered where on them her body would be, tonight, tomorrow, Sunday.

All her misgivings of the first hours of the trip resolved now, at least temporarily, she entered the privy with repulsion and a sense of satisfaction, what she had to do here just a minor annoyance before she experienced something wonderful, the majestic earth under her feet.

There were two seats here, the other unoccupied, Hannah noted with relief. She'd been leered at by her share of males, a female here and there too, and she'd used a facility once with a boy who'd apparently been instructed to masturbate by the girl waiting for him. While the girl and Allain made small talk beyond the screen, the boy – separated from Hannah by nothing but a flimsy barrier of chicken wire – quickly escalated from ogling her as he stroked his penis to whispering about what he would do to her if they weren't chained. She stared straight ahead while she urinated, ignoring his obscene ideas and his grunts as he released.

She could have complained about his behavior to the girl outside, and that might have gotten him punished, but she wasn't offended enough to do that. Often enough, she'd felt the burn for a stranger, even if she hadn't given voice to her lust. The burn boys felt seemed to be far more fierce, she knew, although she wasn't certain why.

Holding her breath against the twin offenses of waste and chlorine-based disinfectant, she chose the least filthy of the seats, wiped it with a paper towel although she had no intentions of sitting on it, pulled her wrap up to just under her top and slid her panties halfway down her thighs. Hovering a good six inches above the seat, she emptied her bladder into the hole.

She didn't care if Allain watched, and owners would often enough step into the facility to supervise or get out of the rain, but he remained beyond the screen.

"Enjoying the trip so far?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir," Hannah replied, slipping into the formality she always used in public, even when the public was sparse. "Your friends are nice."

"Even Beth?"

"I'm figuring her out."

"You think so?"

"Yes. I know she didn't want me along."

Allain was silent, so Hannah knew she was right.

"She's been texting me on the drive," he said.

"What about?"

"You."

"Why?"

"She's wondering how you ended up with us."

"She doesn't know the story?"

"She can't believe that's how we got you."

"Well," Hannah said, wiping, pulling up her panties and returning her wrap to her hips, "you did."

"She thinks you were kidnapped."

Hannah left the privy in silence. What had been done to her was entirely legal, but caging and chaining a free girl who had done nothing wrong could be called many things, kidnapping among them. Of course, her life before that moment had been worse than now in many ways. Better in some ways as well.

"Kidnapped by you? Or your family, or someone?"

Hannah was ready to follow Allain back to the van, but he stayed just outside the privy.

"She was kind of joking, but I think she believes if she dug hard enough, she'd find out you were stolen from a rich family, had your

memory wiped, and got sold.”

“Memory wiped?” Hannah laughed. “That sounds like science fiction.”

“I know,” Allain agreed. “But would it bother you if she asked you some questions?”

“About what?”

“About your life. Before.”

“Sure,” Hannah agreed. “Like, on the drive? In front of everyone?”

“Yeah. If you say it’s okay, I’ll tell her.”

“What if she finds out I was stolen?” Hannah asked.

“Then we’ll make sure you go back to wherever you belong.”

Hannah looked into Allain’s eyes and believed he was being sincere. There was no other answer he could give, she knew, but it was strange to imagine.

“You’d just dump me off?”

She was smiling, but that imaginary moment filled her mind vividly: her true identity and family found, the Petrosyans having her collar cut off, then dropping her off on the street in front of her true home, with her books and clothes in a plastic garbage bag. Or, equally as bad, just putting her on a plane. Quick hugs and goodbyes, maybe a kiss, never seeing one another again.

Hannah felt an unexpected lump in her throat.

“No, we wouldn’t just dump you off,” Allain replied, his voice catching, and Hannah knew he was feeling something too, that he was imagining the same moment, in his own way. “I would write you every day. Until you told me to stop.”

“I wouldn’t tell you to stop,” Hannah protested, fully aware how impossible it was to say what she would do, what anyone would do, under these circumstances. Allain nodded, reassured as far as reassurance was possible. He was smiling, as if they were both merely toying with impossible ideas, for fun. Like when he joked about marriage. But there was pain in his eyes too, and she sensed something new with him, a level of kinship that hadn’t been there before.

Allain swallowed, and awkwardness replaced other feelings. A car had pulled up, two female slaves and a free male in his teens exiting the back seat, and Hannah didn’t want any of them looking at her, trying to talk to her or Allain. More than once, a rude stranger had asked about her sales

price, requested permission to look into her mouth. Even if Allain said no, which invariably he did, Hannah hated being talked about like property on the side of the road, cars whizzing by, her chains glinting in the sun.

“What would happen if I didn’t want to talk to her?” Hannah asked, taking a step toward the van.

“We have nothing to hide about you,” he replied, following her. “So it’s always best to answer questions. If someone gets really suspicious, and they have anything to go on – including evasiveness – they can do a formal inquiry, and that can be a pain.”

“Pain?”

“We’d have to hire a title defender. And you might have to go someplace for awhile.”

“For what?”

“Just to be held, until they get things resolved.”

They reached the van and Allain helped her in.

“I’ll tell her anything,” Hannah said quickly, not remotely interested in being held anywhere. “But I was gonna do some calculus before we got to Guadalupe, so I’m going to be rude if she goes on and on.”

“I understand you’ve already been rude,” Allain said. “I don’t think it will surprise her.”

Hannah dropped into her seat and Allain buckled her in.

“What do you want for lunch?”

Hannah looked at the little store where they’d stopped.

“Anything edible,” she said. “Those fried burritos can be good, if they have them and they’re not a week old. Fruit or something. And a cookie.”

“Sure.”

“And you need to get my book,” she said. “It’s right in the front in my bookbag. And that notebook. And there’s some pencils in the front pocket. Get me two.”

Chapter 9: An Inquiry and a Revelation

Hannah, book open in her lap, notebook and pencils at her side, regretted not getting started on studies earlier on the drive. But then, this was supposed to be her vacation too.

For 30 minutes, they conversed sporadically while they ate and touched their phones, probably talking about Hannah while she studied.

Then Beth began her interrogation.

“Hannah?”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“Where did you grow up?”

“Four Pillars Tabernacle of Jesus,” Hannah replied instantly.

“It was religious?”

“Yes. But men could have four wives.”

Hannah decided not to turn in her seat to talk to Beth this time. She was flattered by Beth’s concern, particularly by her belief that Hannah must be the product of well-to-do parents. But something about Beth’s inquiry was bothering her, and she wasn’t sure what.

“What was your mother’s name?”

“She’s still my mother,” Hannah shot back.

“Oh,” Beth said.

“Martha Loughbridge.”

“You’ve seen her?”

“Yes. Almost every month.”

“Where?”

“At our club. At other places. We have lunch together usually.”

“How do you know she’s your mother?”

Hannah laughed and decided to face Beth directly now.

“People usually know who their mothers are,” she said, twisting around, juggling book and papers in her lap, chains rattling. “And I have 18 years of memories with her. Good and bad.”

“Your father?”

“Micah Loughbridge.”

“Do you see him?”

“No. I don’t want to.”

Beth fell silent, and Hannah looked at her. “If I weren’t smart, would you be asking me these questions?”

Beth said nothing.

“So if a girl seems dumb, you wouldn’t care if she was stolen?”

“That’s not it,” Beth said.

“My mother is Martha Loughbridge, and she was my mother since the day I came out of her body, and she did her best with me under impossible circumstances, and there’s not a day I don’t love her and miss her. And not a day, I’m sure, she doesn’t love and miss me.”

Buck squirmed in what Hannah knew must be profound discomfort. She felt Allain’s eyes on her, Nina’s eyes on her, but she didn’t look at either of them to get a sense of their feelings. All her focus was on Beth.

Their eyes locked and Hannah felt, briefly, that she’d won. But there was something in Beth’s expression she couldn’t interpret. That pain again, perhaps.

“Did you want to know anything else?” Hannah asked.

Beth just stared, her mouth partly open, as if she’d gone numb.

Hannah spun forward in her seat and tried to return to her book, almost succeeding before Beth spoke again.

“Hannah?”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“Sorry.”

“Yes, Ma’am, of course, Ma’am,” Hannah said, in a way that made it clear the apology was not accepted.

“Hannah?”

“Yes, Ma’am?” Hannah said, doing her best to appear patient.

“I was stolen.”

The book opened on Hannah’s thighs became so distant it almost vanished before she convinced herself she’d misheard.

“I was stolen,” Beth repeated.

Slowly, deliberately, Hannah turned back toward the three occupants of the back seat. Allain had also turned, and Buck and Nina were studying Beth as well. Then all three turned to Hannah, as if only she could speak next.

“How old were you?” Hannah asked quietly.

“14.”

“How long were you . . . gone?”

“Three days.”

“Who stole you?”

“Two men. And a woman.”

“Where did they get you?”

“Party I wasn’t supposed to go to. I was hoping to meet this older guy. Stupid . . . stupid. He didn’t even know who I was. I drank something. I don’t remember anything else until I woke up, the next day. I was in this little cage. With all these other people around me, in cages. Naked. All of us. Naked. I started screaming. I just started screaming. They took me somewhere else, by myself.”

Beth’s face took on a distant look, as if she were telling a story about something that happened to someone else.

“It was all a blur. I was crying and screaming. People tried to touch me. They tried to get my footprint, and I tore up the paper. They tried to get me to take a sedative. They tried to put something on my ankle. They finally got my footprint when I fell asleep, and my mom reported me missing, and she got me back. But it took three days.”

“I’m sorry,” Hannah said blankly. Nothing Beth described was at all out of the ordinary, other than that it was done to a 14-year-old girl.

“Did you just go home and try to forget about it?” Nina asked.

“No,” Beth said. “I sued them. Or, my mom sued. My dad helped too, even though they were divorced.”

“Did you win?” Hannah asked.

“Yes. And no. I’m still in therapy. I still have nightmares, a few times a month. But they had to pay. All my college. All my graduate school. Appointments with my therapist.

“And some new laws got passed. I was in the paper. Never with my name. But a lot of people read about the 14-year-old girl who spent three days in a cage, and how it wouldn’t happen again.”

“Oh,” Hannah said.

“It was because of how I looked,” Beth continued. “And how I talked.”

“How you talked?” Hannah echoed.

“This is the funny thing about it,” Beth said, and she smiled for the first time. “When I drink, or get really tired, or smoke pot, I start talking with a foreign accent. Bangladeshi. Which I heard I guess a few times when I was little, before we moved here. I can hear myself, it’s kind of convincing. So they got me when I left the party, is what they said. I was walking down the street, by myself, and supposedly there was this whole

conversation, at 2 in the morning, where they're asking me who I am, and I'm answering with an accent because I'm really drunk, and they think I look Guatemalan, and they think I have a Guatemalan accent, and so I must be illegal, and they decide I'm probably 16, or can't prove I'm not, and I have no ID because my purse is still at the party . . ."

Beth started laughing, hysterical, hands to her face, eyes wet, and Hannah studied her and gained a new understanding. Hannah was both a trigger for her, and the catalyst for what might be therapeutic. At this moment, she'd decided to let Hannah help with healing. All Hannah had to do was listen.

Beth continued to talk through a laughter bordering on tears.

"No matter how bad it feels to remember it, I always laugh about that part. These bounty people or whatever they were pulling up next to me in their van at 2 in the morning, and talking to me, and I'm doing this dumb accent because I'm drunk, and I'm probably saying 'No, I'm Beth. I'm 14. I was born in Austin. I go to school,' and they're just saying back 'Yeah, probably not.'"

"None of us knew this, Beth," Beatrice said from the front, speaking guiltily, as if they should have known and treated Beth accordingly even if Beth hadn't told them. "I'm so sorry."

There was more conversation, about the law, about Beth's parents, about her trauma. Hannah asked a few questions, but she was glad to yield the floor to the others, to have served her purpose. She slowly eased forward, returning to her book until Fernando pulled up at the main entrance to Guadalupe.

Chapter 10: Reaching Guadalupe

Fernando rolled his window down and a chubby, middle-aged woman in an oversized Mountie hat leaned toward him from her office.

“How long are you staying?” she asked.

“Until Sunday,” he replied.

“Campground riverside or on the slope?”

“Riverside,” Hannah blurted.

The woman peered into the van to look at Hannah. Hannah stared back blankly.

“Riverside,” agreed Fernando.

“That’s 32 per night, for two nights. So, 64.”

Fernando pulled out his credit card, the woman ran it and returned it to him, along with several slips of paper.

“You’ll be at site 17, keep that on your dashboard,” she said. “How many subjects?”

“Just one,” Fernando replied.

“Her?” the woman asked, nodding toward Hannah.

“Yes.”

“She needs to go to the office,” she said. “And someone else needs to accompany her.”

“Right now?” Fernando asked.

“Yes.”

Allain reached over to unbuckle Hannah’s seatbelt, and he opened the door and stepped out.

“Allain,” Beth said. “I can go with her while you get camp set up.”

Allain looked at Beth, looked at the woman, waiting at the open door.

“Can anyone go with her?” Allain asked the woman.

“Are you the owner?”

“Yes.”

“We just need a non-subject escort. It can be anyone.”

“Thanks, Beth,” Allain said, settling back into his seat while Hannah put on her flip-flops and Beth helped her out of the van.

Before he pulled the door shut, he leaned out and Hannah smiled and kissed him on the mouth.

“See you at the site in a few, I guess,” she said.

Hannah watched the van pull away, suddenly nervous, as she always was before experiencing treatment in an unfamiliar place. Her greatest fear was usually humiliation, not being hurt or abused. But then, humiliation could sting as fiercely as any physical pain. Allain had seen her embarrassed often enough, and she hated that. She was glad Beth was going with her now.

“Step in here, Miss,” the woman said, motioning toward the office.

Hannah followed the woman into the building, Beth behind her.

Inside, along with the desk, the closet, the shelves, were three tiny cages, each only big enough to stand in.

The woman opened one of the cage doors, Hannah stepped in and turned, watching as the woman shut the door and locked it with an oversized key.

She picked up the phone on the desk. “Got a subject down here, staying at site 17,” she said and hung up.

A car pulled up and the woman stepped outside to take their money.

Hannah looked at Beth, who was staring back at her with a look somewhere between profound sympathy and something harder to define.

“What?” Hannah demanded.

“Why?” Beth asked simply.

“Why what?”

“Why do you have to be in there?”

“It’s just until someone comes to get me.”

“Okay. Why?”

“So I don’t go away, or get stolen or whatever.”

“You’re already chained.”

“Yeah.”

Beth continued to stare.

“This is reminding you of . . . your history, isn’t it?”

“Yes, a little.”

“You mentioned therapy,” Hannah said. “Has it helped?”

“A lot. But I’m still kinda messed up over it.”

“Why did you volunteer to go with me to the office?”

“I thought it was just going to be some paperwork.”

“It’s gonna be more than that,” Hannah warned.

“You’re the first, um, first subject I’ve ever been with,” Beth said.

“I don’t know how any of this works.”

“You were with everyone after they stole you. In those cages.”

“Yeah,” Beth agreed, her eyes flashing with the deep fear that, Hannah guessed, was usually just beneath the surface, waiting to be summoned. “But I didn’t talk to anyone. I just screamed. And since then, I’ve sort of . . . not wanted to, see . . . or talk to . . . or . . .”

Beth’s voice trailed off.

“You didn’t want me on this trip,” Hannah asserted.

Beth looked at Hannah, looked away.

“It’s okay,” Hannah said. “I could tell from the start, and it made me mad. Now I get it. I’m not mad anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” Beth said. “I’m really sorry. I know this was your trip. But I’m still working things out.”

“So let me explain—” Hannah began.

“But this is therapeutic,” Beth interrupted. “I really think it will be. You’re not what I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

Beth opened her mouth to speak, closed it, then seemed to decide to say something else. “What were you going to explain?”

“Oh, just that, well . . . people . . . we . . . are worth a lot. Or, they pay a lot for us, anyway. So if we get away, or someone takes us and doesn’t bring us back, or we get hurt or die, a lot of money can be involved. So that means someone’s going to get sued. So when I go somewhere, they have to keep me, um, secure.”

“Are you going to be chained the whole time?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“How much did Allain pay for you?”

“He didn’t buy me.”

“Okay, how much did his family pay for you?”

“It’s rude to ask,” Hannah said.

“I know, but we’re friends now.”

“One point five,” Hannah said.

“One point five?” Beth repeated. “One point five what? Thousand? Or one point five, like, credits or something? Like, there’s a special currency for this or—”

“Million.”

Beth’s eyes grew wide.

“No fucking way. No fucking way.”

Hannah looked away, immediately regretting what she'd said.

"Why?" Beth demanded.

"I don't know," Hannah said. "Ask the Petrosyans. Actually, don't ask. Don't say anything, please. I shouldn't have told you."

The door to the office creaked open and a man entered, dressed in the same uniform and hat as the woman.

He stepped up to the cage, unlocked the door and opened it, turning. "C'mon," he said.

Hannah hobbled after him, Beth trailing both.

The late afternoon sun felt good on Hannah's shoulders, and she kept to the middle of the road until a car passed and she sidled to the edge and the shade of juniper and pine. She looked up, across the road, to a mountain of green meadows and pine stands and massive boulders, so tall it seemed to climb forever to the sky, and she knew she would be climbing toward the sky on it – soon, today – and she thought of it as a giant, complicated rock whose secrets she needed to figure out, and she was happy again.

The office was hidden behind a stand of trees, invisible until they were almost upon it, a squat, boxy building of rough-hewn timbers in front, a whimsical round structure behind it with a peaked roof of windows and cedar shingles.

The man, middle-aged and stocky, like the woman, held the door open for them, ushering them into an air-conditioned space with three desks, supplies on shelves, and a barred door in the back, that, Hannah guessed, ran to the round part of the structure.

Then man sat down at his desk and pointed to the floor beside his chair, looking up at Hannah.

"Kneel here so I can ID you."

Hannah obeyed and, with Beth looking on, he pulled a form from a slot on his desk, leaned toward Hannah and raised the tag dangling from her collar, copying the data to paper.

"How long will you be here?" he asked.

"Until Sunday," Hannah replied.

"Owner's name, address and phone?"

Hannah provided the information, listing Allain Petrosyan as her owner, although, technically, he wasn't.

"Medical concerns?"

“None.”

The man stood pulled out his phone, waved it over Hannah’s back, where a chip had been inserted, compared the data on his phone to what he’d written on the form.

He stepped over to the shelf and pulled two latex gloves from a box.

“Open your mouth.”

Hannah obeyed and he leaned forward, peering at the roof of her mouth, at her tongue, then reaching in to look under her tongue, sliding his finger along her gums, upper teeth, lower. He threw the gloves away and pulled out a second pair.

“Slip everything down to your thighs and bend over.”

Hannah pushed her wrap and panties down to just above her knees, and bent at her hips. The man stood beside her, steadied her hip with his free hand, and slipped two fingers up her vagina, provoking a quiet gasp.

“Why do you have to do that?” Beth asked.

The man ignored her at first, removing the gloves and putting on a third pair. He slipped his finger up Hannah’s anus, she gasped again, and he looked at Beth with one eyebrow raised, the expression of someone explaining one of the more interesting parts of his job.

“We’ll find things in here that don’t belong,” he said.

“Like what?”

“Almost always pills or weed,” he said. “Sometimes keys. Once, I found a condom.”

“A condom?”

“Still in the wrapper.”

“Why would someone hide a condom in . . . there?”

“Use your imagination.”

“I still don’t get it.”

The man said nothing, so Hannah straightened and supplied the answer: “She probably wanted to have sex with someone she wasn’t supposed to have sex with.”

“That’s about it,” the man agreed.

“What happens if you find something?” Beth asked.

“If it’s something legal, I just tell the owner and let them sort it out. If it’s illegal, I call someone with federal.”

The man threw the third pair of gloves in the trash.

“Tissue there,” he told Hannah. “You can use the bathroom.”

“Thanks,” Hannah said. She grabbed two tissues and, with her skirt and panties still around her thighs, she shambled into the bathroom.

She shut the door, urinated, wiped and flushed, returning to the office, her wrap and panties back at her middle.

Beth turned to the man. “How many, um, subjects stay here?” she asked.

“At least a few every night. Weekends it’s more. We fill up the round. And then some.”

“The round?”

“The room back there.”

“Can I see it?”

“Sure.”

The man stepped to the barred door, unlocked and opened it, and Beth and Hannah followed him in.

They passed through a hall with benches on either side, hooks set into the walls at hip level, and entered a space entirely ringed with barred doors, each door about three feet high. The only light in the space came from grimy windows set in a ring around the ceiling.

Beth sucked in her breath and grabbed Hannah’s arm.

“How long are people kept in here?” she asked.

“Usually just overnight,” the man said.

“Where do they — oh, god!” Beth blurted, her eyes darting to the face of a girl, peering at them from one of the barred doors, a heavy padlock securing the door shut.

“I thought they were only here at night,” she said.

“We’ll keep them here during the day, if we’re asked to.”

“Why is she here?” Beth demanded of the man.

“Why don’t you ask her?” Hannah said, fighting to keep her voice even amidst her annoyance.

Beth turned to Hannah, whispering, “Will she mind talking?”

“She’s like anyone else,” Hannah said curtly. “Ask her, and if she doesn’t want to talk, she’ll ignore you.”

Beth took a tentative step toward the girl.

“Hey?” Beth said, more a question than a greeting.

“Hi,” the girl replied. She was in her mid-20’s, Hannah guessed, dark-haired, with olive skin a shade or two darker than Beth’s. She was

nude except for her collar, and black cuffs around one wrist and one ankle. She'd been given a thin mat to sit on, and she'd doubled it up to serve as a cushion against the metal floor.

At the back of her space, Hannah saw a bucket, a spigot above it, and guessed that the spaces had running water. So she could drink, and she could flush down what she put into the bucket. And the spaces were big enough to lie down straight in, and featured solid walls on the sides, for privacy. There were worse places to be kept.

"What's your name?" Beth asked.

"Niedra."

"Hi, Niedra, I'm Beth."

Niedra turned, her hip and shoulder against the bars, back against the side of her cage, and she looked at Beth, then turned her gaze to Hannah.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Hannah."

"Hi, Hannah."

"Hello, Niedra."

"Do you mind talking?" Beth asked.

"God no. I'm dying of boredom," Niedra replied. Her voice was light, slightly inflected, and Hannah sensed she was born somewhere else, outside America.

"How long have you been in here?" Beth asked.

"I got here at 3," she said.

Beth looked at her phone.

"So, like 90 minutes?"

"Probably something like that," Niedra agreed.

"Why are you here?"

"I'm afraid of water."

Beth raised her eyebrow, prompting Niedra to elaborate:

"My family's on the river, on a boat, so I asked them to drop me off."

"Here?"

"Yeah."

"Why here?"

"Where else would they drop me off?"

"Couldn't you have just stayed in the camp?"

“Yeah, but they’d have to chain me,” Niedra said, tilting her head toward Hannah. “Like you.”

“You’re here with a family?” Beth asked.

“Yeah. My family.”

“What do you do for them?”

Niedra offered the enigmatic smile that Hannah recognized immediately, the smile of a sex slave when she (or he, often enough) was asked what they did. Normally, however, the smile was followed by a straight face and a list of practical things that didn’t involve sex, and Niedra observed that convention.

“You know what an au pair is, right?”

“Oh, like a nanny?” Beth asked.

“Yeah, but an au pair. Because I’m from another country.”

“Where?”

“Morocco.”

“How did you end up here?”

“My family dropped me off.”

“No, I mean, how did you come to America?”

“I volunteered.”

“For this?”

“For whatever,” Niedra replied.

“Why?”

“Anything was better.”

“What was happening in Morocco?”

“It’s complicated.”

“You, uh, flew then?”

Niedra laughed and turned, now sitting cross-legged facing them, making no effort to hide her shaved vulva. “No no no. I was on a boat.”

“Like a cruise ship?” Beth asked.

“Yeah,” Niedra deadpanned. “Except the rooms were a little small, and they called them cages, and I spent two weeks in mine and I never left.”

“Are you glad you, um, volunteered?”

“Yes,” Niedra said. “Because if I didn’t, I’d be dead.”

“How do you know that?”

The girl looked at Beth, looked away, and Hannah recognized the distant gaze, nearly universal among subjects as they remembered the pain that had brought them to what they were now.

“When did you volunteer?”

“I was fifteen.”

“So,” Beth stammered, forging ahead through what Hannah knew was an increasingly difficult interaction “. . . you’re helping raise the children?”

“Yes, two boys and a girl. But mostly the girl. The boys are getting . . . older.”

As they talked, the man moved down the hall to the front office, returned with a pair of cuffs and stepped up to Hannah.

“Miss, can you hold your left hand out?” the man said to Hannah. She complied and he closed a black cuff around her wrist, knelt to close a second cuff around her ankle. Hannah inspected the cuff on her wrist. It was heavy plastic, a little thicker than a watch, with a faint blue light flashing in the middle of the thickest part.

“How old are you now?” Beth asked after a quick glance at what was being done to Hannah.

“27,” Niedra replied.

“How much did they pay for you?”

Hannah tapped Beth’s arm, trying to make her stop. She doubted Niedra’s owners wanted her talking to strangers about anything, much less her price.

“Six hundred thousand,” Niedra said, smiling, clearly proud of the number. She looked at Hannah, to gauge her reaction, and Hannah looked back wide-eyed, as if she’d never heard of a price that high.

Beth just looked at the girl, incredulous again.

“We need to go,” Hannah said, stepping beside Beth, raising her hand to the limits of her chain to take Beth’s arm. Beth allowed herself to be turned and pushed out of the room.

The man was at the desk in the front office, two forms before him, both with blanks at the top filled in with Hannah’s name and federal ID number.

“You need to sign this one,” he said to Beth.

“And this one’s for you,” he added, nodding toward Hannah.

“What is this?” Beth demanded, studying the form.

“You accept responsibility for your subject, and agree to make sure she follows the rules.”

“What happens if she doesn’t?”

“You’ll be held liable.”

“I’m not her owner.”

“We start with whoever’s name is on the form. But normally it’s the owner we go after in the end.”

Beth looked at the form, filled in the blank for her name, paused, looked at Hannah.

“Please tell me you’re not going to fuck around.”

Hannah decided to treat Beth’s plea as a joke, and she laughed.

The man tapped Hannah’s form.

“Can you read, Miss?”

“Why wouldn’t she be able to read?” Beth demanded.

“That means you can read?” the man said without apology.

“I can,” Hannah replied. “Yeah.”

“She was doing calculus on the drive up,” Beth asserted.

“Okay,” the man said, clearly unconcerned about what a subject did in her free time. “So I’m gonna sum everything up anyway, okay?”

“Sure,” Hannah replied.

“Restraints are mostly at your owner’s discretion, but the tracking cuffs stay on as long as you’re here. Don’t try to take them off or deactivate them. If either one shuts down or comes off, it’ll let us know and we’ll come find you. If you’re right there and you haven’t tampered with your cuff, fine. If you’re not right there, that’s escape.”

“Can I swim with them?”

“Yes, down to 10 feet. Under that, the signal stops, and it’ll turn red and you’ll need to come to the surface within a minute.”

“Okay.”

“What you wear is at your owner’s discretion,” the man continued. “You can be nude, unless someone complains. If any guest, any park employee, any child tells you to cover up, you do so.”

“Sure.”

“Oh, and for god’s sakes, no public sex,” the man said.

“That happens?” Beth inquired.

“Often enough,” the man replied. “Owners have a coupla drinks, and then they’re egging their people on, and the subjects don’t give a damn, they’re just following orders, and then someone’s kid sees it. God, those parents, they’ll just raise hell about that.”

“What happens if she breaks a rule?”

“It’s up to us,” he said, handing Beth copies of the documents they’d signed. “We might ask everyone to leave, or we might let everyone else stay if you kennel her here for the rest of your visit. And then—”

“Kennel?”

“Yeah, that room back there. Where you were talking to the girl. And then, the rest is common sense. Stay with your owner or owner designate. Fifty feet apart at most, no further. Don’t leave the park without signing out here. If everyone you’re with needs to leave the park, they can bring you here for confinement, or they can put approved restraints on you, as long as you stay in your reserved site.”

“Approved restraints?” Beth asked.

“What’s she’s wearing now is fine,” he said. “And curfew’s at 11:30.”

“Curfew?” Beth echoed.

“She’ll stay here overnight. You can sign her in anytime between 8 and 11:30. But you’ll need to physically sign her in. Don’t just drop her off. And she won’t need anything overnight. No blanket, no pills, no clothes, no glasses or jewelry. And pickup’s any time after 7 a.m.”

“Okay.”

“Here’s a map,” he said, pulling a sheet from a stack on his desk and marking it with a pen. “You’re at site 17, so you’ll go this way, then left at the fork, then up here, third on the right.”

“Thanks,” Beth said, taking the sheet.

“It’s about a quarter-mile,” he said, looking at Hannah.

“Okay.”

“You can take her chains off,” he said, turning to Beth.

“I don’t have a key,” Beth said, turning to Hannah. “Did Allain give you one?”

Hannah just looked at Beth quizzically.

“Oh, yeah, right,” Beth said. “Sorry.”

“I can walk,” Hannah said. “It’s not that far.”

Chapter 11: To the River

Back in the sun, the embarrassments of registration altogether minor and witnessed only by Beth, Hannah walked shoulder-to-shoulder with Beth as she studied the map.

“Allain brought your key, right?” Beth said.

“God, yes. I just had to be chained until I got registered.”

“Is that Allain’s rule?”

“No, his mom’s.”

“Why?”

Hannah ignored the question. “You shouldn’t have asked that girl how much she sold for.”

“Why not?”

“It’s rude.”

“She seemed proud to tell me.”

“Yeah, because she sold for a pretty high price.”

“Why . . .” Beth said, pausing for effect. “Why would anyone pay six hundred thousand dollars for a nanny?”

“She’s not just a nanny,” Hannah said.

“What else does she do for them?” Beth asked. “Play the stock market?”

“She has sex,” Hannah said. “She’s a sex slave.”

“She said she’s an, an au pair.”

“Sex slave,” Hannah said.

“How do you know?”

“It’s just, so obvious, it doesn’t even have to be explained,” Hannah asserted.

“Give me the executive summary.”

“Okay, sales price. And how she looked. Did you notice?”

“Notice what?”

“Her hair, for one. Professionally cut, professionally tended, full. No one does that to a nanny’s hair. And God, her eyebrows. She had them worked on this week, by someone who knows what they were doing. And her makeup. They bought her because she’s beautiful, and they show her off, and they have sex with her.”

“Okay,” Beth said, “okay, but who’s having sex with her then?”

“Well, the dad at first.”

“What?”

“Yeah, that’s how it is. The mom had her daughter, plus two sons already there and growing up, so she was done with sex . . . so, they bought him a girl.”

“That’s . . . sick.”

“It’s what happens,” Hannah said, feeling defensive for reasons she couldn’t reveal. “You asked, I’m just telling you.”

“So she’s the dad’s sex slave, and—”

“And the sons’,” Hannah interrupted.

“Oh my god,” Beth protested, looking up, squinting against the sun. “So why did she say she’s an au pair?”

“Raising the family’s little girl is what she does when she’s not having sex.”

“So she said au pair because she’s embarrassed? About what she really does?”

“Should she be embarrassed?” Hannah asked.

Beth peered sharply at Hannah, and Hannah knew Beth had forgotten that she was talking to a sex slave. It happened often enough in Hannah’s experience. Even when she was nude, even when she was chained, as she was now, hobbling beside Beth along the road to their campsite, people forgot. They’d be conversing, and Hannah would be speaking to them like a peer, like an equal, and they’d lose track and let something slip, a casual word or two that revealed their true feelings about slaves, and what slaves did, and who slaves were.

“I didn’t . . . I mean,” Beth stammered, and Hannah knew she was searching desperately for a cover, a polite reason for the thing she had just said. Hannah decided to let her flail.

“I just meant,” Beth began again, “that she had to, to be in that . . . that place . . . so she said au pair, because . . . because you wouldn’t expect . . . to find—”

Hannah laughed and Beth stopped speaking.

“It’s fine,” Hannah said. “You think she should be embarrassed. You probably think I should be embarrassed. I disagree, and I don’t think I need to tell you why.”

“No,” Beth protested, “I just . . .”

“Do you wanna be friends?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then just be honest with me. It’s okay if you say things. I know you’ve got a history. And I know how people think about us. So just go with it. If you say something, I’ll say something back. And then we can move on.”

“God damn,” Beth said after a long pause, quietly, under her breath.

They’d reached a tree-lined path, more a trail than road, each site’s number carved in white on a short post at the front of the plot.

As they made their way, counting up from site 1 to site 17, Hannah alternated her gaze between the river, visible as a glint here and there among the foliage, and the other camping spaces – some vacant, some with a tent or two but no people, some occupied. She saw an older couple reading, parents having early dinner with two young children, young lovers embracing on a blanket next to a makeshift tent of tarps and blankets. Some of those they passed noticed her, looked up, stared, the sight of a girl in chains a novelty, most likely.

Hannah looked away once she noticed she’d drawn someone’s attention, but she was determined not to be embarrassed or self-conscious. She had as much right to be here as anyone else.

At their own site, four tents were taking shape – one each for Beatrice and Fernando, Beth and Nina, Hannah and Allain, and a single small tent for Buck.

Hannah marched straight to Allain, who was working with Fernando to raise a tent, the two of them at opposite corners.

“Please tell me you have the key,” Hannah said.

Allain smiled at her and, leaning forward to let the tent corner rest on his shoulder, he fished in his pocket, drawing out his key ring.

“Beth, can you do the honors?” he asked, handing her the ring.

Beth grabbed the ring and moved to the picnic table, sitting, beckoning Hannah to follow. Hannah got the sense this was embarrassing for Beth. Hannah wanted it to be.

“Which key is it?” Beth asked.

“The smallest one, there,” Hannah said, pointing. “No, the silver one.”

Beth separated the key from the rest, turned to Hannah, and Hannah raised her left hand and tapped the little keyhole. “Right there.”

Beth inserted the key, turned it, and the cuff opened with a click. Hannah raised her other hand and Beth repeated the process, then knelt

before Hannah to free her ankles.

“Where should I put this?” Beth asked, holding Hannah’s chains with a grimace, clearly wanting to dispose of them quickly.

“Put them with Allain’s stuff,” Hannah said. “Just set it on the blue bag.”

Beth stepped to the van and opened the side door while Hannah went to the back, yanked open the rear door and pulled out her duffel bag, rummaging around in it until she found her navy blue bikini. With a quick glance over her shoulder to confirm no one was in her immediate vicinity, she stripped nude, bare for no more than 10 seconds before she was dressed for the river.

Allain and Fernando, finished raising the tent, were driving tent pegs into the ground around it as Hannah approached.

“Who gets to live there?” Hannah asked, crouching beside Allain.

“You and me,” he replied.

“Can I go to the river?”

Allain looked at her, then down at her bikini. “Well, that didn’t take long.”

“It’s the thing I most want to do,” she said, adding after a pause, “right now.”

“I gotta finish up here,” he said with a smile. “How about after that?”

“Make Beth go with me.”

“You gonna be safe?”

“You know I can swim,” Hannah protested.

“Hey, Beth,” Allain said. “Can you take Hannah to the river?”

Beth, on her knees to poke around in the cooler, looked up at Hannah.

“When did you change?”

“Uh, five seconds ago.”

“You can swim on your own?”

“No, you need to get in with me.”

“I’ll need to put on my swimsuit.”

“I’m just joking,” Hannah said, stepping to Beth and grabbing her hand. “We have to go now.”

Beth shut the cooler and stood reluctantly, looking at the other girls, who were stacking things on the picnic table and clearing out the grill.

“We’re fine,” Beatrice said with a wave. “Go with Hannah.”

A thin trail led from the back of their campsite, and Hannah picked it out, pulling Beth behind her.

As they neared the river, the sounds grew louder, of children, adults, what Hannah guessed were oars being wielded clumsily, banging against the sides of boats.

They cleared the woods and Hannah gasped with gratitude at the panorama before her, a broad, shallow waterway, green mountains soaring beyond it, a dozen of the people of America before her, of all ages, at least three races, most free and, she noted quickly, a few slaves.

There were two older teen boys in two canoes at the far side of the river, and Hannah studied them first, then moved her gaze to the young boy and girl splashing, parents sitting nearby on a narrow beach of white sand Hannah knew was from somewhere else. A man, woman and little girl, 8 or 9, Hannah guessed, paddled a third canoe upstream, 100 yards away.

And, at the other end of the little beach, Hannah saw for more people standing in the sand, two boys and two girls, all in their early 20’s, one boy and one girl collared and nude, a little boombox at the collared boy’s feet, playing jazz. They were just talking, Hannah noted, as if they were at a dinner party, or standing by a pool.

“Oh, my god, they’re naked,” Beth observed.

“Yeah, I guess no one’s told them to get dressed yet.”

“So those are slaves, right?”

“The nude ones, yeah,” Hannah replied. “Want to talk to them?”

“God no,” Beth said.

Hannah continued moving toward the water, pulling Beth with her.

“I was kinda joking,” Hannah said. “But you seem curious about things. Maybe they’ll answer some of your questions.”

Beth stopped short, squeezing Hannah’s hand.

“Are you making fun of me?”

Hannah turned back. “Is that what it feels like?”

“It kinda does.”

“Okay, sorry,” Hannah said. “But after you asked Niedra how much she sold for, I figured you were past therapy and you were just curious. Like, morbid curiosity.”

“Goddamn,” Beth said.

Hannah kicked her flip-flops off in the soft grass at the edge of the sand. "You have to put your feet in the water with me."

Beth, with another furtive glance at the two naked subjects, slid her shoes off and followed Hannah.

The sand was still hot from the day's sun, but the water, fed by streams born where the air was thin and cool at night, was bracingly cold, and Hannah gasped as the water closed around her feet and lapped against her ankles.

"You wouldn't think it would be this cold," Beth observed, just her toes submerged.

"I'm still going to swim in it," Hannah said. "I'm here to be baptized."

"Baptized? Like religious baptized?"

"Yeah," Hannah replied, and she gazed up at the mountain. "At least, religious to me."

"So when I keep saying goddamn, that offends you, doesn't it?"

"No," Hannah replied. "I've heard worse. I've seen worse. But you've said it twice. Why?"

"I'm here to camp," Beth said. "And I feel like I'm doing anthropologic immersion instead."

"What's that?"

"It's where you go into a culture, and you live like they do."

"And I'm the culture?" Hannah asked.

"Well, you, and some others."

Beth looked at the naked subjects again, the male sitting in the sand with the free girl, the female looking at Beth and Hannah, looking away.

"Have you done an immersion?" Hannah asked. "I mean, a real one?"

"No, but a friend did. For school. In Uruguay."

"I'd love to do that," Hannah said, inching forward, the water halfway up to her calves now. "But what does that have to do with saying goddamn all the time?"

"You're saying things that are making me think harder than I'm used to thinking," Beth said. "When I'm on vacation, anyway. And it's surprising me. And when I'm surprised, I curse."

"Maybe you should stop asking questions."

"No," Beth said. "I have to ask. But when you answer . . ."

“What?” Hannah demanded.

“You’re just sort of . . .”

“What?”

“Aggressive.”

Hannah laughed.

“That’s a first,” she said. “Aggressive. Oh my god.”

“Yes,” Beth said, nodding. “Aggressive. From the moment we met.”

“You said I wasn’t wearing enough,” Hannah said. “You started it.”

“That wasn’t aggressive.”

“What was it, then?”

“I was just, um, expressing an opinion.”

“So was I,” Hannah said. “Your clothes didn’t match.”

“Goddamn.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, deciding that Beth’s ‘goddamns’ would indicate the conclusion of a topic, and she reached back and pulled Beth further into the stream. “Now, immerse yourself in this.”

“I’m still dressed,” Beth gasped, the water closing around her knees, and she, pulled her hand away.

“Fine,” Hannah said, and she lunged forward, her thighs, hips, chest, and then her head breaking the surface of the water with a foamy splash.

She forced all of her body under, and then she popped out with a laughing cry.

“Oh, god, that’s cold!” she said. “Oh! Oh!”

Beth stood waiting, arms folded, as Hannah stumbled back to her.

“Okay, baptism complete,” Hannah announced.

“Is that the only thing you came for?” Beth asked.

“No, of course not,” Hannah replied. “I’m going to have a lot of baptisms.”

“What else?”

“Baptism by mountain,” Hannah replied. “By meadow, if I can find one. By flower. By the woods.” Hannah paused, looked at Beth. “Baptism by friends.”

“That’s poetic,” said a female’s voice to Hannah’s left.

Hannah glanced over, saw that the naked slave girl had broken away from her little group, had taken a few faltering steps through the cold

water toward Hannah.

Hannah opened her mouth to speak, but Beth beat her to it, blurting, “She studies calculus.”

The girl smiled at Beth indulgently, then at Hannah, and the two slave girls exchanged a look that spoke volumes, indecipherable to anyone free.

The girl was dark-haired, fair-skinned, a little shorter than Hannah, with gray, searching eyes that made Hannah believe there must be curiosity and intelligence behind them. Her breasts were B’s, tipped with small nipples of light pink, matching the flesh at her shaved vulva.

“Are you from Texas?” the girl asked.

“Yes, Dallas,” Hannah replied.

“Are you staying overnight?”

“Yes, until Sunday.”

“I’m Jill.”

“Nice to meet you, Jill. I’m Hannah.”

“If they double us up tonight,” Jill said, getting to the point of the conversation, “wanna share?”

“Sure. Straight, bi—?”

“Mostly straight.”

“Same here.”

With a small, shy wave, first to Hannah, then to Beth, Jill backed away, rejoining her group,

“What was that about?” Beth demanded.

Hannah, shivering, left the water to sit on the grass, and Beth sat beside her.

Hannah lay back, the grass rough on her back, the slanting sunlight bringing relief to her goose-bumped skin.

“Baptism by sun,” she said, closing her eyes.

“What was that about?” Beth repeated.

“I thought we agreed you wouldn’t be asking any more questions.”

“We didn’t agree to that.”

“But you don’t like my answers.”

“I’m okay with them.”

“You said they’re aggressive

“I shouldn’t have said that.”

“And then, you keep saying goddamn.”

“I’ll stop.”

“No you won’t.”

“Okay, maybe not. So what was that all about?”

“They might not have enough, um, spaces for the people here tonight,” Hannah explained. “So we might have to double up. And if we do, she asked if she could be with me.”

“Two of you?”

“Yeah.”

“In that little space? Where that girl was?”

“Niedra. Yes.”

“But you just met her.”

“It’s not ideal,” Hannah said, “but you can tell a lot about another subject on sight alone.”

“How so?”

“Think about it. We’re constantly monitored. You can see our collars from a mile away. We’re worth more than most houses. We get great medical care, we’re tested all the time. And we’re tortured if we don’t follow every rule exactly. So we’re the safest people you’ll ever be around, and Jill and I know that. And then, I’m guessing she’s used for sex, and we’re about the same age, so we have a lot in common. Most likely, the worst thing she’ll do is snore.”

Hannah opened her eyes and turned to Beth, who was staring at the mountain, mouth tight, eyes focused on nothing.

“Beth?”

“Hmmm,” Beth said simply.

“Beth? Are you okay? Beth?”

Beth tore her eyes away from the nothingness they were locked on, looked back at Hannah, unfocused.

“Is this triggering you?” Hannah asked. “Is this messing you up?”

“Yeah,” Beth replied, grabbing her knees and shivering. “Sort of. It’s complicated.”

“I’m sorry.”

They were silent for a few minutes, listening to the sounds of splashing, of canoes bumping, of a female child protesting something her brother had done.

“You and that girl, you—” Beth began.

“Jill,” Hannah interrupted.

“Yeah, Jill. You and Jill, you gave each other a look. When she first spoke to you.”

“Uh huh,” Hannah agreed.

“I was watching.”

“Okay.”

“What did it mean?”

“None of your business.”

“Seriously?” Beth said. “That’s, like, very rude.”

“What are you thinking when you look at that naked slave boy?”

Hannah asked, rising up on her elbows, staring at Beth.

Beth turned back, her expression a mix between surprise and anger.

“You’re straight, right?” Hannah asked.

Beth said nothing.

“You want him?” Hannah persisted.

Beth rose abruptly to her knees, staring at Hannah expectantly, but Hannah remained motionless.

“You’re offended?” Hannah asked.

“No, I just need to get back to the camp,” Beth replied. “I’m sure they need me.”

“I’m not going,” Hannah said. “So you’ll go back alone. And it’s more than fifty feet. And if they catch me, they’ll blame you first.”

Beth glared at her.

“You’re offended,” Hannah said, this time as a statement.

“Yes.”

“Because I asked you how you felt. About something private.”

“Yes,” Beth agreed.

“When you ask what two slaves are thinking when they look at each other,” Hannah said, “that’s the same thing. The same thing.”

“God—” Beth said, choking on the rest of the word.

“So, I’ll tell you,” Hannah said, “but you won’t like the answer. Which is most of the reason we don’t like to tell what we were thinking. Because the person we’re talking to won’t like the answer.”

“Go ahead,” Beth said, and she sat down and stared at Hannah.

“You keep telling everyone I do calculus,” Hannah said. “Why?”

“Because . . .” Beth began cautiously, narrowing her eyes at Hannah, clearly suspecting it was a trick question. “Because I’m proud of you. Okay? I’m proud of you.”

“Oh really?” Hannah queried. “It’s not because you’re a little embarrassed to be seen with someone who’s obviously a sex slave? You don’t want them to think that’s why you’re with me? You don’t want people to judge you for spending time with a slave who isn’t smart? Because that’s what Jill and I decided you were thinking. And that’s why we looked at each other.”

Beth looked away, looked back at Hannah.

“Goddamn.”

Hannah, reclining on her elbows, turned her eyes back at the mountain and felt bad for Beth. Most people didn’t have her history. Most people weren’t this curious. Curiosity was good. But the discoveries made by curious people weren’t always the welcome kind.

A pair of hands grabbed Hannah by the shoulders, and she tilted her head back and looked into Allain’s smiling face.

“Hello, Sir,” she said politely, but with a smile that suggested things that weren’t necessarily polite.

He kissed her forehead.

“I’m Allain here,” he said. “Just Allain.”

“Okay, Allain,” Hannah agreed. “How does camp look?”

“It’s all set up, pretty much,” he said. “And people are getting hungry.”

“I’ve got the best idea for dinner,” Hannah said. “My spaghetti thing.”

“You’re going to let us help, right?”

“Yeah, you need to keep me from burning stuff.”

“Okay, we can do that.” Allain turned to Beth. “How is Hannah behaving?”

Beth, seated with her arms across her knees, said nothing.

“That bad?”

Beth nodded.

“She keeps asking questions,” Hannah said. “And I keep answering them.”

Allain squeezed Hannah’s shoulders again.

“I’ll go back and make dinner,” Hannah said. “But first you have to get into the water.”

“How far in?”

“All the way in. Beth only got her feet wet.”

“Hannah calls it being baptized,” Beth said.

“Full immersion?” Allain asked.

“The only way it’s done,” Hannah replied.

Allain stood, pulled off his shirt and dropped it on Hannah’s head. She pulled it off and watched his lean, healthily-muscled body move toward the water.

He put his feet in, looked back at Hannah with an expression of shock.

“All the way in,” she said.

He edged forward, scanning the river, his head turned for a long moment toward the naked Jill, sitting on a towel now with her compatriots. Hannah allowed herself to wonder briefly if any slave, any slave vagina, would do for him, if his hunger was that indiscriminate.

“You tell him what to do,” Beth observed.

Hannah sat up, held up Allain’s shirt before her, shook it out and folded it neatly before she set it beside her thigh.

“I do,” Hannah agreed. “And sometimes he obeys.”

“You’re good at this.”

“At what?” Hannah asked, laughing.

Beth held her peace, and Hannah knew what she meant. Was it a compliment, though? Was being a good slave an achievement?

Allain made it to mid-thigh before he turned back, left the water, knelt beside Hannah and retrieved his shirt.

“No way you went all the way in,” he said.

Hannah grabbed a hunk of her damp, blonde hair and held it out for him.

“She did go in,” Beth said. “She screamed, but she went all the way under.”

Chapter 12: Dinner and Jill

Hannah, cooking in just her bikini, had more help with dinner than she needed – or wanted, honestly – but she succeeded in managing a simple but competent meal, of spaghetti, salad, bread, wine. The sauce was her own recipe, a concoction she was trying to perfect that included sausage and onions. Tonight's version was good enough, but everyone's effusive praise eventually felt condescending, and she was glad when the conversation turned back to academics and the fall term and life in Corpus Christi.

More than once, Hannah caught Beth's eyes and smiled, but Beth responded with little more than a pensive smirk, and Hannah wondered if Beth was always like this, or if she was still struggling with Hannah's presence.

After dinner, night fully descended, the boys built a fire and Hannah and the others gathered around it, some in chairs, Hannah on a towel at Allain's feet.

"Have you ever slept in the woods, Hannah?" Beatrice asked.

"No," Hannah said. "But I'm not really going to tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"I have to stay in this place. At the office."

"Oh," Beatrice said. "I didn't know that. I'm sorry."

"It's one of those rules at Federal parks," Hannah said. "I looked it up before we got here. It's fine."

"When do you have to go?" Nina asked.

"What time is it?"

"10:45."

"Curfew's at 11:30," Hannah said. "So I should probably get going."

"Allain, you want me to bring her?" Beth offered.

Allain looked at Hannah.

"Yeah, let her take me," Hannah said. "You're not missing anything. It's boring there."

Hannah rose, went to the tent, suffered a small pang as she imagined spending the night here with Allain, instead of in a cage.

But then, they'd agreed they wouldn't make love while they camped, even though she was supposed to start ovulating Saturday. There

was no privacy in the tents. And they could make up for lost time on Sunday night. And Monday. And the rest of the week.

Beth came to the door of the tent while Hannah rummaged around for her bag, slipping off her top and bikini bottoms and stowing them away.

"I'm going naked," Hannah said. "Except for my flip-flops."

"Why?"

"They said no clothes," Hannah said.

"I could carry your things back," Beth said.

Hannah ignored her. Her bikini was worth more than \$300, and she didn't want to worry about where it ended up after she handed it to Beth. She also didn't want something as personal as a bikini bottom she'd been wearing all evening left on a table somewhere. Afforded very little privacy, she clung to it where she could.

"You're going to walk there nude?" Beth asked.

"It's dark," Hannah said. "No one will care."

Hannah left the tent, zipped closed the flap and moved to the edge of the fire to give Allain a kiss.

"I'll see you in the morning," she said, hugging him from behind as he sat in a folding chair.

"Thanks for dinner," he said, standing and wrapping his arms around her. "Sleep well."

Hannah knew she was visible to everyone, and she wondered in particular about Buck. Fernando had grown up around naked slaves, Hannah knew, but she wasn't sure about Buck.

Tearing herself away from Allain's embrace, she moved beyond the firelight, headed to the little lane that led back to the office, Beth in tow.

"I'm sorry you have to do this," Beth said.

"It's part of the deal," Hannah said. "It's worth it."

"I feel complicit."

"Complicit? In what?"

"In this," Beth replied. "In the whole thing."

"You mean," Hannah began, lowering her voice and speaking in an official tone, "the subject industry."

"Is that what you call it?"

"No, I call it my life," Hannah said. "But that's what other people call it. And you've been complicit all your life."

"No I haven't."

“Ever eat a Topper Drop?”

“Yeah.”

“Slaves make them.”

“No fucking way.”

“Yes. One factory, in Nevada, anyway.”

“Ever eat lettuce?”

“Shut up.”

“I know you do, because I saw you eating lettuce tonight at dinner.”

“Shut up.”

“But I always get Benton Farms, and that’s what we ate tonight, which doesn’t use slaves, and that’s why it costs more. But if you have other lettuce, good chance . . .”

“Okay,” Beth said, “I’ll remember that.”

“And then, your college.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re letting brokers pay for your college.”

“Yeah,” Beth said. “So please don’t call me complicit. I sued them when I was 14. Or 15, before it was all settled. I sued them before I could drive.”

“Did you have any other options, besides getting college paid for?”

“Uh, I guess,” Beth replied. “Like, yeah, the cops asked me if I wanted to press charges, and I said yes, but then my mom heard from a lawyer, a few days after she got me back, and then we went that route.”

A car appeared, headlights illuminating Hannah, and she wondered who was seeing her, hoping they wouldn’t roll down their window and say something rude and interrupt the point she was about to make. Fortunately, they drove on.

“You know why that lawyer called, right?” Hannah said.

“Yeah, because they knew I’d win.”

“That lawyer wasn’t working for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“He, or she, was —”

“She.”

“She was working for them.”

“For who?”

“For the people that picked you up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Look,” Hannah said, and she gestured in the darkness, trying to map out the logical flow of the process. “They took you. They shouldn’t have, and they got caught. Now the police are involved. So they send a lawyer to your mom, and they pay, what, \$100,000, for—”

“It’ll be about fifty thousand, over four years,” Beth said. “I got scholarships.”

“They can make that much in two months. So you settled and they’re still driving around at night, looking for girls like you. If you’d given up the money and pressed charges, they would have lost their licenses, at least. Maybe gone to jail.”

The next hundred yards were walked in silence, Beth whispering something under her breath. Hannah couldn’t tell if it were more “goddamns” or something else.

“At least you did something,” Hannah said quietly.

“I was 15,” Beth said quietly. “I was 15. I didn’t know.”

“I’m not saying you should have known. I’m just saying that there’s a reason it’s a three billion dollar industry. Well, 3.5 billion, last year. And that probably doesn’t include what they’re paying for you.”

The lane was completely quiet except for the two girls and the noises of the surrounding woods, creatures of the day turning in, nocturnal creatures waking, talking to each other, watching. Hannah guessed most of the voices belonged to insects, but there was a grumble here and there, warbles and deep shakes, like the forest itself had a mouth, and was talking about the people it had seen and known, about the things it had seen, about the girls passing by now.

“What kind of therapy are you getting?” Hannah asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You mentioned, on the drive, you’re in therapy, and the people who took you are paying for that.”

“Yeah, a couple times a month. It helps.”

“What kind, though?” Hannah persisted. “Behavioral? Grief counseling? Cognitive? Psychotherapy?”

“We just talk,” Beth replied. “Is this something else you’re an expert in?”

“No,” Hannah said. “And I’m not an expert in anything. But I read an article about the kind of help former slaves get. Or sometimes current slaves.”

“And you memorized it all.”

“No, but the important points. I didn’t even know you could get help like that, by talking to people. So it stuck in my head.”

Beth breathed in, and Hannah waited for her to speak, looking up at the dark sky, governed by a quarter moon, littered with stars and planets, many more above than she could see at home.

“You said torture, earlier.”

“When?”

“At the river. You said you’d be tortured if you didn’t do everything exactly right. That was your word, exac—“:

“That was an exaggeration,” Hannah interrupted.

“Have you been tortured?”

“I’ve been punished.”

“What did they do?”

“It hurt,” Hannah said. “And then it was over, and I moved on.”

“Do you want therapy?”

“Yes.”

A glow ahead told Hannah the office was just beyond the next line of trees, and the girls fell silent as they reached the pavement just outside the office door, light pouring from the windows atop the round building where, Hannah guessed, some had already been confined for the night.

A line had formed outside the door, nude and barely-dressed subjects and their owners, or owner-designates, talking quietly.

“Are you going to look for that girl?” Beth asked.

“Jill?”

“Yes, Jill.”

“Yeah, I guess. But she might have already decided to pair with someone else, or they might have enough places for everyone to have their own.”

“I wish you didn’t have to do this. It’s bothering me.”

“It’s fine,” Hannah said. “I’m just going to sleep, and then you can come get me any time after 7. I’ll be awake.”

As the line progressed and Hannah could see into the building, she saw new faces, a younger man and woman in the same uniform, with the same oversized hats, one at a desk, working paperwork, the other processing subjects, walking them through the door to the confinement area, scanning the chips in each subject’s back.

The line moved briskly, efficiently. At the desk, the man told Hannah to bend so he could inspect her collar, reading out loud the characters engraved there while the woman scanned Hannah's chip, making sure everything matched. He filled in Hannah's line on a form, his handwriting illegible to her, and he pointed to Beth.

"Sign here."

Beth signed, turned to Hannah, hugged her.

"Bye," she said simply.

"Thanks," Hannah said, bending to pull off her flip-flops, handing them to Beth.

"This way," the woman said, and Hannah followed her to the hall, where almost a dozen subjects were waiting, seated on two long benches facing each other, male and female, all nude, collars fastened by short chains to rings in the wall.

"Mouth," the woman said.

Hannah opened and the woman performed a cursory inspection.

"Bend over," the woman said.

Hannah obeyed, listening for the tell-tale snapping of latex gloves, closing her eyes as a finger went up her vagina, then into her rectum.

"Stand up."

Hannah straightened and the woman pulled a leash from a hook where a dozen hung, clipping it to the ring in Hannah's collar.

"Sit."

Hannah sat between a male and a female, the male's penis soft, and the woman secured her leash to the same ring that held three or four others.

"Hey," said a female from the opposite bench, waving to Hannah.

"Oh, hey," Hannah said, spotting Jill, and guessing Jill had forgotten her name. "Jill, right?"

"Yeah. Remind me your—"

"Hannah."

"Oh, right. Hannah. You still wanna double up, if we have to?"

"Sure," Hannah replied.

"Oh, yeah, they're packing us in tonight," the girl next to Hannah observed bitterly.

The woman brought in several more subjects, inspected and leashed them, then freed several of those sitting closest to the round room, including Jill.

“Anyone have a partner?” she asked, wrapping the leashes around one hand.

“I do,” Jill said, pointing to Hannah.

The woman nodded to Hannah and drew her charges into the confinement room. Hannah listened to the sounds of doors opening and clanging shut, being secured with padlocks. In the hall, several of the subjects waiting on benches knew each other, and they talked quietly, a girl laughing at something a boy said that Hannah couldn’t hear.

Hannah was in the next group brought back, and she was walked to Jill’s cage, the door still hanging wide. She smiled at Jill and surveyed the room, seeing pairs of faces in most of the spaces, two girls or two boys or, in one kennel, a male and a female together. Did they know each other? Hannah wondered. Could she have requested to share her space with a boy? Not that she would have, but she found the possibility interesting.

She caught Niedra’s eye, three spaces away, sharing with a girl darker than she, and they offered each other a quick wave. The boy she’d seen with Jill was in a space beside Niedra, by himself for now.

The woman holding Hannah’s leash tapped her shoulder and raised a small key to her collar, opening her leash. “Get in,” she said, and Hannah clambered in, carefully extending, not wanting to start her stay off by kneeing Jill in the jaw.

“Do you squirm a lot?” Jill asked.

“No, and I don’t snore much either,” Hannah said, rolling over to rest on her belly, adjusting her mat beneath her as the woman padlocked their door shut. “At least, so I’ve been told.”

Jill lay on her side, her breasts inches from Hannah’s arm.

These spaces weren’t meant for two people, Hannah thought to herself.

“Who are you here with?” Jill asked.

“My owners’ son,” Hannah replied. “And his friends.”

“That guy you were with?”

“Yeah.”

“Is he nice?”

“Yeah,” Hannah replied. “It’s been wonderful. I mean, relatively.”

“How long?”

“Almost a year. What about you?”

“I was 10. They got me and my brother from a home.”

“So that other guy’s your brother?”

“Yeah.”

“What kind of home?”

“A children’s home, sort of.”

“I didn’t know places like that could sell people.”

“It was a church home,” Jill said. “And it was closing, and some people from that church got us, because they didn’t want to see us go to a factory.”

“Your parents . . . ?”

“Dad was nonexistent. Opioids. I guess he’s still alive somewhere. Mom had been a subject before, so when things got rough, they just took her back in and we went to that church home, and it was pretty simple from there to make us subjects, since she couldn’t fight it.”

Hannah held her tongue. Saying I’m sorry seemed ridiculously trite under the circumstances.

A few last subjects were being brought in, paired up, doors clanging, voices speaking quietly.

“Who are you here with?” Hannah asked.

“The boy and girl,” Jill said. “Kind of trying to figure things out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Really long story,” Jill said. “But they had these two younger kids, then they get us, and we’re a little older, and it’s just sort of to all be friends, because they knew us from church and liked us. But now we’re older, and they’re older, and . . .”

“Has it happened yet?”

“Well, we both got trained,” Jill replied. “But not for them, obviously.”

“But . . .” Hannah said, letting the word trail off.

“Something happened, yeah . . .” Jill said, pausing, and Hannah sensed she was about to say more about what had happened, then thought better of it. “And the parents found out. So there was this weird kind of meeting, but no one wants to talk about it directly, so it’s just tension. And – hey, the kids are old enough, okay? He’s 19, she’s 20; and it’s not incest, even if they’re saying it is – so we’re camping this weekend. Like, to just be somewhere else, while the parents work on things.”

“Work on things?”

“Mom wants to sell us, Dad wants to set us free and kick us out.”

“Oh god.”

“Like, banish us. That’s the word he used. ‘Banish.’ Not a good outcome, either way. Either way, we lose them.”

Hannah was looking into Jill’s eyes – strangely serene given the story she’d just told – when the lights went out and the door into the confinement area was closed and locked.

A single red emergency light burned over the exit, casting a faint glow over the room.

Hannah had expected someone to shout out the rules, but apparently there were none, other than the list she’d been given when she and Beth registered her that afternoon.

It was too dark to see into any of the other spaces, but Hannah heard the sounds of coupling as soon as the door was locked, a girl’s heavy breathing in the kennel beside hers, a joint cracking here and there as males and females worked within the available space to get sex organs in position.

Hannah was still staring into the room when she felt a slight tap on her shoulder, so faint she could have ignored it. Not wanting to be rude, she chose to acknowledge it, however, rising up on her knees, reaching out in the darkness to find Jill’s breast, squeezing it, raising it to her mouth and licking it, first around the nipple, then across the nipple itself, pulling it into her mouth and sucking gently.

Jill breathed in, deeply, breathed out, and Hannah understood that the quiet sounds of lungs working would be the only conversation necessary, the sighs of new friends. Or new lovers. Or something in between.

Jill shifted on her mat, rolling to her back, and Hannah moved her mouth up from Jill’s breast to her neck, to her lips.

It was a short, practical kiss, open-mouthed and long enough to establish mutual desire. Hannah sensed Jill wanted to get things finished, and so did she.

Since Hannah was already on her knees, the task fell to her to navigate the little space, turning around carefully while Jill helped from below, guiding her legs so that, with a little trial and error, one knee was positioned beside either shoulder.

Hannah widened her legs so she could lower her vulva to Jill’s mouth, her knees hitting the sides of the space just as she got low enough to feel Jill’s tongue making its first tentative brushes against her folds.

Hannah dropped her mouth down to Jill's opening, wrapping her arms around Jill's thighs to hold them wide, pressing her tongue against the girl's bare mound, then moving down from there to Jill's clitoris, her slit and, finally, her moistening hole.

Hannah knew she was producing her own stream of honey, thicker possibly with ovulation due to begin tomorrow, and she hoped it wasn't more than Jill was expecting.

Jill didn't seem to mind, though, her tongue alternately stroking Hannah's clitoris and exploring Hannah's hole deeply, almost hungrily. Clearly, she'd gotten the same training Hannah had, full instruction in serving both males and females.

Even in the midst of giving and getting pleasure, Hannah wondered what had happened between Jill, her brother, and their owner's children. She imagined the possibilities – an orgy involving all four of them? An hour of screaming sex the parents couldn't help but hear? Or something more discreet, a furtive tryst between one of the slaves and one of the free children that the parents had somehow discovered? Obviously, Jill didn't want to go into the particulars, but Hannah felt strongly there wasn't anything to be ashamed of. What did the parents expect? Once they'd come of age, Hannah guessed, Jill and her brother had been trained for sex, were probably kept nude around the house, and were probably shared often enough with friends, guests, colleagues. That the children would get curious, that they would want to explore with slightly older, probably far more experienced peers, was in Hannah's mind inevitable.

But why were Jill and her brother trained in the first place? There was something important about the story Jill had left out. The question popped into Hannah's mind and sat there, a mystery, all its clues hidden in the head between Hannah's legs.

The tension beginning to build between Hannah's legs brought her back to the present, and she returned her full attention to Jill's sex organ, licking the slit, sliding her tongue against the clitoris, drinking from the opening, and Hannah immediately sensed the stiffening in Jill's body, in her thighs and pelvis, that told her the climax was coming, that it was time to let the pleasure wash over her own body.

As the orgasm rocked her, Hannah did her best to keep her reaction to quiet moans and gasps, but Jill seemed to be unable to control herself, issuing a hard cry and then a series of high-pitched squeaks as she arched

her back, legs shaking against Hannah's shoulders in brief, profound ecstasy.

Hannah wondered if it was strange for Jill to know that her brother, caged four spaces away, had heard her orgasm.

Jill's was not the only body being wracked by climax, however, the room a veritable chamber of carnal release, voices rising here and there to work through the demands of a pleasure too intense to be endured quietly.

Hannah stayed in position until Jill was completely finished, and then she slowly turned, moving to lie beside Jill again, the two girls facing each other, still no words necessary, Hannah's head at the end of the mat, thickened to form a sort of pillow, her arm draped around Jill's waist.

And, as the room quieted again, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 13: A Satellite

Hannah's sleep was fitful, disturbed both by her unfamiliar surroundings and Jill's occasional restlessness.

There was no clock here, simply the dingy ring of windows high above, so each time she'd awaken, Hannah would squirm quietly to the bars, look up and hope to see light. She repeated the process a half dozen times through the night before, at last, she saw the first faint glow of dawn.

Jill was still asleep, her calm, rhythmic breathing in counterpoint to a waking life in turmoil.

Hannah scanned the rest of the room, wondering if she could see any other faces, if there might be a quiet communion of eyes among the early risers, but the room remained too dark, lit only by windows overhead and the red glow of the emergency light.

Something wasn't right here, Hannah realized. There was something where it shouldn't be. A black shape. An outline. A male form, standing three feet away, in the darkness. Facing her.

Hannah stifled a scream and edged back, away from the bars.

Now the man, whoever he was, knew she was awake. He moved toward her kennel, reached for the padlock, and her fear turned to a bladder-loosening terror. She eased back, toward the rear of the space, found the little waste bucket with her feet, positioned her opening over it and released, her urine ringing quietly against the metal container.

Heart thumping, bladder draining, she watched his dim silhouette slide a key into the padlock, turn it with a click, open it and remove it, all so quietly she knew this was a practiced act, a silence akin to art.

The door swung open, on quiet hinges.

What did he want?

Hannah was beyond terror now, riven by a blind panic, the draining of her bladder all but forgotten.

What did he want?

She felt a splash of something on her leg, her mind immediately concluding that someone must be behind her, reaching for her through the rear wall somehow, before she realized that she had moved out of position, her urine spilling where it shouldn't. Forcing her mind back to her immediate concern, she moved back over the bucket, hoping she hadn't made too much of a mess for Jill to deal with.

She squeezed out the last few drops and considered holding still, freezing until the man went away. And yet he stood, waiting, door open.

Hannah's struggled to focus.

She could wake up Jill and ask for help. She could scream. She could fight.

But, even in her groggy state, panic was yielding to curiosity. What did he want? He wasn't here to rob her, obviously. If he wanted to rape her, she would resist, she would yield if she had no other choice, and then she would report it and hope that they believed her. And maybe they would. She hadn't let herself out of the cage, after all.

Maybe he was here to steal her? No, no one could be that stupid.

Slowly, Hannah moved to the front of the space, past Jill's quiet form, to the door, looking up at the black mass that, she could see now, was clearly one of the park rangers, big hat atop his head.

She eased out of the little space, standing beside him, arms at her sides, heart continuing to pound, wondering what he was going to do, wondering for the first time if she were being ridiculous, fearing something that wasn't logically frightening. No one who worked here could get away with stealing or abusing the subjects in their care. He would be caught and charged after the first offense. And, as he silently closed and locked the door back, she knew he'd done this many times.

She looked into the man's dark face, saw eyes that didn't look kind, nor particularly malicious: just another smooth, middle class male face. He was no more than 40, and he smelled of aftershave and mouthwash.

He raised what she saw, after some squinting, was a leash. She reached up, noticed that her collar had turned through the night, that the ring was now over her left shoulder, so she brought the ring back to the front, and he clipped the leash to it and wrapped the leash around his hand, moved to the exit and closed and locked the barred door, Hannah trailing behind and into the office.

Bright overhead lights illuminated the space, and Hannah blinked and looked around, reassured by the familiar, welcome sounds and smells of coffee brewing.

"Want some coffee?" he asked her.

"Yes," Hannah replied, looking at the name sewn into his shirt: Hartridge. Probably his last name. "Why did you get me?"

"I don't want to drink alone."

“You scared me.”

The man said nothing, just dropped her leash, letting it fall against her breast and thigh, and he moved to the brewer on a stand in the corner, a big old machine that Hannah guessed the federal government bought in bulk, the same model for any government facility, no matter how many people worked there.

“You like cream or sugar?”

“Both,” Hannah said. “Let me make it.”

The man turned back to her, eyebrow raised.

“I want to make my own,” she said with a small, dismissive wave.

“I have a certain way I do it.”

He laughed, looked her up and down, and Hannah remembered that she was naked. His gaze wasn't lecherous, necessarily, more the look males gave her sometimes as part of understanding her.

Often enough, she guessed, they were imagining what it would be like to have sex with her. But she liked to think it was more, too, that they were wondering how she thought, what she believed, what kind of person she was. Who could ever really be certain, though? She still didn't always know what Allain was thinking.

He filled two brown mugs with coffee, leaving room in the second mug for whatever Hannah wanted to put in there, and then he stepped back and gestured, with a sweep of his arm, to help herself.

She stepped up, poured in the cream, dropped in just enough sugar so she could taste it, and turned to watch him moving through the door, into the morning air.

Should she just follow him? she wondered. Why did he leash her if he wasn't going to bother holding it?

She moved to the door, grabbing her leash in her free hand after it swung against her belly twice, and she stepped out into the dawn, looking up at the sky, where stripes of purple and pink heralded the start of another day.

The air was cooler than she'd expected, and she looked down to confirm her nipples were hardening. For some reason, she didn't want to be seen in that state by a man who hadn't shared his first name with her, and she considered going back inside, sitting down and keeping company with her coffee.

But when the man appeared, leaning his head around the corner of the building, she followed him, finding past the edge of the structure a large cleared area, a blackened patch of earth in the middle, stacked with kindling and larger pieces of wood, surrounded by rocks, a few small chairs facing it next to logs that seemed to be for sitting as well.

“You can sit here or here,” he said, pointing at the logs. Chains had been bolted into the sides of both logs at even intervals, each one ending with a rusty, open cuff, and Hannah took her seat and looked away while he closed one of the cuffs around her right ankle.

“It’s rusty,” she said.

“They all are.”

“What if it’s so rusty it breaks?”

“Then I hope you won’t wander off.”

“No, I mean, what if you can’t open it?” Hannah clarified.

“Because the key won’t work?”

“Want a fire?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Hannah said, deciding to drop the subject of malfunctioning restraints.

The man knelt beside the fire, stuck a lighter into the kindling and clicked it, three or four times before he seemed to be satisfied with his efforts. Within a few minutes, a few small flames grew together into a single blaze, licking through the kindling and darkening the bigger pieces of wood set above. The man took one of the chairs, and Hannah moved her leash from between her legs to the side of her leg, allowing it to rest against her thigh and dangle to the ground.

He looked at her, and she waited for him to speak, but he just stared into her eyes.

He had said he didn’t want to drink alone, she recalled. He didn’t say anything about talking. So just having her sit there, in silence, was good enough for him?

Hannah found it awkward. “I’m Hannah,” she blurted.

“Doug,” he replied, and he raised his mug as if in toast.

Hannah looked down, into her coffee, little swirls of pale brown among the deeper brown, and she raised it to her lips and sipped carefully.

“Your machine makes it hot.”

“I tend to set it high. Gets more of the coffee out of the grounds.”

“It’s good.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“You scared me.”

“Would you rather be back there?”

“No,” Hannah said firmly. He could probably take her back, she thought, if she ended up not being the kind of company he was looking for. She didn’t want to go back into the kennel, but then, Beth or Allain or someone would come for her soon enough, so she could think of no reason to go out of her way to be polite.

“But still, you scared me,” Hannah said again. “It was dark, and then I see this shape in the middle of the room, and it’s a person, looking at me.”

“Would you prefer I’d knocked first?” he asked.

So, he wasn’t going to give an inch here, Hannah realized. He did what he did, and she should just be grateful and drop the matter.

“Do you have a family?” she asked, noticing his wedding band.

“Two sons. A wife.”

The fire had grown, now warm enough that it felt good on her skin, the earlier chill chased away, her nipples softening, although she didn’t care anymore if they got hard or not, because the man didn’t seem to care.

The man pulled his phone out, tapped, frowned, tapped some more.

“Do you want to see something?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Look up. Straight up.”

She followed his gaze, seeing nothing but dark blue sky and a few fading stars.

“There,” he said. “See it?”

“What are we look—” Hannah began, silenced by something bright, moving quickly, just a single golden light, too high and fast to be a jet, too slow to be a shooting star.

As quickly as it appeared, it was gone, and Hannah looked back at Doug, shoving his phone back into his pocket, a satisfied grin on his face.

“What was it?”

“Satellite,” he said.

“Oh,” Hannah said. “How did you know to look?”

He tapped the pocket where his phone rested. “There’s an app for it. Early mornings here are a great time to look for them.”

“Do you know which one it was?”

“Yeah, he said. “NP165. Communications. And probably a spy module or two.”

“Oh, that’s what it was called?”

“NP165.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, “it’s like my number.”

“What number?”

“On my collar,” Hannah said, and she raised her hand to the collar around her neck, her fingers tracing the characters engraved into the metal.

“Not the same number,” Doug said.

“No, but close,” Hannah said. “My ID number is N8114P165. The satellite is NP165. There’s some of the same characters. In the same order.”

“Do you think you were named after a satellite?” he said, grinning again.

“No, my name’s Hannah,” she shot back. “I think I already told you that.”

“I was joking,” he said. “Damn, lighten up.”

Hannah stared into the fire, wondering why his little joke had bothered her. Her name was Hannah. Only Hannah. She would never allow anyone to rename her. And she would never allow Beth to suggest she was anyone else, from anywhere else. She liked Beth, but that part of yesterday’s interactions with her were still troubling.

“I’m sorry,” Hannah said. “I’m just a little touchy about my name.”

“Apology accepted.”

“So you should apologize for scaring me.”

Doug turned his gaze to her, and she stared back. He wasn’t just looking. He seemed to be drilling into her with his eyes, trying to read her mind. She sensed an intelligence there that hadn’t been fully cultivated. Or maybe it had been, just in ways she couldn’t see.

He was a park ranger, and she knew that put him toward the low end of the pay spectrum. But maybe it’s all he wanted. He got to sit out under the dawn sky with a naked slave girl and watch satellites and get paid for it, while Ormek had to rush off to a demanding job six or seven days a week, working hard from first thing in the morning until, often enough, after dinner.

As far as Hannah knew, Ormek’s greatest pleasure from day to day was putting his penis between the bars of the cage in the basement, where a

girl would bend over to service him, briefly, without emotion, without affection.

“Are you this way at home?” the man asked.

And it wasn’t enough for Ormek, Hannah thought, peering into the fire, studying the way the flames danced away and closed back in every time the wood exploded, as if the little pops of trapped fluid hurt the fire and delighted it at the same time.

It wasn’t enough for him. Maybe it wasn’t enough for her either. This was something that needed to be resolved. When Allain went back to school.

“Are you this way at home?” Doug asked again.

“Oh, sorry,” Hannah said. “What do you mean by home?”

“Where you live, or whatever. You just give people shit all day, don’t you?”

“I don’t,” Hannah said. “I don’t.”

“I don’t believe it,” he said. “I’ve had, what, a hundred girls sit right there, or over there.” He pointed to the far log. “I get ‘em out, and they sit there, and they say ‘yes, sir,’ and ‘no, sir,’ and ‘thank you, sir,’ and—”

“I say ‘Sir’ all the time,” Hannah interrupted. “I’m very polite.”

“Says the girl who just interrupted me.”

Hannah laughed. He was right.

“I think you’re spoiled,” Doug said.

“Yeah, I am spoiled,” Hannah agreed, pausing before she added, with the merest tinge of sarcasm in her voice, “said the naked girl chained to a log who slept in a cage.”

It was Doug’s turn to laugh. “Touché.”

“Touché?” Hannah echoed.

“It’s French.”

“I don’t speak French.”

“It’s common usage in English.”

“Okay,” said Hannah. “What does it mean then?”

“Well, shit, hmmm . . . I guess when you say something, and the other person takes what you said, and stomps it flat. So you say touché to acknowledge that they got the better of you.”

“Touché,” Hannah said again, working the word around in her mouth. “So I won our conversation, and I’m not spoiled.”

“I’m just observing,” he said. “Take it or leave it. But I’ve talked to a lot of girls like you, and you’re different. You’re different.”

“Then they weren’t like me, were they?”

Doug laughed again, muttered “Sheesh” under his breath, and stared into his coffee.

Somewhere, through the trees, Hannah heard the sounds of car wheels on gravel and looked up to see a large, dusty green government pickup pull up behind the office.

Two rangers, a man and a woman, were exiting when a motorcycle pulled up and younger ranger hopped off, helmet under his arm.

They approached Doug slowly, the man and woman continuing a conversation that had apparently begun in the truck.

All glanced quickly at Hannah before the two male newcomers exchanged a few words with Doug, about how many subjects were confined, if there’d been anything unusual overnight, and then both headed to the office.

The woman sat down on the log beside Hannah, turned to her.

“What time did he wake you up?”

“I was already awake,” Hannah said. “But he scared me. So when I first saw him, he made me more awake.”

The woman scowled at Doug, look back at Hannah.

“Well, looks like he got the queen of the corral this morning,” she said. “So you just—”

“What do you mean?” Hannah demanded.

“About what?”

“You said corral,” Hannah said. “What did you—”

“Oh, damn,” Doug interrupted. “Here we go.”

The woman, smiling faintly, directed a puzzled look at Hannah, then at Doug.

“You gotta watch your tongue around this one,” Doug said, “or she will beat you down so fast—”

“I will not beat anyone down,” Hannah protested. Even the hint of physical violence by a subject could lead to terrible things.

“She will also interrupt the shit out of you,” Doug laughed.

“No,” Hannah said, looking directly at the woman. “Just don’t say corral. I wasn’t in a corral. A corral’s for horses. I—”

“Oh, sweetie, God, don’t take it like that!” the woman cried, and Hannah noticed tears in the woman’s eyes, and she wondered how the tear ducts could operate that quickly, and why there would suddenly be this much emotion. “I didn’t mean that at all. I was just paying you a compliment.”

“You said corral,” Doug said. “She took it personally. I don’t blame her.”

“Queen of the corral,” the woman said slowly, glaring at Doug with her jaw clenched, “is a term of endearment. That I happened to grow up with. And it was a compliment. For any girl.”

“I didn’t know what you meant,” said Hannah. “Now I do. That’s fine.”

The woman laughed, her sudden sorrow gone as quickly as it had appeared, and Hannah guessed there was a story there, or more than a single story, and something about Hannah had triggered memories that usually stayed buried.

“Let’s start over,” Doug said. “Hannah, this is Telly. Telly, Hannah.”

“Hi, Telly.”

Telly nodded to Hannah.

“Now, Telly, in case you haven’t already observed,” Doug continued, “Hannah is not someone you just say things to. You gotta weigh your words carefully. And even then, she will catch you up.”

Hannah looked into her coffee, the incongruity of the situation striking her, the latest incongruity in a long series of them. They were treating her like an equal here. Naked, collared and chained by the ankle, they had accepted without debate that her feelings were important, that she must not be given offense. Many of those from the class of people that the Petrosyans belonged to had no such qualms, and Hannah’s cheeks burned often under the casual humiliations of being nothing more than property to such people.

The men returned from the office with coffee, the older man with two mugs, one of which he handed to Telly before he sat down beside the younger man on the log opposite Hannah.

“I saw NP165 this morning,” Doug said.

“How long this time?” the young man asked.

“No more than seven seconds,” Doug replied. “And it was gold this time. Wasn’t it, Hannah. What color was it?”

“Gold.”

“But here’s the thing,” Doug continued. “Telly, look at her collar.”

“What for?” Telly said, glancing over. “It’s just like all the others.”

“No, read the numbers set into it.”

Hannah leaned and raised her chin, and Telly peered at her neck.

“Okay,” Telly said, “N-8-1, uh, 1-4, and then, uh, P-1-6-5.”

She looked at Doug. “What of it?”

“It’s the same numbers!” the young man exclaimed. “Well, mostly the same.”

“Oh, you’re right, damn!” Telly said. She looked up at the sky, pondering, turned back to Hannah. “Now what do you suppose that means?”

“I hadn’t thought about it,” Hannah said. “I just noticed it.”

“Well, for one, it means you’re supposed to be right here. Right now.”

“Bullshit,” Doug observed. “It means nothing of the kind.”

“Well, Doug, you’re the one who pointed it out.”

“So?”

“Why’d you bother if you didn’t think nothing of it?”

“It’s just interesting is all,” Doug replied. “That’s all it is.”

“No, I believe that shit,” the young man said, nodding to Telly. “If you pay attention, that kinda shit can save your damn life.” He looked up, stood. “Someone’s here.”

“It’s not quite time.”

“It’s 6:55. Tell ‘em to wait.”

Hannah looked back, surprised to see Beth rounding the corner.

“Is this one yours?” Doug asked.

“Yes, I’m here for Hannah.”

“You’re early,” Doug said. “But since she’s already out . . .”

Hannah stood and Beth walked quickly up to her, seemed to be prepared to give her a hug, but she stopped when she saw the leash swinging between her breasts, the chain at her ankle.

“Can someone take all that off?” Beth said, staring only at Hannah.

Doug stood, using his small key to remove the leash, then he knelt to put a second key into the rusty ankle cuff which, Hannah noted with

some relief, popped open immediately.

He turned toward the office, Beth and Hannah following, and Beth signed the form that freed Hannah from nighttime confinement.

“Thanks for the coffee, Doug,” Hannah said, following Beth back into the morning air.

“You’re welcome,” Doug said, adding after a brief pause, “Hannah.”

Chapter 14: Plans with Buck

“You forgot my flip-flops,” Hannah observed, as soon as they left the office. She looked up, the side of the mountain blazing in the day’s first sun, beckoning her, almost calling her name. She would climb it today, she told herself. She would be there. She would be free on it.

“I left them in your tent, and Allain’s asleep,” Beth said. “Want me to get them and come back? I can get your clothes too.”

“No, don’t wake Allain. I’ll just be careful where I step. And if I cut my foot, you can carry me.”

Hannah looked at Beth. She seemed particularly humorless this morning.

“What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t sleep at all last night.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. Maybe being in the forest. Or maybe you.”

“What about me?”

“I still have nightmares about places like that,” Beth said. “And I took you to one. Remember how you said I was complicit?”

“Yeah.”

“On the walk back, it hit me. I just took a girl to, what’s to me, the worst place in the world.”

“I was fine,” Hannah said.

“Did they double you up?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you sleep with that girl?”

“Yeah.”

“How was it?”

“How was what?”

“Sleeping. With that girl.”

“What are you getting at?” Hannah asked.

“I can’t take another day of this,” Beth said. “I’m tired. If you don’t want to answer a question, just don’t.”

“Okay.”

“Why were you already out?”

“I was awake, so he let me out.”

“What were you talking to them about?”

“Satellites. And numbers and letters.”

“It’s your own secret little world, isn’t it?”

“Oh, god,” Hannah said, gesturing toward her middle. “What about me makes you think anything is secret?”

“I know, I know. But you’re just being kind of evasive.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “I had sex with that girl last night. Is that—”

“Did you want to?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “It was consensual.”

“All night?”

“No, god! It took probably 15 minutes. And then we went to sleep.”

Beth fell silent, the only sound her shoes scraping along the narrow trail, Hannah’s bare feet making no sound at all.

“And then, talking to those people,” Hannah continued. “There’s no secret, but it’s kind of embarrassing. That man said I’m spoiled.”

“What?”

“Because of the way I spoke to him.”

“So I’m not the only one?”

“Of course not. It’s just how I am.”

“Everyone talked about you last night,” Beth said after a brief pause, “when I got back from dropping you off.”

“Oh, I’m sorry you didn’t have anything more interesting to discuss.”

“Buck,” Beth said simply, and she slowed, almost to a stop.

“What about Buck?” Hannah asked, but she already knew. There was a certain way this topic was broached, by anyone, regardless of their experience with slaves. They would talk about something else, and then they’d get quiet, and then they’d bring it up, like an afterthought, although she knew it had been foremost on their minds the whole time.

“I had nothing to do with it,” Beth said. “And neither did Buck. Beatrice started it.”

“What did she say?”

“Just stuff like, ‘Oh, Buck, you’ve been studying too hard. Do you even have a girlfriend? When was your last time?’”

“What did Buck say back?”

“He was quiet. Just laughed nervously, I guess.”

“Go on,” Hannah said.

“So, the conversation continues, and it’s obvious Buck wants to, but he’s too shy to say anything, and then Beatrice looks at Allain, and he says—”

“If she wants to,” Hannah replied. “If Hannah wants to.”

“Yeah, that was about it,” Beth said.

Beth and Hannah stepped into the shadows cast by a long line of mesquite, allowing a big camper to pass. The campsite was a few minutes away by foot, so Hannah stopped because she needed to know a few things she didn’t want to bring up in front of anyone else.

“Is he a virgin?” Hannah asked.

“I don’t think so. He had a girlfriend last year, but she went back to Russia.”

“Okay. And was, um, how it would be done, um, discussed?”

“In his tent.”

“With everyone around?”

“No. We have to get some things from town. He’ll stay here. With you.”

“When?”

“After breakfast.”

“Okay.”

“Do you want to do this?” Beth asked, and she moved closer to Hannah and stared into her eyes.

“It’s what I do,” Hannah replied. “It’s one of the things I do.”

“No,” Beth said, a sudden intensity in her voice that surprised Hannah. “Unless you tell me now you want this, I will do everything in my power to shut this down, up to and including kicking Buck in the nuts.”

“Oh my god, don’t you dare!” Hannah said, not sure whether to laugh or be afraid.

“It’s one of the things that kept me up all night,” Beth said. “I will not be party to rape. And that’s what this is. I will not—”

“Look, Beth,” Hannah said, grabbing her friend by the wrist to shut her up. “I like Buck. He seems sweet, and everything you’ve told me about the conversation last night makes me like him more. So, yes, I want to do this, and if he doesn’t chicken out, I’ll do it, and it’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” Beth agreed, but she didn’t sound convinced.

“I’m hungry,” Hannah said, turning to continue along the lane, trying not to look like she was pondering. The truth was, she was more conflicted than she was letting on, but it wasn’t for reasons Beth needed to worry about. Why had Beatrice brought it up? Why had Allain approved? He could have told everyone Hannah wasn’t in service this weekend, and that would have ended things. But he’d left it up to Hannah. And he knew full well Hannah always said yes.

Would he be jealous if it happened?

And then, there were always the larger questions, about Hannah’s place in the world. She moved easily among virtually anyone, from the very wealthy to, just this morning, government employees on a fixed, low salary. In some ways, she was equal to all of them. Except for how she was expected to use her body. Fortunately, she liked sex. But what if she didn’t? What if she wanted to make love to a boy the Petrosyans didn’t approve of? Sexually, she was not particularly free. But then, no one really was. And it didn’t bother her. Should it?

“Chicken out?” Beth said.

“It happens,” Hannah said, glad to be stirred from her reverie, feeling the grass and the gravel under her feet and remembering she needed to watch her step.

“No way.”

“Sometimes,” Hannah said. “There was this girl who was interested, and we set things up a few times and she kept changing her mind.”

“Did you ever . . . get with her?”

“Yeah, finally. She was young, though, and I was her first, so I don’t blame her.”

They reached the line of campsites, Hannah glancing at the campers and the tents and towels, hanging on lines strung between trees, most of the humans still asleep and hidden, a few up, sitting in folding

chairs, studying phones, glancing up at Hannah and Beth, staring at Hannah.

“I’m not sure I was supposed to say anything,” Beth said. “So act surprised, okay?”

“How surprised?” Hannah said, and she laughed. “Like, total amazement? Like, ‘Oh my god, I can’t believe it’ – that kind of surprise? Or more run of the mill – like, ‘Oh, imagine that. How interesting.’?”

Beth finally laughed. “Okay, then, how do you usually react?”

Hannah stopped and faced Beth, grabbing her shoulder.

“Here’s my most common reaction,” Hannah said. “Ready to watch?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, making her face comically blank. “That’s it. ‘Okay.’”

Beth laughed again. “I’m going to treat what you just said like a joke,” she said. “And not a cry for help.”

The girls reached their own space in silence. Only Nina was awake, building a small fire with newspaper and kindling and more of the logs that Fernando had brought.

“That was fast,” Nina observed, her expressionless eyes running the length of Hannah’s body. “I thought I’d have coffee ready before you got back.”

“She’s already had coffee,” Beth said. “She was out with the rangers when I came to get her.”

“They let everyone out?” Nina asked.

“Just Hannah,” Beth replied. “I guess because she’s special.”

Hannah snorted and headed for the cooler in the back of the van. She’d liked running dinner and wanted to be in charge of breakfast too, and she pulled out eggs and bacon, set up two frying pans on the little stove and sparked it to life.

“Do you want to borrow some clothes, Hannah?” Nina asked.

“I don’t care,” Hannah replied. “But I tend to make a mess when I cook. So if you give me anything to wear, I’ll need an apron too.”

Nina let the matter drop and held a match to the fire. Within a few minutes, she had a decent blaze going, setting the coffee pot on it while Hannah laid out the bacon strips one by one and coated the second pan with butter for the eggs.

As she cooked, Hannah decided she would stay naked until someone told her to dress. The girls wouldn't care, Allain was used to it, Fernando had Beatrice here, and now, Buck had her. She heard the whine of a tent zipper, turned to see Buck emerging. He looked up at her, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Good morning, Buck," she said, trying to convey with her expression that she didn't mind being seen in daylight nude.

"Hi," he said shyly, rising and heading to the bathroom. She watched him walk, wondering what being with him would be like. People often surprised her. She liked guessing and seeing how right or wrong she was.

Beatrice was next out, saying a quick hello before announcing that she had to pee desperately, following Buck. Fernando appeared, said hello to everyone, took a long look at Hannah and checked on the status of the coffee. He'd gone in the bushes in the middle of the night, Hannah guessed.

Only Allain hadn't shown.

"Beth, can you watch things while I wake up Mr. Sleepyhead?" Hannah asked. "Just turn the bacon. And if you feel ambitious, pour all the eggs in and scramble them."

Hannah unzipped the tent and crawled in, not surprised that Allain was wide awake, up on one elbow, tapping on his phone.

"Were you waiting for me?" she asked, scrambling over the bedclothes, grabbing Allain's phone, setting it down and forcing a hard kiss on his lips.

"I was," he said. "How did you sleep?"

"It was fine."

"Beth said they might be doubling you up."

"They did. They put me with a girl. She was by the river yesterday. Jill. And in case you're wondering, yeah, we did stuff."

Allain grabbed Hannah's hair and pulled her away so he could smile at her. He was never jealous of girls. Indeed, he liked it when she admitted to a same-sex session. Often enough, when the opportunity was there, her stories about making love to girls served as a prelude to sex with him.

They couldn't do anything now, but she brought it up anyway. She didn't mind making him a little uncomfortable now and then. Allain's steady, nearly insatiable sex drive was something she'd learned to manage.

When they were alone, they did whatever they wanted. When there were limits, as there would be until they got home, she kept him a little hungry, just a little on edge.

She grabbed Allain's shoulders and pushed him until she was flat on his back, looking up at her.

"We have to do everything today," she declared. "Everything."

"What's on the list, then?" he asked.

"There's a road that goes halfway up the mountain, so we have to all go on that, and then we'll hike. And you have to get in the river with me. And lunch on the mountain. A picnic. I've planned it all out. There's ruins, and we have to see those."

Allain looked up at her, still smiling, but with something else on his mind. Hannah decided to pretend she didn't know what it was.

"As soon as we get back from the store," he promised. "We'll do everything."

"When are you going to the store?"

"Right after breakfast. Do you want to go?"

"No. I'm supposed to check in at the office any time I leave the park, and that would be a pain. I'll wait."

"Does someone have to wait here with you?"

"No. You could take me to the office, and they'll lock me up. Or if you put those chains on me, I can stay here."

"I guess someone could just stay here with you," Allain said, lowering his voice.

"That's fine," Hannah said, speaking just above a whisper. "If they didn't mind."

"Well – Buck?"

Hannah looked into Allain's eyes. This was a dance they had to do, she and Allain, she and the Petrosyans, any time they wanted her to be with someone. They never ordered her. Really, they never even strongly encouraged it. They simply put it out there, giving her just enough information that she could draw her own conclusions, make the logical leap and agree to things without being asked.

"Just me and Buck?" Hannah said.

"Yeah," Allain said, his tone neutral, his feelings about this impossible for Hannah to read. "If you're okay with that."

"Sure," Hannah said. "But, um, what if something happens?"

“That’s okay,” Allain said. “Do whatever you want.”

“You won’t be jealous?”

“No,” Allain said. “He’s not Ramone, after all.”

Hannah laughed, forced another kiss on Allain and leaned back, pulling him up, throwing a shirt into his face, helping him dress and dragging him out of the tent and into the sunlight.

Beth had scrambled the eggs, Nina was stacking up the bacon, someone else had gotten out bread and butter and set it on the table with a jar of jelly and a plastic bowl of mixed fruit, and the coffee was done, meaning breakfast was served.

Hannah made her own plate and sat carefully, checking for loose splinters before she set her bare bottom down on the raw wooden picnic table that came with the site. She sat next to Beth, Allain sitting on her other side.

The conversation was a little stilted – Beatrice mentioning a noise she thought she heard at night, someone else talking about bears and antelope in the wild – and Hannah knew that they were all wondering about what might happen between her and Buck. She wished it didn’t have to be a big deal. Sex was sex.

“Does everyone know what we have to do today?” Hannah asked, breakfast all but done.

Beatrice and Fernando smiled at Hannah indulgently, and she smiled back and went through the same list she’d given Allain. There was general agreement, with the caveat that the adventures would begin after cleanup and the trip to the store, which would probably take about an hour.

“Hannah, would you like a shower?” Beatrice asked.

“Will I be allowed there?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah, I checked,” Beatrice replied. “Subjects are fine.”

“I’ll need an escort,” Hannah said. “Fifty-foot rule.”

“Well, maybe Buck could go with you,” Beatrice said, as if the idea had just occurred to her. “Buck, you don’t need anything from the store, do you?”

“I don’t,” Buck said, and he looked down, at the ground, and Hannah believed she could detect a small quake in his voice. “I could use a shower too.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said, deciding not to look at Buck. “Let me get my things, I’ll be ready to go in five minutes.”

Back in the tent, the sounds of cleanup and laughter coming to Hannah through the thin walls, she had her first chance to be alone since the trip began, and she used her solitude to be nervous.

Building a shower bag from the things she'd brought – soap, shampoo, towel, hair dryer, a little makeup – she wondered about Buck, what he liked, what he didn't like, the myriad ways things could go badly with him this morning, or with any new lover.

He might be feigning interest, because he'd been pressured last night by everyone to agree to this. He might want a seductress, a coquette, a girl who batted her eyes and simpered, and these were simply things Hannah couldn't be or do. One learned such behaviors from older girls, or maybe their mothers, and Hannah had never been any such female in her formative years.

Cleanup was still proceeding apace when Hannah slipped out of the tent and looked at Buck, waiting with his own bag, leaning against the van and tapping on his phone.

He looked up, smiled, looked away and turned to head to the restroom, and Hannah wondered if Buck felt any jitters. On the exterior, at least, he seemed serene.

"Is Buck your real name?" she asked him, walking beside him, shoulders almost touching.

"Yes, my middle name," he said, and looked at Hannah, possibly a little surprised by the question, but his voice steady, if not completely confident. "Otis is my first name."

"Buck's a perfect name for camping," Hannah said. "But you use it all the time, right, not just this weekend?"

"Yeah, always."

"What year are you in school?" Hannah asked, hoping he hadn't already indicated his year in one of the school conversations while she was thinking about something else.

"I'm in my third year. One more and then I do a residency."

"What are you specializing in?"

"Thoracic."

"Pulmonology or surgical?"

"Pulmonology," he replied. "How did you know to ask that?"

"I remember stuff," Hannah told him.

"Did you memorize it for the weekend?"

“What?” Hannah asked. “Oh, you mean, like, memorize medical stuff so I could talk to everyone and not sound dumb?”

The question annoyed Hannah, and she waited for Buck to say something, but wasn’t surprised when he didn’t. They were nearing the bathrooms, so she spoke quickly, not wanting to get into the kind of conversation she’d been having off and on with Beth.

“My owner is a doctor,” Hannah said. “And Allain is becoming a doctor. So there are a lot of medical books lying around.”

“You’re majoring in physics,” Buck observed.

“Thank you for remembering that,” Hannah said, with sincere gratitude, and she studied Buck’s eyes and sensed that, like Beth, he was just curious, and most likely had not encountered many slaves in his life. “It doesn’t mean I can’t open a different book now and then.”

“You open medical books, though? For fun?”

“Yeah, in my spare time. Some days, I have a lot of spare time.”

They stopped before the bathrooms, which occupied a green, symmetrical building with “Men” and “Women” signs on its two halves. A man stood under the “Men” sign, tapping his phone, and two girls exited the “Women” side, chatting excitedly, glancing at Hannah, falling silent briefly before continuing their conversation.

“And I didn’t get any school for three years, and I’m making up for lost time now,” Hannah added. “And I don’t know much at all, really. If all Allain’s friends were in robotics, I would just stare.”

Hannah demonstrated by making a blank face and staring into Buck’s eyes, and he laughed and stared back, mostly into her face, but his eyes flickered down now and then, and she knew he was taking in the rest of her too, her legs and her breasts and the little triangle of golden pubic hair above her opening.

“How long do you usually take?” Hannah asked.

Buck stared at her, speechless.

“In the shower,” Hannah said quickly, trying not to blush. “How long will you take in there?”

“Oh, maybe 20 minutes,” he replied.

“I’m going to be more like 30,” Hannah said. “Will you wait for me?”

“I will,” he said, smiling again.

Chapter 15: In Buck's Tent

Hannah headed into the women's side of the building with a sense that she had charmed Buck, or at least established the basis of a relationship. The butterflies were still there, but some of them were resting now.

She washed as quickly as possible, although her vagina complicated things, her thick ovulatory fluid leaking out every time she passed soap over her vulva. There were other complications as well – sinks that were too small to set anything on, a single small mirror, and electrical outlets under the sinks that took her a good three minutes to find.

She guessed it had been 35 minutes before she had her eyes made up and her hair dryer plugged in.

"Buck?" she called out, staring into the mirror.

"Yeah?" came a voice from outside.

"I just have to dry my hair. You haven't given up on me, have you?"

"No, just checking on the news."

"Anything interesting happen?" Hannah asked.

"The usual political stuff," he replied after a pause. "And an earthquake, but everyone's okay."

Hannah worked on her hair and tried to imagine what Buck was thinking. She didn't go out of her way to surprise people, but she liked it when it happened. More than once, including this morning, she'd been told she was different. She liked what the ranger had said about that. She liked everything he'd said. Except for the part about being spoiled. She wasn't spoiled.

Done at last, pleased with the way her hair was cooperating, satisfied as well with the quick work she'd done on her face – a little lipstick, black mascara around her eyes, even a little rouge on her cheeks – although all of it seemed ridiculous in the wilderness.

Hannah threw everything back into her bag, slung it over her shoulder and, still naked, exited the women's bathroom.

"Sorry," she said to Buck, leaning against the building poking at his phone.

"That's okay," he said. The sun was hitting her hair, the side of her face, her breasts and arm, and he just stared, taking all of her in. Drinking

her in, it seemed. She hoped he felt that the wait had been worth it.

“Has everyone already gone?”

“They went by about five minutes ago, when you were still drying your hair.”

That left them about 55 minutes of alone time, Hannah calculated. She didn’t care how long it took or who saw or heard her making love, but she assumed Buck would want to be done before his friends returned.

“They had some things to say,” Buck added, as they headed back to the campsite.

“Like what?”

“Allain said you usually took two hours to get ready in the morning.”

“I think he was just making fun of me. I usually don’t take that long.”

“Sometimes you do?”

“Yeah, for special occasions. People come over and fix me up.”

“You look fixed up enough now.”

“Thanks. I saw a satellite this morning.”

“What kind?”

“The kind that orbits the earth.”

“I know, but what kind was it?”

“NP165. They said it was for communications. And spying. And the number’s almost the same as on my collar.”

Hannah stopped and looked at Buck expectantly. He just stared at her in confusion.

“See?” she said, lifting her tag.

He glanced at it.

“My ID number. On my collar and my tag. It has the same letters and numbers, in the same order. It has a few extra too. But see?”

Buck looked at Hannah’s tag quickly, nodded and looked away, and Hannah realized that he was embarrassed by her collar, as if she’d just asked him to inspect an unsightly birthmark on her neck. She regretted bringing it up, and they walked the rest of the way to the campsite in silence.

The butterflies were flying again around Hannah’s stomach when she reached Allain’s tent, threw her bag in and zipped it back.

That she was getting ready to have sex with someone she'd just met was a minor aspect of her anxiety. More worrisome was the relative lack of guidance. Normally, there was more discussion than this, more pre-arrangement, some kind of explicit understanding with her partner. But she had very little to go on with Buck. For all she knew, he wasn't in on this. Maybe he hadn't understood the full import of last night's conversation. Maybe Beth and Allain had misread him. She imagined the humiliation of offering her body to him and being greeted with confusion or, worse, rejection. He hadn't made the slightest overture toward her, and she'd just walked with him, nude, to the shower and back.

But when she turned away from her tent, he was standing at the opening to his, smiling tightly, nervously, and she had her answers.

"I want to see what your tent is like," she said.

He unzipped the door it, leaned forward into it until he was kneeling, and looked back at her.

"It's kind of small," he admitted.

He crawled in and she followed him, zipping the opening shut behind her.

Buck was neat, Hannah quickly concluded. He'd opened his sleeping bag and spread it across the floor, like a big red plaid carpet, his bag and laptop and shoes lined up along the edge, just a pillow on the side where he lay his head.

Hannah sat down, crossed her legs and looked at Buck.

He was studying her, shamelessly now, his eyes taking her in again, more obviously, his gaze lingering on her nipples, and down between her legs, on her slit.

"I might be leaking," Hannah said, looking down. "I'm ovulating and it's kind of a mess."

Buck tried to remain neutral, but she heard him breathe in, deeply, involuntarily, the discreet sigh of male lust.

Some males would lean toward her at this point, initiate a kiss, or a touch, or both. Buck just sat, watching her, his pupils flaring, his lungs taking in the air, expelling it.

"Why don't you undress too?" Hannah suggested. "I shouldn't be the only one who's naked."

Slowly, deliberately, Buck slipped off his shirt, and Hannah confirmed that his broad chest was shaped by muscle, and wondered if he

worked out, or he was one of those males born with it.

He rose up on his knees and slid down his shorts, his penis bobbing until it firmed up, at which point it stuck straight out, pointing at Hannah, as unyielding as a pornographic stone statue.

Hannah stared at it, partly because an erect penis was interesting, and partly to assess its length and girth. It had become increasingly inevitable that Buck's sex was going to be pushed into her sheath this morning, and she wanted to know how much work she was going to have to do to accommodate it.

Her immediate answer came quickly – this was going to take some effort.

Buck had decent length, but his thickness was a little frightening to Hannah, a thick plug of masculinity that was going to sting.

Buck settled back down, still passive, still waiting for something. Hannah looked into his eyes.

“You want me to do all the work?”

He laughed, nervously, but he looked at her confidently.

“Yes,” he said. “This needs to be up to you.”

“It is, you know,” Hannah said. “I wouldn't be in your tent if it wasn't okay with me.”

“Okay,” Buck said. “You're in charge. All the way through.”

“This is your first time?” Hannah inquired, and she rose up and inched toward him on her knees, reaching out to put her hands on his shoulders. “Your first time, I mean, with a . . . subject?”

“Yes.”

Buck allowed Hannah to push him slowly to his back, angling him down until his head was on his pillow, his penis perfectly upright, as straight and vertical as a telephone pole.

“Last chance to change your mind,” Hannah whispered, crouching over him, straddling his hips with her thighs.

He closed his eyes, waiting, declining her offer to back out, and Hannah reached between his legs, pulled his penis forward slightly and lowered her middle until the tip was against her slit, wet now with both ovulatory fluid and the honey of her growing arousal.

With one hand on the floor beside Buck's shoulder, she spread her lips with the other, lowering until Buck's tip had filled the mouth of her organ.

Her pink doors were already straining to let him through, his head stretching her, her organ registering both pain and pleasure.

There were tricks to this that she'd heard about, but she'd never had a chance to practice until now. She grasped Buck's shaft a little behind the head and rocked her pelvis, the tip sliding from her opening to her clit and back to her hole, her vulva nearly electric with aching stimulation, her honey flooding her slot.

After a minute with Buck's member oscillating among her folds, she started dropping down slightly each time the tip reached her chamber, impaling herself a little more deeply with every pass.

Buck kept his eyes closed, lying still, passive, as if asleep. On the lane a few yards away, a vehicle crunched over the asphalt and gravel and kept going. More distantly, a child cried out, a happy sound, Hannah thought.

In the meantime, Hannah's struggles with Buck's penis continued, but she was making progress, finally taking him deeply enough that sliding him up and down her vulva no longer made sense.

She looked down between her legs, saw that she had worked at least two inches into her tunnel. The hardest part was over, she told herself. Now it was time to commit.

Continuing to rock her pelvis slowly, allowing the end of Buck's shaft to stir within her without going deeper, Hannah breathed in, bit her lips and began lowering herself.

Buck opened his eyes and looked up, and she looked down, and she immediately saw herself as he must, the face of woman in the midst of struggle, like a female athlete in the heat of competition, of a girl during any physical challenge: brows knit, mouth tight, eyes set with anxious determination.

In spite of herself, Hannah laughed, a shallow, amused giggle that she stifled quickly.

"Sorry," she said. "It's just . . . I'm sure I look ridiculous."

"That's not the word I would have used," Buck said, and he reached up and wrapped his left hand around her right breast, squeezing it, regarding the nipple as it hardened, looking at her with an almost medical detachment.

With another deep breath, Hannah dropped down again, finding it easier to bring his member into the depths of her sex than it had been to

draw him through the opening. Her walls were still crying out, but not with same protests of her vaginal mouth.

She looked down, between her legs, nothing but Buck's black hair where his penis had been.

"Oh, god, I got it all," she groaned victoriously.

She slid up, slowly, dropped back down, slid up and dropped again, sighing with the effort.

Buck, passive until now, suddenly came to life, as if awakened from a terrifying dream, his whole body jerking, arcing up, eyes wide and blank, and Hannah knew he was cumming, that the effort of getting him inside her had been at least as stimulating as the actual rising and falling, and he grunted rhythmically, and Hannah knew that, with every gasp, he was delivering another shot of thick semen into her slot, depositing it within her groaning walls, against her cervix.

Buck looked up again, his entire demeanor changed, a broad smile on his face, a sort of relief washing over his body, almost palpable to Hannah.

"Oh fuck, thank you," he whispered.

Hannah laughed again, not trying to stifle it this time, feeling her own sense of relief, the kind that comes from performing well under uncertain and difficult conditions.

Hannah looked down at the place where he was still firmly lodged in her body.

"Are you going to shrink?" she asked.

"I don't think so."

"How can that be possible?"

"It happens," he said. "It's happened to me before. Pull off if you want."

But Hannah remained seated, not minding the sensation of being full now that she didn't have to do anything but hold Buck's sex.

"When was your last time?" she asked, leaning forward, putting her hands on Buck's shoulders, looking down at him.

"Six weeks ago. Way too long."

"You have a girlfriend?"

"No. Someone at a party. Kind of a friend."

"She could be your girlfriend then."

“No,” Buck said, his eyes searching the wall of the tent, as if the girl’s picture was hanging there. “Too different.”

“What’s not different?”

“What do you mean?”

“What are you looking for? What is, um, acceptably undifferent from Buck?”

He looked up at her in surprise.

“What?” she demanded.

“I don’t know. I just didn’t expect . . . you’re not just, like . . . I don’t know.”

“You expected a sex robot?”

“No,” he said, and he looked away. “I just didn’t know what—”

“You said I’m your first subject.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, we’re all different. So if you do another one, don’t expect her to be like me.”

“I think you probably stand out, though.”

“In what way?” Hannah asked, not caring what he said, just trying stay amused while his rod remained fully enlarged and embedded within her body.

“I feel like there’s an agenda.”

Hannah laughed. “An agenda,” she mused. “Okay. But shouldn’t everyone have one?”

“Well, yeah. I guess.”

“But not slaves,” she said.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You thought it.”

“You read minds too?” he said, looking up at her and smiling.

“Sort of,” Hannah said. “It goes with the job.”

“You’re good . . . at your job.”

“Someone called me spoiled this morning.”

“Who?”

“A man. You don’t know him.”

As they talked, Hannah moved slightly up and down while contracting and relaxing her vagina, not thinking much about either action, just finding it more comfortable than holding her straining chamber still.

“Why are you doing that?” Buck asked her.

“Doing what?”

“You’re sort of moving.”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said, and she leaned back, crossing her arms over her breasts.

Repositioning above him forced her insides to shift and adjust, and she gasped quietly before she spoke. “You’re just sort of big, so it’s easier to, um, stay busy. Want me to stop?”

“It feels good,” Buck grunted. “No, it’s good. Everything’s good.”

“Even my agenda?”

“That . . . most of all.”

He looked up at her, a new intensity in his eyes, and Hannah knew what it meant, and she rose up, allowing half his penis to leave her body before she settled back down on it with a grunt, the twin lubricants of her syrup and his semen easing her slide.

She leaned forward again, hands back on his shoulders, her breasts swinging, mouth just above his.

“How long will it take you this time?” she asked. “I’m not sure how much more I can do.”

“Let me get on top. I’m already close.”

Hannah rose up, watching as Buck’s wet, glistening manhood left her body and dropped down to his belly, their fluids mingled along his shaft, white cum alternating with her clear honey, from his tip to his balls.

She rolled off, dropped to her back, raised and spread her legs and looked at Buck expectantly.

He wasted no time getting in position, lowering his penis to her opening, working it into her while she whimpered quietly.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he sighed to himself, thrusting gently but deeply, tormenting Hannah’s walls with every insertion.

“Ah!” she cried in surprise. “Oh my god, I’m going to cum, I—”

The rest of her thought was lost to posterity, and she growled and rocked through a long, slow orgasm, oblivious to everything around her, only faintly aware that Buck was cumming now too, his second climax, his second pouring of ejaculate into her deep, overworked chamber.

For a long minute, they cried out together like animals, and then it was over, and Buck’s penis at last began relaxing, softening.

He dropped down on her, kissing her for the first time, with his whole, open mouth, as his penis slipped out of her chamber and lay against

her anus.

She kissed him back, becoming one with him by mouth, and for a long moment, she loved only him, thought only of him, and then her mind wandered. Had it been an hour? Everyone would be returning from the store soon. Maybe they were already back, and Hannah and Buck just hadn't heard them. Maybe they were all sitting just outside the tent, listening. Maybe Allain was hearing her and not approving and getting hurt and jealous because Hannah wasn't just having sex with Buck, she was talking the way a girl talks when she's falling in love, or wanting to fall in love, or wanting her lover to fall in love with her.

Allain wouldn't understand.

Hannah, still beneath Buck, feeling his weight on her chest, pulled her mouth away and turned her head to listen.

"Would you be embarrassed if they were already back?" she asked, looking at the green wall of the tent.

"They wouldn't stay," Buck said. "They'd leave until we were done."

"No, they'd listen," Hannah countered.

He rose up on his hands and knees, looking down at her, a puzzled expression, clearly not sure if she was joking.

She just smiled, so he grabbed his wrinkled t-shirt and pulled it on and slipped on his shorts, and she sat up and looked down, watching Buck's semen ooze out of her vagina and onto his sleeping bag.

"You're going to have to wash your bag," she said with mock regret.

"Never," he said.

Hannah played his response through his head a few times before she realized he was being sentimental. She found that surprising.

He unzipped his tent flap, peered out, turned back to Hannah with relief. "They're still gone."

"Okay, that's good," she said. "For your sake. I don't really care."

"Really?" he asked.

"Really," she said. "Because it seemed like it went well. If it had been bad, I wouldn't want them here, though."

"Yeah, it went well."

"Okay," Hannah said. "Whatcha wanna do now?"

"What do you mean?" Buck said, turning to study her.

“Well, if you just want to do your own thing, that’s fine, but I can’t go anywhere. So you’re kind of stuck with me.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Go to the river,” she said, looking down at her wet middle. “I want to wash up, and I want you to go with me. It’s just back there, past the trees.”

“I’ll go,” he said, and he stepped out of the tent, holding the flap open for her.

The day was warming up quickly, the sun burning down, on Hannah’s shoulders and the top of her head, on her bare breasts and hips.

“Are you going to say anything, about what happened?” Hannah asked as they picked their way along the path, through the trees.

“What do you mean?”

“People can be nosey,” she said. “Because of what I – because of how it is. So they’ll feel like they can ask me what I did, with someone else. Which they’d never ask if the girl was free. And normally I’ll say nothing, that they should just talk to my partner. And I’m going to say that to them, unless you want—”

“You don’t even tell Allain?”

“Yeah,” Hannah replied. “He doesn’t ask anymore, because he knows I won’t talk. So I can act like nothing happened, or I can tell people to talk to you, or I can say, um, you know, we had a nice time and let people draw their own conclusions.”

“That’s fine,” Buck said. “You can say whatever you want.”

They cleared the last line of trees, the river in view now, the sun dancing on the ripples, a half dozen other campers scattered along the bank, and Hannah ran ahead and splashed into the water, allowing it to climb to her kneecaps before she stopped to catch her breath.

“It’s cold,” she said, looking back at Buck. “You won’t believe how cold it is.”

Buck reached the water, put his feet in, grimaced.

“Are you going all the way in?” he asked.

“No,” she replied. “I did that last night, but I don’t want to mess up my hair now, right after I washed it.”

“It sort of got messed up, I think,” Buck said.

“No it didn’t,” Hannah said, and she turned and squinted at him and squeezed her head between both hands, pressing her hair in and then forcing

it up and into shape. “See?”

“Impressive,” Buck said. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and looked at it. “They’ll be back in 10 minutes.”

Hannah moved further into the channel, crouched and discreetly passed a hand over her opening, washing away the fluids of her time with Buck, letting them run with the current until it all reached, she guessed, some great body of salt water.

“That’s funny they texted you,” Hannah said, stepping out of the water, dropping her bare bottom onto the grass. “Like they wanted to make sure we finished up before they got back.”

“Probably,” Buck agreed, sitting beside her. “Are you happy?”

Hannah laughed. “I am,” she replied, “if I don’t think about sad things.”

Chapter 16: Adventuring on Guadalupe

The rest of the day went as Hannah wanted. They took the van as high as it would go into the Guadalupe mountain range, and that’s where they had lunch, sitting on blankets on a bluff overlooking the Texas plains, fading into green grayness an impossible distance away, the farthest Hannah had ever seen while sitting on earth.

The conversation ran from school to music to family and, briefly, a peculiar sculpture of iron beams and potted plants on the campus in Corpus Christi. Allain didn’t seem jealous about what Hannah and Buck had done, and when Hannah caught Allain’s eye, something she tried to do frequently when they were among his friends, she found that same secret look he always gave her, the expression that told her they had something more, something special, and he couldn’t wait until they could enjoy each other again in private.

Throughout the day, Hannah dressed as she pleased, first in black shorts and a pink t-shirt with lace shoulders that Nina admired, then nude to jump into a great earthen bowl of warm water, high in the mountains, naked afterwards to dry in the grass and talk to Allain about the coming week. Hot at midday but not wanting to soil the picnic blankets, she wore just her bikini bottoms for lunch, her nipples firming up and softening with a mind of their own, a phenomenon that didn’t escape the notice of the males there, she noticed.

She glanced at Buck now and then, smiling in a way she hoped said she'd enjoyed her time with him, and that was all there would be. Free boys sometimes got confused about how things worked, but Buck's expression was neither seductive nor unfriendly, and she believed he understood.

It was a mark of class to be seen with an attractive slave girl, Hannah knew, or any slave for that matter, and when another couple showed up during their picnic to admire the view, Beatrice handed them her phone and asked for a picture. Hannah, sitting at the front the group, covered her nipples with her forearm, smiled and looked at the camera, and wondered where this picture would end up, who would see it, who would see her.

For the visit to what were called the ruins, a series of collapsing adobe structures of unknown age, Hannah got fully-dressed, in hiking shoes, cream cargo shorts, and a long-sleeved, blue denim shirt she'd had embroidered with her name from her own funds. She was the most adventurous of the group, climbing a pile of debris in the vain hope of finding an arrowhead or pottery or bones or the other things she knew from reading one might find in such a place. And she was the only one who fell to her belly to stick her head into a small natural cave, pulling out only when Allain reminded her that snakes and scorpions might be inside.

Another baptism, she thought to herself. Just her head, but it still counted.

It was almost 6:30, the evening sun slanting down across the mountains, when they at last dragged themselves into the van for the drive back to camp and dinner.

"Hannah," Nina observed as she pulled the cooler out of her tent, "you were the best-dressed today. And you got the dirtiest."

"Thank you," Hannah replied. "On both counts."

Beatrice and Fernando headed up dinner preparations tonight, something Spanish in the works, and Hannah ducked into the tent, stripped and reemerged nude.

Allain had just opened his first beer, leaning against a tree and conversing quietly with Buck, so Hannah turned to Beth.

"Can you take me to the river again?"

Beth looked at Beatrice, who waved her on. "You two go ahead, we've got it covered."

“Thanks for the day,” Beth said as soon as they reached the little trail.

Hannah laughed. “Uh, I think you’re thanking the wrong person.”

“You planned it,” Beth countered. “We’re all here because of you. And everything we did today was your idea.”

Hannah was silent, realizing for the first time that she’d spent most of the day telling six free people what to do, and they’d obeyed.

“Thanks,” Hannah said. “Everyone could have said no and done something else.”

“I don’t have enough fun,” Beth said. “Today reminded me I need to do more of it.”

They reached the lawn before the river, the grass cool on Hannah’s bare feet.

“Can I ask you a question?” Beth queried.

“Go ahead,” Hannah said, already suspecting what Beth wanted to talk about.

“With Buck . . .” Beth began, falteringly. “Was it . . .?”

“What?” Hannah replied. She searched the river, saw Jill and her brother nude, and the two others, male and female, clothed, standing, all four talking beside a boombox, like the night before.

“Truly consensual?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “But thanks for asking. I’m going to get all the way in the water again.”

Hannah grabbed Beth’s hand and dragged her forward, letting go when the water was halfway up Beth’s knees, then pushing deeper on her own,

“Hannah!” someone cried.

Hannah turned to see Jill, wading through the water to her.

“Hey, Jill,” Hannah said casually, but there was an intensity in Jill’s eyes that spoke of something more, of a sense of connection, and Hannah remembered Jill’s story, that she and her brother were about to be sold off, or banished, and she understood that Jill must be looking for connections anywhere, no matter how tenuous, and she suddenly felt desperately sorry for her.

Jill didn’t stop until she her breasts were pressed against Hannah’s. Hannah accepted the hug and the kiss on her neck.

“You were gone when I woke up this morning,” Jill observed.

“They let me out early,” Hannah said.

“Did you ask them to? I never heard you.”

“No, no,” Hannah said, “I woke up early and one of the rangers was there, and he saw me moving and let me out.”

“I thought you were mad at me.”

“Oh, no,” Hannah said, a wave of guilt washing over her, colder than the water lapping at her thighs. While she’d been adventuring all day, Jill had been suffering through another loss in a life too full of them. “I’m sorry. I should have said something. No, not at all.”

Jill just stood there, staring, waiting for Hannah to say something. Hannah caught on after a brief moment.

“Do you want to share a space again, if we have to?” Hannah asked.

“I’d like that,” Jill said, smiling for the first time. “Yeah. Can I walk with you? Tonight, to the office?”

Hannah looked at Beth, still shin deep in the water. Beth nodded.

“Sure. We’re camping right through there.”

Jill turned back to the others, her brother waved to her, picked up the boombox and turned it off, and Jill edged away and waved, first to Hannah, then to Beth. “See you like 10:45 or so?”

“Sure,” Hannah said. “Oh, by the way . . .”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry for the mess I made this morning.”

“What do you mean?”

“When they let me out,” Hannah said, “they – I mean, that ranger – scared me at first, and I think I sort of peed everywhere around the bucket instead of in it.”

Jill laughed, a loud, confident laugh that reminded Hannah Jill had been raised almost free for years, free and comfortable and middle-class at least. She knew how to laugh, and Hannah hoped she would always have something to laugh about.

“God, I didn’t even notice!” Jill said. “Or if I did, I probably thought it was water or something. Please don’t worry about it. See you in a few hours, okay?”

“Okay.”

Hannah, with a mix of sorrow and guilt, pushed to the middle of the river and forced herself down, the pain of the icy current competing with

the pain in her heart.

She stayed submerged until she thought Beth might be worried for her, and she rose up gasping and stepped quickly to the bank, sitting in the grass. Jill and her party were gone now, four strange figures trapped in a quiet maelstrom others had created for them, suffering serenely as they awaited decisions other people would make.

“What’s going on with her?” Beth asked, looking at the place where they had been.

“Long story, and I don’t know everything, and some of it I can’t tell you.”

“You can’t tell me about sex, right?”

Hannah, irritated at the world and the people who let the world be the way it was, looked at Beth and scowled, ready to fight again.

“No, I can’t tell you about sex,” Hannah said.

“Can you tell me about pain?”

“Yes, I guess. Unless the pain has to do with sex.”

“I got the sense of pain. With your friend. Jill.”

“Yes,” Hannah said, and she shivered. The sun was low enough that it was no longer shining here, and she missed it. “She and her brother got sold to a family when they were young. Like, not even teens yet. Just for companionship. But then other things happened. I’m not sure what.”

As they made their way back to dinner in silence, Hannah thought about tomorrow’s drive, knew it would involve hours in chains, and tried not to dread returning home. The day had been a success – which meant the trip was a success too – and she’d get Allain all to herself for a week starting tomorrow, until he left for a practicum the following Sunday.

Dinner was good – better than Hannah had made the day before, she admitted to herself – but then, it was a meal Fernando had grown up with, and he’d prepared many times.

After dinner was a repeat of the night before, the friends sitting around the fire, Hannah choosing to stay nude, resting on a blanket at Allain’s feet, accepting the kisses he planted in her still damp hair.

Jill showed up with her brother and the free girl at 10:40, and Hannah stood, hugged Jill and introduced herself to Jill’s brother, Mason, and the free girl, Nicole.

Hannah pulled Nicole and the naked brother and sister toward the fire for quick, awkward introductions, and then she nodded to Beth, and the

party of five headed into the night.

Nicole's phone hummed and she pulled it out as they reached the lane.

"Okay," she said, staring at it. "Emily's mom and dad are out. The price is too high. But they said I should get in touch with some people her mom knows, and she's going to get me their email address. And they're in East Torch, so it's like 30 miles away."

"What did she say about them?" Jill asked.

"Nothing. Just that they're rich, and they might be willing to buy two people."

The rest of the walk was in silence, shoes and flip flops crunching along the edge of the road, the great drama of two slaves looking for new owners playing out against the regular drama of people being caged for the night.

Confinement proceeded with the same efficiency as it had the night before, Mason, Hannah and Jill leashed, bending to have their cavities checked, deposited in small cages and locked in. Mason and Jill had met a slave girl in the adjacent campground, and the owner had given permission for him to share his space with her. Hannah listened to their quiet negotiations from two spaces away, the girl requesting oral stimulation first, and agreeing to allow Mason to penetrate her vagina but not her anus.

Hannah was willing to repeat last night's session, but Jill wanted to talk first.

"So, they're gonna sell us," she whispered to Hannah.

"Yeah, I guessed that from what Nicole said."

"Nicole and Tommy are looking for someone with that much money," Jill said. "Not much luck so far."

"I'm really sorry."

"It's our fault," Jill blurted.

"How?" Hannah asked.

"When we were younger, we were all really stupid."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever have a brother or a sister?"

"No. Well, a half-brother, but he was a baby when my mom and me moved out."

"Okay, but you know kids fight, right? Sometimes over stupid stuff?"

“Yeah, definitely.”

“So we fought too. But when two of you are slaves, and two of you are free, the fights are different. I borrowed some of Nicole’s stuff without asking, and she got pissed, but she didn’t just call me out, she called me a thieving slave bitch, because that was the worst thing she could say. And Mom and Dad punished her, but that just made her madder, and things just spiraled out of control for weeks. We were all fighting, and you could tell Mom and Dad were kind of taking their own kids’ side, and then, at dinner – we were having dinner, and I made most of it – Nicole called Mason a boy bitch over some stupid thing, and I knew exactly what she meant, and I threw a glass at her, and it hit her, and she was screaming, and I came around the table and slapped her, hard, so she fell. On the floor. And then Tommy got up, and he, and he . . . Oh my god, oh my god.”

Jill brought her hands to her face, and Hannah knew how powerful the memory must be, because she seemed to be there again.

“Wait,” Hannah said. “Nicole. You mean, Nicole who just walked you here? That you’re camping with?”

“Yeah.”

“So, you’re friends again.”

Hannah wasn’t trying to listen to Jill’s brother, but she couldn’t help but hear the unmistakable sound of a girl being vaginally penetrated, first a soft “oh?” almost as a question, and then a sigh as Mason’s penis moved from the entrance of her chamber to fill her entire sheath.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jill said, almost impatiently. “Mom and Dad shipped us out, sent us to this place where they train people. I was 19, he was 18. We got a crash course in . . . in everything. Mom and Dad were going to sell us off, and we were all good with it, then, because we were all so upset. Really, I just wanted to die, so I didn’t care what happened. But then, Nicole and Tommy start missing us. Can you believe it? They missed us. So they’d come over after school and do these visitations, and we’d cry, and then Mom and Dad found out, and they visited us, and we all talked it over, and they brought us back home.

“But we had to do a little work. Like, use our training. So we could pay for it, because it was super-expensive.”

Jill fell silent.

“They were going to pay for training by selling you,” Hannah observed.

“Yes,” Jill said, and her voice dropped to a whisper, as if her next words were the hardest to confess: “We’re not rich.”

Hannah heard a series of male grunts and knew that Mason must be thrusting up his girl now, the two of them locked together, nothing else to do but share their sex organs. Hannah heard other sounds of coupling – discreet sighs, a few whispered instructions, the first quiet cries of orgasm – and felt an undefinable tension. Her vagina was still tingling from her time with Buck this morning, so she was sure she didn’t want sex with a male, if one were available. And making love to Jill seemed wrong, a sort of trivialization of the difficult things she’d shared.

“And then more stuff happened,” Jill said. “Starting last month. I think I mentioned that last night.”

“Sex with Nicole, and, um, Tommy?”

“Both,” Jill said. “That upset them as much as anything. I did Nicole. She asked me to. So I did her. They found out. So we all told them everything that had happened. And they said incest, and then they said lesbian. A total fucking shitstorm.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to stay with your brother?”

A male voice – Hannah was certain it was Mason’s – uttered a single syllable, “AH!” and Hannah knew he was cumming inside the girl.

Jill breathed out, quickly, staccato, and Hannah at first thought she was crying, but then understood that she was laughing, that her brother’s escapades were amusing to her. Hannah wondered if they had been together. Possibly even trained together. She wasn’t sure what the rules were about that. Or if there even were rules.

“I don’t know,” Jill said, growing quiet, finally speaking again. “If our dad hadn’t . . . opioids . . . that’s what did it. That’s what our therapist told us to focus on. It’s not our fault. I keep forgetting that. It’s not anyone’s fault, really.”

“Therapist?”

“Yeah, talk therapy. It helped some. Mom and Dad paid for it. Or, their insurance did.”

Jill fell silent again, and then whispered, “Hey, you wanna . . .?”

“Sure. If you do.”

They started by kissing, Hannah wishing she could suck all the sorrow and the bitter memories out of Jill’s body and mind, but the knowledge of Jill’s pain – of any pain – ebbed as she tasted her friend’s

mouth, lips pressing against each other, tongues wrestling, Hannah's ovulating genitals taking over.

They kissed far longer than the night before, both working to get focused, and then they agreed silently, mutually, with touches and gestures, that Jill would be on top this time, would turn around to have her genitals serviced, and to tend to Hannah's vulva and hole.

Jill was in position for no more than a few minutes before the climaxes came, softly but inexorably, to each girl's body and mind, Jill rocking her pelvis slowly while Hannah continued to lick, wondering through her own orgasm if she would ever taste this hole again, the semi-sweet, slightly bitter musk of an on-again-off-again slave girl whose future could be merely difficult, or could be terrible.

Chapter 17: Back to Dallas

Hannah was ready for Doug the next morning. She was sleeping lightly when the soft click of the door to confinement brought her to full wakefulness.

She wanted out, so she put her face against the bars, seeing the dark male form against the exit light that had so terrified her the morning before.

He reached for her padlock, opening it with the same stealthy silence as before.

Hannah scooted to the back of the cage, lowered her vulva to the waste bucket and urinated, guessing he could hear the quiet ring of her stream against the metal and wouldn't mind waiting until she was done.

Finished, she clambered out of the cage, waiting for Doug to leash her, but he simply exited the room, and she followed him into the bright lights of the office, squinting as her eyes adjusted, smelling the coffee that percolated in the big federal coffee maker.

Doug had already poured his mug, so Hannah found a free cup and prepared it the way she liked, following Doug into the cool air of a quiet Sunday morning, the last stars of the night twinkling out.

"You're not going to leash me?" she asked.

"No need," Doug said. "I know you today. I didn't know you yesterday."

"What does that have to do with it?"

“If it’s someone new, I’ll leash her, so she doesn’t think she’s getting a pass to do whatever. And some I’ll leash every morning. You know, the fidgety ones. But I trust you.”

“Okay, thanks,” Hannah said. “I mean, thanks for everything. For letting me out, and coffee, and everything. You sort of scared me yesterday, so I—”

“I believe you mentioned that,” Doug said. “Several times.”

Hannah chose her place on one of the logs, and Doug picked up the nearest cuff, locked it around her ankle and settled into his usual seat, the fire just beginning to blaze.

“So I may have been a little, um, abrupt,” Hannah conceded, settling her bare bottom down on the log. “But it was nice.”

Doug laughed and pointed his mug at Hannah.

“You’re okay,” he said. “You’re okay.”

Hannah looked up.

“Are we going to see that satellite again?”

“No, not for another 12 days. A Russian thing went by earlier, according to the app, but I wasn’t here yet.”

Hannah raised the cup to her nose, breathed in, touched the rim to her mouth, took a drop, found it still too hot to drink.

“I told people what you said yesterday,” she said.

“You mean, about the satellite?”

“No. Well, yes, about that too. But about me being spoiled.”

Doug laughed and peered off into the trees.

“Now why would you wanna tell people about that?”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “It just stuck with me. You know, how someone says something, casually, and it sort of keeps coming back to you?”

“I do.”

“That’s what it was like. I think I needed to figure something out about it.”

“Did you?”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah said. “I’m sort of spoiled, and I’m sort of not spoiled. That’s what I decided.”

“A true epiphany,” he said, and he looked at her.

“I know what that means,” she said.

“What does it mean then?”

“It’s when you get a new idea. Like, an awakening,” Hannah replied.

“Very good.”

“Do you know where the word comes from?” she asked.

“No.”

“It was when the three wise men found out Jesus was lord, and they —”

“You religious?”

“I was raised religious.”

“You religious now?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. “Sort of, I guess. I can say I’m sort of spoiled, so I should be grateful for things like that.”

“Fair enough,” Doug said, in a way that suggested he might not be at all religious but wasn’t the sort that had to fight about it.

Hannah believed she could talk to Doug this way for 100 years, just saying whatever came to her mind, letting him speak from his, and she thought about her life and wished she had a decent father, someone she could talk to now. Her mind turned to Ormek, and she laughed at herself.

Not Ormek. No.

Like the morning before, the rest of Doug’s comrades showed up and took their places around the fire, and the little group spoke of nature and the weather and the animals that roamed the park, some common and some vanishingly rare, like the mountain lion, and Beth arrived, remembering Hannah’s flip-flops this time.

“How soon are you leaving?” Doug asked Beth, kneeling to release Hannah from her ankle chain.

“As soon as possible,” Beth replied. “Probably within the hour.”

“You want to get your tracking cuffs off now?” he asked Hannah.

“Yes, Sir, if I can,” Hannah replied.

“You can be in the park for two hours without cuffs. If it’s longer than that come back here and we can lock you up until your group leaves.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, and she and Beth followed Doug into the office, where Beth signed Hannah out and Doug opened up the cuffs with a peculiar, bent key.

“Thanks,” Hannah said, and she took her leave of Doug and the other rangers and felt a lump in her throat she hadn’t expected.

“Did you sleep better this time?” Hannah asked her once they were walking the lane back to the campsite.

“Yeah, way better.”

“How soon does everyone want to leave?”

“They’re already breaking the tents down. Allain’s just waiting for you to get your stuff, though, so your tent’s still up.”

“Are you glad you went?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah. So glad.”

“Are you glad I went?”

Beth stopped in her tracks and turned abruptly toward Hannah.

“Look,” she began.

“Okay,” Hannah replied, waiting for the next words.

“I think I’m going to remember my understanding of things, of certain things . . . as before Hannah, and after Hannah.”

Hannah laughed, uncertainly, not sure she knew what Beth meant.

They walked the rest of the way in silence, finding a bustle of activity at the campsite.

There was no coffee this morning, and people were eating whatever they could find – leftover bread, an orange, an apple, a can of Coke. Hannah sensed a little stress, everyone wanting to finish the tedious process of packing the van back up so they could get back home by mid-afternoon.

Allain was kneeling next to the collapsed tent that had sheltered Fernando and Beatrice, pulling up stakes while Buck and Fernando put tent poles in a bag.

She knelt beside him, put her hand on his shoulder, kissed his ear.

“Good morning,” she whispered.

He turned, smiled and kissed her on the mouth. “Sleep well?”

“Yes, as well as can be expected.”

“Can you get your things out of the tent?”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah replied.

“Do you know where your chains ended up?”

“I told Beth to put them on your bag. Your blue one.”

“Oh, yeah, I put ‘em away. I’ll get them for you when I’m done here.”

Allain seemed tense, maybe even a little irritable, and Hannah decided it was because he was missing sex. On a good day, he could go three or four times, and he’d gotten nothing since Thursday. And now

Hannah was ovulating. He could probably sense it. She hoped the drive went quickly.

Hannah slipped into the tent, found her last pair of panties and the blue wrap for her hips and top, and put everything on. She packed her clothes in one bag and assembled her books and notebooks in the other, put one bag in the back of the van and the other in her seat, and then returned to straighten up, rolling up Allain's sleeping bag and stacking up his clothes so he could pack efficiently.

Outside the tent again, she found an apple in the cooler, a bag of croutons beside it, and made herself a small breakfast while she sat at the picnic table, watching the camp get broken down, waiting to be asked to do something.

Allain's tent was the last standing, and he dove in, pushing his things one by one out the door – sleeping bag, blue bag, red bag, computer bag. If he appreciated the work Hannah had done, he didn't show it, and after the tent had been emptied, he emerged humorlessly, picked up two bags and headed to the van, Hannah's chains slung over his shoulders, the open cuffs for her wrists and ankles swinging against his belly.

Something about Allain, about the way her restraints were draped casually around his neck, kind of like a stethoscope, was bothering Hannah, for a reason she couldn't put her finger on.

He stepped to the back of the van, handed his bags to Fernando, and headed toward Hannah, not offering her the apologetic smile he usually wore when he had to cuff her. This was, apparently for him, just another of his list of chores for the morning: pack up his things, take down the tents, chain his slave girl.

Hannah surveyed the rest of the party, hoping no one else was watching. She caught Nina's eye, but Nina quickly looked away, a gesture that was perhaps meant to reduce Hannah's humiliation, but only increased it.

Hannah had planned this trip. She had directed dinner Friday night. She had led everyone yesterday, on adventures she had come up with.

She had been a peer, until now, the illusion of equality smashed by seven pounds and eight ounces of steel.

Hannah stepped over the bench to face Allain, her hands thrust forward. If he wasn't going to smile, she wouldn't either, so she just looked

down somberly as he closed a cuff around each wrist, making sure they were just tight enough so she couldn't slip them off.

"Allain, we're dropping you and Hannah off first," Beatrice said from the back of the van, "so we're setting all your stuff on top."

"Okay," he said, pausing to look.

"That's my laptop bag," he said, pointing. "That goes with everything else."

"Okay."

Hannah sat on the bench and he knelt, chaining her left ankle.

"There's a bag on Hannah's seat," Nina announced from inside the van.

"That's mine," Hannah said, annoyed that she had to speak. Being put in restraints was, she realized, an intimate moment, not unlike sex, something that should be done in private. But here she was, being chained by Allain while the two of them talked to everyone else.

Allain secured her right ankle, checked the fit of both of the lower cuffs, rose without a word and stepped to the back of the van to help load, leaving Hannah to fumble through the rest of her improvised meal with her hands and feet manacled and secured to each other with a yard of silver chain.

Well-versed in the challenges of eating this way, she raised her feet to the bench, giving herself enough slack in the middle chain that she could raise her hands to eat.

If she'd been alone, she would have cried. Just a little cry, not the sobbing and shaking she used to do as she adjusted to the life she was living now. But she was unhappy, and she pushed the food into her mouth, without tasting it, staring at the trees, listening to the sounds of people, coming from other campsites or from the river where she'd baptized herself.

Stuck in her misery, she lost track of everything around her until she felt a hand on her shoulder, looked up and saw Allain beside her, his familiar smile back, the stress of packing in a hurry relieved, his warm hand not just resting on her, but squeezing her shoulder.

"Ready for the trip?"

"I am," she said, remembering that Allain's charm, like his lust, was always there, just beneath the surface, ready to work its magic over Hannah. She had a love for him that the everyday irritations of being owned could bend, but couldn't break, and she reminded herself how lucky – even

spoiled – she was, and she turned on the bench, put her feet on the ground and rose, making her way slowly to the van while Allain disposed of the remnants of her breakfast and returned to help her awkward entrance into the vehicle.

The drive back home was a repeat of the trip Friday, a little conversation, stops for coffee and lunch, people poking at their phones, Hannah splitting her time between talking, studying, looking at Allain's phone, reading the news and trying to reach the next level of *Katzink*.

They reached home by 4, and everyone exited the van to exchange hugs, Hannah getting and giving embraces rich with meaning that no observer would recognize, particularly those she gave Beth and Buck.

She spent the night with Allain, coupling twice, both of them crying quietly through long, hard orgasms, and afterwards Hannah lay awake on Allain's bed, listening to his steady breath while his semen leaked out of her vagina, feeling free with the run of his whole bedroom and bathroom, and she told herself that she was very, very lucky, and she wasn't spoiled at all.

Chapter 18: Ramone, and Athena

Hannah passed a glorious week with Allain – friends, the club, pools, dining out, dining in, making love, sleeping in. Studies took a back seat, but he'd be leaving Sunday for a two-week practicum in New Orleans, and she'd make it up while he was gone.

By the time Sunday arrived, she was ready for a few weeks of relative peace and solitude, doing the little chores that the Petrosyans has allowed to slip while she was entertaining Allain, and the quiet time with her books in her cage. She knew she'd be expected to perform now and then, and she looked forward to that as well. She missed Ramone, and she wanted things resolved with Ormek. It needed to return to the way it was: her bent at the bars, him behind her. No talking, no touching, no kissing.

That mid-July Tuesday she was returned to her cage after lunch, studying all afternoon on her bed and at her desk, until she heard the elevator bump and Athena appeared at the bars.

Hannah could tell immediately the girl wanted something, and she stuck a pen in her physics book, closed it and turned.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” Athena said. “We’re bringing Ramone to you tonight.”

“Before dinner, or after?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yeah, I want to know if I should get made up for dinner.”

“Do you think he cares?” Athena asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” Hannah said. “All boys care.”

“Well, why not make yourself up either way?”

“If you’re only bringing him to me for the night,” Hannah explained, with a tone meant to convey just the right amount of impatience, “it doesn’t matter so I won’t bother. Because you’ll be turning the lights off anyway.”

What was Athena working on? Hannah wondered, and she studied Athena’s body language and tried to guess at her true motives, and found she couldn’t.

“What if we didn’t turn the lights off?” Athena asked.

“I don’t care,” Hannah said. “I can do it with the light on. Or during the day.”

“You don’t need it . . . private?”

“What are you getting at?” Hannah asked. “Just tell me what you want.”

“I want to watch.”

“Watch what?”

“You and Ramone. Doing it.”

“Oh, god,” Hannah said, and to her surprise, she felt her forehead grow hot, and she knew she was blushing.

“What?” Athena demanded, and Hannah reminded herself that Athena was the most vulnerable of the Petrosyans, a normal teen girl with normal teen insecurities. Or maybe her insecurities were worse, because she belonged to a family of talented, beautiful people, and she was attractive but not striking, and she wasn’t even as beautiful or intelligent as the family’s slave.

“It’s fine,” Hannah said. “It just surprises me a little. I—”

“Why?” Athena demanded.

Careful, careful, Hannah told herself. The wrong answer could turn something that was minor into something that wasn’t minor.

“You just haven’t asked to watch before,” Hannah said. “I mean, why? It’s fine. You can. But if I knew why, like if you wanted to see a

certain thing, or . . . something . . . I could . . . we could—”

“Just do what you always do,” Athena said, slipping into a tone Hannah found more familiar, just the usual irritability. “Pretend I’m not there. Okay? Can you do that for me?”

“Sure,” Hannah said. “I’ll make sure Ramone knows.”

“Uh,” Athena began, and she rolled her eyes and looked at the ceiling, clearly annoyed by the burden of having to explain something so obvious. “Could you please not? Like, over dinner? Or in front of my parents? Or anyone? As in, the whole world doesn’t have to know about this?”

Now Athena was being dramatic for the sake of drama.

“Very good, Ma’am,” Hannah said, and she opened her book back up, turned to lean against her pillows and, looking down at the page, asked with her most stilted formality, “Will that be all, Ma’am?”

“Fuck you.”

“Very good, Ma’am,” Hannah said, never taking her eyes off her book.

“Oh, and Ramone will be here for dinner,” Athena said. “So don’t be weird or anything.”

“Okay.”

Before she returned to her studies, Hannah found she needed to process. Really, the request wasn’t that unusual. Watching subjects make love was one of the standard perks of ownership. It’s just that it had never happened here. All sex was private, discreet, in the Petrosyan household. Now, for the first time, Athena wanted to watch. Why?

But then, why not? Athena had watched porn online, something Hannah knew for a fact, because Athena had shown her what she’d found, a movie that Hannah laughed at out loud because it was all so artificial, so fake and badly acted.

This would be in person, and it would be real. Or as real as Hannah and Ramone could be, with an audience. There were certain things they couldn’t do tonight, and Hannah was a little disappointed about that.

So, Hannah concluded before she returned to her book, this was a new layer in her relationship with Athena, a relationship that was already rich with layers. They were like sisters in some ways, like conventional owner and slave in some ways, and like friends, too. There was a deep

history as well, a great deal of baggage, some of which Hannah could treasure and some she could be bitter about, if she were the bitter type.

Was Athena going to masturbate? Hannah was almost certain not. Athena's sexuality was for the most part a closed book, something Hannah nor anyone else in the household knew about or, really, wanted to know about, as far as Hannah knew. And that seemed to be the way Athena preferred it.

But now, as Hannah considered Athena's request, something fell into place. The last few times Ramone came over, Athena had lingered at the bars after she'd locked them in, commenting on the weather, or something about school, or something even less meaningful. She was waiting for them to start, Hannah guessed, hoping they'd begin while she stood there, wishing perhaps that they'd invite her to watch and save her the trouble of imposing.

It had never occurred to Hannah that Athena might be waiting for something, so she humored the girl, Hannah and Ramone making small talk with her, observing a respectful distance from each other until Athena gave up and left.

Foiled by the couple's discretion, Athena had been forced to express her wants, something she clearly didn't want to do. Her request tonight, Hannah realized, was an act of courage, performed at great risk.

Hannah got another half an hour of study in before Athena returned, any animosity from their earlier interaction gone, the cheerful self that Hannah liked best here for now.

"Darcy's doing most of the cooking tonight," Athena said, reaching through the bars to put on Hannah's shackles. "But we need you to make the desert."

"What kind?"

"We bought a mix. Something new. But it's not that many steps."

Athena unlocked Hannah's door.

"It has yeast though."

"I've worked with yeast before, but it's been awhile."

In the elevator, Athena turned to Hannah and grabbed her arm.

"You're not going to say anything, right?" she inquired urgently, eyes wide and imploring.

"Of course not," Hannah said. "Seriously, no. Never."

"I might not."

“Watch?”

“Yes. I might or might not watch. I’ll decide when I bring you down.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Either way is fine. And I didn’t mean to seem surprised earlier. I was just kind of lost in this new physics thing I was reading, so I was just reacting to talking to you. That’s all.”

“Okay. Whatever.”

Darcy was frying chicken, something Ramone always requested, and she nodded to Hannah and pointed to the box of desert mix, a sort of cake torte, and Hannah went to work, studying the instructions, determined to get the recipe right.

She was still mixing the first set of ingredients when Ormek arrived from work, Ramone with him, naked and shackled, dark-skinned and beautiful, his smoldering eyes settling on Hannah first before he took in the rest of the kitchen.

“Hey, Ramone!” Athena said, stepping to Ramone and kissing him on the cheek, not apparently concerned at all that she had stepped close enough to him to feel his limp but still sizable penis through her skirt.

“Athena,” he said warmly, bouncing from her to Darcy, wrapping his arm around her and lowering his mouth to kiss the top of her head.

“*Como vai, gatinha?*” he asked her with a smile.

She waved him away, and Hannah marveled at his ability to be so friendly to someone so plain, so dull.

Laura made her first appearance in the kitchen, drawn by the arrival of her husband and the male slave of their friends, and she kissed Ramone on both cheeks, the way she always did, a European custom Hannah found touching.

Finally, with the free people acknowledged, Ramone turned to Hannah.

Stirring cake batter in a large bowl, she glanced at him, smiled, cast her eyes back to her work, waiting for him to come to her, the way he always did when he arrived, his demeanor just this side of lechery with the girl he was here to mate with, while she held still, as if shy.

Standing beside her, he pressed his whole length against her, arms wrapped around her shoulders, penis pressed against her hip, and she turned to look up at him and accept his kiss, their mouths staying closed, but the carnality almost palpable.

He pulled away to smile at her, and she did her best to convey with her expression that he needed to know something, that something was going to be different tonight. He raised his eyebrows, and she cast her gaze so quickly to Athena and back to Ramone that no one but he could notice, and his eyebrows fell and she believed that, quite possibly, he understood.

“Ramone, do the salad like you do,” Darcy commanded.
“Everything’s in the fridge.”

Hannah was last to the table, sliding the cake into the oven and hoping it would turn out alright.

When Ramone came for dinner, he was always placed beside Hannah on one side of the table, Athena on the other, and they would play a game with their feet, moving them so slowly their chains made no noise against the floor, touching them together, wrestling with them in ways that Hannah found so provocative she would sometimes wet herself well before dinner was finished.

“How are the girls?” Laura asked.

“Sonja’s already talking about where she’ll apply to college,” Ramone replied with the slightest accent. His first language was the Portuguese of his native Brazil. His family had come for a weeklong vacation, but 16 and irresponsible, he had lost his passport, possibly at Disney World, and the authorities stopped him at the airport, took him into custody and, after a few months of proceedings, sold him to the highest bidder. If he hadn’t been handsome, fluent in English, obviously bright and charming, they probably would have let him go back home.

Hannah could get very little information from him about what it was like to transition from free to property over the course of a few months, and she suspected there was more trauma there than he was comfortable sharing. She wanted to believe that she was a silver lining. She knew he wrote home about her, telling his family that there was a girl named Hannah he sometimes visited, that she was nice and was studying physics. The Abercrombies were generous with Ramone’s mail privileges, allowing a letter a week to Brazil.

“Sonja might go to Austin, so she can be with Darla,” Ramone continued. “And Bethany is going to California for band camp next week.”

Hannah was glad to let Ramone dominate the conversation tonight. It had been more than a month – since early June – that Ramone had been over, and he had news to share. The three daughters of his owners were

always doing things – when they weren't with Ramone – and Hannah knew them in passing and from Ramone's confidential revelations.

As the family listened to Ramone, Hannah cast a furtive glance now and then at Ormek in the hopes of detecting something about his feelings for her. She sensed no jealousy in Ormek's tone or manner and assumed that all was as it should be, that what had happened between herself and him last month was a one-time fluke, something that wouldn't – and shouldn't – be repeated.

Hannah willed herself to see that outcome as entirely positive, the only arrangement that made any sense.

Hannah's cake was a success, any flaws in it something Hannah could blame on using a box recipe, and she accepted praise for it and proposed trying to make something similar from scratch, but she knew she wouldn't, and the people around the table probably did as well. Cooking was something Hannah had very little affinity for.

As soon as dinner was complete, Laura looked around the table and smiled at Hannah and Ramone.

"Athena, will you take Hannah and Ramone downstairs now?"

"Shouldn't they help clean up first?" Athena protested, and Hannah could sense in the girl's voice the fear that her plans for the evening were about to be dashed, that she'd be upstairs while Hannah and Ramone coupled alone.

"No," Laura said patiently. "I'm sure they'd like to get started on things. You've been apart more than a month, haven't you?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Ramone replied. "Since June eighth."

"I think it was June 10," Hannah corrected. "It was the day I started ovulating."

"Hannah, will you want the door left open all night?"

"Yes, Ma'am, if that's okay," Hannah replied, and then reconsidered her answer, in light of Athena's request.

"Actually, Ma'am?"

"Yes?"

"Could it be locked at first? I'd like to catch up with Ramone before we start, and that would be easier with the door closed."

"I can come down a little later to open it," Athena said quickly. Too quickly. Hannah hoped, for Athena's sake, Laura wouldn't figure out what her daughter was up to.

“Maybe give us half an hour to talk?” Hannah said.

“Sure.”

Ormek stood and the rest of the party rose with him, Hannah and Ramone stepping to the elevator, Athena joining them there, Ramone’s penis already hardening.

As soon as the elevator shut behind them, Athena turned to Hannah.

“So, you’re not going to do anything between the bars?”

“No,” Hannah said. “Well, talk, I guess.”

“Okay,” Athena said. “Thanks.”

“What’s going on?” Ramone asked.

Athena opened her mouth to speak, shut it and turned to Hannah.

“I’ll explain it downstairs,” Hannah said.

Athena escorted Hannah and Ramone to the pair of cages in the basement, first letting Hannah into hers, then locking Ramone into his cage, leaving the door between the cages locked.

“I’ll be back in half an hour,” Athena said, removing Hannah’s and Ramone’s shackles, and she stood and looked at Hannah severely, with an expression that indicated she expected full cooperation.

“Yes, Ma’am, thank you, Ma’am,” Hannah said, in the tone she used sometimes to mock Athena and sometimes to lighten Athena’s mood.

Athena turned and left, the elevator bumped, and Ramone and Hannah were alone.

“What’s going on?” Ramone asked, leaning against the bars, making no effort to hide his growing penis.

“Guess,” Hannah said, and she sat on her bed and pulled her legs up, wrapping her arms around them. Well aware of the things that could happen through the bars of a cage, she didn’t want to do anything to tempt Ramone – or herself.

“Something’s going on with Athena,” Ramone ventured.

“Well, yeah,” Hannah agreed.

“What?”

“I want you to guess,” Hannah said. “I want to see if you can read my mind.”

“She wants us to do something while she watches.”

“Close enough,” Hannah said. “She wants to watch.”

“Watch what?”

“Just us doing it.”

“That was my guess.”

“Not quite,” Hannah countered. “You said she wants us to do something, and that’s not really it. She just wants to watch us do whatever we always do.”

“Well, we can’t do that,” Ramone said, turning to his toilet to urinate.

“I know,” Hannah said, and she settled on her own toilet. “So we’re going to have to do something more, um, usual.”

Ramone turned to look at Hannah, eyebrow raised.

“Don’t watch me pee, please,” she said.

“You’re watching me.”

“That’s different,” Hannah said.

Ramone finished, flushed and faced the wall until he heard Hannah wipe and flush, then he turned back, stepped to the bars and lowered his voice.

“Do you want to fake it until she leaves?”

That idea hadn’t occurred to Hannah. And she wasn’t sure it would work. What if Athena just kept watching? What if Ramone couldn’t hold on that long?

“Okay,” Hannah said, despite her misgivings.

“Had a good month?” Ramone asked.

“Yeah, it’s been nice,” Hannah replied.

“So, how are the girls?” Hannah asked, shifting on her bed.

“Same as always. Sonja gets me three nights a week when she’s not on her period, Bethany, you never know. She’ll take me all afternoon, then she won’t talk to me for a week. And Darla’s doing summer school, but she had me brought up for a couple of sorority parties.”

Hannah laughed. “Please don’t tell me you did Darla’s sorority.”

“God no. Darla though, yeah. And her roommate once.”

“How was Austin?”

“Loved it,” Ramone said, folding his arms and nodding, his penis showing no signs of relaxing.

“I went camping,” Hannah said.

“Sonja told me about that.”

“How did that come up?”

“Athena told her, and she told me. Athena said you made Allain take you, to Guadalupe, and you made him bring his friends, and you fucked one of his friends.”

“All that’s true,” Hannah said. “It was really —”

“Did you like it, bitch?”

Hannah looked into Ramone’s smoldering eyes and her heart skipped a beat, and she drew in a long, slow breath.

“Yeah, I did,” she said, slowly, quietly. “He had the biggest cock I’ve ever seen, and I sat on it and took his cum twice, and he —”

“You fucking whore,” Ramone whispered, staring at her between the bars with deep, evil malevolence.

Hannah shrunk to the head of her bed, back pressed into the corner, and looked at Ramone in abject terror.

“They asked me if I wanted it,” Hannah choked. “I didn’t really have a choice. If I didn’t do it, I’d be tortured.”

“But you liked it?”

“Yes.”

“Fucking whore.”

“You can’t do that,” Hannah said breathlessly.

“After she leaves I can.”

“What are you going to do while she’s watching?”

“Something normal. What’s she expecting?”

“She said to pretend she’s not here. She just wants to see us do it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “Maybe her friend told her to. Maybe it’s for a class she signed up for this fall. But she’s been wanting to watch for awhile.”

“She told you that?”

“No, but I figured it out. You know how she’d sometimes stay and talk? Kind of about nothing?”

“Yeah.”

“I think she was hoping we’d get —”

Hannah heard the elevator bump and immediately shut up.

Athena appeared, unsmiling, paler than usual, and handed the key to Hannah, who unlocked the door separating her from Ramone and returned the key to Athena.

Ramone wasted no time stepping to Hannah's bed. Hannah lay down on her side, and Ramone lay beside her, facing her, and he wrapped his hand around her arm, leaned forward to kiss her, slid his mouth down her neck to her breast, sucked her nipple, returned to kissing her.

"Oral?" he asked quietly, just loud enough for Athena to hear, and Hannah lay down on her back and spread her legs while Ramone clambered over her, lowering his penis into her mouth, bringing his own mouth to her opening, the couple consuming each other industriously, with a quiet moan now and then, for five minutes before Ramone, satisfied with Hannah's state of arousal, rose up, turned around, and lay between her legs, pushing – without any further ceremony – his cock up her vagina.

"Ahh, god!" Hannah grunted, rocking to help him work all the way up her hole.

Athena was still there. Hannah could see her out of the corner of her eye, standing at the bars impassively, simply watching, motionless, whatever she was feeling kept hidden.

For another five minutes, Ramone pounded Hannah's organ, thrusting, grinding, panting, while Hannah lay still, mostly passive except for the occasional twist of her pelvis as she worked to get Ramone deeper, or enhance the sensation of his thrusts on different parts of her vulva or vagina.

His climax arrived with quick grunts, followed by slower, deeper groans of pleasure, Hannah joining him, her hips rocking quickly, her sharp cries echoing through the room.

They writhed together for almost a minute before Ramone, spent, collapsed on top of Hannah, kissing her, embracing her, his penis still buried with her sheath.

Hannah looked to the bars.

Athena was gone, satisfied with whatever it was she had come to see. The elevator bumped, and Hannah looked into Ramone's eyes and nodded.

"Okay," she said.

Ramone withdrew his penis, wet with Hannah's lubricant, pulled away and sat on the edge of the bed, head lowered, collecting himself.

"What was his name?" he sighed.

"Buck."

"You fucked him all weekend?"

“No, just once, like I told you.”

Hannah sat up, moving toward Ramone, reaching toward him as if trying to calm him.

He turned and, with raw fury in his eyes, he reached up, grabbed a wad of blonde hair at her temple and shook it.

“Ow, goddam,” she said, wincing. “It was once!”

“You fucking liar.”

“It was once,” Hannah said quietly, her cold eyes raging as they looked deep into Ramone’s.

“You wanted him more than once,” Ramone asserted, shaking her head, and with his other hand, he slapped her jaw.

“Ow, stop!” she cried.

“You wanted him all weekend, you dirty whore!”

I did,” she admitted. “I did.”

With terrifying speed, he spun on the edge of the bed and, never loosening his grip on Hannah’s hair, forced her to her back.

“Stop it, stop it, please!”

With his free hand, Ramone grabbed Hannah’s calf so hard she feared she would bruise, and he raised it high, forcing her legs wide apart while he slid into position, his tip at her opening, against her vulva, up her slot, deep into her pussy while she cried out again, “Stop it, stop it, you’re killing me!”

“You fucking whore,” Ramone grunted, jaw clenched shut. “I should kill you.”

“Goddam you,” Hannah sighed below him, her voice suddenly icy cold again, “I told you I had to. I told you they’d torture me if I didn’t.”

Ramone said nothing, just kept thrusting, pounding, pulling all but his head out of her chamber, then pushing back up her so hard and fast it knocked the air out of her, her gasps coming rhythmically, frantically.

“You’re going to break me in half!” Hannah screamed. “Stop fucking me like that. Goddam you, stop!”

But Ramone did not stop, did not yield, did not pause, his hand wrapped around her hair, the hollow of his shoulder forced against the meat of her calf, his other hand against her thigh, fingers wrapped around taut muscle, grunting with every hammer blow against the wet, pink flesh of her vulva.

Hannah lost track of the number of times he violated her, filling her body and emptying it, over and over again, everything from her clitoris and outer lips to her uterus screaming out in agony and urgent need.

She looked up, her face still frozen in terror, but Ramone seemed to be able to tell, from something about the way her eyes changed perhaps, that she was ready to cum, that it was time, and his own expression altered slightly as well, softened, as Hannah felt his orgasm begin, his penis stiffen and swell.

“Ohmygodjesusjesusjesushelpme!” Hannah prayed through a climax so hard she thought it might melt the bars of her cage.

“OhgoddamgoddamgoddamI’m dyingJesussaveme.”

Ramone said nothing intelligible, uttering quick, meaningless gasps of overwhelming pleasure as his seed roared down the rock-hard tube of his manhood and splashed against Hannah’s cervix, defiling it with a sticky white cream.

“Ohmygod,” Hannah sighed. “Ohmygod. Ohmygod.”

The couple rocked and writhed together until all the waves of orgasm had crashed against their consciousnesses, and then Ramone, spent for real this time, collapsed down on Hannah.

But she wasn’t finished yet. She raised her mouth to his shoulder and bit down, hard enough to make him flinch, and then she screamed, a roaring cry from someplace in the pit of her body that wasn’t quite human, her lips sealed around his dark skin so the sound would dissolve against his flesh.

She drew in two more breaths, screamed two more times, rattling the bone and sinew that knit Ramone’s arm to his body, and as her final scream ended, her cry turned to weeping, great wrenching sobs as hard as her orgasm had been, and she looked up through blurry grey eyes into the dark, bewildered eyes of Ramone.

For at least a minute, she simply wept, inconsolably, then she choked out a dozen gasps of despair, finally passing a hand over her eyes, smiling sheepishly, communicating with her face that she was done, the spell was broken, she was finished with whatever it was this had been.

She arched her back and Ramone, still lying between her legs, penis soft but resting along the folds of her vagina, pushed himself off her, rose to his knees, looked down at her.

She looked back up, not happily, necessarily, but relieved.

And then, from beyond the bars of her cage, she heard the thump of the elevator and knew, almost preternaturally, what it meant. Had Ramone heard it? She looked into his eyes and decided he hadn't. She was particularly sensitive to the sound, because it meant her owners were there, were coming for her, would free her and take her places. The sound meant less to Ramone, so there was no reason he would perceive it. Hannah decided quickly she wouldn't tell Ramone Athena had stayed.

She laughed, sat up, put her feet on the floor and her face in her hands.

"Oh, god," she said, as if that summed up everything, and she rose to go to the toilet, wiping Ramone's semen, urinating again although she barely needed to.

She washed her hands and her face and returned to the bed, sitting with her legs crossed, facing Ramone.

His shoulder where she'd bitten and screamed was still wet with her saliva, red where her teeth had dug in, and she reached up to smear it with her finger.

"You're going to break the skin one of these days," he said, reaching up, pressing her hand against his flesh.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Tell them you fell."

"They won't believe me. They'll probably notice—"

"Joking," Hannah interrupted. "Please don't lie."

"You'll get in trouble."

"I don't care."

"I could put something else in your mouth," he suggested.

"Like what?" Hannah demanded. "I don't have any clothes down here. A book?"

"Your pillow?"

"No. It has to be your shoulder. Or some other part of your body."

Ramone looked down at his semi-erect penis. "No," he said. "Not with those teeth."

Hannah laughed and looked down at the sheets beside her thigh, five long blond hairs there lying in a clump, casualties of Ramone's assault.

"Would you ever do that to one of the Abercrombie girls?" she asked.

"Yes, if they asked me to."

"No you wouldn't."

“Yes I would,” Ramone said, looking into her eyes. “I have.”

“No you haven’t.”

“Yes I have. To Sonja.”

“When?”

“Three weeks ago.”

“Tell me. Tell me what you did.”

“It wasn’t as much as with you. But I grabbed her hair while I was fucking her. Just once. I think she liked it, but she wasn’t expecting it, and could tell she wasn’t sure about it, so I let go.”

This was an important detail to Hannah. Now she understood more things.

“Did she cum?”

“Hard.”

“Harder than usual?”

“Yeah.”

“Why did you do it?”

“She was looking up at me, with, I don’t know, this kind of helpless expression. Like she didn’t know what I was going to do next, and it scared her, and she wanted to be scared.”

“You like taking risks, don’t you?”

“No,” Ramone said. “That’s not what it was. I was just living. Just living.”

Hannah looked down, pondered, looked back up.

“What did you say to Darcy?”

“When?”

“When Ormek brought you home. You kissed her head and said something in Spanish to her.”

“It wasn’t Spanish. It was Portuguese.”

“Okay, what did you say then?”

“*Como vai, gatinha?*”

“I know. What does it mean though?”

“What’s up, kitten?”

“Kitten? You called her kitten?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to go to bed with her?” Hannah asked.

“Yes. Can you set something up?”

“I already have. The next time you come over, instead of just kissing her on the head and saying, saying that kitten thing you said, you’re supposed to tear her clothes off and call her, um, a wild mountain goat.”

“Okay.”

“And then do it. On the kitchen floor.”

“Okay. You’ll be watching, right?”

“Yeah, the whole time. Athena too.”

For another hour, Hannah and Ramone caught up, talking about the month they’d been apart, revealing the darkest secrets of their lives, the sex and the chores and the expectations. Hannah never told Ramone or anyone else about Ormek, however. That was off limits to everyone. Sometimes, people talked in their sleep.

“I’m tired,” Hannah announced. “Are you going to let me go to bed?”

“Yes, after I fuck you one more time.”

Hannah looked down, saw that Ramone’s penis had returned to full attention, so she lay back with her head on her pillow and spread her legs.

Ramone worked quickly, efficiently, sliding in and out of her chamber with steady, workmanlike thrusts, groaning through a soft, gentle orgasm within a few minutes.

“Do you want to cum?” he asked her after he finished panting.

“No, you’ve already screwed me three times.”

“The first one was just for show, though.”

“You weren’t faking what you did to my pussy,” she said.

“Everything’s kind of tender right now.”

“Did you want me up you just now?”

“Would I have let you if I didn’t?”

“No,” Ramone said. “Of course not.”

She looked down to watch another shot of Ramone leak onto her sheets, for Darcy to wash.

“I’m tired,” she said. “You wore me out.”

“Where do you want me to sleep?”

“Spoon me until I’m asleep, then go to your own bed.”

“What if I fall asleep first?”

“Then don’t bother me, or I’ll kick you out.”

“You need a bigger bed.”

“They asked me what I wanted, a desk or a bigger bed, and I told them a desk.”

“You’ve told me that story before.”

Hannah slid under the sheets and put her head on her pillow. Ramone lay behind her and draped his arm over her belly. The last thing she felt that night was his wet penis against her bottom.

Chapter 19: Hannah’s Idea

Hannah awoke, as she often did in the summer, with the first day’s light peeking through the windows set high in the wall. Ramone was asleep in the other bed, and Hannah guessed he’d woken up in the middle of the night and moved over. She went to the toilet, wiped herself, found that she was still leaking Ramone, grabbed a book off her desk and went to her bed, listening for the sounds of life from elsewhere in the house. She heard water running, imagined Ormek in the shower, and she wondered who would be taking Ramone home this morning. Usually it was Athena, but Hannah suspected Athena might beg off and the task would fall to Ormek. The Abercrombies lived just past his clinic, so really, it made sense for him to drive Ramone on all but his busiest days.

Hannah, just able to see the words of the book in the dawn light, struggled with a difficult physics passage, reading it three times while she tried not to speculate on what would happen with Athena today.

The elevator bumped, the light came on, and Athena’s voice rang out.

“Hannah, Ramone, you decent?”

“Yeah,” Hannah replied. “But Ramone’s still asleep.”

Athena appeared, a plate of food and a single set of shackles in her hand, and she reached through the bars to give Hannah the plate and a key.

Hannah looked into Athena’s eyes to gauge her mood, wasn’t surprised to see the girl in full but discreet “what-the-hell?” mode, eyebrows raised, eyes wide open, mouth agape.

Hannah just smiled, set the plate on her desk and locked the door between hers and Ramone’s cages.

Ramone stirred, raised his head.

“I was asleep,” he protested.

“Dad’s gonna take you in a few minutes,” Athena said.

“You’re not taking me, *gatinha*?” Ramone asked with disappointment, sitting up and looking up at Athena.

Athena stared at Ramone, puzzled.

“It means, um, cat,” Hannah offered. “In Portuguese. He called Darcy that last night.”

Ramone stepped to his toilet to urinate.

“So it’s what you call short old ladies?” Athena demanded.

“No no no,” Ramone protested from the toilet, and Hannah knew he’d forgotten how sensitive Athena could be. “It’s a term reserved for the most delightful Brazilian girls.”

“Then why did you say it to Darcy?”

“She doesn’t speak Portuguese,” Ramone offered.

“Neither do I. That answer makes no sense.”

Ramone flushed, stepped to the sink, clearly pondering his next words.

“Sometime a girl is a *gatinha*,” he said, water cupped in his hands. “Sometimes I want to turn a girl into a *gatinha*. You are of the first variety. Darcy is the second.”

“Now I’m a variety?” Athena demanded.

The situation was hopeless, Hannah knew, for reasons that Ramone didn’t know and Hannah didn’t want to get into right now.

“Athena,” Hannah said, “do you know when I’m getting out?”

“Later this morning, I think,” Athena said. “Mom’s taking you to lunch with Gramma.”

“Just Gramma?”

“Raven’ll probably be there. And Uncle Bear.”

Ramone, having been rescued by Hannah, stepped to the bars without speaking and allowed Athena to shackle him, and Hannah noticed that he was getting erect and hoped he wouldn’t stay hard for the drive home with Ormek. Ormek probably wouldn’t care, though. Maybe Ramone wouldn’t either.

With one more wide-eyed look at Hannah, Athena escorted Ramone upstairs and Hannah went to her desk, opened her introductory physics book back again and started breakfast, waiting.

She didn’t wait long. She made it through a few bites of egg and just a page or two before the elevator bumped and Athena returned.

“You lied to me,” Athena announced, standing at the bars, staring at Hannah.

“What did I say?” Hannah asked, glancing at her, returning to her breakfast.

“You know what you did,” Athena said. “It wasn’t something you said.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “You mean about last night?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, well, we—”

“Why did you scream?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You did your little fake sex thing, and then I left and it sounded like he was killing you. And then you screamed like you were dying. I think there was something in your mouth, but you screamed. I heard it.”

“Ramone’s shoulder was in my mouth.”

“Did you want it there?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then, why?”

“Sometimes I scream,” Hannah said. “It feels good.”

“You mean, after Ramone beats you into submission? That’s when you scream?”

“Okay,” Hannah said, drawing in her breath and turning in her chair to look at Athena. “If you want to think of it that way. Yes.”

“Why do you let him do it?”

“I don’t let him do it,” Hannah said. “I make him do it.”

“Why?” Athena demanded, and her voice rose, then it broke, and Hannah sensed angst for the first time and guessed that Athena had heard more last night than she could comprehend. She wasn’t really upset about the deception. She was upset about everything else.

“Some things can’t be explained,” Hannah said. “They just happen.”

“Okay,” Athena said, clearly not accepting the answer. “He’s doing the same thing to Sonja now. She told me that. And I bet he learned it from you. So that’s what I’ll tell her.”

For the first time in the conversation, Hannah became alarmed, as she imagined the worst ways this might play out.

It could be a meeting of the families, Hannah in the middle, explaining to the Petrosyans and the Abercrombies why she allowed Ramone to abuse her, what great disturbance in her soul made her scream and bite.

Or, they might call someone else in, a professional in such matters, who would conduct an unpleasant interrogation and, likelier than not, finish it with a set of remedies – more confinement, fewer privileges, a schedule of punishment.

Or the Abercrombies might just call the Petrosyans and tell them Hannah had corrupted their slave, an ill-defined but criminal offense in many states, including Texas. He wouldn't be coming over anymore, they would declare, and Hannah would probably face consequences not just at home, but in the courts as well.

Or, most likely, nothing would come of it. She assumed Ramone was being honest last night. He'd tried something with Sonja and it didn't quite work and that was it, and then Sonja had mentioned it to Athena and Athena had turned that knowledge into something else, for her own purposes.

Hannah, hoping to say something that would redirect Athena before anything bad happened, stood and went to the bars.

"What are we to each other?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" Athena replied.

"Am I just your slave?"

"You're not my slave," Athena said. "You're our family's subject."

"Then what does that make you and me?"

"I don't know," Athena said, laughing nervously.

"Are we sisters?"

"No," Athena said. "Why are you even asking me this?"

"Because how you answer will tell me what I should say next. About what happened."

Athena rolled her eyes, but she gave no indication of wanting the conversation to end. Hannah routinely surprised her, and she seemed to appreciate that.

"Are we friends?" Hannah continued.

"Okay, I know what we are," Athena replied. "Frenemies."

"Frenemies?" Hannah burst out. "Like, sometimes I'm your enemy?"

“Yes,” Athena said.

“An enemy is someone who hurts you,” Hannah protested. “How have I ever hurt you?”

“You hurt me all the time,” Athena blurted. “Your existence hurts me.”

Hannah stared at Athena, wide-eyed, turned, went to her bed and sat. This is not how she expected the conversation to go. Athena’s words stung.

She looked up at Athena. The girl was not about to apologize to a slave – or to anyone, for that matter – but her face betrayed a sense of horror that told Hannah all she needed to know, that the words were spoken carelessly and immediately regretted.

They were honest words, though. Hannah knew that. Words that came from a terrible place. Hannah was, in many senses, superior to Athena – more attractive, smarter, more confident. Just as difficult, perhaps, Hannah was more intriguing. She was the girl people truly wanted to talk to, her life far more interesting than Athena’s. Less free in some ways, more free in others, and therefore more interesting, a fact driven home every time a family friend asked Athena about school briefly and then looked at Hannah and smiled and inquired, in a conspiratorial tone that suggested they both knew a secret, “And how have *you* been, Darling?”

“Can I ask you something?” Hannah asked, standing, moving back to the bars of her cage.

Athena said nothing, but she grimaced, and Hannah knew she was waiting for the cutting question she deserved. Something like “Do you take a bitch pill every day?” or “You’re always on the rag, right? Always?”

But Hannah’s question was of an entirely different tack, something she’d been wondering about, broached now because the risk was reduced while Athena struggled with guilt.

“What do you think of Ramone?” Hannah asked.

“What do you mean?” Athene demanded, narrowing her eyes.

“Just that,” Hannah said.

“Why are you asking me that?”

“I think . . . I think he likes you,” Hannah confided.

As far as Hannah knew, it was true. Ramone liked everyone. Even Darcy. And Athena was at least as attractive as any of the Abercrombie girls. Probably more attractive. With bigger breasts.

“Oh my god,” Athena said. “If you are fucking with me, I will, I will . . . have you sold.”

“Deal,” Hannah said.

“Why are you asking me, then?”

“If you like him . . .” Hannah replied, her voice trailing off.

Athena stared at Hannah, mind clearly laboring on the right response. To Hannah’s surprise, it was entirely practical.

“My door doesn’t lock,” she said quietly.

“Mine does. Use my room.”

Athena’s cheeks flushed and she took a deep breath and sighed it out slowly, and Hannah knew the girl had reached a different place in her mind now, imagining something that had most likely been an impossible fantasy until two minutes ago.

“Do you want me to say something to your mom?” Hannah said.

“I don’t care,” Athena replied, and she just stared at Hannah through the bars, and Hannah knew Athena did care, so much that she had no idea what else to say, or to think.

“Mom said you should take a shower after Darcy checks you,” Athena said at last, her face gone blank. “She wants to leave for lunch at 11.”

“Where are we going?”

“Four Seasons.”

“Are you going?” Hannah asked.

“No, I’ve got some school stuff to take care of, and then me and Anne are gonna hang out.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, one more thing,” Athena said.

“Uh huh?”

“Did anyone threaten to torture you if you didn’t have sex with, um, that boy? Allain’s friend?”

“No,” Hannah said curtly.

“You said they did.”

“I said it to Ramone.”

“Did he believe you?”

“Of course not. He knows what it was.”

“Then what was it?”

“I already told you,” Hannah replied. “It’s a thing I do. With Ramone. It’s just words. And if you want to tell people about it, I can’t stop you.”

“Do you want me to?”

“Of course not.”

“I won’t,” Athena promised. “If you’re not fucking with me about Ramone.”

“I thought our deal was that you were going to sell me.”

“That was an empty threat,” Athena said, pausing. “This isn’t. They’d probably rather sell me than sell you. But I can always talk about you.”

Chapter 20: To the Four Seasons, and Back Home

Hannah read another page before Darcy arrived, pushing a cart. Wishing she could get the interruptions over with, Hannah rose from her desk and, without being asked, slipped her hands into the brackets, watching as Darcy secured them.

Darcy had nothing to say this morning, stepping to Hannah's bed and pulling off the sheets with a mild sigh, no doubt seeing the evidence of Ramone's visit and knowing there was no reason to mention it.

She stepped behind Hannah and Hannah parted her legs and bent, doing her best to cooperate as Darcy slipped the thermometers up her anus and vagina.

"Can you hold it?" Darcy asked.

"Yeah, I'm not that wet," Hannah replied, but she tightened her vagina anyway, gripping the instruments until both beeped and Darcy retrieved them.

"You've cooled off," she observed, entering the figures on the chart outside Hannah's cage. "98.7. On both."

"I finished ovulating almost a week ago," Hannah said.

"Do you have enough tampons?" she asked, looking into the little nightstand beside Hannah's bed.

"For a day or two," Hannah replied. "I'll need some more."

Hannah went to her shower as soon as Darcy left, washing and drying her hair, applying more makeup than usual, then turning to her books to study and wait for Laura.

The elevator bumped a few minutes after 11, and Hannah rose as Laura called out, "Hannah? Hanna? Ready to go?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said.

Laura rounded the corner, Hannah's best little black dress, a van Minsk, on a hanger in one hand, a canvas bag in the other.

"I'd like you to wear this," Laura said.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Laura hung the dress on the cross bar and passed the bag through the bars. Hannah heard it clink and knew it held the rest of her outfit, as well as her restraints. She reached in and pulled out the panties first, putting them on.

“Athena was down here quite awhile this morning,” Laura observed.

“We had a nice chat,” Hannah said.

“Are you talking about the new school year?”

“Not this morning,” Hannah said, pausing to pull her bra up her arms and clasp it in back. “But something else . . . The next time Ramone comes over, I think he and Athena should be able to talk a bit, in private. Ramone is very nice, and it seems like I’m very selfish with his time.”

Laura shut her mouth and stared at Hannah, taking her in, studying her carefully, the way she did, as if she believed that by staring hard enough, she could see into someone’s heart, someone’s soul. Maybe she could. The possibility frightened Hannah.

“And this is something Athena chatted with you about?” Laura asked gently.

“Yes, Ma’am, more or less. It might be something she would like. And maybe they’d like to visit in my room.”

“While you stay down here?” Laura inquired.

“Yes, that would be fine.”

“Maybe we’ll have Raven brought over for you that night.”

“That would be nice. Thank you, Ma’am.”

Laura seemed finished with the topic of her daughter, and Hannah pulled the dress off the hanger and stepped through it.

“How was your visit with Ramone?”

“Very nice.”

“Did he ejaculate inside you?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said, turning so Laura could zip her up. “Twice.”

“And you had an orgasm?”

“Yes, Ma’am. One.”

Hannah looked in the bag, found her plain black pumps, slipped them on, reached back in for her chains and passed them back through the bars.

She held her hands up and Laura cuffed her through the bars, knelt to secure her ankles.

“I understand we’ll be seeing Gramma, Raven and Uncle Bear,” Hannah said, stepping out of her cage and following Laura to the elevator.

“Yes,” Laura agreed. “And we’ll be making arrangements for Raven’s next visit.”

“She’s coming over tonight?” Hannah inquired hopefully.

“No,” Laura said, offering no more information, leading Hannah out to the SUV and helping her climb the steps to the passenger seat.

Laura said nothing more until they’d left the neighborhood, heading downtown on a busy thoroughfare.

Since Allain had come home for the summer a month ago, Hannah had almost no time to talk to Raven, and she had much to share, and to learn no doubt as well. She wanted to talk about Athena, and she’d heard that Uncle Bear had a job, for the first time since his military discharge.

The only place Hannah could speak in true confidence to Raven would be in her cage, and she was eager for their next meeting there. On some night soon, she hoped, Raven would be brought over to make dinner, because she was exceptionally good at it, then she’d dine with the family, then the two girls would be caged downstairs to talk and have sex.

“How are your studies going?” Laura asked.

“Pretty well, I guess,” Hannah said. “I’m learning a lot. I think I’m about to be done with all four classes.”

“We’re all very impressed with your work.”

“Thank you. I’ll need to take some final exams online in a few weeks, in my room.”

“That can be arranged,” Laura said.

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

“I’ll be staying with Gramma tonight,” Laura said, “and taking her to the doctor tomorrow for a procedure.”

“Nothing serious, I hope?”

“No, but she won’t be able to see properly for the rest of the day.”

“Oh, the subepithelial excimer refractive surgery?”

Laura, stopped at a light, turned to stare at Hannah.

“Why would you guess that?” she asked.

“Dr. Petrosyan mentioned it at dinner a few weeks ago,” Hannah said. “Is it a different thing? Maybe I misunderstood.”

“No, I think that’s it, if Ormek mentioned it. But I didn’t remember the name of it. Apparently you do.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “Sometimes I remember medical terms.”

“Of course you do,” Laura said, easing through a left turn.
“Hannah,” she said after a long pause.
“Yes, Ma’am?”
“How does your vagina feel?”
“It’s fine.”
“Not sore after your time with Ramone?”
“Well, it was last night, and a little this morning, but it’s fine now.”
“Very good. Ormek will be meeting with you tonight.”
“Yes, Ma’am. What time?”
“Eleven. Just before bed. The same understanding as in all other instances.”
“Yes, Ma’am, of course, Ma’am.”

Because the grand restaurant on the fourth floor of the Four Seasons met certain security standards, Laura removed Hannah’s chains and checked them at a counter behind the maître d’ stand, and after her chip was scanned, Hannah breezed in, unencumbered, to survey the beautiful expanse – tables on three levels, a swan ice sculpture beside a piano, fresh flowers in wall sconces, the ornately-tiled hotel pool beyond a glass wall, and an army of formally-attired staff, some free, some subject.

It took Hannah just a moment to spot the table where they’d be dining, across the room and one level down. Gramma was already there, flanked by a tall, statuesque black girl named Raven, and Uncle Bear, his long hair down to his shoulders, but still bearing the confident posture of ex-military.

Hannah and Laura navigated the room with studied efficiency, she waving at the friends she knew, Hannah just staring, primarily at the seated subjects, there to be shown off, to remind the world that they were owned, and who their owners were.

Gramma was the first to spot Laura and Hannah, and she stood with an ease that belied her age, Raven immediately leaping up after her, Uncle Bear struggling to rise, as he always did, his left leg below the knee lost to war.

After a round of hugs, everyone took their seats, the newcomers were served mimosas and the small talk commenced.

“Gramma?” Raven piped up in the first lull.
“Yes?”

“May Hannah and I go to the bar?”

“Yes, of course,” Gramma replied. Hannah looked at Laura, and she nodded.

“Just stay where we can see you. We’ll be ordering lunch at noon.”

The vast clock over the door, its face divided into four quadrants for the four seasons of the year, said 11:30. Hannah and Raven had 30 minutes to catch up, semi-privately. Not nearly enough time, Hannah thought.

Raven grabbed Hannah’s hand and practically dragged her up a short flight of stairs to the bar, where a spot along the rail offered a clear view of Gramma’s table and the rest of the room.

Raven, like Hannah, had been put in a black cocktail dress, and Hannah saw in her mind what the eyes of the patrons dining below them saw, two slave girls standing together, drinking and talking and looking and being looked at.

“I’ve missed you,” Raven said as soon as they settled their elbows on the railing, and she leaned over to kiss Hannah on the lips.

Hannah kissed back, smiled. “Laura said she’d bring you over soon,” she said. “You’ll never guess what for.”

“Tell me.”

“We’ll be downstairs while Athena is in my room.”

“Oh, really?” Raven deadpanned, raising one eyebrow, as if considering an interesting point of logic. It was a look that always made Hannah laugh. “And will she be in your room . . . alone?”

“No, she won’t.”

“Oh my god,” Raven hissed. “Ramone?”

“That’s the plan.”

“She asked for it?”

“Long story short, I suggested it, and she didn’t say no.”

“When are you going to ask Laura?”

“Already did.”

Raven raised her glass and Hannah clinked against it.

“You do know how to get things done.”

“It’s not done yet,” Hannah said. “She might end up like Jessica. Twenty cases of cold feet before she takes the plunge.”

Hannah raised the mimosa to her mouth and sipped, reminding herself that she needed to drink slowly. She had classwork to do this

afternoon, and Ormek to entertain tonight.

“What’s in it for you?” Raven asked.

“Well, her eternal gratitude, I guess,” Hannah said.

“If you have to get your cherry popped,” Raven noted, “you couldn’t do better.”

“And then, she’s supposed to keep something secret. She—”

“She won’t do that,” Raven interrupted.

“Probably not,” Hannah said. “But if she talks, then she’ll feel guilty, and I can use that.”

“What’s the secret?”

“She . . .” Hannah began, then faltered, and she looked around to see who was within earshot. “You know how . . . how I have Ramone do certain things . . . to me?”

Raven studied Hannah, took a long sip.

“I do.”

“Athena heard.”

“Oh, god,” Raven choked.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Hannah said. “We talked it through. I think she sort of gets it. Sort of. And if she hadn’t asked me about it, I wouldn’t have had a chance to propose the thing with Ramone. So maybe it’s for the best.”

Hannah heard her words and almost laughed. “Maybe it’s for the best.” It was a common expression at Four Pillars, the religious community where she grew up. You’d say it when you thought maybe God wanted something unexpected to happen. Or maybe Jesus was in charge, arranging a strange outcome for his own mysterious purposes.

No one, to Hannah’s knowledge, at Four Pillars or anywhere else, had ever used those words in the present context.

“Now, why did Uncle Bear get a job?” Hannah asked.

Raven looked at Hannah, and she tried to smile, but there was pain there.

“What have you heard?”

“Just a couple of night ago, over dinner. Laura said he’s working at a boathouse, and he just started.”

“A marina,” Raven corrected. “At Lake Hubbard.”

“What’s he doing?”

“Whatever they tell him to.”

“He’s a millionaire,” Hannah observed. “Why is he—”

“His mother’s a millionaire,” Raven blurted. “He’s got nothing. Nothing . . .”

Raven looked away, sniffed into her mimosa and turned back so Hannah could see the tears in her eyes. One rolled down her cheek and she smiled and wiped it away.

“He doesn’t even have me,” Raven added, and she tightened her mouth and looked at the giant clock.

“What?” Hannah whispered. “What?”

“That’s a story for another day,” Raven said. “Here’s comes our man now.”

Hannah followed Raven’s gaze, saw that Uncle Bear was indeed limping along, beautiful black hair bouncing on his shoulders, his gait almost normal despite the rod and the metal foot concealed by a square-toed boot.

He looked up at them, smiled at Hannah in the way not uncommon among men who had made love to her. She’d been with him three times in the last year, twice under Raven’s supervision, once when it was just the two of them.

He’d lost his leg to a North Korean landmine. He’d killed at least three men, or possibly seven, he’d confessed to Hannah. And he was the gentlest lover she’d ever been with, easing slowly into her, smiling and kissing, cumming quickly and unexpectedly, with a deep, sad groan.

Raven stood back and let Uncle Bear step up to Hannah until their bellies were touching, and he wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her bare shoulder.

“Did Raven tell you what I’m doing?” he asked.

“She said you’re the president of a boathouse,” Hannah replied.

Uncle Bear laughed. He was as big a fan of her impertinence as anyone she knew. He would have made a wonderful slave, she thought.

“Not the president,” he said. “Yet.”

“I’m sure it won’t take long.”

“Did Raven tell you what I came home smelling like Saturday night?”

“No, Sir.”

“Boat fuel,” he said. “Right, Raven?”

“Yes,” Raven agreed with a scowl. “Among other things.”

“Twenty-five to one mix,” he boasted. “I didn’t even notice it until she said something.”

He put his arm out and Raven took it, not just draping her arm around it, but gripping it, embracing it.

Hannah followed behind the couple. Were they lovers? Boyfriend and girlfriend? Husband and wife? She wasn’t sure. But something had changed beyond them, Hannah knew, and it had changed what was between them as well.

Regardless, Uncle Bear seemed pleased with his new job.

Lunch was a pleasant affair, Hannah taking in the food and the atmosphere with equal enthusiasm, marveling as she often tried to do at the wonders of her new life, the luxuries and pleasures that, less than a year ago, were as far away as another planet from her and her destitute mother.

Uncle Bear’s job came up more than once, a topic of cautious pride for both he and Gramma, and a topic of what seemed to be pure annoyance for Raven, who offered Hannah more than one eye-roll as the details were discussed.

Gramma also expressed what seemed to be sincere interest in Hannah’s schooling, listening intently as she rattled off the classes she was taking, duly impressed that she was close to completing her first four courses.

After lunch, Hannah and Raven were scanned, returned to their chains and put in Laura’s SUV for the ride to Gramma’s.

Hannah had always found the home a peculiar dwelling, built as a grand mansion a century ago but little improved since, with small bathrooms and closets, a cramped kitchen, and great rooms for entertaining that were each approximately 10 times bigger than the last apartment Hannah shared with her mother.

Athena was expected to show up at any moment to take Hannah home, so she was left in her dress and full chains, but Uncle Bear asked Raven to strip, and he closed a pair of shackles around her ankles and led the girls upstairs, guiding them as they ascended, their chains just long enough to allow them to move from one step to the next.

Uncle Bear wanted to watch the news, and the girls agreed, Hannah a little more enthusiastically than Raven, so they went to the small upstairs den, Hannah and Raven settling on either side of Uncle Bear. Raven tucked

her feet under herself, held his elbow and lay her head on Bear's shoulder, while Hannah was limited to pressing her arm against his.

She glanced at his face, knew that he was happy at this moment, and was glad to be part of it. Whatever had provoked Raven's tears at Four Seasons seemed to be forgotten now, and Hannah guessed that as long as they were side by side, the fears were held at bay.

War in Africa, a US economy in slight decline that might get worse or improve, and a child's shooting in Texas led the news, and Hannah watched absently while her mind wandered, considering the studies that awaited her this afternoon, and the meeting with Ormek that would happen tonight.

Ormek, Hannah believed, had recovered from whatever had pushed him to inappropriate contact a month before. He didn't seem jealous about anything – certainly not his son – and his dealings with Hannah were professional, normal, needlessly formal. Like always.

Tonight, she would stand for the ritual of being found, of having her breasts felt, her nipples pulled through the bars, and she would groan in pain, or mock pain, then turn and bend at the hips without getting her chair or offering to do so or saying anything else, and Ormek would insert his penis up her vagina, finish in a few minutes and depart for bed.

Perhaps their hands would touch at the bars. Perhaps they would issue alternating grunts of pleasure, each answering the other. But that would be it. Nothing more.

Athena appeared 15 minutes after they turned on the news, watched a few minutes of it and made a show of catching up with Raven and Uncle Bear, but she was distracted by something, and after visiting for the minimum time that would be considered polite, she proposed that she and Hannah depart and Hannah stood, accepting hugs before following Athena down the stairs and to the waiting SUV.

Athena asked her first question before they left Gramma's driveway.

"What did you say to Mom?" she demanded.

"That I shouldn't get all Ramone's time," Hannah replied. "That maybe you should get to visit with him as well. In my bedroom. While I was downstairs."

"What did she say?"

"She just asked if I'd talked about it with you."

“What did you say?”

“I said yes.”

“Okay,” Athena said, taking a left out of Gramma’s neighborhood of old, massive homes.

“Oh,” Hannah said, “and then she said she’d get Raven for me that night.”

“Okay.”

“Has your mom said anything about it?” Hannah asked.

“No,” Athena said. “Dad did.”

“Oh,” Hannah blurted. This was a surprise to her. She imagined Laura would do all the arranging.

“Not about it specifically,” Athena said. “Dad called me at lunch, while I was at Anne’s, and he was just, like, ‘Don’t you think it’s time for you to get on birth control?’ and I said, ‘Sure, whatever, Dad,’ because it’s not like I’m going to have this whole conversation with him about it in front of Anne, and then he says ‘How about an IUD?’ and I said ‘Like Hannah?’ and he said, ‘Yeah, ask her about it. If you want, I can get you an appointment with Dr. Ferdal this week probably.’”

“Dr. Ferdal?” Hannah repeated. “Like, fertile?”

“Yeah, but it’s spelled F-E-R-D-A-L.”

“It’s still sort of funny, though,” Hannah said.

Athena didn’t seem to be in a humorous mood, and Hannah immediately understood, going back in her own mind to less than a year ago, when she lost her virginity. It was one of the most terrifying things she’d ever had to do.

“So, how is it?” Athena asked.

“How is what?”

“Your IUD?”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “It’s fine. I felt it for a few days, but now—”

“Did it hurt?”

“No. It was a little distracting, but not painful. Now I’m used to it.”

“Should I do this?”

“I think it’s better than a pill, or the thing they put in my arm last year,” Hannah said. “No chemicals.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

Hannah looked at Athena, and Athena stared back, trying only to look impatient, but Hannah sensed fear.

“Oh, you mean with Ramone?”

Athena turned her attention to the road.

“Yes,” Hannah said. “Definitely. If you don’t want to be a virgin.”

Athena turned on the radio, quickly changed the station when “*R U Gonna B My First?*” started playing, and the girls said nothing more until they reached their own neighborhood.

“You’re okay with all this?” Hannah asked cautiously.

“You did what I told you to,” Athena said.

“Okay,” Hannah agreed. “But if you have any regrets, you can sell me. Or tell on me. Or both.”

Athena laughed, and Hannah believed neither would ever happen.

Back home, Hannah headed straight for the elevator in the kitchen, allowing Athena to escort her to her cage, lock her in and remove her chains.

“Will I be getting out tonight?” Hannah asked, kicking off her pumps and turning so Athena could unzip her dress.

“Yeah, I’ll be back for you at 6:30. We’re making dinner for Dad tonight.”

“What are we making?”

“Goulash. It’s easy.”

Hannah handed her dress through the bars and unsnapped her bra. Athena bent to pick up her shoes.

“Hey,” Hannah said, hesitantly, letting her bra slide down her arms.

“Yeah?”

“If you change your mind, that’s okay.”

Hannah pushed her panties down, stepped out of them, wadded them up and stuck them inside her bra. Athena took the bundle, tucked it inside Hannah’s dress and wedged everything under her arm.

“I’m not afraid,” she said, scowling.

“I didn’t say you were,” Hannah said. “It’s just . . . a big thing, sort of. Do it for yourself, only. No one else. You never forget your first.”

“Who was your first?”

“A boy named Taylor.”

“Your first boyfriend?”

“No, no, just another slave in the stacks. They brought him to me to break my hymen.”

“Oh, fuck,” Athena said. The particulars of what happened to Hannah before the Petrosyans bought her was rarely discussed, and Hannah suspected each family member had their own reasons for not wanting to know things. But Hannah knew that her early sexual experiences – regardless the circumstances under which they occurred – might likely be of interest to Athena now that she stood on the threshold of her own sexual arrival.

“It’s fine,” Hannah said. “I needed to get it done. And he was sweet. Ramone’s sweet too.”

Chapter 21: Troubling Revelations

Hannah spent the afternoon caged, and glad to be there, with her books and her math problems and some decisions to make about final exams. She was on track for straight A's, and she desperately wanted to finish with them, meaning considerable time wrapping up assignments and preparing for the tests. She didn't want to wait to be able to say she was 12 credit hours closer to a bachelor's degree.

August 8. A Wednesday. She would take her calculus and biology exams that day – her hardest and easiest subjects. Then physics the next day, world history on the 9th.

The University of Texas at Austin recognized their best students, whether slave or free. They called it the Dean's List. It didn't matter what else she was, what she did, what was expected of her, that she wore a collar and had sex with people she'd just met, that there were records in the State of Texas archives that listed her sales price.

If she made the Dean's List, that would be who she was.

Head down in her books for three hours, her mind finally began to wander a little after 6 that evening, to Ormek, and what Laura called the meeting they'd be having.

It had been more than a month since they'd had sex, and she thought about how it would feel, how long it would take, and she felt herself getting mildly aroused, the space between her legs warming, growing more sensitive.

She imagined masturbating while she indulged an innocent fantasy – only a fantasy – where Ormek came to her, spoke to her, kissed her, hugged her.

Loved her.

He might bring the keys to her cage and lie with her in her bed. Or perhaps he'd sneak her upstairs, to the bigger bed in her own bedroom, where she entertained free people. Or he could take her to his own bed, the bed he shared with Laura.

Hannah looked up at the windows and the deepening blue sky of early evening, and silently cursed herself for being a fool. If Athena heard them, saw them, suspected, she would find some way to let Laura know, and Laura would not forgive.

Hannah did her best to return to her work. She'd saved biology for last today, and she raced through a complicated section on the biology of flight, losing all track of time until Athena called out "Hannah, you decent?"

Hannah rose from her desk, still stretching and yawning as Athena rounded the corner with a pair of blue shackles.

"I got you a present," Athena said, holding the restraints up by one cuff, swinging them back and forth.

"That's very nice of you," Hannah said with a hint of sarcasm. Some slaves were never chained at home. Some were allowed occasional freedom. But Hannah was always chained outside her cage in the Petrosyan household. It was one of Laura's rules, and Laura did not apparently trust Hannah yet, almost a year after they'd bought her.

"They're supposed to be more comfortable," Athena said.

Hannah stepped to the bars, watching as Athena knelt to secure her ankles.

"What do you think?" Athena asked, unlocking Hannah's door.

"They're definitely lighter," Hannah said. "Where did you get them?"

"That shop on 50. I've pointed it out to you before."

"Oh, subject something?" Hannah ventured, following Athena to the elevator. "Like, Subject Supply?"

"Yeah," Athena said.

"Why did you buy these?"

"I was there with Anne, 'cuz she needed some stuff for their girl, and I saw these, and I texted Dad, and he said I could get them, so I used his card."

Judging from the stride they allowed, Hannah guessed that the chain between the cuffs was about the same length as her previous restraints, permitting her to walk briskly but not to run. Overall, it didn't seem any better or worse than what she'd been wearing.

"They're supposed to fit around your Achilles tendon," Athena said, stepping into the elevator Hannah shuffling in behind her. "It actually said that on the box. Something like 'Conforms to the Achilles tendon.'"

Hannah looked down.

"I think you put them on backwards."

"No I didn't," Athena insisted.

“Look,” Hannah said, crouching to touch the left cuff. “It curves out in the front, and it doesn’t need to. That’s where my tendon is supposed to go.”

“Whatever,” Athena said, fishing around in her shorts pocket, pulling out a pair of small silver keys fastened to a single ring. “Hold still.”

The elevator door opened but Hannah held her place, allowing Athena to open the left cuff, remove it and return it to her ankle in the proper direction. She repeated the process with Hannah’s right cuff, stood and put her keys away.

“Happy now?” Athena asked.

“Just delighted,” Hannah said, following Athena into the kitchen. They were actually a marked improvement over the last pair of shackles, Hannah admitted to herself, but she wasn’t about to admit that to Athena.

“They cost 65 dollars,” Athena said, opening the refrigerator to study its contents. “Regular ones were, like, 20 to 40.”

“How many choices were there?” Hannah asked, deciding to humor Athena, who probably wasn’t above taking the chains back to the store if Hannah was completely dismissive.

“There was all kinds of stuff,” Athena said. “I could take you there, if you wanted to see—”

“No,” Hannah said.

“No?” Athena echoed.

“No. I don’t want to go there.”

Athena grabbed an armload of ingredients – chicken, carrots, onion, celery – set them on the counter and turned to look at Hannah.

Hannah stared back.

“Why not?” Athena demanded.

“I just don’t,” Hannah said.

“Tell me why.”

“Do they sell . . . things for, um, punishment there?”

“Yeah. They have a whole section. That’s what Anne needed, so we —”

“I never want to go there,” Hannah blurted.

Athena shut her mouth and studied Hannah’s face.

“Oh, god,” she said, with no sympathy in her eyes or tone, and she bit her lip in what Hannah interpreted as a mix of annoyance and guilt.

“Because of what they did to you?”

“Yeah.”

“Like, a year ago?”

“Less than that.”

“Get over it,” Athena said curtly, reminding Hannah of the jarring gulf between herself and the girl who was almost a friend, almost a sister, but an owner as well. Frenemy was probably not a terrible term.

Hannah chopped while Athena managed and directed and put things in a pot.

Ormek arrived before seven, kissed his daughter’s head and nodded warmly to Hannah, taking all of her in, from her eyes to her breasts to the golden hair that covered her mound. Was he just greeting his subject, or was there more to it? Hannah wasn’t sure.

“Dad, look at what I bought her.”

Ormek stepped over and Hannah moved away from the counter, planting her feet a few inches apart and holding still, feeling ridiculous. This wasn’t the kind of thing one should show off, she thought. New pumps, new sandals, new flats, yes. New chains, no.

“Are they an improvement, Hannah?” Ormek asked.

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah replied. “Thank you.”

It was just the three of them at dinner tonight, with Ormek praising the meal and opening a half bottle of wine, asking both girls about their day, about Athena’s visit with Anne and Hannah’s lunch at Four Seasons.

More than once, she felt his eyes lingering on her, longer than necessary, longer than advisable. Surely Athena would start to suspect something, Hannah thought with an ill-defined fear. Or maybe she already knew. Or maybe this was a blind spot for Athena. Socially skilled, intuitive, as culturally fluent as anyone her age, Athena might have chosen to leave shut the door into her father’s sexuality.

But then, other things were going on with Athena, Hannah reminded herself.

Athena, working through Hannah, had reached a milestone today, announcing to her parents that she wished to lose her virginity to a slave.

More significantly, Laura and Ormek had agreed. In a sense, Athena had already lost a portion of her virginity today, Hannah thought, that aspect of virginity in which sex was not under consideration, not contemplated, not planned.

The question of birth control didn't come up over dinner, but while the three of them were cleaning up after the meal, Hannah saw Ormek slip Athena a business card. "Call his office tomorrow," he said quietly.

"Thanks," Athena said, obviously not believing any of this needed to be kept private. "Can Hannah come up to my room?"

"For the night?" Ormek replied. It was a ridiculous question. Hannah never spent the night in Athena's room.

"No, just for a while," Athena said, setting the last pan in the dish drain.

"She needs . . ." Ormek began before he thought better of his words. "Her mother wants her back downstairs tonight by 10:30."

"God, she's not going to be with me that long," Athena retorted. "Like, an hour or something."

"Fine."

"Can I get a book?" Hannah asked, suspecting she wouldn't be reading much of it in Athena's room.

"Yeah, just be back in my room in, like, 10 minutes."

Hannah took her time, something she always did when allowed to roam the house on her own. Although she was chained, it was still a relative freedom, and she enjoyed it.

Knowing that Athena would probably be playing music, Hannah got her easiest book, on biology, and she smoothed her sheets and straightened her cage, used the toilet, and slowly made her way back to the elevator, hitting the button for the second floor and the bedrooms there.

Athena had her door open, so Hannah passed through it. Light rock, moody and emotional, was playing, and Athena was nodding her head to it, studying a fashion magazine.

"Close the door," she said, not looking up. Hannah pushed it shut and moved to the bed, taking her place next to Athena, propping up pillows, crossing her ankles and tucking her chain under her feet, her book open in her lap.

"That thing you do with Ramone," Athena began quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Did you just tell him to do it, and he did?"

"No," Hannah replied. "It sort of, um, developed."

"When?"

"I guess from the start," Hannah said. "The first time we met, he—"

“You mean at the mall, when we bought you all your clothes?”

“Yeah, there. We were in the elevator. With just some shop person, holding our leashes. Ramone asked me what I wanted him to do to me. And I said . . . I said, ‘everything.’ It just came out. And then, it kind of built up. Like, a little more, now and then. More since January.”

“So you told him to beat you?”

“He doesn’t beat me.”

“I heard a slap last night.”

“One,” Hannah said. “Yeah. I told him it was okay to do, as long as he didn’t leave any marks.”

“What else did he do, then?” Athena demanded. “You sounded like you thought he was going to kill you.”

“Why do you want to know?” Hannah asked.

“I’m just curious. You have to tell me.”

“I have to tell you because your family owns me, or because we’re friends?”

Athena pondered the question.

“Okay, then, we’re friends,” she said. “Tell me because we’re friends. And it’s just between you and me. I won’t tell anyone else. I swear.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed, not trusting Athena but not having a clear reason to disobey her. “He just grabbed my hair, and kind of grabbed my leg and pushed it up, and then . . . then he, um . . .”

“He fucked you,” Athena said.

“Well, yeah.”

“Is he going to be sad if I don’t let him do all that to me?”

Hannah laughed and put her hand on Athena’s arm, lightly, just a touch, before she removed it.

“Oh, god, no, please don’t ask him to do that, it’ll—”

“Why not?” Athena blurted, anger in her eyes. “You’re the only one who gets to—”

“That’s not it,” Hannah said. “That’s not it. It’s just that, you and Ramone shouldn’t start with something like that. If you keep doing it with him, things will evolve. But they’ll be your things. That’s what he wants. He’s good. He knows what he’s doing. Just start simply, and then you can go anywhere from there.”

Athena scowled, slipped off her bed, grabbed a sheet from her desk and handed it to Hannah.

“That’s my class schedule,” she announced. “I’m gonna keep you busy.”

“You’re taking calculus,” Hannah observed. “And AP history.”
I’m going to the University of Texas,” Athena said.

“You mean, not Dallas Community first?”

“No, straight to the big school. I need to get away from home.”

“When did you decide that?”

“I’ve been thinking about it off and on for weeks. But when I got my schedule, that settled it. They’re letting me do all college prep.”

“I think you’ll love it,” Hannah offered.

The girls talked about school, and the fact Athena had no idea what she wanted to major in or do with her life, until after 10, and then Athena slid off the bed and went to the door, her signal that it was time to go downstairs.

Hannah followed, passing with Athena through the darkened hall, past the door that led to the bedroom of Laura and Ormek. It was shut, but there was light coming from underneath, and Hannah wondered if he were waiting for her, thinking about her, or if his mind were elsewhere. She had no doubt, however, that he would be there at 11, and her heart raced because she had no idea what was going to happen, and the lack of uncertainty was, suddenly and surprisingly, terrifying to her. She could hear his voice, feel him, smell him, the sensations of Ormek so palpable she half-believed he had joined her and Athena in the elevator.

“You know why I haven’t said thanks yet?” Athena said, pulling Hannah back to reality.

“Uh, ‘cause you have nothing to thank me for?”

“No, I do,” Athena said. “You said something to Mom, and I never could have done that.”

“Why not?” Hannah asked.

“I didn’t know what they’d say. Like ‘Athena, you’re not a whore,’ or ‘you’re too young’ or whatever. I mean, with Allain, as soon as he turned 16, they were calling in favors for him, to—”

“What?”

Athena looked at Hannah. “What do you mean ‘what?’”

“Calling in favors?” Hannah echoed. “What does that mean?”

“You know,” Athena said. “Friends that owned a girl, Mom or Dad would call, and ask to borrow her, and—”

“When he was 16?”

“Yeah,” Athena said. “Oh my god, you don’t know about this?”

The elevator door opened but Athena continued to lean against the wall, staring at Hannah, clearly enjoying the unexpected turn the conversation had taken.

“I don’t ask Allain about what he’s done,” Hannah said.

“You should,” Athena asserted. “He’d probably tell you.”

“I don’t want to know,” Hannah said.

“You’re jealous?” Athena said. “Seriously?”

Hannah just stared back, saying nothing. The elevator door shut.

“So with Ramone, you’re not jealous, right? Ramone and me?”

“No, I’m not jealous,” Hannah said.

“But with my brother, you are.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. She wasn’t sure it was jealousy, at least not as the term was defined. But there was discomfort there, as Hannah’s imagination filled in the images of a 16-year-old Allain, making his way among the slave girls of Dallas, loaned to him by their owners, having sex with them, sweating and groaning over them, cumming into them, making them cum. On command.

Did he love them? Did he cry over them? Was Hannah just the latest in a long string of slave girls with whom he felt nothing other than the temporary relief of orgasm?

No, Hannah told herself. It wasn’t that simple. None of this was.

She was the Petrosyan’s property, and she saw that strange fact as the most constant, the most certain of things. The rest – the sex, the jealousy, the emotions, the late-night couplings, the friends who needed a favor – all that was inherently unstable, a vortex of doubt and animal passion and human frailty.

Hannah pushed the button to open the door, wanting this moment with Athena to end. She needed to get caged, get her shackles off and prepare for Ormek. And right now, getting her vagina ready was going to take more effort than usual. She was feeling nothing, for anyone. Athena’s casual revelation had gotten under her skin, partly because the fact itself bothered her, and partly because Athena knew it bothered her, and was glad it bothered her.

Adding to the annoyance of Athena's words was her presence. What if she wanted to keep chatting? What if she was still here, standing at Hannah's bars, when Ormek showed up, nude as he always was, penis out like a weapon, there to be used on Hannah?

Athena would know immediately why he had come. Beyond that, Hannah couldn't guess at her reaction, other than that she would probably blame Hannah, and that would be bad. Would Athena be permanently scarred? That would be bad too.

Hannah stepped into her cage and pulled the door closed, and Athena obliged her by locking it.

"Are they so comfortable you want to sleep in them?" Athena asked, looking ironically down at Hannah's shackles.

"No, I want them off," Hannah said.

"Seriously," Athena said, pulling the keys out of her pocket. "Better or worse?"

"Better," Hannah admitted. "And thanks."

Athena opened the cuffs, pulled the chain through the bars and draped it over one of the pegs under the window.

Hannah went to the toilet, needing to get things done whether Athena was there or not.

Athena returned, leaning against the bars to watch Hannah urinate.

Hannah looked up at her, raised one black eyebrow at her.

"Whatcha wanna do tomorrow?" she asked.

"Whatever I'm told," Hannah replied.

"What if it were up to you?"

Hannah wiped, flushed, stood and thought.

"I want to visit Uncle Bear, at his new job," she said.

"What?" Athena said. "You mean, at that dock place?"

"Yes," Hannah said. "It's a marina."

"Oh my god, that would suck."

"You asked," Hannah said.

"Why there?" Athena asked.

"I think it's interesting. And Uncle Bear seems happy about it."

"You know why he's working there, right?"

"No."

"Gramma says if he doesn't get a job and start paying his way, she won't leave Raven to him."

Hannah just stared. She understood each of the words Athena had spoken, but their meanings together made no sense.

“You don’t know what I’m talking about?”

“No,” Hannah said.

“Okay, follow me here,” Athena said, speaking slowly, as if talking to a child. “Gramma’s health isn’t that great. She —”

“You mean, her eye condition?”

“No. Her heart. It could give out at any moment. And there’s some other stuff going on. She’s, like, 80. And right now, in her will, if she dies, Raven goes to this church group. Like, a donation, ‘cuz Gramma doesn’t think Uncle Bear can take care of her properly. She just told Uncle Bear about it, and —”

“Church group?” Hannah interrupted.

“Yeah, it’s called, um, National Baptist something something, and they run homes and schools and hospitals, and Raven would go there, and help there.”

“But Uncle Bear . . .” Hannah said, not sure how to finish the sentence.

“They could send her anywhere, and he couldn’t follow her. Or even if she stays in Dallas, they’re not going to let him see her, probably.”

Hannah understood Raven’s tears now, and her distress, and her fear. This was a terrible thing.

“At least, that’s what Gramma told Uncle Bear. Basically, get off your ass, or she —”

“But he seems happy about it,” Hannah said.

“I think it’s all an act.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think Gramma really has that in her will, and I don’t think Uncle Bear thinks she does. But he’s just showing her he can do it, and he’s getting her off his case. Really, it was the easiest thing in the world. He’s a disabled veteran, he knows everyone, it probably took him three phone calls to get that job. And then, if Gramma dies, it’s a normal will. Mom gets half, Uncle Bear gets half, and Raven goes to Uncle Bear. And he’ll set her free on day one, and marry her on day two.”

Hannah felt her throat closing, the tears welling up, and wasn’t sure why. She saw Uncle Bear and Raven standing together, Raven in white, Uncle Bear in his best suit, being united before an altar, of some kind.

“Not on day two though, literally,” Athena continued. “Raven wants a big wedding, so it would take months to plan. And the court would be, on Bear’s side, veterans like him, and on Raven’s side, all slave girls, and probably you—”

Hannah raised her hand to her mouth, turned to her sink, grabbed a tissue and raised it to her eyes.

Athena studied her.

“You’re still jealous about what I told you?” she asked.

Hannah tried to speak, couldn’t make any words come out, nodded and pressed the tissue to her eyes, allowing a single groan to escape her lips before she shut down on it.

It wasn’t Allain. At least, not completely. It was everything. Hannah didn’t fully understand it. She certainly couldn’t explain it to Athena. And even if she could, she needed Athena to leave.

“I’ll be okay,” Hannah choked. “It’s just . . . been kind of a long day.”

“Hey,” Athena said. “C’mere.”

Hannah sniffed, stepped to the bars. Athena reached through, hugged her and kissed her on the cheek.

Hannah smiled, Athena’s random moments of affection impossible to predict or to fully understand.

“See you in the morning,” Athena said, stepping away, turning off the light, plunging Hannah’s world into darkness.

“Good night.”

Chapter 22: Ormek's Offer

Physically, mentally, emotionally, Hannah was not remotely prepared to entertain Ormek.

First, she needed to cry, for reasons that remained unknown. The little red letters on the clock radio outside her cage said 10:45. She had time.

She sat on her bed and wept, quietly, face in her hands, tears across her palms, visions of teenaged Allain having sex with slave girls, alternating with Uncle Bear, limping up the aisle alone, then limping back with Raven on his arm, a white dress against her brown skin, a contrast that, at that moment, was the most beautiful thing she could imagine.

She didn't have Ramone's shoulder to scream into, so she raised her fist to her mouth and cried out, a long, muffled "uuuaahhhhgggg!" She panted, groaned, sobbed briefly, and then told herself she was done, that there was no more time for this, wiping her eyes impatiently, pressing her back against the wall, focusing on the cool surface and how it felt on her shoulder blades, willing herself to return to normalcy.

She needed to wet herself. If she could get her lubrication going, nothing else mattered. Ormek wouldn't know of her torment, of the twisted braids of romance and angst and heartbreak writhing within her heart.

She raised her knees, spread her thighs and grabbed her vulva with her right hand. Tonight, it was simply a piece of equipment, a tool to be operated, and she approached it that way, sliding her two fingers on either side of her slit, opening herself and tapping her hole, circling her clitoris, doing all the things that under normal circumstances brought her organ into service.

Nothing was happening. She might as well be touching her shin, she thought. She was on the verge of panic. What would Ormek think if, after more than a month apart, the vagina that had been bought for more than a million dollars didn't work for him? Would he think she'd lost interest? That his son was all she wanted? That Ramone had completely satisfied her?

Would he tell Laura that Hannah was no longer able to service him? Would Athena break her promise, claiming that Hannah preferred to be abused by her lover?

Hannah looked at the clock. 10:57. In less than five minutes, Hannah might take the first step in losing her family's favor. Ultimately, they might sell her. Or give her away. To that church place, in place of Raven.

She continued to work at her opening, panic consuming her responsiveness before it could turn into anything else.

The elevator bumped. It was 11:05. Ormek was late.

The light came on. The light wasn't supposed to come on. Was it Athena?

Hannah stood, stepped to the bars, almost crying out with surprise when Ormek appeared, naked as always, his penis sticking straight out, head flared, shaft thick and almost purple with arousal.

"Sir?" Hannah said. She wasn't supposed to speak, but the light wasn't supposed to be on. They weren't supposed to look at each other, but Ormek was studying her eyes.

He reached up, through the bars, and Hannah allowed him to stroke her cheek.

"A tear," he observed.

"Yes, Sir," Hannah said, and then she spoke again, giving words to a ridiculous lie, among the most blatantly false lies she had ever told. "I was afraid you wouldn't come."

Why had she said that? Why?

Ormek looked at the clock, turned back to her, and she knew by his expression that she had said exactly the thing he most wanted to hear, and that he never should have heard.

He reached down and Hannah spread her legs, feet well apart, allowing him to touch her lips, to spread her opening and stroke her, to confirm that she had so far failed to lubricate herself.

"I was too upset to prepare, Sir," Hannah said, doubling her lies. "I'm very sorry. Perhaps I could prepare you instead?"

Ormek grunted, quietly, affirmatively, most likely not understanding her proposal but willing to allow her to do anything at this point.

She grabbed the bars and lowered herself, Ormek's hand releasing her genitals, drifting against her belly, her breasts, touching her jaw as she knelt. She looked up at him one more time, turned her attention to his penis, opened her mouth wide and devoured him. She took in his tip, his head, the

thickest part of his shaft, stroking the underside of his member with her tongue while Ormek whined, penis spasming with involuntary joy.

She could make him cum like this, she knew, coax the hot semen out of his body and try not to choke as it shot against her tongue, her teeth, the back of her throat.

And then, her own organ rendered the matter moot, roaring to life so suddenly it hurt, flooding her slot with her smooth nectar.

She pulled her mouth slowly away from his penis and stood, staring into Ormek's eyes again, then she smiled and put her arms through the bars and kissed him, deep and hard, sucking on his lips and tongue the way she had just attended his penis, the rules being smashed one by one now. She pressed in, dropping her arms to his lower back, pulling him toward her, forcing his rod against her mound, as if it were a spear and she wished only to die.

Hannah pulled her mouth away and opened it to speak, but she needed the right words. Her enflamed mind searched for something perfect, something exquisitely arousing, something obscene.

Briefly, she considered professing her love, or demanding to be fucked, but in the end, she chose delicious formality.

"I believe I've gotten your penis wet enough, Sir," she said, in the tone she would use to let him know dinner was ready, watching his eyes as they flickered and half-closed. "I think I can accept it comfortably now."

Ormek bent his knees to position his penis properly, and she lowered her arms, opened her vaginal doors with one hand and guided Ormek's tip inside her chamber with the other, grunting with discomfort because the angle was difficult and her sex was already burdened with too many sensations.

Ormek thrust once, twice, three times, driving his cock deeper into Hannah's body with each attack until, with his fourth insertion, almost all of his rod was up her, and then he cried out, dangerously loud, loud enough to be heard in the kitchen, maybe loud enough to be heard on the third floor, and he made short stabs within her while his sex swelled and shook and spat inside her, filling her hole with cream.

By his third squirt, Hannah had joined him in climax, groaning out with her lungs, gripping him with her sheath, united with him in an impossible pleasure, two organs in perfect sync.

They fought together like that, against everything else in the world, for an entire age of existence, kissing as the pleasure ebbed, as Ormek's penis softened and dropped out of Hannah's vagina, followed by a long string of semen and lubricant that swung briefly from Hannah's left lip before it dropped loose and spun away, touching and immediately clinging to the inside of her right thigh.

The lovers stood there, panting, and then Ormek spoke, contributing more layers to the farce that this had become.

"I'm sorry," he said, while the aftershocks of climax still echoed through Hannah's mind and body.

She leaned back, summoned a weak smile and a puzzled expression.

"For what?"

"For how . . . we keep you."

For how we keep you.

Hannah played the words over in her mind.

For how we keep you.

For how we keep you?

Finally, after a year of chains and cages and the occasional punishment, he was sorry? Sorry because doing that to a girl was always wrong, or sorry because he'd finally made love to her the way people were supposed to make love, and he at last saw Hannah as something almost human?

In that moment, the magic of what they had just shared evaporated, and Hannah was thrown for a loss, again today, struggling anew to make sense of the senseless.

She wanted to go to bed, and she wanted Ormek gone, but he just stood there, smiling at her in a dazed way, as if his inane words were the gift she had longed for all her life.

No, Hannah thought, that's not what you have done, Ormek. You have simply exposed another fracture in a wall that, broken and ugly as it is, continues to serve its primary purpose – to keep me captive. No words tonight, and nothing that has happened between us, can change that.

Hannah couldn't explain her feelings to Ormek. He wouldn't understand, even if she could find the words to express herself perfectly. So she just smiled, stupidly, as if his confession meant something.

"Thank you, Sir," Hannah said. "I understand that it's necessary."

“Would you like us to chain you less?”

“That will need to be your wife’s decision,” Hannah said, hardening her expression, trying to communicate to Ormek without saying as much that this was dangerous territory, that if Ormek began to advocate for her, they were both at risk – Hannah more so than Ormek.

Ormek’s expression fell. He seemed to understand now as well that the magic was finished, not to be restored, and no words could reclaim it. Not tonight. Perhaps not ever.

For a long, pregnant moment, he paused, stared, seemed about to say something else, and then it was over. He turned, the room went dark, the elevator bumped, and Ormek was gone.

Chapter 23: A Trip to a Boathouse

Hannah could smell Lake Hubbard before she could see it, a heavy pungency – mud and loam and old leaves and the scent of something animal – filtering through the trees along the drive that led to the marina.

Athena was studying her phone, ostensibly to find her way but – contrary to everything her parents had ever told her about driving – she was texting with Jessica and Anne as well.

“Turn here,” Raven said, chained in the passenger seat.

“My phone isn’t saying to turn yet,” Athena said.

“You have no idea what your phone is saying,” Raven observed.

“You’re texting. And that’s the sign right there.”

Athena sighed, set her phone between her legs and yielded to the obvious, turning left at the faded wooden sign that said, “Hubbard Lake Marina and Drydock” and beneath it, in smaller letters “Rentals, Service, Restaurant.”

“Restaurant,” Athena said, hitting the gas. “That’s the last thing on the list. You sure you want lunch here?”

“Where else would we go?” Hannah asked. The trip was her idea, and she was feeling defensive. She wanted to see a marina, because she’d never been to one before. She wanted to have lunch on the water, which the marina website suggested was possible. And she wanted Raven to see Uncle Bear at his job, to encourage him, to get Raven used to the idea that he would work, to help them move forward together to a new place.

Would Gramma really give Raven away if she died? Hannah wasn’t sure, but she was going to do everything in her power to make sure it didn’t happen.

“Oh, God, what a dump!” Athena exclaimed, pulling into a parking lot of asphalt, dirt, and white sand, some spaces marked with old white lines, some marked with railroad ties, laid in long, semi-straight lines, and some simply agreed to by convention, cars and trucks and SUV’s, many towing empty boat trailers, set side-by-side in ad hoc rows.

The marina’s structures were erected with the same sense of order as its parking lot, Hannah thought. Her eyes went first to a surprisingly large building of gray aluminum siding to the right, half over the water, half on land, “Drydock/Service” and various logos stenciled on the side, with a

vast door in the front through which Hannah could see boats and parts of boats and parts of boat engines on cables and shelves.

A half-dozen smaller buildings, sheds of aluminum siding, shops and huts of cinder block and wood and brick, looked to Hannah as if a giant had tossed them all in one great handful, and wherever they landed was where they remained.

“There’s Bear’s car,” Raven said, pointing toward his little red Ford, parked between two pickups. It was all Gramma let him have, Hannah had been told.

Directly ahead, the best building of the property stood at the water’s edge, an elaborate, white, three-story structure that – other than the fact it needed a paint job – reminded Hannah of the great house at the country club where Ormek golfed and, often enough, the family dined. It featured a front section of windows, solid wings on either side, and a cupola with a sailboat on top, pointing toward the source of the wind.

“Doesn’t Uncle Bear work there?” Hannah asked hopefully, imagining him in a windowed office on one of the upper floors.

“He works all over,” Raven said.

“Did he say anything about parking?” Athena asked, ramping up the exasperation in her voice.

“Wherever you can,” Hannah suggested. “Unless you see a sign that says, um, something like, ‘Uncle Bear’s people.’”

“Oh, yeah, like they’d really put that there,” Athena said, backing up to maneuver into a space between two boat trailers.

“Hannah was joking,” Raven said.

“Uh, I know,” Athena said. “I was joking too.”

“When?” Hannah asked.

“When I said, ‘They’d really put that sign there,’” Athena said.

“I thought you were being serious,” Hannah said from the back seat. Like Raven, she had been chained by the wrists and ankles and was in a bikini, her black French-cut. “But then, I thought Raven was joking. And I was sort of being serious, and sort of joking.”

“I was being serious,” Raven said.

Athena put the SUV in reverse and turned back to squeeze the SUV between two small cars, watching where she was going and scowling at Hannah in equal measure, her patience worn thin by, Hannah guessed, multiple issues: the long drive to an unfamiliar destination, the spontaneous

game of logic Hannah and Raven were playing at her expense, and her anxiety over being with Ramone for the first time that evening.

Athena put the car in park, turned off the engine and, instead of exiting the car, picked up her phone and tapped out a message.

“Uh, we’re five minutes late,” Raven said with a hint of impatience, reaching for her door handle.

“I’m letting Uncle Bear know we’re here,” Athena said.

Athena’s phone vibrated. She sighed and tapped out another message, quickly, impatiently. Hannah’s heart sank, certain that Uncle Bear had called off lunch, and their visit, and Athena was about to hit the SUV’s ignition and take them back home.

Athena’s phone vibrated again, she tapped and set the phone down.

“Okay,” Athena said. “He can’t believe we actually showed up. So, some rules: He’s going to be Gerald, or Jerry. Don’t call him Uncle Bear.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed.

“No kissing.”

“Okay.”

“And, your chains have to come off.”

“Well, that’s convenient,” Raven said.

Athena slid out of the SUV, rounded the front, opened Raven’s door. Raven turned, allowing Athena to open her cuffs. Athena wadded up the chain and threw it on the floor at Raven’s feet, opened Hannah’s door and repeated the process.

Both girls descended from the vehicle, setting free feet onto the ground. Hannah, delighted over an unexpected freedom, studied the nice building, half-expecting Uncle Bear to appear at the front and wave them in.

But Athena began picking her way to the big, non-descript gray building to the right. “He said we’ll find him over here,” she said.

They spotted Uncle Bear just inside the cavernous entranceway, regarding a boat engine suspended at eye level while a woman used what looked like two screwdrivers to manipulate something within the guts of the machine.

Her face and hands were smeared with black grease, and Uncle Bear’s were little cleaner, but he turned and smiled as the girls approached, hugging each and introducing his colleague as Rhonda, a stocky woman in her 30’s who seemed genuinely glad to meet them.

Greetings complete, he directed them to the restaurant in the big building, where they should ask for a table beside the water.

“I’ll be with you in less than 10,” he said.

It was more than 15 minutes before Uncle Bear joined them, but his delay gave Hannah time to soak in the life before her, the other diners on the deck – some slave, most free – and beyond the deck’s white railing, the boats, big and small, each in its own slip, and further on, the boats that had been unmoored, plying the lake, some with skiers behind them, some merely sitting, pondering. And then, far, far away, the other side of the lake, gray-green in the hazy distance.

This was a place where rich and poor met in communion, she realized, beautiful ships with windows just above the waterline where, Hannah knew, there must be bedrooms and living rooms, docked beside dinghies of rough-hewn planking, faded paint and grease-smeared engines, not fit for even a single person to lie down and rest.

Lunch was surprisingly good, fish and shrimp, crab and oysters that everyone shared. And while they ate, Uncle Bear spoke of his job, the mundane details, the people he had met, the husband and child of his co-worker, Rhonda, who had a mechanical knack but a surprisingly soft side as well, mostly involving flowers she grew in her garden and brought to work in pairs.

Raven was more engaged than Hannah thought she’d be, asking questions about Uncle Bear’s colleagues and responsibilities, expressing guarded acceptance of his working conditions.

Hannah had questions but held back, allowing Raven and Uncle Bear to talk, while she studied the skipping boats and the roiling sky, gray with clouds that, for now, were keeping their rain to themselves.

Hannah realized that, at this moment, she was completely happy, and it surprised her, and then she decided she shouldn’t be surprised.

Athena stayed busy texting, and Hannah guessed she was talking to one of the Abercrombie girls about picking up Ramone later in the day.

The meal was almost done when a woman appeared, put her hand on Uncle Bear’s shoulder and turned to Raven.

“And this must be your gal,” she said, smiling, offering her hand. “I’m Chelise. Can you come with me?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Raven replied, looking puzzled but standing obediently.

Uncle Bear waved dismissively. "A little paperwork," he explained. "Does she need an escort?"

"She does," Chelise confirmed.

"Athena, you mind?" Uncle Bear inquired. "I wanna keep enjoying my break."

Athena stood without saying yes or no, continued tapping on her phone as she followed Chelise and Raven into the building.

"Life insurance," Uncle Bear said, winking at Hannah.

"Life insurance?" Hannah echoed.

"I got a policy through work," he said. "If I die, Raven gets the money."

"How much?" Hannah asked. She wouldn't have asked anyone else that question, but Uncle Bear was different.

"Fifty thousand for starters. And it'll grow a little through the years, if I stay here."

"That's nice," Hannah said.

"So you're all set to turn Athena into a woman tonight?"

"No," Hannah said. "It won't make her a woman. But maybe it'll make her a little easier to deal with."

Uncle Bear stared at Hannah, open-mouthed, and then he laughed and banged his hand so hard on the table the other diners started.

"I need to tell you something," he said, serious again, leaning toward her and lowering his voice.

"Like what?" Hannah inquired.

"What you've been told about me and my job and Raven."

"Yeah?"

"Gramma isn't going to give Raven away when she dies. She's going to me no matter what."

"Then what's all this for?" Hannah asked, gesturing around her.

"It's the only way Raven would let me work," Uncle Bear confided.

Hannah blinked. The words didn't make sense.

"She runs the house," he said. "You know that, right? Raven's in charge."

"That's news to me," Hannah said.

"More and more. Momma has offered her the reins, and she taken 'em. We do what she says, and she gives us the best she's got. Just the best she's got."

Uncle Bear's eyes grew watery, and he lowered his head.

Hannah was working through Uncle Bear's revelations one by one, but his emotions had her stymied. None of this was expected.

"I'm tired of drawing disability," he continued. He raised his leg and dropped it, his artificial foot making a hollow sound on the deck. "There's a lot of work you can do with a blank leg. But Raven wouldn't stand for it. So Gramma made her threat, and Raven refused to speak to her for a week, and then they reconciled, and now here I am."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I know what Athena told you, and I know it upset you, so I wanted to get the truth out, and I trust you won't say anything."

"Raven's my best friend."

"Then keep this to yourself."

"Yes, Sir."

For a long, quiet moment, Hannah and Uncle Bear just stared at each other, and Hannah felt she could say anything to him, ask anything of him. But the words came out before she was able to fully consider them.

"You had Raven punished once," Hannah said.

"More than once," Uncle Bear said, with a chuckle.

"No, I mean formally punished. You brought her to that room, at our house. You had a person come do it. While Laura – while your sister – watched."

She thought Uncle Bear would grimace, blush, wince with embarrassment, curse.

He just laughed again, a quiet, comfortable chuckle.

"Who told you that?"

"Who do you think?"

"Raven?"

"No, Athena."

"It's true," Uncle Bear said simply.

"Okay," Hannah said, not sure how to proceed.

Uncle Bear looked at her, waited, spoke after a long pause.

"She insisted."

"Gramma?"

"No, Raven."

"Raven?"

"Yeah, she insisted."

“Why?” Hannah demanded.

“Because what she did was that bad.”

“What did she do?”

Uncle Bear waved his hand and squinted, and Hannah understood that now he was in pain. What was done to punish Raven didn’t hurt him. What Raven did to get punished – that’s what hurt Uncle Bear.

“What did she do?” Hannah repeated.

“It was a mess of things,” he confided, speaking quietly, looking toward the marina and then out across the water. “Lasted a week. You can blame PMS. You can blame adolescence. Every girl goes through it. Every girl rebels. Some don’t care. Some feel so bad they want to die. Raven . . . she was the second sort.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, putting up her hands. She didn’t want the conversation to go any further. She was satisfied with what she’d been told. She believed it was the truth.

“Does that mean you’re okay with that answer?” he asked.

“I don’t want to know any more,” Hannah said.

“Then you’re not satisfied,” Uncle Bear said.

Hannah looked away. Three tables away, a young couple, their infant and their slave girl sat, having lunch.

The girl wasn’t made up, her plain brown hair dropping to her shoulders, her white t-shirt and black gym shorts designed for work, not play. No doubt, Hannah thought to herself, the tag that hung from her collar didn’t say “Female, Recreational.” She wasn’t bought for play. “Female, Domestic,” was the most likely designation. Or maybe “Female, Nursemaid.”

And yet, Hannah could tell, through something the girl was saying without speaking – her physical attitude, the way she cast down her eyes to look at the child, the way she nodded when spoken to – she was serving the father, in other ways.

Did the mother know?

Uncle Bear was speaking.

“Nothing’s harder than killing someone, okay?” he was saying.

“Don’t talk to me about your hard life, or Raven’s hard life, or anything else.”

“You didn’t want to . . . ?” Hannah began, allowing her voice to trail off. She had always believed that soldiers killed like they were doing

anything else, like anyone was doing anything else, as a job. That's the way it looked on TV.

"Some I did, sure," Uncle Bear said. "They had it coming. Some no. Some I didn't . . ."

Uncle Bear stared off again, his gaze blank.

"Oh, god, Uncle—" Hannah blurted. "Oh, god, um, Jerry, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to upset you."

"No," he said, smiling at her. "Some hard things need to be said, sometimes, I guess. But damn, you got a knack. You got a knack for . . ."

"For what?"

"You just dig things out of people."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," he said. "It's a talent. Some people wait all their lives for someone like you, someone they can talk to."

"Okay," Hannah said, reaching for her collar, as she sometimes did when she was uncomfortable, tracing the letters and numbers etched into it, toying with the tag that dangled from it.

"Do you think I'm spoiled?" she asked.

"Yeah," he replied. "Hell yeah."

"I don't think I am," Hannah said.

"You ever sweat while you're working?"

"Yes. When I clean the pool."

Uncle Bear laughed. "C'mon, get serious."

"Okay. Yes. When I do it outside. Like, a few weeks ago, we were camping, and I was in this guy's tent, and it was kind of hot, and we did it, and afterwards, I went to this cold river to cool off, because—"

"Wait, wait," he said, holding up his hand, clamping down his mouth on what appeared to be an effort to fight overwhelming hilarity.

"What?"

"You're talking about . . ." He lowered his voice. "You're talking about sex, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay," he said passing a hand across his face, pulling the hair out of his eyes, grimacing in what looked like an ongoing battle with amusement. "You understand why that doesn't count, right?"

"I was working," Hannah protested, starting to feel embarrassed. "I was doing what I'm supposed to do."

“Did you cum?”

“Well . . . yeah.”

“Nope, sorry, not working.”

“In a way . . . it was,” Hannah persisted.

“Okay, when you were with me, then,” Uncle Bear continued after a quick glance at the nearest tables, “was it just a job?”

“No,” Hannah replied quickly. “Because you’re who you are. I love you.”

He smiled, with a look that told Hannah that, in some way at least, her love was reciprocated.

For all her life until Hannah was taken at the age of 18, she believed that she would say “I love you” to one man only, her husband for life. She wished she could bring her 15-year-old self, her 16-year-old self, the girl she was at 17, to this place, to this deck beside a marina and a lake, to sit beside her and listen to her tell this wild, injured man who would probably be marrying someone else – a black slave girl no less – that she loved him.

“I lived in a one-room apartment for three years with my mom,” Hannah said, not ready to let the matter drop. She had paid her dues. She was still paying her dues, whether Uncle Bear acknowledged it or not.

“An efficiency?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Air-conditioned?”

“Yeah. Well, usually. Sometimes it would break.”

“I shared a tent with three other men for two years,” Uncle Bear said. “All weather. No air-conditioning.”

“Touché,” Hannah said softly.

“Well, that was a big pain the ass,” Athena announced, and she and Raven returned to their seats, finished lunch, describing in detail what sounded to Hannah like nothing more than tedious paperwork.

If she was spoiled, Hannah thought, then so was everyone else. Except maybe Uncle Bear.

Chapter 24: Preparing for Ramone

As soon as they were back on the road, no less than a half mile from the marina, Athena announced the rest of the day's plans.

"We're not picking Ramone up until 5," she said. "So we're going home first."

"Okay," agreed Raven.

"And you're both going to help me," Athena continued.

"How?" Hannah inquired.

"Makeover," Athena said simply.

"That's not something . . . we're . . ." Hannah stammered.

Athena turned to stare at Hannah, chained and buckled in the back seat.

"Why not?"

"It's not one of our specialties," Raven said simply.

"You'll just have to do your best, then. I'm not going to get it done somewhere else."

Hannah was working hard to understand Athena this afternoon in the hopes of anticipating her next demand, her next expression of insecurity. Most likely, however, Athena's mental state was going to be a moving target up until the moment Ramone entered her vagina, and the afternoon would be similarly uncertain. Hannah doubted she would get any studying done the rest of the day.

Back at the Petrosyans, Athena escorted both girls downstairs to the cages but didn't bother to look them in, just removed their chains and told them to strip and use their toilets while she pulled two sets of shackles off the peg on the wall.

Hannah stepped up first, accepting the new shackles with a slight sense of guilt. They were in fact far more comfortable than her old pair, which were assigned to Raven.

Oddly, she felt worse about getting the more comfortable restraints than about the secret Uncle Bear had told her. Raven was being lied to, the threat that she could be given away just a ruse so she would let him work. He needed to work, after all, Hannah thought. He wanted to work.

She and Raven followed Athena upstairs, and as soon as they were all in her room, Athena stripped as well, peeling off her shirt, her skirt, her bra and panties without, as far as Hannah could tell, any self-consciousness.

Athena dropped her clothes in the hamper in her closet, then turned toward Hannah, put her hands on her hips and stared, as if daring Hannah to look at her. Or wanting her to.

Hannah, required to be nude most of the time at home, had never seen Athena without at least a bikini on, but she overcame her surprise at Athena's sudden lack of modesty and appraised the girl, bringing to the effort the sense of someone who understood that each body, slave or free, could be assigned a monetary value.

Athena's breasts were close to D cups, the round undersides resting against her ribs, her soft, pink nipples pointed up, her belly just slightly rounded. Her pubic hair, thick and black, appeared untended other than being trimmed casually, unevenly overall and shaved along the sides – just the maintenance required to wear a bikini bottom without being scandalous.

Beneath the hair, Hannah glimpsed Athena's sex, pink lips curving away from the mouth of the chamber where, if things worked out, a penis would be pushed in later that night for the first time.

It surprised Hannah that Athena, as difficult and thoughtless as she could be, possessed attractive genitals. It shouldn't have been a surprise, of course. Athena was a girl like any other. But Hannah halfway expected to see nothing between Athena's legs. Or a penis.

“Oh, Ramone's gonna have a party tonight,” Raven said.

“What does that mean?” Athena inquired, but she was half smiling, and Hannah sensed that she wasn't as insecure about this as she might be. No doubt, she'd looked in the mirror many times, compared herself to the girls in magazines and videos and pornos and knew that she wasn't that far off. Not that it should matter, Hannah thought to herself. But to Athena, it would. She wanted to be good at this, at least.

“Ma'am?” Raven inquired, using her most formal, most cautious tone.

“Yeah?” Athena replied. The three girls stood, facing each other, like three corners of a triangle.

“May I ask a question, Ma'am?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you a virgin, Ma'am?”

“Uh, yeah,” Athena replied, as if that should have been common knowledge to everyone.

“May I ask another question, Ma'am?”

“Uh, okay?”

“Do you still have your hymen?”

Athena laughed, raw nerves pushing her to an explosion of mirth.

“What the hell business is that of yours?” she demanded at last.

“It isn’t,” Raven said. “But it is Ramone’s business.”

“Okay, then, why?” Athena demanded. “And what’s a hymen, anyway?”

Raven, not at all fazed by Athena’s ignorance, or by the illogic of her initial response, patiently explained the biology of the tissue in Athena’s chamber, that it might hurt when it broke, and it might bleed, and that, if was still there, Ramone needed to know.

“Okay,” Athena said. “I get it. And I don’t know if I still have one.”

“Would you like us to check?”

“What does that involve?”

Raven just bit her lip. Hannah stared at the floor.

“You can just look, right?”

“I think so,” Raven said.

“I don’t want you to touch,” Athena said, and she turned around and bent over, reaching between her legs to spread her vaginal lips.

Raven looked at Hannah, and Hannah pointed at Athena’s opened sex organ, shook her head and pointed at Raven, hoping her meaning was clear.

Raven had brought it up, so it was Raven’s job to do the inspection.

With a brief shiver, Hannah saw herself as the girl she was a year ago, standing naked in a showroom, collared less than a week before, chained by one ankle to the floor, bending and spreading her lips while prospective buyers stepped behind her, peering at her sex organ, as if that told them anything about who she was, what she cared about, how her mind worked, how it felt to make love to her.

Raven knelt behind Athena and peered at her vulva.

“Can you spread a bit more, Ma’am?” Raven asked, turning to scowl at Hannah, returning her attention to Athena.

Athena parted her legs and used both hands to open herself.

“You got an IUD, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Athena said, staring at the floor. “A week ago.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Not really, when he put it in. It bothered me some that night, though.”

“Did you bleed?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry, Ma’am, I can’t tell,” Raven said.

Athena sighed, stood and faced the two slave girls, her face red, and Hannah understood that this was embarrassing for her, a necessary, humiliating and ultimately fruitless part of her preparations for an evening that would change her life.

“What do I wear?” Athena asked abruptly, clearly wanting to move on the next challenge.

“Anything you want,” Raven said. “It doesn’t matter. It’ll all come off.”

“No,” Athena said flatly. “It does matter. Anytime we’re going to see Ramone and Hannah has to wear something, she gets all pushy about what I get for her.”

“Oh, Athena,” Athena said, hand on her hip, raising her voice and staring at the ceiling in a caricature of Hannah that was, in Hannah’s mind, both offensive and completely inaccurate. “Oh, Athena, get me my black skirt. My shortest one. Oh, oh. And get me my, my, white and black checked shirt. You know the one. The van Minsk. Nothing but van Minsk for Ramone. And my blackest black pumps. Oh, and my pink thong. The one that shows off my whole beautiful ass. Oh, oh, and my tiara.”

Hannah crossed her arms under her breasts and glared, and then glanced at Raven, who appeared to be tragically amused, all her white teeth on display, her eyes wrinkled with mirth.

“I don’t have a tiara,” Hannah said, and she knew she was blushing, because there was just enough truth in Athena’s little performance to sting.

Raven, still smiling, looked at Hannah, Hannah glared back, and Raven quickly summoned an unconvincing frown.

“Do you want to know what to wear, then?” Hannah asked, allowing impatience to creep into her tone.

“Yes,” Athena said, “but I already know I’m not wearing a thong.”

“Why not?” Raven asked, no longer solicitous, her tone returned to its natural state of subtle contempt, masked with a thin veneer of politeness.

“I don’t want to be completely obvious,” Athens said, and she moved to her drawer and pulled out a pair of white panties.

“Not white,” Hannah said. “If you bleed, you’ll never get the stain out.”

Athena turned, stared at Hannah, processing what she’d said, and Hannah sensed that the girl’s mind had just been pushed to the next level of anxiety. Bleeding as a concept wasn’t as frightening as was bleeding in a way that would stain her clothes.

She threw the white panties back into her drawer, rummaged around, ignoring her red and pink panties, pulling out a black pair, holding it under her chin and looking at Hannah.

“Perfect,” Hannah said.

Athena pulled them on, reached into the next drawer for a white bra, looked at Hannah. Hannah nodded, because bra color didn’t matter, and Athena pulled it on and clasped it behind her.

“Okay,” Athena said, moving into her closet, the two girls following, the chains between their ankles rattling faintly. “What next? And please don’t try to dress me like a hooker.”

Raven laughed. The idea of Athena, the most sexually private of all the Petrosyans, working as a prostitute seemed to strike her as not just funny but ridiculous. She quickly recovered, stepped into Athena’s closet while Hannah hovered beyond the door.

“You want to look like you could take him or leave him, don’t you?” Raven asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Some girls, if they were about to give their cherry to Ramone, they’d—”

“I don’t know if I still have my hymen.”

“Cherry isn’t just your hymen,” Raven said. “It’s your virginity. It’s your innocence. It’s your—”

“Okay, okay, whatever, what are you trying to say?”

“Some girls would spend the afternoon on a makeover, but that’s not you. Here’s what you’re going to say to Ramone with what you wear today: ‘Ramone, you wanna pop me, fine, tonight works, but if you don’t do it, someone else will.’”

“Okay,” Athena agreed, nodding earnestly. Raven’s words, Raven’s confidence, appeared to be a tonic.

“Trust me, he’s getting more out of this than you will,” Raven added.

“What do you mean?”

“Boys love virgins. And he’s going to cum no matter what, so he’ll get that too.”

“But I’m getting him.”

“You’re worth more than he is,” Raven asserted. “You’re a girl, he’s a boy. You’re worth more.”

Athena just stared, so Raven reached up, grabbing one of Athena’s sun dresses off the rod, a bright dress with greens, peaches and blues in a stylized floral pattern, something Hannah had never seen Athena in. Gramma had probably bought it for her in the hopes it would one day replace her black jeans and angry-girl t-shirts.

“It’s low cut, so it will show off your tits, but it’s not too formal, not too sexy, just something you threw on.”

Athena looked at the dress, looked at Raven, then at Hannah.

“Okay,” she said.

Raven backed up and Athena stepped into the dress, turning to let Raven zip it up.

“Makeup and hair,” Athena announced, and all three girls moved to her bathroom, Hannah and Raven standing behind Athena, who sat and stared into the mirror, what little color she’d put on her face earlier faded.

“Dark around the eyes,” Raven suggested.

Athena raised her mascara, brushed lightly.

“More,” Raven said.

Athena obeyed.

“More.”

“I look like a raccoon.”

“You look like a woman.”

“Lipstick,” Raven said. “No, not light purple, please. Don’t you have a basic red?”

Athena rummaged around in the basket that held her makeup, found a plain red lipstick with a virgin tip, applied it with a scowl.

Athena stared for a long moment at her face, grimacing in what seemed to be her attempt at a smile, then frowning, pressing her lips together, smiling again, sincerely and self-deprecatingly this time, and Hannah realized for the first time that Athena could meet any standard of beauty, if she wanted to.

Athena's phone had been resting on the bathroom counter, vibrating now and then as it always did, with texts and messages from friends, posts from the people she followed on Look! and other media.

She handed her phone to Hannah.

"Take my picture."

Hannah crouched awkwardly, wishing she could put just one knee on the floor, her shackles making that impossible.

Athena turned, simpered, smiled, scowled, while Hannah tapped the phone.

Athena held out her hand, Hannah gave the phone back and Athena studied it, deleting the pictures she didn't like but keeping several.

"Let's go," she said, rising. "We're late."

Chapter 25: Possible Scandal at House Abercrombie

Athena's driving was terrible, her nerves creating a toxic mix of distraction and irritability.

This was the next hurdle, Hannah knew, perhaps the toughest one, and Hannah sympathized. To lose her virginity this way, Athena was going to have to drive to the home of family friends and take physical custody of a male slave, probably restrained, probably nude. Athena wasn't worried about the Abercrombie girls, Hannah guessed, but she'd have to interact with at least one of the parents, and Hannah knew Athena didn't want to.

The trip was silent, awkward, and mercifully short, Athena wheeling the SUV to the Abercrombie's gate, pushing the buzzer, pulling through and parking as close to the front door as she could.

Mrs. Abercrombie herself opened the door, as frumpy as always in a gratuitously ugly gray-green housecoat and terrible, terrible faded red Crocs.

To her credit, Athena drew forth the normal, self-assured persona she normally used for adult friends, offering a hug, stepping into the hall, answering with a clear voice questions about her summer and the impending school year.

"Shall we get Ramone?" Mrs. Abercrombie asked after the pleasantries were concluded with Athena and her two slave escorts.

"Yes, Ma'am," Athena said.

There was no sign of the Abercrombie girls, and Hannah began to suspect that Athena had told them to stay away, that she didn't want her acquisition of Ramone to take any longer than necessary.

Hannah and Raven, wraps around their breasts and middles, all four limbs in restraints, shuffled behind Athena and Mrs. Abercrombie to the elevator in the hall, descended to the basement and to the pair of cages where Ramone was kept, and where Hannah had on a few occasions passed time as well.

Ramone, whose relatively large cell held an exercise bike that Hannah envied, had been pedaling, but he stopped and disembarked as soon as he saw he had visitors.

Observing an unwritten etiquette, Ramone looked only at Athena, meaning Hannah could study him without being caught. He was naked, of course, a thin patina of sweat across his beautiful, olive skin, but her eyes

were drawn first to what had been fastened to his genitals, a metal tube that hung between his legs. He'd been sleeved, Hannah realized with surprise.

"Athena, I believe you know Ramone?" Mrs. Abercrombie said.

Was this formality really necessary? Hannah wondered. Mrs. Abercrombie knew that Athena and Ramone were well-acquainted, didn't she?

"Ramone and I go way back," Athena said. "It's nice to see you again, Ramone."

Ramone bowed, smiled. "The pleasure's all mine," he said, his beautiful accent just barely a rumble in his voice.

"I sleeved him yesterday afternoon for you," Mrs. Abercrombie said.

Athena looked at Mrs. Abercrombie, one eyebrow raised.

"His penis," Mrs. Abercrombie clarified. "To prevent masturbation. His last orgasm was two nights ago."

"Thank you," Athena said simply, not a trace of embarrassment in her voice.

"So he should be a very eager partner," Mrs. Abercrombie continued. "But not too eager, right, Ramone?"

"No, Ma'am," Ramone said politely, but with the hint of irreverence in his voice and face that Hannah recognized and Mrs. Abercrombie quite possibly did not.

He understood what this was about, Hannah thought to herself. With all the politeness, all the formality, all the ritual of what was being done today, the end result would be the same as everywhere, for everyone: a raw, wet fuck, the groans of insertion and orgasm, the dazed afterglow, a girl with something new, wondrous – and a little strange – to remember.

"You're a virgin?" Mrs. Abercrombie asked, as if she was asking Athena's age.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"He should be able to give you all the service you'll want," Mrs. Abercrombie droned on. "He's probably good for up to an hour of penetration, if you want a second session."

Ramone just stood, expressionless, no visible reaction to being talked about, at least on his face, but Hannah gazed at his sleeve and noticed it wasn't simply hanging between his legs now. It was angling up, his penis hardening, his arousal growing.

Was that happening because Mrs. Abercrombie was talking about him? Hannah wondered. Was her peculiar way of describing his abilities and what he would do to Athena a sexual stimulant?

“Not that you’ll probably want that much during your first experience,” Mrs. Abercrombie continued. “Do you still have your hymen?”

“I’m not sure,” Athena said, and she looked at Hannah, and then at Raven, unblushing, just answering another question. “Raven checked, but she couldn’t tell.”

Was this not devastatingly embarrassing for Athena? Hannah wondered. Possibly not. If Mrs. Abercrombie wasn’t going to be embarrassed, Hannah thought, Athena wouldn’t be either. Could one simply tell oneself not to be ashamed, and it would work? Did Athena have that power?

“Ramone broke Bethany and Sonja,” Mrs. Abercrombie said, “and both girls were very pleased with him. As I’m sure you know.”

Athena nodded.

“Ramone will be able to find your hymen, if it’s still there,” Mrs. Abercrombie said. “And if he feels it, he’ll let you know, and then you can decide how you want to proceed.”

“What do you mean?” Athena asked.

“He can stop and let you wait until you’re ready, at another time, he can very slowly tear you, or he can rip you through with one quick thrust and get it over with. You’ll let him know, and that’s what he’ll do.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Athena said, and she finally seemed uncomfortable with the conversation, grabbing one of the bars of Ramone’s cage to steady herself, looking slightly green.

“And if you do want a second session with him, give him about half an hour to recover,” Mrs. Abercrombie said, ignoring Athena’s queasiness. “But if you don’t, Ramone will of course respect that decision.”

Mrs. Abercrombie paused. “Feel free to put his sleeve back on if you spend the night together and don’t want to tempt him. He can be a little, um, persuasive at times.”

Ramone just smiled, eyes turning quickly to Hannah, then back to Mrs. Abercrombie, and from her to Athena, locking eyes with her, his sleeve now almost horizontal.

Hannah, with an intimate knowledge of the organ filling its metal holder, sensed a brief, sweet tinge of desire between her legs before she turned it off, chiding herself. Desire for Ramone this afternoon, she reminded herself, could lead to flirting, and any flirting between herself and Ramone could draw out Athena's insecurities. The project to relieve Athena of her virginity could all come crumbling down in dozens of ways, Hannah reminded herself. This had been her idea, and she wanted it to succeed. Sabotaging it, however inadvertently, could never be forgiven.

"Have you operated Ramone's restraints?" Mrs. Abercrombie asked.

"Yes, almost every time he comes over," Athena said. "His chains, anyway. But, um, not his sleeve. That takes a key too, right?"

"Yes, it locks around his scrotum," Mrs. Abercrombie said.

"Ramone," she added, gesturing him to step forward.

He moved to the bars, and Mrs. Abercrombie knelt and motioned to Athena to drop beside her.

With Athena on her knees, staring, Mrs. Abercrombie reached up, raised Ramone's sleeved penis and pointed to the band that locked around his testicles. "The key goes in here. Turn it clockwise half a rotation, and you'll hear a click. And then slide it off. Gently. If he's fully erect, he can be a little sensitive."

Mrs. Abercrombie stood and stepped to a row of pegs set in the wall, where Ramone's restraints hung. Athena rose too, staring at Ramone through the bars, into his eyes, something akin to affection, if not love, in her face. Or interest, at least, Hannah thought. Athena could at times be impossible to read.

Athena accepted the restraints from Mrs. Abercrombie, reaching through the bars to cuff Ramone's wrists, kneeling to chain his ankles, as Hannah had seen her do at least a dozen times at home.

"You're on birth control?" Mrs. Abercrombie asked, unlocking Ramone's cage.

"Yes, I got an IUD last week," Athena said.

"Then you shouldn't need a condom," Mrs. Abercrombie said. "But have you thought about using one?"

"I hadn't," Athena said, still speaking plainly, confidently.

"I don't recommend it," Mrs. Abercrombie said, ushering Ramone out of his cage and guiding him to the elevator. "Keep him bare. And let

him release everything inside you, if you can. He tends to give his hardest thrusts while he orgasms, but if you stay relaxed, it can be very pleasurable.”

Mrs. Abercrombie and Ramone had walked ahead, allowing Athena to turn back and discreetly look at Hannah and Raven, eyebrows raised, mouth open in a look of abject shock.

The elevator opened and everyone squeezed in, Hannah’s hips and shoulders pressed against Raven’s and Ramone’s, his sleeve still horizontal, the tip touching the small of Mrs. Abercrombie’s back.

“Ramone will give you a full charge,” Mrs. Abercrombie continued, the elevator creaking as it slowly rose. “But don’t douche unless it’s bothering you. Your body knows how to take care of it, and you’ll learn to . . . well . . . let’s just say holding semen is a taste you’ll acquire, if you aren’t born with it.”

After the exchange of a few conclusory pleasantries in the foyer, Athena was back in the driver’s seat, Ramone up front beside her, nude except for his chains and sleeve, and Hannah and Raven buckled in the back.

“Okay . . .,” Athena slowly drawled before she’d cleared the Abercrombie’s gate. “So, Ramone . . .”

“Yes, Ma’am?” he said, turning to look at her.

“I’m not your Ma’am, I’m Athena,” Athena shot back. “And why did Mrs. Abercrombie say those things?”

“What things?”

Athena looked at him, stopped for a stop sign, looked at him some more.

“About what it’s like, to . . . to . . . how you do it?”

Hannah and Raven exchanged quick glances.

“I service her daughters,” Ramone said simply.

“No,” Athena said. “She knows too much.”

“Girls talk,” Ramone observed.

“Not that much, not with their mom.”

“Hmm,” Ramone said. “Interesting.”

“Sonja did not tell her mom what it’s like when you finish,” Athena insisted. “Like, how you, um, thrust.”

“I couldn’t be sure,” Ramone said, maintaining complete innocence. “I’m not always there when the Abercrombie girls speak to their

mother.”

Athena sighed audibly, pulled onto the busy commercial highway and hit the gas.

“Point blank then,” Athena said, “are you doing Mrs. Abercrombie?”

“No, Athena,” Ramone replied.

“Liar.”

“I’m riding with you,” Ramone added, “at this very moment. Mrs. Abercrombie isn’t—”

“You know what I meant.”

“Not completely,” Ramone said. “You see, in Portuguese, that question would translate into what we call the immediate tense, *o tempo imediato*, and—”

“There’s no such tense and you are going down on Mrs. Abercrombie and oh my god,” Athena declared. “I know you are. Please just tell me Mr. Abercrombie knows. Please tell me that.”

Ramone looked out the window, turned back to Athena.

“Will I be making salad tonight?”

“She practically told us you were,” Athena said. “She wants us to know. Raven, right?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I agree,” Raven said.

“Hannah?” Athena said.

“Absolutely,” Hannah said. “She got way too personal, I thought. I bet she’s delicious. Isn’t she, Ramone?”

“Is Darcy preparing dinner tonight?” Ramone inquired, looking back at Hannah with a blank face, then turning to Athena.

“No she’s not we are and oh my god those Crocs,” Athena said. “They used to be red, I guess. In the last century. And that housecoat. Did she get it from a thrift shop, also in the last century?”

“Mrs. Abercrombie wears what’s comfortable,” Ramone said, his tone changing subtly to defensiveness, the voice of a male subject protecting his mistress’ honor. “And when, and when—”

The girls fell silent, allowing Ramone to continue.

“And when a woman dresses comfortably, that means she knows what she likes. So don’t look down on her for her clothing. She knows what feels good.”

“Okay, okay, that’s as good as a signed confession,” Athena said.
“Right, Raven?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Hannah?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Athena hit the gas to pass a truck, and she laughed, evil and victorious, and Hannah wondered if Athena was going to sabotage the evening herself. Not intentionally, but just because she couldn’t help but be who she was. And yet, Ramone was unflappable, dodging and deflecting the girls’ questions with the skill of a martial artist.

Hannah could easily imagine Ramone as he might be, had he not lost his passport. A lawyer, maybe. Or a doctor. Or a student, since he was still of college age.

In some other universe, Hannah thought, drawing from a concept she’d encountered in her physics book, she and Ramone were free, collarless, sitting next to each other in a history class, or a biology class, glancing shyly, talking, less at first, more as the semester proceeded.

From there, her mind wandered on its own to a new place: Does Ormek want people to know? Does he hint at a special knowledge of Hannah when he talks to peers, friends, other doctors, the staff in his clinic? Just enough detail – like Mrs. Abercrombie had done – to make people wonder?

“I think she wanted us to know,” Hannah said, voicing the first thing that came into her head to chase the daydreams away, “but she didn’t want us to be able to say we knew. So, if you went to Mr. Abercrombie right now, and said, ‘I believe Ramone’s making love to your wife, because, um, here’s what she said,’ he could just laugh at you.”

“Whoa,” Athena said. “It’s like, she’s doing a secret message. Like, yeah, I do it with Ramone, but only you can know, so I’m going to tell you, but just sort of.”

“Do you think she’s proud of it?” Raven ventured. “Like, ‘Oh yeah, I’m getting me a slice of that Brazilian t-bone too, thank you very much’?”

“Definitely,” Athena said, and she turned to Ramone. “Are you getting mad at us?”

“No,” Ramone replied, with a dignity that impressed Hannah, given he was nude and chained, with a metal tube locked around his penis. “I never get mad.”

Chapter 26: Athena's Deflowering

As soon as they arrived home, Athena brought everyone downstairs, shackles going on, the rest of their chains coming off, Hannah and Raven being stripped nude, but Athena leaving Ramone sleeved.

Then up to the kitchen all went, where Ramone's metal tube rose and fell as he helped with dinner preparations, in an intermittent arousal that Hannah guessed must be a sort of torment.

He bore his restriction stoically, however, and without embarrassment, even when Laura arrived home, set a bottle of port on the kitchen counter before him and pointed to the label.

"In your honor," she said solemnly, her other arm around his shoulder. "It's from Brazil."

"An excellent choice," he said, suffering through another moment of arousal, sleeve sticking straight out.

"When was that put on?" Laura asked.

"Yesterday afternoon."

As Hannah watched out of the corner of her eye, Laura reached down, raising the sleeve to peer through the tip, at what Hannah guessed was Ramone's inflamed, aching head.

"Did you sleep in it?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Is it designed to keep you erect?"

"No," Ramone said. "That just happens now and then."

Laura, raising the sleeve until it pressed against Ramone's belly, examined the collar fastened around his testicles, motivated by morbid curiosity, Hannah guessed, or by more practical concerns, making sure the device would remain in place until Athena was ready to remove it.

Satisfied with her inspection, she dropped it and turned to the girls.

"How was your visit to the boathouse, Raven?" she asked.

"The people there are very nice, Ma'am," Raven said. "But it was a long drive."

Hannah wondered if she was the only member of the Petrosyan household who knew the truth about Uncle Bear's job, if Gramma had kept her ruse secret even from her daughter. Did Uncle Bear have that much faith in Hannah's discretion?

Ormek arrived home a little before 7, greeted everyone, saving his warmest hug for Athena, kissing the top of her head, a wordless acknowledgment of her impending rite of passage.

The Brazilian port was a minor new pleasure, but dinner was noteworthy for its ordinariness, the meal like any other to Hannah, the small talk about school, Gramma's health, the goings on of the Abercrombie household. To Hannah's relief, Athena was a little subdued, a little self-conscious perhaps, and she made no mention of her suspicions about what happened between Ramone and Mrs. Abercrombie. Most likely, though, it wasn't that Athena would never bring it up. She would probably just wait until her knowledge could do maximum damage.

Dinner became awkward only at the end, when Ormek pushed away from the table, and Athena stood and looked at Ramone, and then at Hannah and Raven, and then at the kitchen, clearly uncertain about what was supposed to happen at this moment.

Laura came to the rescue, rising, stepping to Athena, hugging her, then to Ramone, hugging him and kissing him on each cheek.

"We'll take care of the kitchen, Athena," Laura said, "you go help Ramone get settled in for the night."

Ormek, following Laura's lead but without her poise, hugged his daughter and shook Ramone's hand, looking down at the sleeve that was raised to its full height and pointed like a weapon at Ormek's belly. Ormek mumbled something and turned to pick up his plate.

Hannah picked up hers and Ramone's plates, carried them into the kitchen, glanced back to see Athena and Ramone exiting the dining room, Athena leading him tentatively to the front stairs, all her confidence of earlier in the day gone. Was it an act? Was she trying to appear uncertain, shy, because she thought he wanted that? What did it matter anyway? Hannah wondered. Ramone could get erect making salad. There was no question about his ability to perform for Athena at the highest level, no matter what she wore, how she behaved.

The next time she saw Athena, Hannah thought briefly, she would no longer be a virgin. Because of Hannah.

Cleanup took half an hour, the plates scraped and stacked, pots and pans left to soak, Darcy expected in the morning to finish the job.

Laura escorted Hannah and Raven downstairs, locking them in Hannah's cage, removing their shackles and leaving the middle door open.

"I'm not sure where Athena's going to have Ramone spend the night," Laura said, leaning against the bars while both girls went to their toilets. "But there's a chance all three of you will be down here for the night."

"Yes, Ma'am," Raven said.

Hannah, who found herself increasingly distracted by what might be happening upstairs in her bedroom, remained silent.

"If that happens, make sure Athena gets the pillow and the extra blankets from the linen closet," Laura said.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Laura headed to the elevator, leaving the light on.

"Chess?" Hannah said, reaching under her bed for the set she'd bought with her own money, Einstein and Bohr the kings, Curie and Hypatia the queens.

"Yes," Raven said, "if the winner gets to choose what we do afterwards."

"We'll both choose the same thing," Hannah said, setting out the pieces. The girls sat on either side of the chessboard, nude, legs crossed, and as she lined up the pieces, Hannah looked down at Raven's shaved vulva, imagining the way she tasted, the way she would respond to being touched and licked.

"Then why not do it now?" Raven asked, apparently thinking the same thing.

"Too much uncertainty," Hannah replied. "Athena might be bringing him down, at any time, and I don't want to be interrupted."

"You really think she's going to dump him off on us?"

"I don't know," Hannah admitted. "There's a lot of things about Athena and sex I can't predict."

"Athena is an old soul," Raven said.

"You're being serious?" Hannah said.

"Look into her eyes sometimes, and you can see her mind working on something that isn't meanness or friends, or whatever. She's the way she is because of the family she was born into. If she was a slave, you'd love her."

"Maybe," Hannah said. "But you might have a different opinion if you lived with her."

“I’ve known her a lot longer than you have. Gramma bought me before I was 10.”

“And she used to be nice?”

“Not exactly. But she’s spoken to Gramma for me. More than once.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gramma’s threatening to donate me to a home after she dies.”

“Athena told me about that,” Hannah said, going through a quick mental checklist of what she should know, that Athena had told her, and what she shouldn’t know because they were secrets from Uncle Bear.

“What did Athena tell you?” Raven asked.

“Just that if, um, Uncle Bear doesn’t get a job, Gramma’s going to have you in her will as, um, going to some place, where you’ll have to work.”

“I don’t know if it’s true,” Raven said, looking at Hannah with terror in her eyes, clearly not sure what was true, what wasn’t.

“But he got that job at the marina,” Hannah assured.

“It’s not the right job.”

“What’s the right job?” Hannah asked.

“Ormek offered him a job earning three times as much, at the—”

“At his clinic?”

“Yes.”

“What would he do there?” Hannah asked.

“On the job training. Learn. Maybe go to school some. Become a medical technician.”

“Have you told him to do that instead?”

“I’ve given up. He wants to do this on his own. He doesn’t want family help.”

“Well,” Hannah said, “I kind of admire that.”

“If he doesn’t make enough, we’ll have to live off Gramma’s money,” Raven said.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s hard to talk about,” Raven said. “Let’s play.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. All the pawns in her chess set were meant to look like post-graduate research assistants, male and female. Hannah moved a female pawn forward two spaces.

Raven responded with the move of a male pawn.

“I hate Gramma’s money,” Raven said quietly.

“Why?” Hannah inquired.

“It’s what was used. To buy me. To keep me. When I think about living off it after she’s gone – if me and Uncle Bear are together – I just wanna burn it. It makes my skin crawl.”

Hannah looked at Raven, and Raven stared back. This was something, Hannah suspected, Raven had never told anyone.

“How long have you felt this way?” Hannah asked.

“Ever since Gramma bought me,” Raven said. “But I didn’t know what it was at first. Now I know how to say it.”

Raven paused.

“Don’t you hate it? Don’t you hate their money?”

Hannah raised her knee to her chin, pushed another pawn forward.

“I’ve never thought about it,” she said. “I’m not saying you’re wrong. It’s just not a thing I’ve felt before.”

Raven smiled. She’d been heard. Maybe that’s all she wanted. She stuck her tongue out and laughed, self-deprecatingly, as if everything she’d just said was a joke.

“God, watching that boy, uh, blowing in the wind,” she said, sighing as she moved a space-suited knight mounted on a small space scooter. “I’d love to swallow that one again. I hope Athena appreciates what she’s getting.”

“You had him, what, in May?”

“Yeah, after that party. They locked us up together after everyone went home, and he worked me for a coupla hours.”

“Or you worked him,” Hannah countered.

“Yeah, kinda mutual.” Raven paused. “The next time I’m with him, I’m gonna ask for the Hannah special.”

“You’re going to tell him to do that?”

“Think he will?” Raven asked.

“I don’t know. It took us a while to work it out. I had to think about things, tell him to try it, then sometimes switch it. Especially grabbing my hair. You know, he grabs it, and then he shakes, and some of it comes out. That took awhile to get right.”

“I’ve got some to spare,” Raven said, slipping her hair behind her ears.

The girls played steadily, Raven easily the better player, years of experience playing, and sometimes beating, Uncle Bear. Hannah held her own this evening, though, taking both of Raven's rooks (square rocket ships) and a knight, but losing her queen to carelessness.

The elevator bumped. Hannah looked up, hearing the clink of Ramone's shackles and Athena's voice, speaking quietly.

The couple appeared, Ramone nude, fully erect and unsleeved, Athena in a pale blue t-shirt that went to the top of her thighs, her face expressionless. She wasn't in a bra, her nipples announcing their presence and condition with two firm little points. Did she have on panties under her shirt? Hannah wondered. Possibly not.

What does one say at a time like this? Hannah had no idea. Raven remained silent as well.

Athena unlocked the cage door, Ramone stepped in and turned to be unshackled.

"One of you needs to take care of him," Athena announced.

Hannah and Raven looked at each other over the chess pieces.

"Your turn," Hannah said.

Raven went through the middle door to the guest cage, got on the bed on her hands and knees, and Ramone joined her there, knelt behind her, reached down to spread her lips and make sure she was wet enough for penetration, then inserted his penis up her vagina.

"Oh, god," Raven grunted quietly to herself, arching her back to adjust to Ramone's girth.

Ramone went to work immediately, pulling out, pushing back up, repeating, gasping quietly with each thrust, brought downstairs apparently just to release his excess cum and his excess lust.

Hannah peered up at Athena, trying to find the eyes of the old soul Raven had spoken of. Athena studied Raven and Ramone, turned her eyes to Hannah, smiled a sort of half-smile, and Hannah knew at that instant that things had gone well.

Hannah stood, stepped to the bars that separated her from Athena, decided to speak as bluntly as Mrs. Abercrombie had earlier.

"He penetrated you?" she asked quietly.

"Yes."

"Hymen?"

"It was there. He ripped it to shreds. God it hurt."

“One quick thrust?”

“First he was just pressing in a little, so I told him to get it over with, and he did.”

“Did you scream?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you bleed?”

“All over him, all over your sheets. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. Apologize to Darcy.”

“Tell her it’s your blood.”

“Whatever,” Hannah said. “Did you let him stay in after that?”

“Uh, yeah,” Athena said, responding to the question in her usual way, as if it were the dumbest thing she’d ever been asked.

“You let him cum in you then?”

“Buckets,” Athena said with another half-smile.

“Did you cum?”

“Not during,” Athena said, and she pointed to her mouth. “After. Oral.”

“Think you could have done it again?”

“Maybe, but I didn’t want to push it. So when he got hard again, I said we should let one of you take care of it, so I wouldn’t have to sleeve him.”

“You’re spending the night together?”

“Yes,” Athena replied. “Yes.”

She looked down, pulled her shirt up in front, confirming she had no panties on underneath, her black triangle of pubic hair bared in all its glory, her lips still inflamed, spread wide, bright pink.

She bent to inspect her hole, pulling up on her mound, a pearl of Ramone’s semen at her opening.

“Get me some toilet paper,” she commanded.

Hannah obeyed, stepping over to her toilet, glancing at Raven and Ramone, coupling softly, rhythmically on the bed, Raven’s eyes closed as if in meditation, Ramone’s open and cast down, studying Raven’s back and hips while he steadily worked at his own pace toward his second orgasm of the evening.

Hannah pulled an arm’s length of tissue off the roll and brought it back to Athena, who spread her legs, parted her lips with one hand and wiped with the other.

Done, she held the soiled tissue up to the bars.

Hannah looked at it, looked into Athena's eyes.

"Take it," Athena said with an emphatic shake.

"No," Hannah said, crossing her arms under her breasts. "I'm not your trash can."

"It's just Ramone's semen," Athena said, sneering. "I know you're not afraid of that."

"It's got your blood on it, probably, and your other stuff too," Hannah said. "Put it in the trash next to the sink."

Athena glared but did as she was told, and when she returned, she was smiling again, and Hannah suspected something else was going on, that Athena didn't really want her to dispose of the tissue in her cage, just wanted her acknowledgment of it.

"You're a woman now," Hannah said. She meant it as a joke, but Athena looked at the ceiling and pondered, apparently taking the observation seriously.

"Closer," she said upon reflection. "Like, I've done this one more thing now."

"Uh," Ramone grunted, a familiar sound to Hannah, and she looked to watch his face contract, his muscles tense and – true to Mrs. Abercrombie's warning – he shook and pounded through his orgasm, Raven opening her eyes and looking up at Hannah in mock horror, her hair swaying against her cheek, her breasts swinging, as he ground out his relief within her chamber, depositing his second jolt of sperm since he'd been sleeved.

Hannah heard Athena sigh, sensed her shift with what seemed to be sudden pain, and she looked at the girl and saw her staring, watching the pair of slaves inside the cage, all her attention focused on their coupling.

Finished with his orgasm, Ramone slowed but didn't stop, moving in and out of Raven casually now, with shallow, gentle thrusts, probably because he thought sudden withdrawal would be rude.

After another 30 seconds of penetration, he reached down, grabbed Raven's hips and disengaged himself, his semi-erect penis swaying, Raven easing off the bed, going to the mirror to look at her face.

Ramone stepped over to Raven, put his hand on her waist, kissed her cheek, moved into Hannah's cage, kissed her cheek and offered her a

smile, with heavy-lidded eyes, and went to the bars to let Athena return him to his shackles.

“Well, g’night I guess,” Athena said to the girls, opening the cage door, letting Ramone exit, locking it back. “See you in the morning.”

The light went off, the elevator bumped and they were gone. Hannah felt a lump in her throat.

She continued to look out past the bars, at the windows set high in the wall, at the night sky and its faint stars, until she felt a hand on her rear.

She turned to find Raven beside her in the darkness, her need understood. For Athena’s convenience, she’d taken Ramone’s penis, accepted his seed and hadn’t cum.

“Don’t step on my chessboard,” Hannah said, guiding her friend to her bed.

They settled beside each other, on their sides, face to face, and Hannah offered her mouth to Raven and reached out to stroke Raven’s breast, but Raven appeared to be all business tonight.

“Ramone left a mess,” she whispered. “I’m gonna need a lot of cleaning.”

Hannah, the only one who’d been celibate so far this evening, felt her tension build. Raven always knew how to move her.

“You’re lucky I like the taste of his cum,” she said into Raven’s ear.

“I wouldn’t ask if you didn’t.”

“Maybe you should get on your back with your legs spread,” Hannah advised. “And I’ll get over you.”

“Your pussy at my mouth?” Raven asked quietly.

Hannah answered by moving into position, swinging her leg over Raven’s head and dropping her warming slit down to Raven’s mouth, and the two slave girls rocked and bobbed with each other, backs arching, vaginal openings grinding forward, easing away as the lust and the sensations moved them, each girl serving the other while she made sure she was served.

Hannah had tasted Ramone’s semen plenty of times, taking him by mouth by mutual agreement occasionally, or because her vagina was too tender for a second round of use, but this was the first time she tasted his cum leaking from Raven’s slot, and the mingling of two familiar tastes into a third, unusual flavor took some getting used to, slowing her own ascent to orgasm.

For her part, Raven moved without hesitation to climax, gasping and squirting and grinding against Hannah's mouth, concluding with a soft moan of pleasure.

Hannah raised her vulva, allowing Raven to recover without having to deal with golden hair and a pair of pink lips in her mouth, but Raven reached up as soon as her orgasm was complete, grabbed Hannah's bottom, pressing one fingertip against her anus, and pulled her back down, raising her mouth to Hannah's soft opening, giving her all the attention she could ask for, mouth and teeth and tongue dancing across Hannah's female flesh, tapping and biting and sucking her clitoris, forcing her up to climax in less than a minute.

"Damndamndamngoddamn," Hannah grunted quietly, pelvis gyrating, vulva rising and falling against Raven's mouth.
"Dammithelpmefesus."

Hannah fell still and silent, on hands and knees above Raven, working through what she had just felt, collecting herself as she often did after orgasm.

Raven, used to Hannah's post-relief pause, waited on her back until Hannah turned, folding Hannah in her arms for a last embrace and kiss.

Instead of moving into the other cage and to her bed, Raven lingered, her mouth by Hannah's ear.

"They're going to do it again, aren't they?" Raven whispered.

"No doubt," Hannah whispered back. "She was watching you and Ramone, and you could almost feel her get worked up when he started cumming."

"Think she's grateful?" Raven asked.

"To Ramone? I hope so. I hope he is too."

"No, to you."

"Ok, 'cause I set it up?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Athena's gratitude isn't worth much, though."

"She sure wanted you to see that wet pussy," Raven observed.

"You noticed?"

"Oh yeah, I didn't have my eyes closed the whole time."

"Did you see her raise her slit?"

"Yeah. She wanted you to see that too."

"Ramone's cum?"

“Yeah. You saw it, right?”

“Yeah, her pussy was a mess. Worse than yours.”

“She had to show.”

Why?”

“She didn’t think you believed she’d go through with it.”

“She was mistaken.”

“Or maybe she thought you didn’t believe Ramone would get what he needed from her hole.”

“How do you know?” Hannah asked.

“Just an educated guess. She knows you don’t like her.”

“I like Athena,” Hannah said, and she knew she was blushing, and she knew that sometimes people blushed when they were lying, and she was glad it was dark.

“Do you want to finish our game tomorrow morning?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah. You don’t mind losing?”

“I’m going to win.”

“You lost your queen.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

Chapter 27: Unexpected Meetings with Ormek and Laura

Hannah had expected that life might change in some way, dramatic or subtle, after Athena and Ramone had been together, but two days later, on the last Saturday of July, nothing seemed different, all the usual routines in force, Hannah devoting herself to her books and to studying for the exams she hoped to take in early August, and to waiting for the return of Allain, due back Tuesday.

It had been agreed over dinner the previous night, with Hannah's assent, that she would stay caged until 4 p.m., when Athena would release her and get her made up for a night of clubbing with Athena and her friends.

This would be a first. She'd been to friends' houses, out to dinner with Athena and a friend or two, but tonight, someone's dad had rewarded his daughter's straight A's the previous year with a limousine rental, and Hannah and Athena and close to a dozen of the girl's friends, most known to Athena, most unknown to Hannah, would have an innocent night of fun at the Dallas establishments friendly to teens and best equipped to handle subjects.

It was understood that Hannah would be unchained for the evening, and that was perhaps a new thing. Being with a mass of Athena's friends was also a new thing. But Hannah wrote it all off to Athena's vanity. The Petrosyans had spent a million and a half dollars to buy a human being, and more to keep her, maintain her, entertain her. Owning an expensive, beautiful slave girl – and Hannah looked the part – held a certain cachet that the owning of other things did not, even much more expensive things. A house could not wear stilettos and van Minsk.

So Hannah would be Athena's decoration for the evening, like a purse of staggering value. She would be there to let the other girls know that Athena was a girl of unique substance – not just wealthy, but a member of the class where net worth was irrelevant, the class that could buy people for mere beauty and the frivolous pleasures of their company.

All Hannah had to do was be poised, throw out the sort of flippant comments she was known for, try to hold her own with girls who had been immersed in wealth from before they were born, and not embarrass Athena.

When she paused from her studies to look at her clock, she thought about what lay ahead, and remembered that she was terrified.

She was also a little agitated. Athena had gotten the time with Ramone Thursday night that would have gone to Hannah. Last night was just a masturbation night, and tonight most likely nothing would happen unless she took matters into her own hands again.

So it was with some relief that she heard the elevator bump a little after 12:30, guessing it was Athena come to distract her and bring her lunch.

“Hannah?” Ormek said softly.

“Yes, Sir?” Hannah replied with surprise, setting her book on her desk and rising.

Ormek rounded the corner, nude, a plate in his hand, his penis erect.

“Oh,” Hannah said, startled. “I thought you were Athena.”

“Athena’s out with friends, getting ready for tonight.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah said, finding herself unable to say anything more. What was Ormek doing here? Where was Laura? Why was he naked? And erect?

“And Laura is having lunch with Gramma.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah said. Of course. Just the two of them in the house. Of course he had come to her without his clothes on. This was inevitable. And perhaps a little funny.

“So you had to make my lunch,” Hannah observed. She noticed for the first time that her heart was pounding. But she was no longer disoriented, just aroused and stimulated by the job that lay before her, a job she did not hate. Ormek was just another boy now. Older, but like all the rest, with desires that she could satisfy. They came to her, like supplicants, she the temple they chose to visit. Or *had* to visit. She wasn’t sure how much of this was voluntary.

“Sir,” she said, and now her voice was strong, “perhaps you should hand me my plate.”

Ormek nodded, his eyes running the length of her body, up and down, from her feet to her eyes, back to her feet, back to her eyes, as he moved to the slot where plates were passed through and, when necessary, her hands could be secured.

She took the plate, set it on her desk beside her books, returned to Ormek, still staring at her through the bars.

“Will there be anything else, Sir?” Hannah asked.

Ormek smiled, said nothing, but he moved slightly, toward the bars of Hannah’s cage, toward Hannah.

“May I take care of that for you, Sir?” Hannah asked, looking down at Ormek’s penis. The words were simply flowing, the ideas taking over her mind with no conscious intervention.

He looked into Hannah’s eyes, said nothing, but advanced again, pressing his thighs and belly against the bars, his penis into her cage.

“Can you bend your knees a bit, Sir?” Hannah said.

This is not lovemaking, Hannah told herself. This is not lovemaking. She was simply solving a problem. Laura would have nothing to be jealous of. No rules were being broken.

And yet Hannah knew, in the deepest, most secret corner of her mind, that what was about to happen could happen only between Ormek and Hannah, that there was something that united them that could not be duplicated anywhere else, by any two other people, and Hannah’s formality and her polite instructions were not an attempt to soften their lust, but to drive it, to heighten it, to turn their spirits into two beasts, writhing on either side of a set of bars while their bodies and their voices maintained a façade of reserve so false as to be blatant perjury.

Ormek bent his knees as instructed, lowering his penis, and Hannah stepped up, wrapped her fingers gently around the middle of his shaft, grabbed the bars with one hand while she worked his tip into her opening with the other.

Ormek’s eyes went wide, staring into Hannah’s, as if she were killing him, and he sighed out, the way Athena had at the height of her lust two nights ago, allowing his slave girl to bring him into her body, to wrap her vagina around him, around his penis, around – in a sense – his soul.

“I needed a break,” Hannah said with a small gasp, Ormek’s member coming to life within her, filling all of her wet sheath.

“How . . .” Ormek choked, clearing his throat and trying again. “How are your studies coming, Hannah?”

“Very good, Sir, thank you for asking,” she replied, and her pelvis began rocking on its own, her walls massaging Ormek’s member gently, slowly. No need to hurry. They were just talking about school now. This wasn’t making love. This was just a conversation with their mouths, while

they engaged other parts of their bodies to solve a problem, as they had many times before, with Laura's explicit approval.

"I see . . ." Ormek said, struggling to form complete sentences. "I see . . . that your books are out. You must be working very hard."

Ormek grimaced, backed away, pushed forward again, shoving his cock quick and fast up Hannah's chamber, once, then again, and again.

"Oh, augh," Hannah replied softly. "Yes, Sir. Yes, Sir. I hope to take finals in . . . oh god . . . in a weeks or so . . . early . . . August . . . augh."

Ormek looked up at the ceiling, closed his eyes and grabbed the bars, his knuckles white, his jaw clenched, his neck muscles in sharp, fierce relief, and Hannah knew it was time, and she tightened around his spasming penis, embracing it as it exploded within her, Ormek's grunts turning to cries of panic as he sent jolt after jolt of his seed into her chamber.

"Oh!" Hannah shouted. "No, god no, no!" But her words could do nothing to stop her own arrival, her body racked by an orgasm so furious it felt like pain, and her screams blended with Ormek's cries of despair, the two of them cumming as one, and entirely separately, until the mystery was, for the moment, resolved, Ormek panting into Hannah's face, his penis still buried deep within her, nothing more for either of them to give to the universe, or to ask of it.

Ormek grimaced again, this time with what Hannah guessed were more complicated feelings, and he eased back until his penis dropped out of her hole. She looked down, saw it swing, glistening, a drop of cum at the tip, his softening shaft painted with the strange, raw cocktail of unprotected intercourse.

"Thank you, Sir," Hannah said softly.

He looked at her, clearly not sure of her meaning.

"For school," she clarified. "I will always be grateful."

He smiled.

"Is that why you did . . . this?" he asked, and there was a new look in his eyes. Her answer could break his heart, Hannah realized.

"No, Sir," she said. "It happened . . . because . . . because . . . I know . . . you felt it, the same as I did."

He half-smiled at her, the way Athena half-smiled, reminding Hannah that he was Athena's father, and he turned away, the elevator bumping.

Ormek was gone.

She had never kissed him, she reminded herself. Only talked. About school.

Hannah went to her toilet, wiped, urinated, wiped again, returned to her desk to eat the lunch Ormek had made her, cried briefly because he'd put her chicken salad on a large, carefully-chosen lettuce leaf, which he didn't have to do – or maybe she was crying over something else, she wasn't sure – and she wiped her nose and brushed her eyes with her fingertips and resumed her studies, refusing to consider the possibility that she had done anything wrong, that Laura would not approve.

But when the elevator bumped half an hour later, she jerked so suddenly she almost slid her book off the desk.

“Hannah?” Laura called.

“Yes, Ma'am?” Hannah replied, rising from her desk, moving to the bars, her heart thumping with an apprehension so deep she had to reach out to the metal to keep from falling over.

Laura rounded the corner, dressed only in bra and panties.

“Are you ready for your evening out?”

“Yes, Ma'am, but I'm a little nervous too,” Hannah said, relief washing over her. Laura was just here to check on things. “I've never been in a limousine.”

Laura looked at the sheet of paper on the wall next to Hannah's cage.

“Darcy hasn't examined in you three days.”

“No, Ma'am,” Hannah agreed, misgivings growing again.

“Hands in the brackets, please,” Laura commanded.

Hannah immediately complied, holding her hands in position while Laura clamped her wrists.

“Where does Darcy keep your thermometers?” Laura asked, and Hannah looked into the woman's eyes and saw something she'd never seen before, a sort of terrifying deadness.

“In . . . in a cup on her cart, Ma'am,” Hannah replied. “Which, I think it's in . . . on . . . in near the laundry room.”

“You seem very nervous,” Laura said. “Is it just about tonight?”

“Yes, Ma'am, sorry, Ma'am.”

“There's no reason to be sorry for being nervous,” Laura said, pausing for a terrifying moment. “Is there?”

“No, Ma’am, there isn’t,” Hannah agreed, and her world shrank down to the wall outlet where her clock was plugged in, the clock that rested on the table beneath the windows. Hannah noticed that the unused outlet was scuffed, a black mark next to one of the holes where the prongs were inserted, and she wondered what had happened there, if someone had kicked it with a black shoe or pump, or if a prong itself, the bare metal, could make a mark like that, if one of the many physics principles she didn’t know yet could cause that to happen. Or maybe it was the result of fire. Sometimes, a little flame could burst out of an outlet of its own accord and quickly extinguish itself, for reasons she didn’t understand. She’d seen it happen once, at one of the little efficiencies she and her mother shared. Mother told her not to worry about it, that it was the spirit of God.

Hannah had the vague sense that her cage door was being opened.

“Legs apart, and bend a bit for me, please,” Laura said.

Hannah obeyed by reflex.

“Which hole does Darcy check first?” Laura asked.

Hannah played the question over in her mind, studying the individual words so carefully their overall import was lost to her.

“Which hole, Hannah?” Laura asked.

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Oh, um, both.”

“Which first?” Laura’s voice was patient, icy, emotionless. Not completely human.

Hannah looked up at the window and the blue sky beyond it and brought her mind back to the present.

“My, um, my anus, Ma’am,” she stammered. “I’m not sure it matters, though.”

Hannah felt the tip of the thermometer at her rear opening, and she arched her back and winced as Laura inserted the instrument.

“And now, your . . . vagina,” Laura said.

There was something about the way Laura said the last word, pausing briefly, then almost spitting it out.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah agreed, waiting for what she knew was about to happen.

Laura’s fingers touched her lips, stroked her slit from her clitoris to her opening and then, in a single quick motion that made Hannah gasp, she spread her flesh and pressed one finger into her chamber, probing, stroking,

pushing against her walls, her long fingernail with its designer polish scraping the depth of Hannah's sex.

There was a sound. Hannah heard a sound. A wetness, the sound of fluid and flesh mixing in a tight space, so loud, so obscenely, deafeningly loud it left Hannah's ears ringing.

"Are you ovulating, Hannah?" Laura asked, withdrawing her finger.

"I don't believe so," Hannah replied, simply saying words now, forming sentences the way a robot would. "I finished my period on Wednesday."

"There seems to be a lot of fluid in your vagina," Laura said.

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said, searching for some additional word to say, some perfect explanation for why her vagina was full of . . . something. Her mind flailed, landed upon nothing except what she had already said.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Laura slipped the second thermometer into Hannah, sliding it up her female sheath, holding it there with one hand.

And then, there was a mouth sound. A smacking, or kissing sound. Was Laura tasting something? Was Laura tasting what she'd found in Hannah's vagina? Hannah shuffled on her feet, felt her bowels loosening, felt her stomach leap, as if both were preparing to empty their contents.

No no no, Hannah told herself, willing her body to cooperate. This too shall pass. This too shall pass. Don't think about Laura's mouth sound. It meant nothing. It was nothing.

The thought of losing control of everything was horrible on two levels to Hannah. It would be humiliating, but that was the lesser of Hannah's worries. The greater fear: vomiting, emptying her bowels while she stood secured here, would be tantamount to a confession to whatever it was Laura, in her veiled, obtuse way, was accusing Hannah of.

And both women knew exactly what Laura was accusing Hannah of.

The anal thermometer beeped but Laura ignored it, waiting until Hannah's vaginal temperature had registered with its own dulcet tone, then pulling both instruments out, examining the reading on each, pulling a wipe out of the dispenser to clean the thermometers, clean her hands, before recording the two numbers on Hannah's little health chart.

Laura closed Hannah's cage door, locked it, freed Hannah's wrists from the brackets.

“Make sure to finish your shower before 4,” Laura said.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And no,” she added, stepping away, turning toward the elevator.

“You’re definitely not ovulating.”

“Thank you for checking, Ma’am,” Hannah choked out, Laura’s only response the bumping of the elevator.

Chapter 28: Fuckyoubitch

Hannah heard the voice of Delilah before she saw her, Delilah's voice ringing out as soon as the elevator bumped open.

"Now, where are you going, then?" Delilah asked.

"St. Bart's," Athena replied. "Maybe New Punk. Maybe End of the World. And Dallas Hops."

Delilah rounded the corner as Hannah was rising from her desk.

"Oh, sweet heavens, Babydoll!" Delilah exclaimed. "You are going to kill them tonight. Just knock them all dead!"

Hannah smiled, her spirits lifting under the force of Delilah's indomitable spirit, and she stepped to the edge of her cage.

"You're not going to make me wait for a hug," Delilah said. "Just pretend the bars aren't here."

Hannah reached through, standing in the same place where, three hours ago, she had serviced Ormek, and where, less than two hours ago, Laura had taken her temperature, and looked into her eyes the way a corpse looks into someone's eyes. And violated her. And made a terrible, terrible mouth sound.

Delilah kissed Hannah's cheek, leaned back to study her face.

"What's wrong?"

Hannah tried to look innocent. Innocent and puzzled, as if there couldn't be anything wrong.

"Oh," Hannah said, feigning an unconvincing laugh, "I'm just super nervous about tonight."

Delilah stepped back to allow Athena to put Hannah in her shackles, put her hands on her hips and stared into Hannah's eyes until Hannah looked away.

Delilah knew. Delilah always knew, with a knowledge Delilah herself could not control. Hannah wanted more than anything else for Delilah to just ignore the signs of distress and be normal and fix Hannah up and leave. Nothing could be said. Not in front of Athena. Not in front of anyone. But Delilah knew – not the details, just that something terrible was happening – and Delilah was forced by an inconvenient inner sense of universal justice to demand answers.

Delilah was still staring, Athena still applying the shackles, so Hannah looked back into Delilah's eyes, looked down at Athena and looked

back up with a desperate expression that said, Hannah hoped, “Shut up, not here, not in front of her, not ever.”

Delilah understood, transitioning so quickly it almost made Hannah forget what had just happened between them.

“You’ve never been clubbing, right, Darling?”

“No, never,” Hannah said.

“What look are we going for, then?” Delilah asked while Athena unlocked Hannah’s cage.

“What are my options?” Hannah asked. “I don’t know anything about this.”

Delilah skipped to the elevator, pushed the up button, Athena and Hannah trailing behind. The door opened and she moved within, turning, her back against the wall, one hand under her chin.

“Well, there’s international spy, CEO, corporate lawyer, cover girl . . .” she said, looking up at the ceiling. “I can do country comes to town, psycho, soft butch, sweet bitch, femme fatale—”

Hannah laughed. It was all so ridiculous. She’d be in a silver subject collar, her role in life obvious to anyone who gave her a passing glance. And yet, imagining herself as someone else was like a tonic at this moment. Delilah herself was like a tonic, for that matter. Born male, declaring herself female as a teen, sold by her father immediately thereafter, she was the freest person Hannah knew. Her owners bought her to make people beautiful, and she was quite possibly the best in Dallas at it. The best in the world, perhaps. And she was deliciously, almost dangerously concerned about people. Particularly Hannah, it seemed.

Hannah needed this right now, she realized. As long as there were Delilahs in the world – even one – the terrible things that could be done to a slave girl by the woman she had betrayed almost didn’t matter. She smiled, forgetting everything else for a moment while she tried to decide, leaning for the moment toward cover girl or CEO.

“What the hell is psycho?” Athena asked.

The elevator door opened on the second floor, but Delilah held her place, looking dolefully at Athena.

“It’s not for you.”

“What is for me, then?” Athena demanded.

“Brickhouse, married to the mob, trans-Atlantic stowaway, hard bitch—”

“I don’t know what any of these are,” Athena said. “Just pick one.”

“Okay,” Delilah said, breezing out of the elevator, “hard bitch it is.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Athena demanded, following Delilah into the hall, Hannah trailing behind.

“Your look tonight is going to be hard bitch.”

“I know. Why did you pick it?”

“Because you asked me to.”

“You’re fucking with me right now, aren’t you?” Athena said, narrowing her eyes, stopping in the hall.

Delilah stopped, turned, stared at Athena with mock contempt. Or maybe it was real contempt, Hannah couldn’t tell. “I am always fucking with you, Sugar Tits.”

“Just tell me what hard bitch is, and I’ll decide if that’s what I’m going to be.”

“Here’s a hint,” Delilah said, resuming her walk to Athena’s bedroom. “I wouldn’t have proposed it a week ago.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“A little bird tells me you got your bell rung Thursday.”

“Yeah,” Athena agreed without breaking her stride. If it bothered her that something so intimate was being discussed by people outside the family, she gave no indication.

“Not that I needed a little bird to say anything,” Delilah continued. “One look at you this afternoon and I could tell.”

“Fine,” said Athena, pausing at her bedroom door, the merest hint of pride in her eyes, in her voice. “What’s hard bitch?”

Delilah crossed her arms and leaned against the wall.

“It’s the look for a girl who will fuck when she wants, and who won’t fuck when she doesn’t want, and anyone who doesn’t get that about our little hard bitch ends up with a number six stiletto in their crotch. The first thing hard bitch does when she walks into a room is to size up every man there for overall fuckability and general value, and if he’s on the list, she might talk to him, or she might put that stiletto to him just because. It’s the look that—”

“Okay, okay,” Athena interrupted. “Hard bitch.”

Delilah turned to Hannah.

“And what are you going to be?”

“International spy,” Hannah replied, feeling embarrassed and trying not to blush. If Delilah had offered any variation on slave girl, she would have taken it. Spoiled slave girl. Lost slave girl. Doomed slave girl. Lacking those options, international spy seemed like as good a choice as any.

Athena opened her door and Delilah moved immediately to her bathroom.

“Do you have a second chair?” Delilah asked.

“No,” Athena said.

“Can we use Hannah’s bathroom?”

“Whatever,” Athena said. “Her door’s unlocked.”

“Okay, let me start with her in there,” Delilah said. “And, Athena, I need just a little wave in your hair. Just a touch, at the ends. Curl inward, toward your neck. Can you do that for me, while I get started with Hannah?”

“Sure,” Athena said, sliding her chair into position, sitting down and simpering into the mirror.

Hannah followed Delilah across the hall to her bedroom, shackles jangling quietly against the carpet.

The bed was still a mess, the way Athena and Ramone had left it, and Hannah reminded herself to tell Darcy to wash the sheets.

Her eyes moved quickly to her laptop, waiting for her, and she looked away and felt an ache she couldn’t define.

Delilah shut the door, went into the bathroom, stood behind the chair and motioned Hannah to sit down.

As soon as Hannah was seated, Delilah stared into the mirror, and through it to Hannah’s eyes, her face tight, eyes wide with concern.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Hannah whispered.

“Why are you whispering?”

“I’m fine,” Hannah said.

“Liar.”

Hannah looked into the sink and her eyes filled with tears.

“Oh my god, I knew it,” Delilah said. “What is that bitch doing to you now?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Hannah stammered. “Wait, which bitch?”

Delilah tilted her head toward the door, smiled ironically. “Uh, Hard Bitch.”

“No,” Hannah said. “It’s not her.”

“Laura?”

Hannah bit her lip, looked up, confessing with her eyes through the mirror and through a fog of tears.

Delilah squeezed Hannah’s shoulders.

“Ormek,” Delilah said quietly. “And now Laura knows.”

It wasn’t a question, it was a statement of fact.

Hannah fought to control her emotions, but she could feel her chin shaking, the tears running down on either side of her nose.

“Babydoll,” Delilah whispered, “Babydoll. Goddammit. I don’t know what they expect. They cage you, they chain you, they loan you out for sex, they make rules even they can’t keep, and when something gets broken, it’s always your fault.”

Briefly, for a fleeting second, Hannah felt vindicated, even innocent. But then her mind went back to the specifics, to what she had done with Ormek, the way she had grabbed his penis and forced him into her body, the things she had said to him, about school, the way she had squeezed him through his climax. No one had made her do that. She could have told him no. He wouldn’t have complained or punished her.

Hannah fumbled with the designer box the Petrosyans had bought her, pulled out two tissues and wiped her eyes and her nose, staring into her face in the mirror, Delilah’s face above hers.

“Okay,” Hannah said with one more sniff, one more wipe. “That’s it. Fix me up. Make me an international spy.”

“You’re not going to be international spy,” Delilah said, angling over to look into the bedroom. “I was just pretending to give you a choice.”

“What then?” Hannah asked.

“Fuckyoubitch,” Delilah said. “Fuckyoubitch. All one word. Fuckyoubitch.”

Hannah stared blankly.

“It’s the only look I was ever going to give you tonight,” Delilah said. “But we don’t need Athena to know.”

“Well, she’s hard bitch.”

“Fuckyoubitch is better.”

“What is it, exactly?” Hannah asked.

“You’ll know it when you see it. How many girls are you going out with tonight?”

“I think a dozen or so.”

“All free?”

“I think so. I’ll be the only slave.”

“Fuckyoubitch,” Delilah said again. “You’re going to need it.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“I just needed to know what was going on,” Delilah said. “Let’s go back to Athena’s room and see how badly she’s botched her hair.”

Delilah dragged Hannah’s chair to Athena’s bathroom and Hannah settled beside Athena, Delilah going back and forth between the girls, maintaining a steady patter while she turned both girls into something deep, profound, otherworldly.

Hannah found that that watching her transformation took her mind off everything else, so she studied Delilah’s work carefully, still despairing that she could ever understand the art.

The focus for both girls was on their eyes, the liner going on thick, almost caked, but then Delilah would brush it, touch it with fingers that seemed magically deft, define it with a pencil. Then she highlighted cheekbones and noses and lips, touched up hair and sprayed it in place.

“Whatcha think, Babydoll?” Delilah asked, aiming Hannah’s face toward the mirror before turning back to Athena.

Hannah stared at herself in silence.

Fuckyoubitch.

Tonight, she would look at least 30, Delilah somehow adding a decade to her appearance.

Hers were the eyes of someone who had seen it all. Who had seen it all and found very little of it worth loving, or liking, or not hating. She looked weary but not beaten down, one of those people who were too good for this world, as if they’d been meant for a different, better, alternative universe, but something had gone wrong and they’d been sent here, and now they were doing their best, surviving, even succeeding, but with the constant sense that something was off.

Sometimes, Delilah’s work drove Hannah to tears. Today, Hannah felt nothing, just the emptiness that went with her new mask. Did she want to look like this? Was this who she was? She wasn’t sure. But today, it was her. All her.

Fuckyoubitch.

Bitch being, tonight, the universe, Hannah thought. From the Big Bang on.

“It’s beautiful,” Hannah said at last. It was a ridiculous word to use, but there was no good word for this. Hannah knew Delilah would understand.

Athena seemed equally satisfied with hard bitch, staring into the mirror when Delilah told her to, first looking straight on, then turning her head to look at herself sideways, then up and down, all the while experimenting with her mouth: smile, half smile, simper, frown, grimace, and then finally, hard bitch smile, teeth barely showing, upper lip curled in contempt.

Delilah stood back, folded her arms.

“Hannah, can I do your muff?”

Hannah looked down, her golden pubic hair not growing out of control, really, but unkempt enough that Delilah had noticed.

“How?” Hannah asked. “We don’t have one of those chairs.”

“On the bed. I do this all the time.”

“Show me,” Hannah said.

Delilah pulled a towel from the rod next to the shower, followed Hannah to Athena’s bed and spread the towel down at the edge.

“Lie down here, bottom at the edge of the bed, legs up.”

Hannah obeyed, raising her legs and spreading them as far as her shackles allowed, and Delilah retrieved a chair and her kit from the bathroom, planting herself before Hannah’s opened middle.

“Athena, think yours might need a little work too?” Delilah asked.

“Uh, we’re not going nude tonight,” Athena noted, and Hannah knew she was still admiring herself in the mirror.

“Well, if you don’t mind wearing the wilderness between your legs, that’s your call.”

“So you want me to take off my clothes for you, right?” Athena asked.

“Nude and spread,” Delilah replied without hesitation.

Athena said nothing, so Delilah turned to Hannah, ran her finger along the line of hair that defined a rough triangle over Hannah’s mound.

If Delilah could tell what had happened here earlier today, both the master and the mistress working their own things out within this hole, she wasn’t letting on. Nor did Hannah expect her to. Not with Athena here.

Delilah started with an electric trimmer, edging the hair neatly while Hannah tried not to flinch or laugh. Next, she trimmed everything, hair by hair in some places. Hannah closed her eyes until she heard the faucet at the bathroom sink running. She looked up and Delilah tilted her head and smiled. Hannah wasn't sure what was happening until Athena returned, still in her t-shirt but bare from the waist down, her pubic hair completely untended.

"Get a towel, Dear, I'll be ready for you in just a minute," Delilah said without looking up.

Athena disappeared, returned with a towel, spread it out and sat on it while Delilah put the finishing touches on Hannah's muff.

"All done," she said, sliding her chair over to Athena, who leaned back on her elbows, raised her legs and spread her thighs. As far as Hannah could tell, Athena was feeling no more embarrassment over this than anything else that had happened in the last few days.

"Aren't you going to make up a name for this too?" Athena asked, twitching slightly as Delilah marked off the edges of her black triangle.

"It's the same for every girl," Delilah said. "Sweet pussy."

"Not hard bitch pussy? Or international spy pussy?"

"No," Delilah said. "Once a man gets past the bitch, or the CEO, or whatever you are, they all get the same thing. Sweet pussy. There's no other kind."

"We're not going to be doing anything like that tonight."

"Doesn't matter," Delilah said. "This is just for you then." She leaned back, studied Athena's vulva, Athena watching the proceedings carefully.

"You've got a sweet little playground down here," Delilah observed.

"Uh, thanks. I guess."

"Was it good?" she asked.

"Yes. After he tore me. God yes. You know who it was, right?"

"That little bird was singing Ramone's name," Delilah said, and she turned her arms into little wings and sang, "Tweet tweet Ramone! Tweet tweet Ramone!"

Chapter 29: A Limousine, Liquor, and a Pill

Hannah, unshackled to put on her panties, returned to her restraints to don her bra, her little black dress, her heels, sat on Athena's bed and tried to study and tried not to think about anything but school while they waited for the limousine.

Athena sat at her desk and surfed the web, alternating between fashion websites and the pages for the places they might go that evening.

"End of the World has a treehouse inside," she said, turning her laptop so Hannah could see.

"That you can go into?"

"If you have a pass, yeah."

"What's the point?" Hannah asked.

"There is no *point*," Athena explained, scowling and speaking slowly, as if to a child. "It just is."

A little before 6:30, the girls heard a horn honk. Athena slid off the bed and peered out her window.

"They're here, let's go."

Hannah followed Athena to the elevator.

"Bye, Mom, we're going!" Athena said to her parent's bedroom door.

Athena pushed the elevator button.

"Um," Hannah said, looking down at her shackles.

"Oh, yeah," Athena said, opening a faux tiger-skin purse that Delilah said didn't match Athena's black dress and that Athena said she was taking regardless. She pulled out a key ring and knelt to open Hannah's cuffs.

Laura drifted out of her bedroom, moved toward the girls, her expression unreadable.

Athena slipped the shackles into her purse, and Hannah knew it was intentional, that Athena meant to bring the restraints, that Hannah could easily end up chained tonight, that her relative freedom would be a tenuous thing.

Laura hugged both girls with the same courteous sweep of her arms, but Hannah knew something was broken between them that could probably never be repaired.

In the elevator, Athena spoke quietly. “Mom seems weird today,” she said.

“You mean, just now?” Hannah asked.

“No, that was pretty normal, but earlier. She’s been in her room a lot today. I don’t know.”

They left the house through the front door, passed through the little door in the wall.

The driver had stepped out of the limo to stand beside the door to the back.

Hannah fought with her nerves as they approached the vehicle, the slanting evening sun still strong enough to make her skin glow.

The driver, in a dark suit and the cap that seemed to be required apparel for all limo drivers, put his hand on the door as the girls neared, but didn’t open it, his eyes focused on Hannah.

“Miss?” he said.

“Yes, Sir?”

“I’ll be responsible for you tonight,” he said. “Can you work with me?”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah replied. She heard a muffled scream from within the limo, followed by hysterical laughter, and her nerves ascended to their most jumbled state.

“You’ll do what I say?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“Let me give you a scan.”

Hannah offered her back to him and he held his phone over the little chip, buried in her flesh almost a year ago, that held all her most important subject data.

He looked at Athena.

“You needed to have her restraints,” he said, using a tone that suggested he was sure she’d forgotten them.

“I brought them.”

“Let me see them,” he said, and he turned his back on the limo, and Athena turned away as well, opening her purse, pulling out Hannah’s shackles, the new set designed for maximum comfort.

Back still turned, hands close to his chest, he looked over the shackles quickly, and Hannah realized he had turned so that no one in the

limousine could see what he was doing, presumably to preserve her dignity. It was a small gesture, but one she appreciated.

“If I tell you to put these on her, you do it, okay?”

“Yes, Sir,” Athena replied, summoning unusually good manners, the price of admission to tonight’s event.

“You brought keys?”

“Yes,” Athena replied, still politely.

Satisfied that Hannah was who she was supposed to be, and that Athena would be responsible, he opened the door, the voices of girls escaping unfiltered now.

Athena went in first.

The gasps, audible for Athena, were louder for Hannah, the nine girls within falling silent.

“Athena, fuck, who did you?” someone asked.

“Delilah,” Athena said, settling into a seat at the back of the vehicle, patting the space beside her for Hannah.

“My mom tried to get Delilah this afternoon,” someone else said. “I didn’t know you had her.”

“She has a thing for Hannah,” Athena said. “Anytime we call her, she comes. Oh, and this is Hannah, if anyone hasn’t met her.”

Hannah scanned the other faces, glad to see several she vaguely recognized, as well as regular acquaintance Sonja Abercrombie and, to her surprise, Jessica.

“Hey, everyone,” Hannah said with a small wave.

“Hey, Hannah,” several girls said, followed by laughter. Awkward laughter? Hannah wondered. Excited laughter?

“You didn’t tell me Jessica would be here,” Hannah whispered to Athena.

“She came back from France early,” Athena said. “And I wanted to surprise you.”

Jessica, chatting amiably to the girl beside her, seemed to sense Hannah’s eyes on her and she turned, stared back for a long, pregnant moment, her expression a summation of all that had passed between them. Hannah smiled, Jessica smiled, and the limousine pulled away from the curb, the cacophonous voices of 10 free, excited females – and Hannah – so loud she thought the roof of the limo might come off.

Every girl had her phone out for selfies, except for the phoneless Hannah, and by the time they reached their first stop, half a dozen girls had dropped beside or between Hannah and Athena, arms draped around Hannah's shoulders in most cases, for selfies and videos, many of which were livestreamed, or posted immediately to Look!.

The first destination was dinner, the girls escorted to a long table at a rustic barbecue place with paper napkins, called simply "Homeplace," Jessica hovering until Hannah chose a seat, immediately settling to her left, Athena on her right.

"Did you forget about me?" Jessica asked.

"No," Hannah replied. "How was Europe?"

"Fun, sexy, boring, in that order."

"Sexy?" Hannah repeated.

"Hannah?" Terion shouted from across the table. She was half black, half white, long hair bleached gold down to her shoulders. She was the evening's benefactress, the girl who got straight A's, whose father rented the limo.

Hannah looked at her and raised one eyebrow.

"What look is that?"

"Huh?" Hannah queried.

"What look did Delilah give you?"

"Oh," Hannah said. "Um, international, um, spy."

"That's not international spy," someone said at the end of the table.

"What did Delilah tell you it was, seriously?" someone else asked.

Hannah, realizing all the girls had been seated and the whole table was waiting for her to answer, hesitated.

In the silence, a girl seated two down from Terion spoke up: "I'd never let a girl with a dick touch my face," she announced, her words greeted with raucous laughter.

Hannah's cheeks burned, and she looked at the girl who had spoken, and as soon as the laughter had died down, she opened her mouth.

"Would you let a girl with a dick save your life?"

"Huh?"

"If the girl with a dick was a paramedic? Or a doctor? Would you let her save your life?"

"Well, yeah," the girl replied, to more laughter.

“So it’s just something weird about your face?” Hannah pressed.
“Dicks and your face?”

Someone gasped. Someone else whispered “oh my god” quietly, and then the table erupted, even the girl Hannah had humiliated laughing.

Hannah wasn’t trying to be funny. She was trying to use the verbal equivalent of a man’s size 15 boot, tossing it against the head of the girl who was at this moment the rudest, most repulsive human being on the planet.

“I told you!” Athena said, to the table in general, as if it were a single person. “You always know where you stand with Hannah. Oh my god!”

Why were they laughing?

For a brief, uncomfortable moment, Hannah looked at herself as she thought the others saw her. She was the only subject here. Subjects were humble, quiet, demure. Always in fear of being punished. Hannah wasn’t any of that. What was wrong with her? Something was missing. Something she needed. Maybe it was the reason things had gone the way they had with Ormek. Another, more docile slave girl would simply have turned and bent for the master of the home, over and over, for as long as she was his property. Something about Hannah had told Ormek the rules could be broken with her. Nothing was his fault.

If Hannah weren’t defective, she would have sent him and his enflamed penis away today. She wouldn’t have faced him. She wouldn’t have grabbed him and stuffed him up her sheath. She wouldn’t have said those ridiculous things about her studies.

Hannah felt an unease, almost like a sickness, borne of the sudden awareness of deep, personal flaws, and she turned to the menu, filled with colorful pictures of food that seemed to be all beef.

“Yes, sexy,” Jessica said, leaning over until her chin was on Hannah’s bare shoulder.

“What did you do?” Hannah asked, finding that the distraction of Jessica was better than the distractions of the menu. “I mean, who did you do?”

Jessica laughed.

“Two girls, one boy.”

“A boy?”

“He was there.”

“All French?”

“The boy was from Georgia. Like, America Georgia. The girls were French and Algerian.”

“How was the boy?”

“I liked it. I think I’m bi.”

“You’re not a virgin,” Hannah observed.

“Why do you say that?”

“You had a boy. I mean, I assume he —”

“You took it,” Jessica blurted with hurt in her voice. “You took my virginity.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“It doesn’t matter what goes up your pussy,” Jessica asserted. “I’ve thought a lot about this. It’s the feeling someone give you. And you . . .”

Jessica let her voice trail off, and she pretended to look at her menu. “I want to be with you again,” she whispered.

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“Just okay?”

“Or maybe no.”

“What do you mean?” Jessica demanded, turning back toward Hannah.

“You have to promise to not be an idiot this time.”

“It was my first time,” Jessica protested.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” Hannah said. “It’s not about experience. It’s about the other things you said. Promise that and arrange it with Athena, and I’d love to.”

“Okay, I promise.”

The girls ordered dinner and ate and chatted and laughed, the limo drive hovering against a bare part of a nearby wall, just beside the place where the wait staff picked up plates, as if it were designed for this purpose.

Hannah guessed he was in his mid-40’s. Solidly built, he gave off an air of discreet confidence, and she wondered if he’d always been a limo driver, and was certain he hadn’t been. He might not even be one now, not really. Perhaps he was a cop.

Her plate finished, Hannah stood, squeezed Jessica’s shoulder.

“Don’t leave without me,” she said. “I’m going to talk to my guard.”

She stepped up to the man without hesitation.

“What’s your name?”

“Edgerton.”

“Is that your last name?”

“Yes.”

“What else do you do?”

“Security services.” He fished a card out of his pocket, handed it to Hannah. “It’s the only thing I do.”

She glanced at it. It said “Dominique Edgerton. Security Analyst.”

“I don’t have a pocket,” she said, handing it back. “You get paid more than the average limo driver, right?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I’ve got a subject bond.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s like insurance. I take some classes, I pass some tests, and then, if a subject I’m responsible for runs off or gets hurt, insurance covers it.”

“So, they hired you because of me?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I got the job.”

“How much more do you get paid than someone who doesn’t have, um, that bond?”

“Varies. Three hundred. Five hundred.”

“What would you do if I ran away?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Because I want to know.”

“Report you.”

“Report me? That’s all?”

“Yeah, that’s all I’d need to do. Every cop and bountyman within a half mile would get the word. And your picture. Your little life of crime would last about 15 minutes.”

“Crime?”

“Escaping is a crime.”

“It shouldn’t be. You know that.”

“Not my problem,” he said.

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“Okay,” he replied.

“I’m not going to do that,” she said.

“I know.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you’re not dumb.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I couldn’t do my job if I couldn’t tell.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “I’m just going to the bathroom now.”

“I know.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I picked you up two hours ago and you haven’t gone yet. You’ve had a glass and a half of water and two Cokes. And you’re a girl.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” he said, surveying the table, looking back at Hannah. “No one’s ever asked me those questions before.”

“I’m curious about stuff.”

“I know.”

“Okay.”

Hannah sat in the stall, draining her bladder and pondering. Terion’s father – or someone – had spent hundreds more dollars to have a driver with a subject bond.

The girls – or at least some of them – wanted Hannah here.

As the evening’s decoration.

That’s what the selfies were for. That’s why she was invited. Any girl could hang out with friends. Only girls of a certain class could spend the evening with a beautiful sex slave, a human being whose value had been objectively established at what Hannah knew was a generally known figure: one million and one half dollars.

No one had given her any rules tonight, beyond those that applied to all subjects. She would be who she was. If Terion told her dad tomorrow morning that the extra money for their limo driver had been wasted, that Hannah really wasn’t much of an addition to the evening – that would be their problem. Hannah would be herself. It was a sort of freedom that not everyone had. Hannah knew that. She reminded herself to be grateful for it, and not be spoiled.

Night had fallen by the time they left the restaurant, the driver standing at the limo door, watching each girl enter.

The next stop was End of the World, a club with blaring music, seizure-inducing laser lights, a tree house, and far too many people.

After everyone got a blue wristband that identified them as too young to drink alcohol – and one of the bouncers discreetly scanned Hannah – all the girls went to the bar to order something non-alcoholic.

“Sip off the first inch or two and take it to next to the dance floor,” Athena shouted to Hannah.

“Why?” Hannah asked.

“Just do it.”

Hannah followed the rest of the crew to the edge of the human maelstrom, bodies moving wildly beneath what was, indeed, a full-scale treehouse. There were people in it, faces intermittently lit and in darkness, looking down at the dancers, looking across at their fellow treehouse occupants. No one was talking. That was impossible.

A boy appeared before Hannah with a tiny, clear bottle in his hand. He nodded to Hannah, gestured toward the bottle, and she raised an eyebrow.

He seemed to take that as a yes, because he tilted the bottle over Hannah’s coke and poured in what looked like water but Hannah knew was something else.

Some of the other girls – Terion, Athena – were getting the same treatment. After the liquid was poured, the boys put the bottles away and held out their hands, and the girls joined them on the dance floor.

Hannah took a sip, winced when she smelled and tasted the foulness of something very strong over the flavor of weakened Coke, and she allowed the boy to bring her to the floor, sipping her drink and swaying while he went through what looked to Hannah like an exercise routine. He was cute, in a red shirt that she guessed was his best, black pants that were too tight and probably his favorite pair.

The song over, the DJ started yelling something and the boy leaned in and shouted in her ear, “You’re very beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said, smiling.

“Are you available?”

“What do you mean?”

“Tonight? Are you available?”

“Available, as in my owners might loan me you so you can fuck me?” Hannah asked. “Available, as in you can do what you want to me because I’m a fucking sex slave?”

The boy just smiled, a little puzzled looking, and Hannah knew he hadn't heard most of her words. Nor had she meant for him too. She liked the noise in this bar. She could think out loud and her thoughts remained private.

She looked back up at the tree house, and its meaning became clear to her. If the world ended, people would live in trees. Like before. The tree house at The End of the World. It made sense. Hannah was getting dizzy.

Another song came on and Hannah swayed and drank again while the boy stepped closer, moved more slowly, but seemed for now okay with not having his question answered.

At the start of the third song, he shouted something else that Hannah couldn't hear, and then two more boys showed up, punched him, and one dragged him off, both laughing, while the new boy danced with her.

Hannah held up her drink expectantly. Slave or free, that was the price for dancing with her.

This boy – taller, smarter looking – pulled out a bottle of something brown, gave Hannah a long splash and swayed the way she did. She liked him more, and the mix of Coke and two alcohols was starting to taste good, and her balance was off, the hand holding her drink unsteady.

“Hannah, we're leaving!” Athena screamed as the song ended, her voice set at its shrillest pitch. “Now!”

Hannah, hoping the boy didn't mind that he got just part of one song to dance with Hannah, smiled and raised her drink, and he smiled back.

Athena grabbed Hannah's arm, led her back to the entrance, the rest of the girls gathering there, around the limo driver, who had probably been in the bar the whole time.

They exited into the street, still hot and humid, into the crowds milling about, waiting to get inside, or just needing to talk before they entered. The limo was parked half a block away, the girls running ahead, screaming, as if it were a final refuge. Hannah held back, finding the histrionics embarrassing.

“Do you always take drinks from men you don't know?” Edgerton asked her.

“Why, you going to offer one next?” Hannah blurted. His question had annoyed her, the liquor had loosened her tongue, and she looked at him with challenge in her eyes.

“No,” he said, “but sometimes they’ll put something—”

“Why did you ask me, and not the other girls?” she demanded.

“Because you’re next to me,” he said. “And you’re the only girl I’m driving tonight who’s talked to me.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“Stamos!” someone screamed up ahead, near the limousine.

“Stamos! Oh my god!”

It was the girl who had insulted Delilah, recognizing someone on the sidewalk down the street, and she screamed “Stamos!” again and ran to him, arms outstretched.

Edgerton opened the door for the girls, but he stared after the one that had run away, following her with his eyes as she hugged the person she was calling Stamos, and then, strangely, slipped into a building with him.

Athena and Hannah were about to enter when he pulled Athena aside and motioned to Hannah.

“Okay, I’m going to have to go get someone,” he said to Athena. “I need you to shackle her. Can you do that?”

“Yeah,” Athena said. It was all the same to her, obviously.

“There’s an eye in the floor at the front corner,” he said. “Put her chain through that.”

He looked at Hannah, said nothing, and she nodded back.

Edgerton dashed down the street at an impressive clip, considering how he was dressed, and Athena reached into her purse, following Hannah into the limo.

“He said something about an eye,” Athena said, trying to speak over the sounds of eight excited and now slightly tipsy girls.

Hannah stooped and walked to the front of the space, hoping no one would notice what Athena was about to do.

“Terion, we need your seat,” Athena announced.

“What for?”

“Well, Hannah needs it,” Athena said. “Move over a little.”

Terion slid over, and Hannah knelt, found the small loop of metal where, she guessed, slaves were fastened all the time. “Here it is.”

Athena knelt beside her, began working one end of the cuff through the eyelet while Hannah watched.

“It’s too tight,” she complained.

“That’s what she said,” someone announced.

“That’s what Athena said,” someone else clarified. “To Ramone.”

“Oooh!” several female voices said at the same time.

Athena ignored them, grunting as she worked the parts of Hannah’s open cuff through the eyelet.

“What exactly are you doing, Athena?”

“It’s for Hannah, I think,” Terion said.

The girls fell silent, and Hannah quietly died inside. Some of them belonged to families that owned slaves, some of them didn’t. But watching someone dressed like Hannah, made up like Hannah, worth what Hannah was worth, getting chained by the ankles – in a limo, no less – was a unique spectacle. Their silence as they watched the proceedings was worse to Hannah’s ears than if they’d all started calling her a slave whore in unison.

Athena got the cuff through at last and looked up at Hannah. Hannah plopped down and smiled, as if this were just another, ordinary part of the day, and Athena closed the cuffs around Hannah’s ankles and slid into the seat beside her.

“Where the fuck did Shirley go?” someone asked, mercifully, diverting attention to something other than Hannah.

“She saw an ex,” someone said. “And she wanted him to see her.”

“What a bitch. Like, ‘Look how special I am, and you’re not. I’m glad I broke up with you.’”

“He broke up with her, though. So she wasn’t rubbing it in. Technically.”

“She’s still a bitch. Just for general purposes.”

Hannah agreed but held her tongue and tried not to think about the metal around her ankles. She was chained because of Shirley. Shirley had gotten the last laugh. Unwitting revenge, perhaps, but revenge all the same, for what Hannah had said about dicks and Shirley’s face.

The door opened and Shirley clambered in, red-faced and smiling, and Hannah knew she was flushed with teenage passion and not embarrassment.

“God, Shirley, where’d you go?”

“I saw Turk.”

“Who’s Turk? You were screaming Stamos like he was fucking you blind.”

“Turk is his normal name, Stamos is what I call him,” Shirley said, and Hannah suspected she was enjoying the attention.

“He’s not even your boyfriend anymore.”

“I still have feelings for him.”

“You broke up with him.”

“Yeah, and I cried.”

“For two minutes probably, and then you jerked off and forgot about him.”

“Girls don’t jerk off.”

“Yes they do.”

“Boys jerk off. Girls pleasure.”

“Bullshit.”

“I guess you’re an expert.”

“You’re the biggest expert in the world.”

“Bullshit.”

The door shut, Edgerton declining to let Athena know she could free Hannah, Hannah silently seething. Things that were just a job to other people were everything to slaves, and no one cared, or even knew, often enough.

Shirley looked in her purse, looked around the limo, and Hannah followed her eyes, watching as they went to her feet and the cuffs around her ankles.

People had a sixth sense about this kind of thing. Something was different in the limo, and Shirley had sensed it and found it.

She could have asked loudly why Hannah had been chained. Maybe she knew, maybe she didn’t, but her eyes went back to her purse, and the usual sounds of girls cackling and shouting filled the limo, Hannah’s humiliation forgotten by everyone but her.

Hannah was finally freed at Dallas Hops, an upscale brewery where the girls could stare down at giant steel towers filled with things they weren’t supposed to drink for three or four more years.

There was no dancing here, so everyone ate fried pretzels and took sips from a surprisingly large bottle of vodka someone got from one of the boys at the first bar, possibly because the boy thought that would get him sex.

Edgerton was watching. Edgerton was always watching from whatever place he found at whatever bar they went to. Hannah tipped the

bottle up at her mouth and glared at him, daring him to stop her. He just looked.

Then they all talked about how lame everything was until they finally decided to leave and all of them clambered back into the limo.

It was after 11 and the steam was going out of the evening, the alcohol just deadening them now, the girls quiet, staring into their phones, barely talking, as they headed to their last bar, St. Bart's.

That's when the purses opened and Hannah heard a new sound, the rattle of prescription bottles, accompanied by a language she barely understood.

"Pixie curls, curls what ails ya!" one announced.

"Did anyone bring the new sideways?"

"My mom just started taking them, and she watches them like a hawk. Trust me, I tried."

"Three topsy turvies here, first come, first served."

"A month's supply of Loegrain!"

"The powers of Atlanta!"

"No, it's the powders of Atlantis."

"Uh, the powders of Olympus, try?"

Several bottles of water made the rounds, girls popping things into their mouths and upending the bottles in two quick motions.

Athena followed suit when the water reached her, putting something on her tongue, washing it down.

"Here," she said, holding out a small purple pill to Hannah.

"What is it?" Hannah asked. It had six sides. A hexagon.

"Propecia," someone declared, looking at Hannah and laughing.

"Doorbells," someone else said. "That postman only rings once."

"Viagra!" someone shouted.

"That won't do Hanna any good."

"Female Viagra," another voice countered.

"Trust me," Athena deadpanned. "She doesn't need that either."

The laughter quickly turned to shrieks, the climax of the night, the moment that everyone would talk about tomorrow. At Hannah's expense.

With a few choice words, Athena had pointed out the elephant in the limousine. They'd all been barhopping with a sex slave, a girl barely older than they, who did more sex in the average week than all of them had done all their lives combined. Tonight, they were treating her like a peer,

but they all knew – they all knew – what she was, what she did, how she lived.

And now, Athena had brought it out into the open, ripping the bandage off the perpetual wounds of female adolescence and lust and mystery and confusion, and what other people did because they were allowed to or required to or something in between, and now all the girls could laugh the way they'd been waiting to laugh. Or was it laughter? Something about the screams reminded Hannah of the sounds she sometimes made with Ramone, that she smothered against his shoulder.

“Take it,” Athena insisted.

Hannah looked at the pill, put it in her mouth, took the bottle of water from Athena, swallowed.

What was it? Athena had taken one. Surely it wasn't poison.

Hannah had virtually no memory of the actual final bar they visited. It wasn't that she blacked out. It's just that her experiences had nothing to do with any reality she was familiar with.

She remembered girls shouting for no reason. And someone – Terion or Shirley or one of the girls whose names Hannah couldn't recall at this moment, standing in line for the restroom, in a dark, narrow hallway – who pulled her dress down in the front, showing off her left breast briefly to the other girls, for reasons that would remain forever unknown.

And then Athena – Athena – pulled up her dress in front and pushed down her panties, to show off the work Delilah had done on her pubic hair.

It made perfect sense, in a way. Tonight was a night of many things, but fashion was high on the list. And pubic hair was fashion, of a sort. And Delilah had done a fashionable job on that part of Athena's anatomy. So not showing off Delilah's work was almost a violation of the evening's unwritten code. Athena did it because she had to.

The other girls looked. Someone agreed that Delilah had done a good job. Shirley said she was reconsidering using Delilah's services, but she was so expensive, and Hannah understood, in her diminished state, that Shirley's family wasn't wealthy, and her comment about Delilah and dicks was just a cover for relative poverty, and sometimes the terrible reason people gave for something wasn't the true reason at all, and Hannah felt she could apply that knowledge to other things, to what people said and did, maybe even to what was going on with Ormek and Laura, and then she

thought about what had happened earlier that day with the two of them, and Laura's mouth sound, and she suddenly felt nauseated and she tried to remember what she'd just discovered and couldn't.

On the drive back to everyone's homes, someone moaned, someone knocked frantically on the window behind the driver's head, the limo pulled over, the door opened, a girl left the limo. It took all of two seconds in Hannah's mind, from the initial moans to the opening of the door. But the next moment seemed to last an hour, Edgerton with his hand on the girl's back while she bobbed and retched on the side of the road, intermittently lit and in darkness as cars passed, all the evils she'd taken into her body spilling back into the world, into the gravel and weeds on the shoulder of the highway.

Then they were home, after midnight, which was past their curfew, but Hannah knew no one would care.

Athena escorted Hannah to her cage, locked her in, left and turned off the light, saying nothing, nor taking Hannah's dress.

Hannah stripped on her own, draping her dress over the cross bars, dropping her panties beside the toilet, urinating, flushing and collapsing on her bed, not even bothering to brush her teeth.

Chapter 30: A Verdict for the Morning After

It was agreed that Hannah and Athena wouldn't be going to church, so Ormek and Laura stayed home too, and someone set a plate of food outside Hannah's cage, which she noticed first by smell when her swollen eyes opened and she realized the morning was well on its way.

Ten-thirty in the morning, according to the clock. Hannah had slept more than 10 hours.

She felt horrible. Not like she wanted to throw up. Just weak and tired and wishing she could keep sleeping, but when she closed her eyes, the cage spun and her mind whirled, so she staggered to her toilet to pee, studied the panties at her feet, the little black dress perched like a giant black bird on the cross bar, waiting for her to die; the breakfast plate, which seemed to hold eggs and fruit and a pastry, none of which she wanted.

Her mind went next to a review of the preceding day. There had been a limousine. Girls. Some she knew, some she didn't. Athena. Athena had shown everyone her pussy. Or at least, her pubic hair. And she'd made a joke about Hannah's sexuality. That Hannah had a penis. No, that Hannah didn't need female Viagra. Everyone laughed. Someone threw up. There was liquor. Something brown, something clear. Vodka. There was a pill. Yes, there was a pill. Hannah took it.

Hannah had been drunk before, or at least extremely tipsy, but this was different. Liquor and a pill. The last bar was a blur. There were strange memories. Of Athena, and others too. Someone's breast. Someone's screams. Boy's faces appearing, disappearing. One boy was upside down. Or was Hannah? One looked like Ormek. No, Ormek was earlier in the day.

Ormek.

Laura.

Oh, God.

Hannah slid off the toilet without flushing, dropped to her hands and knees, trying not to imagine how she looked right now, a naked girl on all fours, collared, like a dog, next to a toilet, suffering through the aftermath of a day in which she had indulged her greatest weaknesses, the consequences still unknown, and terrifying.

Oh, God.

Eat something.

She crawled to the bars, gazed at the food.

The pastry almost looked good. And there were two little sausage patties next to the eggs. She reached for them first, put one into her mouth, chewed sitting up, laid down and kept chewing.

She ate until almost 11, finishing everything but the eggs, and she went to her toilet again, head in her hands, hoping no one would show up.

Hannah was back in bed when the elevator bumped at 11:20.

“Hannah?”

It was Athena’s voice.

“Yeah?” Hannah said weakly, sitting cross-legged, a book spread out before her that she was trying to read.

Athena appeared, makeup smeared on her face, eyes puffy, a long t-shirt, and probably panties on underneath.

“They know about the pills,” Athena said.

“What pills?” Hannah asked.

“The pills we took.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, unconcerned.

“God, the parents know we took pills, okay?” Athena said, her irritability growing with every word.

“Oh.”

“But you and me didn’t.”

“Yes we did,” Hannah replied, trying to be helpful. “They were blue or purple or something, and you took—”

“No,” Athena said, her mouth clenched so tightly Hannah thought her teeth might break. “We. Did. Not. Take. Any. Pills.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, understanding. This was a lie. Athena was lying.

“Well, I didn’t see you take anything. But I did,” Hannah said, deciding that a lie about perception was more acceptable than a lie about actions.

“No. You. Didn’t,” Athena said, teeth still clenched.

“I did, it’s okay, I—”

“I told Mom and Dad neither of us took anything. I swore it.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. She looked down at her book. Her cage was spinning again, and her mind was working slowly. But now she was piecing things together. Athena had come down to tell her about the lie, to coach her, to tell her she needed to lie too.

“No,” Hannah said.

“No, what?”

“No, I will not like to your parents. No.”

Arguing with Athena was always a stimulant to Hannah, just difficult enough to be entertaining, and she felt her strength returning, her mind clearing, the spinning of her cage slowing.

“You have to,” Athena said icily.

“Too bad,” Hannah said. “I won’t.”

“Mom says if you took a pill, it’s a big deal.”

“What does that mean?”

“Like . . . serious. You know.”

Hannah stared at her feet, wiggled her big toe and watched it move, and felt the blood draining from her face.

Okay. Okay. This could be bad.

But when she looked back up at Athena, her eyes and her voice were resolute.

“I’m not going to lie,” she said.

“I shouldn’t have taken you,” Athena said, a grim smile across her face. It was the most cutting thing she could think of, Hannah knew. To be excluded, not invited, left out. For Athena, this would be like dying. For Hannah, it meant nothing. This is something Athena didn’t understand about Hannah.

“I wish you hadn’t,” Hannah said.

Now Hannah smiled grimly, staring at Athena, recalling new layers of the evening, her fear and her rage building into a combination of things she couldn’t control.

“And you didn’t want me there anyway,” Hannah said, rising from her bed. “You just needed a decoration. Someone with a collar, so everyone would know you and all your little bitch friends were rich enough to go out with a slave.”

Athena just stared, something approaching horror in her eyes now.

“Did it impress the boys? Do you think the boys liked you more because you were with me? Did your friends like that joke? That joke about . . . about female Viagra? Do they all think I’m a slut? That I’m a whore? Was—”

Hannah grabbed the bars of her cage and shook them impotently, Athena stepping back, out of range of Hannah’s arms.

Hannah's throat closed on the rest of her words and opened again to let out the harsh, pathetic sounds of a weeping girl with a scratchy throat, and she turned and swept backward and collapsed on her bed and screamed into her pillow.

Hannah cried quietly, great black drops of washed off mascara falling onto her pillow, so she wiped her nose and her eyes on the sheets, admiring the black smears and thinking about how angry Darcy would be about them.

Athena was gone.

Hannah sat up, staring numbly at the clock, unable to move, to study, to do anything but watch the clock tick down the minutes: 11:45. 11:57. 12:03. 12:20.

She shouldn't have said those things to Athena.

But Athena shouldn't have asked her to lie about taking a pill. What if Laura had her blood drawn? Taking a pill was a small crime, lying was big.

Athena reappeared at 12:35, Hannah's shackles in her hand.

"Lunch time," she said, her voice neutral.

"What's going to happen to you?" Hannah asked, stepping to the bars, looking up at the windows and the blue sky while Athena restrained her.

"Like you care."

"I do," Hannah said. "And . . . I'm glad you took me last night. It was fun."

"I'll probably be grounded for two weeks," Athena said. "There's a party next weekend. And—"

"What's going to happen to me?"

"I don't know."

Darcy was in the kitchen, putting lunch together, and Hannah ambled past her and sat, quietly, across from Athena.

Ormek appeared next.

"I understand you girls had quite the time last night," he said plainly, just trying to make conversation.

"Yes, Sir," Hannah agreed. "It was very nice."

Darcy set out plates of meatloaf and salad and Hannah focused on the salad.

Laura entered next, still in her bathrobe, and she sat and began eating, saying nothing, not looking up.

Hannah waited, barely touching her food, just going through the motions of eating, wanting nothing more than to finish lunch and back go to her cage.

But midway through the meal, Laura spoke.

“Hannah?”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“We got a call from Mrs. Semper this morning.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“She noticed that some pills were missing last night, and she asked her daughter about it, and her daughter confessed that she took the pills, and some other girls stole pills too, and everyone took them last night.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Athena says she didn’t take any pills, and you didn’t either.”

“I did take pills. Or, just one pill.”

“Did you drink?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I did.”

“What pill did you take?”

“I don’t know. It was purple. It had six sides.”

“Who gave you the pill?”

“Athena did, Ma’am.”

“How did it make you feel?”

“A little dizzy. I sort of didn’t . . . I sort of didn’t always know what was happening at the last bar we went to.”

“So you mixed alcohol and an unknown pill.”

“I did. It was very irresponsible. I wish I hadn’t. I’m sorry.”

Laura reached into her bathrobe pocket, pulled out two sheets of paper, stapled in the upper corner. It was the contract Hannah had signed on the day she was bought, almost a year ago. Laura slid it across the table to Hannah, and Hannah smoothed it out and glanced over it, remembering the day she’d signed it, her last day waking up in the place they called the stacks before she was brought home, to the Petrosyans.

“What does that fourth term say, Hannah?” Laura asked.

“Oh,” Hannah said, her stomach knotting around what little food it held. She flipped to the second page of the document, saw where she’d signed it, turned back to the first page.

“It says, um, ‘You will take care of yourself physically and mentally, alerting us if you notice anything amiss and accepting any care provided. You will not harm or endanger yourself in any way. Cutting, taking non-prescription narcotics and unnecessary risk-taking are strictly forbidden.’”

“What do you think of all that, Hannah?” Laura asked.

“I think it makes sense,” Hannah said. “It’s to protect me. And I broke it, and—”

“What does the ninth term say?”

“Um, oh, uh, ‘Should you be disobedient, we promise to punish you fairly and consistently. In the event of an infraction, you will receive a clear description of how you have fallen short, and will be given a chance to explain yourself prior to being punished. Punishments may include but not be limited to verbal reprimand, loss of rewards or privileges, additional confinement, additional restraints, corporal punishment, and sale.’”

“Would you like to explain yourself?” Laura asked.

Hannah looked up into Laura’s eyes, trying to convey all the contrition she felt.

“I don’t think I can explain myself,” Hannah said. “I broke a rule. I have no excuse. I did it on purpose.”

“You did,” Laura agreed. “How should we punish you?”

“Oh,” Hannah said, and her eyes went to the contract, and she saw the word “sale,” and felt her throat close. Was that what this was about? Was Laura going to sell Hannah? For a pill? Or for other reasons, that couldn’t be spoken of out loud?

“I don’t think I should be sold,” Hannah said, eyes filling with tears as the terror of the unknown overtook her. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. Please. I—”

“We’re not going to sell you,” Laura said, and she smiled for the first time.

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

“But you understand how serious this is.”

“I do.”

“What do you recommend then?”

“Well . . .” Hannah said, wiping her eyes with her fingers, pushing her hair behind her ears and looking at the other consequences in the contract.

This was way beyond verbal reprimand, she knew. “Additional confinement?” Hannah offered. “Additional restraints? I could stay in, um, my shackles, in my, um, space, and you could —”

“I don’t think that’s enough,” Laura said.

“Oh, um, um, corporal, um, punishment?”

Laura just looked at Hannah, waiting.

“Would I go to that place again?” Hannah asked, her voice quaking now with shame and dread.

“We could take care of it here,” Laura said quietly.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said, understanding now. She was going to be beaten. She was going up to the room on the third floor, specially built for the purpose. She’d only been there once, just to see it, when Allain was giving her a tour soon after she arrived. She’d never been there to be punished.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said again, wiping her eyes, resigned to her fate, almost relieved now. It would have been much easier if Laura had just told Hannah up front she was going to be taken upstairs and beaten. But then, Laura liked to do things a certain way.

Hannah looked at Athena, who was just staring at her plate, no more interested in her food than Hannah was.

“Mr. Ortega will be here at 3 today,” Laura said.

“Mr. Ortega?”

“He’ll manage your punishment.”

“Oh. Yes, Ma’am.”

So Laura had already scheduled him. Hannah’s fate had been determined well before Laura had played out her little drama over lunch. Hannah held her fork over her plate, her knuckles going white. Were people like Mr. Ortega just waiting by the phone, for it to ring, checking their calendars to see when they were free to make someone else suffer?

“You’ll need a witness,” Laura said. “Who would you like it to be?”

“Oh,” Hannah said, remembering what she’d been told, almost a year ago, about Raven’s visit to the room. Laura had supervised that session.

“Could it be . . .” Hannah stammered. “Could Athena . . .”

Hannah looked at Athena. Athena continued to stare at her plate.

“Your partner in the crime,” Ormek said quietly, and Hannah wondered if he was speaking just to say something, waiting for an

opportunity to make some noise, so it would seem like he was in agreement with all this, that he understood Hannah needed to be punished, because he had no feelings for her, he wasn't in love with her, he didn't see her as anything but a slave, as a pleasure hole.

"Yes, that will be fine," Laura agreed. "Athena will witness."

Hannah took a bite of food. Darcy's meatloaf was actually surprisingly good, flavored with something unusual, jalapeños, perhaps, and Hannah's appetite was coming back. Now she knew what was going to happen. Or at least the rough outlines. Uncertainty was worse than knowing, even if the knowledge was difficult.

"Ma'am?" Hannah said.

"Yes?"

"How much, um, will I, um . . . from Mr. Ortega?"

"He'll determine that."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Hannah looked toward the kitchen. Darcy was hovering by the door, ostensibly waiting for empty plates to pick up, but Hannah knew she'd heard much, if not everything, and she was enjoying every minute of it.

As soon as lunch was over, Athena brought Hannah back to her cage, removed her shackles and hung them on the peg.

Hannah believed there was nothing more to be said. This was simply one of those things that happened, and you got through it. Unless Mr. Ortega was a flaming sadist – not an impossibility, given the career path he'd chosen – worse had been done to Hannah. She'd survive.

"Be back at 2:30," Athena said.

"What for?"

"To take you up."

"He's coming at 3."

"He wants you ready for him. And I have to figure some stuff out."

"Like what?"

"He texted Mom some instructions."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, just what to do before he shows up."

"What did he say?"

"I don't know."

"Yes you do."

“I’ll be back at 2:30, and we can figure it out then.”

Athena turned and left. She didn’t want to talk about this. Neither did Hannah, but it was her body that was going to suffer.

She needed to study. She needed to work math problems. If what was done at three hurt bad enough, would she forget everything she’d learned in the hours before? Is that what pain did? Or could the pill have made her dumber? She felt stupid right now. Maybe it was permanent.

She went to her toilet, grabbed a handful of tissue from the roll, got a book off the desk, sat on her bed, wiped her eyes and tried to study.

Chapter 31: Mr. Ortega

Hannah stopped being able to do anything at 2:20, although Athena didn't show up until 2:35, stepping wordlessly to the peg that held Hannah's full restraints: wrists, ankles and a chain connecting them.

Hannah went to the bars, watched Athena close the cuffs around her wrists.

"We're just going upstairs, right?"

"Yeah. Mr. Ortega said put you in these to bring you up."

"Is he here yet?"

"No, he's getting here at 3."

"Then how do you know what he wants?"

"He texted Mom, remember? Hello?"

"What does he want, then?"

Athena opened Hannah's door and Hannah shuffled after her to the elevator.

"I don't know," Athena said. "I'll show you."

"That's two different things."

"Will you please just shut up and let me do this?"

"I want to know."

Hannah followed Athena into the elevator. Athena hit the button for the third floor.

"You chose me to witness. If you wanted all this information, you should have picked someone else."

Hannah fell silent. Athena had won this round, which happened sometimes when Hannah was stressed.

They reached the top floor and Athena led Hannah out, down the hall.

This floor was stuffy, hot, the hallway narrow and not at all luxurious, just an extra space for storage, and maybe a guest or two if the Petrosyans had more visitors than they could accommodate downstairs. Sometimes Allain's college friends stayed up here. More than once, Hannah had serviced them up here.

And then, this was also the floor with what Athena called the mean room, a room for punishment that all large new houses featured. There wasn't an official term for something so hideous, only a shifting set of euphemisms that Hannah heard in passing from the news or the Petrosyan's

friends: Subject control room was sometimes used. Training room. Correction room. Discipline chamber.

Athena opened the door and let Hannah pass in first, and Hannah hit the light switch and shivered, despite the heat. It was how she remembered it from the year before, windowless, brightly lit, with a tiny cage in the corner, too small to do anything but stand within, heavy boards against the wall and on the floor, with rings at the upper and lower corners. There was a post in the middle of the room, with rings attached as well, at shoulder level, at hip level, high overhead.

“He wants you over here,” Athena said, pointing to the board against the wall.

Hannah shuffled over and stood.

“I’m supposed to tie you.”

“I’m already chained.”

“To the board.”

Hannah was being intentionally dumb. But Athena, who normally reacted with sarcasm anytime she felt Hannah didn’t know something obvious, wasn’t taking the bait this afternoon. Hannah wanted a reaction, something that felt normal, something that reassured her Athena was with her in this.

Athena went to the cabinet, opened the doors and, despite herself, Hannah stared at the contents. At least a dozen whips and rods, of various sizes and lengths and thicknesses, hung on one side. Hannah tried to imagine the store that would sell such things. Were there salespeople there, who talked about which rod worked the best for which infraction? Which whip hurt the most?

And who bought these things? Laura? Ormek? Or did it all come with the house?

Athena poked around in the cabinet, opened a drawer, pulled out several lengths of rope, looked at her phone, stepped to Hannah.

“Let me see your phone,” Hannah said.

“No.”

“What are you going to do, then?”

“Tie you to these rings, okay?”

Athena checked her phone again.

Hannah tried to see what it said, couldn’t because of the angle. There was a functioning clock on the wall, second hand sweeping around. It

was 2:50.

Athena looped a length of rope around the upper right ring, looked at her phone again, knotted the rope. She pocketed her phone, unlocked Hannah's right wrist.

"Raise it up toward the ring."

Hannah lifted her hand and Athena tied it in place.

"You'll be facing the board," Athena said, unchaining Hannah's left wrist.

"I know."

"Hand up."

Hannah turned, face against the board, nipples touching the cool wood, and Athena repeated the process, securing Hannah's other hand to the ring, then stooping to remove her ankle chains.

"Legs apart."

"Okay. Like this?"

"Yeah."

Athena tied Hannah's feet to the lower rings.

Hannah, legs and arms spread out, had been secured firmly but not stretched tight, and she leaned back, pulled on her bonds, wondered if she could free herself with enough effort, and what would happen if she did. Athena would just tie her tighter, of course, and she'd probably get more punishment.

"That's it," Athena said.

"Why couldn't you tell me?"

"I didn't feel like it," Athena said.

It was 3:03. Mr. Ortega was late.

Now came the waiting.

Hannah leaned back to look at the board, noticed that there were streaks in the thin film of dust that coated it.

"Did Darcy dust up here?"

"Huh?" Athena asked, standing to Hannah's side, pulling her phone out.

"Did Darcy dust up here? Today?"

"Why does that matter?" Athena asked.

"So she did? Today?" Hannah repeated.

"Why do you care?"

“I don’t know,” Hannah replied. Her mouth had gone dry, and she was struggling to speak, but she wanted to talk, because she didn’t want to wait for pain in silence. “It just seems strange. Like, ‘Darcy, go dust that room upstairs. For Hannah.’”

Athena, clearly not interested in answering, typed into her phone. Was she texting friends? Talking about last night? Or planning the next party?

“In case you’re wondering,” Athena said, “I’m just letting everyone know that I won’t have my phone for, like, the next 10 years or so.”

“Sorry.”

Hannah heard Laura’s voice, in the hall. Then a man’s voice that wasn’t Ormek’s.

The door opened.

“She’s right in there,” Laura said. “Thank you.”

Mr. Ortega grunted, stepped into the room, shut the door. Hannah turned to look at him. She thought he would be Hispanic, but he looked almost Chinese, and her mind went of its own accord to pondering if Chinese people were crueller than Hispanic people in these matters. Her heart was pounding, her left wrist starting to sting because Athena had tied it too tight.

Mr. Ortega set a bag down on the floor. Hannah studied it. It was a duffel bag, big enough to hold all the misery in the world.

He stepped over to Hannah, standing to the side, so she could see him. He seemed to expect her to look at him.

“Tell me what you did.”

“I took a pill I wasn’t supposed to take last night,” Hannah confessed. Just get this over with, please, she said to herself.

“What’s your name?” he asked Athena.

“Athena.”

“How do you know this girl?”

Athena laughed. The question was strange, but she eventually fumbled through an answer. “Uh, I see her every day. Uh, I’ve known her for almost a year, since my parents bought her.”

The man went to his bag, pulled out something, long leather thongs dangling toward the floor, swaying as the man walked, each thong tipped with a small white knob, of plastic, or metal, or bone. Hannah looked away.

He stood behind her and she closed her eyes. She felt him checking her ropes, inspecting Athena's work, apparently satisfied. Then he touched her back, her shoulder blades, pressing on the skin over the bone.

"Will you tell me what you're going to do?" Hannah asked, her voice shaking.

"What you wanna know?"

"How many?" Hannah said.

"I don't know."

This was a terrifying answer, and Hannah struggled to stay calm.

"When will you know?"

The man said nothing, but she heard his feet shuffling behind her, then Athena sucked in her breath audibly, then something came fast and cruel across both of Hannah's shoulders, and she yanked at her ropes and cried out.

"Ow, Jesus!" Hannah cried. "Please, just—"

Another blow landed across Hannah's shoulders.

"Oh, god, no!" Hannah cried. "Please stop!"

The man touched Hannah's back again.

"Why are you touching me?" she asked.

"The lady told me not to break the skin," he said. "You have thick skin. But still, I want to be careful."

Hannah stared at the grain of the board, noticed that it was almost white here in one place under her chin, a white streak bounded by darker wood, and she wondered why wood did that.

The third blow landed across the middle of her back, and she flinched forward, hitting her breasts so hard against the wood they hurt, and she drew in her breath.

"Oh, God!" Hannah cried. "How many? Stop! How many?"

Mr. Ortega said nothing, just struck the small of her back this time.

"How many?" she screamed. "Stop!"

He was working his way down her body, Hannah realized, the next two blows of the whip crossing her bottom.

"God, help, help!"

Hannah looked up at her hands in a blind animal panic now, tugging against the ropes, trying desperately to free herself as he struck the back of her opened thighs twice, the end of the whip curling cruelly around

her left leg on the second blow, popping the flesh just inches below her vulva. Then, two more strikes, against her calves.

“Stop it, damn!” Hannah screamed.

The man stepped over to his bag, put the whip in, pulled something else out.

“What are you going to do now?” Hannah asked, voice high-pitched, terrified.

If she could free her hands, she thought, or even one, she could untie the other, and free her feet, and turn and talk to him about what he was doing, explain that he needed to stop. Or maybe she could at least negotiate a reduction in her sentence.

But Athena had done her work well, the bonds not yielding, and the man stood behind Hannah, and she heard a quiet pop. She tried to turn and look but he was directly behind her.

She felt a hand on her shoulder.

“No!” Hannah screamed reflexively.

Hannah felt something cool against the stinging places on her skin.

“Aloe and some oils,” he said quietly, as if to himself, speaking the way one speaks when tending to an animal – or a plant.

He spread more of the liquid on the other places where it stung, and Hannah guessed he was guided by her welts, by the raised, red marks of her tortured flesh.

If the whip had left a welt on the inside of her thigh, he didn’t seem to notice it, and she decided not to mention it, not wanting to be touched by him there.

The man went back to his bag, zipped it up, hoisted it over his shoulder, opened the door.

“Let her rest,” he said, turning to Athena. “Don’t work her for two hours.”

Hannah, slumped against the board, suspended by her wrists, the sting of the whip waning, the humiliation of what had just been done to her gnawing at her soul.

Don’t work her for two hours.

What did that mean? Did he think Hannah carried water, drew a cart, plowed fields?

“Don’t work her.”

Hannah heard Laura's voice from the hall, saying something, the man responding, then he shut the door and Hannah heard nothing more.

So Laura had been out there, lurking, listening.

Of course. This wasn't just about the pill. This was about Ormek too.

What jealous wife wouldn't want to hear her rival, the other woman, screaming in pain and fear? Even if the other woman was a teenaged girl she owned?

Hannah felt Athena's fingers at her ankles, loosening the ropes, releasing them. Then her hands went free.

She turned, rubbed her wrists while Athena picked up her chains.

As Hannah was returned to her restraints, she studied Athena's face. The girl looked paler, older, more tired than a girl her age should ever look. Her eye makeup still clung thickly.

"You look like a raccoon," Hannah said. "So I probably do too. I haven't even looked in the mirror today."

Athena looked back at Hannah, puzzlement in her eyes.

"Are you delirious?"

"No. Just bouncing back."

"What does that mean?"

"You should have it done to you sometime. It's awful, and then you come out on the other side."

"No thanks."

"Part of the punishment is not knowing," Hannah said, speaking slowly, flatly, talking because she found silence now worse than conversing. "Mr. Ortega didn't say anything, so you don't know what's going to happen. And then when it's over, you know everything."

Back in the elevator, Athena finally said what needed to be said.

"I'm sorry for making you take that pill."

"I put it in my mouth."

"Just let me apologize."

"Okay," Hannah said. "Apology accepted."

Hannah paused.

"I'm sorry for calling your friends bitches."

"They're your friends too."

"I don't know them as well as you do."

“You went out with them on a Saturday night. You made them laugh. They liked you. They’re your friends too.”

“Okay. And they’re not bitches. They’re nice. Even Shirley.”

“And then there’s Jessica.”

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed. “She wants to be with me again.”

“Want me to set it up?”

“Sure.”

Chapter 32: A Vision with Mother

On the Monday after the worst weekend in Hannah's recent memory, although not the worst weekend of her life, Hannah had lunch with her mother.

They met at the club, on the top floor of a Dallas skyscraper. It was a secure place, and the staff knew to look after Hannah so she could dine without chains, without an escort.

"I'm taking my finals in a week or so," Hannah said.

"I bet you'll get straight A's."

"Physics is really hard, and it's my worst class. 89."

"You're majoring in that."

"Yes."

"What percentage of the grade is your final?"

The question surprised Hannah. This was a relatively complicated math question that also touched on knowledge of how school grading worked. A year ago, Mother simply couldn't have asked this.

"Thirty percent."

"So you need a, um, 93?"

"Ninety-four," Hannah replied. "She doesn't round up."

"That's not fair."

"Yeah."

"Are you happy?" Mother asked. They met at least once a month, and she always asked that question, and Hannah always answered in the same way, with similar words.

"I am," she said. "The Petrosyans treat me very well."

Sometimes, her answer was truer, and sometimes less true.

Despite the heat on that last Monday in July, Hannah had chosen a dress that covered all her back, and her legs down to her knees. The welts across her calves were faded, almost invisible, but if anyone asked, she had her answer ready: She had been sitting with her feet in a pool Sunday, her calves propped on the rough edge, and it had left a mark.

Mother looked out the window.

"This isn't the only time you eat here, is it?"

"No," Hannah said. "We go after church every few Sundays. With the Abercrombies usually."

"The family that owns . . . that boy?"

“His name is Ramone,” Hannah said. She’d mentioned Ramone more than once to Mother, when Mother asked for a complete accounting of the people she associated with.

“They just . . . put you with him?”

“I’ll sit next to him sometimes. But if Allain’s here, I’m usually with Allain.”

“You know what I meant.”

Hannah smiled. Little by little, Mother was trying to learn from Hannah the way things worked. Not how they worked in the subject industry as a whole – Mother had educated herself proficiently on that topic over the last year. But how things worked specifically for her daughter. She still felt deeply guilty about what had happened to Hannah, so she stepped lightly, asking questions only when she believed she could tolerate the answer. She was today ready to learn more about Ramone.

“Okay,” Hannah replied. “They bring him over a few times a week, when the Abercrombie girls aren’t using him, and—”

“Aren’t *using* him?” Mother interrupted.

“It’s how it’s put,” Hannah said, looking into Mother’s eyes. “It is . . . what it is.”

“So you’re . . . put with him then?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “They lock us in my cage together. Or, he has his own side. There are those two cages, and he can sleep in the other, and there’s a door between them that can be locked, but it can stay open, and—”

“And then he gets to use you,” Mother blurted, and her eyes were hard with accusation. It was a recurring theme of their lunches together, Mother certain that Hannah was being abused, and that Hannah didn’t know it and needed to know.

Hannah had learned that the best response at these times was patient explanation – not to justify the system that had enslaved her, necessarily, because that ultimately couldn’t be justified using any but the narrowest of philosophies or faiths – but just to assure her mother that she was doing as well as could be expected within that system, and there was much good about it.

“Ramone is a friend, and a lover,” Hannah said. “He is not forced on me. I can say no. But . . . when I say yes . . . he’ll be . . . in my bed, and then . . . when we’re, um, finished . . . he goes to the other cage to sleep, unless they’re taking him home then, or I let him stay with me, on my side.

Usually he goes to his own bed, though, because he doesn't fit next to me. But it's always up to me."

Mother didn't seem convinced.

"You know he was free until he was a teenager," Hannah said. "He was from Brazil. He lost his passport after his family went to Disney world. So the government kept him, then they sold him because he's beautiful and charming."

Hannah laughed, and Mother looked at her.

"Sometimes, he speaks, Portuguese, just to be funny," she said. "He calls people '*gatinha*,' which is Portuguese for kitten. He even called our maid that, and so I—"

"Do you love him?" Mother interrupted.

"I do," Hannah said. "But I love lots of people."

"Like that girl . . . Raven?"

"I love her too," Hannah said. "More than Ramone. And Ramone knows it."

"And they put you with her too?"

"Yes, same deal as with Ramone. She'll spend the night. With me. In my cage."

Hannah paused. "She's kind of a mess right now."

"What do you mean?" Mother asked quickly.

"Oh, it's nothing about me. It's just that, she belongs to, you know, Gramma, the woman who's the mother of Laura Petrosyan, and she's really close to Laura's brother. Like, really close. They'll probably get married, in fact. But there's all this stuff going on. It's too complicated to get into, but the guy – Uncle Bear – he wants to work, but Raven wants him to have a better job, because she hates Gramma's money – which is a story of its own – and then Gramma is pretending that she's going to, um, in her will, um, give . . ."

Hannah realized she didn't want to go any further in the story, and Mother didn't seem that interested in it anyway, so she let her voice trail off.

"Anyway," she concluded, "it's just a bunch of stuff."

Mother looked out the window again, looked back at Hannah.

"And Dr. Petrosyan?"

"Yeah?" Hannah asked blankly.

"He's the father, right?"

“Yes.”

“How often with him?”

“What do you mean?”

“How often do they put you with him?”

Hannah laughed, nervous, high-pitched, looked away, looked at her plate, looked around the room.

“What do you mean?” she asked again, looking back at Mother.

“He’s the father. They wouldn’t put me with him, like, in my cage.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Like, you mean, does he, um, well, I don’t know. What do you mean?”

Hannah stared at Mother, eyes wide, like a cornered animal.

“I’ve touched a nerve,” Mother observed.

Hannah raised an eyebrow, trying to look curious, or confused, as if she simply didn’t understand.

“You’re the one who’s always telling me that everything is fine,” Mother said, “that you’re in control. I almost forget, when we’re together, what you . . .”

Mother’s voice trailed off, while she looked out the window and reconsidered her next words.

“Okay,” Mother said, smiling, nodding. “I don’t have to know everything. I don’t want to know everything.”

Hannah nodded in agreement, drove a fork into her poached salmon, glad to shut the door on that part of the conversation.

After a brief pause, where Mother seemed to be sorting herself out as well, she spoke again.

“You remember my email address, right?”

“Yes. First name dot middle initial dot last name at gmail.”

“Do you think they’ll ever give you an account?”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “Maybe. I have that laptop to take tests on. It’s just restricted right now.”

“Where do you see yourself in five years?”

Hannah, her mouth full of food, laughed in shock.

“That’s not . . .” she began. “I don’t . . .”

Hannah’s eyes filled with tears. Why? No one had ever asked her this question before. Why did it bother her?

“I’ve touched another nerve,” Mother said. “I’m not trying to . . .”

“No, it’s okay,” Hannah said, raising her napkin to her eyes. “I just . . . it’s just, such a strange question to think about. I have no idea. I never think about it. So many things could happen. I just don’t know.”

Hannah finished dabbing at her eyes, struggled to regain her composure, smiled and laughed, looking up at Mother.

“What made you ask that?”

“It’s a question Roger’s manager asked him a few weeks ago. It made me think about things.”

“How’s Roger?”

“Oh, they love him at work.”

“Does he ever talk about marriage?”

“We both talk about it. But no plans yet. Don’t buy a dress.”

Hannah gazed off, imagining herself at her mother’s wedding. Would she be a bridesmaid? Probably. And at Raven’s too. Hopefully they wouldn’t get married on the same day.

“So,” Mother persisted, “five years from now?”

“Let me try again,” Hannah said, her composure returning. “I hope I’ll have a bachelor’s degree, in physics. And then maybe I’ll be trying to get a doctorate, in five or six years. And maybe they’ll let me work. Maybe I could discover something. About physics. I love science. And you can have a lot of different jobs, when you’re a, a, a subject. I’ve looked into it. Part time. I could teach. I could be a teacher, or, or a professor.”

Hannah laughed, her eyes crinkled, and a tear rolled down beside her nose, which she chose to ignore.

“Can you imagine me,” she asked, “in front of a classroom?”

“I can,” Mother said, and now her eyes clouded over, the two sharing a vision together, like mothers and daughters have always done, that was as beautiful as it was preposterous.

Chapter 33: A Difficult Topic

It was Tuesday, the last day of July.

Allain had returned that afternoon and they had, as always, been given the house to themselves for their rituals: sex at Hannah's cage, sex in Allain's room, sweet affection and sweet conversation.

It wasn't until they lay, carnally spent in late afternoon, that Allain admitted what he knew.

"Mom told me about that party," he said, up on his elbow, Hannah on her back beside him, his hand on her belly.

"About the pill?"

"Yeah."

"And she told you what happened . . . the next day?"

"Yeah," he said, and he frowned and looked toward the light of his curtained window and seemed to be as sad as Hannah had ever seen him.

"It's okay," Hannah said. "I deserved it."

"No, you didn't," Allain said. He rarely was so direct in his disagreement with Laura's management of the family slave.

Hannah didn't dare agree, at least not openly.

"I drank, and then I took a pill," she said. "I didn't even know what it was. It could have killed me. Or caused brain damage or something."

Allain sighed.

"So, I'm glad I was punished."

"Not like that, though."

"What did your mom tell you?"

Allain was silent, staring at the curtains.

"What did she say?"

Allain was silent.

"Did you see the marks? On my back. And everywhere?"

Allain said nothing, and Hannah knew he had.

Hannah raised her leg, pointed to the inside of her thigh, where a bright red welt lingered. "He put this aloe cream on me afterwards, everywhere but here, probably because he didn't see it, so you can still really notice it."

Allain looked at her leg, looked away, said nothing.

"We need to be able to talk about this," she said, and she dropped her leg and laid her hand over Allain's.

“Why?” he asked, looking down at her.

“Why not?” she asked. “Why not? It’s something important, that happened to me.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

“Not necessarily. But I don’t like that you just shut down over it.”

Allain’s eyes went back to the weak light at the window.

“It’s not embarrassing?” he asked.

“Of course it is. Really, really embarrassing. I had to be tied up, to that board, all spread out. In that room. Athena had to—”

“Stop, please,” Allain pleaded.

“Why?” Hannah demanded. In the past, she’d just accepted that the topic was off limits to Allain, and she didn’t push it and didn’t wonder why. But something was different now, and she wanted it discussed, so she stared at the ceiling and tried to put herself in Allain’s shoes, to understand why he couldn’t talk.

“Are you ashamed of me?” she asked. “Because I just took a random pill, and—”

“Of course not,” he said. “Everyone takes pills.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah,” he said. “And Mom and Dad don’t know, so—”

“Like I would tell.”

Allain smiled weakly. “So, what kind of pill was it?”

“I don’t know. It was purple, hexagonal. I think it was a normal prescription pill, though. Everyone stole them from their parents’ medicine chests.”

“What did it do to you?”

“I’d been drinking too, so maybe nothing. But I was just sort of more drunk. Way more drunk, actually. Time was weird. Space-time was weird.”

“Space-time?” Allain laughed.

“What?”

“You said space-time. It just seemed funny to me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Is it something you learned from your physics class?”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “I guess it was. It just seems like a normal concept to me. Like if you were trying to describe something where you got

anxious, and you said, um, ‘When that thing happened, it stimulated my HPA Axis and hippocampus, and then my amygdala did—’

“What?”

“What what?”

“What are you talking about?” Allain said.

“Neural circuitry,” Hannah replied. “You know, medical stuff.”

“We touched on that my first year,” he said. “I would never say that.”

“It was just an example.”

“Where did you get an example like that?”

“But I saw something about it last week, and I sort of remembered it.”

“In one of your classes?”

“No, probably one of your dad’s books.”

“Why are you reading my dad’s books?”

“It was on the shelf, so I grabbed it. As a break between my school stuff.”

Allain looked at Hannah with a sort of bewildered admiration. It wasn’t the first time she’d seen it in his eyes. She wasn’t trying to provoke it, but she liked when it happened.

“Okay,” he said. “Do you want to know why I don’t like to talk about it?”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want you to hate me.”

“Why would I hate you?” Hannah demanded, laughing. Allain’s words made zero sense.

“Because of what we do to you.”

“What do you mean ‘we’?” Hannah asked, and she sat up and crossed her legs. As her body shifted, Allain’s semen slid out of her vagina and put a dark wet spot on his sheets, pastel blue, which she had picked out for him in the spring. “Don’t you think I can tell you apart?”

Allain rose, facing her, his legs crossed as well, his penis limp for now. He’d already put two charges into her chamber, but he might be up for a third, so Hannah kept a discreet eye on his member, well aware she could be called back into service at any moment.

“Your mother makes the rules,” Hannah said. “We all know that. I follow them. You do too. That’s how it is.”

“And—” Hannah added quickly, “I don’t hate your mother either. She’s doing what she needs to do. She’s—”

“She didn’t need to have you whipped.”

Allain’s face completely transformed. Bitter, disgusted, angry. Heartbroken. She’d seen this look once before, during dinner in March, when Allain was home for the weekend and Hannah had said something complimentary about Ramone. The look had flashed across Allain’s face like a lightning strike, there and gone. This time, it lingered.

Hannah put her hand on his arm.

“So she told you about it?”

“All of it,” Allain said.

“Why?”

“She thought I should know.”

“She hired someone to do it.”

“I know that.”

“He got me ten times.”

“Mom said you kept telling him to stop.”

Hannah laughed until she looked into Allain’s eyes and found, in place of bitterness and disgust, deep, despairing pain now. His eyes were wet. Was he crying? Was Allain crying?

She didn’t want Allain to cry. Allain didn’t want to cry.

This was the reason he didn’t want to talk about it. He didn’t want to cry.

Hannah wanted the moment to end. Why had she pushed this? Why did she have to go down this road?

“I did tell him to stop,” she said, laughing, and her laughter was sincere. Two days after she’d been punished, the pain a fleeting memory, most of the marks on her body fading as well, she could start to see the humor in it.

“Like that would do any good,” she continued. “‘Oh, you want me to stop?’ I guess that’s what I thought he’d say. ‘Okay then. You should have mentioned that earlier.’ His name was Mr. Ortega. He was sort of Chinese—”

“I know, Mom told me who did it.”

“So, when it’s being done, you kind of think things that don’t make any sense, and so I was saying, ‘stop, stop,’ and needless to say, it had no effect, which makes sense now, but I—”

“Could we—” Allain said, putting his hand over Hannah’s. “Could we—”

“Not talk about this anymore?” Hannah said.

“Yeah.”

“Sure, I’m done,” she said. “And, um, thanks for letting me . . . say what I said.”

Hannah looked down at Allain’s penis. It was as small as she’d ever seen it. A reverse erection, she thought to herself. If she ever wanted to calm him down, she could use this. Just talk about being tortured.

Chapter 34: Laura's Decision

Dinner that night started normally, everyone around the table, the four Petrosyans fully-clothed, and their nude, shackled female, Hannah, dining on a chicken casserole that Darcy had prepared at Allain's request.

Ormek was normal, Laura was normal, the two enthusiastically asking Allain for details about his practicum, which involved travel to Mexico and work with children.

Any lingering guilt Athena felt seemed to be resolved. She was sans phone, and had lost her freedom for a time, but her sentence seemed to have been reduced to a week.

And, Hannah thought, any lingering bitterness on Laura's part had apparently been assuaged by Hannah's suffering Sunday.

And then, Laura spoke.

Hannah was sipping wine – something red that wasn't bitter – when Laura cleared her throat.

"Allain," she began, helping herself to the steamed vegetables Hannah had helped prepare.

"Yes?" Allain said, and his foot slid over to Hannah's, touching hers.

"Your father and I have decided to kennel Hannah at your school this year."

Hannah had to replay the words through her mind several times. She'd heard her name. And then "kennel."

Kennel.

Hannah looked at Allain. She wasn't sure yet what Laura had actually said. She was trying to find the meaning of the words in his face. His face was blank.

He struggled to speak.

"Why . . ." Allain stammered. "What would . . ."

Something was bothering Allain. Hannah could tell this. He seemed lost.

Hannah looked at Athena.

Athena's eyes were fixed, oddly, on her silverware. On her knife, possibly, her face and body frozen. Had she had another pill? Was she high again?

Allain was still trying to speak.

“It’s not . . .” he said. “It’s not . . .”

What was it not? Hannah wondered. Say it, Allain. It’s not what?

“Oh, Hannah’ll love that,” Athena said.

Something was going on with Athena, Hannah thought. She wasn’t just speaking. She was . . . erupting. With everything that was Athena. Boiling fury, more than a girl’s worth. A small mountain. Something was going on with Athena.

“You finally get to go to college!” Athena said, each word growing more shrill, more frantic and enraged until, on the last word, “college!” her voice sounded almost otherworldly, not quite human, the sound of the small, flaming kernel of adolescent rage grown large, with kicking legs and a mouth.

Athena’s next sentence was all in that voice, each word coughed out, as if it were on fire.

“Just what you always wanted!”

Athena stood, bumping the table, her knife clattering to the floor, her chair almost tipping backwards, and she stormed off to the stairs, a furious, molten ball of girl, every step ringing out, echoing through the house as she ascended to her room.

Now Allain was saying something, words barely reaching Hannah through a fog of incomprehension.

He wasn’t screaming. He wasn’t molten. But through the icy calmness of his voice, Hannah detected something she’d never heard before, a barely controlled unhappiness, a rare, tense differing with his parents – or with Laura at least – that Hannah could almost feel.

“ . . . and they keep them in cells there . . .” Allain’s voice said, wavering in and out, the message getting lost, the meaning flickering off and on. “ . . . work them. They work them. They make them do . . .”

“There are too many temptations here for Hannah,” Laura was saying. Now Laura’s voice was coming through with blinding, stabbing clarity. “She’s so grown up in some ways that I forget she’s still just a teenager, with the weaknesses and frailties of any young girl.”

Allain again, saying something Hannah barely heard: “ . . . they put them in cages . . . in boxes . . . from the . . . she’ll hate it . . . anatomy . . . every morning they . . . I saw in class . . . she was standing there . . .”

There were more words. Ormek chimed in, saying something and nothing at the same time, which he had a talent for.

Allain said something Hannah couldn't hear.

Then Laura: "No, she won't be going back with you next week. I've signed up for a service to pick her up this week, so she can get settled in."

"Will I get to bring her home on weekends?" Allain asked quietly.

"No. She'll stay there."

Hannah opened her mouth, closed it, struggled to form words, to understand what was being said about her life, to ask a question. She needed to know something. Her mind waded through all the turmoil of the last few days, the drinking, the limousine, the pill, the night out, Ormek, Laura, and the thing that, through it all, was the most important thing in the world to her. The most important.

"Will I . . . be able to study?" she asked through the roiling gray anarchy that had suddenly become her life.

"No," Laura said. "You'll have enough on your plate adjusting to the kennels."

"May I bring my books?"

"No."

Hannah understood now, all the meaning in the words around her completely, horribly clear. She was at that moment as close to insubordination as she'd ever been. She wanted to scream. She wanted to throw something. She wanted to say something horrible, to Laura, who had obviously planned this, or to Ormek and Allain, who tolerated it.

Instead, she wept, quietly, face in her hands, tears dripping around her fingers and down to her plate.

This was, of course, all her fault. That was the worst of it. And it wasn't because of the pill she took. It was about Ormek. That she knew.

Ormek.

To be guilty of a devastating sin, that was tragedy. To sin alone, in a way that couldn't be acknowledged – hell.

"I'm sure you'll adjust, Hannah," Laura said.

Hannah closed her eyes, mouth open in a silent scream.

And then, the coup de grace:

"With Hannah so upset," Laura said, "it might be best if she stays downstairs tonight."

Hannah closed her mouth, opened it again.

"Hannah, have you finished your dinner?"

“Uhh,” Hannah groaned.

“Hannah, have you finished your dinner?”

“Uhh. Um. Uhh. Yes. Ma’am.”

“Allain, can you take her downstairs now? And then, your father and I need to speak to you, so can you come back up immediately?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Hannah stumbled to the elevator, her shackles almost tripping her.

As soon as the door closed, she turned to Allain, as upset as she had ever been with him.

“I need my books,” she said.

“Mom said—”

“I need my books,” she said again.

“I can’t, Mom . . .”

Hannah crossed her arms, stared at Allain, her heart breaking.

She’d asked twice, he’d said no twice. Strike three, you’re out.

Hannah decided not to ask again. Instead, while the elevator door was still opening, she squeezed through it, stormed to her cage as quickly as her restraints would allow, flung the door open and pulled it shut behind her.

Allain just stared.

“Well, lock me in.”

He stood, saying nothing, lost.

“Please? Now?”

He fished the key out his pocket, put it in the door, turned the bolt that locked it shut.

“Shackles,” Hannah said.

Allain knelt, freed Hannah’s ankles, hung her chains on the peg, turned back to her, spoke haltingly:

“I didn’t know Mom was—”

Allain stopped in mid-sentence, apparently expecting Hannah to interrupt again. She just glared.

“I had no idea that she—”

He stopped again, staring into Hannah’s eyes.

“I need my books,” she said again.

At this moment, that’s all Allain was. The source of her books. Perhaps she would love him again. But right now, at this moment, he was not an object of love, or sex, or even affection. He was the only thing that could get Hannah her books. And she needed them.

Hannah continued to glare at him until he turned, headed to the elevator, a hopelessness in his eyes that could not be resolved through any means at his or Hannah's disposal tonight.

"Turn off the light," Hannah said. The light went off, the elevator bumped, and Hannah was left alone, in the darkness.

She found her bed in the gloom, lay down, and slapped her hand against her pillow.

Her mind was not lost solely in despair, however. Not completely.

This might just be another thing to survive, and she had survived others. She might have some problem-solving in her future. And they might yet prove to be insurmountable problems.

Allain had said things. Hannah had heard some of it, some of it was filtered through her distress into meaninglessness. But the gist was clear. Subjects kenneled at the University of Texas at Corpus Christi weren't treated well.

Kenneled.

Was that the official term for what this was? Or just the word Laura chose, to add to the sting of what, Hannah understood clearly, was the next phase of her punishment for what she had done with Ormek?

She wouldn't be allowed to continue her studies. She wouldn't be allowed her books. That alone was a death sentence. Her body would continue on. But if she wasn't in school, a part of Hannah would be getting ripped out and executed.

Hannah's mind turned to Mother, Raven, Ramone, Delilah. Uncle Bear. Athena. Even Darcy. She was about to lose them all, or at least, the regular contact she wanted, and that's what she thought about as she cried herself to sleep.

Chapter 35: Integrated Transport

Hannah woke late. It was almost 7:30, more than enough light for her to see her way to her toilet. By 8 she'd have enough light to turn to her books.

Something was off. Something was strange.

Her mind turned, slowly, groggily, to the deep rift in her universe. At first, she tried to convince herself it was all a dream, but she quickly moved from there to the reality of things, and from there to the bitter truth that it was all her fault.

She sat on her toilet, lost, despairing, and strangely hungry.

The elevator bumped.

"Hannah?" Laura called out.

"Yes, Ma'am?" Hannah replied, wiping, flushing, standing, her empty stomach grinding away with both hunger and, now, deep anxiety.

"They'll be coming for you about 9," Laura said.

"Who is that?" Hannah asked.

"The service. To get you to Allain's school today."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Are you excited about going?"

"I'm not sure," Hannah replied. If Laura wanted to know how she felt, Hannah was going to be honest. "I'd rather stay here, Ma'am. I'll miss everyone. And I don't want to stop studying."

"Of course," Laura said. "That might be possible. Eventually."

"Really?"

"Dr. Petrosyan, Allain and I spoke for quite awhile about you last night after you turned in," Laura said, retrieving Hannah's shackles from the peg. "They both felt strongly that you should continue your studies."

"Thank you Ma'am," Hannah said, watching as her restraints were applied, waiting for Laura to continue her thoughts.

"I'm not sure I agree," Laura said, unlocking Hannah's door.

"Certainly not now. I know you're almost done with your current courses, but I don't see how you'll finish, with all the changes you'll be going through at Allain's school."

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said, following Laura to the elevator.

"Perhaps you can start over, in a year or two."

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said. If there had been any food in her belly, it would have come up.

And yet, when she reached the kitchen and smelled coffee and Darcy’s cooking – sausages, a pastry, an egg casserole – her hunger returned full force.

She passed Darcy at the sink without speaking to her or looking at her, and she moved to the table, where Allain and Ormek were already seated, food untouched before them, eyes cast down. Athena was not at breakfast this morning.

Hannah helped herself to a plate, piled it high with what might be her last taste of Darcy’s cooking – perhaps forever.

“Good morning,” she said quietly.

Ormek mumbled something. Allain looked at her, looked back down.

Wasn’t this better for Allain? He’d have her with him at school all the time, ready to serve. Didn’t he want that? She wouldn’t be seeing Ramone anymore. Wasn’t he happy about that? Were things so grim for subjects at Corpus Christi that Allain couldn’t resolve it? Were the kennels that terrible?

Hannah had no choice but to accept this new condition. So, from her despair on her toilet to now, she had moved in her mind to a place of at least tentative acceptance.

Perhaps Laura would relent about school. Perhaps Allain would sneak her books to her. But how would she take her finals? Even if Allain brought her laptop, where would she plug it in? She was certain that no place called kennels would have internet access. Perhaps all was lost. Perhaps not.

Hannah shoved eggs into her mouth and stared at the wall. Laura settled at her end of the table. No one said anything, and that was as Hannah wanted it.

Hannah’s plate was almost empty, her stomach unpleasantly full, when the doorbell rang.

She jerked and looked at Laura, who rose from her chair to see who it was. Ormek and Allain simply sat, still barely touching their food.

Hannah heard a man’s voice. Was it her imagination, or was it the voice of Mr. Ortega? Did he do everything terrible that needed doing?

The voices grew louder, a man's and a woman's voice, Laura replying, saying "Okay, okay" and something else.

The door closed. Laura returned to the dining room alone. Where were the people?

Hannah knew Laura must have opened the front gate because she heard the engine of a truck in the driveway now, loud, roaring, sounding as if it were about to pass through the front door and park in the foyer.

Her stomach was jumbled again, her food threatening to rise. Was that why she ate so much? Just to vomit it all back up, as her final, official pronouncement on what was being done to her?

Out front, the truck continued to roar intermittently, being positioned. Hannah's heart roared in response, the blood thumping in her ears.

The doorbell rang again. Laura rose again. More voices.

"We need about an eight by eight space to get everything set up," the man said.

What were they talking about?

"You can use the den," Laura said. "Just push the table against the wall."

Hannah could hear everything now, their footsteps, their breathing, their words.

Something was being carried into the house. Or wheeled in. It sounded like wheels. Squeaky wheels.

A woman entered the dining room, in blue coveralls. Hannah turned to regard her. The woman was plain, ordinary, a vulgar intrusion into the sanctity of this place. Her hair was unkempt, tied up in a bun. No makeup. Or maybe she had been made up. By Delilah. Something subtle. Truck bitch. International slave shipper. Cartyoubitch.

But when she spoke, the woman's voice was gentle, kind.

"Is this our girl?" she asked.

Hannah looked up at her but said nothing. Ormek and Allain remained silent as well.

"Hey, Honey," she said, bending toward Hannah, smiling at her. "Can you stand up for me?"

Hannah pushed her chair back, grabbing the back of it to steady herself.

The woman stepped up, pulled her phone out, glanced at Hannah's tag, ran her finger along the characters carved into Hannah's collar, stepped behind Hannah to scan her microchip.

"When did you last empty your bladder, Hannah?"

"I guess about an hour ago," Hannah said. "When I woke up."

"When was your last bowel movement?"

"The same time."

"Good. Do you need to do anything now?"

"No."

"Okay, I need to catheter you."

"What?"

"Catheter you."

"No," Hannah said.

"Hannah," the woman said, and she stepped before Hannah and faced her. "We're going to have to work together, okay?"

Hannah fell silent.

"Okay?"

"I guess so."

"Are you going to let me put your catheter in?"

"I just don't know why you have to do that," Hannah protested.

"Can't I just go to the bathroom?"

"Not for integrated transport."

"What's that?" Hannah asked. She sensed Ormek and Allain were watching, knew that Laura was there, by the wall. And Darcy as well, at the door to the kitchen.

All watching.

"I'll show you in minute," the woman said. "William's getting everything set up. But you need a catheter in."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Just turn around and bend over. It'll take a second."

Slowly, looking into none of the four pairs of eyes around her, Hannah turned, bent, hands on her knees.

She heard the woman reach into her pocket. She heard the sound of something being sprayed and felt something on her vulva, a shocking coolness that made her start and was, she guessed, an alcohol-based disinfectant.

Then fingers, opening her vaginal lips, spreading wide the mouth of her chamber. Then a sharp discomfort as something was pushed up her urethra and deep into her body.

“All done, thank you,” the woman said.

Hannah straightened, red-faced, still avoiding all the eyes, looking down at what had been placed in her.

It was a clear tube, dangling between her legs, down to her calves, with a small clamp at the end, the wheel of the clamp pushed down to close the tube tight. Hannah’s urine trickled slowly into it, stopped at the clamp, bubbles rising.

“Okay, William’s probably ready for you,” the woman said.

“Could we delay it just a minute?” Laura said.

“Yeah, sure,” the woman replied.

“Hannah,” Laura said.

“Yes, Ma’am?” Hannah said, staring down at the floor.

“Will you say goodbye to Athena?”

“Yes,” Hannah replied. “Where is she?”

“In her room. Just knock.”

Hannah went to the elevator in a daze, hit the up button.

No one was going to escort her, apparently.

She entered the elevator alone, arrived on the floor that held the bedrooms alone, shuffled past the books and tables of the great room alone.

She knocked on Athena’s door.

“Go away!” Athena shouted.

“It’s me,” Hannah said.

“What do you want?”

“Your Mom said I had to say goodbye to you.”

“Oh, so that’s why you’re here?”

“No,” Hannah said. “I’m here to say goodbye to you. Because I want to. They’re waiting for me. So that’s fine if you don’t want to say anything. I’ll tell your mom I tried.”

Hannah heard an annoyed grunt, then heard Athena’s bed rock. The door opened, Athena’s puffy, bitter face appearing.

Her eyes went from Hannah’s eyes to her middle.

“What the hell is that?”

Hannah looked down.

“Catheter.”

“Why’s it there?”

“They put it in me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I guess for while I’m going to that school.”

“Okay, whatever, bye,” Athena said. “Have a great time at your school.”

“I’m not going to school,” Hannah said, annoyance growing. “I’m going to the kennels, okay? They just happen to be in a school, ‘cuz Allain goes to school there. I don’t get to study anymore, okay? I’m done with school. Okay?”

Hannah’s voice shook on the last words, and her eyes grew misty and she fought the urge to scream out her misery, to use Athena’s shoulder the way she used Ramone’s, to shout against the illogic of . . . of everything.

“Don’t cry,” Athena said, but it was too late, her own eyes filling with tears. “God damn you, god damn you.”

She threw her door open, stepped to Hannah, hugged her and wailed into her neck, briefly, before she fell silent.

“I was just starting to like you,” she said, and she laughed.

“If I stayed, you’d just start hating me again, I’m sure,” Hannah said, choking back her tears. “You have to visit me. I’ll think of something that annoys you by the time you show up.”

It’s not your fault, Hannah said in her mind. It’s not the pill. It’s so much more than that.

The two girls wept into each other’s necks until Athena pulled away.

“Just go,” she said. “Just go.”

Hannah backed up, smiling, confused.

Athena slammed the door, wailed again, a bitter, despairing cry of anguish, and Hannah heard her bed rock and wondered how long she’d spend lying down. Hours? Days?

Sniffing, her heart too broken to express itself with mere sobbing, Hannah returned to the elevator, finding the buttons through the water in her eyes, returning to the first floor, walking through the kitchen to the dining room.

No one was there.

“Hannah?” Laura said from the den.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“We’re in here.”

Hannah shuffled in.

Allain, Ormek and Laura were seated on the couch. The woman was in a chair, facing them. Between them, where a small coffee table usually stood, a man dressed in blue coveralls like the woman’s was crouched beside a large, plastic board.

Hannah looked at it, understood immediately what it was for, looked away.

“Hannah, will you sit down?” the woman said.

Hannah raised her catheter to her belly and took her seat on the chair beside the woman, facing the three Petrosyans, who seemed to prefer not to look at her.

“You’ve never been on integrated transport?”

“No,” Hannah said. She looked at the board again, at the various fixtures and restraints and pegs set into either end, and in the middle.

“It’s designed to be very comfortable, and very secure,” the woman said. “It’s more advanced than a cage or crate. We’ll adjust it to you, and we’ll get you where you’re going as soon as we can.”

“Okay.”

“You’ve been prescribed a transport medication.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked.

“One of our medical staff wrote a prescription for you.”

“What’s the medication?”

The woman stood, pulled a small pill bottle from her pocket, opened it and held it out.

Hannah raised her hand and the woman upended the bottle, dropping two small, purple pills onto Hannah’s hand.

Purple. With six sides.

“Oh,” Hannah said, the irony not lost on her. “I took one of these . . . Saturday.”

“Good. Would like to take one now? Or both?”

“I’ll take both,” Hannah said.

“You had a normal breakfast?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

The woman pulled a small, warm bottle of water from her pocket. Hannah unscrewed the cap, popped the pills into her mouth and washed

them down.

“You’ll start feeling the effects in about five minutes, so let’s get you integrated now,” the woman said.

“Okay.”

“Would you like us to explain the transport unit to you?”

“Okay.”

The man looked at Hannah, then at the Petrosyans, who all looked back at him. Only Laura smiled. Or sort of grimaced. Ormek looked dead. Like a corpse who by some magic remained upright. Allain look less than dead, his shoulders hunched, his soul extinguished. None of them wanted to be here. Hannah didn’t want them to be here. But this is how one said goodbye to a slave, and no one had any choice in the matter. Except Athena. And Laura. And Laura’s mind was made up, well beyond revocation.

“Your head goes here,” he said, pointing to a curved platform, the merest hint of a plastic cushion across its surface.

“Legs here, with straps at your ankles, knees and thighs. Arms up here, three straps. Your middle here, crotch against the peg, anus and vagina plugged. We’ll tape a bag—”

“The peg will rest against your chamber mouths, so you can’t release anally or be violated,” the woman interrupted. “And to prevent the insertion of contraband. Not that anyone should be able to do that, but it’s just there as an added precaution.”

“We’ll tape a bag for the catheter here,” the man continued. “Hips and belly strapped, head braced, mouth gagged.”

Hannah stared, woozily, the pills already having their effect. Or the strength of her revulsion having its effects. She wanted to vomit again.

“Ready to get on board, Hannah?” the woman asked.

On board.

Was that supposed to be a joke?

“I guess,” Hannah said.

“Okay, sit down here,” the man said, motioning to the place in the middle of the contraption, near the middle peg.

Hannah moved slowly, crouching, moving into position on hands and knees, sitting down, her shackles rattling against the plastic of the thing that would be her home for at least four hours.

“Now, it’s a little tricky here,” he said, “but if you can kind of scoot down and let those plugs into your anus and vagina, it’ll adjust to you.”

“Is there anything in either chamber that shouldn’t be there, Hannah?” the woman asked.

“No, Ma’am.”

“Because the plugs won’t fit if there are. Or they’ll be very uncomfortable.”

“There’s nothing in me,” Hannah said.

The man pulled out a tube of lubricant and squeezed a liberal measure of it onto both plugs.

Hannah bit her lip and, falling to the depths of shame, angled her pelvis and slid forward, pressing against the plugs, issuing a quiet, embarrassed “uh, uh” as they penetrated her front opening and filled her rectum.

“Keep pushing,” the woman said, “until the peg is against your vulva.”

Hannah complied, although she wanted the things out of her, especially the rear plug, because it made her feel like she needed to go to the toilet.

“Very good. Now, lie back.”

Hannah obeyed, going limp, staring at a ceiling of pressed tin in a floral pattern, allowing her arms to be positioned and strapped in place at the top of the board.

Someone removed her shackles, and her legs were spread and positioned and strapped, neck and belly secured, small boards positioned on either side of her head, forcing her to look straight up, as if she needed to concentrate with all her mind on the ceiling.

She heard tape spooling off a roll, wondered what it meant, felt a slight tug on her catheter, determined with what felt like a great mental effort that a bag was being attached to the end of the tube, taped in place, the valve opened.

She felt the pressure in her bladder reduce and believed that she was urinating where she shouldn’t. In bed? On her chair at breakfast? On the floor in the den?

“Hannah, open your mouth.”

“Hannah, would you please open your mouth?”

“Hannah? Hannah?”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“Open your mouth, please, so I can get you gagged.”

“No.”

“Hannah?”

Hannah felt fingers at her mouth, smelled disinfectant, felt something being pressed between her lips, between her teeth.

“No!” Hannah said, but her voice came muffled and strange for some reason. Why?

“Hannah, can you open your eyes so everyone can say goodbye to you?”

“Okay, bye everyone,” Hannah said. She was walking to go get ice cream. She was the only one going, to the little shop down the street from where she grew up. Mother was waiting for her there. She was trying to say goodbye to other people, other family perhaps, but she couldn’t hear her own voice. It was stopping at her teeth. Her tongue wasn’t working. And she needed to go to the bathroom, her bowels overburdened, her bladder so full it made her urethra sting.

Hannah tried again. “Bye, everyone.”

Still no voice. She opened her eyes. Everything was wobbly.

She was moving. She was floating. Somehow, she was floating through the Petrosyan’s den, through the foyer, through the front door. She was escaping, just floating away, and it wasn’t her fault. Someone else was doing it. She pictured herself, naked, floating to freedom under some unknown force, and she laughed, except she could no more make the sounds of laughter than she could speak. Why?

Allain was above her, walking beside her as she floated. She wanted to reach for him, but she couldn’t. She wanted to hold his hand, but her hand wouldn’t move.

She wanted him to make love to her, and she tried to raise her pelvis, to let him know her will. She couldn’t tell him to do it, because something was wrong with her mouth, and she couldn’t raise her hole to him either, or do anything else, for some reason, so she tried to scream, but she couldn’t scream either. All she could manage was a quiet “uhhhhh . . . uhhhhh.”

The sky disappeared, Allain disappeared, and she was looking at another ceiling, but this one was plain metal. Dull stainless steel.

She had the sense of being raised, of being slid onto something – a shelf. Blackness. She tried to scream again. She felt fingers against her ribs, something being taped there. She heard a beep-beep, beep-beep, beep-beep,

and thought she could hear her own heart. But you can't hear your own heart, unless it's thumping because you're scared. And even then, it doesn't beep. It bumps. Like the Petrosyan's elevator.

Everything was black, and Hannah tried to scream again, and nothing came out, and she was terrified. Then she was asleep.

Chapter 36: Kennel Processing

“She’s coming out,” someone said. A female voice. A voice Hannah didn’t recognize.

Hannah screamed.

“Aaaauuggggghhh!”

There was nothing preventing it now, nothing in her mouth, and she was able to make almost as much noise as she wanted with the first cry.

With the second, she didn’t hold back, opening her mouth wide, pulling the air into her lungs, expelling it with the force of a tornado.

“AAAUUUUUGGGGGHHHHHH!”

She opened her eyes. She was in a bright room, fluorescent lights mounted to the ceiling. She couldn’t move, not even her head, but she could scream.

“AAAUUUUUGGGGGHHHHHH!”

“Whoa, fuck, is this the autistic?” a man’s voice asked.

“No, she’s due next week,” the woman said. “And no, they don’t ship autistics like this. They shouldn’t ship anyone like this.”

Hannah listened, but when the conversation ended, she drew in her breath for scream number four. She would keep screaming, and she would count them. Maybe she’d stop at one million.

A woman’s face appeared, just enough sympathy in her eyes to make Hannah catch her breath.

“Hey,” the woman said.

Hannah looked but declined to speak. She had no idea where she was, who this woman was, why she couldn’t move. But her terror was progressing to rage.

“LET ME GO!” Hannah screamed. Her voice sounded strange in her ears, dry and high-pitched, more like a bird than a human.

“I can’t release you until you’re sentient,” the woman said.

“Sentient?” Hannah repeated. “Sentient? Like, a member of a sentient race? How ‘bout conscious? How ‘bout conscious? Sentient?”

The woman laughed, looking down at Hannah. She was in her early 20’s, and wearing a pink button-down, which seemed completely out of place here. Wherever here was.

“What’s your name?” the woman asked, fingering Hannah’s tag.

“You’re reading it,” Hannah said. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“This is a cognitive test,” the woman said, laughing again. “You were really out. I can’t release you until you’re back with us.”

“Sentient, in other words.”

Hannah tried to move her head. There were boards on either side of it. Her legs and arms were immobile. Her vagina and anus stung. But at least her gag had been removed.

She was starting to remember things. She’d been looking up at Allain a few minutes ago.

“Allain?” she said. “Allain?”

“I don’t think he’s here,” the woman said.

“What’s your name?” Hannah demanded.

“Why do you need to know that?”

“You tell me your name and I’ll tell you mine.”

“Tammy.”

“Hannah.”

“Okay,” Tammy said.

“So I passed your little test?” Hannah said. “I’m sentient now?”

“No,” Tammy replied. “I’m gonna have to—”

“I need my books,” Hannah said. Her mind was skipping from place to place, latching on to a word here and there. Sentience. Tests. Books.

“What?” Tammy said.

“They’re downstairs, in my cage. Can you get them?”

“Where do you think you are?”

“My name is Hannah Loughbridge, and I’m . . . at . . . the Petrosyans . . . I think? In Dallas?”

“No,” said Tammy, “that was this morning. This is the University of Texas at Corpus Christi.”

“That’s where Allain goes to school!” Hannah exclaimed. “Allain? Allain?”

“He’s not here right now,” Tammy said. “But if he goes to school here, I’m sure he’ll be showing up when classes start.”

“When do classes start?”

“August 14.”

“Can I take my finals then?”

“I don’t know,” Tammy said patiently, and Hannah sensed the woman still thought Hannah was babbling. “Probably not. Finals will be in

December. Unless you're taking a summer class that went late."

"You're really going to keep humoring her?" a man's voice asked.

Tammy looked up, annoyed, looked back at Hannah.

"Who said that?" Hannah demanded.

"She heard you," Tammy said, looking up again, looking at Hannah again. "That's Donovan."

"Donovan?" Hannah said. "Donovan?"

A man appeared over Hannah, looking grim as he studied her face.

"Who's humoring me?" Hannah asked.

"Hannah," Tammy said. "Can you slow down and just talk for a second to me?"

"Okay."

"What did you take?"

"When?"

"When they put you on this board."

"Oh . . . they were purple. I had one Saturday night."

"What about this morning?"

"Two. I had two."

"What did they look like?"

"Purple. Six sided. I had two, and then, and then . . ."

Hannah closed her eyes and wrinkled her mouth, suddenly crying quietly to herself. Memories were coming back, none of them pleasant.

"They gave her two Zeebers?" the man said. "Damn, no wonder."

Hannah felt a hand on her forehead. It drifted to the top of her head, stroking her hair.

"Hannah?"

Hannah opened her eyes. The woman was still there, her hand still on Hannah's head.

"Huh?" Hannah asked.

"We want to get you off this board, but we need to make sure you're with us first, okay? We don't know you, and you don't know us, so we all need to get introduced, and then we can decide how to process you."

"Okay, I'm Hannah."

"Right. I'm Tammy, and this is Donovan."

"Hi, Tammy. Hi, Donovan."

Hannah smiled. She was trying to be funny now, but no one else seemed to get the joke.

But she was connecting, understanding things. These people were here to help. Or at least, to free her. But she couldn't be freed until they knew she was okay.

"Was I screaming?" Hannah asked.

"Yeah, pretty loud," Tammy said.

"I won't scream anymore."

"Good."

"What else do I need to do?" Hannah asked.

"Tell me your subject ID number," Tammy said, touching Hannah's collar.

"N8114P165," Hannah said quickly, and then her mind leapt again.

"Can I say something else, for extra credit?"

"Sure."

"I saw a satellite a few weeks ago. It had a number too. NP165. Which was a lot like mine."

"Okay," said Tammy, smiling. "You mentioned books."

"Yeah, I'm taking 12 hours at the University of Texas at Austin. It's online, so the finals are whenever I want."

"What classes?"

"Um, calculus, introductory physics. Um, biology. World history."

Hannah bit her lip and looked up. Most likely, she was no longer taking any of these classes. School was over. Forever.

All the memories were coming back now, everything that had happened, with Ormek. Laura. Athena. Allain. Mr. Ortega.

It hurt, but Hannah willed herself to focus on the present dilemma. "So, these are the kennels?" she asked.

"Yes," Tammy said.

"What's this room?"

"Kennel processing," Tammy said.

"That's what you do?"

"Yeah, part-time," Tammy said. "They told us we were getting a shipment, so we were waiting for you, and then, you've been lying here for a coupla hours."

Tammy moved her hand from Hannah's face.

"You're one of the first ones for the fall semester. Most people aren't going to be showing up until next week."

"Yeah, they shipped me early," Hannah said.

“Why?”

“Long story,” Hannah replied, and she got the sense that she could say anything here. She could talk about the whole sordid history of things that had happened with Ormek and Laura, and it wouldn’t matter. She wouldn’t, of course. But she was in Corpus Christi now. She’d never been to Allain’s school, or to the city before. A completely different part of Texas. It was a freedom, in a sense. She decided to focus on that, and not on the tragic turn her life had taken in the last three days.

She had a vague sense of having screamed a few minutes before. She was done with drama.

“Can you please let me off of this thing?” Hannah pleaded.

“You think you’re okay?”

“Yeah,” Hannah replied. “Wait, sentient. I’m sentient. Did someone say that? I feel like I heard that word.”

“Yeah, I said it,” Tammy said. “You made a big deal out of it.”

She and Donovan turned to Hannah’s legs, releasing them first, then Donovan shackled her ankles together, using standard restraints, not designed for comfort. They unclipped the straps at her neck and belly, freed her arms and handcuffed her in front.

“There’s stuff in me,” Hannah said, rising to one elbow, sitting up and looking at the peg between her legs, the catheter tube, the full bag of urine between her thighs. A wide piece of white tape had been adhered from the top of her pubic hair to the post. “Inspected: Contraband Free,” it repeated over and over, in thick black letters. “Inspected: Contraband Free.”

Hannah felt something touch her back and knew Tammy was scanning her, then Tammy stepped beside her and removed the tape, Hannah wincing as it pulled at her hair.

Next, she grabbed the catheter and worked it slowly out of Hannah’s urethra, a brief squirt of fluid shooting onto Hannah’s belly and mound before Tammy could pinch it off.

“Okay,” Tammy said, “we need you to slide your chambers off the plugs, slowly.”

“Okay.”

“Do you think you’re going to expel?”

“God, I hope not.”

With Tammy and Donovan on either side of her, Hannah grunted as she worked her way off the rods, grimacing through the process,

particularly the strange discomfort of having something leave her anus that way.

To her relief, nothing came out after the anal plug was withdrawn and, still seated in the middle of the board, she turned sideways, rubbing stiff shoulders and elbows with her manacled hands, dropping her knees over the side of the table where her board had been set, looking around the room.

It was a large space, well-lit, with small, wheeled cages bunched up at one end of the room, rows of pegs on one wall holding chains and leashes, two large bays that Hannah guessed were for trucks to pull up to, delivering captives. There were two more tables like the one where Hannah's board had been set, all equipped with a chain and cuff in each corner for the securing of legs and arms.

A half dozen cubicles ran along the wall just beyond the tables, some empty, some with chairs and computers. And in the corner, there were holding cages and showers, five of each, and three toilet stalls. The opposite wall featured six doors, each bearing a large number, one through six.

Hannah's hand touched something wet. She looked down, a black rubber rod beside her thumb, chains on either end to secure it to hooks set into the board, on either side of the place where her mouth had been. She dimly remembered being gagged.

A clock above the cubicles said 5:30. Almost dinner time, and she hadn't had lunch. She'd slept through the whole day, which was probably just as well. She realized she was hungry.

Tammy and Donovan stepped to either side of her, grabbed her arms and eased her off the board, setting her feet on the floor.

"Think you can stand?"

Hannah felt a little dizzy, but she straightened, took a step, nodded, and Tammy and Donovan let go, allowing her to shuffle to the next table, where she set her hands flat, her handcuffs rattling against the edge of the table, and she imagined all the lives that had crossed this surface.

"How about a shower?" Tammy proposed.

Hannah turned, headed for the place along the wall where the showers waited, her legs still wobbly, her chain making a scraping sound against the concrete floor. Most of the Petrosyan household was carpeted. This was a sound she'd have to get used to.

Each shower had a bottle of soap and shampoo, dispensed with a press, and she ran the water until it came out hot, washed her hair and her body awkwardly with the handcuffs on, careful not to drag the chain across her face or breasts, and she tried not to think about the generic, industrial-strength shampoo she was probably using.

Done, she spied the stack of towels – white, small and rough – and took three – one to dry off with, one for her hair, one for her hips. There wasn't enough fabric to cover everything with one towel, and she didn't care anyway.

"Come over here," Tammy said from one of the cubicles. Donovan was seated at another machine, and he looked at her and then back to his monitor.

Hannah dropped the towel she'd dried off with in a hamper, stepped over and took a chair across from Tammy. Tammy looked at her monitor, looked at Hannah, moved a black sphere across the desk and pointed its little clear eye up at Hannah's face.

"Smile for the camera."

Hannah looked down, tried to smile, heard a click.

"Try again," Tammy said.

Hannah just stared.

"Try to look sentient."

Hannah laughed and the camera clicked again.

"Owner's name?"

"The Petrosyans."

"One of them's a student, right?"

"Yeah, Allain Petrosyan."

"Okay, you mentioned him. What's his student ID number?"

"Huh?"

"Student ID?"

"I have no idea."

"Email address?"

"No idea."

"Phone number?"

"Nope."

"Do you actually know this person?"

"Um, yeah," Hannah said. "Really well. In certain ways."

Hannah looked at Tammy, to make sure she understood. Tammy nodded.

“Have him stop by when he gets to campus.”

“He’s coming back Monday.”

“That day, then.”

“Okay.”

“Are your owners really rich?” Tammy asked.

“Is that one of the questions on your computer?”

“No, but it’s a legitimate question. We need to understand what’s going on with everyone kenneled here, and I’m not getting you.”

“Okay, yeah, they’re rich, and they take care of a lot of stuff, and Allain just comes home for weekends, and when he’s there, we’re together, and when he’s not there, he’s here and he’s in med school and it’s really hard so I don’t bother him. So I don’t call him. And I don’t have email.”

Tammy stared at her screen and typed for nearly two minutes.

Finished, she looked at Hannah. “Why are you here?”

“Long story.”

“You said that before.”

“It’s still the case.”

“You don’t want to say?”

“Okay, sure,” Hannah said, “I took a pill Saturday night, so they thought I should be here, where there’s more supervision or something, or so I can’t take pills.”

“Are you having your addictions treated?”

“What?”

“Are you being treated for substance abuse?”

“What? No. I don’t need treatment. I took one pill, because Allain’s sister told me to. It was a purple thing. They had me take two today. So they’re legal.”

Tammy typed.

“Look,” Hannah said, “that’s the official reason, okay? It’s not the only reason, so don’t make a big deal about it.”

“What’s the unofficial reason?”

“Stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said. “Stuff that doesn’t need to be written down, because it has nothing to do with anything here.”

“Sex?”

“Stuff.”

“Look,” Tammy said, leaning forward, putting her elbow on the desk, looking hard into Hannah’s eyes. “If you’re a fugitive, or the mob’s looking for you, or you stole something from someone, we need to know about that.”

“Okay, fine, sex.”

Tammy typed.

“Don’t write that.”

“I’m not.”

“What are you typing?”

“Domestic transition.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Hannah said. “That works.”

Tammy typed for another minute, far longer than the time required to write “domestic transition.”

“You’re not writing that I have substance abuse, right?”

“No, but I’m writing that you took a non-prescribed narcotic.”

“Okay, but I don’t need treatment.”

“Sure,” Tammy said. “Do you take any prescribed medications?”

“No. Well, Advil, for cramps, but that’s not prescribed.”

“Where did you go to high school?”

“At the Four Pillars Tabernacle of Jesus. They had a school there.”

“You graduated last year?”

“No, I never graduated. I was there until I left with my mom when I was 15.”

“How are you taking college courses?”

“I got a GED. And then I studied a bunch, and took the SAT, and did, um, okay.”

“More than okay, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” Tammy said. “Orientation’s on Wednesday.”

“I thought this was orientation.”

“No, we’re just covering the basics today. Official orientation’s next week.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“Curfew’s at 11.”

“11?” Hannah echoed.

“11.”

“What do you mean?”

“Curfew’s at 11.”

“You mean, I have to be, um, home by 11?”

“Well, here. But yeah.”

“So someone has to bring me back here by 11. At night.”

“You just have to be back here by 11.”

“I could show up by myself?”

“Yeah.”

“Where?”

“There’s a door you come to. Show your tag, someone will let you in. If you’re late and you’re unlucky, you’ll be reported as a runaway. If you’re lucky, they’ll put you in storage and notify your owner. You’ll get one bar from us, and then whatever your owner wants.”

“What’s a bar?”

“It’s how we classify punishment.”

“So, if I show up, alone, before 11, you’ll just let me in?”

“This seems like a hard concept for you,” Tammy said.

“Fine,” Hannah said, blushing. This was an intimation of a freedom Hannah had never had at the Petrosyans. She needed to adjust. She needed not to act surprised by things like this.

“I get it,” she said. “Let’s move on.”

“Will you be serving?”

“What do you mean?”

“Serving, working, helping the school, helping in classes.”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know that was an option.”

“Some classes need a model sometimes. Or you can help with training. The med school asks for people all the time. Or you can—”

“Oh,” Hannah interrupted. “Allain said something about that. He said we go to class, or something, and we have to . . .”

“If you’re signed up.”

“It’s optional?”

“Yeah, but most people sign up.”

“Why?”

“You get out of here. And you get paid.”

“How much?”

“It depends. It’s not a lot. But it gives you something to do. And a little money.”

“Okay, I’ll want to do that.”

“Your owner has to sign you up.”

“Okay, I’ll have him do that.”

“Tell him he needs to fill out a service passport for you.”

“Service passport?”

“It’s what we call it. It has all the options. What you can be used for, what you can’t.”

“Can I see it beforehand? And tell him what I want to do? Then he just signs it?”

“Yeah, I’ll get you a copy.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, and that work will be in addition to what you do here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone has chores here. If you’re able-bodied, you do them.”

“Like what?”

“Cleaning, food service, other services.”

“What does other services mean?”

“Other things, depending,” Tammy said. “Will you want to couple?”

“What’s that?”

“You’re recreational, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You partner with other people besides, um, Allain?”

“Yeah.”

“Will you want to do that here?”

“Um . . . yeah. Boys and girls?”

“Either or. Up to you. And we’ll occasionally mate you.”

“What does that mean?”

“A few times a month, we’ll schedule you with another subject.”

“No,” Hannah said.

Tammy looked up from her PC.

“I have the final say,” Hannah blurted.

“I know,” Tammy said.

“Then why didn’t you start with that?”

“What do you mean?” Tammy asked.

“Don’t just say, ‘We’re going to put you with someone, or schedule you,’ or whatever you said. Say something more like, ‘By the way, there’s this other thing, and it’s up to you, and you can do it or not do it.’ Start with that.”

“I felt it was understood,” Tammy said.

“It wasn’t,” Hannah said. “I’m new here, I don’t know what’s going on yet.”

Tammy leaned back, took a long slow look at Hannah. “I’m not used to people who are this pushy.”

“It’s how I am,” Hannah retorted.

“Okay.”

“Someone told me I was spoiled a few weeks ago,” Hannah added.

“I’m not surprised.”

“It bothered me. Now I think it was a compliment.”

Tammy smiled, said nothing.

“So why would you, um, put me with someone?” Hannah asked. “I mean, ask me to be with someone, if I say yes.?”

“It can be a reward, for your partner. Or for both of you, for that matter. Or sometimes it’s just something someone on staff recommends, if they feel there are indications for it. They’ll fill out a—”

“Indications?”

“Do you know what that word means?”

“No, not how you’re using it.”

“It’s a medical term.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“If staff feel there are certain conditions that would be mitigated by a—”

“Okay, stop,” Hannah said. “I can be with people. I understand that. But I always get final say.”

“Okay. That’s how it works.”

“Does Allain have to sign something for that?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll need to see that form too.”

“Okay, I’ll get you one.”

“Okay.”

“Any more questions?”

“I want dinner.”

“It’s in your kennel.”

“Where’s my kennel?”

“I’ll show you. Think you can stand?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Put your towels in the hamper and come back here.”

Hannah stripped, deposited her towels, wet hair against her shoulders, and returned to Tammy, who was standing over a small machine that looked like a printer.

As Hannah approached, she heard a tiny clink, and Tammy reached in and pulled out a white plastic tag.

“This goes in front,” Tammy said, opening a cabinet and pulling out a pair of pliers and a small ring of metal.

“Let me see it first,” Hannah said.

One side of the tag bore Hannah’s first name, her federal subject ID number, a second number that Hannah guessed was her kennel ID – just the date followed by 04. Below that was a bar code and a phone number.

The other side of the tag bore her smiling, somewhat disheveled face. But she was smiling. It was not a terrible picture.

Tammy took the tag back and Hannah raised her chin, staring at the ceiling, while Tammy used the pliers to fasten the tag to her collar.

Chapter 37: Kenneled

“This way,” Tammy said, rising.

Hannah followed her toward the six numbered doors in the far wall.

“Are you a student here?” Hannah asked.

“Grad student.”

“What are you studying?”

“I’m getting a master’s. In social work.”

“Is that why you work here?”

Tammy waved a card in front of the pad beside the door bearing the number 4, and it beeped and clicked and she opened it.

“There’s some overlap, yeah.”

Hannah followed Tammy into a small space, a barred door before them, which Tammy opened with a key.

Tammy led Hannah into a long hallway, lined with more barred doors, perhaps 20 on either side.

“These are the kennels?” Hannah asked. It was dismal, utterly dismal. There were no windows, there was no carpeting, no pictures. Just bright, fluorescent light and concrete floors, a drain in front of every third door.

Hannah looked to the left and the right. Every kennel was narrow, dark, no more than four feet wide, perhaps eight feet deep, with cinderblock walls at the sides and back wall, where a toilet and sink had been crammed together. There was a bare mattress on a twin bed, with a little metal shelf affixed to the wall at the foot of the bed, a plastic chair shoved beneath it.

“No,” Hannah blurted, and she felt her dizziness returning.

Tammy moved to a kennel toward the middle of the hall, unlocked the door, opened it and looked warily at Hannah.

“I can’t stay here,” Hannah said, understanding now, clearly, palpably, what being kenneled meant. “I need to go somewhere else. Upstairs. Is there an upstairs?”

“This is your space,” Tammy said.

“What’s through the other door?” Hannah asked, noticing a door at the far end of the hall, a small window at eye level.

“The rest of the kennel facility.”

“Can I go there?”

“Not now. Day’s over.”

“I want to go there.”

“You have to go here,” Tammy said, and she pointed into the kennel where, as far as Hannah was concerned, she was being sentenced to death. It was like being asked to lie down in a coffin.

Hannah looked into the gloomy space. There was a stack of things, sheets and towels, two pillows, on the bare mattress, and a bag of something on the little shelf.

“What’s in the bag?” Hannah asked. She didn’t care. She just didn’t want to go into the kennel yet.

“Your dinner.”

“Why is it in a bag?”

“The cafeteria’s not open until tomorrow, so they brought fast food.”

“What kind of fast food?” Hannah asked. The bag bore a bright yellow logo, and a chicken’s smiling visage.

“Chicken.”

“Chicken?”

“Yeah, chicken. A chicken meal, probably.”

“I can eat chicken. Will it always be chicken?”

“No.”

“Do I have to make my own bed?”

“Yeah.”

“Our maid did it at home.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“There’s no shower,” Hannah noted.

“The first two kennels by the door there have three showers each.”

Hannah looked up, looked at the floor, pondering, while Tammy waited patiently, her hand on the barred door that would mark the threshold of Hannah’s terrible, tiny new world.

“So, I should go in now?”

“Yes, please.”

Hannah moved in a sort of despairing slow motion past Tammy and into the space, struggling not to scream, to faint, to cry out in utter horror.

Tammy shut the door with a clang, locked it, the sound of the mechanism the last thing Hannah believed she would ever hear in her life.

“Okay, okay,” Hannah said, still alive somehow and trying to work through her new existence. “I’ll . . . make my bed. And I’ll have dinner.

Here.”

“Sounds good,” Tammy said.

“Is there anything else I should do?”

“No. Lights out at 11:15.”

“What will I do until then?”

“You’ll stay here.”

“But what will I do here?”

“Make your bed. Have dinner.”

“But it’s only, um, 6, I think.”

Tammy consulted her phone. “6:23.”

“So that’s, um, five hours.”

“Yeah.”

“It won’t take me five hours to make my bed and eat.”

“Probably not. You can go to bed before 11:15, of course.”

This was the next circle of hell, Hannah realized. She was stuck here, in this tiny dark space, without windows. But the suffering went deeper than that. She would be here alone, without books, with nothing, her mind slowly turning to mush.

Tammy knelt and Hannah stepped to the bars by reflex to have her shackles removed, held her hands still to let Tammy free her wrists.

“Light switch there,” Tammy said. “And curtain for privacy.”

Hannah hadn’t noticed either. The light switch was mounted in the wall beside the little shelf, and a white curtain of heavy plastic hung from a rod at the top of the bars, buckled to the wall at the front corner by two thin straps.

She hit the switch, her kennel immediately bathed in a bright, warm glow.

“Oh,” Hannah said. This was a small thing, but surprisingly welcome to her. “Okay. I can turn it on anytime?”

“The master switch goes off at midnight, back on at 6.”

Hannah squinted at the lights, unbuckled the curtain and pulled it closed. Tammy’s face appeared in a little square window of plastic film, and there was a slot by the shelf, presumably for food to be slid through. So, not complete privacy, but more than she had at the Petrosyan’s. And more light, too.

“Hygiene behind the mirror.”

“Okay.”

“All set?” Tammy asked through the window.

“Yeah,” Hannah said. She would leave the curtain closed and pretend she was camping.

“Night.”

“Night.”

Hannah tore open the bag of chicken, ate it and the biscuit with her fingers, ate the coleslaw with the spork that had been provided, finished with a little brownie that was strangely satisfying, then went to her sink to wash everything down.

She peered at her face in the mirror, confirmed that she was still Hannah, still alive, but nothing more. She pulled the mirror open, found a toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, a simple brush, tampons, tissue.

She needed a clock. What time was it?

She thought about the clock at the Petrosyans, beneath the windows, across from her cage, and fought the urge to scream over all she had lost.

Yes, she reminded herself, willing her mind away from the precipice of despair, she’d be seeing Allain. Soon, and perhaps more often than before. But where? How? Would he come down here? He’d be disgusted as soon as he entered the hall. She should have asked Tammy about that. How do your owners actually visit you? She had no idea how anything important worked here.

“Hannah?”

Hannah looked up. Tammy’s face was at the window in the curtain.

“Yeah?”

“Something else for you to do. You wanted to see those forms, right?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah.”

Hannah almost ran to the end of the kennel, pulled her curtain aside, accepted a pair of documents through the bars.

“Can I give you my trash?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah.”

“Thanks,” Hannah said. “Thanks for remembering.”

Hannah set the forms on the shelf and turned to making her bed. Pad, fitted sheet, pillowcase, top sheet, blanket, comforter, all in an ivory that wouldn’t show stains as clearly as white. She hung the two washcloths

on the rack beside her sink, then returned to her shelf, decided to think of it as her desk, and spread out the forms.

Both forms were short, just two pages, front and back. Hannah wished they were longer, but this was something, at least.

She turned to the first sheet, which bore, at the top in bold letters, “Service Passport Application.”

There were blanks for Allain’s name, student number, phone. More blanks for Hannah’s information. And then several paragraphs of legalese, things like “Failure of the subject to comply with service instructions may result in reduction in or termination of service privileges,” and “Each service area reserves the right to apply a punishment regime independent of any other punishment regime, e.g. those maintained by the Kennels, Owner(s) etc.).”

The rest of the document was a list of dozens of service areas, with a box next to each that the owner could check.

Hannah studied each item on the list as if it were the name of a foreign country, a place she could go with her passport for a temporary reprieve from a new life of loneliness and deprivation.

The service areas were organized by department. Art had two under it: life model and anatomy model. Allain would be checking those, Hannah immediately decided. Many other academic areas listed Tutor. Maybe she could teach math. Or eventually, physics. Yes, Allain would check those as well.

There were several non-academic departments: Grounds, Buildings, Maintenance, Cafeteria, Administration, Athletics, each with a few items under it, the kinds of things you would expect from a skilled or semi-skilled slave: Mowing, accounting, horticulture, food preparation, uniforms, maintenance, laundry, janitorial.

All those would be checked too, Hannah decided. If she weren’t right for a job, they could just send her back. Briefly, she imagined being chained and naked somewhere on campus, trimming bushes while the students on their way to class ogled her. She’d adapt, she told herself.

Medical/Biology seemed to have gone in together on their list, and it was long: Training Model, Examination Model, Biology Model, Testing, Laboratory Assistant, Class Assistant, Research, and other terms Hannah wasn’t sure how to interpret. Dynamic Biology Model, for example. What did that mean?

Nothing anywhere on this list was a problem, she realized. Allain would be checking everything, and indeed, there was a box at the top of the list for that purpose: “All Service Areas.”

Yes, that’s what Allain would check. Just that.

At the bottom of the back page of the form was a section titled “Schedule Restrictions,” with a row for each day, and times during each day she wasn’t available. Saturday and Sunday were out, but everything else would work, she knew.

The second form bore, in bold letters, the title “Copulation Grant.”

Hannah found the title of the document strange, the rest of it as well.

It started out obviously enough, with “I, the Owner”, and then a space for Allain’s name, ID number, phone and address, followed by “do grant copulation permission to my Subject,” and then a space for Hannah’s name and number.

After that, the art and science of being intimate with another human being was reduced entirely to legal terms:

“Subject shall gain the verbal/written permission of Kennel Staff prior to copulation;”

“Subject may copulate in his/her kennel, in his/her partner’s kennel or, subject to availability, in a copulation pen;”

“Subject may not harm and may not suffer harm during copulation, harm including but not limited to bruising, breaking of skin, tearing out of hair, ingestion/injection of an unauthorized substance, or unlubricated penetration.”

Hannah read that term over several times, realizing she and Ramone had violated it several times.

The next term referred to what Tammy was talking about: “Subject may occasionally be asked to copulate with another subject, but may refuse at the time of request. Subject shall not however refuse to serve in a sudden, arbitrary or unreasonable way.”

Okay, Hannah thought, she’d have the final say, but with some qualifications. That was acceptable. Besides, she couldn’t think of anyone she’d refuse to be with, unless they were mean or violent. Some might trigger less arousal than others, but that wouldn’t be her fault.

The backside of the form provided a list of preferences the owner could check, including “No Anal Sex,” “No Oral Sex With Male,” “No

Homosexual Partners,” and “No More than One Partner Per Day.” There were blank lines for other things the owner didn’t want happening, and below that were several more blank lines, for the names and subject ID numbers of “Individuals (if any) with whom Owner does not want Subject associating intimately.”

Hannah decided she would simply present the form to Allain and ask him to sign it. Perhaps he would do so without question. If he wanted to know more, she’d explain there was a girl she was interested in, and hope he didn’t get jealous about the boys.

Hannah guessed it was between 7:30 and 8. The forms Tammy brought had granted her no more than a half hour’s reprieve from the desperate boredom that her life had become.

She stood, took in all of her new world.

She stepped to the sink and toilet. She stepped back to the desk.

She walked back and forth again, something she’d had little opportunity for since she was taken a year ago. Before that, because her mother didn’t have a car and rarely enough money for a bus, she walked everywhere – to the library, the store, church. It wasn’t that she wanted to, necessarily, but she had to, and now she missed it. She would have loved to have walked through the Petrosyans’ neighborhood, but that wasn’t an option. She wished she could have gotten an exercise bike, like Ramone had, or a treadmill, but there wasn’t room in her cage.

So she walked, pacing back and forth, from the toilet to the curtain, and in her mind, she saw the places where she used to walk. For some reason, she imagined the walk she used to take with Mother to get ice cream, so she walked there in her mind, to the little shop down the street from her home at Four Pillars.

While she walked, she hummed. Beethoven. Something new with a pretty chorus by Serve the Finest. Vivaldi. Parker Toppe. Mozart. And she thought about things. Ormek. Laura. Athena. Mr. Ortega. Allain.

Allain.

Allain.

Allain.

Why didn’t Allain want her at school?

Hannah remembered his words vaguely, but his passion clearly. He’d argued with all the emotion he could put forth in his mother’s presence against Hannah’s kenneling.

His concern was entirely about Hannah's welfare, as she recalled. Keneled subjects weren't treated well, were sometimes humiliated, or something.

But why would Allain – who chained Hannah in the nude as a matter of course, who routinely locked her in her cage and left her there, who, while he had never punished her directly, countenanced her punishment when his mother ordered it – why would Allain Petrosyan suddenly care about her discomfort or humiliation?

Wouldn't he want her at school with him, where he could make use of her company and her vagina whenever he had free time? Was he really so busy every single weeknight?

No, there was something else going on. Allain didn't want Hannah at school for some other reason than her convenience, or her ease, or her dignity.

No.

Allain Petrosyan . . . had a girlfriend.

Allain Petrosyan had another lover.

Yes, of course.

Allain Petrosyan had taken as his true partner a fellow student, a girl older and far better educated than Hannah, from a wealthy family. Bright, beautiful, sophisticated, free.

An equal.

The girl Allain would marry.

Chapter 38: Who?

Hannah's bare feet pounded the cool concrete, step after step, toilet to the curtain, curtain to the toilet, past her new bed of plain ivory linens and the little shelf that she called a desk but where there would be no studying ever, only the eating of fried chicken from a bag.

Allain Petrosyan was in love.

With another girl.

Hannah was as certain of this as anything she had ever known.

Who?

Hannah racked her brain.

Who?

How could such a thing have been kept secret from her? How could Allain's lover not have been mentioned by accident, by Athena, by Ormek, by Laura?

By Allain himself, in his sleep?

Was the other girl studying to be a doctor too? Did they study together? After they studied, did they go out for late-night Chinese? Did they return to his apartment to make love, and afterwards, prop up on his pillows and talk about school and the future and the poor slave girl back home who studied physics and thought she was in college?

Were they talking, even now, this very moment, by text or phone or email, of the disruption Hannah would bring to the new semester? Or would he simply ignore her on weeknights, see her on weekends, as before, but go back home to Dallas often enough, taking his true lover with him?

Would the girl, whoever she was, sleep in Allain's bed? Or would she be given Hannah's bedroom, often enough during their weekend stays, while Hannah languished in a tiny kennel?

Maybe he'd give her a tour of the house. Here's Hannah's cage, he would say. And up here, on this floor, is the room where we have Hannah beaten.

That's why Allain didn't want her to talk about being punished. It embarrassed him. No girl worthy of Allain should ever be tied and whipped. And Hannah had unwittingly fed his prejudice, mentioning punishment more than once, insisting on a complete accounting of her time with Mr. Ortega. Of course, Laura had given him the details first. Laura

understood the value of these stories, to manage Allain's perspective on the females in his life.

Hannah knew she should cry. Allain's lust-powered affection had been one of the most important constants of her life at the Petrosyans, and now that was either gone, or so diluted by his love for someone equal to him as to be meaningless.

Hannah wasn't heartbroken, however. She was furious. She had given, performed, served. Spread her legs over and over again without question. Taken Allain's semen up her chamber, spilled very little of it back onto his sheets.

And now this.

Who?

Did he travel with her? Surely he did.

He just done a practicum in Mexico. Or so he said.

Was that really what he was doing? And if it was, did he go alone?

Or did he travel to Mexico with her?

Or anywhere else with her?

Did he go . . . camping with her?

Hannah continued to pace, her movements unchanged to any observer, but a new revelation began to break through her mind, so shocking and startling – and obvious – that it felt like a lightning bolt, striking the top of her head and passing through her body and her legs and her feet and into the concrete floor of the kennel. She looked down, halfway expecting to see black footprints wherever she stepped.

Who?

Beth.

Beth.

Of course.

Beth.

She wasn't rich, no. but she was bright, and pretty, and serious, and studious, and Allain, also bright, and beautiful, and studious – and rich – would be a brilliant catch.

Beth.

Beth, the friend on the camping trip.

Of course.

Beth's first line of attack was to try to get rid of Hannah, by questioning Hannah's history, and she'd wasted no time on the drive to

Guadalupe going there. If she could have proved that Hannah was stolen, kidnapped, illegitimately owned, Hannah would have gone free within the week, ceasing to be an impediment.

Failing at that, Beth had moved on to plan B: Bond.

She'd been so concerned, so interested, so attentive to Hannah, taking her to the river, taking her to the offices at night, picking her up first thing in the morning, talking to her, asking her questions, engaging with her.

Acting like she cared.

No, Beth was studying, learning, practicing at owning a slave. Practicing at owning Allain's slave. Because when they married, she would share in the responsibilities of managing the family's girl.

Hannah would be bought a new dress for the wedding, of course, and she would likely be a bridesmaid. Delilah would spend all day on her face and hair, and she would be more beautiful than the bride.

But then, that would be Hannah's job, to decorate the sacrament of holy matrimony in the same way that all the other clothing and finery and ornamentation did, the same way the cake did, which would be admired and then cut into small pieces and put on plates and eaten and spoken of months later as very, very good cake.

And when Laura and Ormek signed Hannah over entirely to the new couple, a gift worth more than a million dollars, if no longer quite one and one half million dollars – Hannah would decorate the marriage itself.

Everyone would applaud the parents' generosity. Perhaps the gift would be made publicly.

Of course it would be.

Hannah, step up, please, Laura would say, and Hannah would do so, on a day that she had been dressed up and made up to perfection. And then, with her customary flourish, Laura would present the paperwork – signed and notarized and stamped with a Texas tax seal – that made the transfer of ownership official.

And Hannah would nod and smile and go on to serve faithfully, raising the couple's children, tending to household matters and, no doubt, still serving Allain when Beth permitted it.

She would bend at her new cage in her new home, saying nothing; the kissing, the laughter, the warm afternoons of loving and sleeping and sex and talk in the bed of Allain Petrosyan a distant, fading memory.

When Allain and Beth returned from their honeymoon, Laura would take Beth aside and warn her: Hannah has no regard for rules, or propriety or dignity. Watch her. She will steal Allain's semen when you're not looking, and she will do her best to steal his heart. Stay vigilant. And if you must, sell her. She's yours now. Dispose of her as you please. Allain will accept whatever decision you make. He has been raised well.

Beth.

Of course.

Allain brought his own tent to Guadalupe. Big enough for two. Big enough for he and Beth.

Beth brought Hannah to the campground kennels, and then she returned to sleep with Allain.

Hannah had planned the trip, planned the meals, forced everyone to do what she wanted to do. And all the while, her owner and her future owner were loving each other right under her nose.

Beth.

Was Beth's story of being taken a lie, another duplicity, another way for her to gain Hannah's trust and sympathy? See, we're not so different, Beth was saying with her little tale. I was caged too. Just like you.

Hannah had stopped pacing now, and she sat on her bed, her feet weary, her legs aching, going over everything, again and again. The absence of her books had forced her to learn something far more important tonight. Her books had been a distraction for months, she realized, preventing her awareness of that which was both, in hindsight, far more important, and blindingly obvious.

Where will you be in five years, Hannah? she asked herself.

Now I know. I will spend my time between a cage and a nursery, tending to another couple's children.

Maybe they'll breed me, Hannah thought. Maybe they'll let me have a child. Even Allain's child. A child to grow up with all the wealth and comfort and food I never knew when I was a child, and none of the freedom.

Finally she cried, as she thought about the child she might give birth to, and raise as her own, and of the day she would sit the child down and explain what mother was, and what that made the little one.

She found herself on the edge of thoughts she dare not think, so she wiped her eyes and looked toward the little plastic window in the curtain,

toward the gap where her food tray would be slid through.

Darkness.

When had the lights gone out?

How close was it to midnight?

Hannah stood, turned off the light switch, a dim light in the hallway producing a pale gloom just above pitch blackness, and she felt her way to her bed, pulled her sheets down and slipped under them. They were cool, the building well air-conditioned, and she turned her mind to a question of place, briefly – where in this building was she? The basement, or the ground floor? The truck bays in the processing room suggested one or the other, nothing higher.

She stared at the ceiling, her eyes adjusting to the darkness, and returned her mind to the knowledge she had gained – a wisdom no book could impart.

A terrible, bitter, essential enlightenment.

Chapter 39: 'Welcome, Hannah!'

Hannah woke feeling sick. Not sick physically. There were no pains, no digestive issues, no headache, no cramps.

But her sense of loss, of emptiness, of utter devastation, was complete, the thorough overlaying of her soul with the poisons of the world.

She'd failed to ask Tammy what time the lights came on, but they were still off now, just the gloom from the hallway to light her world.

She felt her way to her toilet.

There was nothing to do, no more forms to read, no reason to turn on her light, no hope for anything.

She sat and stared into the blackness, her face in her hands, for what felt like an hour, before a sudden brightness beyond her curtain told her the lights were on, the day had begun for the one girl in this hall of kennels.

At least there was that.

She wiped and flushed, stood, pushed her curtain aside, turned on her light, her world bathed in artificial luminescence.

She heard a quiet tone, and then a repeated clicking sound, starting at the end of the hall, growing louder and closer until the clicking sound emanated from the upper corner of her kennel door, then fading as it continued up the hall.

She touched her door, pushed it, and to her surprise it swung open. She stepped into the hall, ready to return to the refuge of her kennel if someone told her to. But, thinking this might be how things worked here, that the doors were set on timers and they opened of their own accord and subjects were permitted to exit as soon as it happened, she kept moving down the hall, to the door with the small window.

This was, she forced herself to acknowledge, another improvement over the Petrosyan household: a door that let her out in the morning, no one there with a key and shackles. But how far could she go?

She noticed the showers in the kennels on either side of the exit door, and then she touched the door itself, cautiously, as if she expected it to be hot, or electrified, or to trigger a siren.

Nothing. She grabbed the doorknob. The handle turned. She pushed against it and the door opened.

Convinced she was doing something very wrong, she froze, peering into a long hallway.

“Hello?” she said. “Hello?”

Her voice echoed against the concrete. She stepped into the hall, looked either way, confirming that the six doors from the processing room were matched in this hall, each door with a number from one to six, her own door numbered 4.

Beyond the door numbered 1 hung a red, glowing “Exit” light.

She moved toward the exit, peering through the little windows in doors one through three, noting that each looked into more kennel hallways like the one where she had been confined. How many kennels did this floor hold? she wondered. If each hall held 40 kennels, as hers did, the building could hold hundreds of slaves.

She opened the door beneath the exit sign, found a flight of stairs, climbed it, ready at any moment to be confronted, to be rebuked, perhaps even to be called a runaway and punished. But she was prepared to apologize, plead ignorance and return quickly to her kennel. She was taking a calculated risk, not the first she had accepted recently. She hoped this one would turn out better.

At the top of the stairs stood another unlocked door. Holding her breath, she pushed.

The door opened up to a large cafeteria, rows of tables and chairs, enough for 200 subjects, she guessed, but there were just a dozen slaves here, male and female, naked, collared, seated in small groups of two or three, mostly near the far wall, which was all windows, bright and beautiful in the first sunlight of the day, revealing the trees and the brick and stucco buildings of the University of Texas at Corpus Christi.

Along the wall to her right ran a long counter, with glass cases behind it, two men behind it, talking idly.

Hannah stood and stared, struggling to get her bearings, beginning to wonder if this was a peculiarly vivid dream that she was about to wake up from. Soon, she would open her eyes to find that she was back in her cage in the Petrosyan household, all the bad things that had happened since Saturday morning the workings of an overactive imagination.

The floor felt real, however, and she drifted across it, drawn by the smell of food to the counters where the two men were standing.

Still expecting to be sent back to her kennel at any moment, Hannah approached the two men. One looked up, pointed wordlessly to a stack of orange trays. She picked one up, returned to the men.

Both looked into her face, down at her breasts, back to her face. One picked up a plate.

“Sausage?”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

“Eggs?”

“Yes, please.”

“Grits?”

“Okay.”

“Fruit cocktail?”

“Yes.”

“Everything, then?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. He was smiling. Was he joking with her?

He raised the plate over the case, handed it to her.

“Thanks,” she said. “Coffee?”

“There,” he said, pointing to a machine in the corner.

Hannah held her tray and walked between the windows and the slaves at their tables, looking out the window, looking at her fellow subjects.

Two girls, her age or perhaps a little older, paused from their conversation to regard her. Given their looks, both were recreational, Hannah guessed, and one smiled.

“Hi,” Hannah said, stopping, hoping for an invitation to sit.

One of the girls gestured at the table and Hannah set her tray down.

“I need coffee,” she said, continuing toward the corner, where she poured a cup for herself into a large ceramic mug that said, “University of Texas at Corpus Christi: Kennel Services.” She sweetened and creamed it, returned to her tray and sat, her bare bottom against the hard plastic.

The girls, blonde and brunette, both small-breasted, introduced themselves as Pamela and Amy, both owned by new faculty in the College of Business, kenneled in hall 3 since early July while their owners established new residences and set up their homes for subject confinement.

If they said anything more, Hannah knew, they’d have to share everything – how they’d become slaves, what they’d lost the day they were taken, whom they loved and hated, how they suffered, how they received

pleasure, what dreams they allowed themselves. Amy and Pamela didn't seem interested in sharing, so Hannah held back as well, telling a very shortened version of her story too, just that she had been shipped here from Dallas yesterday and would be serving the family's son, who was in medical school.

"You'll be here all year, then," Pamela said.

"Yeah."

"I'm supposed to leave next week," Pamela said. "I'm gonna miss this place."

"Why?" Hannah asked.

"A lot of freedom. In lots of ways."

Pamela and Amy looked at each other, and Hannah knew what she was hinting at, that they had been intimate, and had enjoyed it.

"I'm still getting used to everything," Hannah said. "The kennel's kind of small."

"Don't spend any time in your kennel," Amy said.

"It's just for sleeping and fucking," Pamela said.

"Oh," Hannah said. "Where do I go, then?"

Amy pointed to a pair of doors set into the wall near the coffee machine. "The lounge is that way."

"And we can just go there?" Hannah said.

"Usually. You'll need to check in, and they might tell you to go back to your kennel, if they're cleaning or they have to have a door open or something. And sometimes they just lock it. But you can hang out here when that happens."

"Is it open now?" Hannah asked.

"Probably, and hardly anyone's in there, so you'll have the run of the place."

Hannah looked toward the double doors. Her plate was already half consumed, and she set upon the other half with something approaching enthusiasm, even a modicum of optimism, chiding herself for her despair last night.

But then, she'd lost her books. She'd lost school. And she'd discovered Beth. And Allain's deceit. Or, if not deceit, his sin of omission.

She looked at the doors again, glanced over at a group five male slaves, talking quietly to each other. Two of them looked at her until she

looked back, then all three looked somewhere else. Hannah, not sure why she was embarrassed, blushed and returned her gaze to the doors.

“Can you take coffee in there?” she asked.

“Yeah, but no food.”

“And don’t leave your cup lying around, or they’ll get onto you for that.”

Hannah looked at Amy.

“Get onto you?”

“Yeah, like a mark or two.”

“A mark?”

“Five marks equals a bar. Once you get to a bar, you go to hall 6.”

“What’s that?”

“The last hall. It’s where they do their dirty work.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked.

“All the usual bullshit,” Amy said. “Hutches. That’s their name for it.”

“And other correctives,” Pamela added.

Hannah raised an eyebrow to ask a question that didn’t require words, and Amy answered.

“Yeah, once, last week,” she said. “Missed curfew by five minutes, so that meant four hours in a hutch.”

Amy scrunched up her shoulders and held her arms against her chest, and Hannah understood. Four hours in a very small space.

“Pitch black?” Hannah asked.

“No, more like fencing. You can see out. They’ll even talk to you sometimes, if they get bored. And if anyone else is in trouble, you can watch.”

“Corporal?”

“Yeah.”

Hannah looked down, spread her thighs, saw that the little red mark was still there, the last vestige of Sunday’s suffering. She cleaned her plate, bade her new friends farewell, dropped her tray off at a cart beside the doors, and passed through with her coffee.

Directly before her stood a round desk, large enough to four or five people, but there was just one girl there, reading a book, so engrossed she didn’t look up until Hannah reached the desk and said, “Excuse me?”

“Yup?” the girl said.

“I’m new,” Hannah told her. Beyond the desk, Hannah saw more windows, more views of the campus. There were chairs, exercise bikes, desks, study carrels, and a whole row of PC’s.

“Can anyone use the computers?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Thanks.”

“Yeah,” the girl said, picking up her phone. “Scan.”

Hannah turned to be scanned, and the girl returned to her book and Hannah moved to the PC’s, sat down, tapped the mouse, was greeted by a login screen.

“ID?” it asked, above a large white field where she was supposed to type something.

She looked around. She wasn’t alone here. Three desks away, a boy her age was staring at his monitor.

Just staring.

He was so still, he looked like a statue.

Did he know Hannah was there?

Moving finally, he raised his hands, rubbed his face, returned his hands to his lap, to either side of his relaxed penis, and continued to stare.

Was he watching something?

Nothing was moving on his screen. It looked like just a list of items.

Email, perhaps, Hannah thought. But who just stares at their email inbox? She’d seen Athena go through email. It was a dynamic process. Open, reply, send. Open, delete. Or just delete.

She’d rarely seen Allain go through email. Too many messages from Beth there, no doubt.

Hannah returned her attention to her screen. If she could type the right thing in there, she could use a computer.

But what?

ID.

Did she have an ID?

She thought back to yesterday. Her memories were spotty, but she dimly remembered screaming, and arguing with a girl named Tammy, and being told something confusing about curfews. If she’d been given an ID number, she didn’t remember it. Maybe it was written down? Maybe it was in her kennel somewhere?

She reached up to feel her tag. There were two there now, her old metal one, and a new one made of hard plastic.

The plastic tag featured her picture. She remembered that. And a phone number.

And an ID number. She remembered that now. But what was it? The number had been based on something logical. But what?

She ran her thumb over the tag, as if she could read it with her skin.

“Hey,” she said without pausing, looking at the boy three PCs away.

He jumped in his seat. He literally jumped, before he turned toward Hannah with a shocked, dazed expression in his eyes.

“Sorry,” Hannah said, trying to smile reassuringly. “Could you help me with something?”

He stared at her, wide-eyed, like he was trying to decide if she were a ghost, so she stood up, walked over to him and leaned over.

“Can you read the ID number on my tag?”

“Uh,” he said, and it sounded like he was about to say no, so she grabbed it and smiled and raised her eyebrows expectantly.

“Okay,” he said after drawing in his breath. He fumbled with her tags, reading both, it seemed. “Which tag?”

“The plastic one.”

Okay. The first part’s just a date, and then 04.”

“Oh yeah,” she said. “Yesterday’s date. And I guess I was the fourth one in yesterday or something.”

“Probably.”

She looked at him. With his last word, he seemed a little less catatonic. He almost smiled.

Hannah sat down, typed the number into the screen.

Another message appeared: “Federal ID Number?”

She typed that.

The screen flashed, and then a new screen popped up, with a message at the top:

“Hello, Hannah!”

“Oh,” Hannah said, drawing in her breath, covering her mouth.

Someone, or something, knew who she was. Her mind returned to the interview with Tammy the previous night. Tammy had entered what seemed like volumes of data about Hannah into her computer. Some of that

data had apparently made its way into a computer system, and it had been waiting for her ever since.

“Create a Password,” she was told. Immediately, without needing to think, she went with “raven” and Raven’s birthday.

A new screen popped up, with a Google search field and icons for what Hannah guessed were various school functions or departments.

Hannah moved the cursor to the search field, typed the first thing that popped into her mind: Dr. Ormek Petrosyan.

Immediately, his Dallas clinic website appeared, beside a picture of Ormek himself.

Hannah went back, searched “News.” There were links to everything, unprotected, unlimited. Politics, murder, disaster, crime, a video of a cat chasing a dog.

Hannah went to Look!, the social media website where, for the time being, people Hannah’s age posted pictures, announcements, images, opinions, for their friends to read and look at and comment on and share.

“Create a Look! email address!” read the link at the top of the page.

Hannah clicked it, filled in a few blanks, typed in her first choice of address – Hannah.Loughbridge@look!.com – and a password.

Hannah had an email address now.

After some trial and error, she figured out how to compose an email, and she typed in her mother’s address, put “Hey, Mom, it’s me!” in the subject line, and wrote the same thing in the email body. She hit send and waited. How long till Mom replied?

While she waited for an answer, she sipped her coffee, went back to the login screen, noticed a picture of books on a shelf, clicked it.

“Welcome to the UoTCC Library!” said the next screen.

In the menu below the greeting, there was a link that said, “Request Books.”

She clicked that. A new search field popped up.

Within seconds, she was typing frantically, certain a grave error had been made, and that someone was going to discover it and correct it at any moment.

“Elements of Physics: Fundamentals,” she typed. “Sparks and Brookings.”

It was there. The current edition. She selected it.

“Evolution and Revolution: Biological Sciences, van Damme.”

There too.

“World History, 450 BC to WW1. The Corfette Group.”

She added it to her cart.

“Introductory Calculus, Piedmont Edition 4.”

It was there.

She opened her cart, clicked “Deliver,” chose “Immediately” and hit submit.

A new screen appeared. “Thank you for your order!”

Why would anyone thank a slave for ordering books?

Hannah leaned back and stared in horror at the screen.

What was she thinking? How, Hannah asked herself, could she possibly have thought any of this was a good idea?

Laura had said specifically that her schooling was over. At home, they’d never allowed her unlimited access to the internet. She wasn’t permitted to have an email address.

Surely, this was all a huge mistake. More than a mistake. A major glitch in the school’s computer system that she’d somehow been able to exploit.

Soon – this afternoon, tomorrow – she’d be confronted, asked how she could have believed she had any business ordering books or creating an email address, and she’d get sent to hall 6, to spend for four hours in a hutch. Or a day in a hutch. Or the rest of her life in a hutch.

And as soon as she got out, if she ever did, Mr. Ortega would be waiting for her.

But then, she had never been told by the Petrosyans she couldn’t do these things. They just weren’t made available to her.

And she could plead ignorance, if this was indeed a system error. She got here just last night, after all.

She opened up her University of Texas at Austin school account page, one of the few things she was able to access from the Petrosyans.

It popped up. The page where she would take final exams popped up. Her last round of assignments popped up.

She could take her final exams, in this room, on this machine.

She blinked. The screen was getting blurry.

“Hannah?”

Someone was saying her name. The voice was coming from the boy three PCs away.

“Yeah?” she asked, startled, turning toward him. He was blurry too.

“Are you okay?”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked. If anyone wasn’t okay, it was the boy, staring at his PC like a zombie.

She raised her hand to her face, surprised to find tears on her cheeks. She sniffed, took another sip of coffee.

“Oh,” she said, and she laughed self-deprecatingly. “I just . . . there are some things I could do here that I never could before. I guess it kind of surprised me.”

He continued to look at her.

“Are *you* okay?” she asked him. “You seemed kind of . . . tired earlier.”

“Long story,” he said.

“Tell me,” Hannah said, glancing at her email screen. No reply yet, just a dumb welcome message from the people at Look!.

Chapter 40: Britt

The boy breathed in, focused his eyes on her, and she realized he was young. Probably younger than she. And he was cute, and healthy, with muscles in his legs that told her he was probably a runner. His hair was short and dark, his eyes dark too.

“Very brief version,” he said, “my sister got power of attorney over my parents and sold me to the school.”

“That’s a new one,” Hannah blurted before she remembered her manners. “I’m so sorry.”

He bit his lip and looked at her.

“What happened to your parents?” she asked him.

“Dad was in a wreck a couple of months ago, brain damage, Mom was declared incompetent because of habitual substance abuse. My sister got power of attorney last week, they came for me Monday morning, I got here that night.”

“What hall?”

“2”

“I’m on 4,” Hannah said, and immediately felt stupid again. He was telling her about the worst thing that had ever happened to him. She was just making conversation back. But she’d been hearing stories like this for almost a year. She’d never heard of someone who’d been sold by his sister, though.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Britt.”

“Hi, Britt, I’m Hannah.”

“I know, I read your tag.”

Hannah needed to regroup. Why was this conversation so hard for her? Britt wanted to talk, for now, but at some point, her social ignorance was going to turn him off. She didn’t want to hurt him. She also didn’t want him to think she was an idiot.

“What have you been doing since you got here?” Hannah asked.

“Trying to figure everything out,” he said. “I just go to email, and . . . I’m emailing my sister, my mom, my girlfriend, and no one’s . . .”

His voice faltered, and he looked up at Hannah with the fierce expression of a boy desperate not to cry.

“Girlfriend?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah,” he replied with a croak. “She doesn’t get it. She totally doesn’t get it. She said she’s done. I just got her email.”

“Oh, I’m so, so sorry.”

He looked at her with a sort of wounded gratitude, and she wondered if he’d been sitting here every free minute since his arrival, suffering alone.

“Where did you used to be?” she asked him.

“Mobile.”

“Where’s that?”

“You never heard of Mobile, Alabama?”

“Well, I was thinking it was in Texas.”

“We’re from Mobile, but my sister went here. So she gave them a deal.”

“Can’t you just tell your girlfriend that’s what happened?”

“My sister told her I got half the money.”

“Is your sister, um . . . really evil?”

Britt laughed, and for a moment, the lost, empty look in his eyes was gone.

“I don’t know,” he said, despairing again. “I think money made her evil.”

“It does that to people,” Hannah observed. “So, she shipped you from Mobile?”

“Yeah, in a crate all day. No food or . . . anything . . . but water.”

“Did they give you any pills?”

“No.”

“They gave me one. Or two, really. I slept the whole time.”

“Where are you from?”

“Dallas.”

“How did you end up . . . here?”

“Mom went broke, I got taken and put on the market, a family bought me, I stayed there for a year. Now I’m here.”

“What for?”

“The son goes to school here. So I guess I’ll be, um, entertaining him here now.”

Hannah fought the urge to tell Britt everything – about Ormek, and Laura, and Beth too. She was in the mood to confess, for some reason.

“Entertaining?” he asked. “Is that what recreational female means?”

“You mean, female, recreational?”

Britt stood and stepped over to Hannah to read the second tag on her collar again. “It says ‘female, recreational.’ I read it ‘recreational female.’ But I still don’t know what either means.”

“I, um, entertain.”

“Like, dancing, singing?” Britt asked.

“You really don’t know?” Hannah demanded, and she scowled at him suspiciously.

“No, I don’t,” he said. “I don’t. This is all new to me. So if I’m supposed to know what a female comma recreational is, I don’t, and if that makes me stupid, then I guess I am.”

“Think about it.”

Britt looked at her, into her eyes, and then down her body, at her breasts, at her hands, resting in her lap.

And then he bit his lip again and looked away, and Hannah knew he’d figured it out but didn’t want to say it.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s that.”

“Are you new at it?” he asked.

Hannah looked at Britt, trying to understand his question.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you seem . . .” he said, his voice trailing off.

“Seem what?”

“Like . . . like it’s not your first thing.”

“Not my first thing?” Hannah repeated. “Like, not something I’m that good at?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You were thinking it.”

“Well, you’re just . . .”

Hannah tried stepping outside herself, to see herself as Britt might, so she could understand what he was saying.

“Oh,” she said, thinking she understood. “Okay. I’m just not what you would expect.”

“That’s it.”

“How would you expect a . . . a . . . someone like me . . . to act?”

Britt looked at her, looked away.

“Seductive?” she said. “Sexy? Coming on to you, while we’re sitting here and you’re telling me about what your evil sister just did to you?”

Britt blushed, and Hannah knew she was right.

“There are probably some girls who are like that,” Hannah said. “I can’t be. I wasn’t raised that way.”

Britt laughed, a brief, explosive guffaw.

“Why is that funny?” Hannah asked.

“I don’t know,” Britt replied.

Hannah wanted to change the subject.

“What does yours say?” she asked.

“What does my what say?”

“Your tag.”

“I don’t know. They put it on me Monday night.”

“There’s an ID carved into the collar,” she said. “And on your tag too. And your metal tag says your name, and your main job.”

Britt looked at her.

“Want me to look?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

Hannah stood, stepped over to Britt, watching his eyes run the length of her body, from her feet to her eyes, then to her breasts and down to the golden hair at her middle, the slit just visible behind it.

She reached for his tags, lifting the plastic one in front to look at his picture, which wasn’t terrible, then peering at the metal one behind it.

“Britton,” she said, pretending she didn’t notice his hardening penis. “Male comma T-B-D.”

“What does that mean?” he asked, shifting uncomfortably, dropping one hand to his lap to hide his erection.

“I don’t know,” Hannah said, focusing on his eyes, doing her best to convince him she had no idea what was happening between his legs.

“Maybe they want to test you for things first.”

“Why would the school want me, then?”

“Maybe it was someone in the school. Like a certain department?”

“I don’t know. No one will tell me anything.”

“Who have you asked?”

“Just the people who work here.”

“Yeah, they’re not going to know.”

In a movement he no doubt thought was subtle, Britt pushed his penis down between his legs and held his hand over it, before he reached up with his free hand to his collar to run his finger along the edge of the metal.

“You know these things don’t come off, right?” he observed, wanting Hannah to look at his neck.

“Yeah,” Hannah said, sitting back down at her PC, well aware not only that Britt was completely erect, but that his aroused penis was respectably thick, and long enough to bury his semen deep inside any girl he partnered with. “Not without some kind of special saw, anyway.”

Hannah turned to her email again.

Mother had replied, a simple message back:

“How did you get email? How are things?”

Hannah turned her full attention to the monitor, typing with one finger at a time to give her mother a complete accounting of what she felt she could share – that she was in Corpus Christi for the time being, and might have more freedom in some ways, and might be able to see Mother more often, if Mother could make it to town.

Hannah hoped it wouldn’t be too upsetting for Mother, and she realized she didn’t want a long email conversation where Mother asked more awkward questions and Hannah would have to think about how to answer them. She would not be using the word kennel, of course, nor describing the nature of her confinement.

“I might be able to get on email once or twice a day right now,” Hannah lied, and she hit send.

At some point while she’d been typing, Britt had quietly taken his leave. She hadn’t seen him go. He probably rose as soon as his penis softened, she surmised, mortified by his erection in her presence.

She wondered where he went. If she ever saw him again, she needed to talk to him about not being embarrassed. Erections happened. And they were a good thing.

Hannah thought about her last sex, with Allain on Tuesday afternoon. That was two days ago. Allain wouldn’t be back until Monday. Five more days. And he couldn’t sign her copulation form until he was back. She’d be celibate until Monday, at the earliest. And she’d be ovulating on Saturday or Sunday. This was a smaller problem, but it was a problem. She thought about Raven, Ramone, Allain. Even Ormek. Masturbation would have to do.

She went to the front desk, borrowed five sheets of paper and a pen, returned to write down her final class assignments. She finished her coffee, looked at the screen. “Log Out,” appeared in the upper corner.

She hit the link, ended her session, knowing she’d be back, and she’d stay for as long as they let her.

Chapter 41: Jane

Hannah returned to her hall, took a shower, the same soap and shampoo here she used in the processing room, but it felt good, and drying off with a towel felt good. There were mirrors and three basic hair dryers as well, and she ran one for half an hour and fluffed up her hair and looked in the mirror and decided she looked okay sans makeup.

To Hannah's continuing amazement, her books showed up, stacked neatly just outside her kennel when she returned from lunch.

The rest of Thursday and all of Friday were a blur of studying, eating, and meeting the slowly growing body of new subjects.

Someone else was kenneled on her hall Friday, a girl three doors down named Jane who belonged to a female student, and who seemed to want to keep to herself after she revealed the basics of her situation.

Hannah didn't think about Beth, or about the unfairness of being kenneled, or the unfairness of life. She limited her distractions to a few emails per day with Mother and masturbating twice per day, once in the afternoon with the curtain closed, once at night at bedtime.

Mother took the news of her kenneling surprisingly well, Hannah thought. She and Roger traveled every few weeks, usually to see his family, so she seemed amenable to a trip to see her daughter outside the confines of the club. If she was curious about Hannah's sudden move, she kept those questions to herself. She'd upset Hannah twice at their last lunch, and Hannah suspected Mother was reining in her curiosity, grateful for the messages and not wanting to cause any more distress – at least, not until they were physically together.

Hannah's interactions with staff were surprisingly infrequent. Someone would move through the hall every few hours, peek in on Hannah while she was studying or pacing or on her toilet or masturbating, and then they'd come back to make sure everyone was locked in for the night.

Saturday morning, she brought her books to breakfast, noticed Britt by himself, away from the windows, and joined him with her tray.

He looked up at her as she sat, his eyes wandering over her body before they settled on her eyes. He looked a little less crazed and a little more sad today.

"How are things?" she asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “I got in touch with one of my aunts, and she’s trying to get the rest of the family on my side.”

“And then what happens?” Hannah asked. She wasn’t sure how relatives could change the purchase of a human being.

“They’re trying to make my sister admit the sale was improper.”

“And then she just gives the money back?”

“If she hasn’t spent it all,” he said, his eyes going dark. “It’s a longshot.”

“So what do you do in the meantime?”

Hannah meant the question to be helpful. She wanted Britt to say he’d go along, do as he was told, survive – as she had done. But he scowled and looked down at his half-eaten food.

“I can’t put up with this,” he said, reaching reflexively for his collar. “I’m close to shutting down.”

“Are you still upset about your girlfriend?”

“Her, and everything else.”

Hannah leaned back to stretch, raising her breasts unintentionally. He looked at them, at her nipples, back into her eyes.

“They took you a year ago, right?” he asked.

“Yeah, August 15.”

“How did you cope with it?”

“It was hard, yeah,” Hannah said. “But my mom and me were really poor. And poverty’s sort of like a prison too. In some ways, I’m a lot richer now.”

Hannah paused, looked to the windows on the other side of the cafeteria, wondered if she would someday walk unchained among the trees she could see. “And I sort of just dealt with everything. Sometimes I’d go outside my body, and watch what was happening like I was another girl.”

“Literally?”

“No, not literally,” she laughed. “Kind of more like a mental exercise.”

“Didn’t you ever try to fight it?” he asked.

“No,” said Hannah. “I didn’t have relatives I could email, even if I had an email account. I didn’t really even know what was happening for the first few days. I was just in a little cage, by myself, and then in a cage with a bunch of other people who were in cages. And then . . .” Hannah laughed, because the memory was coming back hard and sharp. “And then, once I

figured out I was going to be sold . . . for, um, recreation . . . I thought I'd meet my husband. I thought my husband would buy me. Or he'd turn into my husband after I won him over. So I cooperated."

Hannah blushed, the admission of her youthful naivete surprisingly embarrassing.

"It didn't exactly work out that way," she quickly added, as Britt smiled sympathetically. "But it's fine. I get to study. The people who bought me are nice."

Britt nodded, talked more about his situation, was starting to repeat what he'd said the day before.

Hannah excused herself as soon as she finished her food, so if Britt were erect again, he wouldn't have to stand and try to hide it. Which would be impossible while he was standing, she knew.

Books cradled in her arm, Hannah returned to her kennel, startled to find the door locked.

She shook the door to make sure, slid her books through the slot onto the shelf and walked down to the other occupied kennel, where Jane was sitting on her bed, staring at a graphic novel about a female heroine and, as far as Hannah could tell, copying out the pictures on a sheet of paper.

She looked up, peering at Hannah through black-rimmed glasses, expressionless.

"I can't get in," Hannah said.

"Yeah, they've gone to access control today."

"What's that?"

"Kennel doors stay locked."

"How do I get in?" Hannah asked.

"Just go to your door and wait. They'll open it. Then pull it closed and they'll lock it."

"When will they open it again?"

"At lunch time, probably."

"How will they know I'm waiting to get in?" Hannah asked. She imagined standing at her kennel door for an hour, never getting access. Maybe Jane just wanted to get rid of her.

"They have cameras," Jane replied, pointing through her bars at the ceiling, where Hannah spotted small black spheres at either end of the hall.

"I didn't know those were there," Hannah admitted.

“First time here, right?” Jane asked. She seemed to want to talk. She was a husky girl, with short, brown hair and heavy breasts, her pubic hair dyed pitch black. Was the dye Jane’s choice, or her owner’s? Was her owner a lesbian? Was Jane?

“Yeah, I got here Wednesday,” Hannah said, leaning against the bars of Jane’s kennel.

“I was here last year. They’re pretty lax about stuff in the summer, but it’s going to get a lot stricter between now and next week.”

Hannah received the news with resignation, but not surprise. She couldn’t imagine how hundreds of subjects could be granted the freedom she’d enjoyed the last few days. Now, apparently, she’d just lost the freedom of coming and going from her kennel as she pleased.

“Do you like it here?” Hannah asked.

“It’s a place,” Jane replied with a dismissive gesture. “I don’t get to see Heather as much, so I kind of miss that.”

“Heather?”

“My best friend,” Jane said. Her face was still expressionless. Was she joking? Being sincere? Hannah realized that Jane was hard to read, and guessed it was something she’d learned to do long ago. Hannah wanted to learn more, politely, so she ventured what she hoped was a neutral question.

“How long have you known her?”

“Her parents bought me when we were both 12, just as a companion, ‘cuz she didn’t have a sister and always wanted one.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, raising one eyebrow just a degree above its resting place. If that’s all Jane wanted to share, she could stop talking, but Hannah was curious and hoped she wouldn’t shut up.

“We’re more than companions now,” Jane said with the briefest hint of a smile. “That sort of happened, and it didn’t surprise anyone. Heather’s parents knew she was a lesbian before she did.”

“What about you?” Hannah asked.

Jane looked at Hannah through her glasses, very briefly looked at Hannah’s breasts and mound, and Hannah knew the question could be interpreted as a subtle proposition, and that was fine, particularly now, on the day she expected to start ovulating.

“I can go either way,” Jane said, staring into Hannah’s eyes. “I love Heather, but she’s not jealous. I can play sometimes.”

Hannah nodded, sensing that she and Jane had more or less reached an understanding. If Allain signed her copulation form, they would probably be partnering.

“Okay,” said Hannah. “I gotta pee, so I’m going to see if they’ll let me in now.”

“It usually takes about a minute,” Jane said.

“Okay, bye,” Hannah said, not sure what else to say. They’d be no more than 20 feet from each other.

“Bye,” Jane said, smiling again.

Hannah went to her kennel door, looked at the cameras in the ceiling, heard the sound of a bolt opening within 30 seconds, stepped in and pulled the door closed, hearing it lock almost immediately.

Using the paper and pen she’d borrowed from the front desk of the lounge, she lost herself in calculus problems until she heard a voice.

“Going to lunch?”

She looked up to find Jane standing outside her bars. She rose from her chair, tested her door, surprised when it swung free.

“I didn’t hear it unlock.”

“There was a chime,” Jane said. “Listen for that.”

“I didn’t hear that either.”

Hannah stepped into the hall, closed her door, heard it bolt.

“Are you a nerd?” Jane inquired.

“Yeah, I am, I guess” Hannah admitted, laughing. “I was out of school from age 15 until I started studying earlier this year, so I’m trying to make up for lost time.”

As they talked about their lives, Hannah decided Jane wasn’t standoffish, just cautious with how quickly she got familiar with someone. Hannah, thanks to getting locked out of her kennel, had made it past that threshold, apparently

Over a meal of spaghetti and salad, Jane revealed more about her life. Like most subjects, she occupied that strange sort of gray area of human relations, as close as a sister and a daughter to the family that owned her, but collared, kept nude at home, regularly chained, often confined to a downstairs cage, and subjected to corporal punishment when she strayed.

And, Jane admitted without any hint of scandal or shame, the father availed himself of her physical services once a week, usually on Thursday nights.

“Everyone knows?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah, we had a family meeting about it, when I turned 18. I think it was Mom’s idea, but Dad was good with it. And . . . it’s not loving, okay? We do it the same way every time. That was covered in the meeting. I’m on hands and knees, and he gets behind me.”

“Heather is okay with it?”

“It was an adjustment,” Jane said. “She wouldn’t touch me until Saturday night for a couple of months, but I started douching on Fridays and she got over it.”

“But now you’re here,” Hannah observed.

“Yeah, it was just when we were in high school,” Jane said, “and then all summer.”

“How do they punish?” Hannah asked, wanting to change the subject. Talk of sex between a slave girl and the patriarch of the family made her nervous. She knew any time the topic came up she was sending out signals – with her voice, her eyes, her body language – that made her crimes with Ormek clear.

“Just cane on the bottom,” Jane replied. “Dad always does it. Mom’s always sad about it. Good cop bad cop.”

“It’s the opposite for me,” Hannah said. “The mom is the bad cop.”

“She spansks you?”

“No, but she paid someone to do it Sunday.”

“What did you do?”

“Took a pill.”

“You don’t seem like the type.”

“I’m not. The daughter made me, while we were doing the town.”

“That’s total bullshit.”

“Yup,” Hannah agreed, certain her single word of sedition would never make it back to Laura’s ears.

“Who’d she hire?”

“A Mr. Ortega. Ten hits. Back, butt, legs. Then aloe.”

Hannah laughed. The memory seemed more ridiculous every time she thought about it.

Chapter 42: A Meeting with Allain

Hannah thought of the rest of the weekend as a marathon, a long race to be run, endured, survived. Monday was coming. Allain was coming. But in the meantime, she needed to study and hope no one took her books away, email Mother and hope no one closed her email account.

There was a distracting pang here and there, on Saturday night, when she wondered what Allain was up to, what friends (or girlfriend) he was seeing. Hannah was in full ovulation now, her vagina leaking warm honey, masturbation every three or four hours barely easing her frustration.

She wondered if Athena was still grounded tonight, or all the talk of her punishment was for show, just to justify Hannah's suffering.

Sunday morning, she thought about church, about the music she was missing, about the lunch at the club with the Abercrombies she wasn't invited to, about the coy glances she couldn't exchange with Ramone when no one was looking.

For every bite of fear, frustration, despair, however, there was brief optimism, even a sense of adventure. Perhaps she would get to take her final exams after all. She'd be meeting people, making friends, experiencing new lovers. And, if Allain approved, she would be working, possibly at something approaching a real job.

So when Monday morning broke, first in darkness, then with a quiet chime and the sequential unlocking of kennel doors, she rose with the first true sense of excitement she'd felt in more than a week. This was her life, and she would live it to the fullest, given the limitations she faced. And everyone faced limitations, she reminded herself.

There were seven people on her hall now, and she and Jane and three of them – a boy and two girls – went to breakfast together, talking about their owners, about their hometowns, about their lives, their hopes for the semester.

There were several ways to interact with owners, Hannah learned. There was email, of course, and everyone had it and used it, and the idea that Hannah went almost a year without it seemed quaint to everyone at her table. Then, there were meeting spaces, where owners and subjects were separated by glass but could talk privately. And then, owners could schedule subjects for release from the kennels, until curfew or even overnight.

“You just walk out at your time?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah,” said Jane. “Well, they check you out. You have to pass through a few doors, and get scanned.”

“You walk out naked?” Hannah queried.

“No, you get a locker you can keep stuff in, and you put it on when you leave, and take it off when you come back.”

Hannah had no idea when, or how, she’d be seeing Allain first. Maybe he’d schedule her for release this afternoon? That’s what she wanted most, to be free today, to wander the campus, even if it was just to go to Allain’s apartment for a few hours. Or maybe he’d take her to dinner? But would they be alone, or would Beth be there too?

Hannah went to the lounge, emailed Mother, rode a bike until she was too sweaty to see, then showered and returned to her kennel, holding the door closed and listening to it lock with a sense of almost frantic anticipation.

Even now, Allain was probably on his way, traversing the four-hour drive as quickly as he could. He would probably stop for lunch, but at 1:30, or 2, or certainly by 3, he would be here, and Hannah would be his first stop.

But if he scheduled her for release, how would she know? Or if he just wanted to talk, how would she know that? They wouldn’t look for her in the cafeteria, would they?

Hannah raced to lunch as soon as she heard her door unlock, wolfed down her food while Jane and her neighbors talked about their own concerns, and made it back to her kennel to be locked in by 1:15.

She opened her calculus book, read the same paragraph about a new differential concept three times before she gave up and set it aside. History went no better, a convoluted list of wars and battles during the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries confounding her.

Biology worked, however, and she lost herself in the evolution of the eye until she heard Tammy’s voice just outside her kennel.

“Knock knock,” Tammy said.

“Hey,” Hannah said.

“You have a visitor.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, leaping to the bars, half expecting to see Allain in the hall. “Who is it?”

“Allain.”

“Where is he?”

“I’m going to take you there.”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

Tammy unlocked the kennel door and Hannah stepped out, following Tammy out of the hall, through the cafeteria, through the lounge and to a row of numbered doors.

“He’s in three,” Tammy said.

Hannah threw it open.

“Allain!” she said as soon as she saw him.

He was seated, wearing a loose gray t-shirt and old blue gym shorts, and he looked up at her sadly. But he didn’t just look sad. He looked strangely diminished, and Hannah remembered the crumpled figure on the couch, beside his parents, watching Hannah take two pills, watching Hannah get plugged, strapped, gagged, watching Hannah carried to a truck like a load of cargo.

This was the same Allain she looked at last Wednesday, as if he’d been transported from the couch at home to the chair on the other side of a pane of glass, with no intervening time, no respite of happiness or hope. His hair was long, unbrushed, his eyes weary and puffy.

“What’s wrong?” Hannah asked. But Hannah knew what was wrong. She knew how guilt could gnaw at an owner’s psyche, especially if he had been assuming the worst. For all Allain knew, Hannah had spent the last five days caged in isolation, her dreams of schooling dashed, all the things she loved taken from her.

Disabusing him of his sympathies might be done in time, Hannah told herself, but not yet.

She settled into her chair, facing him through the glass and smiled weakly, as if through a great effort.

“I’m so happy to see you,” she said. “How was your drive?”

“Fine,” he said. “I missed you this weekend. I haven’t stopped thinking about you. Please tell me you’ve been okay.”

“I’ve been fine,” Hannah said evenly. “I’ve been learning how things work here. It’s been kind of a challenge.”

“Do you have everything you need?”

“No,” she said quickly. “There are two forms I need you to sign. One is a service passport, and the other, um, lets me interact with . . . the

people in here.”

Allain raised his eyebrows and sat up a little straighter. He did look tired, Hannah thought, and not just from the drive today. Maybe he really was thinking about her all weekend. When he wasn’t thinking about Beth. Of course, Beth was presumably fine, while Hannah wasn’t.

“Where do I get them?”

“Was there a desk or something you had to go through to get here?”

“Yes.”

“Probably there, then.”

“And what are these forms?”

“One’s called a service passport. So I can do work and things. Just check the box for—”

“You’re okay with that?”

“With what?”

“With what you have to do?”

“I am,” Hannah said. “It’s better than spending all day in my kennel. And I get money.”

“Okay,” Allain said, his guilt obvious.

“I get all the money. It will go into my account.”

“Okay.”

“So just check the place on the back that says ‘all service areas,’” Hannah said.

“Okay. And what’s the other one?”

“Oh, it has a weird name,” Hannah said, blushing, realizing this was more embarrassing than she’d expected. “It’s called an, um, copulation grant.”

“What does that do?”

“It just means I can be . . . with some . . . there’s . . . well, there’s this girl on my hall, and I can’t . . . her name’s Jane.”

Allain looked at Hannah, somewhere between bemused and puzzled.

“You want to be with other people,” he said.

“Yeah,” Hannah said slowly. “Like, this one, um, girl, she’s . . .”

Allain smiled for the first time. He knew what Hannah was asking for, and it wasn’t just about one girl, but she sensed that he was glad to be asked for this, that signing the form might compensate a little, for what had been done to her.

Hannah would not be telling Allain about her email account, her books, the computer where she would take her finals. He'd find out eventually, she knew, but maybe she'd use it when he felt guilty about something else.

"Now," Hannah said, with both sincerity and urgency. "When do I get to be with you?"

Allain looked down, and she realized immediately neither of them would like his answer.

"Friday," he said.

"Why so long?" she asked, letting her voice break.

"I'm sorry, Hannah," he said. "I have to get a bunch of things done. But Friday, I'm going to schedule you for 5 o'clock, okay? Five on Friday?"

"What do you have to do until then?" Hannah asked, because she wanted to see him squirm. He needed to take care of Beth, Hannah knew. Beth needed to be reassured that the presence of Allain's slave girl on campus wouldn't disrupt things between them.

"I'll be going from 8 to 8 every day," Allain said. "Eight to 10 on Wednesday. There's an orientation, a bunch of meetings, a group project that starts Thursday."

He put his chin on his hand and looked at Hannah, blinking at her in a way she found endearing. Like a frustrated boy. Even if it was all an act, it was cute.

"I'm gonna miss you," she said.

"It'll still be like it was," he said. "I'll see you on weekends. I'm signing you out until Sunday."

"Okay, that will be nice," Hannah said. "Will you have any work to do then?"

"Yeah, but you can use my phone some if you want, and there will be friends around."

"Will Beth be there?"

Hannah studied Allain's reaction. He looked puzzled again. "Beth? From the camping trip?"

"Yeah," Hannah said. "We got sort of close on the trip."

"I'll let her know you asked about her."

"Do that," Hannah said, staring into Allain's eyes, trying to communicate with her expression that she'd figured it all out, not quite

ready though to say it with her mouth, though.

Allain looked at his watch.

“Hey, I gotta go,” he said. “There’s a class introduction across campus in fifteen minutes.”

“You’re going like that?” Hannah asked.

“It’s casual.”

“Okay, have fun,” Hannah said. “Oh, and I need clothes. There’s a locker here where I can keep them, so I’m not walking out of here naked.”

“What do you want?”

“What did you bring?”

“A lot of stuff,” Allain said. “A whole suitcase.”

“Okay, thank you. Panties, bra, dark shorts, blue or black, and my white or pink tank top. And my flats, the black ones. Oh, my white bra. Oh, and did you bring that skirt, it has that tartan pattern on it?”

“You mean the plaid?”

“Yeah, the green and black plaid. That and a white button down, if you brought it. I’d rather have the van Minsk, but the Garbie is okay. And my sundress. I might want to wear that instead. Peach? The peach one? You know, with the lace in the back? Oh, but if you get that, get my white sandals. The ones with the strap above the heel, and the open toes, not the other ones.”

Allain wore the expression of a man who had no idea what he’d packed, but he nodded, and Hannah assumed he’d do his best.

And if he didn’t, more guilt.

“Will you have time to sign those forms before you go to your meeting?”

“Sure, I’ll try,” he said.

“They’re simple, and I’ve already looked them over, so just check for everything and sign it.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you, I love you,” she said as he rose to go.

“I love you too,” he said, smiling awkwardly, and Hannah knew his guilt ran very deep.

Chapter 43: ‘A Range of Interactions’

Hannah went straight from the meeting space to the PCs, where three other subjects had taken machines. She typed out a quick email to Mother, asking when she might make it to Corpus Christi, and proposed a Sunday afternoon or evening visit. Allain could study then and Hannah could excuse herself, have dinner with her mother and Roger, whom she had yet to meet, and then return to Allain or just go back to the kennels. Alone.

Imagining this level of freedom was, Hannah began to realize, almost intoxicating.

Hannah returned to her kennel, ready to be alone. The hall was full of noise now, and with the voices of close to 20 subjects talking to each other through the bars, the space seemed as full of life now as it had been dismal last Wednesday.

A male had been put in the kennel directly across from hers, and she stepped to the bars to introduce herself. His name was Farhid, his English wasn't too great, and he was here as the subject of a brother and sister from Pakistan. How he served them, Hannah decided, would have to remain a mystery. He shut his curtain after their brief exchange, but Hannah left hers open.

She wasn't quite ready to dive back into her books, so she sat on the bed and listened, eyes closed, face tilted up, the music of other voices filling her ears. This feeling was something akin to happiness, she realized. Last week, she hadn't believed she'd ever be happy again.

“Hannah?”

Hannah turned, saw Tammy standing at the bars.

“Hey, Tammy.”

“Your owner signed everything.”

“Yay.”

“So, we have a request.”

“Yeah?”

“Someone mentioned you.”

“Who?” Hannah asked.

“His name is Britton.”

“Oh yeah, Britt. I've talked to him a few times.”

“Okay, so, we suggested he get a partner, and —”

“That didn’t take long,” Hannah said.

“You know where this is going?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Britt’s nice. And I’m sure he’s um, indicated for, um, what you recommended.”

“Where would you like to get it done?”

“In here’s fine,” Hannah said.

“Okay, I’ll go get him.”

“When?” Hannah asked.

“Now.”

“Okay, I’m ready.”

Hannah continued to sit on her bed, but she grabbed a book and flipped through the pages absently, allowing the first wave of mild excitement to pass through her body and mind.

In the thick of ovulation, her opening was always a little wet, warming up and glistening when she anticipated sex, flowing when she masturbated, covering her lips and hair and everything she touched, trickling across her anus. She always pulled her comforter down and sat on her sheets during ovulation, or whenever her chamber was leaking any other fluid. She wondered how often the sheets would be changed, and if she could request that, or it was done in accordance with a strict schedule. She hoped there wouldn’t be a Darcy here, to complain about the messes she made in her bedding.

She heard the door at the end of the hall open, heard Tammy’s voice, heard Britt say something in reply, his voice husky and tense, and she tossed her book to the foot of her bed, rose and straightened her sheets hastily, pulling the cover up to her pillow, her hands shaking. Despite her experience in these matters, she always felt a jolt of nerves anticipating a new partner.

Tammy appeared at the bars, Britt beside her, making no effort to hide his engorged penis now, his eyes half-closed.

Tammy pulled out a key and unlocked Hannah’s kennel door, the three of them in a silence that Hannah decided must be broken.

“Sometimes you use a key and sometimes it’s done remotely,” Hannah observed. “I still haven’t figured that out.”

Tammy pulled the door open, but Britt stood still, looking uncertain, bewildered apparently by Hannah’s decision to ask a mundane question at a time like this. Hannah wasn’t being completely inappropriate,

however. She'd found with boys that providing eager, unimpeded access to the pleasures of her use sometimes confused them, left them unsettled. A girl should be at least a little bit of a challenge. Even a slave girl.

"The key and the remote system operate the same locking bolt," Tammy said, motioning Britt to step in. "Keys if we have them, since they're a little quicker, or we can just wave at the camera and wait."

Britt entered Hannah's kennel, stood just inside the door, glanced around, stared at the book on her bed, perhaps surprised that Hannah had left it there.

"Hi, Britt," Hannah said.

"Hey, um, Hannah."

Tammy locked the door, turned to step away.

"Uh, Tammy?"

"Yeah?"

"How does this work?" Hannah asked.

Tammy smiled. "What do you mean by 'this'?"

Hannah laughed. "Um, just, I mean, if Britt gets tired of me after 15 minutes, how does he leave? When do you come back for him?"

"Just open your curtain when you're done."

"Okay, thanks."

Tammy stepped away and Hannah closed her curtain, turning back to Britt, still standing by the door, his penis still long, but a little deflated, angling toward the floor.

Hannah turned toward him, looked into his eyes, smiled.

"I'm not going to get tired of you," he said quietly.

"That's okay if you do," she said. "How have you been?"

"I'm okay," he said.

"Okay sounds like an improvement," she said, and she moved to her bed, pulled the comforter down, put a pillow against the wall and leaned against it. She set the other pillow at the middle of the bed, but decided to let Britt decide when he would sit, or if he ever would.

"You said to get used to this the other day," he said. "So I'm trying."

"Still working on getting free, though?"

"Yeah, but it's way harder than I thought. It takes a lawyer, and paperwork, and a record search, and it takes six months to get free, if you ever do."

As he talked, his penis returned to full attention, pointing a little up, a little to his left. Talking to Hannah – even about difficult subjects – seemed to arouse him.

He looked down, smiled and looked back at Hannah.

“You know that’s okay, right?” she said.

“Yeah, I’m getting used to it. It was just really weird, though, when we were talking at the PC’s.”

“I was flattered,” Hannah said. “I mean, I assumed it was because of me, and not something you were reading.”

Britt looked at her, clearly puzzled.

“Sometimes I joke,” she said. “It throws people off.”

“Is that why you do it?”

“I don’t know why I do it. It’s just something I do, I guess.”

“Sorry for what I said, by the way.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I didn’t get you, remember? I said something like, I thought you were new at this . . . at what you did, and it probably seemed like an insult.”

“It didn’t,” Hannah said, “not at all.”

Britt looked at her, crossed his arms and shifted his weight to one leg, a casual pose in stark contrast to his male part, swollen and hungry and desperate-looking.

“Do you mind talking right now?” Hannah asked, looking at his middle, back into his eyes.

“It’s fine,” he said. “I was sort of hoping we weren’t just going to do it.”

“Why?”

“I like talking to you. It’s really helped. You know . . . my girlfriend, and then . . . you . . . and talking to you . . . and I sort of realized . . .”

Hannah nodded, letting him continue his thought.

“I’m not saying, I’m not saying . . . I fell in love . . . I’m in love, or . . . oh, you know . . . but it was . . .”

Britt was blushing now.

“You can feel whatever you want,” Hannah reassured. “I fall in love with everyone I’m with.”

“That sounds like it could be . . . painful.”

“It’s a sort of love,” Hannah said. “Not the kind that can break your heart. It just means I give it my all, and the person is happy, and I’m happy too.”

Britt nodded, opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

“It’s starting to look painful,” she said, looking down and smiling.

“I could stand here all day and talk to you, just like this.”

“That’s what I live for,” Hannah said, so touched by his words she had to swallow. “I never forget when someone says something like that.”

He smiled, said nothing more.

“Okay,” Hannah said, straightening her back, tucking her hair behind her ears. “I’m good with starting, though. Can we be practical for a few seconds? Since this is our first time together?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“So I’m going to just say what I think we should do, and then you can say if you want to or not, and it’s fine if you have another idea.”

Britt looked at her, confused again perhaps.

She motioned him to approach her, and she slid to the edge of the bed, put her legs over the side, her toes touching the floor.

“You like oral, right?”

“I’ve done it once,” he said.

“Step up,” she said.

He obliged and she leaned forward, first giving his tip a few quick trial licks, looking up into his eyes, looking back at his penis and opening her mouth to accept as much of his shaft as she could comfortably fit.

Britt’s penis shook as she tended to it, her teeth holding it in place while she ran her tongue along the ridge of his underside, tasting him, pressing him, caressing him.

“Oh, god,” he said, and Hannah knew she could make him cum now if she wanted, so she pulled her mouth away. The unwritten understanding of the engagement, she knew, was that it would involve her vagina, and she preferred that as well.

“From the front or back?” she asked quietly, looking up at him.

“The back to start,” he said.

Hannah slid to the head of her bed, pushed down her comforter and got on her hands and knees, looking at Britt expectantly, arching her back to raise her front opening to him.

He grunted, as if already feeling the embrace of her sex, and clambered onto the bed behind her. She reached between her legs, parted her lips and waited, Britt immediately pressing his tip against her slot, pushing forward, pulling back, her lubrication coating his shaft, him filling her vagina on his fourth thrust.

“Oooh, ahh,” Hannah grunted, her first sensation of being fully penetrated not completely pleasurable. “Wow.”

“Are you okay?” Britt asked, easing out until just his tip was in her chamber.

“Keep going,” Hannah sighed. “It’s just . . . been almost a week, and I’m always more sensitive during ovulation.”

He pushed in more slowly the second time, allowing Hannah to sense his member inch by inch as it reopened her chamber, his head gliding along her flooded walls until his base was against her vulva, his tip buried in the depths of her body.

“Okay?” he whispered.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

Britt pulled out, pushed back in, Hannah grunted with pleasure, and he seemed to accept that as the signal that he could plumb her depths with abandon, grinding within her, grunting with every insertion until his gasps turned to a long, low moan, and Hannah held still, receiving shot after shot of his ejaculate, his second and third squirts forceful enough that she believed she could feel them striking her cervix.

He put his hands on her hips and held still, breathing in and out as if he’d just finished a race, then eased slowly out, Hannah struggling with the minor disappointment of being emptied before she came. Could he cum again? She wouldn’t push it. She knew his performance just now was fueled by lust, and now that he was sated, other feelings might come into play. He was still fragile, on the verge of being broken by what had been done to him.

Hannah, no longer being called to accommodate Britt’s penis, lowered her head to look between her legs, watching as her chamber disgorged the cocktail of Britt’s semen and her own fluids onto her sheets. Then she tucked her legs beneath her, turned and leaned against her pillow, setting the other one beside hers, patting it.

Britt understood, sat beside her, closed his eyes and crossed his legs.

“Okay, I get it now,” he said quietly.

“Get what?”

“What you do.”

“What do I do?”

“That was just . . . really . . . really good.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said. “I’m glad you liked it.”

“No, it was perfect, it was—”

“Every girl is different,” Hannah interrupted. “Every boy is different. Sometimes it just works.”

“It worked,” he said. “At least for me.”

“It worked for me too.”

“Did you cum?”

“No, but that’s okay. I don’t have to.”

Britt looked away, and his shoulders slumped, and Hannah sensed that he had moved to a new place, very quickly.

“I wasn’t supposed to do that,” he confessed.

“What do you mean?”

“My girlfriend . . . I’ve been telling her . . . doing a chat with her, telling her what it was like here . . . that they keep us, um, naked. And it’s boys and girls. So she gave me a list of rules yesterday, while we were talking. And—”

“What were the rules?”

Britt chuckled quietly.

“No looking. No talking to any girl. No getting aroused by anything but thinking about her. And no sex, no sex at all.”

“Yeah, you just kinda broke all of them,” Hannah said.

“I did. I told her I’d do whatever she said, and then this morning, it just . . .”

“What happened?”

“I was just lying there, in bed, and one of the women who works here, she—”

“Tammy?”

“No, someone else, a black girl. She walks up, to my kennel, looks through the window, asks me what’s up, so I told her the same things I told you, and she listened, and asked me if I knew any other subjects, and if it would help to talk to them, so I said ‘Hannah,’ just like that. ‘Hannah.’”

“You were saying my name,” Hannah observed.

“Yeah, it just came out. And she says something like, ‘Oh, would you like intimacy too?’ and I said, ‘What’s that?’”

Hannah laughed.

“I know what the word means, but it was just weird to hear it put that way. So she said, ‘You mean, Hannah, blonde hair, on hall 4, right?’ and I said yes. So she said that she’d see if you had some paperwork done, and if you did you could provide a range of interactions. That’s how she put it. A range of interactions.”

“Yeah, I just got that taken care of.”

“What was she talking about?”

“There’s this form your owner has to sign, that says you can, um, do it, you know, with other people.”

“They signed that?” Britt said.

“Yeah, he did.”

“He?”

“Allain.”

“Who’s Allain?”

“My owner. Or, the son of my owners. But here, he’s my official owner, I guess.”

“So he’s like . . . you do it . . .”

“Yes, I serve him. Like this.”

“Is he jealous?”

“He is.”

“But he signed the form? Saying you could do this?”

“Yeah.”

“So you didn’t break any rules?”

“No, of course not.”

“I did,” Britt said.

“I don’t think those rules were going to work,” Hannah observed.

“I know. But the next time we chat, she’s going to ask, and—”

“You’re going to tell her?”

“I guess.”

“Look,” Hannah said, and she turned her whole body toward Britt, sliding her vulva along her sheets, feeling another shot of fluid spilling out between her lips. “I don’t know how long you’re going to be here, like this, but free people – just aren’t going to understand.”

He looked at her, unconvinced.

“Sometimes,” she said, pausing to put a new thought together, “sometimes, you should do what your head tells you. Sometimes, what your heart tells you. And sometimes, what this tells you,” and she reached between his legs and picked up his penis, letting it fall. “Knowing what to listen to when – I’m still learning that, but I’m okay at it.”

He put his chin in his hand and stared at the other wall of Hannah’s kennel, a wall of white painted cinderblock that, at this moment, marked the edge of their world. Hannah knew he was struggling, caught between two existences, strong forces in each pulling at him.

Right now, however, the second world seemed to be winning, his penis responding to Hannah’s brief touch, or her words, or the presence of her nude body.

He looked down, looked at Hannah’s breasts and mound, looked back at his penis as it hardened and angled up, and he smiled at her.

“Are you going to go with it?” she asked him, lowering her voice to a whisper.

“Will you let me?” he asked.

“Yes. But from the front this time. I want to cum too.”

Chapter 44: A Study Break With Jane

Hannah slid her pillow back to the head of her bed, dropped her head down on it and raised and parted her thighs.

“Will he be jealous?” Britt asked.

“Who?”

“Um, your owner. Allain.”

“He signed that form.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean he—”

“He knows how it works,” Hannah said, rising up on her elbows but keeping her legs up and spread, a position she knew held her lips apart, especially after she’d been entered and stimulated.

“You’re not the first boy I’ve been with other than him.”

Britt’s penis indicated no doubt, rising to full arousal as its owner struggled with moral questions.

“It’s not like I’m going to tell him,” Hannah said.

“Doesn’t he ask?”

“Yeah, and I’ll just say it was a boy here. Britt. He knows my other partners. He’ll be fine with it.”

Britt turned, rose up on his knees, the call of Hannah’s spread legs and opened female organ outweighing the risk of a jealous owner. His eyes went from doubtful to determined as he grabbed his penis and lowered the tip to the wet mouth of Hannah’s tunnel.

He inserted, performed two quick test thrusts and, satisfied with her lubrication, pushed in remorselessly, groaning as she embraced him with the same enthusiasm she’d brought to their first coupling.

Hannah knew he’d take longer to release on his second performance, but she had no interest in gambling on another quick ejaculation that left her yearning, immediately focusing on the feel of his shaft scraping against her walls, the tap of his pubic bone against her clitoris, the thought of what was being done to her insides. Her orgasm came fast and strong, wrenching her body, her legs rocking, her voice issuing soft, rhythmic cries of inescapable relief.

“Jesus,” she said, unable not to be profane when the pleasure reached its peak. “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.”

Britt seemed to sense a change in her sheath, a tightening or throbbing, and he pushed in faster, deeper, groaning guiltlessly, launching

his second deposit of cream as she wound down from her own climax. Holding himself over her until now, he dropped down and she grabbed his shoulders, pulling him to her, putting her hands on either side of his head and forcing his mouth against hers, kissing, devouring, loving.

He kissed back with the same passion, both mouths open, tongues licking lips and teeth and each other while the aftershocks of pleasure worked through their bodies, hips shaking, breath coming in short gasps, muscles slowly relaxing until they were a single unit of spent and profoundly relieved flesh.

Hannah waited until Britt's breathing eased to speak again.

"Think that will work?" she asked quietly.

He laughed into her ear. "I think it will do two things," he said. "It gets me through today. And I'll never forget."

Hannah laughed in response. "That's a great answer," she said. "Are you really smart?"

"I do okay," he said.

"I met a boy once who got taken because he was smart. He—"

"How smart?"

"I don't know. Maybe 160 IQ. Way up there, anyway."

"So he could do what, run a nuclear power plant or something, invent a new—?"

"Breed," Hannah interrupted.

Britt rose up, his soft penis against Hannah's vulva, his puzzled face above hers.

"What are you talking about?"

"Breed," Hannah repeated. "Reproduce."

Britt's face was lost in a mask of incomprehension.

Hannah raised her pelvis, lowered her legs, and he understood that she wanted him off, and he slid back to his pillow and sat, crossing his legs this time, looking at her expectantly, waiting for her to explain.

"Make babies," Hannah continued, positioning her pillow to sit against it. "Like, you have sex with girls who want smart babies, and you get them pregnant, and then they have smart babies."

His expression went from puzzled to shocked to incredulous.

"You're joking, right?"

"No."

"So I could be a father. In a year."

“Well, biologically. But you might not be raising them.”

Britt looked at the cinder block wall, pondering.

“She isn’t going to like that.”

“Probably not.”

Hannah went to her toilet to urinate and wipe, Britt looking at her in surprise, then looking away.

“Sorry, this isn’t something I need privacy for,” she said.

“There’s a lot I’m having trouble getting used to.”

“You want to go to lunch? I think I heard the chime a few minutes ago. And I can tell you everything I know.”

Over lunch, in a cafeteria where something approaching 100 subjects dined and chatted and laughed, Hannah revealed the intricacies of the institution to which she and Britt both belonged, telling him all she felt she could about her life, the people she had met, the ways one became a subject and what happened after the collar went on. He listened attentively, curiously, frowning at times, but smiling now and then, and Hannah wondered if he were giving in, if he was succumbing, consciously or otherwise, to a system that couldn’t be fought.

It wasn’t until she reached the present day, the limousine, the friends, the pill, and Mr. Ortega, that Britt grew so curious he couldn’t keep quiet.

“Why did the daughter have to tie you?” he asked.

“That’s your first question?”

“I don’t know why, but it’s jumping out at me as strange. Why didn’t he just do it?”

“I have a theory about that,” Hannah replied, narrowing her eyes and looking toward the windows. “Tying someone is . . . like being close to them. I know that sounds strange, but then, everyone in my family chains me at times, even Allain. And they’re not trying to be mean. You know why they say they do it?”

“Why?”

“So I won’t get stolen. That’s one of the biggest reasons they give. So no one can steal me. So I’ll never go away. So it’s kind of like, in a way, an act of love. They don’t want to lose me. So maybe Mr. Ortega knows that. Tying me is almost like loving me, in his mind, maybe. So he doesn’t want to tie me, and then hurt me so bad I’m screaming.”

“Wow,” Britt said, nodding. “That’s like, really deep. Really profound.”

“It’s either that,” Hannah said, “or he’s lazy.”

Britt laughed. “What are you doing now?” he asked her as they finished their plates.

Did he want to come back to her kennel? Hannah wondered. Would it be allowed? Could he, physically, go again?

“I need to study,” Hannah said.

Britt’s face fell with more than mere unrequited lust. She was his refuge, she suspected, his safety blanket, his hope. But with Hannah, he was at risk of the wrong kind of love, at risk of moving from one kind of terrible pain to another that was at least as terrible.

“Don’t get attached,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Just enjoy, when you can, but never get stuck on anyone,” she said. “It’s not good for you.”

“That’s one of your rules?”

“It has to be,” Hannah said. “I’m sensitive. So I just don’t let myself go there.”

Britt’s eyes grew wet before he blinked and looked away, and Hannah knew she had just broken a small part of his heart. And she knew that if she professed her love for him and dragged him back to her kennel and spent every minute she could with him until Friday, she would break a much larger piece of his heart.

“Meet other people,” she said. “Promise me you will. I’m sure there are some good people on your hall. Just wave to anyone who’s got their curtain open, and—”

“But . . . you and me . . .?”

“Of course,” Hannah said. “Unless you get yourself free. How about Wednesday or Thursday?”

“Either day.”

“Okay, I’ll come to your kennel, maybe in the afternoon. Wednesday. After lunch. Maybe 2?”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I’d like that.”

Hannah returned to her books that afternoon with a renewed sense of determination, a new rush of hope. Even thoughts of Beth didn’t bother

her. In that day she now considered inevitable, when she spent her time between a cage and a nursery, she would serve faithfully, and demand as her reward that they bring her a male, regularly, and if it weren't Ramone, it would be someone else whom she could train to terrify her, to abuse her, to grab her hair and shake her head and force her legs apart like he was trying to split her in half.

And if Beth wanted to watch, or listen, that would be fine too. Hannah was at peace with all of this.

Britt, she realized, had been as good for her as she hoped she'd been for him.

But the restlessness that accompanied ovulation returned to full force by the dinner chime, Hannah's hands trembling as she pushed open her kennel door and headed not to the end of the hall that led to the cafeteria, but to Jane's kennel.

"Hey," she said at the bars to Jane, who was on her toilet.

"Hey," Jane said, "going to dinner?"

"Yeah, want to make it a date?"

"What kind of date?" Jane asked, wiping and flushing.

Hannah looked at Jane blankly.

"You didn't work that out earlier today?" Jane asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Uh, you . . . and that guy?"

"You heard it?" Hannah asked.

"I think people on the next hall heard it," Jane said, pushing through her kennel door.

Hannah blushed. "I had my curtain closed," she protested.

"God, you're actually embarrassed?" Jane said. "Please tell me you know I'm joking."

"I don't know," Hannah said. "I don't know what's normal here."

"A bunch of naked males and females housed together, most armed with unlimited copulation grants," Jane said. "You might have been one of the semester's first, but believe me, there'll be times you won't be able to hear yourself think here."

"Okay," Hannah said, still struggling with embarrassment.

"Anyway, I'm ovulating, so I'm kind of . . . you know."

"Okay, I'm interested," Jane said, as she and Hannah were jostled amidst the crowd of naked subjects heading to dinner. "I've been interested

since I met you, and your little performance today clinched it.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed, embarrassment quickly waning.

Dinner with Jane was hurried, mostly wordless, Hannah realizing that Jane was as eager as she to get back to the kennels for a session. More than once, Jane caught Hannah staring at her nipples, which never seemed to soften, remaining firm, pointed at Hannah’s shoulders.

Hannah imagined sucking them, being sucked by Jane, and she looked down to find a flood of arousal and the remnants of Britt slicking her chair.

“Messy?” Jane asked toward the end of the meal.

“Yeah.”

Jane reached toward a small dispenser that Hannah thought held napkins, withdrew a small damp sheet, stood and wiped her own chair. Hannah followed suit, needing a second wipe to get the mess up.

The girls put up their trays, returned to hall 4 wordlessly, until Hannah spoke.

“Your kennel?”

“Yeah. From the sound of things this afternoon, yours is a mess.”

They stepped to Jane’s kennel door and waited.

“What’s the process now, when it’s our idea?” Hannah asked, looking at the camera in the ceiling.

“They’ll send someone. Just a formality.”

Hannah waited an interminable two minutes for the two doors from processing to open, a male staff member approaching.

“Coupling?” he asked simply.

“Yes,” Jane said.

He looked at Hannah expectantly. Apparently, he needed affirmation from both partners.

“Yes,” Hannah said.

He waved at the camera, Jane’s door was released and the girls passed in, shut the door and let it lock.

Jane shut her curtain and turned toward Hannah, the desire that had been playing through her eyes over dinner reaching a new level of intensity now, and the girls embraced and kissed, open mouths engaged, breasts, hips, mounds and thighs pressed against each other, heat and hormones and longing passing back and forth between their bodies.

Jane pulled her mouth away, lowered it to Hannah's nipple, sucked, stopped and let Hannah do the same, Hannah wrapping her lips and tongue around the swollen bud until Jane whispered into Hannah's ear, "I'll get on top. You deserve to have it easy."

Hannah agreed with a quiet laugh, barely distracted by the sounds of footsteps and voices from just beyond the curtain. Hannah knew her neighbors might look through the little windows in the curtain, and decided that shouldn't bother her. She moved to Jane's bed, adjusted the pillows, lay down and, for the second time that day, raised and spread her thighs.

Jane didn't put her own hole over Hannah's mouth, however, opting instead to crouch between Hannah's knees and lower her mouth to Hannah's wet sex, licking the clitoris, spreading the lips with her tongue, pushing her tongue into Hannah's chamber like a wet penis while Hannah groaned.

"Can you taste him?" she sighed.

"Yeah, yeah," Jane said. "He put some sweet stuff in you."

Hannah rocked her pelvis, rose up on her elbows and whispered a single word command: "Turn."

Jane obeyed immediately, raising her mouth from Hannah's vulva and carefully moving into position over her, one thick thigh next to each of Hannah's shoulders, dropping her slit down until Hannah could reach it comfortably with her mouth, the two girls licking and tasting and making love.

Jane, one climax shy of Hannah's total for the day, came hard, pelvis shaking frantically, small cries alternating with strokes of her tongue against Hannah's seam and clit.

"Oh, god, no please no," Hannah groaned in a frenzy of pleasure when it was her turn, thighs shaking, mouth sucking at Jane's vaginal folds in a vain attempt to gag her cries. If anyone were looking into the window now, they would see what they would see, Hannah thought, hear whatever they heard, the idea of being watched not mortifying at all to her.

Chapter 45: Allain Gives a Tour

Hannah made the most of her time waiting for Friday. The foundation of her endeavors was always studying, working problems, memorizing terms and concepts and formulae, but she broke up her academics with a variety of distractions: meals, sex, socializing, emails to Mother, exercise on the bikes in the lounge, and checking the news that came to her unfettered now.

She trysted with Jane Tuesday night and promised Britt at Wednesday breakfast she was his that afternoon.

But after breakfast that day, everyone was ordered back to their own kennels, and staff moved through the hall methodically, reaching through the bars to shackle and handcuff each subject in turn

“What’s going on?” Hannah asked as she was restrained, wondering if her plans with Britt were going to be foiled.

“Orientation,” came the terse reply. “Listen for the chime.”

Hannah and her hall-mates spent the next hour in chains, a minor inconvenience to her but a source of vocal complaints from subject less accustomed to being arbitrarily secured. This was one way, at least, that she wasn’t spoiled, she thought, and she sat on her bed, crossed her legs and worked problems, barely noticing the clink of steel fetters as she scribbled numbers and studied.

She didn’t notice the chime, but heard the voices moving past her kennel, and she pushed at her door, it opened and she slipped out and down to the doors that led to the processing room, Hannah remembering her time there the previous week through a fog of incomplete memories. She remembered the tables, the loading bay, the desks, the little cages, the showers and toilets. Not much else.

The subjects were directed to the large, open area in the middle of the room, some sitting in front, most standing, a male here and there with his penis out, long and directed forward, or long and angled down. Hannah caught Britt’s eye, smiled, and he smiled back through the crowd. If he was erect, he didn’t seem to care. She hoped he was and it didn’t matter to him. Jane took her place at Hannah’s right, their arms touching, transmitting a sweet electricity that only they could sense.

While many of the slaves around Hannah grumbled under their breath about what a waste of time orientation was, Hannah got some of her

lingering questions answered.

There were no outlets in the kennels, but each subject was allowed a small, battery-powered clock. Hannah resolved instantly that she would order Allain to buy her one.

There were just three ways out of the building, Hannah learned: First was a medical emergency, which was rare and meant a trip from processing through the truck bays to whatever care facility was warranted. Second was being scheduled by an owner, which meant being escorted to a locker room, retrieving clothing from a locker with a combination lock she'd have to remember, and exiting from the main entrance. Third was being brought out for service, which was done through a side door, under whatever terms of restraint the service requested. Depending on the order, one might simply walk out, dressed as instructed and told where to go. But, for most of the service areas, the subject would be ordered to be delivered in what was called "box and chain" delivery, meaning full restraints and confinement to a small cage or crate, being wheeled across campus and deposited at the department that had asked for them.

"Will we be given privacy in the box?" a girl demanded, asking the question Hannah also wanted answered.

"Yes, almost always," the presenter said, "and protection from the elements."

Monday would be service day, the subjects were told, when representatives of all the services were given the run of the kennels, to meet, interview, inspect and, when appropriate, to negotiate terms like pay and service boundaries. If they had what was called a contact tab – a red ribbon taped to the side of their badges – they could touch. Otherwise, no, and any subject who permitted touching by unauthorized representatives, or any other interaction deemed inappropriate, was subject to discipline.

Moving on to general logistics, they were told that all subjects would be scanned any time they left the kennels, and if they hadn't scanned back in by 11 on the scheduled day of return, they'd be reported as runaways. There might be a grace period of five to 20 minutes, when latecomers would be allowed in but placed in an isolation cage for punishment. Staff would spot check returning mouths, anuses and vaginas, the subjects were told. Not everyone would be inspected upon every return, but chances were decent that anyone concealing contraband would be

discovered, and punishment would be severe and immediate, and often followed by expulsion from the kennels.

Much of orientation involved discipline. Hannah and her fellow subjects were told that life in the kennels was a privilege, not a right, which could be rescinded entirely, severely curtailed, or made very unpleasant. After a long list of rules was presented, most of them common sense to Hannah, consequences were described. Minor infractions would earn a single mark, which would be recorded but otherwise ignored, but the fifth mark earned a bar and more serious consequences, typically a visit to hall 6 for whatever punishment kennel staff and the owner deemed appropriate. Discipline could include hours of tight confinement or stress positions, days in a tiny discipline cage, or a wide range of corporal remedies, including whipping, beating, suspension by the wrists or ankles, and the application of clamps or what were euphemistically called “electric leads,” taped in pairs to whatever parts of the body staff decided on, then turned on for anywhere from two to 10 seconds.

A girl standing next to Hannah looked up at the male beside her, grabbed her nipples and raised them high, crinkling her eyes and opening her mouth in a mock scream, and Hannah wondered if she were just imagining what was done, or remembering something she’d seen, or reenacting a personal experience. The boy smiled and the girl laughed quietly in what Hannah recognized as the subject’s most powerful response to torture: laughter.

Males who experienced excessive erections would be sleeved when outside their kennels, a female staffer warned. The definition of “excessive” was left open, but seemed to depend heavily on complaints from other subjects. Unwanted sexual advances, whether or not accompanied by an erection, could also result in sleeving, she said, along with severe punishment on hall 6.

Sex and masturbation were permitted only in locked kennels, and both sexes were expected to manage fluids. There would be no ejaculating through or on the bars, and any ejaculate or lubricant on the floor or walls should be cleaned up immediately.

Any drug found anywhere – from aspirin to alcohol to heroin – that wasn’t on the subject’s chart as an approved medication, meant mandatory expulsion.

Orientation lasted a little over an hour, then everyone was returned to their kennels, unrestrained and released for lunch.

That afternoon, Hannah stayed true to her word, reporting to Britt's kennel for their Wednesday afternoon session, getting let in and completing an hour-long round of oral sex, kissing and intercourse.

Afterwards, she felt just the slightest pang when he confirmed that there was a girl on his hall he had been with Tuesday, and would likely mate with again.

That night, just before lights out, she closed her curtain, lay on her bed, opened her legs and spread the honey from her slot across her vulva and clitoris, allowing herself a single quick, efficient orgasm.

Thursday, she abstained altogether. No sex with other subjects, no touching, no thoughts of sex with anyone but Allain. She offered her regrets to Jane and gently rebuffed two other propositions, from a male and female on other halls, explaining that she was saving herself for a weekend with her owner.

In truth, she needed to boost her desire for Allain. The last two times she had seen him – on the couch in the den while she was being prepared for shipment, and then in their brief Monday meeting – he had been weak, passive . . . *pathetic*, not a word she ever expected to use in his regard. She was not anticipating their time together with anything near the frantic devotion, the urgent lust and eager passion she was accustomed to.

Beth, she had to admit to herself, was also impinging on her feelings for Allain. She could no longer think of him without his future wife, and the presence of the girl in her imagination colored everything else about Allain.

But as she'd gone through the week and pondered Beth here and there, Hannah had been formulating a plan. There would be no downstairs cage, she'd determined. Hannah would get a bedroom upstairs, like her bedroom at the Petrosyans. It would probably lock with a combination she didn't know, but that was an acceptable concession. And they take her out, to movies, for dining, to music, on trips, and they would bring her males, and breed her, at least once, but more than that if motherhood suited her.

And she would not be punished. Or, if she strayed at times, she could be punished, but on her own terms. And corporal punishment would never be her only option. If it were more convenient for her to suffer physically, vs. hours confined and in restraints, she herself would decide.

And she would choose the man (or the woman) brought in to do the job. And they would tell her what they were going to do to her before they began.

She knew she needed to start working on Beth now, but that's where her plans got a little fuzzy. She wanted to lay the groundwork immediately, somehow, so that on the day Laura and Ormek presented the happy couple with free and clear title to Hannah, Beth would understand the full rights – and the full responsibilities – of owning Hannah.

Controlling Beth – and that's how Hannah thought of it – would take a little assertiveness, a little righteous anger, and a little sorrow, real or feigned.

In sum, a lot of, *finesse*, a perfect word she'd encountered in the news that week and had to look up.

By late Friday afternoon, as she anticipated an uninterrupted weekend with Allain and her new, as yet unknown freedoms, Hannah was full of enthusiasm – for Allain, for life, for everything – and she found herself jumping every time she heard the door open at either end of the hall.

Finally, one of the staffers appeared at her bars, unlocked her door, let her out.

He didn't lead her to processing, instead entering the hall that led to the cafeteria but heading in the other direction, to a door beyond hall six. As they passed that dreaded door, Hannah listened, hearing voices and a shout that might have been someone joking, or someone crying in pain. She couldn't tell and didn't want to know.

The staffer beeped her through the door with the swipe of a card, and she stepped in and got in line in a small waiting room, where a girl standing at a counter scanned Hannah's chip, rummaged through a folder and handed her a piece of paper.

"That's your locker number and combination," she said. "You'll need to remember that, and not share it with anyone else."

Hannah nodded and was allowed through the next door, entering a busy, noisy room with dozens of chattering subjects, and with rows of small lockers in the middle, and sinks, mirrors and toilets lining the walls.

Hannah studied the sheet, found her locker, opened it on the third try and found what was at that moment a veritable cornucopia of fashion – all the shoes, underwear, dresses, skirts and shirts that could be crammed into the little space.

Almost laughing with delight, she snatched out panties and a bra, both white, pulled them on, then grabbed the peach sundress and her best white sandals.

The clock over the mirrors said 5:10. If Hannah had found any makeup in her locker, she would have applied it now, but there was none. Did Allain forget to bring it from Dallas, or just forget to bring it to the kennels?

She added that to her mental list. Small clock, batteries, and basic makeup.

At 5:15 sharp, she reported to the line at the exit door, passing with her fellow subjects through another small room for her second quick scan, and then into the sunlit lobby of the kennels of the University of Texas at Corpus Christi, a giant mural of farmland and a city above Hannah's head and, to her left, windows two stories tall, looking out onto the campus of trees and buildings and students. And blue sky.

And there were doors here. Doors that simply opened when you pushed them. Hannah watched as collared subjects walked up to the doors and pushed them and they opened and the subjects walked outside, on their own, some alone, some meeting owners or other subjects, but all of them free, and smiling, and happy.

Hannah, still not convinced she could do it too, still certain all the doors would lock just before she reached them, put her hand tentatively on the door's steel bar, pushed and, to her amazement, was suddenly outdoors, the delicious late afternoon heat and the divine sun warming her skin and filling her with the overwhelming belief that anything, anything, was possible.

She walked slowly across the plaza, staring at a tree growing before her, moving into the long shadow it cast until she felt an arm around her shoulders.

"Allain!" she cried, turning to him, embracing him with all the enthusiasm she had ever felt, near tears with delight. "Oh thank you, thank you!"

Allain, for his part, seemed restored to his former glory, his eyes bright, his hair trimmed and combed, his body attired perfectly, in a pair of cream cargo shorts, an olive golf shirt, light brown loafers, a dark brown belt.

She kissed him, on his neck, his face, his mouth, his neck again, his shoulder, holding onto his hand with both of hers, releasing his hand to embrace him again, her behaviors more like a faithful puppy's than a girl's.

He returned her kisses, on her hair, her ear, her forehead, tousling her hair, smiling into her eyes.

But when he spoke, the merest shadow of pain crossed his face.

"This has been one of the longest weeks of my life," he said, and Hannah decided to believe. Surely, he still had feelings for her. Strong feelings. Beth couldn't just erase those with the snap of her fingers. "I've been counting the hours. The minutes."

"Where's your car?" Hannah asked, reaching for his hand, following him as he led her back into the sun, away from the kennel building. She glanced back at it, the glassed front blazing in the sun, "University Kennels and Subject Services" in great silver letters across the top edge.

"We don't need it," he said. "We can walk to my apartment."

"What are we going to do tonight?"

"First, I'm going to give you a tour of my place," he said with a squeeze of her hand, and Hannah laughed, well aware what that meant. "And then dinner. We're meeting about a dozen people at an Asian place. Beth promised to be there. And then we'll probably go to a bar, maybe a sports bar around the corner."

"How's Beth?" Hannah asked, and she was so pleased with the outdoors, and the evening, and Allain's plans, and Allain, that she didn't care what he said.

"We're getting married tomorrow, and you're not invited," would have been an acceptable answer.

But Allain's answer was as evasive as she expected. "She's good, she's good. Getting ready for the new semester, like the rest of us."

There were free people everywhere, in the grass, under the trees, walking beside them, toward them, and Hannah reveled in their presence, their very existence a sort of freedom. Some glanced at Hannah, looked into her eyes, down at her collar, back into her eyes, and they knew what she was but didn't, she believed, think less of her. No one was really free on a college campus, she told herself, everyone owned by something – a master, a mistress, a professor, or the disciplines they had committed themselves to learning.

“Did you bring my makeup?” Hannah asked.

“Oh,” Allain said, looking at her with a face of mild shame. “I didn’t even, I didn’t . . .”

“That’s okay, that’s okay. You should have seen my face when I opened my locker and saw everything you brought.”

“That’s all they’d let me drop off,” Allain said. “There’s more in my apartment.”

“Thank you thank you,” Hannah said. “And then, maybe we could pick up a few things while we’re out? Eye liner, mascara, lipstick?”

“Sure,” he agreed.

“Oh, and a little clock and batteries, for my kennel.”

“Yes,” he said, a little less brightly.

Allain lived with a roommate on the third floor of a quaint four-story building on the edge of campus, elaborate stonework and arched windows concealing very ordinary living quarters, with white plaster walls, linoleum tiles on the floor, and kitchen and bathroom countertops of faded and stained vinyl.

But Allain had his own room, and his roommate was gone when they arrived, and Hannah found his living arrangements perfect, drawing him to his bed, locking the door and pulling her sundress off in one quickly motion.

“You’re mine now,” she said huskily, undoing her bra, kicking off her sandals, sliding her panties down her legs.

Allain allowed her to undress him, standing still to be stripped, smiling as she exposed his hardening penis, kneeling on the floor to swallow it, massage it, lick and suckle the tip.

As soon as she tasted his precum, she rose, pushed him to his back on the bed and, with the last traces of ovulatory fluid leaking out of her opening, she spread her lips and mounted him, arching her back while she stared at the ceiling and groaned out quietly with the familiar pang of his thick manhood.

She held him by the shoulders, driving her nails into his flesh while she milked him, staring down at his face, at his half-closed eyes, watching his mouth go tense as her body forced him to feel her, to know her, to experience again the power of girl and female and vagina.

She rocked her pelvis and tightened her walls in a mad spiral of pressure and relaxation until, after 15 minutes of sheer carnal mastery over

the boy who owned her, she decided it was time, and she clenched her organ around his shaft and writhed with her middle, forcing what sounded like a scream of terror from Allain's mouth.

Even while he was still releasing within her womanhood, shooting jets of cream into her gyrating middle, she dropped her clitoris against him, wresting all the pleasure she'd been craving from his passive form, rewarding herself with all her power, crying out with the joy of perfect pleasure in a universe that was far less than perfect.

Only when she was finished, Allain's penis softening, dropping out of her, did she hear the girl's voice speaking casually from a position that seemed to be just outside Allain's bedroom door.

"No, I don't want to watch that," she said. "I saw the whole season last Saturday."

Hannah looked down at Allain, who was still smiling up at her, dazed the way he always was after she'd pleased him.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"One of Robbie's friends, I guess," he said.

"They probably heard us."

"Yeah," he agreed.

Hannah thought Allain would be embarrassed, but he didn't seem to care, so she tried not to as well.

Maybe Allain wanted them to hear, she thought, and her mind darkened. Maybe he wanted them to know he received pleasure from a beautiful slave girl. And gave her pleasure as well.

Hannah slid off the bed and reached for her panties.

"Should I introduce myself?" she asked, but she had already decided she would, unless Allain specifically told her she couldn't. He just waved his hand and pulled his blankets down to slide under them.

Hannah pulled her bra back on, shimmied into her sundress and opened the door.

Would she have been so bold a week ago, she wondered? Or even a few days ago?

She had been sent to an awful new place, and had figured out how to make it work for her. She had confronted a terrible future, and was figuring out how to make that work as well. She was changing, or being forced to change. Either way, she believed, the end results were positive and

included being able to walk into a room where strangers had just finished listening to her screams of ecstasy.

Chapter 46: Attacks on an Outing

“Hey,” Hannah said to the back of the head of a girl, seated on the couch just outside Allain’s bedroom door.

The girl turned, looking up at Hannah with surprise.

“I’m Hannah,” she said, rounding the couch, offering her hand.

The girl moved the beer to her left hand to greet Hannah.

“I’m Lacey,” she said. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Are you here with Robbie?”

“Yeah,” Lacey said, “he’s trying to find something for me to watch.”

Hannah had never met Robbie but knew from Allain that he was the roommate, and he was getting a Ph.D. in philosophy. Hannah turned toward the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, found a six-pack of cider, which she preferred to beer, grabbed a bottle, opened it and took a chair near the couch.

“Are you moving in?” Lacey asked. She was probably 20, a little younger than Robbie, blonde-haired, cute in a simple way. She was in a green t-shirt and cutoff blue jeans, barefooted, sandals beside her feet.

“No,” Hannah said, savoring the first alcohol she’d had since the previous Saturday night.

“Allain?” she shouted.

“Yeah?” he replied from behind his closed bedroom door.

“I’m drinking a cider.”

“Those are yours.”

“Thank you.”

“Hannah?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll be right out, give me five minutes to text some people, and then we’ll get going.”

“Sounds good,” Hannah replied, imagining what Allain was texting to Beth. Something like, “Hannah is happy, suspects nothing, so just act normal. The semester will be fine.”

Which is what she wanted Allain to text Beth. Her plan for managing Beth was slowly coming into shape, and it would begin tonight.

The door behind Hannah clicked open, and Hannah turned to see a tall, gaunt male with long dark hair emerging from the other bedroom.

He looked at Hannah, not surprised, necessarily, but alert. Hannah was beginning to wonder if either of them had heard her and Allain in the throes of their exercise. Maybe life in student housing wasn't that different from the kennels. People did what they needed to do, and others were fine with it.

"You must be Hannah," he said.

"I am," she said, rising and turning to offer her hand. "Robbie?"

"Yeah," he said. "I recognized you from your picture."

"Which one?" Hannah asked.

He pointed to the mantel below the TV screen, where each of the roommates apparently had half of the space to display their treasures. There was a model car, a bust of someone Hannah guessed was a philosopher, and pictures of family, lovers, pets. Hannah stood, finding the picture from Guadalupe of all of the campers, at the picnic in the mountains, the grand sweep of southwestern Texas behind them, Hannah in the front, sitting crossed legged, wearing just her bikini bottoms, her arm across her nipples. Allain was beside her, his arm around her shoulders. She hadn't remembered him doing that. Behind them sat everyone else – Beatrice, Fernando, Buck, Nina, and Beth of course.

It was a big, wide picture, almost as big as a sheet of paper, in a large silver frame that Allain got from his mother for Christmas, and Hannah imagined Beth hated this picture. Surely she'd been by this week. How often had she already had to look at it on her way to Allain's bedroom to practice being his wife?

"That's from last month," Hannah said, remaining by the mantel. "We were at Guadalupe."

"He told us about it," Robbie said, going to the fridge. "Hey, mind if I grab a cider?"

"All yours," Hannah said.

Robbie returned from the kitchen.

"Allain said you stuck your head in a snake pit."

Lacey laughed, and Hannah looked with puzzlement at her, then back at Robbie.

"That's not something I remember doing," Hannah said.

"Well, he said you stuck your head in a hole in the mountains, but when he told you there might be snakes inside, you backed out."

“Oh, yeah,” Hannah confirmed, taking a long sip of cider as she considered the right response. “But if you aren’t sticking your head in dangerous places . . . can you really call yourself a philosopher?”

Robbie took a long, slow sip of his own, but he apparently could think of nothing to say back.

Hannah looked at Lacey and smiled, and Lacey returned her gaze with an expression of continuing surprise.

“How old are you?” Lacey asked.

“19.”

“You like cider?”

“Yeah. More than beer, anyway. Less than good wine.”

“How long have you been drinking?”

“Why do you want to know that?” Hannah asked.

“Just curious.”

“Less than a year. I never drank before that. I didn’t even drink coke or coffee.”

“Religion?”

“Yeah, and poverty,” Hannah said. “How old are you?”

“20.”

“So neither of us are drinking legally,” Hannah observed.

“Where are you living?” Lacey asked. Hannah got the sense she was the first subject Lacey had met like this, in a social setting, and she was curious and trying to be polite but not sure what to say or ask. Robbie sat down beside Lacey and put his hand on her leg, watching, content to listen for now.

“I’m in the kennels,” Hannah said. She expected to get questions about lodging anytime she was out with Allain, and she’d made the conscious decision to answer honestly and completely.

“The kennels?” Lacey repeated.

“Yeah, it’s where subjects are kept,” Hannah replied.

“Subjects?” Lacey said.

Allain’s bedroom door opened wide. His hair was still a mess from bed, and he was tucking in his shirt.

“Hannah, ready to go?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said, draining her cider. “As soon as I pee.”

The walk to dinner took a welcome 30 minutes, Hannah reveling in the cooling early evening air, talking to Allain about his semester, and sharing the details of her life, about the kennel food, which was relatively good, and service day on Monday, when she'd meet the people who would engage her services.

"Do you think I'll get brought to one of your classes?" she asked, walking beside him along a bustling, tree-lined street.

"I don't know," he said guardedly.

"I'm not going to embarrass you," she promised. "I'll just look and smile, if that's all you want."

"Some of the classes are really big," he said. "You might not even see me."

"I need to memorize your whole schedule," she said, "so I'll know if you're there. Can you show it to me?"

"Of course," Allain replied, and Hannah sensed he was warming to the idea of seeing his girl in class.

"Here's the dinner place," Allain said as they neared an unimpressive old building with "Friendly China" spelled out in garish gold letters across the roof. It wasn't the kind of place Hannah had ever been to in Dallas, but she could smell the meat, the sesame oil, the garlic, and she was hungry, and eager to eat and see Allain's friends and begin working on Beth.

Hannah and Allain were ushered to a long table at the back of the building, the last to arrive. Fernando and Beatrice were there, Buck as well, three other friends.

And Beth. Of course.

Everyone stood, the old friends embracing Hannah, the new ones shaking her hand and smiling. Beth's hug was the longest and the tightest, and Hannah hugged back just as dearly. She could do far worse than Beth as Allain's partner in her ownership.

Seats were rearranged to accommodate the couple, and Hannah was not at all surprised when she ended up with Allain to her right, Beth on her left.

Briefly, she saw herself as she had been a week ago, made up professionally, sitting at a long table with Athena and her friends, Jessica by her side. She had more in common with the people at this table, she

decided, and she ordered tea and knew no one would expect her to accept drinks from strangers, or take a pill.

“How are you doing?” Beth asked.

Hannah turned to her and smiled.

“It’s been a little rough,” she said. “I’m sure you know everything that’s happened.”

“Not that much,” Beth said, “just that you’re staying on campus this year.”

“Yeah, in the kennels,” Hannah said, and she studied Beth’s face as she spoke. “I hope that won’t be too disruptive.”

“You mean for Allain?” Beth asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Yes,” Hannah said. “For Allain . . . or anyone else.”

Beth looked at her menu, clearly ignoring Hannah’s hint.

The dinner talk followed the same pattern as the conversations on the camping trip, mentions of medical school classes interspersed with gossip about professors, other students and a celebrity here and there.

“Aren’t you still taking some classes, Hannah?” Beatrice asked. It was a question Beth would have asked, if she didn’t already know all the details from Allain, Hannah thought.

“I sort of am,” Hannah said, preparing to commit the minor lie of omission. “I’m really hoping to get back into it soon.”

“Hannah’s majoring in physics,” Beth announced proudly. Of course she was proud. Who wouldn’t want to be able to say that the female they owned, who raised their children and served them with her body, was interested in physics?

Hannah ordered chicken and shrimp, and was going to use a fork, but Beth insisted on helping her sharpen her chopstick skills, and Hannah proved a willing student as Beth first demonstrated her own technique, then took Hannah’s hand in both of hers to position everything correctly. Should Hannah find herself in Asia one day with her owners, she reminded herself – or just at a very nice Asian restaurant in Dallas – it wouldn’t do for her to embarrass them with her lack of culinary refinement.

After dinner, as the checks were being paid, most of the party agreed to walk around the corner to a casual sports bar, where Hannah could probably get whatever she wanted to drink.

On the walk to the bar, Hannah noticed a drug store across the street and grabbed Allain’s arm.

“I bet everything I need is there,” she said, tugging on his elbow. “It will just take a few minutes.”

Allain looked at the store, looked back at Hannah, and she knew he didn’t want to do this.

“I can take her,” Beth said. “I need some stuff too.”

Allain pulled out his wallet but Beth waved her hand. “I’ll charge it, and you can pay me back,” she said.

Hannah just smiled, the effort to keep their slave supplied already a joint financial effort.

The visit to the drugstore was an unexpected but fortuitous turn, Hannah realized, enabling her to continue working on her plan.

Standing beside Beth in front of the makeup shelf, she picked up a red lipstick and blurted, as if the idea had just occurred to her, “Have you ever wondered who Allain might marry?”

Beth turned to her, eyes tinged with pain, and she spoke quickly back.

“No,” she stammered. “No, I just . . . sort of always just pictured him with you.”

“Oh, well,” Hannah said, trying to sound just vague enough, “that’s not really up to me.”

Hannah launched another attack when, with a basket holding \$50 in makeup, plus a little clock, a pack of batteries and a toothbrush, she stopped in front of a rack from which dozens of cheap purses dangled.

“I need a purse too,” she said. “I totally forgot about that.”

“Add it to the list,” Beth said. “I’m sure Allain will cover it.”

“You have a lot of faith in Allain,” Hannah noted, picking out a small blue purse on a gold-painted chain.

“What do you mean?” Beth asked.

“Well, you’re charging a lot for him to have to pay back.”

“I know he will.”

“Do you think Allain’s nice?”

“Well . . . yeah,” Beth said, paying for their purchases. “Of course.”

Hannah, purse slung over her shoulder, with no ID other than the ring of metal around her neck, which was apparently satisfactory at some Corpus Christi drinking establishments, did indeed succeed in getting a beer at the sports bar, and she drank it slowly and split her time between conversing with Allain’s other friends and working on Beth.

The next theme of her attack was the camping trip.

“Beth,” Hannah said, slipping up beside her friend as she returned from the restroom, stopping to look up at a football replay.

“Hey,” Beth said.

“I just wanted to tell you,” Hannah began, “how grateful I was for all your help at Guadalupe.”

“Well,” Beth said, a little unsteadily, “I was glad to do my part.”

“You’re very sweet,” Hannah said. “I bet you’d do that for any subject.”

“Well . . .” Beth said hesitantly, the response Hannah was hoping for.

“Or was it just something special about me?” Hannah asked.

Now Beth was completely focused on Hannah, turning away from the TV to face her, searching her eyes with what appeared to be confusion. She was regrouping, Hannah realized, trying to find the right response as Hannah got closer and closer to the truth.

“Well,” Beth said, “you’re with . . . Allain, and . . . you know, he’s a friend . . . and so . . .”

Beth’s voice trailed off, and she blushed, the guilt almost palpable in her face.

With every attack, Hannah knew, Beth was getting closer to cracking, to confessing everything, to revealing her secret relationship with Allain, to apologizing for keeping it from Hannah. And when Hannah dissolved in tears – which she would say were tears of joy for the couple, but that Beth and Allain and anyone else observing would know were the tears of a completely surprised and broken-hearted slave girl – Hannah could begin to negotiate terms, to use their guilt when it burned hottest to start working out the details of her presence in the imminent matrimonial home of Allain and Beth.

Wherever possible, and as early as possible, Hannah had decided, things would be put in writing, particularly about money, and freedom, and punishment.

And breeding.

If it weren’t to be Allain, she would choose her partner, and she would choose with the utmost care, not just based on looks, but on overall health, on disposition, on the way he laughed and made her laugh, on his

intelligence and pursuit of schooling, regardless whether he'd been able to earn a degree. If Ramone were available, she might choose him.

Hannah looked at Beth expectantly, but Beth fought back skillfully with a change of subject.

"So, how much have you had to drink tonight?" she asked.

"Huh?" Hannah replied before she understood that this was retrenchment, that Beth would not yield so easily, even as Hannah slowly painted her into a corner. "Oh, I had a cider at Allain's," she said. "And then this. Because they didn't have any good wines, and it's too late for a mixed drink."

"Nothing else?" Beth persisted. "Other than alcohol?"

"Oh, you mean another pill?"

"Yeah, or something," Beth replied.

"No, nothing but the two drinks," Hannah said.

"Wait," Beth said. "Another pill?"

"You didn't hear about last Saturday night?"

"No," Beth said, telling what was to Hannah her biggest and worst lie of the night.

"I took a pill, when I was out with—" Hannah began, her words cut short as an arm wrapped itself around her waist.

"Hey," she said, turning, looking up into the eyes of Allain. He seemed to want a kiss, and Hannah obliged, just a peck. A terrible slave girl, especially one who'd had two drinks, would undoubtedly have turned to her owner and given him – as his future wife looked on – a deep, open-mouthed, eye-shutting kiss, accompanied by the slight parting of her legs and the subtle tilt of her pelvis.

Hannah wasn't such a girl, so after the peck, she grabbed Allain's arm and turned back to Beth, smiling as if to reassure that Beth was welcome here, Hannah was content to take the master's measured affection and immediately defer to the mistress.

Allain proposed that they go to another club, this one nicer, where Hannah would likely have to settle for Coke, and they agreed.

It was just four of them there – Hannah, Allain, Beth and Beatrice – and they talked and laughed and Hannah felt that this was her destiny, with Allain and his people, far preferable to last Saturday night in the limousine.

It was close to 11 when they began to make plans for the next day.

“I’m sleeping in,” Allain announced. “But Hannah’s going to be up early, unless she’s given up on that.”

“I’ll be awake when the sun comes up,” Hannah promised. “What will I do about breakfast?”

“How about brunch with me?” Beth asked.

Hannah looked at Allain, and he paused, clearly working through a challenge and struggling to do so in his slightly inebriated state.

“Okay,” he said slowly, considering his words, “but there are some rules.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, not surprised by his answer. “What are they?”

“Mom’s rules, not mine,” Allain continued. “Your restraints . . . you have to . . . overnight.”

Hannah allowed Allain to continue, raising an eyebrow as if she were completely confused. She knew where he was headed and it wasn’t a surprise, but she needed to give the impression of a little disappointment.

Allain started over, clearly resigning himself to explaining things without euphemism or reserve.

“I have to put your shackles on when we go to sleep,” Allain said, “and they stay on until I’m awake or there’s someone else with you.”

“Every night I’m with you?” Hannah asked, allowing her face to fall.

“Yeah,” he replied.

“Okay,” Hannah responded bravely, nodding. “So when Beth shows up—”

“They come off,” Allain promised, and he reached into his pocket, pulled out his keys and began unspooling one from the ring.

“That’s for me?” Beth asked, as if she were surprised that Allain was about to give her a key to Hannah’s chains.

“Yeah,” Allain replied. “Please don’t lose it.”

They worked out the logistics over the next half hour, as they got Beatrice to a cab and the three final night-outers walked back to campus.

Then, with Beth back in her car and Hannah and Allain back in his bedroom, Allain took his turn, ravishing Hannah, first with his mouth against her vulva, then with his penis up her vagina, thrusting and grunting while she gasped and writhed, the two of them cumming quickly together,

sighing into each other's ears, quietly, deciding as one not to broadcast their passions to whoever might be lingering just outside the door.

It was only after Hannah had wiped herself and urinated and brushed her teeth and put underwear and a change of clothes beside the front door and got on the bed that Allain, with his customary look of regret, pulled Hannah's shackles out of his top dresser drawer and turned to her.

Hannah, nude and leaning against the pillow that would be hers tonight, stretched out her legs without complaint, smiling as Allain cuffed her ankles. He'd brought her more comfortable chains, she noticed. She hoped they wouldn't interfere with sleep.

"Oh, can you set your phone for me?" Hannah requested, sliding down the bed, pulling her sheets up. Allain nudged his phone into the secure mode reserved for Hannah, handed it to her, and she set it on the nightstand and lay down, Allain beside her, and they kissed and murmured of their affection and Hannah was asleep within minutes.

Chapter 47: A Confession Over Breakfast

The first of the day's sun was barely peeking through the blinds when Hannah opened her eyes and stared at the black ceiling, mind immediately focused on the task at hand. She had made progress with Beth last night. Today might be the day she moved well into the next stage of the effort.

She looked at Allain's phone. 7:23. Beth was to knock quietly on the apartment door about 7:50. Hannah slipped out of bed, her shackles clinking as the chain dropped against the little rug Allain had put there beside the bed. She walked slowly to the bathroom, seeing to master the art of walking quietly in restraints, and she urinated without flushing and, with Allain's phone in her hand, eased open the bedroom door, listened to his undisturbed breathing, closed the door and made her way quietly into the living room.

There was more breathing in this room, coming from the couch. She stopped, froze, studying the black mass just before her, knowing that someone must be lying on it. The breath was even and, Hannah concluding after listening to three soft exhalations, female.

Lacey, most likely.

Hannah was less concerned about waking up Lacey than Allain. The girl hadn't just spent an exhausting week preparing for another semester of medical school. And besides, Lacey didn't own Hannah. Allain did.

But still, Hannah did her best to pass silently through the living room to the front door, where she planned to sit and play with Allain's phone until she heard Beth's quiet knock. More than once as she stepped, however, the chain that held her feet together rattled along the floor, and just before she found the chair, the light by the couch came on.

Hannah whirled with irrational fright, turning to see Lacey blinking at her, her form under a rumpled pile of blankets, head raised above a couch cushion.

The girls stared at each other, and then Hannah stepped back to the couch, more quickly now, not so concerned about being quiet.

"Hey," she whispered, falling to her knees before Lacey. "Sorry I woke you up."

“I wasn’t sleeping that great,” Lacey replied slowly, yawning and stretching. “The couch is kind of lumpy, but Robbie was snoring. Want me to go back to his room though?”

“No, I’m just waiting for someone to come get me. They should be here in about 20 minutes. I’ll be quiet.”

Lacey sat up, a long, black t-shirt twisted around her shoulders and breasts, and she looked at Hannah, seemed to realize for the first time that she was completely nude. Her eyes ran the length of Hannah’s body, stopped at her feet, returned to her eyes.

“Who’s coming to get you?” she whispered.

“Beth,” Hannah replied. “A friend.”

“You’re going . . . like that?”

“No, I have clothes by the door,” Hannah said. “I’ll put them on when she gets here.”

“Are you walking?”

Hannah looked at her shackles, looked back at Lacey.

“They’re coming off,” she said. “Beth has a key.”

“What are they for?” Lacey asked.

“So I can’t run,” Hannah said. Most likely, she was going to see Lacey again, and she would provide simple, straightforward answers to any questions the girl asked.

Lacey looked at Hannah, looked back at her feet.

“If they weren’t on, you’d run?”

Hannah could tell that Lacey’s groggy mind was slowly processing unfamiliar things this morning, coming up with questions common to those not familiar with subject ownership, questions one couldn’t help but think, but couldn’t ask out loud:

If a free person is in the presence of a shackled subject that someone else owns, and it’s just the two of you, is the free person responsible for the subject?

If Hannah slipped out the door or tried to work her shackles off, should Lacey notify Allain? Or would it be more just to allow Hannah to escape?

If Hannah grabbed a knife from the kitchen, held it to Lacey’s throat, and demanded that they unchain her and let her leave, should Lacey cooperate, or fight, or flee with Hannah to aid in her quest for liberty?

Hannah wished Lacey had kept sleeping. The topic of escape was something Hannah had pondered at length. She could easily spend hours answering Lacey's simple question, drawing on philosophy, morality, economics, the law, emotion, game theory – all areas, with the possible exception of emotion, that Hannah was barely fluent in.

As far as Hannah knew, physics had virtually nothing to contribute to the conversation, which might have been why she chose to major in it. She knew Einstein wouldn't have approved of slavery, though. Of that she was certain. But would he have approved of Hannah, who allowed herself to be chained, who stepped willingly into cages and kennels and stalls, who spent her days nude and uncomplaining among free, clothed people, who granted access to her opening to virtually anyone okayed by her owners?

And would he have approved of her deriving her own pleasures from her use? Was she not, as her clitoris swelled, as her sheath filled itself with lubricating honey, as her walls embraced fingers and tongues and penises, as she grunted and sighed and writhed and climaxed and arched her back and raised her bare feet to the ceiling, as complicit in the institution as everyone else who benefitted from it?

"No, I wouldn't run," Hannah said simply, wondering what it would be like to try to put her thoughts about escape, and not escaping, and everything else about slavery, into words that another person could hear and understand. She would want Robbie there for the conversation, since he was a philosopher. She wouldn't want Allain there. Maybe she'd get a chance to have that conversation this semester. It would be a perilous discourse, though. There was a fine line between talking about the philosophy of escape, and conceiving of an escape. The latter was invariably punishable. The former might be as well.

"Why wouldn't you run?" Lacey asked quietly, and she stared into Hannah's eyes with eyes that were now fully awake, intense, almost strange in their hunger for an answer.

"We'll talk," Hannah said.

Lacey leaned forward, reached out her hand and touched Hannah's jaw, brushed her chin, dropped her hand to her collar, ran her finger along the metal, along the letters and numbers engraved there, tapped her tags until they rang together, pulled her hand back, leaving Hannah lost, mystified, unable to settle on any explanation for the gesture.

Was it sexual? Hannah knew the many looks of sex, and that wasn't this, she didn't think.

Was Lacey touching her for the same unfathomable reason one wants to touch an exotic animal?

Or did Lacey want to add tactile sensation to her memories of Hannah this morning? If she fell back asleep and woke up at 10 and had coffee with Robbie, she would be less likely to dismiss it all as a dream if she remembered not only the sounds of Hannah's chains and voice and words, but the way her face felt, the hardness of her collar, the swing of her tags.

Was that it?

Hannah realized the gesture couldn't be explained, perhaps not even by Lacey, but that it wasn't meant to be offensive, and she smiled at Lacey and believed she had found another friend, someone she would expect to see again, someone she could talk to about things other than fashion and celebrities and gossip.

"Are you in school?" Hannah asked.

"Yeah," Lacey replied. "I'm doing accounting at Nueces Tech. But I'm going to transfer to Corpus Christi next year."

"Cool."

"Are you in school?" Lacey ventured.

"Yes," Hannah said. "Physics at Austin."

Hannah heard the quiet knock on the door, turned.

"Your friend's here," Lacey said.

Hannah shuffled to the front door, opened it quietly, hiding her naked body behind it, smiling at Beth, who was as much her owner in her mind as Laura had ever been. More so, perhaps. Laura was receding. Beth was the future.

Beth stepped in quietly, looked with surprise at Lacey, offered a small wave.

"Ready to go?" she asked Hannah.

"Yeah, if you remembered the key."

Beth pulled out her key ring, Hannah's shackle key fastened to it, and the two girls dropped to the floor, Beth working deftly to open Hannah's cuffs.

"Where should I leave them?" Beth whispered, picking up the shackles, pocketing the key.

“On the coffee table,” Hannah whispered back, reaching for her panties, standing to slip into her bra, black shorts, a white tank top, white sandals. “Leave the key with them.”

Beth removed the key from her pocket, dropped it next to the shackles, and Hannah set Allain’s phone next to them. She had expected to play a little *Katzink* while she waited for Beth this morning, something she hadn’t done for weeks. The conversation with Lacey was more interesting, though.

She waved at Lacey as she slipped through the door after Beth. Lacey waved back, reached up to turn off the light.

“Who was that?” Beth asked as they descended the building’s winding staircase.

“Lacey,” Hannah said. “She’s Robbie’s girlfriend.”

“Who’s Robbie?” Beth asked.

“You know who Robbie is,” Hannah said. She wasn’t trying to trick Beth at this moment. There were just a whole body of assumptions she was working with now that Beth was still pretending weren’t the case. Indeed, Hannah found herself annoyed by Beth’s ruses. The sooner they could get everything on the table, the sooner they could stop dancing around details of mutual interest.

“Why would I know who Robbie is?” Beth asked.

“Allain’s roommate,” Hannah said, unnecessarily, quickly changing the topic because this one was tiresome. “Hey, thanks for coming for me this morning.”

They pushed through the building’s side door, stepped into the street, already busy with early Saturday morning traffic, a brilliant sun shining sideways on cars, bikes, people, and Hannah’s golden hair.

“Yeah, I’m taking you to one of my favorite places,” Beth said. “Cheap, but great food.”

They made small talk as they navigated the three blocks to a decrepit building with “Morning Chops” over the door, but as soon as they sat down with their menus, Beth looked up.

“I don’t just want to have breakfast with you this morning,” she said.

“What else?” Hannah inquired innocently, trying to control her voice. Her heart was instantly leaping, the blood pounding in her ears. Was

Beth about to give up the game? And could Hannah cry here, amidst dozens of strangers in a bustling breakfast diner?

Yes, she would have to.

“Okay,” Beth said, pausing, drawing in her breath. “Would you say we’re friends?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, nodding. “Very good friends.”

“Right, good,” Beth said, “I agree. If we weren’t friends, I wouldn’t bother saying this. But last night . . . I was picking up a strange vibe from you.”

Hannah played the words through her head.

Strange vibe?

Strange vibe?

No. A girl who is regularly chained, who spends most nights locked in a cage or kennel, who is preparing to lose her lover to someone who considers her a very good friend, is not the strange one. That girl is not guilty of a strange vibe.

Hannah felt the color rise in her cheeks, felt her pupils dilate, felt the words building within her chest, rising to her collared throat, and then they burst forth, quietly, venomously, all Hannah’s artifice and strategy and planning overwhelmed by a raging sense of injustice and deceit.

“Okay, okay, okay,” Hannah stammered, staring into the face of Beth, who was doing her best to look confused and innocent and entirely unaware.

“Strange vibe?” Hannah demanded. “Let’s talk about a strange vibe.”

Hannah looked down, mouth working silently as she tried in vain to organize her thoughts, to speak articulately through a morass of bitter emotion.

“Okay, then, camping,” Hannah spat. “Guadalupe. Remember that? Camping. Yeah. I know what that was all about. I know what you were doing.”

Immediately, Beth’s face transformed, horror now where there was uncertainty before. Her face turned red, her eyes watered and she dabbed at them and swallowed, chin quivering.

“Oh, god, I’m so sorry,” she whispered, lowering her head, a shame so deep it almost looked like terror. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Hannah said, all her anger evaporating like a drop of water on a hot pan.

This wasn’t quite the reaction Hannah was expecting. She was pushing too hard. If she got Beth upset instead of contrite, all of this could backfire. Maybe it was too late. Hannah had lost control of her emotions, and now everything else was spiraling out of control.

Rein it back in, Hannah thought. Rein it back in.

“I understand,” Hannah said. “I can see the logic of it. But you just should have told me.”

“No one knows,” Beth said. “No one. Not even my parents.”

“When are you going to tell them?” Hannah asked. “They’re going to be really, really proud.”

Beth looked at Hannah, confusion still there.

“I don’t think they will be,” she said. “I don’t think they’ll approve. They’re very traditional.”

“What?” Hannah said. “Why? Have they met him yet?”

“Met who?”

“Allain.”

Beth looked at Hannah, shame gone, fear gone, nothing but bewilderment in her eyes now.

“What does Allain have to do with it?” Beth asked.

The question made no sense, so Hannah ignored it.

“What do they have against Allain?” Hannah demanded. “He’s beautiful. He’s rich. He’s going to be a doctor. He’s—”

“Okay, okay,” Beth said. “I’m not disagreeing with any of that. But why are we talking about Allain?”

“Well,” Hannah began, annoyed anew but struggling to throttle her anger this time. What was Beth doing? Returning to her lies? Muddying the waters? She’d been so close to confessing, and now she was backing away from the truth again.

Hannah measured out her next words more carefully, settling on biting sarcasm instead of blind anger. “Well, normal people talk about the guy they’re going to marry.”

Beth leaned back in her chair, performed three long, slow blinks at Hannah.

“Oh. My. God.” she said slowly. “Oh. Just no. Oh god. Oh god.”

Beth's responses this morning were repeatedly defying Hannah's expectations. Indeed, Hannah wasn't sure how any of this was going to play out anymore. She hadn't gotten Beth to confess, and that was a major flaw in her plans. Hannah could no longer draw upon spontaneous, surprised, heart-broken tears. She could still cry though. And she could still bargain. She could always bargain.

"Hannah," Beth said, and now she was smiling, something new and strange working its way through her mind. "Listen to me."

The girls paused to order coffee, and Hannah asked for orange juice as well.

"Go ahead," Hannah said, leaning forward, watching Beth's face for the next strange emotion.

"I am not going to marry Allain," Beth said.

"You're just going to live together then?" Hannah demanded.

This made sense. No wonder Beth's parents wouldn't approve. But whether Beth and Allain were officially married or not would probably make no difference to Hannah's affairs. Either way, it would be the three of them in the household, along with, eventually, offspring.

"Hannah, please," Beth said. "There is nothing there. Allain and I are friends. Nothing more. Nothing. Who have you been talking to? Where is this coming from?"

For the first time since Hannah's revelation as she paced in her kennel ten days prior, she was doubtful. Beth could withhold the truth, but she couldn't issue a blatant lie to Hannah's face. Hannah searched her mind for evidence, immediately seizing on something obvious and irrefutable.

"You just basically admitted it," Hannah said.

Their coffee and juice arrived. Hannah downed the orange juice in a quick series of furious gulps, raised the coffee to her mouth, blew on it, winced when it burned her lip, set it down, poured in cream, tried to drink it again, set it down because it was still too hot, leaned forward on one elbow and prosecuted her case.

"You admitted it," Hannah declared. "Everything at Guadalupe. You said sorry about that. Just now."

The pain returned to Beth's face, but confusion too.

"What exactly do you think I was doing at Guadalupe?" Beth asked.

“Practicing,” Hannah said, biting off the word with an air of finality. “Practicing. At owning me. Getting to know me. Learning how to manage me.”

Beth’s face ran through a spectrum of emotions before she succumbed to mirth, and she laughed so hard her eyes teared up again, Hannah staring at her, lost, angry, suspecting Beth wasn’t completely stable, or rational.

Did Allain know Beth might be a little off?

“Oh, god,” Beth blurted, fighting for composure. “Is that what this is? Is that what you think this is?”

Hannah was remembering other things now, slipping back into anger.

“But only after you couldn’t get rid of me,” she hissed. “That was your first plan, right? To prove I was stolen, or something? Stolen like you were? I mean, like you said you were? Like you made up this whole story about being stolen, and then you wanted me to think I was stolen too, and maybe I was, so you could get rid of me, and, and . . .”

Beth held up her hands, and now the look was mostly sympathetic.

“Hannah, please, why would I want to get rid of you? Why—”

“So you could have Allain to yourself.”

“I don’t want Allain to myself. He’s a friend, just a friend, he’s—”

“Liar,” Hannah spat. It was her last line of assault. It was all she had left. “Liar.”

If Beth were a slave and Hannah could prove her case, Beth would spend hours suffering. Being called a liar was a terrible, terrible thing.

“Hannah,” Beth said, leaning forward, face red again, eyes suddenly serious. “No. I’m a . . . I’m a . . . lesbian.”

Hannah stared. This was a powerful play. This might win. Hannah studied Beth’s face, looked into her eyes.

Lesbian?

Allain couldn’t marry a lesbian. Bi, yes. Lesbian, no. A lesbian wouldn’t want to do what Allain wanted her to do.

The server returned and Hannah diverted her racing mind to her menu for the first time, quickly settling on French toast and sausage and eggs to make the girl go away.

Hannah tried her coffee again. It was just cool enough to sip. She swallowed, set it down.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay. But . . . what about Guadalupe? Every time I bring it up, you look like you’re going to cry. What were you doing if you weren’t practicing on me?”

Beth drew herself up, grimaced, paused, leaned forward, finally found the word she had to say:

“Lusting.”

“Lusting?” Hannah repeated. This was simply meaningless. For the first time, Hannah was wondering if they were having two different conversations, if Hannah were using words for things that meant totally different things to Beth.

“For you,” Beth added, and her body went limp, and she leaned back in her seat, all the muscles in her face slackened, and Hannah saw the relief of confession, the almost euphoric feeling of revealing something terrible about oneself, and enjoying that delicious gap of time between the liberation from guilt and the suffering of consequences.

But Hannah was still lost. She looked down at her coffee, swirled it, forced her mind to regroup. If Beth were being honest – and she had to assume she was – Hannah had just made a complete fool of herself, had believed a ridiculous misconception for more than a week, had devoted precious mental energies to a plan with no purpose.

She’d have to work on much of this later. At present, Beth sat before her, coffee at her lips, mouth tight now and, it seemed, waiting for judgment, waiting for reckoning.

What reckoning, though? What did Beth think was going to happen?

“That’s it?” Hannah asked. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry. You don’t know how sorry.”

“About what?”

“Taking advantage of you. Exploiting you. Abusing you.”

It was Hannah’s turn to smile, and she opened her mouth to say something reassuring, or dismissive, but Beth leaned forward, eyes tearing up again, so Hannah let her speak.

“I should have told you what I was doing. Taking you to the river. Walking you to that place at night. Coming back for you the next morning, acting like your friend, and the whole—”

“You are my friend,” Hannah asserted.

“And you were always naked,” Beth said. “That’s not supposed to mean that much to girls, but I . . . I—”

“I wasn’t always naked.”

“Often enough,” Beth said. “That first night, after I—”

“You said you didn’t sleep that great, because—”

“Because I felt bad about you,” Beth said. “Like, I was upset about how you were being treated or something. Lie. Lie. You’re right. I’m a liar.”

“What happened that night then?”

Beth leaned forward, elbow on the table, and she glanced around before she lowered her voice to just above pure silence, and her eyes took on the look of self-disgust one would expect from a remorseful murderer.

“I was . . . masturbating.”

Now it was Hannah’s turn to laugh, and she let her mirth ring out, filling the room, sweet hoots of something akin to joy as she marveled, from somewhere outside her body, at the utter chaos that sex injects into lives that are otherwise completely orderly and rational and plain.

Beth looked at Hannah, guarded relief playing across her face now. Had she been expecting Hannah to slap her, scream at her, stand and return to Allain’s apartment in a furious huff? Apparently.

The food arrived, Hannah buttered her French toast and looked at Beth.

“Beth,” she began.

“What?”

“I. Do. Not. Care.”

Chapter 48: Arranging a Second Date

Beth looked at her plate, looked at the people by the windows, looked back at Hannah, her eyes brimming with tears.

“If there’s some god you worship,” Hannah said, “who commands you to tell people that you’re lusting after them, and you can’t lust for them without telling them, then fine, talk to him. Or her.”

“It’s wrong,” Beth said, her voice wavering. “For you, it was wrong. Because you’re a . . . because you’re a—”

“No,” Hannah blurted, the anger back in her eyes, her back straight, hands on either side of her plate, knife and fork held in white-knuckled fingers.

“No,” she repeated. “I’m Hannah. I’m Hannah. Nothing else matters. I’m a girl named Hannah.”

Beth just stared.

“Okay?” Hannah said.

“Okay?”

“Okay,” Beth finally agreed.

“Are we done then?” Hannah asked. “Can we please be done with this?”

Beth looked at Hannah, the relief on her face again. But then her eyes darkened.

“I wanted to have breakfast with you, because of you,” Beth said. “I didn’t know you’d be naked when I showed up.”

“I couldn’t put my panties on until you took my shackles off. Or my shorts.”

“You could have put on a skirt.”

“I didn’t even think of it,” Hannah said. “I didn’t think it mattered.”

“I didn’t look.”

“Look at what?”

“At you.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s wrong.”

“No it’s not. I told you it’s not.”

“I feel like it is.”

“How about now?” Hannah said. “I know what you’re thinking now. So now you can look.”

“I don’t know,” Beth said, and the two girls dug into their breakfast, the questions before them now not mixed up with deep uncertainties over abuse and betrayal and exploitation, more just interesting topics, something academic to argue over because arguing other over nuance and morality had become part of their relationship.

“Tell you what,” Hannah said. “Take me out. Take me on a date.”

Beth paused above her breakfast, hands and eyes frozen.

“Just think about it,” Hannah said, not sure if she’d offended Beth or just said something so outrageous Beth couldn’t process it yet.

“Take you out,” Beth repeated.

“Yeah, Allain can schedule it. If you’re ever free on a weeknight. Or maybe the weekend too. We can ask him—”

“Allain can’t know,” Beth said. “No one can know.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not sure I’m a lesbian.”

“You just told me you are.”

“I’m seeing someone about it.”

“Like, a therapist?”

“Yeah. And everything’s all wrapped up with what happened at that place, where they took me. That’s what we’re working on. A lot more since Guadalupe. Since you, and Guadalupe. Oh, and—”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked. “What about Guadalupe?”

“A lot of our appointments before that were the same. You know, those people who took me had to pay for it, so I’m meeting with her a couple of times a month, just kind of a check-in. But after Guadalupe – my first appointment after that – I just started talking. About you, about things I was starting to remember, about you some more. About everything. Talking talking talking.”

“In a good way?” Hannah asked.

“Well, talking the first session, crying hysterically for the next session – the whole second session after we camped.”

“Sorry,” Hannah said.

“My therapist called it a breakthrough. Her exact word. Breakthrough.”

“It was a good thing,” Hannah surmised.

“Yes. Oh, and it’s true, by the way, what I said about being taken. It’s true.”

“I know, I’m sorry. Please forget everything I said this morning up until, um, about five minutes ago.”

“Okay. So, anyway, I’m 14, and I get taken and I wake up nude in a cage and there are naked girls around me, naked women, and I was screaming, but I was looking too, I was taking everything in. I know that now. I understand that now. So maybe that turned me into a lesbian. You know what I mean?”

“I’m not sure . . .”

“You know, it was so traumatic, maybe it just kind of broke me, and I—”

“You know I like girls, right?” Hannah said.

“Yeah, like that girl at that place where I took you. And they put you in there with her. And I knew you were doing it, and I wanted to be her. Oh, god—”

“Okay, okay,” Hannah said. “Yes, I did it with her. I’ve done it with other girls. That doesn’t mean I’m broken.”

“No, no, I’m not saying that. It’s just me. Maybe it’s not natural for me. Because right after it happened, a few months after everything, I started having feelings. For girls. And I’d see them and remember the girls in the cages and it all became part of the same thing, the same experience. Lust, shame. Lust, shame. Liking girls is natural for you, and that’s fine. And it’s fine for lots of other girls. But maybe it’s not natural for me. Because of what happened, to me, in that place. So my lust isn’t natural lust, it’s some sort of sick traumatic expression. Like I was . . . broken.”

“You’re not broken,” Hannah said. “I’m not broken. Don’t say that. Don’t think that. I can’t be with you if you—”

“Wait,” Beth interrupted, and there was a new look in her eyes, almost like an epiphany. “So you’re offering . . . to be . . . with me . . . in . . .”

“Yes. I thought that was clear.”

“Okay,” Beth said. “So not just take you out, but in . . . in . . .”

“At your place,” Hannah said. “I won’t tell anyone. But only if you’ll be okay with it afterwards. Not if you think you’re broken, or I’m broken.”

“Okay,” Beth said.

“All cured then?” Hannah asked, raising both eyebrows.

“Yup,” Beth said, and she laughed ironically.

“You’ve done it before, right?”

“Yes. Once. In high school. And she was probably 30. And it was terrible. She was terrible. She was mean—”

“That’s what you should be working on, then,” Hannah said. “I won’t be mean.”

“Does it always work, though? What if we’re just not, you know, compatible . . .”

“I got a pretty high score,” Hannah said.

“At what?”

“At being with a girl.”

“What are you talking about?”

“They do an assessment. When you’re for sale. They put you with a girl, and tell you what to do, and they watch, and you do it, and they score you, and I got a high score.”

Beth’s eyes glazed over, as if she had just been punched.

“Are you okay?” Hannah asked.

I’m just trying to picture it. Or, trying not to picture it.”

Beth shifted in her seat, wincing, and Hannah knew what it meant, that things were happening between Beth’s legs – clitoris rising, lips swelling, lubricant flowing, hole throbbing. If she could work through her shame or trauma or whatever it had all turned into, Hannah thought, she would be a beautiful lover.

Hannah felt the warming of her own organ, but nothing could be done now, so she moved to something else she’d always wondered about and didn’t dare ask. At this moment, Beth had emerged as the only person in the world she could talk to about this.

“Okay,” Hannah said, “if not you, who?”

Beth looked up, a startled expression as she chewed, and Hannah knew immediately this line of questioning would bear fruit.

“There is someone, isn’t there?” Hannah persisted. “Here in town?”

Beth finished chewing, swallowed, raised her coffee to her lips, sipped, set it back down.

“Yes,” she whispered.

After what Hannah had been through with Beth this morning, the revelation barely troubled her.

“Think I’ll meet her soon?”

“You already have,” Beth said.

“Who?”

“Nina.”

“Nina? The girl who camped with us? With green hair? And it was cut like that kid’s cartoon show?”

“That’s her.”

“Nina?” Hannah repeated, her incredulity growing. “Who’s not even in school right now?”

“Yup.”

“Are they engaged?”

“No,” Beth said, “they’re not even together. They did a few things last year, but that’s all over.”

“Huh,” Hannah said.

“It ended at Guadalupe.”

“Huh?” Hannah said again, this time as a question.

“You’re not supposed to know any of this,” Beth said. “I hope that’s obvious? And you can keep a secret? And you don’t talk in your sleep?”

“I don’t think I do,” Hannah said.

“Okay then, first, about Buck.”

“What about Buck?”

“You remember how all that came about?”

“Yeah, I think,” Hannah said, fork raised above her plate as she pondered. “Beatrice is the one who suggested it to him, right?”

“Well, not really. Nina thought it up, and told Beatrice to push it. They’re cousins.”

“Yeah,” said Hannah. “But why?”

“Because Nina could see things weren’t coming together with Allain, and she was desperate, and she blamed you, so she—”

“Wait, how do you know all this?”

“Beatrice dropped a few hints, and I pieced some of it together.”

“Okay. And then?”

“So, Nina thinks if she can get Allain to loan you out, to be with another guy, it will remind him what you are, and what Nina is, and he’ll get serious about her. Really, it was all kind of fucked up, when you think about it. But Buck was there and convenient, so Nina said something to Beatrice, and Beatrice brought it up that Friday night after you left, and Allain agreed because he didn’t want to be a jerk I guess, and then, you know, the next day . . .”

“Yeah,” Hannah said, pausing, looking at the wall, closing her eyes. “I’m having trouble with this.”

“I’m sorry,” Beth said.

“You didn’t think this would upset me?” Hannah asked.

“Obviously, I’m not good at predicting what bothers you.”

“It’s just . . . it’s just . . .” Hannah stammered. “When you do something, and you think you know it’s a certain way, and then you find out it’s . . .”

“But it was okay with Buck, right?”

“Yeah, other than he was big and it hurt at first.”

“But he wasn’t in on it. The girls were. But he just said yes. What else would he say?”

“Okay,” Hannah said, slightly reassured. “But right now, I’m not a big fan of Nina. Or Beatrice. And we went out with Beatrice last night. And I hugged her.”

“I understand.”

Hannah looked at her plate, returned to working at it with knife and fork, looked up at Beth again. “Wait, you said everything ended at Guadalupe? Between Allain and Nina?”

“Not that there was that much by then anyway, but yeah, that was it, crash and burn, flaming wreckage,” Beth said, and she smiled with what appeared to be a particularly juicy memory.

“What happened?”

“Oh, god, so the second night, I drop you off, I come back, and everyone’s having at it with Nina. Call it karma or whatever because of Buck and everything, but her life’s just laid out there while everyone’s around the fire, and no one’s impressed because she’s not working and she’s not in school or doing anything else productive, and she’s trying to defend herself and she’s not doing it well, and then Allain just killed her. Just killed her. And he used you to do it.”

“Go on.”

“So, Nina’s saying she can’t do school because she has really bad cramps every month, and they’ll probably happen right when exams come, so first she needs to get that under control, and then—”

“Wait,” Hannah interrupted. “Did they do it there? Did Allain and Nina do it there?”

“No,” Beth said. “Nina was on her period. And she never mentioned cramps, in case you didn’t notice, which is an interesting tidbit. But they probably wouldn’t have done it anyway, Saturday night. Especially after what Allain said.”

“What did he say?”

“I wish I could remember the exact words, but the gist of it was something like, ‘Nina, come on. Hannah gets cramps too. And she spends her days in a cage. And she’s in a cage right now. And we chain her up all the time. And she’s taking 12 hours from the University of Austin and she’s probably going to get straight A’s.’”

“Oh, god,” Hannah said, and she allowed herself a few moments of vindictive pride before she tamped it down. “Did she throw something?”

“No, but she quit arguing. It was almost painful to watch. And then she went back to her tent, with some pathetic excuse. Like, ‘Well, it’s been a long day, gotta pack up tomorrow, I’m turning in.’ But I know she was crying when she was trying to go to sleep.”

“Did you hear her?”

“No, but wouldn’t you cry?”

“Yeah.”

“You can’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t,” Hannah promised. “But Nina? Nina?”

“Different from you,” Beth ventured. “Maybe that was it. A lot different.”

The check arrived, and Beth picked it up.

“I’m paying for this.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said.

“Not Allain. He has to pay for your makeup and your purse and toothbrush, but this is on me.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, trying to understand why Beth was mentioning it. “Oh, so . . . this is a date then.”

“Yes,” Beth said. “First date. Is that okay?”

“Of course,” Hannah said.

Beth pulled a handful of bills from her purse put them across the check, looked back up and bit her lip before she spoke.

“My roommate is going to be staying with her boyfriend most Wednesday nights.”

“Good. Tell Allain to schedule me out then.”

“You really want to do this?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, and she sighed. “Okay, do you know what I hear when you ask that question?”

“What?”

“You’re asking me if I want to be raped.”

“I don’t get it.”

“If I agree to do it, even if I don’t want to, then I’m basically agreeing to my rape,” Hannah clarified.

“Yeah,” Beth conceded tentatively.

“Okay,” Hannah continued, wanting to get this point across, “if a guy walked up to you and asked if he could rape you, what would you say?”

“I wouldn’t say anything,” Beth said. “Knee straight to the groin, straight to the —”

“You get it then. So if I say I’m going to do something, and you keep asking if I really want to do it, that’s the question I hear.”

“Okay, I get it,” Beth said.

“Good,” Hannah said. “And how does tomorrow look? Late afternoon, evening?”

“Why?”

“I might be free. Allain has some school stuff he has to do.”

“What are you going to tell him?”

“I’ll tell him you volunteered to take me back to the kennels and we want to spend some time together before then, to talk about Guadalupe or whatever, and he’ll probably agree.”

“Okay,” Beth said.

“He might suspect something,” Hannah warned. “He might even ask me. He’s like that.”

“You won’t tell him, right?”

“Not if you don’t want me to. But I want you to be able to tell everyone, someday. It doesn’t need to be a secret.”

Beth shook her head, not ready for that.

“Give me some time to work through that, okay?”

“Okay.”

“So just have him text me, if you get the okay,” Beth said. “I’m pretty sure my roommate’s not coming to town until Tuesday.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “And, um, one thing . . .”

“Yeah?”

“Have you ever been with a boy?”

“Yeah. Two. It didn’t work.”

“Didn’t work?”

“I pictured girls and I got wet and pictured girls again while they were in me, but I never came.”

“You’re a lesbian,” Hannah said. “A natural, unbroken lesbian.”

“Maybe so,” Beth said, and she almost seemed to believe it.

“But you know what boys do, right?” Hannah asked.

“Well, uh, yeah.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, “Do you have a douche?”

“Huh?” Beth said, and then she blushed and she shuffled uncomfortably in her seat again. “Oh . . . yeah. Okay, I’ll get one.”

Chapter 49: Two Plugs

Allain was awake when Beth brought Hannah back, drinking coffee on the couch and talking to Lacey and Robbie.

Hannah skipped over to him, draped herself across the couch, across his lap, making amends for the suspicions she'd believed with all her heart for 10 days, that Allain didn't know about and never should. Everything Beth told her made her only love Allain more, and he looked at her and offered her a puzzled smile, and she just looked up at him and glowed.

Beth stayed and chatted through a lunch of delivery pizza, and when she had to leave in early afternoon, she hugged Hannah longer than most mere friends would, and Hannah wondered if Beth was already not caring about what Allain thought.

Robbie and Lacey departed soon after Beth to catch a movie or something, their departure probably pre-arranged, and as soon as they were gone, Allain led Hannah back to his bed, where they tore off their clothes and took turns yielding to each other, Allain pouring his sweet semen into Hannah's chamber twice in two hours, Hannah begging for the mercy of orgasm until it happened, and then begging for the mercy of just being able to breath and lie still.

They went out to dinner at the top of Corpus Christi's tallest building, an affiliate of the Petrosyan's Dallas club that Allain was allowed to visit a few times a month.

Hannah was adequately made up and wearing her best van Minsk, a short, black, sequined gown with such a plunging neckline she couldn't wear a bra with it, and as the eyes watched her pass, she liked imagining that the cream of Corpus Christi society was quite comfortably scandalized tonight by the girl who grew up at Four Pillars Tabernacle of Jesus.

"What's up with you and Beth?" Allain asked when the main course arrived, lobster for Hannah, ribeye for Allain.

Hannah knew Allain well enough to guess he'd been preparing to ask that question all afternoon.

"There's a strong connection there," Hannah said, sipping the wine that seemed to flow freely to underage girls all over the city, from stratospheric clubs to the lowest environs. "We clicked at Guadalupe. We've always had a lot to talk about."

“I thought you hated her on the drive up.”

“We just had to figure out some things.”

“Is she a lesbian?”

Hannah looked out the window at the red sky of a beautiful day’s end.

“When do you have to work tomorrow?” she asked.

Allain smiled. “Anytime. It’s just some prep work. Mindless spreadsheet stuff. But it’s going to take a few hours.”

“Can it wait until around dinnertime?”

“Yeah, sure,” Allain said. “You want me to drop you off at her place for dinner?”

“Would you mind?” Hannah asked. “And she’ll get me back to the kennels.”

“That’s fine,” Allain said.

“I’ll go easy on you after lunch tomorrow,” he said, watching Hannah’s eyes for clues.

“You don’t need to,” Hannah said.

“Does Beth have a douche?”

“I want to play *Katzink* tomorrow before you wake up, since I never got to this morning,” Hannah replied, and Allain smiled again.

They dined, they danced, they got home at almost midnight, and Hannah forgot that she was a slave, as she sometimes did, her only reminder coming at the end of the evening, after she and Allain made love again, she’d brushed her teeth and used the toilet, when she stretched out her legs and watched Allain apply her chains.

The next morning, not long after first light, she clinked quietly out of the bedroom, naked and shackled, relieved to see that she had the living room to herself. She helped herself to a small breakfast of cereal and sat down on the couch to look at Allain’s phone.

After her internet freedom at the kennels, the secure setting reserved for her on his phone seemed woefully incomplete, but she tucked her feet under her, refreshed her knowledge of the world’s major events, and lost herself in *Katzink* until Allain emerged from the bedroom a little after 10.

He kissed the top of her head and headed for the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” he asked quietly, settling beside her, a yogurt in one hand, half a bear claw in the other.

“I just got two more monopolies,” Hannah said. “And my worst cat got her sentence commuted, so she’s back in business.”

“What did she do?”

“Catnip again. She was dealing. But now I have enough money to bribe the dogs.”

“You up for a hike around Lake Pierpont?”

“Yes, of course. When?”

“Leave in 30 minutes, walk there, go to lunch, and then come home, and then I’ll get you to Beth’s.”

“Yeah,” Hannah said, and she slid her feet out from under herself and crossed Allain’s lap with them. “But could you take care of this now? I’d like to get dressed before someone else wakes up.”

Allain slipped off the couch, returned with the key to Hannah’s shackles and freed her.

“Where should I leave them?” she asked, rising to dress.

“Top of the dresser.”

Lake Pierpont was beautiful in its own right, but more delightful because walking around it with Allain felt like another freedom, families and couples and people running beneath clumps of pine, oak and juniper. They ate at the Pierpont marina, smaller but more elegant than Uncle Bear’s workplace.

Back at Allain’s apartment, he didn’t hold back, performing with Hannah twice, filling her hole with two charges of a sticky cream that soaked her panties, and still had her vulva wet when Allain pulled up at Beth’s.

“Thank you,” Hannah said. “This was nice. So nice. Thank you.”

“You’ll be okay in the kennels?”

“You’ll get me out on Friday, right?”

“Yes, same as this weekend. Pretty much the same for all of August and September, but I’m not sure about October. I might have to go home one weekend, and they’re talking about a weekend trip for one class.”

“I’ll manage,” Hannah promised.

Hannah kissed Allain goodbye, long and slow, and headed up to Beth’s apartment on the fourth floor.

Her building was newer than Allain’s, farther from campus, less interesting on the outside but, Hannah guessed, more modern on the inside.

She didn't remember until she reached the second landing that she might be about to make love to someone new, and should probably be nervous. But the nerves wouldn't come. Her relationship with Beth was already, in some ways, deeper than sex. They'd had a fight, after all. Several, really, if you counted all the bickering at Guadalupe. But yesterday's grand confrontation stood apart to Hannah for its emotional intensity, as well as its farcical resolution.

Hannah knocked and the door opened immediately, and Hannah was only mildly surprised to see that Beth was nude, B cup breasts tipped by dark, erect nipples, a trimmed patch of black pubic hair, solid thighs and hips, slim calves.

Hannah took Beth in, smiled, slipped her new purse off her shoulder and pulled her tank top over her head. Nothing needed to be said about this. Both girls would start the evening naked, and that was fine with Hannah. But would they launch into sex immediately? Or wait until after dinner? Or never do anything?

"Vegetable fried rice and tofu," Beth said. "Can you smell it?"

"Yeah, I need something like that after last night," Hannah said, slipping off her bra, kicking off her sandals, pushing shorts and panties down her legs. She stooped to pick everything up, folded it and set it on a little table by the front door. "Made it from scratch?"

"Sort of. It's a family recipe. I've been making it all my life. So it doesn't really feel like scratch."

Beth's voice came a little clipped and choppy, and Hannah knew she was nervous and trying to hide it.

"You want wine?" she asked.

"I've been drinking illegally all weekend," Hannah confessed.

"Is that a no?" Beth asked.

"It's a yes," Hannah said. "I won't get another chance until Friday."

"No liquor in the kennels?" Beth asked, turning toward the kitchen. Her skin was uniformly brown, Hannah noted – no tan lines across her back or around the round, solid rump that bounced with every step.

"No, nothing," Hannah said. "And they search you when you come back."

Hannah heard the chime of glass against glass, the gurgle of something being poured, and Beth reappeared, smiling slightly, two glasses of wine in her hand.

Hannah reached out but Beth held both glasses until she got to her couch, sat, turned and tucked up her legs, parting her thighs so that the dark lips guarding the opening of her sex were visible to Hannah when she sat.

Hannah took the wine, pulled her legs up and glanced toward the window, knowing that it was Beth's turn to look, to take in – hopefully without guilt – Hannah's golden hair, and the lips that lay beneath it.

"They search you?" Beth said. She took a sip of wine, but she seemed just as tense.

"Yeah. Or they said they will, anyway. They'll search some people, whenever we come back at night. It hasn't happened to me because I haven't come back yet."

Hannah felt the trickle of Allain's semen, looked between her legs.

"Do you have a towel?" she asked.

Beth smiled, and Hannah knew she liked the question. She went to her bathroom and got two white washrags, offering Hannah one, positioning the other under her own vulva.

"Does it feel good, to be searched?" Beth asked.

"What do you mean?"

"When they, uh, put their fingers inside you? Like they did at the campground?"

Hannah laughed. "I never thought of it that way. It's just something to get through for me, really."

"I kind of like it," Beth said.

"Being searched?" Hannah asked.

"The feeling," Beth said, and she looked away awkwardly, and Hannah began to suspect that Beth's trauma at the age of 14, followed by years of almost no sexual interaction, had led the girl to create her own world, a wild, strange place where others might struggle to find a home.

And yet, Hannah was still comfortable here, none of the jitters that preceded sex with someone new.

"You've been searched?" Hannah asked.

"No. Well, yes, probably. That's something I'm working on. It probably happened at that place. It must have happened. But if it did, I don't remember. Not consciously, anyway. But the first time I put something . . . up there . . . oh, god."

"Up your . . ." Hannah prodded.

"Anus."

“What did you use?”

“A plug. I have a few. I have two.”

“Oh.”

Hannah looked down at Beth’s opening and the towel beneath it, saw the telltale oval of fluid there, looked back into Beth’s eyes and realized she was talking to a girl she didn’t know anymore, a girl in the grip of something powerful that grew entirely from the seeds of her own life and psyche and sexuality.

Today, the girl was going to try to grow it around Hannah.

Hannah just needed to bend, to yield, to breathe the air of Beth’s world until Beth was sated. If that was possible.

“Do you want to see them?”

“Yes,” Hannah said sincerely. She’d been allowed several dildos at the Petrosyan’s, but the question of anal stimulation or penetration was never addressed.

Beth rose and headed to one of the bedroom doors, and Hannah watched her breasts and her bottom shake, and smiled when she returned, wine in one hand, two black objects in her other.

She sat down, positioned the wet rag under her vulva, set the plugs between hers and Hannah’s knees.

“Before I put it in,” she said, and now her voice was no more than a nervous croak, “I lubricate it with my pussy.”

Hannah nodded, looking into Beth’s eyes, reminding herself to sip her wine, as if this was the kind of thing friends who drank wine together talked about and did all the time. She thought Beth wanted that. Eroticism against a backdrop of normalcy, familiarity. It wasn’t uncommon.

Beth raised herself off the couch, looked down as she worked one of the anal toys up her vagina, stirred it around, pulled it out, its black surface coated with an impressive quantity of lubricant.

Still holding herself above the couch, wine in her left hand, she moved the plug to her rear opening, grunting as she forced it into her body.

It took a minute for her to bury it to the base, and when she was done, she settled down slowly, looked at Hannah, eyes glazed with what Hannah knew was that rarest, most precious degree of arousal.

“It’s fine if you want to use one too,” Beth said, struggling to keep her voice even. “I always wash them.”

Hannah, expecting the offer as soon as Beth admitted to owning two of these, picked it up, regarded it carefully, decided she could probably get it into her body without injury or major discomfort.

“If you don’t mind,” she said, and she set her wine down on the coffee table, spread her legs, parted her vaginal lips with one hand, slid the toy up her vagina and wetted it with Allain’s semen and her own syrup.

Done lubricating the toy, she withdrew it, satisfied that it was wet enough, even if it wasn’t as saturated as Beth’s plug. Closing her eyes to concentrate, she put the tip against her anus, pushed and found to her surprise that it went in easily, quickly filling her rear chamber.

“Uhhh,” Hannah sighed, lowering herself back to the couch, wiping her vulva with the washcloth and setting it back into position at her lips.

She leaned over to retrieve her wine, looked at Beth, and Beth offered a crooked smile, one eye slightly more closed than the other, one of the strange manifestations of Beth’s roaring arousal.

“We can wear them,” Beth began, her voice a whisper, and her hand drifted to her vulva, fingers drumming on her clitoris, before she finished her thought. “During dinner. If you think yours feels good.”

“It’s nice,” Hannah agreed.

Indeed, it wasn’t terrible, a little like needing to have a bowel movement, but strangely erotic as well. Would it still be erotic if she weren’t doing this with Beth? Hannah wondered. She wasn’t sure.

“Do you want to masturbate before dinner?” Beth said.

No, Hannah thought, she didn’t want to masturbate. She’d cum once last night, and Allain had forced two orgasms out of her this afternoon. She could fake it, but she wanted to be honest with Beth, and she decided that honesty was more valuable than playing along insincerely.

“I’m not sure I can orgasm yet,” Hannah said, “but if it’s okay with you, I’d like to touch myself.”

Beth stared into Hannah’s eyes, long and hard, and Hannah recognized the look of unembarrassed lust, and she stared back, seeing at the edge of her vision that Beth’s hand was working her lips and clitoris while she clutched her wine with her other hand, knuckles white around the stem of the wineglass.

Hannah touched her own vulva gently, stroking her lips, tapping her clitoris, getting used to the sensation of having her genitals stimulated lightly while she held something hard and firm in her rectum.

Beth arrived almost immediately, her face suddenly tense and stone like, and then it twisted, like she was going to cry, before she smiled with ecstasy and, never taking her eyes off Hannah's, made a disconcertingly weepy sound, an "oh oh ooooh uh uh!" while the orgasm worked its way from between her legs to the depths of her soul.

Finished, panting, body relaxed now, she looked at Hannah's knees a little sheepishly, and Hannah smiled and hoped Beth wouldn't dissolve in shame, as she almost had at breakfast yesterday. But Beth raised her hand from her vulva to her left breast and squeezed it and bit her lip and looked back at Hannah with a new expression, a deep, lecherous sneer, and Hannah knew that Beth had more sex in her, that this was just a pause in things.

"It was my grandmother's recipe," Beth said, looking at the floor again, cheeks flushed, her breathing deep and labored. "She never wrote it out. I knew it by heart by the time I was seven."

Beth raised her wine to her lips and Hannah did the same, and wondered if sipping meant the end of one chapter of their evening together, the beginning of the next.

Beth inhaled again, and her voice when she spoke again, while still breathy, was more natural, less nervous.

"Sometimes I come out nude, when my roommate might see me," she said, mock guilt in her eyes, and Hannah knew this was a confession, that Hannah wasn't here just to serve Beth's erotic drives.

"Do you like her?" Hannah asked.

"I shouldn't. I know I shouldn't. But I do. I didn't room with her because of that, but it just happened."

"Do you ever get a sense she's . . .?"

"I'm pretty sure she's straight. And she has no idea about me. She'd probably move out if she knew. So it's sort of a contest for me, where I just . . ."

Beth's voice trailed off.

"What?"

"I didn't think I'd ever tell anyone about this, ever," Beth said.

"Not even my therapist. I can't believe I'm going to tell you."

"Go ahead."

Chapter 50: More Confessions

Hannah sipped her wine, shifted on the couch, made sure the towel was where it needed to be. She was leaking, and it wasn't just Allain oozing between her lips.

"Sometimes, when my roommate comes back from the pool, she pulls off her bikini right inside the door, and she'll walk into the kitchen like that to get something to drink, and I just try to be there, in the—"

"Nude?"

"No, that would be too obvious. In the kitchen. But in bra and panties sometimes. And I'll talk to her until she gets dressed."

Beth paused and adjusted the washcloth, now so wet that Hannah believed she should probably change it.

"Is that wrong?"

"You know what I'm going to say," Hannah replied.

"This is what I think about," Beth said, gesturing to herself and Hannah. "I imagine it like this with her, where one thing leads to another, and then we're both on the couch, masturbating together."

"Do you ever want to, um, do more with her?" Hannah asked. "Or with anyone?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Hannah said, proceeding cautiously, afraid the wrong word could ruin everything in Beth's fragile, lonely world.

"Just, you know, being together, and touching, or whatever."

Beth looked at Hannah.

"I don't think I can do that."

Hannah looked and nodded and smiled, because she wanted Beth to understand that was fine, that Hannah had no expectations. But was that Beth's idea of lovemaking? Two girls looking at each other and masturbating?

"Hungry?" Beth asked.

"Yes," Hannah said, glad for the distraction of a meal.

Hannah brought her wine and her rag to the kitchen to watch Beth set out dinner on a small table by a window that stretched from floor to ceiling. Her apartment was high enough up that no one could see them, Hannah believed. Or if they were visible to passersby below, all they would perceive was the forms of two nude girls. They wouldn't see the plugs planted securely in each female's bowels.

Beth's family recipe was good and a little surprising, curry and other flavors Hannah couldn't identify. They talked about school, about the camping trip, about Nina and Beatrice and Allain, and about what life would be like for Hannah this semester.

"Tomorrow's service day," Hannah said. "They're going to look at us and decide who they want for whatever they need."

"They're making you do that?"

"No, I volunteered," Hannah said.

"For what?"

"For everything."

"Medical school?"

"Yeah, medical and biology was one service area, and I had Allain sign up for it."

"I might see you in one of my classes," Beth said, expressionless.

"That would be nice," Hannah said.

"No, it wouldn't."

"Why not?"

"You probably won't even see me."

"I'll look for you. I know Allain's whole schedule, so if I get taken to one of his classes, I'll try to see him. You have to give me your schedule too."

"They've brought girls into some of my classes," Beth said. "I tried to stay professional . . ."

"If it's me," Hannah said, "you're allowed to think things."

"For some reason, that's really hard for me to get used to," Beth said. "You know, when you're fourteen, you think the whole world's staring at you anyway. So to be stuck in a cage, naked, with a bunch of other people . . . all I wanted to do was not be looked at. So my therapist says it's a form of guilt. The class models are me, and if I look at them – or you – I'm doing it to myself, and it's wrong."

"I shouldn't have doubted your story," Hannah said. "I think, of all the dumb things I said yesterday, that was the worst."

Beth laughed. "I think that was the most amazing conversation of my life. Especially because of how it ended."

"What do you mean?"

"That we agreed . . . agreed . . . to this."

"You mean, our date?"

“Our second date,” Beth corrected.

Hannah shifted, looked at her washcloth, reached down to wipe her vulva.

When she looked up, Beth was staring at her, her eyes unreadable.

“It’s kind of like low-grade arousal, all the time,” Hannah said.

“Just having it in. Is that what it does for you?”

“Yeah. Sometimes I’ll put it in, then I’ll come out here, after my roommate’s gone to sleep, and fantasize about her catching me. If it really happened, I’d probably faint, and she’d move out the next morning. But it’s why I have two. To make the fantasy more real. So when she says, in my head, ‘I bet that feels good, can I have one?’ I can get it for her.”

Beth’s voice was thickening, and Hannah sensed another wave of arousal building.

Being with Beth was going to be a little like a ride on a roller coaster, Hannah thought, with her hanging on while the mind of a traumatized, sexually-isolated girl raced through twists and loops and drops until this was done. And what was this, anyway? A date? A get-together? A tryst? Therapy? The loaning out of a slave girl to the owner’s friend, so the friend could use her as she saw fit?

Or was it all of the above, including the last item, which Beth would deny with all her righteous vigor?

Hannah wondered where Beth’s mind would go this time, if she would just masturbate again, back on the couch, or just do it here, at the table, with half-empty dishes before them. Hannah hoped not.

“What if . . .” Hannah said slowly, “she wanted to kiss you?”

“I’ve never been kissed, by a girl,” Beth said, and she suddenly looked nervous, even terrified. Deer-in-the-headlights terrified, Hannah thought.

“That woman you were with didn’t?”

“No. And I would have let her. That’s part of why it was bad. She was like a guy. It was all about her. She told me to suck, and I tried, and she came and it was over. And that experience, on top of what happened to me in the cage . . . just not good.”

“Do you ever get kissed in your fantasies?”

Beth looked into Hannah’s eyes. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Is it good?”

“Sometimes.”

Beth leaned forward, over her plate, her mind obviously working on something new, adjusting to that separate, independent animal of lust that writhed within her, with a mind of its own, a force that mostly just pulled her along.

“Do you want to . . .?” Beth asked.

“Yes,” Hannah said. “But not here. On the couch. Or in your bed.”

“Couch.”

Hannah stood and Beth rose tentatively. Hannah took her hand and led her back to the couch, turning there, the two girls facing each other, Hannah an inch taller.

Beth closed her eyes and Hannah put her arms around Beth’s lower back and lowered her mouth to Beth’s ear, breathing into it. Beth sighed back, and Hannah moved her mouth across Beth’s cheek to her lips, pressing against them while she tightened her embrace.

Beth stiffened, her mouth closed, lips unyielding, but Hannah persisted gently, conforming her mouth to Beth’s, locking their lips together.

Beth pulled away, but her eyes wore the look of ongoing arousal.

“Do you think you’d ever want to . . . lick me?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “How do you imagine it?”

“I’m at the edge of the couch, watching TV. And she . . . and you . . . are watching with me, leaning against me, between my legs, and—”

“Do you want the TV on?”

“No.”

“And you notice I’m wet, and you ask about it, and I say I should get myself a towel, but you say maybe it would be easier if you just . . . um . . .”

“Okay,” Hannah whispered, wondering how many other stories Beth had created – or Beth’s sex animal had created for her and forced her to masturbate to. “Sit down.”

Beth sat, spread her thighs, and Hannah settled onto the floor between her legs, gingerly, mindful of the toy still stretching her anus.

As soon as Hannah was in position, Beth slid forward, her warm, wet vulva against Hannah’s upper back.

Hannah was prepared to fulfill her role as Beth described it, but the story was apparently evolving, Beth’s fingers dancing around her opening

now, against her clitoris, rapping against Hannah's back as she worked her sex organ.

When the fingers stopped moving, Hannah turned, looked up at Beth, her face locked in the same deep arousal as earlier, eyes half closed.

"Maybe I should clean you," Hannah whispered.

Beth said nothing, answering with her body, sliding forward further on the couch, widening her thighs, tilting her pelvis forward in an attitude of female lust that Hannah found both garish and strangely compelling.

Hannah got on her hands and knees, looked up into Beth's dazed eyes, looked back down, at the black hair across her mound, at her dark lips, at the base of the black plug.

Hannah's own sex was warming anew, contracting around itself, pumping out new fluids, when she dropped her mouth to Beth's wet slit, her tongue making one long, exploratory lick from Beth's opening to the top of her pubic hair.

"Uh," Beth sighed.

Hannah returned her tongue to the bottom of Beth's genitals, focusing on the wet hole, cupping it with her tongue, licking up the lubricant, enjoying the soft muskiness, like no other taste in the world.

Hannah kept drinking until the fluid seemed to be under control, and then she moved her tongue to Beth's folds, licking and tasting, before she found the clitoris and forced her tongue against it, touched it with her teeth, sucked it between her lips, licked it again, using a sort of sixth sense to gauge Beth's responses, working the hardened pick knob and the flesh around it until she heard Beth suck in air, felt her body stiffen and freeze, and then she groaned out, another round of what sounded like crying, a heartbroken girl suffering through the throes of an unspeakable pleasure she had always known alone.

When the orgasm waned, Beth stopped jerking and gasping, and Hannah felt hands on her shoulders, pulling her up, and she rose to her knees until she and Beth were face to face, noses touching, mouths an inch apart. Beth looked into her eyes, and Hannah knew she was seeing a different Beth – not the Beth of medical school, or the camping trip Beth, or the Beth of argument, or the Beth who shared her anal plugs, or even the Beth of the orgasm. This was a new Beth – possibly a Beth who had never existed until now – and this Beth opened her mouth and devoured Hannah, as if trying to suck her soul out of her body. Hannah opened her mouth in

response, and the two girls kissed as one, tongues licking, teeth against each other, lips pressing against each other, until Beth eased back, smiling at Hannah, falling slowly until she hit the cushions behind her, completely spent, a soft smile on her lips, the rarest sort of happiness settling on her face.

Hannah settled onto her thighs, hands on her knees, and watched Beth, unsure what might come next. Tears? More lust? Guilt? Shame and mortification?

But Beth closed her eyes, entirely at peace, it seemed. Was she going to fall asleep?

It was almost 9, all but the last light of the day gone from the windows, curfew in two hours. Hannah had no idea how to get back to campus, much less the kennels. She hoped Beth would be well enough to drive. She put her hand on Beth's thigh, gave it a gentle squeeze.

Beth opened her eyes and smiled.

"I like the taste," she said.

"So do I," Hannah said honestly.

"You didn't cum."

"I did earlier," Hannah said. "Twice."

"But you've been getting wet," Beth protested weakly, and Hannah knew that it would be fine with Beth if Hannah took care of things herself, or didn't take care of things at all. Beth's face was a mask of complete sexual exhaustion. Hannah believed she would see that face, taste the vagina that belonged to that face, the next time she masturbated. But it wouldn't be until tonight. Or tomorrow. She was tired too.

"I should probably get this thing out, before I forget it and get caught with it at the kennels," Hannah joked.

"Go through my bedroom to the bathroom," Beth instructed. "It should slide right out."

Hannah did as she was told, passing through Beth's neat bedroom, walking around her narrow bed, sitting on the toilet to pull out the plug. She washed it, set it on the sink, wondered if she'd wear it again, and how many times.

Hannah was dressed and waiting by the door, her purse stuffed with new supplies when Beth emerged from her room in shorts and a t-shirt.

"Will I see you Wednesday night?" Hannah asked.

“I’ll check my schedule and talk to Allain,” Beth promised.
“Maybe this Wednesday. But definitely some Wednesdays this month.”

Beth paused, seemed to be forcing herself to speak again, as if she understood the logic of the words but rarely thought this way and found it unnatural: “I want to see you cum,” she said. “I want . . . I want to . . . make you cum.”

“I’d like that,” Hannah said.

In Beth’s car on the ride back to campus, Hannah kept the window down and enjoyed the humid heat because she knew she probably wouldn’t feel any of it again for days.

She turned to Beth. “I have something for you to do.”

“What?”

“If a girl gets brought to your class – whether it’s me or someone else – you have to look at her and think, um, impure thoughts.”

Beth laughed.

“You’re like my therapist,” she said. “She gives me homework too.”

Chapter 51: Service Day

The lights came on a half an hour early that Monday morning, and everyone participating in service day was released, sent to the cafeteria first thing and told to be showered and back in their kennels by 8 a.m., when the service area representatives would start making their rounds.

Hannah, washed and back in her kennel by 7:50, watched the minutes tick by on her new clock and suffered her customary insecurities, imagining as if it had already happened that no one stopped by her kennel, that her various deficiencies made her unworthy of any use, that she would spend every day locked up in this building, waiting to be released in accordance with Allain's busy schedule. Maybe Beth would rescue her on Wednesdays, but that was far from a sure thing.

She could look at the PC's and study, but what would she do when she finished her current round of courses? It wasn't something she'd even considered until this morning. Yes, she was probably going to take her finals this week, and she considered that a minor miracle. But what then? The Petrosyans wouldn't pay for any more schooling, would they? Even at the highly-subsidized rate paid for subjects?

She had about \$350 in her bank account, and she believed she could figure out a way to access the money in it from the computers upstairs. But 12 academic hours at Austin cost almost \$2,000. Where would she ever get that much money? How much did service pay?

So when the door at the end of the hall opened and the first representatives started filing through, stopping at the first kennels and speaking brightly to the subjects confined in them, Hannah was in a state of deep despair.

A sheet of paper had been taped to her bars while she was at breakfast, and she looked up at it again as she waited, reading the front with the help of the light that passed through the thin sheet:

Hannah
Kennel 4-10
Female
Age: 19
Recreational
All Service Areas

And on the back of the sheet were instructions for the subjects that were so obvious they made Hannah laugh:

Turn on your light
Answer all questions honestly
Speak plainly
No masturbating
Be polite
Use your toilet only when necessary
Don't whisper or shout
Don't mumble

Only the last instruction made Hannah nervous:

Do not permit touching without a contact ribbon!

The voices were getting louder, closer, and Hannah rose from her bed, uncertain what to do, how to look when the representatives reached her. Sitting on her bed would make her look lazy. Standing by the bars would make her look pathetic. Pacing would make her seem restless, unreliable. Sitting at her little desk and reading would make her look pretentious. At last, she settled on the least ridiculous pose she could think of, although it was still ridiculous. She picked up her history book, opened it to the last few pages of her final assigned chapter, and leaned against the wall, as if she did this all the time, standing in her kennel and casually reading textbooks.

"Hey, uh, Hannah," a male voice said.

Heart skipping, she looked up to find two males in what she recognized as the uniforms of the building and grounds crew – dark blue pants, light blue shirts, service day badges dangling from shirt pockets – staring at her through the bars. Not just staring. Ogling. They were in their mid-20's, and Hannah sized them up quickly. They weren't at Hannah's kennel to find a worker. They were there to enjoy one of the fringe benefits of university employment.

"How can I help you?" Hannah asked coldly, and she dropped her book on her bed and turned to face them. She was willing to give them one more chance to get professional, or they would face her wrath. Impotent wrath, perhaps, coming from a nude, collared girl stuck in a kennel. But wrath was wrath.

“We’re here for, um, service day,” one of the males said, eyes wandering spasmodically all over her body, from her toes to her eyes to her breasts to her hands to her mouth to her thighs to her little brown triangle of fur, then back to her eyes again. He was looking for something. He was looking for many somethings. Looking for answers in a universe that doled them out sparingly.

None of which was Hannah’s problem.

“That’s obvious,” Hannah said. “Why are you talking to me?”

The men looked at each other, eyebrows raised. Was she puzzling them? Or amusing them?

“We need . . . help.”

He smiled as he said it. Lecherously.

“What kind of help?”

“All kinds,” he said, smiling and nodding, with the face of a man who believed he was uniquely good at seduction.

“Who sent you here?” Hannah asked.

“Our boss. He said to—”

“I want to talk to your boss,” Hannah said, and she felt her face reddening, her heart pounding in her chest.

“Why?”

“To tell him not to send a couple of jackasses over here on service day.”

The man kept smiling, but now it was the variety of smile Hannah recognized as pained, the look a wounded man gives when he doesn’t want to look wounded.

“Problem?” someone asked, and one of the kennel’s female staffers appeared.

“I believe these two gentlemen are . . . underqualified,” Hannah said brusquely.

“What are you doing?” the girl asked them. As one, the weak smiles on the two male faces faded to abject apology.

“Give me your badges,” she said.

The men reached up, all their seduction and lechery and misdirected boyish lust replaced by humiliation, and they pulled their service day tags off and handed them to the staff girl.

“Door’s that way,” she said, pointing. “Do not come back. Ever.”

She stared down the hall after them, then turned to Hannah.

“I’m very sorry,” she said.

“How did they get in here?” Hannah demanded, her wrath only slightly assuaged. These men didn’t get in by themselves.

“I’m not sure. I’ll be talking to Fidel. Today.”

“Fidel?”

“Head of engineering. He should have known better.”

“And then what?” Hannah asked.

“You’ve probably cost both of them their jobs.”

“Oh,” Hannah blurted. Did she want that? Did she want them fired?

“I heard enough,” the girl said. “I knew they were trouble as soon as I saw them. And I’ll be talking to the other girls they spoke to. It’s a formal process. It’s rare, but not the first time it happened. This is the only hall they got onto, fortunately.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“Again, I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

Hannah’s heart was still thumping but her anger was gone, replaced by a wonder at the strange ways of justice, which could alight anywhere, even where justice seemed to run particularly thin.

The hall was full of voices now, laughter, questions and answers, the sounds of interviews being conducted by professionals.

A short woman in her fifties with large, thick glasses and a gypsy skirt of colored patches appeared at Hannah’s kennel.

“Oh, hi,” she said, staring at Hannah sharply, but not ogling at all.

“Hi,” Hannah said, smiling sincerely.

“I’m with the art department,” she said.

“What are you looking for?” Hannah asked. None of the rules said she couldn’t ask questions. If a service area didn’t want help from someone who asked questions, she didn’t want to work for them anyway. The two males had put some fight in her this morning, she realized. She considered that a good thing.

“Life drawing,” the woman replied. “Do you know what that is?”

“I would model, for your artists?” Hannah guessed.

“Yes. In the nude?”

Hannah imagined herself naked, surrounded by students learning to convert her body to paint or ink or pencil on paper.

“Yes, I’d be glad to,” Hannah replied.

“Could you turn, so I can look at you in profile?”

Hannah turned while the woman studied her.

“I’m going to take your picture. Is that okay?”

Hannah bit her lip, remembering that last time, almost a year ago, when someone photographed her while she was confined to a cage. But she answered with almost no hesitation, “Yes, that’s fine.”

“Thank you,” the woman said. “Now, turn away from me.”

Hannah obeyed.

“Thank you,” she said. “But we’re not looking for models.”

Hannah turned to look at the woman, unsure of her meaning, but she had moved on.

The representatives filed through for another two hours, some merely glancing at Hannah and reading her sheet before they headed to the next kennel, some stopping to chat, to take pictures, to ask Hannah about her interests and knowledge in accounting, food service, math, engineering. Hannah had to plead ignorance on many of the topics, which left her increasingly frustrated.

She had begged for permission to work when she turned 16, but Mother responded with a firm, oft-repeated, and irrevocable no.

Surely every other subject in the kennel had experience in something skilled or semi-skilled. All she had beneath her name on the sheet was “Recreational,” and none of the skills and attributes required for that role had anything to do with what people wanted today, it seemed.

The worst moments of the morning happened when someone looked at her sheet and moved on, judging her, she was sure, by that one word.

And many of those who did stop to talk often spoke with foreign accents, making Hannah suspect they simply didn’t know what she was.

“What are your qualifications?” asked one woman, black-haired, with piercing eyes, probably in her 30’s and speaking in a thick accent Hannah thought might be Eastern European. Hannah stepped forward, saw “Mathematics” on the service day badge dangling from the lapel of her jacket.

“I’m taking calculus online,” Hannah said. “I’ve always been sort of good at math.”

“What is your average of performance in mathematics course?” the woman asked coldly.

“Oh, well, I got almost 700 in quantitative on the SAT,” Hannah replied, “and I’m getting —”

“This is not what I ask you,” the woman interrupted.

“I don’t have any actual grades yet,” Hannah said, her cheeks burning, reminding herself to be polite. “But I’m on track to get an A in calculus.”

“Send you transcript to our chair,” she said, turning. “We need good tutor for calculus. If you get not an A, don’t bother.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah replied, and the woman strode away, leaving Hannah’s questions unanswered, about who the chair was, and how one sent transcripts to them – or to anyone. Maybe that was part of the challenge. If she didn’t know how to do things like that, she wasn’t qualified for the job anyway.

No work experience. Less than two weeks of experience on a real computer. This would be Hannah’s lonely home for as long as she was kenneled here, she knew, and she was fighting tears when a man and two women stepped up, their badges all bearing red contact ribbons and reading “Medical/Biology.”

The woman glanced up at Hannah’s sheet, smiled. “Hello, Hannah,” she said.

Hannah stepped to the bars, read the name on her tag. “Hi, Denise.”

“We’re looking for volunteer medical models,” she said.

“Volunteers?” Hannah repeated. “I thought we got paid.”

All three of them laughed.

“You do, you do,” Denise said, “but we’re not everyone’s favorite department.”

“Why not?” Hannah asked.

The woman opened her mouth to speak, but Hannah talked first.

“Oh, that’s okay,” she said. “My, um, owner is in medical school. So I might go to his class. We talked about it. Some other people I know too.”

Hannah heard the words as they left her mouth and died a little inside. What did knowing medical students have to do with anything? Why did she even mention it? Whatever they were looking for, it was undoubtedly not a girl who babbled on about irrelevancies.

But the woman smiled indulgently, the other woman and the man nodded as if Hannah had said something profound, and she remembered

that medicine and biology were not anyone's first choice of service area. Having all areas on her form checked didn't mean they could assume she would cooperate with every assignment. She was, in a sense, interviewing them. She could do that.

"So pay is involved?" Hannah asked.

"Yes, we're about double the average service pay."

"How much?" Hannah asked.

"Twenty-three seventy-three to start," Denise replied.

"Twenty-three dollars?"

"And seventy-three cents. Per hour."

"Okay," Hannah said. This was well over what she expected to make. How many hours of service would they ask of her, though?

"I've talked to a few medical students about what's involved, and I'm fine with it," Hannah said. "I assume nothing's being done that will hurt."

"That's correct," Denise said. "We follow what's called the National Live Model Instructional Standards. We can get those for you if you'd like to see them."

"I would," Hannah said.

"What's your email address?" Denise asked.

"Oh, um, Hannah.Loughbridge@look!.com"

The woman tapped on her phone.

"Now, Hannah," the woman said, a little hesitantly.

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"We'd like to get some pictures . . . and do a quick inspection."

"That's fine."

"We need to look at your sex organ."

"Oh. Okay."

Hannah stood, waiting, not as uncomfortable with this request as they seemed to think she'd be.

"Can you step up?" Denise asked. "And face us? And open your legs a bit?"

Hannah complied, her mind going to the girl she was almost a year ago, when requests like this plunged her into such a state of humiliation she had to push her mind beyond the confines of her body.

All three visitors knelt, Denise looking at Hannah's sex, looking up.

"Is it alright if we touch you, Hannah?"

“Yes, Ma’am.”

The man pulled a bottle of sanitizer from his pocket, and the three of them sprayed their hands, rubbed them together, sprayed again, almost like a ritual that wouldn’t work if it weren’t done twice, and then Denise reached up, tugged on Hannah’s lips, parted them, stroked her clitoris, slid a finger inside, while all three spoke their own language, using expressions like “labial affect” and “elasticity” and “lubricant resilience” while Hannah looked down, content for now not to understand.

“Thank you, Hannah,” Denise said. “Can you turn around and bend over, bottom against the bars?”

Hannah obeyed, setting her feet a little forward, leaning against the cold metal, hoping it wasn’t too obvious that this wasn’t the first time she’d assumed this position. But then, who cared if it was? Denise and her colleagues weren’t here to judge Hannah or how she performed domestic chores.

After more spraying, the inspection of Hannah’s genitals continued, fingers touching and probing while the representatives murmured in their indecipherable language about Hannah’s suitability for whatever it was they needed.

“Thank you, Hannah,” the woman said.

“Thank you,” the other two said.

Hannah nodded, straightened and turned. “I’ll be glad to help.”

The day’s final visitor was a man in dark blue pants and light blue shirt. He appeared at Hannah’s kennel with deep contrition in his eyes. His tag said “Fidel.”

“I’m here to apologize,” he said as soon as Hannah looked at him. He was in his 50’s, Hannah guessed, wiry and compact, with a dark, no-nonsense face and a large, assertive nose.

Hannah, beginning to wonder if she’d created a school-wide incident, dropped to her bed.

“Apologize for what?” she asked.

“We need a lot of help,” he said, and he pulled out a rag and wiped his forehead. “So I had seven service day badges printed. But one of my gals didn’t show up, and someone was out sick, so those two, those two . . .”

Hannah waited for him to continue.

“ . . . the report says you called them jackasses.”

“I did.”

“Those jackasses picked them up.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“They’re both gone,” he said.

“Yes, they were kicked out right after they started talking to me.”

“Terminated,” he said. “Fired for cause.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“The official reason is misappropriation of identification, because that’s immediate and documented. We could have gone after them for harassment, but that can take months, and I wanted them gone today.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah said.

Fidel looked at her carefully, into her eyes.

“You have rights,” he said. “I’m glad you know that.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said, trying to speak unironically.

Chapter 52: Art

Hannah looked at her clock, repeatedly grateful for it. The time was 10:30. The impressions of service day, the interactions, the confrontation, remained fresh in her mind, so she forced them out with an act of will and turned back to her studies.

Two weeks ago, she had targeted early August for final exams. She had fallen behind, but possibly by no more than a week. She looked over her final assignments, thought about all she had learned since spring, and realized she was no more than a day away, possibly two, from knowing the material as thoroughly as it was possible for her to know it.

Wednesday, she decided. Finals on Wednesday, August 15. All of them, in one day. It was, Hannah realized only after she said the date in her head, her anniversary – the date the collection agency came to take her mother's things, including her daughter once they realized there was a girl who was young enough to be counted among Mother's possessions. Hannah became a slave a year ago on Wednesday. This Wednesday, she would take her final exams and, with any luck, get her first 12 hours toward a bachelor's degree in physics.

She smiled at another irony in a day rich with them, and threw herself into her books, pausing only for lunch, for dinner, and for a 90-minute mating session with Jane, the girls moving easily from kissing to oral sex to a recounting of their weekends, finishing with a listing of the service representatives they'd spoken to and how it had gone. Jane had met the mathematics professor as well, found her just as cold as Hannah had. She didn't remember the two imposters, seemed to revel in the story of justice being done with Hannah's help.

The next morning, just after the lights came on and Hannah was finishing at her toilet, a staffer appeared and slipped something on Hannah's shelf.

Hannah flushed, strode over curiously, picked it up: "Report to your kennel at 7:30 a.m., Tuesday, August 14, for restraints. Art."

The woman from the Art Department had finished her interview with Hannah by saying they didn't want models. But Hannah wasn't a model. At least, not the kind that posed for magazines. Maybe someone there had realized that? Or maybe Art was a person? From another department? Maybe he worked for the building and grounds department,

and Fidel had decided to continue making amends by putting her to work. For Art. She doubted they paid much, though.

Hannah looked at her clock and panicked. 6:55. She'd barely have enough time to shower and dry her hair, much less have breakfast. She pushed on her door, relieved to find it unlocked, headed straight to the showers, all but one of them occupied. Taking her place between two males, she shampooed, soaped up, rinsed, ignoring the partial erection of the African-America male on her left. He was still erect, fully now, when she was drying her hair.

Finished with his shower, he stepped up to her. "Aren't you Hannah?"

"Yes," she said without pausing, working the dryer at the back of her head.

"Would you like to mate?" he asked.

"When?" she asked, looking at him. He was cute, her height, and he seemed sweet. And his penis, which had obliged her curiosity by demonstrating its size, looked like it would fit comfortably. And he was surprisingly forthright. She didn't mind being asked this way, she realized.

"Tonight?" he said.

"Can you ask me again tomorrow?" Hannah replied. "I'm going to be studying tonight, for finals."

His face fell. He wasn't trying to maintain his male dignity or look seductive or anything else, Hanna realized. And as far as he knew, Hannah surmised, he was being turned down with a preposterous lie.

"I'm being serious," Hannah said. "I'm taking finals tomorrow. Online. Four classes at Austin. And I might go out Wednesday. But ask me again, please. Tomorrow. Thursday would probably work."

Face registering a little more hope, he smiled again, and she turned her dryer off, looked into the mirror to tousle her hair, wished she could get some hair spray.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Brad."

"Nice to meet you, Brad," she said, and she looked into his face, then down at his penis. "Both of you."

He smiled, just a little sheepishly.

"What kennel are you in?" she asked.

"Four."

“Okay, hall 4, kennel 4. I can remember that. Is your place nice?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Great view.”

“We’ll do it there then,” she said. “This week.”

Hannah was back in her kennel at 7:25.

The girl who’d rescued her from the two imposters yesterday appeared a few minutes after 7:30, restraints slung over her forearm.

“Turn, hands behind your back please,” she said.

Hannah obeyed, feeling the cuffs on her wrists, wondering when they’d come off again.

“Thanks for the help yesterday,” Hannah said.

“You get most of the credit,” she said. “Once I heard you say ‘jackass,’ I knew something wasn’t right. But they might have kept going if you hadn’t confronted them.”

Hannah felt the cuffs close around her ankles, turned back to the girl. “How long before I leave?”

“I’m not sure. I’m just the chain girl. But someone should be along soon to get you.”

“Okay.”

Hannah, unable to do anything but sit on her bed, suffered another round of misgivings. Someone could have her chained and then never come for her, she thought. What if she had to use the bathroom? What if they kept her out all day, and she didn’t eat until dinner, and was too weak to study tonight? She didn’t want to put off finals any longer than necessary.

To her relief, a male staffer came for her a few minutes later, unlocking her kennel and walking her to the door that led to processing.

Before the door was open, Hannah could hear the voices, impatient, speaking over each other. Someone was complaining, someone else was trying to explain something, their tones just shy of exasperation.

Inside the room was something akin to controlled chaos.

There were at least 30 subjects here, all shackled, most of them handcuffed as well. Hannah was guided to the edge of the group, her escort moving past her to stand with the two dozen or so staff bunched defensively around the cubicles.

“The printer is not working,” barked an older female staffer, looking over the shoulder of a beleaguered man at a computer. “We are working to get it back online, and as soon as it’s operational, we’ll get everyone boxed up and on their way.”

“I’m going to be late on my first day,” one girl protested, hopping, her chains rattling against the floor.

“First day bugs, folks, please work with us,” a man said. “It always happens, and that’s why everyone got chained and brought out an hour ahead of schedule.”

“I had to skip breakfast,” another girl lamented.

“Ask for food when you arrive. Every building has a vending machine, and if—”

“Potato chips for breakfast, yay,” a girl announced bitterly.

“And if they’re not jerks they’ll feed you for free, and if they are jerks, get a bill and you can settle with them tonight.”

The impatient girl was still hopping, her breasts bouncing violently, and the older woman scowled at her.

“We do not recommend jumping in restraints,” she said, rotating her head so it looked like she was talking to everyone.

Suddenly, something good seemed to happen, the sighs of relief from the staff almost palpable, and Hannah could hear the whine of a printer, sheets clicking off the machine at more than one per second.

“Jacob!”

“Here,” said a male, working his way through the throng to follow the girl who had called his name.

He followed her to the far end of the room, where a whole fleet of open cages on wheels waited to hold their living cargo.

The girl pointed to a cage, he ducked in and sat, she closed it around him and locked it, grabbed a tarp from the hooks on the wall, covered him, stuck his sheet and other things in the tarp’s clear pocket, and wheeled him up to a closed door where two staffers waited.

“Sam!”

“Here.”

“Brittany!”

“Here.”

“Hannah!”

“Here,” Hannah said, and she shuffled between her fellow subjects and, heart pounding, made her way to the cages, sat down in one, raised her hips one at a time so that her bottom wasn’t on her handcuffs. The tarp plunged her little cage into darkness, but not complete blackness, and she tried to calm herself as she waited. The tarp shook as someone shoved her

sheet into its clear pocket. Next, she heard the clink of keys, being dropped into the pocket, and hoped that meant she'd be unchained once she got where she was going. She wished she knew what her little sheet said.

"If you were handcuffed in back, that's what your service area requested," a woman announced from somewhere among the cages. "Do not attempt to move your handcuffs to the front. Your service area will report that, and you'll be punished. And do not masturbate. Do not masturbate. That's two bars. If they find semen, that's two bars. And girls, that goes for you too." The woman paused, then added, ominously. "They can tell. Believe me, they can tell."

The names continued to ring out, the shackles continued to scrape against the concrete floor. Hannah heard cages lock, tarps go on, instructions here and there. A girl asked if she would be able to get coffee where she was going. No one bothered to answer, Hannah knew, because the question was dumb and the girl was just asking it because she was nervous and she had discovered that making sounds with her mouth eased her tension. The girl spoke again but her voice was muffled this time and Hannah knew she'd been caged and tarped and no one heard her question or cared if they did hear it.

The sounds of people being put into rolling cages stopped, and new sounds began. There was the squeak of rusty cart wheels, the thump as carts got pushed into each other. A female staffer laughed apologetically. Some else said "bumper cars" under their breath.

"This just says administration, but it doesn't say which administration," a female staffer complained.

"If it doesn't say, it means main administration, on Hayes Street."

Hannah's cage lurched forward and she drew up her knees. It stopped, moved again, stopped, and then she was outside, the tarp in the sun and allowing the rays through, so bright now it was almost white.

"Where are you going?" a female voice asked.

"Business," a male replied. "You?"

"Art," she said.

Art, Hannah thought. The Art Department. Not Art, the person.

"Which way are you going?" he asked.

"By the cafeteria, I guess, why?"

"There's a bunch of steps that way," he said. "You can't get up them with it. I got stuck there last year, finally gave up and had to go

around.”

“I’ll follow you then.”

“Are you new?” he asked.

“Yeah, transferred from Nueces. I’m kind of a sophomore.”

“Whatcha studying?”

“Vet tech.”

“Oh, cool. Animals, right?”

“Yeah. Like pets. And livestock too.”

“I’m Tapper.”

“Tapper?” she asked.

“Yeah. Like, tap tap tap. But Tapper.”

“I’m Elisha,” she said.

Both cages hit a bump, just a crack in the sidewalk one would step over and barely notice, but every strike of wheel against fissure jarred Hannah’s cage and produced a deafening clang, echoed by the cage being pushed beside her. Hannah wondered who it held. Male? Female? And why would the business school need a naked slave?

Hannah listened to the boy and girl talk, the boy obviously interested in the girl, asking her about her social plans, about her weekend. The girl seemed at least receptive in turn.

This is how free people courted, Hannah thought. Tapper did not, as soon as he found himself pushing a cart next to Elisha, expose a sizable erection and propose that they mate tonight. And if he had, Hannah was certain that Elisha wouldn’t have regarded his penis for overall fit, then asked him if he could hold off until Wednesday or Thursday.

Maybe they were missing out. Or maybe Hannah was. She wasn’t sure.

The two parted ways outside the business school, after a quick farewell in which Tapper asked for the details of Elisha’s work schedule. They overlapped on Mondays and Thursdays, and Hannah decided that, if she had nothing else to do this semester, she would observe the staff, try to get a sense of who was mating with whom. It was only fair.

Hannah’s cage was stifling, sweat beading up on her forehead and under her arms and probably ruining her hair too, when she felt herself being wheeled up an incline and then over the bump of a threshold and into a dark space, cool air immediately rushing in from the tarp’s bottom edges.

“Hey,” Elisha said. “This is for life drawing. Studio 301.”

“The elevator’s right there, hit 3, and then it’s on your right two doors down,” said an effeminate male’s voice, speaking quickly, by rote, as if he said this all the time.

Hannah waited, no longer nervous, the chemical smells of paints and paint cleaners and other, less-identifiable odors washing over her, none of them unpleasant.

She was pushed onto the elevator, it creaked up slowly to the third floor, she was pushed off. She heard a knock, heard someone punching the buttons of a door combination, heard a door swing open, heard a woman’s voice say, “Thanks, leave it there.”

The door closed again and Hannah waited some more.

The same woman was speaking, no one answering, and Hannah concluded she was on her cell phone, talking about cats and picking up milk and mini pads and calling her mother, and Hannah guessed she was talking to her significant other. Maybe her husband. Maybe her wife.

“Okay,” she said, “I’ve got to go, they just brought my girl in and she’s probably not at all what I wanted, so I might need to send her back. Okay, bye. Bye.”

Hannah heard footsteps, felt the tarp shake as someone grabbed it, and then it was raised and tossed aside and Hannah found herself blinking against bright lights in a large studio, sinks along one wall, windows along another, a dozen easels set in a circle, all facing a large Styrofoam rock.

Hannah looked up at the instructor, in her 20’s, blonde and chubby.

“How do I get you out of there?” she asked.

“You’re keeping me?” Hannah said back.

“Oh, you heard that?” she asked, laughing. “Sorry, I was just babbling to my husband. Some girls just won’t work. You’re perfect.”

“The key’s in a pocket in the tarp, I think.”

The woman picked up the tarp, turned it over and reached into the pocket, pulling out Hannah’s sheet and a small envelope.

She reached into the envelope, pulled out a pair of keys on a ring, glanced at the sheet.

“You’re Hannah?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

The woman stuck a key in the lock that held Hannah’s cage closed, lowered the side and motioned Hannah to step out.

“I’m Deb.”

“Nice to meet you, Deb.”

The woman looked Hannah up and down. “I don’t need you handcuffed,” she said. “That was the art department’s call. If I order you, I’ll ask them to leave those off.”

“Okay.”

“Can you turn around?”

Hannah turned, and Deb freed her hands but left her shackles on.

“I’ll take those off once everyone’s in place,” she promised. “Class starts in about 40 minutes.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, glancing at the rock, wondering what she’d be doing with it. Draping herself over it dramatically? Holding it on her shoulder, like a girl used in common labor?

“Have you ever done life modeling before?”

“No.”

“You’re comfortable with it?”

“I’m almost always nude,” Hannah said. The question annoyed her. Being naked in front of strangers was one of her distinct talents.

“You can hold still for half an hour?”

“Oh,” Hannah replied. This wasn’t a particular skill of hers. What if she couldn’t do it?

“I think so,” she said.

“Do you need anything?”

“Is there coffee?” Hannah asked. “I didn’t get anything to eat or drink this morning.”

“Why not?”

“They got us all ready kind of early, I think because it was the first day.”

“Can you go down to the canteen on your own?”

“Yes, if you tell me where it is.”

Deb pulled four one dollar bills out of her pocket, gave them to Hannah and hit the combination on the studio door, and she stepped into the hall and pointed. “That last door there on the left. There’s coffee and a few vending machines. Be back in 15 minutes, and just knock on the door.”

“Thank you.”

Hannah focused on the door and took two steps in her chains before she realized she was not alone in this hall, that three students waited outside

a classroom door before her, two more walked behind her, and there were voices coming from the canteen, a girl laughing in there.

Yes, she was used to being nude in front of strangers – at home, at campgrounds, in kennels and clinics – but this was a school. This was, she reminded herself as she stepped slowly forward, the first college or university building she'd ever visited.

She looked at the three students by the door, and all three looked back at her, stopping their conversation and staring.

"Hi," she said and smiled, but the butterflies were churning now, making her nervous, scared, insecure. Deb seemed to think it was perfectly normal to send a nude, shackled girl down the hall of a college building. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe Deb was trying to get rid of her.

Hannah kept moving, forcing herself to the canteen, deciding to try to make this feel routine until someone told her otherwise.

She stopped at the door, Deb's bills crumpled in her hand, and took everything in.

On a counter along the left was a sink, a microwave and a small coffee machine with "\$1.00" stamped on it. Three vending machines stood before her, filled with the sort of things she tended not to want: bags of dry pretzels, greasy cookies, bars of alleged fruit, packages of crackers and chips, some with cheese. A giant green pickle in a bag.

In the middle of the room, six students sat at two tables and, as Hannah expected, all stopped talking and turned to her.

She was going to smile and say hi again, but one of the girls spoke first.

"Whose class?" she asked.

"Deb's," Hannah replied, easing into the room.

The students looked at each other, consulted their phones. "Deb," someone whispered. "Deb."

Hannah went to the coffee maker, nerves a little eased by the conversation, as inconclusive as it had been.

"Oh, here she is, Deborah Heath."

"She was at Plymouth last year," someone else said.

"God, she's got stuff at the Guggenheim."

"No she doesn't, not really."

Hannah grabbed a cup, slipped a dollar into the coffee machine, made her choices and hit "Brew."

“Yes, here’s a page on her. This is her thing. Whoa. Chessboard. Lions. It was at the Guggenheim, on—”

“Was,” the girl interrupted. “As in, a temporary exhibit. That’s different from having it there, always.”

“Still,” a boy said.

“I’m drawing you,” the girl announced.

Hannah looked back. No one seemed to be drawing anything.

“Drawing me in your mind?” she asked.

The girl looked surprised, while two boys laughed at her expense. Did Hannah really need to be rude to these people? Would she ever not be insolent?

“No, I mean, I’m in your class,” the girl clarified. “If you’re in Dr. Heath’s class today, then I’m drawing you.”

“Cool,” Hannah said.

“We are all drawing you,” the boy said in a slow, ominous voice, and he stared into Hannah’s eyes, and then at the rest of her body.

“I’m not drawing her,” said another boy.

“Except Casper,” added the first boy, in the same ominous tone, which for some reason everyone but Hannah found very funny.

“Where’s your class, Casper?” the girl asked. Hannah looked at her. Something was wrong. Hannah studied her neck. Her neck was collared. She had been fitted with a silver band of metal, keyless, irremovable, light and secure and etched with numbers and letters. A little metal tag dangled from the front of her collar. Just a metal tag, not the plastic kennel tag.

“Sociology,” Casper answered.

Hannah crossed her arms, raised the coffee to her lips, tried not to stare at the girl. What was a subject doing here?

“Where are you staying?” a boy asked.

“In the kennels,” Hannah replied.

“Yeah, she’s got a kennel tag,” she girl said. “She’s one of the lucky ones.”

“Lucky?” Hannah said.

“Yeah, lucky,” the girl said.

“How so?” Hannah asked.

“You live on campus, for one,” she said.

“You don’t?”

“No, I’m 10 miles out. I drive in or take the bus, and both are a pain in the ass.”

“Well, the kennels are kind of strict,” Hannah said.

“Everywhere’s strict,” the girl said, touching her collar absently, leaving Hannah to wonder.

“Are you a student here?” the girl asked.

“No, I’m taking classes at Austin,” Hannah replied.

“Are you going to transfer here?”

“I’m not sure,” Hannah said. “I’m not sure that’s an option.”

“What are your grades?”

“I don’t have any yet,” Hannah said. “I’m taking finals tomorrow.”

“The better your grades, the less it costs. And you can move all your credit hours here from Austin. They’ll take anything.”

Hannah took another sip of coffee, found it to be passable.

What was a subject doing at the University of Texas at Corpus Christi? she wondered. Why was she taking classes here?

The girl didn’t look recreational, not exactly. Her eyebrows were thick and unkempt, her hair in a messy bun over her head, acne along her jaw, eyes a little far apart. Was she being trained to work, to do a certain job? Or did her owner just want her to get an education, for some other reason?

But whatever her story, she seemed happy. She seemed to fit here. This was possible, then. And being kenneled was an advantage, not a punishment. Did Laura know? Maybe Laura just wanted Hannah out of the house. If the kennels were awful, so be it. If the kennels were almost perfect, that was fine with Laura too.

Two boys walked into the canteen, prompting shouts, hugs, so much commotion Hannah thought she was going to get trampled, so she eased out of the canteen and back up the hall, a burning lump in her collared throat. Did the people there, the boys, the girls, and particularly the slave girl, know how lucky they were?

Chapter 53: The Thinker

Deb apologized about the canteen’s inadequate sustenance when Hannah gave her back three dollar bills. And as promised, Deb removed

Hannah's shackles as soon as the last students filed into the classroom, large drawing pads stuck under arms or wedged into wheeled cases.

Hannah sat against the wall during the course introduction, while Deb stood beside the Styrofoam rock and explained her objectives for the class, after which she had everyone introduce themselves by name and major.

"Tabitha, commercial art," the slave girl said.

"Commercial art." The phrase echoed in Hannah's head.

"Hannah," Deb said when the introductions were over. "You're on."

Hannah stepped up to the rock, nodded at the girl and the others she'd briefly met.

"I know her," the girl announced to no one in particular.

Deb put her hand on Hannah's shoulder.

"They sent us classic beauty today," she said, and she raised her hand to Hannah's cheekbone. "There isn't a flaw. Look at her eyes. There isn't a flaw. God, look at her ears."

Deb pulled Hannah's hair back, and Hannah smiled. Deb was trying to be dramatic, Hannah decided. There were more beautiful girls. Everywhere. Beth, as just one of many examples, possessed a solid, exotic, olive-skinned beauty that Hannah with her plain bloneness and fair skin could only dream of.

"When were you bought, Hannah?" Deb asked.

"About a year ago?"

"How much did they pay?"

Hannah looked at Deb sharply. Was she being serious?

"How much did they pay for you?" Deb repeated.

"I'd prefer not to say."

"No problem," Deb said. "But if a girl that looked just like you, and your age, um, 20, 21 —"

"Eighteen."

"If an 18-year-old girl was put on the market in Corpus Christi a year ago —"

"Dallas, Ma'am."

"— was put on the market in Dallas a year ago, a girl just like you, how much would she sell for?"

Hannah pondered the question, shifting uncomfortably. Being nude was one thing. Having her sales price discussed in front of a class of

strangers was something else altogether.

“Hannah’s doing what she was trained to do,” Deb said. “It’s very rude to discuss what you sold for. It’s very rude to ask.”

She turned to Hannah. “Do you know why I’m asking you that?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Beauty has a price now,” Deb said, circling to speak to everyone in the class, raising her voice for emphasis. “Even human beauty. Whatever your opinion of slavery – and I know some of you find it deeply offensive – it’s given artists information they didn’t have before. What is the value of human attractiveness? How much is it worth today? Hannah, I know I’m putting you on the spot, but we need to know what we’re drawing today. Not just that we’re drawing a beautiful girl. We need to know her objective value.”

Deb turned to Hannah, eyebrows raised expectantly.

Hannah chose her next words carefully.

“Well, if a girl who looked like me was for sale a year ago in Dallas, she might sell for a million and a half dollars.”

Deb put her hand on Hannah’s shoulder and squeezed it. Hannah looked down, not wanting to see the shocked expressions. She heard hissing, the sucking in of breath, someone whispering something. She hoped the slave girl who was somehow a student here wasn’t offended. But it was just a number, after all.

“Now we have a number to work with,” Deb said. “One point five million dollars. More than most houses. More than twenty luxury cars. And she is going to hold still for us for the next, um, 40 minutes, while we turn one point five million dollars worth of girl into art.”

Deb turned to Hannah.

“Hannah, are you familiar with *The Thinker*?”

“By Rodin?” Hannah queried, pronouncing it “ROE-din.”

“Roe-DAN,” Deb corrected. “Very good. Now, our little rock here is perfect for that pose. Take a seat.”

Hannah obeyed, doing her best impression of the statue’s upright, thoughtful stance, trying not to laugh at the irony of a slave girl bought for sex and beauty emulating the West’s most enduring symbol of deep contemplation.

“Now, your challenge today,” Deb continued, speaking to the class, holding her arms out. “You six students, from here to here, you’ll be

drawing her face first. Do not make her beautiful. Do not make her young. You have to use her face, but only as the foundation. What would Hannah look like in 10 years, in 20 years, in 30? What if she was stricken with disease? What if she grew up malnourished? It has to be identifiably Hannah. But it's not one point five million dollar Hannah."

Deb stepped beyond the circle, leaving Hannah alone, her bare bottom against the rough gray Styrofoam.

"Start," she said. "You have 20 minutes, and then Hannah's going to turn toward the other half of the class, and they'll get the same assignment."

Sitting still turned out to be exceedingly easy for Hannah, especially today. She needed to think, and she was in the perfect pose for it. The last hour had given her more to ponder than the average month did. Maybe more than the average year. With a few deft words, Deb had opened up new worlds to Hannah, about how to look at things, how to perceive art, beauty, money. Even Hannah's sales price, something she'd always considering a dark and, at times embarrassing fact, contributed to the lesson.

And then – could she be a student here? Was it possible?

Twenty minutes was over before Hannah sensed the passing of half that much time, and she shifted her position toward the other half of the students, stared at the floor with her chin on her hand, and listened to the scratching of charcoal pencils against paper, wondering who was making her old, who was making her diseased.

Deb stopped everyone after another very brief 20 minutes, looked at their art, praised a few, commented on a few, and then the bell rang, class was dismissed, and the students shuffled out, voices raised, laughter pealing, in what Hannah guessed was first-day enthusiasm. They couldn't all always be this happy, could they?

"Hannah, you did beautifully," Deb said.

"Thank you."

"Next class is in 90 minutes. Think you can go again?"

"Absolutely."

"How 'bout lunch?"

"I'm starving," Hannah agreed.

"There's a shop across the street. Turkey sandwich?"

"Yes, thank you."

Deb picked up Hannah's chains from her desk.

"Just while I'm gone," she said. "I had no idea you were worth that much."

Hannah blushed, embarrassed again now that the academic context of her price wasn't part of the conversation.

Deb knelt, fastened Hannah's ankles together.

"The last thing I need on my first day on the job here," Deb said, as Hannah turned to be handcuffed, "is trying to explain how I lost a million and a half dollars."

Hannah followed Deb to the cage and slid in, Deb closing it and, after some adjustments, locking it tight.

Hannah, thoughts racing, didn't mind the indignity of restraint and confinement as much as she usually did, and she pondered the matters of the morning and looked out the window at the wind whipping the treetops, until Deb returned a half hour later with drinks and sandwiches, released Hannah and offered her a seat at a low table in the corner.

"You're deep," she observed as soon as she was settled.

Hannah sipped her Coke and looked back at Deb. The statement could mean several things to a girl in Hannah's place, but she assumed she knew what Deb meant.

"How did you know about Rodin?" Deb asked.

"My owners have a bunch of books, and I go through them. And I try to remember things. They don't tell me how to pronounce things, though."

"Roe-DAN. Everyone makes that mistake until they hear it pronounced," Deb said. "I wasn't just testing the students with that pose. I like to see how models handle it. I meant what I said. You had it down from the start. I usually have to do a lot of adjustment."

"It was the right pose for me," Hannah joked. "I had a lot to think about. First day of school."

"Oh, you're a student here?"

"No, I didn't mean that. I want to be, but no. Just, new things happening today. I met some people in the canteen. I liked what you said about art. I get why you asked me about . . . that."

"Sorry, but if I don't expand these kids' minds, I'm not doing my job. They all come in thinking about beer and sex and the weekend. You got them focused."

“I enjoyed it. I’d like to see what people drew.”

“I’ll give you a look at the end of the next class.”

“I’d like that.”

“You said you want to be a student here?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Someday.”

“Apply for spring.”

Hannah took a bite of her sandwich, looked out the window and knew that she’d been waiting for someone to suggest this. She didn’t have the courage to think it herself, but now it had been proposed by someone else. Someone free. It couldn’t be dismissed.

“Use me as a reference,” Deb said. “If you need one. And that’s not an offer I make lightly.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said.

Deb propped her door open while Hannah finished lunch, but she allowed Hannah to remain unshackled this time, and Hannah took her place along the wall and watched the students file in, some glancing at her, some not noticing her at all.

The class proceeded as the first one had, with Deb’s course descriptions, student introductions, and Deb’s exhortations about art and beauty and the values thereof. She didn’t make Hannah repeat her sales price, instead just telling the students what someone like Hannah would go for.

Hannah posed for 20 minutes in one direction, 20 minutes in the other, and Deb called time.

“Hannah,” she said, gesturing, “come take a look.”

Hannah rose, stepped outside the circle and regarded the first few, mostly passable depictions of herself, as an old woman, a diseased girl, a victim of chronic malnourishment, hip bones and ribs protruding through paper-thin flesh. But, in one male’s conception of diseased and skeletal Hannah, her breasts were as perky and firm as – and a good bit larger than – healthy Hannah’s actual breasts.

Hannah continued following Deb around the circle until her eyes stopped on forty-year-old Hannah.

The artist was a scrawny male who’d introduced himself as Charlie, with thin, matted hair, ill-fitting jeans, heavy black prescription shoes, one sole thicker than the other. He’d clumped into the classroom late, looking at Hannah through thick glasses, Hannah looking at him and looking away,

not sure what his gaze meant, if it were lustful or curious or something else. Trying to see through her, perhaps. His eyes were like Laura's in some ways.

Forty-year-old Hannah, in his conception, had gone soft, her breasts hanging, her legs thick, thighs bowed under their own weight, her belly rounded, her eyes and her forehead lined, chin no longer tight under her jaw.

But forty-year-old Hannah's hair still hung thick and straight where it wasn't tucked behind her ear, and there was the slightest smile on her face.

Hannah studied the picture, frozen in place, staring, speechless.

"Are those stretch marks?" she asked quietly, pointing at forty-year-old Hannah's belly.

"Yes," came the simple reply. No explanation offered. No explanation required.

Forty-year-old Hannah was beautiful.

Nineteen-year-old Hannah stepped back, brought her hands to her face, her eyes filled with tears, and she issued a single soft cry, a sort of quiet "oooh" that she choked off before it could become a wail.

The boy turned to look at her, startled – or terrified – his eyes wide, his mouth tight.

"I'm sorry," he croaked, and Hannah noticed that his voice was not perfect either.

"No," she said. "No, no . . . it's beautiful. It's so . . ."

The boy continued watching Hannah, as if he were waiting for her to scream at him, to throw something at him, to tell him that whatever dreams he'd been keeping – of art, of beauty, of greatness – were grossly misplaced.

Hannah couldn't muster the words to reassure him. Deb stepped in.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Deb announced. "Please have a look at art. Art with a capital A. Charlie, you have brought tears to your model's eyes. That is always an achievement."

Charlie looked at her, looked back at Hannah.

"How long have you been drawing people?" Deb asked.

"My aunt says it started when I was three," Charlie replied solemnly, his words a little thick.

“You painted truth,” Deb asserted. “And that’s what Hannah sees, because she’s not vain. But even if she were vain, and I had to pull her off you because she was trying to strangle you . . . never apologize for painting truth.”

“Okay,” Charlie agreed, standing, closing his pad and clomping out of the studio.

The rest of the students left, Hannah composed herself, and she was returned her to her chains and her cage in the anticlimactic end of her first working day in Corpus Christi.

Back in her kennel, she buried herself in her books and her scribbled calculus problems, tearing her eyes away only long enough to have a quick dinner, offering quick regrets to Jane, to Britt, to the new boy she’d met in the shower that morning.

When she could no longer stop yawning, she looked at her little clock, saw that it was almost 1 a.m., and turned off her light.

Chapter 54: Exams, and Brad

Wednesday morning began in a miasma of unease for Hannah, a searing emptiness in her core, somewhere near her stomach, boring through her as soon as she opened her eyes.

She looked at her clock, knew the lights would be coming on soon.

Would she get another assignment? Would her plans to take her finals be delayed another day? This seemed like a terrible day. For tests. For posing in front of artists. For anything.

She went to her toilet, put her head in her hands, and the memories of a year ago today came roaring back. A single apple for a meal that she had to share with Mother. Then the men came to collect on years of Mother's debt. Then they saw Hannah, knew immediately she was the prize, the jewel of her mother's estate, the rest to be sold off by the pound as rags and filler.

Hannah was handcuffed and caged and her mother – meek and submissive all her life – was handcuffed as well after she bloodied the deputy's nose. It was a terrible day, both for the way Hannah and Mother were treated and for the uncertainty, the jarring transition from free and poor to caged and – something else.

It was necessary, Hannah told herself, despite an ocean of misgivings. Had she not been taken, had not all the other things happened, she would not be here this morning, about to take her finals.

A male staffer passed through the hall to drop assignments, left nothing for her, so she trooped upstairs with her books as soon as she heard her kennel door's bolt slide open, and she sat down to a quick breakfast with everything spread out before her, like a wall meant to admit no interlopers. For whatever reason, she was left alone.

Done with breakfast, she grabbed one of the two remaining free PCs, noted with dismay that a male two machines away was watching videos of helicopter crashes and the sound was a few decibels too loud.

Two girls were giggling at a second machine. Someone was talking to the girls at the front desk.

She forged ahead, logging into her email account to send a short email to Mother: "About to take finals, wish me luck!"

And then she went into the Austin site, clicked to her history course, found the link at the bottom: "Take Final Now."

She held her breath and selected.

“What are you doing?” a female voice barked from just behind her. Hannah jumped, almost knocked the keyboard off the tray, whirled around.

She said nothing, just stared into the eyes of the same book-reading girl who’d checked her into the room on her first day.

“What are you doing?” the girl asked again.

“I’m, uh, taking final exams.”

“Why are you doing it here?” the girl demanded.

“It’s online,” Hannah explained. “I need a PC.”

“You don’t want to use an office?”

“Where’s that?”

“This way,” she said, striding away, Hannah logging out, collecting her books and hustling after her. The girl led her to a door that opened to a tiny room with nothing but a desk, a PC – and solitude.

Hannah sat down, spread out her books again, logged in again, and for five uninterrupted hours, she took tests. Biology first, because the class was ridiculously easy and the final was 45 minutes of open-book multiple choice and one three paragraph essay. Then calculus, which she plowed through, working 20 problems that felt like the same things she’d been doing for months. Physics was multiple choice, formulae and two essays.

She saved history for last, three long essays on questions she got to pick from a list of 15. The first question concerned the impact of classic slavery (called “classic” so it wouldn’t be confused with the modern kind) on the transmission of art and culture.

She finished at 3, walked out of the stifling little office dizzy, almost giddy, went to the cafeteria to pick over the remains of lunch before it was all put away, and then she went back to her kennel, collapsed on her bed and woke up at 4:30, burning with a strange lust.

Would Beth come for her this afternoon, or tonight? But no one came, and she gave up on waiting to be summoned and went to dinner at 6:30, deciding she needed to discreetly share her email address with Beth. Not knowing if she was going to be released from one Wednesday night to the next was an inconvenience she didn’t care for.

She found Brad, the boy who’d propositioned her in the showers Monday morning, dining at a table of male friends. She didn’t care that he wasn’t alone.

He looked up at her, clearly surprised as she approached.

“Hey, Brad, you still want to get together?”

“Yeah,” he said without hesitation.

“Tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“Your kennel?”

“Yeah.”

“Now?”

“Okay.”

Brad stood, his penis firm and bobbing, and he put his tray up and Hannah followed him downstairs. If she had a penis, it would have been the same size.

“How did exams go?” he asked her, a little breathlessly.

“I think I did okay, thanks for asking,” Hannah said.

They stood at his kennel door together. Tammy entered the hall after a minute or two.

“Hey, Tammy.”

“Hey, Hannah.”

“Brad and I are going to spend some time together.”

“Brad, you’re good with this?” Tammy asked, ignoring the yes that his penis was speaking with all its length and girth.

“I am, thanks.”

Tammy unlocked Brad’s kennel door, they stepped in, she locked it back and Brad closed his curtain.

Hannah dropped to his bed, pleased to see that it was made, because a lot of boys on this hall didn’t bother, and she got on her hands and knees and looked at him, arching her back to raise her vulva for his inspection.

That was all the instruction he needed, clambering onto his bed behind her, reaching down, parting her lips and, satisfied with her wetness, sliding himself up her hole.

“Oh, god,” Hannah grunted.

“Too fast?”

“No, it’s fine. I’ve just been in academic mode the last two days. I guess that made me tighter or something. Oh, god.”

Brad’s settled into a pattern of thrusts, moving in and out a half dozen times, then stopping to stir Hannah’s insides.

Every time he stirred, Hannah grunted and tightened, the sensation of having her organ manipulated like that strange and not completely pleasant. But she'd propositioned him tonight and come to his bed, so she decided to let him have that privilege.

"How close are you to cumming?" Hannah asked, her walls throbbing, her clitoris burning between her legs.

"Almost there," Brad gasped.

"Finish me in front," Hannah said. "I need to cum too."

She pulled away, turned, dropped to her back and spread and raised her legs, and Brad was immediately upon her, pushing his glistening shaft up her oozing slit, pounding against it while her tension built and broke.

"Dammitdammitdammitdammit," she whispered, pulling him down by his neck so she could pour her profanities directly into his ear. "Jesusjesusjesusjesusdamn."

Moments later, Brad's pleasure arrived unintelligibly, him gasping "uh, uh, uh" in time with the bucking of his hips as he delivered five hot jets of semen to Hannah's spasming chamber.

The two acquaintances lay there after they'd finished, breathing into each other's hair, bodies going limp, Brad's weight a pleasant reassurance to Hannah that she was still alive, still good at something.

But finally, she'd had enough.

"I get your toilet first," she announced quietly.

Brad rose and she went and opened herself, allowing a stream of his cum to drop out. She wiped, urinated, wiped again.

"Do you usually do a lot?"

"I've been waiting since Monday morning for you," he said.

"That's sweet," Hannah replied. What else could be said? She opened the curtain, smiled at Jane in the kennel across the hall, and Jane smiled back knowingly. Hannah mouthed the word "Tomorrow" and Jane nodded.

Within a few minutes, a staffer appeared to release Hannah.

"Thanks," she said, offering Brad a wave. He waved back, and Hannah wanted to believe they'd both gotten what they wanted tonight.

Chapter 55: Medical School

Hannah woke Thursday morning as optimistic as she had been four the day before. No matter how she did on her finals, she was done with them, a tremendous achievement given how grim things looked a few weeks ago.

And surely, she'd be able to take a few more courses from Austin this fall. Maybe she'd have the money for them. Maybe the Petrosyans would pay for them. On the other hand, maybe they'd find out what she did and take offense. And sell her.

Or bring her home and schedule a weekly appointment with Mr. Ortega. Every Sunday afternoon. She would have Ormek witness next time. He'd have to tie her.

But she was intent on the future in ways she hadn't been before in her life – possibly ever. She didn't know where she would be in five years, but the vision of being a student here in a few months filled her mind, sharing space with the image of forty-year-old Hannah. The image haunted her in ways she didn't understand. Maybe that's what art was supposed to do.

As vividly as she still saw Charlie's creation, however, she couldn't remember if he'd put her in a collar. How could she have forgotten the image's most important detail? Or was it the most important detail? She would still be Hannah. Forty-year-old Hannah. But as long as she was who she was, did it matter what she was?

The lights came on, she slipped to her toilet, heard the hall door open and knew someone was coming through, passing out the morning's assignments. Her curtain was closed, so she watched the little slot where her assignment would be dropped, her heart racing. Would she get to model again? Would Deb tell everyone to make her old or decrepit again? She wanted to say something to Charlie, to reassure him, to tell him that his art had touched her deeply, profoundly.

A hand appeared at the slot in her curtain, bearing a slip of paper, dropping it on her shelf.

She flushed, crossed the length of her tiny kennel and snatched the paper up: "Report to your kennel at 8 a.m., Thursday, August 16, for restraints. Medical."

Hannah raced to the cafeteria, loading up on food and coffee, showering and making it back to her kennel by 7:50.

The female staffer who called herself the chain girl appeared at 8:07, and Hannah greeted her at the bars and, without having to be asked, turned her back and held still to be handcuffed and shackled. Would she see Allain today? Or Beth? She'd forgotten to get Beth's schedule, but she knew Allain was in class on the second floor of Perkins hall this morning, studying immunology. She couldn't imagine why an immunology class would need a subject, but she sat on her bed and pictured Allain there, smiling at her, maybe even waving. She would wave if she could, smile if she were still chained.

But for the first time since she'd reviewed the service passport form, she was suffering misgivings. Allain had told his mother kenneled subjects weren't treated well in his classes. He'd seen things that bothered him, apparently, and he'd seemed surprised when she told him to permit any service, including medical work.

She was allowed out of her kennel and into processing just before 8:30.

There was no throng of naked, chained, impatient subjects this morning, no frantic staffers waiting for a printer to work. Hannah stood with two other females briefly before each was escorted to a cage, locked in, covered with a tarp and, after a brief wait, pushed out into the morning light, cages banging over cracked sidewalks, Hannah's heart banging in her chest.

There was no conversation to listen to. Hannah's escort seemed to know where he was going, and he was pushing her cage alone. She sensed an incline, guessed she was being moved up a handicap ramp, and she heard the whoosh of automatic doors, felt the familiar bump of a threshold, breathed in the cool air of only the second university building she had ever visited.

She smelled coffee until her cage reached the elevator, and then the smells became less identifiable. Scents not unlike the clinic in Dallas where she was taken for checkups and, once, for punishment.

The elevator beeped each time it reached a floor, and she counted four beeps. Allain was on the second floor of the Perkins building this morning. And this might not even be the Perkins building. No Allain. Maybe just as well.

The elevator door opened, her cage rumbled into the hall, stopped, advanced, stopped, and then a door opened.

“Female,” said a male voice, presumably the staffer pushing her.

“Over there,” a man’s voice responded. Her cage moved what she guessed was another five feet before it bumped into something and stopped.

She heard a door close. Then, nothing but her own breathing, the minutes ticking by.

“Over there,” someone had said. The instructor? She played his instructions over in her head, because she had nothing else to do. The words were spoken with an accent. Indian, perhaps?

She heard footsteps approaching, stopping beside her cage.

She held her breath and waited for the tarp to lift, but it stayed in place. She heard the rustling of paper, saw the tarp shake and knew he was reaching into her pocket to pull out her sheet and her keys.

“Han-hah,” the man said under his breath. “Han-HAH,” he repeated, this time stressing the second syllable of her name. “Ann-nahh,” he tried again, with a pronounced expelling of breath at the end of her name.

The man hummed something, and she heard his shoes step away.

A door opened and Hannah heard the voices of a male and female, conversing quietly. There was a dull thud, the sounds of a zipper, more thuds. Silence. The door opened again. Thuds, conversations, quiet laughter.

Hannah listened, trying to picture the scene beyond her tarp. This was a normal classroom, with desks and chairs, all facing the front, she guessed. Facing her. Did they know what waited beneath the blue tarp? When she was uncovered, released, told to stand, told to walk, would they gape, ogle? Would they laugh?

Hannah, always more afraid of the things she imagined than what ever happened to her, was terrified.

She heard footsteps approaching her cage, but this was a different stride, a different pair of shoes. A woman, Hannah concluded.

“Where’s the key?” a girl’s voice queried. “It’s supposed to be in the pocket.”

“Oh, I have it,” the man said back, his accent clearly Indian.

The girl’s feet moved away, returned. The tarp lifted. Hannah looked up into the face of a rail-thin girl in a skirt and light blouse. Eyes darting quickly, she spotted behind a podium the man she guessed was the

instructor, very dark-skinned, but with features that were otherwise Caucasian. Definitely Indian. He was looking down at his notes, not teaching yet.

As the girl unlocked Hannah's cage, she twisted around, sucked in her breath in terror. There were easily 100 students here, seated in ascending rows, from just a few feet away to, six or seven rows back.

And everyone – everyone – was staring at her. Every pair of eyes was looking at her, the nude girl in chains who had been sitting in a covered cage, her cover off now, her cage unlocked. The girl who was turning, setting her feet on the floor, who was being helped up now, her upper arm grabbed, the professor's assistant guiding her to her feet.

Hannah glanced back at the students, and they all stared back, some into her eyes, some at other places.

She looked back down, at the floor, at her feet, seeing herself as they saw her, a shamed, naked slave girl, pulled out of a cage to do whatever it was this class required. She looked behind her, searching for a place to hide, a door to pass through.

Someone had written "Reproductive Biology" in large black letters on the whiteboard, in a strange penmanship that Hannah guessed was how they wrote things in India. Below that, in the same hand, was scrawled, "Dr. Mitha Vendu."

Hannah looked at the students again, staring back at her from their gallery of seats.

There would be no Charlies here today, no one to turn nineteen-year-old Hannah into something older, dignified, beautiful. But she focused on that image in her mind, and it restored her. She was that Hannah, she told herself. She would be that Hannah today.



(Image by 2Loose2Trek)

She looked at the students again, this time with courage. Nervous, uncertain courage, but courage nonetheless. Immediately, she found

connection. There was sympathy in the first pair of eyes she looked into, the eyes of a girl who smiled weakly at her. Hannah smiled back. Beside the girl, a boy regarded her the way boys did. Of course he wanted to have sex with her. She could see that immediately. But he was not leering and ogling and smiling lecherously, like the two jackasses Monday. He belonged here. He was here to learn. Hannah was here to help him learn.

Hannah belonged here.

She swept the room, looked at other eyes. Some stared back. Some quickly looked away. She smiled again.

I could have sex with any one of you, she told herself. I could laugh with any one of you. And, if circumstances required it, I could sit across from you at breakfast and call you a liar.

Hannah belonged here.

A bell rang somewhere and Dr. Vendu began speaking, his voice filling the room with its heavy accent, the class falling silent immediately.

“Without reproduction, life dies with the current generation,” he announced. “Without reproduction, there is no change, no adaptation, no evolution.”

Hannah glanced at him. He seemed to be reading from notes.

“For the next four months, we will be completing a graduate-level survey of earth’s greatest miracle – the miracle of infinity. The biology, if you will, of infinity.”

The man continued to speak with an admirable flair for drama, inflections not always appropriate in English, but his passion for the subject was clear, the profundity of his declarations was clear. Hannah lost herself in his words, forgetting that she was standing at the front of the class while the students sat. Did any instructor at the University of Texas at Corpus Christi ever open their mouths and not say something amazing, something profound?

Moving on from the heights of his preamble, Dr. Vendu spoke of the mundane, introducing the rail-thin girl as his graduate assistant, covering class expectations, test and assignment weights, the semester schedule of exams and other work. Hannah began to believe she had been brought here to serve as nothing more than a prop, a manifestation of the female participant of human reproduction, dressed appropriately for the role, required only to stand and display herself.

But after a half hour of speaking, Dr. Vendu stepped from behind his podium, joining Hannah before the class.

“Today, we begin where it all begins, with the female reproductive system. The better half of human reproduction. She brings not only seed, but also the womb. Her organs have come together not just to contribute half the new life’s DNA, but to house that new life, to nurture and grow it, and at exactly the right time, to kick it out.”

The students laughed. Hannah smiled again, but with Dr. Vendu beside her, she was too nervous to laugh.

“How shall I say your name?” he asked Hannah, turning to her.

“Hannah,” she croaked.

“Hannah,” he repeated. “Hannah.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said, a little louder.

“How old?”

“Nineteen.”

“Have you given birth?”

“Excuse me?”

“Have you born a child?”

“Oh. No, Sir. No.”

“You are sexually active?”

“Um . . . Yes.”

“When was your last reproductive act?”

“Pardon me?”

“When did you last have sex?”

“You mean, with a male?”

Hannah heard the snickers, quick laughter passing like a small, humiliating wave from the front rows to those in the back. This was a class about reproduction. Of course Dr. Vendu was asking about sex with a male. Why did she ask him to clarify gender? Did she want to appear stupid? Was she indeed stupid?

“Homosexual behaviors,” Dr. Vendu said, with an impatience that silenced the classroom, “have an important – and respected – role in the history of reproduction. And they can on occasion produce offspring, in other species.”

He turned back to Hannah. “Yes, with a male.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Last night.”

“A regular partner?”

“No, Sir, I hadn’t, um, coupled with him before.”

“Did he ejaculate in your vagina?”

Hannah looked at Dr. Vendu. He looked back expectantly.

“Yes, Sir,” she said quietly.

Did Allain take classes like this? Did Beth? Where a naked girl was expected to answer deeply personal questions, in front of a roomful of strangers?

Her answer seemed to please him. He gestured to his assistant, who’d been leaning against the wall with her arms folded, and she stepped over.

Hannah watched instructor and helper carefully, trying to guess at what was next, but he only nodded to the assistant and stepped away.

The girl tapped Hannah’s elbow, leading her to a table in front of the whiteboard.

“You’ll be on this,” she whispered to Hannah.

“How?” Hannah queried.

“Just put your feet here,” she said, pointing to a place on the floor beside the table’s legs.

“What’s going to happen?” Hannah whispered.

“Bend over,” the girl said, as if that were the answer, and she put her hand between Hannah’s shoulder blades, over the place where the chip had been inserted, and – with Hannah’s hands still bound uselessly behind her back – she gently pushed Hannah over, her breasts touching the cold metal first, nipples immediately hardening uncomfortably.

Hannah dropped her cheek to the table’s unyielding steel, closed her eyes, opened them and looked at the students, who looked back at her, impassive faces masking what Hannah guessed were a range of emotions.

She heard what sounded like a cart, one wheel squeaking as someone, presumably Dr. Vendu, positioned it behind her.

The classroom went dark, the only source of light a screen where the whiteboard had been. Hannah raised her head, turned, settled her other cheek against the metal, looking away from the students and toward a large video screen.

“NO SIGNAL,” the screen said, in floating words that changed color.

The screen went black, lit up again, blurry with indecipherable images generated by a camera. Hannah watched until she recognized what

seemed to be skin, bright white, illuminated by a light mounted on the camera itself. A leg. Her leg. Her thigh, but at a strange angle, and through a fisheye lens, its shape distended, two dark shapes that seemed to be her dimly-lit feet very far away.

“Can you spread her?” Dr. Vendu quietly asked his assistant.

The girl’s hand continued to apply steady pressure between Hannah’s shoulder blades, but her second hand was at Hannah’s anus now, and Hannah felt herself being spread, and she watched with quiet horror as her rear hole was displayed, in massive, brightly-illuminated, obscene detail, to 100 strangers.

“Anus,” Dr. Vendu announced. The camera jerked, focused, went blurry, focused again, her hole fading in and out, once, twice, three times.

“Very healthy,” Dr. Vendu added.

Done with his inspection of her rear opening, the camera jerked to her front, her lips forming a neat seam.

“Legs apart, Hannah,” Dr. Vendu instructed.

Hannah obeyed, feet sliding on the floor with a quiet hiss.

“Spread her, please,” he said.

The assistant’s hand moved from Hannah’s anus to her vulva, Hannah watching as two distended fingers lined up along Hannah’s outer lips, separating them, opening Hannah’s chamber while the camera captured it all, the hair, the clitoris, the lips and folds of flesh and, now, the pink mouth of her reproductive sheath.

“Unaroused state,” Dr. Vendu announced. “No fluid at the entrance to her chamber, lips and clitoris relaxed.”

Dr. Vendue pointed the camera at Hannah’s clitoris, and a giant, gloved finger hovered just above it before it descended, Hannah watching as her flesh was pressed, circled, massaged while she felt it happening, the stimulation that always felt good, with a lover, with a friend, with herself, and now with Dr. Vendu, who seemed to know what he was doing. Did he take a class on this?

Hannah, breasts and cheek pressed against the steel table, sighed, raised up on her toes and rocked her pelvis involuntarily.

“Immediate response,” Dr. Vendu announced, focusing the camera on her clitoris. “Arousal of the female external genitalia can be subtle, but if you were watching, you should have seen her clitoris firm up just a little.”

The camera and its bright light moved back to Hannah's opening, still spread wide by the assistant's fingers, now glistening with her clear honey.

"Lubricant," he announced. "Can everyone see that? The best indicator of a female's arousal. She's already released enough to cover her opening and lips, definitely ready for penetration."

The assistant's hand left Hannah's back, slid up to her neck and grasped a clump of her blonde hair.

And with that, the camera and its unforgiving little lamp was plunged into her sex, and Hannah watched the screen, her horror yielding to curiosity now. Everyone was looking at something that could be any girl's part, she thought. They weren't looking at a chained, naked slave girl. They were looking at a vagina.

"Urethra," Dr. Vendu announced. "Bartholin's gland."

He pushed deeper.

"The perfect home for the erect penis," he said, the camera sliding along Hannah's rough pink walls, her fluids running thick.

"Not the only home," he added, "A determined male can find a home in all kinds of unexpected places."

Laughter.

The camera and its little light were thin, far smaller than a penis, not even as thick as a tampon, but the sensation of having things moved through her chamber was a little maddening nonetheless, and she found herself getting restless.

"Hannah, please tighten," Dr. Vendu said, perhaps sensing her impatience.

Hannah complied, contracting her vaginal walls so firmly the screen went almost black, the light clamped too tightly to illuminate what the camera was seeing.

"Very good," he said simply. "You may relax."

He pushed the camera deeper, paused.

"Semen," Dr. Vendu announced victoriously, stopping the camera at a pearl of white fluid clinging to Hannah's wall. "Sperm can remain viable in the vagina for days, so we are most likely looking at living culture, fully motile individuals, all striving to reach the egg."

He pushed on to the end of Hannah's chamber, the little hole of her cervix garishly illuminated.

“Cervix,” he said. “The door to the womb. Are you on birth control?”

“Yes,” Hannah said quietly. “IUD.”

“Hannah’s had an IUD inserted,” Dr. Vendu told his class. “So we’re not going to overstay our welcome today, but we will be exploring an unobstructed uterus later in the term.”

Hannah hoped his words meant her ordeal was over. Her breasts hurt, and being face down on a metal table with her wrists chained behind her was making her shoulders ache.

“More semen,” he said, pausing the camera before another puddle of seed beside her cervix. “A very prolific partner.”

Hannah’s mind wandered. What if someone in this class knew Allain? What if the word got out among Allain’s classmates about the blonde subject named Hannah who was spread and stimulated and probed with a camera, and who admitted to having sex last night, the indisputable evidence thereof displayed before a class of 100 medical students?

Hannah’s partnering with Ramone, frequent as it was, was more or less a family secret, something only the Petrosyans and the Abercrombies knew about, and perhaps a few of Athena’s friends.

Today, this morning, Hannah’s habit of having intercourse with other males, random males, any males, had become official, public and documented, the evidence of his visit and pleasure still copious within her tunnel.

Over dinner two Tuesdays ago, Laura had proposed that Hannah be kenneled to keep her out of trouble. The idea was, in hindsight, laughable. Hannah’s violation of the spirit of the rules, if not the letter, had become constant and unrepentant. The only rules she wasn’t breaking had to do with Ormek.

Surely, as soon as her crimes were uncovered – maybe at some point later today – that horrible shipping company would arrive at the kennels with their cruel board, offer Hannah two purple pills and order her to impale herself, lie down and be strapped in for the trip back to Dallas. Or to oblivion this time. Why would the Petrosyans waste any more effort waiting for her to stop being rebellious, insolent, promiscuous, dangerous?

The camera and its light was removed from her sheath, Hannah was returned to her cage and locked in, she was covered by the tarp and glad to be, nothing but the rest of Dr. Vendu’s lesson to listen to.

Chapter 56: A Final Reckoning

The bell rang, the students packed up and filed out with thuds and steps and words and laughter, and someone came for Hannah's cage and rolled it back to the processing room, releasing her, marching her back to her kennel, locking her in, removing her chains. It was 11:30 a.m. She'd be allowed out for lunch in 30 minutes. She had promised Jane her time tonight. But she didn't want that. She didn't want to eat. She didn't want to do anything. She missed, with a sudden, excruciating agony, everything about the Petrosyans. The smells. Her cage. Ramone. Darcy's cooking. Athena's sarcasm. Ormek.

The sense of loss mingled with the sense of doom. Soon, she would be discovered. And punished. And disposed of.

And yet, she brought her usual passion to the after-dinner tryst with Jane, the girls locked together in Hannah's kennel this time, kissing and groaning and licking and experimenting with tongues against wet openings and hard nipples and tight anuses, each enjoying a long, breathless climax before they kissed again, mixing saliva and the lubricant of two vaginas within their mouths.

The next morning, Hannah went to the PC's as soon as she'd finished breakfast and ordered two biology books, one about female reproduction, one about endocrinology. All four of her Austin courses had stimulated and challenged her, but biology did more, provoking a sense of comfort, of belonging with every page she turned.

The books arrived at 11.

Tammy arrived at 11:15.

"Someone here to see you."

"Who?" Hannah asked, rising, terrified.

"Male is all I know."

"Allain?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

Hannah followed Tammy to the little meeting spaces. She stepped in. Allain was there, on the other side of a sheet of impenetrable glass, looking haggard, defeated, even wearier and more beaten down than he'd been on his first day back.

Hannah fought the urge to scream out her apologies, to beg forgiveness, to plead to be given one more chance.

“Hello, Allain,” she said simply. No, she would not make this job easy for him.

He just looked at her, tragedy in his eyes.

“Hey,” he said weakly.

“What brings you by?” she asked, and then she forced herself to say the next words, certain they were almost comical in their presumption. “I didn’t think I’d be seeing you until tonight.”

“I needed to let you know some things,” he said simply, rubbing his eyes.

“What?” she demanded. Just get it over with. Just get it over with.

“Well, Mom and Dad called, and . . .”

“Yeah?”

“How have things been?” he said, raising his despondent face to her. “I hear you did reproductive biology yesterday.”

“I did,” Hannah agreed. So everything was going to come out at once, now, all her crimes in one prosecutorial cascade.

“Dr. Vendu said you did amazing,” Allain said. “He caught up with me after—”

“All I did was, um, stand there,” Hannah said. “And stuff.”

“He loved that you were, um, carrying.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’d been . . . with someone.”

“Oh, yeah, the night before, I—”

“Who?” Allain asked. Hannah searched his eyes, looking for jealousy, or anger, or something. She just saw exhaustion.

“Brad,” Hannah said. “He’s on my hall.”

“Subject, right?”

“Yeah. And then Jane last night. Just Jane.”

“Okay.”

“But still, I don’t see why he cared about any of that. He just—”

“I don’t know,” Allain said, “seems like you impressed him. He looked you up after the class, found out I was your, um, that you are, you know, with me, so he caught me in the hall. We talked a little about what I’m doing, and he said we should have lunch.”

“That’s good,” Hannah said, waiting for the other shoe to fall.

“So, Mom and Dad . . .” Allain continued, apparently finished with the topic of Dr. Vendu. “They’re coming to town this weekend.”

“Yeah?” Hannah whispered.

“They got a suite at Park Tower.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“So you need to bring your black bikini, and your sneakers, and—”

“What’s Park Tower?”

“It’s the hotel where Mom and Dad always stay. They’re members or something.”

“We’re going to visit them?”

“We’ll be staying there too. They got a suite. One side for them. One side for us. And Athena’s got her own room.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “What are we going to do there?”

“Everything. You’ll love it.”

Hannah swallowed.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“No, I’m terrible. “Worse than I was last Friday. I—”

“You were great last Friday.”

“You didn’t see me that morning. Classes, assignments, meetings. It’s supposed to get easier soon, but they’re killing us right now.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, it’s what I signed up for. One more class, and then I go back to bed. I’ll see you around 5.”

“Okay, I can’t wait.”

Allain stood, grabbed his head, sat back down.

“Oh yeah, oh yeah,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Mom and dad said congratulations.”

“For what?”

“You don’t know?”

“No.”

“You got straight A’s.”

Hannah gulped. “Oh,” she managed to choke.

“Dad got an email this morning. They asked me when you took your finals. I told them I didn’t know.”

“On Wednesday,” Hannah replied. “They have PC’s here.”

“Yeah, I told them that must have been it. Anyway, they said I had to tell you in person, so I—”

“Tell me what in person?”

“Congratulations. Oh, and go ahead and sign up for another 12 hours if you want to.”

“Yeah,” Hannah said. “I will.”

Hannah bit her lip, looked at the floor, looked back at Allain. Whatever universe she had woken up in today seemed to be operating by a different set of rules than her last one. Or it was just owner’s guilt, a force so powerful it could create the illusion of a new universe. Either way, she’d play it a little longer. Some things could wait. But she needed everyone to know, and accept, one more thing.

“I got an email address,” she said.

“I kind of figured. I’m at Gmail. First name dot middle dot last name. Write me.”

“I will. Get some rest, please.”

“Yeah. See you at 5.”

END