
Female, Recreational III

Spartacine

A Novel, by Badger Therese



Female, Recreational III: Spartacine
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Chapter 1: News from Athena

Hannah, confined to her kennel, sitting naked and cross-legged on her bed with books scattered by her hips or pressed beneath her thighs, had just reached a startling conclusio “This is wrong.”

No one observing the girl from the hall outside her tiny space would have known the exact instant the idea landed with a dull thud among the neurons and synapses of her brain. Perhaps, were someone given access to her vital signs, they might have observed a slight quickening of the pulse, an irregular intake of breath. And she did look up as the thought sprung into her conscious, gazing toward the bare, cinderblock wall that formed one of the many limits of her existence. But she looked up often, for it was a habit of hers, something she always did when pondering deeply.

In an act of minor courage, she picked up her notebook, filled with ideas and citations and doodles, searched for a blank space, found one in the lower left corner of the page before her, and made the idea manifest, scribbling it out in black ink:

“This is wrong.”

Born free, but raised in the cage that is American poverty for most of her teen years, she was ripped from the faltering protection of her destitute mother and forced 13 months ago to adapt to the mixed blessings of being owned by a wealthy family.

She had not gone hungry since. Her shelter was always assured. She slept well. She was allowed to take college courses, enrolled in 12 online hours at present. Her owners bought her beautiful clothing, permitted her to earn, keep, and spend her own money, and encouraged her to explore and satisfy virtually any sexual interest. And they loved her, in their own way.

So Hannah, still a teenager at 19, could be forgiven for taking a year to reach the conclusion that she had just committed to paper:

“This is wrong.”

At the moment of her epiphany, she was being held in what were called the kennels at the University of Texas at Corpus Christi. Her assigned space, like all the others here, was no more than four feet wide, eight feet deep, with bars at the front, and a barred door that opened only when others decided it should.

There was a bed, a toilet, a sink, a small shelf set into the wall, which she used as a desk. Showers were down the hall. There was a cafeteria upstairs. She had access to the internet on the PCs in the lounge, and could order books from the school library.

Her life, like any other, had its share of good things, and its share of bad.

More bad though, perhaps, than most others.

Far more bad.

A day rarely passed in which she wasn't confined and chained. She could be punished, cruelly and swiftly, for the stray words and small irresponsibilities of any girl her age.

And she was used for sex, gently, but with the tacit understanding that if she at some point abandoned her enthusiasm for coupling, if she refused to yield, to serve, to open herself, she might lose privileges, she might fall from favor, she might be sold. And her chaste labor would be welcome at the factories and farms and workhouses that had sprung up over the last few decades to benefit from the sweat of captive people.

Yes, the bad outweighed the good. Most girls were free, and free girls weren't caged and chained and used and professionally punished.

It was an entirely different sort of indignity that provoked her this day, however, something she'd discovered upstairs in the lounge, on the computers there.

“Hannah?”

The thing that prompted Hannah's first comprehensive awakening against the system that possessed her was entirely academic.

“Hannah?”

Someone had spoken her name from beyond the flimsy privacy curtain she drew to sleep, to have sex, to masturbate, to study.

Hearing her name at this moment startled her. It was a Friday morning in late September, and she was not expecting to be bothered. She wasn't going to be working today in the classrooms, where she'd be taken often enough to model nude for art students, or display herself for anatomy instruction, or hold still while she was explored in a biology demonstration.

She wasn't expecting any distractions until this evening, when she'd be let out to spend the weekend with Allain Petrosyan, medical student, future doctor, son of the man and wife who owned her.

Nor was she scheduled for punishment. Indeed, since her arrival in the kennels six weeks ago, she had not been taken once to the hall where punishment was meted out, for she was obedient and a quick study, and she knew as well as any subject what happened when a rule was broken.

But then, you didn't always know when you'd be taken. The kennel staff might just appear, as they had often enough at one kennel or the other along the hall, and ask the male or female confined therein to step to the bars and accept restraints for a walk to Hall 6, the punishment hall. Usually, the subject went in silence, seeming to know why they'd been summoned. But sometimes, they'd appear surprised, asking why, what they had done wrong.

Had Hannah's time come? Was this her turn to spend hours in a box, or hung by her wrists, or tied to a post and whipped? Had someone complained about all the books she'd borrowed from the library? Had she committed some other infraction? Had they, somehow, seen what she'd just written?

Was that it? Was it a crime to write "This is wrong?"

She and the other subjects sometimes joked that each kennel must be equipped with a tiny camera, but no one really believed it. It wouldn't be there to watch the subjects go about their daily routines, of course, to watch them sexually relieve themselves alone, or partner with another slave. If there was a camera here, it was meant to uncover rebellion, sedition, disobedience.

And was not committing the words "This is wrong" to paper all three? Or at least something she should be required to explain?

So when Hannah jerked toward the sound of the voice and replied first with "Yes?" and then a "Oh, hey, Tammy," her voice broke, her heart fluttered.

If Tammy sensed Hannah's fear, she didn't show it.

“Someone here to see you,” she said.

“Who?” Hannah asked, rising from her bed with partial relief. This was most likely okay. Her words had not been spotted. Someone just wanted to talk.

“I don’t know,” Tammy said. “A girl.”

Tammy unlocked Hannah’s kennel door and let her through.

“They’re in four,” Tammy said.

“Okay, thanks,” Hannah said, and she headed for the end of the kennel hall where she lived with dozens of other slaves, entered the hall that led to the stairs, made her way up to the cafeteria and through that to the hall where kenneled subjects could meet with visitors, separated by a sheet of glass.

Only as she reached for the doorknob to the fourth meeting room did she remember she was still naked, and she hoped whoever was waiting for her wouldn’t mind. She had no clothes to put on, of course. Those were only available in the locker room where the kenneled went when they were allowed to leave the building altogether.

She had nothing to worry about. She pulled the door open to find Athena Petrosyan, sister of Allain, a complicated girl who had become, in some ways over the last year, Hannah’s worst enemy, one of her closest friends, and, in a sense, her sister – with all the rivalry, insecurity, jealousy and inevitable closeness common between teenaged siblings.

When Hannah lived with the Petrosyans, she’d been seen nude by Athena as a matter of course, for such was the near-universal custom among slaveowners.

Hannah, blonde and curved, with high cheekbones and dark eyebrows, was more beautiful than Athena by any standard measure, and she was smarter, by any academic measure, and a year older as well. But she was a slave, and Athena’s family owned her.

“Hey, Athena,” Hannah said breezily, taking a seat.

Athena, elbows on her thighs, had her phone out, holding it with both hands, staring at it, tapping on it with both thumbs, but she looked up when Hannah spoke.

“Hey,” she said, and looked back down.

“What brings you to town?” Hannah asked, allowing a slight tinge of impatience into her voice. She wasn’t interested in watching Athena bang on her phone.

Athena tapped her phone one more time, angled up her hip and shoved it into her back pocket, settled back and glared at Athena through heavily made up eyes.

“Campus tour.”

“You’re going here next year?”

“No,” Athena said, scowling. “I probably don’t have the grades. But Mom and Dad want me to go to stuff like this, and I needed to tell you some things anyway.”

“Like what?” Hannah asked. The question wasn’t impertinent, necessarily, but Hannah meant it to sound a little abrupt. She had things to do, classes to study for, matters to think about, and Athena was an interruption.

“I’m doing fine, by the way,” Athena said, scowl growing darker.

So Athena wanted to start out their meeting with pleasantries. It had been more than a month since they’d seen each other. Small talk probably made sense.

But Hannah didn’t always know what Athena wanted. She didn’t particularly care, either, and Athena knew it. Hannah had been bought for Allain, and to serve the parents, and only incidentally to assist Athena, with tutoring and the occasional chore and whatever support adolescent girls give each other by accident. Athena was due all the deference of any free person, but Hannah maintained her own definition of deference, and Athena, to her credit, didn’t want obsequious sniveling. Just a little respect, now and then.

“How’s school?” Hannah asked.

“Good,” Athena said. “Seniors get a lot of breaks, and my classes seem easy so far.”

“Glad to hear it. I miss tutoring you.”

“Yeah,” Athena said. “I liked it more when you were living with us.”

“I thought you hated me.”

“You were starting to grow on me, and then Mom fucking kennels you, with no warning. I still don’t get that.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“How’s life here? Still good?”

“I miss my bedroom,” Hannah said. “But I’m staying busy. Classes, and I might try for a scholarship.”

“What kind?”

“Biology.”

“Why biology?”

“Because the application works better for me. I just have to read books and articles and come up with ideas.”

“What kind of scholarship?” Athena asked.

“It depends. If you win the top one, you get a full scholarship, extra money, research privileges, a trip, a special parking space, a—”

“You don’t have a car.”

“But the other things are good too,” Hannah said. “The second place is less money, no trip, no research, not as much recognition.”

Hannah bit her lip and forged ahead, doing her best to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“They always give a free person the best scholarship,” Hannah said, “and a subject the other one.”

Hannah paused, waiting for Athena to interrupt, but Athena just sat there, staring. Athena liked dissension, and the injustice that produced it, Hannah knew. And surely the girl sensed some of both in Hannah’s subtle cues of voice and body this morning.

“Even though,” Hannah continued, “a lot of times, the slave’s treatise is better.”

Athena savored Hannah’s mild anger for a moment before she spoke.

“How do you know?” she asked, one eyebrow raised skeptically.

“I can tell,” Hannah said. “It’s obvious. They post them online, and I’ve read them all, and—”

“And you’re biased,” Athena interrupted.

“No, it’s an objective assessment.”

“Of course you’re going to say that,” Athena said. “That doesn’t make it true.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. Athena wasn’t going to budge without evidence. Or probably even with evidence. But Hannah didn’t care. She just wanted to give voice to the injustice, to say it out loud so a free person could hear it.

“Raven’s gone,” Athena said.

Chapter 2: A Request for Assessments

“Huh?” Hannah asked.

“Raven’s gone.”

“What do you mean gone?”

“Like, no one’s seen her in 10 days gone.”

Hannah blinked and tried to wrap her mind around Athena’s words.

“Have you heard from her?”

“No,” Athena said impatiently. “If we’d heard from her, she wouldn’t be gone, right?”

“Well, she could be physically gone, but maybe she’s checking in?”

“She’s gone,” Athena barked. Her impatience always flared when Hannah pursued a matter logically. “No contact, no sighting, no nothing.”

“Like, run away?” Hannah asked.

“That’s the theory. Escaped.”

“Maybe she was stolen.”

“That’s a second theory.”

“Where was she?”

“She was on her way back from the grocery store,” Athena said.

“She was driving?”

“Yeah, by herself. In Uncle Bear’s car.”

“Have they found the car?”

“No, that’s gone. And they’re looking for it, but it hasn’t turned up yet. Which suggests collusion.”

“Collusion?” Hannah asked.

“It means they think Raven—”

“I know what it means,” Hannah said. “Who would Raven collude with?”

“Someone who knows how to get rid of a car.”

“Why would she do it, though?”

Athena just aimed her darkly painted eyes into Hannah’s, as if she considered the answer too obvious to waste time on.

It was anything but obvious to Hannah, however.

After Laura Petrosyan and her brother Gerald grew up and moved away from home — Laura to college and then marriage to Dr. Ormek Petrosyan, Gerald to join the Army — their wealthy, widowed mother, Canda Dupre, bought a young black girl named Alice. Alice was seven, orphaned when her parents — also well-to-do — died in a plane crash on a business trip.

Ms. Dupre – the woman Hannah, Athena and Allain called Gramma – changed Alice’s name to Raven and raised her as her own, as a companion, as a helpmate, as a source of noise and life to fill the void in a home where the two natural children had gone away.

But things don’t always work out as expected.

Gerald went to war in North Korea and lost his left leg below the knee when he stepped on a mine, and he returned to Gramma’s old, spacious home, first to merely recover, then to linger. The scars of war lay deeper than flesh alone, Hannah knew.

And, as happens often enough, the girl Gramma bought to be her helpmate grew up – tall, elegant, confident – took charge of Gramma’s home, and became friend, confidante, lover and soulmate to Gerald, whom all called Uncle Bear.

Someday, it was generally expected, Gramma would die, Uncle Bear would inherit Raven, and he would immediately sign the paperwork freeing her. Immediately, he would have her collar cut off, and he would marry her that same day or – if Raven insisted on a formal wedding, which she probably would – they would be wed as soon as arrangements could be made.

Raven was a slave, but of that most respected class, who ran households, who drove cars, who went out on their own, who were likely to be made free at some point.

But she was still a slave, wearing around her neck the collar without a keyhole, removable only through special equipment and special legal declarations. Like all slaves, she bore a small chip, lodged in the flesh of her back and easily scannable by anyone with the right phone app, and she was caged and chained often enough, at home and elsewhere. At the Petrosyan’s, she and Hannah were usually caged together to talk and share and copulate.

And, like any slave, Raven was still property, and Gramma, as her sole owner, could dispose of her at any time, or will her away at death to someone other than Uncle Bear. And indeed, Gramma had threatened to do so, although Hannah knew it to be an empty threat, a ruse Gramma was conducting for other ends.

Raven, like any slave, was subject to the cruel laws that strictly forbade escape, or attempted escape, or talk of escape, or even thought of

escape. More than one slave had been punished for merely writing out the wrong words.

And the punishment was severe. Any disappearance, whether it was an act of will by a slave who longed for freedom, or a theft where the hapless subject resisted being taken with all her might, her (or his) recapture meant seven days of misery in a facility designed to inflict it, before return to her owner and whatever further torment they might at their own discretion visit upon her flesh and soul.

Even if the owner felt no further punishment was warranted, even if they were certain their subject had gone missing through no fault of their own, the seven days was mandated by law, and carried out by authorities over whom the owner had no control.

Hannah's first response was no more than a little distress, however. Hannah and Raven were best friends, and lovers, and sisters, and more than that, making their way together in that special partnership, sexual and spiritual, of two united in the strange world of bondage that had swallowed both their lives.

Hannah was certain she had not seen the last of Raven. Surely the girl would be found, even if the car wasn't. And she would talk her way out of her punishment. Or figure out at least how to have it reduced. Or endure it with the quiet dignity born of the girl's rare strength.

"I'm sure she'll turn up," Hannah said brightly.

"She's insured," Athena said, offering what Hannah found to be a non-sequitur.

"Oh. How much?"

"I don't know," Athena said with another scowl. She probably did know, but she didn't consider that knowledge to be any of Hannah's business.

"It was a lot, though," Athena added. "So the insurance company is going to do a full investigation before they pay."

"Okay," Hannah said, with considerable relief. Professionals were looking into this. Raven would be found. And she would have no reason to have escaped, so it was surely all a misunderstanding, and she might yet receive some lenience.

"They're going to want to talk to you," Athena added after a pause, and her eyes darted away, to look up, above Hannah, at the wall behind her head. She did this when she was nervous. Why was she nervous?

“Who?” Hannah asked.

“The investigators,” Athena said. “They work for the insurance company.”

“I’ll tell them anything they need to know,” Hannah promised. Athena brought her eyes back to Hannah, staring inscrutably before she spoke again.

“Mom gave them permission to come get you whenever they want.”

“Like, to talk to them here?” she said, gesturing at the space where she and Athena conversed.

“No, they’ll want to take you to their offices.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed, looking forward to what she believed might be a minor adventure.

“Another thing,” Athena said.

“Yeah?”

“Mom and Dad said I can have a boy.”

“A boy?”

“They’re going to buy a boy for me.”

“Oh,” Hannah said.

Why? Hannah thought. Why would Laura and Ormek buy Athena a boy? Particularly Athena, mature in some ways, woefully immature in others? Athena, insecure, quick to anger and irritability? Athena, utterly inexperienced in matters of male romance, male flesh, male pleasure?

She’d never even had a boyfriend, so far as Hannah knew.

Why her? Why now?

“What?” Athena demanded.

“What what?” Hannah replied back innocently, straightening her back and returning her eyes to the girl. Athena could sense Hannah’s thoughts sometimes, particularly the negative ones, and Hannah knew she needed to proceed cautiously. Her disapproval would only antagonize Athena, while it had no influence on the outcome of this ill-advised venture.

This was not, of course, entirely unexpected news. Hannah had been bought primarily for Allain, to serve as his companion and his playmate and his lover and whatever else she was to him while he made his way through medical school and, perhaps, through the rest of his life. Now that Athena was coming of age and preparing to go to college, it was her turn.

“Who is it?” Hannah asked, returning to form, smiling enthusiastically, doing her best to appear supportive.

“I don’t know yet,” Athena said, and she smiled in return, fooled by Hannah’s studied demeanor, probably because she wanted to be fooled.

“I’m looking around.”

“You’re going to the place where you found me?”

“No, I’m shopping online,” Athena said.

“I’m sure you’ll find someone as nice as you are.”

Athena, smart enough to know when Hannah was being ironic, delivered up her darkest scowl yet before she worked through her annoyance, leaned forward and smiled in a not entirely friendly way.

“You get to help,” she said.

“Sure,” Hannah said, without quite knowing what she was agreeing to.

“You get to help assess,” Athena clarified.

“Oh,” Hannah said. “I’m not qualified.”

“You’re close enough.”

“No,” Hannah said, considering the matter settled. “You have to take classes, and pass tests, and do a bunch of trial assessments, and get graded on them, and—”

“I can’t afford the real thing,” Athena interrupted, hunching her shoulders.

“Since when couldn’t you afford anything?”

“You are such a fucking bitch,” Athena declared.

“Don’t call me that,” Hannah said, surprised, as she always was, at how quickly a conversation with Athena could devolve into fury-fueled, adolescent name-calling. She usually didn’t mind Athena’s denigrations, however. The metal ring that had been closed around her neck a year ago represented the standard against which all other insults were measured.

“I have a budget,” Athena said.

“How much?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Yes it is,” Hannah said. “If you want me to be involved, and pretend to do assessments or whatever, it is my business.”

“I don’t want you to pretend. I want you to do them.”

“You’re going to get me trained, then?” Hannah asked.

“No, that would cost 8,000 dollars.”

“So what am I doing, exactly?”

For the first time, Athena smiled sincerely at Hannah, and she pulled her little plastic chair up to the glass, pulled out her phone, and waved Hannah closer.

Hannah slid her chair up and peered at Athena’s phone as she tapped it.

Now that the preliminaries were out of the way – the antagonistic tête-à-tête that seemed to be requisite before any serious negotiation with Athena could begin – Hannah was ready for details.

In fact, Hannah was not an entirely disinterested party in this enterprise.

The Petrosyans were about to add a sixth member to the family – if slaves could be called members, and she believed they could – and that had important bearings for her. He would no doubt be kept in Dallas, while Hannah would remain kenneled at Corpus Christi, but there would probably be travel, and interactions, in one city or the other. And he might be an ally in some ways, or at least someone to talk to, someone who understood her existence the way no one else in the household could.

They might even be put together for mating at time. Hannah expected to provide him release when Athena was on her period, or tired, or not interested in coupling, and Allain was likewise unavailable, traveling or busy with school. Hannah, when and if she were returned to the Petrosyan home for a stay now and then, might be caged with him, left overnight with him, expected and welcomed to take him within her and grind against him, to hear him release, to sigh in his ear.

Sex or no, he could bring improvements to her life. Variety, at least, and a friend, perhaps. As Ramone had been. As Raven had certainly been.

Where was Raven?

As Hannah peered at Athena’s phone through the glass, she thought that she might never see Raven again stung her, briefly but sharply.

“There’s a thing I found called the, uh, Smithfield something,” Athena said, pointing to a list on her phone as it lay on her thigh. “You don’t have to be certified for assessments to do it.”

“I can’t see it,” Hannah said.

Athena scowled, pressed her phone against the glass, and Hannah leaned forward.

“Smithfield Protocol,” it said at the top of the screen, followed by a few lines of text: “While an assessment by a certified assessor is the gold standard for measuring sexual performance and aptitude, if the following instructions are followed carefully by a partner with reasonable experience, a valid measure may be obtained.”

Below that appeared a sub-heading: “Female Assessor (“Female”), Male Assessee (“Male”), together, the Partners” and the first five steps: “1. The Partners will agree upon an assessment venue that is private, that will be free of interruptions for at least one hour, and that features a full-size bed or mattress; 2. The partners will have rested well the night before and will not be either hungry or overfull. Assessments should be done at least two hours after meal times; 3. The partners will abstain from all sexual activity, including masturbation, for 24 hours prior to the assessment; 4. Partners will abstain on the day of the assessment from non-prescription use of any drug, including alcohol, that might impair performance; 5. Partners meeting for the first time may spend up to 10 minutes prior to the start of the assessment on . . .”

Hannah reached up to slide her finger along the glass in a vain attempt to scroll further through the list.

Athena smirked.

“I forgot there was glass there,” Hannah said. “Scroll for me.”

Athena pushed the screen to a random place further down the list and pressed the phone back against the glass.

“Now we’re in the 20’s,” Hannah said, noticing with a slight twinge between her legs that the instructions were getting very explicit. “How many steps are there?”

Athena took the phone back, scrolled while she made a face.

“30.”

“I can’t remember that many.”

“I’ll email it to you.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “But then . . . how am I supposed to get together with anyone? Are they coming here?”

Athena put her phone away and looked at Hannah.

“So you’re going to do this.”

It was a statement, not a question.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You’re asking all these questions, like you want to do it,” Athena said. “Which I’m sure you do.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked, narrowing her eyes. Regardless why the Petrosyans had bought her, she didn’t like her services being taken for granted.

“Look,” Athena said, “the guys I’m finding . . . you’ll like them. There’s one that . . .”

“How many?”

“There are probably 50 in Texas, more if—”

“I’m not assessing 50 males,” Hannah said emphatically. This was not a negotiating point. It was simply not acceptable under any condition.

“Did I ask you to assess 50 boys?” Athena demanded, her voice rising.

“You implied it. You said—”

“Just shut up,” Athena said. “Just shut up and let me talk.”

Hannah looked at Athena and realized they’d crossed some line in Athena’s mind, an invisible, incomprehensible threshold between what did and did not provoke the girl. Athena wasn’t embarrassed about buying a boy, or asking her parents to get her a boy, or using him for sex, or asking the family’s slave girl to do the assessments. But questions of quantity had pushed her over the edge, for some reason.

As she always did when she’d set Athena off, Hannah retreated, literally as well as in demeanor. She edged her chair away from the glass, crossed her arms beneath her breasts, and leaned back, staring down, looking at her gold triangle of pubic hair, realizing it needed a trim and a little edging, waiting with a face clear of judgment or challenge for Athena to regain her composure.

Athena breathed in, looked down at her phone, tapped it, scrolled, tapped again, while her breath evened out and her cheeks returned to their regular complexion.

Calmed, she looked at Hannah and pressed her phone against the glass.

“Him.”

Hannah squinted at the face of a male who looked disconcertingly like Athena’s father, except that he was 20 years younger and he bore around his neck a metal collar.

“Cute,” Hannah said, leaving the rest of her opinions to herself.

Athena grabbed the phone back, scrolled, held it to the glass so Hannah could see.

“Oh,” Hannah said, putting her hand across her mouth but keeping her eyes fixed on the screen, which depicted a closeup of a long, erect penis holding forth above a pair of heavy testicles.

Athena laughed, uproariously, her standard reaction to certain kinds of sexual tension with Hannah.

“Nice?” she said after her laughter subsided.

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “I have no idea what he’s like.”

“That’s what the assessment’s for.”

“So just him, then?”

“No,” Athena said. “But not 50. It’s just that there are 50 for sale in Texas, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I’m not looking at all 50, okay?”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “I didn’t think you were, I just—”

“I have no interest in most of them. They’re too old, or for labor, or not my type or whatever, so you can—”

“How many do you want me to assess?” Hannah asked. This in her mind was of central relevance to the discussion, and should have been the first thing Athena mentioned.

“Does that matter?” Athena asked.

“Why wouldn’t it matter?” Hannah demanded.

“Because you like it.”

Hannah felt her own face grow red. It was not impossible for Athena to provoke her as well, and she had just succeeded this morning.

“Is that what you really think?” Hannah said, her voice rising. “You can just find boys on your phone and put me with them whenever you want and I’ll just—”

“God, fuck,” Athena hissed. “Will you just chill?”

“No,” Hannah said. “This isn’t how it works. This isn’t how it’s going to work. You can’t just—”

“Goddam it, once a week, tops!” Athena said, nearly shouting.

Chapter 3: ‘Something Needs to be Done’

Hannah closed her mouth and stared at the floor, trying to collect her emotions.

One assessment a week was doable, even if it involved 30 steps on some list Athena was going to email her. But she was still annoyed.

“You should have started with that,” Hannah said. If Athena could just learn a little logic, a little finesse when it came to asking people for things, interactions like this could be reduced, if not eliminated altogether.

But maybe she liked arguing with the family’s slave girl. Would she want to argue with her boy as well? Probably. No doubt. Most assuredly. But it wasn’t Hannah’s problem.

“So, if I don’t say everything just the way you like it, you turn into a total bitch,” Athena observed.

Hannah leaned back. Maybe she’d made her point, maybe she hadn’t, but she wasn’t going to pursue it anymore. Athena wasn’t fun to argue with. She was insecure about her intelligence, especially in Hannah’s presence, so she usually just got mad and even less rational when Hannah used reason against her.

“Once a week is fine,” Hannah said. “But I don’t know how it will work.”

“I’ll worry about that.”

“Okay, but at some point I’m going to have to do something, right?”

Athena sighed and rolled her eyes upward.

“I’ll find the boy, and I’ll talk to their owner, and I’ll schedule everything, and you just have to show up.”

“How am I supposed to show up?” Hannah asked. “I can’t just walk out of here.”

“They’ll come for you.”

“How?”

“What do you mean, how?” Athena asked.

“There are three regular ways to leave the kennels. They chain us and put us in a box and wheel us out, or they pull a truck up and put us on that some way, or we can go through a locker room and get dressed and just go out through the main entrance. But we have to be authorized, how ever we’re leaving.”

“I don’t know,” Athena said. “They’ll probably want you chained or something.”

“You’ll need to talk to the kennel people,” Hannah said.

“I did, to get back here.”

“Yeah, but you’ll need to talk some more, and turn in a form, and get Allain involved. He’s the one with official authority. Or your parents too, I guess. Someone needs to sign something.”

Athena scowled again, but half-heartedly this time, and Hannah could tell the girl was paying attention.

“Does Allain know about this?” Hannah asked.

“I’m going to tell him after my tour.”

“He might not like it,” Hannah warned.

“Mom and Dad say it’s fine, so he has to go along with it.”

“I’ll need at least 24 hour’s notice before anyone comes for me,” Hannah said.

“Why?”

“That’s what that, um, protocol says. I have to abstain for 24 hours.”

“Is it that hard for you?” Athena asked with a smirk that betrayed insecurity. Hannah’s sexuality, an open topic in the Petrosyan household, had always fascinated, titillated – and intimidated – Athena.

“No, it’s not hard for me,” Hannah said. “But I just need to know so I can plan accordingly.”

“I bet you do it all the time.”

“Not during my period.”

Athena laughed. “That means all the time.”

“And not right before the weekend,” Hannah added, her meaning requiring no elaboration. Most weekends, she stayed with Allain, so she usually abstained Thursday evening and all day Friday. On Friday and Saturday, her body belonged only to Allain. Sunday too, often enough.

“So, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday,” Hannah said. “And just Thursday morning, preferably. Oh, and I do laundry on Wednesday morning.”

“Laundry?” Athena repeated. “You don’t have any laundry.”

“We all sleep on sheets,” Hannah said. “And they get washed once a week, and it’s my job to collect them and give everyone new ones and get them to the—”

“You should probably wash them every day,” Athena said.

“Once a week,” Hannah said, ignoring Athena’s latest attempt at humor.

“Are there a lot of boys in the kennels?” Athena asked.

“Yeah. Boys and girls.”

“Naked?”

Hannah just stared, the answer obvious.

“Have you done it with all of them?”

“No, Athena, I have not,” Hannah said, but there was no edge to her voice now, and she looked at the girl impassively. Proposing she assess 50 strangers all over Texas was an affront. Suggesting she had partnered with close to 200 fellow slaves in the kennels was something else. A joke, more or less.

Athena smiled wickedly, as she usually did when they’d found a way to talk about sex that left neither of them upset.

“How much do you do it?” Athena asked.

“When I want, or when they ask me to.”

“Who asks you to? Like, some guy?”

“Guys, or girls. And I might ask them, or it’s just sort of understood.”

Athena swallowed as if she were taking medicine, as if Hannah’s words were a drug, a sort of hallucinogen designed to trigger certain kinds of visions – raw, sexual, obscene – in her adolescent mind.

“Sometimes,” Hannah continued, because she enjoyed Athena’s gulping pauses, “staff might ask me to do it with someone, if they see a benefit to it, but I can say yes or no.”

Athena swallowed again, processing more fleshy visions before she came back for another dose.

“You do it every chance you get, right?”

“No,” Hannah said. “Not last night.”

“I bet you’re climbing the walls.”

“I’m fine,” Hannah said, done provoking the girl. “I have something like 20 books on my bed, so I wasn’t thinking about sex at all, because I’m trying to figure out what my scholarship topic will be.”

“Do you want to do it with that guy?” Athena asked, holding up her phone to give Hannah another peek at his genitals.

“I will be glad to assess him,” Hannah said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m doing it with him.”

“Yes it does. Totally.”

“Following 30 steps with someone is not even remotely doing it, trust me on that.”

“When does your period start?”

“Probably in two weeks. I started ovulating yesterday.”

Athena looked down between Hannah’s legs.

“I didn’t notice you dripping.”

“I don’t always drip. And why are you looking there anyway?”

“I’m not a lez, if that’s what you’re saying.”

“I’m not saying that.”

“I’m going to try to get you scheduled for next week, with him, or someone,” Athena said. “I’ll go for Tuesday or Wednesday.”

“Fine, but send me that list,” Hannah said. “Like, by Sunday, so I can print it out. And I’ll need you to tell me the day before, and—”

“You already said that, and I’m not stupid, hello?”

“And if I score someone high, and you buy him because of that, and you end up not liking him, that’s not my problem.”

“I know that.”

“So you might want to think about . . . with the top two or three guys, doing it, too . . . yourself . . . because they’ll probably . . . let you . . .”

Athena’s cheeks flushed again, but she held her tongue long enough that Hannah had time to change the subject.

“Have you thought about buying Ramone?”

“Yeah,” Athena said.

Ramone was owned by the Abercrombies, for the use of their three daughters, but he was shared freely with the Petrosyans for his and Hannah’s mutual relief, and had also partnered with Athena, breaking her earlier in the year. He was beautiful, exotic, charming, and Hannah believed he had deflowered Athena to her full satisfaction. And the Abercrombie girls were growing up, in college or making college plans, finding free boys, Ramone’s value to them dwindling.

“I’ve seen him do it with you, though,” Athena said, and there was something unexpected in her eyes, something Hannah had never seen before, a new kind of maturity, perhaps. “So he’s sort of tainted, in my mind. Plus, I don’t think the Abercrombies are ready to sell him yet. And there’s talk of sending him back to Brazil.”

“What do you mean?”

“His family there is trying to get him back, and the Brazilian government’s talking about a trade or something with a bunch of their people in America, so they might work out a deal where they pay the Abercrombies enough money for them to give him up.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. Losing Raven would be devastating, but losing Ramone would hurt too. Not that she’d seen him since she’d been sent to Corpus Christi the previous month. But she liked knowing he was in Dallas, liked knowing that they could partner again if the Petrosyans brought her home for a visit. She liked what he did to her, how he did it, how she’d trained him to do it.

“What’s your budget?” Hannah asked again needing to turn her mind to other things and guessing, correctly, that she’d worn Athena down enough.

“Exactly 150 thousand,” Athena said without hesitation, and possibly a hint of pride. “Gramma’s helping out too. Like, more than half.”

“You can get a lot of boy for that much,” Hannah said. The Petrosyans had bought her for 1.5 million dollars, but recreational girls were more expensive than males. And then, Hannah’s appearance made her a special case.

“That’s for everything,” Athena said. “That’s my limit. Mom and Gramma were very clear about that. Assessments, transport, taxes, inspection. Not just the sales price.”

“And me,” Hannah said.

She meant it as a joke, but Athena looked at her seriously, no scowl this time.

“How much do you want?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” Hannah said, surprised by how quickly Athena was ready to offer her money. “Maybe a trade of something. Let’s see how things go, and if I’m any good at this, and then I’ll think of something.”

“Okay,” Athena said, standing and smiling, satisfied apparently with the outcome of her meeting despite all the intervening rancor.

“Send me that email,” Hannah said.

“Yeah, and good chance I can get the assessment set up next week. Maybe Tuesday. But I have no idea about the insurance company.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The people that want to ask you about Raven. They could show up at any time.”

“Oh, yeah,” Hannah said. “Bye.”

“Love ya.”

“Me too.”

Hannah left the little meeting room, passed back through the cafeteria, where some of the subjects had already begun filing in for early lunch, getting plates or sitting, naked, around tables in small groups, and she returned to her hall.

She stood at her kennel bars, waiting for whoever was operating the camera to see her and unlock her door. It clicked, she opened it and pulled it closed, and it clicked shut, locking her in until lunch, or until she was summoned for some other purpose.

Normally, returning to a kennel full of books would delight Hannah – especially on a Friday, when Allain and freedom awaited – but as she urinated and gazed at the array of books from her toilet, she felt a strange despair.

She had a dozen ideas for a treatise topic, but she wasn’t sure she was competent enough to pursue any of them. Which should she choose?

And then, something about her conversation with Athena had left her unsettled. How could Raven have disappeared? It made no sense. And would Ramone be sent home to Brazil, where he’d no doubt do his best to forget everything about the ordeal that began when he, a teen on a family vacation to America, lost his passport?

And now she had agreed to do this favor for Athena. It was the unknowns that concerned her most, particularly the unknowns having to do with her. She had no training for what Athena was asking of her, just a list of 30 steps that she would have to consult while she performed with a male she’d just met.

Always, hovering just over Hannah’s shoulder, was the fear of failure, of being revealed – to herself, to the Petrosyans, to all the world – as just another slave girl whose ambitions stood well beyond her abilities or her resources.

Or was something else bothering her?

She moved to her bed, gazed at the open books scattered around her, turned to her notebook, picked it up, found the corner where she’d written “This is wrong.”

No matter how skillfully she composed her treatise, how thorough was her research, how clever were her ideas, she would win at best second

prize. The metal that enclosed her neck ensured that.

“This is wrong.”

She underlined the words. And then she added, in very small script in the space below it, “All of it.”

She gazed up, once again searching for the hypothetical camera mounted somewhere in the ceiling of her stall, halfway expecting to find it, halfway expecting someone to come for her again, this time to take her to punishment on Hall 6.

No camera, and no one came this time to disturb her peace.

She picked up her left leg so she could set her chin on her knee, and she looked down and saw the shimmer of juice leaking from her vulva, and she decided to ignore it.

All the laws must change, she thought but did not write.

All the slaves must be freed.

There must be a revolution.

But the slaves themselves could do nothing. Collared, chipped, chained, caged, they had no power. Even the nudity Hannah and her fellow captives regularly endured was a weapon of dominance. Naked girls, naked boys, could not pass laws, could not argue, could not fight.

Their jobs were chosen for them: labor, breed, entertain.

Fuck.

And the small privileges they were given, to go to school, to study, to win the lesser of two scholarships, were as much a cog in the machine of submission as any other. The slave always won second place. Not because they were slaves, but because they were inferior. The scholarship was not a gift to the slaves. The free people, the owners, the authors of this society, gave away small rewards now and then only because the benefits to themselves far outweighed the sacrifices. When the winners were named next spring, the contest would reassure all that, once again, the right person had won, the right person had come in second.

The better person was free, the lesser wore a collar and did as he or she was told.

In the little white space remaining at the corner of her notebook, Hannah marked out a third assertion, in tiny script:

“Something needs to be done.”

Chapter 4: Friday Night Out

At 5 that Friday evening, feeling more knowledgeable but no closer to a treatise topic, Hannah was released from her kennel by one of the male staffers, and she did her best to clear her mind of the day's distractions as she made her way down the exit hall, first presenting her back for scanning, then making her way to her locker, jostling with the other subjects as she put on makeup in the nude, then donning bra and panties, a black skirt, a red sweater and her black sandals. Dressed, she made her way after another scan to the great, glassed-in lobby of the kennels, and from there to the wide outdoors.

Allain hadn't arrived yet, so she crossed the plaza to stand in the shadows of the trees that grew there, waiting, savoring a freedom that came only on weekends, determined not to let it frighten her.

"This is my natural state," she told herself. "The kennels are not."

It was not the first time she'd said this in her mind, but the things she'd written this morning, in diminished script in the blank corner of a notebook page, gave the words new meaning.

New potency, perhaps.

Allain appeared within five minutes, and she ran across the plaza to him and embraced him and kissed him and loved him as dearly as she ever had, because she'd been bought to do so, and because he'd earned her affection on his own account, treating her well, and gently, and with respect, and with as much love as she could ask for, as any girl could ask for from any lover, perhaps.

"You look well," he said, holding her out at arm's length to survey all of her, and there was a little guilt in his eyes, and in his voice, because he knew being kenneled was not Hannah's first choice, that she would rather live at the family's home in Dallas, where she had a full bedroom she could occasionally sleep in, where Allain would come on weekends to be with her.

And there were other sources of guilt, and regret, deeper and unspoken, inevitable in a relationship such as theirs.

"I've been good," she said, following Allain, his apartment a long walk across campus. "Classes are still easy, and I'm working on a scholarship paper."

"Which one?"

"The Burnham."

"That's biology."

“Yeah?” Hannah asked.

“I thought you were going to major in physics.”

“All the physics topics are empirical, so I’d need access to a lab,” Hannah said. “For the Burnham, you just read and come up with a research design, so I—”

“Yeah, I turned a paper in when I was an undergrad,” Allain said.

Hannah opened her mouth to ask if he’d won, before she clamped her jaws shut. If he’d won, he would have said so.

“Let me read what you write,” he said.

“It has to be all my own work,” Hannah said, “but I’d love your opinion.”

“Of course,” Allain replied.

“The subject papers were sometimes better,” Hannah said. “But the free papers won for every year I looked at.”

Hannah waited for Allain to disagree. He just kept walking.

“I saw Athena today,” she said.

“I saw her too. Sounds like she’s going to get a boy.”

“And Raven’s missing.”

“Huh?”

“Athena didn’t tell you?” Hannah asked. “Raven’s been gone for 10 days. Disappeared on the way back from the grocery store.”

“Shit,” Allain said.

Why hadn’t Athena told Allain about Raven? Hannah wondered.

Would Allain know why Athena had kept him in the dark here? Sometimes Hannah asked him questions about the odd workings of the Petrosyan family, sometimes she did not. She decided to leave this mystery untouched.

“She told you I’m supposed to help her, right?” Hannah asked. “On the boy thing?”

“Yeah, she mentioned that,” Allain said. “She had me sign some forms.”

Hannah looked into his face, trying to guess how he felt on the topic. He was not above jealousy over the services Hannah provided other males, but he’d learned to manage it, and hide it perhaps when he couldn’t quite manage it. At this moment, he seemed to be managing. She was his now, tonight, this weekend, and he looked at her and smiled.

“She also said she called you a fucking bitch.”

“She did.”

“She’s sorry.”

“Huh?”

“Athena is sorry for calling you a fucking bitch.”

“She actually apologized for that?”

“Yeah. To me.”

“It would mean more if she said it to me,” Hannah said. “But it’s a start.”

Allain nodded.

“How was your week?” she asked. By mutual agreement, they did not converse over email while they were apart. Both knew that checking in with a single sentence could lead to a paragraph reply, prompting more paragraphs back, and interfering with the studies that were to be Allain’s focus during the week.

“Really piling it on now,” he replied, passing a hand over his hair. “All-nighter Tuesday, and I’ve got some reading to do this weekend, and a group project tomorrow.”

“How long?”

“Probably two hours. Starts at noon.”

“What’s it on?”

“Respiratory.”

“What kind of respiratory?”

“Obstructive pulmonary.”

“Bronchitis?”

“Emphysema.”

“Cause or treatment?”

“Treatment.”

“Where?”

“The lungs, and—”

“I know that, where is the meeting?”

“At Dr. Chokkul’s.”

“He’s a professor?”

“Yeah. Every team gets one Saturday at his place. Lunch is included. It’s sort of a production, and he pops in to answer questions once we’re wrapping up, but he’s not there for the whole meeting.”

“Do you need to impress him?”

“Yeah,” Allain said.

“Do they own any . . .?”

“No, but they follow the conventions, if one is brought.”

“I’ll go,” Hannah said, because she knew that’s what Allain wanted, because one of her purposes was simply to be, to exist, to stand beside Allain, to serve as appropriate, to let the world know what she was, and what that made him.

“Thanks.”

All thoughts of everything else disappeared when they reached the last street before Allain’s apartment, four stories of finely-crafted stonework, a narrow stairwell leading to the apartment he shared with a roommate on the third floor.

And by the time Allain unlocked his apartment door, she was practically shaking with desire, with the certainty of Allain’s lust, and her own ovulatory responses.

It was just the two of them there, the roommate and his girlfriend absent, and they went to Allain’s room wordlessly, stripped wordlessly, and followed their unspoken custom, that the first coupling was to be directed by Hannah.

She turned to Allain, looked down at his hardening member, took it in her hand and pushed him back, as if it were the handle he was designed to be operated by. He sat on his bed, looking up at her, and she raised her hands to his shoulders, forcing him back, letting him settle on to his pillow.

She climbed up on the bed, lowered her mouth to his penis, licked his tip and shaft in a quick, symbolic cleaning, and clambered over him, straddled him, rested one hand on his shoulders, her red fingernails digging into his flesh just enough so that he would feel them, and she reached down with her other hand and used all her fingers simultaneously to spread her soaking lips and guide the tip of his penis into her chamber.

Her eyes went wide as his shaft stretched her walls, and she breathed out, a sharp, loud gasp, closing her eyes and raising her face before she turned back to Allain, gazed down at him, watched his mouth go tense, his eyes go half shut under the spell of her female slot.

“Uhhh,” she grunted, dropping down, taking all of him into her body. Briefly, she held still, adjusting to his length and his girth, and then she went to work, performing with relish that most important task, the role she’d been trained for, she’d been bought for, rising up and down, milking Allain’s penis, his body, his soul.

She tightened her vagina, released it, rolled her hips and held them still, rose slowly and dropped down again hard, almost violently, guiding him to orgasm as she chased her own pleasure, grinding her clitoris against the bones of his pelvis with every third drop, with every second drop, and then with one last descent as the two of them spasmed and groaned, climaxing together, stirring together, as if there were a recipe before them that required they make within her sheath a single cocktail of his semen and her juice.

She continued to writhe above him until both were finished discharging, and then she fell upon him, hips still pressed against his, to join mouths in a union as fierce as the one they'd practiced with their sex organs.

And at this moment, Hannah loved Allain with all her soul, and body, and might.

As they kissed, Allain softened, and they kept kissing, tasting, sucking each other's mouths, then his penis grew warm again where it lay beneath her mound, and it returned to life, and he took her by her shoulders and raised her up.

"How?" she whispered, for now it was his turn to decide.

"Behind."

She crawled off him, took her place on hands and knees and waited, holding still now while Allain knelt behind her as if in worship, spread her lips wide and pushed into her, grunting through a pleasure that was mostly his, for Hannah could not orgasm in this position.

She joined him in his final grunts, however, for his thrusts in this position were invariably fierce, deep and urgent, and when she felt his penis swell with its second deposit of ejaculate, she gripped him to the depths of her organ and sighed and kept herself still.

Done, he disengaged, slid down beside her, and they lay together face to face, kissing gently until he fell asleep, Hannah too stimulated for slumber, laying beside him as if she were his protector while her overfull vagina slowly released the soft honey of their union.

She let him sleep no more than 15 minutes before she shook his jaw.

"Wake up, Dr. Petrosyan, you have a patient," she whispered.

He opened his eyes groggily, laughed out loud at her joke, rose and went to the bathroom.

“What are we doing tonight?” she asked as he urinated.

“First the club for dinner, then we’re meeting everyone for drinks somewhere downtown, but I’m not sure where yet.”

“Who’s everyone?”

“Beth, Fernando, Beatrice, Buck, probably some others.”

“Okay.”

Hannah took her place on the toilet next, urinating and wiping.

“I’m on my third handful of tissue,” she announced, as the light ringing of Allain’s belt told her he was getting dressed.

“It’s mostly you,” he said.

“No, it’s mostly you.”

“Are you ovulating?”

“Well, yeah.”

“It’s mostly you, then,” he declared with finality.

And the girl who woke up in a kennel that morning, behind a barred door, that night drank chardonnay and dined on steak tartare at a table high above and overlooking the Gulf of Mexico, and when the meal was complete and they returned to sea level and drinks at First Lady’s, she hugged all of Allain’s friends, and she bantered with them as if she were a peer, and she kept everything she knew to herself, for she had partnered with most of them intimately.

But Beth remained in Hannah’s mind an unfinished project, and Hannah took her aside discreetly when the speakers blared “I Want More of That,” because it was a song Beth danced to, by herself, with soft movements of arm and hip, whenever it came on.

Hannah brushed Allain’s shoulder and he smiled at her, and she stepped up to Beth and whispered in her ear, “Dance with me.”

The system that had swallowed Hannah whole a year ago, at the age of 18, had nibbled on Beth and spat her out when she was 14. It was a mistake, Beth confused with an illegal immigrant because she was drunk and couldn’t speak properly. The mistake was corrected on the third day, but by then, Beth had spent three days naked, in chains, caged with the general population for much of that time until her hysterics earned her segregation. But by then, the damage was done.

Beth had suffered since with a strange, stilted sexuality, part lesbian, part straight, fixated for a time on Hannah. She’d confessed to lust, over Hannah, over other girls. She’d confessed to masturbation. But when it

came to consummation, she struggled, a fear or shame or discomfort forcing a pause before she could engage, or lick, or even kiss.

Hannah blamed herself for all of it. She had not taken Beth into custody, or caged her or examined her or ignored her protestations for three days. But where Beth had been broken by the system, Hannah was doing her best, if not thriving. And that, in the peculiar workings of Hannah's mind, was her fault.

A medical student like Allain, Beth smiled and seemed to know that Hannah was offering a sort of therapy, clumsy as it might be, but she let Hannah lead her to the near vacant dancefloor and embrace her, and the two swayed together with steps rendered a little leaden by beer and whisky shots.

"I have an assignment for you," Hannah whispered into Beth's ear. Beth laughed.

"Kiss me," Hannah said. "Out here. Like we're lovers."

"We are lovers," Beth said.

"Very good," Hannah said. "That was your first test."

"Why should I kiss you?"

"Because I want you to."

"Here?"

"Yes. Before the world."

"There are probably less than 30 people here."

"Close enough."

"Why?"

"Because it's what people do. And you are . . . a people."

Hannah's verbal confusion made Beth laugh again, and she drew back and smiled and closed her eyes, and Hannah took that as her cue, pressing forward, tightening her arms around Beth's waist, touching lips to lips.

Beth's mouth stayed closed and firm at first, but Hannah persisted until Beth yielded, allowing Hannah to taste the whisky lingering on tongue and teeth.

They swayed that way until the end of the song, locked together like the lovers Hannah wanted the world to see, and when they were done, Beth smiled again, and Hannah wanted to believe that at least she had done no harm.

The evening ended with another round of hugs, and Hannah and Allain went quietly back to bed in his apartment, both ready for a short, final round in missionary. Hannah lay on her back, head on the pillow, legs raised and parted, and Allain mounted her quickly, industriously, wringing a soft, groaning orgasm out of her middle before he found his own relief, delivering a last, sweet jolt of semen to her body, kissing her with joy, rolling off and dropping his head to the pillow.

But he did not fall asleep, and he did not forget the rules.

Hannah went to the toilet, and when she returned to bed, he was holding her shackles, kept in the nightstand, the key somewhere else, and she sat on the bed with her feet together and watched him chain her.

Collared, with a chip buried in the flesh of her back, and pictures on file of her face, her body, the naked places between her legs, she would not get far if she vanished in the middle of the night.

But the Petrosyans, particularly the elders of the family, would not suffer any risk to their equity. Only fools trifle with something worth 1.5 million dollars, be it a home, a lottery ticket, a diamond – or a girl.

Hannah listened to the click, watched the metal close around her ankles, and looked into Allain's eyes. He smiled back apologetically, swung around to turn off the light.

Hannah put her head on her pillow, draped her arm around Allain's ribs, and wondered again about Raven, how she could have vanished, how she could be gone even a single day, much less 10. And with a car, no less.

But Hannah's last thought as the liquor of the evening subdued her and pushed her to her dreams was far simpler:

I have been imprisoned.

She closed her eyes and made the words with her mouth.

I have been imprisoned.

Wrongly.

Chapter 5: An Argument with Allain's Classmates

Hannah woke first as the first light of dawn peeked through the blinds, and she slid off the bed, listened to Allain's steady, comfortable breath and ambled to the bathroom. Then, as had become her habit the last few weeks, she eased through the bedroom door and into the living room,

where Lacey, girlfriend to Allain's roommate Robbie, slumbered on the couch.

The girl always woke up when Hannah clinked quietly to the kitchen, as if Hannah were her alarm clock.

"Hey," came the quiet voice. Hannah finished starting the coffee, made her way back into the living room, knelt before the couch and gazed into Lacey's eyes, barely visible in the dimness.

"Good morning, Lacey."

"What are you doing?"

"Making coffee, like always. You want some?"

"Of course. Where were you last night?"

"Dinner, drinking, dancing."

"You drink?"

"You've seen me drink."

"In public?"

"Yeah."

"Aren't you a teenager?"

"I'm almost 20. But no one cares about it. They'll give slaves anything."

"Is that what you are?"

"You know I am."

"Not a servant? Or a subject?"

"Slave," Hannah said. "Those other words are euphemisms."

"There's a reason they invented euphemisms."

"I don't feel like using them right now."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing."

Lacey sighed, sat up, shifting a heavy comforter around her shoulders. She slept on the couch whenever Robbie snored, which was most nights.

"Are you planning a revolt?" Lacey asked.

Lacey was studying vet tech at the community college, but she hoped to transfer to Corpus Christi in the next year. And she was dating a philosophy Ph.D.

Hannah found her altogether unreadable.

"Do I look like I am?"

“You answered a question with a question. People only do that when they can’t say the answer.”

“Is that a philosophy thing?” Hannah asked.

Lacey shrugged. “I don’t let Robbie talk about his school stuff. It’s boring.”

The coffee finished brewing and Hannah rose. She would serve the coffee this morning, but not because she was a slave. Lacey served often enough.

Lacey liked her coffee black, while Hannah loaded hers with cream and sugar most mornings.

She shuffled into the kitchen, poured and mixed and stirred, shuffled back, set the cup into Lacey’s hands, sat next to her on the couch, tucking her shackled feet under herself and pulling the edge of Lacey’s comforter across her hips, and the two girls drank without speaking while Hannah’s mind whirled.

Why would Lacey ask that? This morning? Could people look at Hannah, or listen to her talk, and know what she was thinking, how she felt, what she’d written in her notebook yesterday? She needed either to stop pondering sedition, or to figure out how to keep her thoughts secret.

“What are you doing today?” Lacey asked.

“Going to a class project with Allain, at lunchtime, then probably out tonight again.”

“Cool. Are you happy?”

Hannah laughed. “What?”

“Are you happy?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because you seem happy,” Lacey said, glancing at Hannah’s nude body, the chained ankles tucked under her thighs. “So that makes me think you’re okay with your situation. Or you’re planning to change it.”

Hannah laughed again, but more nervously this time.

“What makes me seem happy?”

“Another question,” Lacey noted. “Busted.”

“You should be teaching Robbie philosophy,” Hannah said.

“Also not an answer.”

“Have I always seemed happy, or just this morning?”

“Always,” Lacey said.

“What’s happy to you?”

“I’m not saying you’re, you know, singing and dancing around. That would get old. But you just have this attitude. You never hang your head. You’re always taking things in. You talk about anything. You’re—”

“I’m just curious,” Hannah said.

“An inspiration.”

Hannah heard Allain flush the toilet, looked at the sunlight streaming through the window, and turned back to Lacey.

“I’m not planning to change anything,” she said, lying. “And yes, I’m happy.”

Lacey made a sort of “phsht” sound into her coffee, and Allain emerged, kissed Hannah’s head, greeted Lacey, and went to the kitchen.

This was something Allain invariably forgot on Saturday mornings, to retrieve the key and remove Hannah’s chains. As on past occurrences, she pointed discreetly to them after he settled into the easy chair.

And as always, he set down his coffee, rose chivalrously, brought out the key and freed his girl, returning the shackles to the nightstand.

Breakfast was cold pizza from Thursday, and some fruit someone had bought at some point.

Robbie awoke, took his place on the other side of Lacey, and the conversation descended from the mysterious heights where Lacey had taken it to the cultural depths where celebrity gossip and social media resided. Hannah excused herself early to shower, putting more effort into it than usual because she’d be shown off today. She and Allain were on the road by 11:30.

It was a Petrosyan household rule that Hannah be in full chains for any trip in a vehicle – handcuffs, shackles, and a chain running between them, making it impossible for her to raise her hands much higher than her breasts. On long trips, she had to draw her feet up to eat or drink.

Allain hated the rule – possibly more than Hannah – but had followed it to the letter, securing her indoors just before the trip began in the year after they bought her. Since she’d arrived in Corpus Christi, though, he’d taken to waiting until she was in his car to restrain her. She’d sit and fasten her seatbelt, and he’d lean in through the passenger door, grab her chains from beneath her seat, cuff her and shut her door.

She was dressed only in a red wrap this morning, an elastic top, a short skirt, both snapping at the side so they could be removed without taking off her chains.

“Do I know anyone who will be there?” Hannah asked.

“No, I just met most of them myself, this week,” Allain said.

“There are two Chinese guys, a Russian girl, the rest American. Seven total.”

“Is anyone else bringing . . . anyone?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Do you know what I’m going to do?”

“I mentioned you to Dr. Chokkul, and he said he’d appreciate the help if you could be there. His wife makes a goulash that everyone loves.”

“I’ve made goulash before,” she said. “Something your dad likes.”

Dr. Chokkul and his wife lived by themselves in a nice, older neighborhood, their home dignified, spacious but not a mansion.

Hannah and Allain arrived at 10 ‘till noon, the first car in front of the home, Hannah still in her chains when they stepped to the door.

Mrs. Chokkul, elderly, portly, smiled warmly and ushered them in.

“You must be Hannah,” she said, focusing entirely on the girl.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Oh, such good manners!” she exclaimed with a thick European accent. She looked at Allain. “How will she be helping me today?”

Allain looked at her, puzzled.

“She’ll need her hands free, to serve, if she can do that,” Mrs. Chokkul explained.

“Oh,” Allain said, and he set down his bag, pulled a key out of his pocket and freed Hannah’s arms and legs, put away her traveling chains and pulled Hannah’s shackles from his bag, and while he knelt to close them around her ankles, Hannah unsnapped her top and skirt and dropped them on his bag. Nude except for her collar and the steel around her ankles, she smiled at Mrs. Chokkul and hoped she didn’t find any of this awkward. The woman smiled back, no hint of embarrassment, and Hannah guessed she was not the first subject to cross the threshold or help out during a class session.

“Your meeting is there,” Mrs. Chokkul said to Allain, pointing through the den to a door beyond it, and she took Hannah’s elbow and led her down a hall thick with the aromas of exotic cooking.

“How long have you been with Allain?” she asked as she brought Hannah into a large kitchen, tiled all in white, bowls with a variety of ingredients on the counters, two pots bubbling on the stove.

“A little more than a year,” Hannah said.

“What did you do before that?”

“I lived with my mother.”

“Taken from your mother?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I was.”

“Do you see her?”

“I do, every month or two, and I email her too.”

“Is this a good thing?”

Hannah looked at Mrs. Chokkul, trying to ferret out her meaning. If Mrs. Chokkul were from a nation that didn’t permit slavery – and there were some – people like Hannah must be a constant curiosity to her.

Hannah chose an opaque answer.

“I think so,” she said, turning toward the two pots on the stove. “It smells wonderful.”

Mrs. Chokkul laughed, and Hannah detected more sophistication than one would expect after just looking at her.

“You must stir, then,” she said, handing Hannah an ancient, black wooden spoon.

Hannah stood at the stove and stirred, glad to have something to do. She could hear more students arrive, Mrs. Chokkul greeting one or two, then what she guessed was the booming voice of Dr. Chokkul’s, greeting the next few. She heard Chinese accents, a Russian accent, a variety of American accents.

Soon, presumably, she would be shambling in, ankles bound, nothing but steaming bowls to hold before her female opening and the golden hair that shrouded it – and nothing at all after she set her loads down, unless she put a hand over her middle.

Was she nervous?

No, she told herself, not in the least. She had grown used to this – learned to enjoy it, even, because of the way some people responded to her. She was just following the rules.

She sometimes had naked dreams, still, but she was no longer uncomfortable in them, even when – as had happened in one dream – she was the only one nude at a formal banquet.

Mrs. Chokkul returned, dipped a second spoon into the goulash, tasted and smiled at Hannah, as if the girl’s stirring had made all the

difference. She sprinkled something from an envelope into both pots, went to the freezer and pulled out a pitcher of ice.

“We have tea and water,” she said, “will you serve it?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah replied, taking the bowl and the pair of tongs the woman handed her.

“There are pitchers on the side board,” Mrs. Chokkul said. “Ask everyone what they’ll have, and you may pour.”

Hannah left the kitchen and made her way to the door she’d seen Allain pass through. On the way, she passed a mirror, glanced into it briefly, confirmed that her time had been well-spent this morning, her blonde hair full and straight, her eyes and lips made up as close to a model’s face as she could manage.

The room was small, full of conversation, lit by the laptops everyone was consulting as they mapped out treatment ideas for emphysema.

But all turned, as one, to look at her as she entered, bearing a bowl of ice and tongs.

She had every right to announce herself, to let everyone know she was the ice girl, to ask how much ice each student wanted, to deliver it with a flourish, and then to linger over Allain so that they would know she was his. And many a slave girl would have done so, but this was not Hannah’s way. Raised in a tight-knit, polygamist community in which females were there to breed and quietly practice sisterhood, Hannah preferred to make her statements quietly.

Unless provoked.

She met a few eyes, the girls looking into her face, the boys taking all of her in, and then she dropped tongs full of ice into each glass, set the bowl on the table and grabbed pitchers of tea, one marked sweet, the other devoid of sugar, and she brought both pitchers to the table and, beginning with Allain, raised the sweet pitcher first over his glass and paused.

“All sweet,” he said quietly.

Hannah circled the table with the short steps of a girl in shackles, each student whispering their requests – all sweet, half sweet, no sweet, or just water? She nodded and poured, saying nothing, setting down the tea, bringing the water, filling the rest of the glasses.

“Thank you, Hannah,” Allain said once her first little task was complete.

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah said, stepping toward the door to see if she was needed in the kitchen.

“Thank you, Hannah,” said one of the American girls. Hannah turned to her, wondered if she’d grown up with slaves, or hadn’t.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Hannah’s in school,” Allain said. “Online at Austin now, but she wants to go here. She’s working on the Burnham scholarship.”

Hannah smiled at Allain and suddenly felt uncomfortable.

“Last year’s winner was amazing,” said one of the American girls.

“Hannah says the subject paper was better,” Allain said, and he smiled at Hannah in the same wicked way that Athena did when she was in the mood to cause trouble.

“I’m sure it wasn’t better,” said the American girl.

“Did you read it?” Hannah asked, and she felt her cheeks suddenly burning, and she zeroed in on the girl’s face, framed by long, black hair that hadn’t been washed since yesterday.

“I know the general concepts,” she said dismissively, “the—”

“The free author proposed one form of glucose testing,” Hannah said, and her words came clipped and her pupils dilated, the way they did when she was trying to control her emotions. “Sherry . . . the subject, Sherry Mercer, she laid out five malarial vector markers, and two had never been tried before, and she included almost 30 citations, with—”

Hannah stopped, caught herself, saw seven pairs of eyes studying her from seven faces, only Allain’s smiling. Now she wanted to hide. Being naked and shackled wasn’t embarrassing anymore, but arguing with medical students about something they no doubt all found completely inconsequential was.

“I think lunch is almost ready,” she said, dismissing herself.

The whispers followed her through the den and down the hall to the kitchen. She couldn’t hear the words. It was the American girl’s speaking first, perhaps, then someone else, then Allain, then laughter – loud, boisterous – and she knew he’d said something to break the tension she’d left in her wake.

We didn’t buy Hannah to keep her opinions to herself, he might have said. The unspoken message was more important: Allain’s family owned a girl who wasn’t just beautiful. She was also strong, unpredictable, and possibly even slightly brilliant. The Petrosyans didn’t need docile. They

were a strong family. A confident family. And Allain must therefore be both as well.

When she grew impatient, though, Hannah wasn't trying to be anything. Sometimes, there were just things that needed to be said.

After she put the salad together, Hannah helped Mrs. Chokkul bring out bowls of goulash and the rest of the meal, and she met Dr. Chokkul, who regarded her carefully as she left the room with empty dishes and he entered to answer the team's questions. Because she'd already served this semester as an anatomy model in several biology, pre-med and medical classes, she was generally known to the faculty as the beautiful slave girl who belonged to a medical student and never protested, even when displayed naked before 100 strangers, even when the inner mysteries of her body were explored with a scope.

Hannah got her lunch last, at the breakfast table in the kitchen, eating alone and looking out the window while the laughter of Allain and his classmates echoed through the home.

She envied the collegial camaraderie she had helped feed but could not join.

And she struggled with a sense of doom. From some corner of her mind, a deep, unexplainable misgiving was sprouting. A formless fear.

She wrote it off to the rebellious thoughts of the day and night before, and forced herself to think of other things. The view here was beautiful, a bright garden on the other side of the window, with herbs and flowers and trees in equal measure, and beyond that an old wooden fence where birds chased each other sideways, and past that the tops of other homes where comfortable, free people lived.

"Mel said she hopes she didn't offend you," Allain said as soon as they were back in his car.

"Who's Mel?"

"The one you yelled at about last year's Burnham winners."

"I didn't yell," Hannah said, pausing to consider her next words. "I was strident."

"She looked it up over lunch," Allain said. "Last year's subject wrote a better paper."

Hannah gazed out the window, at the cars beside them and the stores and neighborhoods beyond, and she quietly, without gesture, declared victory. Six medical students – or seven, if you counted Allain – had

gathered to ponder pulmonary obstruction, but had inadvertently learned about something else: that a slave could write a better paper than a free person, and be deprived of recognition only because she was someone else's property. And the instructor of this vital fact was a naked blonde girl with her feet chained together.

Depending on how you defined a subject, there were at least a million of them in the United States, Hannah knew. If every one of them, once or twice a month, could enlighten a half dozen people as she just had, the revolution would be well underway. Until all the laws were changed and all the slaves were freed, this would have to do.

Allain was silent, navigating the streets away from the home of Professor and Mrs. Chokkul, and Hannah could tell he was thinking.

"This really matters to you," he said at last.

"It does."

"Why?"

The question was silly, almost insulting. Of course it mattered. If it were generally accepted that medical students were inferior, wouldn't Allain fight that?

She could have sniffed, the way Athena would have. She could have rolled her eyes, and spoken with the subtly condescending tone that any slave could resort to, and Allain would listen and wouldn't have her punished and might not even take offense.

Hannah felt he deserved more respect than that, however. He had not created this system any more than she had, and he was working his way through it like her, navigating the dynamics the way he drove his car through the city.

"I just think everyone should get the recognition they deserve," she said. "And, sometimes they'll actually try to do one of the studies, right?"

"Yeah. One of the papers a few years ago did."

"Well, Sherry Mercer's study design was good enough to implement. And malaria kills half a million people a year. But why bother if it came in second?"

"That's a good point," Allain conceded.

"Can we go shopping before dinner?" Hannah asked, satisfied with the exchange. "I need panties, and the fall van Minsk is supposed to be out."

Chapter 6: An Early Pickup

Athena had emailed Hannah the Smithfield Protocol Saturday afternoon, but Hannah didn't get back into email until Monday morning after breakfast.

"Franklin Tuesday, probably, so hold off on fun stuff," Athena said in the message that accompanied the list.

"What's Franklin?" Hannah emailed back.

"Franklin is a boy, duh," Athena emailed back almost immediately. "And it's official. 2 Tuesday. Be ready."

"Where?" Hannah asked.

No answer. Hannah sent the list to the printer at the information desk. Three pages, 30 steps. There were no official rules about what subjects could print, but too many pages were frowned upon. Excessive pornography was frowned upon. The girl at the desk was going through the three sheets when Hannah approached.

"What's this?" she asked.

"It's an assessment protocol I'm probably using tomorrow," Hannah said.

"Where are you doing it? Here?"

"I don't think so. I think they're going to pick me up."

"Are you certified?"

"No, this is one you can do without being official. Supposedly."

The girl handed the sheets to Hannah, and Hannah put her elbow on the counter to leaf through them, stopped where the steps started to get explicit, folded the paper once to hide its contents because she found the whole matter slightly embarrassing, and returned to the computers.

She was still feeling unsettled, but she stayed before the PCs all day, except for lunch, first to work on her courses at Austin, then to consider treatise topics, sifting through biological terms and concepts and possibilities, and requesting a few more books, and some journal articles where the latest research seemed to reside.

"How's your project coming along?" asked Jane over lunch.

"I'm trying to come up with what to do it on," she said.

Lunch was pancakes and ham. Hannah picked at her meal.

Jane leaned back, her breasts swaying. She was big-boned, with dark hair and a full chest, nipples that stayed perked up most of the time, a

property Hannah envied.

“Think you’ll want to take a break at some point?” Jane asked.

“I have to hold off until tomorrow,” Hannah said, understanding Jane’s meaning. Since Hannah’s arrival six weeks ago, the girls had settled into a comfortable routine, coupling just before or after dinner once or twice a week, in Jane’s or Hannah’s kennel.

“What are you holding off for?”

“I’m doing an assessment.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, for the girl. No orgasms for 24 hours before.”

“Assessing a boy, right?”

“Yeah, she’s straight. It’s for Athena.”

“Oh, the bitch?”

“I never called her a bitch.”

“You didn’t have to,” Jane said.

Hannah frowned. Speaking ill of one’s owners, even to another slave, could lead to punishment, if there were witnesses or it was otherwise documented.

Hannah considered Jane her closest friend in the kennels, and the girls took turns sharing the details of their lives, their own victories and challenges, the habits, qualities and foibles of their owners, but Hannah knew she needed to watch her mouth. Complaining about Athena was a chimeral victory in the struggle she had quietly joined on Friday. Briefly satisfying, it was a meaningless tactic in the wider war.

“Where are you doing it?” Jane asked.

“I’m not sure. I asked, no answer back yet. But probably somewhere else.”

“When?”

“At 2. I have no idea how long it will take, but if I’m back by 5, I’ll look for you.”

“You’ll have stuff in you, right?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said. “It’s supposed to be done bare. I mean, I will if he cums.”

“He’ll cum,” Jane predicted. “And don’t wipe too much. I want to taste what he gives you.”

Hannah felt her vulva warming, and Jane smiled.

“You’re a bitch,” Hannah said quietly.

Knowledge was one of the few things that could suppress Hannah's carnality, so she pursued it with vigor between lunch and dinner at the PC's. And after dinner as well, back in her kennel, poring over books, scribbling ideas in her notebook, reading two assigned chapters for Austin, then back to the treatise. Ideas were firming up, one or two. Two very good ideas.

She rarely closed her curtain when she was just studying. The sounds of voices, the steps of slaves and keepers, the occasional rattling of chains, the quiet gasps of masturbation, the louder grunts of coupling, all serving as a comfortable backdrop to her academic pursuits.

"Hey, Hannah," said a male voice at the bars.

She looked up.

"Hey, Brad!"

She slid to the edge of her bed.

Brad, African-American, polite and poised no matter how naked or erect he was, was her male Jane, taking her once or twice a week, without fuss or drama.

He belonged to a graduate student who brought him out for weekends, but at least one weeknight per week, or two when she was ovulating, or none when she was on her period. On nights he was free, he invariably checked in with Hannah.

"Not going out tonight?" Hannah asked, rising and stepping to the bars, ready for a short break.

"Nope, on my own," he said. "Bitch has an exam tomorrow."

"Do you call her bitch to her face?"

"Yeah, all the time."

"I'm going celibate tonight," Hannah said.

"Please don't tell me it's so you can be with your books."

"No, I'm doing an assessment for someone tomorrow. No orgasm for 24 hours."

"Oh yeah?" he said, his penis growing despite Hannah's news.
"Who?"

"Someone one of my owners wants me to check out."

"Damn," he said.

"Let's do the raincheck thing," Hannah said. "Jane's getting me before dinner if I'm back by then, but tomorrow after dinner, if you're around?"

"I'll try to be."

“Okay.”

“So Jane’s free tonight?” he asked.

“She might be,” Hannah said. “You’ll have to ask her.”

Hannah stepped up to Brad, offered her mouth between the bars, and they shared a quick kiss.

“Night.”

“Night.”

As Brad stepped down to Jane’s kennel, Hannah felt a sharp ache of frustration. This was a sacrifice for Athena, things she wanted to do that she couldn’t.

She returned to her bed, heard Brad’s voice, Jane’s voice in response, quiet chatter for a minute or two, and then a staff person entering the hall to make sure both were amenable to coupling. They did it often enough, and the answers were two quick yesses. There was the clang of Jane’s kennel door opening, the clang of it shutting and locking, and then the two of them, working together for their mutual satisfaction, Brad’s grunts increasing in intensity until he groaned through ejaculation, Jane limiting her response to a quick howl of pleasure just after Brad got his release. And then all was silent, and Hannah went to her toilet to wipe, and forced her mind back to her books.

Hannah woke early and dissatisfied after a restless night’s sleep, went to her toilet, went to her door to see if had been unlocked yet, found that it hadn’t, flipped on her light, grabbed a handful of books from her little shelf and threw them onto her bed.

She shouldn’t have agreed to do assessments for Athena. Why had she? The girl had called her a fucking bitch, and it was not the only insult, by word or gesture, she had aimed at Hannah’s from the other side of the glass yesterday. And what would Athena do with a boy anyway? She could barely manage her own life and emotions. Most likely, the Petrosyans were about to purchase a \$150,000 disaster.

Hannah didn’t have time for this. She didn’t want to do this. Once a week – if Athena kept her word – Hannah was going to have sex with a stranger based on some list, and she’d have to keep score, report back to Athena, and quite possibly get something wrong. If the boy didn’t work out, it would be Hannah’s fault, not Athena’s, no matter how many disclaimers Hannah presented.

The only plus was that someday, maybe, if Hannah didn't screw this up, she could ask Athena for a favor. Or money, at least.

And she might get to enjoy the boy's attentions, of course. When they were together. If she liked him. If he knew what to do. But she already had all the boys she needed, with Allain, and the males in the kennels.

She had calculus 2 problems to work. She had a chapter of classical history to read. And her treatise topic hung over her head, always. It was due March 1. Today was October 1. Five months to go. To write a treatise of the caliber of last year's best entry – the second-place paper by Sherry Mercer – she would need five years.

Amidst it all, the Smithfield Protocol sat, still folded in half on her shelf. She knew she should review it now, but she expected to have time after lunch, or on the way to wherever the assessment would be done. She imagined being allowed into the locker room, dressing, leaving the kennels by the main entrance, where she'd be picked up by someone – the boy's owner, or the boy himself? in a nice car? Or a limousine? – and brought someplace interesting. Maybe even a private home, where intelligent, decent people would greet her. They'd have a bedroom to do the assessment in, she and the boy would both enjoy the session, Hannah would come back to the kennels, report to Athena, and her balance in the Athena account would climb significantly.

Hannah turned to calculus, but the doors clicked while she was still struggling with her first problem. Why was this so hard for her? She rose, left her hall alone, joined a few of the early risers on the stairs up to the cafeteria, had breakfast with a male and two females from hall 3, and then made her way back to her own hall for a shower and more studying.

At 10:05, Bud appeared at her bars.

"Hey, Hannah."

"Hey, Bud," she said, noticing with disappointment that he seemed to be bearing restraints.

"Someone here for you."

"Oh yeah?" Hannah said, stepping to her toilet.

"Yeah, in the bay, seems all official."

"Probably for this assessment I have to do," she said, wiping and flushing. "But it wasn't supposed to be until 2 this afternoon."

"Gonna be a long day," Bud observed, stating the obvious.

Hannah stepped to the bars, hoping in vain that Bud's restraints were for someone else.

"They want you in these," he said, holding up a pair of cuffs bolted directly to each other, with no chain between them.

"Why those?" Hannah asked, holding her hands out in front.

"No idea," Bud said. "They were lying in the cage, with a little note."

"Okay."

"The note said to cuff you behind, so you can't masturbate."

"Oh," Hannah said, her disappointment escalating to a quiet rage. Surely, this was all Athena's doing.

She turned and put her hands behind her back, and Bud reached through the bars to apply the cuffs, closing them tightly around her wrists.

Still facing away from him, she stared bitterly at her bed and her shelf and the books there, while Bud shackled her ankles and unlocked her door.

They were halfway down the hall to the processing room when she stopped with a jerk.

"Oh my god, Bud, I need this protocol. It's three pages, on my shelf. Folded. Can you reach through and get it?"

Bud stepped back to Hannah's kennel, retrieved the document, showed it to her.

"That's it, thanks. Can you slip it into my hand?"

Bud gave her the protocol and unlocked the door into the processing room, a large, brightly lit space where subjects were usually brought when they first arrived at the kennels, and where they passed through on their way to be used in class or transported off campus securely. There were cubicles here for staff, toilets and showers along one wall, chains and leashes on pegs, three examination tables with restraints, small transport cages, and two bays where trucks could load and unload the human cargo they bore to and from the kennels.

The door at one of the bays stood open, and Hannah could see the wooden insides of a truck through it, nothing but a single small cage there with its top angled up and its side flat on the truck bed.

Hannah slowed, grimaced, memories roaring through her mind. This was how her freedom had ended, a summer ago, in a tiny cage in the

pitch-black back of a truck, the first place she was put after she was forcibly taken from her destitute mother.

“You okay, Hannah?” Bud asked.

Hannah shook her head, smiled at herself.

“Just some memories,” she said.

Bud, gray-haired, probably over 40, had joined the morning crew a few weeks ago as one of its older members. He held Hannah’s elbow for the rest of the walk, leading her into the truck, which smelled of old wood and something else, maybe tobacco.

She stepped to the cage, sat on the floor of smooth steel, and Bud raised the side and lowered the top, pausing before he pushed everything together to latch them closed.

“They didn’t send a key, so once I shut you in, that’s it,” he said. “Last chance to go to a normal bathroom.”

“You just saw me go,” she said, glancing at the small covered bucket fixed to the floor at one end of the cage, the meager solution for necessary things when subjects were forced to linger in the cage for hours. Or days.

She released the pages of the protocol and spun around awkwardly on her bottom to look down at them, using her manacled feet to spread them out while Bud locked her in. She was supposed to have read through everything by now.

“Think you’ll be back today?” he asked.

“I better be,” Hannah said. “It’s just an assessment for one of my owners. It wasn’t supposed to be some big production.”

Hannah made it as far as step 7 before Bud closed and locked the truck door, plunging her space into darkness.

“Really?” she asked of no one.

She heard a door slam, heard muffled voices, guessed it was Bud telling the driver the girl he’d come for was safely restrained and caged and locked in the space behind him, as if she were a wild animal or a toxic chemical, and the truck rumbled to life and lurched forward while Hannah tried and failed to get comfortable.

Sitting up, cross-legged, the chain of her shackles drawn tight beneath her left calf, and her wrists bound uncomfortably at the small of her back, Hannah allowed herself to seethe.

In near total darkness, the only light coming from cracks around the truck's rolling door, she had no idea where she was, where she was going, how long it would take.

She'd asked Athena where the assessment was taking place, and Athena had ignored the question.

What was Athena doing that was more important than telling Hannah this most important detail of her day? Probably posting pictures to Look!, or texting friends, or looking at a fashion page.

Texting friends. Of course. Telling everyone that she'd gotten her family's stupid slave girl to agree to fuck a bunch of random boys that Athena had no interest in buying.

Hannah began composing the email in her mind she'd send to Athena when today's ordeal was over. She'd start with a dry, clear accounting of what she'd been through: "They cuffed me in back, chained my ankles together, put me in a cage, and stuck me in the back of a truck with no lights, and drove me around for hours." And she imagined the closing: "Sincerely, Fucking Bitch."

And then, the P.S. "Oh, and since you're too busy to tell me where your assessments are happening, or how long they'll take, never mind. I'm not doing any more."

Hannah was still building upon her imagined email to Athena when the truck stopped, rolled backward and turned off. It had been no more than a 20-minute drive to wherever she was now.

Chapter 7: Arguing with Marsha

Hannah heard the truck latch opening, and then the door rolled up and light returned, blindingly, and two figures appeared at the truck's opening, beyond them a loading dock.

Blinking against the glare, Hannah heard small wheels turning, felt her cage rise, felt it drop, felt it move forward, toward the dock, and she knew where she was.

In Dallas, there was a place like this, called the stacks, where the owned were stored for sale. They might be let out for training, for inspection, for display, but for the most part, they languished, for days or weeks, in tiny cages like this, just long enough to lie down in, just high enough to sit up in.

A relative cold front had blown through Sunday night, the first of autumn, and the concrete of the loading dock was wet where it was uncovered, puddles here and there with pairs of damp tracks running away from them, where Hannah knew other slaves in other rolling cages had been pushed this morning. She shivered, more from nerves than from the blowing wind, which rippled the puddles and hardened her nipples.

She looked up at the face of the man pushing her, his fingers wrapped through the chain link that formed the walls and top of her cage, and their eyes met for a brief, awkward moment before both looked away. A whole body of social etiquette had grown up organically over the last few decades to accommodate the ownership of people by other people, and Hannah was still learning the rules, trying to master them. One did not smile at or nod to or make small talk with the stranger pushing one's cart, any more than one interacted with the driver of one's bus. It might happen, and no one would be punished for it, but doing so would be considered quaint, or needy, or even strange, unless one needed specific information.

And Hannah needed no information. She knew where she was going. She saw before her two entrances into the building where she would be assessing an unknown male. The smaller entrance bore the word "INTAKE" across the door. That was her first destination. The bigger entrance, protected by a pair of doors that were closed this morning, no doubt concealed dozens or hundreds of people, male and female, all nude and confined to tiny cages like hers, stacked in rows and columns to make walls of people set beside each other in pairs. Some might be chained, but most no doubt were allowed at least the small liberty of free limbs as they conversed with their neighbors, lived their lives, and waited for the next thing to happen.

It had been more than a year since Hannah's days in a place like this. It was a terrible place, a dreadful time in her life. And yet, there were elements of it she missed. She could talk to anyone. She could say anything.

The intake door opened automatically and she was pushed into a bright, antiseptic room – small, white, fluorescent, lined with shelves.

A woman sat at a desk, tapping on a PC.

The man left through the automatic door. Hannah looked at the woman, who gave no indication of any interest in or awareness of Hannah.

Hannah turned her attention back to the protocol, opening her legs and rattling her chains, using her feet to spread the pages before her.

She made it to the 11th step this time.

“What’s that?” a female voice barked. Hannah looked up to find the woman standing over her.

“My protocol,” Hannah said. “I’m doing an assessment.”

“No contraband allowed,” the woman said.

“It’s not contraband, it’s an assessment.”

“You should have sent it ahead,” the woman said, staring at Hannah with a look of annoyed disappointment.

“Take it up with my owner,” Hannah said.

“What?” the woman said, dropping to her knees to peer in at Hannah, and she raised her eyebrows expectantly, as if waiting for Hannah to remember how things worked and switch to deference. But this woman was, in Hannah’s mind, merely a colleague, someone whose help Hannah needed to get a job done. They were working together. There was no hierarchy here.

“I’m here to do an assessment,” Hannah said again, her voice quavering with anger, her cheeks flushing. “My owner arranged it, because she’s considering buying a male here. So if you have to send me back, that’s fine, I’ll just tell her that . . .” Hannah looked at the woman’s chest, which bore a brass nameplate “. . . that Marsha sent me back before I could get my job done. And then my owner – her name’s Athena Petrosyan, from Dallas – maybe she’ll give you a call and you can explain things to her. And the boy’s owners will probably want to talk to you too, since they can’t sell him without an assessment.”

Marsha returned to her desk, sat, typed on it, and Hannah waited, tense, still angry. She might have resolved things with this woman, or she might have just dug herself into a very deep, painful hole.

There were no witnesses to their little exchange this morning. Marsha, if she had taken this job because it meant working with a population forced to give her respect, could make up any lie she wanted about what Hannah had said and done, and could make things very unpleasant for the disrespectful slave girl.

But then, two owners of slaves would be unhappy. A sale might be thwarted. And if disruptions like this happened regularly between Marsha and otherwise well-behaved slaves, she would be replaced.

Hannah had, she realized, done all the math here before she subjected herself to the risk of arguing with Marsha, performing a hundred

calculations not requiring conscious thought.

But was it worth it? Was this a fight Hannah needed to take on? Couldn't Hannah have simply apologized for having the list with her, and asked politely if she could keep it?

She could see Marsha's face at her PC, typing, staring at the screen, typing.

"Okay," Marsha said, rising, voice free of either vindictiveness or kindness, "I think I've found you on the docket, let me see your collar and give you a scan."

Hannah hoped this meant she'd get her restraints off, but Marsha simply knelt beside her cage with her phone out, so Hannah shuffled on her bottom until her back was against the wire. She felt the phone touch her back, then fingers on her collar, turning it so the numbers engraved into it could be read.

"Slide your papers over to me," Marsha said, unlatching a side door at the end of the cage.

Hannah used her foot to deliver the document, and Marsha pulled them out.

"I'm going to need those," Hannah said, panicking now. Without the protocol, there would be no assessment. And that would be Hannah's fault.

"I'll have it sent to your room, let me see your mouth."

Hannah turned, opened her mouth toward the woman.

"Tongue up."

Hannah complied, and Marsha reached through, pushing Hannah's tongue out of the way, checking for pills or wires or keys or anything else that shouldn't be there. Even candy could get you in trouble.

"Now, the instructions say I need to check your tchotchkes," Marsha said.

"My what?"

Marsha looked down at Hannah's middle with eyebrows raised before she stood to get some things from the shelves. So this was her word for a girl's holes, Hannah thought. Tchotchkes. Small, decorative trinkets. Was it meant as an insult? A euphemism? Something else? Was she too embarrassed to say anus and vagina? How long had she been working here?

Hannah dropped to her back and shuffled until her two openings were at the little door, and she raised her bound feet and dropped

awkwardly to her elbows to watch.

Marsha returned with gloved hands, reaching through to spread Hannah's vaginal lips.

"Any sores, infections, injuries?"

"No, Ma'am," Hannah said.

"Anything you shouldn't have in either place?"

"No, Ma'am."

Marsha pushed her finger up Hannah's front opening, rummaged around thoroughly but not aggressively. This would have been an opportunity for revenge, but Marsha refrained from digging unnecessarily.

"Up," Marsha said.

Hannah raised her pelvis and Marsha slid her finger up Hannah's anus.

Finding nothing, she slipped a thermometer into that hole and stepped to another shelf, retrieving three metal cylinders.

"Food, water, wipes," she said, sliding each cylinder into its appointed slot.

"Thank you," Hannah said.

"Keep your lid closed after you put anything in it," Marsha added, pointing to the bucket.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Marsha withdrew the thermometer, glanced at it and dropped it into a bag, and slapped an adhesive tag onto the plate next to Hannah's cylinders.

"Passed," Marsha said, returning to her desk to tap on the keyboard.

"Will I get my restraints off?" Hannah asked.

"Instructions don't say that," Marsha replied.

If there would be revenge, it would be served cold, and subtly, Hannah knew.

Hannah glanced up at the clock. 12:30. She was hungry, and sore, and increasingly irritable.

"I can't eat with my hands like this."

Marsha rose, stepped over to Hannah's cage, reached in and pushed the dispenser at the bottom of her food cylinder. A little cake dropped out, rolled to Hannah's hip, spun, spiraled and fell flat.

"One or two?" Marsha asked.

"Two."

Marsha let the second cake fall, returned to her desk.

Hannah fell to her right elbow and shoulder, lowered her mouth to the food, and tried to concentrate on eating, satisfying her hunger, and not on this latest offense.

She was almost done with the first cake – bland but not terrible, supposedly packed with all the energy and nutrition the average female needed to fulfill her responsibilities – when the worker arrived to push her cage through the door that led into Corpus Christi's version of the stacks.

There were dozens of slaves here, not the hundreds in the Dallas facility, stacked only three high, side by side and end to end, male and female, chattering and laughing and singing, now and then, because to remain silent would constitute giving in to the misery of such a place.

A forklift raised Hannah from her wheeled platform to the top of a stack, three cages high, a girl at either end of her cage, a boy beside her.

Hannah kept eating, biting hunks of cake off the steel plate, but she nodded to the two girls, both talking to neighbors, and she glanced at the boy. He was studying her intently.

"Punishment?" he asked.

"No, here for an assessment."

He was her age, nice-looking, and he smiled sympathetically but curiously.

"Why are you chained then?"

Hannah found his bluntness refreshing.

"My owner forgot to say they were supposed to come off," Hannah replied. "Or so I was told."

"Your owner sucks."

Hannah laughed.

"What's an assessment?" he asked, sitting cross-legged, facing Hannah, his penis staying limp.

"I just have sex with someone," Hannah said, "but everything has to be done in a certain order, and you score them on how they did."

He looked at her.

"This is all new to you?" she asked between bites, lying on her side.

"Yeah, I got brought here this morning, they're not sure what to do with me yet."

"Sorry."

“I don’t care,” he said, and Hannah believed him. His eyes were a little wild, his black hair still long and matted, and she wondered if he’d grown up like her, a child of poverty. “Do you do assessments all the time?” he asked.

“I’ve never done one before,” Hannah said. “I’ve been assessed, but I haven’t done one. I have no idea what I’m doing, and they took away my protocol.”

Hannah finished her second cake, rose to her knees and angled up the lid from her bucket with her toes.

“Protocol?” he asked, watching her.

“A fancy name for a list of assessment steps,” she said, putting her shackled feet on either side of her bucket, positioning her vulva above it to urinate, face and shoulders and breasts pressed against the floor of her cage.

“You’re missing,” he said.

Hannah felt the warm trickle against her left toe, adjusted, listening for the sound of urine ringing against the side of the bucket.

“You got it now,” he said.

“It’s been more than a year since I used one of these things,” she said. She finished, scooted around to grab a wipe with her toes, turned back and passed the wipe over her spill.

With a few more clumsy motions, she dropped the wipe into the bucket and closed the lid.

“Well done,” he said.

“You learn to make do. But I really wish I could wipe myself.”

“Leg too long?”

“It doesn’t bend that way.”

“So, if you like that boy, you’ll buy him?”

“I won’t buy him. My owner will.”

“Shouldn’t she be the one doing the assessment?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said, “but think of it this way.” She looked down at her wet vulva and the wet floor of her cage beneath it, and tried not to think about wiping, and tried not to let the bitterness creep into her voice. “My vagina is like a piece of equipment to my owners. I’m expected to use it to provide relief for . . . for some of them. And if they need to test someone else’s penis, I’m expected to use my vagina to do that too.”

She looked into the boy’s eyes, and he stared back, absorbing her meaning perhaps.

“I can say no, but it’s less trouble to just go along, to be good, to be happy.”

The forklift returned to Hannah’s place and picked her up.

“Bye, good luck,” she said, noticing only then that the boy was now sporting a sizable erection. He waved to her casually, and she wondered if he’d masturbate. She’d never learned his name or how he’d ended up here.

The lift bumped along between the room with the cages and a long hall, and Hannah sat up because it hurt to rest on her elbow when she was being transported this way.

At the end of the hall lay a large room with small ports at floor level. A port opened up, her cage was lowered and slid in, the forklift withdrew, and the port door closed behind her.

This room was a small classroom, another identical echo of her time at Dallas. There was the whiteboard, the table and chairs, the door into the rest of the facility, the mattress, the clock.

1:33. The assessment was less than half an hour away. They’d have to free her for that.

There was a shower here, sink and toilet, rings set in the floor and walls where subjects could be fastened and left and forgotten for a time.

She slid over to her water bottle, realized how thirsty she was, and sucked it slowly, still draining it when the door opened and a naked male walked in, bound by the wrists and ankles, a connection chain swinging between his legs, followed by male and female staff people, talking quietly among themselves.

All fell silent as soon as they spotted Hannah.

“Here’s our girl.”

Chapter 8: Franklin Fulmer the Third

Hannah sat up, looked first at the boy, his hands together at his middle, cupping his penis, hiding it.

This was not the boy Athena had shown Hannah on Friday. That was fine. One boy was the same as another, although Hannah found that she needed to adjust her expectations a little. She wondered what size his penis was. Athena seemed to prefer them well-endowed.

The female staffer stepped over to Hannah, knelt, peered in. Hannah, sitting cross-legged and trying not to appear uncomfortable or

disappointed or furious, peered back.

“Hannah, right?”

“Yes, hi,” Hannah replied.

“You’re ready to do an assessment, right?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said. “Well . . .”

“Well what?”

“I need the protocol.”

“Which one?”

“Uh, the Smithfield. I brought it. I had it, but they took it away in intake. Um, Marsha. Marsha said she’d send it to the room.”

“Here it is,” the male staffer said, standing over the table.

Despite herself, Hannah silently thanked Marsha, who could have thrown the protocol away and claimed never to have seen it.

“Have you memorized it?” the woman asked, unlocking Hannah’s cage.

“No,” Hannah admitted it. “I’m going to need to refer to it, some.”

“Some?” the man said, flipping through the three sheets.

“All the way through, okay?” Hannah said.

“It would be better if you’d memorized it,” the woman said, raising the top of Hannah’s cage, lowering the side.

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed, and she scooted on her bottom over the wire and onto the cold linoleum floor of the room before she shuffled awkwardly to her feet and turned to face the woman. “So why don’t you send me back?”

“Huh?” the woman said.

“Send me back,” Hannah said. “If I’m not good enough to do an assessment, send me back.”

“Whoa,” the man said.

“You’re serious?” the woman said.

“You know what would have been better?” Hannah said. “It would have been better if I hadn’t been picked up at 10 o’clock for a 2 o’clock assessment. And it would have been better if I hadn’t had my hands cuffed behind me since then. And if Marsha had left the protocol in my cage so I could at least have used my feet to turn the pages and go through it.”

“No contraband in the cages,” the woman said.

“It’s not contraband, it’s an assessment protocol.”

“Which one is it?” the woman asked.

“The Smithfield. The Smithfield Protocol.”

“Why did you choose that one?”

“I didn’t, my owner did,” Hannah said, almost physically biting her tongue to keep from saying something that could get her into trouble. But she felt like she knew her limits here, that she was acting in accordance with the calculations she was learning to make when interacting with various kinds of free people. These two, the man and the woman, were managing the boy who was for sale. They were outside agents, not facility staff; they were just here to move a transaction forward. And one could take liberties with them one couldn’t with others you might meet in places like these.

“Why did your owner pick the Smithfield?” the woman asked.

“Why don’t you ask her?” Hannah said.

The woman aimed her dark brown eyes at Hannah’s blue ones.

“Okay, do over,” she said, drawing in a breath. “I’m Rashanna.”

“Hi, Rashanna, I need to be uncuffed,” Hannah said, and she turned to show the woman her bound wrists.

“That’s a staff thing.”

“Is there a reason you haven’t called them yet?” Hannah asked.

“We just got here.”

Hannah looked at the clock. 2:04.

“You’re late.”

“And this is Byron,” she said, pointing to the man, still standing at the table, eyebrows raised in surprise.

“My business here is with him,” Hannah said, nodding toward the naked, chained male, who was watching the proceedings with an air of amusement, his hands still covering his genitals.

“You’re Franklin, right?” Hannah asked.

“Yup.”

“Are you ready to be assessed?” Hannah asked.

“I think so.”

“Have you been assessed before?”

“Not really.”

“Have you had an orgasm in the last 24 hours?”

“No, they caged me,” he said, pulling his hands away to reveal a wire cup over his genitals.

“Okay,” Hannah said, “we can start as soon as, um, Rashanna and Byron decide to get everything off.”

“It says two 6-foot tethers on a ring, or a 12-foot chain they both wear on an ankle,” said Byron, leafing through the protocol. “And she’ll need some supplies.”

Byron walked over to Rashanna with his thumb pressed against the middle of the first sheet, and Rashanna pulled her phone out of her pocket, turned her back and whispered into it.

Hannah looked at the clock. It featured a sweep second hand, one of the things she would need.

“Let’s get started, Franklin,” Hannah said, nodding to the table, and she stepped over to it and kicked a chair out to sit on, and Franklin sat across from her.

He wasn’t quite what Hannah expected as someone Athena would choose. He wasn’t as cute as the boy Athena had on her phone the other day. He looked more serious, a little stocky and about Hannah’s height, with strawberry blond hair, short and wavy, and blue eyes. No, he wasn’t beautiful the way Athena would like, but he was beautiful to Hannah. Thoughtful, deep. Mysterious perhaps, with earnest eyes, that could see through anything.

Hannah turned from Franklin to Byron.

“I need the pages set so I can read them,” she said.

Byron arranged the three sheets of the protocol before her. Franklin glanced at them.

“Don’t read them,” she said, leaning over to continue her review of the protocol where she’d left off, at step 7. “They’re supposed to be a surprise.”

Byron nodded, leaned back, his chains rattling, his face still registering uncertainty.

“Where are you from?” she asked, forcing herself to pivot from impatience with everyone who wasn’t a slave to the reason she was here.

“This is starting?” Franklin asked.

“Yes,” Hannah said, glancing at the clock. “2:06. We can talk for up to 10 minutes, since we don’t know each other. That’s one of the steps.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’m Franklin Fulmer.”

“How old are you?”

“25.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “That’s older than me. The girl I’m assessing you for is still in high school.”

Franklin raised his eyebrows, and Hannah was beginning to wonder if the look was not just uncertainty or concern, but full-on panic.

“And she owns you?” he asked.

“No,” Hannah replied, “her parents do.”

“What’s your family like?” he asked.

“They’re not my family,” Hannah said. “They own me. And they’re fine. Normal. I was bought for the boy, and he’s sweet. And they let me go to school.”

“You’re in school?” he asked.

“Yeah, just online for now. But I’m hoping to attend classes in Corpus Christie in the spring.”

“In what?”

“Let me ask you some questions,” Hannah said.

“Sorry.”

“How did you end up here?” Hannah asked.

“I’m a family bond,” he said, smiling, as if he knew the expression meant nothing.

“A family bond? What’s that?”

“Have you heard of Fulmer Interiors?”

“No.”

“Most people haven’t, but it’s a family business, a really big company with 11 factories, and it’s gone into bankruptcy.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“It’s not the end of the world. We’re in restructuring. And Granpa got better terms if he put me up.”

“Put you up?”

“Here.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked. “I’m lost.”

“With me as bond, it’s a 10-year at 60-on-the-dollar, without me its 7 and 40.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

“Okay, that’s probably more information than you need, sorry. Bottom line, if Granpa gets things over margin in two years, he buys me back at 40 percent.”

“Okay, wait,” Hannah said. “He thinks he’s going to buy you back in two years?”

“It’ll be in the contract,” Franklin said. “If he can, he will, and whoever buys me has to give me back to him, and they’ll make a little off it.”

“Does Athena know about this?”

“Who’s Athena?” Franklin asked.

“The girl who’s considering buying you.”

“I don’t know,” Byron said. “I don’t know what people know. I’ve been lying in a cage for four days.”

“Here?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah.”

Hannah looked at Franklin, trying to reconcile what he was telling her with what she thought she knew about things.

“Your parents are okay with this?”

“It’s between me and Granpa.”

“But aren’t they upset, at least?”

“Probably.”

Hannah leaned forward to read the tag that dangled from Franklin’s collar: “Male, Breeding,” it said.

Breeding? she wondered to herself.

“Are you rich?” she asked.

“No. I was. I’m not today.”

“Did you go to school?”

“Yeah.”

“Where?”

“Yale. Then Harvard Divinity.”

Hannah looked over at Rashanna and Byron, certain someone was playing a joke on her. Both of them were just tapping on their phones, leaning against the wall.

“You look confused,” Franklin said.

“I am. I really don’t understand your situation. I’m not sure you’re not joking with me.”

“No one gets it,” he said. “But does it matter?”

“I guess it doesn’t,” Hannah said. “I’m just supposed to be doing an assessment, and it starts with introductions, but I’m probably not supposed

to worry if you don't give normal answers. If Athena doesn't like your, um, situation, that's her problem."

Franklin smiled. "You don't like Athena," he said.

"It's more complicated than that. I'm kind of mad at her right now, because today isn't going that well, but—"

"I noticed," Franklin said.

"It might be the same for you," Hannah warned, shuffling uncomfortably in her seat, clenching and opening her hands to make sure she wasn't losing feeling in them. "If you're doing this voluntarily, you might find out it's—"

"How did you end up here?" he asked.

"You might find out it's terrible."

"Today hasn't been bad," he said, smiling.

Hannah frowned. "You know your tag says breeding, right?"

"Yes."

"So you might end up making a bunch of new Franklins you'll never—"

"Franklin ones."

"Huh?"

"I'm Franklin Fulmer the Third. I won't be making Franklin threes. I'll be making copies of my grandfather, Franklin one. Franklin Fulmer the First."

"Because he's the one who started that company?" Hannah said, eyes wide. "They think they'll be getting children like him?"

"That's the theory," Franklin said, unsmiling. "That's how I'll be packaged, most likely."

"I think Athena wants you for recreation, though," Hannah said.

"They're not mutually exclusive," he asserted.

"She's got an IUD in now," Hannah said. "But I guess she could have it taken out."

Franklin nodded, as if he believed Hannah was being serious.

"Maybe she'll have twins," Hannah said. "And they'll start wearing three-piece suits when they learn to walk, and they'll start their first company when they're in kindergarten."

Hannah laughed, Franklin remained sober.

"What about your mom, though?" Hannah said, "what—"

"Hungarian nobility."

“I didn’t know Hungary had any nobility.”

“Not officially, but there’s paperwork.”

“And people care about that?”

“Yes, some do.”

Hannah bit her lip and looked at the clock.

“How did you end up here?” he asked again.

“My mom went broke. Really broke. So they came and took everything one morning. And I was part of what they took.”

“That’s worse than anything that’s happened to me.”

“So far,” Hannah said. “You haven’t met Athena yet.”

Franklin leaned back and laughed, but his laughter came a little weak, a little nervous, Hannah thought. He closed his mouth and leaned forward, raising his eyes sympathetically.

“When were you taken?” he asked.

“A little over a year ago.”

“Have you been okay?”

“I’m doing fine,” Hannah said.

“You’re not what I expected,” he said.

“People say that,” Hannah noted. “I wonder if Athena wants a tutor?”

“Where is she in school?”

“In high school. In Dallas. She’s a senior. I used to tutor her, and then I got kennel — I got moved here.”

“You aren’t living with the family?”

“No, not that much. Maybe for holidays. I’m not sure. But the son goes here, so I’m with him.”

“So, if they bought me — ”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

“Yes?”

“Yes, we’d probably get mated.”

“Mated?”

“There’s a cage downstairs there, at the family’s house in Dallas. Or two cages, with a door between them. I stay on one side when I’m there, and they bring people to stay on the other side, but — ”

“People?”

“Slaves. A girl the grandmother owns. A boy a family owns.”

“A girl?”

“Yes. So, if you were on the other side, and they left the door open . . .”

Hannah heard a key in the door to their room, looked up to see a female staff person enter, pushing a cart.

Chapter 9: The Assessment Begins

“Free her wrists,” Rashanna said, pointing to Hannah.

Hannah stood and looked down at Franklin while her hands were released. The worker set the cuffs on her cart with a clunk and moved assessment supplies from cart to table – two pens, a tape measure, lubricant.

Hannah rubbed her wrists and shoulders, sat and put her hands on the protocol sheets with relief. She hated not being able to touch what she was reading.

“Okay, we’ve talked enough, so step 7’s done,” she said, running her finger through the list, starting at the top. “You washed thoroughly today?”

“Yes.”

“No drugs or alcohol?”

“None,” he replied, smiling.

“Okay, Step 8, says we can have up to three witnesses. Rashanna, are you witnessing?”

“Yeah, just me and Byron.”

“Step nine is how we’re restrained,” Hannah continued. “What are we doing there?”

“12-foot tether you’ll both be on,” Rashanna said. “And it needs to be looped through a floor ring.”

Hannah stood, picked up the protocol and, still in her shackles, shuffled to the mattress. She sat down, motioning Franklin to join her. The staffer pulled a long chain off the cart, a cuff at either end, and slid it through a ring set into the floor. Hannah held out her left ankle, the staffer closed a cuff around it and removed her shackles. Franklin followed suit, his ankle was cuffed, and his chains came off.

“Can you free his penis now?” Hannah said.

Franklin leaned back, the staffer opened the collar around his scrotum and eased the genital cage off, his penis quickly hardening to its

full size, and Hannah understood at that moment at least one of the reasons Athena had chosen him for an assessment.

“Okay, Step 10,” Hannah said. “Supplies. I need a pen.”

Rashanna brought her one from the table.

“And a tape measure. And lubricant.”

Rashanna delivered the other two items.

“When do you think you’ll want us back?” the staffer asked, standing at the door.

“Less than an hour,” Hannah said. “But I can’t say more exactly than that.”

The staffer slipped out the door and locked it.

“Step 11,” Hannah said, talking to herself at this point. “I just make sure . . . all supplies on hand, restraints applied. Okay.” She looked at Franklin. “You’re mentally and physically ready to be assessed?”

“Yes,” he said, his expression pure bemusement.

“Now, for Step 12, I’m supposed to read something to you, exactly as it’s written.”

“Okay,” Franklin agreed

“The assessment,” Hannah began, reading the protocol, turning to Franklin, turning back to the sheets in her hand, “will consist of a series of 18 tasks, which are to be attempted in a specified order and must be completed within 40 minutes. After a task has been read to you, with its sequential number and time limit, you will have four options. You may ask for it to be read again, you may decline to attempt the task, you may perform the task, or you may ask for clarification. If you decline the task, you will receive no points. If you perform the task immediately, you will receive one point. If you ask for clarification or a second reading, you will receive a half a point.

“Following completion of the task, you will receive a multiplier of 1 to 5, based on my objective assessment of your performance. A multiplier of 1 indicates incomplete or minimal performance. A multiplier of 5 indicates optimal performance.

“You will not ask me for my opinion of your multiplier. You will not argue with me about what your multiplier should be. If you cannot perform or complete a task, we will move on to the next task. You are not required to perform every task to receive a score. Do not get frustrated or anxious. Stay focused on completing those tasks you can.”

Hannah scanned the next paragraph, drew in her breath and tried to forget she was talking to a boy who went to Yale and got a divinity degree. What was a divinity degree anyway? Did it mean he wanted to be a priest? Or a minister? And if so, how did he feel about what he was doing today?

“Many tasks will require you to maintain an erect penis, so you are encouraged to refrain from orgasm if that will reduce penis rigidity. Note that the 17th task is ejaculating up my vagina. If you experience an orgasm prior to that task and lose your erection, or lose your erection for any other reason, you will be given up to five minutes to restore your erection. If you are unable to do so, we will move to the next task where an erection is not required, and you will be given a 0 for all missed tasks.

“Immediately following orgasm, you must notify me that you have done so, and I will check at that time for semen. You will receive a full five points for each verified orgasm, for up to 15 points, or three orgasms. There is no limit to the number of times you may ejaculate during our session, but keep in mind the assessment time limit is 40 minutes.

“If I determine that you are unable or unwilling to make a sincere effort to complete the assessment, I may at my discretion terminate the assessment and score you at 0. You may request another Female, but my determination is final and ends our assessment.

“You are not required to bring me to orgasm and should not attempt to do so. I may experience an involuntary orgasm, in which case I will do my best to continue the assessment without interruption. Or I may find it necessary to relieve myself to effectively continue the assessment, in which case I will pause the assessment for no more than two minutes to masturbate. If I am unable to climax within that time, you may ask that the assessment be rescheduled. If you request to be rescheduled, I may at my discretion assist you in achieving orgasm during the current assessment, should you request it, but I am not required to do so.”

Hannah looked at Franklin, raised an eyebrow. This was her first reading of this part of the protocol, and she found the language strange, stilted.

“Everything make sense?” she asked him.

“It does,” he said, and there was shock in his face again. Guarded arousal too, perhaps, but mostly the expression of a stunned man.

Hannah forged ahead.

“We have up to 40 minutes to get everything done,” she said, and she pointed to the clock. “It’s 2:26 now, so that means 3:06.”

She looked at the protocol.

“Task 1, 2 minutes,” she said. “Partners may at Male's discretion sit or lie on the mattress for full mouth kissing.”

She looked at Franklin. He looked back at her.

“Now?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

He reached up, tentatively, uncertainly, and wrapped his arm her shoulder. She closed her eyes and waited, feeling the brush of his fingers against her cheek, feeling him turn her face gently toward him, feeling his lips on hers, softly at first, then harder, and she opened her mouth and took him in.

Everything was mechanical at this point, the touching of mouths and tongues within a two-minute time limit, and Hannah found herself completely unaroused. After what felt like the full two minutes, she pulled her mouth away from Franklin’s and looked at the protocol.

“Task 2, 1 minute,” she said, taking a quick peek at Franklin’s penis to confirm he was still fully erect, “Male stimulates Female's breasts and nipples manually and by mouth.”

Franklin was gentle again, cupping Hannah’s right breast with his hand, squeezing it, pinching her nipple. It felt good, and she arched her back, closed her eyes and breathed in, trying to focus on the sensations and not the protocol driving them. She felt the first pump of lubricant warming her vagina, and she wondered if the fluid in the bottle would be necessary, at least for her front chamber.

Her eyes still closed, she felt Franklin raise her breast, envelop the nipple within his mouth, suck her firming bud. She arched forward and brought her feet against the mattress, the chain on her left ankle sliding against the floor.

“Okay,” she said, a little huskily, “wait a second, I need to write some things down.”

Hannah slid her hand across the mattress to the pen, clicked it and gave Franklin the full point plus the full five-point multiplier for each of the first two tasks.

Rashanna and Byron were both absorbed with their phones, Hannah noted with relief, leaning against the wall at the other end of the room.

“Task 3, 1 minute,” Hannah read. “Male achieves erection, if necessary by manual stimulation; the Female may assist by hand only.”

Hannah looked at Franklin’s member, still firm and waiting, sticking up between his thighs.

“Okay, that’s taken care of,” she said.

“So, task 4 is 1 minute,” she continued. “Okay it says, um, Female will inspect the penis, for, um, infections, open wounds or other irregularities.”

Hannah blushed and turned to Franklin, but he retained his composure as he dropped the thigh closest to her to the mattress and allowed her to reach down, peer at his organ, raise it, turn it, press his hair down to make sure all was as it should be. More than once, his penis quivered at her touch, and she noticed a thin drop of fluid at his opening.

Finding nothing of concern, Hannah continued, “Task 5, 1 minute. Using the tape measure, the Female will measure the length of the erect penis along the top, starting at the base of the penis and including the tip or head.”

Hannah reached for the tape measure while Franklin rose to his knees, penis bobbing. Hannah raised herself before him, reached down, grabbed the underside of his shaft and put the tape measure where the end of the penis met the bottom of his belly, stretching it to his tip.

Six and three eighths inch.

“Female will measure the circumference of the erect penis at the thickest point,” she read aloud, and Franklin held still while she wrapped the tape measure around the part of his shaft a few inches behind his full, circumcised head.

Five and an eighth inch.

She wrote both measurements down, continued reading the protocol, which asked her to “note any unusual features, e.g. bending, large tip, scars etc.” She found nothing, so she continued.

“Task 6, 1 minute,” she said. “Male stands, Female kneels, and Male uses slow, even strokes to thrust his penis into Female's mouth.”

Franklin stood and Hannah knelt before him and looked up. She recognized the tension in his mouth, the half-closed eyes, as the face of a boy who is in deep arousal, so she returned her attention to his manhood, tilted her head down and opened her mouth.

Franklin's first thrust was slow, but not uncertain now, and Hannah sensed an eagerness here as the tip of his penis reached her tongue and his shaft slid within her lips. He continued to push until his head reached the back of her throat and she grunted for him to stop.

He withdrew until just his tip lay within her mouth, pushed back in to the depth of Hannah's grunt, and repeated, his interpretation of "slow, even thrusts" matching Hannah's, and she decided he would earn another 5 on this task.

Hannah, mouth opened wide for Franklin's next thrust, glanced at the clock. She was losing track of time, but she was sure at least a minute had passed. Still holding the protocol, she pulled away from Franklin's penis and looked down at the document.

"Task 7, 2 minutes," she read. "Female lies on her back and the Male kneels between her legs to orally stimulate her vaginal lips, clitoris and mound."

Hannah dropped to her back, lifted up on her elbows and raised and parted her legs while Franklin positioned himself between her knees.

The chain that joined her ankle to his remained slack, but she suspected position changes were coming and the chain would have to be managed. Franklin didn't seem to need much managing, however, maintaining his arousal while he carried out each assigned task. She looked at the clock, saw the second hand was sweeping past the :15, felt Franklin's mouth on her vulva, tongue running the length of her lips, from her hole to her clitoris, with a stroke or two against her thick, golden hair before returning to her pink slit.

"Mmm," she said quietly, lying back to stare at the ceiling, turning to the clock, noting that the second hand was rounding :00, probably for the second time.

Still flat on her back, Hannah held the protocol over her face.

"Task 8, 1 minute," she said a little hoarsely. "Remaining in position, Male inserts his tongue between Female's vaginal lips and uses slow, even licking motions within Female's opening."

Franklin immediately went to work, the sound of his tongue slicking against her vulva, and the maddening smoothness of every stroke, telling her she was oozing fluid now.

Hannah, trying to keep focused on completing the job before her and not get lost in the pleasures of oral attention, wondered if the protocol

sometimes failed because the boy didn't like the girl, or didn't like the way she did her part, or didn't like the taste of her vagina.

Franklin seemed to like how she tasted, though.

Why did he study divinity?

"Task 9, 1 minute," Hannah said, the protocol wrinkling as she gripped it and held it before her eyes. "Remaining in position, Male orally stimulates the Female's anus, including insertion of tongue."

She set down the protocol, raised her pelvis and lay back, reaching down with both hands to spread her buttocks.

Franklin was pausing, Hannah sensed. The tongue and penis that had been delivered quickly so far wasn't landing.

She looked at the clock, the secondhand sweeping :40. When it made a full circle, she'd just move on to the next task and give him a 0 for this one. But after 20 seconds of hesitation, as the second hand passed :00, she felt Franklin's tongue at her rear entrance, barely touching, just a few perfunctory licks, and no insertion.

After 40 seconds of his feeble efforts, Hannah dropped her pelvis to the floor and propped herself on one elbow.

"Let me get some scores down," she said, picking up the protocol, reaching for the pen. She looked back at him, crouched, penis still fully-engorged, eyes on something far away.

She gave him a five for every task but the last one, scoring him a 2 there. If Athena wanted full tongue-to-anus penetration during every round of foreplay, Franklin might not be her man, Hannah thought.

"Task 10, 1 minute," Hannah continued. "Remaining in position, Male uses slow, even strokes to thrust his penis up Female's vagina."

Franklin returned to form, rising up on his knees, planting one hand beside Hannah's waist, spreading her lips with the other hand, lowering his penis to her opening and thrusting within her.

"Ahhh," Hannah sighed, wrapping her arms around Franklin's waist and raising her hole to meet his first deep thrust.

"Is this where I cum?" he grunted, pulling out and pushing back in.

"You can if you have to," Hannah croaked back, "but you're supposed to stay hard for a few more tasks."

"Oh, boulders," he said, demonstrating anything but "slow, even strokes" as he pounded her vagina, Hannah gasping with every insertion.

It took more than a minute, but less than two, for him to find relief inside her body, his penis swelling as his rocking member delivered five quick jolts of semen to the depths of her chamber.

Hannah reached up and pulled his mouth to hers, and for a time, the protocol was forgotten, broken, violated entirely while the assessment partners allowed nature to reign, forcing their mouths together while Franklin continued to writhe within Hannah's front chamber and she rocked against him, pressing her clitoris against the bones of his pelvis, once, twice, three times more, before her own orgasm tore through her body and mind and she spasmed and whispered desperately to no one but herself, "ohjesusohjesusohelpmegodohnnohno."

Calming now, assessor and assessee stared at each other, Franklin above, Hannah looking up at him, both breathing in, breathing out, Hannah's mind working randomly through carnal matters and the science of sex, and she guessed he was doing the same thing.

After one last shallow thrust, Franklin pulled his penis out of Hannah's vagina, rose, fell back to a squat, looked at Hannah with disappointment.

"Sorry about all that," he said.

Hannah propped herself on her elbows, lowered her legs to the mattress, calves resting against Franklin's knees.

"It happens," she said.

"So we're done, I failed?"

Hannah laughed, the shake of her diaphragm forcing out a dollop of Franklin's semen.

"You didn't listen to the instructions," she said.

"I heard most of them," he said.

Hannah peered at the protocol, still gripped tightly, wrinkles and creases spread across the sheet.

"Many tasks will require you to maintain an erect penis," Hannah read. "Remember that part?"

"Now I do."

"So you are encouraged to refrain from orgasm if that will reduce penis rigidity."

She and Franklin both looked at his penis, hanging wet, satisfied and limp between his thighs.

“Note that the 17th task is ejaculating up my vagina,” she continued reading. “If you experience an orgasm prior to that task and lose your erection, or lose your erection for any other reason, you will be given up to five minutes to restore your erection. If you are unable to do so, we will move to the next task where an erection is not required, and you will be given a 0 for all missed tasks.”

Hannah looked at the clock.

“It’s 2:41,” she said. “So if you can get your erection back by 2:46, we can continue with task 11.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” he said, looking at his penis.

“Is it possible?” Hannah asked. “I mean, have you ever gotten an erection that soon after an orgasm?”

“I have,” he said, looking down at her. “What’s the next task?”

“Task 11, 2 minutes,” Hannah read. “Female remains in position, male reverses position, placing his penis into Female's mouth and orally stimulating Female's vaginal lips, clitoris and mound.”

“Do you want that?” Franklin asked.

“It’s completely irrelevant,” Hannah said.

“I don’t think it is.”

“Explain,” she said.

“I’m not sure what I’m doing here,” he said.

“You’re being assessed,” Hannah said. She knew he meant the question more broadly, but she didn’t want to get that far off track.

“No,” he said, not so easily dissuaded. “That’s the proximate matter, but there’s a higher morality here, there are macro issues I’m working on now, that I probably should have . . . already thought about.”

Hannah looked up at him, and for a moment, their eyes met, and there was no lust here, just two intelligent beings – or at least one intelligent being, Hannah thought, because she knew he was very bright and she wasn’t sure about herself – trying to make sense of their strange places in a strange world.

If love was possible in this life, the meeting of eyes was its foundation, she thought.

Not the meeting of sex organs.

“Don’t you ever question—?” he began.

“All the time,” Hannah whispered, with a quick glance at Rashanna and Byron. “Every day.”

“How can you do this, then?” he asked.

“Assess you?”

“No. How can you have sex with a stranger? How can you —”

“I like sex,” Hannah said. “Don’t you?”

“You know it’s more than —”

“Why did you study divinity?” Hannah asked.

“To find God. To get a job.”

“Did you?” she asked.

Franklin laughed and ran his hands up and down along his thighs.

“No. I completely lost him. No. On both counts.”

“For me,” Hannah said, “having an orgasm is sort of like God. And I just leave it at that.”

“That’s brilliant.”

“No it’s not, but thank you,” Hannah said. “It used to be simple. I believed. I had questions, but I believed. And then . . . everything happened. And none of it fit. And then . . . I cum.”

“So you’ve had god this morning.”

“Don’t put it that way,” Hannah said. “It sounds sacrilegious.”

“You know what I meant.”

“You’re going to learn things too,” Hannah said. “That will add to your divinity degree. Or take away from it.”

“I’m sure there are things you could teach me.”

“Probably not,” Hannah said. “So, do you want to try to do everything else?”

“What else is left?”

Hannah, still on her back, legs spread and resting on either side of Franklin’s, rose to one elbow and leafed through the second and third pages.

“We’re at task 11, where we do oral together, and then there are, uh, seven more.”

“Do you want oral?”

Hannah looked up at Franklin and chased the retorts out of her mind.

“Yes,” she said simply, and she raised her wet vulva slightly, and opened her legs no more than an inch, two subtle gestures even the witnesses in the room might not notice.

Franklin noticed, however. And his penis noticed, his tip arcing up, slowly but inexorably.

Hannah glanced at the clock. It had been six minutes. Close enough.

“You’re going to need a little more chain,” Hannah said, pointing to the place where their tether ran through the ring in the floor.

Franklin stood, and Hannah slid across the mattress, moving her left ankle closer to the ring so Franklin could draw the excess through it, the links sliding with a metallic growl. He was at full attention now, penis bobbing.

“Some advice,” Hannah said, as Franklin fell to his hands and knees beside her shoulder. “When you’re doing sex in a restraint, it’s not just about how much chain you have. It’s where it goes, too. Don’t let it drag across your partner’s body. Don’t leave it where she might end up lying down on it.”

“Not something they taught us at Harvard,” Franklin confessed.

“You have to go to advanced slave university for stuff like that,” she said.

Franklin pushed the chain off the mattress, crouched and lowered his mouth to Hannah’s, the two exchanging a brief, open-mouthed kiss.

“That not a task,” Hannah said, pulling away after a half a minute, and she smiled because something happened in her mind she didn’t understand when their mouths touched.

“That one was God,” he said, rising, lifting his leg over Hannah’s face, forcing her arms straight by her sides, pushing his penis into position, his tip an inch or two above her mouth.

She lifted her mouth to lick his head, moved her tongue up his shaft, swallowed his cock, rising until his tip reached the back of her throat, and she drew in her breath as Franklin’s mouth found her slit, licking her lips, pushing his tongue inside, tasting her again now that she was flavored with his semen.

Hannah allowed herself to lose track of time, tasting her vagina on Franklin, enjoying his attention, allowing more time than outlined to pass this way, certain Athena would not begrudge her a little unscheduled pleasure with the boy she might buy.

“Okay, okay,” she said after another three to four minutes, dropping her pelvis and turning her head. “Here, lift your knee up so I can see what’s next.”

Franklin complied, and Hannah bent her elbow and glanced at the protocol while his penis hung inches from her cheek.

“Task 12, 1 minute. Remaining in position, Male orally stimulates the Female's anus, including insertion of tongue.”

Chapter 10: A Strange Finish

Hannah spread her legs and raised her pelvis and guessed this would be another low score, Franklin performing a few half-hearted strokes of his tongue after he'd spent half a minute screwing up his courage, but he surprised her, immediately delivering his tongue to her rear opening, licking it with passion, then driving in so fiercely Hannah jerked and spasmed before she returned her hole to position and her mouth to Franklin's penis, licking around the head and shaft while he brought high passion to the opening she considered her most private.

A minute passed, maybe two, before Hannah remembered her role, dropped her head and pelvis and returned to the protocol.

“Task 13, 2 minutes,” she announced with a heavy breath. “Female rises to hands and knees, Male kneels behind Female and uses slow, even strokes to thrust his penis up Female's vagina.”

Franklin climbed off and stood and Hannah turned over, rising to her hands and knees, positioning her chain so Franklin wouldn't kneel on it, and she looked back at him, expectantly.

He quickly earned another 5 in that position, kneeling, spreading her lips and mounting her, pushing his organ up her chamber in one deft motion, and Hannah allowed herself a long, quiet groan of pleasure tinged with pain, her sheath beginning to ache under the unceasing stimulation of the assessment.

After at least two minutes of thrusting, she lowered her head and forced herself to read the wrinkled sheet she held against the mattress.

“Task 14, 1 minute,” she said hoarsely. “Remaining in position, Male uses slow, even strokes to thrust at least three inches of his penis up Female's anus.”

Hannah sucked in her breath and grimaced. Allain never used her anus, nor did any other lover except one family friend, once during an overnight visit, and his penis was smaller than Franklin's. It wasn't

something she liked, especially when the friend came, bucking against her and plumbing her bowels.

But there were just four tasks after this, and none involved her anus.

Franklin withdrew from her vagina and Hannah widened her legs and angled her pelvis down, positioning her rear hole where her vaginal opening had been.

She felt Franklin's tip there, felt him pressing, sensed the natural lubricant coating his tip, and did her best to relax.

Franklin pushed slowly, stopping when his head was lodged within Hannah's body and the girl was moaning quietly, "oo, oo, oo, oo, oo."

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Keep going," she panted. "We're almost done. But try to stop at three inches."

"Hannah, do you want some lubricant?" Rashanna asked, kneeling beside the mattress with the bottle in her hand.

"Yeah, yeah," Hannah grunted with surprise. She'd assumed Rashanna was present in body only, all her attention on her phone.

"Franklin, don't pull out," Hannah said, sensing he was about to withdraw. She didn't want to be impaled again. "Just have her put it on your shaft right outside my hole."

Hannah heard the quiet suck of the bottle's cap opening, and then the gurgle of tiny air bubbles as Rashanna squeezed out a liberal helping of lubricant across Franklin's penis, some of it dripping onto her flesh, stretched tight around Franklin's erection. Hannah felt fingers spreading the lubricant over the penis and around her rear opening.

He eased his penis further into her chamber, eased back, repeating with shallow thrusts until the lubricant had worked its way up to his tip and down his shaft, Hannah's anus embracing him almost comfortably now.

Hannah watched the clock as Franklin gently completed the 14th task, earning a 5 on the strength of his gentleness alone.

"Okay, out, oh my god, out," Hannah gasped.

Franklin withdrew and put his hand on her rear, as if to comfort her.

"Task 15, 2 minutes," she said, determined now to reach the finish. "Male washes his penis thoroughly."

Hannah looked at Rashanna, still crouched beside the mattress. She knew it could take five or 10 minutes for a staffer to show up with the keys

and chains necessary to get Franklin securely to the sink to wash his penis, and then back to Hannah.

“You’ve got hand sanitizer, right?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah,” Rashanna said, pulling a small bottle out of her pocket.

“Okay, and there are wipes in my cage,” Hannah said. “Can you bring me four or five?”

Rashanna grabbed the wipes, returned and handed them and the sanitizer to Hannah.

Franklin held out his hand, but Hannah continued clutching them.

“I’ll do this,” she said. “It’s my vagina we’re protecting.”

Franklin leaned back and Hannah gripped his penis at the base, upending Rashanna’s bottle, coating his penis with it, and she laughed when the cold liquid made him flinch, penis pulling away so quickly it slipped out of her hand. She cleaned from base to tip methodically with the first wipe, dropping it to the floor, repeating the process until all five wipes had been deposited in a little pile beside the mattress.

“Task 16, 2 minutes,” Hannah said, “Male lies on his back, Female straddles male, accepts his penis up her vagina, and slides up and down Male's penis with slow, even movements.”

Mindful of the chain that ran from his ankle to Hannah’s, Franklin carefully positioned himself as instructed, his penis raised at 45 degrees.

Hannah clambered over him, looking between her legs, placing two fingers against his tip and guiding him into her chamber.

“Oh, damn, damn,” Hannah said, her whole sheath screaming around Franklin’s thick member.

He immediately pushed against her hips with his hands and bucked under her, attempting to withdraw.

“No,” she said emphatically, pushing his hands away, “I’m fine, let me finish.”

“I’m hurting you,” he protested, grabbing her thighs.

“It stung for a second, now it just feels good,” she said, honestly for the most part, and she lifted herself slowly and dropped back down, the pleasure far more intense than the pain on this second insertion.

“Oh, godjesus,” she grunted. “Oh, goddam.”

She looked at Franklin and smiled and he smiled back, both able to appreciate the irony of her profanities even through their wet coupling.

“I have no idea what this is assessing,” she grunted, smiling again, feeling almost giddy now, her job almost done, her carnal senses overwhelmed.

“You,” Franklin said.

“We’re not . . .” Hannah gasped, rising and falling quickly, hungrily. “We’re not . . .” she repeated, trying to form the next words as something at her middle began distracting her, “we’re not . . . here . . . nogodno . . . for that . . . ohgodnopleasenojesussaveme.”

The orgasm burst from the tortured core of her clitoris without warning, expanding outward from there like a cataclysm of universe-birthing proportions, her hips rocking, her belly shaking, her thighs and breasts bouncing, her vagina clenching Franklin’s shaft while she continued to pray obscenely, and he groaned out and drove upward, forcing himself all the way into her slot, the two bodies remaining joined that way while Hannah shook through the spasming finish of her climax and he began his, jet after jet of cream filling her sex, his mouth opening to release the guttural cries of a male in uncontrollable ecstasy.

Still panting, she dropped the protocol and leaned forward to rest her hands on his shoulders, digging in her red-polished nails and smiling down at him with a face she knew must look like madness while he gazed up at her with the same expression.

They continued to stare into each other’s eyes, far longer Hannah thought, than normal people stared that way, and she realized she was looking for something, an answer of some kind, or the presence of God, or whatever else brought enlightenment, and she wondered what he was looking for, and if he was finding it, in the blue irises that embraced her black pupils in eyes set beneath black eyebrows.

“Okay,” Hannah sighed, breaking the spell by necessity, because the world continued to spin, their bodies continued to function, and the strength of their coupling was a power only unto themselves, society unimpressed, unaware, and unlikely to pause or revoke the rules that required them very soon to return to chains and cages.

“Almost done,” she said, collecting herself and striving to speak evenly, retrieving the third page of the protocol, clutching it in a fist as it rested against Franklin’s shoulder.

“Task 17, 5 minutes,” she read, and laughed. “I think we’ve got this one covered.”

“What’s it say?” he asked weakly.

“I mentioned task 17 before,” Hannah said between deep intakes of breath. “Male, if he has not yet ejaculated, may ejaculate up Female's vagina or, with her approval, within her mouth or rectum, or by any other means that she approves.”

Hannah paused, the words so irrelevant now they seemed like a foreign language.

“Male may thrust at any rate,” she continued, smiling at him. “Female may, if she is experiencing discomfort, request lubricant or terminate this task, at which point Male may use any alternative means to achieve orgasm approved by the female; the Male does not require Female's approval to masturbate.”

Hannah felt a twitch within her vagina, realized that Franklin was still buried within her, penis still hard, still alive.

“Could you cum again?” she asked.

“With enough time,” he whispered. “Yes.”

“I believe you,” she whispered back, “but I’m only counting two.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “We’re done then?”

“No,” Hannah said, sliding her hair behind her ears with one hand while she held the protocol with the other. “One more. Task 18, 5 minutes. After ejaculation, Male will demonstrate proper follow through, lying beside Female for kissing, touching, fondling and/or discussion of the assessment; Female may offer input at this point, which Male will graciously accept.”

Hannah lifted up, watching as Franklin’s still-firm member dropped out of her chamber and fell against his belly with a wet thud.

She tumbled to his side, the chain around her ankle clinking against the mattress, and he turned toward her, putting his mouth against hers as if they were starting the assessment anew, their tongues wrestling, their mouths open as if sharing the same air, breath after breath, eyes open, looking for answers.

He put his hand against her right breast, pinching her nipple, but without lust, more as an act of curiosity, or as if he were trying to feel her heart.

“I’m ready for your input,” he said quietly.

“Stay awake,” she blurted without pondering her words. “I’m coming for you.”

“What?” he said, and his hand slid to her other breast in a gesture that felt to Hannah like he was looking for some way to cling to her, looking for a handle.

“I’m not done with you yet,” she said.

This was strange. All of this had become very strange. Hannah didn’t understand what was happening anymore. This was supposed to be an assessment. Just an assessment.

“Never forget,” she added, rising above him on an elbow and closing her eyes to try to hold in the tears, too late to keep one from running along her nose and falling onto Franklin’s chest with a tiny plop, audible only to the two of them and whatever being presided over moments like this.

Hannah looked at Rashanna with something akin to mad fury in her eyes, because she knew what must happen next.

“We’re done,” she announced.

Rashanna tapped on her phone, and Hannah looked down at Franklin, lying on his back, gazing up at her in wonder.

“I have known a lot of brilliant people,” he said.

“Okay.”

“I have never met anyone better at compartmentalizing.”

“Compartmentalizing?”

“Yes, you know what it means?”

“Yes.”

“In less than an hour: anger, despair, lust, orgasm,” he said, wrapping his hand around her shoulder. “And that goddamned protocol.”

Hannah looked at the ragged sheets in her hand, laughed.

“You did very well,” she said. “I have no input.”

Hannah heard the key at the door. It opened and a male staff person entered.

“Her first,” Rashanna said, pointing at Hannah.

Hannah crawled over Franklin, minding her ankle chain, staring down at him until she reached the edge of the mattress. She set her feet on the floor and held still while the staffer shackled her and opened up her ankle chain.

She stood, clutching the protocol and, in an act of persistent hope, held out her hands before her.

“These go on behind,” the staffer said.

She turned and put her hands behind her, and he secured her as before, in a pair of cuffs bolted to each other.

She stepped over to her cage and sat on the steel floor. The staffer raised the side, lowered the top, latched everything closed and taped an envelope to the wire.

“Chains and penis cage,” Rashanna said, pointing to Franklin.

While the staffer secured Franklin, Rashanna went to the cart of supplies, picked up a package and stepped over to Hannah, crouching.

“I need a swab,” she said, tearing open an envelope.

“Of what?” Hannah asked.

“Vagina.”

“Why?”

“Semen sample,” Rashanna explained.

“What are you sampling?”

“Semen.”

“No, what about the semen? Count, motility, viability, muta—”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because collection method can impact test validity; depending on what you’re testing.”

“Are you an expert in this?”

“No,” Hannah said. “Other than—”

“Butt against the wire.”

“This would have been easier if you’d done it before I got put in here,” Hannah said, sliding awkwardly across the floor of the cage on her shoulder, elbow and thigh.

Rashanna slid a long, narrow swab through the wire and up Hannah’s vagina.

“How did he do?” she asked.

“You saw,” Hannah replied, wincing.

“Pretend I didn’t,” Rashanna said, and she pulled out the swab, slipped it into a plastic cannister and closed the lid.

“Really well,” Hannah said. “I’ll score him very high.”

Franklin was standing now, speaking quietly to Byron, but he turned for a final glance at Hannah, and he smiled ironically, as if he were amused by his chains and the cage over his penis. It was the kind of smile one gives with an ongoing joke, a joke one expects will continue for at least the next few minutes.

But some things aren't amusing, no matter how much you smile, Hannah thought. And some jokes are never finished. These were things she knew, and he didn't yet.

So when the little door beside her opened, and the forks entered, slipped under her cage and raised her, she offered him a sad smile, of faint hope instead of ironic bemusement, and she wondered if he understood, or could understand.

The forklift whisked her down the hall, through the stacks, out onto the loading dock and into the same truck that had brought her here five hours and a lifetime ago.

A female worker – not Marsha, thankfully – crouched beside the cage, scanned the chip in Hannah's back, stepped to the dock and rolled down the truck door, plunging her world into darkness. She lay down, closing her wet eyes, listening to the door being latched, the click of a key turning in a lock, and then a voice, unintelligible but most likely telling the driver that the caged, bound, naked girl in back could now be safely transported.

The truck rumbled to life, moved, stopped, moved again, and Hannah lay her head down until the truck hit the first bump, which hurt, so she twisted until she was seated on her bottom, staring into the darkness.

Why had she said those things to Franklin?

Why had she felt those things about Franklin?

Would she remember him?

She barely remembered Taylor, the boy who was brought to her a year ago to break her hymen. He'd taken her virginity, but now she couldn't see his face, hear his voice.

Would she, a year from now, have relegated Franklin to the same dust heap of fading memories?

No.

This was different.

Why?

Because Franklin had gone to Yale? And Harvard? Because he seemed smart? Because his family was rich, even if he, at least temporarily, wasn't?

They'd been together barely an hour, and most of that time was spent having sex in accordance with instructions Hannah read off Athena's protocol.

But he'd kissed her when the protocol didn't say he had to, Hannah thought. And then she smiled in the darkness, a weak, pained smile, because she knew she was being ridiculous.

Boys kiss girls. Boys fuck girls. It isn't love.

But still.

There was something in how their mouths touched. Every time they touched. And in the way he talked to her, about God, about his life and his strange situation. There was something about how he looked at her.

A tear slid down her face and onto her thigh.

She wasn't done with him yet.

The truck stopped and backed up with a steady, annoying beep, and Hannah drew up her knees to wipe her eyes on them.

Maybe she would come for him, as she'd promised him she would. The words she'd spoken, born as they were of naïve desperation and longing, gave her hope, because she'd said them out loud.

Like the words of rebellion she'd written in the corner of her notebook, she'd given form, no matter how transient, to things that must otherwise exist only within the gray cells of her mind, microscopically, invisibly, so immaterial and passing as to be almost non-existent.

If one could write out one's dreams, even in the smallest script in a place where no one would see it; if one could speak one's hopes, even in a whisper beside another's ear; the things one wanted became a little more manifest, a little closer to fruition.

Maybe God even heard them, sometimes.

The truck's engine went silent, she heard voices, the door rolled up and she blinked against the fluorescence of the processing room, a place that had become less familiar in the last five hours.

Chapter 11: A Revenge Enema

"Hey, Hannah," said the male form, silhouetted at the door, stepping to her cage.

"Hey, Donovan."

"Have fun?"

"I guess," she said, confident Donovan wasn't interested in details. "It was just an assessment."

Donovan – earnest, clean-cut, a law student – pulled the envelop off the wires of her cage, opened it, drew out a form and a ring of keys and unlocked the cage. She scooted backwards to the protocol, grabbed the three sheets with one bound hand, slid out, rose to her feet, and followed Donovan into the room.

It was 3:35. She'd promised Jane she'd be available to couple before dinner. And Brad after the meal. Why had she scheduled two trysts on a day she was doing an assessment?

Because, she told herself, she wasn't expecting anything to happen with Athena's prospective boy.

Truth is, the boy Athena had shown her Friday looked a little gay. Franklin was definitely not gay.

Hannah wanted to be taken to her kennel, to get her restraints off, to wash up and look at her books and decompress a little. But Donovan was just standing there, holding the ring of keys in one hand, a torn envelope and a folded sheet of paper in the other.

"Do you care who does your enema?" he asked.

"What?"

"Ruby's got the most experience, but she's out until after 4," Donovan said. "Holly can probably do it now."

"What are you talking about?" Hannah asked.

"They ordered an enema," Donovan said.

"Let me see."

Donovan turned the sheet to Hannah and stretched it out at the top and bottom.

It was a standard subject medical order form, used when someone needed an eye exam, or blood drawn, or a pap smear, or a physical.

Or an enema.

Hannah's name and collar number were written out on the lines at the top, just under the facility's name, address and phone. The box next to "ENEMA" had been checked, and in a blank area under the word "DETAILS/EXPLANATION" at the middle of the page, someone had written "medical necessary."

At the bottom of the form, the name Marsha Singletary appeared, followed by her title: Assistant Intake Manager, and below that, her signature.

“It says ‘medical necessary,’” Hannah said. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“I’m sure she meant medically necessary.”

“I don’t need an enema,” Hannah said.

“Did you have any bowel issues during the assessment?”

“No.”

“Was anything put in your rectum?”

“No. Well, a penis.”

“That must be it,” Donovan said.

“No, it was just three inches.”

“Did he ejaculate?”

“In my vagina, yes, but not my anus. And even if he had, no one gets an enema because they have semen in them.”

“It’s an order,” Donovan said. “We have to honor it.” He touched Hannah’s elbow and took the first step toward the three examination tables, large, stainless steel surfaces with a chain and open cuff dangling from each corner.

Hannah, still clutching the protocol behind her back, followed him slowly, furiously.

“You know what this is, right?” she said.

“Huh?”

“This is revenge,” Hannah said. “That Marsha lady and I had a disagreement when I first got to intake, so now she’s getting even.”

“An order’s an order,” Donovan said, leading Hannah to the first table. She slumped against it, hip against the cool metal.

“And no, we’re not going to call her,” Donovan added. “And if we did, you know she could say things that could get you into more trouble.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, defeated, and she turned and raised her bound wrists to the middle of her back. “Can you open my cuffs?”

“Once I get your ankles chained,” Donovan said. “Get up onto the table.”

Hannah angled her bottom onto the surface, Donovan gripping her upper arm to steady her until she was seated in the middle, bound legs stretched out straight before her.

“Scoot down a little so I can get this on,” he said, holding up an open ankle cuff.

Hannah obeyed, shackles scraping noisily against flat steel, and she looked at the doors to the kennel halls, 1 through 6, while Donovan secured her left ankle. He removed her shackles, dropped them beside her thigh with another rattle, and she spread her legs, watching vacantly as her right ankle was cuffed to the table.

Donovan stepped beside her, took the protocol from her and laid it by her thigh.

“Can you make sure you get that to my kennel?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said, and he unlocked her wrist cuffs and dropped them next to the shackles with the dull thud of steel against steel.

Hannah rubbed her wrists and swung her arms, making the most of what she knew would be a brief moment of freedom.

“Now,” Donovan said, “lie back, arms way up, reach for the corners.”

Hannah obeyed, gasping when her back and shoulders settled on the cold metal.

If any female staff member had gotten the order, Hannah believed, she would have tossed it into the garbage as soon as things were explained. But Donovan did things by the book. Sometimes that was a good thing, sometimes not.

“What did you argue about?” Donovan asked absently as he closed the cuff around Hannah’s right wrist.

“She said my protocol was contraband,” Hannah said.

“Well, she probably had her reasons,” Donovan said, cuffing her left wrist. “They’re really strict at some of those places.”

Donovan was right, Hannah thought. The kennels weren’t strict, not like the place where Franklin was being kept. She should probably be grateful for that.

But Marsha had won.

Hannah had challenged her, and Marsha had responded with an act of calculated vengeance. She didn’t even have to be here to watch Hannah suffer. She knew what would happen.

“Okay, I just need to stretch you tight,” Donovan said. “Can you scoot up a little higher?”

Hannah inched up the table, driving her heels and shoulders down first, arching her back, planting her bottom down next, moving up the table in small increments until her ankle chains went taut while Donovan pulled

her wrist chains through the catches at the corners, first the right chain, then the left, then the right and left again, each link passing through with a click as Hannah was drawn out.

“Want me to get Holly now, or would you rather wait for Ruby?” Donovan asked.

“I just want it done,” Hannah said, head flat on the table, eyes on the ceiling. “I don’t care who does it.”

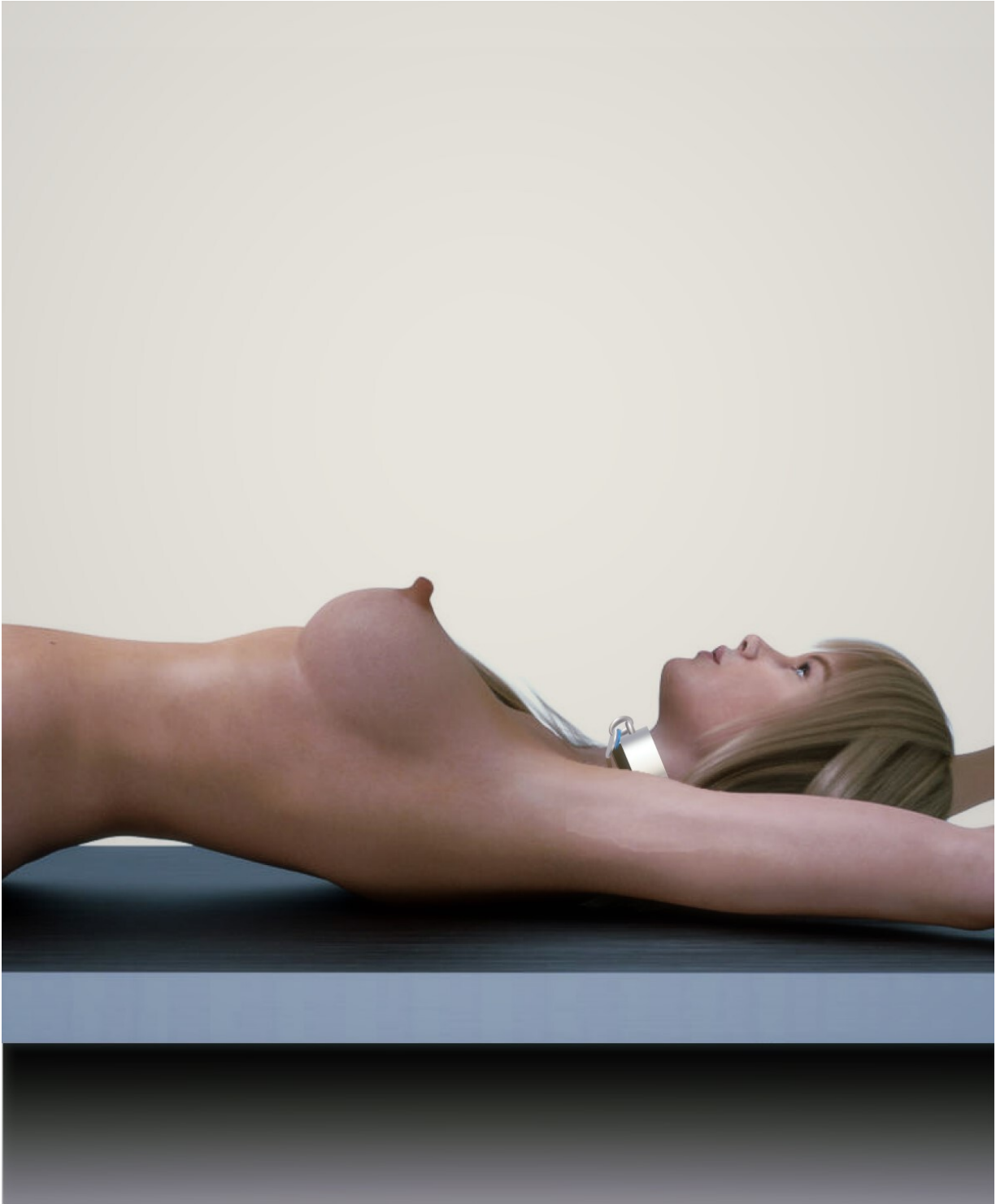


Image: 2Loose2Trek

“Okay, let me send the truck back and I’ll find someone.”
Donovan picked up the shackles, the wrist cuffs and the key ring,
and Hannah heard him drop them onto the floor of the open cage in the back

of the truck. She listened as he closed the truck's door, then the processing room door, and went outside to let the driver know he could leave. The distant roar of an engine told her the truck was departing now, going back to that other place, where Franklin lingered with a cage over his penis.

Hannah, too uncomfortable and too distraught to relax, closed her eyes and tried to think about something other than Marsha's petty cruelty. About schoolwork, about her treatise topic, about Allain, about Athena and her search for a boy. About Franklin.

About Raven.

Where did Raven go? Why did she leave? Wasn't she happy? Or at least as happy as she could expect to be, living with Uncle Bear, living with Gramma?

"Hey, Hannah, not feeling good?" spoke a female voice, startling Hannah out of her reverie.

She opened her eyes to find Tammy standing over her.

"No, I'm fine," Hannah said.

"What are you on the table for?"

"Revenge," Hannah said.

"Huh?"

"I argued with someone at a place where I was doing an assessment this morning," Hannah said, wondering if she might yet escape Marsha's retribution. "So she sent me back here with an order for an enema, but I really don't need one."

"Oh, damn," Tammy said. "Who stretched you out?"

"Donovan. I tried to explain things, but he—"

"Why didn't he put you on your stomach?"

"No idea. But really, I don't need one. And I don't care about position anyway."

"Well, Ruby does enemas, so she might want to turn you over."

"Donovan said Holly can do them too."

"I guess," Tammy said. "Where's your order?"

"Donovan probably took it when he went to find Holly."

"Okay, let me see if I can find either one of them. And you definitely don't want Ruby doing it?"

"No, that's fine, anyone can. But Donovan said Ruby's out until after 4."

“Okay, let me take care of a few things, and then I’ll look for someone.”

“Yeah,” Hannah said

She raised her head to look at the clock. Almost 4. And Tammy seemed no more likely than Donovan to commute her sentence. On the contrary, Hannah feared, this was starting to turn into a fiasco, where one staffer after another came to her, heard her story, confirmed that the enema was needed, and disappeared to look for someone else while she remained hopelessly stretched out in her chains, waiting.

Normally, processing ran smoothly, the subjects taken into the kennels or passing out to their on- and off-campus assignments quickly and efficiently.

But when things broke down, they could really go haywire. And it wasn’t just things breaking, or money lost, or time wasted.

It was human flesh, bound, stretched, suffering

Hannah closed her eyes again and tried to think of something positive. She knew she wouldn’t be here all day. There was still time to be with Jane, probably, and at this point, a little carnal distraction would probably help.

After the enema: get washed up, see Jane, study, look at books, have dinner, maybe be with Brad before bed.

Just get through this.

“Hey, Hannah, not feeling good?”

Hannah looked up to see Holly’s welcome face.

“Oh, god, Holly, did Donovan find you?”

“Donovan? No, I haven’t seen him.”

“He was looking for you. I’m fine, but there’s this order he wanted to give you.”

“What kind of order?”

“Enema,” Hannah said.

“Why?”

“I did an assessment, and the place I went to ordered it.”

“Did you get sick?”

“No, I argued with someone, and they got mad and wanted revenge.”

“How were you punished?”

“I wasn’t. Except for this.”

“It’s an enema.”

—”
“Well, I think it’s sort of revenge. By this Marsha lady. She’s just a

“Where’s the order?”

“Donovan has it. He was looking for you.”

“Who restrained you?”

“Donovan.”

“Why on your back?”

“I don’t know. Can you do it like this?”

Holly stepped to the end of the table.

“Maybe,” she said, “but it might not be as comfortable.”

“Well, lying on my face won’t be comfortable either.”

Holly reached down, spread Hannah’s vaginal lips.

“How many assessments did you do?”

“Just one.”

“He put a lot of semen up your vagina.”

“I’m ovulating, so you’re probably seeing that too.”

“Are you sure they didn’t order a douche?”

“No, definitely enema. Do you have to have the order?”

“Officially, yeah, but if you want me to get it done now, I can.”

“Please.”

“If the order isn’t for an enema though, that’ll be enough marks to
get you sent to Hall 6.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “I saw the order, it’s definitely an enema.”

“What kind?”

“Huh?”

“What kind of enema did they ask for?”

“What kinds are there?”

“Distilled, saline, gel, medicated,” Holly said, looking up at the ceiling and counting off on her fingers. “And then cold, warm, hot. Oh, and lukewarm. And colon, full bowel, thin line, autopump, gravity, thick line, plugged, unplug—”

“What’s quickest?”

“It has to be what they ordered.”

“They didn’t say.”

“They should have.”

“They didn’t, I swear.”

“Okay, cold saline, thick line, gravity.”

“Okay.”

Holly disappeared and Hannah listened to the hopeful sound of cabinet doors opening and closing, the squeak of wheels, paper packaging being torn.

Holly returned with a pole and a pile of supplies she set between Hannah’s legs.

Hannah raised her head, watched Holly fumbling with a saline bag, screwing a line into it, hooking it over the pole, studying the instructions on a plastic wand, and she marveled at the prescient beauty of Marsha’s revenge. With a few marks on a sheet of paper, she had sent Hannah into not just a physical ordeal, but into a grinding maw of administrative dithering.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it set up,” Holly announced. “Can you raise up just a little?”

Hannah angled her pelvis up as much as her restraints would allow, felt Holly’s fingers on her anus, then the cold, lubricated tip of the enema wand.

“Oh, ow,” Hannah said, wincing, trying to relax as her anus was forced around something thick and unyielding for the second time that day. She looked at her breasts, her nipples thick, as if this was something they enjoyed. Her vagina was warming up again, stimulated by what was happening beside it.

“Okay, it’s in,” Holly said. Hannah looked up, saw Holly tear off a piece of tape, felt her affix it to the line, against her thigh.

Holly reached up to the saline bag, opened the valve, and cold salt water rushed into Hannah’s bowels, a strange sensation that was not quite terrible, but very unsettling.

“What you here for?” a female voice asked. Hannah, mouth tight, eyes closed as she endured this violation, looked up, saw the woman she knew as Ruby approaching.

Ruby was new to processing, short and built to lift things, a no-nonsense, former soldier, former emergency room nurse who was far more likely to yell at her fellow staff members than any subject in the kennels.

“She’s getting an enema,” Holly said.

“What kind?”

“Cold saline, thick line, gravity.”

“What’s it for?”

“I don’t know,” Holly said. “Something about an assessment.”

“Where’s the order?”

“Donovan has it.”

“Whoa,” Ruby barked, “whoa whoa whoa.”

“She saw the order, she confirmed it,” Holly said, looking at Hannah with a hint of accusation in her eyes.

“With all due respect to . . . what’s your name?”

“Hannah, Ma’am.”

“With all due respect to Hannah here,” Ruby said, “you can’t just give someone an enema because she says so.”

“Donovan has the order, and he’s the one who chained her to the table.”

“Is that true?” Ruby asked.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said.

Somewhere, a door opened and Holly turned.

“Donovan!” she cried with obvious relief.

“Hey,” he said.

“You’ve got the order, right?”

“What order?”

“For Hannah’s enema?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said.

Hannah had felt her intestines fill, then empty, the waste water running through a second tube dangling from her anus, into another bag, and now her insides were filling again, the sensation making her woozy. She raised her head, saw Donovan reach into his back pocket, pull out a sheet of paper. Obviously, he’d forgotten all about it, Hannah thought.

How could you chain a naked girl to a table, stretch her out, and then get distracted by something else?

“Let me see it,” Ruby barked.

Donovan stepped over to Hannah’s table, handed the order to Ruby. It took Ruby less than a second to shake her head and scowl, first at Holly, than at Donovan.

“I don’t know what this is,” she said with disgust, “but this is not an order.”

She pulled out her cell phone, dialing with one thumb while she squinted at the order with the other.

“Marsha Singletary please.”

She waited, still scowling.

“Marsha? Marsha Singletary? Hi, this is Ruby Muller, on the medical staff in the kennels at Corpus Christi University.”

Ruby paused.

“Yeah, hi, yeah. I’ve got an order with your name on it, for an enema. Subject ID N8114P165.”

Another pause.

“What? No. It’s got your name on it. And your signature. Why did you order an enema?”

Hannah could hear the woman’s voice on the line now, high-pitched, loud, squeaky, but the words were too faint to be made out.

“No, I’m sure it’s not a misunderstanding,” Ruby snapped, her voice growing louder in turn. “Unless someone forged your signature. Did someone forge your signature?”

Squeaks.

“I didn’t think so. What kind of enema did you want us to give her?”

Squeak.

“No, what kind of enema?”

Squeak.

“No, I asked you what kind of enema you wanted for this girl, because you didn’t specify, so right now she’s in four-point restraints on an examination table getting cold saline pumped up her bottom. Does that sound right to you?”

Hannah’s heart sank. Marsha didn’t have to imagine her revenge. She was getting it described graphically over the phone, her victory compounded with every word from Ruby’s mouth.

“So that sounds right, eh?” Ruby said, arching one eyebrow. “What’s your medical background?”

Squeak.

“No, your medical background. For example, I’m a nurse practitioner, with a one-year combat tour, 7 years of emergency room experience, four years at Mount Sinai, two years in a cardio clinic.”

No squeaks this time.

“So, Marsha, where did you get your training?”

Squeak.

“No, your medical training. I don’t care where you got your associate’s in business.”

Silence.

“What then, exactly, qualified you to order an enema for this subject?”

Squeak.

“It says, uh, medical necessity here . . . no, uh, medical necessary, which makes no sense. Did you write that?”

Squeak.

“Who was the supervising physician?”

Squeak.

“So there wasn’t one? I didn’t think so. Which means you were practicing medicine without a license.”

Silence.

“Correct?”

Silence.

“Correct?”

Silence.

“Do you know how much an enema costs us to administer?” Ruby asked.

Hannah studied the woman’s face, her tone and demeanor no longer angry or aggressive, just stony, and terrifyingly cold. “One hundred seventy five dollars, give or take. Which you’ll need to pay.”

Squeak, higher pitched now, frantic.

“You have two options,” Ruby said icily, silencing the squeaks. “I will send this form and a bill to your facility’s medical supervisor, with copies to the Texas Medical Licensing Board, and let them sort it all out. Or I will send a bill directly to you, and you can pay it however you want.”

Squeak.

“The second option, then, I thought so. Thanks.”

Ruby hung up and turned to the two staffers, still hovering over Hannah while her insides were flooded and churned.

Somewhere in processing, a door opened.

“Donovan,” Tammy’s voice said from across the room. “I’ve been looking for you. Do you have that order for Hannah?”

Ruby sighed and rolled her eyes.

“This is not an order,” she said, holding up the document. “This is someone playing doctor.”

She folded the order and stuffed it into her back pocket.

“Okay, so I’m going to put this in writing later today, but for now, I’m just telling you verbally, and emphatically: all medical orders come to me first, and I’ll approve or disapprove.”

Ruby looked down at Hannah, sympathetically now.

“Finish her up and get her off the table,” she said, turning to stalk away.

You couldn’t be a combat medic, or an emergency room nurse if you couldn’t compartmentalize, Hannah thought. You couldn’t be a slave if you couldn’t compartmentalize.

Anger, lust, longing, pain, humiliation, defeat, tears.

And love, perhaps.

All in one day.

And then, the sweet compartment of victory – the best kind of victory, served blazing hot by someone else.

Hannah looked up at Donovan and Holly, their faces blank.

Tammy’s face appeared, looking curious, and perhaps a little relieved. She wasn’t the one getting yelled at.

Hannah didn’t need an apology, didn’t expect one. No one apologized to subjects. But she knew she’d won here, by grace of happenstance, the chance arrival of someone with power and the will to use it.

Everywhere, every day, Hannah knew, slaves guilty of nothing more than speaking up for themselves languished on tables like this without reprieve, because the right person didn’t show up at the right time. But today, one naked girl with a hose in her bowels had, in a very small way, struck another tiny blow against the way things were.

Hannah winced and stared at the ceiling as another flood of cold saline water rushed into her rectum.

Chapter 12: Comfort from Jane and Brad

As soon as Hannah was drained for the third time, Donovan removed the enema wand from her anus while she gasped and rocked her pelvis. He coiled the lines and set everything under the table, opened her

cuffs and retrieved the three pages of the creased and wrinkled protocol. She sat up, waiting to be chained for the walk to her kennel, but he just shook his head and turned to the door marked with a number 4. Puzzled, she slid off the table and followed him through the little entry cage and onto her hall.

Donovan felt guilty, Hannah realized. He couldn't apologize, but he could spare her at his discretion the indignity of chains for the short walk from the exam table to her kennel.

Most of the curtains were closed, subjects within presumably napping, or masturbating, or having sex. Hannah heard a female's sigh from the kennel beside Jane's, a mattress being rhythmically compressed.

Jane's curtain was open, the girl sitting on her bed, three colored pens laced through her fingers as she doodled on a notebook in her lap.

"May I speak to Jane?" Hannah asked.

Subjects going from processing to their kennels walked in chains and didn't stop to chat, but the rules were a little different today, and Hannah wanted to see what else she could get away with.

Donovan didn't say yes, but he didn't say no either. That meant yes.

"Hey, Hannah," Jane said, looking up through black-rimmed glasses, hand pausing over a big-eyed anime face she'd been drawing, of a blue girl with green shading and black hair like Jane's.

Hannah stepped to Jane's kennel, reached up her hand to hold one of the bars that kept Jane confined, and was struck by how much she needed her friend.

This was the familiar, the normal, the comfortable, and she longed for it after a day of singularities, of fights and victories and unpleasant medical procedures.

And Franklin. Winning Franklin. Losing Franklin. And finding Franklin again. Someday.

"Do you still want to get together before dinner?" Hannah asked.

"Yeah," Jane said, and she straightened her back, unconsciously it seemed, forcing her breasts out, pointing her perpetually firm nipples toward the ceiling. "Now?"

"I was going to wash up first," Hannah said.

Jane pushed her lower lip out in an exaggerated pout and pulled off her glasses, setting them on her shelf.

Hannah turned to Donovan and raised her eyebrow, and he replied by unlocking Jane's door.

Hannah stepped in and he locked it back.

"I'll put this on your desk," he said, holding up the protocol.

"Thanks, Donovan," Hannah said, sincerely.

"Anytime," he said, and Hannah thought he seemed surprised by her gratitude. Really though, she thought, he wasn't to blame for what had happened. He thought he was doing the right thing when he'd chained her to the table.

On her way to the toilet, Hannah leaned over to kiss Jane on the lips.

Jane rose to shut the curtain.

"How was the assessment?" Jane asked, clearing her bed of art and pulling down the covers.

"It had its ups and downs," Hannah said, wiping and flushing.

Jane sat down on her bed, patted the space beside her.

"Was he good?"

"Almost too good," Hannah said, sitting beside Jane so closely their hips and thighs touched.

Jane looked at Hannah, studying her face, trying to understand.

"He put it up you?"

"Well, yeah," Hannah said.

"He squirted?"

"Twice."

"Is it still in?"

"Yeah, what I didn't laugh out."

"He made you laugh?"

"And cry."

"What were you using for an assessment guide?" Jane asked, reaching up to cup Hannah's breast. "Shakespeare's sonnets?"

"The Smithfield," Hannah said, biting her lip as her eyes watered.

"Oh my god, what happened?" Jane said, no longer cupping Hannah's breast, now stroking her hand.

Hannah turned to look at Jane, raised her free hand to her eyes to wipe them.

"You fell in love," Jane said accusingly. "You bitch, you fell in love."

Hannah shook her head and smiled.

“I was with him for an hour.”

“It happens,” Jane said. “It happens sometimes.”

“To you?”

Jane covered her mouth with both hands and laughed.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said, waving one hand through the air as if dispelling a ghost. “But if you saw the last guy who assessed me . . .”

Hannah pulled her legs up and crossed them.

“Do you want to do this?” Jana asked, returning her hand to Hannah’s. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Hannah replied. “I want to. I need to. But if we can go a little light, that would be good. A lot’s happened down there today.”

“Tell me what you’re up for,” Jane said.

“Oral,” Hannah said simply, grateful Jane wasn’t asking for details. “Together.”

“Yeah,” Jane said, voice suddenly husky. “You on the bottom, let me do the work.”

Jane stepped off the bed and Hannah lay flat, head on Jane’s pillow. Jane put her knee on the bed next to Hannah’s shoulder, and Hannah reached over to guide her other knee over her.

With Jane’s legs set firmly by her shoulders, Hannah opened her thighs and raised her mouth to Jane’s slit, already thick with arousal and glistening with lubricant.

Hannah ran her tongue along Jane’s hair, from her clitoris to her opening, rocking gently when Jane brought her tongue to Hannah’s vaginal mouth.

Jane had a few fetishes. Anime was one, her notebook laden with round, naked females and angular, erect males, posing and mating and simpering, gazing up from the pages to their creator’s face while she rested on one elbow and stroked her vulva. Hannah had seen her getting relief like that more than once, when she forgot to close her curtain. Or pretended she’d forgotten. Exhibitionism was a second fetish, a taste often acquired by necessity by subjects given little privacy and kept naked by policy and custom.

The third of Jane’s fetishes were the sweet cocktails Hannah delivered with her vagina, the blend of lubricant and semen she brought

back to the kennels after a weekend with Allain, or carried within her chamber after a tryst with one of the kenneled males. Twice, they'd played a game of Jane's invention, Hannah mating with someone and bringing his seed back to Jane to see if she could guess who'd deposited it. To Hannah's surprise, Jane got it right once, guessing correctly that the cum belonged to Brad. It wasn't much of a challenge, though. Jane, along with Hannah, were two of Brad's regulars during the week, both girls well-versed in his flavors.

The other semen belonged to Britt, who'd been sold to the university by his sister over the summer, after she got power of attorney over her parents' estate. Britt, devastated by the betrayal, staggered by the upheaval in what had been a comfortable, middle-class life, was settling in, serving in the school labs and other departments as needed and, Hannah liked to think, learning to enjoy the pleasures of being kenneled with a girl who'd been bought and trained for sex.

"Wow," Jane said, raising her mouth from Hannah's vulva.

Hannah withdrew her tongue from Jane's opening and dropped her head to the pillow.

"What?"

"Bitter," Jane said. "Complicated."

"You need to give me a taste," Hannah said.

"You didn't suck him?"

"Yeah, but he didn't cum in my mouth."

"You could have used your finger to taste him inside you."

"I didn't think of it," Hannah said. "And they cuffed me behind my back as soon as it was over."

"Can we both cum first?" Jane said. "And then I'll turn around."

"I'm probably not going to," Hannah said, "but let me finish you."

Jane didn't argue, widening her legs and lowering her sex so Hannah barely had to raise her mouth to put her tongue around her friend's clitoris and up her slot.

Partnering once or twice a week since August, the girls knew each other well, Jane sending instructions to Hannah through the gyrations of her hips, Hannah responding quickly and accurately.

Arching her back and raising her openings meant Jane wanted her clitoris licked. Bowing her back upward meant either vaginal opening or anus, Jane shaking her pelvis to communicate hole preference. Faster

gyrations meant Hannah had found the right opening. Slower movements meant Hannah needed to switch holes.

And then, Jane would quiver, quickly, near-imperceptibly, and that meant it was time for Hannah to bring her tongue back to Jane's clitoris, to finish her with quick strokes while Jane cried out quietly until the first full waves of the climax, when she shouted and bucked, her cries loud enough to be heard up and down hall 4.

Today, Hannah continued to lick and press, moving her tongue from hole to hole until Jane grunted, screamed, stopped shaking and went limp, dropping down on Hannah with her mouth on the girl's inner thigh, kissing and licking it because it was the only thing she could reach.

For a minute, Jane rested and panted, as if struggling through an intense dream, before she stirred and awoke, lifted and put her tongue into Hannah's vagina for one final lick before she turned, hands and knees across the mattress, to join mouths, allowing Hannah to lick her tongue and lips.

"What do you think?" Jane asked, pulling away, propped up on her elbow, eyebrows raised, as if she were watching Hannah try a new recipe.

"I'm tasting mostly me," Hannah said. "But yeah, complicated, I guess. Not bitter, though. Not sweet. But not bitter."

"Who was it?" Jane asked.

"His name was Franklin," Hannah said. "Weird story."

"They're all weird stories," Jane said.

"This one was particularly weird," Hannah said. "His grandfather was going bankrupt. I mean, his grandfather's company. So they put him up, like some kind of bond, so—"

"I've heard of that," Jane said. "Better terms if you put up a family member. There was a girl here last year they did that to. Blank stare for two weeks, until she developed a taste for boy juice."

"Did she get any Jane juice?"

"Yeah," Jane said, nodding. "Once or twice."

Jane sat up, Hannah followed suit.

"I heard our doors click," she said. "Sure you don't want to cum before we go to dinner?"

"I'm good," Hannah said, sliding off the bed, standing.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Jane asked, stepping to her door, pushing it open.

“You mean, because I didn’t cum?”

“No, because you seem a little . . . different.”

“Long day,” Hannah said. It was a lie, and she knew Jane knew it was a lie, and she knew Jane was too good a friend to challenge her on it, at least now.

As she followed Jane up the hall, she peered into her kennel, confirmed that Donovan had set the battered protocol on her shelf, that all her books were still scattered across her bed, waiting patiently for her, like another lover.

Brad and three of his male friends joined them at dinner, a gathering whose familiarity also brought Hannah comfort, and she lingered over her plate, gossiping and chatting but mostly listening, mind pinballing from topic to topic, from bankruptcy bonds to treatise topics to the strange sensations of having her viscera flooded to Franklin.

She was staring out the windows, watching the sun’s rays go slanted when Brad leaned in.

“Still think you might be free tonight?” he asked her.

“Hannah’s in a weird place today,” Jane blurted.

“No, I’m fine,” Hannah said, scowling at Jane before she turned to Brad. “Just nothing too involved is good.”

“I can wait,” he said.

“No, I want to,” Hannah said. “But it needs to be in your place. Mine’s a mess.”

“Mi casa su casa,” he said.

“I love it when you speak Spanish,” Hannah said. “It makes you seem exotic.”

“Hannah, I’m black,” Brad observed.

“I forgot.”

“Hannah is the least racist person I know,” Jane said.

“It’s not racist to notice someone’s ancestry is African,” Brad asserted.

“I didn’t really forget,” Hannah said. “I was just saying that.”

“What’s more exotic?” Jane asked the table. “Being black, or speaking Spanish?”

Everyone worked at the question for a time, agreeing that it depended on what was meant by exotic.

Brad seemed satisfied with that outcome and returned to his after-dinner question.

“Seriously, you’re good with this?” he asked again.

“That’s the second time you asked,” Hannah said, trying to conceal her annoyance. To ask her if she wanted sex after she’d said she did suggested that she might not know her own mind or, worse, that she was agreeing to something she didn’t want.

“I must be giving off some kind of anti-sex pheromone,” she said.

“You are!” Jane exclaimed. “That’s a perfect way to put it.”

“I was joking,” Hannah said. “You don’t give off pheromones just because you’ve had a weird day.”

“Hannah did an assessment today,” Jane announced. “Some guy from a rich family, and now she’s swooning.”

“Some other things happened, in processing,” Hannah said, to change the subject. She didn’t want to talk about the enema, but she didn’t want to talk about Franklin more. She considered what had happened between them, albeit witnessed by two strangers and to be reported in detail to Athena, to be profoundly private.

“Yeah, some stuff was going on there today,” said Lance, a close friend of Brad’s. “That new medical director was going through the lounge, getting in the staff’s faces about medical orders.”

“Oh, wow,” Hannah said. “That was ‘cuz of me.”

“Huh?” said Jane. Everyone turned toward Hannah.

“Revenge enema,” Hannah said simply, as if that was all anyone would want to know.

It wasn’t, of course.

Jane leaned over, put her hand on Hannah’s shoulder and said, slowly, drawing out the words, “Go on?”

“Can you tell I don’t want to talk about this?” Hannah said.

“Yes,” Jane said without apology. “But now you have to.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, drawing in her breath while she composed the most efficient version of the story in her mind. “Okay, I got to the assessment place, I argued with this lady, so after the assessment she sent me back here with an order for an enema, and then —”

“Did he put his penis up your rear?” someone asked.

“Yeah, for a minute,” Hannah replied.

“Did he cum in it?”

“No, and that doesn’t matter. It was all about revenge.”

“Fucking bitch.”

“So Donovan chains me to a table, completely stretches me out, and—”

“That’s policy for stuff like that.”

“And he just leaves me there, goes off to find Holly to do the enema, then Holly shows up and puts it up me, and as soon as I’m getting started, and it really feels weird, Ruby—”

“I hate enemas.”

“Ruby shows up, and then Donovan shows up, and she takes the order from Donovan, and she says this order’s no good, it’s a joke, so she calls the lady who wrote the order, and—”

“Oh my god, no.”

“Yes, and she’s practically yelling at her, asking her where she went to school, and—”

“Oh yeah, oh yeah.”

“And then when she finds out the lady has zero medical qualifications, just a business degree, she says the lady has to pay for the enema. A hundred seventy five. And the woman will probably have to pay out of her own pocket, and Ruby threatens to report her and the whole facility where she works to the Texas Medical Association, and then—”

The rest of Hannah’s narrative was lost to celebratory madness, the issuance of hoots, the raising of arms, the things that oppressed people do any time a crack opens up – no matter how trivial, how brief – in the otherwise impenetrable walls that surround them.

Hannah, who’d done her celebrating in her own mind earlier, bathed in the cheer of her comrades, and knew that she was not the only one who longed for change.

When the table quieted down, and the rest of those in the cafeteria stopped looking, Jane smiled.

“So, Brad, you should probably leave Hannah’s butt alone tonight.”

“That’s not the hole I use,” Brad said, and he turned toward Hannah with his eyebrow raised, and she knew he was about to ask about her interest again, and she didn’t want him too.

“Yeah, let’s leave that one alone tonight,” she deadpanned to more laughter. “But maybe just 10 or 15 minutes?” she asked.

Brad smiled.

“You’ll have to change positions every two minutes to get to all the main ones,” Jane quipped.

“Just one position, from behind,” Hannah said. She had no interest in acrobatics tonight.

Someone barked, followed by more laughter, and all rose.

“Looks like Brad’s ready to go,” one of his friends noted, and Hannah glanced at the erection he bore, his face betraying neither awkwardness nor embarrassment.

The rest of their little gathering went ahead, granting Hannah and Brad a shred of privacy as they made their way back to his kennel.

“You made my day,” he said, touching her arm as they descended the stairs from the cafeteria. “Or, you’re making my day, anyway.”

“You liked my story?” she asked.

“Indeed. I wish it hadn’t happened at all, of course, but at least there was a happy ending.”

Hannah laughed.

“And you’re okay with things being a little quick tonight?”

“Of course,” he said, “if you promise me romance next time.”

“Candle and flowers,” Hannah agreed.

They stopped at Brad’s kennel door. While they waited for a staff person to let them in, Hannah reached down to touch the tip of Brad’s penis.

“Last orgasm?”

“Two nights ago.”

“Nothing last night?”

“No, I was holding off. For you.”

“That’s sweet of you.”

“No it’s not, it’s completely selfish.”

“What do you mean?”

“I like saving up for you. I like knowing you’re going to drip while you’re asleep.”

Holly entered the hall from processing, her face bearing the same subtle apologetics as Donovan’s had earlier.

“You’re partnering?” she asked.

“Yes,” Brad replied.

“Yes,” Hannah said. “But just for 10 minutes or so.”

She looked at Brad, looked down at his penis again. “That’ll be enough time, right?”

“Definitely.”

Holly unlocked Brad’s kennel door, they stepped in and she locked it back.

Brad kept a neat kennel, but it was tidier than usual tonight, bed made tightly, books in a stack on his shelf, piled in order of decreasing size. Hannah knew he’d done it in hopes she might spend time with him, and she was glad he made the effort.

All the words required for this had already been spoken over dinner, so Hannah pulled the covers down without speaking, dropped to all fours, and Brad settled behind her.

She drew in her breath as soon as she felt his fingers at her vulva, and she arched her back as he tested her lips and opening for lubricant.

He seemed satisfied with her body’s readiness, spreading her lips and raising his tip to the mouth of her sex.

He pushed in a bit more slowly than usual, Hannah noticed, perhaps still uncertain she wanted him inside, or uncertain she wanted him to stay long enough to ejaculate, but she flicked her pelvis once, then again, an indicator of her readiness they both understood, and he plunged forward, the familiar contours of his head and shaft and base another comfort on a day Hannah when needed them.

Hannah gasped, still stinging slightly from the demands of assessing Franklin, and Brad paused until she flicked her pelvis one more time, at which point he was all business, sliding in and out of her with steady, deep thrusts until his breathing turned to desperate gasps and he uttered the three short, guttural cries that were his orgasmic signature.

Hannah tightened, felt him swelling against her walls, sensed the arrival of each jet of semen against her cervix, and flicked her hips again, swallowing his ejaculate with her body the way she might take medicine with her mouth.

They held still for a minute or two after he finished pulsing within her, and then he pulled his semi-erect penis out of her hole and crawled off the bed.

Before she left the bed after him, however, Hannah looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

“Please,” he said simply, which was Hannah’s cue to spread her legs and arch her back until her vulva rested against the middle of Brad’s

sheet. She stayed in that position, rocking gently, until she'd left a large, wet smear.

"You're the only person who's ever asked me to leave that kind of souvenir," Hannah said.

"Call me strange, then," Brad intoned.

"No, I think it's sweet," Hannah said. "But it's only going to last until tomorrow."

"Aren't you doing laundry now?"

"Yeah, I was so good at it last week I think it's going to be permanent."

"I'll make sure to have mine ready," he said.

"If I don't get it all before lunch, I get a mark."

"Have you been scheduled for Hall 6 yet?"

"Uh, what?"

"The punishment hall."

"I know what it is. I haven't broken any rules."

"No, to work there."

"I'm not going to work there," Hannah said. "Ever."

"Everyone takes a turn," he said. "A half day every few months."

"You've done this?"

"Yeah," he said. "No big deal. You just help out. Staff do all the mean stuff."

"You have to?"

"You go one way or the other," Brad said. "There are a few conscientious objectors, who refuse to serve, so instead of working, they get a bar or two for insubordination and go that way."

"Who?" Hannah asked.

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head, and he put his finger across his lips, reminding her that the specifics of what happened on Hall 6 – who went and what was done to them there and why – was one of those things you didn't talk about.

Hannah followed Brad off the bed, standing before him, scowling.

"Good?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, mustering a smile. Nothing he'd just told her was his fault. Nor was it really surprising. She filed her new knowledge away and tried to stop frowning. She had other things to think about.

"Brad, Hannah, you guys done?" Donovan asked.

“Just finished,” Hannah said, and she gave Brad a peck on the lips, brushed her fingers against his wet penis, and drew the curtain aside.

Donovan unlocked the door, and she smiled at Brad one last time and stepped to her own kennel, waited for Donovan to unlock it, stepped in, closing her curtain while Donovan locked her in.

She dropped to her bed, glanced at the protocol, a tattered and ink-scrawled representation of something that was deep and strange and wondrous, and she flipped absently through one of the journals, realized no more work could be done tonight, and she stacked up everything on her shelf, pulled down her covers, turned off her light and reached down to feel her vulva.

It was wet with Brad’s semen and her own fluids, and sensitive everywhere. She circled her clitoris, her touch making her hips shake, and she thought about Franklin and rocked her pelvis and grabbed her breast and thought about the way he put himself up her, and the words he used, the way he said “boulders” when he came, the way he groaned when the semen left his body.

Twice.

The way he kissed her, when he wasn’t supposed to.

He said he could have cum a third time.

She wasn’t finished with him yet.

She hoped Brad couldn’t hear her orgasm, a soft groan, quick pants, hips shaking against her mattress. Or if he did hear it, that he wouldn’t think Hannah did want to cum with him.

He wasn’t the jealous type, of course. No one here could be.

And she’d cum with Brad again, she knew. But this one was for Franklin.

Chapter 13: Emails from Athena

Hannah woke early, unsettled but mostly optimistic, and she went to her toilet and looked at the silhouette of the pile of books and periodicals on her darkened shelf.

Applications opened up today for the spring semester at the University of Texas at Corpus Christi. She had a few weeks to apply, but she wanted to get it done soon. Immediately.

In a little over three months, she could be going to class. Attending lectures. Sitting beside other students. Raising her hand to answer a question, to ask a question. You couldn't do any of that online.

The last time she'd been in an actual classroom, she was 15, she lived at Four Pillars Tabernacle of Jesus, and it was understood girls were not to show off their intelligence, particularly if they were around boys. Hannah was smarter than every boy in her school, but she kept that a secret, conspiring against her own gender for . . . for what?

She wasn't sure, but it didn't matter. She wouldn't hold back. She wasn't above getting revenge, even if it was revenge against an intangible, a condition, a set of intractable beliefs.

She would get in. She was certain of it. She had straight A's in her online courses at Austin. And colleges were encouraged, financially and otherwise, to accept subjects into the classroom. It was good publicity for a system – all the money and laws and societal conventions notwithstanding – that had its share of enemies and detractors and inherent fragilities.

Hannah, protocol in hand, went to breakfast as soon as the kennel doors unlocked, joined a small group at a table by a window and retold her story about the enema and Ruby's phone call, to more cheers.

From there, she went to the lounge to check email, unsurprised when she found a note from Athena, with no subject line, and a single word, "Well?"

Still fighting the urge to provide a complete accounting of the ordeal she'd suffered, in the end she provided a simple, dry report, beginning with, "Franklin appeared fully prepared for the assessment. He had been wearing a penis cage to prevent masturbation overnight. There were two witnesses, his managers. He and I were chained together by one ankle each. We talked for awhile, and his situation's a little weird, you might want to look into it."

After that, Hannah listed Franklin's score on each of the 18 steps, hit SEND, and headed downstairs a little after 9:30.

It was understood that at 10 a.m. on Wednesdays, every subject was to have their sheets off the bed. If they were in their kennels when the laundry cart passed through, they would hand the old linens through the bars. If they were gone, they'd drape their laundry at the cross bar, and Hannah would take it from there.

On the second pass, she'd slide fresh sheets onto every shelf, and then she'd be done. There were 40 kennels per hall, and five halls, but not all 200 kennels were occupied. There were three or four empty kennels on every hall.

As long as she worked diligently between 10 and noon, she found, shuffling steadily in her shackles and chains, she'd be able to get everything done on time.

She went back to her kennel, but only to drop the protocol off before she headed to the end of the hall, staring up at the camera and waiting to be recognized.

"Hey, Hannah," Bud said, opening the door from processing and stepping into the entry cage.

"Hey, Bud, here to do laundry."

"Yeah, okay."

He held up a pair of handcuffs and she reached toward the bars to be chained. Would Donovan have let her go unfettered again? Probably not.

"I haven't set anyone up for laundry before," Bud said.

"I'll show you what to do," she said.

Bud knelt, reached through the bars to apply Hannah's shackles, and then he opened the barred entry cage door and escorted her through it, then through the door that led to processing.

The laundry cart, and the kennel's industrial washer and dryer, lay behind a door at the far end of the processing room. As they passed the examination area, Hannah glanced at the table where she'd been chained, ignored and violated and, ultimately, vindicated, but her sense of victory was fading, replaced by a vague dread that came from nowhere.

Bud opened the laundry door, the room here smelling of lint and bleach and industrial detergent. Hannah's cart, canvas stretched over a metal, wheeled framework, rested in the corner beneath a shelf stacked high with neatly-folded sheets and pillowcases.

The cart featured two long chains, fastened to the back, and Hannah picked those up and pulled the cart through the door.

"You leave my shackles on but take off my handcuffs," she said. "And then, this chain goes on my left hand, since I'm right-handed, and this one goes on either foot, it doesn't matter."

Bud followed her instructions and let her into hall 1 to begin her rounds.

She knew most of the other subjects now, at least by sight, and she was trying to learn how to banter professionally as she made her rounds. It was not a skill she'd learned living in poverty with her mother, or had much opportunity to develop at the Petrosyans either.

Many subjects were gone or their curtains were closed, their used sheets simply hanging on the cross bars, and some passed the sheets through the bars upon Hannah's arrival without comment. But a few wanted to chat, and Hannah did her best to accommodate them without being delayed.

This was her third Wednesday on laundry, and she was starting to get a sense of who would want to talk, and even what they would say.

"Hi, Hannah!" said Amelia, the nervous girl in hall 1. She was new to the kennels, arriving a week after Hannah. Her owners, a middle-class family who'd taken her off the streets with the understanding she'd become their property, forbade tattoos, so she sometimes drew on herself.

Hannah believed she might be autistic.

"Good morning, Amelia," Hannah said. The girl had folded her used sheets neatly before she hung them over the bar, and she beamed proudly beside them, naked, stiff and straight, as if standing at attention for Hannah's inspection.

"Don't you wish everyone folded their sheets like that?" Amelia asked, staring at Hannah's cart.

"Well, it would make things a little easier," Hannah said.

"We should start a petition," Amelia said, appearing completely serious.

Hannah laughed and glanced at Amelia's shoulder, where she'd written, in thick black ink, "*your answers are all wrong.*"

"Good day, Hannah," Amelia said.

"Bye."

Yesterday's incident with Ruby came up several times as Hannah made her rounds, just a quick "Think that bitch'll pay it?" or "Don't let 'em get you down!" and Hannah nodded and moved on. Such stories would sometimes grow legs among the kennel's captive denizens. Were Hannah to hold forth on the events, to recount in great detail during her laundry tour all that had happened yesterday, to stand on a table in the cafeteria and recite her experiences in epic form, she would enjoy rapt audiences.

And an increasingly annoyed staff.

There was no explicit rule against sharing stories like this, but kennel personnel had ways of discouraging unearned heroics and wayward drama.

The kennels held a number of people, of both genders, interested in coupling with Hannah, and she'd learned after her first few weeks to stay on guard, to feint and dodge diplomatically. She was here to study during the week, to serve Allain on the weekends, and to build friendships, with no distinction between free and slave. She was not here to provide unlimited relief to people who had plenty of other outlets.

"Not right now," was her standard response once a conversation about politics or kennel conditions or gossip bent toward an explicit suggestion of intercourse.

Jane fielded far more requests than Hannah. Her luxuriant curves, black-rimmed glasses, black-dyed and unkempt pubic hair and perpetually erect nipples seemed to suggest an availability that Hannah's conventional attractiveness didn't. And Jane tended to be a little more blunt.

"Jane, can I fuck you?" began one exchange Hannah witnessed, the words spoken over dinner by one of Jane's steady partners during a state of exceptional randyness.

"No," Jane replied, "but you can fuck yourself."

They worked out their differences quickly, however, Jane taking the boy back into her kennel and into her body three days later. But only after he asked politely.

Hannah's sexual release, daily during ovulation, near-daily the rest of the month, was to her like a little garden she tended, nurturing established flowers much of the time, occasionally planting something new to see how it would grow. If she thought she'd found a friend, someone who offered personality, kindness, an unexpected perspective, she might entertain them.

If she'd found a Franklin in the kennels, her assent would have come instantly. She wouldn't have waited to be asked, she believed, just looked into his eyes, waited for the spark of his intellect to match with something within her, followed by a quick discussion of whose kennel they would use.

There were no Franklins here, but there was a boy on hall 3 Hannah noticed on occasion in the cafeteria. He was too shy to say hello, but she caught him casting furtive glances toward her when he thought he wasn't

looking, and everything she'd learned about him through casual inquiries to Jane and a few other friends intrigued her.

He bore the solid, fundamentalist name of Jacob, and, like Hannah, he was born in a polygamist community. Girls in such places got married off to older men or, in Hannah's case, fled with their mothers in self-imposed exile. Boys in such places sometimes joined the ranks of the leaders upon maturity or, more often, were removed – either dumped off literally on the side of the road, or sometimes sold.

Jacob had suffered the latter fate for some reason, bought primarily to tutor a student with a learning disability when she was 16 and he was 18. Now she was 19, a sophomore at Corpus Christi, and he was 21 and, Hannah guessed, still her tutor as well as serving other purposes.

He did not meet any traditional standard of attractiveness. His face was too wide, his lower jaw unnecessarily large, dark hair thick and wavy, but Hannah found his smile, when he joked with friends at mealtimes, strangely compelling. There was kindness there. And cleverness, Hannah thought, or maybe cunning, in the way his eyes narrowed and darted when he laughed.

Those who forgot to get their sheets ready tended to spring into action as soon as they heard the squeaky left front wheel of Hannah's cart, or the distinct sound her long ankle chain made as it dragged along the concrete floor.

Jacob met that description this morning, and she heard a chair slide back as she began her slow march up the hall, heard the soft rustle of a bedspread and sheets, saw them appear at the bars – pillow case, sheet, fitted sheet.

Failing to have your sheets ready on Hannah's first pass – sleeping through her visit, for example, or leaving one's kennel and failing to put one's sheets on the bars first – meant two marks.

Hannah was expected to report any laundry laggards, the responsibility she found most distressing with this particular chore, because once five marks had accumulated, one went to Hall 6. Fortunately, no one had been late yet.

But then, she thought, people should get their sheets washed.

"Almost missed me?" Hannah said when she reached Jacob's kennel.

“Heh,” he said, smiling the way he did, laughing self-deprecatingly. “I forgot it was Wednesday.”

He was at his shelf, not seated, just resting one knee on his chair, as if he were preparing to sit but wanted to wait until Hannah was gone. A book lay open on his shelf, Chinese and English side by side.

“You’re studying Chinese?” Hannah asked. One had to be judicious when inquiring about the contents of someone’s kennel, particularly if what they’d left out was pornographic. This seemed safe, though, and indeed Jacob smiled again and looked at Hannah with what seemed to be gratified surprise.

“I wanted to read the Epic of Darkness in the original language,” he said, adding with a shrug, “tough going so far.”

Hannah tumbled his linens into the cart and turned back, easing toward him.

“I’m Hannah, by the way,” she said, offering her hand.

“Hi, Hannah,” he said, and he reached through the bars to shake, his grip warm and confident, smile ready.

Hannah took a quick glance at Jacob’s penis, something she often did when meeting a new boy, but it continued to hang calmly, leaving her to guess at its size when it was fully-erect.

“I admire your studies,” she said.

“Aren’t you in school?”

“Yeah,” she said. So he’d asked about her as well, she thought.

“Yeah, just online at Austin for now, but I’m going to apply to go to classes here soon.”

“Me too, in the spring.”

“Cool,” she said. “Look me up in the cafeteria sometime, so we can compare notes.”

“I’ll do that,” he promised, and he put his other foot on the floor and for the first time looked at Hannah searchingly, as if trying to guess at her motives.

Her motives didn’t have to be revealed now, of course. And she wasn’t completely clear on them herself. Yes, she was ovulating, a condition that increased her sexual desire and made her more generally social, particularly where boys were concerned. But what about Franklin? Was she already forgetting? After a day?

She offered Jacob a small wave, he smiled back, and she continued her tour.

No, she was not forgetting Franklin. She was just being realistic.

She'd promised to come for Franklin, somehow, but promises were no match for steel chains and alloy collars, and laws and a culture set up to keep slaves where they were put.

She was too young to pine away for a dream.

She could hold the dream, yes, and pursue it as she was able.

But there was no reason to give up her life for it.

Nor, most likely, would Franklin want her to.

And he would keep living too, of course. In two years, his grandfather might buy his freedom, and he'd be rich again. And free.

But he wouldn't forget Hannah, not completely. Of this she was certain. She might be reduced to the status of a brief, precious interlude on Franklin's journey through a strange transition, but she would be at least that in his mind, even if he found a wife, had children, inherited Fulmer Interiors from his grandfather, and ran it wisely.

Hannah said a few brief hellos on hall 5, yanked the sheets from the bars, wiped her eyes on one or two, deposited the used sheets in laundry room, stacked up the clean sheets and made a second pass through the kennels. Most of the subjects, including Jacob, had left for lunch or the lounge by now, and this trip was quicker and less social, which was fine with Hannah. Grab a fitted sheet, grab a top sheet, stack a pillow case on top, hang them over bars. Repeat. Everything in ivory. Everything always in ivory. And cinder block walls, and steel bars, and lives of regular tedium punctuated by nights at the club, and sex with her owner, and sex with other people, and sex as a chore for Athena.

"your answers are all wrong"

The words came back to Hannah while Bud was freeing her from her cart and handcuffing her for the brief walk to her hall.

Amelia had written them on her shoulder today.

Why? Had someone said it to her? Had she said it herself? Did it come from the memory of a bitter fight with someone, or had the words come to Amelia's flesh less consequentially? Lyrics from a song, lines from a movie, something she'd heard in a dream?

But the words were bothering Hannah. Something about the words Amelia had chosen to decorate her skin with had gotten under Hannah's.

Now that her weekly job was done, the dread was back, the fear and doubt following her steps anew.

Hannah had lunch with Jane and a few of their mutual female friends, conveying by the way they hunched and whispered and leaned their shoulders together that boys weren't invited. Sometimes, girls needed a girls-only meal to talk about things boys couldn't understand or wouldn't care about – fashion, romance, gossip, periods, tampons.

Jacob was there with his friends, and she looked at him but he didn't look back. Maybe he wasn't interested. There were other boys here she hadn't met yet. But she was disappointed in him.

She needed a distraction.

She needed a distraction, from too many things.

After lunch, she made her way to the PCs in the lounge, logged on, went straight to the Corpus Christi website, created an account and lost herself in applying for the spring semester.

It asked if she were a subject, asked for her Federal Subject ID number, asked for permission to access her Austin transcripts, asked a few questions about race and ethnicity, gender and disabilities, the name and address of her owners, and then it asked if she wanted to apply for scholarships.

She clicked that, went to a long list of opportunities, drew in her breath and clicked the box beside the “Charles H. Burnham Scholarship for Undergraduate Biological Innovation.”

Now she was committed. Now it was official. She could simply refrain from submitting a treatise, of course, but that would be humiliating. Her name was on the list.

Hannah Loughbridge.

Undergraduate. Candidate. Scholar.

She needed a topic.

She hit submit. No fee was required of subjects.

She leaned back, allowed her mind to take her to her first classroom, sitting, fully-clothed, among students free and slave, listening to a lecture, with a beautiful Nature's Army bookbag Allain would buy her under her seat. Nature's Army made their bookbags out of leather and cotton, browns and tans and blacks, but with gorgeous trim in pink or aquamarine or teal. They were talking about mauve, too. She would love that bag like a child.

She went to email, a message from Athena waiting for her.

“You got something wrong,” she wrote. “9 and 12 don’t match.”

So that’s all Athena had to say. A half-day ordeal of chains and cages, of fighting and violation and hard-won victory, and all Athena could offer in return was two sentences of criticism.

Hannah, tamping down her anger, thought through the protocol, remembered that tasks 9 and 12 both required Franklin to lick her anus. He’d been tentative the first time, so she gave him a 2, his lowest score on any task. The second time, he was all in, and he earned a 5.

Between tasks 9 and 12, they had performed oral and vaginal sex and orgasmed together.

And talked. About God and divinity. Which Hannah believed were two different things. They kissed when they weren’t supposed to.

Had they fallen in love between tasks 9 and 12? Maybe. Hannah wasn’t sure. But they’d grown closer – close enough for Franklin to get comfortable with that part of her body.

“We knew each other better by the 12th task,” Hannah wrote. She hit “SEND” and surfed the news and celebrity pages, then she went back to email, out of morbid curiosity.

Another note from Athena awaited.

Hannah imagined Athena, perched before her laptop, watching with hungry, kohl-lined eyes, like a vulture with fashion sense, waiting for Hannah’s answers about the first boy she’d assessed.

One of the signs you’re not ready to buy a slave, Hannah thought, is how obsessive you are about it.

Athena was terse again: “So you’re in love with each other now?”

Hannah put her hands over her mouth and looked at the keyboard. There was so much wrong with this she didn’t know where to start. If Athena was going to get jealous of Hannah over a male – a male she hadn’t even bought yet – the whole effort was even more doomed than Hannah had anticipated.

And, Hannah feared, she’d take the blame for it all when it collapsed in on itself.

“No,” Hannah wrote back, not sure whether she was lying. “But maybe I shouldn’t do any more assessments for you, if it’s going to bother you this much.”

“Hannah?”

Hannah read her reply over several times, mindful of the caution and tact needed here. Athena was probably forwarding everything to Laura and Ormek, and anything that smacked of insubordination or disrespect against their daughter – especially in this most sensitive of their daughter’s undertakings – would likely result in consequences. And, if sufficiently provoked, Athena might even publish the entire exchange to Look!, where Allain and everyone could see it, under a heading like “Asked a favor from our bitch slave and . . .”

“Hannah?”

Hannah hit “SEND,” looked up.

Someone seemed to be saying her name.

“Hannah?”

It was Tammy, standing in front of a man and woman in suits, bearing chains and belts.

“Yes, Ma’am?” Hannah said, startled.

“These folks are here to pick you up.”

“Huh?”

Hannah looked at the couple behind Tammy. In their thirties. They might be married. They might be someone’s parents.

“Why?”

“You’ll need to talk to them about that,” Tammy said, and for the first time, Hannah noticed that Tammy looked worried. Why would Tammy look worried?

“They have an order,” Tammy added.

An order.

Hannah turned in her seat, her email account still open.

“Did Ruby look at it?” Hannah asked hopefully.

Hannah could feel the openings across her skin, pore by pore, first on her upper back, then her breasts, under her arms, along her spine to her bottom, at her forehead.

“It’s not that kind of order,” Tammy said.

“What kind —”

“Hello, Hannah,” the woman interrupted, stepping out from behind Tammy, smiling politely. She held a wide, light brown leather belt, fitted with rings and hooks and a buckle that locked.

Hannah looked at her, looked at Tammy, looked back at the woman. Something was telling her to run, to flee the PC area, the lounge, to escape

through the cafeteria, to return to her kennel and get locked in, to make her bed with her new clean sheets and crawl under them.

“Hannah,” the woman said, and she held out the belt and raised an eyebrow expectantly. “Will you please lift up your arms for us, so we can put this on you?”

Chapter 14: Bound to a Platform, Destination Unknown

Hannah looked at the woman, looked at the man, looked at Tammy, who was staring back at her with nervous expectation.

Tammy, like any experienced kennel worker, had developed by necessity a sixth sense about subjects, reading their emotions, their fear and anger and lust.

Hannah was terrified, with that most unpredictable of fears, the fear of the unknown, and she knew Tammy knew it.

Were Hannah to run, to fight, to be injured, that would be Tammy’s problem. It would also be Hannah’s problem, because resistance of any kind against a direct order was imminently punishable. But damage to a slave girl whose worth had been objectively established at over a million dollars was bad too, for any employee responsible for things when it happened.

Very bad.

Hannah had just been asked to raise her arms. Heart thumping, mind whirring, she pondered her options imperfectly, but in the end – guided by Tammy’s wordless presence – arrived at the only logical answer.

Hannah turned back to her PC, closed out of her account, stood, lifted her hands.

The woman stepped up slowly, smiling in a way that looked to Hannah almost like sympathy.

Sympathy.

It was a recurring theme among the people of this industry, she thought. They felt sorry for what they had to do, often enough. And yet they did it, because of the thousands of other people depending on them to do it.

Whatever it was.

The woman stepped behind Hannah, the man stepped before her. The woman pressed the belt against Hannah’s lower back and pushed the two ends forward around Hannah’s waist, and the man took the two ends

and slid one through the other until the belt was tight around her, too tight to be raised past her ribs, too tight to be pushed down over her hips and bottom. The man used a key to open a lock, pass it through the buckle, close it.

“Can you put your hands behind your back, Hannah?” the woman said.

Hannah obeyed, listening to the sounds of metal, clinking indistinctly against itself, brushing against her bottom.

A cuff was closed around her left wrist. Another around her right.

More sounds of metal from behind her, and a second pair of cuffs closed around her ankles.

There were other people on PCs here, or in the chairs that ringed the room. Hannah turned her head to look at them. Some were watching what was being done to her, others were ignoring the scene, out of respect for a slave’s humiliation, or out of apathy. Distressing as this moment was to Hannah, it wasn’t that unusual. Hannah had herself seen subjects taken this way in her six weeks here, usually from their kennels, but once or twice from the lounge, from the cafeteria. They might be going to punishment, or something far more innocuous. A medical checkup. A sale. An assessment.

An assessment.

Athena.

The man and woman took their places on either side of Hannah, each gripping an arm, their hand against the sides of Hannah’s breasts.

This was all Athena’s doing, Hannah thought as she was escorted out of the lounge and into the cafeteria.

Athena had promised one assessment a week, but girl had grown greedy.

There were 50 males for sale in Texas. and Hannah had refused in very clear terms to assess all of them, and Athena had agreed.

But this was Athena’s true answer. She wanted all of them looked at. Every day, for months to come, Hannah would be taken by force from wherever she was, chained, marched through processing, locked in a cage in the back of a darkened truck, taken somewhere, and forced to open herself to men she’d just met. In service to Athena’s greed.

Or, not greed.

Vindictiveness.

The couple lead Hannah out of the cafeteria, Tammy somewhere behind them, following silently.

They reached the top of the stairs, the couple each grasping one of Hannah's arms in both their hands, walking her down the stairs, one cautious step at a time, as if she were a priceless statue.

So Athena was getting her revenge now.

If Hannah was going to fall in love with every boy she assessed – or worse, if Hannah was going to make every boy she assessed fall in love with her – Hannah would earn that love.

Somehow, as her email conversation with Hannah proceeded this morning, an enraged Athena had issued the order for a second assessment. Perhaps she'd specified the way Hannah was to be taken, choosing the option that was the cruelest, the most upsetting, the most humiliating.

The timing didn't quite work, however.

Athena's rage was a powerful force, but it couldn't violate the laws of physic. Or the laws of standard subject administration, either. Normally, at least a day, more likely two or three, was required to schedule an assessment.

And if Athena had somehow managed to get an assessment scheduled on such short notice, surely she knew it couldn't be done properly. Hannah hadn't abstained for the last 24 hours. She had no printed protocol to score the next boy on. She remembered all the steps, or at least most of them. But not in order, necessarily, and that was important too.

They'd reached hall 1. Hannah was brought through slowly, ploddingly, the subjects here watching her pass.

She looked back at them, catching the eyes of one or two before she stared at the floor and pondered and her mind turned to the inevitable, dark place of how she might get even.

She had no protocol. She hadn't abstained. Her next assessment would be appropriately terrible.

"Hey, Hannah, where are you going?"

Hannah looked up, startled from her reverie to look into the autistic face of Amelia, who at this moment was staring at the ceiling as if she were expecting something to fall from it. But Amelia was smiling, a strange smile that conveyed no meaning and all meaning, a sort of blank curve of the mouth that might be, when one reached the farthest corner of the universe, something one would find there.

Amelia had shaved her pubic hair into a thin strip since Hannah spoke to her earlier this morning, but she hadn't washed her shoulder yet.

"your answers are all wrong"

"Hey, Amelia," Hannah said, keeping her voice even, mindful that a careless word, an expression of distress, could trigger autistic people in unpredictable ways. "Just leaving with these nice people. For a little while."

Hannah and her two escorts, their hands never leaving her upper arms, passed awkwardly through the hall 1 entry cage and into processing, where the open maw of a new truck waited at the bay.

There was no cage this time, just a contoured piece of plastic to mate with Hannah's body, open straps and hooks and chains extending from its edges like the legs of a bug, and a single hole, black and terrifying, where her face would go.

She was marched within, turning her head to confirm that Tammy was still there, following, watching, but otherwise uninvolved.

Yesterday's truck had been lined with timber, and it smelled of wood and tobacco. This truck was all steel. What did it smell of? Metal had no odor, but there was a smell here. Something antiseptic, perhaps. Alcohol. Cleaning fluid.

"Okay, Hannah," said the woman, "we're going to put you, front down, on the shipping platform, and we're going to strap you in, so you'll be secure, and then you'll be plugged and hogtied, and we'll be on our way. Okay?"

"Hogtied?" Hannah repeated. She was familiar with the term, but something about its use seemed out of place in this context.

"Can you get down on your knees?" the woman asked.

Hannah knelt.

"Now, scoot forward until your knees are in the pits."

Hannah obeyed, feeling the cool plastic against her legs.

"Now, we're going to lower you forward, so you just relax and let us do the work."

Hannah did not relax, because she couldn't.

That served the purposes of her captors, however, who angled her body, board stiff with fear, against the plastic.

The plastic had been molded for female hips, for female breasts, for a girl's shoulders, an imperfect but not terrible fit, and Hannah guessed they

had been given her general dimensions by someone before they'd selected this object to fasten her to.

Someone put a hand on the back of her head, forcing her face into the dark hole of the shipping platform's musty interior. All was not black and airless here, however. Little slots had been cut through the walls of the hollow platform, allowing a modicum of air, a modicum of light, just enough of either so that she could continue to breathe, continue to confirm that the world had not gone completely lightless.

"Lift up your bottom for us," the woman said.

Hannah obeyed and braced for what she knew was coming, the spreading of her vaginal lips, a gloved finger into that hole, a second finger up her anus, and then the insertion of two small, lubricated plugs, and the passing of a small belt between her legs, anchored in the plastic, locked to the chains at her wrists, put there to ensure she remained plugged, unviolated, and contraband-free.

Unviolated.

More belts followed, across each thigh, across the small of her back, around her shoulders, behind her head.

Someone grabbed the chain that joined her ankles, forcing her feet up toward her back.

She heard more clicks, the closing of another lock. She tried to straighten her legs, found she couldn't.

Hogtied. Bound up into a neat little package of plastic and steel and leather and girl.

Nothing extending.

No legs for someone to trip over, if she were left for a time where people needed to walk.

Minimal length required for storage, should she be put into a box or set on a shelf.

And she could not swing her legs. She could not kick the floor, or push against it, or propel herself with her toes. She could not extend her calves to move herself a few inches forward, until the top of her new plastic prison struck a wall.

They didn't used to hogtie, perhaps. But when they bound slaves this way, with their lower legs free, they invariably used their toes and calves to move themselves, the only thing they could do and therefore something they must do.

Invariably, they would be set in the middle of the truck, as Hannah was. And invariably, when the journey was done, they would be found bumping the truck's wall, toes rubbed raw, calves burning, spirits a little lifted because they had done what they could.

They had moved.

They were put in one place, and they had journeyed to another place.

Such were the workings of the minds of subjects, that this could be called victory.

And that is why they hogtied now, because victories for such folk were dangerous.

Hannah opened her mouth.

She could still speak.

"How long will I be like this?" she asked, but her only answer was the sound of a door, sliding closed, being latched, being locked.

"Aaaah!" she cried to no one. "No no no no!"

Her world did not go black this time, however.

This truck featured an interior light, something she hadn't noticed when she was bundled onto it, one of those random, incongruous kindnesses that subjects could enjoy or dismiss, depending on how they looked at the world. Hannah chose mild gratitude for the minor gift, keeping her eyes open, peering through the gloom at the black plastic before her face. Many others had been bound here, she told herself. All had taken their turns here, and had eventually been released from it.

Her breasts were starting to hurt. They'd put her on a platform meant for an A cup, or a B cup at best. She was a C.

How long would this trip take? Had Athena scheduled her next assessment in Dallas? Or further away than that? Would she be here into the evening? Or overnight?

Athena could be flippant, dismissive, insulting, carelessly cruel. But not like this, surely. This was monstrous.

But, Hannah wondered, had something about Hannah's assessment of Franklin summoned something new and evil from some dark, unused place in Athena's psyche?

If that were the case, Hannah knew, there would be no victory here. If an owner, or the daughter of an owner, decided to make the family girl's

life miserable, they could do so. There were no Rubys to rescue one from this kind of abuse.

But Hannah could answer in turn. There were things she could do, beginning with the natural consequence of an improper assessment. She had no protocol, after all. She had not abstained, Brad's semen still wet in her chamber, his sperm still wriggling toward her uterus.

She could simply have terrible sex with this new candidate, allowing him to penetrate each of her holes in turn, ordering him out at whim, pushing him away upon orgasm so that he ejaculated uselessly, into midair, into nothingness. Or didn't ejaculate at all. Hannah had never tried to inflict that particular cruelty on a male, but she believed she had enough knowledge of the penis's workings to stymie its pleasure.

Terrible sex.

Or very, very good sex, depending on the man Athena had paired Hannah with this time. Just sex. Raw, eager, crude, wet sex. Whatever Hannah wanted. Vaginal, mouth, vaginal, mouth, orgasm after orgasm, wet ejaculate and wet lubricant combining into a thick, sopping, anti-Athena puddle.

Hannah's next report, delivered promptly, might be nonsensical scores of 0 or 5 or anywhere in between with, most certainly a zero for the first anal licking, a 5 for the second.

Or, better yet, pure confessional.

"He's really nice," Hannah would write in her summary. "We sort of hit it off, from the start, and he kept asking if you were like me, and I had to say no, but I said you were nice enough, and okay-looking when you put on a lot of makeup."

Athena had the power to have Hannah bound and shipped and used, but Hannah had that far greater power, born of superior intellect and advanced maturity, to reduce Athena to a hormone-laced cube of quivering, adolescent jelly.

The truck turned in a long, slow, arc, not unlike one of the turns Hannah remembered from yesterday.

In fact, the path of today's travels might be very similar to yesterdays.

The path might even be . . . identical.

Was Hannah being taken back?

Back to see Franklin?

Or back to see . . . Marsha?

The notion went from plausible to quite possible to an unshakable certainty in the time it took Hannah to utter another scream, her sharp cry echoing impotently within the hollow chamber that had swallowed her face.

Never underestimate the power of a free person to bring retribution, Hannah thought, and she struggled against the cuffs and straps and chains that held her immobile, knowing rationally that they would not yield, her mind descending into the blind animal terror that told her they might break and she might go free, escape from the truck, run naked back to the kennels and be let in, with no questions asked.

Marsha was personally out \$175, a loss that began with an argument with a slave. And now she had called in a favor, cashed in her chips, because this was worth it.

“Bring her back to me,” Marsha had told someone. “She’s in the kennels at the University of Corpus Christi, this is her collar number, and I want her. Bind her to something terrible. Now.”

Today, if Hannah escaped Marsha’s talons with nothing more than another enema, she’d consider herself lucky. But surely, it would be much worse than that.

Hannah’s breasts hurt. Her anus and vagina were starting to sting. She needed to go to the bathroom.

The truck stopped, moved, stopped. Was it moving backwards now? Forwards again? Hannah couldn’t tell. How much time had passed? Twenty minutes? An hour? A day?

The truck’s engine rattled and fell silent, and Hannah prepared to meet her fate.

Chapter 15: Questions from Sylvia

Hannah heard the opening of the truck door.

Courage.

If her mind were like a toolshed, courage was one of the tools. She’d used it before.

Find it now. Pull it from its hook. Dust it off. Wield it.

Courage.

She was lifted by someone, set upon something, probably a cart of some kind, and she felt herself moving, and she heard the squeak that

seemed to be a requirement of all subject conveyances.

There was the bump she assumed was cart moving from the back of the truck to a platform. Another bump as she crossed a threshold into a building.

But, with her senses limited to sound and smell, she was beginning to doubt she was being brought back to Marsha, or back to Franklin.

Something she couldn't put her finger on seemed different.

Another assessment, then. Back to her first plan. A justifiably terrible assessment.

She returned to writing up the report for Athena's consumption: "We basically fell in love, but I'm pretty sure he wouldn't be right for you."

"In there," said a woman's voice.

The cart turned, rolled, squeaked. Stopped.

She felt things happening at her middle, against her bare rear, and suddenly her legs were free and she was allowed to straighten them. She extended them, bent them again, straightened them again, making the most of this first small freedom, dropping her toes until they touched a carpeted floor.

Carpet. The floor in Marsha's intake office had been bare. Linoleum, perhaps. Concrete.

Another piece of evidence that she was somewhere else.

The belt between her legs came off next, the plugs up her anus and vagina removed slowly, gently.

More belts were loosened, removed. Behind her head, at her shoulders, across her back, across her thighs.

She felt hands on her upper arms, and suddenly she was upright, on her knees, blinking in the light of a small room with a table and two chairs and a black window across one wall. Was it nighttime? Had the rest of the day passed?

Two people were holding her by her arms, new people, two men.

They raised her. They wanted her to stand. She dropped her feet to the floor, wobbled, found her footing, looked to the table.

There was a woman seated there, hands clasped, a coffee cup and a legal pad before her.

The woman looked at her, smiled.

She was not Marsha.

Hannah's heart was thumping.

Courage.

The cuff around Hannah's right wrist was opened, and one of the men took it and moved it to the front, closing a handcuff around it.

Her left wrist went free, was brought to the front, was cuffed.

"Raise your arms."

Hannah obeyed and one of the men unlocked her belt, unbuckled it, removed it, and both men left, taking the belt and the plastic shipping platform, shutting the door behind them.

Hannah, now in just shackles, with her hands chained in front, felt almost completely free. She could walk, she could reach for things, she could feed herself.

She could move.

"Hello, Hannah," the woman said brightly, standing and offering her hand.

"Hi," Hannah said, accepting the unexpected courtesy.

"How have you been?"

"Uh, a little scared," Hannah said.

"Take a seat," the woman said, gesturing toward the opposite chair.

Hannah pulled it out with both hands, sat down.

"Would you like a Coke?"

"I would," Hannah said. "Thank you."

The woman nodded toward the window, set blackly and impenetrably in the wall to Hannah's right. Were there people behind it?

"I'm Sylvia Fremont," she said. "With Dimper and Dimper."

"Dimper and Dimper?" Hannah repeated.

"We do investigations," Sylvia said. "We've been engaged by Taft Mutual to work on an inquiry, and we needed to meet with you."

"An inquiry?" Hannah repeated.

"It concerns a missing subject."

"Oh," Hannah said, her understanding bursting through all in one piece. "Oh! Raven? Raven, right? Oh!"

Hannah was so relieved she brought her hands to her face, her eyes watering.

"Yes," Sylvia said, nodding.

"Okay," Hannah said. "Okay. Athena told me about that. Athena Petrosyan. She said . . . she said you'd want to talk. Yeah. Nice to meet you."

There was a knock on the door. Sylvia rose, opened it a crack, extended her hand, drew it back, holding a red can.

She opened it with a pop and a fizz, set it before Hannah, and the girl wrapped both hands around it and sipped, reveling in the familiar, welcome taste.

This was about Raven.

Raven.

Athena had warned her they might be picking her up to chat. Of course.

“Raven and I were really close,” Hannah said. “I really hope I can help.”

Sylvia smiled, a little indulgently and, Hannah thought, a little sadly.

She was a handsome woman, brunette, solidly built, dark eyebrows, dark, curious eyes.

She was wearing a navy suit. Pleated skirt, nice jacket. Light blue blouse, matching handkerchief, neatly folded in the pocket.

A necklace, with a cross high on her neck.

A Christian.

“Now, first, just to make sure we’re talking about the same Raven,” Sylvia said, and she looked down at her legal pad. “She is the subject of Canda Dupre.”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “Yes, Ma’am. Raven is black, and maybe about 5 foot 10, and maybe 130 pounds, with straight hair. Her name was Alice when she was born, and—”

The woman reached inside the sheets of her legal pad, drew forth a small picture, slid it across the table to Hannah. It was a recent picture, Raven in shorts and a tank top, with her arm around Uncle Bear’s shoulder, her head tilted to touch his, seated at the marina where Uncle Bear was working now. Both smiling, the lake behind them on a sunny day.

“That’s her,” Hannah said, with small lump in her throat. “That’s her, with Uncle Bear. Or, um, Gerald. Gerald Dupre.”

“Very good,” Sylvia said. She reached into her legal pad again, pulled out a single sheet and slid it and a pen across to Hannah.

“Before we proceed, Hannah,” Sylvia said, “I’ll need you to sign something.”

Hannah looked at the document. At the top was a heading in heavy black type: "Agreement of Non-Disclosure and Confidentiality."

Hannah scanned the words quickly. It required her to promise not to reveal the nature of her conversation with anyone at Dimper and Dimper, on this or any other matter, nor to discuss anything that happened while she was in a Dimper and Dimper facility, or under Dimper and Dimper's authority in any other location. Violation of the terms meant a variety of consequences, including legal action against her or her owners, and additional, unspecified punishments, "as allowable by law, policy or custom."

Her name and ID number, and the Petrosyan's address, had already been filled out, so she just signed it at the bottom and slid it back.

Sylvia looked at the form, returned it to a place within her legal pad, looked at Hannah and leaned forward.

"How long have you known Raven?" she asked.

"Thirteen or 14 months," Hannah said. "I met her right after the Petrosyans bought me. The same day."

"You said you were very close?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said. "We would, um, be together once or twice a week, sometimes more."

"Be together?"

"Yes. She'd sleep with me. Or, in a cage next to mine. But they'd leave the door open, so we—"

"You were intimate?" Sylvia asked.

"Yes, Ma'am. I mean, as friends. Or as really close friends."

"But you would have sexual relations?"

"Yes, Ma'am. We're not really lesbians. But it was just, um, something we did. We were allowed to. Or we were expected to, sort of. I was supposed to—"

"Did you talk a lot?"

"Yes, Ma'am, all the time," Hannah said. "We had sex, but mostly we talked. A lot."

"What about?"

"Everything, really," Hannah said. "Our families, who we were with, how things worked, that kind of—"

"How things worked?"

"Yeah. Raven was seven when her parents died, and—"

“How things worked?”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean, how things worked?”

“Oh,” Hannah stammered, feeling her mouth go dry. This wasn’t just a friendly conversation, Hannah realized. This was more like an interrogation. Like something you’d see on TV, or in a movie. If Hannah didn’t say the right things, if she didn’t speak confidently, there could be problems.

She saw Amelia’s shoulder again.

your answers are all wrong

Could a thing bother you, about something that hadn’t happened yet?

your answers are all wrong

“You seem nervous,” Sylvia said, and she reached for her coffee and leaned back, taking a sip.

“I am a little,” Hannah said, reaching for her Coke, trying – and failing – to affect Sylvia’s casual demeanor.

She’s drinking coffee.

I’m drinking a Coke.

We’re both drinking something.

My mouth is dry.

“Why are you nervous, Hannah?”

“Well . . . because Raven’s missing. And I know that’s bad. And people get into a lot of trouble over that. Because—”

“Hannah.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Sylvia leaned forward, both elbows on the table, fingers of both hands around her coffee cup.

“A moment ago,” she said, “you told me that you and Raven would talk about how things worked.”

“I did say that, yes.”

“What did you mean by that?”

“Well, Raven was the first sla— . . . the first subject I met. Or I mean, the first subject I really talked to, and she told me, the day after I met her, what happens if . . .”

Hannah’s voice trailed off.

“What happens if?”

“If you . . . escape.”

“Why were you talking with Raven about escaping?”

“Oh, no, Ma’am. We weren’t. No, Ma’am. Raven was telling me you couldn’t. Or you shouldn’t. You shouldn’t try it. It wouldn’t work.”

Sylvia kept leaning forward, kept listening.

“She said . . . she said . . . well, first, I would be naked, since I probably wouldn’t have clothes to wear if I . . . if I slipped out . . . and then . . . my collar . . . people would notice that . . . and there’s a chip in our backs. Everyone has one, and anyone can scan them. And then, pictures . . . of us . . . they take pictures of us. Of me. So they would find us, find me . . . and then . . . punishment . . . a week.”

Hannah bit her lip and looked into the black hole at the top of her Coke can. She wanted another sip. Her mouth was going dry again. If she sipped, would it seem like she was trying to look calm when she wasn’t really calm? If she didn’t sip, would that indicate guilt?

Hannah decided not to sip. She adjusted her feet beneath her, her shackles unexpectedly loud as her cuffs clapped together.

“You seem very nervous,” Sylvia said.

She’d already said that once. She was speaking like a friend now. A friend might say something like that, if Hannah were about to take a test, or meet a new boy.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“You seem a lot more nervous than most other people I’ve talked to.”

Hannah tried to smile, tried to work her mouth, felt only dry concrete where her gums and lips used to be.

Did Sylvia know something Hannah didn’t? Did Hannah know more than Hannah knew she knew? Was there something wrong with Hannah?

“I’m not,” Hannah stammered. “I mean, I probably am. I know I am. Because, because . . . this is not something I—”

“So, did Raven’s advice convince you not to try to escape?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Or, no, Ma’am. Because I wasn’t going to escape. I wasn’t saying I wanted to. Raven was just telling me about it, just in case I ever . . .”

“Ever what?”

“Ever . . . um . . . had those thoughts. But I didn’t. I didn’t.”

“Did Raven?”

“Did Raven what, Ma’am?”

“Did Raven ever have thoughts about escaping?”

“No. No, Ma’am. I don’t think so. She never said anything like that to me. I don’t think so. I think she was happy. Or pretty happy. She was a little worried about some things though.”

Hannah straightened her back as a whole category of memories flooded her mind. Of course. This is what she should be telling Sylvia about. Of course.

“Oh yeah,” Hannah said. “You know that Gramma was threatening to leave Raven to someone else?”

Sylvia kept staring, into Hannah’s eyes.

“In her will,” Hannah continued. Now was the time for another sip. She raised the can to her mouth, drank, set it back down, smiled, the way an honest person would. “In her will. She wanted Uncle B— . . . she wanted Gerald to get a job, and he got one at the marina, but Raven wanted him to get paid more, and I think there was some arguing about that, and—”

“They’ve told us about all that,” Sylvia said.

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Good. That’s good. Because I think it’s important.”

“Hannah.”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“Your family tells us you’re very intelligent.”

“You talked to them?”

“Yes. One of my colleagues did.”

“That’s good.”

“Are you very intelligent?”

“Well . . . I got straight As. At Austin. I was taking 12 hours, and —”

“I don’t mean book smart,” Sylvia said. “I mean, smart smart.”

“Well, I sort of see that as the same thing,” Hannah said. “But I try to apply myself, in every way.”

“Hannah.”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“If you had talked to Raven about running away, would it be smart not to say anything?”

“I never talked to Raven about running away.”

“But if you had. Would it be smart not to say anything?”

“No, that wouldn’t be smart at all. I should say something. But I never talked to Raven about that. About running away.”

“You just told me you did.”

“I did?” Hannah squeaked, her mouth a desert, the Coke before her on the table like an oasis she dare not venture to.

“You did. You told me you talked about what happens if you escape.”

“Oh, yeah. We did. But we never talked about plans. Or, I mean, trying to escape. We never said we were going to. Just that one time. That one time. Raven told me about what happens if you try, or if you do get away. That it was a bad idea.”

“I understand you’ve been formally punished. Several times.”

Hannah closed her eyes and lowered her head as if she’d been punched, opening her eyes after a pause to look at her hands, bound together by handcuffs, and she watched her fingers curl up, making two tight fists, clenching on their own.

Who had told them that about Hannah’s punishments? Was it Laura? Ormek? Athena?

It must have been Laura.

Hannah imagined Laura on the phone, speaking sweetly, confidently, as she provided a dry, thorough accounting of the trouble Hannah had gotten into over the last year.

“I was, yes, Ma’am, I was.”

“Would you like to talk about that?”

“I would, yes,” Hannah lied. “One time, the most recent time. I took a pill. One pill. It’s to calm you and make you fall asleep. They’re legal. They get prescribed. They’re called Zeebers, informally, but they’re a longer-acting variant of pentobarbital, and the chemical name is 5-ethyl-5-pentan—”

“Can you tell me about the other times you were punished?”

“Yes. I can. Yes. One time was at a clinic. I got six points. I had to lie down, like, tied lying down, and they . . . and they . . . and I had to put my feet and hands in—”

“What did you do?”

“Oh. I . . . I lied.”

“About what?”

“About, um, being punished.”

Hannah laughed nervously, seeing some ironic humor in her answer, hoping Sylvia might laugh with her.

Sylvia didn’t laugh, or even smile.

“You lied about being punished, so you got punished again?”

“Yes. That was it.”

“Why were you punished the first time?”

“Oh . . . because . . . because . . . someone overheard me . . . talking. Talking about, um, well, um . . . they thought I was talking about escaping . . . but I really wasn’t . . . I was just saying . . .”

“Do you talk about escaping often?”

“Never,” Hannah said, shaking her head. “Never, since that one time.”

“Do you think about escaping often?”

“Never.”

“Did Raven think about escaping often?”

“No. Not that I know of. No. Never.”

“Do you know where Raven is?”

“I do not.”

“Do you know where she might be?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Is there a place she ever talked about going?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Did she ever show you pictures of places she liked?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Do you know where her car is?”

“You mean Uncle Bear’s car? Gerald’s car, I mean? No, Ma’am.”

Sylvia looked down at her legal pad, wrote what looked to Hannah like several lines of notes, and then she looked up and smiled.

“Okay, Hannah, almost through.”

Chapter 16: your answers are all wrong

“Oh,” said Hannah, and she laughed with relief. “That’s great. I hope I’ve been helpful. I really tried to—”

“I just need a few minutes to design a series of questions,” Sylvia said. “And you’re going to meet some other people, and they’re going to

help me ask them.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, a little disappointed. She was more than ready to go back to the kennels, even if it meant getting strapped to the shipping platform again. It wasn’t that bad, really, on short trips.

Sylvia nodded toward the black window, and Hannah raised the Coke to her mouth with both hands, sipping freely now, the ordeal over.

Two more women entered the room, one older, gray-haired, tall and slender, the other short, younger, stocky.

Sylvia stood, pointed first to the younger woman.

“Hannah, this is Paula. She’ll be our inquiry technician.”

“Hi, Paula,” Hannah said, standing, offering her hand.

When you shake hands in handcuffs, Hannah thought, it looks like you’re going to shake with both hands, as if the person you’re meeting is a dear friend, but not quite someone you hug. Paula wasn’t a dear friend, so Hannah just let her left hand dangle while her right hand gripped Paula’s.

“Hi, Hannah,” Paula said, her eyes wandering Hannah’s body. Perhaps she was a lesbian.

“And this is Dr. Ohr, our medical attendant.”

“Hello, Dr. Ohr,” Hannah said with another handshake, grabbing her own right forearm with her left hand this time, deciding after the fact that must look very awkward.

Maybe she should just use both hands to shake when she was handcuffed. Just wrap both hands around the acquaintance’s hand. Was there a protocol about this? People would understand. Some might even see it as a particularly friendly gesture, and like Hannah more because of it. Very few people would mind. Paula wouldn’t have minded. Dr. Ohr wouldn’t have minded.

A man stepped into the room, one of the men who had freed her from the platform earlier, holding a belt like the one she wore before. The two new women stepped out of his way.

“Hands up,” he said.

Hannah raised her hands, the man reached around her with the belt, circled her waist with it, buckled it in front.

“Hands down.”

Hannah obeyed and he opened one handcuff.

“Hands in back.”

Hannah moved both hands behind her, looking at Sylvia, who was scribbling on her legal pad now. The man passed Hannah's handcuffs through a ring in the back of the belt and closed her other wrist within it.

"Room 3?" he said.

"Yeah," Sylvia said. "I'll be there in 10 minutes tops."

The man went first, Hannah following him, stepping carefully in her shackles, Paula and Dr. Ohr trailing behind.

They went down one hall, turned a corner, entered another lined with doors with numbers on them. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. Even numbers on one side, odd on the other.

They stopped at the door marked with a number 3, and the man opened it.

Hannah stepped into the brightly-lit room, with cabinets along two walls and, in the middle, a single chair, dark wood, almost like a throne, with heavy armrests, a high back with a cushion for the head, solid legs that seemed to be bolted into the floor, straps for all four limbs.

Why they had come here was a complete mystery to Hannah. She kept expecting to see her shipping platform.

No, Sylvia said she was going to design a few final questions to ask.

Design? Why did she use that word?

"Okay, Hannah, sit down," said Paula, pointing to the chair.

Hannah shuffled over and sat awkwardly, unable to lean back with her wrists still bound behind her. She looked down between her feet, noticed a drain there. Something about the drain didn't seem right, so she chose to ignore it.

Paula knelt, buckling a strap around Hannah's left shin, around her right shin, cinching them tight to the chair's legs. Almost painfully tight.

The man freed Hannah's left wrist, and Paula took Hannah's arm and set it on the armrest and strapped down her wrist first, then her upper arm to the back of the chair. Hannah's left arm was bound at the wrist, but her upper arm was left free.

These were all tight too.

"Lean back for me, Hannah," said Paula.

Hannah did so, and Paula lowered the cushion a bit, so that it lay directly behind Hannah's head.

The last person who sat here must have been taller, Hannah concluded.

The man left the room.

Dr. Ohr stepped up.

“Can you open your mouth for me?”

Hannah complied and Dr. Ohr inserted a thermometer, went to the cabinet, returned with a blood pressure cuff, wrapped it around Hannah’s right upper arm, inflated it, pulled out a stethoscope and put it against Hannah’s forearm, recorded what she’d found and removed the equipment, and Paula applied the final strap to Hannah’s upper right arm.

“Look straight ahead,” Dr. Ohr instructed, and she bent and pointed a penlight into Hannah’s eyes, first right, then left.

“Okay,” the doctor said. “She’s ready.”

For a time, they waited, Hannah left to puzzle over what was happening now. Had the Petrosyans asked for a brief medical checkup while Hannah was here? Was that a normal role for an investigative firm?

The door opened and Sylvia walked in with her legal pad.

“We can start,” she said, nodding to Paula.

Paula stepped behind the chair. Hannah heard her opening cabinet doors.

“Hannah,” Sylvia said, stepping directly before Hannah, looking at her legal pad. “I have six questions for you. Are you ready to answer them?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said, unclear why she needed to change rooms to continue her conversation with Sylvia.

“Where is Raven?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where do you think Raven might be?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did Raven ever talk to you about escaping?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Did you help Raven escape?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Where is Raven’s car?”

“I don’t know.”

“What else do you know that you should be telling us?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay,” Sylvia said, raising her eyes from Hannah’s face, and Paula appeared, holding a blue plastic jar in one hand, and she unscrewed the lid. A brush was fastened to its underside, thick white paste clumped upon it.

She spread the paste across the top of Hannah’s left thigh, making a neat square about five inches on a side.

“What’s that?” Hannah asked, curious.

“Capsaicin,” Paula said.

“Capsaicin?” Hannah repeated. “From chili peppers?”

“That’s the active ingredient, but it’s in a blend that—”

“Why did you put it on my leg?” Hannah asked.

“You should start feeling it in another few seconds.”

“Hannah,” Sylvia said.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“You aren’t giving us the answers we need.”

“I’m sorry Ma’am,” Hannah said.

your answers are all wrong

“Ow,” Hannah said. The paste Paula had spread on her legs went from cool to hot in little more than a few seconds.

“Ow.”

“Hannah,” Sylvia said. “Can we try again?”

“What?” Hannah asked, confused.

“I’m going to ask those same six questions again.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Ow.”

She looked at her thigh. Something was happening to her skin under the innocuous white paste. A burning. She wanted to touch it. She tried to reach her hand toward it, the belt holding firm.

“That really hurts,” Hannah said. “It’s really starting to get hot.”

“Where is Raven?” Sylvia asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Where do you think Raven might be?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did Raven ever talk to you about escaping?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Did you help Raven escape?”

“No, Ma’am. Ow.”

“Where is Raven’s car?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“What else do you know that you should be telling us?”

“Nothing. Ow. Please.”

Hannah shook her right leg, tried in vain again to touch the place where Paula had applied the paste. It felt like someone had set a piece of metal on the stove, warmed it up to the point where water would sizzle on it, then set it on Hannah’s thigh.

“It’s really burning, ow,” Hannah protested. “It really hurts.”

Paula stepped behind Hannah’s chair, returned with a white rag and a green tube, wiped off the paste and squeezed white cream onto Hannah’s leg, spreading it with her fingers.

The relief came so quickly and thoroughly it was in Hannah’s mind akin to orgasm.

“Oh, god, thank you,” Hannah said, eyes watering again. “Oh. Jesus. Oh.”

Hannah was still reveling in the relief when Paula did something that, in Hannah’s mind, was completely illogical.

She opened up the blue jar again, with the white paste on the brush. And she began to mark out a second square, five inches on a side, on the top of Hannah’s left thigh.

“Why are you doing that?” Hannah asked, balling her hands into fists, and she shook her leg involuntarily.

Paula said nothing, just held Hannah’s leg still with one hand while she used the other to continue marking out the little square of white paste.

“Hannah.”

“Yes, Ma’am?” Hannah said, looking at Sylvia.

“Your answers aren’t helping us.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I don’t have any other answers.”

“Where is Raven?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where do you think Raven might be?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did Raven ever talk to you about escaping?”

“No, Ma’am. Oh. Ow. It’s burning. Can you take it off again?”

“Did you help Raven escape?”

“Ow!”

“Did you help Raven escape?”

“No, Ma’am. Ow. Ow!”

“Where is Raven’s car?”

“I don’t know.”

“What else do you know that you should be telling us?”

“Nothing. I need that cream. I need that cream! Ow!”

Paula removed the strap from Hannah’s right upper arm, and Dr. Ohr wrapped a blood pressure cuff around it and pressed the stethoscope against Hannah’s arm.

Hannah shook her arm, desperate to reach her leg, to pull off the skin if she had to, so Paula held her limb still while Dr. Ohr got her readings.

“Stop!” Hannah cried, whole body rocking tightly now. “It’s hurting. Stop!”

Paula returned Hannah’s arm to the straps.

Dr. Ohr got out a penlight, bent before Hannah. Paula put her hand on the top of Hannah’s head, grabbing her hair to hold her still, and Dr. Ohr looked into each eye with the light while Hannah tried to keep her eyes open and forward.

Were they looking for dilation? Hannah wondered. That’s what the eyes do when there’s stress. They dilate, the iris receding, the pupils going great and black.

No one knows why.

“She’s doing great,” Dr. Ohr said, straightening, putting the light back into her pocket. “You can keep going.”

Paula disappeared, reappeared with another tube, squeezing clear gel from it onto her fingers.

“Please hurry,” Hannah said with relief, and she raised her burning thigh so Paula would know where to put the gel.

“Hannah,” Sylvia said.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“Your answers aren’t helping us.”

your answers are all wrong

In one clear, terrifying moment, Hannah understood. They were hurting her to make her speak the truth. They were using pain because they didn’t think she would be honest without it.

Hannah was being tortured.

And they weren’t finished.

The realization and the opening of her bladder came simultaneously, the urine rushing between her legs, under her thighs and forward across the seat until it tumbled over the edge, and Hannah knew the liquid was being channeled that way, that the chair was designed for this.

There was a drain in the floor, between her feet. She couldn't see it now, but she knew it was there, and now she knew why it was there. Others had sat here before her. Others would come after her. Often enough, they lost control, because of what was being done to them here. And the people who created this room knew that, and they designed the chair accordingly, to channel the flow of urine, setting the drain where it needed to be.

"Oh, god no," Hannah said, wriggling impotently, the pain in her thigh reaching a new intensity now that she realized it was intentional, it was meant to hurt, and it wouldn't stop until she could provide different answers.

"I don't know!" Hannah wailed. "I told you everything!"

Paula wasn't wiping off the paste. She wasn't rubbing the white cream onto Hannah's burning thigh.

Hannah looked down, staring absently at Paula's fingers as they ignored her leg and instead applied the new, clear gel to the sides of her breasts, first the left, then the right.

She looked back at Sylvia.

"Can you ask different questions?" she asked, sucking in air, blowing it out between her lips, shaking her leg, thighs slapping wetly together. Her legs were wet. Why were they wet? She smelled urine.

"Those are the only questions I can ask you, Hannah."

Paula was doing something else. Hannah looked down. Paula was holding what looked like two pieces of window screen, two inch-square black wire meshes. She stuck one to the gel on Hannah's left breast, one to the right. The mesh stuck, because the gel was thick and viscous. Using tiny clamps, she attached wires to the meshes. Both of the wires terminated in a black box in Paula's hand. A cord ran from the box to a place beside Hannah's chair she couldn't see.

"I'm ready," Paula said. "Did you want to stay?"

"Not for this one," Sylvia said. "How far should we go?"

"I won't know until I've heard her, but it's probably going to be loud," Paula said. "You should be fine if you go out the door and to the

right, then left at the first hall, and down past the water cooler. Girls' voices don't travel as far as males'."

"How much time should we give you?" Sylvia asked.

Paula pulled her phone out.

"I'll count off 30 seconds after you close the door, then I'll do 10 seconds. So, come back in a minute and a half."

Sylvia and Dr. Ohr left the room and shut the door, and Paula pressed something on her phone and stared, holding the black box in her other hand.

Hannah looked at her, looked down at her leg. She was bouncing both thighs now. Moving eased the pain. Or distracted her from it. Something was wet under her thighs, amplifying the slap of soft thigh against the chair's black wood.

The sound bothered her. Why were her legs wet? Had she spilled her Coke?

She leaned forward, blowing on her leg. Every third or fourth puff seemed to help, the breath reaching her skin and cooling her, briefly, imperfectly.

She was blowing again when she heard a click, coming from Paula's hand.

"AAAAEEEEEEEEYYAAAAAAHHHH!" Hannah shrieked, jerking up quickly, violently, her head striking the cushion behind it. "STOP GOD HELP ME STOP NO! AAAAAAAHHHHH NOOOOOOOO!"

Hannah drew in her breath to scream again when the agony ceased.

Hannah, panting, uttered another soft cry, looked down. Something had just been done to her breasts, where the wire meshes had been stuck onto her, with the gel.

"It's shorting out!" Hannah shouted, the pain in her leg forgotten while she alerted Paula to the problem at this other area of her body.

Paula didn't respond. She was just staring at her phone.

"It's shorting out!" Hannah screamed. "Take them off!"

Paula continued to ignore her.

The pain at Hannah's breasts subsided, evaporated, almost as if it had never been, and Hannah became aware of her leg again, the pain there morphing into something beyond heat, as if the skin were bubbling up under the paste. Or being stretched or squeezed. As if different nerves, designed to detect tearing and compression, were being called to work now,

to relieve the exhausted nerves designed only to feel and report searing heat.

Sylvia and Dr. Ohr returned.

“Did you hear anything?” Paula asked.

“Not a peep,” Sylvia said. “You did it, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Full reaction?”

“Oh yeah.”

Hannah looked at the meshes, looked at the box in Paula’s hand, looked at Sylvia.

Dr. Ohr stepped up to her, shone the light in her eyes as before, pressed the stethoscope between her breasts.

“She’s good,” the doctor announced.

“Where would you put her?”

“At least 90 percent to insurance grade distress.”

“Hannah?” said Sylvia.

“What?” Hannah said, startled from a place she’d created in her mind where things hurt for no reason and she was trying to leave or go to sleep and, for some reason, couldn’t do either.

“I’m going to ask you those questions again, and then if you give the same answers, Paula’s going to turn on the mats again.”

“The mats?”

“The wires on your breasts.”

“No,” Hannah said. “No, please no.”

“Where is Raven?”

“My leg hurts. Make it stop!”

“Where is Raven?”

“I don’t know!”

“Where do you think Raven might be?”

“Can you make my leg stop hurting?”

“Where do you think Raven might be?”

“I can’t talk.”

“Where do you think Raven might be?”

“I don’t know!”

“Did Raven ever talk to you about escaping?”

Hannah wailed, nose running, legs shaking. She looked with tear-filled eyes at the wire meshes on her breasts, wondering if she could bend

far enough to get them near her hands.

No. Her straps made that impossible.

“Where do you think Raven might be?”

“What?” she cried. “No! No!”

“Where do you think Raven might be?”

“I don’t know!”

“Did you help Raven escape?”

“Nooooooooo!”

“Where is Raven’s car?”

“I don’t knooooooooow!”

“What else do you know that you should be telling us?”

“Yes!” Hannah screamed. “It’s my fault! It’s my fault! I did it!”

Chapter 17: Confessions

Hannah dropped her head and wept, the pain of guilt trumping all other pains now, her face a wet, twisted mess of spit and mucus, tears and self-revulsion.

“Tell me what you mean, Hannah,” Sylvia said.

Was there sympathy in her voice? Could there be sympathy in her voice?

“Don’t turn the things on! Don’t turn the things on!”

“Hannah, we won’t, we won’t yet, but you have to tell me what you meant.”

“Six weeks ago . . . auhhh . . . Laura had me sent away . . . kenneled! Owwww! Because, because of what I did with her husband . . . Ormek . . . we had sex . . . noooo! . . . when it wasn’t . . . allowed . . . it was . . . I was . . . in my cage, and I held him and . . . and we kissed . . . and I grabbed his penis and . . . and . . . oh god, noooo!”

your answers are all wrong

Hannah shook and sobbed, guilt and burning flesh vying for prominence in her mind.

“If I hadn’t been sent away,” Hannah continued, panting, forcing out shallow cries, sucking in her breath, trying to control her voice, “maybe . . . maybe I would have known . . . I would have been with Raven . . . probably twice a week . . . and something would have been . . . I would have known . . . I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

Hannah wept hopelessly now, shaking in her bonds. She lowered her head, raised it until it met the cushion set in the back of the chair at precisely the height required to absorb the impact of her writhing form. She looked up, remembering that she wasn't alone, that there were three people here.

None of them were friends. They were all somehow involved in this, but she wasn't sure how. She stared into three pairs of impassive eyes, which each stared back, in silence, waiting for her to continue.

She had nothing more to offer. She lowered her head, wailed, remembered that her leg was still on fire, the pain throbbing strangely, almost nonexistent at first, then building to agony, then ebbing again. She could voice no more protest, resigning herself to this as her new life, a bitter pain in her leg, always there, burning, easing, burning.

Her legs were wet. Why were they wet?

"Oh," she sighed quietly, to herself. "Oh, no."

Dr. Ohr stepped up, her black athletic sneakers all Hannah could see. Paula grabbed Hannah's hair and forced her head against the cushion.

The doctor aimed the light into Hannah's eyes, first the right, then the left. Hannah stared blankly back. The doctor released Hannah's arm, wrapped it in the blood pressure cuff, put the cold stethoscope against her arm, then against Hannah's chest. Hannah winced.

"About one hundred ten percent," Dr. Ohr announced, removing the blood pressure cuff so Paula could return Hannah's arm to its strap.

"Can you document that this afternoon?" Sylvia asked. "They're in a hurry to check her off."

"Sure."

A rag appeared. Someone was holding a rag to Hannah's face. She snorted out her nose, blew, coughed. Another rag appeared, wiping her eyes, her nose, her mouth and chin.

Then a third rag, on her leg, wiping the paste off, and a hand at her left breast, at her right, removing the wires and the meshes, wiping off the gel.

"Stop!" Hannah said, misunderstanding the gestures. "Ow, no!"

Then cream. The white cream of salvation, squeezed out on someone's fingers, spread across the place on Hannah's leg where the paste had sat.

“Oh, oh, oh,” Hannah groaned, as if enduring a shameless orgasm.
“Ohjesusyes.”

Paula disappeared, returned with a thin towel.

“Lift up,” she said.

Hannah raised her bottom off the chair and Paula shoved the towel beneath her. Hannah dropped, the towel clumped uncomfortably under her left thigh and buttock.

Was this another torture? How long would they make her sit like this?

Hannah looked down, saw that the towel was wet, noticed the smell of urine again.

Who had peed? Why would they pee there, between her legs?

There was a drain in the floor. She’d seen it when she was sitting down. So it would make sense for anyone to urinate there, directly above it. But not on her lap.

“Hannah.”

Sylvia was speaking.

“Hannah.”

“Yes?” Hannah said, raising her head, voice hoarse, barely a whisper.

“Hannah we’re done.”

“Done with what?”

“Done talking.”

“We were talking?”

“Yes, I was asking you questions.”

Hannah closed her eyes, lowered her head. Things had happened, but the memories were coming piecemeal.

Torture. She’d been tortured.

It was her fault.

She’d been kenneled. She’d been sent away. And then Raven vanished. That was her fault.

Sylvia had kept asking Hannah questions, and Hannah had refused to answer them.

No, they were questions she couldn’t answer.

No, she had answered Sylvia’s questions, but not the way Sylvia wanted them answered.

your answers are all wrong

Hannah remembered staring into darkness.

While she was being tortured?

No, before. On the plastic shipping platform.

Chained, strapped, plugged.

Hogtied.

Someone had gone to the bathroom. In this chair.

Who?

Hannah.

She had urinated.

Why?

Hannah opened her eyes, focused only on herself. She looked at the damp towel between her legs. She looked at her thighs, remembering that one of them had been burned, torn, ruined.

Which one?

Both.

And yet, there was no mark there, just slightly pinkened skin.

She looked at her breasts. Something had been done to there too.

Both breasts. On the sides. At the same time. Terrible. Hellish. And yet, just more pink skin, and firm nipples, as if they'd risen up in terror.

Or protest.

Or rebellion.

Hannah's nipples could do one thing in answer to any stimulation:
rise up.

Be it the touch of her hand, cool air after a shower, a lover's mouth, or the application of unfathomable pain to the breasts just beside the nipples, they responded with all the fervency at their disposal.

Rise up.

She stared at them for a long time, from one nipple to the other. The left. The right. The left again.

Rise up.

You don't have arms, legs, a mouth, a mind, she thought.

And yet here you are, speaking out with everything at your disposal, to say something happened here.

Something was done.

Something terrible.

Repulsive.

Unjust.

your answers are all wrong

No.

this is wrong

Yes.

all of it

Inarguably.

Something needs to be done

Yes.

I have been imprisoned. Wrongly

Indeed.

“Hannah.”

Hannah looked up, the room spinning. She’d been upright too long. She’d been seated this way too long. She was losing track of her body, losing track of time. The rag under her thigh and buttock hurt.

Only Sylvia was here now, standing before her. Paula was gone. Dr. Ohr was gone.

“Hannah.”

“Yes?”

“Would you like to finish your Coke?”

Hannah squinted, puzzled.

A very long time ago, in a very different place, Sylvia had handed Hannah a can of Coke.

Hannah had sipped it, when she thought it would be okay to, refrained when she wasn’t sure. Why had she been so uncertain? Did she think the way she drank would have prevented what had just been done to her?

Memories continued to return, still piecemeal, but in larger chunks now. Question, pain, question, pain, Raven. Urination. And a shameful, miserable confession.

Surely, the Coke was long gone, flat, evaporated; the can recycled or moldering somewhere in a landfill.

“I would,” Hannah said doubtfully.

Sylvia reached for the shelf, turned back to Hannah holding a glass with ice, dark liquid in it, a straw. Someone had moved the remaining Coke from can to glass. Or poured a new one.

Who?

Sylvia brought the straw to Hannah's lips. Hannah sucked, the taste the same as it had been, the fizz the same as it had been.

The circle had been closed. It began with Coke, passed through something unspeakable, ended with Coke.

Hannah took another sip, pushed the straw out with her tongue.

"Thank you."

Sylvia set the glass on the shelf, disappeared. Hannah heard the rumble of wheels on the floor.

Sylvia reappeared, sliding a chair before Hannah, sitting down.

"How are we doing?" she asked.

Hannah stared at her, closed her eyes, gathered her thoughts, tried to see herself as she was.

Not as she'd seen herself before, through a prism of pain and fear and shame. Not as Sylvia and Paula and Dr. Ohr saw her, as a . . . as a . . . what? She wasn't sure.

It didn't matter.

She was what she was.

She was Hannah. That's all that mattered.

The reality beyond that, however, was proving elusive. The room was changing shape. Her memory was changing shape. Sylvia's face was not as she remembered it.

"What?" Hannah inquired.

"How are we doing?"

"I don't know."

"We don't want to send you back until we think you're ready to go," Sylvia said.

"Back where?"

"To where you live. The university."

"I'm ready," Hannah blurted, eyes filling with tears.

It had been a dream she'd held close to her heart for what felt like ages – ever since Sylvia's interrogation had turned hostile, accusatory.

She wanted to go home.

Back to her kennel. To safety. To her books and her bed and the showers.

Her lower half appeared to be wet with urine.

She needed a shower.

Sylvia sat, staring, without sympathy, without cruelty, without anything, eyes simply gathering information, the way eyes do, the cross at her neck catching the fluorescent glare from the lights above.

“How will you know when I’m ready?” Hannah asked.

“It’s different for everyone.”

“Do you . . . do this a lot?”

“No.”

If there had not been pain, Hannah thought, all this would make sense to her. Pain moves through the flesh, where it stays but briefly, predictably, before it passes into the mind, where it lingers, doing strange things, perverse things.

Hannah looked down and closed her eyes again, forcing her mind to a place it didn’t want to go, to a complete accounting of what she had suffered.

Leg.

Thigh.

Capsaicin paste.

No.

Yes.

Paste, painted out on her thigh. Both thighs. One at a time. Two squares, each five inches on a side. Two white squares, bearing something from a green plant that grew in the desert, its essence combined with other things – vehicles, binders, accelerants, mitigators.

It hurt. It burned.

It tormented so fiercely it made her weep, beg to have it wiped off, removed, eased with a base. And then relief, from a dairy extract, perhaps. Or sugar. Something white, and so powerful the pain vanished, as if it had never been.

And then . . .

No.

Yes.

Something. On each breast.

No.

Yes.

Electricity.

A box, that Paula held. Plugged in somewhere, designed to transport electricity from a standard outlet, through wires, through the box

with a button in it, through more wires, to little meshes that Sylvia called, in an obscene euphemism, “mats,” and from there to Hannah’s breasts, and from there to the final target of the exercise, the soft, gray tissue of Hannah’s mind.

Take away the pain. Forget the pain. The pain is transitory. The things behind the pain are not.

Take away the pain.

Study what’s left.

Understand.

Compartmentalize.

Compartmentalize.

Torture, regardless why it was being inflicted, was always the same for Hannah.

She wept, she begged, she went mad with fear.

And then it was over, and she focused.

She focused.

Despite the pain – or because of it – she focused.

Hannah raised her head, looked up.

Sylvia was still there, watching.

“Dr. Ohr mentioned something,” Hannah began hoarsely, looking directly into Sylvia’s eyes, clearing her throat. “Insurance grade. Insurance grade distress.”

Hannah was no longer afraid of Sylvia, because all of Sylvia’s powers – questions, torture, questions, torture, chains and chairs and a can of Coke – had been brought forth, summoned, wielded. And they were finite.

And they were, ultimately, weak.

There was a girl in the kennels who wrote things on her body. The ink, and the flesh below it – the dermis, the capillaries, the nerves, the fat and muscle and bone – those were infinite.

The smile of the skinny girl named Amelia, who might be autistic.

That was infinity.

Torture was the final pretension of a system that had no other claim to legitimacy, that staggered on legs of wire and white paste and fizzy drinks and urine-soaked rags.

“It’s an expression,” Sylvia said, frowning a little uncertainly. Most likely, Dr. Ohr wasn’t supposed to have used that term in front of Hannah.

But then, one doesn't expect a slave in agony to hear much.

"What does it mean?" Hannah asked, and she believed she already knew, but she wanted to hear Sylvia say the words out loud.

"It's a medical term," Sylvia replied.

"No it's not," Hannah croaked, the words so rough as to be unintelligible. She cleared her throat, tried again. "No it's not."

Sylvia looked at Hannah, surprise passing briefly through her eyes before she brought them back to order, to the impenetrable mask she had to wear to do her job.

"What does it mean?" Hannah asked again.

Sylvia rolled her chair back to the shelf, grabbed Hannah's Coke, slid forward with a squeak, raised the straw to Hannah's lips.

Hannah sucked, swallowed, sucked, until the room that had echoed with her screams and her pleadings and her sobbing confession echoed with the gurgling sound of a straw that had reached the end of its use.

Hannah spat out the straw.

"What does it mean, Sylvia?"

Sylvia pushed back, set down the drink, turned back to Hannah.

"You signed a non-disclosure form."

"I did," Hannah agreed. "But I'm just asking for me. What does it mean?"

Sylvia looked into Hannah's eyes. Hannah stared back.

Sylvia yielded first, breaking her gaze, setting her elbows on her knees, lowering her head to stare at the floor.

"I can look it up when you send me back," Hannah said, her voice raspy and harsh in her own ears. "We have access to the internet where I'm kept."

Sylvia looked up, looked down.

your answers are all wrong

"But let me guess," Hannah said, "as long as we're still chatting here. Gramma – Canda Dupre – took out an insurance policy on Raven. And they won't pay, unless . . . unless the people closest to Raven all share what they know. So I'm sure you and your people talked to the Petrosyans, and Uncle B – and Gerald, and Gramma. And you were polite and didn't have to put them on chairs like this. But it's different for slaves, isn't it? Until you've gotten them at . . . what you call insurance grade distress . . .

the insurance company won't pay. Even if the slave knows nothing, and you know she knows nothing. Is that right? They won't pay?"

Sylvia looked up, straightened her back, smiled guiltily, shrugged.

"Would you like another Coke, Hannah?" she asked.

"No," Hannah replied. "You hate days like this, don't you?"

Sylvia raised an eyebrow, questioning now, trying to look as if she thought Hannah might be delirious again, but Hannah knew it to be another studied affectation, the face Sylvia put on while she tried to regain her footing with someone she'd just finished torturing.

"And you think that makes you a good person," Hannah continued. "Because you hate it. Hate what you have to do."

Sylvia did something with her mouth, as if there were a piece of flesh within her cheek she needed to bite off, before her face returned to impassivity.

"But," Hannah said, "you'll do it again, won't you?"

Sylvia stared.

"You'll do it again, won't you, Sylvia, to the next slave who's sent to you?"

"I'm very good at my job," Sylvia said, and she crossed her arms and stared at Hannah, confidence fighting with doubt in her eyes.

"You are," Hannah agreed. "I've seen your work. I'm sure your family is very proud."

Sylvia stood, left the room.

Hannah watched her go, watched her shut the door, sat and waited. She knew she had invited vengeance, again.

And she knew that the vengeance would not come.

There were rules for slaves, but there were rules for those who worked with slaves as well, certain things you could do, and certain things you could not, or should not do.

Slaves were not quite people, but they were more than people in one way.

Value.

An established, documented price tag. Normal people didn't have that.

Sylvia knew that, Hannah was certain. Yesterday, Marsha had learned it.

The door opened and one of the company's men entered, carrying a leather belt and the same shipping platform Hannah had been brought here on.

Hannah sniffed, glanced away, tried to look annoyed, but within, she was euphoric.

She was going home.

And she was going home the way she wanted.

For a half an hour, more or less, she would be held immobile, plunged into gloom, resting, and at peace. She would breathe the dark, musty air of the platform's innards.

And she would continue to process, think, work things through.

The world must be pondered.

The man set the platform down, turned to Hannah, opened the straps that bound her upper and lower arms. No words were necessary now, no instructions required. Still seated, Hannah leaned forward and the man wrapped the belt around her waist and buckled it.

Hannah reached behind, allowing him to cuff her wrists.

He opened her leg straps, and she stood in her shackles, tentatively, uncertainly.

The man, no doubt accustomed to freeing wobbly, disoriented subjects from the chair, grabbed her upper arm, steadying her as she walked to the end of the platform.

He lowered her to her knees, allowed her to catch her breath, levered her face-down into the plastic.

She raised her hips, angling her bottom up, accepting the gloved fingers, then the lubricated plugs up her anus and vagina.

While he strapped her in place – thighs, small of her back, shoulders, behind her head – she inhaled, drawing in the spirit of this dark, serene place, its contrast with what she had just experienced so great as to be restorative.

This was a different platform, shaped a little differently, the space for her breasts deeper. They wouldn't hurt this time.

She smiled, because no one could see her smile.

She felt him grab her shackles, and her legs were doubled up, followed by the click that confirmed her ankle chain had been secured at her wrists.

Hogtied.

Hannah heard steps. Another man was here.

She heard the squeaky wheel of a cart, felt her platform rise, felt herself move, the squeaks echoing off the walls of the interrogation room, through a door, down the hall.

She stopped moving.

Someone put a hand on her back.

“Hannah,” spoke the voice of Sylvia.

Hannah said nothing, nor did she flinch under Sylvia’s hand, or even breathe in.

“I’ll have that non-disclosure and confidentiality form sent to everyone,” she said. “To Allain in town, and to everyone in Dallas. Laura and Ormek. Canda and Gerald.”

Hannah lay so still she hoped Sylvia thought she was dead. Why was she bothering Hannah now, with information of no consequence?

“And that agreement remains in effect if we need to bring you back,” Sylvia continued.

Of course. Sylvia wanted to threaten Hannah with more torture.

“If new information comes to light . . .” Sylvia added, “that you might be able to help with.”

Like Marsha yesterday, she needed the last laugh.

And then, the coup de grâce:

“If you need to get in touch with me about anything, here’s my card.”

Hannah heard adhesive tape, a short strip being unwound, being torn from its dispenser. And then, something being stuck to her bottom.

Sylvia’s card. Taped to her rear the way you tape something to a suitcase, or a piece of furniture.

And yet, even Sylvia’s final offensive could not shake Hannah’s relief, as the cart continued its journey through the halls of the building and to the back of the truck. The door was closed, the interior light burned, the truck roared to life, and it trundled her body over the streets of Corpus Christi.

She breathed the dank air, gazed into the gray gloom, contemplated existence.

Hannah’s mind was whirring now. With Sylvia no longer before her to argue with, to channel her intellect against, Hannah’s thoughts shifted to

other concerns, sliding place to place, addressing topics, summarizing and concluding, moving on.

Was this all punishment for what she had written in her notebook? Had she displeased God with her furtive protest?

Within moments of writing out her first rebellious thought Friday, she'd been summoned for an unexpected meeting with Athena, about Raven, about the assessments, leading to being bound unpleasantly, hauled in a cage, given an enema.

And today, it was worse: fear, torture, screams, misery.

Words in a notebook, a meeting with Athena, then a gauntlet of unpleasantness.

And she'd confessed. They'd gotten her to confess to what she had done with Ormek.

Were transcripts produced of every interrogation? Did they record and write down not just the words spoken, but the groans of pain, the sighs, the screams?

Would Laura and Ormek receive a copy of the transcript? Would Gramma?

Probably not. You could get anyone to say anything once you'd inflicted enough distress. Some of it might be true, some of it crazed babbling, tailored from the same fabric that made up dreams.

Indeed, Hannah had blamed herself for Raven's disappearance, screaming out a barely coherent narrative in which her kenneling was the central element of the mystery.

No, Hannah's confession, while it brought a strange easing to her pains of the moment, and might have helped end her suffering, was all fantasy. Even had she and Raven coupled every night for a week before Raven's disappearance, Raven would not have breathed a word of her plans to escape.

Hannah was certain of this.

And if Raven was stolen, not even she would have known it was to happen.

But no, not everything that had happened since Hannah wrote her rebellious words was bad.

She'd met Franklin.

And she'd prevailed. No wars had been won, but she'd fought a few minor battles, standing worn and ragged on the edge of the field, arms

raised in victory.

She could be brought here again. Yes, there was that. More torture, more pain. But the element of surprise would be gone. Sylvia and her team didn't leave marks. The pain vanished, as if on schedule.

Hannah would endure.

If a god were watching and directing and had seen what she wrote, he was not a god of judgment or disapproval. He was a god of humor, of pranks and pratfalls.

Suffer a little, he was saying to Hannah, be brave, and then we'll laugh together.

Be brave.

And pity me, he would say. Everything they do to you hurts me more.

And Hannah would laugh at that while this god sat silent, because she could not imagine any theology where such words made sense.

If she ever got the chance, she would ask Franklin about that. Maybe he knew.

How much was Raven insured for, Hannah wondered? Clearly, enough to justify a thorough inquiry, the hiring of investigation firms where teams of professionals spent their time tormenting a girl who knew nothing.

Were they talking to every subject Raven had been intimate with?

Hannah had been her most regular partner. But what about Ramone? He had been put with Raven, more than once. Hannah had witnessed a coupling herself, Ramone delivering his second ejaculation to Raven one night in the spring, while Hannah watched, after he'd devoted his first to the deflowering of Athena.

Had Ramone been tortured?

Hannah desperately hoped not. But Ramone would have to take care of himself. And perhaps Athena spoke the truth, that Ramone might be sent back to Brazil soon. She would miss him, but she enjoyed imagining him resuming his life in his native land, his years of captivity in America a strange, profound memory that Ramone and his own god might someday laugh about.

This is wrong, Hannah thought, beginning in her mind the first words of her evolving litany. All of it. Something needs to be done. I have been imprisoned. Wrongly.

She stared into the dark interior of the thing she had been bound to, the truck rumbling and bouncing and swinging its way around corners, comforting her like a cradle, like a womb.

It is the duty of all of those wrongly imprisoned, she continued thinking to herself, to challenge their confinement. To escape, in mind if not body. To sabotage.

The truck stopped, backed up with a beep, stopped again. The door opened. Hands unfastened straps, unlocked chains, removed plugs, raised her to her knees, applied handcuffs and shackles, and now it was Donovan again, holding her arm wordlessly, guiding her off the truck, through processing, through the entry cage into hall 4, to her kennel.

He locked her in, opened her shackles and handcuffs.

She looked at her little battery-operated clock. 1:15. If she hurried, she could get the dregs of lunch.

“Can you open my door back up?” she asked, stepping to her toilet. “I need food.”

“Yeah,” he said, returning the key to the door.

She sat, noticed that something had been taped to her bottom, crinkling against the toilet seat.

“Ah,” she said, remembering Sylvia’s card. She pulled it off, the tape clinging to her as it peeled. “Did you see the thing they stuck to me?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t going to say anything.”

Hannah thought about throwing it away, decided to keep it, slung it under her bed.

Donovan continued to linger in the hall. She knew he was curious, that the staff had probably been talking about the way she’d been taken from the lounge this morning, two people with an order to apprehend her, to bind her with particular thoroughness.

Hannah wasn’t going to volunteer information, but she’d say what she could, if he asked.

“So . . .” he began, “was that another assessment?”

“No,” she said, wiping. “I doubt they ever take people to assessments that way.”

“I didn’t think so either.”

“Someone I know disappeared a few weeks ago, so they had some questions.”

“Someone in your family?”

“No, another family. A subject.”

“Oh,” Donovan said. “I’ve heard . . . those inquiries . . . can be a little . . .”

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed, flushing.

She stood, washed her hands and face, looked into her mirror. She didn’t look awful. Just drawn, tired, a little weak

Hannah went to her door. Donovan stepped back to allow her to pass.

“Did they . . .” he asked.

“Yes,” Hannah said, turning to him so quickly he backed up a step, as if he thought she was about to strike him. She breathed in through her nose, lowered her eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asked, searchingly.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Thanks for asking. And no, I’m not going to tell you what they did, because I signed something.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she said, adding to change the subject, “I applied this morning to go to school here.”

Donovan stared at her, slack-jawed, and she whirled away, trotted upstairs to the cafeteria, made a meal of what was left from lunch, eating alone. She washed it down with a Coke that she poured herself.

She returned to her hall for a shower, stepped to her kennel still damp, closed the door, heard it lock, and she felt safe.

Chapter 18: An Email from Mother

An hour after the kennels were unlocked for dinner that night, Jane appeared at Hannah’s door.

“Heard you got carted off this morning,” she said.

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed, rising from her bed, glad for the distraction from books.

“What did they do to you?” Jane asked just before they reached the stairs to the cafeteria.

“Torture,” Hannah replied quietly.

“Eeeee!” Jane said in a tight, urgent whisper, and she stopped and grabbed Hannah’s arm, turning to face her.

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” Hannah said, pulling away.

“No you’re not,” Jane said, following Hannah up the stairs.

Hannah struggled with a response, Jane’s assertion unexpectedly irritating.

Tempted to walk back to her kennel or tell Jane she wanted to eat alone, Hannah simply continued climbing.

“Hannah,” Jane said, catching up with her, taking her arm again.

Hannah stopped, turned to Jane.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Jane asked. “You need to talk about it.”

“I’m working through it,” Hannah said quietly. “And I had to sign something.”

“Sign something?”

“Confidentiality,” Hannah explained, pushing open the door that led into the cafeteria, and she found comfort in the noise of the space, the commotion of more than 100 naked captives dining boisterously, happily.

“Why did you have to sign something?” Jane asked, moving to the practical.

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “I guess so no one would know how they did things. Like, so their competitors wouldn’t find out.”

“That’s not it,” Jane said, pulling out a tray and stepping into line. “They just don’t want anyone knowing what they do . . . to us.”

“Huh?”

“Bad publicity.”

“I guess the same rule applies here,” Hannah said. “Hall 6.”

“Have you been yet?”

“No, of course not,” said Hannah. “I’m good.”

“I mean to work it.”

“No. You?”

“Yeah, every few months.”

“How is it?”

“Whatever,” Jane shrugged. “Most people that go there need it.”

They were joined by the usual friends over dinner, and they talked about safe things, gossip and news and their owners, but as Hannah cleared her plate, Jane leaned into Hannah’s arm and whispered quietly, “Tell me what I can do.”

“The same things as always,” Hannah said. “Normalcy helps.”

“Your kennel for a little while?” Jane asked.

“Yeah,” Hannah said.

Just before Hannah rose to clear her dishes, someone put their arm around her chest from behind.

“Ah!” Hannah shouted, particularly sensitive to unexpected contact today, almost sliding down in her chair to get away.

“Hey, Hannah!” Amelia shouted, with no apparent awareness she’d startled her friend.

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Hi, Amelia.”

“Did you go somewhere nice with those people?” Amelia asked.

“Yes,” Hannah said, with a quick glance at Jane. “I sure did.”

“I’m surprised,” Amelia said.

“Why?” Hannah asked, turning to look at Amelia’s shoulder, scrubbed clean of its message.

“You looked nervous,” Amelia said.

“I was just excited about how nice it would be.”

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye.”

Did Amelia’s shoulder truly bear that message this morning, or had Hannah imagined it all?

your answers are all wrong

No, it was there.

Jane and Hannah laughed about Amelia’s clumsy friendship all the way back to Hannah’s kennel, but Hannah felt grateful too. Something about Amelia was like a tonic, perhaps.

Jane was a part of the cure too, Hannah realized, sensitive when she needed to be.

The girl could be forceful at times, planting a hand between Hannah’s breasts and holding her against the bed while she repositioned herself, pushing Hannah’s legs wide to access her openings, pressing her mouth against Hannah’s mouth hard enough to make their teeth ring together.

But tonight, Jane was all gentleness, allowing Hannah to lead, allowing her to decide what they would do.

Hannah, consciously reminding herself that affection was the norm, torture the exception even in the lives of slaves, focused first on Jane’s mouth, the two girls lying side by side in Hannah’s bed to kiss, deeply, to breathe into each other’s ears, to lick each other’s lips and teeth.

Only at the end, Hannah's vagina leaking through its last day of ovulation, did she move her mouth down to Jane's perpetually erect nipples, sucking slowly while the steam built between her own legs, working her way from there to Jane's sex opening, pushing her tongue through the thick hair and into her friend's slit, eventually turning to submit her own chamber to Jane's inspection, the two girls reversed, Hannah on top, tongues and lips and teeth working at their respective holes to deliver slow, languorous climaxes.

The girls rose stiffly from their coupling, untangling until both were seated at the edge of Hannah's bed, leaking out onto her sheets.

They'd asked Tammy for half an hour. Twenty-five minutes had passed.

"Tell me you're okay," Jane said, reaching to rest her hand on Hannah's.

"I'm okay, for now," Hannah said. "That's the best I can give you. Thanks."

They kissed again, like friends, mouths closed, and Jane ran her palm along Hannah's back, up to her shoulders and down to her bottom, and Hannah set her head against Jane's neck and breathed in.

"Hannah, you guys done in there?" Tammy asked on the other side of the curtain. If she'd looked through the clear window, she could see for herself, but sometimes the staff chose to give the kenneled a little privacy.

"We are," Hannah replied.

Jane stood, retrieved her glasses from Hannah's shelf, and Hannah pulled back the curtain.

"How are you doing, Hannah?" Tammy asked, unlocking and opening the door.

Hannah could tell by the look in her eyes that the staff had been talking, that Donovan had shared what he knew about Hannah's suffering. Maybe they had formal meetings about this kind of thing, or maybe it was just a word or two in passing, something like, "I think Hannah got tortured today."

"I'm good," Hannah said, kissing Jane goodnight on the cheek, and she turned back to her bed, listened to the clang of doors opening and closing down the hall, stared at the ceiling and slowly drifted off to sleep.

Hannah woke the next morning at peace, the sense of dread that had haunted her intermittently for days completely lifted.

As she relieved herself at her toilet and prepared for the day, she wondered at the workings of her mind.

She had known all along that she'd be tortured. She'd known it since Athena warned her, that previous Friday, that Raven was gone and Hannah would need to answer questions. Athena probably didn't know the specifics, but she no doubt suspected Hannah was in for an ordeal, and she'd practically admitted it with her hedged words and the way her eyes darted.

But something in Hannah's mind had kept the bitter truth from breaking into her conscious.

Why?

Was it not better to know what lay ahead?

No, Hannah concluded. Not if nothing could be done about it.

Deal with it afterwards, as she had. Ignorance before the fact – even if it were ignorance tainted with the sense of impending doom – was probably for the best.

After breakfast, she went to the PCs to look up “insurance grade distress,” confirmed that it meant what she thought, and checked email.

Nothing from Athena, and Hannah felt a little guilty when she remembered her anger yesterday, her mind searching for the reason she'd been bundled up again, landing first on treachery by the innocent Athena.

Athena wasn't going out of her way to be good, Hannah knew. But she wasn't needlessly evil.

Along with the junk Hannah deleted without reading, she found an email she'd been anticipating, from Mother.

“I'm driving over this weekend,” Mother had written. “I need to see you.”

“Is there an emergency?” Hannah replied before she dove into her studies.

“Does there need to be an emergency for you to see me?” Mother replied almost immediately.

“No, Ma'am,” Hannah wrote. “When? I can't wait!”

“I should get there Saturday afternoon. Maybe we might have dinner?”

In negotiating the contract Hannah had signed when the Petrosyans bought her a year ago, Hannah had insisted on seeing Mother at least once a month.

Now that they could correspond via email, Hannah believed, they might not need to be together in person quite as often.

Mother, apparently, disagreed.

The truth is, Mother made Hannah nervous. She was trying too hard to understand Hannah's situation. Sometimes, she asked awkward questions. They shared a difficult history.

Raised and married in a fundamentalist community, taught little beyond the Bible, Mother was functionally illiterate when she fled to save Hannah from an arranged marriage.

In the end, Mother had only delayed the inevitable, losing Hannah not to a grizzled polygamist at 15, but to slavery three years later.

The former might have been preferable in some ways. Hannah would be miserable, but not collared, and she and Mother would surely have seen each other far more often. Every day, most likely.

It didn't seem to Hannah that Mother could ever forgive herself for what had become of her daughter.

Hannah remained equivocal. What's done is done. Those who fixated on the good that might have been ignored the good that was, and lost themselves to bitterness. Celebrate. There was always something to rejoice in. Even in a week when one was tortured.

Mother was coming. That seemed worth a little joy.

But this was awkward. Because they'd agreed not to email each other, she couldn't let Allain know until tomorrow, Friday evening, that some portion of Saturday would be spent with Mother.

Very well. Mother had suffered her share of making do. Allain would have to make do on Saturday, Hannah thought.

But then, Mother had never met any of the Petrosyans, and Hannah understood the perils involved.

Legal as their ownership of Hannah was, the Petrosyans were in a moral sense her kidnappers, holding her for an unpayable ransom.

Not spiriting Hannah to parts unknown, necessarily, or holding her incommunicado, but taking the lion's share of her time, and most of the benefits of her company. Mother might be quite justified in at least condemning Allain to his face, if not attacking him outright. And it had happened often enough, Hannah knew from her perusals of the news, bereft parents or children or lovers wreaking vengeance on owners.

Often enough, however, the bereft were unstable, or the owners were abusive. Or both.

Mother was stable, and she had adapted to the way things were, if not found complete reconciliation with them in her heart. And the Petrosyans were, overall, generous and kind. Allain in particular.

Mother would be civil to Allain, certainly. The reunion would be like any other where a girl and boy have moved in together, and a parent is visiting for the first time. The fact that Hannah was there but Friday and Saturday nights, confined to a tiny kennel the rest of the week, could be left unspoken.

Mother would come to Allain's apartment, Hannah decided, to see where Hannah spent her weekends. Hannah would make meatball soup for dinner, one of her best creations.

"Yes!" Hannah wrote, after careful consideration. "Here's Allain's address and his phone number if you get lost. I'll make us all dinner!"

No one bothered Hannah Thursday, to chain her and cage her and carry her off, and she was able to dedicate herself to academics all that day, burying herself in her studies at the PCs, laboring over the pile of books and journals in her kennel, narrowing down her treatise topics to three very good ones, and she noted that her thinking remained clear even if her voice still came out a little rough.

As was her custom on Thursday nights, Hannah kept her bedtime thoughts chaste and her hands at her sides, saving up her lust so she could marshal all of it Friday for Allain.

She went to bed hopeful, dreamed about being tortured only once, cried out until she woke herself up, saw she was safe and kenneled, and she began Friday morning optimistic, eager for a new day and another weekend.

She picked up her academics where she'd left them Thursday evening, determined to accomplish enough that she could leave it all behind without guilt until Sunday night. Other than breaks for lunch and a spin on an exercise bike in the lounge, she spent the day learning.

Chapter 19: Coffee with Lacey

By Friday at 4, an hour before Allain was scheduled to meet her in front of the kennels, Hannah was woozy and giddy, the words on the pages and on the computer screen dancing before her.

She took her best shampoo to the showers, and a razor and a can of shaving cream, bathed and laughed with Jane, shaved her pubic hair into a neat triangle, fended off several propositions from boys showering beside her or watching her dry her hair, and by 4:45, she was at her locker, picking out a white thong and bra, blue jeans, a yellow sweater, a black belt and black sandals, then at the mirror, applying makeup, getting her back scanned, and flying out the door and into the waning sun two minutes after 5.

“Allain!” she screamed, seeing him, his back turned, 20 yards away. “Allain!”

As was her custom on Friday nights, she ran to him, and he turned just in time to catch her, the lovers embracing, Hannah planting urgent, grateful kisses on his neck and mouth.

“I’ve missed you!” she cried, satisfied to sum up their five days apart that way. He didn’t need to know all she’d done during the week. Indeed, some of it she couldn’t speak of. If he asked, she would tell him about her studies, and about her progress on the treatise. That was it.

But she had more important things to talk about right now.

“Guess who’s coming to town?” she said breathlessly as they began the walk across campus to his apartment.

“Your mother,” he said.

“Huh?” Hannah said, dumbstruck.

“She called me yesterday, and we’ve been texting a little too.”

“Huh?” Hannah repeated.

“I thought you knew. She said you gave her my number.”

“I gave her your address. She was just supposed to show up. I gave her your number in case she got lost.”

“I guess she wanted to say hi beforehand,” Allain laughed, looking at Hannah uncertainly.

They almost never fought, rarely even argued. But things weren’t coming together at all the way Hannah thought they would, and she had grown somber while she tried to regroup.

“Okay,” Hannah said. “I didn’t know that was going to happen.”

“Your mom’s nice,” Allain said. “She reminds me of you.”

“Don’t say that,” Hannah blurted, unsure why Allain’s words bothered her.

Allain laughed disarmingly, as if to assure Hannah that Mother was most assuredly not like her daughter in at least one important respect.

Hannah was only mildly buoyed.

“So, what were you talking about with her then?”

Was Hannah jealous of her mother?

No, not sexually at least. But Hannah wasn’t allowed to talk to Allain during the week, while Mother was, apparently.

Hannah paused, still regrouping. Okay. Allain and Mother were just getting introduced. They weren’t talking all the time. One phone call. Some texts. And Hannah herself had kicked things off.

It had been more than a year since the Petrosyans had bought her. Wasn’t it well past time someone from the family met Mother?

Hannah drew in her breath, forced herself to a place of perspective. Compartmentalize, she said in her mind.

Did Franklin’s word work in this context? She wasn’t sure. She wished she could ask him.

“We just talked about weekend plans,” Allain said, the first hint of defensiveness in his voice. “She’s supposed to get here by 3, and then we’ll take her to the club, and—”

“I was going to make dinner tomorrow night,” Hannah protested.

“Well, let’s talk about it when she gets here,” Allain said. “I can cancel the reservations.”

“You made reservations?”

“Yes, for 7 tomorrow.”

“When do you have time to make reservations?”

“It barely took any time.”

The sun was setting earlier now than it had when Hannah arrived six weeks ago, and the hot wind that raked the campus on Friday evenings in August and September was blowing just a little over room temperature now, on the first Friday in October. Winter was coming. And January. And school. And class, if she got accepted.

“Hey,” Allain said, and he took Hannah’s elbow, turning her, and the two faced each other in the middle of the sidewalk, Hannah mostly oblivious to the passing of students and faculty on their way to the weekend.

Hannah looked up at Allain, waiting for him to speak.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m more than okay,” she said sincerely. “I’m happy.”

“I got something in the mail today.”

“Yeah?”

“From Dimper somebody.”

“Dimper and Dimper,” she corrected.

“Something you signed.”

Hannah looked into Allain’s eyes, working to make her face blank. She wasn’t supposed to talk about this. With anyone. Dimper and Dimper could sue her if she did. More likely, though, they would sue Ormek and Laura. Allain might suffer too. So might Athena.

“Yeah,” Hannah said simply. “I went there Wednesday.”

“And they talked to you?”

“Yeah.”

“They asked you some questions?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said after a pause. Of course they asked questions. That wasn’t a secret.

“Did they . . .”

“Did they what?” Hannah asked.

Allain just looked, waiting for Hannah to answer without having to hear the rest of Allain’s question. And indeed, she had always been open to him about her suffering, about being punished, how it was done and how it felt. But that was punishment, done officially and openly, with witnesses. This was something else.

“Did they what?” Hannah asked again, sharply.

She was not compartmentalizing right now.

Franklin would be very disappointed.

“I need to pee,” she lied. “Let’s get to your place.”

It was Friday night, she was with Allain, Mother was coming tomorrow, she had two days of freedom and pleasure before her. The sky was blue, the sun glancing off stately buildings of red brick and white stucco where she might, in three months, sit at a desk and be a real student. She should be happy. She should be in that simple, bright compartment marked “Happiness.”

But her mind had been pushed by Allain’s gentle question to a dark, ugly box, with nothing but desperate fingernail gouges on the outside.

She was angry again. She was hurting again, not with real pain, predictable and fleeting when applied during an interrogation, but with the

phantoms of remembered agony that stalked her flesh of their own accord, summoned in dreams or by the words of a concerned lover.

She looked down as she walked, at her thighs, at her breasts, half expecting to see white paste caked across her jeans, a pair of wire meshes affixed with clear gel over her yellow sweater.

What if she told him? What if she described to Allain, in vivid detail, all that she'd suffered? Would he, like any responsible owner of a slave girl, keep her confidential revelations to himself? Or might he, like the lover he pretended to be, or truly was, call his mother and his father and rail against them for what had been done?

Would he call Gramma and Uncle Bear, and scream at them?

He should probably call Gramma.

Gramma was, after all, the ultimate beneficiary of Raven's insurance policy. She wanted Raven back, certainly, but if she couldn't have the girl she'd raised and loved, she would want the money. Did Gramma, a sweet woman who had charmed Hannah every time they'd met, know what had to be done before the insurance company would pay up?

Hannah wasn't sure. Hannah hoped not. The implications were too terrible to contemplate.

No, Hannah must not speak of this.

If Hannah told Allain, he might keep it to himself, or he might say something to someone, and his words, like an illness, would spread and mutate through the family. Athena would overhear, and she would announce all she knew, at the most inopportune time, to her friends, to her peers, to the world on Look!.

And someone, probably Gramma, would call Dimper and Dimper, to complain, to criticize. To feign surprise, perhaps.

Then there might be a lawsuit. Maybe even criminal charges. Hannah remembered a vague, frightening term in the document she'd signed – unspecified punishments “as allowable by law, policy or custom,” and she imagined herself being dragged back to Sylvia's lair, to suffer again, this time not for knowledge, but for raw retribution.

Worst of all, Hannah thought, her little victory over Sylvia Wednesday would fade.

“I'm sure your family is very proud,” Hannah had said. Sylvia had responded by leaving the room.

That's what Hannah wanted Sylvia to remember, when she thought about the girl she'd tortured. "I'm sure your family is very proud."

Were Hannah to complain, to talk and blab and cry, the memory of Hannah's biting words would yield their place in Sylvia's mind to another, far more palatable recollection – just another soft, whiney slave girl who couldn't keep her mouth shut.

I'm sure your family is very proud

Hannah wanted that sting to last, to burrow into Sylvia's soft gray tissues, to stay and haunt. In the end, those phantoms would burn more than the ones Sylvia had put within Hannah's mind.

Hannah stopped on the street across from Allain's apartment, and she turned toward him, and this time, she took his elbow.

"They asked some hard questions," Hannah said, honestly. "They just want to get Raven back, so they really dig, like they suspect you, and I didn't like it."

Allain searched Hannah's face, trying to see inside her mind, but not quite able to get past her blue eyes.

It's something Franklin could do.

Allain couldn't.

"Okay," he said, clearly not quite believing her. "You just seemed sort of . . . stressed a second ago."

"Well, yeah," Hannah replied evenly. "I'm nervous about Mom. Aren't you?"

"I'm really not," he said. "She sounded like you on the phone. And you don't make me nervous."

"Okay," Hannah laughed. "But I'm nervous. And that's probably normal."

"Do you have a cold?" Allain asked, leading Hannah across the street.

"Huh?"

"Did you catch something this week? Your voice sounds a little raw."

"Oh. Oh, yeah. A couple days of sniffles. No fever. A 48-hour thing. I'm fine."

Hannah woke Saturday morning on pins and needles.

No nightmares this time, no screaming herself awake, just a sharp fear at the day's first light over all the ways things could go badly this afternoon and evening.

Mother would be here at 3. She would pull up at Allain's apartment after the six-hour drive from Dallas. She was driving now, probably borrowing the truck of her boyfriend, Roger. She had a smartphone.

She was living with Roger. She was, obviously, having sex with him.

Mother was fornicating.

A year ago, Hannah and her mother lived in celibate squalor. No car, no cell phones, barely enough money to eat.

Since then, both of them had adapted.

Hannah went to the toilet, slipped past the bed and out of Allain's room, naked but for her shackles, rounding the couch where Lacey slumbered quietly.

"Hey," Lacey said in the darkness, thick comforter rustling.

"Hey, want coffee?"

"Yeah."

Hannah stood by the machine while it gurgled and muttered to itself, poured two cups in the half light, black for Lacey, creamed and sugared for Hannah.

She handed Lacey her cup, sat on the floor before her.

"You can sit on the couch," Lacey said. Did it make her feel guilty, when the slave girl brought her coffee and then sat before her, like a pet?

Hannah didn't care.

"My mom's coming today," Hannah whispered.

"What time?"

"Three or so. She's driving from Dallas."

"Why?"

"To see me. She's my mom."

"I mean, some special occasion? Birthday?"

"My birthday's in April. She just hasn't seen me in almost two months, so she wants to visit. And I'm going to make dinner."

"Cool."

"My meatball soup, if you want some."

"Is she staying the night?"

"Oh," Hannah said, feeling stupid. "I hadn't even thought of that."

“She can have the couch, if she wants it.”

“That would be strange,” Hannah said.

“Why?”

“I’m used to you there in the morning. If I’m coming out, and my mom’s sleeping there, and—”

“God, are you going to do it while she’s here?”

Hannah blushed, glad for the darkness, and raised the coffee to her lips.

“Why would you even ask that?” she eventually queried.

“Well . . .” Lacey said, clearly scratching around for an answer. “I mean, she’s your mom, and Allain’s your, your . . .”

What? Hannah thought. He’s my what?

Slavery added rocks to the seas where conversations sailed, Hannah thought, and they popped up when you weren’t looking and you ran aground on them, a final word that couldn’t be spoken, a sentence that couldn’t be finished.

The fear, often, was that the subject might take offense. Already insulted by collar and convention, a careless word in the midst of a friendly conversation might offend irreparably, the slave withdrawing, shutting down, going silent. For an hour. A day. A lifetime.

There was something about Lacey, though. Curious, open, sincere – even philosophical – that Hannah could never take offense with.

“Allain’s not my owner,” Hannah said.

Lacey raised an eyebrow, took a sip.

“He’s not my master either, really,” she added. “His parents own me. So . . . we’re together.”

Lacey nodded.

“If she stays,” Hannah said, “we’ll just do it . . . quietly.”

Lacey snorted into her mug.

“What?” Hannah demanded, and she felt her face reddening again.

“Look, I don’t try to listen, okay?” Lacey said. “So don’t call me a pervert. But that door is like . . . it might as well not be there.”

Hannah bit her lip and looked at the floor. Why was this embarrassing? Why was any of this embarrassing?

Because . . . because . . . Hannah was two Hannahs. Two Hannahs. One Hannah, slave Hannah, who had sex while people watched, whose vagina could be farmed out by her owners, who was expected to email

reports about intercourse with strangers, being sodomized by them, being licked between her legs by them, while their penises hardened and bobbed and leaked at the tip in anticipation of being pushed within her.

And the other Hannah, refined, bright, schooled, an esteemed member of a wealthy, respected family.

A girlfriend. A daughter. The occasional occupant of a medical student's apartment, where she loved with dignity, with discretion.

"You breathe a lot," Lacey said.

"Huh?" Hannah said.

"When you're doing it. You breathe a lot."

"Yeah," Hannah said flatly. "People need to breathe."

Lacey snorted again, while Hannah worked through these words, finding her shame irrational, wiping it away.

Adapting.

Compartmentalizing.

She was two Hannahs, and sometimes, they bumped into each other, one emerging into the other's sphere uninvited, unwelcome, dressed for the wrong party.

Or not dressed at all.

Two Hannahs.

Slave Hannah.

And . . . free Hannah.

Chapter 20: Making up Mother

After Allain woke up, Hannah showered, spent an hour on her makeup, picked out her new white van Minsk sundress with a blue belt and gold along the hem and at the shoulders, but she let it hang on the bedroom door and put on t-shirt and shorts while she shared a lunch of delivery pizza.

With Allain and Robbie up, the conversation skipped over the standard themes, of school and commerce and music and a new movie people wanted to see.

At 2, Lacey and Robbie left. They said they needed to go somewhere, but Hannah suspected they just didn't want to be here when Mother showed up. Maybe they'd come by later, for Hannah's soup.

Allain needed to study while they waited for Mother, and he grabbed a book and his laptop and sat on the couch, losing himself in schoolwork, while Hannah dressed and touched up her makeup.

Hannah, in her sundress now, sitting beside him, flipped through one of his textbooks, found it boring because she'd already read most of it in one of Ormek's old textbooks, got Allain's phone and asked him to set it so she could play *Katzink*.

She had just finished creating a new character she'd named Hannahpaws, who wore blue and pink fur and was going to start a restaurant, when someone knocked on the door.

Hannah set Allain's phone on the coffee table, nearly tripped on the way to the door, opened it wide.

"Mother!" she cried, stepping into the hall, wrapping her arms around the woman who had given her life, and who still loved her so much she was willing to drive six hours to see her.

Martha Loughbridge had shown up at Allain's door in a simple smock, light blue, the kind of thing women wear early in their pregnancies. Her pants were denim but not quite jeans, a soft, cream fabric that looked new. She was wearing light purple sneakers, a large leather purse over her shoulder.

She had put on no makeup this day, tied her blonde hair in a simple ponytail.

Hannah, who had learned to assess appearances, her own and others', confirmed that Mother was as beautiful as always, even if she were dressed like a commoner, her face a little narrower than Hannah's, eyes more piercing, sharper.

Mother released Hannah, grabbed her daughter by the shoulders and looked her up and down, her eyes stopping briefly at her neck, as if wondering if this was the same collar, or if the thing around her with tags dangling from it might be new jewelry, the collar replaced by something fashionable free girls wore.

"Oh, Hannah!" Mother exclaimed, her inspection complete, her disappointment kept to herself. "Please tell me you don't just sit around in things like that all day."

"It's van Minsk," Hannah said. "Allain bought it for me last weekend. On clearance, but I had to have it."

Hannah turned to bring Mother into the apartment to meet Allain, but he was already behind her.

He was going to meet Hannah's mother on his own terms, apparently. And Mother wasn't holding back either.

"Hello, Mrs. Loughbridge," Allain said politely, almost meekly, as he stepped around Hannah and offered his hand.

Hannah held her breath. Had mother driven from Dallas to spit in Allain's face? To curse him? To shoot him with a gun she hidden in her purse?

Mother looked up at Allain and smiled.

"It's very nice to meet you in person," she said, and something in her voice told Hannah that she liked Allain, or at least accepted him, that she wasn't here to hurt him, or challenge him, or try to change things.

Hannah breathed out, ushered Allain and Mother into the apartment, and Mother asked for a bathroom, so Hannah escorted her through the bedroom, past the bed where Hannah was shackled for sleeping.

Mother didn't close the door to urinate, so Hannah hovered just out of sight and marveled at all that had changed between them. These kinds of doors used to stay closed, always.

"You're staying the night, right?" Hannah asked.

"Oh no, I'll head out after dinner, drive as far as I can and get a hotel."

"No," Hannah said. "You have to stay overnight here."

"Oh no," Mother said.

"I'll take your keys," Hannah said. "I will lie in front of your car. You have to stay."

"Shouldn't you check with Allain?" Mother asked, flushing.

Hannah leaned against the wall, waiting for the sound of the toilet to subside, and suffering through deep, unexpected distress. Nothing was going as she'd expected. Two worlds were meeting – or colliding, perhaps – and she was in the middle and trying to control them, because that should be her role, and her right, and no one was doing what she wanted them to do, and everything was bothering her more than it should.

She imagined herself screaming and curling up in a ball on Allain's bed. Neither Mother nor Allain would understand. Hannah wouldn't either, not fully.

Mother emerged from the bathroom.

“This is up to me,” Hannah said. “I want you to stay. You need to stay.”

“We can talk about it,” Mother agreed.

“Okay, but you have to stay.”

Mother passed out of the bedroom, sat on the easy chair. Hannah and Allain sat on the couch, and they talked like three old friends, Hannah announcing that she’d applied to Corpus Christi this week and was working on a scholarship treatise, Allain describing his classes and his program, Mother surprising them both by revealing she had just started a paralegal program and was doing administrative work at a law office.

“Law, Mother?” Hannah exclaimed. “You’re going to work with lawyers?”

“If I finish the program and I can get a job doing it, yes.”

“How’s Roger?” Hannah asked.

Mother looked away before she answered. “He’s good. Very supportive.”

From there, the conversation moved on to the Petrosyans, Mother asking cautiously about Allain’s parents and sister. She’d learned much of it already from Hannah and her own research, but hearing it from Allain was another form of politeness, or a way to fill in the gaps of her knowledge about the people who owned her daughter.

Mother spoke knowledgeably, confidently, using words Hannah had never heard from her mouth before, like “extemporaneous” and “impromptu.”

In Hannah’s mind, Mother’s disposition, attitudes, and religious outlook had been frozen in amber, unchanging from Hannah’s first memories of her. But now, she seemed to have broken free. Maybe it was the shock of losing her daughter. But something had changed, and was no doubt continuing to change.

Hannah, looking for a lull in the conversation, had to wait until 5 to blurt out her ideas for the evening.

“Mother,” she said, “do you remember Mr. Sampan’s meatball casserole?”

“Barely. I can’t believe you remember it at all.”

“I ate it all the time at the potlucks,” Hannah said. “Until probably the year we left. So, I’ve worked out a variation.”

Mother smiled indulgently.

"It's the same little meatballs, with salt and pepper, and —"

"Oregano?"

"Oregano?" Hannah echoed.

"Rosemary, thyme, a little paprika . . ."

"I don't need any of that," Hannah said. "And then celery, and cabbage, and carrots."

"I'm sure it's very good," Mother said.

"I want to make it tonight, so we need to go to the store," Hannah said.

"I thought we were going to the Petrosyan's club," Mother replied.

"Is that what you want?" Hannah asked, her voice cracking.

This hurt. This really hurt.

Her mother had been conspiring with Allain – since Hannah had emailed her his phone number Thursday – to make their own plans, regardless of her preferences. Hannah wanted to make dinner. She wanted to cook for Mother.

She wanted . . . she wasn't sure.

She wasn't seeing things clearly. Her eyes weren't focusing the way they should. Her heart was thumping and her breath was coming fast and shallow.

Hannah leaned back on the couch and looked up at the ceiling, one hand clutching her thigh.

Mother and Allain continued to talk, something about meatballs, something about the club, oblivious to her malaise.

Malaise.

Is that what this was?

Ennui?

Dysthymia?

Panic attack?

Hannah rose, went to the bedroom, shut the door that kept out no sound, and collapsed on the bed, hugging her pillow to her chest.

She longed to cry, to scream, to issue a howl for the ages, but she just wept, quietly, her mascara sliding down the side of her face.

After her first bout of self-absorption, Hannah closed her mouth and opened her eyes, listening. Allain and Mother were still talking, but hushed now, in what Hannah perceived as concerned whispers.

She couldn't hear the words, but she knew what they must be saying. Mother must be asking Allain if Hannah wasn't feeling good, if this was a regular occurrence, if she were often moody, if she were starting her period soon, if she were under stress.

And then Allain would nod to Mother, and rise, and go to his girl.

And, as if on cue, Hannah heard him open the door, heard his steps, felt the mattress sink when he sat beside her.

He put his hand on her head, worked his fingers into her hair.

"Hey, Hannah," he said, quietly. "You okay?"

Hannah, eyes open, stared at the wall.

Am I okay? Well, no one wants my soup. I work very hard at it. Each little meatball has to be rolled by hand. I practically invented the recipe myself, with just a few memories from childhood to go on. Doesn't it taste good? Maybe Allain doesn't like it.

If I can't cook for Allain, I am barely a woman.

I am a failure.

your answers are all wrong

Hannah breathed in, lungs filling to capacity, body tensed, eyes shut in pain, and she raised her pillow to her mouth and bit.

She wanted to scream. She bit instead.

No, this isn't about soup

These are the phantoms, inserted Wednesday through her thighs and her breasts, lodging in her mind now, slashing and biting at her neurons.

No, Hannah said to herself. I'm not okay.

Not yet.

She reached up, pulled Allain's hand from her hair, moved it to her cheek.

"I'm okay," she said. "There's just so much going on."

"I know," Allain said. "I think you might be studying too hard."

She rolled over to her back, looked up at him.

"So let's give you a break tonight," he said.

"You don't like my soup, do you?"

Allain said nothing, just raised his hand to her hair again, and his answer was as excruciatingly obvious as if he'd shouted it:

No, he might as well have said, the soup recipe you invented and worked so hard at two weeks ago wasn't, really, all that great.

The second sentence was also left unspoken:
We didn't buy you to cook.

Perhaps Hannah, in the first days after she was taken captive and brought to the stacks, should have insisted that she was there only for food preparation. She would not have allowed herself to be taken to a classroom to train for sex, with males and females. She would instead have been brought to a kitchen, to mix, stir, bake, fry, toast, broil, poach. Three witnesses would have watched her roll out little meatballs and drop them into a boiling pot, ladling it all out and serving it to two trained, certified assessors, male and female, who would have groaned not from the orgasmic release she delivered with her mouth and vagina, but from the gastronomic ecstasy she delivered with her hands and her own clever mind.

The Petrosyans would still have bought her, of course, but primarily to cook. She and Allain would still have been mutually attracted, of course, and would have found opportunities for discreet, furtive lovemaking. But only after she'd fed him something delicious.

Ormek would have had no expectations of satisfying himself within her body, and she and Raven, a talented chef in her own right, would have only cooked for each other. They would not have made love, they would not have been intimate, and when Raven escaped in Uncle Bear's car to cook for someone else, Hannah would certainly not have been tortured to find out where she'd gone.

Hannah smiled. Was it not funny? Was there not a god somewhere, laughing? Were some of the phantoms that haunted her mind jesters, dressed in piebald, bells dangling from the bent peaks of garish hats?

She took Allain's hand and he helped her sit up, and she wrapped her arms around her legs, heard the door into the hall shut, and wondered if Mother had given up on her daughter and headed back to Dallas.

"Is Mother leaving?" Hannah asked.

"No," Allain replied, "she went to get some things. She's spending the night."

"You convinced her?"

"We both did."

"I want to make something you like," Hannah said.

"I love lasagna."

"Okay."

"But there's not time tonight," he said. "Club okay?"

Hannah looked at Allain, moved her mouth to his ear.

“Mom can’t go like that,” she said.

“Aren’t you the same size?” he whispered back.

“Okay.”

Hannah slid off the bed, went to the bathroom to wash off what was left of her carefully-applied makeup, and returned to the living room, where Mother was staring at a picture on the mantel.

“This must be from Guadalupe,” she said, turning to Hannah, her eyes searching her daughter briefly.

“It is,” Hannah said, laughing as if a little scandalized.

The picture captured her in a happy moment on a mountain, sitting with Allain and their friends, Hannah just in bikini bottoms, her arm across her nipples, all of southern Texas behind them. “That’s me of course, and Allain. And that’s Beth, Nina, Beatrice, Fernando, Buck.”

“Were you always dressed that way?” Mother asked. Hannah looked at her. She wasn’t judging, it didn’t seem, just curious.

“Sometimes I wore less,” Hannah said. “Sometimes more. It was up to me.”

“What’s that on your ankle?”

“The rangers put it on me, for while I was there. It tracked me during the day.”

“Who have you been with?” Mother asked. She didn’t hesitate before she asked the question, didn’t pause at certain words, didn’t blush, didn’t smile the way people sometimes did when they were embarrassed. She still wasn’t judging.

Without speaking, Hannah put her thumb beside Allain’s face, red nail on his cheek. Then Fernando’s, and Buck’s, and Beth’s.

Mother leaned forward, studied the faces, the way parents have always studied the faces of those their children have been intimate with.

She turned back to Hannah, smiled. “I understand you’re going to dress me and make me up.”

“Is that what Allain told you?”

“He did.”

“He told me you’re spending the night,” Hannah said.

“I am.”

Allain was on the bed with textbook and laptop, but he moved back to the couch when Hannah and her mother stepped in.

Mother kicked off her shoes, slid down her pants and yanked off her top with no hint of modesty, revealing a very standard bra and panties, the kind one buys in packs at department stores that also sell groceries.

Hannah turned to the closet where she and Allain hung their clothing side by side, and she pulled out her favorite little black dress.

Mother, not surprisingly, shook her head.

“Okay, I’m being serious now,” Hannah said, and she pulled out a red plaid, knee-length skirt and a black silk shirt. “If you tuck the shirt in, you get a black belt and you’re ready for the office. If you leave it untucked, you’re ready for the bazaar.”

Mother nodded, and Hannah pulled off her own dress, threw everything on the bed, and she brought Mother into the bathroom where for the next half hour they played with colors – eyeliner, rouge, mascara, lipsticks, blushes.

Mother, who had not worn makeup until after Hannah was taken from her, who had not done many things until after Hannah was taken, knew enough to get by, but Hannah brought the skills of a near-expert.

“There’s a girl named Delilah in Dallas,” Hannah said, carefully marking off Mother’s eyes. “She’s generally considered the best at what she does, and she’s taken a special interest in me.”

Hannah grabbed a lipstick.

“I try to watch what she does, so I can copy her,” she said. “But it’s impossible. It’s like trying to copy an artist. You can’t.”

“You’re doing wonders with me.”

“She has all these looks,” Hannah continued. “She rattled them off one day, when me and Athena went out on the town. International spy was one. Something stowaway. Like, Transpacific stowaway, I think. Some kind of CEO. And then . . . and then . . . fuckyoubitch. All one word.”

“fuckyoubitch?”

“You know what you’re saying, right?” Hannah asked. Two of the three words Mother had just spoken had, as far as Hannah knew, never left her mouth before.

“I do,” Mother replied. “Was that the look she gave you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Delilah’s got . . . sort of an edge to her.”

“Is she a . . .”

“A subject. Yes. She started out as a boy, decided she was a girl, her dad sold her the next week, she—”

“Is she a lover?”

“No,” Hannah said. “Not at all. She still has her . . . boy parts. So, we love each other, but there’s no sex.”

“What does fuckyoubitch look like?”

“I looked like I was 30.”

“Why that look, though? Why those words?”

Hannah turned, one eyebrow raised. Everything would be normal with Mother, and then she would dig. Why? What was she trying to find out? What did she want Hannah to say?

“We all have an edge,” Hannah said, mindful that Allain, while immersed in his studies, could probably hear everything they were saying on the other side of the door. She’d already troubled him enough today. She didn’t want a few words about something obvious to trigger another round of concern.

Hannah reached up, touched the two tags that dangled from her collar, the tag that said “Hannah” and “Female, Recreational” and listed her Federal ID number, and the plastic tag with Hannah’s little picture on it issued by the kennels.

“We all have an edge,” she repeated again, as if those words could sum up a book’s worth of law and culture and policy, an endless narrative of flesh and blood and bone that could be precisely valued and traded and tortured.

“Who is bitch?” Mother persisted.

Hannah laughed. “Certain people,” she said. “Certain things.”

“Are you okay?” Mother asked.

“Why?” Hannah asked in innocent surprise, as if Mother’s question made no sense.

“When you just got up . . . and stormed off.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, glad to have something specific to respond to. “There’s a lot going on right now. School, and projects. And having you here. And I wanted to cook for everyone.”

“But Honey, meatball soup?”

Hannah frowned, fought the urge to pout, or cry, or lie down again and ruminate on her failure.

“I was just a little overwhelmed,” she said. “I’m fine. I’m okay.”

They both turned to the mirror, two faces, side-by-side, strangely alike given all the differences in their lives over the last year. As if one of them were living through the other.

“Is anything,” Mother whispered, hesitating now, “being . . . forced on you?”

“Forced on me?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No,” Hannah said adamantly, quietly. “I always have the final say. Now let me do your hair.”

Mother removed her band and Hannah reached up, fluffing, shaping, tossing, pulling out hairspray and her dryer, giving Mother volume above her forehead and the arches of her eyebrows that implied sophistication, confidence, health.

Mother looked in the mirror, laughed. “I’m not sure that’s me anymore.”

They dressed, presented themselves for Allain’s enthusiastic inspection, and all three headed down to the parking lot for the evening’s most awkward ritual.

Chapter 21: Pointed Questions

Mother insisted on sitting in the back of Allain’s car, an old, four-door BMW, so Hannah took her place in the front, Mother behind her.

Hannah buckled her seatbelt and waited for Allain.

After he made sure Mother was settled, Allain stepped to Hannah’s door and knelt on the pavement, reaching under her seat to grab her chains while she held her feet out of the way.

Hannah raised her hands, as she always did, and Allain wore the same, blank expression he always did as he bound her, closing the cuffs around her wrists with two soft clicks, reaching down to secure her ankles, shutting her door, rounding the car to get in.

Mother waited until Allain had eased the car out of the parking space to speak.

“What was that for?” she asked, quietly.

Hannah opened her mouth, closed it, decided this was Allain’s question to answer.

She looked at Allain, who seemed focused on driving, who had possibly not even heard the question.

But after a pause that Hannah decided would not distress her, no matter how long it lasted, Allain spoke.

“It’s a family rule,” he said.

He could have stopped there, Hannah thought, but he took another breath, trying with halting words but admirable courage to justify that which could not be justified.

“A girl like Hannah . . .” he stammered.

Mother and daughter just listened.

“Because of what . . . was paid,” he continued, trying a new approach. “We don’t want . . .”

“You’re afraid someone might steal her?”

“We are,” Allain said, relief in his voice. He wasn’t prepared for a monologue on this topic.

“Or she might run away?” Mother asked.

Digging, digging. She’d dug at Hannah. Now it was Allain’s turn.

Still, there was no judgment in her tone, just the softly-voiced questions of innocent curiosity. Next, after she was done talking about her daughter’s chains, she might ask about the clothing Allain bought for Hannah, or how often he took her to the club.

“I don’t think . . .” Allain said, voice trailing off.

“I understand you have a sister,” Mother said, “about Hannah’s age.”

“I do . . .” Allain agreed. “Athena.”

“Athena,” Mother echoed. “How do you two get along?”

“Better,” Allain replied, laughing with relief. “She’s easiest in small doses.”

Hannah and Mother laughed too, while Hannah reveled in an unspoken partnership.

Mother had, Hannah realized, joined the insurrection, using a subtle jab here, a passive inquiry there, to question, to challenge.

And someday, perhaps, to do her part to overthrow.

“Athena’s like my sister too,” Hannah said. “We sort of love each other . . . and we sort of don’t.”

For the rest of the drive, Hannah and Allain took turns telling stories about Athena, her mischievous streak, her fondness for dissension,

her ability to foment it often enough, as well as her more endearing qualities, her friendships, her occasional concern for others' feelings, her progress in school.

In the downtown garage closest to the club, Allain parked, quickly pulled off Hannah's chains, and escorted mother and daughter to the building, describing the dining options and the general layout of the facility for Mother's benefit.

They were given a table by the window, where they could watch the day end in a glory of reds and pinks.

To Hannah's surprise, Mother ordered wine, a cabernet sauvignon. Hannah ordered her usual white, Allain requesting a dirty martini.

Talking as old friends again, they worked through the courses of their meal without interruption until Allain saw two medical school faculty and excused himself.

"Since when did you start drinking?" Hannah asked, leaning forward.

"It's one of the bad habits I've picked up since . . ."

"And what were you getting at with Allain?"

"You know exactly what I was getting at," Mother answered, smiling.

"I find myself doing the same thing," Hannah said. "But Allain's a believer. He just doesn't know it yet."

"Do you work on any non-believers?" Mother asked.

"When I can, yes," Hannah replied.

"Are you doing enough?"

Hannah looked at Mother. For the first time since she'd hugged Mother in the hall, she felt judged.

Are you doing enough?

Hannah sipped her wine and looked into the last grays of day's end, the lights of cruise ships and freighters and tankers extending to the horizon, each craft in her mind like a small prison where escape meant not a week of torture, but simple death.

Are you doing enough?

"They don't care that you're still a teenager?" Mother asked, nodding at Hannah's drink.

"No. They see the collar and – I guess the rules are different."

Allain, after 15 minutes at the other table, brought the two professors by to introduce them to his girl and his girl's mother.

Drs. Paulson and French, who taught infectious diseases and medical ethics, respectively, presented themselves with short bows. Hannah sensed the men might be gay lovers, and wondered if they lived together.

"I understand you help out in class quite a bit," said Dr. French.

"Well, since this semester started," Hannah said. "Maybe once or twice a week."

"We don't use models in infectious diseases," said Dr. Paulson, "for obvious reasons."

"You could give me something non-fatal," Hannah said, "for your own amusement."

Allain laughed first, the two faculty looking at each other in puzzlement before Dr. Paulson covered his mouth and laughed, high-pitched, eyes closed, hand eventually moving to Allain's shoulder.

Allain walked with the men to the exit, and Mother leaned in for more information.

"How do you help out?" she asked.

"Anatomy model, life drawing," Hannah said.

"Anatomy model?"

"Yes," Hannah said. This wasn't something she had ever planned to share with Mother, but the subject had been broached, making full disclosure her only option.

"They take me nude, and they draw me, or they look at me, or they put things inside me, or—"

"What things?"

"A camera," Hannah said, forcing out the words. "Up my vagina. Like, for a class on reproduction."

Mother smiled, not in pain, not with a disappointed grimace, but with what appeared to be sincere pride.

"You keep surprising me," she said.

"In a good way or a bad way?"

"I just wanted to protect you," she said, "because I knew about the world, and I didn't think you could survive it."

"I'm making—"

"I can barely keep up with you."

"There's nothing to keep up with."

Mother shook her head, looked over Hannah's head, and Hannah felt hands on her shoulders and a kiss on her ear.

Allain took his seat, smiling at Mother.

"Did your daughter always talk that way?" he asked.

"Like what?" Mother inquired.

"Like . . . you never know what will come out of her mouth next," he said, and he laughed. "Last weekend, while she was serving lunch and tea, she shut up a class of medical students."

"What did you say, Hannah?"

"I was arguing about scholarship papers," Hannah said. "I said one was better than the other, and I was right and they looked it up themselves and agreed with me."

The trio finished their meal with conversation and desert and brandy and returned to Allain's car, where Hannah's chaining was allowed to occur unremarked this time.

Lacey and Robbie were in the apartment, drinking something clear out of plastic cups, both standing as soon as the door opened, introducing themselves to Mother with all the formality Allain had affected earlier, and the five of them talked until almost midnight, and Hannah drank from this fount of friendship and family and considered herself at least partly restored, her phantoms subdued, maybe a few slain, never again to arise.

Not for the first time, she imagined Sylvia, and the phantoms Hannah had planted in her mind, if indeed they had been planted, and she wondered if friends and family could dispel Sylvia's phantoms, or if the exorcism would take longer, and require a different medicine, and hurt more.

Lacey and Robbie drifted off first to their bedroom, Allain next, Hannah following after she made sure Mother had all she needed on the couch, one of Allain's long black t-shirts to wear, and a spare pillow and a thick comforter and a light she knew how to turn on and off.

In bed with Allain, Hannah would not hear of withholding her treasures from Allain just because Mother slept on the other side of a flimsy door, Allain assenting after a short, whispered argument.

But their lovemaking was brief, quiet and missionary, Hannah struggling to control her breathing, Allain delivering steady, gentle thrusts up Hannah's vagina, the lovers climaxing together with muffled grunts and tight embraces.

Indeed, nothing was as loud as the click of Hannah's cuffs, wrapped around her ankles after she went to the toilet to wipe her opening and wash her face.

Are you doing enough?

As Hannah lay on her back, waiting for sleep to take her, listening to Allain's steady breathing, the seed of a plan fell among the gray folds of her mind, an idea as wicked and rebellious and subtle as anything she'd ever contemplated.

Are you doing enough?

Hannah woke early, as was her habit, slipped to the toilet and then out of the bedroom, naked and shackled, all in accordance with custom.

She rounded the couch where Mother slept, creeping as quietly as she could with her chain ringing against the floor.

"Hey, Honey," Mother said quietly.

Hannah turned, stepped, knelt before the couch, and Mother sat up, looking at her daughter in the first dim light of dawn.

"You're naked," she observed.

"Yes, it's how I sleep," Hannah said.

"He chains you at night?"

"Yes."

"When does he take them off?"

"As soon as he wakes up," Hannah said. "Usually I have to remind him."

"Another family rule?"

"Yes," Hannah whispered. "Would you like some coffee? Are you drinking coffee now?"

"I am, and yes," Mother said. "Cream and sugar."

Hannah brewed a pot, prepared two cups identically, returned to her mother and sat down beside her, tucking her shackled feet beneath her and pulling the comforter over her hips.

"Tell me about Roger," Hannah said quietly.

"He's been a step on the path."

"The path?"

"To not losing everything," Mother explained. "My mind. My soul."

"I'm sorry."

"I go to meetings."

“Meetings?”

“For people like me . . . who have lost someone. Have you heard of Subject-Bereft?”

“I have.”

“We all blame ourselves. So I had to work on that. That was part of the path. None of us want to live anymore, so I—”

“Mother!” Hannah hissed quietly.

“Sweetie, I’m not talking about that,” Mother said. “I mean, live. Have fun. Laugh. Make love.”

Hannah nodded.

“We have something we say, at the end of every meeting, all together: ‘If anyone deserves to live, it’s me.’”

“Do you believe it?”

Mother leaned forward.

“Those words were written for me,” she said, her eyes wide and wet, mouth shut tight, as if she had just bitten something off and it was still alive behind her teeth.

“You know how I was raised,” Mother said. “You know how I lived. It was barely living at all.”

“We both lived it,” Hannah said.

“I’m spending money now,” Mother said, her eyes guarded.

“The money . . . you got from me?” Hannah asked. It was the sorest of sore points for them, Mother receiving almost 10 percent of the proceeds of Hannah’s sale – more than \$100,000 – and refusing to spend it.

“You told me to spend it on school,” Mother said.

“I did.”

“The paralegal program is almost three thousand dollars.”

“Good.”

“For every dollar I spend on myself, I put a dollar in savings,” Mother said, pausing, “and I give a dollar to Absolution.”

“Absolution?”

“The freedom group. You must have heard of it.”

“I have,” Hannah said. The oddly-named organization worked openly to end slavery worldwide, and was rumored to maintain underground operations as well, freeing slaves when they could and cutting off their collars and spiriting them away, to nations where the institution wasn’t practiced or enforced.

“You’re part of the path too,” Mother said, raising her hands to her eyes to keep the tears from running down her cheeks. “Every time I saw you, I saw a girl making do, growing, thriving. If you can adapt, to . . . all this, so can I. That’s what I told myself. Adapt. Live. Grow.”

Mother reached over, took Hannah’s hand, her grip trembling, tight, desperate.

“To make up for everything that was taken from me by . . . them.”

“Them?”

“My parents, the men, Four Pillars.”

For a time, they sat, Hannah pondering all that could be taken away from a woman by men who claimed to know God’s mind.

“Where are you living now?” Hannah asked. It was a simple question she’d avoided, because it raised other questions that Mother might find awkward.

Mother laughed quietly to herself.

“In a trailer, with Roger, on his sister’s land.”

Hannah held silent, knowing there was more to be said, waiting for Mother to say it if she chose to.

“I love him,” Mother said, adding after a long pause, “and he doesn’t change. I do.”

She brought her hands to her eyes again, breathed in.

“I want you to visit us,” she said, “the next time you’re with the Petrosyans.”

“I’ll ask,” Hannah said.

“You could spend the night.”

“I’ll have to check. Maybe. I want to.”

Toilets flushed.

“People are waking up,” Hannah said.

Lacey emerged, got coffee, sat, turned groggily toward them.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Good morning.”

They talked about the club, about the day’s plans, about Mother’s drive home.

Allain came next, kissed Hannah’s head, Mother’s head.

Robbie last, and the five of them splayed around the living room, eating fruit and bagels and leftover casserole, giving the floor mostly to

Robbie, because Mother was curious about philosophy, what questions it could answer about how people should live and what they should do to each other, and what questions it paused before. Even Lacey found the conversation interesting enough to ask things, now that Mother was forcing him into a discourse of the primarily practical.

And then Mother was on her way, hugging Lacey and Robbie in the living room, hugging Allain at the door, hugging Hannah beside a blue pickup truck, and fighting tears with kisses.

“Will you be in Dallas for Thanksgiving?” Mother asked.

“I think so,” Hannah said.

“You know I heard you last night.”

“I guessed you would,” Hannah said. “I heard you and, um, Dad a long time ago.”

“When?”

“I came home early from school ‘cuz I was sick, and you were doing it, so I went outside and waited.”

“Sometimes he wanted it during the day.”

“Did you?” Hannah asked.

“I didn’t matter.”

Chapter 22: Ronen and an Angry Woman

Athena emailed Hannah that following Tuesday that she’d scheduled another assessment for Wednesday afternoon, at 2.

“You’ve seen his picture,” she wrote.

So he must be the boy with model looks and the large penis.

Would he and Hannah fall for each other?

Hannah suspected not. Apparently, Athena wasn’t worried about it either.

But Franklin must have been struck from the list, for some reason.

Probably just as well. She didn’t need Athena to buy him. When she came for Franklin, she would do it on her own.

Hannah printed out a new copy of the protocol and made her laundry rounds quickly that morning, fearful she’d be taken from the middle of one of the halls, unchained from her cart at any moment, bound strictly and tossed in a cage.

She finished her chores, went to lunch, went back to her kennel and studied with one eye on the clock.

At 1:30, she started worrying. Had they come for her in the morning and given up when they couldn't find her? Would they burst in at any moment, bundle her up and race her across town? Would she go back to the facility where Marsha worked? Was Marsha up to something, another attempt at revenge?

At 1:55, Donovan appeared, holding chains.

"Hey, Hannah, ready to go?"

"For what?" she asked. She held her hands forward, hoping she'd be bound that way. To her relief, that's how Donovan handcuffed her.

"I'm taking you to one of the rooms upstairs," he said, kneeling to apply her shackles. "They're waiting for you."

"How many?"

"I just know it's some people," he said. "I didn't see them."

He unlocked Hannah's door, and she grabbed the protocol and followed him up the stairs, through the cafeteria, past the lounge and meetings rooms and down another hall, lined with doors. She knew the event center was up here, as well as guest rooms and a few holding pens.

Donovan brought her to one of the guest room doors, opened it, let her in.

The boy from Athena's phone sat naked on the bed, chained hand and foot, penis soft.

A man and woman sat in two chairs by the desk.

The woman stood first, dressed for business, a stylish coat and matching skirt. Too much makeup, however. And she was bulging in strange places around her hips, evidence to Hannah of industrial-strength undergarments, something that was supposed to lift and shape but only served to deform, obvious to one who knew where to look on the wrong kind of body.

"You must be Hannah," she said.

"Yes, Ma'am, a pleasure," Hannah said, and she reached out and took the woman's hand in both of hers. The man, also in a suit, stood, offered his hand. Hannah tried the two-handed shake on him as well. Both smiled in surprise, as if she had completely charmed them.

Neither introduced themselves by name. Were they parents? No, they seemed too young, and parents rarely participated in projects like this

regardless. Were they relatives? Probably not. Investors? Yes, Hannah decided. They'd seen the boy's pictures and bought him for less than they thought they could sell him for.

"And this is Ronen," the woman said.

He continued sitting on the bed, raising his bound hands to Hannah's. She took his hand in both of hers, while his left hand just dangled, aimlessly. He hadn't learned her trick yet.

His eyes passed languidly over her body.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi, Ronen, nice to meet you," Hannah said, wondering if he were born with the name or given it by these two, part of the process of fixing him up for resale.

She looked at his penis again, still sleeping between his thighs. She looked into his face, his good looks something any normal girl would swoon over.

Something was wrong.

Hannah suspected she knew what it was, but tried to keep her mind from that conclusion because of the bias it would generate.

Donovan stepped before Hannah, removed her restraints.

"Check on you in an hour?" he asked, pausing at the door.

"Yeah, we should be done by then," she replied.

Donovan left, locked the door behind him. Did the couple have a key, or were they all captive now? There was a bathroom here. It didn't matter.

"You'll both be witnessing?" she asked the couple.

"Yes," the woman said.

She turned to Ronen and raised the protocol to her eyes.

"You're rested, not hungry, not too full?"

"Yeah."

"You haven't had an orgasm in the last 24 hours?"

"No," he scowled.

Hannah sat on the bed next to him. He looked at her again, looked away.

"Tell me about yourself," she said. "We have up to 10 minutes."

He laughed, in an annoyed way.

"Ten minutes," he said, looking at the wall. "That's a long time. I ended up in this place, and then people thought I was ready."

“What place?”

“A sort of, uh, therapy place.”

“Here in Texas?”

“Yes.”

“Is there anything else I should know?”

“No,” he said.

“Do you want to do this?” Hannah asked, halfway expecting him to say no.

“Yes,” he said, with a quick glance at the couple before he turned to Hannah. “You’re really hot.”

“Thanks,” she said. She turned to the protocol for her supplies, verified there was a clock with a second hand on the wall. A door beside the bed opened to a simple bathroom, where Ronen could wash himself after he sodomized her.

“I’ll need a pen,” she said, “tape measure, and lubricant.”

The woman reached into her purse, set the requested items on the desk.

“I’m using the Smithfield Protocol,” Hannah said. “If that wasn’t explained to you.”

“It was,” she said.

Hannah turned to Ronen, holding the protocol up between them.

“The assessment will consist of 18 steps . . .” she began, reading the document word for word while he gazed at her, at the wall, at the couple.

“Any questions about any of that?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” she said, “Step 1, 2 minutes. Partners may at Male's discretion sit or lie on the mattress for full mouth kissing.”

The woman stepped over, opened Ronen’s shackles and handcuffs, and he stood, turned to Hannah, put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her down, lying next to her.

“Oh, baby, oh baby,” he said, as if reading a part for a play, and he pressed his mouth against hers, pulled away to continue his patter. “You are so hot. I can’t believe how hot you are.”

Hannah opened her mouth, but he kept his closed for the next round of kissing, his flaccid penis pressed against her thigh.

Hannah pulled her mouth away.

“Okay, okay, wait,” she said, pushing him up.

“What?” the woman demanded, leaning forward in her chair.

Hannah turned to Ronen. “Have you ever made love to a girl?”

“All the time,” he said.

“Are you gay?” she asked.

“I’m not gay,” Ronen said, his words carefully rehearsed, delivered with the merest hint of offense. “I am so into you.”

He leaned back toward her, tried to press his mouth against hers.

“No way,” Hannah said, pushing him away again, sliding up to sit on the edge of the bed, protocol clutched in her hand. “We’re done.”

“He’s not gay!” the woman cried, rising, while the man remained seated beside her. “We took care of that.”

“You took care of what?” Hannah asked.

“The chemistry’s off,” the woman asserted, looking away. “You’re not the right girl. As soon as they brought you in, I could tell. We need a girl with some experience, not some lesbian, and then we’ll—”

“This isn’t going to work,” Hannah said coldly, not remotely interested in outlining her experience or orientation.

“Are there other girls here?” the woman demanded.

“It’s not going to work with any girl,” Hannah said. “Stop faking.”

“What the hell do you know?” the woman demanded.

“I know the market’s better for straight boys,” Hannah said. “And then you can breed him too. And all that means more money. But only if he’s actually—”

“You gonna do this, bitch?”

The woman was facing Hannah, shoulders hunched, arms extended, ending in fists.

Hannah felt the hairs stand up on the back of her neck. She left the bed, went to the bathroom and locked the door.

She heard quiet talking, the man’s voice, the woman’s, Ronen’s.

“How long are you going to be in there?” the woman asked.

“Until they come to get me.”

“Who?”

“Kennel staff.”

“You need to do the assessment.”

“No,” Hannah said, stuffing the protocol in the trash, sitting down on the toilet.

“Please, Baby, I’m sorry about what I said earlier,” the woman pleaded, almost winning Hannah’s sympathy, if not her compliance.

More quiet talking, then BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! on the bathroom door, and someone turned the knob, pressed against the door, all in vain.

“Get out here, bitch!” the woman screamed.

“Are you staff?” Hannah asked.

“Bitch! Bitch! BITCH!”

Hannah laughed. This didn’t hurt. No phantoms would be planted here.

Hannah heard another knock, this one on the outside door, which opened with the jangle of keys, and then Holly’s voice.

“Is everything okay in here?” she asked. “I heard someone banging.”

“Holly!” Hannah yelled from the bathroom. “Holly, get me out of here!”

“Hannah?” Holly said, voice just outside the bathroom door. “You okay?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, “but I need to go back downstairs. Do you have chains?”

“Yeah,” Holly said, “Open the door.”

Hannah unlocked it, opened it wide.

“What’s going on?” Holly asked.

The man and woman were both seated, the woman staring at Hannah with a deep malevolence.

Ronen was still on the bed, staring at his feet.

“I was brought up to do an assessment,” Hannah said, “but I have the prerogative to terminate, and I decided to do that.”

Hannah pointed at the woman. “And she made me feel physically unsafe.”

Holly held up handcuffs and Hannah put her hands out, stood still to be shackled, and followed Holly to the door, but she turned and looked at Ronen before she passed through.

“It’s not worth it,” she said. “Be who you are.”

Once Hannah and Holly were in the hall, the woman appeared, glaring.

“She refused a direct order,” she announced. “She needs to be beaten.”

“You don’t give orders here,” Holly said. “We do. Get out.”

The woman muttered something quiet, inaudible, but when Hannah and Holly reached the door at the end of the hall, she began yelling at the occupants of the room, her voice angry and distraught, her words unintelligible.

Hannah was trembling now, not in fear or pain as much as anger and frustration. How could people be this stupid?

“Thanks for rescuing me,” she said.

“They’ll be reported,” Holly said. “They won’t be allowed back.”

Only when she was safely locked back in her kennel did Hannah cry. For Ronen. For the pathetic way he flailed against her body. For what he was being put through, because his owners didn’t like what he was.

No one, not even a slave, could be ordered to be something they weren’t.

Not Ronen.

And not Hannah.

That night before she went to dinner, Hannah logged into email.

“I had to terminate the assessment,” she wrote to Athena. “He’s gay.”

Hannah went into her Austin assignments, checking email only occasionally.

It took no more than 10 minutes for Athena to reply.

“What do you mean gay?”

“He likes boys,” Hannah typed back.

“I know what gay means. Why are you saying he’s gay?”

“Talk to his owners. They practically admitted they did conversion on him. But it didn’t work, of course. Soft penis. And exact quotes: ‘Oh, baby, oh baby. I can’t believe how hot you are’ and ‘I am so into you.’”

Hannah paused, considered, decided to add one more line:

“But if all that turns you on, buy him.”

Hannah hit SEND, returned to her studies.

Athena had nothing more to say that evening, and Hannah allowed herself the small pleasure of imagining the seething girl back in Dallas, now

with two candidates scratched off her list.

Chapter 23: A Visit from the Viking Stepchild

The days tumbled over each other, growing shorter, turning to weeks, the air cooler, turning to rain, Hannah screaming out her laughter under a Saturday night downpour as she raced Allain to the door of his apartment building.

She partnered casually during the week, but gave all of herself to Allain on the weekends, either with her vagina or, during her period in the middle of October, by mouth. She offered her anus that weekend, was secretly relieved when Allain declined.

She traded emails with Mother but heard nothing more from Athena and wanted to imagine the girl had abandoned her efforts to buy a boy.

By late October, Hannah was past the midpoint of her Austin coursework and waiting to hear back on her spring application from Corpus Christi.

And by then, Hannah's thoughts of rebellion had coalesced around a single form: something wicked she might do with her scholarship treatise.

Falling asleep beside Allain during Mother's visit in early October, she'd happened upon the seed of an idea, so ill-advised and yet so deliciously disruptive she could neither pursue it wholeheartedly nor abandon it.

Because it could get her severely punished, if not sold, she contemplated it as an academic exercise only, the way one might imagine robbing a bank without any intentions of doing so. But her ruminations tended toward considerable detail. And the bad karma or pranking god that seemed to attend her first seditious thoughts had worked things out with her, apparently. No one came for her, to bind her, to take her to assessments, to cart her body somewhere for interrogation and torture.

But she was brought two or three times per week to one classroom or other, earning a little money by being chained and locked in a cage and rolled across campus and let out to pose for life modeling classes, to be displayed for anatomy or reproduction lessons, to hold still, tethered to a table or examination chair, while students used her body to learn about breast exams, pap smears, transvaginal ultrasounds.

And when she was staring at the ceiling in class, or eating alone, or going to sleep, Hannah wondered about Franklin. She would always wonder about Franklin, she knew.

She worked diligently on Wednesday mornings, wrist and ankle chained to the laundry cart as she made her rounds, and Amelia, the strange girl who might be autistic, emerged as an unexpected high point of Hannah's weekly passage.

Amelia invariably folded her soiled linens neatly, standing at attention and speaking politely, cryptically to Hannah while the words she'd scrawled on her body did their own talking.

One Wednesday, she'd written in reverse just above her nipples, forcing Hannah to study the girl's A-cup breasts.

"Left breast," said the words, plainly legible only in the mirror. "Right breast."

"Don't you think things should be more organized?" Amelia inquired, eyes fixed on Hannah's cart.

"I do," Hannah agreed. This seemed to be one of Amelia's preoccupations, the desire to impose order on things. Was her concern a rejection of slavery, or a commitment to it? Hannah knew Amelia had been taken off the street, but only if she agreed to become the property of the family that rescued her. Was she trying to conform, or to resist?

"Entropy," Hannah added, "is really causing problems lately."

"Entropy?" Amelia inquired, looking very briefly and nervously into Hannah's eyes before she returned her gaze to the cart. "Entropy?"

"It's sort of a joke," Hannah said, regretting that her stray comment seemed to have sent Amelia to the verge of panic. "Gradual disorder. But it's not something to worry about."

"Okay, I'm probably going to get in trouble again," Amelia said. "Good day, Hannah."

"Bye," Hannah said.

During the last week in October, Hannah's chore landed on the first day of ovulation, and her fellow subjects, particularly the males, seemed to sense her condition. Those who usually just gave her a nod and a few words as she took their soiled sheets stepped to their bars to ask how she was doing, to make an observation, to wax philosophical about dirty linens.

Jacob, the sweet-smiled boy who'd been sold when he reached 18 and his polygamist community no longer wanted him, seemed to be waiting

for her, standing behind his bars with his sheets clutched to his chest.

“Good morning, Laundry Girl,” he said.

Hannah laughed, surprised by his uncharacteristic familiarity. Was he just amusing himself, or was he perhaps interested in her after weeks of ignoring her?

“Good morning, Chinese Boy.”

Jacob blinked, stared, clearly taken aback.

“Because you’re studying Chinese,” she explained.

“I am?” he asked.

“You had that book out,” she said, noticing that it was gone now, replaced on his shelf by other works. “Epic of, um, something?”

“Oh, yeah, Epic of Darkness,” he clarified. “I finished it. It was a little disappointing.”

“You finished it in Chinese?”

“Yeah.”

“How many languages do you know?”

“A few. None of them all that well, though.”

“Are you going to give me your sheets?”

He raised them, Hannah pulled them through the bars, she looked down to confirm his penis was hardening, and she looked back into his eyes and wondered if he’d noticed her quick inspection.

“You are interesting,” she said.

In their first chat, she’d invited him to join her in the cafeteria, to talk about applying for classes in the spring. He had yet to take her up on the invitation, so she let the conversation end, turning back to her cart and pushing it down the hall with the quiet ring of her chains.

Did he find her interesting as well, as a partner in academics, or for any other reason? She still wasn’t sure. Sometimes boys got erections that had nothing to do with the girl they were talking to.

Hannah wondered about his owner, a sophomore at Corpus Christi who perhaps hadn’t signed the form permitting him to partner sexually in the kennels. Or, even if she had signed it, she could impose any rules she wanted outside the document. Hannah imagined the girl, explaining to Jacob what he could and couldn’t do while he was confined with the other subjects, bringing him to her dorm immediately upon each release from the kennels to examine his penis for the vestiges of another female. A sensitive mouth and nose could pick up clues, even after a shower.

Or the girl might just ask him what he'd done at the start of every reunion, and he must either confess or lie, both options placing him in peril.

Hannah thought Jacob might be better left alone, that putting a boy in danger of punishment put her in the same state, one way or another. But something about him stirred her. His smile. His ungainly face with the too-large jaw. His intelligence. His history.

She continued her tour, feeling unresolved and restless, the fluid wetting her vaginal lips a mild torment.

"Hey, Hannah," said Xavier, a tall boy on hall 3 whose name, and his blond hair and blue eyes, contradicted each other in a way that mildly troubled her. She had not been with him yet, didn't know much about his history.

"Hey, Xavier," she said, reaching through the bars to take his sheets.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" he asked.

"I have everything but," she said. "What about you?"

He looked at her, pausing to process her words, finally recovering.

"Do you want one?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. You know anyone?"

"Me," he said, clearly not wanting to get caught flat-footed by Hannah's flippancy twice.

She dropped his sheets into the cart without looking at them. Sometimes, boys would try to deliver their bedding so certain things were obvious: blood from somewhere, presumably a girl, which she found disconcerting; coffee on occasion, which she found uninteresting; and more semen than she would have predicted.

"I'm booked through the weekend," she said. "Tuesday?"

"You're being serious?" he asked.

"Yeah, I started ovulating today, and I like to set things up for it, but I've got no Tuesday plans yet."

Xavier studied her, still clearly not sure if he was being toyed with.

"Everyone wants to talk this morning," she said, "so I'm running behind and I'm being blunt, okay? Next Tuesday would work."

Hannah paused.

"Or possibly tonight. I'm supposed to be with someone else, but if her period starts early or PMS shuts her down, I'll be free."

“When will you know?” he asked, and Hannah looked down and noticed his erection for the first time, protruding between the bars of his kennel. She imagined turning around, bending, still chained to her cart, and presenting her opening to him. And she would accept him between the bars – the way she used to do with Ormek – to work through the ache of this part of her cycle.

How long would it take for a staff person to spot her deviance through one of the cameras, barge onto the hall, stop her, and schedule her for a visit to Hall 6? Would Xavier be able to finish in her before she was sent on her way?

“By dinner,” Hannah said. “I’ll say something either way.”

Hannah spent the rest of the day using books and periodicals and studies to distract herself from her biological condition. Had she not had a scheduled partner and a backup as well for the evening, she most likely would have drawn her curtain and masturbated by dinnertime.

Abstaining all afternoon meant her eyes went immediately to Jane’s vulva when they met to go to dinner. Nothing was visible there, but the girl whispered to Hannah on the way upstairs that she’d begun cramping after lunch and had a tampon in to prepare for the inevitable.

“Where’s the string?” Hannah asked.

“I tucked it in,” Jane said. “Raincheck?”

“No problem,” Hannah said. “I have a Plan B, sort of.”

“Who?” Jane asked as she grabbed a tray.

“Someone new. Xavier.”

“Oh, Viking Stepchild?”

“Huh?”

“That’s what people call him. His parents were Hispanic and his mom couldn’t quite explain why he looked like he did after he was born, so his dad named him Xavier for revenge and sold him.”

“That’s awful,” Hannah said.

“It gets worse,” Jane continued. “The people who bought him couldn’t have kids, so that’s what he was going to be. And then . . .”

“And then what?”

“Fertility treatments, or in vitro, or something. They had twins, kicked him down to subject status, and here he is, helping them get through school.”

Hannah felt her appetite waning, studied her tray and the food she'd put on it, and remembered that the reasons to hate the way things were could occur at any time, any place.

She waited until they were seated to speak again.

"How do you know all this?" she asked. "Have you been with him?"

"No, but people talk," Jane replied. "I'm not sure what he's said, and what someone dug up or got from his owners, so probably best not to ask him a whole lot about his family life."

"Yeah, I'll skip that topic."

"Kinda tormented," Jane added as an aside.

"What do you mean?" Hannah asked.

"You know how some people – most people – just kind of go with it?"

"Yeah?" Hannah said, more question than affirmation.

"He doesn't," Jane said.

"What do you mean?" Hannah asked.

"He's a little . . ." Jane's voice trailed off.

"Go on," Hannah said.

"I don't know," Jane said brusquely. "More a feeling than anything specific. So, how did he score you?"

"Asked nicely at the right time and place," Hannah said.

"When and how?"

"I was doing laundry this morning, ovulating, and he asked if I had a boyfriend."

"You fell for that?" Jane asked, laughing.

"Fell for what?" Hannah asked. "I knew what he was getting at."

Hannah and Jane joined Brad and his friends, who were just finishing up when the girls sat down.

Once those males left, Xavier appeared, got dinner, joined them, his looks tragic in Hannah's eyes now she knew his story.

"Xavier, this is Jane," Hannah said.

"I sort of knew that," Xavier said. "Hi, Jane."

"Hi, Xavier," Jane said through her black-framed glasses, her nipples as pert as ever.

He looked over Hannah's head, toward the plate glass windows and into the night, the lights of campus and distant traffic the only illumination.

This was awkward for him, Hannah realized. Probably because Jane was here. Everyone was embarrassed by different things, aroused by different things.

Jane was embarrassed about her period. Xavier was embarrassed about propositioning Hannah.

“Do you still want to be my boyfriend?” Hannah asked.

“I guess,” Xavier replied.

“You guess?” Jane echoed.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Xavier said, cheeks reddening.

“Oh my god, a boy who can blush,” Jane said.

“Where, Xavier?” Hannah asked to end Jane’s teasing.

“Your kennel?”

“I’ll be there,” Hannah said. “Hall 4, toward the middle.”

Once she was locked in and waiting for Xavier, Hannah found herself suffering from second thoughts.

We’re all recovering from something, she told herself. But Xavier’s wounds ran deep. She could see it in the pain in his eyes, the way his shoulders slumped, even the way he brought food to his mouth, as if he were eating the universe because he had to, and he found every bite distasteful.

She wasn’t sure what she was afraid of. He wouldn’t harm her, surely. But words could hurt too. Or she could hurt him, and that would be just as bad. She had already been flippant, this morning. Then Jane had teased him over dinner.

Hannah listened for the door at the end of the hall to open, watched for Xavier’s appearance at her bars, and tried to distract herself with her books.

When he finally showed up, smiling the way he did, she rose, went to the bars.

“Hi,” she said, looking down, confirming that his penis was already rising in anticipation.

“You’ve got a lot of things to read,” he said, looking at her shelf.

“It’s for classes at Austin, and I’m writing a scholarship paper for here too.”

“How many papers?” Xavier asked.

“Just one,” she said defensively. Was there something in her eyes that suggested otherwise? How much information could the body convey

without using words?

Tammy entered the hall, stepped to Hannah's kennel.

"Hannah, I'm letting Xavier in?"

"Yes, please."

"How long will you need?"

Hannah looked at Xavier. "How long do you need?" she asked.

"Aren't we boyfriend and girlfriend now?" he asked, looking at her without smiling.

"I think we are," Hannah replied.

"Overnight, then," Xavier said, looking at Tammy expectantly.

Tammy reached humorlessly for her keys, unlocked Hannah's kennel and let Xavier in, shutting it and locking it back before she spoke.

"Think you can finish in 45 minutes?" Tammy asked.

"Yes," Hannah said, "as long as he doesn't tell too many jokes."

Tammy left the hall, and Hannah drew her curtain.

"It's okay, you can tell jokes," she said. "Now that Tammy's gone."

"She doesn't know humor when she sees it."

"Hears it," Hannah corrected, turning to face him.

Xavier stepped up to Hannah, pushed his penis down so the tip pressed against the golden hair of her mound, and leaned forward. She closed her eyes and allowed him to kiss her, his hands at the small of her back, their mouths closed at first, then open, the affection with a new partner always tentative at first for her, then blooming as she sensed confidence, or passion, or pure carnal desire, or all three.

With Xavier, it was mostly confidence.

He moved his mouth from hers to speak into her ear.

"I know what you are," he whispered.

What was he saying? How should she respond?

"When did you first notice I was a girl?" she asked.

Xavier raised his hands to her shoulders, held her before him.

"You know what I mean," he said.

"I'm not sure I do," she said. "Are you here to help me figure it out?"

"Among other things."

"Can you do it and talk too?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"Be my boyfriend."

“I can,” he said. “Except during oral.”

“Do you want oral?”

He pulled her back to him, arms around her back, penis sideways against her hip bone, and he kissed her again before he spoke.

“I know what you are, and that’s what I think about when I don’t see you,” he said. “But every time you walk through chained to that laundry cart, all I can think about is your pussy.”

Now it was Hannah’s turn to push him away, to hold him at arm’s length.

“No,” she said. “You need to see all of me when I’m there. And think about all of me when I’m away.”

“Then you know what I’m talking about?”

“Let’s pretend I don’t,” she said. “How do you want to start?”

“Foreplay?”

Hannah laughed. “Can you narrow it down a little?”

“We talked about oral before. You still good with that?”

“Yes,” she said, “but I’m kind of a mess down there.”

“Why?” he asked nervously.

“Just ovulation,” she said. “And some fluid because of you.”

“Mutual?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said, and she turned to her bed, pulled down the sheets and lay down on her back, helping Xavier get into position above her.

As soon as she spread her legs, Xavier was between them, servicing her vulva with his tongue and lips, starting at her opening and working his way up from there to her clitoris, where he sucked and licked just enough to force a spasm at Hannah’s middle before he journeyed back down her slit to her vaginal mouth.

Hannah lifted her head, put her tongue out for a first taste of his head and shaft, licked all around his girth and then wrapped her mouth around his organ, sucking and biting gently, judging from his own spasms and jerks what felt best to him.

What was he getting at? Hannah wondered, as the tragic figure on all fours above her returned to her hole, this time stopping there to explore her chamber, using his tongue to find the lubricant and the ovulatory honey within her, licking it out, devouring it.

And all very competently, as if they were following a protocol, as if Hannah were assessing him, or he were assessing her.

And yet, within her mouth, his rod stayed firm, insistent, leaking its own juice at the tip, a drop or two of precum that Hannah always found intriguing.

Hannah was rocking now, her pelvis swinging against Xavier's mouth. She could easily orgasm this way, and she wondered if he wanted her to. No, it seemed. He pulled away, perhaps sensing her state, and he turned over her, smiling tightly when their eyes met, kneeling between her legs.

Lifting up on her elbows to watch, she opened her legs wide, drawing up her knees and raising her thighs, and he grabbed himself at the middle of his shaft and guided his tip within her, both of them sighing out as hard flesh plunged into wet flesh, and then he was down upon her, forcing her down to her back, belly to belly, mouth to mouth, collars striking once with a dull ring, and he thrust in, moved deeply with her, pulled out slowly, methodically.

He kissed her, allowing her to taste herself on his lips and tongue before he moved his mouth to her ear again, to whisper what he had come to whisper.

"You are the resistance," he said.

Was it a question? A statement?

Hannah wasn't sure, but she answered quietly, "I am."

She felt a sort of relaxation pass through his body and into hers. Or relief. Or serenity. Her answer seemed to have provoked a physical change in him, but there was no word for it, particularly now, while a part of his body was plunging into hers, over and over again, expressing its own opinion of things.

For a time, it was only that, two organs in harmony, no disagreement between themselves or with anything else, Xavier pushing so fast and so desperately into Hannah it forced out her breath, and she grunted into his ear, "ah, ah, ah, ah," with every push.

And then he spoke again, quietly, into her ear.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm already doing it," she replied.

"What?"

"I have an idea," she said.

Xavier had been waiting for that moment to release, it seemed. Or he could wait no longer regardless. He pressed his mouth to Hannah's,

redoubled his thrusts into her and groaned out, spilling semen into her chamber while she continued to grunt and writhe beneath him.

“Ahhhh,” he sighed into her ear as he finished, his member still buried within her.

“Did you cum?” he asked.

“No,” she said, “and I need to.”

Xavier raised himself above her, arms straight, hands planted by her elbows, and he resumed thrusting with quick, deliberate motions, within her hole and against her clitoris.

“Yeah,” Hannah sighed, rising up to her elbows again and widening her legs to watch Xavier’s impressive post-climactic work, his penis still hard, slicking noisily in and out of Hannah’s now thoroughly-soaked chamber, his semen mixing with her syrup and spilling out around her lips and down to her anus.

“Oh,” Hannah said as she felt the first quake of orgasm spreading from her loins to the rest of her existence.

“Ohjesusjesusjesusnohelpmegod.”

Hannah drew in her breath, rocked her pelvis against Xavier’s pressing form, and issued a final cry of tormented delight, “Auueeeya!” loud enough to be heard well beyond her kennel’s flimsy curtain.

Chapter 24: Working Hall 6

Hannah studied, read, partnered, plotted and, just after breakfast on the second Friday of November, got the assignment she’d been dreading.

“Hey, Hannah,” said Donovan, standing at her bars with chains slung over his arm.

“Hey, Donovan, where to?” Hannah asked, rising from her chair, biting her lip as she waited for Donovan’s answer.

“Hall 6,” he replied.

Hannah stepped forward, hands out.

“Am I in trouble?” she asked, throat closing.

“No,” he said, clicking a pair of cuffs around her wrists, “unless you want to confess to something now?”

“Nope.”

“Good,” Donovan said. “You’re just working it, then. It’s your turn.”

“I’ve never done that before,” Hannah said, adding quickly, “I don’t want to.”

“It’s not optional,” Donovan said.

Hannah grabbed her bars and brought her feet together, looking at the ceiling as Donovan chained her ankles.

“What am I supposed to do?” she asked.

Donovan unlocked her kennel door, led her out and toward processing.

“Just follow directions. Keep an eye on things if the staff person leaves. Whatever.”

“How long?”

“Till lunch.”

“I’m not going to beat anyone,” Hannah declared as soon as they passed through the door into processing. “I’m not going to hurt anyone. I’m not going to—”

“Hannah,” Donovan said, stopping and turning toward her just outside the door with the large number 6 painted on it.

“Huh?”

“This is not the time or place to make a stand,” he said.

She looked at him. What was he saying? That there was some other time, some other place, to make a stand? That he knew she wanted to make a stand?

Was he accusing her of being rebellious? Were the things she had written, the things she had thought, all common knowledge now?

He opened the door, Hannah’s eyes running the length of Hall 6 as soon as she joined him in the entry cage.

One side of the hall looked like all the others, the except that the kennels were very small, no wider than the doors that opened into them, large enough only for a mattress, set on the floor or leaning against the wall, and a toilet and sink.

The other side of the space was unique to Hall 6, however, the stations of punishment arranged in order of severity, the worst immediately beside Hannah.

High on the wall at the far end of the hall, where Bud sat at a desk, poking at his computer, “ONE BAR” had been stenciled in large red letters. Beneath the words, Hannah spotted three tiny cages, only large enough to

stand in, three posts beside them, ropes dangling from rings set high, and three tiny boxes.

Under “TWO BARS,” the stations became more ominous, with a pair of chairs like the one Hannah sat in during her interrogation, four short posts, no more than a foot high, with rings set into the top and sides, and a stack of shelves loaded with equipment Hannah couldn’t make out.

“THREE BARS” had been stenciled above a third set of stations, ropes dangling from pulleys, more boxes, more posts.

A groove had been cut into the floor for the length of the hall, a silver coil at one end that Hannah guessed was the chain she would wear while she was here.

“Where is everyone?” Hannah asked hopefully. If she were assigned to Hall 6 when no one was sent to be punished, all her reservations would be moot.

“They start showing up around 9,” was Donovan’s disappointing answer. “Go talk to Bud, he’ll get you set up.”

Hannah clanked down the hall, listening to the door as it slammed behind her, Donovan off to his next task. Hannah averted her eyes from the punishment stations, looking toward the kennels and noting with surprise that some of them were occupied. There was a blonde girl in one, someone Hannah recognized from the cafeteria, sitting cross-legged on her mattress, staring at her knees. Three kennels further, a boy had leaned his mattress against the wall so he could pace, and he glanced up briefly at Hannah, turned and paced away.

Kennel prison, Hannah thought. Had they spent the night here? Had they been locked up for days, weeks?

Each occupied kennel held a small breakfast plate, the boy’s empty, the girl’s half-cleared. They were fed here too, she thought, denied the normal privileges of coming and going, of socializing over meals in the cafeteria.

“Hi, Bud,” Hannah said, reaching his desk, noting that a toilet and sink had been put here, so that visitors could relieve themselves and wash up before they were punished.

“Hey,” he said, glancing at his PC. “Hannah, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, Hannah,” he said. “Have you worked here before?”

“No, Sir.”

“You understand that everything that happens here is confidential?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Okay, let’s get you tethered,” he said, rising from his desk.

Hannah followed Bud to the end of the groove cut through the middle of the hall, confirmed that the silver coil there was a long chain someone had neatly arranged.

Bud picked up the chain by the open cuff, turned to Hannah and knelt.

“Do you care which ankle?”

“Left, I guess.”

He closed the cuff and removed Hannah’s chains.

“You’ll be able to walk the length of the room with that on,” he said, “but don’t try to run, and be careful around the middle of the hall. It sometimes catches there.”

“You should get that fixed,” Hannah said.

“Okay,” Bud continued, “so we’re expecting about 10 here this morning.”

“Ten?” Hannah repeated.

“Yeah, it’s usually more.”

“Okay.”

“There are a few kinds of people we’ll be working with,” he said. “People I have to go get, people who are already here, and the rest are anyone who shows up with an order.” Bud stepped to his desk, grabbed a computer printout and turned back to Hannah. “Orders look like this.”

Hannah scanned the document.

“Hall 6, Administrative,” it read across the top. Below that was yesterday’s date, a girl’s name, “Tessa,” her kennel ID number, and the words “Disrespectful” and “One Bar.”

At the bottom, next to “Authority/Contact,” a scan of Tammy’s signature appeared.

Hannah imagined that a girl named Tessa had talked back, presumably to Tammy, and had paid the price. Who was Tessa? Another rebel? A member of the resistance? Someone Xavier had whispered seditious sentiments to while he plumbed her chamber?

Or just someone who couldn’t find any slack in her short fuse yesterday?

“How do we know what to do with them?” Hannah asked.

“I’ll make all those decisions,” he said. “You just help out. You calm people down. If they don’t cooperate, they get more bars, so you keep them steady.”

“Okay.”

“Can you do that for me, Hannah?”

Bud sounded doubtful, prompting Hannah once again to wonder what was being said about her by staff, or what they knew without needing to talk amongst themselves, her decision to resist the way of things obvious in her eyes, in her voice, in the way she set her mouth.

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah replied, trying to sound sincere.

Bud threw the order for Tessa’s punishment into the trash next to his desk, logged out of his PC, and went to the door opposite the one that led into processing.

“If anyone shows up while I’m gone, check their order first,” he said. “If the date’s off, the ID’s off, the name doesn’t match their tag, send them away.”

“That happens?” Hannah asked.

“Sometimes,” Bud says. “The wrong person gets the slip and doesn’t check it.”

“I would check,” Hannah said.

“But if it looks legit, tell them to wait in one of the kennels.”

“I don’t have a key,” Hannah protested.

“There’s a camera,” Bud said, pointing. “It works the same as all the other halls.”

“Okay.”

“I should be back in about five minutes,” he said.

“Okay,” Hannah agreed. “Can I walk around?”

“Make yourself at home.”

Bud left, Hannah staring at the door after he closed it, slightly reassured. This wasn’t like the dens of misery she herself had been brought to more than once, teeming with victims and staff, ringing with the cries of the suffering.

She looked down at the tether that bound her to the floor. It was perhaps 10 feet long, enough distance to give her access to everything in Hall 6. She knelt, curious about how it worked, saw that the end of her chain terminated in a steel ball forged wider than the groove’s metal edges.

A ball and chain, she thought. She would be suffering here today too, in her own way, like everyone else who showed up.

Hannah took a first few tentative steps, watched her tether go taut, stepped again, pulling the chain after her.

It yielded easily, the ball sliding in its groove with a quiet “zing, zing” as she traversed the length of the room.

She glanced briefly at the boy and the girl confined here, the boy on his mattress now, laid on the floor, the girl at her bars, looking out.

“Did he go to get people?” she asked when Hannah returned.

She had nothing in her kennel – no books, no papers, nothing to draw on.

She smiled.

Hannah wondered how long she’d been here, and felt terribly sorry for her.

“Yeah,” Hannah said stopping. “That’s what he said.”

“When is he getting us?”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked.

“We’re doing a couple of bars a day, usually first thing.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “I don’t know about that. I’m new.”

“Are you nice?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” Hannah inquired.

“I hope you’ll be nice,” she said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Hannah asserted. “That’s up to Bud, I’m just helping.”

“It’s up to both of you,” the girl said.

“I don’t even want to be here,” Hannah said. “I hate this.”

The door opened and Hannah looked up hopefully, wanting Bud to return, to clarify her role and ease her fears. But it was an unrestrained girl with a slip of paper in her hand.

Hannah walked back to the door, dragging her chain behind her.

“Here,” the girl said, handing over the slip.

Hannah glanced at it, confirmed that the date was right.

“Can I see your tag?”

The girl leaned forward and raised her chin.

The name on her tag, Maxine, matched the name on the slip. The crime was “Tardy for chores,” and she’d gotten one bar. Bud had signed it.

“Choose your kennel,” Hannah said, handing back the slip. “One of the empty ones.”

Maxine chose the first kennel, stood before it until it clicked, pulled it open, stepped inside and pulled it shut.

“What’s being done to us today?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “That’s Bud’s job.”

“Bud’s in charge today?”

“Yeah, he’s just getting someone.”

“Whew,” the girl said with what seemed to be sincere relief. So Bud was one of the nicer staff, at least in here, Hannah guessed.

“Didn’t he write you up?” Hannah asked.

“Well, yeah, I was late for cleanup.”

“Where?”

“I clean the toilets and showers in processing, and I had better things to do.”

Hannah’s laugh was cut short by the sound of the door opening, Bud entering with a girl in chains.

“Hey, Maxine,” he said.

“Hey, Bud,” she said.

“Here for yesterday’s marks?”

“Yes, Sir.”

If there was any bitterness between the two of them, Hannah couldn’t tell.

“Hannah, put her in a one bar cage,” Bud said, pointing, and he led the new girl further into the hall.

Hannah stepped to Maxine’s kennel, waiting for it to click open.

Maxine led the way to the little cages under the “ONE BAR” stencil. She seemed to be completely familiar with things here, even comfortable. Hannah hadn’t felt much of a call to calm anyone down yet.

Maxine stopped at the cage door, looked at Hannah expectantly. Hannah unlatched the door and opened it, and Maxine stepped in and turned around.

Hannah closed the door and latched it shut top and bottom, presumably beyond the reach of Maxine’s fingers.

“Are you going to set the timer?” Maxine asked.

A small digital counter had been affixed to the side of the cage.

“How long?” Hannah asked.

“It’s usually 3 hours, but you better check with Bud on that.”

“How long, Bud?” Hannah asked.

“Three hours,” Bud confirmed, looking up from his work on the girl he’d just brought.

With a few taps on the timer, Hannah got it set for three hours, looked through the bars at Maxine.

“Sorry,” she said.

“You’re going to apologize to everyone?” Maxine said.

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “I was trying to be polite.”

“This isn’t a polite place,” she said. “Just get it done and leave.”

Chapter 25: Retching Among the Wretched

“Hannah,” Bud said from the middle of Hall 6.

Hannah dragged her chain behind her with a “zing, zing, zing.” Bud was kneeling beside the girl he’d brought, who was sitting at one of the short posts. Her chains had been removed, but Bud had used rope to tie her ankles to the rings on either side of the post, a third length binding her wrists to the ring at the top, forcing her to sit on the concrete floor, hardly able to move.

Bud stepped to a timer on the wall, clicked off three hours.

“Do you see how I’ve tied Amy?” he asked.

“Yes, Sir.”

Hannah looked down at the girl, who looked back up dispassionately, no stress here either as she settled in for hours of discomfort.

“I need the male and female in the kennels tied the same way, while I go get a few more people,” Bud said. “Use the rope on the third shelf from the top.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“Oh, and three hours each.”

Bud left the hall and Hannah went to the girl’s kennel first, and she rose from her mattress, and Hannah waited for the locked door to open.

She wore her straight red hair long, down to the shoulders, her trimmed pubic hair dyed dark red, her breasts heavy, full, freckles on her cheeks. She was tall, slender, elegant, surely used for recreation.

The door clicked, Hannah pulled it open and led the girl to the post beside the one that held Amy.

The girl sat down, clearly well-versed in what was going to be done to her, and Hannah went to the shelves, picked out three pieces of rope and returned.

“You’re Hannah?” the girl asked.

“Yes,” Hannah said, kneeling, setting down two pieces of rope, holding the third, studying the girl’s hands and feet.

“What’s,” Hannah stammered, “. . . your name?”

Why was this a hard question for her to ask?

Because she didn’t want to know the girl’s name. She didn’t want to know anyone’s name. She wanted to complete this chore – something she’d have to do no more than three or four times a year – and be gone, and forget.

No one talked about Hall 6.

Hannah had been on the receiving end in places like this, had seen the way her punishers kept their distance as they inflicted suffering.

No small talk, no exchange of names or pleasantries, the only conversation happening among the staff – lunch plans, holiday parties, office gossip.

Today, Hannah was one of them.

“Elisha,” the girl replied.

What did you do, Elisha?

Hannah asked the question in her mind, dared not speak it out loud.

Why are you being kept in a tiny, isolated kennel, taken out only so another slave can tie you to a post? How long have you been here?

What did you do?

Hannah passed the rope through the ring at the top of the little post and looked at the girl.

“Tie my feet first,” she said.

Of course. Securing Elisha’s ankles first, to the rings on either side of the post, would set her properly. Then she’d lean forward to have her wrists bound. Tie her wrists first and she’d have to scoot back, or forward, to have her ankles fastened.

Hannah removed the rope, studied the rings, studied the girl’s left ankle, passed the rope through the adjacent ring, tied it once. Elisha slid her foot up and Hannah raised it with one hand, using the other to slip one end

of the rope beneath Elisha's ankle, against her Achilles's tendon, passing the rope's other end above it, to make a first loose knot.

I am tying a girl to a post, Hannah's mind muttered absently to itself.

There are two kinds of knots one might use for this task her mind continued on its own: 1). square knot; 2). Gramma knot.

No, not Gramma knot. Granny knot.

I don't have a reason to do this, other than that I was told to.

A granny knot occurs when you pass the two ends of the rope around each other the same way twice.

I don't know what this girl has done.

The granny knot is the more intuitive knot, but it is the weaker knot, and it is ugly, forming an askew cross, like the symbol of an unfinished faith.

She might be innocent.

The square knot is the superior knot, as implied by its superior name, holding whatever it must hold – the stays of a tent, a stack of beams, the limbs of a girl – more surely, more predictably, and with a symmetry that pleases the newer and more fashionable gods, who are known for preferring order among the things that have to do with slaves.

Or perhaps Elisha did something terrible to someone.

Square knot: Left piece of rope under right piece of rope on the first pass; right piece of rope under left piece of rope on the second.

Egregious disrespect, a cruel insult, the taunting of someone weaker, less intelligent, less attractive.

To make a square knot, one must overcome one's first inclination, to tie the ends the same way the second time as one had the first.

Perhaps Elisha struck someone. A slap, an elbow, a closed fist.

A square knot requires a reversal, a redirection, a resistance to things as they have been done.

Left breast. Right breast.

Revolution.

Hannah studied the knot she had tied. It was square, and it bound Elisha's left ankle perfectly, not so tight its three thick white strands, wrapped around each other in a triple helix, dug into her flesh, but not so loose the girl could slip out.

Hannah moved to the other ankle, picked up the second piece of rope, passed it through the ring, and the foot moved into place.

Hannah picked up the foot so she could pass the rope beneath the tendon, and she united the ropes again, in a second square knot, neither too tight nor too loose.

Now the hands.

Now the hands.

Left breast. Right breast.

If Elisha had struck someone with a closed fist, any time in the last few days, at least one knuckle should show some distress.

Hannah picked up the last piece of rope, passed it through the short post's top ring, tied it, and pulled the ends wide, as if they were arms offering an embrace.

Elisha raised her hands, lacing her fingers together, positioning them, allowing Hannah to bind her wrists with a third square knot.

There were no abrasions on these knuckles.

Perhaps it wasn't a punch, then. Perhaps it was a slap.

Slaps can sting as well, and they left no marks on the hands.

What did Elisha do?

Hannah stood, looked down at the girl, relieved that she seemed content to study her bound hands, no more conversation necessary.

Hannah set the timer on the wall for three hours, shuffled over to the boy's kennel, the ball catching once briefly within the groove, as Bud had warned her it might, forcing a stutter step that she found embarrassing, as if the imperfect equipment in Hall 6 were her fault.

As if she belonged here, and all the things done here were her fault.

She stepped to the boy's kennel. She didn't want to know his name, or talk to him at all. She'd seen him in the cafeteria. She'd seen him talking to Brad a few times. She would see him again. Every kenneled subject had to take their turn here, and they'd be done, and the punisher and the punished would all see each other again, in the cafeteria, in the lounge, and if they met here again, the punisher and the punished might flip, the one who suffered binding now, the binder being bound.

A reversal, the way a square knot is reversed.

If any subject in this room can both torment and be tormented, does it matter if there was a crime? The suffering, even if it be cruel and arbitrary, is inflicted equally.

And if Hannah herself, today the punisher, were brought here on some other day to be punished, whether guilty or innocent, all she did on this day would be absolved, her suffering a retroactive expiation.

This hurts me, she said in her mind as she secured the boy's left ankle to the ring, as much as it hurts you.

Hannah bound the boy the way she bound the girl, with three square knots, one knot for each ankle, one for both wrists. He held his hands together, fingers laced as if in prayer, and watched her work. He seemed satisfied with her efforts, and his penis registered its own approval, rising as she finished, lifting, hardening, pointing up toward the heavens.

Were they allowed to masturbate on Hall 6? Probably, if their hands weren't bound away from their genitals. But their little kennels had no curtains.

Hannah set his timer for three hours, stepped away with a "zing," toured the room, found that Bud had been busy while she'd focused on Elisha and the nameless boy. A second boy had been caged beside Maxine, his fingers wrapped around the bars, and she glanced at him quickly and looked away.

A timer was ticking on one of the tiny boxes beneath the TWO BARS stencil, an hour and 58 minutes left to go.

Someone had been put in there. Crated, packaged, hatched.

A boy or a girl?

Hannah drew her chain back to Bud's desk, standing, waiting, as if she were the hostess at the Petrosyan's club, except that the club's membership was limited to the wayward, all the members dined in the nude, and its menu wasn't food but other things, which no one wanted.

The door opened and Bud entered with Amelia, her wrists and ankles chained, a third chain running between them, her mouth issuing the sounds one might expect from an autistic girl suffering from nerves, or uncertainty, or ignorance of what was happening.

"And then," she laughed, near hysteria, "the other one says, 'I'm not in a pickle!'"

Bud smiled indulgently.

Amelia's eyes darted to Hannah, darted back to the floor.

"Hannah! Hi, Hannah!"

"Hi, Amelia!" Hannah said brightly, struggling with a sense of deep dread. Why was Amelia here?

Left breast. Right breast.

"I wrote on myself again," Amelia announced.

Hannah noticed that the girl had completely shaved her pubic hair, searched the girl's skin, saw no message today.

Left breast. Right breast.

That was gone.

your answers are all wrong

Erased.

"Any trouble while I was away?" Bud asked.

"No, Sir," Hannah replied.

Bud took Amelia's elbow, leading her past the other sufferers of Hall 6.

"C'mon, Hannah, let me teach you how to hang someone."

Hannah followed, dragging her chain behind her, the rhythmic "zing, zing, zing" marking her passage, a "clunk" where the chain caught.

let me teach you how to hang someone

They kept going, to the places of suffering beneath the red THREE BARS stencil.

Had Amelia earned three bars? For what? For writing on herself?

Whose rule was that?

They stopped beneath one of the ropes dangling from a pulley, its neatly wrapped end near Amelia's hip.

Bud released Amelia's wrists from their cuffs, dropped the chains with a heavy clank, leaving her ankles bound, and she brought her hands forward and crossed them at the wrists, waiting.

Bud stepped before her, took the rope in one hand.

"You want to do a figure eight," he said, circling one wrist with the rope, passing the rope between her hands, circling the other wrist, repeating until both wrists had been looped a half dozen times. He made a knot with the loose end of the rope, tucked it in.

"Got it?" he asked, looking at Hannah.

"Yes."

He untucked the rope, untied and unwound it.

"Your turn."

Hannah bit her lip and looked into Amelia's eyes, but the girl was looking elsewhere, down at the floor, or down at nothing, her mind detached now, the ebullience of her entrance gone, or paused, or broken.

If Amelia had protested, or wept, or pulled away, Hannah might at that moment have declared her status to be conscientious objector, refused to do any more work here, and faced the consequences.

But Amelia didn't seem to care. Perhaps she had reached a desperate level of distress, but it was all hidden in her mind, where Hannah could not see it, and Hannah reached for the rope and bound her friend's limbs the way Bud had, around one wrist, between them, around the other.

Figure eight.

She tied off the loose end as Bud had, tucked in the excess, looked into the same distant eyes, looked back at Bud.

"Good," he said. "Almost done. She just has to be raised."

He pointed to the other end of the rope, tied to a cleat in the wall, running loosely up to the pulley, and down from there to Amelia's form.

Hannah stood, waited.

"You do it," he said.

Hannah swallowed, stepped over to the rope where it was passed around the two-pronged cleat in the same sort of figure eight that had been used on Amelia's wrists.

Left breast. Right breast.

Hannah loosened it, pulled the rope downward, trying not to connect what she was doing to Amelia, whose bound hands were being drawn up, to her breasts, to her shoulders, past her face, over her head and, finally, as high as they would go, elbows straight, body straight.

"Just a little more," Bud said. "You probably outweigh her, so see if you can get her feet off the floor."

Until this moment, Hannah was mostly just pulling rope, Amelia's responses incidental. But now there was resistance, gravity pulling at Amelia's body, her weight forcing the rope taut, her body and the rope a single thing, all of it fighting against Hannah.

Amelia remained still, stoic, passive, but she was a being with mass all the same, and that mass was saying no.

"Pretend you're trying to climb it," Bud suggested.

Was this a special talent of Bud's, to break down atrocities into a series of minor tasks, none unspeakable in their own right, each dovetailing with the next, each following logically, unquestionably, uncondemnably, until one stood back – if one ever did – and examined all the parts as a whole?

But Amelia was not blameless here.

She kept writing on herself, Hannah said within her mind. Hannah had herself seen the things she'd written. And it was wrong. There was some rule that said she shouldn't write on herself, and it was probably a sensible rule. One could write dangerous things. One could write "FIRE!" in a crowded theater, for example. And the skin, unlike a notebook page, could absorb the poisons and toxins, not just of the words and the sentiments behind them, but the impurities of the ink itself, the pigments and dyes and binders and fillers and mitigators that could ooze their way through the unliving outer shell of the body and into the quick, into the blood and the marrow. Into the mind.

And damn Amelia for her passivity, for standing and waiting and raising her hands and straightening her elbows, as if this were all normal.

Hannah pulled.

Pretend you're trying to climb it.

Amelia was indeed very light, her body rising, her feet extending, just her toes against the concrete, and then nothing against the floor but the chains that ran from her ankles and lay in a pile of silver links beneath her heels.

"Whoo!" she said, as if being raised like this was mostly amusing.

"Tie her off," Bud instructed.

Hannah held the rope taut within two white-knuckled fists, moved over to the cleat, put the rope around one end the way she'd put it around Amelia's wrists, made a quick figure eight, turning the last loop on itself so that, like a square knot, it would serve well, hold fast, please the gods.

Hannah looked over, the results of her work undeniable now, because Amelia was dangling by her wrists, her body slowly twisting toward Hannah, her face a ragged smile.

Hannah had seen infinity in that smile before. Now, the objectively identical biological affect had repeated itself as farce, the expression of someone when the universe has become puzzlingly opaque.

"Steady her," Bud said, stepping to the shelf.

"What do you mean?" Hannah asked, facing the still-stoic form of Amelia.

The girl seemed to be in no more need of comforting than anyone else here.

“Hold her from behind, upper back,” he said, returning from the shelf with something in his hand, an object Hannah thought at first might be a towel before she focused on it, realized with a dizzying, numbing dread that Bud was holding a small whip, dozens of thongs dangling from a black rubber handle.

“You’re using that one?” Amelia inquired.

“You’d prefer another?”

“The ends aren’t even on that one.”

Bud didn’t care, obviously.

And Hannah.

Didn’t.

Care.

She was somewhere else now, far, far away, her feet resting on one of the earth-like planets they found sometimes, elsewhere in the galaxy, her body very long and strange, stretching from the place where one ankle had been chained to a ball in a little slot on that distant world, legs and hips and torso and head and arms wending their way through the shifting ether and the biting winds of a billion suns, only her hands present here, on earth, resting against the shoulders of a girl who sometimes wrote on herself and wasn’t, for some reason, supposed to.

“Where did you write this time, Amelia?” Bud asked.

“I wrote on my tummy,” she said. “Sorry.”

What did you write? Hannah thought, her whole body snapping back to earth so she could ask the question in her head.

Hannah closed her eyes, held her hands against Amelia’s shoulder blades, felt the warmth of her flesh, the firmness of the sharp bones beneath.

Shoulder blade. Technically, scapula, as it was labeled in one of Ormek’s anatomy books. One scapula. But Hannah was holding two. One on either side of Amelia’s body, one under each hand. So they were plural. Scapulas. Scapulae.

What did you write?

Hannah felt Amelia’s shoulders tense, heard the slap of whip against belly, felt the spasm of a female body responding to pain, heard the rattle of the chain coiled beneath her feet, running limply from her ankles.

“But if Furette finds Pincher and John!” Amelia sang, belting out what Hannah recognized as the theme song of a children’s cartoon.

Another slap, another rattle, another spasm of pain. Or shock. Or resistance.

“she’s gonna make it all the way to Persianville!”

A third blow, a jerk, Amelia’s song growing in volume and intensity.

“But not if Hairy and his doggone friends get there first!”

The fourth, a ring of chain, a twist of the back and the shoulders, Hannah adjusting her hands on Amelia’s dangling form, eyes closed, refusing to see Bud standing on the other side of her friend’s body and doing this to her.

“But meow, meow, meow, you can’t stop us!”

The fifth. Another spasm and a clink of chain.

“Meow meow meow, meow meow!”

A pause.

It seemed to be finished. Hannah opened her eyes and watched Bud step away, return the whip to the shelf.

“Set her timer for 30 minutes,” he said. “I’m going to get one more person.”

“I need to throw up,” Hannah heard herself saying.

“Throw up?”

“Yes, I need to vomit,” Hannah said. She removed her hands from Amelia’s scapulae. The girl began to twist, slowly.

“Why?” Bud asked, eyebrows raised.

“Do I need a reason?”

“Bud, I think Hannah’s getting sick,” Amelia said.

Hannah looked at the girl, hanging from the rope Hannah had tied around her wrists.

Her weight was making her turn, it seemed. Or the god who liked to laugh had reached his hands in, his feet still standing on the evenly cut grass in his idea of heaven, and he was turning her, so that Hannah could see the little red marks the whip had made across her belly.

Hannah didn’t look into her eyes.

“Use the toilet next to my desk.”

Hannah shuffled to the other end of the hall, pulling the chain behind her, the ball sliding in the groove with a soft “zing, zing, zing.”

Bud had not broken the skin.

Indeed, the marks on Amelia's belly could hardly even be called welts.

Hannah reached the toilet and knelt, as if in supplication.

Symbolic. Everything done here was symbolic.

Hannah put her face above the bowl, breathed out upon the water, which answered her with small, concentric ripples.

No one was brought here to learn not to be bad, to stop breaking rules, to turn away from evil.

People were brought here only to remind them that this could be done.

The other reasons were immaterial.

Hannah's stomach expelled breakfast in a great, awful stream.

Everyone was brought to Hall 6, and to all the places like Hall 6, to regard the symbols of a hideous power.

To feel, to hear, to watch.

Rope, darkness, tiny cages, rattling chains, a girl screaming out the theme song of a children's cartoon.

Hannah's stomach contracted again, her body rejecting all the food she had not yet digested, hydrochloric acid burning her throat.

And among the symbols of that hideous power – central among them, perhaps – stood Hannah, slouching back and forth on her chain, carrying out faithfully all directives, today the punisher, tomorrow perhaps the punished.

The dog biting its own leg.

Hannah retched once more, coughed, dropped to her haunches before the toilet, paused with her hands on her thighs.

She filled her lungs, rose and leaned forward to flush, wiped the porcelain rim with a few squares of toilet paper, flushed again, rose shakily, turned to find Bud looking at her with concern.

"I'll be fine," she said huskily.

"Do you need to leave?"

"No," she said, certain that if she left now, the work would be made up later, or made up in some other way. And the arc of suffering here, she believed, had peaked, was bending down now, timers ticking off their minutes and seconds to the end of this.

She went to the sink, washed her hands, washed her face, cupped water and brought it to her mouth, rinsed and spat, rinsed and drank, was

struck suddenly by gratitude for air and water, and she thanked the universe for them, only the universe, because the creation of air and water were surely beneath the efforts of any god, jester or serious or angry or pathological.

Left breast. Right breast.

“Did you set Amelia’s timer?” she asked Bud, who was still studying her.

“No.”

“I’ll do it,” Hannah said hoarsely. “Go get your next person.”

Meow, meow, meow!

Amelia was released first among all the suffering there, thanking Hannah as she was lowered, her chains were removed and her wrists were untied, the flesh beneath the ropes redder than her belly in the end.

“Hannah,” she said, urgently. “I’m going to fold my sheets for you next Wednesday.”

“Okay, that’s good to know.”

A few minutes after Amelia left Hall 6 unfettered, Donovan arrived.

“Hey, Bud,” he said, acknowledging Hannah with a nod. “Someone needs to see Maxine upstairs, can I take her?”

“How long will she be gone?”

“No more than half an hour.”

“Hannah,” Bud said, reaching into his top desk drawer. “Pause Maxine’s timer and let her out.”

Hannah obeyed and Maxine stepped over to Bud, who held out a set of black-painted chains.

“Have you worn these before?” he asked her.

“No.”

“They’re Hall 6 return restraints,” he said, closing the cuffs around Maxine’s wrists, kneeling to chain her ankles. “As soon as you’re done upstairs, come back here. Staff knows what these are for, and no one should be taking them off but me.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Maxine was gone no more than 20 minutes. After Donovan brought her back, Bud removed her chains and Hannah put her back in her punishment cage, pushing the timer to resume marking off the minutes of her prescribed unhappiness.

Where had Maxine gone? Hannah wondered. To see someone in one of the meeting rooms? To do a quick assessment in one of the apartments? To make an appearance in the event space?

Hannah went to the toilet to urinate, and Bud looked up from his PC.

“Amelia knows the rules,” he said quietly.

“Whose rules?”

“Her owners’. We don’t care if anyone writes on themselves, if it’s not something rude.”

“Do you ever ask her why she does it?”

“No. That’s not part of the protocol they gave us.”

Hannah wiped and flushed, but remained on the toilet, the only seat available, and she stared at the floor between her feet until the timers finished counting, and they beeped, and Hannah and Bud took turns releasing the captives.

Cages were unlatched, crates were opened, people left the hall or went back to their little punishment kennels, and Hannah was glad she had stayed to bring it about and see it, the liberation of each, the freeing of the slaves from at least one form of subjugation.

Bud marked the completion of Hannah’s duties by releasing her tether.

“Thanks for keeping at it,” he said. “Do you want to see someone?”

“No,” Hannah replied. “I threw up because of what I saw, and did.”

“Think you’ll be able to eat lunch?”

“Yeah,” Hannah replied. It was almost 1. “I think so.”

Chapter 26: Structured Time with Amelia

Hannah had no reason to write down her litany of rebellion anymore, even as it grew. She had taken to wearing it on her heart, as if it had been engraved there:

This is wrong.

All of it.

Something needs to be done.

I have been imprisoned. Wrongly.

It is the duty of all of those wrongly imprisoned to challenge their confinement. To escape, in mind if not body. To sabotage.

By mid-November, she had added another tenet.

No matter the cost.

Of course, she would never serve again in Hall 6. When her time came, she would elect punishment, because she couldn't stand to get sick again. Indeed, she longed to go back, because she could not be forgiven, could not forgive herself, until she had suffered there.

Maybe such places were necessary. She could probably rationalize their existence and operation if she pondered long enough. And she didn't condemn her fellow subjects for their willingness to serve when their turn came. But she simply couldn't, for reasons she couldn't articulate but that were as real to her as her vomit and the hanging, singing form of Amelia, which haunted her dreams once or twice a week after that, joining the repertoire of other troubling phantasms during her REM stage of repose.

She couldn't serve, and she considered the matter settled.

And she had settled her treatise plan as well, crystallized it, committed herself to it, body and mind.

Mind, because she must write not one but two treatises.

Body, because if her plan succeeded, the punishment would most likely be excruciating. And if her plan failed, the punishment would most likely be just as physically painful, but emotionally worse because she would be suffering to no end.

On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving week, to the surprise of no one, Hannah was accepted as a full student to the University of Texas at Corpus Christi.

She received a second email later that day from the chairwoman of the Biology department, reminding her that she had signed up to submit an entry in the Charles H. Burnham Scholarship for Undergraduate Biological Innovation, wishing her luck, and providing detailed formatting instructions.

Hannah bit her lip, fighting guilt, replying with an acknowledgement and thanks.

They wanted good papers, she reminded herself. Some years, the entrants were very weak, and yet, two must always win, and the better must be by the free student, the lesser by the slave.

Or, this year perhaps, one must be by a slave, and the other must be by the same slave, under the name of someone free.

Hannah forwarded the acceptance email to Allain and Mother, receiving an immediate “Congrats!” from the first, an ecstatic “I am SO PROUD of you!” from Mother a little later.

By the end of the day, she’d received plaudits from Beth and a handful of Allain’s other friends, as well as separate messages from Laura and Ormek, and even Athena, chiming in with just a quick but unexpected “That’s great!”

The next day on her laundry rounds, Hannah knew she must be glowing, not biologically, because ovulation was a week away, but academically. The responses along her tour were just as warm as if she were fertile, the boys stepping to their bars to say hello, even some of the girls greeting her with unusual warmth.

Jacob remained a mystery, however, ungainly face bent into a sweet smile, a friendliness that never quite extended to sexual flirting.

“I got accepted,” Hannah told him as she took his sheets.

“I did too. Congratulations.”

“What are you going to study?” she asked.

“Ancient languages, possibly,” he replied. “You?”

“I guess physics maybe.”

“My owner’s curious about you,” he said.

“Okay,” Hannah said.

He smiled, and Hannah moved on, wondering if partnering would have to wait until she was approved for it. Or perhaps it would never happen. Maybe Jacob’s owner wanted to know about something else.

“Hello, Hannah,” said Amelia, standing at attention, her sheets folded and placed over the cross bars of her kennel.

“Hi, Amelia,” said Hannah.

There would be no mention of what had taken place on Hall 6, Hannah decided, unless Amelia brought it up.

Amelia had something else on her mind this morning, however.

“I am going to ask for you,” she said.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, to visit me, for sexual relations,” she said.

“Okay,” Hannah said, adjusting to this new information. She believed Amelia to be asexual.

Amelia looked at Hannah, puzzlement in her face.

What reaction was she expecting? Hannah wondered.

“I don’t want you to be my girlfriend,” Amelia said. “I just think one time would be . . . nice.”

“Sure,” Hannah said, smiling.

“They tell me if I don’t write on myself, I can ask for someone, once a month, and so I chose you for the first one.”

“That’s very nice of you,” Hannah said. Indeed, all of the skin Hannah could see was free of marks, and she was leaving her pubic hair untouched as well, the bush coming in thick and black. Was that another rule of her owner?

“It’s because of how you do the laundry,” Amelia said. “You’re very responsible.”

That afternoon, Hannah applied for an assistanceship for the spring. Winning one was not the certainty that getting admitted had been. They paid well, they could be helpful upon graduation, and many more students wanted them than there were slots.

But Hannah believed she had more than her share of professors willing to provide good recommendations, in the art department where she’d done some posing, among the biology and medical faculty she’d met while serving as a model, or met through Allain, or both.

Hoping that assistanceships would be awarded on merit alone and not given with preference for the free, she finished applying and returned to her kennel to work on her treatises, poring over books on her bed for little more than half an hour before Tammy showed up.

“Hey, Hannah.”

“Hey, Tammy, what’s up?”

“We’ve got a partner request for you.”

“Amelia?”

“Yeah, did she mention it?”

“This morning while I was doing laundry, yeah.”

“Are you okay with it?” Tammy asked. “We think it would be good for her.”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

Partnering with another kennel resident for whatever benefit had been identified by staff – personal, emotional, or strictly carnal – was optional but strongly encouraged, and Hannah saw it as a small price to pay for the freedoms she enjoyed here.

And this was only the second request for her services over the last two months, the first being done to aid Britt as he dealt with his loss of freedom and the breakup with a girlfriend who didn't understand.

And Hannah liked Amelia.

She wasn't sure Amelia knew how to make love, however. How did her owners use her?

"Are you free now?" Tammy asked.

"Sure," Hannah said, ready for a pause from biological complexities.

Tammy unlocked Hannah's kennel and the two girls walked to hall 1, where Amelia was standing stiffly by her door, hands around her bars.

"Hi, Hannah!"

"Hi, Amelia!"

Tammy unlocked the door and Hannah stepped in.

"How much time will you need?" Tammy asked, locking the door.

Hannah looked at Amelia.

"How much time do you take?" Amelia asked.

Perhaps Amelia didn't make love, Hannah speculated, simply did as she was told.

"Forty-five minutes," Hannah offered.

Hannah drew the curtain because Amelia just stood there, at the bars, watching Tammy leave the hall.

Only when the door into processing shut did Amelia turn to Hannah.

"What do you want?" she asked.

Considering partnering was Amelia's idea, this seemed like an odd question to Hannah, and a sudden doubt settled upon her.

It was a sacred place, this chapel of the mind where sex received its veneration.

Approach it at your peril. Enter on your knees.

Hannah – grown comfortable with the familiar Allain, the steady Jane, the mostly predictable boys, and the assessments where everything was detailed in advance – had to remind herself that sexual relations, as Amelia called them, were rife with the possibilities of sacrilege.

Enter on your knees.

She had 45 minutes to talk to Amelia, or play with Amelia, or therapize Amelia, if such a thing were possible.

Or to profane Amelia's altar.

"What do you like?" Hannah ventured.

"I want to make you feel better," Amelia said.

"Oh, that's sweet," Hannah said, completely lost. What did Amelia think was wrong with her?

"Do you get sick a lot?" Amelia asked.

Ah.

So this was about what happened on Hall 6.

"No, I just wasn't feeling good that day," Hannah said. She paused, considered her next words carefully.

"And I didn't like what happened to you."

Amelia stepped up, until she was just inches away from Hannah, looking at her neck.

"There's this one thing that girls can do," she said. "To their . . . front places."

"I would like that," Hannah said.

"You would?" Amelia asked, eyes wide, staring at Hannah's breasts with incredulity.

"Yes," Hannah replied. "But how would—"

"Okay, okay," Amelia said, grabbing Hannah's hand, pulling her to the bed. "Let me show you."

Amelia smoothed her already smooth bedspread.

"Sit here, sit here," she said, pointing to her pillow.

Hannah sat, legs straight out before her.

"Now, you have to lift up," Amelia said, touching Hannah's knees.

Hannah raised and spread her legs, and Amelia clambered onto the bed, up on all fours before she dropped down, head between Hannah's thighs.

She looked up at Hannah, briefly making eye contact before she turned her gaze toward the wall.

"Can you believe that people do this?" she asked.

"I've heard of it," Hannah said.

"Do you really want me to?" she asked, still staring at the wall.

"Yes."

Amelia lowered her head, and Hannah felt the first tentative touches of tongue against vulva, Amelia licking her opening and folds and

clitoris without, as far as Hannah could tell, any ability to distinguish among the parts.

It was an awkward position, but a safe one, Hannah thought, Amelia able to push away any time she wanted.

Amelia stopped, raised her head, looked at the wall.

“I learned this from Connie,” she said.

“Who is Connie?”

“She’s in my family,” Amelia said. “She doesn’t give me that many rules.”

Amelia returned her tongue to Hannah’s vulva for a few more mechanical licks.

“Does Connie ever lick you?” Hannah asked.

It was only fair. One shouldn’t expect pleasure from a slave without giving some back.

Amelia raised her head and stared at the wall, breathing deeply.

Had Hannah offended her? Disturbed her? Reminded her of something unpleasant?

Was her question sacrilege?

“Do it,” Amelia whispered.

Hannah looked down at the girl, hoping for guidance.

Amelia parted her legs, so slowly it seemed as though she might simply be getting more comfortably positioned, but when she began lifting herself, raising her middle while she continued spreading, her eyes fixed on the wall, Hannah understood that this is what the girl wanted.

Perhaps this is what she’d wanted all along, but only if it were done a certain way, where Hannah had been brought carefully along the stations toward this place through hints, a feigned concern for Hannah’s well-being, an air of incredulity.

Was this how she and Connie had arrived at this destination, two innocent girls discovering something profound and strange through whispered suggestion and mutual exploration?

Or was there trauma here? Perhaps Connie was the mother of the family, well-versed in the sexual options available to her and ordering the family’s slave girl to perform them.

In the first case, Hannah was simply reenacting an old drama, playing her part to the best of her ability under Amelia’s stilted guidance.

In the second case, Hannah was . . . what? Helping Amelia normalize an experience that was akin to rape? Assuring Amelia that her vulva was worthy of attention? Preparing to do something that Amelia was both troubled by and compelled to ask for?

Had Amelia ever been licked before? Would having it done today bring restoration to Amelia, or more pain?

Hannah, silencing her misgivings, passed her leg over Amelia's body, the girl stone still now, eyes on the wall, hips raised, thighs spread.

Hannah moved to the floor, stepped to the end of the bed, knelt reverently behind the statue-like Amelia.

"two" had been written on her left buttock. "ten" had been written on the right.

Why did she do it? And what did it mean?

Hannah lowered her mouth to the girl's raised vulva, put her tongue against Amelia's opening, the girl rocking subtly under Hannah's attention. Hannah slid her tongue down to Amelia's clitoris, stroked it gently, pressing harder when Amelia responded with a quick shake of her middle.

Hannah felt fingers, inserting themselves between her tongue and Amelia's clitoris, and she brought her mouth back to Amelia's opening, growing wet like any stimulated vagina would, the taste surprisingly sweet, but with the musk that adorned most female openings.

Hannah pushed her tongue into Amelia's chamber while the girl masturbated, her gyrations growing increasingly rapid, her fingers drumming against her clitoris until her body went stiff, muscles tensing, lungs filling up in a brief freeze before her orgasm wracked her body and her hole, a sharp exhalation accompanied by a shaking pelvis and a single shot of sugary juice, spilling out from between her lips and onto Hannah's tongue.

Hannah continued to lick until Amelia pulled away, turning and drawing up her legs, sitting on her pillow the way Hannah had.

Hannah sat and crossed her legs, looked down and noticed that her own vulva had responded mildly to the coupling, a little fluid wetting her vaginal lips and Amelia's bedding. She would take care of herself back in her own kennel, she decided, not sure how masturbating in front of Amelia would go, not certain the girl knew how to bring another female to orgasm, other than perhaps Connie.

“I wrote numbers,” Amelia said. “So it’s not really writing something.”

“I saw that,” Hannah said, certain the staff wouldn’t agree but not interested in arguing the point.

“Do you know what it means?” Amelia asked, staring at the ceiling.

“No.”

“They can give you two seconds with the leads, or 10, or anything in between those two numbers,” Amelia said.

“Oh,” Hannah said, remembering that during orientation in September, staff had gone over the use of electric shocks as a punishment. “You mean . . . in Hall 6.”

“Yes,” Amelia said with a pronounced nod.

“Have you gotten that?” Hannah asked cautiously.

“Yes,” Amelia said, nodding again. “Sometimes. But they make up a different number every time, and that’s wrong.”

“What number should it be?” Hannah asked.

“I don’t know,” Amelia said. She was still looking at the ceiling, but she waved her hand above her lap, as if she were petting a cat there, or she were trying to affect a dismissive gesture she had seen someone else perform. But without being able to feel the emotions behind the movement it came off as forced, meaningless.

“Bud didn’t do that to you when I was there,” Hannah said.

“Some people whip me, some use the leads.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Bud always does five pops with the whip, wherever I wrote. It’s always the same number. So that doesn’t bother me. Just the leads, because it should always be the same number of seconds.”

“Do they always hang you for the same amount of time?” Hannah asked.

“Yes, it’s almost always 30 minutes.”

“Hey, Amelia, how are you and Hannah doing?” Tammy said from the hall.

“Can Hannah stay longer?” Amelia replied.

“It’s been 45 minutes,” Tammy said. “No.”

Hannah stood, turned back to Amelia.

Normally, there would be a kiss now, or a hug, or at least a shared glance, but Amelia was content to move to someplace within herself, it

seemed, arms folded over her breasts, legs drawn up before her, eyes fixed on the place where Hannah had just been.

Tammy unlocked the kennel door and Hannah exited, Tammy locked Amelia back in, and they headed back to Hannah's own kennel.

"Did she orgasm?" Tammy asked.

"Seemed like it."

"How was she with you?"

"I didn't cum, if that's what you mean."

"Yeah. Sorry about that."

"It doesn't matter. I'll just take care of it in bed."

"So she aroused you, anyway."

Hannah laughed. "Well, something did. I got a little wet."

"Did you notice any writing?" Tammy asked.

Hannah was prepared for the question and had her non-response ready.

"What was that supposed to accomplish, anyway?" she asked.

"Her owner suggested it. She's trying to get more structured time for her when she's on her own."

"I don't think of sex and structured time as two things that go together," Hannah observed.

They reached Hannah's kennel and Tammy locked her in.

"Did she write on herself?" Tammy asked again.

"I don't look for things like that," Hannah said, going to her bed, sitting with the pillow at her back.

"That's not an answer."

"Eyes closed the whole time," Hannah lied, and she drew her knees up and pressed the fingers of her right hand against her clitoris and vulva in the hope Tammy would allow her to masturbate alone.

But Tammy remained at the bars, and Hannah heard a boy grunt somewhere, either climaxing within someone, or close to release on his own.

"You're not going to get her in trouble, if that's what you're worried about," Tammy said. "We check her all over right before dinner. Sometimes she washes it off, but once a week or so, she decides she wants to go to Hall 6, and she leaves it on."

"I'm sure no one wants to go to Hall 6," Hannah asserted, her words followed by a small gasp as she drove two fingers into her chamber.

“I don’t know how else to explain it,” Tammy said. “A psychologist friend says it’s a control thing.”

“You talk to your friends about what happens on Hall 6?” Hannah said.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think you should do that.”

“I’m not using names,” Tammy said. “But why do you care? It’s not like—”

“I wouldn’t want to be talked about,” Hannah said, circling her clitoris at a quick, steady pace, the conversation still just shy of dampening her pleasure. “I wouldn’t want anyone telling their friends what was done to me there.”

Tammy pondered.

Somewhere down the hall, a girl cried out in the universal language of orgasm. “Oh, OH! Auhhh!”

“I’m not helping there again, by the way,” Hannah said.

“It’s not optional.”

“I know. I’m going on conscientious objector status.”

“You still have to go.”

“I understand that,” Hannah said. “I don’t care.”

“One bar the first time you refuse, two bars every time after that.”

“I don’t care,” Hannah repeated, trying not to let Tammy’s words disrupt her focus on her sex organ.

Tammy stepped away.

Hannah, closing in on a mild orgasm, decided to leave her curtain open.

“Yvonne, you guys finished?” Tammy inquired from down the hall.

Who was in Yvonne’s kennel? Hannah wondered. The girl tended to keep to herself, but she had a visitor today. Hannah had heard a male grunt. Was that Yvonne’s partner?

“Yeah,” came Yvonne’s reply.

Hannah heard the clank of a door opening and closing, looked up to see who might pass, her fingers paused above the wet folds of her sex.

“Oh, hey Brad,” she said, and her eyes went from his face to his penis, still half erect and coated with the clear film of Yvonne’s lubricant. Some boys wiped their penises clean as soon as they withdrew it from the

vagina, but Brad left his wet and messy, Hannah had noticed, probably so he could wipe it on his sheets.

“Hey, Hannah,” Brad said. “Catch you at a bad time?”

Hannah laughed. “Just trying to finish a little project.”

“Do you always keep your curtain open for that?”

“No, but Tammy wanted to talk, and—”

Tammy reappeared at the bars. Normally, subjects were discouraged from lingering outside each other’s kennels, but Tammy joined Brad at the bars without dismissing him, both of them looking in at Hannah, who resumed circling her clitoris and wished she’d gone ahead and drawn her curtain closed.

“Hannah is going conscientious objector on Hall 6,” Tammy said. “Think you can talk her out of it?”

“I can’t,” Brad said, “and I wouldn’t try if I could.”

“Hannah,” Tammy said, “think this through.”

“There’s nothing to think about,” Hannah said, staring at her feet now, too close to an orgasm to abandon the effort, growing increasingly frustrated with the interruption.

“If you don’t do it, someone else will,” Tammy said. “And they might be meaner than you.”

Hannah put Tammy’s argument on the back burner while she alternated between sliding her fingers up her vagina and letting them dance over her clit and lips.

“And you’ll still see what’s being done there anyway,” Tammy added, “while you’re being punished.”

Hannah held up her free hand to silence Tammy, using her other hand to push herself over the edge, grunting and gasping through a brief, mild climax, her hand running along her slit, legs bouncing against her mattress.

After regaining her composure, and looking up to find both Tammy and Brad still watching her, Hannah rose and pulled her curtain closed.

“None of that matters,” she announced, moving to her toilet to wipe. “I’m not saying it’s rational. I’m just saying I can’t do it.”

Chapter 27: Back to Dallas

Hannah, mind on rebellion, and her studies, and the scholarship she wanted, and the assistanceship she might receive, and the rushing trivialities of carnal release, found happiness in the week before Thanksgiving.

Her online courses were going well, another round of straight As underway. And her treatise papers were taking shape. Both of them.

Her weekend with Allain was unusually nice, his studies lighter for the holidays, their coupling fierce and uninhibited, a warm spell enabling a trip to the beach and the pavilion there, where she was allowed to wander without chains, put her feet in the sand, feel the Gulf's cold, salty waves of autumn bubbling over her toes. After lunch, she leaned over the rail at the end of the pier and looked into the deep Gulf and its strange creatures.

And she would be travelling to and from Dallas in Allain's car, he told her. Chained, yes, but not shipped, not crated, not caged, not drugged and bound to a shipping platform.

And once she arrived at the Petrosyan's, she would be kept now and then in her old cage, a place of unexpected nostalgia for her. It was roomier than her kennel, and she missed its bed, its shower, its carpeting, the full desk, the windows set high in the wall where she could see the sky.

She would most likely spend her nights with Allain, in his bedroom, a place where she could breathe and groan out with no expectation of being heard.

There were things to worry about, of course.

There was a girl in Hannah's own heart bent on sabotage, and she would pursue her scheme with Hannah's full cooperation, and when their plot was uncovered, both would suffer.

She'd gotten almost nothing from Athena since the second, abortive assessment of the gay boy. Was a confrontation in the works with the girl? Or some form of revenge?

Laura, always unpredictable, might wish to cast a little more vengeance Hannah's way for what Hannah had done with Ormek.

And Hannah would be seeing Gramma and Uncle Bear at Thanksgiving dinner, the escape of Raven a lingering pain for everyone in the family, but particularly those two. Did they know what had been done to Hannah? Might they ask Hannah new questions that she would stumble to answer, and that might lead them – in all innocence – to refer her to Dimper and Dimper for another round of questioning?

Raven's absence from the holidays for the first time in almost two decades would hurt for both emotional and practical reasons, Hannah knew. Raven was a daughter, a lover, a family member in many senses. But she was also very valuable property, skilled, bright and beautiful, and she prepared most of the holiday meal herself, combining traditional foods with her own creations, African recipes she found online, hybrids of European and American dishes, always something new.

There would be nothing new this year.

Gramma and Uncle Bear were so distraught over her absence they would not be hosting dinner, for the first time in anyone's memory. They would come to the Petrosyan's this year, joining the family, Raven's absence most likely a gaping wound no one would mention, the elephant that wasn't in the kitchen, wasn't sitting at the table.

But Hannah, for reasons she wasn't certain of, could not muster despondence over Raven herself, or anything else she might worry about. In the week before Thanksgiving, her heart beat thick with optimism, about the missing slave girl, about everything.

She was released from the kennels at 1 that Wednesday, ran to Allain through a cool gray mist, hugged him and chattered all the way back to his apartment, where she spent half an hour applying makeup, and that much time again working through her clothes to find the right outfit for Thanksgiving day, Thanksgiving dinner, the Friday after, the club that night, church Sunday.

She wasn't sure what to pack for Saturday night, however. Her plans for that day weren't settled yet, and as she sat in her chains, three books and four journals at her feet, Allain easing his car away from his apartment and onto the street, her abiding optimism, coupled with the joy of anticipating a long weekend with him, yielded to anxiety.

She wanted something from Allain he wouldn't want to give her, and Laura would most likely refuse even if Allain said yes.

Hannah, normally glib with Allain, even over the most difficult topics, wasn't sure as they started the trip how to make the request, what words to use, what tone to set. So she looked out the window beside her at the passing cars and the businesses and people of Corpus Christi until Allain spoke.

"How's the Burnham coming along?" he asked.

This was another topic Hannah had to address carefully. She needed to plant certain ideas in Allain's mind without confessing her plan.

"I'm sort of stuck on two topics," Hannah said.

"Do you have titles yet?"

"Sort of, yeah," Hannah replied. This was a lie. In fact, she had finalized both titles, working out the words carefully for maximum impact. It was one of many lies she was going to have to tell, to Allain and the Petrosyans, to others she hadn't met yet.

Lying was a terrible thing for slaves to do. A single lie could mean hours of suffering.

"Tell me what you have so far," Allain said.

"Okay, but it has to be my work," Hannah said. "So you'll have to wait until after I turn them . . . until I turn it in, to talk about any of it."

"Okay. Go ahead."

"Using, um, neuronically-channeled beta blockers to treat juvenile epilepsy," Hannah said. "And—"

"Neuronically-channeled?" Allain interrupted.

"There's a few ways to do it," Hannah said. "And reverse somatic hypermutation."

After a brief pause, in which Allain seemed to be expecting more words, he said simply "and?"

"For allergies," Hannah said.

"Okay," Allain said.

This was the reaction Hannah hoped for. She didn't want his approval, didn't need it. She knew she had two valid ideas. Quite possibly two winning ideas. Getting Allain curious, intrigued, involved would only serve to complicate things.

"So," Hannah said, drawing in her breath, "what are we doing Saturday?"

"I'm not sure," Allain said. "The club on Friday night. And church Sunday. Mom and Dad want to show you off."

Allain's choice of words surprised Hannah. He was being blunt today.

One took the family's slave girl to the club to enjoy her presence, or to introduce her to friends with whom she might share a mutual interest, or as a reward for obedience and reliable service.

One took the family's slave girl to church to maintain and build her faith in the family's god.

One did not show off one's slave girl.

If the slave girl went to the club or to church dressed in the van Minsk of the current season – blacks and oranges this year, bold slits up one thigh, large gray bows at the shoulder or breast or bottom – and if her hair and face had received the attentions of the best artist in Dallas prior to her stepping out, and if she spoke to acquaintances, even new ones decades her senior, with confidence and an occasional sharp or ironic edge, and if she could describe a successful and burgeoning academic career, and if she possessed certain curves and a direct way of looking into people's eyes that suggested she was a delight in any bedroom to which she was assigned – if by all this she left observers with no doubt she was indeed a remarkable prize, and that her owners must be people of taste and refinement and vast wealth and perhaps a little divine favor – well, that might follow logically, and the family would have no reason to disabuse.

But one did not show off one's slave girl. One did not discuss their girl's sales price or appraised value, or directly detail the attributes that would contribute to that value. The turning of heads, and the drawing in of breath, and the quiet whispers when the slave girl entered the room – these were all unintended consequences of a judicious, if not blessed, purchase.

"Is there anything you want to do?" he asked.

"I want to see Mother," Hannah blurted. She'd considered artifice, the cautious steering of the conversation to this place, working at Allain until he'd proposed it himself.

But there was a contract. Hannah had signed it on the day she was bought, and she'd suffered under it on occasion, and now she wanted one of its clauses exercised for her benefit. There was no need to be coy.

"Saturday?" Allain inquired.

"Yes," Hannah said. "I haven't seen her since early October. It's time."

"So . . ." Allain prompted.

"Overnight," Hannah said. "For dinner Saturday. And breakfast Sunday. And then church with you."

"Where?" Allain asked.

"At her place. With her and Roger. His sister lives there too, in another place near it."

“Trailer homes, right?”

“Yes. With running water and heat and air conditioning. And food.”

“You’ve talked about this with her?”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah said. “I promised to ask. I told her not to expect anything.”

Allain paused, biting his lip, and Hannah knew he was considering saying something else, and deciding how to say it and what words to use.

At last, he spoke.

“A lot goes on there.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah inquired.

“People in and out, cars and trucks, day and night.”

“How do you know this?”

Hannah looked at Allain, studying him, suspecting she already knew the answer.

“Your mom isn’t being stalked,” he said, his tone defensive. “It’s just a service. Most people use them.”

“You’re paying someone to spy on my mother,” Hannah asserted.

“It’s not really that,” Allain said. “It’s just to make sure she’s okay. To let us know if anything happens that might . . . affect you.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Safety,” Allain said simply.

Hannah knew the Petrosyans had done a background check on Mother, and what they found assured them that allowing mother and daughter to meet monthly would not threaten their investment, that Mother was rational, sane, law-abiding.

But this was a new level of surveillance, the supervision of Mother’s household, of the property where she lived.

Did it bother Hannah, to know Mother was being watched? She wasn’t sure. It depended on what the Petrosyans were finding out, and what they were doing with that knowledge.

“How are they watching?” Hannah asked.

“An occasional drone, and then maybe satellite pictures, someone driving by. Nothing invasive, nothing illegal.”

“Who is visiting?” Hannah asked.

“Mostly extended family, I think,” Allain said.

“Does Mother know she’s being watched?”

“She might suspect. She probably knows it’s done. Your mother is very bright.”

Allain paused, obviously considering his words again.

“Someone out there knows,” he said. “Something.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s all I should say,” Allain replied.

Since she was taken two summers ago, Hannah’d had to adapt not just to a strange way of life, but to all the strange practices that attended that way of life.

“I’m going to tell Mother,” Hannah said. “She needs to know, if she doesn’t already.”

“I can’t stop you,” Allain said.

“How do you know about it?” Hannah asked.

“Mom mentioned it last month, when I told her your mother was coming to visit. She just said it in passing, that things seemed okay.”

“What are the people doing who stop by all the time?”

“I don’t know. That’s all Mom said.”

“Did she sound worried?”

“No,” Allain replied. “I’ll ask if you can go, see what she says. I could make plans with some of the gang that night. They’ll miss you.”

“Have them over in the afternoon, or we could do lunch,” Hannah suggested. “And thanks for considering it.”

Hannah picked up the top book between her bound feet, chains ringing as she flipped to her current assignment in classical history, an accounting of the people and places where the agricultural revolution brought forth its first true flowers of culture – written language, philosophy, complex religion, slavery.

The slaves acquiesced, untold millions of men and women and children who passed through life as property, who accepted the nature of things, who might indeed have been better off than if they’d been sent to the wilderness for the wolves to howl after. But some rebelled as individuals, or en masse on occasion. Servile wars they called them in Rome.

Spartacus, after he’d escaped from a gladiator school, recruited thousands and defeated legions before his movement was crushed.

Spartacus.

There was no record of his death or capture.

She and Allain had reached the countryside now, an occasional home or business punctuating scrabble fields, brown meadows, and stands of pine, dark green in the grays of a misting mid-autumn day.

Were Spartacus a girl, what name would he have been given? Hannah wondered, watching the passing of the world with blue eyes the color of the horizon on a sunny day.

Spartacette?

Spartacelle?

Spartacella?

Spartacine?

Spartacine. Sparta-seen. As in, seen. Seen naked, often enough. Or Sparta-scene, perhaps. A girl named Spartacine would be expected to make a scene, would she not?

They stopped twice, for gas and a snack, Hannah stumbling through light drizzle in her restraints to the little open-air facilities where subjects were expected to relieve themselves. Both were clean enough, the first empty, the second occupied by just one girl, another recreational female. As she sat, Hannah and she regarded each other through the chicken wire, nodding with understanding, words unnecessary.

The drive dragged on, Hannah growing impatient with her chains and sitting, particularly after it got too dark to read.

“How are Gramma and Uncle Bear doing?” she asked, watching the lights of passing cars, gently stomping her feet, making a rhythmic rattle she hoped didn’t annoy Allain too much.

“Both kinda fragile,” Allain replied. “Mom says they’re like parents who have lost a child.”

They reached the Petrosyan household a little after eight, parking in the garage, and all the nervous anticipation that Hannah had kept at bay on the drive – with her reading, an hour of *Katzink* on Allain’s phone, her private thoughts, the thoughts she shared with him – came roaring in as soon as Allain turned off his car.

Athena appeared first, throwing wide the door that led from the kitchen.

Allain, rounding the car to help Hannah step out of the vehicle, stopped to hug his sister, and then the girl was on Hannah, laughing, smiling, eyes wet, pulling her out by her bound hands in a reunion that left Hannah perplexed but guardedly gratified.

Laura and Ormek were waiting in the kitchen, and Hannah noticed then the whole family was impeccably dressed, Ormek still in a tie well after the sun had set, Laura in the sort of black skirt and white blouse ensemble one would wear to a nice lunch. Even Athena had gone to some trouble on her appearance, putting on makeup, black tights and a long-sleeved black dress. Had they just gotten back from a holiday event? Were they trying to impress Allain? Or was this all for Hannah?

Laura, who sent Hannah off to be kenneled after she learned the girl was dallying outside the rules with her husband, offered Hannah a warm, apparently sincere hug and a kiss on both cheeks, Hannah unable to reciprocate because she was still in her chains. Next came Ormek, who leaned forward for a dignified embrace that revealed nothing of the fraught history between them.

Allain, struggling into the kitchen with his and Hannah's suitcases, took his round of hugs, and was answering the first questions about the drive and his week when Athena tapped Hannah's elbow.

"Downstairs," she said.

Hannah went to the elevator and hit the down button, Athena following once she'd retrieved Hannah's key from Allain.

"Guess who's here," Athena whispered conspiratorially as soon as the elevator door had closed behind them.

"Tell me," Hannah said.

"Ramone."

"Ramone?"

"Yes," Athena said. "The Abercrombies are letting me try him out for a week."

"Through Thanksgiving?"

"Yeah, they're all in Aspen. Ramone hates skiing."

"You're thinking about buying him?"

Athena nodded leeringly, eyes squinting, tongue between her teeth.

The elevator door opened, but Athena put her hand on Hannah's forearm and leaned forward to whisper, "Are you jealous?"

Why is Athena whispering? Hannah asked herself. Is Ramone caged down here?

The motive behind Athena's question was easier to work out than Ramone's current location. Competing with Hannah was one of Athena's

hobbies, victory over the family's slave girl a sweet passion made all the sweeter because of how rare it was.

"Yes," Hannah said simply, keeping her face free of emotion so Athena could read whatever she wanted to in Hannah's eyes. Did she want to see hurt, envy, heartbreak, anger?

Hannah loved Ramone, but she felt no ownership over him. Other people owned him. To fall in love with someone who could be sold off, or sent back to his native land, or kept from her through chains and bars, was pure folly.

Athena still didn't understand this. Most likely, she never would.

"He gets me," Athena said, speaking so quietly Hannah had to read her lips.

"How long has he been here?"

"Five days," Athena replied. "And other times too. One or two nights a week since you got . . . sent away."

She stepped out of the elevator.

"We talk," she mouthed before she turned and shouted. "Ramone, you decent?"

"I am," spoke Ramone, his soft Portuguese accent stirring Hannah more than she would have admitted.

"Guess who's here," Athena said, rounding the wall that hid the two cages from view of the elevator.

"The Archbishop of Canterbury?"

"What?" Athena asked. "God no! It's Hannah. Hannah!"

Hannah stepped beside Athena, smiling at the naked, beautiful, olive-skinned boy who at present was wearing nothing but a sleeve over his penis, standing in the middle of one of the two adjoining cages in the Petrosyan's basement.

The smell was almost the same here, but perhaps a little more male-ish, Hannah noted, the air dense and moist like it always was, the thick carpeting and the mismatched furniture contributing to an ambience of casual comfort the kennels lacked. The sky beyond the windows was black now, the stars visible only when all the basement lights had been turned off.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Miss Hannah," Ramone said, bowing slightly with an irony that was obvious to Hannah and most likely lost on Athena.

"Hello, Ramone, I hope you are well," Hannah said, smiling.

Athena pulled open Hannah's cage door and Hannah entered and turned. Athena locked the door, pulled out the key, removed Hannah's chains, and Hannah stripped, passing through the bars her flats and socks, her sweater and jeans, her bra and panties.

"We're doing dinner in half an hour, so don't get too comfortable," Athena advised. "But I thought you'd want to catch up."

"Where's dinner?" Hannah asked.

"In the fridge," Athena said, stepping to Ramone's bars, accepting a quick peck on the lips before she headed to the elevator. "Darcy cooked it earlier, so we just need to warm it up. Oh, and Ramone's supposed to be a surprise for Allain, so don't spoil it."

Hannah heard the familiar bump of the elevator, heard the door close, and felt another deep wave of nostalgia for this place, for these people.

Even Athena.

She turned to Ramone, who was looking at her quizzically.

"How have things been in Corpus Christi?" he asked.

Hannah moved to the bars, touching them with one hand briefly. The door between their cages was locked, but many things could be done between the bars were Ramone not sleeved.

"I've missed you," Hannah said, motioning Ramone to step closer. The two embraced, shared a long, open-mouthed kiss, Hannah's wetting chamber answered by the tip of Ramone's sleeve against her vulva as his penis rose.

"How long have you been wearing that thing?" Hannah asked.

"All afternoon," Ramone replied.

"Why?"

"She gets it all," Ramone said, and he stepped back, allowing Hannah to see that he was speaking not from pride or carnal braggadocio, but from sheer panic.

Chapter 28: Fear in the Basement

"Explain," Hannah said urgently. There wasn't much time, and much she wanted to know.

"Infatuation is a wondrous experience," Ramone said. "I recommend it. But not to help in making a \$75,000 decision."

“Is that what the Abercrombies are asking?”

“Yes, Athena talked them down. The girls are —”

“I heard you might go back to Brazil.”

Ramone breathed in, staring into Hannah’s eyes, and she sensed a profound emotion, the longing of all people for the familiar air and land and water of one’s youth, for the people of one’s youth, for the language one first learned, its cadence and consonance, even in the womb.

“I know only what I read in the news,” he said. “The Castro-Smith Subject Repatriation Act.”

He stepped to the bars, looking at Hannah.

“It is only a matter of time,” he whispered urgently.

“Until what?”

“Until the infatuation wears off.”

Hannah laughed despite herself. “Tell me what you did to her.”

“Nothing,” Ramone protested. “Nothing! I read her poetry. That is all. In Portuguese.”

Hannah nodded.

“And sometimes,” he added, shaking his head, “in English.”

“Before or after you fucked her?” Hannah asked.

“Both.”

“Don’t you know how to be anything other than . . . Ramone?”

“It wouldn’t have fooled her; the girls told her everything,” he said, referring to the three Abercrombie sisters he had been serving for years.

“We would finish, and she would roll over to me and whisper, ‘Sing that song to me Bethany told me you sang to her, the one about the whores of Brasilia,’ and then—”

“You never sang that song to me,” Hannah said.

“Here is what I fear,” Ramone said, reaching through the bars and touching Hannah’s hand, as if reaching out for rescue from a deep hole.

“She buys me and brings me home and the next day, her infatuation wears off, and she doesn’t understand it and blames me, and so do Ormek and Laura, and they leave me down here while she pursues other boys.”

“Stop singing to her,” Hannah demanded. “Stop satisfying her.”

Ramone released Hannah’s hand, stared blankly.

“I cannot,” he said simply.

“You like it with her, don’t you?” Hannah said, feeling mildly annoyed.

“Tell me about the kennels,” Ramone said, a hint of annoyance in his voice as well.

“I didn’t want to go,” Hannah said, annoyance growing to hurt. Was her old lover turning on her? Was she turning on him? Had all this been orchestrated by Athena, putting Hannah down here, alone with him, so they could argue over impossible complexities while she helped prepare dinner? Was she that clever?

“I didn’t want to go,” Hannah said. “Anything anyone told you differently is a—”

“Athena says you always wanted to go to school, that—”

“No,” Hannah said. “It’s true, but I was in school already, at—”

“Why were you sent there?”

Hannah looked into Ramone’s eyes, willing him to understand. Surely, he knew.

“Ormek?” he asked, mouthing the name.

Hannah nodded.

“And Laura found out?”

Hannah smiled weakly, looked at the floor.

Ramone laughed, spread his arms wide. “I will always remember you, Hannah.”

“You sound like you already know you’re leaving,” Hannah said, a lump in her throat.

“The Castro-Smith Subject Repatriation Act,” Ramone said. “Follow it, and you’ll know what has become of me.”

“I will,” Hannah promised.

“Athena tells me you’ve fallen in love.”

“What?”

“She says his name is Franklin.”

“I assessed him,” Hannah said curtly, crossing her arms and staring at the floor.

Ramone laughed again.

“I understand he is very rich,” Ramone said. “A boy any girl would love.”

“You know . . .” she said, shaking a finger and glaring while she struggled to find her next words. “You know, better than anyone . . . better than anyone . . . how little that matters.”

“May you find him on another day.”

Hannah bit her lip, determined not to cry, to let her mascara run so close to dinner. Why was Ramone doing this? Why was he pushing all her buttons?

“Is this how you say goodbye in Brazil?” she snapped.

Ramone’s eyes went wide, not with surprise, Hannah thought, but with shame.

“No,” he said quietly. “It’s how we – how anyone – says that their heart is breaking.”

“Ramone,” Hannah said, waving him back to the bars. “They’re about to bring us upstairs.”

She kissed him, he kissed her back, two pairs of wet eyes looked into each other, and Hannah pulled away and moved on, because they had no other choice.

“People can change,” she said. “Athena’s a girl, and she’s complicated. More complicated than you give her credit for.”

Ramone nodded.

“When the men first came for me,” Hannah continued, “to take me from my mother, I was in a long skirt, and a bra and shirt. And I put on a sweater for modesty.”

Hannah laughed at her own innocence.

“No one knows what Athena will do about you when she’s done with puppy love,” Hannah said. “Not even her.”

“I will make my way,” Ramone promised vaguely.

“Now,” Hannah continued, “tell me about Raven.”

“You know as much as I do,” he said, shrugging and spreading his hands in the universal expression of innocence.

“When was the last time you saw her?”

“They put me with her once after you left,” Ramone said. “Here, in early October, a week before she escaped. She said nothing of any plans.”

“Here?”

“In that bed,” he said, pointing to the place where Hannah had slept for a year, where she and Raven had talked and loved many times. She could see Raven there now, long-limbed, naked and open, gently giving pleasure, gently taking pleasure, whispering deep-voiced to Hannah, her brown skin black in the darkness.

Hannah turned back to Ramone. “Were you interrogated?”

Ramone grimaced.

“How long?”

“I can’t say.”

Hannah looked at the ceiling, rage now where there was annoyance and hurt before.

“Were you . . .?” he asked quietly.

“Of course.”

“Where?”

“Legs,” she said, looking down first, then raising her hands to touch the sides of her breasts.

Ramone nodded, reached down, raised the metal sleeve around his penis, exposing his bound testicles.

Hannah put her hands over her mouth, fighting not the fleeting tears one sheds over boys, but the bitter brine that falls and burns one’s cheeks in the presence of deep, unrightable injustice.

“No one in the family knows what was done to us,” Ramone whispered. “I am certain.”

Hannah wanted to believe.

“What confession did they get from you before they were done?” she asked him.

“About Mrs. Abercrombie,” he whispered. “You?”

“Ormek.”

The elevator bumped. Hannah stepped to the mirror to touch up her hair and check her eyes.

Her mascara was still holding and her eyes were still, mostly, bright. She offered a quick, artificial smile to her reflected countenance and found it passable.

“Get caught up?” Athena asked, rounding the corner with two pairs of shackles in her hands.

“Hannah is not the Archbishop of Canterbury,” Ramone said with disappointment.

“Why do you want to talk to her anyway?” Athena asked, kneeling to chain Ramone’s ankles together.

“She is a he,” Ramone noted.

“You know this person?” Athena asked, moving to Hannah’s cage to bind her.

“Not personally, no,” Ramone said.

Was Athena in on the joke, or was she truly unaware of what Hannah believed to be common knowledge? Had Athena, in the last few months, developed the same capacity for dry humor that Ramone had been born practicing?

The two slaves followed Athena to the elevator, entered the kitchen with her, stepped into the dining room, now rich with the warmed-over smells of Darcy's cooking, steaming dishes superior to anything available in the kennels.

Walking to the table naked before the whole family, something she'd done routinely before she was sent to Corpus Christi, felt briefly strange tonight, perhaps because she was entering with Ramone, the two of them like Adam and Eve in a Medieval painting, naked and uncondemned before the fruit and the fall, but by divine decree required to occupy paradise with their ankles chained together.

Hannah watched Allain. He was talking to Laura but turned to witness the entrance of his girl, his eyes flickering in surprise as his girls' erstwhile lover followed.

Ramone nodded and turned to Athena, as did the rest of the family. This was, Hannah could tell, a moment she'd been waiting for.

"Allain, remember Ramone?" Athena asked in a singsong tease.

"Of course," Allain said, recovering quickly and summoning his usual grace. "Ramone, how are you?"

Allain rounded the table and offered his hand, Ramone taking it with a bow, his own grace on full display, the quiet dignity of his demeanor overcoming, at least for the moment, the laughable device bound to his genitals.

Hannah was glad it was on him, however. She didn't want Allain wondering if her first act upon her return to House Petrosyan was welcoming the Abercrombie's slave up her chamber.

Hannah took her place beside Allain, her usual chair with the usual towel spread across it, facing Ramone and Athena.

Athena's countenance glowed with the unmitigated triumph possible only in the faces of girls seduced by the fantasy – a passing fantasy, tragically, as it always must be – that they had found the perfect boy and in so doing had made all else perfect – the world, the universe, themselves.

“Athena believes she has worked out a deal with the Abercrombies,” Laura said with beaming pride. “I have never seen her work so hard at anything.”

Hannah smiled and nodded at Athena and thought about the work she herself had done in service to Athena’s objectives. She hadn’t assessed Ramone, of course. Not officially. That task had fallen to Athena.

Repeatedly, it seemed.

“What did you talk them down to?” Allain asked.

“Right now, it’s \$75,000, with all his clothes included,” Athena said. “But we’re still negotiating. His English isn’t perfect.”

Before she could stop herself, before she could clap her hands over her mouth or squeeze her belly just below her diaphragm or pinch her leg, Hannah hooted, an uncontrollable, involuntary response of hilarity to Athena’s words that spewed like a climaxing volcano.

If Hannah needed to find a single moment to sum up all that was wrong with this world, the ridiculous denigration of subjects for business purposes while they stood there and listened, naked and restrained, penises bound like sausages hanging from hooks – this would serve.

“What?” Athena immediately demanded. “What?”

“Shall we sit?” Laura commanded.

As soon as the seats were filled and the napkins spread, Athena spoke again.

“What?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Hannah said, scrambling for a reason to have laughed. “It’s just that . . . you reminded me that Ramone speaks Portuguese, and . . . and . . . he says funny things.”

“Like what?” Athena demanded, glaring.

Hannah, you fool. Hannah, you complete fool. Before you even sat down, you spat your irreverence out, for all the family to see, your demeaning laughter, your haughtiness, Athena’s proud little project in tatters at your arrogant feet.

No one in the family knows what was done to us

“Do you remember,” Hannah began haltingly, “do you remember that time Ramone . . . called Darcy . . . when he said, ‘*Coma, um, via, gatinha?*’ to her?”

“*Como vai, gatinha?*” Ramone corrected.

“What does that mean?” Laura inquired.

“What’s up, kitten?” Hannah said, and she knew she was blushing. “I just . . . I just . . . really found it funny. At the time.”

Silence. All the family holding still, waiting for the arc of Hannah’s words to pass from Hannah’s mouth, up over the table loaded with the cooking of the short, middle-aged Mexican housekeeper named Darcy, to Athena’s ears, into her mind.

At any moment, infatuation stands poised – like inebriation – to break, to turn dark and despairing, to deflate and collapse upon itself.

Would this be the moment things turned for Athena?

“Oh my god, oh my god!” Athena exploded. “I totally forgot about that! Ramone called Darcy a kitten, in Portuguese!”

Athena was laughing now. Hysterically, uncontrollably, wiping her eyes with her napkin. Had she taken something? Hannah wondered. Or was her sudden frenzy the result of infatuation alone?

“He called me that too!” Athena recalled. “The next day. Oh my god!”

She leaned over, pressed her head against Ramone’s shoulder, kissed it and sat upright again.

“Oh my god,” she whispered to herself, scooping out a spoonful of Darcy’s casserole.

Hannah felt a toe against her ankle, raising her cuff and letting it fall, and she shifted her eyes very briefly toward Allain, breathing a sigh of relief.

Como vai, gatinha?

No one in the family knows what was done to us.

After a pleasant meal, Hannah and Allain, Ramone and Athena helped clear the dishes, and when the kitchen was tidy enough, Allain poured four small sherry glasses of sweet tawny, handing them out one by one, and all went up to the next floor on the elevator, to the lounge with the pool table, the shelves lined with books on sundry topics, including medicine, the great chairs where Hannah had passed many pleasant hours. Hannah tucked her shackled feet beneath her, one hand draped modestly over her pubic hair. Ramone sat shamelessly, legs spread, his sleeve sometimes resting on the cushion between his legs, sometimes upright, and Hannah knew that it stirred in anticipation of the Petrosyan girl’s pleasures, and she chased the worry out of her mind and was glad for them both.

The couples sat and talked and laughed and sipped, Athena practicing with some success a new phase of adulthood, at one point telling a story about two friends at school without being critical or snarky or mean.

And then, the tawny done, the brother and sister retired to their bedrooms with their naked, bound slaves. The doors of the Petrosyan children both featured locks now, Athena's having been installed the previous month, meaning both could leave their slaves unfettered while they slept.

Allain's bedroom was unchanged from Hannah's last visit here in the summer, and as soon as Allain freed her ankles, she helped him undress, turned off all but the small light on his dresser, forced him to his bed, and held him on his back while she wrung all the pleasure she could summon from his body, kissing him, licking his mouth, caressing his penis with her tongue, clambering over him so that he could drink the lubricant that poured from her slit, finally mounting him, groaning with eyes wide and desperate while she lowered her vagina slowly down around his shaft, rose, dropped, rose, gyrated down, twisted and writhed, and when she felt Allain's member swell with the first rush of seed, she allowed herself her own roaring orgasm, her first in two days, the lovers crying against each other while Allain flooded his girl's pink, swollen sheath with the white cream that served – as it had since the dawn of civilization – as the master's seal of approval, a statement surer than words that the slave girl had served well, that her master was pleased with her.

When they were done groaning, Hannah rose up, lifting herself off Allain's still hardened member, eying with satisfaction the string of semen that spilled from her opening and down to his shaft, and she rolled off him and lay beside him, hand on his belly.

"Your sister is trying to buy Ramone," Hannah whispered.

"So I've heard."

"Is it a good idea?" she asked.

Allain laughed.

Hannah compartmentalized.

When sex was done, she lay that part of her mind aside to address other matters. She was too quick, too curious to linger over things that had been finished. There were a great many categories that filled her life, and she was loath to neglect any of them.

“What do you think?” he asked, turning and rising to his elbow, touching her face with his hand.

“I asked first.”

Allain drew in his breath, breathed out.

“I don’t see how this helps Ramone,” he said.

Hannah laughed this time.

Allain, in his succinct way, had summed up the situation.

“It might not matter, though,” Hannah said. “He might go home.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He says there’s a repatriation law in the works. All the subjects would go home to Brazil, and I guess Brazil does something for us.”

“I don’t see how this helps Athena either,” he said. “I wish she’d just get a boyfriend.”

“I’m not sure that would work – with normal boys.”

“What does that mean?” Allain asked.

“You know what it means.”

Allain looked away, toward the window.

“Do you want to go home?” Allain asked.

Allain, medical student, son of wealth, fierce and sensitive lover, gentle master of a female slave, was willing on occasion to explore difficult topics, one of the traits Hannah admired.

“I don’t have a home,” she said.

“Everyone has a home,” Allain whispered.

“The place I was born chased me away,” she said. “And since then, it was all tiny apartments Mother couldn’t even pay for.”

“You have a home now.”

“Oh, you mean, where Mother lives with her boyfriend?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I’ve never even been there,” Hannah said, and she pondered and spoke again. “This is home. Your bedroom. The kennels. The University of Texas at Corpus Christi.”

Allain seemed pleased with her answer, touched her ear,

“You want to go there Saturday,” he said.

“Yeah, Mother invited me, and she’s my mother.”

“I mentioned it,” Allain said. “Mom said maybe.”

“She’s considering it?” Hannah inquired, surprised.

“That’s all, yeah.”

Allain paused.

“She’s dealing with other things right now.”

“You mean, tomorrow?”

“Yeah. We’ve never done Thanksgiving here. She’s got a lot to plan, and she’s worried about Gramma and Uncle Bear. Tomorrow’s going to be a hard day for them.”

“I miss Raven,” Hannah said, “especially now I’m back here.”

“You guys were close.”

“Yes,” Hannah agreed. “I want to help tomorrow.”

“I’m sure you’ll get a chance.”

“I want to make something.”

“Like what?”

“I could do a pie.”

“Have you ever made one?”

“Well . . . sort of . . . years ago.”

Allain breathed in, obviously not sure what to say.

“Or a casserole,” Hannah persisted. “Green beans. Or rice.”

“Ask Mom,” Allain said. “I think she has everything mapped out.”

“I could do something new, something African, like Raven used to do.”

“That might set Gramma off,” Allain said. “Or Uncle—”

“I’m not trying to replace Raven,” Hannah said, growing frustrated. “I just want to help. Last year, all I did was peel potatoes and mash them. I’m—”

“Mom’s not going to chain you tomorrow,” Allain said.

“What?”

“No shackles,” Allain said. “All day.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, blinking. This was a graduation of sorts, for at least a day, a transition to a new level of freedom, a new level of trust, something that had taken her more than a year to earn. There was no certificate, no diploma, just a few words shared in bed in a darkened room, but its import was not lost on her.

Of course, she’d still be naked, most likely. Allain hadn’t mentioned allowing her to dress. But if she had to choose, she’d always rather go naked if it meant her restraints were left hanging on their hook.

Hannah reveled in the news, briefly.

“Just for tomorrow?” she asked.

“Probably,” Allain said. “It’s partly about safety, I think. There will be a lot going on in the kitchen.”

“Why did you wait until now to tell me?”

“I just thought of it,” Allain said.

“When I talked about cooking something,” Hannah observed.

“Yeah,” Allain agreed.

“No one wants me to cook,” Hannah sighed, rolling away from Allain to stare at the wall.

“Hannah,” Allain said, wrapping his hand around her shoulder. “Hannah.”

“I know,” Hannah said bitterly. “I wasn’t bought to cook.”

“Why do you want to cook?”

“It’s what girls do.”

“Boys cook too.”

“A girl should know how to cook.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “It wasn’t something you learned how to do growing up.”

That stung. She brushed Allain’s hand off her shoulder and hunched her shoulders, closing herself. If his door weren’t locked, she would have stormed out and slept on the couch.

At the age of 15, as all in the Petrosyan household knew, Hannah escaped from the clutches of the aged and already thrice-wived Mr. Johnston, but only to fall with Mother into deep poverty. While other girls that age, wealthy or middle-class or even solidly lower, were learning their way around the kitchen, Hannah and her mother were barely scraping by, taking handouts from restaurants, leftovers from church members, cans of things retrieved from dumpsters, already mixed and stirred and baked, nothing required of Hannah but to warm on a hotplate and eat.

Poverty had much it could teach, but culinary skills weren’t on that list, a lingering deprivation that represented something deeper to Hannah – ignorance, immaturity, failure.

Captivity.

“Hannah,” Allain whispered.

“What?”

“I’m sorry. Tell me what you want to make tomorrow.”

Hannah drew in her breath, tamped down her anger and pondered last year’s spread, half the dishes from Raven’s hand alone: turkey, two

pies, the stuffing, Nigerian couscous, a squash casserole, biscuits.

“Biscuits,” she said.

“Okay,” Allain agreed. “I’ll tell Mom.”

“What’s Ramone making?”

“Beans and rice.”

“You already know that?”

“It was on Mom’s list.”

“She has a list?”

“Yeah, it was on the kitchen counter.”

“Was my name on it?”

“Yes.”

“For what?”

“Everything. Mom’s got you helping wherever someone needs you.”

“You’re being honest?”

“Yes, I promise.”

“Will it make you jealous if I help Ramone?”

“It depends on what you’re doing for him.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Just that.”

“So if I’m just, um, mixing his rice, or whatever you do with rice, that’s okay?” Hannah asked. She was done with the kitchen compartment. It was time to move on again. She was returning to happiness now, trying to be thankful, in keeping with the season.

She could feel Allain’s semen trickling across her lips, and it was making her restless.

“Yeah, sure,” Allain said. “Mix away.”

“But if he’s mixing the rice and just wants me to . . . to bend over for him . . . you wouldn’t like that?”

“Check with Mom, Allain deadpanned. “I didn’t see you and Ramone fucking on her list.”

“What are you cooking?” she asked.

“The turkey,” Allain said.

“You’ll need help with that,” Hannah whispered, turning back to Allain, bringing her face to his, kissing him, laughing.

She’d been trained for sex. She’d been bought for sex. Friday night at the club, and Sunday at church, she’d be dressed and made up and shown

to the world as a girl used for sex.

She imagined herself in the kitchen tomorrow, bending and offering her vagina to any male who needed a little distraction from the rigors of food preparation.

Allain first, then Ramone, and Ormek last, each groaning out their pleasures while she held still. Or stamped out biscuits.

She could do both.

Allain leaned into her, penis hardening.

It was his turn now. She wanted him to take his turn.

She slid to the middle of his bed, lay flat on her back and spread her legs.

Allain clambered above her, holding himself by his shaft, positioning the tip at her entrance, pushing in, the syrup from their last coupling still thick between her lips, deep within her chamber as well, smoothing the way for his thrusts and withdrawals, each quicker than the last until the lovers shared a second orgasm, Hannah's arms around Allain's back, thighs squeezing his hips as if she were afraid he was about to fall off.

Allain finished, fell beside her laughing, and she pulled up the sheets for both of them, her final service of the day before they drifted off to the oblivion of slumber.

No one in the family knows what was done to us.

Chapter 29: Uncle Bear Suspects

Allain set his alarm clock for 7 Thanksgiving morning. Hannah woke before it went off, but had time only to use the toilet before it began playing a complex, mechanical series of notes, and Allain inhaled sharply and stirred.

Hannah listened to him wake, stared into the darkness and thought about the day with a mix of optimism and nervous anticipation.

She would be seeing Gramma and Uncle Bear, deeply bereft on what was supposed to be a happy day. Would they want to talk about Raven? Would they want to talk about her interrogation? Did they know anything new? Did they know of her confession?

But today, she'd have the run of the Petrosyan household – or the kitchen and dining room, at least – without restraints. She would do nothing to make Laura regret her decision.

“Hannah?” Allain said.

Hannah wiped, flushed, went to Allain in his bed, crawled over him, kissed him.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” she said. “You have to cook a turkey now.”

With Hannah’s encouragement, they were both downstairs within 15 minutes.

Laura was already in the kitchen, consulting a sheet of paper covered in neat script when Hannah and Allain arrived. She hugged both of them, asked Hannah to make coffee, and began firing instructions at Allain. Preparing the turkey made Allain master of ceremonies, Hannah knew. Laura wanted her son to succeed. Hannah was, at the moment, glad the job hadn’t been given to her. Coffee was important too, and it was something she knew well.

“Hannah wants to make the biscuits,” Allain announced as he pulled a turkey out of the fridge.

Laura reached for a book on the counter before her, flipped through the pages, opened it to a biscuit recipe.

“You’ll use the second oven, any time after 2,” Laura said, running her finger down the sheet before her. “Have them done by 3.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Once the coffee was brewing, Hannah stepped over, studied the recipe, found it surprisingly intimidating, and glanced over Laura’s shoulder at her list.

There, in print letters as neat as Hannah’s mother’s, Laura had written out everything on the menu, the time each was to be finished, and who was responsible. Hannah’s name, as Allain had promised, appeared throughout, but always with a question mark, suggesting that her services were subject to approval, that Hannah would help where she was wanted, and wouldn’t help where she was not wanted.

Athena’s name appeared beside the biscuits.

Did she want to make them? Was this a special talent of hers? Was Hannah inserting herself improperly, disrupting family traditions to ease her own insecurities?

To Hannah’s horror, Laura picked up a pen, crossed out her daughter’s name, and scratched in Hannah’s beside it.

Would Athena care? Would she see her name scratched out by her own mother, replaced with the name of the family’s slave girl, and storm

off? Would this be the day her infatuation broke, despoiling her romance with Ramone, the holiday itself?

Athena's name appeared elsewhere on the list, Hannah noted, next to cranberries, and something having to do with onions. Perhaps all was not lost.

Hannah studied the ingredients, mapped out the process in her mind, and stepped over to the coffee maker, reveling in the freedom of unshackled ankles.

She poured cups the way she knew Allain and Laura liked them, just cream for Allain, sugar and cream for Laura, and set them out wordlessly while the two conversed over the turkey.

"Thanks, Hannah," said Allain.

Laura squeezed Hannah's arm.

Hannah poured her own cup, turned to rest her bare bottom against the counter, watched the proceedings and remembered all she was thankful for.

Perhaps whatever god presided over human matters was a deity of small things only, of air and water and pie and coffee, of warm beds and sex and soft kisses against shoulders, he or she lacking the ability to see or the inclination to direct the things that seemed overarching to humans, war and governance and the institutions by which people obtained sex, and how people treated each other when the law proposed that one person could own someone else.

Ormek arrived next, nodded chastely at Hannah, kissed his wife and put his hand on his son's shoulder before he set to work on one of his specialties, a vegetable medley with curry and other spices, not one of Hannah's favorites.

And then, Athena and Ramone, Athena wearing the glazed expression of a girl who has once again received a night of devoted attention, her ardent infatuation still intact, Ramone looking as he always did, serene, dignified, offering a quick, conspiratorial smile at Hannah before he greeted the rest of the Petrosyan household.

Athena had left his penis uncovered this morning, and it hung sleepily between his legs, cleaned of whatever she had coated it with in bed. Hannah hoped he'd be left bare all day. Covering his manhood on a holiday just didn't seem right.

Athena sent Ramone over for coffee for both of them while she looked at the list and scowled, not because her name had been replaced by Hannah's, but because her name was on it at all. She already had her hands full with Ramone, she whined to her mother, but Laura shook her head and told her to get the cranberries out of the fridge and follow the recipe, already open on the counter.

The kitchen hummed, Hannah helped whenever she was asked, and at 11, Gramma and Uncle Bear arrived.

Hannah wasn't sure what to expect when they walked through the door. Two dour ghosts, barely able to speak? Mother and son heartbroken, bereft and bitter? To her surprise, the greetings were joyous all around, jokes about Uncle Bear's mincemeat pie and Gramma's potato masher, kind words and hugs from both of them for Hannah and Ramone, warm inquiries about school for everyone who was enrolled.

Lunch was cold meatloaf and salad, just enough to keep everyone going, and when it was over, Hannah returned to the kitchen, awaiting further orders.

Uncle Bear tapped her on the shoulder.

"Gramma and I need to talk to you," he said quietly. Hannah looked at Laura, Laura nodded, and she stepped to the elevator, Gramma joining them for the short ride to the basement.

Uncle Bear led the way, flipping on the main light and stepping to the place past Hannah's cage where a couch and two chairs that didn't match sat facing each other.

Hannah sat in the chair, facing Uncle Bear and Gramma, who dropped heavily beside each other on the couch, backs hunched, the usual twinkle in Gramma's eyes all but gone, Uncle Bear looking five years older.

"Hannah," Gramma said. "We wanted to talk to you about Raven."

"Yes, Ma'am?" Hannah replied, stomach churning slightly.

"We understand you met with one of the detectives on the case," Gramma said.

"Detectives?" Hannah repeated.

"Gramma means Dimper and Dimper," Uncle Bear clarified. "They were brought on by the insurance company."

"Yes," Gramma said with an impatient wave. "I hope they weren't too stern with you?"

"No, Ma'am, not at all," Hannah lied.

“Good,” she said, leaning back, hands clasped in her lap. “But I know that kind of questioning can be . . . stressful for some people. And you might not remember everything you know.”

“I did my best,” Hannah said. “I tried to tell them everything I could.”

“Of course you did,” Gramma agreed. “But do you think . . . can you remember . . . did Raven ever say . . .”

Gramma’s voice trailed off, she brought her hands to her mouth, and her face crumpled, just folded down on itself, and she issued a small, desperate squeak before she closed her eyes and wept.

“Momma,” Uncle Bear murmured, putting his arm around her shoulder, wiping his eyes with his other hand. “Momma, Momma, it’s okay.”

“I am so sorry,” Hannah said, before her own throat closed.

The people on the couch before her had lost a daughter, and a lover, and a future daughter-in-law, most likely, and they were as bereft as two people could be, their tears bringing home to Hannah as nothing else had that she might never see Raven again, that none of them might ever see Raven again.

“She never said anything,” Hannah choked. “She loved you both. She loves you both. It doesn’t make any sense to me.”

Hannah remembered the way Athena had first shared the news with her, matter-of-factly reporting Raven’s departure in conjunction with informing Hannah she’d be doing boy assessments. And then, in interrogation, Hannah’s focus had been on herself, on her fears, on her own pain, on her anger at what had been done to her.

Now, the loss of Raven as an emotional event was made real, in the suffering faces of the two she’d left behind.

“I wish I could help,” Hannah stammered, fighting tears. “If I remember anything, I’ll let you know. But it just doesn’t make sense.”

“I don’t know why she’d do it,” Gramma said, a tinge of bitterness mixed with the pain. “I rescued her from a life of poverty. I bought her to save her.”

Hannah stood, retrieved a handful of tissue from her cage, passed them around, wiped her own eyes and sat down.

Gramma nodded, wept anew while her son patted her shoulder, then she shook, as if physically breaking free of the torment, and she stood,

pressed the tissue against her nose and moved to the elevator with a final cough.

“I’m sure they need me,” she announced as the door bumped and slid open. “I’ll let them know you’ll be along.”

“Yes, Momma,” answered Uncle Bear.

Uncle Bear gave a long look at the elevator door, eyes red and watery, before he turned them back to Hannah.

“How have you been?” he asked, thickly.

“I’m fine,” Hannah said, immediately regretting her answer. Had she been distraught? Had she shed a single tear over Raven before today?

Uncle Bear focused, staring into Hannah’s eyes.

“What did they do to you?” he asked quietly.

“Who?”

“Dimper and Dimper.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Yeah.”

There was something intense in Uncle Bear’s eyes that told her she wasn’t going to be able to brush off the question the way she had with Allain.

“I need to know,” he said, leaning forward, the artificial ankle joint of his left leg glinting below his pants cuff.

“I signed something,” Hannah said.

“I saw it,” he said. “They mailed us a copy.”

“Okay,” said Hannah, remembering the threats, laid out in the document’s dry legalese: Legal action against her or her owners, and additional, unspecified punishments, “as allowable by law, policy or custom.”

“Tell me,” he said.

“Why?” Hannah replied.

She was not afraid of Uncle Bear. He had fought in North Korea, killed at least three men, maybe more, and he returned home with the ghosts of what he’d done and seen there before he lost his lower leg to a mine. There was something in his eyes that was slightly wild, slightly mad. Perhaps it had always been there. He did not, as far as Hannah could tell, share any of that trait with his sister Laura.

But he was a gentle lover, taking Hannah on several occasions, always sweet and a little sad, and he’d fallen in love with his mother’s slave girl, and she’d fallen in love with him.

Uncle Bear laughed, passed his hand across his eyes, swept his hair across his forehead.

“I have my reasons,” he said.

“That’s not good enough,” Hannah said. “You saw what I signed.”

“You just don’t even hesitate, do you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve given you a direct order, and you didn’t even blink,” Uncle Bear noted.

“I didn’t hear a direct order,” Hannah said. “I just heard you trying to get me to break an agreement.”

“You’re a soldier,” Uncle Bear said, pointing at Hannah as if he were accusing her of something.

Hannah turned, made an exaggerated show of looking behind herself.

“I’ve seen my share of soldiers,” he said, laughing. “I’ve seen men and women, who put on the uniform and weren’t soldiers. And now, I’m looking at a girl who’s wearing nothing . . . and I see a soldier.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Hannah said.

“You said that too quickly.”

“Because it’s true.”

“No it’s not,” Uncle Bear said. “You’re a quick liar. And you just lied to me. I know what you are. I know you’re working on something. I don’t know what it is, but it’s something.”

“You’ve let your hair grow,” Hannah observed, and she looked at Uncle Bear blankly, still not afraid, but curious now. What did he think he knew? And why did he want to know what had been done to Hannah?

“I only cut it for the interview last summer,” he said. “They don’t care how it looks at the marina, as long as I get the job done.” He touched his shoulder. “It’ll be back to here in a few months.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed.

“Waterboarding,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Were you waterboarded?”

“What?” Hannah inquired. “No.”

“Beaten?”

“No.”

“They make something from peppers,” Uncle Bear persisted. “Ever heard of it?”

Hannah looked up, toward the windows, the sky still gray.

“It’s called capsaicin,” he said.

Hannah looked into Uncle Bear’s eyes, looked up.

“They’ll spread it out somewhere, and it’s cool, like a cream, and then that motherfucker just starts to burn, and if they don’t wipe it off and spread some sugar over it, you’ll tell them anything they want to know. Anything.”

Hannah breathed in, eyes watering, the phantom of the sting roasting her thighs again, slashing at her mind.

“Hot water,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Hot water. Feet, back, legs, hands?”

“No.”

“Electric shock.”

Hannah looked through the windows again, but she raised her hands to her breasts, touched the sides, dropped her hands back into her lap and looked into Uncle Bear’s eyes, finding sympathy there, and anger perhaps, and she felt a wave of relief, the healing power of therapy, of confession.

She had done nothing wrong, spoken no secrets, but now one free person knew of her suffering, and that was a victory. The best kind of victory, because the gratification was instant.

Uncle Bear leaned forward, elbows on his knees, face in his hands, and breathed in and out, as if something were hurting him terribly.

“So it’s true, then,” he said.

“What?” Hannah asked.

“What they do.”

“What who does?”

“I found some things Raven wrote,” he said. “I dismissed it all as bullshit until about 90 seconds ago.”

“What?” Hannah inquired.

“Private things. About you.”

“What?” Hannah repeated.

“She was sure someone was going to take you,” he said. “Or you’d say fuck it and leave.”

“That hasn’t happened,” Hannah said. “That won’t happen.”

“Raven knew what would happen if it did.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If you disappeared, she knew she’d be brought in, just like you were. She found things online. Someone wrote it up, and she found it. She knew she’d be . . . tortured. And she knew how they’d do it too. Capsaicin. Shocks on the tits. Some other things, but capsaicin and shocks were listed first and second. I thought it was all bullshit, just people talking. I didn’t want to believe it.”

Hannah nodded slowly, looking at the man.

“Ramone?” he asked quietly.

Hannah nodded and pointed to her genitals.

“If Gramma knew what had to be done to collect on Raven’s policy, she’d die,” Uncle Bear said. “She’d die. She didn’t know. I didn’t know. I didn’t know until just now.”

Uncle Bear paused.

“She kept a diary.”

“Raven?”

“Yeah. I knew it was there, but I couldn’t touch it. I never wanted to. But with Thanksgiving coming, and I thought, if she’s coming back, if she’s coming back, now’s the—”

Uncle Bear shut his mouth, cried quietly, shoulders shaking, but his eyes open and clear, looking at something over Hannah’s shoulder, far away.

He coughed, looked at Hannah, smiled with a mix of pain and gratitude.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “If it was up to me, we’d do away with all this shit, all of it, and go back to the way it was.”

“You wouldn’t have met Raven,” Hannah noted.

“No, I would have,” Uncle Bear said. “I’ve been all over the world. I would have seen her. We would have seen each other. And that would have been it.”

Hannah bit her lip and closed her eyes, aching for Raven and Uncle Bear, and for everyone who longs all their life for their one true love, and finds it, or never finds it, or finds it and loses it.

Aching for herself.

Uncle Bear wiped his eyes, looked at the elevator door, seemed to be struggling to compose himself.

“Mamma never should have bought her,” he said. “But that’s the way she is. Always been that way. Maybe mellowed a little in the last few years. But she just needed control. She grew up rough and plain, in a three-bedroom farmhouse, with four other kids. She was the oldest, and they all had to do what she said, and they got by. Her daddy was a drunk, her momma didn’t do nothing about it, because she couldn’t. But they got by, all of them. Momma wasn’t the only one who married money, and she raised my sister up right, you see her now, but she couldn’t do nothing about me, couldn’t even keep me from joining the Army. So Raven was gonna be her redemption project, and they took to each other like they’d always known each other, and Raven . . . Raven was her best. And I got sent back from Korea . . .” Uncle Bear tapped his left knee, “came home to Momma late one night after three months at Landstuhl . . . and this girl’s all grown, and I just looked at her, and I was broken, broken, because that’s what war does, and she heats up leftovers and sets down my plate and puts her hand on my shoulder and says, ‘Is that warm enough for you, Sir?’ And that was it. That was it.”

Uncle Bear smiled, looked off, and Hannah sensed that he was happy now, briefly, even though he’d lost Raven, because he’d known her at all.

“She’d smile and nod and say ‘yes, Ma’am’ and ‘no, Sir,’ and all the while you know she’s thinking something else.”

He looked at Hannah.

“Just like you.”

Hannah returned his gaze, staring at him evenly. There was no danger here. He was just speculating. He could prove nothing. And he wasn’t trying to accuse her anyway. He was just trying to understand.

“She got tired of it, I think,” Uncle Bear said, leaning back. “Or she was afraid. Yeah. She was afraid of what would happen if you went missing. She’d be tortured for information she didn’t have. Now I know she was right about that. So she just up and said ‘Fuck this, all of it, all of you, I’m not going to wait another day. Goodbye.’”

Hannah looked back at the windows, trying to square the Raven she knew – calm, rational, deliberate – with the angry, impulsive, frightened Raven Uncle Bear was describing.

“I thought she was happy,” he said, and he leaned forward, face in his hands. “I was gonna make her happier. I swear. That’s all I want, just to see her one more time, and tell her sorry, and send her on her way.”

He looked up, into Hannah’s eyes, passed his sleeve over his face.

“I’d like to have my car back, though.”

“I’m sure she’s taking care of it,” Hannah offered weakly.

“I was gonna teach her how to change the oil,” he said. “She asked me to. She was into that.”

Uncle Bear reached out his hand and Hannah stood and took it, helping him rise on his good knee and the post and joint that was his other.

“We were talking about sex, by the way,” he said, limping slightly on his way toward the elevator.

“What do you mean?”

“I told Momma I was going to ask you for some of your time,” he said. “That’s all. She doesn’t know what I found out, doesn’t need to hear me talking with you about Raven.”

“You mean . . .” Hannah said haltingly, “you told Gramma we were going to talk about, um, being together?”

“Yeah. Over Christmas?”

“I’d like that,” Hannah said honestly. “Just set it up with Laura. But we were down here a long time to just talk about that.”

“I’ll tell her you argued against it, out of respect for Raven.”

“Okay, but if she asks me about it, I’ll have to tell her the truth,” Hannah said.

“She won’t,” Uncle Bear said. “It took her a month to wrap her head around me and Raven. Some things she doesn’t want to know about.”

“Was she upset about you and Raven . . . being together?”

“For a couple of days, yeah, after we sat her down and told her what was going on. And then she heard me laugh . . . it had been two years . . . and she gave up a little control.”

He took a deep breath.

“Funny thing is, if me and Raven hadn’t been together, she would have freed that girl years ago, and adopted her.”

“I don’t get it,” Hannah confessed.

“Gramma was still trying to control me,” he explained with a cough that sounded like bitterness. “Through Raven. She had more power over the girl as a subject than as a daughter, and as long as Raven was with me, that

gave her power over me too. To get a job. To cut my hair. To keep me in line. It's just her nature."

The elevator door opened, but Uncle Bear took Hannah by the shoulder before she could enter, turned her toward him.

"Hey," he said.

"Yes, Sir?"

"I used to think you were spoiled."

"Yes," she agreed, "you said it to my face."

"Losing your leg hurts a little, until you pass out. Coming out of surgery in a combat tent hurts more. And physical therapy is a bitch. But everyone you deal with after you step on a mine wants to make the pain stop. I've never had anyone look me in the eye and . . . do what they did . . . to you."

Hannah nodded, with another wave of gratitude for the understanding she'd received from Uncle Bear, but she said nothing, just stepped into the elevator.

"One more thing," Uncle Bear said as they ascended to the kitchen.

"Huh?"

"I never read that diary," he said. "I never turned the first page. There were things in there Raven didn't want anyone to know, super-personal shit, and if she ever comes back, I want her to believe I respected that."

"Okay."

Just Allain, Laura and Ormek were present in the kitchen now. Gramma had gone upstairs to rest, Hannah was told, and Athena and Ramone were playing a game in the great room upstairs. Or at least that's what they said they were doing. No one had gone upstairs to check on them, as far as Hannah knew.

It was 1:45 and Hannah, mindful that the second oven was reserved for her from 2 to 3, turned immediately to the book Laura had set out, reviewing the recipe for what were listed as "Downhome Buttermilk Flaky Biscuits."

It was a long recipe, far more complicated than Hannah had expected, with a dozen ingredients and a half-dozen steps, including mixing, kneading, rolling out and stamping. Baking for 20 minutes at the end was the only step that seemed simple.

Hannah, sometimes given to creativity in the kitchen – a little extra sugar, a little more milk or butter, a little less salt – decided to follow this recipe to the letter.

For the next 45 minutes, Hannah worked through the recipe with the same single-minded intensity she brought to the study of any book, hunting down ingredients, mixing them, rolling out dough, oblivious to the comings and goings of anyone else.

Hannah pulled her biscuits out of the oven at 2:58, grabbed one before it had cooled properly, juggled it and almost dropped it, finally buttered it and found it good. More than good, because it tasted as it was meant to taste, and she had made it.

Follow the recipe. Follow the protocol. She would never be an artist in the kitchen, but she could obey directions as well as anyone else.

After all the commotion that preceded it, Thanksgiving dinner itself was anticlimactic for Hannah, eight people gathered around one end of the long, 20-person table in the formal dining room, spending two hours to devour a portion of the food that took all day to make.

Raven's name was never brought up, but the girl hovered over the room like a specter, her absence felt with every bite of the food she did not make, in every mention of the past, in every word spoken by Gramma and Uncle Bear, because their loss was obvious, and deep.

No one looked overtly at Raven's picture, huge at half of life-size, taken on Easter several years before, Raven in a white sun dress before a wall of azaleas. A similar picture had been taken last Easter of Hannah in pastel blue, the two images on either side of a gallery of smaller pictures of the family, individually and in groups, Allain's college graduation, Athena as a high school sophomore, all the Petrosyans, Gramma and Uncle Bear and Raven together, Uncle Bear when he was still in the Army. Everyone smiling, which made the pictures all the sadder today.

And then it was over, Hannah doing her part to clear the table, to pack up leftovers, to return the kitchen and dining room to their normal, uncelebratory states.

Things were bothering Hannah now.

She had started ovulating just before everyone sat down, and she had to excuse herself twice during dinner to wipe her vulva, but she'd still left an embarrassing, wet oval on her towel.

And there was something Uncle Bear had said about Raven that lingered in her mind, but Hannah couldn't quite put her finger on it.

And Hannah still didn't know if she'd get permission to see Mother Saturday, or to stay overnight with her, and she imagined Mother, at her own Thanksgiving table, wondering the same thing.

Things improved after Gramma and Uncle Bear gave their final hugs and departed, and Hannah and Allain joined Athena and Ramone for a spirited game of Monopoly, the four of them gathered around a gaming table in the great room, laughing and forgetting the rules and losing count of money until they'd all had enough of it and Allain poured everyone another round of tawny and they went to bed, Hannah working determinedly against Allain's body and penis to burn off her drive, wresting five orgasms – two for him, three for her – before she felt subdued enough for sleep.

I'm looking at a girl who's wearing nothing . . . and I see a soldier.

Chapter 30: Delilah Arrives

Friday morning, Hannah woke early, went to the bathroom, turned on the light and shut the door so she wouldn't disturb Allain, and dove into her textbooks. She could take her finals anytime, but she wanted to get everything done when students who went to classrooms would be finishing their semester, in early December. She had two weeks to wrap everything up.

She lost track of time as she sat on her pillow, all her senses shutting down except those required to study, until she heard the bathroom door open and looked up to see Allain smiling down on her.

"Good morning," she said brightly, gathering up her books and standing to kiss him.

"I knew I'd find you in here," he quipped.

She waited for him on the bed, and he looked at her a little sheepishly, after he put on his t-shirt and sweats, and retrieved her shackles from his dresser.

"Mom," he said simply.

Hannah, disappointed but not entirely surprised, accepted her restraints and followed Allain to the elevator, arriving in the kitchen to find Laura typing on her laptop and drinking coffee.

After the usual pleasantries and Hannah's pouring of coffee for herself and Allain, Laura looked up.

"Your biscuits were very good, Hannah."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

"You'll have to make them again."

"I would be glad to."

"Hannah."

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Delilah will be here at 2, to make you and Athena up for the Charter Party."

"Thank you," Hannah said.

"And I'll be asking her tonight if she can make it to your mother's Sunday morning, to get you ready for church."

"Oh," Hannah said, almost speechless. "Thank you, Ma'am! Thank you so much."

"We will need to make certain arrangements for you, tomorrow. But I'm sure you'll accept the compromise."

"Ma'am?" Hannah said.

What did that mean? What arrangements? But before she could pursue the matter, Ormek arrived, and conversation turned in earnest to the Charter Party, the annual holiday gathering of club members, a chance for everyone to kick off the holidays, show off their best clothes, and show off the humans they owned.

Athena, still glowing, arrived in the kitchen toward the end of breakfast, Ramone in tow and sleeved again.

When was she going to have her period? Hannah wondered. Would not being able to have sex with Ramone break her infatuation? Would PMS break her infatuation?

Hannah hoped she'd be back in Corpus Christi when the fever broke. She looked at Ramone, he stared back at her in mock panic as he had the night before, and she smiled.

After breakfast, Allain needed to run errands, and Laura and Ormek were going to the club for a pre-party luncheon for board members, so it was agreed that Hannah would go to her cage until Delilah showed up.

"Darcy will bring you lunch," Laura said.

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah agreed without protest, very much ready for some time alone with her books and journals.

“You’ll need to finish your shower by 1:30.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Do they track your cycle at the kennels?” Laura asked.

“No, Ma’am,” Hannah said. “Not like you did here.”

“Do you know where you are?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I believe I started ovulating yesterday.”

“Have Darcy check you.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Hannah turned to Allain, put her hand on his arm.

“Can you let Mother know I’m coming tomorrow,” she said excitedly, “and I’ll be spending the night?”

“Sure,” he agreed, and he turned to Laura. “Do we know when? And where?”

“We’ll have Hannah dropped off there at 5:30,” Laura said.

As soon as Hannah cleared the dishes, Athena volunteered to bring her to her cage. To Hannah’s surprise, she left Ramone at the table, where he was engaged in a spirited discussion with Ormek about Central Asian politics.

“Is this going to work?” Athena asked Hannah as soon as the elevator door had closed.

“Is what going to work?” Hannah asked, turning toward the girl and crossing her arms over her breasts.

“Me and Ramone.”

“I have no idea,” Hannah said, adding for emphasis, “No idea.”

“Are you jealous?” she asked. She wasn’t trying to be mean, Hannah didn’t think. Just curious.

The elevator door opened. Hannah stepped out, stopped, turned.

“Athena,” she said, “do you have any idea why jealousy is completely irrelevant?”

“I would be jealous,” Athena said.

“I like Ramone,” Hannah said. “A lot. But—”

“Hah!” Athena exclaimed.

“But I like a lot of boys. I love Allain. Okay?”

“You like Ramone more.”

“You need to be a slave for a few months,” Hannah said, striding to her cage.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Athena said, trotting behind.

“I have never been on a single date,” Hannah said. “Not really. I have never flirted. I have never—”

“What?” Athena asked, incredulous. “You’re in that kennel place, and I just know you—”

“No,” Hannah said. “Just no. You’re buying a boy. I’ve been bought. I have no frame of reference for what you’re doing.”

“Please don’t use physics terms on me.”

“What physics term?”

“Frame of, of—”

“Reference?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s not a physics term.”

“Just use normal words then.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, stepping into her cage, reorganizing her thoughts while Athena locked the door. What did the girl want? The truth? No one wants the truth when they’re infatuated. Post-infatuation truth is the least desirable and surest of all the truths in life.

“Okay,” Hannah said, again, “There’s a reason I got you and Ramone together.”

Athena knelt to remove Hannah’s chains, stood and eyed Hannah suspiciously through the bars.

“You mean, when you made him my first?”

“I didn’t make him your first. You did.”

“Okay,” Athena agreed. “So, how are we together? How do we seem together?”

Hannah silently chided herself. Why did she have to make this harder than it was? Athena wasn’t looking for a treatise on slavery and the free adolescent girl. She just wanted a little encouragement.

“You and Ramone are really cute together,” Hannah said, speaking honestly before she lied. “And yes, it’s very hard to admit, but yes, I am a little jealous of you and Ramone. You really have something with him, something I’m not sure I ever did. Not like that. I love watching it, but then I wish . . .”

Hannah let her voice trail off strategically, and she looked at the couch and the two chairs where, yesterday, a conversation at the other end of the emotional spectrum had taken place.

“Awww,” Athena sighed, spreading her arms, reaching through the bars for a hug that felt, to Hannah, unexpectedly sincere.

Athena stood back, smiled broadly, eyes wide and burning, returned to full infatuation mode.

“What are you going to wear tonight?”

“Allain and I have been talking about it,” Hannah said. “I think my blue van Minsk—”

“Ramone’s going in this new Aspen tux the Abercrombies bought for him,” Athena blurted, “but he’s never worn out before.”

She raised her hands to her mouth, shoved her finger tips between her teeth and bit.

“Oh my god,” she said, pulling her hands out of her mouth and waving them as if they were on fire. “Oh my god. Like dark blue-gray, with pinstripes. Tails. Forest green bowtie that goes great with his collar. Crease in the pants that could cut through butter.”

Hannah smiled, admitting to herself that she enjoyed the image.

“And Delilah’s doing his hair, after she sets us up,” Athena added. “So do not, I repeat, do not make a fool of yourself over him.”

“A fool—”

“You have a history with him,” Athena said. “Everyone probably knows it. So please don’t make it obvious. Because when you see him . . .”

Athena stuck her tongue out, panted.

“Just . . . just . . . be chill.”

Hannah watched Athena leave, heard the elevator bump, and reminded herself that the girl’s admonitions were meant not for Hannah, but for herself.

As soon as Athena was gone, Hannah turned to her books, three for her Austin classes, the rest for her treatises, and she lost herself in her studies until she heard the bump, the squeaky wheel of Darcy’s cart, and turned.

“Hi, Darcy,” Hannah said, rising.

“Hello, Hannah,” Darcy said, not warmly, not coldly, just saying the words. Her cart bore the usual cleaning supplies, as well as a glass of tea, silverware, a napkin, and a plate with a sandwich, stuffing and Athena’s cranberry sauce.

“Laura wants you to check me,” Hannah said, putting her hands into the brackets designed to hold her while her cage was opened and

cleaned.

Darcy secured Hannah's wrists, unlocked her cage door, set the plate on her desk.

"I haven't used the bed," Hannah said.

What Hannah did to her sheets before she was sent to the kennels – leaking semen and lubricant onto them on a regular basis – had been an ongoing point of contention between she and Darcy. But Darcy gave no indication she appreciated not having to wash and scrub the linens today.

Darcy pulled the pair of thermometers out of the cup on the second shelf of her cart and stepped behind Hannah, and Hannah bent, allowing Darcy to slide the first thermometer up her anus.

"I'm ovulating, and I'm really wet," Hannah said, "so you're going to need to hold the other one in me."

Darcy sighed, reached around to Hannah's front, pushed the thermometer up her vagina and held it in with a fingertip, breathing against Hannah's upper arm.

Hannah, who'd grown used to this near-daily procedure before she'd been kenneled, found it strange today, disconcerting, a moment of cold intimacy, Darcy neither friend nor doctor nor nurse, just someone whose role of keeping house included putting things up the slave girl's holes.

This was another violation, Hannah thought for the first time, both practical and symbolic, another way for everyone who knew this was done to remind themselves that Hannah might be a person, but she was also a valuable piece of household equipment, an object whose functions had to be regularly monitored.

Like a car, which has a gauge that always told you its temperature.
Or an oven.

Yes, an oven, Hannah thought. You set the temperature, you put things in cold, and they come out hot. Steaming. Wet. Organic. The essence of life.

Hannah would be staying with Mother Saturday night. She'd be alone, ovulating without Allain, without anyone. And then Sunday, the long drive back to Corpus Christi. She would need to take Allain Saturday before she left the Petrosyans. Or Sunday, before the drive, or after the drive. Or both. Or all.

Laura had mentioned making some kind of arrangement for Hannah's stay with Mother. She'd called it a compromise. How could it be a compromise if Hannah hadn't agreed to it? And what was it? Hannah imagined herself shackled. Or in the chains she wore in the car, unable to bring her hands to her mouth without drawing her feet up to her chair, meeting Roger and his family for the first time chained like a prisoner.

No. She would not accept this. She would send her regrets to Mother. They could meet at the club for dinner only, and Hannah would press for an overnight visit later, in which she maintained her dignity.

The thermometers beeped, Darcy removed them, read them and wrote the numbers on the little sheet that still hung on the wall beside Hannah's cage.

"What did they say?" Hannah inquired sharply. It was her right to know. It was her body.

"99.6 anal, 100.2 vaginal," Darcy said. "You're running hot today."

Darcy locked the cage, released Hannah's wrists.

"How is Corpus Christi?" she asked.

"I love it," Hannah replied. "I'm going to classes in January."

"I heard about that," Darcy said neutrally, pushing her cart off.

Hannah returned to her desk, sat and read while she ate a meal of Thanksgiving leftovers and looked forward to the seafood – lobster, baked and broiled fish, crab cakes, paella – that was the core of the Charter Party menu.

She tore herself away from her books at 1:15 for a quick shower, drying off and wrapping her hair in a turban before she returned to her desk and watched the clock.

Delilah, born a boy, sold by her father a few weeks after she told him she was a girl, was a slave, but wealthy enough to buy her freedom several times over. She chose to remain property of the company that managed her services because she liked the people and because her status brought shame to her father. She had been making Hannah stunningly beautiful since they'd met at the stacks in the days before the Petrosyans bought her.

And her existence, the presence of Delilah in the otherwise indifferent universe, was one of the things that gave Hannah hope.

The elevator bumped at 1:57, Hannah jumping when she heard Delilah's voice.

“No, Buttercup, you’re not going to be a bitch tonight,” Delilah declared.

“I don’t care what you call it,” Athena argued, her voice growing nearer. “Just make me up like you did last summer.”

The two girls appeared, Athena in a long t-shirt and turban like Hannah’s, Delilah in a flannel blouse and long prairie skirt.

“Babydoll, oh my god!” Delilah exclaimed, hugging Hannah through the bars, unable to wait until she’d been freed from her cage.

“Hello, Delilah,” Hannah said, accepting a round of kisses against her neck. “I’ve missed you.”

Athena stood back, keys in her hand, and scowled at Hannah.

“Who do you want to be tonight?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” Hannah inquired.

“For Delilah,” Athena explained. “I’m going to be hard bitch.”

“I’m not making you hard bitch,” Delilah said, pulling away from Hannah and leaning against the bars.

Hannah laughed over the distant memory. Last summer, when Delilah had fixed up Hannah and Athena for a night on the town with Athena’s girlfriends, Delilah had offered them a range of looks. International spy and CEO were two Hannah remembered, but in the end, Delilah had given Athena hard bitch and Hannah fuckyoubitch, which she meant as a statement on everything.

“My parents are paying you,” Athena said. “Hard bitch.”

“On my drive in,” Delilah said, steering an invisible car while with one hand while she used the other to shade her eyes, “I saw the loveliest little shop, right between Gina’s Gelato and Dollar Pond.”

“And?” Athena demanded.

“Do you know what it was called?”

“No.”

“Hair Palace.”

“Uh huh.”

“A sign out front said the second kid is half off, today only,” Delilah said, and she pulled up a thick wad of her hair and karate chopped at it with her other hand while she shrieked, “Mommy, Mommy, make the mean man stop cutting my hair!”

“And?” Athena asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Go there.”

The smile vanished from Delilah's face. No light in her eyes, no wave of the hands, no shoulder shake, just a deep, wilting contempt, for Athena, for anyone like Athena, for anyone who owned a slave, for the way things were, for everything.

Athena absorbed Delilah's ultimatum with wide eyes and a tight smile.

And then, instead of stomping off or throwing a tantrum with her parents, she recovered.

"Okay," she said. "What am I going to be then?"

"Daughter of privilege," Delilah said, extending her index finger, tapping Athena dramatically on the shoulder.

"Lame," Athena asserted.

"I'm doing truth today," Delilah said. "It's what you are. If you don't like the look, change your life."

Athena scowled, clearly struggling to maintain her balance under Delilah's abiding scorn. "What's Hannah, then?"

Delilah put her finger in her mouth, cupped her elbow in her hand and studied Hannah carefully.

"Oh my god," she said, "where have you been, Baby Doll?"

"Corpus Christi," Hannah replied.

"I know that," Delilah said. "I mean, where have you *been*?"

Hannah stared blankly, unsure of what Delilah meant, or suspected she knew and wasn't inclined to answer in front of Athena.

Hannah remained silent, willing Delilah to understand.

"Doctor," Delilah announced. "Out of network."

"Out of network doctor?" Athena said. "What the hell—"

Delilah raised her hand, turned and glared, silencing Athena instantly.

"To the elevator," she said, pointing and striding off.

Chapter 31: A Compromise

Athena shackled Hannah, unlocked her door, and the girls joined Delilah at the elevator, squeezing in for the trip to the second floor.

"How has lower Texas been treating you, Hannah?" Delilah asked.

"I'll be going to school there in January," Hannah said. "In the classroom."

“Of course,” Delilah agreed. “Will you kick every professor’s ass? For both of us?”

“I will,” Hannah promised.

The elevator opened and Hannah followed Delilah through the great room to Athena’s bedroom door.

Delilah reached for the doorknob, turned it, found it locked, turned to Athena wide-eyed.

“Did you lock Ramone in there?”

“Yeah.”

“Ramone!” Delilah shouted. “Oh my god, you big steaming mug of Peruvian java, let us in!”

“He’s from Brazil!” Athena pointed out drily.

“Ramone, Ramone, let down your golden hair!” Delilah shouted.

“He doesn’t know the combination,” Athena said, stepping up to punch in the code.

She threw wide the door, the three girls peering in to find Ramone standing in the middle of the room, shackled, facing them, nude but for the sleeve over his genitals.

“Delilah,” he said with smile and a bow.

“Ramone!” Delilah shouted, racing to him, embracing him, pressing against his sleeve, then holding him at arm’s length. “Every day I don’t see you, my heart breaks a little more.”

“As does mine,” Ramone said, and he winked at Hannah.

“I’m going to have fun with you this afternoon,” Delilah declared, leering.

“What are you going to make him?” Athena demanded.

“The Duke of Orange,” she said, standing back and holding up her hands to frame Ramone’s face. “No, Prince Philippe of Lisbon. No . . . oh my . . . oh my . . . King Francis the Second. Yes.”

Delilah raised her hand to Ramone’s face, caressed his cheek.

“You are not going to shave,” she said. “Just a little edging. I’ll handle that.”

Ramone nodded.

“If he’s king,” Athena said, “shouldn’t I be queen?”

Delilah whirled, staring at Athena as if noticing her for the first time.

“What?”

“Shouldn’t I be—”

“No.”

Athena shut her mouth.

“To the bathroom,” Delilah said. “Ramone, I’m going to need your help, so don’t you dare wander off.”

Hannah and Athena sat side-by-side at Athena’s mirror, Delilah giving each girl’s hair and face equal and loving attention while Ramone hovered, helping occasionally to hold a bundle of hair in place, fetch a hand mirror.

He’d seen Delilah’s work on the three Abercrombie girls often enough, Hannah knew, had received her attention himself more than once, and he seemed sincerely intrigued by the process, trying to parse the steps of Delilah’s artistry and, like Hannah, unable to.

“Hannah, I understand you’re getting a twofer this weekend,” Delilah said at one point as she meticulously snipped Hannah’s bangs.

“Sunday morning,” Hannah said. “Out where my mother lives.”

“Laura gave me the address,” Delilah said. “8:30?”

“Yes,” Hannah agreed.

“Who am I going to meet?”

“My mother,” Hannah replied. “Her boyfriend Roger, I guess. Maybe some other family. His sister—”

“Will they let me give them a touch?” Delilah asked.

“You mean, let you make them up?” Hannah inquired.

“Yes,” Delilah replied. “Find me a girl or two.”

“You know it’s a bunch of trailer homes, right?” Athena interrupted.

“Trailer homes?” Delilah said, staring at Athena through the mirror with a face of arched curiosity.

“You know, little houses on—”

“I know what they are,” Delilah said. “I spend a third of my time in them. Some of the best people in the world live in . . . trailer homes.”

“Okay.”

Delilah sniffed and returned to pinning Hannah’s hair.

“What are you going to make her for church?” Athena asked.

“Let’s see,” Delilah said, pausing to consider. “Book of Daniel . . . Paul’s Second Epistle to the Thessalonians . . .”

“What?” Athena cried. “Those aren’t even—”

“... Revelations,” Delilah continued.

“Revelations!” Athena shouted, clapping. “Revelations!”

“Revelations it is,” Delilah agreed.

By 4, both girls had been transformed, gowns on, eyeliner and blush and lipstick and something around their noses and chins that made their faces look a little drawn, a little hollow. Hair pinned up and sprayed, a strand here and there loose, golden ropes twisting down on either side of Hannah’s face. Athena looked five years older, Hannah 10.

It had been almost half a year since Hannah’s last session with Delilah, and when the work was done today, she drew in her breath and stared, the girl in the mirror a beautiful stranger. A beautiful, out of network doctor.

A doctor.

“And now, the coup de etat,” Delilah announced. “The grand finale, the el supremo. Ramone!”

The girls rose and Ramone took one of the chairs, smiling at Hannah through the mirror, looking a little embarrassed, she thought.

Athena left the bathroom, returned with a tuxedo in clear plastic.

“He’s wearing this,” she said.

“Oh,” Delilah moaned. “Are those tails?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, King Francis, they will crown you tonight.”

“They don’t crown people there,” Athena said. “It’s just a party at our club.”

“Just once, Athena,” Delilah said dourly, turning, with scissors in one hand and a spray bottle in the other, “believe you are what you deserve to be.”

“Whatever,” Athena agreed, returning the tuxedo to its hook on her door.

Considering all the drama that attended it, Delilah’s efforts on Ramone took a surprisingly short time. Ramone, trimmed lightly, shaved strategically, made up discreetly, unsleeved and tuxedoed was formally presented to Hannah and Athena a little before 5.

Hannah, in a royal blue van Minsk gown, stood back and admired. Ramone was always beautiful to her, so this was just a variation on a theme. Athena, in forest green, appeared more taken, and she walked up and took

his hand, as if they were to be wed, smiled up at him and gave him a small, cautious hug before stepping back, wary of disturbing Delilah's work.

"Snap a picture of me and Ramone," Delilah demanded, and she wrapped her arm around Ramone's waist, Ramone putting his hand on Delilah's shoulder, the two smiling, Athena's bedroom wall the backdrop.

"Send it to me now," Delilah said, giving Athena her phone number.

They continued to take pictures – Hannah and Athena, each girl with Delilah, Athena and Ramone, all four of them with the phone on a timer – until Laura rapped on Athena's door.

"Athena, is everyone ready in there?"

"Yes, Ma'am!" Athena replied, smiling, and Hannah knew Athena had returned to her present world, dazed, happy and infatuated.

She threw open the door, Laura and Allain both there, both dressed for a formal event, Allain breathtakingly stately in a pure black tux and tails, maroon cravat, shoes so polished they reflected every source of light.

Hannah, back in her shackles, stepped into the hall for Allain's inspection.

His eyes went wide as he took her in, Delilah's expertise an order of magnitude more impressive than what Hannah could do at the kennels, or in Allain's apartment.

He reached out his hand, she put hers in it, and he raised her hand to his mouth and kissed it, smiling, because they both knew Allain was too practical to affect the higher airs seriously.

believe you are what you deserve to be

"Delilah," said Laura. "I never expect you to do much with two girls who are already so beautiful, and you always surprise me."

"I took me hours," Delilah admitted.

"And Ramone," Laura added.

"He's not Ramone tonight," Athena said. "He's um, King something."

"King Francis the Second," Delilah announced.

"King Francis," Laura agreed. "Dad's waiting for us in the Brighton. Athena, Ramone, think you can squeeze into the back?"

"Yeah," Athena said.

Of course she agreed, Hannah thought. Who wouldn't want to sit with Ramone in the darkened last seat of the family's cavernous SUV?

“See you Sunday,” Delilah whispered to Hannah as she prepared to depart. Delilah’s eyes were peering at her intensely, learning, absorbing, gathering.

Knowing.

Hannah and Ramone were chained for the drive only after they were both seated next to their partners. On the ride, Laura and Ormek briefed the four passengers on what to expect, who would be there, who would want to talk to whom. Allain’s progress through medical school was of regular interest to family friends, particularly Ormek’s colleagues and associates, but Athena’s college plans were as well. And Hannah and Ramone should both expect attention, Laura warned, Hannah for her school plans, Ramone for the transition he might be about to make; and both, Hannah knew, because they were used for sex by their owners.

Hannah, who had grown accustomed in the last year and a half to the strange and unexpected, still felt a jangle of nerves as the elevator climbed to the 30th floor of one of Dallas’ tallest skyscrapers, home of one of its most exclusive social clubs.

As soon as the doors opened, however, Hannah’s fears eased, as they did often when she moved from anticipation to reality. Blaring live jazz, balloons, and the voices of hundreds of people, slave and free, pummeled Hannah’s senses and drove out her fears as the family stepped from the elevator hall to the club’s foyer, club staff waiting to check them in.

From there, the evening became a blur of wine, food, formal dancing with Allain, and so many introductions Hannah’s head was swimming with new or dimly-remembered names and faces.

“This is Hannah,” was said over and over, by Allain, by Laura and Ormek, followed by some variation of “she’s been with us since two summers ago” and “she’s studying at Austin, and transferring to Corpus Christi in January.”

Of course.

Any family could own a sex slave. A few owned girls that looked like Hannah. Fewer still owned girls who went to college. Hannah, who two years ago lived hungry, destitute and unschooled with her mother in a ground-floor efficiency, was here to prove that the Petrosyans were of that highest caste, wealth beyond wealth, grace beyond grace.

Irony beyond irony.

In the relative quiet of the club toilet, Hannah's mind continued to work. Why would Laura have agreed to allow Hannah an overnight with Mother? She'd mentioned making some kind of arrangement, and that might partially explain Laura's permission. But unless the arrangement included cages, chains, and Allain sleeping beside her, Hannah was still at risk for escape.

No she wasn't.

No.

She wasn't.

Hannah was a student. Because of the Petrosyans. And the longing to study and learn and, someday, to hold a degree, lay at the core of her essence. Laura understood this, Hannah realized.

Were Hannah to flee, to find someone to cut off her collar, to have the chip in her back sliced out, she would be free, but she would no longer be able to study. No school would accept her without her full name and social security number, and her social security number was forever bound to her federal subject ID number.

She would have to go to another country, and start over, using her limited skills to get by – academic prowess, a sharp wit, sexual expertise – only one of which could generate any revenue.

And perhaps, after being spread and pawed by strangers for years down alleys and behind walls, she'd have the money to go to school there, and she'd study and hide, and pray that she'd never be found out and jailed and extradited back to Laura Petrosyan for a final reckoning.

No, if Hannah wished to study more than she wished to be free, if she were at her core a student, things were best as they were.

But the idea persisted in Hannah's mind. Could one even create a foreign identity? Were she to find her way to the shores of a land where she might be able to learn the language and fit in – Sweden came to mind, The Netherlands, Russia – could she create a new persona?

Could she, without leaving Texas, without leaving the kennels, create a girl her age from nothing?

She herself had come from nothing, of course. She knew what it felt like.

Could she not only make such a girl – a free, exceptionally bright girl from a small village in an obscure nation filled with blonde girls;

Finland, for example – but also get her accepted into the University of Texas at Corpus Christi?

And might such a girl, whose first name would be Spartacine, and whose last name was something Hannah would have to discreetly look up from a list of common Finnish surnames, be believable as the author of a very clever scholarship treatise, written in English, entitled “Reverse Somatic Hypermutation as a Mitigation Strategy for Acute Allergic Rhinitis”?

believe you are what you deserve to be

Hannah tucked the idea away, flushed, and returned to the Petrosyan’s table, where champagne had just been poured, and she raised her glass and clinked it to Ormek’s shouted toast, “May the holidays fulfil all our hopes, and may the new year satisfy our wildest dreams!”

Indeed.

Still a little tipsy when she returned home, but still ovulating, still burning, she and Allain went quickly to his bedroom to take each other as they always did, Hannah on top first, Allain on top next, mouths and sex organs congregating, her lubricant flowing like a slow, hot river, his semen shooting out across it, the two lovers grunting desperately into each other’s ears, master and slave serving equally now in an effort that was only pleasure.

The next morning broke cool and bright, Hannah rising, turning to her books groggily, waiting for Allain to wake.

They were the first downstairs, so Hannah started the coffee while Allain foraged for food – more leftovers, fruit Darcy had brought over, bacon.

Laura showed up soon after, joining them with a cheerful “good morning” before she turned to Hannah.

“You’ll be picked up at 5 today,” she said. “We’ve hired a service.”

“Yes, Ma’am, thank you,” Hannah said, knowing that this is how conversations on difficult matters often began with Laura, the mundane first.

“I mentioned an arrangement we’d want to make,” Laura continued. “Do you remember that?”

“I do.”

“To protect you, to keep you safe.”

“Yes, Ma’am?” Hannah said, inflecting to make a question. She was not simply going to agree to this without knowing what it was.

“An additional undergarment,” Laura said.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“You’ll wear it under everything else,” she said. “Around your middle.”

Hannah listened.

“It won’t be visible, under your clothing, but it will keep your . . . vagina covered.”

“Oh,” Hannah said.

“It won’t interfere with showering or . . . normal functions,” Laura continued. “The Gauleys use it for their girl, Sienna, when she’s ovulating and out of the house, and they’re happy with it. She’s about your size. She was there last night.”

“Yes, Ma’am, I remember her.”

“They’ve loaned it to us.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said, disappointed but not inclined to say no. It might be uncomfortable, but it wouldn’t be humiliating. No one would see it, unless she chose to show it.

This was why Darcy had taken Hannah’s temperature yesterday, Hannah realized, to confirm that Hannah was ovulating, fertile, hot. Were she on her period, or merely infertile, this might not be necessary.

“And it does include a beacon,” Laura said.

“A beacon?”

“If it falls off, or it ends up where it shouldn’t be, it will send a notification, so . . . you can be kept safe.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said. “I wore something like that when we went to Guadalupe.”

Hannah looked at Allain, and he smiled at her. Normally, he looked away and grew awkward when Laura dictated unpleasant terms, but he seemed fine with this. He was losing his girl for the night. This was the compromise.

“I’d like to see what I’ll be wearing,” Hannah said.

“Would you like me to get it now?”

“Please,” Hannah replied.

Laura left to go upstairs, returning with Ormek 15 minutes later, a bag in her hand she set on the credenza while she made coffee for her

husband.

Athena and Ramone descended just as Ormek was taking his seat, Ramone's penis bare, soft and, presumably, thoroughly exercised.

Laura turned to the bag, pulled out what looked to Hannah like a series of metal bands.

"Hannah," she said, waving the girl over.

Hannah rose, stood before Laura.

Athena and Ramone returned from the kitchen and sat, Ramone sipping coffee and staring off, Athena watching the proceedings with the same relish she devoted to all matters involving Hannah's restraint and management.

"I watched Mrs. Gauley put it on Sienna, and she let me practice," Laura said. "Turn around, legs wide. It's been washed."

Hannah turned, spread her legs and put her hands on her hips, staring at the ceiling. In hindsight, she wished she had proposed another time to try on the belt.

Laura wrapped Hannah's waist with a thin metal band, the edges curved outward so they wouldn't cut into her flesh, the rest of the device dangling from two rings set in the front.

"Now, bend over," Laura said, "and open your thighs."

Hannah obeyed and Laura grabbed the metal band that swung against Hannah's mound and vulva, pulled it between Hannah's legs.

The narrow bands ran from the front of the device and met at her vaginal opening, rendering it inaccessible. Hannah heard a pair of clicks behind her, the bands locked to the back of the belt at either side of her rear. Going to the toilet would be a little more difficult, she knew, but as long as she wiped around it carefully, and it came off before or immediately after church, she'd make do.

"Okay, stand up."

Hannah straightened.

"How does it feel?"

"It's fine," Hannah said honestly. She was used to sleeping in the nude, but she could probably get comfortable with this in bed.

"Can you reach your clitoris, if you need to masturbate?" Laura asked.

Hannah dropped her hand to her middle, quickly confirmed she could reach her little pink knob.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Would you like me to leave it on?” Laura asked.

“No, Ma’am.”

Chapter 32: A Trip to Mother’s

Hannah and Allain met some of his Dallas friends for lunch, Beth among them, as well as Fernando and two of Allain’s high school associates, Bert and Malek.

As the only two girls there, Hannah and Beth sat next to each other and talked privately, the boys engrossed in a college football game that meant nothing to Hannah but that seemed to be very important to the males, as well as God and Jesus, who were often invoked.

“You remember how you said I could check you out on any Wednesday night?” Beth said quietly.

“Yeah,” Hannah said. “I haven’t seen you.”

“I showed up,” she said. “A couple of weeks ago.”

“Did you end up asking for someone else?”

“No,” Beth said, scowling until she realized Hannah was joking. “No, I left.”

“Why?”

“There’s a little sign out sheet you fill in,” Beth said. “Name, address, time. A place for Allain’s name. Where I was taking you.”

Beth paused, looked at Hannah.

“And purpose.”

“What did you put for purpose?”

“I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“I couldn’t.”

“You couldn’t check me out?”

“No, I couldn’t put down purpose.”

“There wasn’t room for it?”

“No,” Beth said, biting her lip, clearly flustered. “I couldn’t write down why I was signing you out . . . because I was embarrassed to.”

“Oh, oh,” Hannah said, understanding that Beth had given up in the face not of a technical barrier, but an emotional one. “It’s not like you had to write down lesbian sex.”

“Shhhhh,” Beth hissed, grabbing Hannah’s hand and looking in terror at the boys, all fortunately focused on the TV for reasons Hannah didn’t understand, because the players on the field had formed two opposing lines and were just staring at each other.

“Shhhhh,” Beth said again, blushing, her hand so tight around Hannah’s it hurt.

“Okay, okay,” Hannah said, pulling her hand away and holding both up. “Sorry, I . . . forget.”

“Forget what?”

Hannah chose her next words carefully.

“You know what my life is like,” Hannah said. “No . . . privacy. And I forget how it is for other people.”

Beth nodded. “That’s really hard for me.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, “Just write recreation.”

“Like they won’t know what that means,” Beth scowled.

“Did you know any of the people working the sign out desk?”

“Not that night. But I don’t know the name of everyone who works there. What if someone else sees it who knows me? It’s a paper record. It’s probably kept forever.”

“You could lie,” Hannah said. “Put down something like ‘Need help changing a light bulb’.”

Beth laughed. “But what about the next time?”

“There’s going to be a next time?”

“Next semester is going to be a lot easier, or so I’m told. Maybe once or twice a month?”

“I’d like that,” Hannah said. “I only get out on weekends now.”

“So you want this?” Beth asked, doubt clouding her face as the embarrassment waned.

“Yes,” Hannah said, trying not to be annoyed by Beth’s dithering.

“Oh, and I know what you can write,” Hannah said, her mind turning to the spring semester with a wave of optimism. “Put down tutoring. Just that. And it can be true, too. I’m going to need help next semester.”

“I can do that.”

While the boys watched the game, Hannah and Beth talked, about school and Hannah’s mother and life in Corpus Christi, neglecting the two most important matters, that Hannah was a slave and Beth loved her and lusted after her and didn’t quite know what to do with her.

The game ended a little after 2, Hannah hugged Beth goodbye, shook the other's boys' hands, and got into the car with Allain, watching him put her chains on.

"Can we go to Fripp's?" she said as soon as he'd started his car.

"What do you need?"

"Nothing yet," Hannah said. "But they carry Nature's Army bookbags, and I really, really, really want one for Christmas."

"Which one?"

"I'm going to show you. It'll take a second."

Fripp's was on the way home. Allain pulled up, Hannah waved him off when he tried to remove her chains, and she hopped into the store bound, found the Nature's Army winter collection, and ran her hand along the row of bookbags, cotton in butter or light tan with dark leather tabs and brass fittings, trim in pink or aquamarine or mauve.

"Any one of these," Hannah said, looking at Allain with urgent, shiny eyes. "Surprise me."

Back home, at Hannah's insistence, she and Allain went straight to his bedroom for an hour of fierce relief, Hannah cumming twice, Allain once.

"I figured out why your mom says I can see Mother," Hannah whispered to Allain in the sighing afterglow of their lovemaking.

Allain was flat on his back, staring at the ceiling, Hannah propped up on her elbow beside him with her hand on his belly.

"Tell me," he said.

"Because of school," Hannah said. "She knows I want to go to school, and I'm not going to screw it up by running off."

Allain laughed, looked up at Hannah incredulously.

"You're probably right," he said. "Mom and Dad don't seem to mind spending the money."

"It's cheaper for slaves," Hannah said bluntly.

"Yeah," Allain agreed laconically.

"It is," Hannah insisted. "And if I get that scholarship . . ."

"Yeah," Allain agreed again, even less enthusiastically.

This is a way that Allain didn't know her as well as he should, she thought. He was a boy who saw a pretty girl who loved him with all her heart and body. What more could she be? Yes, she was quick-witted, sharp-tongued at times, but her driving, desperate ambition was invisible to him.

Probably better that way. He didn't need to know everything.

"Thanks for letting me go to Mother's," Hannah said, running her hand down to the top of his pubic hair, still damp with the fluids of coupling.

"It was Mom's decision," Allain said.

"It was yours too," she said.

"Please be careful," he said, turning to look into her eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"They have guns out there," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm probably not supposed to tell you this," Allain said, "so you didn't hear it from me. But they've shot down three drones so far."

"What?" Hannah said. "What?"

"You know, those drones that the service sends to check on your mom? They—"

"Someone's shooting them?" Hannah said, almost shouting.

Allain grimaced and touched her hand in a gesture that she understood to mean "lower the volume."

"Who's shooting them?" she asked, doing her best to control her voice.

"Someone where your mother lives," Allain said.

"Okay," Hannah said. "So you're saying that the service . . . the service that checks on Mother . . . they send drones out . . . and someone shoots them?"

"Yes."

"And destroys them?"

"Three so far. Sent to drone heaven. Or hell."

"Who? Mother?"

"I doubt it's her," Allain said. "Whoever's doing it has firearm experience. Probably ex-military."

"Has anyone called the police?" she asked, almost shouting again.

"No," Allain said with another volume gesture. "Drones are cheap. And it's probably legal."

"Sorry," Hannah said. "I guess."

Laura knocked on Allain's door at 4:25.

"Allain? Hannah?"

"Be right there, Mom," Allain said.

Hannah went to the toilet to wipe, stepped out to watch Allain scramble into shirt and sweatpants and open the door to Laura, who was holding Hannah's belt in one hand, one of Hannah's church dresses in the other, white with a short blue cape and a broad blue hemline that fell modestly to just below the knee, but with tight fabric at the bust, because the theology of the Petrosyans did not preclude their informing fellow believers that they owned a girl with C cup breasts, firm and upright.

It was draped in plastic.

"We'd like you to put this on for church tomorrow, Hannah," Laura said. "The service will be here in half an hour, so you'll want to start packing."

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said, standing, waiting half a step for someone to shackle her. When no one did, she stepped to Allain's closet for her suitcase, rolled it out and set it on Allain's bed.

"May I get into my room?" Hannah asked. "There are some clothes in there I'll need."

Laura went down the hall to Hannah's bedroom, unlocked it and smiled at the girl.

Still no shackles.

Hannah walked in and looked with brief, sad longing at the space that, now and then for a year, had been hers, decorated her way, with a bed she sometimes entertained in, a window she could look out, a laptop on the desk she used for classes at Austin.

The laptop was still there, open the way she'd left it the last time she'd studied here, the power cord lying on the floor, unconnected, the laptop surely long ago emptied of its charge, now dormant, dead, like a corpse, a deceased friend.

Hannah went to her dresser, grabbed panties, socks, a bra, threw them on her bed, pulled open drawers until she found a pair of older but still flattering blue jeans, went to the closet for a modest red plaid flannel shirt, grabbed a wide leather belt and picked up a pair of brown leather boots that she loved and decided must come with her back to Corpus Christi.

"Let's secure you now," Laura said, holding out the belt Hannah would wear.

Hannah said nothing, just turned, wondering if she was leaking Allain's semen, if Laura would know, if she would care. The Petrosyans had bought Hannah primarily to serve as the recipient of their son's lust and

passion and seed, and thereby to ease his passage through medical school. That use was acknowledged, documented, made explicit with the engraved words “Female, Recreational” on the tag hanging from her collar, and in the paperwork filed with the State of Texas. But the end result, Hannah imagined, the oozing of a young man’s semen from between the vaginal lips of a young lady, would be viewed with embarrassment, disgust, perhaps even shame, by that young man’s mother.

Why?

Hannah looked down, watched the belt wrap around her waist, Laura securing it tighter than she had this morning, and Hannah bent and opened her legs and felt the hand between them, the quick grasping of metal bands, the passing of the device between her thighs, the fastening and locking of it in place, the little barrier arriving at her chamber door, to protect her, to deny her.

Hannah straightened, waited. Laura was tapping something at the back of the belt, little beeping sounds emanating from it.

“I’m setting your beacon,” Laura said. “You’ll hear it chime now and then, when it finds a base, or has to switch bases, and that’s normal.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

From somewhere at the small of her back, Hannah heard a repetitive pair of beeps, loud and soft, loud and soft, like a heartbeat, and then a single soft chime, and then silence, and she knew she’d been found.

“If you hear a high-pitched whine,” Laura said, “there’s a problem. Stay right where you are and someone will come check on you.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And if it slips off somehow,” Laura continued, “they’ll know.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Hannah.”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“Your mother lives a little beyond the range of the towers.”

“Yes.”

“So something might make a pass now and then while you’re there, through the air.”

“Oh, like a drone?”

“Yes,” Laura affirmed. “And you might know . . . that we have a service that sometimes makes sure about your mother, the same way. That she’s well, and safe.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Very non-intrusive. Just now and then, overhead.”

“Yes.”

“But they seem to . . . excite . . . your mother’s people.”

“Oh, really?” Hannah asked, pretending this was the first time she’d heard such a thing.

“If you could say anything to . . . discourage that . . .”

“If I get the opportunity,” Hannah promised.

She stepped to the bed, grabbed a pair of panties and pulled them on, pulled on a bra, wrapped herself in her flannel shirt, buttoned it, stepped into her jeans, put on her belt, pulled up socks and her boots.

With everything else on, she could barely feel what Laura had wrapped around her. She would ignore it, she decided, pretend it wasn’t there, explain it only if someone asked why her rear kept chiming.

She grabbed a black ribbon from her dresser, tied her hair into a ponytail, stacked the rest of what she was bringing to Mother’s, walked with Laura back to Allain’s bedroom and set everything in her suitcase, folding and placing her dress on top, zipping it up and turning to Allain.

“See you at church,” she said and, while his mother watched, she presented him with a chaste, close-mouthed kiss, as if that’s the way they always kissed, Hannah’s platonic affections all Allain needed or wanted.

Still no shackles as Laura escorted Hannah to the elevator, down to the kitchen, and from there through the front door and to the sidewalk to wait in the bright sun and the warming air for Hannah’s ride.

“I understand you’re writing a scholarship paper,” Laura said.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said. “I do that when I’m not working on my Austin courses.”

“But in biology, not physics.”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “The requirements worked better, for my . . . situation.”

“Very good. I’m sure you’ll benefit from the exercise.”

“I hope so,” Hannah agreed, although “exercise” wasn’t the word she would have used.

A white, windowless van rounded the corner. Hannah watched it approach, felt an unexpected chill, her typical, involuntary response to unfamiliar conveyances.

It stopped at the curb and a man stepped out.

“Mrs. Pe . . . Pe . . . troshun?” he stammered, looking at the sheet in his hand.

“I’m Laura Petrosyan, yes,” she said.

“And you’re, uh, Hannah?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He unlocked and opened the side door and slid it back, exposing what looked to Hannah like a miniature prison, four small cells enclosed with chain link, each with a narrow bench in the back and chains set into the floor.

One of the cells was occupied by a nude male, ankles secured by short chains, longer chains running from the floor to his hands, clasped together in his lap. His penis had been sleeved, Hannah noted.

“Naked or clothed?” he asked.

“Clothed is fine,” Laura said.

“Has she been checked for contraband?”

“She has,” Laura lied.

“Can you pull up your shirt in back for me?”

Hannah saw the phone in his hand, pulled up her shirt and waited while he slid his hand along her back, the warm phone stopping at her chip, beeping when it confirmed who she was.

The man pocketed his phone, took Hannah’s suitcase first, set it on a shelf beyond the cages.

“Step in, Miss,” he said, pulling a cage door open.

Hannah turned to Laura, tucking in her shirt. “Thank you,” she said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Laura kissed Hannah on the cheek, and Hannah climbed up and entered the open cage, dropping to the bench.

“You’ll need to take off your boots,” he said, “and socks if you’re wearing them. But keep everything else on.”

Hannah complied, stuffed her socks into her boots and set them beside her on the bench, as if they were a person, and winced as she put her feet on the cold floor.

The man cuffed each ankle and raised the second pair of chains. Hannah offered her wrists and he cuffed them as well, more loosely than they did in the kennels.

He closed and locked the cage door, stepped outside and closed and locked the van door.

Hannah heard a few indistinguishable words, the man's voice first, then Laura's, and then a door closing and the hum of the engine.

"Where are you going?" asked the boy, staring at her.

"My mother's. What about you?"

"Factory life!" he said with an air of feigned excitement.

"What kind of factory?"

"Don't know," he said. "No one's told me."

The boy was short, squat, muscular, probably in his mid-20s, with a face that seemed slightly animalish to Hannah. Like a bull, perhaps. Bulging eyes, broad nose, receding jaw.

"Have you ever been?" he asked.

The van moved forward, stopped, turned, proceeded.

"To a factory?"

"Yeah."

"No," Hannah replied. "Have you?"

"This'll be my third."

"What have you made so far?"

"Shoes," he said. "Or just the sole part. And dogs and cats."

"Huh?" Hannah asked. Her beacon sounded, chimed.

"Stuffed," he said. "I did their faces. Detail work, and I was good at it."

"What did you—"

"You recreational?" he interrupted.

"Yes."

"Do you like it?" he asked, leaning forward.

"Yes," she said. "Do you like what you do?"

"No, usually."

"Usually?" Hannah asked.

"The work is boring," he said. "But do it right, and you get stuff."

Hannah looked at his face. He smiled back at her, a little lecherously, it seemed.

He wanted to talk.

She didn't, but she imagined where he was going, and felt sorry for him. She had been taken to her share of bad places, but today, she was going to a good place, and he wasn't.

"What kind of stuff do you get?" Hannah asked.

"Girls," came the simple and not surprising reply.

“Nice girls?” Hannah inquired.

“Yes.”

“Are you nice to them?”

He paused for a moment, pondering the question.

“You have to be,” he said at last, adding quickly, “but I want to be.”

“What if someone’s gay?”

He looked at her in surprise, not the first time her queries had prompted a startled look. Hannah didn’t see how knowing about factory life would benefit her, but if he wanted to talk, she was going to steer the conversation to what interested her. Homosexuality – the non-conformity it represented, the ways it expressed itself, the ways people tried to make it go away – were always of interest to her, more so recently.

“You can have boys just about anytime you want,” he said.

“While you’re working?” Hannah asked, sliding on her bench as her beacon sounded again.

The boy laughed. “Okay, I believe you, you have never been in a factory.”

“Yeah.”

“After your shift,” he said, and tilted his head as if there were someone next to him. “Next cage over.”

“Through the bars, then?”

“Yeah,” he said. “If the guy there is cool, and you’re not on restriction.”

He looked down at his sleeved penis.

“You do that?” she asked.

“Sometimes.”

“Are you bi?”

“Nothing bi about it,” he said, a little defensively. “Just something to do.”

“Do they ever put you next to a girl?”

“No,” he laughed. “That would be . . . total chaos.”

How often do you get girls?

“Few times a week,” he said. “They come to me, I go to them, boss has to approve.”

Hannah’s beacon chimed.

“What’s that sound?”

“I’m wearing something,” Hannah said. “So people know where I am.”

“Where is it?”

“Right over my rear.”

“You should consider it.”

“Consider what?”

“Factory work.”

“That’s not really up to me,” she said.

“You’d fit in,” he assured her.

“Would I make things?” Hannah asked. “Or just . . . be with people?”

“All the girls work.”

“Could I make food? Does anyone do that?”

“I guess. Some places have kitchens.”

“I made really good biscuits a few days ago.”

“That’s great.”

For a time, they were silent, the van speeding up, slowing, stopping, turning. Hannah looked at her boots, beautiful brown leather, just starting to wear a crease a bit, the way she liked them.

The van turned, swung back and forth, wobbled down a new road.

“Fuck, where does your mother live?” he asked.

“In the country somewhere,” she said. “I’ve never been there before.”

“Is she poor?”

Hannah looked at him. The question stung, but he didn’t look like he was trying to be mean.

“She isn’t really,” Hannah said. “But she lives with some people who . . . well, I don’t know.”

The van stopped, the engine turned off, and Hannah’s heart started thumping in her chest.

Chapter 33: ‘To Family’

The door beside her slid wide, and she squinted out onto a gray square of asphalt, patched black in two places, beyond that dirt with grass and weeds poking out intermittently, and further on a dark green-gray forest of pine.

The man worked quickly, opening her cage, opening her cuffs, and he set her suitcase onto the asphalt while she slipped on her boots.

She stood, looked up, found Mother and five other adults she didn't recognize smiling up at her, lined up as if posing for a picture. There was a smell here, gas or oil, and something cooking, or finished cooking, thick and acrid and warmly compelling.

She stepped down, threw her arms wide, hugged Mother, turned for introductions when she felt a tap on her shoulder, from behind.

"Miss, can you untuck your shirt in back?"

Hannah obeyed, treating the interruption like a wrinkle in time that only she noticed, Mother and the other adults frozen, cooperatively, smiles unchanged on their faces.

The phone beeped, the man withdrew his hand, Hannah tucked in her shirt and returned to the normal passage of time.

"This is Roger," Mother said, and a man stepped forward to offer his hand, build slightly shorter than Mother's, with thick black hair, a thick mustache, kind, shy eyes that looked at Hannah and quickly looked down. The eyes of a savior, to Hannah. Simple, perhaps, but the man who had rescued Mother, receiving in exchange Mother's time, her affection, her body.

Mother's relationship isn't necessarily a transaction, Hannah reminded herself. Free relationships often aren't.

Next, being introduced as if accordance with an agreed-upon hierarchy, came Roger's sister Trina, Trina's husband Skaggs, Trina's sister Breck, and Breck's 20-something daughter Nala. They were all consistently shortish, Skaggs pale and gaunt, white-haired and blue-eyed, the women big-hipped and soft around the middle, with bleached hair feathered back or tied with eye-goggling tightness.

Hannah got the sense that the females were in charge here, in actuality if not in word.

"Bye," spoke a male voice behind Hannah. She turned to catch the eyes of the boy in the cage before the door slid shut.

"Bye, good luck at your new factory!" Hannah shouted, hoping he'd heard her.

"He was nekkid," Breck observed.

"Do you know him, Miss Hannah?" Nala inquired.

Miss Hannah?

“I just met him,” Hannah said. “We talked a little.”

“Did you get his number?” Breck asked.

“I didn’t have anything to write with,” Hannah admitted.

Hannah studied the woman. Why would Hannah want his phone number? No, Breck was asking for herself. Was a naked boy chained in a cage considered eligible here? Because of how he looked? Because he was naked?

“Uh,” said Nala, issuing a sort of soft grunt with obvious sexual overtones.

The van backed up, beeping, moved forward and sped away, and Hannah turned to regard the other half of the estate where she’d be spending the night.

Before her, to the right, loomed a great old barn, red except where the wood had been replaced with unpainted boards, or infected with what Hannah assumed was some sort of blackening wood-mange.

Beside the barn, the land held four mobile homes, placed in roughly a line among sparsely-grassed fields, a spot of yellow or white where wildflowers had clung to vibrancy through an autumn of alternating moods.

Scattered throughout, Hannah counted 10 vehicles of varying purpose and viability, two cars on cinder blocks or tree stumps, several operational pickup trucks, one of which Hannah recognized as the blue truck Mother drove to Corpus Christi, as well as an old SUV, an upside-down motorcycle, an upright motorcycle on a trailer with a flat tire, and a golf cart with a large, tattered deck umbrella where the roof used to be.

Not far from one of the homes, a girl no more than 10 was doing cartwheels while a second child sat, cross-legged and hunched over, studying something in the dirt.

And beside the SUV sat a man in a wheelchair, baseball cap pulled low, blanket across his lap, green flannel hunting jacket two sizes too big for his frame, new hiking boots, and a rifle across his lap.

He had been placed facing away from everyone, and he rested unmoving, as if dead, acknowledging nothing.

Roger picked up Hannah’s suitcase, put it atop his head, balancing it with occasional touches, and Mother took Hannah’s hand, leading her toward the man in the wheelchair.

But before they could reach the seated man, the girl doing cartwheels fell to the ground, looked at Hannah.

“The princess!” she screamed to the younger girl, and the two of them cried “the princess! the princess!” as they ran toward Hannah with their arms over their heads.

Hannah thought they might run past her, but they maintained what for their little legs seemed to constitute full speed until each slammed into a thigh, wrapping both arms and legs around her lower limbs and clinging with what Hannah found to be impressive strength.

Neither introduced themselves or even looked up at Hannah, simply holding her legs and laughing at each other, grimy hands clutching her jeans, sneakered feet wriggling precariously close to the tops of her boots.

Hannah reached down to touch the blonde curls on the top of each child’s head, pulling her hand away from the older child when the girl tilted her head back and began snapping, primary molars clapping together, tiny lower teeth sliding behind two frighteningly large upper permanent incisors .

They departed from Hannah’s legs as quickly as they’d arrived, running toward the barn, still screaming.

“We told them you were coming,” Breck said apologetically, continuing toward the man in the wheelchair.

“Something we said made Tupper decide you were a princess,” Mother said.

“Tupper?” Hannah repeated.

“The older one,” said Breck.

“She’s the one with all the ideas,” said Skaggs, looking toward the trees. “Sissy’s just along for the ride.”

“Papa, you need to meet someone,” Trina announced, standing before the man in the wheelchair.

The man’s started as if waking, and his hands tightened around his rifle, knuckles going white.

“This is Hannah, Papa, Martha’s daughter.”

The man’s head jerked up, he looked at his daughter, then turned his full face toward Hannah, and what had been a vaguely-shaped mass of armed flesh and fabric transformed, a pair of dark brown eyes peering up at Hannah, opening wide with surprise, lips curving up into what Hannah recognized as a smile, his mouth filled with surprisingly white teeth.

“Oh, great goblins,” he said, looking into Hannah’s eyes, squinting, sticking out his tongue, turning his head and spitting into the grass.

He lifted his right hand from the stock of his rifle, raised it into the air where it flailed until Hannah rescued it, taking it into hers, finding it cold and soft and fleshy until she felt his grip and knew this was a hand sure enough to pull the trigger that had downed three drones.

“Hello, Sir,” she said.

He scowled. “Wumpus.”

“I’m sorry, Sir?”

“Hannah, he wants you to call him Wumpus,” Trina said. “That’s what his grandchildren call him.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Wumpus,” Hannah said.

“Momma!” shrieked the older child from the entrance to the barn.

“There are five creepy-crawlies on the dinner table!”

The younger child screamed unintelligibly.

“What kind?” Breck inquired.

“A momma and a daddy and three babies, but one of them might be another momma!”

“Just shoo ‘em, Tupper, you know how to do that,” Breck said.

Tupper and her little sister ran screaming back into the barn, both shouted “Shoo! Shoo!” and reemerged.

“Can the princess do it?” Tupper asked.

“Tupper,” Breck said. “Princesses don’t shoo creepy crawlies.”

“I wanna be a princess!”

“Do I need to shoo you?” Breck asked.

“No, Ma’am!” Tupper announced, returning to the barn.

“We’ll have dinner once the Compton side gets here,” Trina said, her hand on Hannah’s arm. “We warmed up a Tupelo boar.”

“Whole hog,” said Skaggs, looking at Hannah briefly with blue eyes that, Hannah realized, were as piercing as Laura’s. But, where Laura stared at one to read their soul, Skaggs looked away. Possibly out of politeness.

Was Skaggs his given name? Was anyone, other than Roger, using their given name?

Done holding court with Wumpus, who continued to look at Hannah with wide eyes and a fading smile, the little band moved toward the first trailer, a white single wide upon which someone had painted great red-petaled flowers.

“Roger, can you put Hannah’s case in her room?” Mother asked.
“And give me a minute to catch up with my girl.”

The rest of the gathering lined up to enter the dwelling, while Mother took Hannah’s arm and led her around the trailer to a homemade swinging bench, some of the beams painted, standing beneath an enormous oak tree.

“How are you, Honey?” Mother asked, putting her toes into the dirt, pushing the bench backwards.

“I’m good,” Hannah replied. “I’m really really happy this week.”

“And then I dragged you out here.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re in rare form today,” Mother said, nodding toward the trailer.

“What do you mean?”

Mother laughed.

“Wumpus with that gun. And those girls, I’m sorry. But everyone’s a little off.”

“Does he shoot drones?” Hannah asked.

“He tries,” Mother said.

“He’s shot three down, right?”

“At least,” Mother said. “They started showing up after I moved in.”

“There’s a reason for that,” Hannah said.

Mother swallowed, looked toward the trailer. “I thought so. Does it cost your family any money?”

“They’re not my family,” Hannah said.

“Does it cost the Petrosyans any money?”

“I don’t think so. They’re cheap.”

Mother laughed.

“No one knows quite what to make of you,” Mother said.

“Everyone seems normal,” Hannah observed, raising her feet to the bench, crossing her legs, looking up to stare at the sun through the oak leaves, enjoying the sensation of swinging in a soft breeze.

“You can’t tell, because you’re just meeting them,” Mother said.
“But the way they lined up outside the van . . . everyone thinks you’re a princess, not just the girls.”

“What have you told them?” Hannah asked.

“The truth.”

“The truth is different from a princess.”

“They know about the Petrosyan’s house,” Mother said. “They’ve looked it up.”

“I don’t even live there anymore.”

Mother pushed the swing backward again.

“You hungry?” she asked.

“I will be soon.”

“We’re eating in the barn, after some more family show up.”

“The Comptons?”

“Yes, about a dozen of them.”

“Any kids who are going to grab my legs?”

“Probably not.”

“You taught me to adapt,” Hannah said.

“The women are serving today,” Mother said. “And the men are watching football.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“But the men cooked the hog.”

“Sure,” Hannah said.

“And they clean up.”

“Okay.”

“I just didn’t want you to think . . .” Mother said, her voice trailing off.

“That you were in another patriarchy?”

“Exactly.”

“They seem like nice people,” Hannah said.

“They’re all here for you,” Mother said.

“I hope they’re not expecting anything special.”

“Trust me,” Mother said. “You’re special out here.”

Hannah laughed.

“Ready to serve, Sweetie?”

“I am,” Hannah promised.

“I’m sure your family – the Petrosyans – ran you ragged on Thanksgiving.”

“I had to beg for something to do,” Hannah said, laughing. “They finally gave me biscuits.”

“How were they?”

“Not bad,” said Hannah. “I just did what the recipe said.”

Hannah followed Mother into the trailer home that seemed to be the hub of things today, food in foil pans, on greasy boards, in casserole dishes of varying ages and integrity lined up haphazardly on kitchen counters, stacked around the rickety dining room table, on the coffee table in the living room where Skaggs and Roger were watching football, even beside the sink in the guest bathroom, where Hannah slipped in to urinate.

The belt worked better for this than Hannah had expected. The band at her vulva seemed to have been designed to channel the flow forward, so as long as she leaned over, the urine went where it belonged. Wiping was something of a challenge, the metal bands blocking access to some of the places she wanted dry. She did her best and flushed.

Hannah, grateful for something to do, did her part carrying things out to the barn, setting things upon a row of tables – some homemade, some folding – covered with sheets, blankets and, quite possibly, a sleeping bag.

Floodlights were turned on as the sun descended, bathing the barn’s interior with a warm yellow glow. The barn, floored in cracked, flaking concrete, seemed long ago to have ceased housing livestock or storing hay, all its stalls now taken up by the random detritus of modern life – boxes, stacks of books and papers, engine parts, an artificial Christmas tree, a doorless refrigerator, a rusty heater.

As she passed a counter at the entrance to the barn, Hannah spotted one of the drones, its four blue propellers intact, a neat bullet hole in its center. On the wall above the counter hung a picture of a much younger version of the man she knew as Wumpus, in a military uniform and smiling the way some men smile, with a guarded grin that suggests wariness, suspicion, fear.

The Comptons, related to Wumpus through his late sister, Hannah was told, roared up in a convoy a little after 6:30, led by a motorcycle upon which sat a vast, white-bearded man and an equally large woman in the sidecar, bearing a casserole dish. Hannah paused at the barn door to watch the procession, an SUV next from which emerged a middle-aged couple bearing something taped in greasy paper. They were accompanied by three teens, two boys and a girl, moving slowly, sullenly, each tapping on phones, here in body only. A third couple, middle-aged and childless, emerged from a tiny car, each with a plastic grocery bag of food hanging from one hand.

Last was a pickup truck, driven by a single woman in jeans and a white t-shirt, bearing a bottle of wine in each hand.

More introductions, too many names for Hannah to remember, and then all moved to the barn, standing around the table while Skaggs offered up supplication to the god Hannah used to pray to, beseeching him in Jesus' name to feed them all and keep them safe and healthy.

There was no prayer to prevent their sale to a cruel or neglectful owner, to protect them from being tortured because another slave had escaped, to ensure that their cages were always large enough and their chains were always comfortable enough. There was no prayer to beg for freedom from unnecessary enemas, to grant them the right to decide which penises were put up their vaginas.

The god to whom one offered such prayers wasn't attending this dinner, apparently.

As soon as Skaggs ceased speaking, the gathering assumed a hodgepodge of seats – picnic benches, stools, folding chairs, an office swivel chair missing two wheels, and a red exercise ball upon which one of the sullen teen girls sat, smiling briefly.

Hannah sat between Mother and the two girls who believed Hannah was a princess, much of their energy burned off at the moment, thankfully.

"What happened to your prince?" asked Tupper, the older girl.

"He's busy somewhere else," Hannah said.

"Is he taming a dragon?"

"Yes."

"Is the dragon a Zix or a Glog?"

"Neither," Hannah replied, turning to show her teeth and stare wide-eyed at the girls. "It has long black hair and it looks at you like this."

"Eeeek!" Tupper screamed.

"Eeeek!" Sissy agreed.

A keg of beer had been procured for the evening and had been set beside the barn's wall with a stack of red cups beside it, and the diners took turns pumping beer for themselves and each other, and when most of the cups were full of beer or something else, Wumpus stood, slowly, his rifle somewhere else, Skaggs beside him to help him rise, holding his arm at the shoulder once he was at his full height.

A hush fell over the space, only Sissy speaking, expressing concern over something on her plate until Tupper turned toward her with a finger

over her lips and a loud, hissing “Shhhh!”

“To family,” Wumpus said, voice soft but clear, a red cup sloshing in his free hand.

“To family,” replied the adults and at least one of the teens, and all drank. The girl on the exercise ball raised her cup, sipped and scowled. Was she drinking beer for the first time? Hannah wondered.

“To green grass and spring and the wind in the trees,” Wumpus continued, and he turned to Hannah, staring at her, pausing, smiling.

“And the wind at your tail.”

He continued to stare, not moving his eyes from Hannah’s, and she stared back, politely but directly, uncertain if he had gone into a daze, or if he wanted to say more to her, or if he wasn’t sure who she was.

And the wind at your tail

Someone laughed, his unwavering gaze becoming awkward.

“And the children, Papa,” Skaggs whispered.

Wumpus turned his gaze to Mother.

“Martha, is that your girl?”

“It is, Sir,” Mother replied.

“What’s her name?”

From the small of Hannah’s back, her belt beeped twice and chimed.

“Hannah.”

“To Hannah, and to the children, and to all the strangers among us,” he said. “May they soon be friends.”

“May they be,” everyone agreed.

Wumpus sat down to murmurs of approval, more beer raised in salute, toward him and toward Hannah, conversations resumed, and the single woman in the pickup truck, introduced to Hannah as Chancie, brought beer to Hannah and Mother, her hip brushing Hannah’s shoulder.

“How’s school going, Martha?” she asked.

“Three months to go,” Mother said, and she gestured to her daughter. “Hannah’s in school too.”

“So I hear,” she said, dropping down on her haunches and steadying herself by grabbing the back of Hannah’s chair. “What are you studying, Hannah?”

Hannah turned to look at the woman, who was peering at Hannah with inquisitive green eyes, her hair straight and black, cheekbones high,

probably in her late 30's, solidly built.

Chancie was most likely at least a little native American, Hannah thought.

And she is a lesbian, Hannah continued in her mind, and she might or might not know. And she likes me. And she might or might not know why.

When sex is one's currency, one's stock in trade, one learns to recognize the denominations in all their forms.

"Physics," Hannah said.

"We should talk," Chancie said.

"Ask me anything," Hannah said. "I'm almost done with my second class, so I can fake any answer."

Chancie looked at Hannah, looked at Mother.

"Your girl is sweet," she said.

"She is," Mother agreed, sipping the beer Chancie had set before her.

Did Mother like beer, or was she just being polite?

Was Hannah still Mother's girl? Yes, in Hannah's mind at least. Yes, tonight.

Hannah took a sip, found the amber liquid to be not quite as foul as other beers she'd had. Maybe Mother truly liked it.

"After dinner," Chancie proposed, touching Hannah's shoulder.

"Of course," Hannah said.

The meal lumbered on, Hannah eating more pork and yams and green beans than she believed possible, washing it down with beer and tea and coke and water, all from the same red plastic cup.

"What is your prince's name?" Tupper asked.

"Allain."

"No it's not," Tupper declared, pausing dramatically. "It's *Prince* Allain."

"I just call him Allain, to save time," Hannah said.

"Ooh," Tupper said, squirming. "Could I call him Allain too?"

"No," Hannah said. "You have to call him Your Royal Highness."

"What if I didn't?"

"You'd have to change his dragon's diaper."

"Eeeek!" Tupper screamed.

"Eeeek!" Sissy agreed.

Desert was more beer, Chancie's wine, a bitter liquor from a red bottle, a chocolate mousse from the store, apple turnovers by Trina, and something involving dough, sugar and cinnamon that Tupper had come up with.

Hannah, breaking the dry treat with her front teeth, turned to Tupper and assured, "This would be perfect for rewarding dragons who don't burn things."

Tupper beamed.

Chapter 34: Chancie

Once all had risen from the table and the better serving dishes were removed and everyone was taking pictures of everyone else, the men rolled up everything – paper plates, plastic cups and utensils, straws, the bones of a hog, every unfinished bite of food – in the sheets spread out across the tables, and carried them to a blackened circle of rocks in the yard, shaking them out there, turning this portion of the yard into a miniature landfill.

Gasoline was poured, someone flicked a cigarette, and the remains of dinner went up in smoke, the fire at times bright enough to illuminate the lines and hollows in every face.

When the wind breezed toward her, the odors came to Hannah in waves, gasoline, burning bread, flesh and bone being reduced to cinders, paper plates alight, acrid plastic smoke, all working their way through her nose while the liquor moved through her mind, rendering the world less even than usual.

With final hugs, including an unexpected one from the adolescent girl for Hannah, the Comptons began taking their leave, a vehicle here and there, no convoy for the departure.

Chancie stayed, laughing with Skaggs and Trina while Hannah talked to Mother about tomorrow's plans, Roger in silent witness, as seemed to be his nature.

"You'll get to meet Delilah," Hannah said. "She'll be here at 8:30."

"Delilah," Mother said. "The trans hairdresser?"

"Some people might call her that," Hannah said. "To me she's just Delilah. And she thought she'd have time to do a few people tomorrow, besides me."

“Let me show you your bedroom,” Mother said, and Hannah followed her to the last trailer in the line, plain and white earlier in the day, gray and unlit now.

Hannah sensed the dwelling of a male as soon as they crossed the threshold, the pleasant residues of a man’s body and a man’s spirit, thick and rich and barely displaced by the softer scents – patchouli and jasmine and lavender – of the female who had taken up lodging here a year ago.

“How long has Roger lived here?” Hannah asked.

“Since his last year of high school,” Mother replied, flipping on lights to reveal the sights of a man’s lair, heavy furniture of dark wood, two deer’s heads staring from either side of the big-screen TV. “He couldn’t live with Wumpus anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Well,” Mother said, crossing the den, reaching for a door behind a couch finished in blue plaid. “You’ve met him.”

“Wumpus seems harmless,” Hannah said. “Except for that gun.”

“He’s always had that gun,” Mother said. “And anger. And suspicion. But he’s had two strokes since Roger moved out. All that’s left is the gun.”

“Could you ask him to stop shooting the drones?” Hannah said.

“Yes.”

“Think he will?”

“Probably not,” Mother replied.

“I just need to say I asked,” Hannah said.

Mother pushed open the door, turned on the light.

The room had been generically-appointed years ago, sexless, with a full-size, quilt-covered bed, a dresser of pale wood, a nightstand, a plain white lamp.

“Closet there,” Mother said, pointing. “Toilet there. The shower’s at the other end, in the hall past the den.”

Hannah’s suitcase lay on the bed, and she opened it, pulled out her dress and held it up.

“I’m wearing this to church tomorrow,” Hannah said.

“Did you pick it out?” Mother asked, immediately getting to the heart of the question, to the heart of all questions.

“No,” Hannah admitted.

“Is it what you would have worn anyway?”

“Maybe,” Hannah said, certain Mother knew the question was morally irrelevant. “Maybe not.”

“You beeped earlier,” Mother said, in another hack at the roots of the matter before them. Mother would ignore nothing, deny nothing. She had tried ignorance, immediately after Hannah was taken, found it didn’t suit her, almost lost her only child over it.

“I did,” Hannah acknowledged. “I’m wearing something. They called it a compromise.”

“Is it going to beep all night?”

“Every time a new drone takes over, I think,” Hannah said. “Wumpus doesn’t shoot them after dark, does he?”

“No.”

The front door creaked open.

“Martha, Hannah?” Chancie called.

“We’re in here,” Mother replied.

Chancie appeared at the bedroom door. Hannah had promised her a conversation, she recalled. Was Chancie here to collect? Did she want more than talk? Were assumptions being made about Hannah, even here, on this border between human life and wilderness, on the geographic and cultural frontier that marked America’s raw edge?

“You gonna stay the night?” Mother asked casually, as if this were a common inquiry, Chancie sleeping over whenever convenient. Or was Mother fixing Hannah up? Was she offering her daughter to extended family for some strategic benefit? Or just because she could?

Hannah shook her head and reminded herself of the scene that greeted her upon her release from the van: a rough line of dwelling places, a patched and aging barn, scattered vehicles, many non-functional. This was a place of randomness, of opportunity and destruction as two sides of the same coin, of things that, for the most part, merely happened.

The Petrosyans mated her carefully, strategically, and while her trysts in the kennel were done at her discretion, they followed carefully outlined protocols.

Here, in the world Mother had occupied for more than a year, anything could happen. Or nothing. All was completely up to Hannah.

The freedom excited her – spiritually, philosophically, physically – in a way she didn’t expect.

Hannah looked at Chancie, full thighs and wide hips wrapped in a pair of simple jeans, taken straight from the shelf at a discount store, Hannah guessed, taken into a room with a flimsy curtain for a quick confirmation of fit.

Untailored, tight against Chancie's bottom through good fortune alone.

"I didn't bring anything to wear," Chancie said.

"I can loan you a t-shirt," Mother said, adding after a pause, "Hannah's got someone coming tomorrow morning that wants to fix a few of us up."

"Oh yeah?"

"Her name's Delilah," Hannah said. "She's the best in Dallas, in a lot of people's opinions."

"She's doing this out of the goodness of her heart?" Chancie asked suspiciously.

"Once you meet her," Hannah said, "it'll make sense."

"Let me get a shirt," Mother said, leaving the room.

"Do you visit here a lot?" Hannah asked, imagining Mother and Chancie talking like sisters, staying up late, retiring only when they could no longer keep their eyes open, another aspect of Mother's new world.

"Yeah," Chancie said. "A few times a month. I love your mom. She gets it. You know what I mean? She gets it. Ever since she stopped running."

"Running?"

"Yeah, running."

"Running from what?" Hannah asked.

"You."

"Oh."

Strange as it sounded, Hannah understood.

To lose a child to slavery . . . what else could one do but run away? Death was certainly worse, but it was final, at least. Slavery lingered, haunted, tormented.

"When did she stop running?" Hannah asked.

"She saw you in March," Chancie replied. "It changed her."

"I sent her a letter every month, asking her to visit me. She—"

"God, she cried, every time she got one," Chancie said. "So I said Martha, just go. Just go."

“She showed up because of you?”

“I’d like to think so.”

“And she stopped running?”

“No,” Chancie replied. “She stopped running away.”

“She’s still running, then?”

“Yes. To something now, though, not away.”

“What?”

“To you.”

Hannah pondered, found too much here to work through, looked at the bed. “Do you usually sleep in here?”

“I can sleep anywhere,” Chancie said. “Couch is always good.”

“What do you do?” Hannah asked.

“Substance abuse,” Chancie replied.

“You mean . . . you treat it, right?”

“Now I do,” Chancie said, and she laughed.

Hannah looked at the woman. “How long?”

“Three years clean,” Chancie said. “If you don’t count one bender 18 months ago, when I . . . lost someone.”

“What did you use?” Hannah asked.

“Do you know anything about addiction?”

“Nothing,” Hannah confessed. “Why? Should I not have asked that?”

“It’s okay,” Chancie said. “Because of how you asked it. But I don’t have a straight answer. I just did what was there.”

Had Chancie had anything to drink tonight? Hannah couldn’t remember.

“Three strikes,” Chancie added, “and not out.”

“Three strikes?”

“Drug addict,” she said, holding up one finger. “Native American,” she added, raising the second.

“Who says that’s a strike?” Hannah demanded.

“Wumpus,” Chancie said.

“Mother said he used to be mean,” Hannah said. “But I can’t tell.”

“It’s still there, sometimes,” Chancie said. “Want to guess the third?”

“Lesbian,” Hannah blurted.

Chancie laughed.

“It’s that obvious?” she asked.

“No,” Hannah said. “But I’ve learned to guess pretty well.”

Mother returned with a t-shirt, tossed it onto the bed.

“Hannah, do you need one too?” Mother asked.

“I’ll stay dressed until bedtime,” Hannah replied, knowing that Mother was just being polite. She was well aware that her daughter slept in nothing.

“Roger’s staying with Wumpus tonight,” Mother said, stepping back to the door. “It’s his turn. Wear whatever’s comfortable. We’re making hot chocolate.”

Chancie put her toes against her heels to slip off a pair of well-worn sneakers, simultaneously undoing her belt, unbuttoning her pants.

What did Mother and Chancie wear before bedtime? Hannah wondered. What was etiquette for this place? Hannah pretended she needed to look into her suitcase for something while Chancie pulled her t-shirt over her head, slid the straps of her bra over her elbows, spun it around and unclasped it, full, heavy breasts swinging loose, nipples firm.

Chancie smiled when she caught Hannah looking and pushed down her panties, her pubic hair black and so full it completely hid her opening.

To Hannah’s surprise, Chancie left the room in the nude, ignoring the t-shirt Mother had brought. Hannah watched her go, heard pans rattle in the kitchen, heard Mother’s voice, Chancie’s in reply.

What was Mother wearing? How should Hannah dress?

Hannah decided there was no reason to wear anything but the belt Laura had locked around her waist. She quickly pulled off her boots and socks, unbuttoned her shirt, slipped out of her bra and panties, folded everything neatly and stacked it atop the dresser.

She went to the toilet, urinating carefully, leaning forward, listening to the urine strike the water, wiping the band and as much of her vulva as she could reach.

Done in the bathroom, she exited the bedroom to find Chancie naked at the stove, mother measuring powder into three mugs, wearing only a pair of panties.

Chapter 35: Delilah and the Raccoon

Chancie turned first, eyes registering surprise as she looked at Hannah's middle, moving from there to Hannah's breasts, to Hannah's eyes, expression transitioning to what Hannah interpreted as a variation on lust.

Hannah smiled and stepped beside Mother, who regarded her daughter with neither surprise nor desire.

"Is that what made the noise?" Mother inquired.

"Yes," Hannah said, turning to show off the back of the belt. "Quiet or chiming is good. A high-pitched whine is bad."

Chancie, stirring milk as she warmed it, looked at Hannah with an eyebrow raised quizzically but turned back to the pot, her questions unasked for now.

Hannah hovered but could contribute no effort to making hot-chocolate, Mother and Chancie obviously well-versed in a project that required four hands, not six.

The milk was poured, the powder mixed in and stirred, and Hannah was presented with a mug of her own, following the women to the couch, where they sat in a row, Mother in the middle, Hannah and Chancie at either end, both pulling their feet up and crossing their legs.

"What's that you're wearing?" Chancie asked abruptly, as if she'd had to struggle first to work up the courage.

"Something my owners put on me," Hannah said. "To spend the night here."

"And it makes noise?"

"Yes. Did you hear it at dinner?"

"I thought that was your phone," Chancie said.

"I don't have a phone."

"Why does it beep?"

"It's monitored," Hannah explained. "Anytime the signal switches to a new machine, it lets me know."

"Why is it between your legs?" Chancie asked.

"To keep me chaste," Hannah said with a laugh.

"What?"

"Well, to prevent penetration," Hannah said, looking down, her clitoris and the top of her vulva clearly exposed, just her opening blocked by the metal straps.

"You're always in it?" Chancie asked.

"No, this is the first time," Hannah said. "Just to be out here."

“What did they think could happen out here?” Chancie demanded, on the verge of taking deep offense.

“I didn’t ask,” Hannah said, waving her hand dismissively. “They said they just wanted to keep me secure.”

Chancie seemed satisfied with the answer, and the women drained their mugs slowly and talked about everything, from politics and celebrity gossip to the meandering history of Wumpus and his kin.

Chancie, Hannah learned, was the result of a brief union between Wumpus’ sister’s oldest daughter and a full-blooded Tigua.

According to Chancie, Wumpus had cursed the girl once when he learned of her heritage, but she insisted on attending family events regardless, even after she was old enough to feel his contempt, and he eventually learned to tolerate her presence.

He cursed her again when she announced her preference for girls, but she knew by now how to resist banishment, and she eventually earned his grudging respect.

She never revealed her weakness for narcotics to him, as she could find no reason to provoke him a third time.

Hannah’s belt chimed as she took her last sip of chocolate.

“Changing of the guard,” she said.

According to the wooden clock shaped like Texas that hung in the kitchen, it was after 11.

“I’m turning in,” Hannah added, leaning back to stretch. “Can you wake me by 7:15?”

“If you’re not already up, yes,” Mother said, rising to carry the mugs into the kitchen, rinsing them in the sink.

She returned, standing and spreading her arms, accepting a hug from Chancie first, her daughter second.

“If you need anything, just tap on the door at the end of the hall,” Mother said. “I’ll hear you.”

Hannah watched her mother until she disappeared at the other end of the trailer, quietly clicking shut her door.

“We’re not doing it,” Chancie whispered.

“Huh?”

“Your mother and me.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “I know.”

“I just didn’t want you to think—”

Hannah laughed, looked at her bound middle.

“I just wanted that on the record,” Chancie said.

“Okay,” said Hannah, rising. “Are you going to put on your shirt now?”

Chancie followed Hannah into the bedroom, dark but for the light from the den, stopping at the foot of the bed. But she didn’t put on her shirt, didn’t even bend to pick it up, simply stood, looking at Hannah.

The lust, just a hint around the dinner table, on the couch, emanated in waves now that Mother was gone. Something in Chancie’s eyes, in the way she stood, in the way her lips extended from beneath her black pubic hair, confirmed to Hannah that Chancie wanted union, connection, release.

Hannah stepped toward Chancie, gliding into her, breasts touching, hips pressed against one another, and they kissed, wetly and open-mouthed, breathing in each other’s essence.

Chancie possessed the confidence that comes with age, Hannah noted, wrapping her arms around Hannah’s back, lowering her hand to Hannah’s rear, running one finger along the metal strap that held her chamber closed. She didn’t pause to ask Hannah if she wanted this, didn’t ask if Hannah was permitted to take pleasure from another, given how her owner had bound her. She simply kissed and caressed and touched, her hand moving from Hannah’s rear to her front, sliding through her pubic hair, dancing along the edges of the band, brushing her clitoris so gently Hannah spasmed and pressed forward, the tease making her want a firmer touch.

Still with her mouth on Hannah’s, Chancie pushed closed the door, the room plunged in darkness.

Chancie took Hannah’s upper arms in her hands, pushing her backward gently, forcing her to sit on the bed, continuing to push until Hannah was flat on her back, her ovulating sex organ warming up in anticipation of whatever it was Chancie liked.

What did Chancie like? Hannah didn’t know.

Would the Petrosyans approve of this? Would Laura? Hannah assumed they wouldn’t mind, but she didn’t care. Her body was, tonight, her own. Chancie’s body was, in a sense, also Hannah’s. No one was watching either of them, scheduling them, giving the okay for their time together. No one would ask Hannah tomorrow if she had orgasmed, if Chancie had, if they wanted to be together again.

Not since the summer, when she'd coupled with Ormek, had Hannah known the arousal of unscheduled sex.

Chancie sat down on the bed beside Hannah, and Hannah scooted up, putting her head on the pillow.

Chancie lay down next to Hannah, kissed her again, on her mouth, on her ear, on her mouth again, down to her nipple, sucking it firmly, back to her mouth, and she reached down to run her fingers around Hannah's hair and sex and the metal that protected her opening.

"Lie on your side and raise your leg," Chancie said.

"What are you going to do?" Hannah whispered back.

"See how much of your hole I can lick," Chancie replied.

Hannah laughed, got in position, Chancie turning, her body barely visible in the pale yellow light shining in around the curtain from somewhere outside.

Chancie kissed the inside of Hannah's thigh, ran her tongue up Hannah's leg to the metal band against her vulva, licked her hair and clitoris, then along the edges of the band, brushing the top of Hannah's folds first before she slid her mouth back, exploring everything her tongue could reach, eventually working it in under the band and just barely into the Hannah's wet opening.

Once she'd found a way to access Hannah's chamber, Chancie went to work, tongue darting repeatedly, obscenely, exploring and tasting Hannah, pulling fluid into her mouth, returning to Hannah's slot, provoking tight, quiet sighs from the girl.

Why was this arousing? Why was Hannah's opening pouring liquid into Chancie's mouth?

It's like making love through the bars of a cage, Hannah thought. It's getting a little of something you shouldn't be getting any of, instead of getting a lot of something that's a sure thing. A little pleasure, coupled with the thrill of the unexpected, was stronger than a lot of pleasure.

Hannah began rocking her pelvis in time to Chancie's attention, the two females united like that until Chancie pulled her mouth away and repositioned herself, bringing her hips closer to Hannah, raising her leg as Hannah had done, her desire obvious.

Hannah leaned forward, moving her mouth toward the black triangle of Chancie's sex, pushing her tongue out to feel and taste the thick coils of pubic hair, exploring the fur until she found Chancie's clitoris and

lips, sensing the heavy musk of the woman's female opening, the cocktail of salts and sugars and animal essences that spread from her hole and coated her lips.

Still licking Hannah's bound opening, Chancie reached up to massage Hannah's clitoris, circling and stroking until Hannah writhed, her cries of release muffled against her friend's sex.

Hannah leaned back, dropping her head on her pillow in recovery, her rest brief before she returned her mouth to Chancie's vulva, licking and sucking, reaching in her tongue as if determined to clean out the hole before her, moving from clitoris to vulva and back again under the twisting guidance of Chancie's pelvis, and when the girl came, Hannah redoubled her efforts, bending around Chancie's body to guide her through a twisting, grunting climax.

As soon as Chancie was done cumming, she turned on her knees and settled down beside Hannah for a hungry kiss, mouths fully engaged, as if they were about to make love again.

"Are you going to sleep with me?" Hannah asked when Chancie finally pulled her mouth away.

"I already did," Chancie said.

"That didn't feel like sleeping," Hannah observed.

"You know it's an expression, right?"

"Yeah," Hannah said. "I never understood it."

"You're good."

"I like it."

"Thank you for saying that," Chancie said. "I kept waiting for you to pull back, to act like . . ."

"A slave."

"Yeah. And I was going to stop."

"Why did you start, if you thought that could happen?"

"Because I thought it might not."

"Who do you pray to?" Hannah asked.

"Huh?"

"I'm changing the subject," Hannah said. "Who do you pray to? Or whom?"

"Whom," Chancie repeated, laughing quietly.

"Who or whom?" Hannah said. "I want to know."

"Why?"

“I’m doing a survey.”

Chancie laughed, loud enough that Mother might have heard if she weren’t on the other end of the trailer.

“What do you want to know?” Chancie asked. “Because if you only make love to Christians, it’s a little late for that.”

“You’re not a Christian?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Then you aren’t.”

“I am if you need me to be.”

“It’s that easy to be in a religion?” Hannah asked.

“Yes, if you’re me.”

“Go on.”

“Wumpus found out I was part Tigua when I was three,” Chancie said. “And he told Momma to quit bringing me around. It was one thing if I was a bastard, he could live with that. But not Native American. Not Indian.”

Chancie breathed in, deep and long.

“I was a good kid, okay? But Momma told me how it was. And I just said no. She took me to spend the night at her friend’s house so she could see Wumpus, and I threw a fit. Screamed like I was being burned. Screamed until my lunch came up. I knew Wumpus was wrong, like I know I’m lying here next to you. And she went ahead and took me that night. Took me to see him after all he said. God, he was furious. But what could he do? He tried to ignore me. Momma says I told him to give me candy, because he’d done that before.

And he did then too. Gave me candy. And never told her not to bring me by again. So that’s my religion. It doesn’t matter what you call it. That’s the biggest thing in me. It’s bigger than me. It’s right, and it’s bigger.”

Hannah listened, moved her hand against Chancie’s hip, felt the heat of her skin. Chancie reached down to take her hand.

“So, you wanna know who I pray to?”

“Who?” Hannah asked.

“Wumpus.”

“What?”

“Think about it. Fighting him was my religion. Going to see him was my church. Winning was my salvation.”

Hannah pondered, more here to fathom than she could work through amidst the lingering pleasure of coupling with Chancie, the lingering imbalance of drinking.

“And then, lesbian at 15,” Chancie continued. “Guess who I told first?”

“Wumpus.”

“Bingo. Act of faith.”

“How bad was it?”

“Bad,” Chancie said, and she drew in her breath again and exhaled a long weighty sigh, like she was breathing out the memory so she could look at it, floating over hers and Hannah’s bodies.

“He called me a Chinook faggot. A Cherokee bastard. A . . . a . . . the n-word. Just crazy, made no sense. And I was crying, but I just sat there, and took it. And then . . . you know what I said?”

“No.”

“Wumpus, give me candy.”

Chancie squeezed Hannah’s hand.

“Did he?” Hannah asked.

“No. But he shut up. And I still come around. He doesn’t love me. But he doesn’t hate me.”

Chancie rose on her elbow over Hannah, reached up her hand and tapped Hannah’s collar with her nail twice, two dull, leaden sounds echoing against Hannah’s neck.

“That’s your Wumpus,” she said.

Hannah swallowed and stared at the black ceiling, wondering if there was a god above it. Or a drone at least, hovering there, watching, talking to the little chip locked above her bottom.

“Are you fighting?” Chancie whispered.

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Asking for candy.”

Chancie grabbed Hannah’s breast, raised her nipple to her mouth and sucked, gently, as if drinking something other than milk, and they embraced and kissed chastely and disentangled, drifting off to sleep.

Hannah was awakened twice through the night by the chime from her belt, the first time starting because it was a police siren in her dream, the

second time hearing the voice of someone kind, come to protect her, to rescue and free her, to free everyone who wore a collar.

And there were many kinds of collars.

Hannah woke again, to the sound of knocking this time, and knew that Mother had come to rouse her, that she had slept later than usual.

Hannah rose, opened the door, peered into her mother's dark face.

"It's 7:20," Mother said.

"Okay."

"Is Chancie in there with you?"

"Yes."

The three females dressed themselves, breakfasted and washed and waited for Delilah, who showed up at the trailer's door with a great black case, her usual mutinous ebullience, and a sense of cataclysmic urgency.

She hugged Hannah first, introduced herself to Mother and Chancie with more hugs and the fervency of a long-lost sister, and turned back to Hannah.

"How many are we doing today, Hannah?" she asked.

"Me and Chancie," Hannah said. "And Mother?"

Mother shook her head no. "Just let me watch you fix up my daughter," she said.

"I counted four homes when I pulled up," Delilah said. "Bring me your women. I've got 90 minutes."

Mother left to canvass the rest of the family while Delilah set up shop in the kitchen, pulling two chairs from the table, setting them side-by-side.

She took a third chair, set it facing Chancie and sat, staring into the woman's eyes.

"Where are you going today?"

"Home, and then I'm doing a few hours at Horizons."

"Horizons?"

"Substance abuse treatment," Chancie said, "rehab."

"You used?"

"Yes."

Delilah fell silent, not even breathing, while she studied Chancie's face, taking all of her in, her eyes, her mouth, her chin, her hairline, her ears.

“Sugar water angel,” Delilah said quietly, as if to herself. She stood, pulled things from her case, plugged in a drier and set to work, maintaining a steady patter, asking questions about the family, Chancie’s work, dinner the preceding evening, while she shaped the hair before her, making Hannah’s full as usual, Chancie’s severe, parted on the side, dragged across her forehead, sprayed in place.

Delilah was applying the first touches of color around eyes when Mother returned, Nala and Tupper in tow, and Delilah greeted both with hugs, with a careful look at faces, a few questions, and she set to work, Nala in the last kitchen chair, Tupper too restless to sit, running up to Delilah for a quick touch of color her and there, running outside, returning.

Delilah finished at five minutes before 10 and, with a wave of her hand, invited the females to gaze at each other, and the adults looked solemnly at each other because Delilah had brought out strengths in each face that deserved reverence. And then they laughed at Tupper, because Delilah had made her a raccoon, with dark eyes and whiskers and a black nose.

Next to the bathroom, where each woman looked at herself and found in her eyes someone different, someone new, someone worth knowing. Even Hannah, who had witnessed her transformation under Delilah’s hand at least a dozen times, marveled, for she was indeed, Revelations.

But not the revelations of the end of the world, Hannah understood now. This was the revelation of seeing things: science, injustice, the vague but persistent causes of rebellion, and the whispers of free lovers who come to one at night to groan through the language of orgasm and speak of their own suffering.

As soon as she looked at her face, Tupper announced that she would be searching the woods for a raccoon family to join, forcing the women to explain in words an 8-year-old could understand why her idea was not workable.

Delilah packed up her things and remained silent, and Hannah wondered if Delilah hoped Tupper would be allowed to try after all, and if she might succeed, if Delilah’s work might prove so transformative it could make the shy bold, the human a beast, the oppressed free, victorious, happy.

While the women explained natural things to Tupper, Hannah dressed and packed.

The knock landed upon the door at quarter after 10, the driver here to collect Hannah and her things and bring her safely and securely to the Petrosyan's church.

All came to see Hannah off, Delilah and all the kin here, even Wumpus, in a chair pushed by Roger, and there were hugs and kisses on the neck and tears from male and female alike and promises to have her again, and all gathered at the van's wide door to watch Hannah get scanned and led into an empty cage, and sit and smile while her wrists and ankles were chained to the floor.

There were two other females and a male already bound here, dressed for church, and they nodded at the throng and at Hannah, and kisses were still being blown from the ragged asphalt as the man slid shut the door.

Chapter 36: Reporting to Xavier

Hannah, whose forcible separation from Mother and the dear people she had just communed with might have provoked despair, journeyed to church with a heart of peace and hope. She would see Mother again, soon, in one place or another.

And she had found people, neither slaves nor the owners of slaves, who had accepted her as one of their own. Surely, the world had not brought her forth only to torment her.

Laura stood waiting at the church's covered side entrance when Hannah stepped down from the van, and after the driver scanned the chip in her back, Hannah thanked Laura with what might have been the most sincere hug of their fraught history together, drawing a surprised gasp from Laura's mouth before she held the girl out at arm's length.

"I see Delilah paid you a visit this morning," Laura observed.

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah replied. "Thank you."

"The family's waiting," Laura said, opening the door for the girl. "But let's go to the restroom first."

Hannah followed Laura into the ladies' room and into one of the stalls.

"Turn and bend just a bit," Laura instructed.

Hannah obeyed, and Laura pulled up her dress in back and pressed buttons on the beacon locked around her waist, eliciting two quiet tones that

Hannah guessed meant the belt had been rendered dormant and wouldn't chime during a hymn or an invocation.

Would Hannah be shackled this morning, as she usually was at church? Laura made no move to restrain their girl, awareness dawning on Hannah that she would walk free today, chains unnecessary as long as she was bound by school to the family.

Five minutes before the service was due to start, Hannah made her way to the other Petrosyans, Athena hugging her, Allain greeting her with a hug and a judicious kiss on the cheek, Ormek shaking her hand.

Ramone, beautiful in a conservative gray business suit, bowed and smiled and refrained from doing more.

The family had taken up their usual pew in the vast sanctuary, next to a huge, ornately carved column, and Hannah glanced at the people behind her, every third or fourth family sitting with a slave or two. She was here to be shown off, and the Petrosyan's fellow believers obliged by looking at her.

The service lasted until nearly 12:30. There was a baptism, extended music, words of thanks to invisible gods, exhortations to behave well, which Hannah knew were meant for the free, and calls to obedience, which Hannah knew were meant for her. But the latter were filtered words, Hannah knew, as all of God's words must be when spoken through human vessels. Who could know what God really said before it was written down, translated from one tongue to the next, read by the men who could read things, thought upon, and finally spoken of in a great, echoing sanctuary where a German pipe organ could drown out any mortal voice?

Perhaps the original words were, "Slaves, throw off your chains!"

And perhaps the original corollary was, "And if your chains will not be thrown, hold them before the eyes of the free, for they find that embarrassing."

As always on Sundays, the faithful congregated after the service in a giant room lined with shops, with a ceiling made of glass, and Hannah looked up and thought of the place where Mother lived, which was even richer in sky.

Hannah was on display for more than a dozen introductions or re-introductions, chatting with family friends, free and slave, about school, about her visit with Mother, about the weather. And whenever she spoke to

a male any older than 12, she watched his eyes wander her body in a way that might confuse the god to whom all had just sworn fealty.

They went home in the family's SUV, Hannah chained beside Allain, Ramone and Athena together on the last bench.

Had Athena's infatuation broken? Was Ramone still in peril of being bought by a girl of delusional ardor? Hannah couldn't tell, but she heard the lovers coo behind her, Athena giggling over something on her phone, and she suspected things had not changed in the last day.

At home, Laura took Hannah to her room to remove the belt, asked how it had done, smiled when Hannah said she would wear it again to see Mother.

"And I made a request about the drones," Hannah said. "But I'm not sure it will change anything any time soon."

"At least you tried."

"But the person with the gun is really old, he's had a few strokes, and I don't think he'll be shooting things much longer."

Lunch was quick, just warmed up leftovers so that Hannah and Allain could pack and be on the road by 2.

As soon as they were on the highway, Hannah shared all her memories of the previous evening and the people she had met, of Wumpus the drone shooter, of Tupper the excitable girl, of Chancie the lesbian, and of the love they had made. Done talking, Hannah studied, watched the lights pass, played *Katzink* on Allain's phone. The restaurant founded by Hannahpaws, the blue and pink cat, wasn't doing very well, unfortunately. Hannah blamed her waning interest in cooking. Had her success with the Thanksgiving biscuits cured her of her culinary insecurities? Or was she just moving on? She wasn't sure.

They ate fast food on the road and reached Allain's before 9, hauling suitcases up the stairs, sitting breathless on his couch, Hannah tucking her knees beneath her and putting her arm behind Allain's shoulders.

"Do you want to stay the night?" he asked.

Was he giving her a choice? Did Laura know he was giving her a choice?

"Yes," Hannah said. "If it won't make you fail your classes."

"It won't," he promised, and he pulled out his phone and tapped, letting the kennel staff know Hannah would not be arriving until morning.

“I’ll walk you over by 8,” he said. “It’s not that far out of my way.”

Robbie and Lacey weren’t home, so Hannah and Allain stripped and got into bed to make the most of their privacy, Hannah serving him with her mouth and her arms and her open legs, taking his service in turn, her vagina reduced to a pink, swollen mess by the time they were done making up for a Saturday night apart.

Only after Allain had applied her shackles and the two lay still beside each other in Allain’s bed, his chest rising and falling as he slept, Hannah staring at the ceiling and pondering the last four days, did she receive that revelation Delilah’s work had prophesied.

Raven.

Of course.

Raven.

It all made sense.

Hannah needed to say something, so urgently she had no choice but to email Sylvia and hope she would be spared torture. Or, if she must be tortured, that the pain would be no greater than it had been the first time.

Hannah stared at the ceiling, writing in her head the email that she must send Sylvia Monday morning. Had she recovered from her last visit with the woman? She hadn’t dreamed of what was done to her under Sylvia’s direction for at least a week. Was it truly so easy to recover from such a thing?

No, one could not recover if one were a victim only, if one were running away.

But now Hannah was running toward something.

She had a purpose now, beyond sex and obedience and school and mere plotting.

Hannah Loughbridge hid within her heart someone else, another girl, a girl with a plan both diabolical and divinely just.

Spartacine.

The ultimate motives of Spartacus had been lost to history, but Hannah knew he escaped from a gladiator school, brought many other slaves to his side, won battles, and considered marching on Rome before he was defeated, his forces killed in battle or crucified.

Spartacus expected victory.

Hannah did not.

Hannah expected to be crucified.

But she was no longer afraid, of Sylvia, or torture, or God.
Fighting him was my religion. Going to see him was my church.
Winning was my salvation.

Allain returned Hannah to the kennels at 7:50 the next morning, and she stripped, got scanned and went straight to breakfast, catching up with Jane and Brad, waving to other friends, including Amelia, who didn't seem to see her, sitting alone, the girl's eyes glaring at something distant.

From there, she returned to her kennel to wash up, study and retrieve Sylvia's business card, still where she'd thrown it after her interrogation, lying under her bed.

Sitting on her bed, staring at the cinder block wall, she ran her finger along the edge of the card, bent it back and forth, admired the Dimper & Dimper logo, which wove together the letters of the two names against a large gray ampersand in the background.

Beneath her name and her phone number was printed Sylvia's email address. Emailing Sylvia was not without risks, Hannah knew. Real risk, beyond mere pain. If she said something that suggested she was an accessory to Raven's disappearance, she could be charged, tried and punished even if Raven was never recovered.

But Hannah knew things that were too important to keep to herself. She had no choice. This was for Raven.

After lunch, Hannah went to the PCs in the lounge, took an empty machine next to the one Xavier was on. He was studying intently, leaning forward, scrolling, staring, reading. It looked like text to Hannah, no doubt something revolutionary that had escaped the kennel's automated censors.

The irony of her decision to sit beside him wasn't lost on her. No matter how futile his efforts might be, he was at least doing something. Hannah was, on the other hand, completely bought in at this moment, preparing to send an email to a woman who tortured slaves, in the hopes of recovering a slave.

Hannah opened up her email, ignored for now the email from Mother and the five notices from Look! that pictures taken of her over the Thanksgiving weekend had been posted and tagged, and she composed her message:

"Sylvia. I believe I have additional information about Raven and her disappearance. I want to share it with you. May I do so in an email to

you?”

Hannah held her breath, hit SEND, exhaled.

She raised her hand. Her fingers were trembling.

“Hey, Hannah,” someone said.

Hannah jumped, believing for a moment that Sylvia had already replied, speaking to her somehow with a man’s voice through the computer.

“Jumpy?” Xavier asked.

“Oh, hey, Xavier,” Hannah said, turning to find the boy staring at her from the next PC, looking just as hard into her eyes as he’d been looking at his screen. “Sorry, just sending an email.”

“What about?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. Was he being particularly suspicious of her in this moment? Or was he always suspicious of everyone?

“A friend who’s missing,” Hannah said. “It’s a little complicated.”

“Can you give me an update?” he asked quietly, and he looked discreetly at the two girls on PCs at the other end of the room.

“An update?” Hannah echoed.

He nodded, glanced at the girls again, looked at Hannah, his meaning clear. He wanted to know how Hannah was fighting, rebelling, overturning.

She smiled and fought the urge to laugh.

Hannah was preparing a joke. A brilliant, cosmically disruptive joke, but a joke nonetheless. Xavier was doing something else, something serious, something that required him to steel his eyes and bore them into Hannah’s.

Did he want to know how many bombs she’d made and stashed under her bed? Was he hoping to read the list of slaveowners she planned to kill?

She needed to be careful around Xavier. She could only imagine what torments awaited a subject who had been intimate with a terrorist.

And yet, when Xavier’s features suddenly softened and he smiled back at her, as if he were in on the joke and merely pretending to be plotting something dangerous, she turned her full body toward him, awaiting his next words.

“Can we talk in your kennel?” he asked.

“You mean right now?”

“Yeah.”

Hannah studied Xavier. There was only one reason a boy would invite himself into a girl's kennel. But he'd started the conversation with veiled words of rebellion, not intercourse. Did he want to do both? Could anyone do both, at the same time?

"Are you on your period?" he asked, perhaps sensing Hannah's hesitation.

"No," she said, "I'm just finishing ovulation."

"Okay."

"But I was with someone last night," Hannah said.

"That's fine," Xavier said, and he looked at the girls at their PCs again, as if he expected both of them at any moment to turn, stare at him, read his mind and report the seditious couple in their midst.

"Okay," Hannah said, closing out her account. She rose, and she and Xavier walked in silence through the cafeteria, down the stairs, onto Hannah's hall and to her kennel door to wait.

Bud appeared within a minute.

"Hey, Hannah, hey, Xavier," he said, unlocking Hannah's door. "You're partnering?"

"Yes," Hannah said.

"How much time will you need?" he asked.

Hannah looked at Xavier. He stared back, but there was no answer in his eyes.

"Thirty minutes," Hannah said. That should be more than enough time for Hannah to provide the brief outline of her plan and do her part in providing mutual relief. If there would be any mutual relief. She still wasn't sure, but she looked at Xavier's penis and noticed it beginning to firm up.

Hannah stepped in first, Xavier followed her, Bud locked them in and Hannah drew the curtain.

Immediately, Xavier was against her, the two standing belly to belly, but not to kiss.

"He's one of us," Xavier whispered into her ear.

"I didn't know that," she said.

"When he works Hall 6," Xavier said. "It's obvious."

So this was a guess, Hannah realized. Maybe Bud was just softhearted, and not a card-carrying member of whoever in Xavier's mind "us" was.

"Let's talk in bed," Xavier whispered.

Hannah pulled away, drew her covers down and sat.

Xavier stepped up to her, penis fully-engorged, waiting.

This wasn't talking in bed, she thought, but she opened her mouth and allowed Xavier to press forward, pushing his head past her lips and teeth. She closed her mouth around his shaft, sliding forward on it until his tip had reached the back of her throat, sliding back so she could lick the end of his member, study it.

Still uncertain what Xavier planned, if this was strictly a meeting between two rebels, the sex all a ruse, Hannah found herself responding carnally regardless, her middle warming, the first string of fluid oozing between her lips.

Xavier put his hand on her shoulder, pushing her away from him, pushing her to her back.

Content to let him lead, she scooted until her head was on the pillow, and she spread and raised her legs and looked at Xavier expectantly.

He knelt on her bed, looked at her opening and – if this were all being done to disguise the true purpose of their meeting today – did a very convincing job of having sex, pushing himself into her chamber, his tip forcing apart her vaginal lips, his shaft following, Hannah sighing as her female walls were stretched around his girth.

He lowered himself down to her mouth, smiled, kissed her briefly, and put his mouth at her ear again.

“What are you doing?”

He wasn't looking for the obvious answer, Hannah knew, so she struggled to take her mind off the penis moving slowly into and out of her sheath.

“I'm going to write . . .” she gasped quietly, “two . . . scholarship papers.”

“Huh?”

“I'm not sure how much I can get into,” Hannah said. “It might not work.”

“Papers?” Xavier said, continuing to plumb Hannah's insides.

“Treatises,” she grunted. “Due March 1 . . . oh god . . . I'm writing one with my name, one with another.”

Hannah sighed.

“That's all . . . I can say,” she said. “They announce . . . oh, oh . . . in April. Just . . . just . . .”

Hannah pushed up, wiggled her hips, and for a time the partners worked without speech at their task, breathing heavily, Hannah's mattress shaking rhythmically.

Eventually, Xavier's steady thrusts began to work their magic, and Hannah opened her mouth to grunt and beg.

"Just . . . oh god . . . just hit me right there . . . yeah, yeah, oh god . . . just keep pushing . . . ohnojesusjesusnonostoppleasegodno."

Hannah shook beneath Xavier, who did not withhold his thrusts despite Hannah's pleadings that they stop, because she was not pleading to him directly. After she was done panting and squirming, she looked up at him, still pushing himself into her chamber with steady determination.

"You didn't . . . ?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"Do you want to?"

"Yeah, but you distracted me," Xavier complained.

"How?"

"You were talking about papers," he said. "I was expecting something else."

"What?" Hannah said, beginning to feel uncomfortable. She had just climaxed, but Xavier continued to pound her genitals, her weary clitoris complaining with every strike.

Xavier moved his mouth to her ear again, and said very softly, "I hear you're going to refuse Hall 6."

"Yeah, that too," Hannah whispered back. "I don't think it's a secret, though."

"Maybe not," Xavier gasped, "but it's heroic."

"No," Hannah said. "I'm not trying to make a statement. Working Hall 6 just made me sick, so I can't anymore."

"It doesn't matter what the reason is."

"Okay," Hannah said, drawing in her breath. "Hey, is our meeting done?"

Xavier laughed in her ear.

"Until next month. Why?"

"I'm just asking because . . . because . . . well, could you finish behind me? It's starting to hurt . . . my clitoris."

Xavier immediately withdrew, and Hannah sat up, turned a little stiffly, got on her hands and knees and arched her back, raising her vagina

to Xavier in the hope he would find what he needed.

Soon.

Xavier seemed to appreciate her position, plunging his member into her hole, pushing hard and fast, drawing in his breath with every thrust, obviously nearing completion now that they were done discussing rebellion.

“Hey, Hannah,” said Tammy from beyond the curtain, “are you finished?”

“Almost,” Hannah panted through the stimulation of Xavier’s fierce insertions. “Maybe about a minute?”

Even as Hannah finished speaking her last words, Xavier was groaning through his release, adding his cream to the cocktail of semen and lubricant Hannah had been collecting for days.

“Uh, uh, uh,” he groaned quietly, stirring Hannah’s insides while she held still.

As soon as Xavier withdrew, Hannah slid off the bed, drew open her curtain to find Tammy there, waiting.

“Sorry, I told Bud 30 minutes, should have said 45,” Hannah said.

Xavier was still recovering, crouched on his haunches on Hannah’s bed, back bowed as if in defeat.

Was it defeat? If you have sex to have sex, no. If you have sex as part of a meeting with someone to talk about . . . whatever they had just talked about . . . maybe it was.

Maybe, Hannah thought, as she waited for Xavier to recover enough to move from her bed and stand, maybe sex should be sex, and rebellion should be rebellion.

Or maybe sex that wasn’t rebellion was rebellion after all by its very nature, she and the other slaves forgetting their owners and their masters to be with each other, defiance every time a pair of genitals met and wetted themselves in mutual, self-focused relief.

Tammy unlocked Hannah’s kennel door, and Hannah, after standing at her toilet to wipe herself, followed Xavier out.

“I need some more time at the PCs,” Hannah explained.

Xavier went back to his hall after kissing Hannah at the door. She went back upstairs.

So this would be a monthly thing with Xavier, Hannah speculated, as she logged back in to her account. Once a month, he’d ask to mate with

her in her kennel, and while he was ravishing her insides, he'd be expecting her to whisper her report of sedition and disobedience.

She opened her email from Mother, a sweet note thanking her for coming out, for putting up with Roger's family, for being kind to Chancie and Tupper, for being a devoted daughter.

Hannah replied in kind, secretly glad that it would be impossible for her to live out there with Mother, so no one could ask and she wouldn't have to say no.

She wandered Look! for a time, aimlessly, expressing her satisfaction with a pictures here and there of the images that had been posted after the long holiday – of her and Athena, her and Delilah, all of them with Ramone, and all of Mother's people. And then she opened Sylvia's email, which had arrived while she and Xavier were having sex.

"It's good to hear from you," Sylvia had written, with a politeness that seemed artificial. But then, who could tell? "We'll need to talk in person, but can it wait until next week? I'd like Paula on as technician, and she'll be back then."

"Yes," Hannah replied, swallowing.

So this is how it would be. Paula, wielder of capsaicin and pusher of electric buttons, had to be there. Sylvia was more or less telling Hannah that she would be tortured again. Telling her in passing, as if it were just another minor matter that needed to be taken care of.

Hannah forced her mind to focus on what this was really about: Bringing Raven home. Alleviating the misery of Gramma and Uncle Bear. Returning all of the family – her family, arguably – to proper order. Uncle Bear, in particular, for he had suffered enough. His love for Raven, she believed, was sincere.

More than sincere.

Profound.

Eternal.

Divine.

And now the girl was gone.

Hannah thought of the photo in the Petrosyan's dining room, of Raven on Easter, just her image to preside over the Thanksgiving meal, instead of her in the flesh, her empty chair a second, tragic affront.

Chapter 37: Another Conversation with Sylvia

Hannah, knowing that suffering awaited her, lost herself over the week in her studies, and her treatises, and her plot, drifting through the other aspects of her life as in a trance. She gossiped and made love in the kennels, collected soiled sheets and delivered clean sets, went out Friday and Saturday night with Allain, and smiled and orgasmed and always kept a part of her mind reserved for other things.

A week after Thanksgiving, on the first Monday in December, Hannah received another email from Sylvia.

“We’ll be picking you up Wednesday,” she wrote.

“It needs to be Wednesday afternoon,” Hannah replied. “I have chores that morning.”

Sylvia never wrote back, and Hannah spent the next two days locked with a PC in one of the private rooms, her Austin work set on the back burner while she pored over a dozen textbooks and a dozen more scientific journals, some covering reverse somatic hypermutation, some addressing the neuron channeling of beta blockers.

Hannah imagined the conversation that could occur at any moment and that would bring everything to ruin:

“What are you working on, Hannah?” a staff person might ask.

“The Burnham scholarship paper.”

“But Hannah, you seem to be working from books and articles on two entirely different topics.”

“I am,” Hannah would confess.

“And why are you doing that?”

“Because I’m going to submit two papers,” Hannah would say. “One under my name, and one under the name Spartacine Arkkola.”

“But you’re not Spartacine Arkkola,” the staff person would observe. Donovan would say that. Tammy might too. Hannah wasn’t sure about Bud.

“You’re right,” Hannah would agree. “I’m not Spartacine Arkkola. I made her up. She’s Finnish.”

“Well, that’s a lie, then,” the staff person would conclude. “So I’ll get you scheduled for Hall 6. For a long visit.”

“Sounds great!” Hannah would say, enthusiastically. Fearlessly. “But I’m going to be tortured on Wednesday, so could you schedule it for Thursday or Friday?”

But no one came. And Hannah learned, and wrote, and learned, and wrote.

And lied.

Spartacine Arkkola was free. She loved to watch the Northern Lights. She would stand on the beach and listen to the waves rolling in from the Gulf of Bothnia. She would run across the frozen tundra. When she was eight, someone had painted her face to look like a reindeer, and she'd been so taken with the work she'd committed herself to finding a family of reindeer to live with. Her family never succeeded in dissuading her, but eventually the paint wore off.

Spartacine was born a year after Hannah, in May, in a tiny coastal town called Kaskinen. Homeschooled by a brilliant mother, with assistance from a father who worked in nuclear physics, she was reading by age 3 and studying high school textbooks by 12, but without any high school transcripts, regrettably. Fortunately, she'd taken a special test, roughly translated as the Finnish National Maths and Sciences for University Exam, and she'd done exceptionally well, scoring in the top 5 percent among her peers in all areas, and she'd received a certificate stating so, a certificate which, of all the falsehoods Hannah had to fabricate, proved the most challenging, requiring that she create from scratch, with no recipe, a convincing document written in Finnish translated online from English, issued by a Finnish institution that didn't exist, for a young girl who didn't exist.

Spartacine Arkkola wished to study biology. And she wished to do it in another town on another gulf, but in a big town this time, and a hot one, in Texas.

"With my dream of becoming a doctor who heals the sick and improves lives, I feel that the University of Corpus Christi would be a very good place for me for my studies," Spartacine had written in her application essay, using excellent but slightly stilted English.

What did Spartacine Arkkola look like?

She was blonde, and fair. Even beautiful, it might be said.

Someone had taken a picture of Spartacine very recently, wearing a red flannel shirt and jeans, which stylish Finnish girls certainly wear, standing in front of the raw timbers of a slightly decrepit barn which could easily have been raised somewhere years ago among the farms and fallow fields of Kaskinen.

Spartacine looked a bit like Hannah. A great deal like Hannah, in fact. But where there was a silver collar around the neck of Hannah, Spartacine wore a black choker which, if one looked very closely, one might notice didn't seem to be quite real, or quite on Spartacine's body. The light was off a bit.

The image, once it was created, sat discreetly in Spartacine's account. Perhaps it would be seen, one day. Perhaps never.

The fee for international applicants was \$75. Spartacine paid it from a short-term debit card issued by an American bank, which any foreign student might choose to do.

Spartacine had a Look! email address, and she was certainly not the only young female in Northern Europe who chose that platform for electronic communications.

All who applied to the university had to answer certain questions, about gender and disabilities, race and ethnicity, and if they were or were not a subject.

Spartacine was not a subject, of course. She was completely free. She ran across the frozen tundra whenever she chose, in fact. She almost joined a family of reindeer once. So Hannah clicked no on that question.

And then Spartacine Arkkola, acting through the fingers of Hannah Loughbridge, indicated her desire to submit a treatise for the Charles H. Burnham Scholarship for Undergraduate Biological Innovation.

How many lies was Hannah about to tell? she asked herself, as the arrow hovered above the SUBMIT button in the lower left corner of the computer screen. Would each lie have to be individually accounted for when her punishment was scheduled? Or would her utterly fraudulent application prove to constitute so many lies they couldn't be individually listed, placing her in a special category of disobedience, a special class of suffering?

And yet, had someone been watching her at this moment, on a Tuesday, the eve of her date with Sylvia and Paula, they would have detected no more than a half-second's hesitation before she committed herself to destruction.

That night, Hannah dreamed of Sylvia and Paula again, vividly, but not in terror, and she didn't cry out when she awoke a little after 4 a.m., and there was no sweat on her brow this time, soaking her sheets and making them cling to her back and bare breasts.

Sylvia and Paula worked for her in her dream, and Hannah was naked, and chained, but she wasn't being tortured. Instead, she was standing and asking the questions, about reverse somatic hypermutation and its potential as a treatment for allergic rhinitis, and it was Spartacine Arkkola bound to the wooden chair this time, and she was answering each question perfectly, in a calm, even voice, despite the capsaicin paste that had been spread all the way around her neck, where she sometimes wore a fashionable black choker.

And when Spartacine urinated in terror and pain, it was the salty waters of the Gulf of Bothnia that ran over the edge of the chair and down the drain.

Hannah fell into a fitful sleep after the dream, awoke before 8, went to breakfast, did her chores, studied, went to lunch, returned to her kennel to study and wait.

"Hey, Hannah, ready to go?" Tammy asked a little after 1.

Hannah, books spread across her lap, lay them aside and slid off her bed, turning to find both Tammy and Sylvia waiting at the bars, Tammy bearing standard full chains.

"Hi, Sylvia," Hannah said, trying to keep her voice as even as Spartacine's had been in her dream, although her heart was thumping in her chest and her ears.

"Hello, Hannah," Sylvia said.

Hannah held her hands out in front.

"In back," Tammy said.

Hannah obeyed, turning and holding her hands behind her, staring at her bed while her wrists were bound, her ankles were chained, her door was unlocked.

Tammy and Sylvia each took an arm, escorting Hannah through processing, past the supplies and laundry room and examination tables and into the hollows of a truck with benches on one side, small cages on the other, featuring smaller benches, like the cage she had occupied to get back and forth to Mother's. There would be no all-enveloping platform this time, no darkness and musty air, no hogtying. The smell here was of coffee, and disinfectant, and the odors that emanate from plastic seat covers.

Hannah was walked to a cage, locked in, and she sat, bare bottom on cold metal, and tried to get comfortable.

Sylvia took a seat facing Hannah and set a legal pad on her lap, barely acknowledging Tammy when she pulled the door closed and latched it and locked it.

“I hope you’re prepared to talk now, Hannah?” Sylvia asked.

“This is fine.”

“We always get a little backed up during the holidays, so we’re going to chat while we drive, and we won’t need as much time at the office.”

“Okay.”

“Are you familiar with the terms of Raven’s policy?” Sylvia inquired.

Hannah looked into the woman’s face. Their last meeting had ended badly. Hannah, mind sharp and focused and angry, as it always was after the infliction of pain, had focused on hurting Sylvia.

I’m sure your family is very proud

Sylvia hadn’t responded, simply got up and had Hannah taken away.

Was she bitter? Was this her chance for revenge? Or would she be professional, as focused on what Hannah had to say as Hannah was on neuronically-channeled beta blockers and Spartacine was on reverse somatic hypermutation?

“Not really,” Hannah replied.

The truck engine rumbled to life. Sylvia crossed her legs and looked at Hannah with the blank, impassive mask she usually wore to do her job.

“Raven was reported missing on September 25,” Sylvia said. “If she’s not found within five months of the reporting date, on February 25, the policy pays two million dollars.”

“Raven’s worth more than that,” Hannah asserted.

“It is an unusually large sum,” Sylvia said. “I just want you to understand how seriously this matter is being taken.”

“I get that,” Hannah said, swallowing and fighting jangling nerves. The truck was moving now, running over the same streets of Corpus Christi it had last time.

“Raven was stolen,” Hannah blurted.

Sylvia looked down at her legal pad, wrote for what felt like a minute.

“Is that what she told you?”

Hannah laughed. Two months ago, in her first meeting with Sylvia, such a question would have terrified her. Now Hannah understood what was being done.

And she wasn't having it.

“Why would you ask me that?” Hannah inquired.

“Well, you just said—”

“Do you think I've been talking to Raven?”

“I don't know how else you would know that she was stolen.”

“So you can't think of any way to know something about someone other than if they tell you?”

Sylvia breathed in, breathed out through her nose. “Are you just trying to fuck with me?” she asked.

“No,” Hannah said. “Are you just trying to fuck with me?”

“You know you're going to be chaired again, right?”

“Chaired?” Hannah repeated, swallowing, clenching her jaw. “Like a verb? Chaired?”

“Okay,” Sylvia said, uncrossing her legs, crossing them back in the reverse order. “If this is some kind of . . . continuation of the . . . argument we had last time? Because if you—”

“Argument?” Hannah interrupted, leaning toward the chain link that separate her from Sylvia. “The way I remember it, it was mainly torturing. I don't remember much arguing, other than me asking you to stop.”

Sylvia sighed. “So you think Raven was stolen.”

“I know she was.”

“Explain.”

“Because she knew what would happen if she disappeared.”

“What would happen?”

“Pain,” Hannah said. “For Gramma. For Uncle Bear – I mean, Gerald . . . and for me.”

“For you?”

“She knew about the interrogation,” Hannah said. “She knew about the torture. She knew she'd be tortured if I disappeared. She knew I'd be tortured if she disappeared. She wouldn't have let it happen.”

“How did she know that?” Sylvia asked, writing things on her legal pad.

“She found things online,” Hannah said. “People talk.”

“And how do you know she knew?”

“I can’t say,” Hannah said, because Uncle Bear had found the revelation in Raven’s diary, a book no one could know he’d breached. “And I don’t think it matters. And you need to not ask him. And you need to look into people who steal people, however you do that. If any . . . people who do that were in Dallas . . . near the grocery store where Raven . . . disappeared. Because she didn’t escape.”

Sylvia scribbled more, looked up. “This is what we call a voluntary uncorroborateable opinion.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed.

“The procedures are a little different,” she said.

“Better or worse?”

“Better,” Sylvia said, looking at Hannah with what appeared to be, briefly, relief.

“Tell me what you’re going to do,” Hannah said.

“Paula will—”

“Don’t blame Paula,” Hannah said.

Sylvia blinked.

“It’ll be one round,” she said. “Answer the questions the same way twice . . . before . . . and during, and you’ll be done.”

“During?” Hannah said.

“Yeah, during.”

“During what?” Hannah demanded. “During what, Sylvia?”

“Torture,” Sylvia said. “Do you want to back out?”

“No,” Hannah said. “And I’m sure that’s not an option anyway, at this point.”

“Why did you contact me?”

“Because of Raven,” Hannah replied.

“You don’t care that—”

“I don’t know how things work in your world,” Hannah said. “But I want her found, and this is worth it. She wants to be found.”

“You understand why this is necessary, right?” Sylvia asked.

“You mean, torture?”

“Your testimony could impact things. It might, or it might not. But you can’t ask someone to alter the procedures of a two million dollar investigation based on information that isn’t . . . invested.”

“Invested,” Hannah echoed, smiling grimly.

The truck stopped, backed up, stopped. The engine fell silent.

Someone unlocked and unlatched the truck door. The door rolled up, and Hannah looked toward it, a man there, familiar to her, standing on the lip of a short porch.

“Hey, Hal,” Sylvia said.

“Hey, Sylv.”

“Can you take her to Room 3? And get Paula and Dr. Creighton?”

“Sure.”

“Hannah,” Sylvia said. “I’m going to write up some questions, and Hal is going to get you set up in one of the rooms, and we should be getting started in about 10 minutes.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, sensing a sudden rush of adrenalin, her heart thumping out a response that she fully understood but could not logically counteract. “Sure.”

Sylvia departed, stepped through the door into the building. Hal unlocked Hannah’s cage, took her by her upper arm and walked her off the truck, across the porch, through the door, down a hall and through the building’s lobby.

Someone had set up a Christmas tree here, and decorated it with an eclectic mix of ornaments, birds and balls and gingerbread men and the baby Jesus in a manger. A Christmas song was playing from speakers set somewhere in the ceiling.

Was Sylvia wearing her cross today? Hannah couldn’t recall.

Hal stepped up to a woman seated behind a desk, a young receptionist who might or might not know about the things done here, that she was helping to arrange.

“Can you get Paula and Brice? We’re doing this in Room 3.”

“Yeah.”

Hannah wanted to be held, wanted the hand around her upper arm as the man escorted her down one hall, turned down a second, past a water cooler, down a third hall. Her legs were weak, wobbly. The touch of another human was a strange comfort, even if he worked here and was a full party to what was going to be done.

This all looked vaguely familiar to Hannah, but the memories were coming through the filter of past fear, past suffering.

They reached a door marked with a brass “3.”

Hannah remembered it from last time. The same room.

The man opened the door, led Hannah in, and she drew in her breath and looked at the heavy, wooden chair she'd been bound to two months before, and she wondered how many had sat there since her last visit.

A man entered immediately behind her. A tall, kindly doctor with glasses and gray hair.

"Hannah?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir," Hannah said.

"I'm Dr. Creighton," he said. "I'll be attending today."

"Okay," Hannah said, blood rushing in her ears.

"Paula should be right along."

"Okay."

"Are you enjoying the holidays?"

Hannah looked at him. Was he asking her?

Yes. He was staring at her with a pair of bright, curious eyes. Kindly eyes. If Hannah's arms hadn't been bound uselessly behind her, he might have offered his hand.

"Yes," Hannah said.

Paula arrived.

"Hi," she said, tersely.

"Hi, Paula," Hannah said.

Paula drew Hannah to the chair, eased her onto it, strapped her shins, released her wrists from their cuffs, strapped her upper arms.

"Head back," Paula said.

Hannah obeyed and Paula adjusted the cushion so that, when Hannah jerked and writhed, that's what her head would strike.

Hal left, Dr. Creighton withdrew to a place against the wall, and Paula stepped up with a tube and two little squares of black mesh, an inch on each side.

Hannah was shaking now, involuntarily. But she wasn't afraid. She wasn't frightened at all. Only her body was. It was as if her body had its own mind, and it knew what must be done and was responding in its own way, while her mind remained calm, serene.

Paula squeezed a drop of clear gel from the tube onto one finger, put the tube into her pocket and reached down, grabbing Hannah's left nipple and pulling up, applying the gel to the underside of her breast.

“Slide left,” Paula said, squeezing out a second dollop of gel.

Hannah obeyed and Paula applied the gel to Hannah’s right hip, over the joint., where the femur meets with the pelvis.

Gel applied, Paula affixed the two meshes, and Hannah looked down and wondered how it would feel when the current began coursing through her body, if it would follow a straight line through her lungs and liver and viscera, or travel across her skin. How did electricity travel through flesh? Hannah didn’t know. She should know this.

Sylvia entered, bearing her legal pad and a cup of coffee.

“Is she ready?” she asked, turning to Dr. Creighton.

He stepped up, pushed the ends of his stethoscope into his ears, breathed on the other end and warmed it with his hand, and pressed it against Hannah’s chest, between her breasts.

“Heart rate seems a little elevated,” he said, “but she’s got a strong heart. Very healthy.”

He straightened.

“Hannah, have you had any coffee today?” he asked.

“Yes, Sir, one cup.”

“Do you have heart palpitations?”

“No, Sir.”

“Panic attacks?”

“Only when I have something to panic about.”

Dr. Creighton laughed.

“Hannah, any other reason we can’t proceed?”

“No, Sir.”

“Okay, all set,” he said, stepping back with a nod to Sylvia.

“Go ahead,” Sylvia said.

Paula used little clamps to attach two long wires to the meshes on Hannah’s breast and hip. The wires ran to a box in Paula’s hand. A cord ran from the box to some place behind the chair, an outlet set into the floor. There was also a drain set into the floor, between Hannah’s feet, she recalled. Would she need to use it this time?

“Hannah,” Sylvia began, looking only at her legal pad while Hannah studied her face.

“Where is Raven?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you believe Raven was taken against her will?”

“Yes.”

“Have you spoken to Raven since September 25 of last year?”

“No.”

“Why was Raven taken?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where is Raven’s car?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who took Raven?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay,” Sylvia said. “You’re going to receive a quick stimulus, and then—”

“A stimulus?” Hannah interrupted.

“A stimulus,” Sylvia repeated, and she nodded to Paula, and Paula did something to the box in her hand, and Hannah screamed, even before she felt what was happening, her lungs and her throat combining to issue a high-pitched “Auuggghhh!” before her mind knew rationally she was being shocked.

The pain vanished as quickly as it began, leaving Hannah gasping, shaking, determined.

“Can you give us any new answers, Hannah?” Sylvia said, and her tone sounded pleading now, as if she wanted, more fervently than Hannah, for this to end without further torture.

“I can’t,” Hannah replied hoarsely.

“If you can give us any new answers, Hannah,” Sylvia said, despondently, “we’ll let you up and send you back home. But if you can’t change your answers, we’ll need to stimulate you again.”

Hannah kept looking.

“Okay?”

Hannah stared. This was different from last time. She hadn’t prepared for this. She’d assumed it would be the same as before. Capsaicin. Meshes on the breasts. Shocks. Questions. Done.

“Okay, Hannah?”

“Huh?”

“Okay, Hannah?”

“Okay what?” Hannah asked.

“If you can give us any new answers, we’ll let you up, and you can go home now. But unless you can change any answer . . . even just one

answer . . . we'll need to stimulate you again."

"Oh," Hannah said, playing Sylvia's words through her head until she understood them. "Yes. Yes. I don't have any other answers. Yes."

Sylvia looked at Dr. Creighton, and he stepped up with his stethoscope, forgetting to warm it this time so it made Hannah gasp when he pressed it between her breasts. Done with that, he pulled out a penlight, flicked it into her eyes. But he didn't check her blood pressure. Perhaps each doctor approached the attending of torture in their own way, one checking certain things, the other checking certain other things.

"Good to go," he said, aiming a warm smile at Hannah.

Paula turned to Sylvia.

Sylvia nodded.

Paula did something to the box in her hand.

Hannah clenched her jaw, the pain arising where it had before, under her left breast, at her right hip. But it wasn't unbearable this time, just very uncomfortable. As if she were recovering from surgery.

"Oh," Hannah grunted.

"Where is Raven?"

"I don't . . . know."

"Do you believe Raven was taken against her will?"

The pain grew in intensity.

"Ow. Ow. Ow."

"Do you believe Raven was taken against her will?"

"Yes. Yes I do. Ow."

"Have you spoken to Raven since September 25 of last year?"

The pain ebbed. Was it supposed to fluctuate? Hannah looked at Paula, who was staring intently down at the box in her hand, two fingers moving visibly. Like a musician. Or an artist.

This wasn't a button, Hannah realized. It was a dial, sending the current in ebbs and flows, waxing and waning. If it were always flowing, all Hannah could do was scream. If it ebbed, she would experience moments of lucidity.

"Hannah?"

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Have you spoken to Raven since September 25 of last year?"

"No."

"Why was Raven taken?"

“Oh. Ow. Stop.”

“Why was Raven taken?”

“I don’t . . . I don’t know.”

“Where is Raven’s car?”

“I don’t know. Auuugggh!”

“Who took Raven?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know!”

“Was she taken by Absolution?”

“Who?” Hannah didn’t remember this question. The pain was ebbing now, Paula’s fingers stilled.

“Was she taken by Absolution?”

“Absolution?” Hannah repeated.

“Yes, Absolution. Was Raven taken by Absolution?”

Paula’s fingers twitched.

“Auugh, god help me, no no no!”

“Was she taken by Absolution?”

“Nooooo, jesusgodnohelpmepleaseno!” Hannah screamed.

“Was she taken by Absolution?”

“Noooooooo!”

“Was she taken by Absolution?”

“Yes, she was, she was!” Hannah screamed. “I’m sorry, she was! Oh god, I’m so sorry!”

The pain ended, completely, and Hannah crumpled, wept, chin on her chest, all her senses consumed by the feeling that was no longer there.

Hannah heard the sound of a chair, being wheeled to a position immediately before her.

“Hannah?”

Hannah ignored the voice, choosing instead to weep quietly.

“Hannah?”

“Hannah?”

“Hannah?”

“What?” Hannah demanded, furious with the intrusion of her name into her private world, raising her eyes to stare into Sylvia’s impassive face. “What?”

“You shared some new information with us today,” Sylvia said. “So we’re going to need to keep going.”

“No,” Hannah said, voice raw, sounding strange in her ears. “No!”

“You said Absolution took Raven.”

Hannah breathed in, breathed out. Yes, she had said that.

“I did it to stop the torture.”

“Why did Absolution take her?”

“I don’t know . . . if they did or not.”

“When did Absolution take her?”

“September, um, 18,” Hannah replied. She looked at Paula, who was studying the box in her hand but doing nothing to it. At any moment, she might twitch again.

At any moment.

“Is that what they told you?” Sylvia asked quietly.

“Who?”

“Is that what Absolution told you? That they took Raven on September 18?”

Ah.

Of course.

This was a trick. A trap. Hannah had stumbled into it.

“No one told me anything,” Hannah croaked, focusing now, as she always did when the pain faded. “I’ve never talked to Absolution. I don’t know if Absolution took Raven. I don’t know who took her. But if they did, it was on September 18. That’s when she disappeared. It’s when she was taken. By someone. That’s all I know.”

“Done,” Sylvia said quietly, seemingly relieved, and she and Dr. Creighton left the room and Paula removed the clamps from the meshes and removed the meshes from Hannah’s body and wiped the gel off Hannah’s breast and hip and put a rag against Hannah’s face, and Hannah blew her nose and straightened her back and waited.

Paula left and two men entered the room with a plastic platform, and Hannah was released from the chair and strapped to the platform and hogtied, and the man told her to raise her hips and she did so, wincing when the lubricated plugs were slid up her anus and vagina.

Bound with her face in the platform’s musty interior, she was wheeled through the halls, traveling at times beneath speakers that were playing a new Christmas song.

Then to the truck, transported alone back to the kennels, unbound, unplugged, unhogtied, walked in chains to her space, locked in there until dinner.

She closed her curtain, went to her toilet, wiped, flushed, went to her bed and sat, staring at the cinderblock wall. She'd held her urine on the chair this time.

It was a victory, of sorts. Sylvia's art hadn't reduced her to quite the despairing, incontinent, broken creature of her last visit.

But she couldn't keep doing this.

Harm was being done, she believed. Unknown harm. More than a disturbed dream now and then.

People lost their gods this way.

She turned to a book, touched it, withdrew her hand, stared at the cinderblock wall again, and smiled.

No, she had done what must be done. For Raven. She had survived. And she had learned something.

Sylvia or the people Sylvia was working with believed that Raven had been taken by someone in particular: Absolution. Were they really so powerful, so far-reaching? Mother gave money to them, Hannah knew. Were they using their money only to lobby, to support political candidates, to push for new laws? Or were they also breaking the law with their donations? Stealing slaves? Freeing slaves?

Hannah didn't dare look them up from the kennel PCs, but she had to wonder.

She picked up a book, opened it, continued where she'd left off.

Still smiling.

are you just trying to fuck with me?

Chapter 38: Plug and Cup

"Hannah."

"Hannah."

"Hannah."

"Oh," Hannah said, startled. "What?"

"Are you okay?"

"What?" Hannah asked, picking at her lunch, looking up from spaghetti and meatballs into the worried eyes of Jane.

"Are you okay?" Jane asked.

Hannah laughed. "I am. I'm okay."

"You don't seem okay."

“I’m fine.”

“You’re a million miles away.”

“I’m fine,” Hannah insisted. “It’s just school stuff.”

“Okay,” Jane said, clearly not convinced. “When are you leaving for Christmas break?”

Hannah’s face darkened, slightly. She would not be riding with Allain this time. She’d be shipped. She’d be chained and caged, most likely, while Allain’s trip home was diverted for a visit to a small medical school in San Antonio.

“Tomorrow,” Hannah said. “Tuesday.”

“Did that girl, um, Athena, buy that boy?”

“No,” Hannah said. “Ramone’s going back to Brazil. They announced it yesterday.”

“What?”

“A repatriation law. We’ll be trading people with Brazil and some other countries.”

“Will he still be a slave?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you sad?”

“I don’t know.”

“Didn’t you and he . . . have a thing?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, looking into Jane’s eyes, down to her breasts and their perpetually erect nipples, back to her eyes. “He’d . . . threaten me . . . and assault me, sort of . . . and I’d bite his shoulder . . . and I’d scream . . . and we’d do it . . . really hard.”

“Do you need someone to do that with?” Jane asked. “Here?”

Hannah laughed, shoved her fork into her food, raised it, bending her face down to suck up a long string of spaghetti, and she looked up at Jane again and returned to the present time and her present body.

“I scream really loud,” Hannah said. “If I did that here with someone, with you, they’d come running, and probably walk you to Hall 6 before I could explain.”

Hannah pondered.

“But I’m not sure how much I . . . really need it anymore.”

Indeed.

Hannah was writing two scholarship treatises, the second under a name that was a lie, the name of a girl who had never been born, never

made love, never worn chains or been sent to a cage; the name of a girl fabricated from whole cloth in an act of mad deception, of shrieking defiance, so much more potent than her strange passions against Ramone's body the old playing seemed quaint. Innocent.

But this would hurt.

Yes, losing Ramone would hurt.

"Uh huh," Hannah said, swallowing and looking into Jane's eyes. "I'm going to miss Ramone."

"I'm sorry," Jane said, eyes blinking with sincerity.

"I'll be okay," Hannah said. "People come and go."

For a time, the two girls looked off, at other people.

Hannah smiled at Jacob, sitting with friends, his ungainly face spreading into a beautiful, tragic smile, and he saw her looking and smiled back and left her to wonder what he thought of her, if he was interested in her, if they'd ever get a chance to talk about being raised by polygamists, and about his studies, because he was going to school here too.

"You sign up for classes yet?" Jane asked.

"I got it done yesterday," Hannah said.

"Whatcha taking?"

"It depends on what I actually get. Free people get their classes first, subjects get what's left. But physics, biology, English, maybe a law class, maybe math or history or more biology."

"Think you'll get that, uh, job?"

"The assistanceship?" Hannah inquired, and her eyes darkened again, because this was something she really, really wanted. "I don't think so. I haven't heard anything. Probably not."

"How is Austin going?"

"Oh," Hannah replied. "A little slow. Those papers . . . the scholarship paper . . . it's really sucking up my life right now."

"What are you doing over break?"

"No major trips planned," Hannah replied. "Maybe they'll let me see my mom again. And I'm sure I'll be doing some entertaining, when Allain leaves. He's doing a trip the second week of January. And I'm working on the papers, and I'm going to try to finish my classes over break too."

"You don't seem that excited about it."

“I’m not looking forward to getting shipped. They’re doing that both ways.”

“When are you getting sent back here?” Jane asked.

“I’m not sure,” Hannah replied. “Mid-January or so. What about you?”

“Probably the day before classes start. January 20.”

Jane paused. “What are you doing tonight?” she asked. “Got time for one last fling?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said. “I’m taking Brad for a farewell right after dinner. I can do 8:30 in your kennel, if you don’t mind tasting him.”

“Not at all.”

After breakfast the next morning, Hannah went somberly to the PCs, logged on to close things out for the holidays. She was scheduled to go to processing around 1:30 for shipping, so this was possibly her last time with liberal computer access for a month.

She’d packed up most of her books over the weekend and given them to Allain, along with instructions for the clothes she’d need in Dallas.

This was a disruption she didn’t really want, she admitted to herself.

For every bright moment – holiday parties, gifts, dinners at the club, perhaps seeing mother – there would be inconveniences, changes to routines she’d gotten used to, and the distractions of Athena, whose search for a male had returned to square one with Ramone’s upcoming departure.

Would Athena send Hannah out for a new round of assessments next spring? Or decide not to wait until then? Would she have Hannah taken back to the stacks in Dallas over the holidays for a supervised visit with another stranger or two?

Hannah wanted nothing to do with any of it.

And then, Ramone was leaving, and that would bring both pain and more disruption.

And Raven was still missing, and that would bring something worse.

Whether escaped or stolen, Raven’s absence would cast a pall over what was supposed to be the year’s happiest season.

Gramma and Uncle Bear, who lingered in Hannah’s memory like two fading ghosts over Thanksgiving, would be all the sadder, all the more

broken-hearted and betrayed now.

Hannah had agreed to partner with Uncle Bear over the holidays. Would he even be able to perform? She wasn't concerned about his penis, which invariably sprang to life under her guidance, but there was more to sex than that. Would he move above her numbly until he sighed through a trivial release?

Would he cry when it was done, because Hannah wasn't Raven?

With lunch less than an hour away, Hannah emailed Mother about holiday plans and, in a second email, confirmed her availability to Athena's friend Jessica, who was hoping for some time with her over the holidays, possibly as part of a class assignment of some kind.

Hannah looked at her final Austin assignments, determined to finish all four classes before Corpus Christi's spring semester began. And she opened an email with the subject line "Work-Study Spring," reading quickly:

"To: Hannah Loughbridge," it began.

"(SS#/Federal ID: N8114P165)

"Stipend: \$17.50/hour

"Hours per week: 10-20

"Assistanceship Orientation (Biology/Medical) will be held at 3:30 p.m. Monday, January 21, in Cambridge Hall, Rm. 221. You will receive your initial detail that week. If you cannot attend, please contact . . ."

The rest of the email was lost to Hannah, because she was holding her hands over her mouth while her eyes flooded with tears.

Everything she believed about the universe was, apparently, wrong.

In just over a month, she would be not only a student, in a classroom, in a school she could touch and see and feel, but she would also be the proud holder of an assistanceship, something free students fought over.

Yes, she was sitting naked in a building called the kennels. Yes, in a few hours, she would be bound and caged in some unknown way – hogtied again? – for an interminably long trip to Dallas.

But none of that mattered now. With a few words on a computer screen, she had ascended to a place that made chains and bars and humiliation irrelevant.

Did the Petrosyans know? Possibly not. Hannah decided she would share this news in person, so she could see their faces, so she could drink in

their adulation the moment it emanated, so she could feel the family's admiration the way she would feel a classroom seat beneath her clothed bottom.

One treatise. Only one treatise. Hannah would submit the best, under her name only, and if it were as good as she believed it would be, she would win second place, and she would be happy, and she would not be punished.

And Spartacine Arkkola would cease to exist, vanishing into the same ether from which she'd sprung.

Perhaps Spartacine had already been turned down. Perhaps the admissions staff at the University of Texas at Corpus Christi had sensed fraud in Spartacine's application from the first moment, and summarily rejected her with no further concern or comment.

Hannah, peering about her to make sure no one was looking, opened Spartacine's email account in hopes of finding denial.

No, it was not to be. The confirmation email had been sent from admissions last Thursday. Somehow, a chimera, a non-person, a work of fiction – indeed, a work of insurrection – had been accepted as a member in good standing of next year's freshman class.

As Hannah had a month ago, Spartacine received a second email, on Friday, reminding her that she'd checked the box that indicated her plan to submit a Burnham Scholarship treatise.

Sometime in the spring, Spartacine would email her regrets. She'd be going to school in Oslo, she'd say, and she wouldn't be submitting a paper after all.

But in the meantime, would Spartacine cease working on her paper?

No.

Hannah couldn't conceive of abandoning either of her two topics. Each had ascended to a life of its own. Things were taking shape. Ideas were emerging, some profound, some insightful, some at least noteworthy.

Hannah pressed her fingers against her eyes, dried the tears by brushing her fingers against her hips, shut down all her accounts, and headed to lunch, as ebullient as she had been somber before.

The cafeteria was half-empty, many of the subjects already gone for the break. Jacob was sitting alone by the window.

“Hi,” Hannah said, setting her tray across from his. He’d brought a book, something with very dense type.

“Hey,” he said, with an instant smile.

“Are you doing school next semester?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

“I just got an assistanceship,” Hannah said.

“Congratulations back, then.”

“Thanks. What are you taking?”

“Ancient languages,” Jacob replied. “Accounting. Intro to pharmacy.”

“Oh, kind of a mix,” Hannah said.

“Mainly I’m just tutoring Derisa.”

“Derisa?”

“Her family owns me.”

“Oh, the student here?”

“Yeah,” Jacob said.

He looked at his tray, looked back up at Hannah.

“She might want to talk to you,” he said. “After New Year’s.”

“What about?” Hannah asked.

“Us.”

“Um . . . us?”

“Yeah,” Jacob said. “She doesn’t get it.”

“Doesn’t get what?” Hannah asked.

“What you want.”

“What I want?” Hannah said, and she felt her cheeks beginning to burn.

Jacob set his fork down, crossed his arms, hunched up, sighed, leaned back and looked at Hannah.

“She’s found your pictures.”

“What do you mean?”

“On Look!,” Jacob explained. “She’s seen you there. You were at a party, and on a mountain somewhere.”

“Guadalupe. We went there in the summer.”

“So she’s not sure what you want . . . with me.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, blushing anew, deeply embarrassed, for herself, for Jacob, for Jacob’s owner, for everyone. Could a girl not flirt without being accused of wanting something she shouldn’t have? Could she not be sweet to a boy who looked like Jacob? Were there some minds that could not fathom the coupling of a girl who looked like Hannah with a boy who looked like Jacob?

What should she say now? How does one end such a conversation? she wondered. How does one extricate oneself from cruel generalizations and vague accusations?

“Oh,” Hannah repeated, holding up her hands. “I hope I didn’t . . . I wasn’t . . . um . . . inappropriate.”

“No, no, you’re fine,” Jacob said, and he smiled as warmly as he ever did. “It’s just her. She’s a little, you know . . .”

Insecure, Hannah thought. Jealous. Stupid.

But Jacob was grinning, a little sheepishly, and that helped.

“I’d be glad to talk to her,” Hannah said, feeling her emotions settle. “And . . . you know . . . I’m just curious about where you grew up. I was raised by polygamists too. And we’ll both be in school next semester. So we have a lot . . .”

“It’s okay,” he said. “It’s okay. When are you heading out?”

“About 1:30,” she said.

“It’s 1 for me,” he said. “So I should probably get going.”

“Okay, see you after the break,” Hannah said. “Have a great time.”

Jacob rose, tray at his middle, but a quick, surreptitious glance confirmed his penis was in its full, awkward glory, long and thick and ready to be presented, ready to be inserted, to force a grunt from Hannah’s lungs, regardless what Jacob or his owner believed was the proper order of things.

Hannah went back to her kennel at 1:20, sat on her bed, and waited.

All her best books were gone. She’d already showered and used the toilet and eaten and brushed her teeth and pondered. There was nothing to do now but wait, stare at the cinderblocks and watch the minutes tick off on her little battery-powered clock:

1:25

1:31

1:37

1:42

1:48

Finally, at 1:52, after what felt like an eternity of waiting, Tammy showed up at Hannah's stall, bearing the expected set of chains.

"Ready to go, Hannah?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said, sliding off her bed.

"Have you voided in the last few hours?"

"Yes," Hannah replied. "Bowel movement after breakfast, and I peed right after lunch."

Hannah stepped to the bars, held out her hands. "Is the truck here?"

"Yes, they pulled up 10 minutes ago," Tammy said, reaching through to cuff Hannah's wrists in front. "I've loaded two people from hall 1, you're the last."

"What kind of service is it?" Hannah asked.

"Stack cages, chains in the floor."

"Please tell me I'll be able to move."

"Yeah," Tammy said, kneeling to chain Hannah's ankles. "The restraints give you full range. But no buckets."

"No buckets?"

"Cup and plug," Tammy said, opening Hannah's kennel door.

"What's that mean?"

Tammy declined to answer, leading Hannah down the hall and through the entrance into processing.

Two trucks had been backed up to the bays, each wide and cavernous, each lined with the tiny cages used to store and transport subjects, most occupied now, faces and legs and arms and torsos visible here and there near the truck's open mouths, darkness deeper inside, a cacophony of voices and laughter and metal ringing dully against metal.

Near the bays, a small cage lay with its top and side open, two long chains affixed to its metal floor, and no bucket. Hannah knew it was meant for her.

A woman stood at one of the truck's entrances, and she turned when she heard Hannah's chains, looking up from her tablet to the girls' face.

"Hannah?" she said. "Hannah?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said.

"Oh, hello," she sang, stepping up, her body petite, face sharp and inquisitive, black hair parted in the middle. "We're going to get you home."

"Thank you," Hannah said.

The woman looked at her tablet, leaned forward to squint at Hannah's tag and collar, seemed satisfied with what she found.

"Turn for me, please."

Hannah turned, felt the soft press of a phone on her back, a beep confirming that the phone had found the chip lodged in her flesh.

"Bend over for me, please."

Hannah bent, put her hands on her knees, listened to the telltale sound of a rubber glove being snapped on, and waited for the inevitable, staring at the floor while a pair of fingers parted her lips and one slipped up her vagina.

The finger exited, moved to her anus, entered and explored, departed.

"You'll be staying in here for the trip," she said, motioning Hannah to the cage as she pulled off the glove and dropped it into the trash. Hannah stepped over the chain link side and onto the cool, black-tempered steel that would be the foundation of her little home all the way to Dallas.

The woman moved to a steel box just within the truck's entrance, grunted as she noisily removed a long, clanging set of chains, and returned to Hannah's side.

"These are heavy, but longer than most places give you," she said, as if she were trying to convince Hannah to use this service again. "Let's get these on your wrists."

Hannah, still bound by the kennel chains, raised her hands and watched as the woman restrained her hands, dropped to her knees and carefully closed a cuff around each of Hannah's ankles.

The chains were surprisingly heavy, each link twice the thickness of what seemed to pass for secure fetters by kennel standards.

Like the kennel chains and the restraints Hannah wore in Allain's car, these featured a long chain that ran from the middle of her handcuff to the mid-point of her shackles. Still kneeling, the woman picked up the open cuff of one of the floor chains and fastened it to Hannah's left ankle, picked up the second and fastened it around Hannah's right wrist.

"Alright, let's get your first set off," she said, looking at Tammy, who removed Hannah's kennel chains.

"Last step," the woman said. "Have you voided?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said.

“Good. Since you’re not traveling overnight, you’ll be in what we call a plug and cup.”

The woman darted to the steel box, returned with a heavy belt with attachments along the middle strap.

“This is the plug,” she said, pointing to a short spike positioned for insertion up Hannah’s anus. “We’re going to lubricate this and put it up your rear, to prevent bowel release. Okay?”

“Sounds good,” Hannah agreed, guessing the woman couldn’t detect sarcasm.

“And then, this part goes up against your vulva, and you just release into it any time you need to, and we’ll empty it once or twice on the trip. Okay?”

“Won’t it spill?” Hannah asked.

“Little or none,” the woman said. “It’s got a valve that opens for you, and should keep most of the urine in.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, knowing the second purpose of the fixture – preventing masturbation – wouldn’t need to be mentioned.

The woman moved behind Hannah.

“Can you bend for me and open your legs?”

Hannah complied, gritting her teeth in anticipation as the woman brought the belt into position, wincing as she eased the lubricated plug up Hannah’s anus.

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Oh.”

The woman drove the plug all the way in, stepped in front of Hannah, buckled and locked the belt in front and raised the cup to Hannah’s vulva, cinching and tightening the straps and locking them in place so the cup – a barrel of steel that jutted forward like a short but frighteningly thick penis – was pressed against her opening.

“Make sure to get up on your knees to release,” she said. “If you’re lying down, it’s going to be a mess, and we do punish for that.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, wondering if the truck was equipped with its own Hall 6, something deep within where urine-spilling slaves could be bound and hung and whipped and tormented.

“Punishment is done in-cage,” the woman said, as if reading Hannah’s thoughts. “Discipline taps are applied to the thigh or upper arm.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed, trying not to sound sarcastic this time.

“Now, go ahead and drop to your hands and knees and let’s get your cage closed up.”

Hannah obeyed, watching as the woman raised the side, angled over the top, locked everything together at the opposite corners and made another visit to the steel case, this time to retrieve two silver tubes and a small white sticker.

“Water, and a little snack,” she said, clamping the tubes to the side of the cage. The sticker, which Hannah guessed identified her by name and destination and federal ID number, was applied to a flat plate beside the tubes.

The woman looked into the interior of the nearest truck.

“This one’s ready!” she announced.

After a short wait during which Hannah shifted uncomfortably and took disappointed stock of her condition, two men emerged in blue coveralls, one pushing a cart, and they lifted Hannah’s cage onto it and wheeled it through the bay and down the middle of the truck.

Hannah looked up, at the skylight that allowed the day’s bright sunlight into the space, and then around her, into the eyes of slave after slave, all bound and belted the same way, stacked four cages high on either side, perhaps 50 males and females – too many to count or look at closely – all going home or somewhere else for the holidays.

A pulley hung from a track that ran the length of the truck’s ceiling, a rope passing through it, splitting into two ropes with hooks dangling from the ends. The cart stopped, the pulley was moved into position, a man grabbed the rope and lowered the hooks to Hannah’s cage, metal clanging deafeningly against metal as he passed the tips of the hooks through the wires.

Hannah grabbed the sides of her cage, her chains ringing as she was jostled, one man raising her while the other shoved her cage onto the top shelf, four cages high, clamped her cage at the corners, reached up to pull out the hooks, and moved the pulley back to the end of the track.

The men stepped off the truck, the door was rolled closed, latched and locked, and the engine roared, the sound mingling with the rest of the noise here, the constant ring of chains as slaves shifted, the sounds of voices male and female, someone laughing, someone singing.

Hannah sat with her legs crossed, allowing the urine cup to thud against the floor between her leg. She put her hands on her knees, with her

chains draped across her thighs, under her calves and heels. The plug in her rectum was small, disconcerting but not painful, and Hannah tightened her anus around it, decided she'd had worse things done to her, relaxed her hole and tried not to think about her last trip to Dallas, when she rode chained but fully-clothed, and she could read books and look out the windows and play Katzink and talk to Allain.

Chapter 39: A Voice on a Truck

A boy built for labor named Tim sat in the cage on Hannah's left, a recreational girl named Sally was on her right, and Hannah talked to them both and leaned back when they wanted to talk to each other, and the din of conversation against the backdrop of engine roar and chain rattle brought Hannah a modicum of comfort. There were worse ways to travel, she knew. There were worse ways to suffer, everyone knew. If she wanted serene transport, this was not the way to go, but she willed herself to embrace this journey in all its stinging glory, the sounds of her world, her people.

In the first lull in conversation, a half-hour into the trip, a girl kneeling in her cage across from Hannah shrieked, kneeling, neck bowed against the top of her cage, looking down at her middle in disgust.

"Oh fuck, it's going everywhere!" she cried. As Hannah watched, a small puddle of urine spread out from under her knees, running to the edge of her cage floor and cascading down in front of the cages below her.

"You're supposed to kneel!" shouted the girl in the cage beneath her.

"I am kneeling!"

"Move it around a little," suggested a boy.

The girl grabbed her cup, shook it side to side, raised it and let it fall against the floor of her cage, the echoing thud prompting laughter.

"It sounds like you already filled it up," someone shouted.

"You need to cut back on coffee," someone else said, to more laughter.

"The cups are designed to hold up to 32 ounces of fluid," said a boy in an officious tone. "The kidneys produce up to three ounces of fluid per hour, so unless —"

"Maybe she has super kidneys," a girl theorized.

"Super kidneys don't exist," the boy announced.

“Maybe not where you come from,” a girl asserted, “but I know this one lady—”

“I just got this fucking thing on two hours ago!” the girl cried. “This is the first time I’ve gone all morning, and none of it went in!”

“Try shaking it.”

“Okay, okay, it’s working,” she said. “Fuck. Fuck!”

Hannah knew the girl’s unhappiness was about more than sitting in a wet cage. She had followed instructions but still was most likely to be punished at the next stop.

“Wipe it up,” someone suggested.

“There are no wipes,” someone else observed. “They only gave us water and a snack.”

“Mmmm, a snack!” someone shouted, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“It went over the side,” the girl said, peering despondently through the wires of her cage. “It’s on the floor now. Fuck.”

“Maybe it will dry,” someone offered.

Hannah, frightened her cup might malfunction as well, rose to her knees and carefully opened her bladder, relieved to see that most of the fluid disappeared, just a narrow trickle wetting her hair, rolling down the cup’s side and falling to the floor, where she smeared it away with her knee.

The mood on the truck went dark as quickly as it had bloomed, with the women’s threat of a “discipline tap” against thigh or upper arm hovering amidst the confines of the speeding truck, as palpable as the chains and the cages.

Discipline tap. Another euphemism in an industry full of them.

Had a free person with no knowledge of slavery been listening, they might have imagined something kind, even friendly – a touch on the shoulder, a pat on the back, a caress.

It would be none of the above, Hannah was certain.

Conversation eventually picked up again, the laughter resurrected, and when a boy sang “Over the River and Through the Woods,” two girls joined him, offering their own harmonies.

And when the boy – no longer merely singing, but screaming now – replaced the original lyric of the second line with “the truck knows the way, to carry the slaves,” there was bedlam, the hysterical laughter of 50 souls, forcibly sodomized, cupped at the genitals, threatened with pain for things they could not control, caged and chained and made idle for hours.

Hannah brought her bound hands to her face, first to cover her mouth, then to wipe her eyes. Was she not sharing the light and the warmth and the urine-laced air with 50 rebels, 50 soldiers, each fighting in their own way, partners with her in a revolution that had no name and no god?

The truck slowed, sped up, slowed again, stopped, lurched forward and turned, and all knew there must now be a reckoning.

How long had they journeyed? Hannah wondered. An hour? Two hours? Certainly no more than three.

The door of the truck slid open, cool air blowing in. They weren't backed up to a building now. Hannah put her face against the wire, saw bright sunlight and guessed they were parked at a rest stop somewhere. It wasn't frigid outside, fortunately, but it was too cold to be naked. She shivered and felt sorry for the people caged closest to the door.

A man appeared first, holding a long rod whose purpose was obvious to Hannah. He turned and helped the woman climb up, and she entered the truck with a grunt and stepped forward, speaking cheerfully to the subjects on either side. "How are you doing?" she asked, all but her face hidden by a parka with a fur-trimmed hood. "Everything good? Trip going okay so far?"

She got muffled assent in reply, nods, an occasional "I'm fine."

And then, somewhere out of Hannah's vision, still speaking cheerfully, she stopped.

"It looks like you had a spill," she said.

"Yes, Ma'am," said a male voice, "my cup didn't—"

"Can you sit on your bottom?" the woman interrupted.

"My cup didn't—" the boy said again, a little more desperately, chains clanking.

"That's right, sit like that. Now, draw your legs up, that's right, and wrap your arms real tight around them."

The woman stepped back, the man stepped up.

"And . . . Go," the woman said.

Hannah, faced pressed so firmly against the wire of her cage it was starting to hurt her cheek, saw the man raise the rod, watched him push it into a cage near the open end of the truck, heard a staccato cry of pain that sounded almost like an orgasm, "auuw, auwh auwh!" punctuated by the clatter of chains, and the woman proceeded, the man in tow, continuing to check on the captives.

Hannah watched the girl across from her, studying her face, taking in the expressions of someone who knows she is about to suffer.

Fear, anger, resignation, sorrow.

Anger.

“Another spill,” said the woman brightly, looking at the edge of the cage floor, still beaded with amber drops of urine. She set her booted toe at the edge of the puddle on the floor, stepped back.

The girl said nothing in her defense, just waited for instructions.

“Sit on your bottom,” the woman said. “Yes, and turn a little. Sideways, that’s right. Legs up, arms around your knees, now hold still.”

There was no sound on the truck except the rattling of the girl’s chains as she positioned herself, all other captive life there stilled, silent, frozen in mute witness.

The woman turned to the man.

“And . . . Go,” she said.

The man pushed the rod into the girl’s cage, touched the tip to the mid-point of her thigh.

The girl scrunched up her face and body.

Hannah could tell the instant the rod spat its charge into her flesh, because her leg spasmed and her arms jerked with a great ring of restraints, and her eyes and her mouth opened wide.

For an instant that seemed like more time, no sound emerged from the girl, and then at last, she screamed, “Auugghh!”, grabbing the place on her thigh where she’d been stung, shaking her leg and flailing around it as if it were a separate entity she was trying to subdue, and then she bit her lip, merely rocking her leg now, bouncing it against the floor of her cage, the pain, Hannah guessed, quickly reduced to nothing but an unpleasant memory.

The woman turned to Hannah, smiling.

“How are we doing?” she asked, glancing quickly at the floor of Hannah’s cage before staring into her eyes.

“I’m fine,” Hannah said. “How long have we been on the road?”

“About two hours,” the woman replied. “We’ll stop one more time before we get to the Dallas Holdings, and everyone will get their cups emptied.”

Let there be no more spills, Hannah prayed quietly to herself as the woman continued her tour of the cages.

Let there be no more spills.

“Hannah?”

Let there be no more spills.

Everyone was holding their breath.

No one wanted to hear another cry of pain.

“Hannah?”

Someone was speaking Hannah’s name. Who?

Let there be no more spills.

“Hannah?”

“Everything good?” the woman was asking. “Everything okay down here?”

With no more punishment to mete out, the woman and the man with the long rod left the truck. The door was closed, latched, and locked, the engine rumbled, the truck moved.

“Merry fucking Christmas, everyone!” declared a male somewhere at the other end of the vehicle, prompting another round of laughter, even from the girl who’d just been disciplined and was still holding her leg.

“Has anyone had their snack yet?” a boy asked.

“I did,” a girl replied.

“Did you notice the little red and green candies?” he asked.

“I did,” she replied. “I thought they were mold.”

“No, it’s Christmas!” someone shouted.

“Fuck, I’m Jewish!” someone lamented.

“What colors does Kwanza get?”

Hannah heard the rattle of chains, the sounds of the snack dispensers being opened.

“Mmmm, slave snacks,” someone said with a full mouth.

“Now with red and green Christmas candies!”

“Because that’s what Jesus would do.”

“Can I eat it if I’m an atheist?”

“You’re an atheist?”

“No.”

“Then why are you asking?”

“I was just asking hypothetically.”

“Many foods,” lectured the officious boy, “were originally intended for strictly religious consumption and were later appropriated by non-believers.”

“Like barbecued pork,” someone observed.

“No,” the boy corrected. “Barbecued pork was never—”

The rest of what he said was lost amidst competing voices, some spewing derision, some singing the praises of barbecue, some arguing that pork consumption was wrong because of how the pigs were kept and penned and transported.

Hannah wasn’t hungry, but she reached for her snack because it would help pass a little of the remaining time here, and it would give her an excuse to drink from the little cylinder through a tube that jutted into her cage.

Like all food dispensed to slaves in tight confinement, this was dense and heavy and dark brown edging on black, various edibles compressed into a thick, palm-sized disk. She took her first cautious bite, found it interesting if not delicious, a mix of salt and sugar and earthiness, little green and red candies mixed with grains and nuts and synthetic proteins, with a hint of fruit and vegetable.

Could a person live all their lives eating only such things? she wondered. Probably not. Their bodies might stay alive, but their soul would die.

“Hannah?”

She ate the snack slowly, doing her best to make it last, moving to her water cylinder when the snack was gone, the sharp clink of chains marking her passage, and she wrapped her mouth around the tube and sucked, slowly. The water was good, if a little stale, and she drank what she guessed was half of it, not wanting to pass any more water into her cup than was necessary.

Finished with her mid-afternoon meal, she returned to the center of her cage and sat, cross-legged, settled herself down and rose to slide chains out from under her bottom and thighs, dropped again, put her hands on her knees, palms up as she had seen people do in pictures, and tried to meditate.

She knew nothing about meditation other than that it involved deep concentration, so she concentrated on meditation itself, how it affected the mind, how one knew one was succeeding at it, if it was more a rumination on what one already knew, or an attempt to discover something new, or if it was like a phone call to another entity, reaching out to something that might or might not exist.

There were cultures who worshipped dubious gods and practiced lifelong meditation. Did they spend all their lives trying to connect with nothing? And if so, was that a bad thing?

“Hannah?”

Was meditation subject to individual definition? No one ever got tested on meditation. One could meditate all their lives and call oneself an expert and no one else could question or challenge that.

Was meditation entirely whatever the believer wanted it to be?

Was god?

Hannah lost herself in her ideas, meditation or something else, and then her mind turned to her assistanceship and she lost herself for a time in a state of excited pride she was sure wasn't meditation, until the truck engine quieted, the vehicle slowed and turned and finally came to a stop, the engine falling still.

“Oh, fuck, here comes another pee check,” a girl announced.

The door opened, the man with the rod entered, the woman entered next, and the second man joined them, dragging a steel keg behind him that looked a little like something you poured beer out of, with a long hose in his other hand.

The cool air of a sunny Texas afternoon in December breezed forward, preceding the three, permeating Hannah's cage.

“How are we doing?” the woman asked. “Slide up. Slide up, that's right. Raise your cup. That's right.”

Hannah peered through the wire of her cage, confirmed that this wasn't punishment, just the draining of urine. She rose up on her knees, grabbed the cup with both hands and released, praying all her urine would fall true.

As before, there was a little splash on the edge of the cup, running down the side until she pressed her thigh against it, but the rest was deposited safely into the container.

The man with the keg made quick work, following the woman cage to cage, pushing the end of the hose against a knobby valve at the bottom of each cup, removing the contents in a matter of seconds while wearers rose to their knees and held their cups and rattled their chains.

“How's the trip going?” the woman asked, nearing Hannah. “Got big Christmas plans? Oh, that's good, that's good!”

“Ma’am?” spoke a male voice that seemed strangely familiar to Hannah.

“What do you need, Honey?” the woman said, bending and peering into a cage beneath Hannah’s, two columns away.

“Can you tell me if there’s a girl up . . . up there . . . named Hannah?”

The woman squinted and put her hands between her thighs, as if she needed to go to the bathroom, and she smiled apologetically. “Oh, I’m sorry, we’re not going to be doing that.”

She straightened, continued making her way through the truck. “Everything good here? Everything good?”

Hannah pressed her forehead against the wire so hard she feared she might break the skin, she might spill her blood across the wire that confined her. Would she get punished for that?

Someone had spoken her name. Someone had asked for her. Or they’d asked for some Hannah. For another girl named Hannah.

Who?

Who?

The man with the keg bent to drain the cups of the confined, doing his work now at the cage of the boy who had spoken her name, who had said “Hannah.”

Oh, I’m sorry, we’re not going to be doing that

Who?

The man, machinelike, efficient, finished with the cages below, finished with the cages closer, reached Hannah’s cage and looked at her expectantly.

She rose, kneeling, spread her thighs and slid forward until her knees were pressed against the wire at the side, neck bent against the wire above, and she raised the cup and held it still while the man aimed toward it with the attachment at the end of the hose, snakelike, with a little peg that stuck out in the middle, mating it to her valve, a small hiss marking the emptying of her water.

She watched his eyes, wondering if he noticed the golden hair trimmed neatly above her vulva, if he thought about the parts hidden by the mouth of the cup, if he could imagine the way it felt, the way it tasted, if he could look at anyone here as an individual, or if they were all defined by the single criterion of how obediently they positioned themselves to be drained.

“Oh, Merry Christmas to you too!” the woman was saying, smiling and raising her hands to her mouth in delight before the last cages. “You too, you too. How are you doing? Everything good? Everything good here? Just a little further to go. God bless. Just a little further to go, and then everyone gets where they want to be.”

The woman finished her check, found no more spilled urine, the man finished his work with the keg, the punisher found no one worth troubling, and all three departed, shutting the door, only cold air and empty urine cups to testify they had been there at all.

“Hello,” Hannah said. “Hello? Was someone asking about someone named Hannah? Hello?”

“Hannah?” said a boy, sounding urgent, desperate.

Terrified.

“Hannah?”

“Franklin?” Hannah said. “Franklin? Is that you? Oh my god, Franklin?”

“You assessed me,” he said. “Do you remember?”

“Of course. Franklin. Franklin! How have—”

“You said you’d come for me,” he said. “Thank you.”

Hannah laughed and wiped her eyes and knew she was smiling like an idiot and didn’t care.

“This isn’t what I was talking about,” she said. “Why are you going to Dallas?”

“I’m being . . . loaned.”

The truck engine roared, the chains rattled, the voices returned to the normal level of spoken communion, and Hannah was having trouble hearing.

“Being what?”

“Loaned.”

“Oh. Oh. Did Athena get you? Did Athena get you?”

“What?”

“Athena?”

“Who’s Athena?”

“The girl . . . the girl I was assessing you for. Her family owns me. She—”

“Does she want to be bred?”

“What?”

“Does Athena want to be bred?”

“Bred?”

“Yes. Does she want to be bred?”

“Oh,” Hannah said, laughing again. “No. Probably not. No. I don’t think so.”

“Then I must be going somewhere else.”

“You don’t know where you’re going?”

“What?”

“You don’t even know where you’re going?”

“No,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“No,” he said. “I’m sorry for this. For my ignorance. For what this is. I thought—”

“What?” Hannah said. “What are you saying?”

The truck quieted, the conversation in a brief lull, and Franklin’s next words rang out, clear and precise.

“I entered into this as an interesting business proposition,” he said. “And . . . I had no idea . . . it . . . the mouth of the beast.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought—”

“The mouth of the beast.”

“Are you okay?” Hannah said. “Franklin, are you okay?”

Hannah wrapped her fingers around the wires of her cage, pressing her face against them, listening, waiting.

For a long time, there was silence from the cage below, or if there were words, they were drowned out by everything else. Shouts. Something about Christmas. Something about Hanukkah.

But in the next moment of relative silence, Franklin spoke again, thick and slow.

“Have you found God yet, Hannah?”

“Yes,” she said. “Gods. Something like 10.”

“Ten gods.”

“Or so.”

“Explain.”

“I’m not sure I can,” Hannah conceded. “Um . . . laughing god, distant god, god of slaves, god of the free . . . a god who shoots drones out of the sky. A god you—”

“You’re going to have to explain that.”

“Huh?”

“You need to explain the last one, the god who shoots—”

“Oh,” Hannah laughed. “I met a lesbian, and it was her grandfather. He has this gun, and . . . but what about you?”

“What?”

“What about you? Have you found God?”

“I am saved and condemned in my own mind, alone,” Franklin said. “And it’s been awful.”

“I don’t really get that,” Hannah said, and she tightened her fingers around the wire that enclosed her, and pulled at it as if expecting it to yield, pushing out, pulling back, her chains clapping together. “I wish we could talk. I really wish we could talk.”

Silence. Perhaps Franklin had grown tired of hearing her voice, and trying to reply. Perhaps he was weeping. Perhaps he was just taking a break, the burden of talking through the commotion of a packed slave truck too much for him.

Hannah was determined not to cry aloud, but she couldn’t keep her eyes from watering, and she slipped away from the wire and sat and ran fingers across her eyes and wondered if Franklin could hear that and if he knew what it meant, if he could decipher the particular sounds a girl makes when her hands have been chained together and she has to use them to wipe her eyes.

The trip had reached the interminable stage, already feeling like it had gone on too long, with far too much more traveling left.

How much longer? Hannah wondered. 15 minutes? An hour? Two? Five minutes was more than she could bear.

There was no way one could sleep in such a place, no way one could find peace, and yet now, people were attempting it, chains jangling as they turned, slid, stretched out, tried to find some position of repose that didn’t put a hip against a metal ring, a breast against a coil of unnecessarily thick chain.

Someone started snoring, or pretending to snore. Someone else laughed, quietly. Chains rang, and mouths spoke in fits and starts, but the din had faded, replaced by something quieter, lighter. They were traveling under an overcast sky now, apparently, or it was nearing sunset, the skylight turning from creamy yellow to yellow-pink-gray, darkness descending upon the captives.

“We were talking about god,” said the voice from below.

“We were,” Hannah agreed, heart stirring. If she and Franklin could talk together unopposed, and hear each other without having to repeat their words, without having to shout, she could spend all her life chained like this, in this cage, with a urine cup dangling from her vulva, her anus fixed around a peg.

“You said you found 10.”

“I guess,” Hannah said. “Sort of.”

“It’s the most beautiful thing people do,” Franklin said. “Find a god. Find something bigger than themselves, something to care about that isn’t their own body.”

“Yeah,” Hannah said. “I guess it happens.”

“It does, and then people want to tell.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh,” Franklin sighed, “you know. People can’t keep their gods to themselves. They have to witness. They have to proselytize. They have to make money. It’s the most obscene thing we do. Marketing for the masses what we’ve discovered in a moment of divine, personal intimacy.”

“Did they teach you this in divinity school?” Hannah inquired.

“No,” Franklin replied. “They don’t teach opinion. And I had to go through this . . .” Hannah heard a chain ring and knew Franklin must be gesturing around himself, at the truck and the people in it. “. . . to figure it out.”

“A lot of time to think?” Hannah asked quietly.

“Too much time,” he replied. “No one cares about your boredom. It can be crushing, and it’s like it doesn’t exist. I had no idea that kind of suffering could be inflicted . . . so easily. Sometimes, I’d rather be tortured.”

“Have you been?”

“No, but I’ve come close,” he said. “And I’ve seen it done, of course. What about you?”

“Seen it, had it done, helped.”

“Oh, god.”

“The worst was helping,” Hannah said. “I peed myself when it was being done to me. I threw up after I helped.”

The truck rocked, its engine roaring, quieting, roaring, and Hannah knew it meant they were slowing, perhaps soon to stop, and the slaves disgorged, and she and Franklin parting ways.

“I won’t be helping again,” she said. She wanted Franklin to know this.

“I’m sure you were doing what you were told,” Franklin said.

“I was,” Hannah said, grateful that he seemed to be pardoning her trespass. For a moment, she saw the autistic girl, hanging by her wrists, condemned for the simple crime of writing on herself.

Hannah’s hands on her shoulders while Bud whipped her belly.

The truck stopped, moved forward, stopped, backed up, stopped. The engine quit. People stirred. Chains rattled. Mouths spoke that had been silent.

“And the stupidest thing people do,” Franklin said, pausing to fit in the words in the gaps between the noise.

“Yeah?”

“Believing in someone else’s god.”

The truck door rolled open, light spilling into the space from the interior of a building, the voice of a woman on a public address system.

“Transport 1141 arrived, port B15,” she said blandly. “52. Brownsville. Corpus Christi. Victoria.”

They must be in Dallas, she thought.

Home.

Laura would be picking her up, she’d been told. Maybe Athena. Maybe others.

With speed and efficiency and a banging of steel on steel that sounded like violence, the cages were unclamped from their shelves, lowered, put on carts, rolled off the truck and onto the dock, brought within the building.

Hannah pressed her face to the wire, hoping to catch a glimpse of Franklin, hoping their eyes might meet, but everything was happening too fast, there were too many bodies, too much noise, too many moving cages.

They could write each other. Slaves were permitted correspondence. Hannah could certainly pay postage from her own funds. And they could exchange email, if both had accounts. It didn’t seem like Franklin had an account, though. And how could she get a letter to him when he didn’t even know where he was?

Perhaps she could write his grandfather. Franklin Fulmer the First.

No.

Of course not.

Hannah imagined the haste with which such a letter would be discarded – if it were even opened. A note from a slave girl to a millionaire asking to be put in touch with said millionaire’s grandson would, at best, be ignored. At worst, it could prompt legal action, or an inquiry that could lead to consequences just as unpleasant.

No.

Oh, I’m sorry, we’re not going to be doing that

As her cage was plucked roughly off the shelf and dropped onto a cart, Hannah grabbed the wires to steady herself, and she laughed at her naivete.

Chapter 40: A Reunion with Ramone

Whisked between bare, bright walls, down a series of twisting walls, Hannah lost all sense of direction.

Nor did she know how the handoff would be done, the specific protocol that would move her from this cage to the back of the Petrosyan’s car.

It would be done using electronics though, she concluded. Along the walls and over every door had been hung bright monitors, with times and ID numbers and pictures of faces flashing. Between that and the constant announcements over the PA system, no slave could ever get misplaced here.

Transport 719 arrived, port A9. 24. Houston and Galveston

Transport 599 arrived, port B2. 75. San Antonio, Round Rock, Austin

Holiday-harried workers, saying nothing, pushed cages, paused to read the stickers affixed to them, looked at the monitors, looked at the faces of the caged, resumed pushing.

Hannah scanned the monitors when they weren’t obscured by other cages or the workers’ bodies, hoping to catch a glimpse of her face. Or Franklin’s face. Was he doing the same thing? Would he see her? What picture of her was being used for this? Did he even remember what she looked like?

Would she ever see him again?

He’d remembered her impulsive promise to come for him. Did he really believe she would?

How often did he think of her?

Hannah's destination was the size of a living room where close to a dozen cages had already been set. Several were open, several more were being opened as Hannah watched.

A low wall separated the cages from the rest of the room, people wearing clothing standing behind it, some slave, some free. Hannah sucked in her breath when she spotted Laura there, Athena, Ormek and, to her shock, Ramone.

Naked slaves, still in their transport chains, still bound at their middles, stepped to those greeting them, receiving hugs they couldn't return, in reunions as happy as any reunions anywhere.

"How was the trip?"

"There's a huge box with your name on it already under the tree."

"Tomba is waiting for you, he wouldn't stop barking!"

Hannah's cage was unlocked, the cuffs around her ankles opened. She stood a little unsteadily, smiled, and did her best to wave with one bound hand.

"Alright, Miss, step this way," said a worker, guiding her gently by her elbow. "Go to the gate for a scan. Happy holidays."

Hannah stepped up to the woman in charge of the little door that allowed passage through the low wall. The woman held up her phone, Hannah turned, felt the touch on her back, heard the beep, waited for the woman to confirm that this was Hannah and she was where she was supposed to be, and then she swung the door open and Hannah passed through, smiling and walking as quickly as her chains would allow into four enthusiastic embraces: Laura first, who kissed her twice and ignored her cup; Athena next, who smiled and flicked the cup with her fingernail before she hugged Hannah around the shoulders and pressed her face into Hannah's neck; next Ormek, who gave Hannah a one-armed hug after looking with thinly-veiled concern at her protruding urine holder; and finally, Ramone, dressed in jeans and a heavy flannel shirt, who had apparently abandoned all sense of decorum over the last month.

Speaking rapid Portuguese, in which Hannah heard the word for kitten more than once, he pressed himself against her, kissed her lips, held the back of her head and kissed her again on the mouth, betraying no alarm as the cup pressed into his thigh.

The greetings done, Athena pulled Hannah's regular travel chains from her purse, slipping them on beside the transport restraints while Hannah found positive things to say about her trip.

"You're supposed to go there next," Athena said, pointing to a door that said, "ALL TRANSPORT SUBJECTS" and, in smaller letters below, "AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY."

Hannah, doubly bound in what she guessed was 20 pounds of metal, clunked to the door behind several other slaves, followed them through and entered another bustling room, at least 30 slaves being processed by at least that many staff.

"Stand on the feet at 13," a woman said, pointing to a pair of fading, chipped yellow feet painted on the floor next to a stenciled black "13."

Hannah went to her spot, watching the commotion around her, slaves being scanned, interviewed and freed of their transport restraints, wearing whatever restraints their owners had put on them, finally brought to a row of toilets along the wall where the cups and plugs were being removed and the subjects could immediately relieve themselves.

Hannah had almost forgotten that she was impaled, but as removal of the device neared, she sensed it again, the humiliating cup against her vulva and the invasive little rod in her anus, inserted to prevent that most natural of human functions.

Fighting the strange weariness that comes after a day of sitting, she envied the slaves on their toilets, fantasized about sitting in the Petrosyan's SUV, and dreamed of sleeping in her bed, feeling the soft mattress and the thick comforter of the bed in her cage as if it were already around her. Desperate for distraction, she surveyed the room, studying faces, wondering when she would be tended to.

No, Franklin wasn't here, but she recognized several others. The girl who had been punished after her cup malfunctioned was smiling, nodding her head with relief as she bent to have her belt unlocked and pulled out. Had the punishment done any lasting damage? Hannah couldn't tell. Perhaps not.

She felt a hand on her back, turned to see a tall African-American male holding his phone, looking at it after it beeped.

"Hannah?"

"Yes," Hannah replied. "Hi."

He stepped before her, pulled on a ring of keys hanging from his belt, chose one and inserted it into the wrist cuff of her transport chains.

“Had a good trip?”

“It was kind of boring,” Hannah said, “but it was worse for some other people.”

“Oh yeah?”

She looked at him, kneeling before her, freeing her other wrist and then her left ankle, and she wondered if she would find apathy, a sympathetic ear, or trouble.

Tired as she was, she had no choice but to fight.

“Two urine cups malfunctioned,” she said. “And they both got punished for making a mess.”

“Were they sleeping?” he asked, his tone even, pushing the key into her right ankle cuff.

“No. Not the girl at least. She was up on her knees, but it was still spilling. She banged it around a little and then it worked. But by then it was too late.”

“So they wrote her up?”

“No,” Hannah said. “They popped her leg.”

He said nothing, just freed Hannah’s other ankle.

“She really screamed,” Hannah added. “I know it hurt.”

“Would you like to report it?” he asked, rising, touching her elbow and pointing to the toilets.

“No, I’m just telling you,” Hannah said, following him.

“Why?”

“So you’ll know what happens sometimes.”

“Hmm,” he said, his meaning indecipherable.

“Stand here,” he said, pointing to a place just in front of the toilet, using another key to free her straps. “Do you think you’re going to need to release?”

“I think I’m okay,” Hannah said.

The belt was opened, Hannah sighing with discomfort as the little plug left her chamber.

As soon as the apparatus was removed, she sat and released a stream of urine, less out of necessity and more for the sake of doing so without fearing a spill and subsequent punishment.

She looked up at the male, smiled. He was little older than her. Perhaps he was a temporary worker, just called in over the holidays to handle the press of subjects, let go in early January to resume his life and forget about what he'd seen.

"So, your company takes complaints from subjects?"

"Supposedly."

"Oh," Hannah said. "I thought you were vice president of complaints."

"Huh?"

Hannah reached behind her, grabbed a thick wad of toilet paper from the roll set into the wall, spread her legs and wiped her vulva thoroughly, enjoying another minor comfort she'd been deprived of for half a day.

"I must have misread your nametag," she said apologetically, standing and staring into his face.

"I don't have a nametag."

"So you're the president, then?"

"I'm just a temp," he said, confirming her suspicions, his blank expression impossible to read. Was she amusing him? Offending him? Challenging him? Would he remember her when all his other memories of this place and this time had been buried, subsumed, scraped away? Her goal wasn't to be remembered for herself, however. She hoped that, should any impressions linger, they would remain packaged in his mind with those of the girl who'd been unfairly punished. People needed to know.

"Do you like working here?" she asked.

"It's okay," he said, and he tapped her elbow and pointed to the exit, where a knot of slaves were getting another scan and filing through, one at a time. "I'd rather take chains off than put them on."

"Why?" Hannah asked, following him.

"It's nicer."

"What do you do when you're not here?"

"Graphic arts."

"What's your name then?"

"Jamar."

"Nice to meet you, Jamar. I'm Hannah."

"I knew that," he said, a quick flash of irony in his eyes telling her she'd broken through to a different place in his mind, a place of distinction,

of deeper memory. She'd won, in a sense, minor as the victory was.

Quick as it had appeared, the irony vanished.

"Wait in line here," he said.

"Okay, bye."

"Bye," he said. "Oh, and it's been nice to meet you, Hannah. Happy holidays."

Hannah stood in line for another scan, passed through into a bright, comfortable room of carpets and couches, a bar and restaurant off to one side. But this space was secure as well, no one passing through the final exit without another rounds of scans and ID checks.

Ramone and the Petrosyans were waiting for her on one of the couches, and she stepped over to them, chains ringing faintly now she was walking on something other than concrete, and they stood and beamed, and Athena reached into the large purse slung over her shoulder.

"I got you an early Christmas present," she said, pulling out a hunk of bright fabric, navy blue and gold.

"Oh thank you, you shouldn't have," Hannah said, raising her arms as far as her chains would allow so Athena could wrap the garment around her. It gathered above her breasts, adhering with Velcro there, and around her waist, where Athena closed it tightly to show off the form of the family's female property.

"Oh, and here are some sandals," Athena said, pulling white van Minsks from her purse. "I picked them out because they match your new wrap, but they're not new."

"They're some of my favorites," Hannah said. "Thanks."

Hannah slipped her feet into them and followed the family to the final checkpoint, Ramone by her side. Still collared but unshackled, he exchanged a quick glance with her, his smile telling her there was news he needed to share, privately.

No one in a collar was allowed to leave the facility without a scan, so Hannah submitted first while Laura held out her driver's license. Ramone came next, lifting his shirt in back so the woman could press her phone against his flesh.

It beeped and she waved everyone through, into the lobby, where they passed through a pair of sliding glass doors and into the cool night air, Hannah shivering, the December air coupling with her weariness, her discomfort growing.

They crossed the parking lot to the family's SUV, Ramone wrapping his arms around Hannah's waist to lift her into the vehicle, guiding her first then following her to the back bench where he and Athena had cuddled a month ago.

As soon as Ormek put the vehicle into drive, Athena whirled to look at Hannah from her seat in front of them.

"Ramone is leaving us tomorrow," she said, looking into Hannah's eyes searchingly. "Back to Brazil. Forever."

"I heard about that," Hannah said. "The Repatriation Act."

Athena's eyes showed a glimmer of disappointment, and Hannah knew Athena was hoping to upset her, or surprise her, or provoke some other reaction. Perhaps the nature of the reaction didn't matter. She just wanted something, the way a chemist mixes unknown chemicals to get something, or a researcher drops unknown microbes into a petri dish to get something.

Hannah turned to Ramone. "Congratulations," she said. "I'm sure the Abercrombies will miss you."

"He's mine now," Athena said victoriously. "Until tomorrow. I bought him."

This made no sense. Hannah considered asking for more information, but Athena's eyes, glowing with a pride that bordered on something else – hubris, perhaps, or revenge, or something strange and less definable – pushed her away. She searched her mind for a way to disengage from Athena without offending her.

"I'll miss you too," was Hannah's solution, and she looked at Ramone and affected a sorrow she didn't quite feel. She was, first and foremost, desperately glad Ramone would be going home. Every freed slave was a battle won, regardless how it was accomplished. But legal was best, an act of Congress even better.

"Hannah," Laura said, turning to look at her from the front passenger seat. "Ramone has asked for you on his last night in America."

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said, puzzlement deepening.

"Is that alright with you?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

Athena said nothing, just leered at the couple sitting behind her.

"You're not on your period?"

"No, Ma'am," Hannah replied.

“You have to let him sleep a little, though,” Athena said, the lechery thick in her face. “He’s going to be in planes all day tomorrow.”

Hannah had had enough of whatever it was Athena was working at. The girl was obviously trying to provoke her, and Hannah was determined to resist.

“We’ll be in my room then?” Hannah asked, irritation turning into words she was struggling to channel into something productive.

“Yes,” Laura said, “your space downstairs.”

“It needs to be in my bedroom,” Hannah said. “Upstairs.”

“We’ve just had your sheets changed downstairs,” Laura protested mildly. “It’s all ready for you.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said. “But Ramone and I will need my upstairs bedroom tonight.”

Athena smiled, looking from Laura to Hannah and back to Laura, devouring this little argument as if it were a five-course dinner, and she’d skipped lunch.

Laura smiled, looked at her daughter, looked at Hannah, looked at Ramone while she worked out the best path forward.

“Perhaps we should let Ramone decide,” she said, and her smile changed subtly, the face of someone pouring a little salt on a small wound. “We’re loaning you to him at his request, so let’s leave it up to him.”

Ramone breathed in, clearly weighing his words carefully.

“If it would be alright with you, Ma’am,” he said, “might we use Hannah’s bedroom? The one upstairs? That would be my preference.”

As he spoke, he slipped his fingers against Hannah’s thigh, the gesture telling Hannah all she needed to know, assuring her that she and Ramone were still a team, still partners, still equals, no matter what anyone else might say.

“I think that would be lovely,” Laura agreed.

Hannah looked out the window, celebrating another small victory. She’d spend the night in her favorite place in the world, a bedroom bigger than most of the apartments she and Mother shared. And surely, Ramone would explain what was going on, why Athena had bought a slave who was soon to be freed and deported, why she would seem amenable to giving his last night in America to the family’s slave girl.

Was she on her period? Maybe she had a headache?

“What time does your flight leave tomorrow?” Hannah asked.

“He has to leave at 9,” Athena said, eyes glowing. “Just Dad’s taking him, so you’ll have to say goodbye at home.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed, swallowing.

“Hannah, did you eat on the bus?” Laura asked.

“Just a snack,” Hannah replied, declining to correct Laura’s confusion over the day’s form of conveyance.

“Will you want something at home?”

“A small plate of leftovers would be nice,” Hannah said. “If anything’s available.”

“I’ll make you something,” Athena promised, smiling and somehow making even the offer of food seem vindictive. Or evil. Or maybe just mischievous. Hannah wasn’t sure what was going on, and that impaired her ability to understand a girl who was usually painfully transparent.

At long last, after the drive from the airport and a quick dinner of leftover fried chicken and salad, Athena removed Hannah’s wrap, took off her chains, and – with one more admonishment not to keep Ramone up all night – she locked Hannah and Ramone in Hannah’s bedroom.

Ramone, standing in the middle of the bedroom, looking at her with a face that Hannah found to be the embodiment of happiness, spread his arms wide.

“Hannah,” he said simply. Hannah marched up to him, saw the tears in his eyes before she kissed him, pulled her mouth away and grinned.

“You’ll be free tomorrow,” she said. “Congratulations.”

“I’ll never forget you,” he replied, voice breaking, and he hugged her and rested his chin on her head. “Never.”

“I’m not much to remember,” she said. “I need a rinse.”

“Do whatever you need,” he said. “I just wanted to talk tonight.”

“I’m sure you’ve got some things to share,” she said.

“I do,” he said, nodding.

“But,” she added after a pause, feeling her loins stir for the first time all day, “I’m not letting you go home until you’ve fed me a one last shot of cream.”

“Agreed,” he said, nodding again.

Hannah went to the bathroom, found that her hair seemed to have survived the day’s journey, so she tied it up and washed only her body, scrubbing every inch of her skin with special attention to her anus and vulva.

She stepped out and dried off quickly and emerged naked from the bathroom, finding Ramone still fully clothed, still standing in the middle of her bedroom.

“Okay,” she said, working loose the top button of his shirt. “Tell me everything.”

“Athena went from infatuation to business,” he said. “With no intermediate period of . . . of . . .”

“Angst.”

“Angst, yes.”

“So, business?” Hannah queried, pushing his shirt off his shoulders and working at his belt.

Ramone laughed. “You’re not going to believe this.”

“I probably will,” Hannah said. “Because it’s Athena.”

“She found out how much Brazil was going to pay for me,” he said. “I’m not sure how.”

“How much?”

“Ninety-two thousand dollars.”

“Wow.”

“My family paid some, the government paid some, there was some charity,” Ramone said.

“Wait,” Hannah said, sliding Ramone’s pants down his legs, pulling down his shorts, admiring his penis as it began to harden. “She said a month ago she’d talked the Abercrombies down to seventy-five.”

“Sixty,” Ramone said.

“Sixty?”

“Sixty.”

“So . . .” Hannah drawled, exhaustion and lust slowing her thinking. “So Athena . . . bargained the Abercrombies down to 60. And now she’s selling you for 92.”

“That’s it.”

“How did she get you down to 60?”

“The Abercrombies knew nothing about repatriation, other than that I was probably going home at some point. She used it against them.”

Hannah smiled, kneeling before Ramone, studying his penis, touching the tip gently with her tongue.

“I was sitting right there,” Ramone said, voice thickening with desire. “She said, to Mr. and Mrs. Abercrombie’s faces, ‘I might buy him

tomorrow, and Brazil might take him the next day, and pay nothing, and I could lose everything.”

Hannah, after another quick swipe of her tongue against Ramone’s head, laughed at the girl’s brazenness, and she stood and went to her bed, pulled down the covers and got on her hands and knees.

Ramone crawled to her, knelt behind her, put his hands on her rump.

“C’mon,” she said huskily, trying to focus on the sensations that awaited her and not on the fact something precious to her had reached its end. “C’mon.”

Ramone spread her lips and guided his penis into her chamber.

“Uhhh,” Hannah groaned. “Oh, god.”

He made quick work of her, thrusting fast and hard, climaxing with a desperate intake of breath while Hannah tightened and relaxed her vagina but stayed otherwise completely still.

Fully awake now, fully aroused now, she waited for Ramone to withdraw his still-firm member, and she slid off the bed to turn on the cobalt crescent moon nightlight she’d bought herself. She went to her bedroom door to flick off the overhead light, and she crawled into bed beside Ramone, kissing him before she put her head on her pillow and closed her eyes.

But then, answering not to a rational need but to something more akin to addiction; a strange yearning for something rebellious she, arguably, didn’t need anymore, she reached for him, touched his hip, and he understood.

“Hannah,” he whispered in the darkness.

“What?”

“What have you been doing? In the kennels.”

“Fucking,” Hannah grunted. “Fucking.”

“Who?” Ramone demanded, and he turned to her and put his hand on her belly, slid it up to her breast and squeezed. “Who did you fuck? Tell me who you fucked.”

“Everyone,” Hannah confessed. “I’m sorry. Everyone.”

“Bitch,” Ramone whispered, enraged, hand tightening around her breast.

“Ow, stop,” Hannah hissed. “That hurts.”

“Whore,” Ramone hissed back, uncontrollable rage in his voice.
“Slut.”

“They made me,” Hannah protested, speaking quietly, desperately.
“If I didn’t, I’d be beaten.”

Hannah paused, her eyes filling with unexpected tears as the next words left her mouth.

“I’d be . . . tortured.”

“Bitch,” Ramone whispered again, and he pushed his wet penis, fully-erect and unnaturally warm, against Hannah’s hip.

Hannah, struggling between two profound states, deep lust and vivid memories of pain, spread her legs and fought the urge to weep aloud, scream, cry out primally.

Instead, she groaned quietly. “You’re hurting me.”

She spread her legs. “Stop it. Stop.”

Ramone, instead of stopping, climbed atop the girl, grabbed his penis in the half-light and forced it up her vagina.

“Augh, god, stop it, stop it,” Hannah groaned. “Stop. It hurts. Stop.”

Ramone withdrew his member and forced it back into Hannah’s body with a single, violent thrust and the spitting of a single, violent word.

“Whore.”

“Goddam you, that hurts,” Hannah grunted. “Stop it.”

Ramone dropped against Hannah’s body, hips thrusting mechanically, furiously.

“Fucking whore,” he said. “Bitch. Bitch.”

“You’re tearing me up,” she grunted. “No one fucks me this hard. Jesus help me, please, stop, stop.”

Hannah, eyes streaming tears, raised her mouth to Ramone’s brown, beautiful shoulder and clamped down, jaws closing around skin and muscle and bone.

She spread her legs as wide as they would go and bobbed her pelvis up and down, swollen clitoris grinding against Ramone’s pubic arch.

“Uhhh,” she grunted, mouth bound to Ramone’s flesh.

She tasted blood just as she reached that moment when orgasm became unavoidable, all her mind and body and soul wrapping itself around the impossible pleasure of a roaring climax.

“Oh oh oh oh oh,” she moaned, teeth driving deeper, the blood of Ramone thick on her tongue, a strange, metallic taste that reminded her of her period.

“Oh oh uhhhhh,” she moaned again, vagina and uterus still twitching as Ramone began his second release of the evening, the lovers writhing together, Hannah still clamped to her partner while their middles danced and Ramone groaned out something in rapid Portuguese, a prayer or a curse or the words of the Brazilian national anthem, Hannah couldn’t tell.

Only when the last waves of pleasure faded did Hannah relax her jaws, dropping her head to her pillow briefly before she pushed him off, his softening penis leaving her body and dropping wetly to her sheets.

“C’mon,” she said, motioning him to follow her to the bathroom.

She flipped on the light, almost cried out when Ramone joined her at the mirror, his blood smeared across her chin and dripping in two long strings down his chest.

“Wash it with soap,” she said. “Let me look at the sheets, I’ll be right back.”

She flipped on the overhead light and turned to her bed, relieved to find not a drop of blood there.

Back in the bathroom, she rinsed her face and watched as Ramone made quick work of his injury, washing it over the sink, soaping it liberally, rinsing and soaping again.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.

He turned to her, a dazed smile across his face. “I have never enjoyed pain more.”

Hannah looked at his wound and, despite herself, laughed at the perfect mark she had made, four little red dashes in an arc at the top of his shoulder, six arced dashes below.

“You can’t show anyone,” she said.

“It’s summer in Brazil,” he said. “In two days, I’ll be on Copacabana. Naked.”

“How are you going to explain that?”

“*Completely* naked,” he added, tapping his collar.

Hannah rummaged around in the bathroom drawers, found an old box of adhesive bandages in various sizes, used four to cover the injuries still oozing blood.

“What are you going to tell people?” she asked again.

"I don't know yet," he said, smiling. "Maybe nothing. Or let them guess. But they will never believe the truth."

"Yes they will," Hannah said.

Ramone reached up and, with a shadow of his earlier malevolence, grabbed Hannah by the hair and turned her face to the mirror.

"Look at yourself," he said, and he raised a finger to Hannah's lips. "I was bitten by that mouth? No one will ever believe it. I'll be laughed back to America."

Returned to bed, Hannah's eyes shutting under their own weight, she turned to Ramone.

"How has the last month been?"

Ramone sighed.

"I will kiss my native soil," he said. "And then I will laugh, and I will cry. But I will finish by laughing."

"What did you do with Athena?"

"Everything," he groaned. "Every day, for three weeks. Mouth. Pussy. Asshole. Mouth, Pussy, Asshole."

"You liked it, though. I know you did."

"I pretended she was you," Ramon insisted chivalrously.

"No you didn't."

Ramone didn't argue.

"Three weeks?"

"It changed like that," Ramone said, snapping his fingers in the darkness. "She told me she could get 90 for me, or maybe more, and in the next breath promised me she'd have me tortured for a week if I told anyone."

"She can't just do that," Hannah said.

"Probably not, but why give her a reason to try?" Ramone whispered. "You're the only one I've told."

"So, no sex since then?"

"Not with Athena. It changed on the day I became her . . . investment. Nothing since."

"Sex with anyone else?"

Ramone sighed.

"There has been sex."

"Who? The Abercrombie girls again? Mrs. Abercrombie?"

"All of the above," he said, lowering his voice to just a sliver above silence. "And others."

"Who?" Hannah demanded.

Silence.

"Who?"

"Laura."

"No!" Hannah said, fighting to keep from shouting. "No no no!"

"Yes."

"Where? When? What was it like? Oh my god, what was it like?"

Silence.

"What was it like?"

Ramone turned, pressed his mouth against Hannah's ear, barely opening his mouth to say his next words.

"It was done in the cages," he said. "In the afternoon. She was on her hands and knees, and I mounted her and came and I went to the toilet and she left."

"She let you release inside her?"

"Yes."

"Did she cum?"

"No."

"Did you lick her? Did you do anything before? Did you kiss?"

"No."

"Did you touch at all?"

Ramone laughed, quietly, and his next words were delivered with a very slight Portuguese accent, but in Laura's soft, high-pitched lilt:

"Ramone, if it makes this easier, you may hold me in position."

He laughed again.

"And she reaches back with her hands, one at a time, and places my hands on her . . . rump."

"Oh, oh," Hannah whispered. "How did she feel?"

"Soft. Good. Very wet. And she tightened when I came."

"Did she say anything? Did she say anything?"

"Thank you."

"What?"

"Thank you."

"Just that?"

"Thank you, and she locked the cage and left."

“Naked?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Two weeks ago. A few days after Athena had finished with me.”

“Did Athena know?”

“Of course not, no.”

“Did Ormek know?”

Silence.

“Did Ormek know?”

“Yes, I believe so. He was home, and he was a little more . . . you know the word . . . awkward . . . awkward over dinner that night.”

“So it was . . .” Hannah said quietly, voice trailing off.

“An arrangement.”

“An arrangement,” Hannah repeated.

“Involving you,” he replied.

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Of course.”

More silence. Ramone breathed in. Hannah thought he might have fallen asleep.

“I have always tried to be a gentleman,” he whispered.

“Uh huh?”

“If you speak of this, to anyone,” Ramone said, “you will make me a . . . a . . . *canalha*.”

“A kitten?”

“No, that’s *gatinha*. I am saying *canalha* now, because I don’t know the English.”

“What kind of animal is a *canalha*?”

“It is not an animal. It is a man. A man who doesn’t respect the discretion of a lady. A man who kisses and tells.”

“Or fucks and tells,” Hannah said quietly.

“I have never fucked. Not once.”

“What did you just do to me?”

“Yes, I have fucked. But only you. And you must not tell of these things. Of Laura.”

“Then why did you tell me?”

“Because it involves you, and because I trust you.”

Hannah sighed, turned to her side and touched Ramone’s jaw.

“What were you saying earlier?”

“When?”

“While you were cumming.”

“I was praying for you,” he said. “For your freedom.”

“To which god?”

“There’s more than one?”

“There are 10.”

“Then I was praying to the god who watches over girls with blue eyes and sharp teeth.”

“That makes 11.”

Chapter 41: Into the New Year

Hannah, nude and shackled, gave Ramone a tearful, choking goodbye the next morning, hugging him in the kitchen and getting tears on his shirt while Ormek waited in his car, Laura and Athena both giving wet-eyed farewells too, and then Ramone was gone, and Hannah was sent to her cage downstairs and told to douche and to shower and prepare for Allain, who was due that evening and arrived before dinner with Hannah’s books and some extra clothing, and over the next three weeks she lost herself in the holidays, in her four online classes and her two scholarship treatises, in parties and dinners, in a magical New Year’s Eve celebration at the club, in annoying smugness from Athena and regular, satisfying sex with Allain.

Hannah waited until the drive home from the Christmas Eve service to casually reveal to the family she’d received an assistanceship, and everyone – even Athena, but particularly Allain – congratulated her sincerely, because this was a legitimate achievement, a mark of respect Hannah had earned in competition with free people.

On Christmas morning, Hannah received three boxes of van Minsk – a skirt and sundress and sweater – along with a First Lady gown, blue sandals by Fischer that she would wear in spring and summer, a stack of notebooks for the spring classes, a cookbook from Athena that Allain probably suggested, and from Allain, her prized possession: A Nature’s Army bookbags of heavy tan canvas reinforced with leather, set with brass fittings and trimmed in a warm pink that Allain had picked out, Hannah knew, because it was the color of her nipples and her vaginal lips when she was aroused.

Christmas day was at least as somber as Thanksgiving however, Gramma and Uncle Bear struggling through the meal in the formal living room under the gaze of Raven, smiling down from her picture.

Would it always hang? Hannah wondered when Gramma looked up at it and grimaced, her pain almost as tangible as electric meshes affixed to breasts with a clear gel.

Much of the Christmas food was made by Darcy earlier in the week and just warmed up Christmas afternoon, so there wasn't nearly the commotion of Thanksgiving. Hannah insisted on making biscuits, however, and she was allowed to, but had to wear shackles this time. And, although she believed she had followed the recipe exactly from the book Athena had given her, they came out a little dry, a little hard.

On New Year's day, Hannah woke late, in her downstairs cage, and immediately set upon her Austin books, determined to get her finals taken before she returned to Corpus Christi in less than three weeks.

She spent her first post-holiday week alternating between Allain and his friends, returning things to the mall for better fit or color, and studying.

A week later, on the first Monday of the new year and, conveniently, the third day of her period, she was ready for finals. After a quick breakfast in the kitchen, Athena walked her up to her bedroom and locked her in for the day. Hannah turned on her long-dormant laptop, logged into her classes, submitted final papers and assignments, and took all four exams, pausing briefly for the sandwich and fruit Darcy slipped through the door at noon.

Only when she was done did she check her Corpus Christi account, confirming that she was signed up for five classes, two with afternoon labs: Physics, Advanced Biology, English 2, Calculus 2, and an unexpected second biology class, Vertebrate Reproduction. She would be in class from 1:30 to 5 Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Tuesday and Thursday would be long days, starting at 8:30 and ending after labs concluded at 5. She ordered books, paying with her own money, reducing her bank balance from over \$600 to under \$200, turning meaningless numbers into the most precious thing she knew of – knowledge.

That evening, feeling giddy and elated, Hannah emerged for dinner, reported that all her tests had gone well, that her classes for the spring were lined up, and that night she and Allain shared a muted celebration. She

licked and sucked his penis and rubbed her tamponed genitals, timing her orgasm to coincide with his, and while she groaned and bucked through a mild climax, he writhed and pumped beneath her, delivering seven warm jolts of semen, each dutifully swallowed by the family's girl.

Allain left for school six days later, on Sunday the 13th, leaving Hannah – not scheduled to be shipped back to the kennels until the following Sunday – to other pursuits for the week.

The first of those pursuits was another overnight visit with Mother, Hannah belted for chastity and location monitoring as before. Dinner was limited to the residents of the property, but Chancie showed up later that night for a repeat of their previous time together, drinking hot chocolate in the nude with Hannah, Mother just in panties again, going to bed with Hannah at midnight, making furtive love in which they kissed and fondled and, finally, ran their tongues across each other's vulvas, Chancie doing her best to circumvent the strap protecting Hannah's opening, her tongue exploring Hannah's lips and hole from a variety of angles.

Only after Hannah orgasmed did Chancie allow Hannah's efforts to provoke relief, and she shook and bent her knees and groaned out and, when it was over, lay beside Hannah and cupped her breast and whispered, softly and gently into her ear, "I love you."

The next day, Tuesday afternoon immediately following lunch, Hannah was returned to her cage, and she worked on her treatises – both, although she would be turning in just one, and saving the other for some other purpose – and she found herself able to focus intently now that Austin was taken care of and her Corpus Christi classes were settled as well.

Laura came to her a little after 5, calling out from the elevator.

"Hannah, are you awake?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah replied, trying not to let her mind wander, as it often did in Laura's presence, to what Ramone had done to her in this place.

"How are you doing, Hannah?" Laura asked, coming into view.

"Very well, Ma'am," Hannah replied. "Very well."

"I wanted to talk about the rest of your time with us, until you go back to Corpus Christi."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"I believe you'll be ovulating this week?"

“I think so,” Hannah said and, knowing where the conversation was leading, she rose and stepped to the bars, sliding her hands through the brackets. “Would you like to check?”

“I would,” Laura said, tightening the brackets around Hannah’s wrists. She unlocked Hannah’s cage door and pulled two thermometers out of the pocket of her jeans.

Hannah bent, felt the thermometer slide up her anus, straightened and spread her legs so Laura could examine her front hole.

“Did you masturbate last night?” Laura asked, holding the vaginal thermometer in place, her breath soft against Hannah’s neck.

“No, Ma’am,” Hannah said, briefly torn between the risk of lying and the risk of admitting to a tryst that hadn’t been explicitly approved. “I made love to a female.”

“Who?”

“A friend of my mother’s. She’s related to my mother’s boyfriend.”

“Is she a lesbian?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Did the belt interfere?”

“A little,” Hannah said. “She licked around it.”

“Have you been with her before?”

“Yes, the first time I stayed with Mother.”

The thermometers beeped, one at time, Laura withdrew each and looked at them, and wrapped them in toilet paper before returning them to her jeans pocket.

“Were you with anyone else while you were staying with your Mother?”

“No, Ma’am, only the one.”

“I know you might believe the expectations are a little different at your mother’s,” Laura said, “but I feel you should tell me immediately after you have partnered with someone there. And let me know beforehand if you expect to.”

“In the kennels as well?”

“No, just while you’re staying with us, in Dallas.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t sure about the rules.”

“Hannah,” Laura said, and her voice revealed no strong emotion, neither carefully managed rage nor the icy heartbreak of a woman betrayed,

just the voice of a slaveowner working through a minor administrative matter. “I feel this is something you should have known.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah agreed. “I’m very sorry.”

“We’ll be punishing you until bedtime.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“You’ll wear your shackles the rest of the evening, and you’ll eat dinner in isolation down here.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said.

This was the most minor of consequences, done more to impress a rule upon Hannah than to truly make her suffer. Indeed, dinner in her cage was preferred tonight, as it meant an extra hour of research at a time when she was particularly bent on it.

“I’m very sorry, Ma’am,” Hannah said again.

Laura stepped to the pegs under the window, pulled Hannah’s shackles down and brought them into the cage, fastening the girl’s ankles together, turning to her bed and her desk.

“You seem to be working very hard on your scholarship paper.”

“I am,” Hannah said.

“What’s it going to be on?”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “I’m not exactly sure yet.”

“Allergic Rhinitis: Theories and Treatments,” Laura said, reading from one of the book covers. She picked up another book. “Juvenile Epilepsy: Seven Clinical Case Studies.”

Laura paused.

“These seem to be on two different topics.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, face growing hot. “Yes, Ma’am. I’m interested . . . in both areas.”

“You’re working on both?”

“Well . . . yes . . . they’re both very important topics, and I . . . yes.”

“Which one will your paper address?”

“Oh . . . I’m not sure . . . I’m still trying . . .”

Hannah felt the sweat break out on her forehead, felt her heart begin to thump in her chest. Did Laura notice her distress? Laura sometimes seemed to have a sixth sense about Hannah’s disobedience. Could she tell the family’s girl was up to something – or had been up to something, anyway, a nefarious plot that she was still pursuing even though she told herself she’d abandoned it?

Laura, perhaps satisfied with Hannah's answers, perhaps not, exited the cage and locked the door, but she left Hannah's wrists secured in their brackets and stepped directly in front of the girl to address her.

"Now, about the rest of the week," she said, drawing in her breath in a way that told Hannah this was the main purpose of her visit, everything up to now mere preamble.

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"You'll be by yourself tonight," Laura said.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Will you want to masturbate?"

"I think so."

"Would you like one of your aids brought to you?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

"The thickest one, please. I think it's red. I haven't used it in awhile."

"Very good," Laura said. "Do you remember Jessica?"

"Athena's friend? Yes, Ma'am."

"You know she's interested in mating with you again?"

"Yes, Ma'am, she and I traded a few emails."

"She's asked to stay with us, and spend the night with you here, as part of a project."

"A project?"

"You'll have to ask her for the details, but I believe she's writing something up about experiencing life as a . . . subject."

"Ma'am?" Hannah inquired, puzzled.

"And she wants . . . a complete experience."

What was Laura saying? Hannah wondered. Did Jessica want to experience captivity? Is that what Laura meant? The request puzzled Hannah, and mildly annoyed her. Slave tourism was something Jessica had mentioned before, the opportunity to pay establishments to treat one, temporarily, like a slave, after which one would leave and resume one's freedom.

One of the most important aspects of being truly owned, Hannah knew, was perpetuity. To Hannah's knowledge, no slave tourist could be imbued with sense of lifetime bondage, no matter how much they paid.

Of course, all freedom was relative, even for those who weren't subjects. No one was completely free, even if they thought they were.

"Jessica will be treated like . . . Raven," Laura added.

"Like Raven, Ma'am?"

"In terms of her treatment. Yes. But she will still be Jessica."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Uncle Bear will be visiting Thursday night," Laura continued, "and would like to be with you, in your bedroom."

"Yes, Ma'am, we talked about that over Thanksgiving. That would be fine."

"And then, Friday night," Laura continued, "Athena is . . . examining a boy."

"Ma'am?"

"She is trying to arrange a visit by a candidate," Laura said. "And she wishes to supervise while you couple with him."

"Here?" Hannah asked.

"Yes, down here."

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said, beginning to lose track of her schedule. Tonight, the red dildo, tomorrow with Jessica, Thursday with Uncle Bear, Friday with . . . someone.

"Do you know anything about the, um, candidate?" Hannah asked.

"You'll have to ask Athena about him."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Laura stood, looking at Hannah, drawing in her breath for her next words.

"Now, Saturday . . ."

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Do you remember how you and Dr. Petrosyan used to meet, in the late evenings sometimes?"

"I do, yes."

"Do you remember the expectations?"

"I do," Hannah said. "I do, but sometimes . . . I . . . wasn't . . . sorry . . . I had . . . with . . . and—"

Laura listened for a judicious amount of time to Hannah's flailing contrition, her unintelligible confession to a crime that could never be spoken out loud.

“Dr. Petrosyan will be visiting with you Saturday night,” Laura said. “I’m sure you’ll perform as expected.”

“I will, Ma’am,” Hannah promised. “I will.”

Laura released Hannah’s wrists from the brackets.

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

“Of course.”

Chapter 42: Athena, Pushing Buttons

Hannah forgot her ankles were chained, forgot dinner was happening upstairs without her, forgot everything but the words in her books and the ideas in her head until the elevator bumped at 7:30.

“Hannah?” said Athena. “You decent?”

“Always,” Hannah said, ready for a distraction, as long as it was brief.

Athena appeared, a plate and silverware in her hand, and Hannah took them through the port, set everything on her desk on top of an opened book.

“Have you been crying?” Athena asked, standing at the bars.

“Why would I be crying?” Hannah asked, completely mystified.

“Because you’re being punished.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Oh yeah. I have been crying. A lot.”

“No you’re not,” Athena said. “Liar.”

“I stopped when I heard the elevator, and my face dried really fast.”

“Mom says you were with someone last night. And you were keeping it a secret.”

“I wasn’t keeping it a secret,” Hannah said, determined not to let Athena provoke her. “I just didn’t know I was supposed to tell those details.”

“Who was it?” Athena asked.

“Will that be all, Ma’am?” Hannah asked.

“Who was it?” Athena repeated.

Hannah just stared.

“Girl or boy?”

“Female,” Hannah said.

“Slave or free?”

“Free.”

“Good or bad?”

“Good,” Hannah replied.

“Fat or skinny?”

“Will that be all, Ma’am?”

“Okay,” Athena said. “Did Mom tell you about Jessica?”

“Yeah, she’s coming tomorrow,” Hannah said. “To be a subject or something.”

“She’s our new Raven,” Athena said.

“No she’s not,” Hannah said, feeling the color rise in her cheeks.

“No one is Raven but Raven. You — ”

“God, it’s just an expression, okay?”

“Okay.”

“She’s doing it for a class. Being a slave for a day or something.”

“Okay, fine,” Hannah said.

“She’ll be naked.”

“What?” Hannah nearly shouted.

“Yes. In front of Dad.”

“At dinner?”

“Yes, like you are. It’s not a big deal, and it’s part of her assignment.”

“He knows, right?” Hannah asked. “You’ve told him?”

“Yes,” Athena said.

“But . . . in front of your dad . . .”

“Just be cool, okay?” Athena said. “Can you do that, so she doesn’t end up writing something about how we’re weird or . . . you know . . . what a bitch you are?”

“You think I’m a bitch?”

“You know what I think of you,” Athena said. “Sometimes I love you, and sometimes I hate you, especially when you’re bitchy.”

Hannah laughed. “You’re not exactly, um, Princess Charming all the time.”

“Yeah, but I have reasons,” Athena said.

Hannah looked at the ceiling as the best way to convey how stupid she found Athena’s last words.

“And Friday,” Athena said, and her face turned mischievous and mean and Hannah knew something was coming, and she braced herself for it. “Did Mom tell you you’re going to be doing it with someone?”

“No,” Hannah said coldly. “She said I’d be helping examine a boy, and you’d be supervising.”

“Okay, close enough.”

“Who is it?” Hannah asked.

“Who did you have sex with last night?”

“A free female.”

“What’s her name?”

“You don’t know her.”

“What’s her name?”

Hannah just stared while her mind returned to neuronic channeling, the last concept she’d been researching before Athena showed up.

“Franklin,” Athena said. “That’s his name.”

“What?” Hannah said, mouth instantly dry, heart thumping, vision narrowing down to one of Athena’s arched eyebrows.

“Oh, you remember him, don’t you?” Athena asked. “Franklin.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, struggling to compose herself.

“I can make money off him,” Athena said.

“Great,” Hannah said, licking dry lips. “I hope you do.”

“I made money off Ramone.”

“Oh, really?”

“You know I did, Bitch.”

Hannah held up her hands and widened her eyes in an expression of complete befuddlement.

“I know Ramone told you.”

“Maybe.”

“I can’t punish him, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Athena said. “He’s in Brazil now, or in an airport or something.”

“Good point,” Hannah said. “Yes, he told me.”

“Did he tell you how much?”

“Thirty-two thousand dollars.”

“Yeah,” Athena said, smiling hungrily. “Yeah. Well, 27 and change after taxes. But yeah.”

“Do you have it yet?”

“It’ll be wired this week.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“Buy shit.”

“Does anyone know . . . about the deal you made?”

“Mom and Dad do. And that’s it. Just them. And now you. Not Allain. Not the Abercrombies.”

Athena glared at Hannah through the bars.

“If you tell anyone, it’ll be like, a day in the mean room. With a professional.”

“Ooh, don’t they charge by the hour?” Hannah inquired. “That sounds expensive.”

“That’s official,” Athena said, ignoring the question. “I’m giving you a formal directive and consequence. That makes it official. One day.”

“I think you should put it in writing, and stick it on the fridge,” Hannah said. “Hey, everyone, this is Athena, and if Hannah tells anyone I made \$32,000 off Ramone, she gets —”

“Bitch,” Athena said. “Bitch. Bitch.”

“Am I doing a protocol with Franklin?” Hannah asked, returning to the question that was to her, central.

“No, you already did that,” Athena replied. “But I found out yesterday he was in town, so I scheduled it, and he can be brought over, and I’m still interested in him, and you’re going to do it with him while I watch.”

“Okay.”

“And I’m not just interested in the money,” Athena added. “You gave him a really good score.”

“I did.”

“But now I’m going to find out if you were just fucking with me. If he’s another gay, or incompetent or something, I’m gonna —”

“He’s not gay.”

“Oh yeah, right, I forgot, you fell in love with each other.”

Hannah paused, just long enough to annoy Athena, before she spoke. “We got along. He’s nice. That doesn’t mean we’re in love.”

“You did it twice, right?”

“Did what?”

“Sex.”

“It depends on how you define sex,” Hannah said. “We did almost 20 things on that protocol. We started with —”

“He came in you twice, right?” Athena asked, kicking her left ankle with her right foot in a sign of growing agitation that, for now, she needed to control.

“Yes.”

“Do you want wine with dinner?” Athena asked, looking at the plate growing cold on Hannah’s books.

“No,” Hannah said. “That would be weird.”

“We had wine upstairs.”

“Great.”

“Would you have wanted wine if you were allowed to eat with us?”

“Yes, probably.”

“I’m sorry you have to be punished for lying to Mom.”

“I didn’t lie. I forgot to mention something.”

“Okay. But I really feel terrible about it.”

“I can tell.”

“I’ll be back in an hour, to get your plate and take your chains off,” Athena said with another less-than-friendly smile. “And I’ll bring your little toy then.”

“Thanks.”

“Mom said you wanted the thick one.”

“Yes, I think it’s red.”

“Is it thick enough?” Athena asked, her smile as obscene as a teenage girl’s smile could be.

“It is.”

“Cuz if you need something huge to get off on, I could maybe find something, like a big vegetable, or—”

“Will there be anything else, Ma’am?” Hannah interrupted.

Athena smiled wickedly and turned to leave.

“Good luck,” she said from the elevator door. “With everything.”

“Thanks.”

Hannah listened to the bump, looked up at the black windows, and turned to her toilet, forcing out all the urine she held just to do something that felt normal. But she was still shaking.

Athena had only the most rudimentary understanding of Hannah’s mind, but she knew enough. She sometimes pushed the right buttons, and she’d come downstairs tonight armed with button-pushing fingers, pushing and pushing and watching reactions, and learning, or trying to learn, what worked.

Franklin was coming. She’d be with Franklin again. They’d have sex. Yes, that was a button.

But they wouldn't be talking like they had during the assessment, or even on the truck.

They wouldn't be talking at all, mostly likely, other than to work through the mechanics of sex, with Athena witnessing. Which was not talking at all.

No, there would be no talking at all, unless Athena left him in the cage next to hers overnight. How long was he staying? What was happening? Hannah knew she couldn't ask, that any question about Franklin would be treated by Athena as an expression of love.

Given Athena's insecurities, it was probably best Hannah hadn't mentioned talking to Franklin on the truck. She hadn't seen him, after all, only heard his voice. They hadn't had sex.

Hannah rinsed her face, looked into her mirror, shook out her hair, pursed her lips, and returned to her books while she shoved a cold dinner of fried whiting and asparagus into her mouth, banishing thoughts of anything else but the words on the pages before her.

"Hannah."

"Hannah."

"Hannah!"

"Ahh!" Hannah shouted, looking around wildly before she spotted Athena at the bars, holding a red dildo.

"Please," Hannah said, "don't sneak up on me like that!"

"I didn't sneak up," Athena said. "I said your name 20 times."

"Has it been an hour?"

"Uh, more like three. I got busy with stuff."

Hannah picked up her plate and silverware, pushed everything through the port, accepted the dildo through the bars and tossed it onto her bed.

"Thanks."

"You get your chains off now."

"Yay," Hannah said, stepping to the bars.

Athena knelt and reached in with the key, opening the cuffs and turning to hang the chain on a peg beneath the windows.

"Mom said I have to turn off your lights now," she said.

"No," Hannah said. It was almost 11, according to the little clock under the window. She had no idea it was that late. But she needed more time. She needed two more hours, at least.

“No?” Athena.

“No,” Hannah said, and she bit her lips and fought the lump in her throat.

Athena laughed. “So you’re saying no like, no, I can’t turn off your light? That kind of no?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “No, you can’t turn off my light. And I need my own light. I’ve asked for that before.”

“You’re saying no, like, you’re officially saying you reject something Mom said?”

Hannah clenched her fists in frustration.

Athena had won, and she stood on the other side of the bars and smiled with her smuggest, most infuriating face.

This wasn’t the time or the place to fight, Hannah reminded herself, eyes tearing up. There were bigger battles that had to be won. This was a small battle, and it must be lost.

“I . . . I misunderstood,” Hannah stammered. “I thought you were saying something else. I’m sorry.”

“Look,” Athena said, an unexpected sympathy breaking across her demeanor. “Mom says you’ve got a lot going on this week, and she wants you rested.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Yes.”

“You don’t need light to . . . do your thing?” Athena asked, pointing to Hannah’s red dildo.

“No,” Hannah said. “I just wanted to read a little longer.”

“I know. But I’ve gotta go. And I have to turn the light off.”

“Okay.”

Athena turned to leave, the room darkened, the elevator bumped, and Athena was gone.

Hannah stood still, waiting for her eyes to adjust, her irises to dilate, to use what little light was streaming in through the windows and into her cage before she could move.

Once she could see, she brushed her teeth, moved books from her bed onto her desk, pulled down her covers and sat against her pillow, rubbing her vulva in a state somewhere between rage and mild arousal.

Her honey flowed after about a minute, and she moved slowly past anger and into a grudging acceptance of the value of simple pleasures and, indeed, of sleep.

She had pushed herself hard today, because when she buried herself in the art and science of medicine, her mind was removed from everything else as well – her collar, her cage, her chains, her nudity, and the way things were.

She found the dildo, spread her lips and inserted it, slowly, sighing because it felt good but it was thick enough to sting too, and she thought of Ramone.

Was he getting sex in Brazil?

Hannah wasn't sure. Perhaps he had returned home a celebrity, worthy of desire, worthy of attention from girls who spoke his tongue. Perhaps he had returned a hero, stolen by a foreign land, used there, tortured there, ultimately to escape, to prevail.

One does not forget one's first lover, nor should one forget one's last in such a place.

Hannah, leaning back with her legs raised and spread and her shoulders against the wall, pulled the toy out of her sex and pushed it back in and thought of the way Ramone had devoured his final meal of Texas flesh before he made his way onward.

He was still thinking of her, Hannah knew.

How could he not, even as his mother and his brother and his sisters and his father embraced him and wept on the shoulder she'd bitten?

And she was thinking of him as well, about his body and the feasts they surely held in his honor, his cousins and his family's neighbors and his father's colleagues all in attendance, and she smiled and gripped the dildo with her stinging vagina and danced with her fingers across her vulva and clitoris, and she came and issued a great cry of pleasure, all the sweeter and dearer because it was mixed up with frustration and joy and longing and pain, and she didn't know where one ended and the next began.

She drifted off with a sigh, the wet toy by her hip, and she dreamed deeply, her mind more hungry for sleep than she knew or would have admitted to herself, and she awoke in the first gray of the day, staring at the window, staring at her bed, waiting for the moment when she had enough light to read.

Chapter 43: Tempest, Temporary Slave Girl

Hannah read for an hour before Athena came to shackle her and bring her to breakfast, and she and Athena joined Laura and ate melon and ham and a biscuit, and Hannah's mind stayed mostly elsewhere until the topic of Jessica came up.

"I'll be bringing her over about 5:30, so she can get used to things before Dad gets here," Athena said. "And she's going to be spending time with you, downstairs, to talk, and then we'll do dinner, and then she'll go back downstairs to sleep."

"Okay," Hannah agreed, guessing that there would be more than sleeping happening, and that what they did might find its way into Jessica's report.

"This is all going to be anonymous, right?" Hannah said.

"Absolutely," Laura said. "That's understood."

"But still," said Athena, "can you take a shower this afternoon, so she doesn't have to write something about how gnarly you are? Someone might figure out it's you."

"Athena," Laura admonished.

"Oh, and it's like you're just meeting," Athena said. "She's going to pretend you don't know you. Can you do that?"

"I think so."

Hannah worked through breakfast as quickly as she could, pouring herself a full mug of coffee and bringing it down to her cage when Athena was ready to escort her back.

"Do you want out for lunch?" Athena asked at her bars.

"No," Hannah said, returning to her desk. "Can you just have Darcy bring me a sandwich?"

"Yeah."

Darcy arrived at 12:30 to deliver a sandwich and an apple, to bracket Hannah's wrists and clean her cage and take her temperature.

"Your vagina's hot," she said. "100.2."

"I'm probably ovulating today or tomorrow."

"A shame you don't have Allain this week," Darcy said without sympathy, switching out Hannah's towels.

"I'll be doing other things," Hannah said.

She knew Darcy wanted to know what she'd be doing, and Hannah had no reason not to share what she could, particularly when Darcy had done her the small favor of bringing a meal.

“Athena’s friend Jessica is coming over tonight, and Uncle Bear will be here Thursday.”

“That’s nice.”

Hannah tore herself away from her books a little after 5, and was still putting on makeup when Athena, bag slung over her shoulder, showed up with Jessica, in jeans, sneakers, a black sweater, a decent facsimile of a subject collar, and the same chains Hannah wore for transport, both ankles bound, both wrists bound, a chain the length of her leg to join everything together.

Hannah, eyeliner in her hand, looked from her mirror at the girls, looked back into the reflection of her own face, content to let Jessica and Athena decide how this would go.

“Gypsy,” Athena said.

Hannah looked toward Athena, who was looking back at her expectantly, and returned her gaze to her mirror to line her right eye.

“Gypsy.”

Hannah looked again.

“Oh my god,” Athena said, exasperated, “you’re Gypsy today, okay?”

“Oh, I am?” Hannah said. “Maybe you should have told me that earlier.”

“Gypsy,” Athena said again, scowling, obviously fighting to stay in character when what she really wanted to do was call Hannah a fucking bitch.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“This is Tempest. She’s a subject, like you. She’ll be staying with us tonight.”

“Hello, Tempest,” Hannah said, staring into her mirror. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Hello, Gypsy,” Jessica said.

Hannah set down her pencil, straightened and turned to face Jessica. She hadn’t seen the girl since the summer – probably six months ago – and she was struck immediately by Jessica’s haunted eyes and slumped shoulders. Born to wealth greater than Athena’s, of parents who opposed slavery but didn’t mind it when their daughter dabbled with a slave girl, Jessica looked at this moment like anyone else who had been reduced to property.

Hannah didn't fully understand Jessica's assignment, but believed she was taking it very seriously.

So, as ridiculous as this project might be, Hannah decided, she needed to take it seriously as well.

Jessica, red-haired, freckled and large-breasted, was a fragile, vulnerable girl who had at times been obsessed with Hannah. She was lesbian, or at least solidly bisexual, and she'd chosen Hannah for her first sexual experience, a coupling last spring in which she'd wept, climaxed, offered to help Hannah escape, received a slap from Hannah for proposing it, wept again, and climaxed again.

Hannah turned away from her sink to stand respectfully at her bars, which is what she would have done were Jessica a real slave being confined with her.

Jessica's eyes flickered with familiarity as they ran across the length of Hannah's nude body, but she gave no other indication the girls were friends and sometimes lovers with a fraught history.

"This is your cage," Athena said coldly, unlocking the door to the cage beside Hannah's. Of all the Petrosyans, she was in certain ways the most comfortable with the art and science of treating another human being as property, and Hannah saw in Athena's eyes at this moment a certain satisfaction, even eagerness, as she play-acted with her friend.

Jessica stepped in, Athena locked the door, Jessica turned, and Athena removed the girl's chains.

"Strip," Athena commanded.

Jessica, face downcast but otherwise blank, lifted her sweater over her head, undid her bra and slid it down her arms, kicked off her sneakers, pulled down her jeans and panties and passed everything to Athena.

"Dinner's at 6:30," Athena said, and she removed the bag from her shoulder, shoved Jessica's clothing into it, and withdrew a pen and notebook, passing them through the bars to Jessica.

"Thank you," Jessica said, dropping to her bed, sitting on the pillow cross-legged, opening the notebook slowly, pen in hand.

Athena pulled a folded piece of paper from the bag and handed it to Hannah with a glare that said "play along," and she left the basement, the elevator's bump marking her departure.

Hannah returned to her sink, applied lipstick, turned to find Jessica writing furiously in her notebook.

Hannah unfolded the sheet Athena had given her.

“SUBJECT IMMERSION PROJECT,” it read in bold type at the top of the sheet, underneath of which was written “Hello, my name is,” followed by a blank and Jessica’s name. And then, “I am not a subject. I am participating in a subject immersion product as part of coursework at Lonestar Subject Academy. I respectfully ask that you treat me, within the limits of the law, as a subject named” and here was another blank, upon which Jessica had written “Tempest.”

Tempest? Hannah wondered. Who had conjured up that name? Jessica, or one of her instructors? Had that name been chosen to reflect Jessica’s particularly angst-ridden adolescence?

And why did Hannah have to be Gypsy? Couldn’t she just be Hannah? Maybe not, since Jessica already knew Hannah.

Immersion.

At the bottom of the form was written, “Interested in subject management? Buying a subject of your own? Just curious about this dynamic, growing industry? Lonestar Subject Academy operates 28 schools throughout Texas where you will take accredited courses from highly experienced instructors, receive hands-on training with resident subjects (male and female), and earn any of 15 certificates in subject management, maintenance, brokering, recruitment, marketing and more.”

A headquarters address in Dallas, along with a phone number and website, ran along the bottom of the sheet.

Jessica seemed to be lost in her notebook, so Hannah returned to a long journal article, losing track of time until she looked up and found Jessica staring at her, mouth closed, eyes wide, tension in her face, pen hovering above the notebook opened on her lap. She seemed to be waiting for Hannah to speak.

“How long have you been a subject, Tempest?” Hannah asked.

Jessica’s face expressed immediate relief. Most likely, Hannah guessed, Jessica had been wondering if Hannah would accommodate her class or seek to sabotage it.

Hannah had no reason to disrupt things, nor was it worth the risk of punishment.

But why was Jessica taking a class like this? Hannah wondered. Was she going into the business, against what must have been her parents’ fervent wishes? Or was she merely among the curious? Or was she so

opposed to slavery she was doing all she could to learn about it, taking a course in it while she finished up her senior year of high school?

And was that a vulnerability of the system, that abolitionists could engage with it from within, learning about it in the hopes of destroying it?

Of course, the school got their tuition and fees regardless of the students' motives.

"Since yesterday afternoon," Jessica replied. "It's been very stressful."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Hannah asked.

"Not really," she said, immediately contradicting herself. "They chained me to the floor naked in a showroom, and last night I slept in a box."

"A box . . . like a cage?"

"Yes, a cage."

"In the stacks?" Hannah asked.

How realistic were they making this experience? she wondered. Jessica's distress might be very real.

"No," Jessica said, "but it was with some other people. Other subjects."

"Have they decided what your role will be?" Hannah asked.

"Yes, recreational" Jessica said, and she stared at Hannah with a new intensity. "I think that's why they put me with you."

"Do you need training?" Hannah asked.

"I think so," Jessica replied.

"Everyone decent?" Athena shouted from the elevator.

"Yes," Hannah said.

"It's dinnertime," Athena said, coming into view. "Dad's home."

Yes, Ormek was here, Hannah thought. And he was, in a way, the most important member of the team, playing his role by merely existing. Jessica would go free soon, presumably tomorrow, but in the meantime, she'd suffer in a real way, exposing herself to free, clothed people the way any slave had to. And this particular free person was her best friend's father, a doctor, a man she'd known for years, someone she'd dined with before, but always previously fully-clothed.

Athena pulled two sets of shackles from the pegs, chose Jessica to chain first. The girl rose, looked at Hannah, allowing Hannah to survey her

form, her large upright breasts, her narrow waist and wide hips, her carefully trimmed, dark red pubic hair.

She stepped to the bars, looking down as Athena cuffed her.

Hannah waited at the bars for her own restraints, more mindful than she wanted to be of the vast difference between herself and Jessica. One girl was being chained as part of a temporary class assignment. The other was being chained because her owners couldn't risk the loss of their 1.5 million dollar investment, an investment with legs that, while those legs could and often did spread for pleasure, could also walk. And run.

Athena opened up the cage doors, escorting the girls to the elevator.

"Did you get a chance to get acquainted?" she asked, looking at Hannah.

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said. "I know this has been very stressful for, um, Tempest."

"Remember when you came home?" Athena said, stepping first onto the elevator.

"Like it was yesterday," Hannah said.

Where was Ormek? Hannah wondered. Hovering by the elevator door? Still upstairs in his bedroom? At the dining room table? Hannah looked at Jessica, sensed her anxiety, and marveled at it. The girl had to do nothing but present herself naked. Ormek, Hannah was certain, would observe all the decorum the moment deserved. He was a doctor, after all. He would not leer, he would not say something embarrassing about Jessica's body, he would not ask his wife if he could get permission to push his penis up Jessica's vagina tonight around 11, while she bent at the bars of her cage.

And yet, she understood the girl's anxiety, and knew that talking made things easier.

"I helped you with math that night," Hannah said. "I—"

"You worked all my problems, and then you told me how you did it," Athena said with a rare tone of genuine respect.

"Remember the first time we met, with your whole family?" Hannah said. "In that showroom?"

"That wasn't the first time we met," Athena said. "You know I scanned you a few days before. You were just standing there."

The elevator rose, the door opened. Hannah could almost hear Jessica's heart thumping.

The three girls exited to the smells of dinner, something Darcy had made earlier that Laura was warming up.

Laura was in the kitchen, stirring salad, and she turned and smiled.

“Hello, Hannah. Hello, Tempest.”

“Hello, Ma’am,” Hannah said.

“Hello, Ma’am,” Jessica echoed.

“I hope you’re both hungry?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Athena walked up to Laura and whispered something into her ear.

“At the table,” Laura whispered back. “He’s ready for everyone.”

Athena stepped to the door into the smaller dining room before Laura called her back.

“Will you get a second towel,” she said, “for Tempest’s chair.”

“Already did it,” Athena replied.

“Hannah,” Laura said, holding out the bowl. “Bring out the salad.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Tempest, as our guest, you may be seated.”

“May I carry something, Ma’am?” Jessica whispered urgently.

Laura looked at Jessica, puzzled at first before she seemed to understand, and she smiled and reached into the microwave.

“Dirty rice,” she said, handing Jessica a bowl that was too small to cover more than one breast or, if she lowered it, the hair of her trimmed mound. At this moment, Hannah felt deeply sorry for her friend.

Athena entered the dining room first, followed by Hannah with the salad and Jessica with the rice. Laura came last, taking her seat at the end of the table opposite Ormek. Filet of sole and a broiled squash had already been laid out.

Hannah studied Ormek, certain he wouldn’t do something overtly offensive with regard to Jessica, but hopeful he’d also hide the more subtle cues – potentially just as embarrassing – men give off in the presence of a naked girl.

But Hannah was also looking at Ormek from her own perspective. This was the first time she was seeing the doctor since Laura told her she’d be serving him again. Would he stare at her coldly to hide how he felt about her, or warmly as he usually did, or lustily because he couldn’t hide his jubilation over the impending reunion with the family’s girl?

Ormek did none of the above. Instead, all his attention was on Jessica. And, remaining seated, he kept his eyes solely on hers as she entered, her chains ringing between her ankles, the bowl of rice held before her belly, covering nothing important. Athena motioned her to sit beside her, and she paused before the chair, set down the rice and sat hastily. Once settled, her breasts jutting out over her plate, her nipples jutting out from her breasts, she looked down at her two forks.

“Daddy, this is Tempest,” Athena said. “She’s spending the night.”

“Hello, Tempest,” Ormek said. “I hope you’ll enjoy your stay here.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Jessica said, staring at her spoon now, face paler than Hannah had ever seen it, her freckles all but vanished.

“They put Tempest in a showroom,” Athena announced. “Just like Hannah when we first met her.”

Hannah looked at Jessica. Jessica wasn’t smiling now, but she wasn’t as pale. This was okay to talk about in front of her, apparently.

“I still remember scanning Hannah,” Athena said. “I mean, um, Gypsy. She was just standing there, barely moving, sort of in a daze, and I almost didn’t bother.”

This was new information to Hannah. Had Athena not scanned her on her first day in the showroom, the family might never have known of her existence. They might never have bought her, and she would have, most likely, gone to another family, with a son who went to another school, who had other friends, who owned other slaves, and her life would have been utterly different from this life.

No, not utterly different. Parallel. Different pleasures. Different torments. But in the end, they would have felt like pleasure and torment always do.

“She was kind of a robot,” Athena added. “Or like . . . or like . . . a wax figure. You know? Like there was a room full of humans, and then there was her. Like someone had left their statue there.”

“Tempest, how are you adjusting?” Laura asked, to change the subject, Hannah believed.

“Slowly,” Jessica said. “This is easier, though, than being in the showroom, or sleeping in a cage next to other people last night.”

Athena dominated the rest of the meal’s conversation, telling stories about Ramone, wondering where he was at this moment, talking about

school, mentioning some of the things she wanted to buy – a new sound system for her car, new furniture for her bedroom, some new clothes for school interviews – that most girls her age couldn't afford with their own money.

Had she told Jessica of her windfall? Probably, Hannah thought.

After dinner, Jessica rose almost unselfconsciously even though Ormek was still at the table, and the three girls went up to Athena's room to play a game Athena had gotten for Christmas based on securities exchanges. Hannah noticed flashes of the Jessica she knew while they played, more confident, more a peer of Athena's even though she was still naked and still bound by the ankles.

Athena won, and brought the slave girls, the real one and the temporary fake one, back downstairs to their cages, locking them in and removing their shackles.

"Gypsy, would you like me to open the door between your spaces for tonight?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said. What other answer could she give?

"Tempest, is that okay with you?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

Athena passed the key to Hannah, and she unlocked the door and handed the key back to Athena.

"I'll be back to bring you to breakfast at 8:30," she said, looking at both girls before she departed for the elevator, flipping off the light.

Chapter 44: Uncle Bear Arrives

Hannah felt her way to her toilet, urinating while Jessica remained in her own cage.

Would Jessica be able to follow through? She was a cautious girl who had passed up opportunities to be with Hannah before they'd finally mated. But if they did tryst, would Jessica maintain her role as a subject? Would she pretend to be a novice? Would she orgasm?

Hannah flushed, wiped and went to her sink to wash her hands and face. Her eyes were pressed into her towel when she felt the hand on her bottom, a touch somewhere between a caress and a lewd grab. A sort of fondle, as if Jessica were assessing Hannah's flesh, both for purposes of passion and science.

Hannah turned, smiled, wrapped her arms around Jessica's waist, and the two girls kissed, deep and open-mouthed.

Jessica put one arm behind Hannah's shoulders, raised her other to Hannah's breast, squeezing, pinching the nipple gently before she lowered it to Hannah's rump, then brought it around to Hannah's front, to play in her hair, to stroke the top of her vulva, to tap and circle her clitoris.

Hannah drew in her breath and sighed out, the heat beginning to stir in her loins, the full flame of ovulation's dawn beginning to burn.

"You need to teach me everything you know," Jessica said, whispering into Hannah's ear, and she laughed, quietly and ironically, and in her humor Hannah sensed that the veil had dropped, that now she was just Jessica, and Hannah was just Hannah, and they were going to work out their desires against each other like any two females might, slave or free or something else temporarily.

Hannah took Jessica's hand and led her through the darkness to her bed. Until Jessica asserted herself, Hannah would lead, so she eased Jessica down on her back and lay beside her, kissing her and stroking her breasts, confirming that her nipples were still erect.

Jessica sighed and opened her legs, and Hannah took that as the sign that her friend wanted attention at the mouth of her chamber. Hannah reached down, finding Jessica's hole thoroughly wetted, the lubrication slipping out across her lips and clitoris, leaking down to her anus.

"Are you ovulating?" Hannah whispered.

"Third day," Jessica said.

"First day," Hannah said back, continuing to massage while Jessica bucked and writhed.

"Lick me," Jessica said, urgently. "Oh god, lick me."

Hannah turned while Jessica rose to her side, her body gray in the dim light. Jessica raised her leg and Hannah brought her mouth down against her friend's wet folds, cleaning and devouring and absorbing Jessica's female essence.

There was an unexpected taste here that hadn't been present for their first coupling last spring, a sort of salty, animal muskiness, with a hint of perfume, even sweetness. Was it something that came with age, or experience? Or had the stress of being treated like a slave for a day forced distinct biological transitions? Was it a single change that happened all at once upon the reduction to property, Hannah wondered, or was it an

ongoing occurrence, a girl who suffered and pleased for a year and a half enduring a series of alterations to her composition, eventually becoming, chemically, a different being from free people?

Hannah raised her own leg, allowing Jessica access to her pleasure door while she pressed on, forcing her tongue into Jessica's opening and as deep within it as the physics allowed.

This is how Jessica wished to orgasm, Hannah sensed, side by side, mouths against vulvas, tongues embedding themselves within pink, dripping sheaths, sliding from there up to aching clitorises, returning to holes for more tasting, more licking.

Jessica came first, hips gyrating madly as they had in the spring, the girl squeaking with the delight of a sort of death, but never removing her mouth from Hannah's warming slot, and her tongue seemed to throb in sympathy with the stirrings between her legs, her attention to Hannah's clitoris growing mechanical in its rhythmic intensity.

Hannah's orgasm began as Jessica's waned, so that someone watching in the dark might think something terrible was passing from body to body, a contagious disorder of spasming and quiet grunts that girls passed to each other when they licked each other's sex organs, a brief sickness that, when the fever broke, left them both dazed, panting, smiling.

Hannah lay still, allowing Jessica to rise up on her knees, turn and fall and offer a smothering wealth of grateful kisses, against Hannah's breasts, her neck, her ear, her mouth.

"Oh, my god, I still love you, Hannah Loughbridge, oh god it hurts."

Hannah, afraid her friend was about to weep, to descend into that same place of despaired longing that had haunted her in the spring, stiffened and waited.

But then Jessica laughed, at her own folly, or at something else.

"If this was . . . slavery," Jessica whispered. "If it was just this, only this . . . I'd sell myself tomorrow."

"It's not, though," Hannah said, stating the obvious.

"That's why I'm not going to sell myself."

"What have you learned?" Hannah asked.

Jessica paused and dropped her head down to the mattress.

"I haven't learned anything . . . I didn't already know," she said.

"But now I can say I've felt it. Some of it. A little of it."

“How did it feel?”

“Terrifying,” Jessica admitted. “Horrible. And good. Crazy good.”

“Why are you . . . taking that class?”

“I just wanted to know, I guess. I never thought about it, about . . . subjects . . . and then I met you, and it’s been sort of an obsession since.”

“Are you going to go into the business?” Hannah inquired.

“My parents would disown me.”

“Is that a yes?”

“I think a lot of people who study it have a secret desire to be . . . one. This is the next best thing.”

“Your parents know you’re taking the class, right?”

“Oh, yeah, you can’t hide something like that.”

“They approve?”

“I told them I just wanted to know more about it. They don’t get it, but they didn’t say no.”

The girls fell silent.

“Tempest,” Hannah said with a laugh. “Tempest. Go to bed.”

Jessica rose, felt her way through the darkness, went to her toilet to urinate and wipe.

“I made you cum,” she said quietly through the darkness.

“You did,” Hannah confirmed. “Do you get extra credit for that?”

“I don’t think so, but I’m going to put it in my journal.”

She went to her bed, sat down. “Are you going to lock the door?”

“I don’t have the key,” Hannah said.

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll come back?”

“You can come back, but don’t wake me up.”

“Okay.”

“Good night.”

“Night.”

Hannah awoke the next morning, not sure where she was. In the kennels? In her bedroom upstairs? In Brazil, sleeping beside Ramone?

There was a hand resting on her hip. She reached down, felt it. A girl’s hand. Jessica’s hand. Or Tempest’s. Which one would wake up with her this morning?

The first grays of morning were peeking through the windows above. Hannah eased off her bed, went to her toilet, listened to Jessica’s steady breathing, and thought about her day.

She needed to get back to her books and articles. Jessica's visit had been a pleasant, interesting interlude, but Hannah hoped it would end with breakfast, that Athena would bring them upstairs to eat, and Jessica's project would either conclude then or continue somewhere else.

Hannah had work to do.

She longed for a light. She went to the adjoining cage and leaned against the bars to watch day break through the windows, and to ponder the next few days, which is all she could do for now.

Uncle Bear would be here tonight, to partner with her in her bedroom. She knew what to expect.

Ormek would come to her late Saturday night. She knew how that would go as well, most likely, because she would be in charge, and she wouldn't allow anything not explicitly approved by Laura. Masturbate to wetness, if her ovulatory fluid wasn't already flowing. Listen for the elevator's bump. Meet Ormek at the bars. Turn, bend, accept him, hold still while he worked out his yearning. Report to her toilet to clean herself. Masturbate to orgasm. Go to bed.

But Friday night, it would be Franklin, in a session directed by Athena. Hannah had no idea what to expect.

No, she realized, maybe she did. Athena had a plan. A very practical plan.

"When are you coming back?" asked a sleepy female voice.

Hannah returned to her own cage, Jessica's form stirring on the bed.

"Here I am."

"No, when are you coming back to Dallas?"

"I'm not sure," Hannah replied. "Maybe spring break, maybe summer. Ask Laura."

Jessica rose, kissed Hannah lightly on the cheek, went to the toilet, flushed.

"I need light," Jessica said. "I need to write down everything."

"I can't reach the switch," Hannah said. "We have to wait for the sun."

"Has it always been that way?" Jessica asked.

"Here, yes," Hannah said. "I have my own switch in the kennels, and it works until after midnight."

"Do you like the kennels?" Jessica asked.

“I’ve gotten used to them.”

“Athena says you have sex there all the time.”

“I don’t,” Hannah said. “I have a few friends, and we—”

“How often?”

“Most week nights. Usually just at night. And then, Allain on the weekends.”

“Girls and boys both?”

“Yeah, mostly boys, but I have a girlfriend, and sometimes with some other girls.”

“I want to see you there.”

“You’ll have to talk to Allain.”

“I can spend the night with you?”

“No, you can sign me out, but you have to get me back by 11.”

“Should I go to school there?”

“If you want to go to Corpus Christi, yes,” Hannah said. “I’m going this semester, and probably next year too. Maybe we’d have a class together.”

“That would be cool,” Jessica said. She stood and went to her cage, found her pen and notebook on the floor, sat on her bed and, satisfied with the growing light, began writing.

Hannah went to her desk, flipped open a book, found the words readable.

“Hey,” Jessica said.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry about last time . . . what I said . . . about escaping.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it was dumb. Like, really dumb. They went over it in class. I get it now. Really dumb.”

“Okay,” agreed Hannah. “What are you writing about now?”

“Having sex in a cage, as a . . . like I was. With you.”

“It’s different doing it with a free person, when you’re a subject.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” said Hannah. “You’re freer with another subject, maybe. When you’re with someone free . . . you . . . they’re . . . you have to take care of them, in a way.”

“So you were taking care of me? Before last night? That first time?”

“Yeah.”

When Athena arrived at 8:37, she bore all of Jessica’s clothing on a hanger, passing it through the bars, asking her about her sleep and her day’s plans while Jessica dressed.

The assignment was over, apparently, no one calling anyone Tempest or Gypsy, and Hannah was allowed back into her cage before 9:30 for a repeat of yesterday: Her books all morning, lunch brought down by Darcy at noon, a quick break to stand at the brackets while thermometers were pushed up her anus and vagina, then back to books until 5:15, when she took a shower and prepared for the evening.

“Hannah?” Uncle Bear shouted from the elevator a little before 6.

“Uncle Bear!” she shouted, rising to stand at the bars.

Uncle Bear appeared, looking altogether like himself, wild hair and a beard, jeans, boots, and a light blue golf shirt with a black grease stain on the shoulder and smears across the belly.

He bore a key to Hannah’s cage, but she decided not to wait to be freed to greet him, reaching through the bars and pulling him close, planting a less-than-chaste kiss on his mouth. This would be his night. She would do all she could – not to replace Raven, because that was impossible – but to ease his loss.

He’d been waiting at least a month to borrow Hannah’s vagina, but she knew everything would be up to her. If she said no, he would go home willingly, without relief. She would decide position, how long they were together, when they went to sleep. He had killed people in the course of service to the nation, but in the presence of Raven, or Hannah now, he did as he was told.

After her greeting, he looked at Hannah with shocked gratitude, making Hannah wonder if she’d been too forward. But then he reciprocated, giving her a hard, open-mouthed kiss that told her he probably hadn’t been with anyone since Raven disappeared in late September – almost four months – and he was feeling a hunger that only a certain thing could satisfy. Hannah, in her first full day of ovulation, was feeling it too, every moment with Uncle Bear accelerating it.

He unlocked her cage without shackling her, so Hannah just stood, looking at him with her eyebrows raised.

“No, I’m not going to chain you,” he said. “And that’s what I told Sis. If she doesn’t like it, she can take care of it herself.”

Hannah followed him to the elevator, smelling dinner before the door opened, and she and Uncle Bear emerged and went to the table, where Laura was seated and Ormek and Athena were standing at the credenza, hovering over a bowl of goulash.

Uncle Bear turned to Ormek, continuing a conversation that seemed to have started earlier about medical care standards for combat veterans, so Hannah stepped discreetly to Laura, touched her shoulder and looked down at her feet with her eyebrows raised.

Laura simply waved her away with one hand, apparently annoyed but not enough to trouble herself over it, and Hannah sat.

Just before dinner was served, Laura seemed to think better of her dismissiveness.

“Thank you for telling me, Hannah,” she said.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Uncle Bear sat beside Athena, and Hannah smiled at him whenever he looked at her, and the conversation quickly turned to Jessica and her assignment.

“She was Tempest,” Athena said, smiling at Uncle Bear. “And she turned Hannah into Gypsy.”

“You might want to consider taking a class like that,” Ormek suggested to Athena, and the pride was obvious when he added, “You do have some aptitude.”

“I don’t know,” Athena said, turning to Uncle Bear. “You have to take your clothes off for it, in front of people. I thought she was going to pass out over dinner last night.”

“She came to dinner here . . . naked?” Uncle Bear said. He was sitting across the table from a naked girl, but this idea seemed to surprise him.

“Yes.”

“What for?” he asked.

“Full immersion,” Athena replied, savoring the phrase as if it were scandalous. “That’s what they called it. Full immersion.”

Hannah helped herself to salad and waited for the inevitable.

“And she had to . . . be with Hannah,” Athena added, her voice now in full lechery mode. “They spent the whole night together.”

“I’m sure Hannah was very accommodating,” Laura said.

Hannah nodded and scooped up goulash.

“She had to do that for the class?” Uncle Bear.

“No,” Hannah said, not wanting the conversation to devolve down to Athena’s brand of casual perversity. “I think they just wanted her to spend the night with a family.”

“But we put her with you, and unlocked the door, and you did it,” Athena said in a quick rush of words. “She told me you did. And she liked it.”

“Athena,” Laura said, giving her daughter a look whose meaning was clear.

Dinner conversation moved on to other things, Hannah getting a chance to update Uncle Bear on her studies, on her assistanceship, and the stack of books and articles she was going through for her scholarship paper.

After the meal, Hannah, Uncle Bear and Athena went upstairs to play in the great room, Athena insisting on another round of her new stock exchange game, and winning again, although Uncle Bear played with a surprising amount of intensity.

As the game wound down, Athena looked under the table at Hannah’s unfettered feet.

“You know Mom wants you to chain her, right?” Athena asked.

“I know, and I won’t do it,” Uncle Bear replied.

“Why not?” she demanded. “After Raven hit the road, I’d think you —”

“Raven was stolen,” Hannah said.

Uncle Bear and Athena both looked at Hannah immediately, Athena with an air of deep skepticism, Uncle Bear with profound curiosity.

“How do you know?” Athena asked.

“I just do,” Hannah said.

“So she didn’t just like, call you up yesterday and tell you?”

“No,” Hannah replied. “I just know. And I don’t have a phone.”

“Yeah, but you have email now.”

“She didn’t email me,” Hannah said.

“Oh, I bet she didn’t,” Athena said scowling. “I bet she—”

“Athena,” Uncle Bear said, his body tense with a sudden anger Hannah had never seen before. “Let. It. Drop.”

Athena folded quickly, but more graciously than Hannah expected, giving the same polite, ingratiating smile Laura would give in slightly awkward moments.

“So, can we all agree I won?” Athena inquired.

“I believe so,” Uncle Bear conceded.

Athena packed up her game, looked at Uncle Bear again.

“You know the combination to her door, right?”

“I do,” he said, and he turned to Hannah. “You sleepy?”

“I am,” she said. “But can I get a book, in case I wake up early and want to read?”

“You may,” he said, waving her on.

Hannah stood and took one tentative step toward the elevator.

“You should either chain her or go with her,” Athena said. “Or both.”

“Just knock when you get to the door,” Uncle Bear said, looking only at Hannah, as if he hadn’t heard Athena. As if Athena, at this moment, didn’t exist.

Hannah took a few more steps toward the elevator, wondering if Athena was about to sound some general alarm, to notify her parents that they needed to intervene before the family’s slave girl ran amok through the house or climbed out a window or went to the kitchen and ate leftovers.

This was the Petrosyan’s house, Hannah thought. They were allowed to make their own rules for their girl, and guests should have to abide by them. But Uncle Bear was a special case, perhaps. His rules traveled with him.

Hannah made it to the elevator without interference, stepped in and pushed the button for the basement, only then letting out her breath.

She was almost always this free in the kennels, and on campus. Next week, she’d be going to classes by herself, without chains. What were the Petrosyans afraid of?

Hannah grabbed a book, returned to the elevator, reached the great room where they’d been playing, and where Athena was still sitting, waiting.

Surely, Hannah’s arrival disappointed her, but she just glared at her phone as the girl passed. Hannah’s escape, or attempted escape, would have satisfied Athena for a whole catalog of reasons, Hannah knew.

She went to her bedroom door, knocked quietly, heard Uncle Bear working the combination from inside, and the door swung open, revealing a face of curious urgency.

“Now,” he said, “tell me everything you know.”

Chapter 45: A Little Pleasure for Uncle Bear

Uncle Bear had taken off his boots but was otherwise still clothed, and Hannah slipped into the room, dropped her book on the desk and went to the bed she considered hers, pulling down the comforter and sitting on the sheets beneath, putting both pillows behind her back.

“Raven would never cause this much pain,” Hannah said. “Not to you or Gramma. Not to me.”

Uncle Bear limped to the bed, pressing his leg against it and looking down at Hannah, waiting for her to go on.

“She knew she’d be tortured if I disappeared,” Hannah continued. “You told me that over Thanksgiving. So she knew I’d be tortured if she disappeared.”

Uncle Bear nodded.

“And that settles it,” Hannah said. “She wouldn’t have done it. She couldn’t take that chance. She was stolen. Someone took her.”

“Who?” Uncle Bear asked, sitting down on the bed.

“Have you ever heard of Absolution?”

“Yeah,” Uncle Bear says. “But how could they have done it? Someone got her car too. It’s hard enough to hide a collared girl with a chip in her back, but how do you disappear a red Ford?”

“It was small,” Hannah observed.

Uncle Bear’s face broke into a wide grin.

“You don’t know how much I want this to be true,” Uncle Bear said. “Even if it means we’ll probably never see her again. Even if I—”

“I feel like we will,” Hannah interrupted.

“How?” he asked, looking into Hannah’s eyes, the hint of suspicion in his face.

“I have not been talking to her on the phone, or over email,” Hannah said earnestly. “It’s just a feeling. A premonition.”

“Why do you think it’s Absolution?”

Hannah looked up at the ceiling, hoping Uncle Bear would understand.

“Oh . . . at the . . . in the interrogation?” he stammered.

She kept looking.

“You’ve known this since October?”

“I went again a month ago, after we talked at Thanksgiving,” Hannah replied.

Uncle Bear stared at Hannah for a long, troubled moment.

“You went again,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to tell them Raven was stolen. She didn’t run away.”

“So you just called them? Emailed them?”

“I emailed them at first, but they wanted to talk in person.”

“Talk?” Uncle Bear said.

“Well, interrogate. That’s how they talk.”

Uncle Bear drew in his breath, staring again.

Hannah looked down between her legs, where a small, dark oval of fluid was leaking onto the sheets. Would Uncle Bear want sex? Would sex even be possible after a conversation like this?

“What did they do to you?” he asked.

“I signed something, you know,” Hannah replied.

“They did it again, then?”

Hannah looked up at the ceiling.

“You contacted them again, and said ‘come and get me, and do—’”

“I didn’t say come and get me. I said I knew something. I wanted to just email it, but they picked me up, and . . . did . . . what they do.”

“Was it worse than the first time?” he asked, bending forward, staring at his two feet, the one he was born with and the metal and plastic foot he’d received later in life.

“No, not as bad,” Hannah said. “It’s easier when you know what to expect. And when you know they’re wrong.”

Uncle Bear worked through her words.

“Couldn’t you have gotten in touch with me, and had me talk to them?” he asked.

“In hindsight,” Hannah said, chuckling ironically, “that’s probably what I should have done. But I didn’t have a way to contact you. And I didn’t want to wait. And you didn’t want anyone to know you’d looked through her diary. And I didn’t think they were going to . . .”

“This will not be forgotten,” Uncle Bear said solemnly, and he reached into his wallet and pulled out a business card from the marina, with

his contact information on it. "This will not be forgotten."

"Raven can't know," Hannah said, accepting the card and setting it on her nightstand. "Ever."

Uncle Bear seemed to be pondering her words, and he nodded when he understood.

"Where do you think she is?" he asked.

"No idea," Hannah said. "But I'm sure she's a prisoner there, and every day, she's trying to get back to us."

Uncle Bear grimaced.

"That's why we want to believe she ran. That's why I've been telling Gramma that's what she did. Because if she ran, she's happy at least. Or happier. If she got grabbed, God knows where she is, what they're doing to her, if she's even still—"

Uncle Bear sat on the bed like a small, defeated package, his face in his hands, the embodiment to Hannah of the pervading agony of losing the person you cared about the most, the person who gave your life meaning.

"I'm moving out," Uncle Bear said, his eyes hidden and his voice muffled by his fingers.

"What do you mean?"

"I love Momma," he said, "but I've found a place, and she can't stop me, because she doesn't have Raven to hold over me anymore, and I need to be somewhere else."

Hannah nodded, said nothing, wondering silently what would happen if Raven were recovered. Would Gramma return to threats of selling her, or giving her away in her will? Would Uncle Bear return to Gramma's mansion?

"Insurance pays up end of this month," Uncle Bear said lifting his face from his hands and looking at Hannah with what appeared to be guilt. "That all goes to Gramma."

"Yes," Hannah agreed.

"But it doesn't mean we give up," he said. "Insurance covers a reward too, forever. \$75,000 to whoever finds her."

"Okay," Hannah said.

"So don't stop looking," he said.

"I don't really—"

"You know what I mean," he said. "Anyone could help."

Hannah looked down, crossed her legs and put her hands in her lap.

Her body might be set to copulate, but there's was nothing remotely sexual in the room right now. She felt terrible for Uncle Bear, and terrible for Raven. She slid off the bed to go to the toilet, more to wipe the ovulatory fluid from her lips than to urinate.

She flushed and Uncle Bear went next. Back in her bedroom, she grabbed the book she'd brought up and went to her bed again, propping up on one elbow to read.

"Sis thinks you're up to something," Uncle Bear said, holding a toothbrush.

"Huh?" Hannah said, mouth immediately dry.

"She always thinks you're up to something," he added. "But what are you doing with all these books?"

"How could I be up to something with a bunch of books?" Hannah said.

Uncle Bear smiled, laughed knowingly, and declined to answer the question.

He stepped to the closet, found a spare hanger and slowly stripped, until all that was left was him and the artificial leg that joined with his body below the knee.

He turned, and Hannah looked at his hardening penis.

She was not the only one who could compartmentalize, she knew. Surely people who had been to war were better at it than most.

He flipped the light off and came to her in near pitch-black darkness. She rose to her hands and knees, waiting for him to find her, to feel her.

His hand brushed her bottom, slid up her waist to her ribs, her shoulder, down to her breast.

She heard him sit and knew he was taking off his leg, setting it gently on the floor.

The bed shook and the sheets rustled and he was behind her, knees planted between her calves, hands on her rear, fingers moving down past her anus to open and spread her vulva, and then came Uncle Bear's penis, the tip finding her dripping slot, the rest of his penis following, the shaft opening and stretching her chamber.

She gasped with the pleasure of something she'd last had five nights ago, on Saturday with Allain, and she raised her hips and dropped them, helping Uncle Bear find the most comfortable angle as he settled into

a steady, patient rhythm, Hannah's sheath embracing him wetly with the quiet slick of clear lubricant and her monthly syrup.

His right foot touched hers, and the end of his left leg brushed her calf. It wasn't the first time she'd felt it, and she thought of it like a magic part of him, a part of his body forged in hell and brought up to the light and redeemed.

When she sensed his arousal growing, penis thickening, and her own clitoris swelling with desire, she pulled away, rolled over on her back and opened herself to him. He dropped upon her, sliding his member up her hole, his groans answered with another gasp from Hannah.

"C'mon," she urged, kissing him, dropping her head, kissing again. "Push. Grind. Ohgodyes. C'mon. Yeah. Sweetjesus. Yeah . . . Yeah . . . Ohheavensnojesusgodnoforgivemenonono."

Uncle Bear came second, moaning gently, sad and soft, into Hannah's ear, penis driving deep as it spat its seed, his groans yielding to aching sighs.

"Yeah," she said approving, grabbing his arms to keep him in place while his penis still throbbed deep and thick within her, and she pressed her middle against him, raising her pelvis, shaking it, sweat breaking out across her brow.

"Wait . . . again . . . pleasegodno . . . Oh . . . Oh . . . notagain . . . ohnogjesusnohelpmeplease."

Hannah awoke to the day's first light, Uncle Bear still sighing, but now in sleep, and she slipped off the bed to urinate, found her book and read it on the toilet, listening to the sounds of people stirring and walking and bathing a few doors away.

Hannah studied and read for what felt like an hour before Uncle Bear entered limping, post and joint returned to the end of his left leg, squinting against the light.

She stood and turned it off and closed her book around her finger, watching him pee in the dawn's first blooming light, coming through the wavy bricks of glass over the tub.

"Sleep well?" she asked.

"Yeah, other than when you were crying," he replied.

"I was crying?"

“Well, kinda shout-crying. Scared or sad or pissed, I couldn’t tell. I grabbed your shoulder and you shut up.”

“Thanks, I don’t remember it.”

“Does it ever wake you up?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” Hannah replied. “Less and less.”

He flushed and turned toward her with all the admiration a man’s eyes could hold, and then he scowled.

“Don’t go to those fuckers again,” he said. “We’ll find Raven. I believe it now. We don’t need you doing that.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ve got your email address now. I’ll let you know if I think of anything else.”

He stepped into the bedroom, pulled on his clothes, squeezed on his boots.

“You want out now, right?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, picking up her book. “I would kill for coffee.”

“Whatcha doing the rest of the day?”

“Reading,” she said. “And then Athena’s bringing over a boy for me to try out.”

“Oh, God, she’s still working at that?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said. “In fits and starts.”

Uncle Bear laughed, tapping out the combination on her bedroom door, making no effort to conceal the code. Hannah looked away quickly. There was no reason for her to know it.

“I heard she tried to get you to assess a gay boy,” he said, walking to the elevator.

“She did. He was cute. But gay.”

They reached the elevator, stepped in. Hannah hit the button for the ground floor.

“So who’s this one? Do you know?”

“Yes. I assessed him in October. Athena thinks I’m in love with him.”

“Are you?” Uncle Bear asked.

Hannah turned to him as the elevator descended, simply stared into his eyes.

“Oh, damn,” he said, smiling. “What’s his story?”

“Yale,” Hannah said. “Harvard Divinity.”

Uncle Bear's face fell. In his world, Ivy League degrees meant nothing.

"And he came twice in me."

Uncle Bear's face lifted slightly.

"And we talked about God. And everything."

He smiled.

"You believe in God?"

"Gods," Hannah said. "I'm working it out."

"Let me know when you find her."

"Her?" Hannah said.

"Girls get girl gods," Uncle Bear said. "Boys get boys."

The elevator door opened into the kitchen, and Hannah laughed until she saw the deep pain in Uncle Bear's eyes.

"I watched a girl die," he said, frozen at the elevator door. "A soldier. It took awhile for her to go. Maybe five minutes, but it felt like a year. Bullet in the chest, just nicked an artery. She was talking to me, to the medic who was trying to save her. And then . . . she started talking to her."

"Her?"

"She just said 'Mother.' And she wasn't talking about her mom. 'Mother, I'm coming.' Like that. 'Oh, that's pretty, Mother.'"

Uncle Bear opened his mouth and closed it, as if the memory had been set before him and it was his job to bite it off and swallow it and digest it, and he turned to Hannah with wild, watery eyes before he coughed and laughed at himself and entered the kitchen.

They both poured coffee and Hannah set down her book, made herself cereal and cut half a banana.

Laura was at the table, drinking coffee and picking at fruit. She looked up and smiled at her brother, smiled at the slave girl who had given him pleasure, leaned over to look disapprovingly at Hannah's unshackled feet but gave no indication she was going to resolve the problem.

Ormek had already left for work. Athena arrived a few minutes after Hannah and Uncle Bear had sat down, and she smiled at everyone, hugged Uncle Bear, their brief argument of the night before a distant memory.

"Athena," Laura said when her daughter went to the kitchen. "Can you get Hannah's restraints? She'll be doing some work this morning."

“I told Uncle Bear about that,” Athena said. “He doesn’t care about our rules.”

After a trip downstairs and a trip to the coffee pot, Athena reappeared with Hannah’s shackles and a steaming mug.

“Here,” she said, stepping to Hannah.

Hannah turned in her seat and raised her ankles, watching the chains go on dispassionately, truly not caring right now if they were on or off.

Uncle Bear, Hannah imagined, didn’t care either. He’d made his point. There were bigger things to worry about now.

After breakfast, Hannah did laundry, something she used to do regularly before her kenneling, while Uncle bear showered in her bathroom. He was due at the marina by 11, driving Gramma’s Mercedes for now, something Hannah knew he hated doing. She hugged him goodbye at 10 and was brought down to her cage, book in hand, by Athena.

Chapter 46: A Supervised Meeting with Franklin

As she worked through research for the rest of the day, accepting lunch from Darcy at noon but otherwise dedicated to her studies, Hannah found herself growing increasingly unsettled.

At first she blamed her time with Uncle Bear, their conversation about Raven, the sad way he made love, or maybe the story he’d told about watching a female soldier die.

No, she realized, looking up from a book to the blue sky past the windows, this was about Franklin. And Athena.

A boy who was to her like a mystical being, his voice coming to her in the most unexpected places, even on a reeking slave truck, would be here in the flesh tonight.

But under Athena’s watchful eye, and most likely under her arbitrary direction, all governed by her adolescent insecurities.

Free people, Hannah knew, went on dates. They would choose the time and place mutually. What happened on the dates was at their mutual discretion as well. Normally, if the date included intimacy, that happened in private.

And there were reasons for all this, Hannah knew. Dates were as they were because it is how people preferred them to be.

What Hannah did with Allain was, for the most part, dating.

What was going to happen with Franklin tonight, was not a date. It was the opposite of a date. It was an anti-date.

Hannah found herself staring at the wall, imagining an actual date with Franklin. Dinner at the club, or at a nice restaurant, or at a taco stand downtown. But an event of mutual agreement. Just talking to him again, alone, would be welcome.

The elevator bumped.

Athena appeared.

“He’s here,” she said.

Hannah closed her books, rose.

“I don’t see him,” she said.

“He’s upstairs, charming Mom and Dad.”

“Oh, he’s being charming?” Hannah asked, trying to keep her voice even, hoping Athena couldn’t hear her heartbeat.

Athena scowled and grabbed Hannah’s shackles.

“I know you’re going to try to ruin this,” she said, bending to apply the restraints.

“Why would I do that?” Hannah asked. “I’m being serious now. Why would I do that?”

Athena stood but didn’t unlock Hannah’s cage door.

“Because you’re jealous.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, not interested in arguing the point. “But—”

“Ha! I knew it!” Athena exclaimed.

“Knew what?”

“That you’re jealous. Of Franklin.”

“Okay, I am,” Hannah said. “Fine. But shouldn’t I want you to buy him?”

“No,” Athena said. “You don’t want me to have him.”

“But if you get him, I’ll see him now and then, won’t I? Shouldn’t I like that?”

“You don’t care about him, really. You can have any boy. You’d rather never see him again then know he’s with me. Because you hate me. So I know you’re going to ruin it.”

“Athena,” Hannah said, and she grabbed the bars of her cage, looked at the girl with all the sincerity she could muster, weighing her next words carefully.

Athena, Hannah thought, believed Hannah could somehow sabotage things with Franklin, working from afar – from the kennels in Corpus Christi, no less – in incomprehensible ways. Her fears were all the more potent in their formlessness. Logic could not dispel the irrational.

In Athena's pantheon of divine beings – some she had been taught since birth, some she had created on her own – a blonde, naked slave girl named Hannah reigned supreme, able to destroy all that mattered most, wielding her eyes and her hair and her breasts and her vagina to bring ruin to everything Athena cared about.

Like most people, except perhaps subjects, Athena herself held the majority of sway over her life, to grow and prosper and destroy. But to confess this meant confessing that she must know herself, and study herself, and divine herself. And no one wants to do that, when there are gods one may blame and petition.

Absolition, Hannah thought, turning her mind here and there.

Absolition.

Was not Absolition, the secretive anti-slavery confederation, a god of a sort, the being that the system prayed to and feared and blamed? Was not Hannah's last interrogation – where Sylvia invoked the name Absolition and Hannah responded with groans of agony – the ritual, the divine ceremony by which the system of human ownership looked to other entities for the flaws and injustices it practiced of its own volition?

"Athena," Hannah said again, attempting to answer madness with madness while Athena glared. "Think of it this way. If I don't care about Franklin, then you should buy him if you like him, and I won't do anything. But if I do care about Franklin and can't stand that you have him, this is your chance to win. Buy him, and use him, and sleeve him when I'm around, and I'll have to settle for the boys in the kennels, and it will be terrible for me."

Somewhere, on the floor above, Franklin was talking to Laura and Ormek.

Down here, Athena's mind worked behind two eyes she'd set on glare and didn't bother to turn off, so they continued to direct venom at Hannah while she struggled her way to a conclusion.

"Okay," she said, a sudden, wicked smile and glowing eyes telling Hannah Athena liked the second option, irrational as it was, of using

Franklin to win the cosmic battle with Hannah that existed only in her teen mind.

Girls younger than 20 shouldn't be allowed to buy boys, Hannah thought. Or girls younger than 30. Or girls younger than 100. Or, really, no one.

Athena unlocked the cage door, and Hannah shambled after her to the elevator, her mind turning back full force to Franklin, to the boy of blue blood and two Ivy League degrees, who liked to think about God and talk about God and seemed to like sex.

Seemed to love sex, in fact.

Seemed, now that Hannah pondered their last physical meeting, to worship sex.

Tonight, he would worship again, before the altar of Hannah.

She was wetting herself. While she and Athena ascended to the kitchen, Hannah's sex organ was already oozing its maddening juice, the mere anticipation of Franklin's rigid favors all she needed.

The elevator door opened.

"And then," came a voice from the dining room, the voice of the boy of the first assessment, the voice that wafted up to Hannah on a truck packed with slaves, "the teacher's aid went back to the whiteboard, and he took a *red* marker, and just—"

Hannah guessed Franklin was making a gesture of some kind, prompting a round of laughter from Ormek and Laura, and they were still laughing when Athena entered, Hannah trailing her, heart thumping and breath coming quick and fast.

"Ah, here's Athena," Laura said. "Athena, won't you introduce Hannah to our guest?"

"They already know each other," Athena protested.

Franklin turned, immediately finding Hannah, the two souls joined by their eyes. He was naked, unsleeved, his penis semi-erect. Hannah couldn't see his feet but guessed he was shackled. He smiled at her, wryly, an expression that cut through everything else, that said to her all that needed saying, about this place where they'd found themselves, and their mutual condition, and the things that transcended it all and were the only things that, at that moment, mattered.

"Athena," Laura said sharply.

“Okay, okay,” she said, and now she smiled ironically as well, transcending some other condition.

“Franklin, this is Hannah. Hannah, this is Franklin.”

“A pleasure to see you again, Hannah,” Franklin said, and he stepped around the table carefully, because his ankles were indeed bound together, and he offered his hand and his beautiful eyes and his firm but not fully-erect penis, and Hannah smiled and greeted him and prayed to the god of inconvenient erections that his penis would not suddenly come to full attention or, if it did, Athena would not notice.

Hannah’s vagina was a lost cause, the honeys of ovulation and arousal joining forces at her sex opening, thick enough that she feared she might be dripping.

She didn’t dare look, of course.

“Hello, Franklin,” Hannah said. “It’s been awhile.”

“Yes,” he said, “since I’ve laid eyes on you, at least.”

“Huh?” Athena said.

Laura rose and headed to the kitchen, Ormek following her, and Hannah for the first time noticed the smells of dinner, one of Darcy’s roasts it seemed, potatoes au gratin perhaps.

“You can sit here,” Athena said to Franklin. “Next to me.”

Hannah took her usual space, across from the couple, looking down discreetly to confirm that her towel was serving its purpose, and she smiled at Athena because smiling at Franklin all night wasn’t advisable.

“What did you mean?” Athena asked immediately, turning to Franklin. “It sounds like you saw her after the assessment?”

Franklin looked at Hannah with mild puzzlement, turned back to Athena.

“I didn’t see her,” Franklin said. “Only heard her voice.”

“Where?”

“On the truck, a few weeks ago.”

“You mean, coming to Dallas from Corpus Christi?”

“Yes,” Franklin said. “We talked a bit, when it wasn’t too noisy. But I never saw her. We were on the same side of the truck.”

Athena snorted.

“Wow, Hannah never mentioned that!” Athena exclaimed, her voice perfectly modulated for each of her listeners.

Franklin would hear only innocent surprise, Hannah knew. Hannah heard accusation.

And, quite likely, future retribution.

“We could hardly hear each other,” Hannah said, attempting a dismissive tone.

“What did you talk about?”

Laura and Ormek returned to the table, dishes in hand, and they stocked the table while the youth watched.

“Mom,” Athena said before Laura could sit down. “Turns out Hannah and Franklin were on the truck together, coming up here before Christmas.”

“Oh, I’m sure it was nice to see someone you knew,” Laura sang, taking her seat while Ormek brought out a salad and rolls.

“What did you talk about?” Athena demanded again, looking at Hannah with a smile as bright and eyebrows as high as she could manage.

Hannah laughed.

“I think I heard something about God,” Hannah said, turning to Franklin. “Weren’t you saying something about God?”

“I think so,” Franklin said, a shadow passing so briefly across his face only Hannah could possibly have seen it. He knew Athena was difficult. And now he had provoked the beast with an innocent admission. How would he fix this? Hannah wondered. Would he try?

“I do tend to talk about God when I’ve taken something.”

“You took something?” Athena said.

“For the trip. A mild sedative. I’m sure I was babbling incoherently.”

Franklin looked at Hannah.

“I only came to toward the end,” he continued, “and I knew I’d been talking like a fool, which I always do on pills like that, and I begged her to forget the whole incident.”

“Hannah can be very discreet,” Laura observed.

Athena looked at Hannah, looked at Franklin, and decided to believe the lie.

“So even when you’re snookered, you speak of God,” Ormek said, smiling at Franklin in a way that told Hannah he hoped Athena would buy this boy. To their credit, the family had a taste for intelligence, even in the people they owned.

“Even then,” he said. “I—”

“Franklin’s an atheist,” Athena blurted.

“Athena,” Laura said, correcting her daughter as if the word were an insult.

“He is,” Athena insisted. “He told me about it on the drive over here. He—”

“And I haven’t taken anything,” Franklin said, holding up his hands. “It’s pathetically easy to get me to spout off about God.”

“Franklin,” Laura said. “Would you be opposed to a blessing over the meal?”

“Please,” he said. “I took a class on divine gratitude. I never heard a prayer over food that wasn’t beautiful.”

Ormek smiled and delivered more than his customary grace, praising God for his general contributions to things, as well as for Franklin’s presence this evening, and for Allain’s success in medical school, and Athena’s diligence in things, and Hannah’s presence and well-being.

“Where did Athena pick you up?” Hannah asked as the food was passed. She must say something, she knew. To remain silent would confirm sullenness to Athena. But her questions must be neutral, and safe. This seemed like a safe topic.

“I got him the same place we found you,” Athena said. “The stacks.”

“Have you been there since the truck?” Hannah inquired.

“Off and on,” he said. “I go where I’m sent.”

“They’re getting him to breed,” Athena announced. “He’s—”

“Athena,” Laura interrupted. “Please—”

“I’m talking business,” Athena said. “This is important.”

Laura looked at her plate, yielding to Athena’s complaint. If her daughter’s rudeness had a practical purpose, it must be tolerated.

“I have zero interest in being bred,” Athena said. “Obviously. Right now, at least.”

Ormek nodded and smiled weakly at his daughter.

Laura continued to focus on dinner.

“So I’m going to use that to bargain with,” Athena said.

“What are they asking?” Laura said, looking up.

“One forty,” Athena said. “I have it. But I’m pushing for an even 100.”

“That’s quite a discount,” Laura said approvingly.

“Well, I wouldn’t be buying him to breed,” Athena said. “And then, he doesn’t believe in God.”

Hannah whooped, because she couldn’t help herself.

“What?” Athena demanded. “What?”

“Oh,” Hannah said, waving her hand apologetically, unable to come up with any explanation for her laughter other than the unacceptable truth.

“We could breed him with Hannah, though,” Athena said, vindictiveness following Hannah’s laughter as if they were inescapably linked biological events.

“Athena, I don’t think—”

“Can you imagine the babies?” Athena said, almost shouting. “Oh my god, little blonde-headed geniuses, walking around in their diapers all day going, ‘Aunt Athena, Aunt Athena, Mommy says you’re really dumb. Oh, Aunt Athena, why?’”

Hannah dissolved in a laughter bordering on tears. Something about Athena’s joke, its obscene presumptions, the tension of the meal, or the fact that Franklin was seeing Athena in her full glory, made the moment so amusing to Hannah she simply couldn’t control herself.

If they dragged her back to her cage tonight and had her beaten in the morning, so be it. She couldn’t stop. She didn’t want to stop.

All at the table were staring at her as she recovered and pressed her napkin to her eyes.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said. “I just . . . Athena . . . you know that would never happen. I would never say that. Or my babies. It’s funny because it’s so impossible.”

Hannah looked briefly at Franklin, saw that he was biting his lip, too nervous to laugh out loud, but the tears in his eyes betrayed his mirth.

The rest of the meal passed without event, Hannah saying a word now and then to keep up appearances, otherwise ruminating on this latest revelation, that Franklin had been breeding, putting his semen into other females for the express purpose of producing offspring. Was it done the natural way? Were the girls slave or free? Had any attempts been successful?

Hannah learned, over the small glass of wine Athena allowed her and Franklin at the end of the meal, that he was owned by a consortium brought on by his father’s creditors, and the profits from any services he

provided were split. They were still trying to sell him, but they weren't expecting him to lay idle in the meantime.

"Do you want a tour?" Athena asked as Laura and Ormek cleared the dishes.

"Of course," he replied.

"Hannah, you have to help out," Athena said, motioning her to join them as they headed to the elevator.

"Let's start with Hannah's favorite place," Athena said wickedly, pushing the button for the third floor.

Hannah knew where they were going and pretended to scowl, but she didn't care. There was nothing to be ashamed of.

The elevator rose and Athena looked down at Franklin's penis, now fully erect, sticking up at a slight angle, aimed at Athena's belly.

"Last orgasm?" she asked.

"Two days ago," he said. "They sleeved me as soon as you made the appointment."

"Do you like it at that place?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "A lot of lying around. Literally."

"You can tutor me if I buy you," she said.

"I'd love to."

"That should be more fun than the stacks."

"Most things," Franklin said, "are more fun than the stacks."

The elevator door opened and Athena made a beeline for the mean room, throwing wide the door and looking back impatiently, the two subjects struggling to keep up.

"Have you ever heard of a mean room?" she asked.

"Not in so many words," Franklin replied. "But I'm familiar with the concept."

Athena turned on the light and ushered them in.

Hannah had been taken here only once, after she'd swallowed a strong sedative at Athena's insistence last summer. A man named Mr. Ortega had been brought in to perform the service, whipping Hannah from her shoulder blades to her calves while she screamed for him to stop.

Worse things had been done to her since. She looked at the room blankly, the posts and boards where a girl could be bound and stretched; the cage where she might be held for a time; the cabinet where whips and canes were stored. It was just another place in the house to her.

“This is Hannah’s main room,” Athena said. “She has to come up here all the time.”

“I assume you’re joking,” Franklin said, his penis drooping.

“It was once, for a pill Athena made me take,” Hannah said.

“You accepted my apology for that,” Athena said.

“I’m just saying what happened,” Hannah said. “I’m not mad.”

Indeed, the punishment she’d suffered here was most likely not for the pill at all. Laura had ordered it the day after she’d discovered that Hannah had pleased Ormek without permission, taking him into her body, allowing him to thrust between the bars of her cage and between her legs and into her chamber, depositing as evidence – which Laura found later that day – uncountable swimming sperm and the soup through which they swam.

“Okay, enough of this,” Athena said, striding back to the elevator, Hannah and Franklin shuffling behind.

They made a quick tour of the main residential floor, walking through the room with books and games and the pool table to Athena’s bedroom.

“This is where I sleep,” she said, walking in and waving her arms. “It sucks but it’s home. Franklin, you’ll probably be here all night, after you’re with Hannah.”

She stepped back into the hall.

“Mom and Dad’s room there, Allain’s there, he’s the one we bought Hannah for, and he’s in medical school. And there’s Hannah’s room, fixed up just the way she likes it even though she’s hardly ever there.”

Franklin’s penis was hard again, and when they stepped into the elevator, it brushed Athena’s hip, and she looked down.

“Sorry,” he said.

“Hannah first,” Athena replied, hitting the button for the basement. “That’s where we were going next.”

Hannah looked down at Franklin’s manhood, imagined it within her and felt the lubricant flowing again, thick and wet. Her nipples were hardening and she didn’t care. Nipples weren’t an expression of love. And this is not a date, she reminded herself. This is not a date. She was struggling to breathe normally.

This is not a date.

The elevator door opened. Athena walked out. Hannah and Franklin followed.

“Two cages,” Athena announced. “That one’s Hannah’s. And the other one’s for her . . . guests.”

Athena unlocked the door into Hannah’s cage, motioned them both to step in, locked it and knelt to remove their shackles.

Hannah looked at Franklin, received a wry smile in response.

This is not a date, she reminded herself.

Athena turned to Franklin.

“Just go ahead and get in her,” she said. “But take awhile before you cum.”

Hannah moved to her bed. She’d already decided, unless someone told her otherwise, to do this on her hands and knees. This wasn’t making love. It wasn’t even friendship. Athena just needed to test something.

And yet, Hannah was wet, and not just due to ovulation. Seeing Franklin’s erection had stirred her.

“How long is awhile?” Franklin asked, taking his first tentative step toward Hannah’s bed.

Athena pulled out her phone.

“Like,” she said, looking at it, looking back up at Franklin. “Seven to 10 minutes.”

Did Franklin understand what was happening here? Hannah wished she could speak to him privately. Not about God, necessarily, or all the other things he knew that she didn’t, but just about what was being done, that Athena just wanted an impersonal ejaculation so she could take Franklin up to her room for the actual test.

Still moving tentatively, Franklin reached Hannah’s bed, raised one knee and set it on the mattress.

Hannah looked back at him, smiling and trying to say with her eyes what she desperately wanted to say with her mouth: Go ahead. This is fine. I want you in me, even if she’s watching. This isn’t the last time we’ll meet.

I’m coming for you

I’m not done with you yet

I love you

Perhaps Franklin understood. He brought his second leg to the mattress and walked on his knees over Hannah’s calf, positioning himself behind her.

Hannah looked forward and arched her back, raising her slit for Franklin's inspection.

How many times had he done something like this since they'd talked on the truck? It had been a month today – 31 days, since they'd traveled together. A boy took two days on average to return to a full charge, Hannah knew. Had he been bred every other day for 31 days? That would make 15 sex acts, with 15 girls.

Or no, perhaps he'd been mated with the same girl multiple times while she ovulated.

Hannah felt Franklin's fingers against her labia, parting them, running cautiously along her slot and against her hole, inspecting her, checking her readiness for penetration.

Surely by now he knew the signs of a female set for entry, the full, pink vulva, the leaking fluid, the swollen clitoris, the arched back and the short, sharp breaths.

Hannah felt her lips being opened wide, the tip of Franklin's penis touching her wet entrance, almost kissing it, before he pushed forward and her sheath began stretching around his thickness.

"Uh," she said.

An ovulating girl should probably be inseminated every day, even if her partner isn't delivering a full jolt, Hannah thought, adjusting her pelvis to accommodate Franklin's member.

Buried completely in her chamber, Franklin set to work, placing his hands on Hannah's bottom and thrusting steadily, patiently, and Hannah knew he was pacing himself for ejaculation on Athena's schedule.

She heard him breathe quietly, sighing, felt a slight stutter in his thrusts as he repositioned, shifted on his knees, moved his left hand up along her back, while his right hand, the hand Athena couldn't see, ran down her thigh.

Did he kiss the girls he bred with?

Did he hug any of them?

Did he make love? Did he talk?

Or was it more like this, mounting from behind while someone supervised to make sure he gave it adequate time, kept his thrusts true and deep, maintained full insertion during orgasm? Was it someone's job to verify that the female remained cooperative and comfortable throughout?

Franklin was doing something to Hannah's right thigh, stroking her, tapping on her flesh with his fingers, as if pressing out a code only she could read. Did he know he was doing this? Was he trying to say something to her this way? Was it a simple message, his hand and her thigh partnering secretly, playfully, even cleverly, while her vagina and his penis ground together in raw carnality?

Did he do this with his other girls? How many other girls? Were there enough girls slated for reproduction with Franklin that there was always someone ovulating? On the day one girl's vagina went cool, could they find another whose vagina had pushed the mercury past 100?

Franklin moved his right hand up to her bottom, massaging her before he slipped it down to her thigh again.

Yes, he knew what he was doing. This was a message. Hannah raised her thigh, swung it out, dropped it back to the mattress.

We are together, she was saying to him. Touch my thigh and you make us partners beyond this.

Was Franklin the only mate for the girl he was attempting to breed?

This was a new question.

Hannah raised her eyes to the wall before her, groaned when Franklin delivered a particularly deep thrust, and pondered. What if Franklin were part of a team, one of three or four males coupling daily with the girl, her vagina allowed no rest until the conclusion of her fertility?

Were Athena to make good on her threat of breeding Hannah, who would she be partnered with?

She imagined a line of males servicing her daily. Allain of course, and Brad and Britt from the kennels; perhaps Ramone, if he could be called back temporarily from Brazil. Maybe Jacob would get permission from his owner to deliver the occasional jet of semen.

Ormek, perhaps.

And Franklin. Of course, Franklin.

Franklin would come last, gently wringing his cream out into her aching hole, the two of them groaning together to close out the day. She would always cum for Franklin, no matter how strenuous her breeding regime had been.

Hannah held herself up on one hand and reached between her legs with the other, spasming as soon as her fingers reached her clitoris, as if her fingers were electric.

“Doing okay, Franklin?” Athena asked.

“I’m good,” he panted, his voice just ironic enough that Hannah could sense it, Athena probably couldn’t.

“It’s been five minutes so far,” Athena said. “Can you last a few more?”

“Yes,” he grunted.

“Hannah, are you masturbating?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said.

“Franklin, is that a problem?”

“No, Ma’am.”

Hannah wasn’t touching herself for Franklin. This was a selfish act, something she had to do. But she would not tighten before it was time. Vaginal contractions were normally a part of her self-pleasure routine, but she didn’t want to take the blame if Franklin was unable to meet Athena’s timetable.

Franklin slowed, his penis swelled, and Hannah knew his time was drawing near despite her best efforts to help him hold off.

“How long was it between first and second?” Athena asked.

“Ma’am?” Franklin grunted.

“You came in her twice, right?” Athena inquired. “During the assessment? How long did it take between?”

“Hannah . . .” Franklin grunted. “Hannah . . . was . . . keeping the clock.”

“Hannah?” Athena asked.

Couldn’t this wait? Couldn’t Athena ask this after they were done? Or before they’d started?

“Oh . . .” Hannah said. “Oh . . . godno . . . it was . . . I think . . . less than . . . 20 minutes . . . augh! . . . augh . . . sweetjesusno!”

Hannah shouted through a long, hard orgasm, her vagina contracting around Franklin’s penis now, uncontrollably, mercilessly.

“Uh, uh,” he groaned, losing the battle to withhold.

“Go ahead,” Athena said resignedly in the face of the inevitable. “It’s been almost 7.”

“Aaaaah,” Franklin sighed, pounding Hannah’s chamber from behind, balls swinging against her hand, her fingers circling her clitoris and pushing her through the end of her own climax, the partners in mutual ecstasy for perhaps half a minute before Hannah shook through her last

wave of pleasure and Franklin neared the expiration of his own convulsing orgasm.

Hannah, still gripping Franklin's sex with her feminine walls, dropped to her elbows, resting the side of her face on her pillow, gasping like a beached fish.

Franklin continued to thrust with his softening penis while he stroked Hannah's thigh.

But she felt empty now, as she sometimes did after sex when it was being done for someone else, or her partner was going to be taken away immediately.

"Franklin, done?" Athena asked impatiently.

"Yes," he gasped.

"Let's go upstairs," she said, her voice coming from somewhere distant.

Franklin pulled his penis out of Hannah's chamber, a string of semen and lubricant running out and down to her still-swollen clit, and she collapsed on the bed while he crawled off and went to the bars to be shackled.

Athena unlocked the cage door and Hannah watched him go, offering a small wave in response to one last, wry grin.

"Light on or off, Hannah?" Athena asked.

Her voice was thick, Hannah noted. Athena was struggling to speak. Was she near tears? Probably not. Was she in the throes of arousal, with nothing to do about it until she could get Franklin's penis into one of her holes?

Yes, most likely. And probably within 20 minutes.

"On, please," Hannah rasped.

The elevator bumped, and Hannah rolled over to her back, spread her legs and pressed her fingers to her soaked vulva.

She should have asked for a dildo, she thought. Not her thickest, just something to replace the void left by Franklin's withdrawal.

No, perhaps just as well, she thought. Her raging slot needed a break.

She rubbed her clitoris mechanically, nothing romantic now, just a fertile organ in need of one more round of resolution.

She thought about Franklin, and the way he touched her thigh, and the way he slid into her body over and over until the white elixir of his

passions flooded her sex and spilled out its throbbing door.

“Oh,” Hannah panted, squeezing her breasts, pinching her nipples. “Oh . . . yeah . . . oh . . . yespleasethankyougod.”

After her climax, she straightened her legs and stared at the ceiling, one hand on her breast, the other draped across her mound. Only when her breathing evened out did she rise from her bed, wipe her vagina at the toilet and move to her desk and her reading.

She flipped open to a journal article on hay fever, looked toward the black windows where the day had long since ended, and allowed herself briefly to imagine what might be happening in Athena’s bed right now.

During the assessment, Hannah had provoked a second orgasm from Franklin within 20 minutes of his first.

So, ridiculous as it was, that was the standard Athena was setting. Find me at least as alluring, at least as arousing, as the slave girl. Cum in her, recover in 20 minutes, cum in me.

Would he pass Athena’s test tonight? Would he be able to reset that quickly when Athena’s vagina was his second?

Hannah hoped so – not because she wanted Athena to buy Franklin; he was too good for her – but because she didn’t want to win. It gave her no satisfaction to defeat Athena, in any contest, and her victories only embittered Athena further. And in the end, Hannah would lose any contest with the girl, one way or another.

Hannah might have beauty, and academic prowess, and a quick wit, but ownership trumped all.

Hannah grabbed a tissue, dabbed at her eyes, and read.

Chapter 47: A Little Math and Science

Laura checked on Hannah and turned off her light at 11:30, leaving her to sleep fitfully, dreams of a pounding, thrusting Franklin tangling with a chimera Uncle Bear and an ephemeral Ramone and, briefly, a wispy Raven, and when Hannah awoke the next morning, she concluded that partnering night after night with males with whom she had deep, complex relationships was spiritually taxing and probably inadvisable.

Brad was safe, simply coupling with Hannah as her schedule permitted and her desires determined, sharing pleasant, soft orgasms with her and leaving her with no doubt, second thoughts, worries.

Allain was like that as well, she realized with a start. Her most regular partner for a year and a half, her lover in many senses of the word, he presented no challenges, prompted no sorrows or regrets, provoked no jealousies from Athena. Hannah could take him into her body every night, absorb the cream of his devotions three times a day, and never suffer a single troubled dream.

It was Saturday morning.

Today, she would read and learn and, finally, pack up all her things, her books and her clothing and that Nature's Army bag.

Tonight, she would be with Ormek, a minor tryst, she insisted to herself, akin to exercising with a dildo. Indeed, perhaps she should ask for something to wrestle with after Ormek had warmed and wetted her chamber. If things were done properly – and they would be – he wouldn't be up her vagina long enough to drive her to orgasm.

And then tomorrow, she and her luggage would be shipped in separate containers back to Corpus Christi.

Monday, she'd go to assistanceship orientation.

Tuesday, she'd go to class.

And on that day, she'd begin splitting her time between her studies and writing two treatises. By March 1, she'd turn in her best under her real name.

Spartacine Arkkola would be gone by then, not submitting a treatise, and politely informing the school she had made other plans.

She would, in a sense, die. Or worse, never have been. Her change in plans included no longer existing. Hannah was not looking forward to wiping her away, for reasons she would have difficulty explaining.

Laura came down to shackle Hannah and bring her to breakfast at 8:30. Franklin was due back in storage early this morning, so Athena and he were already gone. If Laura knew how Franklin had done in Athena's bed last night, she said nothing of it, and she brought Hannah back to her cage with the usual mix of pleasantries and instructions.

"You'll stay here for lunch," she said, locking Hannah's cage and removing her chains. "Darcy will bring you a plate. But we'll be going to the club for dinner, to wish you an outstanding semester, and to thank you for a beautiful month here in Dallas."

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said. "Thank you."

“We’ll be leaving at 6,” Laura added. “So you’ll want to be completely washed up and made up by then.”

“Yes, Ma’am, I will be.”

“And you remember that you’ll be meeting with Ormek, after dinner?”

“Oh,” Hannah said, as if that detail had slipped her mind. “Yes.”

“Ormek feels he should take no more than 10 minutes with you,” Laura said.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah agreed.

“I believe there are some things you can do that will help him . . . finish,” Laura said.

“Yes, Ma’am, there are.”

“Very good,” Laura said, turning to leave. She wasn’t going to take Hannah’s temperature this morning, apparently.

“Ma’am?” Hannah said.

“Yes?”

“May I use one of my aids tonight? After the meeting?”

“Of course, Honey,” Laura said, smiling broadly. “Which one would you like?”

“The smaller black one, with the veins, if that’s okay?”

“Yes,” Laura said. “Your vagina is holding up, then?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“We’ve scheduled you pretty heavily this week, I think.”

“I’m doing fine,” Hannah promised. “It’s helped that I’m ovulating.”

“Of course.”

The elevator bumped and Hannah turned and felt a strange, sudden wash of euphoria, the kind of thing that comes now and then when one passes a threshold one had not noticed, until it was crossed. She’d navigated all the holidays successfully, she realized. Not only had she survived the considerable risks of staying here for a month, she’d thrived. She’d finished her Austin coursework, made significant progress on her treatises, and she had served, well and faithfully, bringing pleasure more than a dozen times to bodies male and female, one of them Franklin.

She had but one more obligation to fulfill, and this was the simplest of all, providing her opening for a quick, unsupervised visit by Ormek.

And then tomorrow after what would be, admittedly, the ordeal of returning to Corpus Christi, she would be a student. A real student, in jeans and a flannel shirt and her best van Minsk coat on colder days and the Nature's Army bookbag Allain had bought slung over her shoulder, which she would defend with, quite literally, her life.

She read and turned pages and read and took notes and felt not the slightest need to write anything down except scientific and biological facts and insights. She had, in an earlier life, believed that something was wrong, and she'd written seditious little notes to herself in the corners of notebooks.

No, her life might not be perfect, but whose was? She was happy. She was succeeding.

She heard the elevator bump at 12:30, stood to greet Darcy, bearing a plate, and she smiled at the woman.

"Thanks for all the food," she said. "I'll miss this. I'll miss you."

"Do you do anything but study?" Darcy asked.

"You don't see me at night," Hannah said, blushing slightly because she didn't mean to answer so lasciviously. "I don't study as much then."

Hannah ate, and for another four precious hours, she read and learned, and when the elevator bumped again, she was ready to do something else.

"You decent, Hannah?" Athena inquired.

"Yes," Hannah said, rising and stepping to the bars.

Athena appeared, bearing the black, veiny dildo Hannah had requested.

"Mom says you wanted this," she said, passing it through the bars.

"Thanks," Hannah said, tossing it onto the bed for later.

"Are any like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do any boys have . . . veins?"

"I don't know," Hannah said. "Maybe, but I haven't met one."

"Why do you like that one?"

"It's just different. And a little smaller, and right now I'm kind of worn out."

"Yeah," Athena agreed. She wasn't smiling, wasn't being lecherous. Did she have her mind on other things?

"How was Franklin last night?" Hannah asked.

“You were there.”

“For my part,” Hannah said. “Not for yours.”

“It was good,” Athena said with what Hannah believed was intentional vagueness. “I made an offer.”

“100?”

“Yeah, and they said no. Flat no. A guy on the phone this morning said they wouldn’t even consider it. They can make more than that renting him out for breeding.”

“That seems like a lot.”

“Oh, and they know he’s an atheist. They don’t care.”

“Why not offer full price?” Hannah asked.

“You don’t ever offer full price,” Athena mocked. “Oh my god.”

“But you get it all back, with interest,” Hannah said.

“Yeah, so?”

“The more you pay, the more you get, right? If it works out, anyway? Forty percent?”

“Go on.”

“So if you pay 100 now, you get back 140 in two years, so you make 40, and if you pay 140 now, you get back 196 in two years and you make 56. Sixteen thousand more.”

Athena pulled out her phone, tapped on it for what Hannah considered an inordinate amount of time, scowled and turned away, saying nothing until she reached the elevator.

“Mom says shower now.”

“Okay.”

On the drive to the club, Athena announced her thinking to her parents.

“Hannah says to pay full price for Franklin,” she said.

“Are you going to?” Laura asked, looking back at her daughter.

“I’m going to sleep on it. But she did some math and it sort of made sense.”

“Tell us your math, Hannah,” Ormek said, with the subtle lift in his voice that told Hannah he was looking forward to their time together tonight, as insignificant as it would be to her.

Hannah explained what she considered to be rudimentary math, and the parents nodded wisely.

“It’s all those classes she’s taking online,” Athena said. “Every time I go down there, she’s reading something.”

“Hannah’s working on two papers,” Laura said. “She says—”

“What are the topics, Hannah?” Ormek inquired.

“Reverse somatic hypermutation, to treat rhinitis,” Hannah replied. “And mitigating juvenile epilepsy with neuronically-channeled beta blockers.”

“Interesting,” Ormek said, the condescension just barely audible in his voice. “Neuronic-channeling has never been applied in that—”

“Actually, Sir,” Hannah said, shifting in her seat, her chains ringing faintly, “there’s enough promise in two new studies, in Osaka and Montreal, that I think the idea deserves consideration.”

“But channeling in a neuronic—”

“I’m working off Smorgy’s theory that absence seizures result from synaptical synchronicities . . . so if you can introduce a new beta blocker that attacks dendritic . . . well, it’s a little complicated, but if you can cut depolarization with a minimum 30-percent sodium mitigation, then—”

Ormek, stopped at a light, raised his hands and laughed, not condescendingly at all.

“You are a little over my pay grade,” he said. “Who are you studying with?”

“Sir?”

“Who are you doing your research with? This is a faculty at Corpus Christi?”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “No, Sir. No one. The paper has to be completely independent.”

The light turned green. Ormek proceeded through the light.

Athena broke the silence at the next signal.

“I’m going to sleep on it,” she said. “And call them Monday.”

“Do you know when he’ll be available?” Laura asked.

“Yeah, I asked. It could take weeks, or months. There’s a bunch of paperwork for a family bond. Lawyers have to write up this stuff, and I’ll need a lawyer to read it all.”

“Oh, you should give Mr. Batchelor a call,” Laura said, smiling with profound motherly pride at her daughter.

“Who?” Athena asked.

“The lawyer who arranged Hannah’s purchase,” Laura replied. “We all met him. He seemed like a very nice man, and I think we have his card with Hannah’s papers.”

“Okay,” Athena agreed. “How much does he charge?”

“It will be a lot,” Ormek said. “And it will be worth it.”

“I got my wire this morning,” Athena said.

Ormek and Laura said nothing.

“I got my wire. And Hannah knows about it. And she knows she can’t talk about it.”

“You’re going to save it, aren’t you?” Laura inquired.

“Not all of it,” Athena said. “I want to go to van Minsk.”

“What are you going to buy?” Laura asked.

“No, I want to go to van Minsk. In Odessa. They do total fittings there, they measure everything, it’s all sciencey. Hannah would love it.”

“How much does that cost?” Laura asked.

“Well, you have to fly there, and I would bring my . . . whoever I buy . . . and stay there for a week or something. And then you buy the clothes they recommend. But there’s no markup on them. The fittings and everything are free.”

“Oh, Athena, doesn’t that—” Laura protested mildly.

“I need new clothes for tech,” Athena said. “What I have now is fine for high school, but I need to get really good grades next year, so I can —”

“Do clothes lead to better grades?” Ormek inquired, pulling into the parking garage next to the club.

“I think Hannah should do a paper on that,” Athena said. “But I’m sure they do.”

At dinner, at a table by the windows where Hannah could look out into the clear night sky and see the stars, she ordered a seafood crepe and a Caesar salad and, in anticipation of a difficult journey tomorrow, finished off the meal with port and a red velvet cake with heavy cream cheese icing.

Ormek and Laura left the table to talk to friends at the bar, and Athena looked at Hannah expectantly.

“Hannah, let’s dance,” she said.

“Okay,” Hannah agreed. “Ballroom?”

“God no, it’s a slow song,” Athena said, rising, leading Hannah to the dance floor, where two other couples clung to each other and swayed to

Rising Blue's *First I Get Flowers*.

"I'm not jealous anymore," Athena said, wrapping her arms around Hannah's shoulders and whispering into her ear. "About Franklin."

"Good," Hannah said. "You never needed to be."

"Well, you and he had a thing. I know that."

"I have a thing with everyone . . . I'm with," Hannah said, resting her chin on Athena's shoulder, feeling the girl's breasts pressing against hers. "It's what happens."

"You know why I want good grades at tech?"

"No."

"To go to a four-year. Like maybe Corpus Christi."

"Cool. You'd love it there."

"I'd kennel Franklin there."

"You're definitely buying him?"

"Yeah, I think so. He's a good investment. And . . . damn . . . last night."

Athena breathed in and sighed against Hannah's hair, and Hannah knew Franklin had done his best.

"Oh," Hannah said. "I thought he was gay."

"Uh, you can't fake that," Athena said. "He talks, too."

"Yeah, I noticed that."

"He talks about God even when he's not on a pill."

"Did you learn anything?"

"Yeah," Athena replied. "Well, not about being an atheist. But about other stuff."

They continued to sway.

Why had Franklin done his best? Did he want Athena to buy him, despite what he surely must know she was? Why would he want Athena to buy him? For Hannah? Would he endure Athena for the rare chance to be with Hannah?

"If I buy him," Athena said, "I'll let you do it with him sometimes. When you're around."

"Thanks," Hannah said.

"In the kennels too, if you're not too busy with everyone else there."

Chapter 48: Figure 13

That night, back in her bed, Hannah waited in the dark for Ormek. There was no need to masturbate. She was still ovulating, still releasing a thin wash of clear juice.

The elevator bumped at 11:05. Hannah had already set up a chair to steady herself. She went to it, bent with her bottom pressed against the bars, grabbed the seat and waited.

Ormek was supposed to touch only her vulva, and only for the purposes of spreading her lips so he could put his penis into her vagina.

But he began by stroking her bottom.

Hannah used to tolerate such behavior. She used to tolerate much more.

Not tonight.

“Insert your penis,” she said, loud enough to be heard clearly.

“Pardon me, Hannah?”

“Put your penis up my vagina,” Hannah said, reaching between her legs to spread her lips. “Please don’t touch me like that.”

Ormek withdrew his hand, and she heard his wedding band ring and knew he had both hands around the bars now.

What was he expecting? How could he believe Hannah would do anything besides exactly what Laura had prescribed? Hannah’s last indiscretion with Ormek had gotten her kenneled and, arguably, beaten. She would not make that mistake again.

Ormek drew in his breath in disappointment or resignation or lust, and Hannah felt his tip at her opening, the slow, delicious insertion, the first withdrawal and thrust, and she grunted, because gasps of pleasure, while they were not explicitly allowed, were not explicitly forbidden either.

“Your ideas seems like very good ones,” Ormek said between breaths.

Hannah remained silent, both hands gripping her chair to hold herself still while Ormek’s thrusts deepened and picked up their pace.

“For your papers,” he added.

They were not to talk during Ormek’s visits.

Laura had made that clear. No kissing, no touching, no interaction beyond bringing their genitals together for a brief, emotionless coupling which, tonight, was to last no more than 10 minutes.

What was he doing? Hannah wondered. Why was he talking?

Was this a game?

Yes, this was a game.

That's what people did, she realized.

When they were comfortable, safe, well-fed and sheltered, when they were without fear, without pain, their need for God became secondary. There was no longer the requirement for a rescuer, a protector, a savior.

God became a decoration, a wardrobe accessory, unnecessary but for wearing to church.

But if there was no god to beseech, to what would those turn who were inclined to beseeching?

Games, of course. Playing was a prayer, every point a divine answer, every victory another station on the road toward salvation.

Hannah was Ormek's game. Get the family's slave girl to break the rules.

Provoke her – with soft touches and trivial words and the filling of her vagina with a long, bare penis – into forgetting the promises she had made to the house.

Find that formula of attentions that could inspire a girl – already regularly chained and confined and used – to risk her mind and body before the rages of a betrayed wife.

Did Ormek know he was playing? Probably not, Hannah concluded. He only knew he wished to return to the marital bed with the knowledge that he had pushed the family's slave girl to another indiscretion, using nothing but his voice and his hands and his erect penis.

All he had was not enough. He needed to know he could do this thing too.

If Laura found out, as she had the last time there was flagrant disobedience, Ormek would suffer whatever consequences Laura inflicted. A few days of coldness. The temporary denial of her pleasures. Some act of sincere contrition.

And a soulless partnering with Ramone.

Painful as all that might have been to Ormek – particularly the knowledge that his wife had, however impersonally, wrapped her chamber around another man's shaft, accepted another man's pulsing cream into her body – Hannah's suffering would occur at another level altogether, bordering on the existential. Nothing compared in Hannah's mind to being methodically beaten.

Except, perhaps, being sold off, traded away, declared defective.

And most likely, Athena would manage the transaction.

Ormek was still back there, working with his penis while, Hannah suspected, he considered other strategies for defeating the slave girl's defenses.

"I would like to . . . read some of the articles . . . you're consulting," Ormek gasped.

Hannah remained silent, her only response, in accordance with Laura's implied instructions, the tightening of her vagina, her sudden embrace so compelling Ormek exclaimed, a quick "Oh!" His next five thrusts were almost violent in their intensity, his strategies for winning at this game yielding to the need for mere orgasm.

"Ah," he grunted. "Ah!"

Hannah squeezed again and Ormek lost, settling on the sweet concession of pouring his ejaculate into Hannah's sheath with a dozen deep, furious jabs while she clung to the chair and did her best to hold still.

Ormek's passions slowed, stilled. His penis contracted and slipped out of Hannah's hole, and the elevator bumped over his departure.

Hannah returned her chair to her desk, went to her bed, felt around until she found the black, veiny dildo, lay on her back and drove it into her body, celebrating her last night in the house Petrosyan with a long, groaning orgasm and the ejection from her sex of a thick wash of fluids male and female that felt to her like another victory.

No one was punished on the truck back to Corpus Christi. The snack was better – saltier, sweeter and a little buttery – and the water tasted fresh. The slave transporting infrastructure and the people who worked it – strained to the limit in the week before Christmas, seemed calmer to Hannah, kinder, less frantic.

The trip was still long and boring, but not horrific. There was no Franklin, of course, but there were no cries of pain either.

Hannah reached the kennels before dark, had dinner with Jane, coupled with her afterwards in Jane's kennel. If Jane sensed the presence of anyone's semen, she said nothing, licking Hannah's opening with enthusiasm but keeping her opinions to herself.

Tammy came to Hannah's kennel at 2:30 that Monday afternoon.

"Hey, Hannah."

“Hey, Tammy,” Hannah said, setting aside her books and rising from her bed.

“Got your schedule, congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“You know the procedure?”

“Not really.”

“Someone will let you out, generally about an hour before your first class of the day, and you can shower and go to the lockers and they’ll scan you out up to 30 minutes before class.”

“Okay.”

“And then, be back by 11.”

“Eleven?” Hannah echoed. “At night?”

“Yeah, 11 p.m. Curfew. Same rules apply.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Oh. Okay.”

“Ready to go?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said. “But I’ve already had a shower.”

“Just go to the lockers when you’re ready.”

“I have an assistanceship meeting,” Hannah said, trying to keep her voice even.

“Yeah, our schedule says it’s happening at 3:30, so don’t try to scan out before 3. You can do the lounge or whatever in the meantime.”

“Okay.”

“Trying to scan out early is worth a mark,” Tammy warned. “So you can eventually end up on Hall 6 for being too eager.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“You’re scheduled for February 4,” Tammy added.

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked.

“Helping out then. On Hall 6.”

“I won’t be helping out,” Hannah said. “We talked about that.”

“You’re going either way,” Tammy said.

“I understand that,” Hannah said.

Tammy unlocked Hannah’s door and she stepped out.

“What will they do to me?” Hannah asked, swallowing.

“It won’t be fun, but that’s all I can say.”

“It’s secret?” Hannah said.

“No, it varies. But it sometimes changes people’s minds.”

“Okay.”

Hannah went to the PCs, drew in her breath and created two documents, one after the other, one for a treatise about juvenile epilepsy, one about rhinitis, because she wasn't sure yet which she would be entering.

Formatting instructions – margins, page numbers, abstract – were very precise, and she had just enough time to title them, set them up and save them to her account before it was time to go.

Then, almost shaking with anticipation, with pride, with elation, Hannah went downstairs to the lockers, dressed in her best jeans, red canvas flats she loved, a cream V-neck sweater that flattered her without looking like it was meant to, and she grabbed her Nature's Army bookbag, empty but for two notebooks and a clutch of pens and a campus map Allain had given her, and she put on makeup and tied her hair back in a ponytail so it wouldn't interfere with work, and the doors were unlocked for her and she made her way out into a bright, cool, beautiful Monday afternoon.

The Cambridge building was a 10-minute walk through a mostly empty campus. It was a beautiful building, four-story and all brick, with a grand entrance of cherry doors that she pushed through for the first time.

She had been here before, she knew, but always coming in by the back, chained and confined to a covered, rolling cage.

She ignored the elevator, taking the stairs, because she wanted to feel every step, to overwhelm her senses with the tangibility of this day, this moment.

The email she'd gotten a month ago said to go to Room 221, and she followed several laughing bands of fellow students, entering the room with one last flutter of her heart, finding herself in the back of a large auditorium, perhaps 200 assistanship colleagues here already, more filing in from several entrances.

She glanced around, knew she was being stared at and wanted to believe it was because of her hair and her sweater and not her collar or the work she had done as an instructional prop last semester, and she opened her bag and pulled out a pen and a notebook, opened it up to a brilliant, empty, white page, and waited.

How many other subjects were here? she wondered. She was sitting in the back of the classroom, peering at necks that were covered with hair and shirts and sweaters, but she counted at least three collars, none of them belonging to people she recognized from the kennels.

Several instructors were seated up front, and a little after 3:30, one of them rose, grabbed a stack of paper and handed it to the student in the first row.

“Welcome, everyone,” she said with a slight accent, possibly Middle-Eastern. “I’m Parta Anji. For those who don’t know me, I chair the biology department when I’m not teaching genetics. It’s great to see everyone, and particularly all the new faces today. Please make sure you get the handout that’s making the rounds, because it’s got some important information we won’t be going over today.”

For the next 45 minutes, Hannah listened raptly to every word the woman and her fellow professors spoke – policies, hours, supervision, how to set up direct deposit and get paid, what to do and what not to do.

Several instructors rose to announce special teams, and they singled out students who had qualified to help with a particular grant or specialized research project.

This was the next tier up, Hannah thought to herself, looking at the team members with judicious envy. How did one get considered for this kind of work?

It wasn’t until almost 5 when Dr. Anji called Dr. Tallus to the front.

He was a tall man, younger than most of the faculty standing before the students today, clean cut and with an ambition Hannah could sense from six rows away.

He cleared his throat.

“This is old news to some of you, but our school was awarded one of seven gamete viability research grants in November, a high-dollar and very prestigious, two-year project funded by the New Life Consortium, and we’re kicking off this week. Today, in fact. And I need everyone on my team down here now.”

Fifteen students collected their papers and their bags and rose, moving down the aisles to the front of the class, pride evident in every step.

“If you think you’re seeing the best of the best on their feet, it’s not your imagination,” Dr. Tallus said. “I was allowed to hand-pick my team, and I chose the strongest scholars and the most creative thinkers. Something like half of them have at least one publication to their names. And these are all undergrads.”

Hannah joined the rest of the audience in a polite round of applause.

The students gathered around Dr. Tallus, and he held up a tablet and tapped it for a quick, quiet roll call, shaking each hand as he found them on his list.

Hannah looked at the handout in front of her, committing herself to memorizing every word on the three stapled sheets.

“Hannah Loughbridge?”

She’d be getting at least 10 hours per week, at \$17.50 per hour. Almost \$200 per week. Almost \$1,000 per month.

“Is Hannah Loughbridge here?”

She’d have it put into her account, and she’d use it to buy books, and subscribe to a journal or two. Something in physics. Or biology. Or both. And she’d buy her own bikini, with her own money, for the summer. Maybe two. There was an amazing new designer named Pallmall, and his bikinis were popping up online everywhere, even on the kennel PCs. Pallmall. That was what he went by. Just that.

“Hannah Loughbridge!”

Someone was saying her name, apparently.

Hannah looked up, startled.

“Hannah Loughbridge, are you here?”

“Oh,” Hannah said, raising her hand, desperately embarrassed, face immediately flushed and hot.

Dr. Tallus had been saying her name, she now believed, close to a half-dozen times.

“Yes, Sir?”

“You’re Hannah?”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah said. “I’m a Hannah Loughbridge.”

She looked around, certain there must be another Hannah Loughbridge Dr. Tallus was looking for.

Something was funny. People were laughing.

“Hannah, you’re on the team,” Dr. Tallus said.

“Sir?” Hannah said, mystified.

“C’mon down,” he said. “We need to get started.”

Hannah rose, took three steps toward the aisle without her bag and her notebook and her papers, turned back abruptly to retrieve them while more than 200 of the smartest undergrads at the University of Texas at Corpus Christi watched, and finally the blushing slave girl fumbled down the aisle.

“In Hannah’s defense,” he said, “she never got the notice. I had no idea where to send it.”

“I’m in the kennels,” Hannah announced, her voice far louder than she meant it to be, her face far redder, she knew, than nature should allow it to be.

“Hello, Hannah,” Dr. Tallus said, offering his hand when she reached the front of the auditorium.

“Hello, Dr. Tallus,” Hannah said, her bag and notebook and handout crushed between her left arm and breast while she shook with her right.

“Alright, everyone, this way,” he announced, leading his team through a door behind the lectern while Dr. Anji made concluding remarks.

“If you haven’t been identified as the member of a specific team,” she was saying, “check your email. Assignments will be going out today and tomorrow.”

Out in the hall, Hannah looked at her fellow team members, most of whom seemed to know each other, joking, laughing, sharing information about what they did for the holidays, going over class schedules.

None of them were subjects, except Hannah. Why was she here? She believed she was worthy of an assistanceship, but she wasn’t the best of the best. She had no academic record whatsoever at Corpus Christi. She’d never published anything.

Any moment now, Dr. Tallus would realize his mistake and Hannah would excuse herself, and she would return to the kennels and watch her email for her assignment.

“Hey, Hannah,” said a girl, walking next to Hannah, smiling.

“Hello,” Hannah said, looking at the girl and the boy next to her who, judging from the way he put his arm around her shoulders for a quick squeeze, was her boyfriend.

“We don’t know each other, but I saw you in an anatomy class a couple of times,” she said. “I’m Tish.”

Hannah offered her hand, which seemed to surprise the girl.

“I’m Dave,” said the boy, offering his hand.

“Which class?” Hannah asked.

“Dr. Lautzen’s anatomy,” Tish said. “We were doing the skeleton that day, and he was marking off every bone you could see under the skin.”

“Oh yeah,” Hannah said, recalling the class where she stood, naked, shackled and handcuffed behind her back while a male professor drew on her with a thick black marker. “It tickled when he did the ribs.”

“I think everyone was laughing by the time class was over.”

“I wasn’t trying to be funny,” Hannah said. “It just happens sometimes.”

They reached a sturdy door that said “Authorized Personnel Only” and featured a touch pad and, Hannah realized with surprise, an iris scanner.

“Everyone’s going to be set up for security next week,” Dr. Tallus said, unlocking the door and waving in the members of his team. “It’ll be eye-scan based. And it won’t care if you’re hungover. But I will.”

Laughing, they entered a large lab, at least as big as the Petrosyan’s formal dining room, with a dozen stools on either side of a long counter, heavier chairs at three desks with PCs, a large stand or frame of some kind, a refrigerator and, Hannah noted with slight concern, what seemed to be a small standing cage, for holding or punishment or both. There were at least a dozen boxes, some opened, some still sealed with shipping tape, stacked on the floors and on counters along the wall.

Dr. Tallus reached into one of the boxes and pulled out a tower of thick documents, setting them on the counter.

“Everyone gets one,” he said.

Hannah stepped up, took hers.

“Gamete Viability Phase II Clinical Research Protocol,” it said in bold, black letters at the top of the glossy cover, a brightly-colored logo below for the New Life Consortium.

Hannah flipped to the table of contents, the introduction, the first few pages, language and formulae and charts as dense as any journal article she’d pored over.

A girl near Hannah snickered. Or gasped in surprise. Hannah looked over at her manual, opened to a page with a simple line-drawing of a generic nude female body, bent at the waist and knees and positioned strangely, upper body angled downward, as if falling.

Hannah flipped through the manual, finding the page, staring at the image.

“Figure 13,” it said beneath the drawing. “Collection Female on Sampling Rack.”

She wasn't falling. She was bound to something beneath her, a stand of some kind. Her arms were behind her.

Her wrists were tied.

Hannah turned the page. There were more figures, each labeled, each followed by a sentence or two of instructions.

There was a picture of a leg, with detailed depictions of straps around the thigh and calf. There was a closeup of wrists, bound with a length of cord. A square knot was recommended.

On the page after that, Hannah found a meticulously drawn depiction of the female sex organ, the inner and outer lips and clitoris and opening and urethra all labeled beneath a hole marked "Anus."

The next image showed what looked disconcertingly like a gun, pressed into the vagina.

"Figure 17," the caption read. "Sampling Rod, Inserted."

The next few pages quoted extensively from a separate document entitled "Good Laboratory Practices: Female Subject Treatment and Discipline," with more images, including line drawings of a naked, faceless girl in various restraints, followed by the girl standing in a small cage, standing with her arms raised above her, faceless head turned as if looking back while a thin rod was being applied to her bottom.

"By next week," Dr. Tallus said, "everyone needs to know this manual word for word. And yes, there will be a test. And yes, if you don't pass it, you will be reassigned."

He surveyed the class, pausing on each pair of eyes, stopping at Hannah's.

"Hannah," he said.

"Yes, Sir?"

"You're the star."

"Um, okay," Hannah said. "Possibly you were looking for another Hannah?"

Dr. Tallus smiled while the students laughed, and he stepped beside her, put his hand on her shoulder.

"Everyone turn to page 25," he said, "if you haven't already found it."

Titters. Quiet laughter.

"Hannah will be serving the project this semester as our collection female. Every Wednesday, Hannah will bring us a semen collection, and

we'll be following the protocol strictly – strictly – to evaluate sperm motility and viability, overall semen characteristics, donor attributes, and on and on, at every point in her cycle, including during menstruation. Look at your manual, there's a lot there. New Life has bought us close to a half a million dollars in specialized diagnostic equipment, and everyone's going to learn to use all of it."

Hannah looked at the manual, turning back to Figure 13:
"Collection Female on Sampling Rack."

The girl's hair had gathered around her shoulders, even though her head was hanging down and her upper body descended at an angle.

Her hair should be hanging down as well.

Because of gravity.

There was no face on the female.

Hannah swallowed and stared, her stomach beginning to churn as if with the onset of illness, at the place on Figure 13 where the girl's face should be. There was the outline of a nose, and a chin and mouth.

But no eyebrows, no eyes, no makeup.

No smile.

When she was on the sampling rack, Hannah's hair would be hanging down, hiding her face, hiding her eyes and her nose and her mouth.

Unless she tied it in a ponytail.

Today, Hannah's hair was tied in a ponytail.

The girl in Figure 13 had been professionally drawn. She had been drawn by an artist. Was this the drawing the artist had been destined since birth to create, the way Leonardo DaVinci had been destined to create the Mona Lisa?

Probably not.

"For Figure 13, draw a basic female form, secured to the sampling rack," the artist had been told. "Give her a girl's breasts, a girl's rounded rear, a girl's heavy thighs."

"How should I do the face?" the artist had asked hopefully. "Can I make her a blonde? Can I draw her pretty, but sensitive? Intelligent and optimistic? Rebellious? Faithful?"

"Heartbroken?"

"No, don't draw a face," the artist had been told. "Face doesn't matter. Vulva matters. Draw her vulva."

Some religions depicted their gods and goddesses without faces, so divinity would not be misrepresented.

Or offended.

Maybe that was it. Perhaps Hannah was a goddess no one wanted to offend.

Hannah bit her lip and fought the urge to vomit.

Chapter 49: On the Sampling Rack

“Today, we’re going to get familiar with racking and sampling,” Dr. Tallus said. “Hannah, can you go ahead and get undressed?”

“Sir?” Hannah said.

His hand was still on her shoulder. She turned and looked at him, eyebrows raised.

She knew this was coming. She’d known as soon as she saw the girl in Figure 13 that she was that girl. She was the girl on the rack. Her vagina was the vagina into which the sampling rod had been inserted. That’s what she was here for. To collect semen. Not a student. Not the recipient of a competitive assistanceship. Not a scholar. She was a vagina.

No, she was a vagina containing sperm. Her empty vagina was useless. All of her was useless here unless there was sperm inside her.

“A semen sample would be helpful but not necessary today,” he said. “We just need to get familiar with racking you and using the sampling rod.”

“May I . . .?” Hannah stammered, fighting the urge to scream and rush from the room. “Is there a room where . . .?”

“That’s not in the protocol,” Dr. Tallus said. “And we don’t have a room for it in the lab anyway.”

“Where should I . . . put my clothing?” Hannah asked, resigning herself to this, adapting, swallowing her pride and her dignity and all the hope she had been storing up since before Christmas.

“We still have a lot of unpacking to do,” Dr. Tallus said, “and I believe there’s some furniture in the boxes, possibly a closet or a coat rack or two. But use the counter there for now.”

He was pointing to a sink with a counter at the far end of the lab. Hannah stepped to it, resolving in her mind to get through this while she

worked through other matters. She had questions. Focus on those. Don't cry until I'm back in the kennels.

"Who here has worked with a lab subject?" Dr. Tallus asked.

Hannah looked back. One girl raised her hand.

"Who here has worked with a subject in any other capacity?" he asked. "Your family owned one, or a friend did, or you worked with one?"

About half the students raised their hands. Tish and Dave didn't.

Hannah set her Nature's Army bag down, put her hand on the counter to slip off her flats, kicked them against the wall, pulled her sweater over her head and folded it neatly before she set it down.

"Bigger programs, with a larger role in the project, got a dedicated collection female funded," Dr. Tallus was saying with a tone just short of outright bitterness. "I asked for one, didn't get it. So I asked the school to provide one, and they turned me down too."

Hannah, with her back turned to the people who a few moments ago she considered her colleagues, classmates, fellow students, peers, reached behind her to undo her bra, slid it down her arms, folded it and set it on her sweater.

"So Hannah is our collection female this semester and, obviously, her role is critical."

Hannah unbuttoned her jeans and pushed them down to her knees, pushed down her panties next, picking up her feet one by one to get everything off, folding her panties and placing them beside her bra, folding her jeans and setting them at the top of the little pile of what she'd picked out an hour ago in the kennel lockers with an eager, pitiable naivete.

"The protocol assumes that the collection female is a dedicated resource at every research site. That means she's confined there, and the site maintains responsibility over her, handles nutrition, manages her semen collection, takes care of discipline."

Hannah turned to face Dr. Tallus and the class. He was still speaking, but all eyes were on her, as they always were when she first appeared naked in a classroom.

She fought the urge to stay by her clothing, to find refuge in a corner, to shrink down to nothing.

No.

Until she was told otherwise, she was as much a research assistant here as anyone else. And if she was told otherwise . . .

No.

Breasts bouncing with each step, she returned to her place by the counter, a few feet from Dr. Tallus, meeting every pair of eyes until they looked away.

“Hannah resides in the kennels,” Dr. Tallus said, “and she’s taking classes this semester, so she’s something of a free agent. But while she’s here, we will apply the protocol you see in your manual. It doesn’t make any exceptions for someone with Hannah’s status. Everyone’s going to be trained on her, starting next week.”

Dr. Tallus turned to Hannah, nodded, looked quickly along the length of her body, turned toward the rest of the students.

“And that’s good news. Anyone who finishes out the semester with us will be able to claim about a dozen new qualifications. You’ll get certified on all the equipment, on some unique analysis procedures. And everyone can say they’ve been certified for work with a lab subject.”

A lab subject. A collection female. That’s why she was here. Her mind was irrelevant.

Hannah bit her lip again and fought humiliation by distracting herself. She looked at the boxes, tried to imagine what they held. Her mind went to the sampling rod she’d seen in the manual. Was it in one of these boxes? How would it feel?

“Okay, nine days from now, Wednesday, January 30,” Dr. Tallus continued. “Get this on your calendars now.”

The students pulled out their phones in unison, as if part of a precision phone-checking team. Hannah didn’t have a phone.

“We’ll be meeting at 5:30, staying until 8 or 9, collecting Hannah’s first official sample, and we’ll all be training on her, and there will be a test on the manual. If you have a job, or a date, or a test the next day, too bad. I have a lot of leeway in who is on the team, and I can get by with 10, or eight if I have to, so if you’re not here that Wednesday, start to finish, you’re off.”

Dr. Tallus looked at Hannah. “We’ll need you for the first two items, but you can skip the third,” he said. “Now, let’s get you on the—”

“Pardon me, Sir?” Hannah interrupted.

“We’ll need you here next week, 5:30,” he said. “You’ll be—”

“No you said I can skip the third thing,” Hannah said. “What’s the third thing?”

“You won’t be tested on the manual,” he said, smiling as if he were doing Hannah a favor.

“I will be,” Hannah said, staring at Dr. Tallus.

“You will be . . .” he prompted, smiling and looking a little puzzled.

“I will be tested on the manual.”

“That’s not necessary,” he said.

“Yes it is,” Hannah said, crossing her arms under her breasts.

“It isn’t necessary for the collection female,” he said.

“I’m a research assistant,” Hannah said, and she felt her vision narrowing down, everything in the universe vanishing except for Dr. Tallus’ puzzled eyes and his fading smile.

“You’re the . . . collection female,” Dr. Tallus countered. “It’s a critical role. It’s—”

“I will be studying the manual,” she said, “and I’ll be taking the same test everyone else takes, and I’ll get certified on all the same equipment, and I’ll—”

“Hannah,” Dr. Tallus said, slight annoyance in his voice now.

“Okay, I get it. But no. What’s your year?”

“Second semester freshman.”

“Okay, um, take, um, Jake here,” he said, and he pointed at a bearded student in thick glasses who stared back, goggle-eyed. “Jake Matthews. He’s a senior. He’s been published, twice. He’s going to Stanford Medical in the fall. And, and . . . some of the others on the team . . . all but, uh, two or three are upper classmen. No freshmen. One sophomore – Clarisse – she got a B in organic chemistry last semester. You’re—”

“I’ll be taking the test on the manual,” Hannah repeated. “And I’ll get certified on—”

“No,” Dr. Tallus said. “Hannah—”

“Then find another girl,” Hannah said, voice firm, although her heart was buckling and she was having trouble keeping her lower jaw from trembling.

Dr. Tallus stared, clearly trying to understand what was happening.

Why had he chosen her? Hannah wondered. Why had he selected Hannah for this assistanceship?

Maybe because she was known among the medical faculty for being docile, compliant, obedient?

But cooperating as a class model was, in her mind, entirely different from receiving a assistanceship and then finding out she was chosen solely because she possessed a functioning vagina.

She knew this.

Dr. Tallus clearly didn't.

Yet.

"We'll talk after today's lab," he said.

"No, Sir," Hannah said. "We settle it now, or I put my clothes on and leave."

Dr. Tallus smiled, condescendingly now, reminding Hannah of Ormek last week when she talked about her treatise.

Hannah heard gasps, some quick whispers. What were they saying? Were they annoyed, surprised, shocked? Hannah didn't care.

"What if you fail the manual exam?" Dr. Tallus asked.

"I won't," Hannah said. "I don't fail. Anything."

"Anyone who fails it is off the team."

"Fine," Hannah said. "I won't fail it."

"But if you do . . ." he persisted. "You'll accept your role as defined in the protocol?"

"I won't fail," Hannah said. "But, agreed."

Dr. Tallus smiled, a big, sincere grin now, and he reached out his hand.

Hannah found his recovery from the conflict impressively quick. He knew how to compartmentalize. But so did she. She gripped his hand firmly, smiling in return.

"Everyone, back to page 26," Dr. Tallus said, and he headed to the contraption that Hannah understood now was the sampling rack.

Her sampling rack.

She picked up her manual and turned pointedly to page 25, losing herself in the mechanics of the device as she walked.

She felt a hand around her upper arm, squeezing warmly.

Dr. Tallus again?

No, by the time Hannah looked, the hand was gone, but it had belonged to Tish, and she offered Hannah a sidelong smile as they reached the rack.

What did that mean? Hannah wondered.

You belong here, with us?

I feel sorry for you, poor little slave girl?
Someday, after you suffer enough, you'll understand how things work?

Hannah wanted to believe the message was positive, and she nodded.

She turned to the rack, found it up close and real to be less benign, more knobby and sharp and sinister-looking, than the shape the girl in Figure 13 had been bound over.

It was all metal, painted a dull, glossy black, like a file cabinet, but it was shaped a little like a porch swing, Hannah thought.

Had that been its inspiration? A place where people sat outside and drank tea while they pleasantly swayed?

One didn't sit here, however. One put one's knees where the seat would be, and one bent over it, at the waist, placing one's belly and breasts against a platform.

And from there, the design departed entirely from that of an outdoor diversion.

Straps were applied at the thighs and calves, and a third strap was secured around the female's upper back.

The female put her hands behind her, and a cord was used to bind her at the wrists. A square knot was preferred.

Then, after she was bound, the two parts of the seat where the knees had been placed was separated and spread, opening the legs.

Finally, the rack was tilted forward, lowering the collection female's head, raising her middle up to about four feet off the floor, the ideal height for an average person who needed to work with the collection female's sex organ.

"Is the manual clear enough here, Hannah?" Dr. Tallus asked.

"I think so," Hannah said. She set her manual on the floor, swallowed, and put her knees on the rack. She bent at the waist, lowering her belly and breasts to the platform, sucking in her breath as her nipples touched the cold surface.

Her head hung over the platform, and she stared at the floor, at the four legs of the rack, at the feet of the people gathered around to learn how to do this to her.

"Pass the strap through the slot, and then clamp it," Dr. Tallus instructed as he performed the task himself. Hannah felt the press of nylon

around her calf, heard the click as it was fastened. “It doesn’t have to be tight, just secure enough to keep her still during sampling.”

“Jim, you do this one.”

The second strap was passed around Hannah’s other calf, clamped.

“Clarisse.”

Hannah’s right thigh was strapped.

“Ayeta.”

Left thigh strapped.

Dr. Tallus himself strapped Hannah’s upper back. She inhaled, exhaled. The strap was loose enough that it would not interfere with breathing.

She felt him grab her right hand and move it to the small of her back, and she moved her other hand beside it, staring at the floor while her wrists were bound. She couldn’t tell if he used a square knot.

“Hannah, good so far?” Dr. Tallus asked.

“Yes, Sir.”

“You’ll let us know if you’re not comfortable?”

“I will,” Hannah promised, drawing a little unexpected laughter.

Laughter made this easier, she noticed.

She heard a click and sensed the separation of the seat where she’d put her knees, her thighs being spread.

“Push until her leg frames catch,” Dr. Tallus narrated. “You should hear a very distinct click, like this.”

Hannah heard the click, and she also felt it, a little tap running from her left kneecap and down to her foot, up to her hip.

“If you don’t hear a click, she’s not set properly, and if her leg slips back while you’re working with her, it’s going to hurt.”

Comforting laughter.

“It won’t hurt Hannah,” Dr. Tallus added. “It will hurt you.”

More laughter.

Hannah heard the second click, felt it emanate from her right kneecap.

“Now, we need to angle her forward,” he said. “The catch is here.”

Hannah heard a metallic thud.

“Pull it out, and then, very carefully, very slowly angle her forward. See how easy this is? The rack is designed for balance if a normally-proportioned female is on it.”

Hannah's body rocked forward, rocked back, rocked forward again. She imagined how this would look to the people standing behind her, watching her two openings rise, fall, rise again.

"Hannah appears to be exceptionally normally-proportioned," Dr. Tallus said.

Laughter.

"Pivot her forward and insert the catch," Dr. Tallus said.

Hannah heard another metallic thud.

"Do not just leave her there and expect gravity to hold her in place. If the sampling rod makes her jerk, or if she coughs or sneezes, that can shift her center of gravity enough that she'll come rocking back, and it's gonna hurt. You. Not her, you."

Laughter.

"Does everyone get it?" Dr. Tallus inquired. "Everyone understand the steps?"

Hannah sensed people nodding, murmuring.

"If not, get your questions answered now," Dr. Tallus said.

"Everyone's going to need to be able to walk Hannah from the holding pen over there to the rack, set her up safely, and get her sampled."

Dr. Tallus put his hand on Hannah's upper back.

"Hannah, still good?"

"Yes, Sir," Hannah reported.

"This is one of the areas where you won't get certified," he said, "no matter how you do on the test."

"Sir?"

"You can't get certified for working with a lab subject," he said. "Since you're the subject."

"Oh," Hannah said, to a little muffled laughter. Obvious as it was, that hadn't occurred to Hannah, and it distressed her. She didn't want to miss out on anything.

"Now, interview and diagnostics," Dr. Tallus said. "If you'll look on—"

"Sir?" Hannah interrupted.

"Huh?"

"What if I brought someone in?" Hannah inquired, a little thickly. Talking while resting upside down affected one's voice, she noted. "If I could find a volunteer subject, could I—"

Hannah was thinking of Jane. Surely Jane would tolerate a little indignity for a good cause. She'd need the approval of her owner to leave the kennels on a weekday, of course, but Hannah wanted to believe that wouldn't be a problem.

Or Amelia. She might need to sing while it was being done, but Hannah knew she'd cooperate.

"Let's see how you do on the test," Dr. Tallus said. "It's a moot point if you don't pass."

"Yes, Sir," Hannah agreed.

He didn't want her to pass. That was obvious to Hannah. He would write the test so she couldn't pass. That was also obvious to Hannah.

I will pass, Hannah told herself. I will pass.

"If you'll look on page 73," Dr. Tallus continued. "There aren't any pictures there, but that is the complete sampling methodology, and it's critical, and everyone needs to know it by heart."

Hannah heard shuffling, the crack of a knee, turned to see that someone – Dave, Hannah decided, after studying his pants and shoes – had knelt, and was holding the manual out, beneath her face, so she could read it.

She smiled and remembered that the decencies of the human race at least matched the sporadic kindnesses of the gods, and they could also show up in unexpected ways, and should never be taken for granted.

"Step one, temperature," Dr. Tallus said, paraphrasing from the manual's very formal language on the same topic. "Two thermometers, up her anus and vagina. If you are too squeamish to do this, leave now."

No one left.

Chapter 50: Arguing with Dr. Tellus

Her head lowered, hanging off the edge of the platform, Hannah could see most of the lower half of the lab now, upside down, and she glanced around the room, at the legs of the rack and the legs of the humans, and Dr. Tallus' legs as they strode from beside her to a cart along the wall. The cart was retrieved, pushed – none of its wheels squeaking – until it and Dr. Tallus' legs arrived at the place between Hannah's legs.

She waited for what was coming next, felt the tip of a thermometer at her anus, felt it penetrate her. The second was pushed unceremoniously

up her vagina.

Normally, this was done while she was standing up with her wrists in brackets, and she could tighten and clamp around the two objects without attracting notice.

Well aware how visible everything was now, she struggled to keep her openings still.

“While she’s holding the thermometers, you’ll conduct the interview. All the questions are on the next page, and you’ll ask them as written. And we’re going to go around the room today, clockwise starting with . . . what’s your name?”

“Bubba, Sir.”

“Bubba?”

Laughter.

“Well, Tex . . . or Texas, formally. That’s my given name. But I go by Bubba.”

“Okay, I remember you as Tex. You earned the Pointer Scholarship last year.”

“I guess so,” Bubba agreed.

“That’s why I selected you. Great to have you on the team.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay, Bubba, start with question one. And if anyone isn’t comfortable asking Hannah any question on this list, you should probably ask for reassignment now. Go ahead, Bubba.”

“Okay, uh, okay . . . uh . . . when did your last period begin?”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Um . . . January 4.”

“Does everyone have a pen or pencil?” Dr. Tallus asked. “There are a few on the counter if you need one. We’ll be recording Hannah’s answers to these questions electronically, on an app you’ll get access to, but for now, I want everyone to write her answers in your manual. Her answers don’t matter today, but I want everyone to get in the habit, starting today, of recording data religiously.”

Hannah saw feet shuffling, some stepping to the counter and back, then more shuffling, and she guessed that people were organizing themselves in a rough circle, so they’d know whose turn it was to ask the next question.

The manual under her face vanished.

“Thanks,” Hannah said quietly. She didn’t need it. She could read it later.

“When did your period end?” a girl asked.

“Probably about January 9,” Hannah reported, listening to the scratch of pens and pencils.

“When did you last begin ovulation?” asked another girl.

“Um . . . I think January 16 or so.”

“When did ovulation end?”

“Today, I think,” Hannah said.

“Have your periods been regular?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any pain in your genitals or internal reproductive organs?”

“No.”

“Do you have any digestive issues today?”

“No.”

“Do you have any infections?”

“No.”

“How do you feel overall?”

“Good, other than being upside down.”

“Have you masturbated in the last week?”

“Yes.”

“Have you masturbated in the last 24 hours?”

“Yes.”

“Have you had sexual relations in the last week?”

“Oh . . . um, yes. Do you mean . . . um, with a male or . . . female?”

“Both,” Dr. Tallus said, still standing between Hannah’s legs.

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Um, girls, um, a woman, and a girl, um, Monday and Wednesday. And . . . and . . . males, um, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.”

Hannah clenched and unclenched her hands. She was getting uncomfortable. She didn’t like the cord around her wrists. She didn’t like the questions.

No one but Laura and Ormek knew she’d had sex Saturday night. Now a whole lab full of strangers knew. What if one of them talked to Allain?

“Three different males?”

“Yes.”

“Did all three ejaculate inside your vagina?” Dr. Tallus asked.

“Yes.”

“Okay, this is where the questions branch out,” Dr. Tallus said. “We need to know about each of her partners, using the next set of questions for as many partners as she had. Let’s start with your Thursday partner. Go ahead, um, Jim.”

“Okay . . . um, what was the race of your partner?” Jim asked.

Hannah had made love to Uncle Bear that night. That was no one’s business. Nothing about Uncle Bear was anyone’s business.

“Caucasian,” Hannah replied.

“Age?”

“It doesn’t have to be true, right?” Hannah inquired.

“No, not this time,” Dr. Tallus replied.

“87.”

Laughter.

“Overall health?”

“Great.”

“Does he produce viable sperm?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Did you orgasm?”

“Yes.”

Hannah went through her three partners, making up increasingly outlandish things about each of the males she had been with, turning Ormek into a 300-year-old, cancer-stricken Martian, prompting more laughter.

But this was going to be a problem, she felt. Allain would be one of her partners, and he might not want her talking about him, even if it was all generic information. Other free males might couple with her and desire their dalliances to remain confidential as well. And her fellow slaves deserved privacy too, didn’t they?

“Now, the sampling rod,” Dr. Tallus said, and Hannah heard a light clunk, coming from the direction of the cart. “It’s got a small reservoir for distilled water. Do not fill it until Hannah’s been racked. Use a fresh, unopened bottle.”

Hannah heard the series of quick snaps that told her a plastic bottle was being uncapped.

“You’re going to spill. Don’t worry, it’s just water. But spill over the cart, not the floor.”

Hannah heard laughter, guessed Dr. Tallus was spilling water on the cart. She didn’t see any water fall onto the floor.

“Now, angle of entry,” he continued. “Every girl is different, so whether you’re male or female, I want you to look at the thermometer in Hannah’s vagina. Can everyone see that? Can everyone see? That’s the angle the rod goes in. Straight in. If Hannah doesn’t like the angle, she’s going to let you know. Right, Hannah?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Laughter.

“And, if Hannah doesn’t like what you’re doing, in this or anything else, something tells me we’re going to hear from her, right, Hannah?”

“Yes.”

Hannah wondered what her voice sounded like, bouncing off the floor and people’s feet and legs before it reached their ears.

“The study protocol requires that collection be done by subjects, and all sampling therefore be done on the rack, in restraints. I’m sure Hannah would prefer to be sampled some other way, but we don’t have that option if we want our data validated and funding to continue. So Hannah’s going to show up on Wednesdays, fully-clothed and free of restraints, but while she’s here, she’s going to serve as a dedicated subject. And she’s going to make herself very vulnerable to us, because she trusts us. And we’re not going to violate that trust. And if we do, Hannah’s going to let me know, and there will be consequences. And if all that happens is you getting kicked off the team, you’re lucky. You can lose scholarships, you can be expelled, and if appropriate, we will notify law enforcement.”

“Hannah, still with us?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You’re hearing what I’m saying?”

“Yes, Sir, every word.”

“Good, I’m going to sample you now.”

The thermometers came out, Dr. Tallus announced her temperatures so everyone could write them down, then her lips were spread and something else, thicker than a thermometer but a fraction of the girth of a penis, was inserted slowly into her vagina, extending deep into her chamber before it stopped.

“You pull the trigger once, release when it clicks,” Dr. Tallus said. “That’s all there is to it. It injects a distilled wash into Hannah, and immediately sucks up 20 milliliters of fluid through gills all along the length of the rod.”

Hannah heard a click, felt the cold water rush into her vagina, felt it leak out her opening, felt the rod leave her body.

Dr. Tallus’ feet turned toward the cart.

“Hold the rod over a beaker, pull the trigger again, and that releases the sample. Pour what’s in the beaker equally into two sample cups, and label each by date. These are the stickers, these are the cups. We’ll analyze the contents of one immediately, the other goes into the freezer for later analysis. All of this is detailed in the manual, and you have to know it cold. Any questions?”

There were no questions.

“You’ll see some sections in the manual that apply only to a dedicated lab female. We will not have to worry about Hannah’s nutrition, for example, although I’m sure if someone wanted to bring her a snack, she wouldn’t protest.”

Laughter.

“And there’s a section in there on discipline. Go ahead and read everything, there might be something on the test from those pages, but it’s my understanding we don’t have to train on that with Hannah.”

Dr. Tallus unbolted Hannah, rocked her back and applied the bolt for that position, closed her legs, untied her wrists and opened her straps.

Hannah, feeling a little dizzy, slid her knees off the rack, stood, steadied herself and looked at the cart, where the sampling rod lay in a puddle of water, thermometers sat in a cup of orange disinfectant, and two small plastic cups had been capped, each holding half of her sample, each filled with the puzzled sperm of three donors. Or two, at least. Was Ormek vasectomized? Or one, depending on Uncle Bear’s condition. She didn’t know.

“There’s a towel on the cart if you want it, Hannah,” Dr. Tallus said. “And then you can go ahead and get dressed, and we’ll go over final instructions.”

Hannah wiped her vulva, dressed quickly, slung her bag over her shoulder, returned to the assembled group, found her manual where someone had set it on the counter, and tried to forget the last half an hour.

She was like everyone else again, here on the first day of an assistanceship.

“Study the manual,” Dr. Tallus said to the team. “We will not be meeting again until two Wednesdays from now. That’s your job until then. And think about when you want your hours. Everyone will get 15 per week. I’ll have a signup sheet posted.”

Dr. Tallus waved to the exit. The students began picking up bags and manuals, talking quietly.

“Oh, Hannah,” Dr. Tallus said. “One more thing.”

“Yes, Sir?” Hannah said.

“You’ll be collecting for us next week.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah agreed. “How should I—”

“Let’s wait until everyone’s gone.”

“Why?” Hannah inquired.

“Out of respect for your privacy,” he replied.

Hannah was staring at Dr. Tallus, but listening to the door. It didn’t open. No one had left.

“What privacy?” she asked, to quiet laughter.

She didn’t want to be alone with Dr. Tallus. At least some of the students, she felt, were sympathetic to her cause. Having them there helped. And after what had been done to her on the rack, privacy seemed a quaint notion.

“We need to talk about how you’ll collect,” Dr. Tallus said.

“Go ahead,” Hannah said, certain no one was going to leave now unless Dr. Tallus ordered them to.

“It’s in appendix C,” Dr. Tallus said.

Hannah, standing in the middle of the group, flipped to Appendix C. So did everyone else around her.

“Collection Protocol,” it said at the top, followed by a list of instructions for the researcher. Beginning five days from the day of sampling, the researchers needed to record every ejaculation into the collection female’s vagina, noting time and the characteristics of the donor.

“At most sites,” Dr. Tallus said, resigned to speaking to everyone on the team about this, “collection is being done by a dedicated female, who is being monitored by the researchers. But the assumption at all sites is the female might receive ejaculate that isn’t monitored, so all females are asked to list all partners. That means, Hannah, no matter what your status is on the

team, after next week, you'll be one of our researchers, in a sense. You'll be gathering data for us. Don't think of it as just collecting."

"Okay," said Hannah. "I can do that."

"And you'll get that certification, on data collection, no matter what," Dr. Tallus said, smiling brightly, as if this were a new thought, as if the idea had just occurred to him that Hannah would receive at least this benefit.

"So, Hannah," Dr. Tallus continued, "do you have any questions about how collection is done?"

Hannah glanced over the rest of the appendix. It asked that the researcher – Hannah, in this case – ensure that the penis stayed in the female for as much of the session as possible, and that the penis remain fully-inserted during ejaculation.

Partner and position, Hannah noted, were both determined by the researcher.

"I think so," Hannah said. "Do you care about position?"

"Not really," he replied. "We just want you to bring in as much semen as possible, so something deep is good. Missionary. Or, um, doggie."

Someone behind Hannah – a male, probably – snickered. Someone else – a female, Hannah guessed – shushed him.

"And partner?" Hannah asked.

"How much leeway do you have there?"

"Well, on the weekends, it tends to be . . ." Hannah said, growing uncomfortable as she tried to work out on the fly what she thought was appropriate to say. "It tends to be . . . consistent people . . . but Monday and Tuesday, and Wednesday morning possibly, you can tell me what you want, and I can try to find someone."

"Black, Asian, Semitic, Native American, Aboriginal?" Dr. Tallus said.

"Black, definitely," Hannah said. "I'm not sure about the others. I'll ask."

"Can you bring us African-American on the 30th?"

"Yes, Sir, I'm pretty sure I can. And definitely Caucasian."

"Any more questions, Hannah?" Dr. Tallus asked. She looked at him. He was smiling at her, professionally. At this moment, they were just two researchers, going over methodology.

"Do you have a limit on number of, um, donors?" she asked.

“What’s your maximum?” Dr. Tallus asked.

“Oh, no more than four or five,” Hannah said. “And usually fewer.”

More snickers, but it didn’t bother Hannah. Sex was awkward for some people, and this is how people dealt with awkward things. They laughed.

“That’s not a problem. The more you bring in, the more work we have to do, and the more data we send. All good.”

Hannah nodded, all her questions answered for now.

He waved again, dismissively. “Okay, everyone, see you next week.”

The door opened, conversations resumed, and Hannah turned to leave.

“Hannah,” Dr. Tallus said.

“Yes, Sir?”

“Another word with you, please? About your status only.”

Hannah, not believing she needed support anymore, waited while the team departed. She stood, leafing through her manual, realizing with a sense of both excitement and apprehension that she had a great deal to learn.

As soon as the door closed on the last student, Dr. Tallus stepped up to Hannah, frowning.

“If I have to, I could probably replace you,” he said.

“I gave you that option,” Hannah said. “It’s up to you.”

“Everyone who worked with you last semester mentioned how cooperative you were.”

“I was a class model,” Hannah noted. “That was—”

“I chose you for an assistanceship for collection only. If you leave the team, or if I let you go, you lose work-study altogether. You don’t get reassigned.”

Hannah gripped her Nature’s Army bookbag and clenched her jaw. She had guessed this, but hearing it said out loud was another blow, another humiliation in an afternoon full of them.

“And if you lose an assistanceship in your freshman year, that goes on your record,” Dr. Tallus continued. “You get considered after everyone else for any future work-study, which means, basically, you’ve blown your chances for the rest of undergrad. And if you’re thinking about grad school,

or a job in the field . . . they prefer students who have an assistanceship on their vita.”

Hannah felt the lump growing in her throat, knew her eyes were watering, cursed herself for being unable to hide her emotions.

“We have a deal,” Hannah said, gritting her teeth, voice shaking with impotent frustration. “I’ll pass the exam next week, and I’ll be a full member of the team.”

“If you pass,” he said, nodding.

Hannah turned to go.

“But Hannah,” Dr. Tallus said, “one more thing.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You did good today, everything else notwithstanding. You did good. I want you on the team. I really do.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said. “But I should have known about . . . my role before today.”

“Point taken,” Dr. Tallus said. “But . . . would you have said yes?”

Hannah laughed, remembering how eager she was to get a work-study award in December.

“Yes, of course I would have said yes. And if you’d come to me a month ago and told me you just wanted me to . . . collect, and not do research, I still would have said yes. But I’ve spent the last month thinking it was something else that got me chosen. And . . . and . . . today was just more of a disappointment than I was . . . ready for.”

Dr. Tallus lowered his eyes with regret, and Hannah knew he was not the first man in history who wished he’d checked in with a woman sooner. But now it was too late. They’d argued publicly, and Hannah had forced him to offer a deal.

“So if you fail the test,” he said, “you’re willing to collect only?”

“I will, if I fail,” Hannah said. “I just wanted things fair, and our deal makes things . . . fair enough.”

Hannah exited into the hall, let the door swing shut behind her, the only thing she wanted to do at present collapsing on her bed in the kennels to cry. She’d cry for 30 minutes. And then she’d read the manual, page by page.

Nothing she had ever read in her life would be as important as the manual. Not even the Bible.

Her eyes continued to water as she headed down the hall, everything blurry, the floor and walls difficult to make out, a couple talking near a door just patches of clothing.

“Hey, Hannah,” said the girl.

“Oh,” Hannah said, stopping, managing to focus through her tears. “Oh, hi, Tish. Hi, Dave. Thanks for holding up the manual while I was—”

“We’re going to get reassigned,” Tish said. “I’m really sorry for what happened in there.”

“What?” Hannah said. “No, don’t do that.”

“We can’t be part of it,” Tish said. “We don’t—”

“I need you there,” Hannah said. “I need friends. Please stay.”

“You’re still on the team?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “He wasn’t firing me. Just letting me know . . . a few things. We still have a deal. I pass the test next week, I’m in as a full researcher.”

“But you’re still a . . .”

“Collection female,” Hannah said, raising her hand to her collar and the tags dangling there, one of which said Female, Recreational. “That’s fine. It’s what I do.”

Hannah returned to the kennels, stripped, put everything in her locker except for the manual and the assistanceship handout, submitted herself for a scan, the manual and papers for inspection, and collapsed on her bed with the curtain closed.

But the tears wouldn’t come. Ambition was trumping fear, and hurt, and humiliation.

After lying with her head on her pillow for five minutes, staring at the ceiling, she rose, washed her face and descended on the manual, reading every page, memorizing, making notes in the margins, synthesizing what she found there with other knowledge.

Although much of it didn’t apply to her, Hannah paid particular attention to the sections on the collection female. There was advice on her nutrition, on her sleeping accommodations, on where and how collection should be done, on how she should be confined and restrained, and on how she should be disciplined.

The rules the collection female must obey to avoid punishment were, as usual, mostly common sense. The subject girl was expected to be polite, cooperative, obedient. She should tell the truth, particularly about the

males she'd been with. She shouldn't try to slip out of her restraints, or resist having them put on. She should be careful and respectful around the equipment, including the equipment that was herself. If she fell short, the researchers were given discretion on what to do, as well as all the necessary equipment to do it with. She could be confined to the pen for whatever time seemed appropriate. She could be forced to stand with her wrists bound to the pen's top, which featured a hook for that purpose. If quick correction were needed, she could receive swats on her bottom with the long, thin cane included with the rest of the lab equipment.

There were no whips, no electrified meshes that plugged into outlets, no capsaicin. Overall, it was a mild discipline regimen, far easier than Hall 6, or interrogation, Hannah concluded.

But that didn't make it right.

Hannah thought about the girls like her in labs around the world living – for as long as they belonged to the grant – under a book that carefully spelled out their suffering, with words and pictures. Were they caged in isolation, or allowed to talk to and mingle with other subjects? Were they allowed to read, to study, to do anything other than lab work?

“So, think you could do me a big favor?” Hannah asked over dinner with Jane.

“Maybe,” Jane replied.

“You know how I'm doing that assistanceship this semester?”

“Yeah.”

“I'm the, uh, lab subject,” Hannah said. “I'm the only one. So I can't get certified on working with a lab subject, since I'm it.”

“Certified?”

“Well, that's what they call it. I think it just means you can put it on your vita.”

“Vita?”

“Like, a resume.”

“So what do you need from me?”

“Well, I'd like to have you come in – some weekday – any time, really – and I'll, um, do some, um, research on you.”

“Like what?” Hannah said.

“Um, well, I have to put you on this, um, thing, and —”

“God, you're blushing,” Jane said.

“This is hard to ask. Really hard.”

“Does it involve pain?” Jane asked.

“No.”

“Do I have to have sex?”

“No. Not then. Before then though is fine.”

“Who with?”

“Up to you.”

“Just tell me what I’m doing then. I’ll probably say yes, but just tell me.”

“You’ll have to take off your clothes,” Hannah said, the words rushing out of her mouth before she could stop or filter them. “And I might have to chain you and put you in a cage. And then I’ll strap you to this rack thing where you’re bent over it, and I’ll take your temperature, and—”

“Anally?”

“Yeah, and vaginally. And then I put this thing up your vagina, to sample you, and—”

“How big?”

“Kinda small. And then you get off the machine and get dressed and leave.”

“How long will it take?”

“Maybe 15 minutes, or more like half an hour.”

“When?”

“Some time this semester. The sooner the better.”

“Will other people be there?”

“Yeah.”

“Any of them professors?”

“Probably. One guy.”

“Is he cute?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” Jane said without hesitating, with perhaps even a little gleam in her eye, “I’m in.”

On the way out of the cafeteria, Hannah caught up with Brad, who rose from his place at the table, completely unabashed by his fully-erect penis.

“How was break?” he asked with a hug, turning so his penis thudded against her hip instead of jabbing her belly.

“Great,” she said, looking down at his erection and laughing. “Want to get together tonight?”

"I thought you'd never ask."

"We need to talk some business, though," Hannah said.

"Oh yeah?" he said, raising an eyebrow.

"Just something for that assistanceship I'm doing this semester," Hannah said. "It involves sex."

"I can do that," Brad promised.

"I'll come to you tonight. Maybe 8:30?"

"I have to wait that long?"

"I've got some studying to do first," Hannah said. "Eight?"

"Deal."

Hannah took her manual to the lounge, read carefully through the first half and found it easy reading once one got used to the terms and the methodology. She made it to Brad's kennel with two minutes to spare, and he rose from his bed, penis quickly hardening, and went to the bars to wait for someone to let her in.

"I can talk business out here," he said, "if you want to take care of it now."

"Sure," Hannah said. "I'm in this, um, research program where I, uh . . . collect semen. And I need —"

"Human semen?"

Hannah laughed. "Yeah."

"And you collect it the standard way?"

"Yes. Exactly."

"And what does all this have to do with me?"

"They asked me for a . . . a black . . . semen from a . . ."

Brad held up his hands and shook his head.

"Stop," he said. "Don't say any more."

"Okay, okay, sorry. But what . . ."

"I don't know, it just sounds racist. I'm not sure why."

"Okay," Hannah said, blushing, finding this far more awkward than she'd expected.

"Just tell me when and where," Brad said.

"My kennel, next Monday night. Any time after dinner."

Tammy arrived on the hall, approached.

"Brad, you want me to let Hannah in?"

"That's Dr. Hannah now," Brad said. "And yes."

Tammy unlocked the door.

“How much time will you need?”

“Can we just do half an hour?” Hannah asked. “I’m studying this manual thing.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Brad replied.

Tammy locked the door and left, and Brad turned to Hannah.

“You know, all you had to say was be there next Monday night, and I would be.”

“But they’ll be looking at . . . what you put in me. On that Wednesday. Maybe even your DNA. So . . . don’t you think you should know that?”

“I’m not sure,” Brad said. “I probably should, but it doesn’t mean anyone would bother telling me.”

“Okay, consider yourself told,” Hannah said.

“Thank you.”

Brad gave Hannah another hug, letting the tip of his penis press into her thigh this time.

“How do you want to do it tonight?” he asked.

“You chose, I’ll choose next week.”

“What are you going to choose?”

“Probably missionary,” Hannah said. “They want it deep.”

“I will do *anything* for science,” Brad asserted.

“I’ve noticed.”

Brad wrapped his arm around Hannah’s waist and, still standing, lowered his mouth to hers, pressing in for a kiss she found surprisingly romantic, given the discussion they’d just had.

Hannah felt herself warming up as she kissed, the first wash of fluid rushing down her tunnel, and she reached down to stroke Brad’s hip, squeeze his ass, caress his penis, lean back to allow him access to her left breast and nipple.

“Hands and knees,” he whispered. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Hannah pulled away, assumed the requested position on his bed, waited for the familiar sensations of his clambering behind her, kneeling, spreading her lips, and she breathed in and sighed as he pushed himself into her chamber, her wet walls easing his entrance, his half-withdrawal, his continuing thrusts.

“Don’t cum yet,” Hannah said, reaching between her legs to masturbate.

Brad slowed obediently, and the two friends enjoyed a pleasant partnership for another five minutes before Hannah's vaginal contractions told Brad it was time, and he picked up the pace of his thrusts and managed to begin ejaculating just as Hannah started moaning and bucking through her own climax.

Tammy arrived to let Hannah out while they were still panting through recovery.

"Next week, it's for science," Brad said with a final hug. "And let me think about what you asked. Maybe I *would* want to know. Officially."

"Okay."

Hannah struggled to fall asleep, and her repose was restless, her mind turning to the disappointments of the day, the contents of the manual, her fight with Dr. Tellus, but when she woke a little after 6 a.m., she had worked through everything and found herself imbued with practical feelings only: Righteous anger, optimism over the semester that would begin in two hours, and a renewed conviction:

Spartacine Arkkola lived.

Spartacine Arkkola would be submitting a scholarship treatise.

Hannah Loughbridge would also be submitting a scholarship treatise.

Chapter 51: Betrayals, and a Quiet Victory

By the time she took her seat in her first class, Vertebrate Reproduction, Hannah was electric with excitement, her hands shaking as she opened up her Nature's Army bag, pulled out her textbook and a blank notebook, wrote furiously in the hopes of capturing every word the professor spoke, even when he was going over the syllabus and the exam schedule.

The rest of the day proceeded the same way. Meals were covered for kennel residents at the campus's biggest cafeteria, and she grabbed a tray of food there and ate while she studied the second half of the manual, tested herself on the first half, found that she was retaining close to 95 percent of it.

Exhausted after a lab that ended a little after 5, she went to dinner in the kennels, proposed coupling with Jane the next night because she was too tired for that tonight, and she went to the PCs.

She'd gotten another round of straight A's from Austin, she learned, and another round of congratulatory emails from the Petrosyans, who monitored her grades and tended to know before she did how she'd done.

She checked in with Mother, sent a note to Uncle Bear to make sure she had his address right, and then she opened a message from "1t3314@look!.com."

It was a forward, something Dr. Tallus had sent out earlier in the day.

"Hello, Team," it said. "Really looking forward to a semester of research and discovery! In preparation for next Wednesday, everyone will want to review a few articles that will be helpful this semester. I'm sure everyone is already very familiar with this basic material, but do take a look."

Dr. Tallus had provided three links. Hannah clicked the first, found an extremely dense discussion of advanced DNA sampling methods. The second presented the mechanics, supported by a dozen algebraic and differential formulae, of the propulsion of sperm flagellum. The third addressed birthrate trends by century and continent over the last half millennia.

Hannah searched her inbox. Only when she found nothing from Dr. Tallus did she bite her lip and fight back tears.

Dr. Tallus was not just going to test on the manual. He was going to test on these three articles as well.

So that Hannah would fail.

He wanted her to fail.

But someone . . . someone, using an anonymous email address . . . didn't want her to fail. Who?

Who?

It didn't matter.

Hannah deleted the email without replying, printed out the three articles, snatched them from the information desk before the girl at the printer could get a good look at them, and she added them to the materials she absolutely, positively had to understand prior to next Wednesday.

Hannah took care of laundry the next morning with uncharacteristic haste, speeding through the halls despite the chains that bound her wrist and ankle to the cart, offering quick waves and a few polite words to the people she saw, wrapping everything up by 11:30, grabbing her manual and poring

over it during lunch, racing off to her afternoon classes, racing back to the kennels for dinner and a long round of concentration on Dr. Tallus' articles.

"Hey, Hannah," Jane said at her bars around 8 that night. "Think you can tear yourself away from school for a few?"

Hannah rose from her bed, stacking up her articles, setting them face down on her desk, smiling at Jane although she could easily have continued reading for another four hours.

Donovan let Jane into Hannah's kennel.

"Hannah's on a mission tonight," Jane told him. "I think she'll want to finish up in half an hour."

"Sounds good."

The lovemaking was hurried but intense, the girls kissing, sucking each other's nipples, positioning themselves against each other for mutual licking of vaginas and anuses, and Hannah's first orgasm arrived in 10 minutes, Jane's five minutes later.

"I can probably cum again," Hannah panted after a few minutes of recovery.

"Studying makes you horny," Jane observed.

"No, you make me horny. Lick me again, me on the bottom this time."

Neither girl made any effort to keep their groans in check, Jane crying out in her customary way during her third climax even as Donovan arrived to return her to her kennel.

Hannah, wondering if there was research establishing the value of a half hour of sex during a night of studying, returned with new vigor to Dr. Tallus' articles, finally turning to her first two actual class assignments at 11.

She brought the manual and the articles and three textbooks to Allain's that weekend, her slender form bowed beneath the bag when she kissed him and clung to his neck after being apart for almost two weeks.

The weekend was a blur, sex and meals out and Allain's friends and, in every spare moment, knowledge. They went to the club for dinner to celebrate her latest round of straight As from Austin, an achievement that meant almost nothing to her now.

To Hannah's relief, Allain had no hesitation over participating in the research effort. He might have even liked the idea of having his cum studied weekly, Hannah suspected.

Monday night, Brad walked with her back to her kennel after dinner, Tammy locked them in and he went to work immediately, kissing her mouth, licking her vulva, getting his penis inside her and smiling through his grunts as he made a special effort to bury his semen deep within.

Only when he was done, the two lying beside each other in a post-sex haze, did he answer last week's question.

"I would like to know if they're looking at my stuff," he said. "You should probably tell everyone that."

"Okay, I agree," Hannah said. "I'm going to bring it up Wednesday."

"Think they'll listen?"

"Probably not," Hannah admitted. "I've been butting heads with the professor since our first meeting. I think he's already sick of me."

Hannah, so jittery she had to concentrate on walking to keep from stumbling, arrived at the door to the lab at 5:25 that Wednesday, finding a crowd already gathered.

Dr. Tallus was letting the students in one at a time, each first submitting to an eye scan while Dr. Tallus punched buttons on the iris reader.

"Hannah!" Dr. Tallus shouted. "Step on up, we need to get you penned."

Hannah stepped up, looked into the scanner, saw a thin glow within the device. It hummed quietly and Dr. Tallus let her pass.

To her relief, Tish and Dave were back, sitting together at the long table, and she greeted both with a wave.

The lab was almost completely set up now, boxes gone, a dozen microscopes lined up along the table, charts and instructional posters on the walls, more equipment on counters, a black cabinet where there had been empty space before.

The rack was still there.

So was the pen.

"Hey, Hannah," Tish said, stepping up. She didn't smile. She seemed very tense.

"I'm really glad you're still here," Hannah said.

"Still working through it," Tish said, quietly.

"What's wrong?"

“Dr. Tallus gave us an assignment.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, her sense of foreboding growing. Had he asked them to let her know she’d been kicked off the team, that another collection female had been found?

“You’re supposed to . . .” Tish said, struggling with the words. “He asked us to . . . me and Dave and Jim . . . to, uh, get you . . . he called it . . . to pen you . . . after you undress.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Okay, yeah, I was expecting that. No—”

“You’re supposed to use the new cabinet,” Tish said, slight relief in her voice.

“That’s fine,” Hannah said, stepping up, pulling the doors open, pleased to find shelves within, and hangars on a rod.

She unbuttoned her blouse, hung it up on one of the hangers, put her bra on the shelf, pulled off her sandals, unbuttoned her skirt, pulled it and her panties off, stored them, closed the cabinet and turned back to Jane, who had been joined by Dave and the boy she knew as Jim.

“What else did he tell you?” Hannah asked, certain she already knew the answer.

“You remember how he said we all have to train on you?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said.

“You saw that part in the manual, right? About working with a . . . a . . . you?”

Hannah laughed. This was the least of her worries today.

“Chains and a pen,” Hannah said. “And then sampling.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s fine,” Hannah said. “Do you know where everything is?”

“It’s in . . . the place,” Tish said.

Hannah strode over to the little cage, pulled the door open. Handcuffs and shackles lay on the floor.

“Go ahead,” Hannah said, holding her hands out in front of her. “This was in the manual. It’s not a surprise.”

Students continued to file into the lab, one at a time, some sitting, some talking quietly, some stepping up to watch the training.

Tish picked up the restraints, fumbled with the handcuffs before she got them locked around Hannah’s wrists. She handed the shackles to Dave and he bound her ankles.

“Who pens me?” she asked, looking at Jim.

“I guess I do,” he said.

“Well, ask me to get in.”

“Go ahead,” he said.

Hannah stepped in, turned, and Jim shut the cage door, clicking it locked.

Hannah smiled, seeing this preliminary as a welcome distraction, the butterflies in her belly already half-subdued. She surveyed the room from her confinement, guessed that everyone was here now, Dr. Tallus entering last.

He stepped up to the pen, looked into Hannah’s eyes, surveyed her bound and confined body.

“Okay, our first team got you put up,” he said. “Hannah, everything done right?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“So let’s get our test out of the way,” he said, “and then we’ll get everyone else trained on you.”

He stepped to a cabinet, unlocked it, pulled out a stack of sheets, moved back to Hannah’s pen and unlocked her door.

“Hannah, we’ll want to go straight back to training as soon as we’re done with the test, so I’d like to leave you in your restraints.”

“Of course,” Hannah said, unsurprised, although she heard several students suck in their breath.

“Everyone take a seat,” Dr. Tallus said, pointing to the long table with the microscopes lined up along it. “Or if there’s not room there, just take a spot at one of the counters. The test shouldn’t take long.”

Dr. Tallus looked at Hannah and held up one of the test sheets, clearly expecting her to follow to someplace other than an actual seat, and she went with him to the counter where she’d undressed the previous week.

“I’ll need something to write with,” Hannah said.

Dr. Tallus drew a pen from his pocket, handed it to Hannah, distributed the rest of the sheets to the team members.

“Okay, go ahead,” he said.

Hannah glanced down at the paper.

Twenty multiple-choice questions. She started circling answers, her handcuffs ringing against the counter, her shackles clinking against the floor as she shuffled her feet.

About 10 of the questions were from the manual, the rest of them from the articles, all simple to anyone who had read everything through once. She could have prepared for it all in a quarter the time she'd spent.

Hannah finished in about a minute, held it up and looked at Dr. Tallus.

"Question, Hannah?" he asked.

"Do I just give it to you?"

"Yes," he said, "when you're done."

"I'm done."

"Did you have any questions?"

"No, Sir."

"You might have noticed some general questions on reproduction," he said. "Our upperclassmen are all familiar with the topics, but I did want to give everyone a chance to get refreshed—"

"Uh huh, I noticed that," Hannah agreed.

Dr. Tallus strode over, expression deeply condescending now. He took Hannah's paper, but as he surveyed Hannah's responses, his smile faded and his jaw clenched and unclenched.

Hannah looked over at the rest of the team, some clearly done, watching the drama unfold before them, some apparently still struggling with the test. It was obvious to Hannah who had read the articles and who hadn't.

"You seem to be in possession of some very specialized knowledge," he said, looking into her eyes accusingly.

"I thought you said the non-manual questions were on general knowledge," Hannah said, looking back with eyebrows raised in complete innocence.

"Well," Dr. Tallus fumbled, "general knowledge for the team here, but as a freshman—"

"Did I pass?"

"So you . . ." he said, clearly grasping at straws as his eyes scanned the sheet, "know a little about the relationship between sperm flagellum radius and—"

"Square root of the coefficient halved," Hannah said, "although there's some debate on that approach, because a linear relationship gives results that are almost as good."

"How good?"

“Average variance of three to five percent.”

Dr. Tallus turned abruptly to find all the team’s eyes on him.

Someone here, someone in this room, had betrayed him. Someone here had sent the collection female – the freshman sex slave, the girl whose only function was delivering semen with her vagina – the list of articles she wasn’t supposed to see.

And she had read them, and memorized them, and made a fool of Dr. Tallus in front of the whole team.

“Everyone done?” he inquired with a self-imposed calmness.

Two students looked up with eyes of panic as they joined the rest of the team in handing Dr. Tallus their tests.

“Give me a few minutes to grade these,” he said, and he pointed at three team members at the end of the table. “Bubba, and you and you – sorry, I’ll learn everyone’s names soon – you get to rack Hannah first. Here’s the key to take off her restraints.”

Hannah, nude and chained and savoring another of the rare but sweet victories that she had managed to squeeze out of the universe, stepped to the rack, held still while she was unchained, and she put her knees on the seat, was strapped at the thighs and calves and upper back. She put her hands behind her back, Bubba bound her wrists, and she was rocked forward until her head hung down close to the floor and her vulva and anus rose up to the optimal height for research purposes. Someone, possibly Bubba, inserted the thermometers. A girl asked her the questions from the protocol, eliciting confessions about sex over the weekend with a healthy Caucasian male and sex Monday with a healthy black male.

The third member of the group, wearing sandals and socks, stood between Hannah’s legs and filled the sampling rod with distilled water, inserted it into her vagina, pulled the trigger, flooded her organ, sucked up 20 milliliters of water and semen and sperm, and, presumably, distributed it into two cups, although Hannah couldn’t see or feel that step.

“Everyone passed,” Dr. Tallus announced while Hannah was still bound upside down on the rack.

“Everyone?” Hannah asked thickly.

“You too,” he said. “Congratulations.”

Someone whispered “Oh” in quiet shock, but Hannah wanted to imagine that at least one person on the team wasn’t at all surprised. Or

maybe more than one person. Had the betrayer let anyone else in on their decision to forward Dr. Tallus' email? Maybe the whole class was in on it.

Hannah enjoyed thinking so.

But she was glad they didn't clap. Victories by subjects over free people were best enjoyed quietly.

"Well done, everyone," Dr. Tallus said. "Now, Sally and Jim . . . you passed, technically, but I think each of you could use a little remediation over the next week."

Hannah guessed there was deep relief in the eyes of the two students who, she suspected, hadn't bothered to read the three articles and probably, technically, failed the exam with flying colors.

The team worked the rest of the evening in groups of three. Three students to free Hannah from the rack, chain her and walk her to the holding pen. Three more students to release her from the pen and walk her in chains to the rack, unchain her and bind her to it.

Meanwhile, other groups of three followed the protocol at the microscopes, studying semen and identifying sperm, while others learned how to use a state-of-the-art DNA sequencer.

"Look at the tail on this one!" Hannah heard a girl shout. Was it Allain's sperm, or Brad's?

By the end of the evening, everyone but Hannah could call themselves at least marginally certified in some of the most advanced technologies in the modern world, as well as that most ancient practice of treating another human being like property.

"Hannah, we'll get you in front of all the equipment next week," Dr. Tallus said to the back of her head, his graciousness restored.

"Okay," Hannah said. "And I've found a volunteer lab subject. May I bring her in next week?"

"Who is it?" Dr. Tallus asked.

"Her name's Jane. She's on my hall in the kennels."

"Can you bring her in two weeks from now?" he asked. "Next Wednesday, we'll still be doing orientation, and we need to cover discipline."

"Yes, Sir," Hannah said. "And I think I still need to give you my email address."

Dr. Tallus chuckled. "I have it."

He paused, raised his voice to speak to everyone on the team. “Hey, I’ve gotten clarification from New Life. We do need to go through the motions on discipline, and we’ll have to train on Hannah for that too. Hannah, nothing’s going to hurt, but I can’t promise it won’t be uncomfortable, or at least a little inconvenient.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, unconcerned. “What’s our policy on informed consent with semen donors?”

“What do you mean?”

“I think the males I’m . . . collecting from . . . deserve to know, on a formal basis, that their semen is being used in research.”

“It’s a valid question,” Dr. Tallus conceded, “but there’s nothing in the protocol about it. I think the assumption was most donors would be male subjects.”

“I think they should be told anyway,” Hannah said.

“Look it up, and report back next Wednesday,” Dr. Tallus said with another chuckle. “You just earned yourself more research.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Chapter 52: A Refusal on Hall 6

The team finished their work after 9, and Hannah put her clothes back on and, leaving last, paused at the door to look back at Dr. Tallus, seated at the table and tapping on his laptop.

Sensing her eyes, perhaps, he looked up at her.

“You’re the only one that got all 20 questions right,” he said.

“That’s strange,” Hannah said. “It was straight from the manual . . . and then, just some basic information everyone should know.”

Dr. Tallus smiled, raw admiration in his eyes.

“You’re going to bring us another sample next Wednesday, right? Any questions about that?”

“Well . . .” Hannah said, “you know I start my period in a few days, right? Probably on Friday?”

“Yeah, I’m charting you. I’m showing Friday or Saturday.”

“And you still . . . want it done?”

“It’s not what I want, it’s what New Life wants. And yes, they’re interested in collection data throughout your cycle. I’m sure you saw that in the manual.”

“Okay, just making sure,” Hannah said. “And do you care about race or ethnicity?”

“Asian this time, if you can swing it.”

“I’ll try.”

Hannah left the building, shrinking against a blast of late January Texas air, eager to make her way back to the kennels, but Tish and Dave and Bubba and another half dozen of the team were chatting together near the glowing exit of Cambridge Hall, and she paused to say hello.

“Congratulations, Hannah,” Tish said, stepping up to her, giving her a tight hug. “Welcome to the team.”

Hannah laughed and glowed, but when she made her way back to the kennels across the dark, empty campus, her mind turned to Spartacine Arkkola.

She might yet bury Spartacine, her paper forgotten.

But the day’s victory was the exception that proved the rule, Hannah reminded herself. She had prevailed today despite the system, not because of it.

This is wrong, Hannah said mouthing the words silently, hustling through the cold.

All of it.

She had not forgotten the rest of her litany:

Something needs to be done.

I have been imprisoned. Wrongly.

It is the duty of all of those wrongly imprisoned to challenge their confinement. To escape, in mind if not body. To sabotage.

No matter the cost.

The walk to the kennels led her along the edge of campus. She could see a row of little shops, a bar and a restaurant across the street, and she heard laughter, and the notion occurred to her in a blinding flash that one night, after her classes or her work with Dr. Tallus, she could cross this street and have dinner. She could probably order wine, or at least a beer. She had enough money for that, and the assistanceship would keep it coming.

Next week, Dr. Tallus had told them, they would sign up for hours, mostly in the lab, but with some independent work as well. Everyone would get 15 hours a week, and Hannah would get two of her hours in what Dr. Tallus euphemistically called “collecting.” She wouldn’t be required to

track her actual time doing that work, he said to laughter. Hannah laughed too.

Everyone would need to spend three hours in the lab Wednesday night, they were told. The rest of their hours could be filled in as it suited. Hannah decided she would put in for a mix of morning hours, Monday or Friday, and some evenings. Her research on getting informed consent from male donors would count too, Dr. Tallus had told her.

She thought of her long days in the cage at the Petrosyans and shivered. This was the life she was destined to lead. Not that.

And yet, she was making active preparations to destroy it all. Enjoy it while it lasts, she whispered to herself.

Had there been any lingering doubts about Spartacine and her treatise, they were dispelled the next day by Donovan, bringing words she'd been expecting – and dreading – for more than a month.

“Hey, Hannah,” he said, standing at her bars after dinner while she was wrapping up her homework and getting ready to read a journal article on sodium reduction strategies.

“Hey, Donovan.”

“You’re scheduled for Hall 6 on Monday.”

“What am I being punished for?” Hannah asked.

“You know what I’m talking about. You need to work it.”

“No,” Hannah said.

“Just the morning. You’ll be done by lunch.”

“No,” Hannah said again.

“Hannah,” Donovan pleaded.

“No,” Hannah said again. “I’m not going to.”

“You’re still going,” Donovan said.

“That’s all be explained to me. How long will it take?”

“It depends on what we do,” Donovan replied. “But plan for up to three hours. It could be less, though.”

Hannah swallowed.

“You know, if you don’t work it, someone else has to do it in your place.”

This was the best argument anyone had for working Hall 6, and it had occurred to Hannah as well. But she simply couldn’t.

“It made me sick last time,” Hannah said. “It doesn’t make other people sick. And some people might even enjoy it.”

Donovan just smiled.

“Does it matter,” she continued, “that I’ll probably be on my period that day?”

“Not at all. We have tampons.”

“Can I reschedule it?”

“To what?” Donovan asked.

“Well . . . maybe when I’m not on my period? The next week?”

“I’ll check, but probably not,” Donovan said.

“That’s possible though?” Hannah asked. “I can get it rescheduled?”

“Sometimes, yeah.”

Hannah, happy Wednesday, spent a miserable weekend with Allain. She was cramping, facing unknown punishments Monday, and worrying about the scholarship deadline now both treatises were due in less than a month, on March 1. She still had an unfathomable amount of work to do on both.

And after she paid for her disobedience on Hall 6 Monday morning, she’d go to class and return to the kennels with more homework and another dilemma: finding a male – preferably Asian – who was willing to have sex with a girl on her period.

Further, she hadn’t done any research on the question of donor informed consent, had no idea when she would get it done, or how she would even research it. And it was due by Wednesday.

But she suffered stoically with Allain, conjuring her cheerier self consistently, laughing with him and his friends and performing oral sex on him Friday and Saturday. She brought him into her vagina Sunday afternoon, both of them enduring the mess so she’d have at least one donor’s sperm for sampling Wednesday.

She finally broke down Sunday night on the couch with him, popping three ibuprofen, crying on his shoulder and blaming it all on cramps. She couldn’t tell him everything that was going on. If he knew about her punishment the next morning, he’d argue with her to just do as she was ordered. If he knew how stressed she was over her classes and her assistanceship, he might insist she give something up. And she couldn’t tell him she was writing two scholarship papers, one under the fictitious name of Spartacine Arkkola.

Allain returned her to the kennels after dinner and after she'd dried her eyes Sunday night so she could study, but she couldn't read her books and couldn't keep her eyes closed, eventually drifting into a fitful sleep well after the lights went out.

She woke early, as usual, tired and bitter, went to breakfast and returned to her kennel to wait.

Bud came for her at 8:30.

"Are you gonna help me this morning, Hannah?" he asked.

"I can't," she said. "I'm sorry."

Bud held up a set of chains, but Hannah went first to her toilet to put in a fresh tampon.

"What are you going to do?"

"We can talk about what we decided when we get to the hall."

"We?" Hannah said, and she stepped to the bars, reached out her hands and allowed Bud to chain her wrists and ankles, putting her in the full, Hall 6 set with a chain that ran between her legs.

"A few of us talked about it," he said. "We don't want to do this."

Hannah walked without speaking to Hall 6, following Bud to the desk, where he sat and stared at the PC monitor.

She could see three people confined in isolation, a male and two females, and one standing in a tiny punishment cage, the timer with almost three hours left.

"We're going to let you choose," he said.

"Quickest," Hannah said with a faint sense of hope as she imagined herself at the PCs today, before lunch, still stinging perhaps, but free to study and research.

"It's one bar this time, two after that," he warned.

"I know," Hannah said. "What's the quickest one bar punishment?"

"Fifteen minutes of hanging and leads on the nipples."

"I could be gone in 15 minutes?"

"A little longer than that, because I need to set you up."

"How long are the leads turned on?"

"Five seconds."

"Okay," Hannah said, clenching her jaw. "That."

She followed Bud to the place where rope hung down from a pulley, where she had bound and hung Amelia.

Bud opened her wrist cuffs and dropped the chain to the floor.

Hannah held out her hands and allowed Bud to loop the rope around her wrists. It wasn't until she felt her arms rise and go taut over her head that her heart began to pound, that she stopped contemplating her impending punishment conceptually and began working through the concrete difficulties she faced.

This was going to hurt. For five seconds, she would be back in all the places she had suffered – the stacks, the Petrosyan's mean room, interrogation. This would be new suffering, layering over the old. New trauma, new things to remember, new things to forget, or try to forget.

Hannah's feet were no longer touching the floor. She looked down, watching her body swing, the chain dangling from her ankles slinking, snakelike, along the floor with a quiet ring.

She heard beeps on the wall behind her and knew Bud was setting the timer for fifteen minutes.

For 15 minutes, she would hang like this, her wrists stinging, her elbows and shoulders beginning to ache. It didn't hurt yet. If she were heavier, it would hurt more. Did they adjust the time of suspension by weight?

Jane, heavier and bigger-boned, might hang for no more than seven and a half minutes for the same infraction.

Bud was holding something, a black box with a pair of wires dangling from it, each wire ending in a small clamp.

Hannah looked on the clamps while Bud adjusted something on the box. They were metallic, a silver blue, with jagged teeth.

Hannah looked down at her nipples. They were fleshy, and pink, and they were trying to hide, both completely flat.

Bud brushed and pinched Hannah's left nipple as if trying to wake it, and the flesh responded, firming up as if raising its head curiously.

Bud applied the clamp, which didn't hurt as much as Hannah had expected, gripping her just firmly enough to stay on. This wasn't part of her punishment.

Her right nipple was awake now, rising up, aware that something had disturbed or excited its sister, but Bud pinched it anyway, giving it equal treatment, applying the clamp once it was fully extended.

Hannah, knowing nothing would change visually when the clamps began doing their job, studied them anyway, looking only at them, her eyes

darting back and forth until she felt a sensation akin to burning, but more cruel than mere heat, more insidious, more invasive.

“Ow, ow, nooooo!” Hannah shouted, shaking, lifting her feet and dropping them with the sharp ring of chain against the concrete beneath her. “AWWWWWW!”

The pain subsided and Bud removed the clamps.

“Oh,” Hannah said to herself. “Oh. Oh.”

But it was over.

Five seconds. She’d known what to expect. The pain was terrible but not mind-jarring, and it relented quickly, leaving her to contemplate the lingering pain – or inconvenience, really, because it didn’t hurt that much – of hanging by her wrists. How much longer did she have here? At least 10 minutes, but no more than 15.

She couldn’t study like this. But she could think, and the cessation of sharp pain invariably sharpened her mind.

She’d been worrying about this since the previous week, her anticipation of punishment on Hall 6 a dark cloud that deadened her and reduced her effectiveness, blocked her highest-order thinking.

Now she was clear.

She’d go to the PCs and search “informed consent” and “subject research agreements” and “subject legal documents” and surely find something.

Then, she’d look for another article on sodium mitigation she’d found a citation for and wanted to read.

And there were always Asian boys in the cafeteria, three or four she could speak to. She would simply approach each and tell them what she needed. Surely one of them would agree to partner with her for science.

Hannah was lost in plans for the rest of the day when she sensed something cold beneath her toes and realized she was being lowered to the floor. She turned, saw a boy at the rope, naked and semi-erect, one ankle tethered to the groove in the middle of the hall.

An Asian boy.

“Hi,” she said when he stepped before her to untie her wrists.

He looked at her, smiled. A kind smile. Because she’d refused to do this, he had to. Did he hate it? Would he throw up?

How would feel about having sex with a girl on her period?

She didn’t recognize him. Was he new to the kennels?

“I’m Hannah,” she said.

He looked up from her hands, where he was still working at the ropes, and said something that sounded like “Shwing way.”

Was that his name?

“Hey,” Hannah said, “could I talk to you, um, at lunch today? About something?”

He removed the rope, smiled again.

“Or,” Hannah continued, looking at Bud, seated at his desk, typing on his PC, “maybe we could talk about it here.”

He looked at her, puzzled it seemed, but interested perhaps, wanting to hear more of whatever it was she had to say. She looked at his penis, noticed it swelling further, almost fully-extended now. That was a good sign. She looked back into his eyes.

“I just need someone . . . you . . . if you would . . . tonight, um . . . in my kennel?”

Hannah knew she was blushing furiously, knew that the tampon string was hanging down between her lips, knew that he must have noticed it.

He shook his head.

“Oh, oh, that’s okay,” Hannah said. “I can—”

He uttered another string of words, clearly another language and not English.

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Do you speak English?”

“No,” he said, smiling and nodding furiously, as people sometimes do when they finally understand something someone else has said. “No Engrish.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “That’s okay. Sorry for bothering you.”

Hannah picked up her free wrist chains and shuffled back to Bud’s desk, her ankles still bound.

“Change your mind, Hannah?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“Change your mind?”

“About what?” Hannah asked, mystified.

Bud rose from his desk and removed the chains from her ankles.

“Are you going to help us next time?”

“Oh, uh . . . probably not,” Hannah said. “I can go now, right?”

“Sure.”

Hannah, barely feeling her nipples, barely remembering what had been done to them, went straight from Hall 6 to the PCs. She checked email first, found a message from Dr. Tallus letting her know that she could bring her friend in for training on this Wednesday if the friend would subject herself to discipline training as well.

“I’m sure she’ll say yes,” Hannah replied, next searching for and immediately finding a treasure trove of documents and templates one used with subjects: medical consent forms, service and obedience contracts, a version of the non-disclosure document she’d signed for Sylvia, even an emancipation form you could use to set someone free. She found three documents that might work for informed consent, researched the arguments for and against the policy, showered, dressed, ate a hasty lunch and raced off to class.

Finding an Asian boy to collect from would have to wait until dinner.

After classes and another session at the PCs, where she uncovered two articles on sodium mitigation, Hannah walked to the cafeteria alone.

“Hey, Hannah,” a male voice said as she moved toward the food line.

She looked, found to her surprise that her name had been uttered by Jacob, the boy made a slave after the polygamists kicked him out; the boy with the sweet smile, planted upon an ungainly face, whose owner didn’t understand why Hannah was willing to couple with him.

“Hey, Jacob,” Hannah said brightly. “How are your classes going?”

“Swimmingly,” he said. “You?”

“The same.”

Jacob was sitting next to the Asian boy from Hall 6.

“Hi,” Hannah said to him with a small wave.

“Steve wants to talk to you.”

“Oh, he speaks English?”

“No, but I’m doing better and better with Chinese.”

“That’s impressive,” Hannah said. Jacob had a thick book beside him on the table. She saw Chinese characters and English as well and guessed it was something he used for translations.

“Thanks,” Jacob said. “He pointed to you as soon as you walked in, spoke too quickly for me to understand, but he seemed to want to talk to you.”

“We met in Hall 6 this morning,” Hannah said. “Let me get dinner and I’ll be right back.”

Chapter 53: Lee June, Scientist

Hannah picked out a casserole and salad and rice and set her tray across from Jacob and the Chinese boy calling himself Steve.

“Okay,” Jacob said, book open. “First of all, Steve is sorry he didn’t understand you this morning.”

“That’s okay. It was a little tense.”

“So, he’s hoping I can translate whatever you were saying.”

Steve smiled and nodded vigorously toward Hannah as Jacob talked.

“Okay,” Hannah said, immediately blushing again and realizing she was easily the worst researcher on Dr. Tallus’ team, the most embarrassed about things that didn’t need to embarrass her. “Okay, so, I’m on this research team, for an assistanceship, and—”

“You got an assistanceship?”

“Yeah. Well, barely. They just wanted me for, um . . . my female parts.”

“Okay,” Jacob said, staring at Hannah.

“And so I’m supposed to . . . supposed to . . . well, they call it collecting, but it just means . . . I, um, you know . . . partner. With a guy. And then . . . later . . . they look at the . . . semen.”

Jacob nodded, his eyes piercing Hannah in a way that suggested an interest in her words that wasn’t strictly scientific.

“So I’ve been asked for . . . Asian . . . um, an Asian . . . a partner, tonight . . . with . . .”

Jacob nodded and Hannah fell silent, picking at her dinner.

“Oing shwee san,” Jacob said haltingly. “Um, oing—”

“Oh, one other thing,” Hannah said.

“Yeah?”

“I’m, uh, on my period.”

Jacob said more words, opened his book and flipped from page to page, tried out an additional phrase or two.

Hannah looked up at him, then at Steve, who was staring at his own plate and nodding sagaciously, as if Jacob were outlining a business deal, or

explaining the religious meaning behind an ancient Chinese poem.

Steve was thin but not gaunt, with thick black hair that grew down to his wide-set, friendly eyes.

“I think he’s saying yes,” Jacob said.

“You’re not sure?”

“Well, he speaks a dialect that’s not in my book. I get most of it.”

“This is sort of important, though,” Hannah said. “He needs to know what I’m proposing.”

“A month ago, he was a farm laborer.”

“What’s his story?” Hannah asked, and she smiled at Steve and he nodded, submissively, then looked down at his plate, appeared surprised there was still food there, and dug in clumsily with his fork.

“We’ve been talking since the day after he got here, 10 days ago, and—”

“They have him working Hall 6 10 days after he gets here?”

“Yeah, I’m not sure why,” Jacob said. “So, his family always worked for his owner’s family. That much I get. It’s not really slavery, like here, but where they live, it’s close. So when the owner’s oldest son got a scholarship to go here, Steve was part of the deal, and they finally got all the paperwork taken care of, and they shipped him out almost two weeks ago, and he’s been settling in since.”

“Are you the only person he’s talking to?”

“Probably.”

“How old is he?”

“18,” Jacob replied, clearly already having gotten the answer.

“Oh, that’s young,” Hannah said. “Oh . . . do you think he’s . . . uh, maybe he never had . . .”

“You want me to ask him if he’s a virgin?”

Jacob immediately began flipping through the pages, found what he was looking for, spoke the phrase haltingly.

“Ah!” Steve shouted, smiling, hiding his face, laughing. “Ah!” he said again, speaking rapid Chinese before he convulsed with laughter. He looked at Jacob, looked at Hannah, overwhelmed by a hilarity that neither of them could comprehend and, Hannah thought, might have been a mask for deep and abiding shame.

Once he’d composed himself, he turned to Jacob and, with profound earnestness, began slowly speaking Chinese while Jacob flipped

back and forth in his book, repeated words, nodded, said more words, was answered by Steve.

“Okay,” Jacob said, turning to Hannah. “I think he’s getting it. He says he does not want to dishonor your family.”

Hannah paused for a moment, trying to work through Steve’s meaning, slowly understanding, and when she arrived at the only interpretation that made sense, she bit her lip to keep from laughing, and drew her hands to her mouth to hide her smile.

When she believed she could speak again, she turned to Steve and nodded solemnly, and he offered a short, seated bow in return.

“Tell him, um . . . I guess tell him it’s different in America,” Hannah said. “I don’t know . . . I don’t know how to answer that.”

Hannah looked at Jacob.

“I’m starting to think this is a really bad idea,” she said.

“No,” Jacob said. “It just needs to be done in a certain way.”

“Can you explain that it’s for scientific research?” she asked.

“No. I’m not even sure how to tell him you’re menstruating.”

Jacob leaned back and took a quick, discreet glance at Steve’s middle.

“But he’s interested, I’m pretty sure. Really interested.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, rising with her tray in her hands. “If he follows me, we do it, if he doesn’t, I find someone else from Asia. Maybe in the lounge tonight.”

Hannah looked at Steve. “You coming?”

He rose, lifting his tray, using it to hide – unsuccessfully – his uncircumcised, fully-erect penis, which jutted forth from a bed of thick black hair.

Hannah looked at it, looked back into Steve’s eyes, stepped to the wall to deposit her tray, found him close behind her.

They left the cafeteria together, headed down the stairs, Steve speaking rapid, enthusiastic Chinese, Hannah replying with English every time he paused.

“I’ve been here since the summer,” she said. “It was a big adjustment.”

He nodded, said something.

“I’m taking classes, and I have an assistanceship. That’s why I wanted to do this tonight.”

He spoke again.

They reached her hall, stepped down to her kennel to wait, continued talking at her door, he in Chinese, she in English.

Tammy appeared.

“Hey, Hannah,” she said. “You’re having Steve with you tonight?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “I think so. I’m not sure exactly . . .”

“How much time do you need?”

“I think a half hour,” Hannah said. “But there’s some language issues. Jacob was translating, and I don’t know what made it through.”

“Uh, how did this end up happening?” Tammy inquired.

“I need someone from Asia to, um, ejaculate . . . in me. For my assistanceship. And—”

“You’re being serious, right?” Tammy said. “You know he speaks zero English?”

“Yes. But Jacob translated for me, and . . .” Hannah looked at Steve’s penis, Tammy following her gaze, “I think he gets the basic idea.”

Tammy unlocked Hannah’s kennel door.

“But just in case there are . . . cultural issues,” Hannah said, stepping in, turning to make sure Steve followed her in, “would you mind staying for a few minutes?”

“Sure,” Tammy said, locking the door. “If you need help, just say ‘help.’ In English.”

Hannah went to her toilet, wondering if she’d gotten herself in over her head, pulled out her tampon, quickly wrapped it up in tissue and dropped it into her trash can. She wasn’t looking at Steve, and she hoped he wasn’t offended.

She wiped, flushed, stood, and he was still there, still standing in the middle of her kennel, facing her, silent now, although his engorged manhood spoke volumes.

Hannah turned directly toward him, hoping he would do something, because she wasn’t sure what she should do.

Finally, he bowed, about 45 degrees down, closing his eyes, straightening again, solemnly.

“He might be a virgin,” Hannah said, returning his bow.

“Is that something Jacob told you?”

Steve seemed surprised to hear Tammy’s voice. He turned to her, as if trying to understand why she was still there.

He bowed to her.

Standing on the other side of the bars, she put her hands together and bowed back.

Satisfied with her response, Steve focused on Hannah, his expression tense now, hopeful, waiting – like every boy Hannah had ever made love to. This she understood.

She moved to her bed, pulled down the covers, sat, angled herself down and put her head on her pillow, glancing at Steve, at Tammy, back to Steve.

Steve stepped to the side of the bed, raised his eyebrows in the universal expression of questioning.

Hannah nodded, believing that was universal too.

But Steve was still trying to figure out things, apparently, eyebrows raised. After what seemed to be a major effort to find his courage, he bent, reached out his hand and patted Hannah's vulva.

Patted it. Like it was a pet.

Hannah, fighting the misgivings that normally attend intimacy with someone with whom one shares virtually no cultural foundation, nodded again and, in case nods meant something different in China, she gestured toward his penis, spread her legs, and dropped her hand to her vulva, opening her lips.

The question was gone from his face now and replaced with determination. Perhaps it was the face he made when he was pushing a plow. Or wrestling a water buffalo. Or driving a tractor. Perhaps he drove tractors. He put his hand on the bed, raised his knee, crawled into position and arched over Hannah, hands on the mattress beside her shoulders, penis bouncing at her vulva.

Still opening herself with one hand, she took the front of his penis gently with her other hand, coaxing him forward, guiding it to her door, raising her opening as he pushed slowly forward, his tip finding her hole, spreading out the mouth of her organ, slowly and inexorably, burying itself within her.

Hannah gasped, nodded up at him, nods being all she had to communicate with, and he looked down at her with what seemed to be rage – not a smile, not a frown, just wide-open eyes and a face compressed into deep emotion. But he continued to push, continued to allow Hannah to pull

him into her, stopping only when his black, wiry hair had reached her vulva, stimulating her with a thousand soft prickles.

“Yeah,” Hannah said.

This was for science, yes, and two hours of assistanceship credit, but nothing said she couldn’t enjoy it. “Yeah.”

He pulled halfway out, and raised his eyebrows again, in another question. What did he want to know now? Did Hannah consider him finished? Did he need to pull out?

Hannah bit her lip, reached up and put her hands beside his ribs, pulling him forward.

He obliged with another face of sudden rage, and Hannah pushed him back and pulled him forward, and he seemed to understand, pulling out again and pushing in, expression transitioning from rage to raptness.

Yes, he was a virgin, Hannah realized. Or he had been, until now.

His third withdrawal and insertion were on his own, and now he was concentrating again, eyes and mouth set with determination, trying different depths, different angles, different paces for insertion and withdrawal.

Was he experimenting? Was he trying to find a comfortable way to have sex, or was he – minutes into the first intercourse of his life – trying to find the optimal method, the combination of motions within Hannah’s vagina that felt best to him?

Was he at heart a scientist, like Hannah believed she was?

What did his collar say? There were three tags hanging from the ring, all intermittently visible as he shook above her. One bore Chinese characters, one had been issued by the kennels and showed his picture, and the tag issued in accordance with United States policies said, “Male, Agricultural.”

Hannah raised her hands to his shoulders, and Steve pulled his hands up and put his arms behind his back, so that only she was supporting his weight above her.

Was this how he’d seen it done? Or imagined doing it? It was as if he were flying, arms swept back aerodynamically, his body bending at the hips, back and forth, back and forth, driving his engorged meat over and over again into her thickened red slot.

No, not flying.

Swimming, like a dolphin, Hannah thought. Or like a sperm.

Could you tell the difference between Asian sperm and African sperm and Caucasian sperm, without opening it up and unspooling the DNA?

Maybe nodding is universal. Smiling is.

Bowing isn't universal – no one who was born in Texas does it, at least, she thought – but it's universally understood.

Cumming is universal, and when Steve began to issue staccato grunts of unstoppable pleasure – “uh, uh, uh, uh” – she knew what it meant, and she watched him for whatever configuration orgasm produced on the faces of men from his culture.

Arms still behind him, supported only by a pair of girl arms that were starting to grow weary, Hannah watched his visage transition with kaleidoscope speed and thoroughness, moving from rage to serenity to concentration to shock while his body bent and he poured his semen into Hannah's chamber with everything at his middle – penis, hips, back, and a taut belly that Hannah noticed for the first time was undulating with thick, rippling muscles, the abdomen of a man whose labors included doing sit ups, apparently.

Or crunches.

Was there a gym on the farm? Did he go to it?

Did he go to church?

What god did he pray to?

Or was this him finding God now, in his 18th year, in the nether temple of a blonde girl on her period?

Hannah hadn't expected to cum. This was about getting an assignment done.

But Steve kept writhing within her after he'd finished ejaculating, and his persistent ministrations were pushing her from mere agitation to something more.

A few quick flicks of her pelvis, his hair tickling her lips and her clitoris, his still-firm penis grinding within her walls, and she arrived, groaning and bouncing through her own orgasm, digging her nails into the white flesh at his shoulders while the boy who called himself Steve looked down at her in apparent alarm.

Did he know girls could orgasm, or did he think she was dying?

“Ohgodnonomore,” Hannah pleaded to the heavens.

“Jesusjesusjesusstopnonono.”

He stayed in place, watching attentively until Hannah stopped quivering and stopped uttering profanities, apparently reassured at that point because her eyes were still open and her chest continued to rise and fall.

Only at the drawing of deep breaths as the last vestige of sexual release did Hannah push gently on his right shoulder.

He understood, pulling his penis out of her body, falling back on his knees, regarding the girl with a face of utter stillness, utter peace.

Utter beauty.

Hannah drew her knees up, turned to sit on her bed, looked between her legs for a sense of the mess she would have to deal with until she replaced her sheets on Wednesday.

Typical for the fourth day of her period, it wasn't bad, just a minor pink wash to match the sheen on Steve's softening penis.

He shifted on the bed, turned to sit beside her, bent forward to rest his elbows on his thighs, his face unreadable, his mind all the more so.

Was this right to have done?

Which of Hannah's near-dozen gods would have approved of this, and which were even now putting her name on the list of those who must be punished?

The laughing god approved, Hannah was certain. If Steve had a god, he or she might even now be saying yes, with feet planted somewhere in China, body stretched across the ocean, and face peering down invisibly from the ceiling while its mind marveled at something it had never seen before.

Tammy was still at the bars, still watching.

"How long has it been?" Hannah asked.

Tammy pulled her phone out of her pocket.

"I guess 25 minutes."

"Do you think he knows he's supposed to leave now?" Hannah asked.

"I can tell him. He knows a few phrases. Just let me know when you're ready."

Hannah touched Steve's shoulder, and he looked at her, eyes still serene.

"Hannah," she said, pointing to herself.

"Ana," he said. "Han . . . na. Han, Han, Hannana."

“Hannah.”

“Hannah,” he repeated successfully this time.

Hannah pointed to him, raised her eyebrows.

“Lee June,” he said.

“Lee June,” Hannah repeated.

He nodded, rose from Hannah’s bed, turned to face her again, continued to nod, and he bowed and smiled.

Hannah stood and bowed, looked into his eyes and at his penis, wondered if he’d wash it tonight at his sink, if he would understand why she’d bled.

“Okay, Tammy,” Hannah said.

“Steve?” Tammy said.

Steve, who was now Lee June to Hannah, turned to look.

“Back to kennel,” Tammy said.

“Ah,” he said, rising from Hannah’s bed, bowing to her, stepping to the bars. She unlocked the door and he stepped through, turned to bow to Hannah one more time, stepping out of the way so Tammy could lock back Hannah’s kennel door, and he continued to look at Hannah until he had passed from sight, following Tammy to the end of the hall, where the door opened and clanked shut.

Chapter 54: Training on Jane

“So, you can make it to my lab tomorrow night?” Hannah asked Jane over dinner that Tuesday.

“Yeah, I got the okay, they’ll let me out.”

“Can you stay a little longer?”

“Maybe, what for?”

“Punishment training.”

“I get to watch you get punished?” Jane inquired, her smile suggesting she might be joking, or this might be another from her gallery of predilections.

“Sorry, no,” Hannah said. “They just have to go through the motions to say they’ve officially worked that way with a lab female.”

“What does that mean?”

“They’re going to do a few things, stuff that’s in our manual, but none of it’s supposed to hurt. And if they can do it to you too, then—”

“I’ve got no other plans tomorrow night,” Jane promised.

“I’m supposed to do it too,” Hannah added.

“Will you just be faking it, or are you really gonna let me have it?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Hannah said. “Can it be a surprise?”

“Yeah.”

Hannah was running late the next evening, got to Jane’s kennel about 5:20, and the girls went together to the locker room, dressed and got scanned out a little after 5:30. It wasn’t until quarter till six that Hannah submitted her iris for a read and pushed open the door.

Dr. Tallus was already speaking to the team, but he stopped and glanced up when Hannah entered.

“I was beginning to think you weren’t going to make it,” he said, clearly relieved, and possibly a little annoyed as well.

“Sorry, this is Jane,” Hannah said.

“Welcome to the lab, Jane,” Dr. Tallus said.

“Hi,” Jane said weakly.

Hannah looked at her friend. Was she going to be shy tonight?

“I was just going over tonight’s plan,” Dr. Tallus said. “Can you both get undressed?”

Hannah pointed to the cabinet and led Jane there, and the girls pulled off their clothes, hung them up and turned – naked except for their collars and Jane’s glasses – to the group.

“Hannah, any luck collecting something other than Caucasian?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “And I have that report.”

“What report?”

Hannah was expecting Dr. Tallus to forget, but it still annoyed her. Of course, she’d annoyed him by being late. So they were even, in her mind.

“You asked me to research informed consent,” Hannah said. “I found some forms and some ethical discussions.”

“Yes,” Dr. Tallus said, clearly surprised, clearly not expecting Hannah to have done anything. “Yes yes yes. Can it wait until after we get some other things out of the way?”

“Sure.”

“Alright, Hannah, let’s get you sampled. Jim, Sara, Tish, your turn.”

The three students rose from the table and stepped with Hannah to the rack.

“Jane, did Hannah explain what we’d been doing tonight?”

“Hannah said something about punishment,” Jane replied, her voice louder now, more confident, and Hannah wondered if she was at her most comfortable with strangers when she was nude.

“Simulated only,” Dr. Tallus said. “I hope Hannah said it wasn’t going to cause any discomfort.”

“No, Hannah said you were going to really work me over.”

The team laughed, while Dr. Tallus’ face registered consternation. Did he think Jane was being serious? Or was he just not ready for someone with Jane’s peculiar sense of humor?

“Hannah is full of surprises,” Dr. Tallus said at last, “but none of that is true.”

Jane feigned relief and turned to smile mischievously at Hannah.

“Can you step over here, Jane?” Dr. Tallus said, striding to the holding pen. “We’re going to train in groups of three. Sally, Peter, Dolly?”

Hannah put her knees on the rack and listened to what was happening with Jane, the three team members introducing themselves while Jane quipped back.

Hannah was bound, rocked forward, her rack bolted in place, the three students moving quickly through the assignment, one questioning her about herself and her partners while her temperature was taken, her vagina sampled.

Released from the rack, she stepped to Jane, standing in the open holding pen, wrists in handcuffs that had been looped over the hook at the top of the pen.

“Good,” Dr. Tallus said to the team whose turn it was to train on her. “Let her out and let’s do corporal.”

Jane smiled at Hannah. She didn’t seem to be minding the attention at all, even if it simulated a humiliating range of punishments. Was she aroused? Hannah couldn’t tell. Jane’s nipples were always erect, and her clitoris and vulva were hidden behind a thick mat of black pubic hair.

One of the students opened Jane’s handcuffs and another led her to the counter, where a long, thin cane had been laid flat.

“Um . . . hands on the counter,” Dolly said hesitantly.

Jane, still smiling, obeyed.

Bubba picked up the cane with one hand, the manual on his free forearm, opened to the punishment section.

“Okay,” he said, hesitantly, “this is where I explain what you did wrong, and then . . . can you lean out a little?”

Jane bent, pushing out her rear, wincing as she watched Bubba.

“I’m not going to really do this, Ma’am,” Bubba said.

“I’m just trying to make it realistic,” she countered. “Your name’s Bubba?”

“It’s what people call me, Ma’am. I was named Texas when I was born.”

“Just Texas, or the Great State of Texas, for formal occasions?”

“Just Texas, Ma’am.”

“I’m not Ma’am, by the way.”

“Sorry, Ma’am.”

Bubba tapped Jane’s bottom, prompting an anguished groan. He handed the cane to Martin for another tap, who passed the cane to Chen Wei.

“Uh,” Jane groaned again. “Oh, god, it hurts. I don’t think I can take it anymore.”

“Hannah, think you can tear yourself away from the drama for a bit?” Dr. Tallus asked. “I’d like to start your analysis training.”

Hannah considered dressing, decided not to while Jane was still nude and pretending – quite effectively – to be enduring repeated rounds of discipline.

Hannah had never peered through a microscope before, and Hannah leaned in with delight, turned knobs to focus, and gasped when she found a beautiful, entirely foreign being, a frantically wriggling sperm, head spinning as its tail whipped. Was it Allain’s? Or Steve’s? She quickly decided there was no way to tell.

Someone passed her the tablet and she recorded her findings, found a second sperm, entered more data, found a third and recorded while she listened to Jane’s adventures – the pen closing and opening, handcuffs being applied and unlocked, Jane’s quiet groans as the cane tapped her bottom.

Next for Hannah at the microscope came an investigation of Hannah’s vaginal biome, the surprisingly varied populous of single-celled organisms that swarmed within her sex organ. She found a dozen species, marking each on the tablet.

“Hannah, Doug, Martin, your turn with Jane,” Dr. Tallus announced.

Hannah stood, approached Jane, who was standing at the counter where the cane had been laid flat again.

“Okay,” Hannah said when neither male spoke up. “You’ve been absolutely horrible, so you’re going to the pen.”

“Sorry,” Jane said, walking to the little cage, stepping in. Martin shut it while Jane frowned.

“Doug, you’re the tallest,” Hannah said. “You want to put on her handcuffs?”

Doug opened the pen and Jane reached up, allowing him to cuff her wrists after a little fumbling.

Jane smiled.

“You are learning nothing from this,” Hannah complained.

“I promise to do better next time.”

Martin used the key to release Jane’s wrists, and she walked to the counter, put her hands on it and leaned forward.

Hannah went first, tapping Jane’s bottom.

“Oh, god, that was the worst of all,” Jane said. “She’s a monster, get her away from me!”

Hannah handed the cane to Martin, and Doug went last, Jane continuing to cry out.

“Alright, Jane, almost done,” Dr. Tallus said, stepping up to the girl.

“Yay.”

“Hannah is going to sample you, but do you mind if she presents something first?” he asked. “I’d like to dismiss the rest of the team as soon as Hannah shares what she’s learned.”

“Sure,” Jane said.

“And . . .” Dr. Tallus added, “I’d prefer to pen you while Hannah talks.”

Jane moved back to the little cage and stepped in, and Dr. Tallus latched it shut.

“Please don’t talk all night, Hannah,” Jane begged.

Hannah went to her bag to pull out a stack of papers and a notebook.

“Would you like to dress, Hannah?” Dr. Tallus asked.

“That’s okay,” Hannah replied with a quick glance at Jane. “This shouldn’t take that long.”

Hannah handed out a one-page summary of findings and relevant links, and her first draft of an informed consent form for presenting to donors at the time of collection.

Her talk lasted less than 10 minutes, concluding with an argument in favor of informed consent for donors both free and subject.

“Hannah, this is stellar work,” Dr. Tallus said, leading a round of polite but what seemed to be sincere applause. “New Life’s asking for input on their protocol from every site, so if you can send me your documents, I’ll forward them on.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah said.

“If this gets added to the next version of the protocol,” Dr. Tallus said to the class, “Hannah, uh, Loughbridge, will be listed as a contributor. Which is no small achievement for any researcher, particularly an undergrad. So, with that, we’re all done.”

The team rose and filed out, Tish not the only one who flashed Hannah a congratulatory smile before she left the lab.

“You continue to make a fool of me, Hannah,” Dr. Tallus lamented as soon as the team had gone.

“That was never my intention,” Hannah said.

“No one warned me about your ambition,” he said. “But it seems to be limitless.”

Hannah smiled and stepped up to Jane.

“Let me out,” Jane begged.

Dr. Tallus went to the cabinet for supplies, returned with shackles and handcuffs, and offered them to Hannah.

Hannah unlatched the pen, opened the door and looked at Jane expectantly.

Jane raised her hands, allowed Hannah to cuff her wrists, chain her ankles, and the girls walked together to the rack, the sampling cart pushed to the side.

Even with an audience of two, Jane remained in peak form.

“Will my agony ever cease?” she asked.

“No,” Hannah said, removing Jane’s restraints. “Not for another five minutes or so. Your knees go here.”

Jane knelt on the rack, Hannah strapped her at the thighs and calves, pushed her down until the intake of her breath told Hannah her ever-aroused nipples had reached the rack's cold, black steel. Hannah continued to push, strapping Jane's back, finding the cord for her wrists.

"Okay, hands behind your back," Hannah said.

Jane obeyed and Hannah bound her wrists.

"I can't feel my hands anymore," Jane announced.

Hannah rocked Jane forward, bolted the rack in place, slid the cart in position and slipped the thermometers up her friend's anus and vagina while Dr. Tallus watched.

"Those were up you a couple of hours ago, weren't they?" Jane inquired.

"Yes."

"They've been soaking in disinfectant since then," Dr. Tallus offered.

"That's okay, Hannah and me have given each other everything by now," Jane said, not elaborating and probably not needing to.

Hannah went back to her bookbag, now showing the first signs of wear – scuff marks on the bottom, tiny frays along the sides – and pulled out her manual, returning to Jane to ask her the full list of prescribed questions.

Done, Hannah removed and read the thermometers, entered their readings on the lab's tablet, and dropped them back into the solution.

She picked up the sampling rod, filled it with distilled water, and slipped it into Jane's vagina, pulling the trigger while her friend groaned and writhed.

Hannah distributed the sample into two cups, set down the rod, rocked Jane back, untied her wrists and freed her.

Jane stood and steadied herself dramatically on the rack.

"That was the worst of all," she said.

Hannah turned to Dr. Tallus.

"All done," he said.

The girls dressed and met Dr. Tallus at the door.

"Treat yourself," he said, handing them two \$10 debit cards for a little restaurant on the edge of campus.

"Got time to go tonight?" Jane asked once they'd stepped into the cool, humid night air outside Cambridge Hall.

“Yes, but I don’t know where this place is,” Hannah said, peering at the card under the glare of campus illumination. “It says Gargoyle’s.”

“Follow me,” Jane said.

The specialties at Gargoyle’s seemed to be limited to burgers and anything fried, as well as dozens of varieties of beer, and the girls took a seat in a darkened corner and succeeded in getting served two pale ales.

“Cheers,” said Jane, “to Dr. Hannah.”

Hannah laughed with all the self-deprecation she could summon.

“I could tell you really wanted to pop me with that cane,” Jane said.

“I was holding back.”

“And yet, you won’t work Hall 6.”

“I can’t,” Hannah said. “It makes me physically ill.”

“And so someone else has to do it,” Jane observed. “I heard they had to get this new Chinese guy who doesn’t speak a word of English to do it Monday.”

“Yeah,” Hannah said, lowering her voice, hesitant to speak of Hall 6 even off campus. “He was the one who let me down and untied me after I hung for 15 minutes.”

“No.”

“And . . . later . . . you know how I was supposed to get someone from Asia to make their contribution?”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Not the same guy.”

“Yes.”

“Did you cum?”

“Yeah, unexpectedly. You know I was still on my period then.”

“He was probably thinking he popped your cherry.”

“I hope so,” Hannah said, taking a long, slow sip. “I popped his.”

“No way,” Jane said. “No fucking way.”

“I’m pretty sure, just based on everything. Jacob was doing translations, and when he asked him about being a virgin, he—”

“Jacob did NOT ask him if he was a virgin.”

“He said he did, after looking at this book. And the boy – Steve is what he goes by, but he told me his real name is Lee June – and Lee June just started laughing, but maybe it was just to save face, since, uh, I think

they do that in China. And then, in my kennel, he seemed like he needed . . . a little guidance.”

“But he did okay?”

“Oh yeah,” Hannah said. “Have him over sometime. He bows, before and after. And he has an . . . energetic approach.”

“You never forget your first experience,” Jane said. “So that’s what he has to remember. A locked up girl on her period.”

“With someone watching,” Hannah noted.

“Who?”

“Tammy stayed the whole time, just in case there was confusion.”

“God, that’s sick.”

Hannah smiled, but Jane’s words stung, and she allowed herself to wonder, briefly, if giving sex to Lee June under scientific pretenses was the right way to introduce him to that aspect of life. Was she being selfish? Selfishly ambitious? But then, Lee June had gotten pleasure from her. Was that a terrible thing?

While she was questioning herself, Hannah’s mind turned to the simulated punishment with Jane. What was different, from a spiritual perspective, between getting certified to punish a girl in a lab, and actually punishing people on Hall 6?

Hannah wasn’t sure.

“Hannah?” a girl’s voice exclaimed.

Hannah looked up to find Beth smiling at her, a beer in her hand, a bookbag over her shoulder. She looked incredulous but, it seemed, a little embarrassed too.

“Beth!” Hannah said, rising to hug her friend.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked.

“I just got done with a lab,” Hannah said. “We’re on our way back home. This is Jane by the way.”

Jane continued to sit, offering a polite, shy wave.

“I needed to study somewhere else but my apartment,” Beth said. She looked down sheepishly at the beer in her hand, and Hannah knew Beth was making a calculation. The way it looked, Beth would rather drink a beer than make love to Hannah. But Hannah didn’t see it that way at all.

Jane rose to go the restroom, and Beth sat down in her place.

“Look,” Beth said, lowering her voice and peering around the bar. “You know how I . . . sort of had a crush on my . . . roommate?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said.
“Well, things are . . . happening there.”
“She’s gay?”
“Shhhh!” Beth said, mouthing the next words: “She’s not sure.
We’re . . . working on it.”
“I’m really glad—”
“Nothing would have happened without you,” Beth whispered.
“But it’s keeping me a little . . . distracted.”
“That’s great,” Hannah said. “I’ve been really busy anyway.”
“She knows about you,” Beth said, lowering her chin almost down
the table. “She wants to . . . meet you.”
“Come for me anytime you want,” Hannah said, smiling.
“Wednesdays should usually work, from 9:30 to 10:30. Maybe next fall too.
Just give me a day or two’s notice.”
“Okay,” Beth agreed, draining her beer, adjusting her bookbag and
leaving before Jane returned from the toilet.
“Cute friend,” Jane said. “Already gone?”
“Yeah, a history there. She’s sweet.”
“So we’re going to do it tonight, right?” Jane said. “Between that
professor, all that punishment, and you fucking with my pussy, I’m a little
restless.”
“Yeah,” Hannah agreed. “Your kennel?”
“Yeah.”

Chapter 55: Back to Hall 6

A little after 9 p.m. on Wednesday, February 27, an ungrateful, rebellious, deceitful slave girl named Hannah Loughbridge opened up the account maintained by the University of Texas at Corpus Christi for a non-existent free girl named Spartacine Arkkola.

And that ungrateful, rebellious, deceitful slave girl, with shaking fingers and a thumping heart and breath coming in short pants, not unlike the way she breathed just before she climaxed, uploaded a scholarship treatise entitled “Reverse Somatic Hypermutation as a Mitigation Strategy for Acute Allergic Rhinitis.”

And while it uploaded, Hannah Loughbridge said to herself the only words that mattered anymore to her, the four words that served as the

distillation of everything she had learned from every person and every experience she'd had in the last 18 months, the pain, the lovers, the torture, the phantoms, the tears, the triumphs, the hope, and all the gods she'd invented or that had been invented for her:

no matter the cost

And then Hannah Loughbridge, still ungrateful and rebellious and deceitful, closed out Spartacine's account and opened Hannah Loughbridge's account and, nerves just a little stilled, submitted a second paper, entitled "Mitigating Juvenile Epilepsy with Neuronically-Channeled Beta Blockers."

Spartacine's paper was good. A little stilted, perhaps, an odd prepositional choice here and there, and some peculiar phrasing in places. But it was in fact very good, running 35 pages, with 47 scholarly citations and one or two ideas that might be worth further investigation.

But Hannah's paper was exemplary, a jewel, a 55-page discourse with 61 references and at least three unique, startling and possibly quite original ideas.

By any measure, objective, subjective, categorical or spiritual, the slave girl's paper was better than the free girl's paper.

Six weeks later, on a Wednesday morning just after she had finished laundry, Hannah Loughbridge – who was no longer a teenager, having celebrated her 20th birthday on April 7; and who was now listed as a contributor in the second edition of *Gamete Viability Phase II Clinical Research Protocol*, and whose informed consent document was being used, with very few changes, at all research sites; and who had for the last six weeks maintained an optimistic cheerfulness belied, only occasionally, by quiet weeping when she was alone in the kennels late at night, the soft tears of a girl who believed she might soon lose everything, a fear aggravated by a pleasant weekend with Allain, or a day when she'd done particularly well in class, or an evening spent laughing or loving with friends, or any time she was reminded of her value to a research project she had fought to belong to – that very same Hannah Loughbridge went to the PCs in the kennels, peered around her, and opened Spartacine Arkkola's email account.

no matter the cost

"Dear Spartacine," read the email waiting for her there.

"Congratulations! It is my pleasure, as chair of the Judge's Committee for

the Charles H. Burnham Scholarship for Undergraduate Biological Innovation, to notify you that your paper, 'Reverse Somatic Hypermutation as a Mitigation Strategy for Acute Allergic Rhinitis,' has been awarded the top prize for the upcoming academic year. This is only the second time since the Scholarship was established that a student outside the United States has received the top prize. We very much hope you will be able to travel to Corpus Cristi May 2 to attend the Presidential Scholars Reception. Note that this award includes a full scholarship for the next academic year, a \$400 monthly stipend, laboratory access, a research trip in your field of interest, and a premium parking space."

Hannah raised her hands to her mouth and fought the urge to be sick as she continued to read.

"This is an achievement of which you should be very proud. All of us on the Judge's Committee applaud your work and look forward to meeting you."

The email was signed by Dr. Tess van Mayes, copied to a dozen other people that Hannah assumed were all judges and faculty, and it included a PS: "We would like to have your picture, for use in announcements and promotional materials. Please send a high-resolution image in JPG or PNG formats."

"Thank you, this is very much a great honor," Spartacine replied proudly, while her embodiment, a girl named Hannah, trembled with a strange mix of pride and terror. "How soon do you need my picture? I can have one for you soon."

Hannah closed out Spartacine's account and opened her own to find another email waiting for her:

"Dear Hannah," began that email. "I would like to inform you on behalf of the Judge's Committee for the Charles H. Burnham Scholarship for Undergraduate Biological Innovation that your paper, 'Mitigating Juvenile Epilepsy with Neuronically-Channeled Beta Blockers,' has been awarded second prize for the upcoming academic year. Congratulations. Please plan to attend a recognition ceremony at 9:30 a.m. Monday, April 22, in the Daggins Event Room in the University Kennels and Subject Services Building. Friends and family are welcome to attend. Note that this award includes a full scholarship for the next academic year and a \$100 monthly stipend."

Like Spartacine's email, this message was signed by Dr. Tess van Mayes, copied to the same dozen judges and faculty, and also included a PS: "We would like to have your picture, for use in announcements and promotional materials."

no matter the cost

Hannah, all her fear gone now, replaced with a blinding anger – at the Judge's Committee, at the way things were and, strangely, at Spartacine Arkkola – replied to everyone with a grainy picture of herself she found on Look!, with the message, "Thank you, I am very honored. Here's my picture."

Hannah leaned back, looked down at her breasts, studied her nipples, which had grown surprisingly thick and erect, and a plan arrived in her mind fully-formed, as if it had been waiting there for this moment, for months.

She forwarded the email to Allain and to Mother and closed out her account.

That evening in the lab, after Hannah's vagina had been sampled and she'd been allowed to dress and had begun sequencing the Semitic DNA she'd collected Monday, Dr. Tallus stepped beside her, put his hand on her shoulder.

"Congratulations, Hannah," he said quietly.

"Thank you," Hannah said, trying to look truly grateful.

"Do you mind if I let the team know?"

"That would be fine."

"Hey, everyone," Dr. Tallus said. "We have a celebrity in our midst. Hannah's won the second prize for the Burnham."

"Oh!" several students shouted. Tish leapt up from her microscope and hugged Hannah from behind, and the team broke into an enthusiastic round of applause that sounded to Hannah like the crumpling of paper.

"She'll be recognized at the kennels on the 22nd," Dr. Tallus continued. "I hope some of you can make it."

"What time?" someone asked.

"9:30," Hannah said.

"I'll be there!" Tish announced.

"This was a very good year for Burnham papers," Dr. Tallus observed. "The top prize went to a girl in, uh, Sweden I think. I'm trying to

get a copy to bring in next week, but I've seen the abstract. It's brilliant. She's worked out a possible treatment for rhinitis."

"Oh, I need that," someone said.

"She's talking about reverse somatic hypermutation."

"Whoa!" someone else exclaimed.

"Hannah, what was your paper on?" Tish asked.

"Mitigating Juvenile Epilepsy with Neuronically-Channeled Beta Blockers," Hannah replied.

"Whoa," the same person said again.

Dr. Tallus, who obviously hadn't bothered to read Hannah's abstract, had nothing more to say.

Hannah returned her attention to the sequencer and found that thinking about April 22 reduced her fury. She had 12 days to bring everything together, and there wasn't much to do. The hardest work was already complete.

Mother was ecstatic, of course, the sort of gushing message only a mother could write waiting for Hannah after the lab. Allain, Laura and Ormek all sent glowing but slightly more reserved messages, and all promised to be there April 22.

Athena's email arrived the next day, shorter but sincere, and her attendance April 22 was all but assured, if she could make arrangements at school. She might be renting Franklin for the week, she said, and he might come too. Athena was still haggling over terms, Hannah knew, but in the meantime paying for his time piecemeal.

The congratulations continued to roll in, Hannah being asked to stand in all her biology classes, receiving accolades in the campus cafeteria, in the kennels as well.

Xavier, the angry boy who wanted to know what Hannah was doing for the revolution each time they met for sex, was particularly impressed.

"Is that what you were telling me about before?" he panted while he thrust his penis rhythmically up Hannah's vagina. "You were going to win that scholarship?"

"Not, uh, really," Hannah grunted back, not daring to say more. "Well . . . sort of . . . ohjesus . . . it was a part . . . a part . . . okay . . . ohheavenhelpme . . . let's talk . . . ohjesusgodnonostopnoplease . . . next week . . . auuuhhhhh."

As he'd promised, Dr. Tallus brought in Spartacine's paper the following Wednesday, just a single copy he'd received confidentially, as official publication wasn't to happen until the 22nd.

The team marveled over the inferior work of the non-existent free girl from Finland, and Hannah pretended to read it, pretended to be impressed, and silently seethed.

"Hannah, you should bring your paper in," Tish said.

"I'll try to, next week," Hannah said after unclenching her jaw.

In the meantime, pressure was building for Spartacine's picture.

"I'm sorry," Spartacine had written to Dr. van Mayes on Thursday, April 18, "I have no good pictures of me. But I am having them taken. I should have one done this weekend."

"Sooner than that would be better," Dr. van Mayes wrote back, "but please no later than Sunday night the 21st. We'll be posting your article on the morning of the 22nd, when the second award recipient is recognized."

"Oh, who is that?" Spartacine wrote back. "I would enjoy meeting her when I am in Corpus Christi."

Dr. van Mayes didn't have time to reply to that question.

The final piece of Hannah's plan, the element of the plan that would elevate it from merely disruptive to something of another dimension altogether, landed in Hannah's lap that Thursday evening.

"Hey, Hannah," said Holly, standing grimly at Hannah's bars.

"Hey, Holly," Hannah said, sitting on her bed with her back against the wall, a textbook in her lap, a notebook by her hip. "What's up?"

"It's your turn again," Holly said. "Hall 6."

Hannah swallowed. It had been months since she'd suffered, other than the suffering that comes from anticipating devastating loss.

"I still can't do it," Hannah said.

"It's going to be two bars this time," Holly said.

"So, double what I got last time?" Hannah inquired, treating the way she would suffer as a mathematical transaction.

"What did you get last time?"

"Fifteen minutes hanging, five seconds on my nipples."

"Okay," Holly said. "Whoever's there that morning will decide. But double at least. Maybe more."

"When?" Hannah asked, going through the next week's schedule in her mind. Tuesday and Thursday were out because she had class. She had

laundry Wednesday. So that left Friday.

And Monday.

Monday.

“Tomorrow,” Holly said. “We really want you to help out, but if you won’t . . .”

“I’m taking a test tomorrow afternoon,” Hannah lied, and her heart began thumping, and her breath came sharp and shallow, and she knew her pupils were dilating, and she struggled to keep her voice even as she spoke her next words. “Could we do . . . Monday morning?”

“Monday morning?”

“Yeah. I’ve got to study tomorrow. Monday would be perfect.”

“You’re not going to help, are you?”

“No,” Hannah said. “Definitely not. It makes me sick. I’m trying to work through it, and maybe I’ll be able to help next time. But Monday, I refuse. I refuse.”

Hannah spent the weekend ovulating, and she wrapped her vagina around Allain’s penis Friday night, and Saturday afternoon, and Saturday night, and Sunday morning, and Sunday afternoon, with all the joy and passion a girl could deliver to the task, while inside she mourned, because on Monday morning, all this must fade, must be given up, for a future she could not see at all, other than that it would involve pain and suffering and profound loss.

No matter the cost, she whispered to herself in Allain’s bed at the end of the day Friday and at the end of the day Saturday, her ankles chained together and her vagina leaking semen.

No matter the cost, she said to herself over dinner Sunday night at the club, Laura, Ormek, Athena and Franklin there, come to town because they wanted to watch Hannah receive recognition, and didn’t understand yet what was going to happen.

No matter the cost, she mouthed late Sunday while she hit the SEND button from the email account of Spartacine Arkkola, directing to Dr. van Mayes a picture very clearly depicting Hannah Loughbridge, standing in a red flannel shirt and jeans before the raw timbers of a barn that might, arguably, be something one might find in the town of Kaskinen, Finland. There was no silver collar in this picture, of course, and in that way, this wasn’t quite Hannah Loughbridge. Instead, this girl wore a black

choker. But if one looked at it very closely, one might notice that it didn't look quite real. The light was off a bit.

No matter the cost, Hannah said when she was back in her kennel Sunday night, staring at the ceiling and masturbating.

Surely, she thought as she groaned through a mild, sad orgasm, she would be allowed to masturbate wherever she was sent. Her next family would allow at least that when she collapsed upon her bed or her mat or her pallet or the floor after another day of interminable chores. Or, in the more likely event that she was sold to a farm or factory, to a business that managed its slaves carefully and enjoyed paying bargain prices for ungrateful, rebellious, deceitful slave girls, masturbation would certainly be permitted, at least on some not too restrictive schedule, and she would indulge herself and remember what it was like to make love to Allain, and Ramone, and Brad, and all the other boys, and even the furious Xavier, and all the girls, Raven and Jane and Jessica.

And what it was like to make love to Franklin, to kiss him and talk about everything.

Hannah woke that morning feeling nothing, her mood leaden, just one step up from death, and she forced down food in the cafeteria and showered and shaved her pubic hair into a neat, golden triangle and put on a little makeup without any passion or joy and thought about Delilah and went to the PCs until 9:20 when – just 10 minutes before she was due for the award ceremony in the event room upstairs – she went to the heavy door of Hall 6 and knocked.

Bud answered.

“Hey, Bud, I think I'm due here?” she said.

“Yeah, where were you? You were supposed to be in your kennel.”

“I was in the lounge, sorry.”

“So, you're helping me out, right?”

“No,” Hannah scowled apologetically. “Not this time. Maybe next.”

“You know what that means,” he said.

“Yes. Two bars. I'm ready.”

Hannah stepped in, went to Bud's desk.

“Do I get a choice again?” she asked, and her eye began to twitch. Hannah's eye had never twitched before. Her heart wasn't thumping. Her breath wasn't coming quick and shallow. Her stomach wasn't tied in knots. Every part of her was already dead, except for her left eye.

Which was twitching.

And her nipples, which were rising for their own purposes, thick and firm.

Bud opened up his PC, peered at his records, apparently found the record of Hannah's last visit here.

"We did hanging and nipples last time," Bud said.

"Yes," Hannah said. "That's fine."

Timing was important here. She needed to get on the ropes.

"Can we start now?" Hannah asked. "I'd like to be done and get some work finished for class before lunch."

"Yeah," he said, leading her past the box where someone had already been confined, the timer ticking down the hours, leading her past the isolation kennels, two occupied by nude, somber girls.

"It's going to be 45 minutes this time," Bud warned.

"That's three times what it was last time," Hannah said. "It was 15 before."

"Yeah," Bud agreed. "And 10 seconds on the nipples, twice. Two bars isn't just double one bar."

"Okay," Hannah said numbly, and she held her hands out and allowed Bud to bind her wrists and pull on the other end of the rope until she was drawn tight, until she was dangling a foot above the floor. Since she'd come on her own, she hadn't been brought in chains, so her ankles were left unrestrained.

Hannah heard the beep of the timer.

Forty-five minutes.

Upstairs, people she would be seeing for the last time were no doubt already gathering, waiting for the guest of honor, the girl in the kennels who had written the second best Burnham paper.

Hannah looked down as Bud stimulated her already-enflamed left nipple, pinching it to ensure it was fully erect, applying the clamp. He took her right nipple between his fingers, pinched and tugged it, closed the clamp over it, stepped back and touched the box in his hand, sending a sharp, sudden current through her flesh.

"Uh," Hannah groaned. It hurt. It hurt for the ages. But she barely felt it. Other things this morning, invisible, intangible things, were hurting worse. "Ow. Ow."

The pain subsided. The clamps came off. Hannah's eye no longer twitched.

"I'll be back for the next 10 seconds in maybe half an hour," Bud said sadly. He wasn't enjoying this.

"Okay," Hannah said.

The door to Hall 6 opened. Hannah looked, saw Donovan entering.

"Hey, Bud, we need Hannah upstairs," Donovan announced.

Chapter 56: 'Congratulations, Hannah'

"Can it wait?" Bud asked. "She'll be done in about 40 minutes."

"No, there's a whole room full of people waiting for her," Donovan said, stepping up to Hannah.

"She's going to have to go up in return chains," Bud warned. "Any idea how long it will take?"

"No idea."

Hannah heard the beep of the timer on the wall being stopped, felt herself dropping, felt the cold floor beneath her toes, the soles of her feet, her heels.

"Hannah, did you know about this?" Donovan asked, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

Hannah watched Bud untie her wrists, ignoring Donovan's question.

"Hannah?"

Hannah ignored him.

"Hannah?"

Her wrists free, Hannah followed Bud back to his desk.

"Hannah!"

"Oh," Hannah said blankly. "What?"

Bud closed Hannah's wrists in the return chains of Hall 6, a set of black restraints that went around the wrists and ankles and held everything together with a leg-length third chain.

"Did you know there's something going on for you upstairs? In the event room? Right now?"

"Oh," Hannah said blankly. "I guess so. I don't know."

"They said you should have known about it."

"Oh," Hannah said. "It must have slipped my mind."

Donovan scowled and led Hannah through the door, down the broad bare hall to the stairs, up the stairs and down another hall where there were small guest apartments and a large event space.

Hannah heard voices, laughter, someone speaking, a woman's voice on a loudspeaker.

"I'm sure she'll be along soon," the woman said, prompting laughter when she added, "her family tells me she loses track of time when she studies."

The door had been propped open.

Hannah followed Donovan to it, stepping up to it, pausing, stepping through, watching the eyes flicker, turn to her, one pair after another to regard the naked, chained scholar, faces immediately registering shock, embarrassment, shame. There were at least 40 people here, Allain and the Petrosyans and Franklin and half of her research team, and even Dr. Tallus, and other faculty, some of whom she recognized, some she didn't.

People were holding phones up, pointing at Hannah. There was a camera on a tripod, pointed at a woman behind a lectern. Some of the phones were put away hastily once Hannah showed up. But Athena continued to aim her phone at Hannah, her mouth bent in a delighted half-smile.

Hannah, remembering that there was a plan here, and she must execute its final phase now, reached down into a part of her that she would never after this moment use again, the part of her that was hopeful and cheerful and enthusiastic.

Find that compartment, she told herself. And occupy it one last time.

"Sorry, everyone!" she exclaimed. "I got delayed by something downstairs."

Laughter. Hannah's voice eased at least some of the tension. A few phones were retrieved from pockets and aimed at Hannah again, high, at her face only.

"Here's our scholar," the woman behind the lectern said, working to behave as if this were all normal. Surely she expected Hannah Loughbridge to show up sans restraints, and clothed. Did they not have a locker room downstairs where slaves kept their clothing?

"Hannah, will you please step up?"

Something else seemed to be bothering the woman, whom Hannah realized must be Dr. van Mayes. She stared at Hannah with vague puzzlement as Hannah moved to the lectern, and she offered her hand tentatively.

Hannah took the woman's hand in both of hers, gripped it warmly, her chains rattling.

"Hello," Hannah said.

"Hello, Hannah, it's so nice to meet you in person. I'm Tess van Mayes."

"Very nice to meet you, Dr. van Mayes."

"Our scholar," Dr. van Mayes said. Hannah turned and smiled, and those who weren't holding phones clapped for the girl.

A man stood behind the video camera on the tripod, a woman beside him, and Hannah heard her whisper fervently, "Just keep it tight, focus on her face."

Dr. van Mayes cleared her throat into the microphone, and the room went silent.

"Hannah's paper was particularly good," Dr. van Mayes said. "One of the best second place papers we've seen in a while. We've printed out copies on the table there, and it's also freely downloadable as of this morning at the University website, along with our first-place paper."

Hannah stood beside Dr. van Mayes, staring at the floor, at the walls, at her thick, reddened nipples, while the woman continued her remarks, discussing the history of the Burnham scholarship, its founder and notable past winners, next recognizing members of the Judge's Committee, of whom there were a half dozen in the room, then pointing to the Petrosyans and Allain and Athena, and then to Mother, who had arrived late last night and was standing in the corner in her best dress, sipping something from a plastic cup and smiling and, Hannah knew, looking upon her daughter and the universe both with a deep and abiding horror.

"Hannah, would you like to say anything?" Dr. van Mayes said, motioning Hannah to the lectern.

"Oh," Hannah said, chest heaving, voice barely under control. "I would."

She waited for the applause to subside.

"I'm very sorry for being late to my own party," Hannah said into the microphone, prompting a spate of laughter that died with her next

words. “I needed to be punished, and the only time it could be taken care of was this morning.”

Utter silence descended upon the room. The silence of tombs. People shifted uncomfortably but said nothing.

The camera on the tripod kept pointing, however, the little light near the lens telling Hannah it was still on.

Athena was still holding her phone.

“They’re expecting me back downstairs to finish,” Hannah said, “so I’m not sure how much time I’ve got. But I would like to say thank you, so much, for this recognition.”

Hannah paused, looking into the eyes around her, smiling at Athena. She was glad Athena had come. Hannah looked at Allain, standing stoically, only the muscles twitching in his clenched jaw telling her how he felt. Hannah looked at Franklin, whose expression was impossible to read. Amusement? Surprise? Pride?

Hannah didn’t dare look at Laura and Ormek.

If she looked at Mother, her heart would break.

Donovan was standing by the door, waiting to take her back to punishment, his face blank.

“I would, however, like to call out the judges a bit, if I might,” Hannah said, turning to Dr. van Mayes before she brought her mouth back to the microphone.

“The first place paper was not as good as the second place paper.”

Someone laughed, a short, awkward laugh stifled halfway through, as if they thought Hannah was saying something funny enough to end the tension, end the awkwardness, but no one else agreed and the tension only thickened.

“And I think I’m particularly qualified to say that . . .” Hannah continued, “because I wrote both.”

Hannah heard Dr. van Mayes suck in her breath.

Phones came out. Hannah knew they were tapping in the university website, going to the Burnham Scholarship announcement, opening the page that concerned the first place paper, by Spartacine Arkkola, and Hannah could tell when they found it, because they looked at the picture of Spartacine, and looked at Hannah, and looked at Spartacine, and held their phones up, and Mother didn’t have a phone but she sidled up beside someone who did, and she surely recognized the picture, and where and

when it was taken, and the merest hint of a smile broke across her face while Hannah watched.

At last, Hannah looked into the faces of Laura and Ormek Petrosyan.

Their faces were frozen. Their whole bodies were frozen.

When animation returned to their forms, Hannah knew, the first order of business would be to determine what to do with Hannah. They would try to get top dollar, of course, but money was less important than getting rid of her, removing her from their lives like a faulty, fire-prone oven, or a urine-soaked couch.

Athena kept recording, kept smiling.

“I think there’s been some mistake,” Dr. van Mayes said into the microphone, the sharp bones of her shoulder, the humerus and clavicle, pressing against Hannah’s, her head pushing Hannah’s aside. “Hannah, could we—”

“There’s been no mistake,” Hannah said. “Now, if everyone will excuse me, I need to go back downstairs to get the rest of my punishment done so I can get to class. Donovan, do you know how much time I have left?”

Donovan shook his head.

“I think it’s another 40 minutes of hanging by my wrists?” Hannah said. “And then, another 10 seconds with the electric leads on my nipples?”

Donovan blanched but said nothing.

“Thanks again, everyone,” Hannah said, and she was answered with utter silence, and she shuffled slowly away from the lectern toward Donovan, who stepped into the hall, choosing to wait for Hannah there.

Hannah looked only at the space before her feet until she reached the hall, and she listened to her chains ringing and thought of that sound and nothing else as she followed Donovan down the stairs and back to Hall 6.

Donovan held silent, simply unlocked the door into the punishment hall, a girl’s cry of pain greeting them, and when Hannah stepped in, he shut it behind her without following her in.

Bud, finished beating a girl tied to a post in the 3 Bar area, stepped back up to Hannah.

“Hey, get everything done upstairs?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said, following Bud back to the ropes. He freed her wrists from her chains and she held her hands out, allowed him to tie her, to

suspend her.

“One more visit with the leads,” he observed.

“Do them now,” Hannah said, watching as Bud obliged her, stroking and pinching her nipples to firm them up, applying the clamps, hitting the button.

This time, Hannah screamed, a shriek for the ages, a wall-piercing cry of agony that, she wanted to believe, could be heard in the Daggins Event Room on the second floor where, even now, people were working through what had just happened with the naked, chained slave girl, what had just been done to them, to the system, to the dignity of the universe and the gods who stood idly by.

Hannah allowed herself to weep while she waited for the timer to tick down to nothing, and she looked down and watched as her mascara dripped onto her breasts in watery black smudges. Would she ever wear makeup again? Did factories and farms allow their female workers to use it?

As she hung, she heard the “zing, zing, zing,” of the boy who had been selected to wear the tether in her place today, and she watched him walk up and down Hall 6, helping out, tying and holding while Bud disciplined.

Hannah was at last lowered by the boy, and he released her from the ropes and brought her, rubbing her wrists and shoulders and elbows, to Bud’s desk.

Tammy was waiting for her there.

“Someone wants to meet with you,” Tammy said.

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed, following Tammy off Hall 6 and toward the stairs.

“What did you do?” Tammy asked quietly.

“I’m not sure,” Hannah said.

“Donovan came back to processing like he’d seen a ghost, and he just said your name and got on his computer.”

“Okay.”

“What did you do?”

“I don’t know.”

“He’s looking up disciplinary stuff,” Tammy said.

“Okay.”

Tammy stopped at the foot of the stairs and turned to Hannah, grabbing her arm.

“You went upstairs, to the event space for something, right?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said. “I won a scholarship.”

“Congratulations on that, again.”

“Thanks again.”

“And then what?”

“And then what what?” Hannah asked.

“What happened up there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hannah,” Tammy said, urgently, squeezing Hannah’s shoulder, “don’t to this. Whatever you’re doing. Don’t.”

“Too late,” Hannah said, turning to walk up the stairs.

“Are you going away?” Tammy asked, trotting after the girl.

“I was never here,” Hannah said.

“Bullshit.”

Hannah was expecting to meet with Laura and Ormek, who probably wished to begin the process of divesting themselves of their slave girl before they made the long drive back to Dallas, and needed to give her preliminary instructions. Instead, to her surprise, she found crowded into the little meeting room on the other side of the glass people she wasn’t expecting: Dr. van Mayes and several other judges from the committee.

And Allain, who looked up at Hannah with not quite the expression Hannah was expecting, something more like Athena’s expression as she aimed her phone at Hannah this morning: A half-smile.

“Hello, Hannah,” Dr. van Mayes said. “We’re very sorry about the errors this morning.”

“There were no errors,” Hannah said blankly. She looked at Allain. He looked back, a full smile now.

“Yes there were,” Dr. van Mayes said. “It took us a few minutes to piece it together, because you had to leave. But we spoke to the Petrosyans, and to Allain Petrosyan. I think you know Allain?”

“I do,” Hannah said. “Hi, Allain.”

Allain smiled and nodded.

“So let me explain what happened,” Dr. van Mayes said, her voice rising, shaking a bit, the other judges shuffling behind her.

“Somehow, your paper got split up, and half of it was erroneously attributed, along with your picture, to another girl.”

“Split up?” Hannah repeated.

“Yes, your paper got split up into two, but we’ve put it back together as a single paper, and it’s this year’s very deserving first-place paper, and the second-place winner will be informed today.”

“The second-place winner?” Hannah said.,

“Yes, his name’s —”

“Free or subject?” Hannah interrupted.

“Pardon me?”

“Is the second-place winner free or subject?”

“Free,” Dr. van Mayes said.

A very slight, very distant ray of light opened up on Hannah’s black horizon.

“So this —” Hannah began.

“Yes, that’s what happened,” Dr. van Mayes said firmly. “Any other version of events would be inaccurate, and we are very grateful that you brought the mistake to our attention this morning.”

Yes, Hannah thought to herself. She had forgotten about institutional pride. In all her ruminations, her angry plotting, the researching and writing, and the hope and the dread, she had forgotten that calculation. The University of Texas at Corpus Christi wasn’t simply going to fall supine before her plot. There were other people, with their own senses of pride and their own abilities to plan and plot and protect, and they had very quickly, very admirably arrived at a plan that granted Hannah academic victory.

Academic victory, but not that overarching but far more costly victory – over the system itself – she believed, while she hung from the ropes earlier this morning, she had won.

But what of the Petrosyans?

“Congratulations, Hannah,” Dr. van Mayes said.

“Congratulations, Hannah,” the rest of the judges said, three of them, each in turn, looking at Hannah, each one speaking sincerely, and she thanked them all again and watched them file out until only Allain was left.

He was still smiling, and he stepped to her, and if there weren’t glass between them, Hannah believed, he would hug her.

Why?

Why was this funny? Was this the face Allain made when he said goodbye forever?

“Mom knew all along,” he said.

“No she didn’t,” Hannah replied. She was prepared to say goodbye. She wasn’t prepared to be toyed with.

“She said you had books on two different topics in Dallas,” Allain said. “She knew you were up to something. We all kind of knew. It took us five minutes to put it altogether when you left.”

“Did you talk to Mother?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah, she really enjoyed meeting Mom and Dad. And even Athena. And she was in tears.”

“Oh, God,” Hannah said, eyes watering, and she brought her fist to her mouth and bit.

“Hannah, Hannah, she was laughing,” Allain said. “She said to tell you she loves you, and she’ll be back in town soon. She was laughing so hard she had to wipe her eyes.”

“Why?” Hannah demanded. No one was responding the way she’d expected.

“Well, she was a little upset about what you said, about . . . being punished, but we told her that was just you being dramatic.”

“I’m not dramatic.”

“Sometimes you are. And that’s what your mom needs to believe right now.”

“Okay.”

“Was it true, though?”

“Yeah, they hung me and did my nipples. Twice.”

“Why?” Allain asked, his smile disappearing.

“I don’t help with punishment on Hall 6 – the punishment hall – so I get punished.”

“That’s ironic, sort of.”

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t you help with punishment?”

“I threw up the one time I did it,” Hannah said. “But I’m working through it. It’s kind of complicated. I might try it again.”

“You’re not . . .?”

“No, I’m not beating anyone. That’s done by staff. I just tie and hang people and put them in cages and then let them out.”

“Wow,” Allain said.

“I like letting people out.”

“Okay,” Allain said.

“So what happens now?” Hannah asked.

“What do you mean?”

“About . . . what I did today. Or what I’ve been doing.”

“Oh well . . . I guess next year’s paid for. Mom and Dad could cover it, but it’s awesome you’re doing—”

“Allain.”

“And there’s a trip to Japan in the works this fall if you want to go, and—”

“Allain.”

“And can I have your parking spot? It’s perfect.”

“Allain!”

“Huh?”

“I lied,” Hannah said, stepping to the glass. “I lied about everything.”

“No you didn’t,” Allain said.

“I lied. I lied. There was no Spartacine Ark—”

“You made your point,” Allain interrupted quietly. “You made your point. Okay?”

Hannah just stared. There was a second shoe somewhere out there in the universe, a great, heavy boot, hovering above her in the hands of a great, heavy god, and soon, he or she would let it go and it would fall upon her and crush her.

“You made your point,” Allain said again, more quietly. “We’re done. You won the top prize. As a freshman. I couldn’t do it when I was a junior. We’re all just trying to figure out how you did it.”

“How I did it?” Hannah asked, narrowing her eyes.

“We all know it was your work,” Allain said quickly. “We’ve all seen the stack of books and articles. We’ve all heard you talking about it.”

Allain paused.

“Your stuff is brilliant, by the way. Brilliant.”

Hannah stared through the glass.

“And you’re Athena’s new hero,” Allain said.

“I saw her with her phone.”

“Livestreaming,” Allain said.

“Livestreaming?” Hannah echoed.

“Livestreaming. On Look!.”

“To everyone?”

“Her friends, mainly. But it’s all being pulled down now.

Copyright.”

Hannah smiled for the first time, wondering which of Athena’s friends got to watch the family girl’s little performance this morning, and how it came across.

“I talked to Dr. Tallus,” Allain continued. “You should have told me what’s been going on in that lab.”

“I’ve told you things.”

“I didn’t know about the whole, uh, collection thing.”

“I didn’t want to make you jealous.”

“He wasn’t surprised by what happened today,” Allain said. “He called you relentless. That was his word. Relentless.”

Allain laughed, looked at his phone.

“Hey, I gotta get to class,” he said.

“What time is it?”

“A little after 11.”

“Okay, yeah,” Hannah said. “See you Friday?”

“Of course.”

Allain put his hands on the glass. Hannah stepped up, put her hands against his, almost feeling his warmth.

“Congratulations, Hannah.”

“Thanks.”

Chapter 57: Two Meetings

“My, aren’t we clever?” said the email, from a string of random numbers and letters and an African domain, two days after the Burnham Scholarship snafu.

“Who are you?” Hannah replied.

“No one you know,” came the answer the next day. “But you have earned our attention, and our admiration.”

“Are you Absolution?” Hannah asked. She shouldn’t have typed that word on the kennel PCs, but she’d been imbued of late with a strange feeling of invulnerability. The final upshot of her performance at the

ceremony was three marks, for discussing confidential Hall 6 matters. Two more marks and she would get a bar and she'd go back to Hall 6. It was a non-punishment.

"There are many of us, and we use different names," came the reply.

"Tell me where Raven is," Hannah said. She still didn't want to be toyed with, and whoever she was talking to was becoming annoying.

Hannah's random correspondent fell silent until the next Monday.

"We've found her," came the reply. "A mistake has been made. She never should have been taken. Would you like to know where she is?"

"Yes," Hannah replied, adding "you are a worse liar than me" before she deleted that line and hit SEND.

"Where shall we meet for dinner, and when?" came the near-instant answer.

"Gargoyle's, two nights from now, 9 p.m."

"Good."

That was all they said back. "Good."

Hannah considered not showing up, in the end decided to get onion rings and a beer, went there alone after the lab wrapped up, and she drank and nibbled and waited.

No one showed up, of course, so she finished, paid her bill, went to the restroom at 9:30, and almost screamed when, while she was still seated on the toilet, an envelope was slipped under the door.

Hannah flushed, pulled up her panties, smoothed her skirt and opened the envelope.

"Saint Mary Magdalena Cathedral, now," it said. "Enter in the front, follow the candles to the confessionals."

The back of the sheet bore a hand-drawn map. She already knew where the cathedral lay, just a few blocks away, a great, beautiful, abandoned hulk whose gargoyles had inspired the name of the place where she had just had beer and onion rings.

Hannah went. How could she not? She approached the glowering, grey-stoned cathedral from the front, pushed on the door of thick, carved oak, was surprised when it yielded.

Someone had lit candles here, a path of them leading into the building, the sort of cheap tea lights one buys in bags at discount stores.

"Hello?" Hannah called out. "Hello?"

No one answered. She followed the candles through the sanctuary, so vast and so dark she couldn't see the walls or the roof. Beyond the sanctuary, in an alcove almost as dark as the sanctuary, she saw an open door, flickering light behind it telling her this was where she was meant to be.

She entered a tiny space, just a little larger than a punishment cage, but with a seat. She slid the candle to the edge of the seat and, trembling, she sat and spoke again.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Hannah," said a woman's voice, whispering through the screen. "I was hoping you'd show."

"Where's Raven?"

"1144 Route 37, Tempe Arizona."

"Okay. 1144 Route 37, Tempe Arizona?"

"Yes."

Hannah committed the address to memory. Or, more accurately, burned it upon her memory. She was starting to believe.

"Is Raven okay?"

"Raven was a mistake."

"What do you mean?"

"She shouldn't have been taken."

"Is she okay?"

"Physically and mentally, she is fine. But she is a prisoner."

"Whose prisoner?"

The woman said nothing.

"Was it Absolution?"

"Why do you think it was Absolution?"

"They kept asking me," Hannah said. "When I was . . . being . . ."

"Absolution is the god they invoke, because they fear it, but Absolution doesn't do nearly as much as they think it does, and other people do more."

"Who was it then?" Hannah asked.

"She'll be there for a few days at most. I suggest you hurry."

"Why was she taken?" Hannah asked.

"It was a battle in a larger war . . ." the woman whispered.

"What war?"

“We’re fighting back, stupidly at times, and we’ve got a long way to go. They were fighting before we even knew there was a fight.”

“Who?”

“The people who feed their wallets off other people’s misery, and call it Jesus and patriotism and jobs and the economy. They have always been with us. But they’ve been busy lately.”

“You mean, a specific person?”

“Start with the Fairchilds.”

“The Fairchilds?”

“Yes, the Fairchilds.”

Hannah committed the name to memory, reviewed the address she’d been given.

“You said 1144 Route 37, Tempe Arizona.”

“Yes,” spoke the voice again. “We’ve attacked them at the top, with laws, but that won’t work, because we can’t get our laws passed, and they can pass theirs. Have you ever heard of a PUMI?”

“A PUMI?”

“P-U-M-I. A person of unique medical interest.”

“No.”

“It’s another way to turn someone into property. It worked in Kansas. They’re trying to go nationwide.”

Hannah nodded in the darkness.

“New Life,” the woman said.

“New Life?” Hannah repeated.

“Slaves don’t breed the way free people do,” she whispered. “Part conditions, part biology that’s not quite understood. The more they breed, the more Americans are born into slavery.”

“I know . . . about New Life,” Hannah said haltingly.

“The homeless, the broken,” the woman said, her voice rising, no longer a whisper, her anger evident through the screen where the faithful used to come to admit their trespasses. “Refugees, the trafficked, people who can’t pay fines, the incarcerated, the addicted, people bankrupted by medical bills . . . and the newborns.”

Hannah fell silent and stared at the candle by her hip.

New Life.

Was she complicit? Carnally, intimately complicit?

Why did the woman bring it up? Did she already know of Hannah's involvement? Her name was on the second edition of the protocol. Surely she knew.

It was a question for later.

"If they can enslave all of us, none of us can vote and they hold all the power. If they can enslave a third of us, though, that should be quite enough."

"Slaves can't vote?"

"No, and you should know that," the woman said, adding bitterly, "It's to protect democracy."

"How does it protect democracy?"

"Subjects would vote as their masters instructed, or so goes the logic. Those who owned the most slaves would get the most votes, and that would be . . . destabilizing."

"Destabilizing?" Hannah said, laughing at the term.

"Why is that funny?"

"Well . . . none of this seems stable, to begin with," Hannah said, and she thought about Ormek, patriarch, struggling to bond with a girl in a cage while his wife waited upstairs. She thought of Franklin, scion of wealth, reduced to lying in a cage and breeding with fertile females while he earned a visceral understanding of the evil he had signed onto. She thought of academic contests whose unfairness could be overturned by a naked girl with access to a PC.

"It's why they want to keep acquiring, keep enslaving," the voice said. "If the system can own just a few more, everything stops wobbling. Just a few more. Always, just a few more."

"People will stop them," Hannah said, remembering the many good people she herself knew. "They can't just keep going."

"What is the root of all evil?" the woman asked.

"Money."

"That's not the right answer."

"The love of money," Hannah said, digging into her memories of long ago Sunday school.

"Biblical, but still wrong," the woman said, and Hannah sensed in her voice the intensity of one who had spent a very long time being very offended. "The church wants you to hate money so you'll give it to them. No, the root of all evil is the love of other people with money."

Hannah had never read that in the Bible.

“You mean,” Hannah said, “love them so they’ll give you their money?”

“No, love them and expect nothing in return. Love them while they are beating you, poisoning you, making themselves richer at your expense. It’s a pathology no one understands, and it yet may be the undoing of us all.”

Hannah’s head was swimming. How long would this woman talk?

“Laws won’t work,” she continued. “We can’t beat them at the top. And attacking them at the bottom – stealing slaves – won’t work either. You can’t steal a million people. So next we try attacking them at the middle. At the heart.”

“How would that work?”

“Shame.”

“Shame?” Hannah echoed.

“We enjoyed your little performance last week.”

“You mentioned that. How did you hear about it?”

“It was livestreamed. The school made a record. There were phones. We pay attention to things like that, but there was luck involved too. We’ll piece it together when the time is right.”

Hannah laughed, her voice echoing in the darkness.

“Okay, uh, but I don’t see—”

“It’s a part of the campaign,” the woman rasped. “Just a part. It will be useful.”

“Are you a religion?”

“No,” the woman whispered. “Are you a religion?”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said.

“Are you taught religion?”

“Yes, but none of it works for . . . this.”

“What do you believe, then? I’m curious.”

“Um . . . if you need a god, invent one,” Hannah said quietly, trying to draw forth a quick summation of all she had learned in her 20 short years – the things she’d been told, the things she’d thought, what she’d heard Franklin say, and all she had decided on her own. “And keep it to yourself.”

The woman laughed out loud. She was at least 50, Hannah thought, husky, healthy, pleasant.

"You mentioned a campaign," Hannah said. "I don't understand how —"

"Go and free Raven," spoke the voice. "This is all you need to know. We'll be in touch."

"But—"

"Go," said the voice. "I have a plane to catch, and I can't let you see me."

"Should I blow out the candles?"

"All of them, as you go," said the voice impatiently.

Hannah slipped her bag over her shoulder and stood.

"Bye."

She blew out the candle by her hip, left the confessional, knelt and blew out all the rest of them, one by one, taking the last one with her to get through the great oak door, stepping into the Texas night air, setting the candle down still lit, heading to the kennels, getting scanned, undressing, and walking immediately to the PCs.

"I have an address for Raven," Hannah said in an email to Uncle Bear.

He replied almost immediately.

"Where?"

"Come to Corpus Christi tomorrow. You and Gramma both."

"We'll be there at 6 tomorrow night," he replied after another short pause.

Hannah worked quickly that evening, creating a set of documents from templates she'd found earlier in the semester, and she printed them out and retrieved them at the information desk.

"Do you have a big envelope I can put these in?" Hannah asked the girl.

The girl reached behind the counter. "First one's free."

"There are some people who might be showing up tomorrow here, to meet with me," Hannah said, and she wrote the names "Gerald Dupre" and "Canda Dupre" on the outside of the envelope, and handed it back to the girl. "Can you make sure they get these before they see me?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks."

Hannah left the lounge, met Jacob coming in.

"Hey, Jacob," she said. "How are you?"

“I’m good,” he said, pausing as if he wanted to talk.

“Are you still helping Lee June with everything?”

“Yes,” he said. “He’s still trying to figure out what was going on with you.”

“Science,” Hannah said. “And no, he didn’t dishonor my family.”

Jacob laughed.

“So, Hannah,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve got the okay now . . .”

Jacob blushed and his penis rose.

“Oh, for us to . . .?”

“Yeah. She saw all that about your scholarship. She said it was okay.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I don’t either. I think it makes a difference that you’re smart.”

“That’s funny,” Hannah said, feeling her own middle beginning to warm up. “Now?”

“Yeah, if you have time.”

“I’d like to, but how about just half an hour?” Hannah said. “I’ve got some studying to do.”

“Yeah,” Jacob agreed, a little huskily.

Hannah led Jacob to her kennel, waited until Tammy locked them in together, and Hannah closed her curtain.

“Does she care how it’s done?” Hannah asked, half-jokingly.

“Yeah,” Jacob replied seriously. “She just wants you . . . on your knees.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, pulling down her sheets and getting on her bed on all fours.

Jacob got behind her and she arched her back, allowing him to check her opening. Satisfied that she was sufficiently wet, he parted her lips and pushed the tip of his penis within her body.

He felt good, moving himself in and out of Hannah slowly, deliberately. Was this something else his owner had requested? No fireworks, no deep, urgent thrusting, no passion?

Hannah held still, the sensation of finally making love to Jacob pleasant but somewhat anticlimactic. What had she been expecting? Why had she spent months flirting with him? Did she think a shared background,

their both being raised by polygamists, would intensify their coupling? Was she trying to make love to herself, Jacob just a surrogate?

His thrusts slowed and she knew he was pacing himself, not wanting to orgasm until he'd made full use of her sheath.

"School ending up good?" she asked, panting slightly.

"I . . . exempted two finals," Jacob said. "And the other three . . . should be pretty easy."

"What are you doing . . . this summer?"

"No idea," Jacob grunted. "Maybe staying here."

"I'll be in and out," Hannah said. She tightened and relaxed her vagina, rocking her pelvis slightly. "Dallas mostly, I think . . . and here a little too."

Jacob grabbed Hannah's hips.

"Is this going to be analyzed?" he grunted.

"No, it probably won't be active . . . by the time I get sampled again . . . next Wednesday."

"So I should wait until . . . next week?"

"Monday night," Hannah said. "I mean, don't wait till then. Cum now. And then Monday too."

"You're ready then?"

"Yeah," Hannah said.

Jacob sighed, pushed in, grunted, and at last delivered the hard thrusts – seven of them, in quick succession, deep and fast – that his owner might not approve of.

He stayed within Hannah's chamber another minute, sighing and moving slowly before he finally pulled out and his semen dripped out of her and across her clitoris.

"Are you going to cum?" he asked.

"No, not right now," Hannah said. "This isn't my best position for it."

Tammy returned to release Jacob. He waved without offering a kiss or a hug, and she waved back, closed her curtain again to masturbate, climaxed, opened her curtain and returned to her books, glad overall for the interruption.

The next evening, Hannah came straight from class to have dinner in the kennel cafeteria at 5:30, going from there to her kennel to wait.

Holly appeared at 6:10.

“Someone here to see you, Hannah,” she said, unlocking Hannah’s door.

Hannah rose, followed Holly upstairs to the meeting rooms, opened the door to find Gramma and Uncle Bear, Gramma sitting and Uncle Bear standing beside her, both looking as forlorn as they ever had.

Uncle Bear was holding the envelope she’d left for them the night before, unopened.

“Hello, Gramma, hello, Uncle Bear,” Hannah said cheerily.

“Hey, Hannah,” said Uncle Bear.

“I understand you might have some news for us,” said Gramma, attempting a smile.

“Yes, I hope so,” Hannah said. “First, open the envelope.”

Uncle Bear tore the flap and pulled out two sets of documents, each neatly paperclipped in the upper righthand corner. He handed one to Gramma, peered at the other.

For a long moment, there was only the sound of sheets being turned, and Hannah’s thumping heart.

“Oh, Hannah,” Gramma said, smiling condescendingly. “I don’t think you have any idea what these things say.”

“I know exactly what they say,” Hannah said, smiling back. She looked at Uncle Bear, who returned her grin with a look of admiration, the same look she’d seen in other men’s faces a few times in the last six months.

“We won’t be signing them, of course,” Gramma said, handing her copies to Uncle Bear.

“Okay,” said Hannah, rising from her chair and moving to the door. “It’s been nice to see you.”

Uncle Bear’s expression switched to a look of sheer panic.

“Don’t you go away!” he said, glaring at Hannah. “Don’t you go away!”

“I have no reason to stay if you won’t sign,” Hannah said.

“How sure are you about where she’s at?” Uncle Bear asked.

“I think there’s a good chance of it,” Hannah said. “If you hurry.”

“Where is she?” Gramma asked.

“Sign first,” Hannah said.

“There’s no reason to sign if you won’t tell us,” Gramma said, no longer smiling. “And you know it’s not about the money.”

“Momma,” Uncle Bear said pleadingly. “If we sign these, and Hannah’s address doesn’t pan out, no harm no foul. But if her address is good, and we find her there. If we find her there . . .”

Uncle Bear’s voice broke off and he looked down, eyes wet.

He cleared his throat and looked up at Hannah.

“Hannah, you gotta know—”

“Oh, we know alright,” Gramma said, and now her tone was uncharacteristically bitter, accusatory, her face twisted in disgust. “Athena . . . Athena gave us a full accounting of your last little charade. You . . . you . . . ly—”

“Momma!” Uncle Bear shouted, almost screaming. “All that matters is Raven. All that matters is Raven. We sign these, we have a shot. We don’t sign . . .”

“We’ll see,” Gramma said, rising so abruptly it seemed tax her heart, and her eyes fluttered and Uncle Bear grabbed her upper arm.

“What do we do next?” Uncle Bear asked.

Gramma was done talking, staring at Hannah’s bare feet as if she believed she could burn a hole through them.

“Sign them and leave one original of each at the desk, with my name on them,” Hannah said. “As soon as I have them, I’ll email you the address.”

“You really don’t trust us?” Uncle Bear asked.

“It’s not about trust,” Hannah said. “It’s about Raven.”

With one last look from Uncle Bear, half hopeful, half baleful – the look of a man who isn’t sure if he’s having his hopes dashed, or if he never should have had that hope to begin with – the two of them exited, and Hannah went back to the lounge and surfed the web for 15 minutes before she went to the information desk.

“If something gets signed and turned in at the visitors’ desk downstairs right now,” Hannah asked the girl there, “what are the chances I’ll get it tonight?”

The girl picked up her phone, dialed.

“What’s your name?”

“Hannah Loughbridge.”

“Hey, Rick, got something for a Hannah, uh, Loughbridge down there? You do? Can you run it up to me?”

Hannah had one each the documents, all signed neatly by Gramma, one signed by Uncle Bear as well, in another five minutes, and she went to her email account and typed out “1144 Route 37, Tempe Arizona” and sent it.

“Thanks,” came Uncle Bear’s reply almost instantly, and Hannah knew he must have been staring at the email account on his phone ever since they’d left the kennels.

Most likely, they were calling someone in Tempe, Arizona, even now.

Epilogue

Friday evening, on the day after she met with Gramma and Uncle Bear, Hannah exited the kennels to find not Allain but Athena waiting for her.

“Hey,” she said, offering a tight hug under the trees. “How are you?”

“I’m good,” Hannah said, not quite sure it was true. She had a week of finals to deal with and some concluding assignments in Dr. Tallus’ lab. She needed to make an acceptance speech during the President’s Reception next week to more than 500 people, including Mother and the Petrosyans, and she’d been told in no uncertain terms she was be expected to show up fully-clothed and free of chains, and that her brief remarks should reflect the dignity of the occasion and must not include any mention of her nipples.

“Where are we going?” Hannah asked, following Athena across campus.

“My car. And then The Four Seasons. Allain’s going to meet us there a little later.”

“Okay.”

“We need to talk first.”

“Okay.”

It wasn’t until they’d been ushered to a table in the middle of the elegant hotel’s equally elegant restaurant that Athena began speaking.

“Raven’s back,” she said.

“Oh, oh, oh,” Hannah said, bringing her hands to her mouth, eyes immediately tearing up. “Oh.”

“God, she’s pissed. I mean, super, super pissed.”

"I don't blame her," Hannah said.

"And she's free. No collar. The people who stole her cut it off months ago."

"She was stolen?" Hannah asked.

"Yeah, that's what everyone says. But then, it turns out Gramma and Uncle Bear signed something . . . emancipating her a few days ago."

"That's great," Hannah said.

"It's weird," Athena said. "How did they know to do it now?"

"But it means she doesn't go in for a week of . . ."

"Torture. No, they don't do that to free girls."

"She's okay?"

"She's great. Other than being pissed. She's asking about you."

"Okay."

"Or, demanding to see you, rather. Mom's bringing you back next week."

"I'd like that," Hannah said.

Hannah ordered a wine. Athena tried to order an old fashioned but settled for root beer when they asked her for her ID.

"There was a reward," Athena said, looking into her drink before she looked up.

"For what?"

Athena studied Hannah's face carefully. She wasn't at Laura's level yet of guessing what other people were up to, but she was working at it.

"There was a reward for finding Raven."

"How much?"

"You know how much."

"How much?" Hannah asked, raising her eyebrows in a look of pure innocence before she raised her wine.

"Gramma and Uncle Bear won't say anything about it. Nothing. Someone found Raven, and they won't say who. They say they can't. I think it's because they signed something."

"That's weird," Hannah said.

"There are things you can get people to sign, and if they do, they can never talk," Athena said. "I didn't know that existed."

"Wow."

"Seventy-five thousand dollars," Athena said. "Seventy-five thousand dollars."

“That’s a lot of money,” Hannah said.

“Somebody got it,” Athena said, narrowing her eyes at Hannah.

“And now Raven’s free,” Hannah said.

“They’re gonna get married,” Athena noted. “They’re picking out the dates now.”

This time, Hannah’s tears wouldn’t be stopped, and for a minute, she wept into her napkin, with a joy that transcended any happiness any god had ever delivered to anyone.

“So tell me,” Athena said, “what are you going to do with the money?”

“Probably go out to eat a few times a week,” Hannah said, sniffing, setting down her napkin, taking another sip. “Maybe get wine, or even beer. There’s this place called Gargoyle’s that serves a pale ale I don’t hate. And maybe buy some new van Minsk shoes, whatever’s out in the fall.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The money,” Hannah said. “The stipend. It’s \$400 a month. I get the first payment on August 30.”

“I’m not talking about your scholarship,” Athena said. “I’m talking about \$75,000.”

“No,” said Hannah. “It’s just \$400 a month.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” Athena said. “I know you got it. I know you found Raven, and had them sign something to make sure you got the reward money. And I think you figured out how to get Gramma to set her free. And Raven knows it too.”

“Huh?” Hannah said.

“I talked to her on the phone while I was driving down today. She was at the airport. She said, ‘You tell Hannah Raven says thank you.’”

“How did she sound?” Hannah inquired.

“Like Raven.”

“Did they get the car back?”

“No, it got put on a truck the same time they got her, and Raven thinks it got chopped.”

“Are you staying with us this weekend?” Hannah asked.

“No, I’m staying here.”

“Here?”

“The Four Seasons,” Athena said, waving around herself with a smugness that wasn’t as annoying to Hannah as it had been on previous

occasions. "I like this place."

"You're here all weekend?"

"Yeah, I'm looking for apartments."

"Apartments?"

"I got accepted."

"To what?"

"To the University of Texas at Corpus Christi," Athena said coldly.

"Oh!"

"Don't act surprised, like it's—"

"You said you couldn't get in."

"Dad pulled some strings," Athena said. "It helps that Allain goes here. And with you and Franklin tutoring me, I'll—"

"Franklin?"

"Yeah, I'm buying him."

"Wow," Hannah said. "When?"

"Paperwork should be done in a few weeks."

"Do you like him?" Hannah asked.

"Uh, I'm buying him? Hello?"

"I know, but—"

"It's not like Ramone," Athena said, and she looked off wistfully, and Hannah knew she'd never quite recover from her first infatuation. "But god, he's deep."

Hannah smiled.

"I didn't mean it that way," Athena barked.

"I know what you meant," Hannah said. "I've talked to him."

"So how much do you want?" Athena asked.

"For what?"

"For assessing him."

"That's not something I charge for," Hannah said. "Not money, anyway."

"Well, let me do something for you."

"Take me to dinner here again," Hannah said. "Next fall sometime."

"Okay," Athena agreed. "I also owe you for that little scholarship stunt you pulled."

"How do you figure?"

“Oh, Athena,” Athena said liltingly, imitating Laura, “bring your phone and make sure to record Hannah’s ceremony. We’ll want to keep that.”

Athena cackled.

“And then, and then . . . ‘Oh, Athena, I’m not sure we’ll want to keep that recording after all.’ Oh. My. God, it was so awesome.”

Hannah grimaced, the memories of her fear and despair that morning still very real to her.

“We already had our first fight,” Athena said.

“Huh?”

“Me and Franklin.”

“Congratulations. What about?”

“You.”

“Go on.”

“I referred to you as a, uh, a fucking bitch, in general conversation, and he called me out on it, and I said ‘Well, why don’t you go fucking marry her, then?’ but he wouldn’t let it drop, so I apologized, and he said he wasn’t the one I should be apologizing to.”

“And you’re still buying him?”

“He’s trying to make me a better person,” Athena said. “Think of him as a life tutor, you know? You’re just a school tutor. He’s tutoring everything.”

The words stung Hannah a bit, but she nodded and smiled.

“So, anyway,” Athena continued haltingly, “I shouldn’t call you . . . a fucking bitch . . . and I’m going to try to stop . . . and I’m sorry.”

END

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