

# Female, Recreational IV: Gargoyles



*Badger Therese*

**Female, Recreational IV: Gargoyles**  
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**12/15/2019**

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## **Chapter 1: Stacey at the Clinic**

Flat on her back, naked, with her feet stirruped, and, watching the Home & Garden Network on the TV mounted on the ceiling, Stacey had almost forgotten that Kari was seated between her legs, doing her part in her annual gynecological exam.

Until it started to hurt.

Kari, exploring Stacey with a transvaginal wand, kept moving it to Stacey's left side, pressing against her wall for some reason.

Stacey raised her head, looked at Kari, looked at the grainy, meaningless image on the monitor next to the table, looked back at Kari.

"Sorry," Kari said. "There's something on that side."

"Uh, yeah," Stacey retorted. "Definitely some nerves there. As in, pain nerves."

"Okay, sorry, I'm done," Kari said. "So, any idea how many ovaries you have?"

"Two," Stacey said.

"I'm finding a third."



“Huh?”

“Three ovaries,” Kari said. “You have a third ovary. Has anyone told you that before?”

“No,” Stacey said, rising up on her elbows. “God no. I didn’t know that was even possible.”

“It happens,” Kari said. “You’ve never felt anything strange down there?”

“Not really,” Stacey said, lying back to ponder. “Well, you know how ovulating can hurt a little sometimes. Right when you release the egg?”

“Yeah.”

“Some months it happened twice. I mean, two separate times where it hurt, like a day or two apart.”

“Now you know why,” Kari said, withdrawing the wand from Stacey’s vagina. “That’s cool. I haven’t seen that before.”

“So it’s not a problem, right?”

“No,” Kari said. “But I think we’re supposed to report it.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a list of things we’re supposed to report. Triplets, or more than triplets, certain kinds of cancer, second uterus. I think third ovary is on the list too.”

“Second uterus? You’re fucking with me, right?”

“It happens,” Kari replied.

“So, you have to report it? Like for government statistics or something?” Stacey asked, looking up at the TV, watching a woman kneeling in dirt, sticking her hand in, pulling out a worm, showing it proudly to the camera.

“Something like that,” Kari said. “We fill out some stuff online. The patient sometimes has to help. Sometimes they call you for more information.”

“How long does it take?” Stacey asked. “I’m getting fitted for a bridesmaid’s dress in less than an hour.”

“Cool, when’s the wedding?”

“Next month. Right before Valentine’s Day.”

Kari slid her chair over to the computer in the corner, woke it up with a few taps and began typing. “I’ll hurry.”

## **Chapter 2: Hannah, First Class**

While she was still waiting for the plane to leave the gate, Hannah spread two journal articles across her lap, determined to read both before the jet landed in Palm Springs, California.

Thirty minutes into the flight, however, and five miles high, she had barely made her way through the first abstract.

People kept asking her if she wanted something, anything, which seemed to be a perk of first class she could do without. And when she wasn't being bothered about alcohol, she struggled to remove her eyes from the window, where a snowfall the previous week had blanketed the higher ground, the peaks and the mesas, with otherworldly whiteness.

"Something to drink miss?"

Hannah turned to the stewardess, pushing a cart down the narrow aisle.

"If you have Zolfa, I'll take a gin and tonic," she replied.

"We don't," the stewardess said, smiling apologetically. "Spitz or St. Flaure?"

"No," Hannah said. "Cabernet?"

"House? It's Thomas-Front."

"What do you have besides house?"

"Vinneyard van Krumpe."

"Where's it from?"

"South Africa."

"That," said Hannah

The stewardess poured the dark red liquid into a plastic cup and handed it over the head of Hannah's seatmate, a middle-aged woman with red-dyed hair and a tight, hunter green plaid dress.

Hannah took a sip, reminded herself that she needed to stay sharp for what lay ahead, and returned to the window and the two journals in her lap.

She had other excuses for her preoccupation. A few months shy of turning 21, she had never flown by herself before, and she found the freedom far more intoxicating than what she held in her hand.

Yes, the plane would go where it would go, regardless of Hannah's will. Five inches from the place by the window where she had planted her palm, the air blew fast and impossibly cold.

She had one seat, the rest belonging to other people.

And there wasn't any good gin on this flight.

But to a girl used to being locked in cages and kennels, the notion of walking into a room in one city and walking out of that same room in a new place a thousand miles away felt like liberation.

Something else had her fretful, though. In that new city, she would be entering an enemy's den. And certain things would be expected of her there, a performance among strangers for which she could not rehearse.

Yes, this was why she couldn't make it past the abstract in the first article.

"You know a lot about alcohol," said a voice.

Hannah turned to find her seatmate smiling at her.

The woman was holding something clear in a plastic cup. She must have placed an order after Hannah had received her drink. Preoccupied, nervous, distracted, Hannah hadn't heard what she'd asked for.

"Not really," Hannah said, and she watched the woman's eyes flicker, predictably, from Hannah's eyes to Hannah's neck, encircled by a keyless alloy band from which hung three tags – one with her federal ID number and her name and her role, a second, of plastic, issued to kennels residents at the University of Texas at Corpus Christi, and one a travel tag.

The woman had no interest in Hannah's drinking expertise, Hannah knew. She wanted to understand Hannah.

"I never drink in the morning," Hannah said. "So I'm a little pickier right now."

"They should be bringing lunch soon," the woman said.

Indeed, as soon as the woman said those words, Hannah smelled food, something steaming from the front of the plane. Chicken, perhaps. Rice.

"Are you going to see your family?" the woman asked.

"No," said Hannah. "I'm meeting with an organization that's funding some research this spring."

"Research . . ." the woman prompted, blinking, clearly not expecting this answer.

"It's a consortium called New Life, and they give my school research grants, and I'm in charge of part of the research, so they're flying some of their best . . . some of their, um, main researchers out to talk about a study this spring."

"You're a researcher?"

"I'm a student, mainly."



“Graduate?”

“No, undergrad.”

“That’s very impressive.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said, and she sipped her wine and looked down at her lap, hoping the woman’s curiosity was assuaged and she could make another attempt at reading.

“What kind of research?” the woman asked.

“Reproduction.”

“Human? . . . Animal?”

“Human.”

“Is that an area of interest?” the woman asked, her gray eyes pausing briefly on Hannah’s neck before returning to her face.

If Hannah were a wax figure, Hannah knew, the woman would have reached up to her neck without reservation, picking through the tags, raising the temporary travel tag that said “DallasTX/Palm SpringsCA ONLY,” lifting the university kennel tag with Hannah’s picture and kennel ID number on it, arriving at the most important of the three, the federal ID tag that declared Hannah’s place, her role, the essence of her being: “Female, Recreational.”

Female, Recreational.

Two pleasant words which, when separated by a comma, engraved upon an oval and hung by a ring from a keyless gray collar of comfortably light alloy around a girl’s neck, meant something else entirely:

Sex slave.

Of course, no one who owned a sex slave ever used that term openly.

And indeed, if “sex slave” meant rape, gratuitous abuse, wanton cruelty and degradation, the term wasn’t accurate, at least in Hannah’s case.

Her arrangement with the Petrosyans, who owned her, remained tacit, discreet, refined – like the family itself. She would deliver her body for the use of others without ever being told she must. It was always a suggestion, an offer, a hint. But she always said yes.

And she said yes quite often.

Her first obligation was to Allain Petrosyan, studying medicine to become a doctor, like his father. She was his on weekends and during school breaks, and it must be said that they took each other as equals, her carnal service answered by his devoted passion, two beings in the flower of

youth working through biological directives with mutual, aching determination.

And then came all the others, fellow slaves in the kennels, friends of the Petrosyans, Dr. Petrosyan himself on occasion, and other males and females Hannah serviced dutifully and, often enough, enthusiastically.

The exchange might even be called fair, if not lopsided in Hannah's favor. At the cost of maintaining a ready sexuality – something she was inclined to anyway – Hannah was allowed to couple creatively, to wrest pleasure from each tryst often enough, even to love, in a sense, when love seemed to matter.

And she'd been given something precious for her labors: schooling.

Impossible before she was taken from her destitute mother at age 18, a college education had become her focus, her obsession, her destiny – the thing that, when she mourned the freedoms she lacked, the lingering indignities of her existence – she turned her mind to.

And she'd found the will, and the ability to excel, poring over books in her kennel, ordering journals and scholarly papers when her class assignments didn't fill in the gaps, winning a scholarship and recognition and, today, a first-class plane ticket to prepare for a spring research project.

Rejoice, she would tell herself in her darker ruminative moments. Be grateful.

If there was rape, it came not in the form of the penises put into her vagina and her mouth and occasionally her anus; the mouths and nipples and vulvas she touched and licked and smothered in kisses; the bodies – free and slave – she worked to delight.

No, if there was rape, it was symbolic, an alloy embrace removable from her neck only with specialized equipment and hours of cutting; a tiny chip embedded in the flesh of her upper back that anyone could (and often did) scan to confirm her name and status; a paper file maintained by the State of Texas that recorded her sale for one and one-half million dollars; an ID number issued by the United States government that reduced her to property, to a number, to inventory.

And a system of discipline, physical and intimate and cruel, that she was expected to submit to when she had been disobedient. A system she was expected to, on occasion, help enforce.

But then, was not the place she was going today with such nervous anticipation worst of all? An obscenity at entirely another level?

Yes, it was.

A question had been asked.

Hannah, miles above the dry, wrinkled deserts of the southwestern United States, sipping a cabernet sauvignon that was surprisingly good, owed the woman sitting beside her an answer.

“Is that an area of interest?” the woman had asked. But that wasn’t really her question. The real question was broader, deeper, and legion: What are you interested in? What do you like? Are you researching the biology of sex because you have sex all the time? Because you *must* have sex all the time? What will you be doing where you’re going today? Sex?

Who are you?

Are you happy?

*What* are you?

“I sort of fell into it,” Hannah said, smiling self-deprecatingly. “I signed up for an assistanceship at the University in Corpus Christi, and I ended up on a team that was doing work for New Life. And . . . I was good at it, I guess.”

“What kind of work did you do?” the woman asked, grimacing and sticking out her lower jaw in the way that, Hannah had learned from considerable experience, meant she knew she shouldn’t have asked the question and couldn’t help herself regardless.

Did she really want an answer? A complete answer?

“A variety of things,” Hannah said.

The woman stared, willing Hannah with her eyes to continue.

“I contributed to the second edition of the research manual,” Hannah said, forging ahead, lowering her voice slightly, so that only the woman beside her could hear her over the roar of the jets and the rush of the air across the aircraft’s skin. “I developed an informed consent form for the donors. I measured sperm motility and sequenced DNA. And . . . I collected semen.”

“Collected . . .” the woman prompted.

“Semen.”

“With . . .”

“My vagina.”

The woman coughed and her countenance went blank. Or, not blank, exactly. Plastic. Now she was the wax figure, her face unnaturally still, as if created with a good but not perfect art.

Why am I doing this? Hannah asked herself. I didn't have to say that last thing. I didn't have to say anything. I could have said I was working on a science project. I could have lied. I could have said I was visiting family. Why did I push this? Why do I push anything? What's wrong with me?

Hannah wasn't sure she had the answers to any of those questions. She needed answers.

Hannah sipped her wine and looked innocently around the cabin. People were watching movies on the screens on the seatbacks before them, or on laptops, or tablets. The drink cart gone, a new one was being pushed down the aisle, the steward handing out steaming trays from it to hungry people.

"Donors," the woman said at last.

Human curiosity is like an engine that, slow as it might be to get turned on, can be even more difficult to turn off.

"Yes," Hannah agreed. "My owner. And others."

"Others?"

"It was left up to me. A few people a week. Friends. Acquaintances."

Surely, that was enough. Surely, Hannah was finished.

The woman didn't need to know how the sperm, after it had been deposited, was extracted from Hannah's vagina, that the research protocol required she be bound to what was called a sampling rack so the contents of her sheath could be drawn out consistently and without interference.

"Are you continuing that project?" the woman asked, because curiosity sometimes takes on a life of its own, no matter the improprieties.

"No, I'll be doing something new," Hannah said. "A focus on some aspect on female anatomy."

"Anatomy . . ."

"Reproductive anatomy."

"Texas brisket, blackened chicken, or Florentine spinach alfredo?"

"Chicken," Hannah replied, opening her tray and accepting the meal. She was surprisingly hungry, and it was just a little past noon. Was flying an appetite stimulant?

"Would you like another cabernet?"

"No," said Hannah. "Coke, please."

The woman chose brisket, and Hannah ate beside her and pretended to be reading the journal article in her lap although half the page lay hidden beneath her tray, and the woman pulled her phone and a small plastic stylus out of her purse and tapped the screen in between bites.

I have just confessed my sexual behaviors to a perfect stranger, Hannah told herself. Why? If I were free, would I have done that? Would I have talked with her about sex with a boyfriend, or my husband?

No.

But then, sex with a significant other is a given. It doesn't need to be discussed. Sex for research, on the other hand, that's unusual. Titillating. Salacious.

People like such things, and when their curiosity persists, it's because they want to know, even if they don't know they want to know.

But why did she answer? Why did Hannah say what she said?

To observe the reaction.

Yes.

To observe.

There are people, and there is sex.

And there is the reaction to sex, which is the orgasm. Other things, but the orgasm stands at the heart of the matter.

And then, there are second-hand reactions to sex. People watch movies of people having sex, and it's like they're having sex themselves, and they masturbate and cum.

And, because sex is such a fascination for people, there is a third-hand reaction as well. People talk about watching sex, or describe having sex in a detached manner, and other people listen. Boys talk about having sex with girls, to brag, or to demean the girl for reasons Hannah didn't understand. Girls brag too.

And then, fourth-hand is watching someone react to being told about sex. That's what Hannah had done. She'd watched a stranger react to being told about sex. Was this not legitimate research, on Hannah's part? Was the woman's reaction not important, as one indicator of the aggregate? As a hint as to how the free people of America would react to being told of such things?

Would all their faces go plastic? Would they all fall silent until they'd found the courage to raise more questions? Would they remain fascinated, morbidly so, until they'd learned more than they were prepared

to know – at which point they’d recoil in horror from what they, either actively or by omission or apathy or ignorance, had created?

“What,” the woman asked, drawing her breath to continue the conversation once lunch was done, “will you be doing in Palm Springs?”

Yes, Hannah said to herself. It continues, as it sometimes must.

Keep answering. See how far you can take this woman, before she withdraws.

If she ever does.

“I’m going to a breeding facility,” Hannah said.

“Breeding?”

“Human breeding,” Hannah said. “Human subjects.”

The steward removed the lunch plates and Hannah set the two journals on her tray, noticed for the first time that the title of the top article was itself provocative, eight words in large, black type: “Impregnation Metrics by Socioeconomic Background for Subject Females.”

“You’re . . . observing?” the woman asked.

“Yes, at least,” Hannah said. “But probably more. I’m the only subject that will be part of my group, and they’ve proposed taking me through some of the basic procedures.”

The woman nodded and returned to her phone and stylus, and Hannah looked down again and, at last, began moving through the article in her lap, in the right place now to process graphs and statistics and formulae and complex biology.

The mind is a peculiar thing.

A few minutes after the initial descent was announced, the stewardess who had brought Hannah her lunch returned with a new cart.

“Miss?”

“Yes?” Hannah replied, inflecting the word into a question even though she was well aware what this was about.

“Can you please step into the aisle?”

## **Chapter 3: Druhler Fairchild, Benefactor**

“We stand at the edge of a new dawn,” proclaimed Druhler Fairchild, hands drumming gently upon the lectern, as they often did during speeches, while he addressed almost 500 of the elite of St. Paul, Minnesota – its wealthiest and brightest and most admired.

Mostly its wealthiest, who were by definition the other two anyway.

“We have reached a turning point in human knowledge, that moment in our history when we may say that we have arrived, that we have achieved true self-awareness.”

The dishes were still clattering, knives and forks sounding like a distant, medieval conflict, as the throng worked at CAB ribeye and crab-stuffed game hen and almonidine al fresco in a French butter reduction, with caviar and foie gras set out in the middle of the tables like dinner rolls at lesser gatherings.

“But if we do not build on past knowledge, every generation must return to square one,” Fairchild continued. “So, our new natural history wing for children is the answer, or part of the answer, one more jewel in the crown of knowledge we give to the next generation. There are always children, and they will be tomorrow’s scientists and innovators and discoverers. And we must give them the platform. No, not the platform. The springboard!”

Fairchild paused for the applause that, his notes told him accurately, should follow, and he basked while people set down knives and forks and glasses of excellent wine and brought their hands together.

They weren’t his words, not directly. But he’d paid for them, and that was at least as good.

Druhler Fairchild, still robust in his mid-60’s, his mind still sharp, his body constructed of solid muscle and solid fat, his hair still almost as full and red as it had been forty years before, turned to take in the sweep of the main ballroom at Founder’s Hotel.

“The next time you walk through the Lucretia Fairchild Children’s Natural History Hall and Garden . . .”

Fairchild looked up, as his notes told him to do, and he raised his eyebrows and peered at the room over his glasses.

“And I’m sure everyone’s going in in the next month or two, right? Right?”

Now, the man who contributed two million dollars of his personal fortune to the new wing basked in laughter.

“Right? What the hell else is there to do in St. Paul this winter? Right?”

Fairchild waited until the laughter subsided.



“Seriously, the next time you wander Fairchild Hall, expect to be challenged. Check your emotions and your doubts at the door. There’s science, and then there’s everything else. Some people say the dinosaurs never were. Well, we’ve got 10,000 bones and four near-complete skeletons that say otherwise. Some people say there were no missing links in human history. We’ve got seven skulls that beg to differ, one original fossil and six more painstaking, state-of-the-art duplicates.”

Fairchild paused. He had a knack for timing.

“And when my good friend Archibald Carver . . . Archie, you out there? Mr. Mayor? Archie? There you are! . . . When my good friend Archie dies, we’ll have an eighth.”

Mayor Carver’s booming laugh filled the room, and the rest of the room followed suit.

They were still laughing when Fairchild barked out his signature closing line.

“Good night, everyone, and God bless!”

The room stood, not in fits and starts, but en masse, rising as one to honor the multi-millionaire who had given one of his precious nights to them in tandem with his precious dollars, and when he descended from the podium, the hands waved thick, one after another grasping his in wordless thanks and admiration.

And while he walked back to his table, where his wife and benefactory namesake, Lucretia, and his two sons and both their wives stood to offer their embraces, a million people in America, give or take, lived subject to his handiwork, a million people with necks encircled in a light, comfortable, unyielding alloy, tags dangling and swinging as they tended machines, or swaddled infants, or sorted the day’s silverware, or pulled delicacies from the wash, or waited in labs, or languished in the small cages of holding centers, or stood naked and tethered to showroom floors, or grunted as they thrust penises into assigned orifices, or groaned and sighed as their own chambers were tested and plumbed, wetted and stretched.

Or suffered for disobedience or the appearance of disobedience, hanging bound, sitting chained, crying with each blow of the whip or the rod, or screaming out information, useful or otherwise, because someone needed to know something, and the rules for extracting information were different for these.

Or plotting, because sometimes the lowest people say no, and the universe hears them and provides an answer that is something other than more suffering.

After the meal was over, the closing formalities spoken by the chairwoman of the museum's board of directors, the final hugs and handshakes, the draining of glasses, Druhler Fairchild slipped into a limousine with his sons, Leston and Brighton, for the ride back to the airport.

The girls, as Fairchild called them, would make their own way back, by whatever means Lucretia found most convenient.

The boys needed to talk.

"One of Beckett's best, I think," said Druhler Fairchild, peeking into the vehicle's cooler to see if it held any more champagne. It was empty.

"You got them on their feet, as usual," Leston said with familial pride.

Brighton remained silent.

"What'd you think, Bri?" Fairchild asked, bending to look at his shoes. Both were tied, but he undid the laces and tied them back again.

"Well . . ." Brighton began, "are you sure Beckett's . . . aligned?"

"Aligned with what?"

"Everything," Brighton said, passing his hand over his slicked-back, well-oiled blond hair.

"Speechwriters don't have to be aligned," Leston said, reaching up to adjust his blue silk bowtie.

"Did you read it before tonight?" Brighton asked.

"I glanced at it," Fairchild said. He leaned back into his seat, unbuttoned and rebuttoned his tuxedo coat. "Out with it, what's your beef?"

"There are some places where a speech like that won't go over that well," Brighton said. "Some people—"

"It did just fine in St. Paul."

"Yeah, but why did he have to mention those skulls? And—"

"Those were some of my best lines!" Fairchild protested.

"They were good lines, but down South—"

"Beckett is the best speech writer I've ever worked with, and he gets better and better."

"I just think—"

"Are you worried about the campaign?" Fairchild demanded.

“Okay,” Brighton said, looking hard at his father first, and then at his brother, who was cleaning his glasses with a blue handkerchief that matched his bowtie. “I am.”

“Brighton,” Fairchild said. “We’re going to get you elected to a full term. The money’s there. You just need to execute, and not get distracted.”

“How is Dad’s speech going to interfere?” Leston asked, still looking at his glasses. “He’s not you.”

“Everyone knows who my father is.”

“So?” Leston asked.

“Dad’s speeches get recorded,” Brighton said, voice rising defensively. “I counted at least 10 people with their phones out tonight at the first few tables, alone. And then something’ll get posted to Look!, and someone will take it the wrong way, and—”

“Someone in Georgia or Mississippi,” Leston said. “You’re running in Jersey.”

“There are conservatives in New Jersey!” Brighton said, shouting now and leaning forward, hands on his thighs. “Evangelicals, anti-vaxxers, people who don’t believe in dinosaurs.”

“Anti-vaxxers?” Leston repeated.

“They’re all part of the same movement,” Brighton argued. “They just—”

“Brighton,” Fairchild interrupted, “just—”

“Why say it?” Brighton blurted. “Why say anything that’ll upset ‘em? Just show up, say ‘Here’s your money fuck you,’ and leave.”

Fairchild laughed before he leaned forward, picking at the crease in his pants and facing his son.

“I’m going to turn 64 this year,” he said. “I’m not sure how many more years I’ve got. And I deserve to go out with a few laughs, and a standing ovation or two.”

“You’re gonna live forever,” Brighton said, only half-jokingly.

“No,” Fairchild said, the love of father for son intent in his eyes. “I’m not. So let me have a little fun before I die. Beckett gets the laughs. Beckett gets them on their feet. And it feels good. Try it sometime. It feels good.”

“You can afford anyone,” Brighton said. “Why not—”

“It’s not about the money,” Fairchild said. “I call him, tell him what I need, two days later it’s in my inbox.”

“Have you ever met him?”

“What is there to meet?” Fairchild asked, laughing. “He’s realer than half the people who run our sites.”

“Okay, but—”

“I understand your concerns,” Fairchild said, untying his shoes again, slipping them off this time. “But don’t get bogged down in minutiae. You’ve been handed something huge. Don’t blow it worrying about anti-vaxxers.”

Brighton sat back and crossed his arms while his father inflated his lungs.

“The world is full of millionaires, and billionaires, and kings, and presidents,” Fairchild said, warming up to a variation of the pep talk he’d been giving his sons for years. “But there are only a few people who can say they’ve really made a difference, really changed things. Alexander the Great. St. Paul. Jefferson. Lincoln, God bless him, who did what was right at the time. Lenin. Churchill.”

Both sons waited for the inevitable punchline.

“And now us. The Fairchilds. Druhler Fairchild and sons.”

Fairchild kicked at one of his shoes, stuck his foot in and withdrew it. Both sons smiled at their father’s earnestness.

“The next time you see a girl in a collar – well-fed, well-dressed, healthy, happy – try to imagine what she’d be without her owners. A meth whore, a convict, a dumpster diver, a refugee with her hand out. A girl with weak, mixed-up genes who’s never going to amount to anything. Someone God washed his hands of the day she was born. We’ve given a million people a sustainable life. A million and counting. And we didn’t just fall into this. I had a vision. *We* had a vision. We’re different. Better genes. Different. Better. So don’t get lost worrying about the little people. The hallelujah choir and the people who don’t get their kids immunized. You know what? When they want to make noise, they’ll make noise, about whatever’s close by. Nothing you can do about that. But you can shut ‘em up when you have to. The same things that work on subjects work on everyone else.”

Fairchild used his toes to set his shoes upright, put his feet in them, thought better of it and set his stockinged feet together.

“I’ve got more important things to talk about, so I’ll finish by saying what I’ve said before,” Fairchild continued, and he pointed to the

limousine's velveteen ceiling. "We had a vision, but He laid it all out for us. He made the way straight. Everything. Every piece, without exception. I still marvel at His work. I don't think miracle is too strong a term. He opened the doors. All we had to do was walk through."

With one more reverent glance upward, Fairchild made a fist and turned his eyes back to his progeny, looking each in the eyes.

"I got another call from Maxim," he reported. "Just before dinner. They still want to deal."

"That was the call you took in the kitchen?" Leston asked.

"Yeah, yeah. I couldn't say much. He did most of the talking."

"They don't have the money," Brighton said.

"That's changed," Fairchild said, shaking his head solemnly.

"That's changed."

"How much?"

"Fifteen point two five."

"Billion, right?"

"Yes, billion."

"For what?" Leston asked, squinting at his glasses as he polished them anew. "Everything?"

Fairchild picked up his foot and bounced it off his shoe's elaborately-carved, leather upper.

"Not everything. But all the big stuff. All the clinics. Breeding and the labs. New Life. The prisons. The farms. Kennel management. All seven plants."

"And we just walk away?" Brighton asked, his voice a little choked.

"No, and that's the beauty of it. We keep all the patents. We keep all the licenses for how we do things. They want to keep doing it our way, so that means they keep paying us, 20 million a year at least in license fees alone. And Leston and I get seats on the new board. And you join us, if you ever leave the Senate. But in the meantime, the new owners bring money at a whole new level, and you get the laws passed we need, and no one will question it. So that's all three of us, doing our parts, in our own ways."

Fairchild closed his eyes, close to tears.

"And if the Good Lord lets me live another 30 years, we'll get to a hundred million, in this nation alone. A hundred million in collars, three hundred million looking after them. And my work'll be done, and it'll be up

to you and your children to move it along, and reap the benefits. Tenfold. At least. Maybe one hundredfold.”

Fairchild looked at his sons. Leston returned his gaze reverently. Brighton stared at his shoes.

“Bri, what’re you thinking?” Fairchild asked. “Still upset about that speech?”

“No,” Brighton said slowly. “They’ve put her up for sale again.”

“Who?” Fairchild asked.

“Baye.”

“Don’t say that name!” Fairchild hissed, eyes wide with a sudden fury, an immediate, palpable fear.

“Okay. But she’s for sale,” Brighton said.

“As what?” Fairchild whispered.

“Recreational, same as last time,” Brighton whispered back.

“You didn’t leave any footprints anywhere?”

“No, I saw her on one of the pages everyone goes to. I didn’t open her listing.”

“The orchard’s never going to get rid of her,” Fairchild said. “She’s stuck there until the day she dies, and no one’s ever going to hear her story.”

“She’s gained weight,” Brighton said. “She’s not a rail anymore.”

“How do you know?”

“I could tell. And someone made her up.”

“Lipstick on a pig,” Fairchild said, almost spitting the last word.

“She looked good,” Brighton said.

“Oh, now you want her again?” Fairchild muttered.

Brighton crossed his arms and bit his lip, and his eyes emanated an existential pain.

“Get those laws passed,” Fairchild urged with a renewed kindness in his voice. “Subject court. And that problem goes away.”

## **Chapter 4: Stacey Asked to Stay**

“Okay, what’s your birthdate?” Kari asked, peering at the computer screen.

Stacey raised her head from the examination table, glad for a distraction, however minor, from the Home & Garden channel, which was getting boring. “Don’t you have all that in my file?”

“Yeah, whatever,” Kari admitted, feigning annoyance. She grabbed the dark green folder that held Stacey’s file, studied as she typed.

“Okay, then, how old are you?”

“23. Which you should be able to tell from my birthday.”

“What do you do?” Kari continued, ignoring the jibe.

“Huh?”

“What’s your job? What do you do for a living?”

“I don’t have one,” Stacey replied. “I’m between jobs. Dad’s helping me out. And tell them fuck you for asking.”

Another 10 minutes passed, Stacey watching TV, Kari typing.

“Do you get laid a lot?”

“Huh?” Stacey responded.

“Do you have a lot of sex?”

“Why are you asking me that?”

“It’s a question I’m supposed to answer.”

“You tell them it’s none of their goddamned business.”

“Okay. I’ll put down that you get fucked every night.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m sure they’ll like that.”

“Okay, done. You want to look it over?”

“No,” Stacey said.

“Sent,” Kari announced.

“So, I could have left?”

“Well, I might have needed some more information. But you can go now.”

Stacey rose up from the table, swung her legs over and dropped to the floor. Her clothes were in one of the clinic’s little changing rooms, so she headed for the door, reaching it just as it opened from the outside.

A stout woman with dark hair pushed it wide. Stacey recognized her as the person who sometimes hovered behind the counter while she was checking in or settling her co-pay. She seemed to be in charge.

“Stacey Fairchild?” she asked.

“That’s me,” Stacey replied. “Hi.”

“You just won the biological lottery,” the woman deadpanned.

“Huh?” Stacey replied.

“Your report got the clearinghouse interested.”

“You mean, about my ovary?” Stacey asked.

“Yes, someone thinks it’s interesting.”



“Okay, great,” Stacey said, and she stepped to the side, hoping to get around the woman, feeling awkward talking to her in the nude.

“They just called. They’ve asked us to hang onto you.”

“What does that mean?” Stacey asked.

“They want you to stay.”

“I need to go get fitted for a bridesmaid’s dress,” Stacey said, looking at the clock. “In less than 30 minutes.”

“You’ll need to call them,” the woman said. “I don’t think you’re going to make it.”

## **Chapter 5: Hannah Arrives at New Life**

Hannah closed both the journals in her lap and slid them under the seat before her, and she rose and sidled past her seatmate, standing and facing the stewardess and her cart.

“We’ve been asked to put these on you,” the stewardess said, pulling a network of chains from her cart’s top drawer.

“They told me about that,” Hannah said, and she held out her hands and waited while the stewardess studied the restraints.

“The smaller ones are for my wrists,” Hannah said, mindful that other first-class passengers were turning in their seats to stare. As often as she’d been chained and caged over the last two and a half years, there were still occasions when she found the process awkward. This was one of those times.

These were standard transport chains, handcuffs and shackles, with a chain that joined them. Silver, they more or less went with Hannah’s white sweater, her blue jeans, her red flats, her collar. She was promised her chains would come off as soon as she got to New Life.

With Hannah’s help, the stewardess got the cuffs closed, and Hannah’s seatmate rose and stepped out of the way so Hannah could shuffle back to her seat.

“We’ll come get you after everyone else has left the plane,” she said.

“Okay,” Hannah said from her seat, and she caught her seatmate’s curious eye and said, almost apologetically, “It’s one of the policies of the place where I’m going.”

“It doesn’t seem to bother you.”

“I’m used to it,” Hannah said, proving her point by reaching dexterously beneath the seat in front of her to retrieve the second of her two journals, flipping it open and dropping it into her lap with the faint ring of chains.

“Some girls would complain.”

“Necessary evil,” Hannah said, prompting an unexpected laugh from the woman, a long, husky guffaw. Had she been waiting for something to laugh at, something to alleviate the tension?

Slavery made people tense.

The descent was bumpy, more so than anything Hannah could recall from her much longer flight with the Petrosyans to New Zealand two years ago. Of course, she’d forgotten much of that trip, taken four months after she’d been made a slave, a time when she was still reeling her way through a life without her mother and her freedom, adapting to a strange new existence of luxury, sex, humiliation, and bondage.

She’d been wanting to travel again. This was good. But she wanted to go overseas. Europe called.

The plane landed and taxied, stopped at a gate, and the free people rose.

“Goodbye,” the woman said, looking into Hannah’s eyes from the aisle, becoming one with the slow, steady stream of departing passengers that Hannah was not to join.

Instead, when the rest of the plane was empty, she stuffed her journals into her book bag and left the aircraft together with a woman who needed wheelchair assistance, escorted by two male airport staffers through the access ramp to a hall with an elevator.

“Here to see family?” the elderly woman asked, looking up at Hannah’s shoulder with two milky blue eyes.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah lied, entering the elevator after her, dropping to ground level.

The elevator opened and the woman was whisked away in one direction, while Hannah, clutching her bag before her, was walked a short distance in the other, to a door that said, “Authorized Personnel Only.”

Inside was a surprisingly comfortable lounge, with couches, tables and chairs, snack machines, a bar.

Some of the people here were in chains, some weren’t.

“Hannah?” said a girl with long blonde hair, rising from a couch, slipping her phone into her purse.

“Hi,” Hannah said. “Estelle?”

“Yes, hello, it’s so nice to meet you!” she said, and she embraced Hannah around the shoulders. “Thanks for being here.”

Hannah leaned forward for the hug, unable to reciprocate.

Estelle took Hannah’s travel bag and slung it over her own shoulder.

“We’ll get you freed as soon as we reach New Life,” she said. “Sorry about the formalities.”

“I’m not complaining,” Hannah said. “First class was nice.”

“You got something to drink, I hope?” Estelle asked, and she stepped in front of Hannah and reached up, peering at Hannah’s tags.

“A cabernet sauvignon,” Hannah confirmed, raising her chin. “South African.”

“Lovely,” Estelle said, fingering each tag in turn. “Okay, good, your tag matches where you are.”

“Is that a surprise?”

“It shouldn’t be, but sometimes there’s a glitch. We had a girl show up last fall with a travel tag that said Seattle.”

“Did you send her back?”

“No, we just made sure the police never saw it,” Estelle said, retrieving her phone from her purse and stepping behind Hannah. Hannah held still, surveying the room and its occupants while Estelle pulled up Hannah’s sweater, slipped her phone up past Hannah’s bra strap, and scanned the little chip embedded in Hannah’s flesh between her shoulder blades.

“Someone’s getting your suitcase,” Estelle said, pulling Hannah’s sweater down and straightening it. She poked at her phone, sending confirmation per agreement to Allain, and probably Laura and Ormek Petrosyan as well, that their girl had arrived safely in Palm Springs. “I’ve got a town car waiting for us right outside the door.”

Hannah followed Estelle out of the lounge, through a second set of secure doors and onto a covered sidewalk beside a small, exclusive parking lot where luxury cars idled.

The air was bright and dry here, no more than 70 degrees, a pale blue sky above and, beyond the lot and the fence and the more distant

highway, a brown shimmering desert and snow-capped mountains.

A black town car eased up to the curb, and Estelle opened the rear door for Hannah and allowed her to slide in first, following her in and sitting beside her, her bag lodged between their hips.

The driver, a black man in a suit, said nothing, nor even turned to acknowledge the girls, just waited for the door to close and for Estelle to buckle in Hannah and herself before he hit the gas.

“You’re the only one who gets a chauffeur,” Estelle said. “Everyone else has to make their own arrangements.”

“How many are you expecting?” Hannah asked, deciding not to offer thanks for the convenience, well aware of the tradeoff she would be making. Everyone else was here as a researcher only. Hannah would be a researcher, as well as something else. A body. A female body.

“Close to 25,” Estelle replied. “One person cancelled yesterday, but we got two more confirmations Monday. And it’s about 50-50 graduate and undergrad. So you’ll be in good company.”

“Where are they coming from?”

“All over. California of course – Stanford, USC and Chico. And then Montreal, Miami, Chicago. A little school in Kansas. Washington.”

“When do we find out what we’re researching this spring?” Hannah asked.

“I can tell you now, generally,” Estelle replied. “It’s not a big secret, we just didn’t want to put it in writing for the whole world to read.”

Hannah shifted in her seat, looked out the window, and wished she could get her chains off now.

“We’re looking at some specific areas of the female system this year,” she said. “Fallopian tubes, hormone production, ovarian anomalies.”

“Anomalies?”

“Egg production, egg withholding, that kind of thing.”

“Withholding?” Hannah queried.

“It happens,” Estelle said. “And we think there may be some answers there.”

“To what questions?”

“An average female drops 11 eggs a year,” Estelle said. “Subject girls drop eight. We want to know why, so we can fix it.”

Fix it, Hannah thought. Fix it. More babies born to slaves, thus, more slaves, because the child of a slave is a slave from her first breath. Or,

to put it politely, a subject. But either way, the child is property.

Fix it.

“Do you have any theories?” Hannah asked.

“Possibly some of the usual stressors,” Estelle said, her words continuing to gloss over whole areas of misery. “Have you noticed any changes?”

“Well . . . yeah, I guess. Last year, and the year before that, I had some run-ins, and—”

“Run-ins?”

“Someone went missing, and I got interrogated,” Hannah said.

“And I got in trouble over some other things.”

“What differences did you notice?” Estelle asked, not needing Hannah to elaborate on her suffering or the cause of it. Every subject goes through it now and then.

“I feel like I skipped a few times,” Hannah replied. “Months later. In the summer. One period was late, and I didn’t feel that little pang . . . you know, when you drop an egg . . . for a couple of months after that.”

“What did they do?” Estelle asked.

Why was she asking that? Hannah wondered. To express her condolences? Or to work out a new research protocol? To gain, casually, the information that might eventually help in the infliction of systematic suffering on females, not for the moderately defensible purpose of improving their obedience, but simply to see how pain and torture affected ovulation and the release of eggs?

Hannah gulped and smiled. “It was covered by confidentiality,” she said, and then she lied. “It wasn’t that terrible.”

And yet, if Hannah admitted she’d screamed in agony during her interrogation and had subsequently gone infertile for two months, might that lead to a reduction in torture, a decision by the authorities of this strange and awful system to be kinder, gentler?

Too often, a simple question could produce a cascade of moral challenges that left Hannah mute and uncertain.

“Okay,” Estelle agreed. “How much of our regime are you comfortable seeing?”

“All of it,” Hannah said, trying to sound academically enthusiastic only, trying not to reveal the other reason she had come.

“And you’re still willing to step in as a breeding model?”

“Absolutely,” Hannah replied. “If no one else wants to do it more.”

Estelle laughed. Of course no one wanted to do it more. No free girl would agree to it. But Hannah didn’t mind, and she knew her cooperation had won her other things.

First class travel, for one. A chauffeur. Someone else getting her bag.

“How much of the experience do you want?” Estelle asked.

“As much as you can give me,” Hannah said. “Everything.”

“Would you like to stay in quarters?” Estelle asked.

“Well . . .” Hannah said, not surprised by the question. “What would I be giving up?”

“Just a basic guest room,” Estelle said. “No window, though. More like a dorm room.”

“What can I have there?”

“Hygiene, reading material,” Estelle replied. “No clothes.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Quarters it is.”

“Uh, you’re definitely not on your period, right?”

“No,” Hannah said. “I start in probably four or five days.”

“Have you been regular?”

“Yes, since the summer.”

“No stressors since then?”

“Very few, if you don’t count cramps, a stomach bug at the start of the fall semester, and a cold in December.”

Indeed, it had been a particularly good year for Hannah, at least since the previous April. She’d finished the spring semester with all A’s, followed by a summer of travel and friendship and pleasure, a trip to New Orleans with Allain and his friends, dinners at the family’s club, at the Four Seasons, days by the family’s pool, and a rich, varied diet of sex – with Allain, with a girl named Raven whom Hannah had freed and who was set to be married in the summer, occasionally with a male subject named Franklin whom Hannah considered her soulmate, despite the considerable challenges between them.

She’d won a full scholarship plus a \$400 monthly stipend for the current year, and just finished another semester of straight A’s. She was going to Japan at some point in the next year for a week of study, one of the benefits of her scholarship. She had received a mostly positive reply to her

proposal for a journal article, something she wanted to write drawing from her scholarship paper on epilepsy.

Most importantly to Hannah, she'd earned the respect of her peers, and even some of the faculty, for her intelligence, her creativity, her sheer doggedness.

Those at the University of Texas at Corpus Christi who knew her best saw her mind instead of her collar, her intellect instead of her role, her job, the function she'd been chosen for, as represented by the little metal tag engraved with "Female, Recreational," that hung from her collar, and bore her first name and her federal subject ID number.

During the school year, she stayed in what were called the kennels, a quasi-prison where each subject was individually caged, chained when necessary, boxed up and carted at times. And yet, even there she had thrived, making friends, and finding lovers, male and female, with whom to tryst during the week when Allain was busy with medical school. She was allowed to leave to attend classes, to work in the lab, to spend the weekend with Allain. She had access to PCs, and her textbooks and notebooks, and journals and other books she could order.

And a small, battery-powered clock.

And she had made her peace with the requirement that every subject help out, every six weeks or so, in Hall 6, the punishment hall. She never whipped or pinched or turned on the leads clamped to nipples. She merely tied, locked punishment cages, set timers and, when punishment was complete, untied limbs and opened cages and let people go. She hated it and it made her queasy but she hadn't, since her first turn on the hall, actually thrown up.

She was also, by many people's standards, comfortable if not well-to-do, with more than \$70,000 in her bank account, a sum very few people knew about, not even Allain.

The institution of American slavery had been very, very good to Hannah Loughbridge.

And yet, she was working, in her own way, at her own pace, with the support and encouragement of a shadowy group with no name, to destroy it.

For every Hannah, she knew, there were ten more, a hundred more, a thousand more, who languished in anonymity and isolation, doing as they were bidden with no recourse, suffering in silence, accepting chains



whenever chains were held out to them, sleeping in cages and kennels, enduring punishment for minor crimes, torture for the even lesser crime of knowing something someone else wanted to know.

Hannah was happy, and angry, and tormented, and deeply, deeply grateful.

“What do you do?” she asked Estelle.

“Assistant researcher,” Estelle answered quickly.

“Scientist, then.”

“Well, I like science, and I did pre-med, but I couldn’t get into medical school, so I got a job at New Life.”

“And you get to do science.”

“Don’t let the title fool you. It means, basically, lab flunky, chief cook and bottlewasher, gofer.”

“Gofer?”

“Gofer this, gofer that,” Estelle explained.

“Gofer me.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that,” Estelle protested. “This is actually one of my better assignments.”

“It’s not really science,” Hannah noted.

“Yes it is. I got to ask you some sciencey questions.”

Maybe that’s all it was, then, Hannah thought. Estelle asked Hannah about her period and about being interrogated to justify – in her own mind at least – having to go to the airport to pick someone up.

While they made their way into Palm Springs, Estelle went over the details of Hannah’s visit. There would be a reception on-site tonight for all the visiting researchers, in a less secure area, but Hannah would most likely wear just shackles there. Tomorrow morning, everyone would take a tour, with Hannah serving as the model. After that, presentations, lunch, and then private meetings where they would talk about possible areas of research focus. After that, everyone would take dinner at a private club downtown, returning the next morning to the airport to get back to their schools and begin a new round of vita-enriching research.

“Here we are,” Estelle said, and Hannah gazed through the windows and felt the stir of knowledge and the call of wisdom, an involuntary sentiment independent of the nature of that knowledge, independent of the misery that coexisted with learning here.

New Life looked like a university campus, with a broad entrance edged by unexpected greenery – grass, shrubbery, African pine. The town car traversed a winding driveway, past two buildings of brick and adobe, toward the campus's central edifice, domed and columned, five stories high and as wide as a city block, panoramic windows on the first two floors, smaller, more secure windows on the top three where, Hannah knew, the breeding females were kept, along with the males who were there to impregnate them, where the labs and procedure rooms had been installed and equipped, where research was done, where punishment was meted out, in a room whose location was particularly important to Hannah. All but the most complicated deliveries were handled here. There was a nursery and a school. There was a showroom.

Hannah had seen the blueprints, highly-confidential documents visible on a kennel PC through a secure link from an anonymous email address. She'd had 15 minutes to study the pictures and memorize what she could before everything vanished in a dissolution of ones and zeros that destroyed the images piecemeal, as though they were melting.

Or being devoured by a million moths.

Hannah went through what she'd seen in her mind repeatedly, studying it the way she approached any knowledge, a quick mind coupled with a steely work ethic, a furious dedication to learning born of years of aching poverty and academic deprivation.

What happened here was easier to understand for Hannah than the floorplan. Girls were brought in, childless but with carefully-established fertility and thoroughly vetted genes, and they were bred, sometimes once, sometimes more than once, and they raised their children here until it was determined – by the people who worked on the first two floors and used computers to evaluate things and count things and measure out flesh and destiny – that they and their progeny should be sold.

The building, far more secure than it looked, was the crown jewel of the empire built by the man who, almost singlehandedly, had created the institution of modern American slavery. In the right place at the right time, armed with a vision that might almost be called charity if it weren't better described as rape, he'd found a nation fertile with potential, everything in place, the egg descended, waiting for the spark, the catalyst, the seed.

Together with his two sons – one brilliant, cold and analytical, one a talented, charismatic politician who had recently bought an appointment

to the US Senate – Druhler Fairchild refused to rest. He continued to grow the enterprise, to found and buy businesses, Hannah had learned through a series of discreet emails. And he continued to push for laws that made it easier to turn people into property, easier to manage, control and multiply them, and harder for them to get free.

He and his sons and their wives and children had all they could ever ask for: personal wealth rumored to be in the hundreds of millions, at least, homes around the world, a fleet of private jets and, most importantly perhaps, the adulation that follows those who spend their money strategically, on certain causes, on museum wings and educational television programming, on funds for the indigent.

And nations around the world – in Europe, Africa, Asia, South America – had added respectability to the enterprise with that highest form of flattery: imitation. Millions more beyond America's shores occupied some tier beneath full freedom without having committed any offense other than being poor, and useful.

So the refusal of the Fairchilds to pause, to settle on their riches, to withdraw with their laurels, remained a mystery to Hannah.

Fairchild, along with a small but growing body of partners and competitors, had put a million people under collar in the United States. How many more did they want? And why?

The driveway to New Life, by accident or design, drew visitors past the full front of the building, where its ornate façade, the carvings around its windows and upon the length of its eight stone columns, and the meticulous landscaping that featured color year-round, could be admired, and Hannah gazed upon the building's majesty and wished it could be used for something else.

"So, what do you think you'll do after college?" Estelle asked.

It was a loaded question, of course. Subjects with an academic bent and indulgent owners could earn degrees. But what they did with their knowledge after they graduated was entirely at the discretion of other people.

Hannah had dreams that she dared not voice.

"I'm not sure," she said. "Maybe graduate school."

The drive continued around the corner of the New Life building, where architectural embellishment faded and the ugly necessities of security held sway, garish "Authorized Vehicles Only" signs and a barrier in

Halloween orange and black and a narrow ramp that descended from the driveway to the building's subterranean realm.

The town car reached a heavy chromed gate and a small guard shack, where a woman leaned out the window to speak to the driver and peer at the passengers.

The guard seemed to recognize the driver and Estelle, but she peered cautiously at Hannah.

"This is Hannah Loughbridge, here for the researcher's meeting," Estelle said. "She should be on your list."

"She's been scanned?"

"Yes, at the airport."

The guard withdrew into her shack and closed the window and, after a brief pause, the gate dropped into the pavement, the car followed the ramp and entered the darkness of a vast basement parking area.

They pulled up to a door marked "Elevators" and Estelle stepped out first, helping Hannah exit, taking her bookbag and retrieving her rolling suitcase from the trunk.

Estelle used a badge at her hip to get them into a small hallway with four elevators, used the badge again to turn the up button green, once more within the elevator to select the third floor.

"You're okay going to quarters now?" Estelle asked as the car rose.

"What are my options?" Hannah asked, half jokingly.

"We have a secure lounge with a window, but I can't take your chains off there."

"Quarters it is," Hannah said. "But you said I can have a few books?"

"Yeah, just tell me what you need."

On the third floor, the elevator opened to a small, barren room, all aesthetic pretense abandoned now, just white walls and two doors with small windows at eye level and buzzers beside the jambs.

Hannah shuffled after Estelle to the door on the left, waiting while Estelle pushed the button, a buzzer sounded somewhere behind the door, a face appeared and the door opened.

"Hannah Loughbridge, for this week's meeting," Estelle told the girl behind the door. "She just needs to be processed for quarters."

Hannah followed Estelle through another door and into a room that looked like a small clinic, with an examination table, a desk and chair,

cabinets, a sink and toilet.

Estelle set down Hannah's bags and reached into her pocket, and Hannah turned toward her to be freed. Estelle opened the cuffs with a practiced efficiency, stowing the chains in a cabinet and turning back to Hannah.

"Okay, can you get your clothes off now?"

## **Chapter 6: Looking for a Hold Kit**

"No, I need to be going," Stacey told the woman who had just barged into the clinic room door. "I have a dress fitting in 30 minutes, and I'm not going to miss it."

"This is about the law," the woman said. "It's not optional."

"Okay," Stacey said, her voice rising. "First of all, who are you?"

"I'm Bridgett Mattos," she said. "I'm the office manager."

"Okay," Stacey said, her combative side out now in full bloom, her mind not at all troubled by the fact she was arguing in the nude with a stranger. "You're not the police or a lawyer, and I have better places to be right now, so I'm going to leave."

Stacey would not be coming back to this clinic, she told herself. Ever.

"This isn't about me," Bridgett said calmly. "If you walk out of this clinic, you become a fugitive."

"Well, don't report me," Stacey said.

"You've already been reported."

Stacey looked at Kari, still seated at her computer, staring up at the two arguing women with what looked to Stacey like an expression of abject horror.

Stacey, on the verge of just pushing past Bridgett and departing, was continuing to process the woman's words.

"What do you mean, fugitive?" she asked. "That's ridiculous."

"If you don't comply with the hold, you'll get reported. Name, social security number, birth date, driver's license. If you get pulled over, if you apply for a job, if you have a job and get paid on the record, they'll find you."

"Find me?"

"They'll arrest you."

“Why?”

“Because you violated a hold.”

“What’s a hold?”

“You’re a PUMI,” Bridgett said. “It’s a legal status. You have to comply with a hold. It’s illegal not to.”

“What’s a PUMI?”

“A person of unique medical interest.”

“So I have a third ovary, and there’s a law about that?”

“Yes.”

“Show me.”

Bridgett rolled her eyes in a way Stacey found deeply offensive, but she moved to the computer.

Kari stood, exchanging a glance with Stacey that was meant to say she was sorry, that she had no idea she was going to cause her this kind of trouble.

Stacey just glared, not interested in forgiving or forgetting. Then she bent over, looking over Bridgett’s shoulder as she navigated a series of Kansas state website pages, eventually finding the one she was looking for, scrolling down and highlighting the following passage:

“15.6.546: Immediately upon designation as a PUMI by any authorized clinic, medical authority, government agency or other qualified party, the PUMI will comply with the instructions of the controlling Clearinghouse, or any party through whom the Clearinghouse has issued its instructions (the “Authorized Party”). Failure by the PUMI to comply is a violation of law, punishable by a fine of up to \$50,000 and/or imprisonment for up to 5 (five) years.

“What’s the Clearinghouse?” Stacey asked, starting to understand that she was going to have to argue this with someone beyond Bridgett and the clinic.

Bridgett poked around until she found the right page.

“Chartered Medical Clearinghouse (Clearinghouse),” the page said at the top, going on to define it as “An organization chartered by the Kansas State government to gather, control, store and distribute sensitive or non-regulation medical supplies, specimens and inventory.”

These were concepts Stacey wasn’t familiar with, so she just stood, arms crossed, and looked at the wall, not certain how to proceed.

“So you’re going to comply?” Bridgett asked.

“For now,” Stacey said, still trying to sound like she had some control over things. “What am I supposed to do next?”

“We need to find a hold kit,” Bridgett replied, looking at Kari. “Do you know where we put them?”

## **Chapter 7: On the Isolation Hall**

Hannah knew this moment was coming, knew she’d be undressing while she was at New Life, but she still found the juxtaposition jarring, moving from academic collegiality with Estelle to naked subject.

But she kept her discomforts concealed, pulling her sweater over her head, slipping out of her bra and flats, pushing down her jeans and panties, folding the garments and setting them on the desk.

“Go ahead and get what you want for quarters,” Estelle said, “and hopefully I can approve it all.”

Hannah raised her rolling suitcase to the table, pulled out an economics textbook she’d be studying during the spring semester, drew out her brush and travel-size bottles of her favorite shampoo and conditioner, retrieved the second of her journals from her bookbag, made a neat stack of them on the desk, and looked at Estelle.

“That’s it?” Estelle asked.

“Yes, if you have soap,” Hannah said.

“We do. And you’ll have your own shower. You can put your clothes in the suitcase, and I’ll bring it to you when I let you out for tonight’s reception.”

Hannah pulled out the cocktail dress she’d brought for the evening’s event, put today’s clothing in its place and set the black dress on top, zipping the case closed and setting it on the floor.

Estelle picked up the journal and the book, flipped through the pages and looked at Hannah with an amused expression.

“Someone will cut out the pages and put something else in there, now and then.”

“Have they ever done it with a Bible?” Hannah asked.

“That’s almost always what they use,” Estelle said, walking to the sink to wash her hands. “I need you to bend over the desk for a cavity check.”



Hannah obeyed, bending at the waist, elbows on the desk, staring straight ahead while Estelle stepped behind her and, without putting on gloves, slid two fingers up her vagina.

“I hope you don’t mind glove-free,” Estelle said, exploring Hannah’s front chamber gently but thoroughly. “It’s cheaper to wash than to throw out a fresh pair of gloves after every check.”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Hannah said blankly.

Estelle withdrew her fingers, went to the sink, washed up again and returned, pulling a lubricant tube out of her pocket, and Hannah winced, arched her back and set her feet a little further apart for what she knew was coming next.

Estelle was less gentle with this hole, pushing one lubricated finger up Hannah’s anus and searching roughly for whatever things – keys, pills, a camera, a weapon – New Life most feared.

Roughness with the rear chamber made sense, Hannah thought. For what was done at New Life, the delicate front hole’s proper functioning was essential, while the rear chamber was far less important – just a place to examine because of its potential for storing contraband.

The finger exited, the hands were washed, Hannah straightened and picked up her books, brush, shampoo and conditioner.

Estelle used her badge to get them through the next door and into a narrow hall with doors on either side, each bolted and padlocked shut, and a pair of doors at the end that led, Hannah knew from memory, to the rest of the floor.

“You’ll be staying in the isolation hall tonight,” she said. “It’s all we could put together on short notice.”

Hannah studied the doors, far more complicated than a simple barrier. Each was solid, but with a variety of ports – a square window at face level, a slot at the bottom for applying shackles and providing food, presumably, a horizontal slot at waist level for chaining the hands and a second, vertical opening for, Hannah guessed, examining the sex organ.

Small panels at most of the ports were closed and latched shut, the girls who lingered behind them not permitted even the small comfort of looking into a barren white hall.

Estelle led Hannah to a door of open panels, unlocking it and pulling it wide, stepping back so Hannah could enter.

Hannah walked through the door and allowed herself, briefly, to imagine being brought here for breeding and research, to be confined here in a huge, hopeless building of chains and cells and white walls.

The cell was a little larger than Hannah's kennel at school, with a simple bed on one side and, along the other wall, a sink, toilet and shower, a single towel hanging from a rod above the toilet. There was a small desk and chair beside the sink and Hannah set her things there and turned back to Estelle.

"What do you use these rooms for?" she asked casually.

"All new breeding females spend their first week on this hall," Estelle said, "and we use them for discipline, for girls who fight or complain or can't get their act together."

"Are there any girls on this hall now," Hannah asked, already knowing the answer, "besides me?"

"Any door with the covers closed has a girl behind it, probably."

Hannah thought about the building blueprint she'd seen on the computer, and the hall with the doors she'd just seen in person: at least a dozen, six on each side, at least 10 with their covers closed and latched.

"One more scan," Estelle said, holding out her phone.

Hannah stepped to her, turned her back and waited.

"Okay," Estelle said, her phone warm against Hannah's bare back. "I'll come get you at 6 so you can get dressed for the reception."

"Sure," Hannah agreed, stepping into the cell so Estelle could shut the door.

"No talking allowed on this hall, if that's not obvious," Estelle said, voice growing distant as she shut Hannah's door and padlocked it.

"I'll be studying," Hannah joked.

"No crying either," Estelle added, dropping to her knees to latch the ankle port, rising to close the middle two panels, and finally shutting the little door in front of Hannah's face. "It gets girls extra time here, and they know that."

Hannah, utterly secluded now, nodded to no one.

"See you at 6," Estelle said, her voice muffled.

"Bye."

Hannah stared at the door, looked up at the ceiling with the glare of its recessed fluorescent lights, and fought a sudden, irrational panic. This was reminding her of something. What? Her first night in the kennels? The

nightmares of hopelessness she sometimes woke up with? Something deeper, symbolic?

She tuned her ears to Estelle's receding footsteps and heard the girl speak again, somewhere down the hall, the words just loud enough to be made out.

"How are you doing, Glenda?" Estelle asked.

Hannah couldn't hear Glenda's reply, but she could guess what had been said when Estelle spoke again.

"Just one more day," Estelle said. "Sometime tomorrow. Probably a little after lunch."

Who was Glenda? Hannah wondered, stepping to the desk. Someone like Hannah had been, a child of poverty? A small-time criminal whose attributes met New Life's standards? An almost-mother, whose terminated fetus earned her the suspicion of the authorities, and whose ability to breed won her New Life's consideration?

Hannah picked up her economics textbook and settled onto the bed, wrestling the thin pillow into position between the wall and her back.

She turned to the new book's first page, its fresh spine cracking in her naked lap as if issuing a muted wail, not unlike a child's first cry.

She shouldn't have brought economics to this place. By the third paragraph of the introduction, she knew this was not her subject, a dry accounting of things she found not just dull but, given her present situation, disturbing.

Supply and demand. Tradeoffs and bargains. The things people did to get what they needed. Someone winning. Someone losing.

Nothing on the page beneath her could not remove her mind from the place that, briefly, would swallow her as it had swallowed many others, for far longer.

## **Chapter 8: House Fairchild Horsetrading**

There were certain calls Brighton Fairchild, R-New Jersey, preferred to make from outdoors, on his cellphone, somewhere outside the domed Capitol and its attendant office buildings that had been, since the previous summer, his workplace.

Cold as it was this January morning, he eased out the Capitol's secure underground exit, made his way to the mostly abandoned public

sidewalk, and pulled out his cellphone.

“Senator Baker!” he boomed.

“Goddam, where the hell are you boy?” demanded Senator Pete Baker, R-Texas. “You sound like shit.”

“I’m outside,” Fairchild replied. “Right by the building. Maybe it’s your phone.”

“Shit, it’s not my phone,” Baker retorted. “Whatcha need this morning?”

“Well, Sir, the people need—”

“The people?” Baker shouted. “What people?”

“The people always need something,” Fairchild said. “And I’m gonna give it to them.”

“Oh, I bet you will,” Baker agreed. “Tell me what they want, then.”

“Just a little tweaking,” Fairchild replied. “Around the edges is all.”

“Oh, God, this is another one of your dad’s things, ain’t it?”

“Huh?” Fairchild asked innocently.

“When’s he gonna quit?” Baker asked.

“Not until he dies,” Fairchild replied, turning the corner onto Pennsylvania Avenue.

“He’s a true believer,” Baker said. “I might not agree with him, but I admire his conviction.”

“He’s a businessman,” Fairchild shot back. “He’s found a way to make a living is all.”

“Having his son in the Senate doesn’t hurt.”

“I’m just doing what’s best for the nation,” Fairchild insisted. “And good chance by the time this goes through, I’ll be out anyway.”

“Out?” Baker repeated, surprise in his voice.

“Out of the business.”

“Your family’s selling?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“This’ll just be between you and me,” Baker wheedled. “You’re selling? Your secret’s safe here, you know that.”

“I’ve already said more than I should have. Just help me get this through the chamber, and America will be better off.”

“Okay, tell me what your pappy wants us to pass now and I’ll draw my own conclusions.”

“A coupla refinements to Danzir-Baker.”

“Such as?”

“You where you can write something down?” Fairchild asked.

“Just tell me, I’ll remember enough. We can put it all in writing later.”

“Okay,” Fairchild said, pulling a folded sheet of legal pad paper from his coat pocket and shaking it out with one hand, “part F, section III, subsections d and i. Combine those at d, and change ‘procurer or deliverer of abortifacient’ to ‘abortifacient handler, transporter, storage provider, houser, or accessory or accomplice to same, regardless of age’.”

“What’s that supposed to accomplish?” Baker asked.

“Broaden culpability,” Fairchild replied quickly. “Shouldn’t everyone who helps a girl murder her baby pay the price?”

“So . . .” Baker said, pausing to reflect, “that means . . . in a practical sense . . . if they find a, a, an abortifacient, in someone’s house or apartment, or wherever, everyone under that roof – at any age – can be arrested, and—”

“We just write the laws,” Fairchild said. “It’s up to law enforcement to work with them. Now, another change, to part B, definitions. This one’s pretty minor. Under abortifacient, we’ll expand the definition to include rumored or suspected abortifacients.”

“Rumored?”

“It’s about intent,” Fairchild said, gazing across the National Mall to the George Washington Monument which, he’d been told once and still didn’t believe, was meant to represent a penis. “If a girl buys something to terminate, even if it won’t work, she’s a murderer, in her heart, and—”

“Now hold on,” Baker interrupted. “You know the latest rumor? You know what girls are drinking now? Olive oil and bleach. Equal parts. Who doesn’t have olive oil and bleach in their house? You gonna send out the police to arrest every girl in a house with olive oil and bleach? And her momma and her sisters? And her brothers too, for that matter?”

“Not if she’s not pregnant.”

“Shit.”

“And the last thing,” Fairchild said, speaking quickly because he needed to get indoors but he didn’t want to talk about this where anyone else could hear.

“Yeah?”

“Subject court.”

“You’re breaking up,” Baker said. “Gonna have to call you back.”  
“Subject court,” Fairchild said again. “Don’t hang up. Subject court.”

“We’ve already talked about that,” Baker protested. “Danzir-Baker’s not the place for it.”

“I understand that. We’re going to add it to the next spending bill. I just need you to support it, or at least let it pass when it comes up for—”

“Look, Brighton, I know this is something your dad’s been asking for for 20 years, but setting up a whole nation’s worth of parallel courts for slaves isn’t—”

“Subjects.”

“For subjects, then, isn’t going to—”

“Not parallel courts. It can be the same courts. Just a different application of jurisprudence.”

“There are already a whole set of laws for subjects. They go to different jails, they get different punishments, their testimony is considered —”

“It’s not uniform,” Fairchild said. “It’s not—”

“You don’t like that you can’t kill ‘em,” Baker asserted.

“Huh?”

“I’ve read between the lines on what your dad’s said. Kill a slave, go free.”

“That’s not true,” Fairchild sputtered.

“That’s the end result, and you know it. No coroner. No inquest. No police investigation. Just a subject court hearing and, at worst, a fine.”

“The owner can sue,” Fairchild countered.

“What if the owner and the murderer are the same people?”

“No one would kill their own subject.”

Baker snorted into the phone, loudly enough that Fairchild had to move it away from his head. “You have an unusually high opinion of people who own other people,” he said. “I assume you don’t read the news?”

“I stand by the law as we’ll be proposing it. It’s fair, it’s honorable, and you might fairly call it God’s will.”

“God?” Baker echoed. “God? God only knows what they’ll do to those girls in the labs, if murder stops being murder.”

“Labs have to meet the highest ethical standards,” Fairchild said. “You know that.”

Baker just laughed, loudly and derisively.

“Pete, are you going to help me?” Fairchild asked, holding the phone away from his ear and scowling.

“I’ll give you part F, and I’ll consider part B. Send me your proposed language. But subject court, I don’t know. You probably don’t need me regardless. And I am . . . I am . . . awfully busy getting the Grayscale Fighter funded, and I—”

“Army says they don’t need it,” Fairchild said. “Marines too. It’s a boondoggle.”

“Army and Marines don’t know what they need,” Baker said. “And I’ve got three plants in Texas that are gonna shut down if we don’t give them some new work. Good plants. Good people. And decades of experience making half of the kinds of components the Grayscale needs. Chassis. Fire control. Pivot and tuck. One holds a patent on that. That patent —”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Fairchild said. “I’m sure we can work together on things.”

“Alright. We probably can.”

## **Chapter 9: A PUMI Hold Kit**

“What’s a hold kit?” Kari asked.

“It’s a bag with things in it,” Bridgett replied.

“Oh, like a green duffel bag? Kind of smallish though?”

“Yeah. We had to buy three a year ago, I haven’t seen them since.”

“Doris moved them into the closet near the MRI in January. When we were putting the Christmas decorations away. How many do you need?”

“Just one.”

Kari left the room and Stacey, still naked, with at least the first half of her day ruined, looked at Bridgett.

“You’ve never had someone in my situation before this?”

“No,” Bridgett said. “I had no idea what they were talking about when they called. I—”

“Then how do you know you’re doing it right?” Stacey demanded.

“The instructions over the phone were very clear.”

“Who called you?” Stacey demanded.

“A representative of the Clearinghouse.”

“What was their name? I want to talk to them.”

“Look, Stacey,” Bridgett said, stepping closer to the girl. “There’s nothing you can do, or we can do. We’re required by law to report certain things, and if they want you, you have to comply. We all have to comply. If we don’t put a hold on you, we’ll be in as much trouble as you.”

“You could be arrested?”

“Yes. Literally. I could be arrested. Do you want to see that part of the law?”

“No.”

Kari returned to the clinic room, bearing a green duffle bag, about the size of a rolled up sleeping bag, “FEMALE PUMI HOLD KIT” stenciled on the side in thick black letters. She set it on the desk, cut the plastic tag that held the rings shut at the top and began pulling out envelopes and small paper bags, some clinking as she set them down. Stacey looked at the items, noticed a water bottle and several plastic packages that said “MRE,” found the jumble of things incomprehensible and disconcerting, and she looked away.

The bag emptied, everything piled on the desk, Bridgett reached for a large, manila envelope that said, “Open First.”

Inside was a stack of papers, the first a letter that said at the top, “TO: PUMI.”

Bridgett handed it to Stacey while she and Kari went through the rest of the packet.

“Dear PUMI,” the letter began. “While your hold is in place, you will obey all instructions from the responsible Clearinghouse, and all parties authorized to act on behalf of the Clearinghouse. Refusal to comply with any instruction, including the acceptance of confinement or restraints, is a crime that may result in, per applicable law at the time of infraction, corporal punishment and/or fines and/or incarceration.”

That’s all it said, so Stacey read it several times over, focusing on the words “punishment” and “confinement” and “restraint,” raising her eyes from the letter when she sensed that Kari and Bridgett were waiting for something from her.

Kari, standing beside the desk, holding other sheets in front of her, stared at Stacey, her face pale, mouth drawn tight.

“There are certain things we’re supposed to do, in a certain order,” Kari said. “Ready to start?”



Stacey stared at her, trying to comprehend the sudden change, in everything. Torn between resisting, even violently, and obeying rules or laws that seemed to be real and powerful, she decided in favor of continuing to comply.

“Okay,” Stacey said. She would obey, but no one in this room was a friend, and she wouldn’t pretend they were.

“Step 1:” Kari read. “The PUMI will insert one tampon up her vagina.”

“I’m not on my period,” Stacey said coldly. “You know that.”

“It’s required,” Bridgett said, pulling a paper cylinder out of an envelope reading “Tampon (3).”

“All the steps have to be done,” she added.

Stacey took the tampon from Bridgett, tore the paper off, parted her legs and bent over, pushing the product into her body with a grunt.

“Step 2,” Kari read. “The PUMI will put on one adjustable panty.”

Bridgett picked up an envelope that said, “Adjustable Panty (3),” opened it and pulled out what looked like a pair of girls’ panties, except that they were made of sturdy brown paper, with adhesive straps at the hips.

After a quick study, Stacey put the panty between her legs, adjusting the straps and securing them in place. The garment was really just a sanitary pad, covering her vulva and anus but little more. She’d shaved her pubic hair the previous evening and, her vanity still intact at this moment, was glad her black muff wasn’t poking out around the edges.

“Step 3: The PUMI will report the time of her last meal.”

Kari looked at Stacey expectantly, and Stacey realized she was being asked a question.

“Huh? Oh, um, 7:30. This morning.”

Kari picked a pen up off the desk and scribbled something on the sheet before she continued reading.

“Step 4: The Authorized Party will place the PUMI in leg irons.”

Stacey, struggling to comprehend a process she was finding increasingly foreign, had to play Kari’s words through her mind several times before she heard them.

“Wait, what?” she asked.

Neither woman looked at her, but Bridgett reached for a small envelope that said “Leg Irons (1),” tore it open and pulled out what looked like a set of large handcuffs.

“No,” Stacey said adamantly. “I’m not doing that. You’re not putting those on me.”

Kari and Bridgett just stood, staring at her, waiting.

“Okay, what if I just walk out now?” Stacey demanded. “Are you going to stop me? ‘Cuz I’m gonna leave. Okay?”

“We won’t stop you,” Bridgett said. “We’re not set up for that kind of thing.” She paused. “This is new for us too. I’m sorry. If you walk out, we can’t stop you. But we won’t be responsible for any consequences.”

“They can’t arrest me because of an ovary,” Stacey insisted.

“They called, they told me to hold you, they said they’d be out to get you later today. If you’re not here, my impression is they’ll go to your home or your job. And you’ll be in trouble. You’ll be charged.”

“I don’t have a job,” Stacey said.

Bridgett inspected the leg irons, opened a cuff, looked at Stacey.

Stacey glared, arms crossed tightly over her breasts, but she looked toward the ceiling, resignedly granting her assent in that way.

Bridgett knelt while Stacey continued to stare upward. She knew Kari was looking at her, wanting eye contact, reassurance that she at least understood the necessity of this, even if she didn’t like it, but Stacey wasn’t about to give her that.

Bridgett, clearly telling the truth when she said this was new for them, fumbled for almost a minute with the cuffs, opening one, closing it around Stacey’s left ankle, securing it too tightly, opening it with a key, closing it again, moving to the right ankle once she was satisfied with the fit on the left.

Once she’d been shackled, Stacey looked down, raised her feet, one and then the other. The chain between her ankles was more than a foot long. She could walk, but she couldn’t run.

“Step 5:” Kari continued quietly. “The Authorized Party will place the PUMI in handcuffs, behind the back.”

Bridgett opened up the envelope that read “Handcuffs (1)” and stepped behind Stacey.

Stacey, trying to convince herself this was temporary, allowed Bridgett to take her hands one at a time and cuff her wrists. No fumbling this time.

“Step 6:” Kari read. “PUMI will observe the collection of her personal effects. Same will be secured and locked with a padlock in the

Hold Kit Bag. PUMI will not be given access to her personal effects.”

Stacey looked at the floor, processing this latest instruction, uncertain what it meant until Bridgett opened the door and motioned for Stacey to step through.

She followed Bridgett and Kari numbly through the hall and to the room where she’d changed, her clothes and purse and shoes and socks scattered about, on the table and chair, on the floor.

Kari picked up her jeans first, folded them, put them in the bag. The rest followed, shirt, bra and panties, her purse with her money and credit cards and driver’s license and phone. Kari put a padlock through the rings at the bag’s opening, looked with profound regret at Stacey, and picked the instructions back up.

“Step 6: PUMI will be escorted to a cell or cage meeting the standards of the Confinement Guidelines sheet. If an adequate confinement facility is not available, the enclosed tether and two padlocks will be used to tether PUMI to a secure structural fixture.”

Stacey, standing chained and almost naked, watched as the women spoke quietly to each other and consulted the sheets. She heard Kari say something about a column in a breakroom, watched as Bridgett nodded.

“Okay,” Bridgett said, looking up at Stacey, no sympathy in her eyes, clearly just wanting to get through this, “we’re going to put you in the employee breakroom. You’ll be able to sit.”

“Oh, great,” Stacey said.

Bridgett held the door open and Stacey stepped back into the hall, just as another changing room door opened, a nude woman in her 30’s exiting, escorted by a female medical technician. Both glanced at Stacey, looked away, looked back and stared.

Stacey’s mortification quickly turned to anger.

“They found a third ovary,” she said, looking both of them in the eye. She turned so they could see her handcuffs. “And this is what happened.”

“What do you mean?” the woman asked.

“Just don’t let them look too hard into your pussy,” Stacey said, following Bridgett and Kari to the end of the hall.

The breakroom featured a couch, two chairs, a table, fridge and microwave. A bulletin board beside the fridge held pictures of children,

families, vacation places. Kari had posted several, of herself and her boyfriend at some beach.

“You can sit here,” Bridgett said, motioning to the chair in the corner, setting the hold kit bag on a table against the wall. Kari also dropped things there, the instruction sheet, the water bottle, several packages that said “MRE,” which Stacey was beginning to understand must be food of some kind.

Stacey sat, adjusting her arms, already feeling the strain of having them bound behind her.

Beside the chair, next to the wall, a thick post ran from floor to ceiling. This time, Kari did the restraining, removing a chain from an envelope that read “Tether (6 feet),” padlocking one end to Stacey’s shackles, looping the other end around the post and padlocking it to itself.

“Seriously?” Stacey said. “Does this seem right to you?”

Neither woman said anything.

“Step 7,” Kari said, reading quietly. “Every two hours, for 15 minutes, PUMI’s handcuffs will be moved to the front and she will be untethered. She may use that time to eat, take care of personal matters, and visit the restroom.”

“Step 8,” Kari read, her voice just above a whisper. “PUMI will be shown the compliance prod and will be read the following statement: While under the hold, you will follow the instructions of the Authorized Party. Any failure to do so may, as determined by the Authorized Party, result in the application of the compliance prod at either of two settings to a selected area of your body. One test application of the compliance prod is recommended but not required.”

Stacey, looking up at the women from her chair, saw in Bridgett’s hand a foot-long rod, ivory with a red tip, two black buttons along the side.

Bridgett pressed one of the buttons and cobalt blue sparks crackled at the end of the rod.

“What the hell?” Stacey gasped. “Seriously? What the hell?”

“We’re not going to do this,” Kari said, her face red now, a mask of embarrassment and horror.

“It won’t be necessary,” Bridgett added, but she pointed to an outlet under the window. “Plug it in there,” she said.

Kari did as she was told and stormed out of the room with what sounded to Stacey like a cough, or possibly the start of tears.

“Have everything you need?” Bridgett asked, taking a step backwards toward the door.

“Of course not,” Stacey said.

Bridgett exited, her shoes tapping down the hall.

“Hey!” Stacey cried, too late, remembering her life beyond the clinic. “I need to call some people! I need to call my dad!”

## Chapter 10: A Reception

As she often did when she studied, Hannah lost track of time and place. The white walls and the slotted door with the closed panels all disappeared, and the minutes ticked by. Or had it been hours?

Economics wasn’t a terrible subject, just a little dry, at least in this textbook. But it had served its purpose. How boring would a subject have to be before it couldn’t throw her into an academic coma?

Had there been knocking? Had she heard banging, briefly, in some half-asleep corner of her mind?

Hannah read through the book’s first two chapters before she looked at the shower and the sink and stretched, arching her back against the wall, shaking her legs back and forth and opening her mouth in a wide yawn.

“Hannah?” said a female voice.

“Yes?” Hannah said with a start, suspecting this wasn’t the first time her name had been uttered from beyond the locked door.

“It’s almost 6:20,” Estelle announced, opening the panel, revealing her face at the window. “You ready to go?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said, sliding off her bed. “Let me pee though.”

She sat on her toilet and watched Estelle open the door.

“Sorry I’m running behind,” Estelle said. “I had to make copies on the first floor after people started showing up.”

“I’ll be fashionably late, then,” Hannah quipped.

“You can look at it that way,” Estelle agreed. “Have your ears been burning?”

“I’m not sure I would have noticed,” Hannah replied, pointing at the book on her bed. “I was studying.”

“People are talking about you,” Estelle said.

Hannah looked down as her vulva stopped dripping, grabbed a tissue and wiped.

“What people?”

“The other researchers,” Estelle said. “Most visitors don’t have a, a subject as part of their group, and they’re glad you’re here.”

“You don’t need me to show them how things work,” Hannah said, flushing, stepping to her mirror to fluff her hair and verify that her makeup was still tolerably intact, crossing her cell to join Estelle at the door.

“We do need you, to demonstrate the full system,” Estelle said. “We’ll usually just show visitors some of the rooms where things are done, but not the actual procedures if all we have is research inventory.”

Research inventory, Hannah thought, and she stared at Estelle while she translated the words to herself: We don’t want anyone to watch us do what we do to girls who aren’t here voluntarily, who can’t stop us from doing what we do, who might say something awkward, or embarrassing, or terrible, if they see an audience.

“The reception is happening on the second floor,” Estelle said, leading Hannah back to the little room where she’d undressed earlier today. “And it’s not secure, so you’ll need to be shackled.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed. This had already been intimated, and she didn’t care. She was here to experience, to learn, to gather information, to do some other things. Being forced to wear chains was, at this moment in her mind, simply another detail to remember.

Or, perhaps it was more than just a detail. It might be useful too. She was working at several agendas here.

Hannah’s bag was waiting for her, laid flat on the table beside a pair of shackles, and she zipped it open, reached in for a pair of black panties and slid them up her legs, pulled out the cocktail dress she’d left on top, stepped into it and pulled it up.

“Can you zip me?”

Estelle obliged and Hannah reached in for a pair of black pumps, slid her feet into them, bent to latch them across the bones of her feet, straightened and looked at Estelle expectantly.

Estelle, with the merest hint of apology, pulled the open shackles off the table, knelt and applied them to Hannah’s ankles.

Hannah, clanking with each step in a way she’d grown accustomed to since she was 18, followed Estelle through the next door and to the

elevator.

“You really studied?” Estelle asked.

“Yeah,” Hannah confirmed. “I’ve been busy with the holidays. This trip is sort of a vacation for me.”

“Are you an introvert?”

“Huh?”

“Are you an introvert?” Estelle repeated.

“I don’t know,” Hannah replied. “Maybe, sort of.”

“Most of our researchers are introverts. Just about everyone is in your group.”

“How can you tell?” Hannah asked. “Didn’t they just get here?”

“I’ve been checking them in all afternoon,” Estelle said. “It’s obvious. Is that van Minsk?”

“Yes.”

“Who picked it out?”

“I did,” Hannah replied, following Estelle onto the elevator.

“But your family bought it for you?”

“They’re not my family,” Hannah said. “They’re my owners. But yes, it was a Christmas present. I said I needed a new cocktail dress for tonight.”

“They bought you a new dress for one night?”

“I’ll probably wear it again.”

“I would kill for a van Minsk,” said Estelle, who was dressed simply, practically, in a black skirt and white blouse. “I’d wear it every night, to everything.”

“They’re doing big, slightly off-color bows this season,” Hannah said, turning to show off the midnight blue bow affixed to the small of her back, its two broad loops resting against her buttocks, its ribbons hanging down past the hemline of a skirt short enough it might be best if Hannah did not bend at more than a 45 degree angle tonight.

“Nice,” Estelle agreed.

The elevator opened and Hannah stepped with Estelle into a hall that was anything but barren. Where the spaces upstairs were narrow, white, devoid of embellishment, the place where Hannah walked now could hardly be called a hall. A lane, perhaps. An avenue, wide and high-ceilinged, paved with a carpet of elaborate, vaguely familiar designs in gold, royal blue, pastel pinks and greens. The walls were hung with a mix of portraits,

framed print articles, landscapes, and new-age sculptures, faces and other organic shapes in bas relief. The ceiling featured inlaid lights separated by thick blue beams, subtle shapes and patterns flowing across the wood and the plaster.

“Oh, that’s DNA,” Hannah noted, looking between her feet.

“This floor is all biology and reproduction and evolution,” Estelle said. “It was done by Xerx.”

“Xerx?”

“A famous artist in Montreal. It cost a fortune, I hear.”

“I would kill for a Xerx,” Hannah said.

Hannah followed Estelle toward a pair of ornate cherry doors, opened wide, hanging grandly on great brass hinges. The subdued voices and light, and the saccharine pop music emanating from therein served as a counterpoint to the otherwise bold, confident ambience.

“You’re probably going to be the only one in van Minsk,” Estelle whispered just before they reached the entrance. “I hope they don’t bore you.”

“They won’t,” Hannah promised, feeling anything but bored by her responsibilities.

“If other people’s clothes bored me, I’d be bored all the time,” she added hastily. The next phase of her mission began now.

She forged ahead, each step cut short by 18 inches of stainless steel links, and she realized she was hungry, the meal on the airplane a delicious but dwindling memory, the void in her stomach filled by the butterflies that always swarmed when a challenge lay before her.

The people at New Life who decided things had set aside far more space than necessary for tonight’s reception, a room large enough for a gathering of 300 people, dedicated to just a few dozen, who hovered near the three tables laden with heavy hors d’oeuvres, plates and forks in hand, and the bar where wine and mixed drinks were poured.

On the wall past the tables, an electronic screen had been mounted, bearing a message in bright orange letters: “Welcome to New Life, Spring Researchers!”

Beneath it stood a table stacked with brochures and forms.

There must be smaller rooms here, Hannah thought, but they chose this one to impress us.

That was Hannah’s first conclusion.



Her second was that, indeed, Estelle was correct. No one here was wearing van Minsk.

Not the boys, who comprised about half the throng and had chosen to don – for an event clearly identified as semi-formal in the gathering prospectus – blue jeans with tragically non-matching blue blazers, thick red sweaters with sleeves hanging from armpits, thin, polyester blend dress shirts with spread collars and no ties and – God save the free world – one pair of camo pants.

And not the girls, who apparently dressed primarily as a last resort before nudity. There were four polyester pantsuits, none of them in redeeming gray or black. There were long, prairie skirts like those Hannah used to wear, in her poor days, and hated. There were ill-advised one-pieces, shirt-dresses and gowns that had been terribly cut and patterned with the wrong colors. Gray with tan. Pastel oranges and purple.

And more camo. Pink, and understated. One girl, with a tight dark bob and black boots, was wearing a top in a distinctly camo pattern.

The girl in camo should be mated with the boy in the camo pants, Hannah thought. She should be brought upstairs, and put in one of the little isolation cells until she was fertile, and then the boy in the camo pants should be required to fuck her and fuck her until she was heavy with child, at which point their child – or litter, more likely – should be examined for the presence of non-human attributes.

Hannah continued to survey, found that the eyes were turning toward her, one pair after another, taking her in, staring.

Drinking her in.

Looking at her face, at her collared neck, at her dress, at her bound ankles.

A hush did not descend upon the ballroom, not exactly, but Hannah heard the pause in sentences, the murmured “there she is,” the intake of breath.

“Everyone, this is Hannah,” Estelle announced unnecessarily, and Hannah smiled and tried to look into as many eyes as she could, and caught many staring back, and for a moment this was just people looking at Hannah, a particularly attractive, notably intelligent sex slave who happened to be wearing van Minsk.

One of the older people there, a man who was not in fact terribly dressed, who had picked out a gray suit and a midnight blue tie Hannah

hadn't noticed before, stepped up to her.

"Hello, Hannah, so nice to have you with us," he said, and he offered his hand and she took it. "I'm Dietrich Johnson."

"Oh, one of the directors," Hannah blurted. "Are you at the wrong party?"

Johnson put his hand on Hannah's shoulder and aimed her toward the bar, speaking quietly.

"I've been introducing myself as an investigator," Johnson said. "You're the first person who's called me out."

"I look into things," Hannah said, asking for a pinot grigio, accepting her wine with a "thank you" and turning to Johnson before she spoke again. "I like to know who I'm dealing with."

"I read your application," Johnson said. "I read all the applications. But I read yours."

"I hope it didn't bore you."

"It's the only one I read more than once. I read it three times."

"Why?"

Johnson looked furtively over Hannah's head, confirming that no one was close enough to hear, no one was hovering, or staring.

"I'd like to have you over tonight," he said quietly.

"Why?"

"Because you're all I've thought of since I read your application," Johnson replied.

"Why? Did you get my picture too?"

"I did," he said. "But there are a lot of girls who look like you. The number who look like you and think like you is . . . smaller."

"You want to fuck me, then," Hannah whispered.

"I knew you'd be unpredictable."

"That's what you want, then?"

"It would be done discreetly. Securely."

"No," Hannah said, and she whirled around with the sharp jangle of her ankle chain, and she knew her cheeks were flushing and wished they wouldn't. No matter how well she thought she'd prepared for something, people did things she hadn't anticipated, couldn't anticipate.

"Hannah," Estelle said, waving her over, and Hannah shuffled to the small band that had gathered around, two boys and three girls, including the girl in the pink camo.

Because Estelle didn't know everyone yet, each introduced themselves, starting with their names, then stating their schools and their academic station.

"Richard, Hannah, nice to meet you, I'm at Duke, post grad in biochemical systems."

"Desiree," said Camo Girl, "Princeton, doctoral program in organic frequencies."

Hannah waited until everyone else had finished to introduce herself: "Hannah, University of Texas at Corpus Christi, undergrad. In something."

As soon as the laughter subsided, Hannah interrogated each new acquaintance about their fields of study, their knowledge and how it would be applied. She'd never heard of organic frequencies, so that was a particular focus, and she drilled the girl in the pink camo top about her studies while she tried to reconcile herself with the girl's clothing choice, which seemed to be a sort of sweater, with faux buttons that, upon closer inspection, featured the faces of America's founding fathers. George Washington was clearly visible at the top. Was that Alexander Hamilton next? And Abraham Lincoln further down?

There were questions for her as well, about her studies and her research and, haltingly, about her personal life that she answered directly, or dodged obliquely, or ignored altogether.

"You're a senior at Corpus Christi?"

"No, just a first semester junior."

"You're staying upstairs?"

"Yes, on a quiet hall in one of the research areas."

"What have you done outside coursework?"

"I researched juvenile epilepsy a little, looked into allergic rhinitis, did some stuff in reverse somatic hypermutation, but I haven't directed anything in a lab yet."

"You haven't? Then I'm sure you're looking forward to your project this spring."

"Oh yes. Very much so."

"You . . . belong . . . you belong to an academic foundation?"

"No, a regular family, in Dallas."

"And they keep you at their home?"

“No, I’m the kennels, in the Corpus Christi campus, where the son goes.”

“Are you allowed to . . . interact . . . with the other subjects there?”

“Yes.”

“Does that make the son jealous?”

“Tell me more about that research area you mentioned . . .”

Hannah made the rounds, introducing herself to everyone, doing her best to be charming, limiting her intake of wine but participating enthusiastically in the pleasures of the hors d’oeuvres, taking bites between questions, finding the escargot well-seasoned and richly buttered, the salmon fritters a little dry, the vegetable dip a surprising mix of curry and ginger, the shrimp cocktail perfect, the pommes frites strangely satisfying. There must be a kitchen here. Was it staffed by slaves?

Tomorrow, Hannah would be a researcher, a slave girl and, at times, nothing but a vagina.

Tonight, she must be more than all that – charming, clever, bold, likable.

Human.

As deserving of the rights of humanity as any other.

What she was planning – the path that had been laid out for her, the little act of insurrection she was to perform – required no less.

## **Chapter 11: In the Breakroom**

Left alone, chained and topless, and bottomless except for the pad between her legs, Stacey’s mind quickly moved to impotent anger. There were laws, apparently, that mandated this, and there were people who carried out the laws, and there were people and companies who, presumably, asked for the laws in the first place. Each, including Bridgett and Kari, had played their own small part willingly, conforming to a system that, at this moment, seemed completely malevolent.

But then, so had Stacey. She could have left, put on her clothing and rushed out of the clinic. But from there, apparently, she would have begun a life on the run.

She needed to call the bridal shop to reschedule her fitting. She needed to call her father and tell him what had happened and get his advice.

He wasn't the kind of lawyer that dealt with matters like this, but at least he was a lawyer. Maybe he knew someone.

She heard the flush of a toilet one or two floors above, then the rush of water through the pipe her tether was looped around. It wasn't a pole or column, as she'd originally believed. It was a sewer line.

The realization of place, of sewer and structure, opened the door to a new, terrifying awareness: she was going to be taken somewhere. They weren't, obviously, going to bring her back home, to her little apartment. They weren't going to leave her at the clinic. Someone was coming for her, and they would leave with her, and take her.

Somewhere.

She looked at the thing they'd euphemistically called the "compliance prod," plugged into the wall, recharging so, if necessary, it could be used to punish her, subdue her. The water, food, and the locked bag with all her possessions, sat on the table.

Her phone rang, the light, airy tune she'd picked out two weeks ago. Probably the dress shop, asking where she was. Or maybe one of her prospective employers, calling to schedule an interview. Her dad had lined something up with a law firm he dealt with. It wasn't remotely interesting, but it would be better than nothing.

The door to the breakroom opened with a creak and she looked up, startled to see a man pushing a large water bottle on a hand truck.

Scanning the room for the water cooler, his eyes immediately settled on Stacey.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed. "Sorry, sorry, I'll come back."

He stepped back into the hall, out of Stacey's view, but he didn't close the door, and Stacey realized he was waiting for her to say something.

"That's alright," she said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I just need to swap the water out, okay?"

"Sure, whatever."

He pushed back into the room, looked at Stacey, first into her eyes and then quickly down her body, down to her feet, along the chain to the sewer pipe and back to her feet, to her middle with its ridiculous paper panty, then her bare breasts, where his gaze lingered in what was clearly utter mystification.

"Long story," Stacey said. She knew she was blushing and felt stupid for that. There was nothing to be ashamed of. She had done nothing

wrong, nothing shameful.

The water cooler stood against the wall, between her chair and the table where her things lay, and he moved to it, clearly trying to focus on his work and having trouble with that. He pulled up the old bottle, with a small remnant of water that spilled out onto the cooler, then onto the floor. He hoisted the fresh bottle, tore off the cap and almost dropped it before he had it in place, bubbles gurgling up.

“You’re okay, right?” he asked, still not looking.

“Well, no,” she said, “but there’s nothing you can do about it.”

He looked at her again, up from her feet to her breasts, C cup with nipples that always firmed up when exposed to the air, then back into her eyes. There is no etiquette for what to do when one encounters a naked female in chains, so he seemed to be taking his cues from Stacey. She returned his gaze calmly, and that was all the encouragement he needed.

“What did you do?” he asked, eyebrows raised, mouth tight, his curiosity and his fear of saying the wrong thing competing, curiosity winning out.

Stacey would have been justified telling him to leave and never come back, screaming at him to stop looking at her, and she probably would have done that for many kinds of men. But he seemed harmless – a little overweight, a face that said middle-aged and middle class and normal. He wore a wedding band, probably was a father, just doing a job.

“I had a third ovary,” Stacey said, the merest smile on her lips, well aware of how strange this must sound, how unlikely. “So someone wants to study it or something. So now, this.”

She leaned forward and moved her hands to the side so he could see her handcuffs.

“That happened today?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“You were a patient here?”

“Yeah, just doing a checkup, and then she finds a third ovary, reports it to some kind of government thing, and then they get this bag of supplies out . . . and I end up like this.”

“How long do you have to stay here?”

“I don’t know. Someone’s coming for me.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where are they taking you?”

“I don’t know.”

“You seem calm, though. I’d be upset.”

“I am very upset.”

He put the empty bottle on his hand truck, looked at her again, taking all of her in – her chained feet, her calves and her pale thighs, her hips, barely covered by the paper straps of what they called her “panty,” her flat belly, breasts and nipples, then back to her face, where she could feel a little of the earlier blush lingering.

“I’ve never heard of anything like this,” he said, and he tore his gaze from her eyes to glance quickly around the room, suspiciously.

Stacey, understanding immediately what he was thinking, glared at him.

“You think this is some kind of prank?”

“No, Ma’am,” he blurted, a new fear in his eyes.

“Like there’s a camera. And you’re supposed to be weirded out and then they come out and say it’s all a joke?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Because . . . because . . . if that happens, it’s a joke on both of us.”

Now Stacey caught herself looking around, wondering if it might be true after all, that someone was going to pop out from behind a fake wall, cameras still rolling, and free her and tell her she’d done great, that the video was perfect and would go viral and she’d make a lot of money and become a minor celebrity for a few months. Suddenly, she wanted that, and the fact it wasn’t happening, that no one was coming out to tell her it was all a joke overwhelmed her, and her eyes filled with tears. She looked down, let one tear roll down her nose and drip off to her knee, and she closed her eyes. When she opened them, the man was gone with his empty water bottle.

Stacey bent over, wiped her eyes on her knee, sat back up, looked through the room one more time in hopes of finding a camera. She leaned back into the chair, appreciated for the first time that it was thickly upholstered and not one of those cheap plastic things, looked up at the ceiling and tried to lose herself in some thought other than her condition.

She had no idea how much time passed before the door swung open again, a woman entering.

“Stacey?”

Stacey looked up, saw the face of a young girl, barely college age probably, peeking around the door.

“Yeah,” Stacey replied.

“We’re so sorry about the water.”

“What water?”

“The water bottle.”

“Oh, the guy?”

“Yeah.”

“He thought it was a joke.”

The girl stepped into the room, eyes on the floor. “No one’s going to come in here again today, while you’re here.”

“Why are you here, then?” Stacey asked, feeling combative.

“It’s been two hours.”

“What does that mean?”

“We have to feed you and let you use the restroom.”

Stacey looked at the clock. It was almost noon. She’d missed her fitting, of course. She’d missed two hours of her life.

The girl picked up the set of keys from the table.

“Can you stand up, please, and turn around?”

Stacey obeyed and the girl took one wrist in her hand, turning it, working at the cuff that encircled it, fumbling as Bridgett had earlier, eventually getting the restraint opened.

Stacey put her hands together before her, rubbing her free wrist, and briefly imagined overpowering the girl, taking her keys, unlocking her chains, ripping open the hold kit bag and taking out her things, getting dressed, leaving, calling her father.

There would be commotion. The girl would scream unless Stacey could knock her out with one punch. Bodies would bump into things. Someone would fall. People would come running. And, most likely, that bitch Bridgett would pull that little torture toy off the wall and jab Stacey with it, unless Stacey could get to it first.

She imagined grabbing it before anyone else could beat her to it, running through the clinic, poking at any woman who stood in her way, dispatching them one by one, watching them scream and double over.

Then she would call her father. He would know what to do. Maybe he had done some work in this area, or something related. Hadn’t he written



up some papers for a group or a company or distant relatives possibly that dealt with subjects?

Her mind continued to wander.

Compliance prod.

That's what they called it. You wanted to be on one end, and not the other. She wondered what it felt like when the cobalt-blue arc passed not through the air, but through flesh. If she got to it first, maybe she could zap her way back to the street. If Bridgett got to it first, it was going to hurt, probably, but Stacey had never been zapped, so she could only guess.

The girl grabbed Stacey's open cuff and Stacey's free wrist and brought them together, securing Stacey's hands in front while she watched.

The girl dropped to her knees, opened the padlock at Stacey's feet that tethered her to the sewer pipe, and stood.

"You know where the restroom is, right?"

"Yeah," Stacey said, remembering the little washroom a few doors down the hall as an entirely different place now, once just a cute space with pink wallpaper and framed pictures of talking animals from a 19<sup>th</sup> century children's book. She'd always go there after her appointments, the first stop after the ordeal of her annual gyno visit. It had been a happy place, one of the minor stations of pleasantness in a life that was not, despite its disappointments and setbacks, too bad.

The girl stepped into the hall, stopped and looked both ways, obviously making sure the hall was empty before she motioned Stacey to follow.

No woman who saw Stacey like this would ever come back to this clinic, whether they knew what was happening or not. Stacey, reliving the small satisfaction of warning the other woman about what had been done to her, was certain of that.

Everything was different now. The hallway Stacey entered, the short walk to the restroom door, the restroom itself with its pink wallpaper and animal drawings, the toilet.

Stacey's body.

All different.

Three ovaries? Who has three ovaries?

Stacey shuffled into position over the toilet, lowered herself to the seat, looked up and realized the girl wasn't going to shut the door, was just going to stand there and watch.

Stacey needed to pee, but not badly enough that the water would come rushing out on its own. She tried to relax, tried to think of what it would feel like to go. Only when she remembered urinating here this morning, right before her appointment, did her body cooperate, the fluid dropping into the bowl with a soft ring.

“Do you have a phone?” Stacey asked the girl.

“Yes.”

“Can you call my father?”

The girl pulled her phone out of her back pocket and, to Stacey’s surprise, tapped it several times and looked at Stacey. “What’s his number?”

Stacey recited it and watched.

The girl dialed, raised the phone to her ear, listened, handed it over in time for Stacey to hear the last few words of her father’s stilted, lawyerly voicemail greeting. “. . . and I’ll get back to you at my earliest convenience.”

“Dad?” Stacey began, choking on a sudden sorrow. “Oh my god, Dad? Daddy? I . . . I went to the clinic today. They found three ovaries. Ohh . . .” Stacey choked back a sob. She knew she needed to speak quickly. She had a minute to leave her message. Or maybe it was just 30 seconds. She wasn’t sure, but it was invariably sooner than she wanted when she needed to explain something, when she was calling for money and it was more than the usual amount and she needed to detail the extenuating circumstances. “So they . . . so they . . . I don’t know what you call it. A hold kit.” Stacey wept again, drew in her breath, the next words rushing out all at once. “So I’m sitting here in chains now. On my feet. Oh my god. On my hands. I didn’t do anything wrong!” Stacey’s sobbed again, breathed in again. “Oh my god, please get me out of here. Help me! They’re going to pick me up, I think. And take me somewhere. I don’t know where. I don’t know who they are. They . . . they put chains on me. I’m at the clinic . . . at the . . . at the . . . where I go for my annual . . . the name is—”

“BEEP!”

“No!” Stacey said.

The girl ripped the phone out of Stacey’s hands and slipped it into her back pocket, regarding Stacey with a look of controlled horror.

“You weren’t supposed to say things like that, probably,” she said.

“I need to call him again!” Stacey shrieked. “I need to tell him where I am! I didn’t leave the full message!”

The girl stepped backward into the hall, eyeing Stacey warily.

Stacey wadded up a handful of tissue, wiped and stood, bumping her shoulder on the door jamb with an “Uhh” before she entered the hall.

“Give me your phone!” Stacey screamed.

The girl continued to back up, her expression unreadable now, her eyes moving from Stacey’s face to something behind Stacey.

But it wasn’t until Stacey felt the hand on her arm, the fingers closing around her bicep, that she realized someone else was there.

She whirled around, almost falling in her shackles before she regained her balance and regarded Bridgett.

“There are other patients here!” Bridgett hissed. “Would you please lower your voice?”

“No!” Stacey shouted. “No, I’m not going to lower my voice! Let me go! Take off these chains! I didn’t do anything wrong! Help! I want to talk to my dad!”

Bridgett wrapped both hands around Stacey’s upper arm, turned and yanked, pulling her back to the breakroom, Stacey hopping to keep up, bound hands flailing.

“Help!” she shouted. “Help me, please!”

No one came to help as Stacey was hustled back to the breakroom, the girl hovering nearby but not touching, only Bridgett managing the recalcitrant female on the PUMI hold.

“Stop it!” Stacey shouted in vain even as she allowed herself to be forced back into the chair, sitting and weeping while the girl looped the chain around her shackles and padlocked it closed.

## **Chapter 12: A Second Invitation**

Hannah, the last one to the reception, wearing collar and shackles, the only subject there, kept one eye on Dr. Dietrich Johnson while she mingled for the next 45 minutes.

As one of the directors of New Life – its chief medical researcher, no less – he was a central player in the evil of this place, and an important cog in the larger evil of the Fairchild empire.

And yet here he was, smiling humbly and nodding agreeably as he chatted with his own gaggle of students, some perhaps knowing who he was, others content to believe he was a mere researcher, albeit one who had

done some groundbreaking work on the orgasm, on female lubricant, on the ovaries.

He was not a particularly attractive man, tall and gangly, with severe features, eyes sunken under a heavy ledge of a forehead, and a shock of unruly black hair. There was something sad about him, as if he'd been organically imbued with some of the sorrow he had caused.

Was he wearing a wedding band? Hannah wasn't sure. She rarely checked, because in her world, it didn't matter. Anyone, under the right circumstances, could use a slave girl.

But still, Hannah knew, this was madness. To take a girl from a facility as secure as a prison – even if she wasn't truly a prisoner there – to take her and enjoy her services without official authorization created profound risks. If something happened to her, if she escaped, if she harmed him, the evidence of his indiscretion, of the misuse of his official capacity to satisfy unofficial desires, would be undeniable and not without consequences.

Wouldn't it?

And the consequences would, most likely, all fall upon his head. Subjects could be punished for many things, but the crime of being brought to someone's home for sex wasn't typically one of them.

Why was he pursuing her when his station and his likely wealth could earn him many other options? Why didn't he just buy a pretty, smart girl? Was his proposition a single man's indiscretion, curiosity, or something bigger, evidence that the system was going wobbly, that even its leading lights were losing track of places and roles and functions?

Hannah was inclined to look for signs of the latter but, like any researcher, she also knew to treat with suspicion data that confirmed preconceived notions.

And yet.

Forty-five minutes after Hannah had begun her mingling with a rejection of Johnson's advance, Estelle stepped to the bright screen on the wall and cleared her throat.

The piped in music, now playing a mournful country ballad, fell quiet.

"Alright," Estelle said, "I'm sure everyone's exhausted after a long day of traveling, so let's go over tomorrow's plans and we can wrap things up and go back to our rooms."

Most people were staying here, Hannah guessed, in rooms somewhere on the first few floors. They probably all had windows, and solid doors that didn't lock and didn't features panels that could be closed and latched shut from outside.

Hannah wished she had a window here. Windows helped her study.

Hannah moved with everyone else to the screen. The welcome message was gone, replaced with a computer interface, folders along the bottom that Estelle pondered before she opened the second one with a two-finger tap, tapped on a file and pulled up a schedule for the next day.

"We'll be meeting in the Lucretia Salon on the third floor at 8:15," Estelle said, reading off the screen. "If you want breakfast, there's continental stuff at the end of the guest hall, and there are a few good diners downtown. Carl's is good. Chip Shot. Google them. Shuttles run every 15 minutes from our front door, or you can do rideshare. Oh, but Hannah, you just sit tight. You'll get a tray slid under your door about 7:30. It's the same thing everyone gets, and our girls eat very well. You'll want to shower, and we'll all come get you before 9, and then we're going to take you through the full process. We'll be walking you to setup, putting you on a board, and doing a supervised mating. You're still good with all that?"

"I am," Hannah promised, smiling when she saw that everyone was looking at her, including Dr. Johnson, who was standing a few feet away from her and whose eyes lingered on her when she, briefly, returned his gaze.

There was something about him she didn't expect. Vulnerable. Disappointed. Tragic.

Why had, in response to his proposition, she blurted "No" and turned on one shackled foot? Because of who he was, or because of how he looked? If he'd looked like Allain, would she have said yes? Was she that shallow?

"After the tour," Estelle continued, "we'll watch a presentation, do lunch in the upstairs cafeteria, and then you'll be meeting with advisors – possibly Dr. Johnson, or one of our other illustrious researchers – to map out your research for next semester. You're going to need to commit to a research area by the end of the day."

Estelle pointed to the word "COMMIT," in all-caps on the screen. "And I do mean commit. We need your decision tomorrow, first choice and

two alternates if first is already taken, so we'll know now what kind of data to expect by summer."

This was news to Hannah. She didn't know she was going to have to make a decision tomorrow. Judging from the glances people shot at each other, no one else did, either.

"And then, dinner at 7:30 at the Silver Pear," Estelle said. "We'll meet in the lobby at 7 and go down together to catch the bus. You too, Hannah. Secured."

Hannah nodded and guessed that "secured" meant she'd go to dinner in chains.

"And then, back here, and we'll get everyone to the airport in time for their planes first thing the next morning."

Hannah felt Dr. Johnson's eyes on her, ignored them.

"Everyone get one each from the piles," Estelle continued, pointing to the table beneath the screen. "There's the schedule I just went through, a brochure about some of what we do, and a good description of topic areas."

Hannah moved to the table, grabbed documents, noticed a fourth stack of sheets, the top one bearing a heading in bold, all-caps: "NEW LIFE NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT."

Judging from the height of the stack, everyone here had signed one. Except Hannah.

She had not been asked to sign, had she?

She searched her memory for that formality with Estelle, in the car, or after they'd arrived at New Life, or somewhere upstairs before or after she'd been asked to strip and bend to have her holes searched.

No, she'd never signed anything, never promised to keep secret the things she heard here, the procedures, the science and sorrow. She'd never agreed that if she broke that confidence, New Life could come for her, sue her, silence her, demand money or, because she was a slave, subject her to other things, to a carefully calibrated ordeal of physical suffering, deprivation, humiliation.

This was an error, another tiny glitch in the system. They'd forgotten something important.

Particularly important in this case, because of who Hannah was, and what she was here to do.

The people she was talking to – whoever they were – in furtive emails she sent now and then through the kennel PCs, might care about this.

Hannah stepped away from the table and stopped, forgetting everything else as she leafed through the five stapled sheets of topic areas, struggling to find something that worked for her.

Some areas – hormone research, blood factors, fluid consistency – involved exacting chemical analysis that didn't appeal to her.

Several topics involved physical structures and anomalies – crimped fallopian tubes, perforated uteri, the ovaries – that required use of an MRI machine she probably couldn't get access to, or surgery she wasn't remotely qualified to perform or authorized to manage.

She continued flipping through the sheets, oblivious to everything around her, determined to find her topic, to know what she'd be doing before she went to bed so she could perhaps dream on it tonight in her cell.

"Turn to page 4," said a male voice.

Hannah looked up with a start, found Dr. Johnson peering down at her, eyes dark and somber. The room was almost empty, a few researchers paused at the door and chatting quietly, Estelle at the screen, shutting things down for the evening.

Hannah turned to the fourth page of the handout, and Dr. Johnson pressed the tip of one knobby finger against the research area second on the page.

"This one," he said.

"It's up to me," Hannah said sharply, looking up at him again.

"Of course it is," he said with a shrug and a smile, "but if you want your name in a journal by December, this will get you there."

Hannah laughed.

"That's not how it works," she said.

Dr. Johnson smiled, stepped back, crossed his arms and raised one eyebrow.

"It doesn't?" he queried. "Then why don't you tell me how it works, Dr. Loughbridge?"

Hannah felt herself flushing, knew her pupils were dilating, and she glared at Dr. Johnson, who was now just another of the many stupid males she'd encountered in recent years, men and boys who wanted the wrong thing, or didn't know what they wanted, and worked through their frustration and confusion by toying with her.

"You get published by coming up with a hypothesis," Hannah began, choking down the contempt in her throat before it reached her

tongue. “And then you find other people’s research so you can prove your hypothesis wrong, and then if you can’t do that, you start doing your own research, and then maybe you find something, and if you do, you put your ideas down logically, and then maybe you can get someone interested in publishing it, and then there’s peer review, and then—”

Johnson silenced her with a wave.

“The hypothesis is done, the general research has been outlined, we’ve gotten solid interest from a very good journal, we just need someone to execute.”

“So I do a few months’ research and you list me as a contributor.”

“No,” Johnson said. “Lead author. My name comes second.”

Hannah looked down at the sheet in her hand, biting her lip and struggling with the cocktail of sentiments that flow through the mind when ambition and annoyance are triggered simultaneously.

She glanced around before she spoke again, content to keep her disgust – valid as it was – to herself. No one was near enough to hear her next words.

“So I let you fuck me, and you stick my name on a paper you wrote, and then—”

“Hannah,” Dr. Johnson interrupted, his voice quiet, patient, but laden with an intensity that silenced her. “No. You do the research. You write it. You defend it through peer review. If you fail at any point, it goes away. But I know your work well enough to believe you’ll see it through.”

“But I still have to let you—”

“That’s a separate matter.”

“If you weren’t interested in . . . that . . . we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I don’t always know why I do things.”

Hannah looked into his eyes. This was a strange confession. An honest confession.

“It’s not fair, though,” she protested. “The other researchers here —”

Dr. Johnson uncrossed his arms, stepped up to Hannah and reached halfway to her collar before he paused.

“May I?” he asked.

“Yes,” Hannah said, raising her chin.



He touched her travel tag first, looking at it quickly before he slid it aside to look at her plastic kennel tag, gazing at her little picture and her school ID number before moving that aside, bending to inspect the third tag hanging from the ring set into her collar.

“Hannah,” said her federal ID tag at the top. Just “Hannah.” Not Hannah Loughbridge. Not Hannah, Scholar. Not Hannah, future doctor. Just “Hannah,” at the top of the tag.

Below that, her federal ID number had been engraved.

And then, “Female, Recreational.”

Recreational. For fun. For entertainment.

A plaything. A pet.

A toy.

“Is this fair?” he asked under his breath.

“Of course not.”

“Things have been taken from you,” he said. “Unfairly. When something’s being offered to you, accept it. Consider it compensation.”

“I want the unfairness to end,” Hannah said. “If I—”

“Are you qualified to do the research on that topic?”

“Yes,” Hannah answered without hesitation.

“Are you qualified to write a paper about what you learn?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

“Are you qualified to undergo peer review?”

“Ye—,” Hannah stammered, pausing. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“No, you’re not,” he said. “No one is.”

“Okay.”

“If I hadn’t propositioned you, would you have chosen that topic?”

Hannah looked at the sheet, studied the description.

“Probably not,” she said. “It says I need a dedicated research female. I probably can’t get that.”

“I can get one for you.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, ambition winning out now, outrage gone wispy. Still, something about this made her uncomfortable. Why? What?

“I’m not going to decide yet,” she said, looking up at Dr. Johnson before she scanned the room. It was just the two of them now, she and the director. Estelle was gone, the screen dark.

“It’s as rightfully yours as anyone else’s,” Dr. Johnson said.

“I’ll decide tomorrow, after I see how things go,” Hannah said, adding emphatically, “I need to go upstairs now. Where’s Estelle?”

“Probably running errands,” he replied. “She’s not as bright as you are, but she never stops going.”

Hannah looked to the door as if she could will Estelle’s arrival with her eyes.

“Now, about tomorrow,” Dr. Johnson prompted.

“I have the outline,” Hannah said, shuffling her papers, finding the one-sheet schedule, turning it to him to prove her point.

“After dinner.”

“What about after dinner?”

“Have you ever been to the Pacific Ocean?”

“No. Well, yes. I went to the beach in New Zealand. I think it was in the Pacific.”

Dr. Johnson smiled.

“After dinner tomorrow night,” he said, “I’ll be going to my place on the coast. Join me if you want. And we’ll go straight from there to the airport the next morning.”

“Doesn’t it take hours to get there?” Hannah asked, well aware that this was a far more conciliatory answer than her earlier “No.”

“Not by helicopter,” he said. “About 45 minutes. And it’s beautiful at night.”

“It’ll be dark,” Hannah said, beginning to suspect that throwing up objections turned what had been her simple “No” earlier into a series of negotiations, each of which she was going to lose.

“Darker, yes, but not completely black,” he countered.

“You’ll get fired,” Hannah said.

“What?”

“You’ll get fired. For taking me.”

Dr. Johnson laughed, a healthy, sincere guffaw.

“You understand how getting published works,” he said. “At least in the general sense. But you have no idea how things work here.”

“I want to go upstairs,” Hannah said. “Now.”

Dr. Johnson pulled out his phone, tapped it, put it away.

“The problem,” he said, “is not that people do conflicting things. It’s that they can’t keep the conflicting things they do separate.”

“Ready to go upstairs, Hannah?” spoke a female voice.

Hannah turned to see Estelle waiting for her at the entrance to the ballroom, and she shuffled off, ankle chains barely ringing against the room's thick carpet. Only at the door did she stop to look back into the room, at Dr. Johnson, and she offered him a brief gesture that she meant to be ambiguous, either a wave, or dismissal.

Why had she humored him?

Another quick "No" would have settled things, but instead, she'd argued, resisted, negotiated.

And lost.

Along with her academic work over the last two and a half years, a second of Hannah's intellectual pursuits was studying the system that held her, learning to calculate the risks and rewards, the things she could get away with, what she could have when she took risks, what she could lose.

She'd gotten good at it, committing crimes small and sometimes scandalously large for her own purposes, suffering when she had to, but never losing track of the ultimate goals.

Where did Dr. Johnson fit? she asked herself as she and Estelle ascended to quarters in the elevator. And what were the terms? Sign up for the topic he'd suggested, do the research, write the paper, and get published as lead author? Or was there one more thing she needed to do to earn what would be a remarkable achievement, for any undergraduate, particularly a slave?

And if that was the deal: research, write, publish – and have sex with a New Life director at his home on the Pacific Ocean, what was wrong with that? She had sex to please her owners all the time, and more often than not, it pleased her as well.

Far more often than not.

Perhaps she'd be using Dr. Johnson as much as he'd be using her. She imagined him naked, guessed all the places hidden by his suit were just as gaunt and knobby as his face and hands. He would probably let her lead. Of course he would. She would be doing him a favor. She would be in charge, and she would take what she wanted from him, his pleasure a by-product, an accident.

It had been four days since she'd had sex, a Saturday night partnering with Allain at the family's home in Dallas before he headed back to school for pre-semester work and she prepared for her trip.

She missed sex.

“I’m going to have to search you again,” Estelle said when they reached the examination room with the tables and the cabinets.

Estelle retrieved Hannah’s bag from the lower shelf of a cabinet in the corner and set it on a table.

“Unzip me,” Hannah said, setting down her papers from the reception and turning her back.

Estelle dropped to remove Hannah’s shackles, stood to unzip her dress, and Hannah let the dress fall to the floor, stepped out of it and folded it once before returning it to her suitcase.

She slipped off her pumps and her panties and went to the table, bending, putting her elbows and her palms on the cool, flat surface, waiting for Estelle to wash her hands, sticking out her jaw when the pair of fingers entered her vagina and searched for something that was not, of course, there. When would she have had the opportunity to slip something up that hole?

Estelle washed her hands again and pushed one finger up Hannah’s anus, Hannah grunting and rising up on her toes in discomfort.

Done there, Estelle washed her hands at the sink a final time and reached into the cabinet above, pulling out a small plastic bag that featured the New Life logo and the words “Pre-Lab” and “Overnight.”

“All of us are going to come for you in the morning,” Estelle said. “And for the first hour or two tomorrow, you’ll be treated like any lab female, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I need to make sure you’re up for this,” Estelle said. “Now and then, someone won’t like it. One girl wouldn’t even let me chain her, another one refused to go into the lab—”

“It’s fine,” Hannah promised.

“Okay, here’s some things for you,” Estelle said, giving Hannah the bag.

Hannah opened it, found a generic shampoo she wouldn’t be using, aspirin and ibuprofen, toothbrush and toothpaste, generic makeup she might indeed use, lip balm, two packs of wipes, one marked “vagina,” the other “anus,” a tube of vaginal lubricant, and a thick, red, pointed rod wrapped in plastic that was obviously meant for stimulating her sex organ.

Hannah reached in and pulled out the rod, peered back into the bag to find instructions, found nothing, and held up the device with one

eyebrow raised quizzically at Estelle.

“When was your last penetration?” Estelle asked.

“Saturday night,” Hannah replied.

“Do you usually go that long without?”

“No, but I’ve been getting ready for this.”

“The rod will help prepare you for tomorrow,” Estelle said. “Just do 10 minutes with it while you masturbate. And just one orgasm. Slow, steady thrusts, just something to open you up a little. And after you’re done, set it in your sink, and we’ll take care of it tomorrow.”

“It’s thick,” Hannah noted.

“We’ve researched it, in case you’re wondering,” Estelle said. “We research everything. That’s the optimal size for pre-lab, especially if you’re paired with one of the larger males. And I’m not sure who’s on the schedule yet for you.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed, and she returned the object to the bag, retrieved her papers, rolled them up and stuffed them in beside the dildo and the generic shampoo.

“Don’t use the wipes until you’re told to,” Estelle said. “Let me get you to your cell, and we can talk more about the morning.”

Hannah followed Estelle into the narrow hall and down to her door, the panels open there, closed on most of the others.

Estelle unlocked the padlock and opened the door, and Hannah stepped in, surveying the little space with a renewed sense of dread. She didn’t want to sleep here tonight. She didn’t want to sleep here again tomorrow night. Yes, this space was larger than the kennels, but the kennels had bars she could see through, instead of a door with panels that latched. In the kennels, you could talk to people through the bars. You could cry or sing or groan through an orgasm, if you were masturbating or having someone over. There were times when she liked being alone, and she would close her curtain and ignore the noises on her hall. But forced isolation terrified her.

She set her things on the table next to the sink and turned to watch Estelle shut and lock the door, as she had earlier in the day.

“So, tomorrow,” Estelle said, regarding Hannah through the opened port, “breakfast at 8, and I’ll make sure you’re awake before then, and then I’ll be coming for you a little before 9. Try to get your shower first thing. We’re on a kind of tight schedule.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed.

“I’ll ask you to wipe yourself,” Estelle continued. “I’ll need to check you. And then I’m going to handcuff you, in back, and chain your ankles together, like tonight, and then I’ll be taking you around the corner to lab processing.”

“What happens there?” Hannah asked.

“It’s complicated,” Estelle said. “You’ll experience it, of course, while everyone else watches. And then you’ll go to the actual procedure.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, swallowing and biting her lip.

“Anything else you need?” Estelle asked, easing the port closed.

“I don’t think so,” Hannah said, watching Estelle’s face disappear, listening to the little latch that closed the panel from the outside, so Hannah couldn’t open it.

“Lights out at 11,” Estelle said.

“Okay.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Hannah imagined returning to her economics textbook, or her journal article, turned instead to the materials she’d been given, picking up the stapled sheets, and she went to the toilet and sat and flipped to the page with the topic Dr. Johnson had recommenced, and realized that she would most likely choose it, if they hadn’t already given it to someone else.

Would she be staying at his home tomorrow night?

Of course. No doubt.

If he invited her again, anyway. Sometimes boys – or men – changed their minds.

Or maybe he was married and his wife would say Hannah couldn’t come over.

But Hannah hadn’t noticed a ring.

Why had she said no so adamantly at the reception?

Because he’d asked her at the reception, held in a grand ballroom where she got wine and hors d’oeuvres and was there as the peer of brilliant students from around the Northern Hemisphere.

But now she was a naked slave girl in an isolation cell, and with the radical change in her circumstances this evening had come a radical change in the propositions she would entertain.

Was that it? She'd known she'd be coming back here. Did she actually have to feel this cell again before Dr. Johnson's request felt acceptable?

No, that wasn't it.

If he indeed invited her again and she said yes and allowed him to fly her to his home on the Pacific beach, she would be there as more than a mere slave girl. She would be observing, gathering information, spying, and the people she was working with – whoever they were – would be pleased.

No. She didn't want this new job. She was already here on their behalf more than she liked, following their instructions at times, pursuing her own ambitions at others.

To indulge Dr. Johnson was another expansion of her role. It was too much. She was feeling overwhelmed. She already had enough to worry about, enough she had to do. If she went, it would be on her terms.

She wiped and flushed, set her list on the table and looked into the bag Estelle had given her.

The red dildo was waiting for her, thicker than most of the penises she'd ever held, Allain's or otherwise.

She unwrapped the plastic and squeezed it with her hand.

This was another bother, another thing she had to do. If it were up to her, she might do nothing, or she might grant herself a quick release just before sleep, lying in bed with the lights out, using just her fingers at the mouth of her vagina.

She moved to her bed, pulled down the sheets and sat upright, positioning her pillow between her back and the wall.

This was a chore, she admitted to herself, a requirement, and that's how she would approach it. She reached down, running her fingers through the trimmed golden hair that grew thick above her opening, continuing to explore, fingertips against her clitoris and the lips that guarded her sex, manipulating the flesh there, pulling and spreading and opening until she felt the first trickle of honey at her slot, and only then did she use her other hand to position the red device at her vagina, pressing the tip against her hole, pushing it slowly, gently, sucking in her breath as she forced the first inch within her, stopping as the dildo's full girth became apparent.

"Oh, oh, oh," Hannah said quietly to herself, the dildo provoking a peculiar mix of pain and pleasure as it spread out the sensitive pink flesh of her sheath.

She eased the device out and pushed it back in, massaging her clitoris with her other hand, a little of her lubricant oozing out between the plastic and her lips.

Hannah pulled the dildo out and set it, damp at the tip but not dripping, onto her sheets, and left her bed to find the lubricant Estelle had given her, pulling out the small tube – enough for no more than two or three sessions of masturbation.

She opened it, broke the seal, squeezed the clear fluid onto a fingertip and smeared it against her thumb.

Back on her bed, leaning against her pillow, thighs splayed, she squeezed out half the tube onto her fingers and coated her lips and vulva with it.

She rarely used lubricant – never with a partner, only occasionally with a toy – but this was helping, creating the illusion of deep arousal, the gush of juice that came a few times a month if the right partner were available, and when she returned the pointed red tip to her entry slot, it passed in easily, and her grunts this time were mostly born of pleasure, her body stretching around the device almost effortlessly, warming it and coating it with her own honey in tandem with the artificial fluids.

“Uhhh,” she groaned. “Ow, ow.”

Doing her best to follow Estelle’s instructions, she pulled the dildo out and slid it back in, all the way this time, expanding her chamber the way a penis would tomorrow, some male who had yet to be scheduled, some male assuming the male mating position while she lay bound and supine before him, as she was told females always were, her wet sheath gripping him, provoking him, rewarding him with an ancient prize for an ancient act within a place doing its best to appear modern, scientific, rational.

Humane.

And she would remember all that was done here, with her, to her, and she would play her small part as well, always looking for cracks in the system, always looking for cracks to exploit, from the trivial – a forgotten non-disclosure agreement – to the dramatic: an officer high in the Fairchild empire reduced to begging a slave girl for sex, who preferred subject to free, whose request was all the proof required that those chained and tagged and owned were at least the equal of the collarless.

There were two systems at work here, Hannah knew, the first marching forward with a terrible, unrelievable hunger, growing itself



efficiently, inexorably with new laws on paper and the more powerful, unwritten laws of supply and demand, of flesh and desire and release and repeat. And then a second system, obvious to Hannah and all those who hungered for the end of injustice, a system not of men and women and their laws and their refined habits, but a beast only, sclerotic and quivering, gazing at its ugly, withering face in the mirror and seeing a beauty that was not there.

“Uhhhhh,” Hannah sighed, moving the toy in and out of her hole, slowly and steadily as instructed, the first two fingers of her other hand swimming in the moat of lubricant she’d poured around her clitoris. “Oh, god.”

She closed her eyes and opened her mouth in a silent howl, thighs shaking, back pressed hard against her pillow, allowing the orgasm to work its way through her body, outward from her vagina and her brain, two all-powerful, concentric circles that rippled across her being until the disturbance ebbed with a few final gasps of relief and she withdrew the dildo for the final time and dropped it onto the sheet.

Still pulling in her breath, she went to the sink to brush her teeth and wash her face, raising her eyes when she was done to study the reflection of her blank countenance.

She turned to her desk, grabbed her textbook, went to her bed and forced herself to pore over its dry narrative until the lights went off, only the gloom of a small lamp over her door to rescue her from pitch blackness.

She closed the book and set it beside her bed on the floor and allowed exhaustion to overtake her.

Sleep, fitful and dreamless, came quickly.

## **Chapter 13: A Visit with Maxim, Somewhere**

This time, Druhler Fairchild was told to report to a small, regional airport 20 miles east of Salzburg.

He’d been given just 24 hours’ notice, barely enough time to schedule one of his planes from Palm Springs to Europe. He was tired and hungry by the time the six-seater landed at Heathrow to refuel.

“Can I step out to get some food?” he asked through the door.

“No,” came the expected reply, a woman’s voice barking through a slot just large enough to permit the passage of sound.

“Security,” she explained after a pause.

Fairchild, alone in the cabin, returned to his seat, looked out the window at the first rays of dawn, and eased back until his upper body was almost horizontal. He slept through the rest of refueling and takeoff, waking with a start when the craft hit turbulence two miles up.

This is for my sons, he reminded himself groggily. My sons and their sons and their daughters, and on and on, a fortune in the offing vast enough to ensure comfortable lives for ten exponentially expanding generations. Or, assuming ongoing licensing revenue, wise investments, the continuing dormancy of the inheritance tax, and the continuing power of money to buy Congressional seats and the laws that body enacted, there might come endless generations, a veritable nation of Fairchild heirs living and breeding and passing on his genes with no requirement to work like the commoners did, to labor, to study base arts and sciences, to contribute, to achieve anything beyond enjoying to the fullest all they’d been given.

A generation from now, two generations, five, ten, parents across America would hoist their toddlers on their hips and point to that portrait – duplicates hanging in stately halls, presiding over formal dining rooms, gazing down upon corporate lobbies and boardrooms – of Grandfather Fairchild, Great Grandfather Fairchild, Great upon Great Grandfather Druhler Fairchild, and they would tell the story of the man who had brought an answer to the nation and to the world, a solution to those most intractable problems of humanity – poverty, addiction, idleness, dissipation, decadence – all the while building the wealth that put silver spoons in their mouths and trust funds in all their destinies.

Every piece was in place for this, except the simplest and most vain. He needed a portrait, something that would age well, that could be converted to digital form and printed out as needed, on the finest paper or parchment or canvas, bound with gilded frames, illuminated with soft, reverent lamps, hung with sure nails pounded into stout walls.

An artist worthy of the job was hard to come by, however. Several good ones said they’d be too busy for years. A few refused outright. There were some talented painters who also happened to be subjects, most of them female, Fairchild knew, but allowing a female slave to paint him felt like the endorsement of a skill such people weren’t supposed to have.

Fairchild leaned to the window and watched the round earth pass beneath him, first the waters of the Channel, and then the forests and

villages and industry of the continent, and finally the airport in Salzburg, where a military green twin-rotor chopper waited, its blades turning lazily, casting distended, hacking shadows across the brown grass under the slanted mid-morning sun of deep winter.

As he had on two previous occasions, Fairchild stood as soon as the chartered jet came to a stop, waited for the female pilot to exit the cockpit and let him onto the tarmac, and he crossed the bleached pavement and stepped, shivering, up the short ladder to the plain, open cabin of the other craft.

A single crew member – probably male – in a helmet, jumpsuit and dark glasses, greeted him, shut the door behind him, helped him buckle into his seat, and off they went, a stomach lurching ascent followed by a veritable dance through the restless skies of Europe.

The last leg of his journey lasted another hour, the craft's windowless fuselage concealing the world below, leaving Fairchild as usual to wonder where he was going.

His phone never worked on this part of the trip, for some reason, although it still kept time.

He knew he was going into Russia, however, that much was obvious, and when the craft bobbed to a hard landing and he unbuckled and stood and grabbed his seat dizzily before he headed through the door and out into the cold, regarding the elegant little dacha that lay before him with a sense of familiarity.

The wind bit through his suitcoat and his trousers while he hustled down a path carved between snow drifts and to the back door, which he knew would be open. Before he reached it, the helicopter was gone, buzzing up and away, barely clearing the canopy of the forest that enclosed this place on all four sides.

"Maxim!" Fairchild shouted as soon as he entered the manor, standing in a sort of storeroom, used mostly to keep vodka and potatoes, it seemed. "Maxim!"

"Druhler!" came the immediate reply from the door to his left. "I am in here!"

The place was colder than it had been on Fairchild's last visit, but the room where Maxim waited was warmed by a blazing fire, and Fairchild crossed the carpet and picked his way between antique pieces in silk of blue and gold to offer his friend a two-handed greeting.

Maxim stood, bowed to hide the ironic smirk that was his trademark expression, and took Fairchild's hands in both of his.

After their greeting, Maxim gestured toward a table in the middle of the room laden with fruit and rare meats and exotic pastries, and Fairchild loaded up the single plate laying there, took up an ancient silver fork and moved to the fire, sitting in a chair built a century ago for beauty instead of comfort, balancing the meal on his thigh while he prepared mentally for the next phase of negotiations.

Maxim, sitting across from Fairchild in a chair just as uncomfortable, wasn't dressed for business. He never was. Today he was wearing blue running shoes and black track pants with yellow tape up the side, a green t-shirt under what appeared to be a 19<sup>th</sup> century smoking jacket, embroidered in a red and yellow floral pattern.

He peered curiously at Fairchild through round glasses, his black hair tied behind him, dropping to the middle of his back, his black mustache curving upwards at the ends.

"We have a draft now," Maxim said in a heavy accent Fairchild could never quite place. German? French? No, it must be Russian. Maxim looked Russian. His dacha was in Russia.

"The full amount?" Fairchild asked.

"No," Maxim said, shifting in his seat, smirking and crossing his legs the way a homosexual would, thigh over thigh. European men crossed their legs this way, Fairchild reminded himself, even if they weren't gay.

"You proposed 15 point two five billion US two weeks ago," Fairchild said suspiciously.

"Now, it's 15 point one," Maxim said, staring into Fairchild's eyes.

"Why the discount?" Fairchild demanded. A reduction of one hundred fifty million, although a small fraction of the deal, was still a considerable drop.

"It's what the newer maths suggest," Maxim said. "Don't you want it?"

"I do," Fairchild said. "But I'd like to see the draft."

"Everything else is as we discussed," Maxim said. "I'll give it over as you leave."

"I just got here," Fairchild protested.

"Stay awhile," Maxim said.

Fairchild worked at his plate with the tiny fork before he looked up at Maxim, who was staring into the fire with a blank expression.

“You’re Russian, right?” Fairchild said with his mouth full.

“How can you tell?”

“It’s obvious,” Fairchild said. “When is Russia going to start doing subjects? You’re one of the last big holdouts.”

“China and India are big too,” Maxim said.

“In China, everyone’s a slave,” Fairchild said. “It’s in their fucking constitution, practically. And India’s got castes that get the job done.”

“I can’t speak for Russia,” Maxim said, spreading his hands apologetically.

“Do you want to know how to get it done?” Fairchild said. “From the man who made it happen in America?”

“You have shared it with me before,” Maxim noted.

“You need to hear it again. I know you’re well-connected. I might not know your last name, but I know you know people, and the way forward is simple as hell, if you . . .” Fairchild pointed upward “. . . if you get a little help from the man upstairs.”

“Then tell me again.”

“First, you’ve got to make the richest, most comfortable people in history very uncomfortable,” Fairchild said, slipping his feet out of his shoes. “Sounds impossible, right?”

Maxim nodded and smiled.

“Turns out, it’s simple. A little terrorism, a little war, and whammo!” Fairchild said, slapping his leg. “They killed people in Chicago, bombed that street in New England, but you know what really did it? When North Korea live-streamed hanging those three girl soldiers. Half the country saw it, then or after the fact, another quarter read about it, or knew about it some other way, and you could just sort of sense the lights going out across the country.”

Fairchild raised his hand, made a fist. “Deep in the gut. No logic, no frontal lobe. Sure, we beat ‘em this time, one Korea and all that, but it was too late. It took a little hanging to bring it all home, how dangerous, how just fucking mean the world can be, and if you’re going to be nice, you’re gonna finish last. And then, the more people have, the more afraid they are, of losing any of it – the more afraid they are of, really, anything – and scared people care less about the touchy-feely shit. And then,

Christianity had to grow up a little. Love is just dandy in the bedroom, workable in the neighborhood, but you can't govern that way. Poverty is a judgment. A judgment. For sin and laziness and, and, lettin' shit happen to you. Feed the poor, they just come back for more, house the poor, they'll just squat and get comfortable. You've got to recognize that some people aren't worth love, never got chosen for it, by God or otherwise: the poor ones, the homeless, the addicts and, oh damn, the refugees. Christians get that, finally.

"Now, I never said any of this – but all that brown skin – brown and black and tan and God knows what else – banging on the borders saying 'let me in, let me in.'" Fairchild used his fist against an imaginary door. "People want a solution to that other than letting them in and letting them run around and make everyone nervous with the way they look. So you collar them up and put them to work and, boom, win-win. But it's not just wetbacks and ragheads and nigg—it's not just the darker people. If you can do it to one race, you gotta do it to all of them, or it's racism, and we can't have racism. God no."

Fairchild snorted and looked down at his shoes, lining them up side by side before he kicked them both over.

"Inconvenient people. The world's full of 'em. Everything's globalized, you know? That means you're competing with eight billion people from the moment you draw your first breath, and some people get it and they work their asses off and make something of themselves, or at least get born to the right family, and the rest settle with being inconvenient. In the way. Takers. Beggars. At least twenty-five percent, but maybe more like half. But I'd settle for 25; that's almost a hundred million people in America alone. All the good land's occupied or too expensive, because land is a finite resource and people aren't, so they can't find anywhere to live, and they rumble through good neighborhoods, and no one wants that. And then, you've got trafficking, human trafficking, hopeless girls used and abused by monsters, rented out by the hour, no laws, no regulation to protect them, so you can pass more laws against it all, and they'll be broken, or you can make it legal and see it's done right. And there's your situation – your business environment, if you will. Countries have moved to subject economies with all that, or a lot less. But it sure helped in America, and America paved the way for everyone else. I'm proud to say it. Damned

proud. God laid out a path for me, and I just took it.” Fairchild leaned forward. “You know my history, right?”

Maxim gestured vaguely.

“My dad was in prison services. Prisons, detention centers, immigration. Food, bedding, laundry, record-keeping, all of that, but toward the end, before the cancer took him, he was working out the first for-profit place, the first prison he’d own and charge rent on. And then he died, God bless him, and he left me the business – just a little thing, a few million a year net – but I picked right up where he left off. You know, really, I had a vision where my dad didn’t. I saw the big picture. I saw where all the loose ends were leading. If you can make a business of locking people up, then it’s all about profit, and people respect that. Put ‘em to work. And you’re not just locking up criminals now. Lock ‘em up for being in the wrong place, or being poor. Put ‘em to work. Inside the prison, or outside. Not just criminals. Debtors. Prostitutes. Degenerates. Immigrants. People with unusual biology. PUMI. That’s a person of unique medical interest. We’re getting that going nationwide on October 1. Law’s all set, nice and quiet because people won’t understand it until they see the good it does. Already got it up and running in Kansas, humming along. Anyone with something interesting gets chosen, hundreds so far have been picked up for this and that. And their children too. Now, how do you tell who’s who? Collar around the neck, no key, just a hinge and a catch. And a chip in the back. Doesn’t hurt much going in, but it’s a bear to take out. We bought the company with the best chip tech, all their patents too. So, I had a little business, and the perfect conditions. God-given conditions, I believe. I just had to develop the solutions, get the laws tweaked here and there, discreetly, under a welfare bill here, a livestock bill there and so forth, and fund someone’s run for office now and then. All legal, all legal. Sometimes someone’d squawk, but we’d take ‘em down at the ballot box, or put an expert out there to say God told us it’s fine and patriotic, and the news says well, there’s two sides to it and one side’s quoting Jesus, and everyone decides it’s a little too complicated and goes back to posting shit on Look!, and I’m moving on to the next place. And then, I don’t want to sound proud here – pride goeth before a fall and all that horseshit – but when you’ve got a little money, they –”

“A lot of money,” Maxim said helpfully, taking off his glasses and wiping them.

“A lot of money then,” Fairchild agreed. “When you have a lot of money, people just listen to you. More than that. They respect you. I’ll be damned if some of them don’t love you. You know, that look in their eyes. I’ve lost count of how many boards I’m on. Museums, children’s stuff, church foundations, historical, whatever. I don’t even have to show up. They list me on their board of directors, stamp my picture on their annual reports . . . hey, you know any good portrait artists? Someone who can do a really nice sit-down kind of painting?”

“Not personally,” Maxim admitted. “But I can ask around.”

Fairchild leaned back, smiled, looked down and selected a pastry to force into his mouth.

“Russia’s ready for it,” he said once he’d swallowed. “I’ve looked into things here. We’re in Russia, right? This is a Russian dacha, right?”

Maxim just smiled.

“You’ve got plenty of comfortable people. You’ve got all kinds of undesirables. You’ve got several nice conflicts. Chechnya’s always there, and that shit in Ukraine could blow up at any moment, and it just takes someone with a cell phone to turn another little death into the thing everyone watches and gets pissed about and scared over. And then . . . and then, the biggest piece. Abortion. It’s still legal here. Outlaw it. And don’t just go after the doctors. Go after the girls too. They’re paying to have it done, for God’s sakes. Or letting it be done, anyway. And get their mothers, and their sisters, as accessories. Take ‘em all in. Then send the useless ones to prison, collar the good ones and sell ‘em. Really, that’s the key to it all. Once you can take a pregnant girl’s sister in, to jail or to the auction block, you can take anyone in, for anything.”

Fairchild paused, stared at his shoes but didn’t kick them this time.

“Girls are gonna fuck. That’s inevitable. And if they can’t get birth control – and most of that’s just another name for abortion, so why should they? Outlaw it all too – but they’re still gonna fuck, and they’ll get pregnant. And, no exceptions. Daddy raped you, or some fucker in an alley, doesn’t matter, that’s a baby now, from day one, that’s your baby, and if you try to abort – and God knows they’ll try – that’s it. Hey, you got the Orthodox church in Russia, right? People’ll listen to them. Not as powerful as our true Christians, but if they speak loud enough, people’ll listen, and they’ll vote, and you’ll get your laws. That’s what happened in America. God’s hand, God’s hand all the way. I know you know people in the



Church. I know you've got connections. Just a word or two, to the right person. Just tell them to start doing what they should have been doing all along, and you can move it forward. And for God's sakes, cut welfare. Food's not a right, it's a privilege. Healthcare. Shelter. And don't get me started on birth control. All things you have to earn, if you should have them at all. Handouts ruin people, just ruin 'em. Take away the safety net . . .” Fairchild raised his hands and lowered them, wriggling his fingers until they arrived upon his thighs, still squirming, “and the ones that hit the ground, you're doing them a favor when you take them in. Do it. Do it. You think you'll make money with what I'm selling you in America, bring Russia along and see what happens.”

Fairchild took another bite and stared at his shoes, pointing the toe of one into the arch of the other, making a sort of cross.

“You talk to the church, I'll take care of the politicians,” he said. “We can dig up dirt in Russia just like we do in the US. Business is business, after all. And after Russia, the rest'll come in. France, Indonesia, Australia. The whole world.”

Maxim watched him for a moment, stared up at the ceiling and smiled, looked at Fairchild again.

“Would you like to see the draft?” he asked.

“Does that mean I'm about to leave?” Fairchild asked.

“Yes, if you're ready to see it now.”

“Hell yeah I wanna see the draft.”

## **Chapter 14: Stacey Fights Back**

Bridgett, satisfied that Stacey was secure again, exited the breakroom, leaving her alone with the girl whose name Stacey didn't know.

“Are you hungry?” the girl asked.

“Why?”

“Because we're supposed to feed you now, but I'm not going to force you.”

“I can have my hands in front as long as I'm eating?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, feed me.”

The girl went to the table, picked up the three packages that said “MRE” and brought them to Stacey, who reached up with her bound hands

and took the food, dropping all onto her lap, spreading everything out to read the chalky white letters stamped onto each. "TNA CASS" read one. "STND GRND W CRCK," said another. "MXD FRT," read the third.

"How am I supposed to know what any of these are?" Stacey asked, holding up a package.

The girl bent, read the chalky white letters and shrugged.

Stacey pinched the white arrow at the top of the TNA CASS package first because it was the biggest, realized immediately from the smell it was fish, looked at the label again.

"Tuna casserole," she said under her breath. "Yay."

She looked up at the girl, who was leaning against the wall now while she stared down at Stacey.

"How the fuck," Stacey asked, "am I supposed to eat this?"

The girl pushed away from the wall, went to a drawer, stirred around in it, brought back a spoon.

Stacey dug the spoon into the gaping top of the package, put the food into her mouth and found it infuriatingly delicious.

She chewed and pondered. Eating was a good idea. Doing something normal made the incomprehensible a little less bizarre. Her mind and her jaws were working equally well.

"Okay," Stacey said, "you understand what this is, right?"

The girl, back at her position against the wall, looked and said nothing.

"It's a kidnapping," Stacey asserted. "I'm being kidnapped."

Stacey took another bite, chewed and swallowed. She looked up at the girl's blank eyes.

"And you're helping. You're helping kidnap me. You're a kidnapper."

"So?"

Stacey stared into the near-empty casserole bag, the verbal parry echoing through her head.

"You don't care then."

"I do," the girl said. "I have to do my job."

"Kidnapping's your job then?"

"No, I'm just an intern through the holidays."

"You're in college?"

"Yes. At Kansas A&M."

Stacey took another bite of tuna casserole.

“Are you studying kidnapping?”

“No.”

“Okay, maybe not, but today, you’re a kidnapper.”

“You’re not a kid,” the girl shot back.

Stacey scraped the rest of the casserole out and put it in her mouth, wedged the spoon between her bare thighs and dropped the empty package on the floor between her bound feet.

Next she tore open the smallest package, labeled “STND GRND W CRCK,” found eight very dry, light brown wafers.

“They could have just put ‘crackers’ on the package,” Stacey observed to herself as she bit.

“This is dry,” she added. “I’m going to need something to drink.”

The girl grabbed the water bottle from the table, handed it to Stacey.

Stacey drank, devoured another cracker, drank some more, finished the package of crackers, opened the third package, MXD FRT, found mixed fruit, predictably, retrieved the spoon from between her legs, scooped up a pyramid of yellow chunks, accented with the unnatural, almost plastic red of maraschino cherry fragments.

She chewed swallowed, found this last of her three courses of lunch inferior to the rest, an over-sweetened assemblage of things either too hard or too mushy.

“You know what you could do?” Stacey said, scooping the last bite of fruit, looking hopefully up at the girl against the wall.

“What?”

“You have all the keys, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Take off all these chains. And let me have my clothes. And let me leave. I won’t tell anyone.”

“No.”

“My dad’s going to—”

The phone rang, an airy chime, muffled amidst Stacey’s clothing in the bottom of the hold kit bag, a green, nondescript lump on the table against the opposite wall.

“That’s my father,” Stacey said. “It must be.”

It rang. The girl looked at the bag, back at Stacey.

“Answer it!” Stacey screamed, her earlier panic restored, the relative serenity of the little meal utterly shattered. “Answer it!”

The girl moved not at all, maintaining the face of one who plans not to move, eyes fixed on a point over Stacey’s left shoulder, mouth a straight, impassive line.

The chime sounded a torturous eight times before it played out and left Stacey with that ninth, utterly more excruciating torture of silence.

“Noooooooo!” Stacey screamed before that single, impotent word yielded to body-wracking sobs, her upper half doubling down, her hands on her face, her breasts against her thighs.

The fluids of tragedy ran thick from Stacey’s eyes and nose, and she dabbed vaguely at it with her hands, thumb and fingers growing hopelessly moist, Stacey lost in a well of despair in which even tissue was unknown.

Only when she arose, sniffed, looked at her hands, passed a finger beneath her nose and realized her hands were wetter than her face did she regain that modicum of composure required to remember that she still occupied a world in which tissue was a thing.

She looked up at the girl through tear-mottled eyes.

“I need something to wipe with.”

The girl returned Stacey’s gaze, looked at the wall, reached into her back pocket, drew out her phone, looked at it, pressed something on the screen with her thumb, repocketed the device, returned her eyes to the wall.

“Who was that?” Stacey choked. “Who was that?”

The girl said nothing.

“That was my father!” Stacey screamed, with a sudden, excruciating certainty, and she leaped up and lunged at the girl. “He saw your number when we called! Answer it! Answer it!”

The girl started and moved backward reflexively just as the tether performed its function, catching Stacey’s ankles in tandem and tossing her to the floor, right knee hitting first, then both hands, then left elbow, then left shoulder, then right breast, every bound extremity landing awkwardly against the unyielding floor.

“Ow, fuck,” Stacey groaned. “Ow, fuck. Ow, fuck.”

The pain at first generalized itself, so many nerves singing out with unfamiliar trauma that her whole body felt strange and tormented.

“Ow, fuck,” she said, more quietly now, more deliberately, as if the phrase were a mantra. “Ow, fuck.”

Lying on her side, still, with her eyes closed, she thought only of herself for a time, and her mind turned away from the general discomfort and to the specific damage that had been done.

Her left elbow hurt with the jarring, echoing pain one feels when bone covered with the merest shroud of skin strikes something hard and unyielding. Her right hand, crumpled beneath her, burned where the palm had skidded against the floor. Her right knee throbbed. Her right breast ached.

Nothing was broken, though. Stacey had broken a bone in her hand playing volleyball, and remembered that pain as uniquely sharp and debilitating.

No, there might be bruises here, but nothing had snapped.

Only after the inventory of major bodily pains was done did she feel the sharp sting at the front of her right ankle. With a grunt, she lifted herself up on her elbow to look at her feet, the pair of tight metal rings there creating the illusion of another person’s legs, another body that she was merely visiting today.

“Ow, fuck!” Stacey shrieked. “Oh my god, oh my god!”

The cuff around her right ankle had cut her, a clean, bloody gash.

Immediately, Stacey was up on her haunches, turning so she could draw her feet beneath her to inspect herself, drawing her tether tight.

The blood flowed, a steady trickle, dripping in a series of lines dictated by gravity and the position of her foot, down to her heel on either side, across the broad spread of the top of her foot, dripping from there onto the floor in several places, the blood smeared against the white linoleum in streaky arcs and mottled bolts.

“Ow,” she said softly, impotently, raising the cuff gingerly with both hands to expose the wound. “Ow.”

She heard footsteps, looked up to see the girl, Bridgett, Kari, one of the clinic nurses.

No one spoke. If they were communicating with each other, it was through some means that Stacey couldn’t hear, but they seemed to reach a conclusion quickly about what should be done.

The nurse stepped up to Stacey and fell to her knees.

Stacey, always compliant before medical expertise, pulled her hands away from her ankle and slid her damaged foot forward until the chain to the other ankle went taut.

“This may sting a little,” said the nurse quietly, clinically, pulling out a bottle and a cotton pad. “But we’ve got to clean you up.”

She was wearing a little plastic name tag, and Stacey looked at it: Alvina.

Alvina opened the bottle, put the pad against its top, upended it and pressed the pad against the wound. Stacey felt the coldness first, and then the sting of raw alcohol, and she sucked in her breath but held still.

Alvina applied three or four more cotton pads until Stacey’s foot was clear of blood and the injury had been reduced to a small, red slit, no more than an inch long, not deep enough to stitch. She reached into her coat pocket, pulled out a box and some tape, opened up a small package of gauze, pressed it against Stacey’s ankle and taped it in place. She used one more pad to clean up the inside edge of the cuff, and she stood and departed.

The rest of the women followed her except for the nameless girl, the holidays intern who had drawn the worst job in the clinic that day. Or that year. Or maybe ever.

The girl unrolled two or three paper towels, went to the sink to wet them, returned and wiped up all of Stacey’s blood from the floor. Briefly, Stacey’s mind wandered to the movies where a crime scene must be cleaned up, by the perpetrators, or by the police.

The girl threw the paper towels into the trash and turned back to Stacey.

“We need your hands in back again.”

Stacey rose carefully, staring at the cuff as it slid down her ankle, catching at the top of the gauze and the tape, and she sat on the chair and raised her hands, eyes on the wall while the girl released her left wrist. Stacey moved her hands behind her and closed her eyes, feeling the cuff return to clench her hands together behind her, uselessly.

Stacey’s phone rang again. She looked at the green hold kit bag, looked away.

“Let me go,” she pleaded quietly.

Her phone chimed eight times, fell silent.

It was her father. She knew it was. The man who had contributed half her DNA, who had raised her in partnership with her mother and then, later, alone, who had cheered her on through school and sports, who had loved her and let her cry when boys she loved didn't love her back, who even now served as her protector and patron, was reaching out desperately through the airwaves to speak with her, to make sense of her peril, to save her. But she hadn't said enough. He had no idea where she went for her annual checkup. It was all handled by insurance.

Maybe he could call his insurance company.

Stacey sensed a vibration, a sort of thrumming, emerging from the nameless girl's rear.

He was calling her again.

This time the girl didn't bother checking her phone. She knew who it was, and she didn't want to talk to him.

"Let me go," Stacey said again, her voice dead in her own ears.

Men's voices.

Somewhere in the hall outside the breakroom, men were talking. Two men. And Bridgett was talking too, her voice light, cheerful.

Relieved.

Stacey looked up at the door.

Bridgett appeared first.

"She's right in here," she said, pointing at Stacey. "We prepped her just like the hold kit said. We did have an incident, but it was very minor, and we've taken care of it."

A man appeared, wearing the blue jumpsuit of a laborer, a transporter, someone who works with heavy things. He looked into Stacey's eyes, then at the rest of her body.

The next man, dressed the same way, was pushing something on a hand truck, large enough to be a refrigerator, Stacey thought, with the first inklings of dread.

No, it wasn't quite big enough to be a fridge. Nor did it look heavy enough. He spun around nimbly with it at the door, stepping backward into the breakroom, the large shape following him at an angle.

No, it wasn't a refrigerator.

It was a sort of box, black and metallic, with chalky writing on the sides.

More like a coffin.

A black, metal, coffin-sized box.

## Chapter 15: Hannah Demonstrates

Hannah had slept fitfully, waking again and again with a start, looking around wide-eyed through the near-blackness, remembering where she was, what she was doing there, what lay ahead.

Her mind raced with every return to consciousness, turning to the demonstration she would perform, the little act of sedition she'd been asked to complete, and the new wrinkle, Dr. Johnson.

She hadn't said yes to him yet, but she hadn't said no either, and that was as good as a yes.

Staring at the emergency bulb over her door, and the grayness and blackness it conjured across the rest of her cell, she put herself to sleep more than once by organizing things numerically.

Three chores must be done. A demonstration. An act of minor sedition. And, most likely, a night with New Life's chief medical researcher, a director no less.

Her most important official purpose here, to choose a topic for the coming semester, was almost an afterthought.

Three things.

Or four, really.

But if she accepted Dr. Johnson's suggestion for her topic – and that was all but a foregone conclusion, she knew – step four was a formality, the easiest of all the things that awaited her.

Twice, she woke up with a shout from the dreams that sometimes tormented her sleep, phantasms that came and went, leaving her unmolested for months at a time, then roaring through her brain two or three nights in a row.

Faces, shouts of pain, friends suffering and crying, her own flesh being jolted, nerves being wrung out by people who were monstrous because they were so normal, so impassive.

This morning, she slept uncharacteristically late, deep in her first good slumber of the night when the knock came, she opened her eyes and saw that her light had been turned on, her cell bathed in bright fluorescent.

"Hannah, you awake?" inquired a female voice that Hannah guessed belonged to Estelle.



“I am now,” Hannah replied, stirring beneath her sheets, pushing them aside and slowly hauling herself upright.

“We’re going to come get you in about an hour,” Estelle said, unlatching and opening the top panel. “Are you still up for this?”

“I am,” Hannah promised, sliding off her bed, standing and stretching.

“Did you masturbate?”

“Yes.”

“You used the prep rod?”

“Yup.”

Hannah went to her toilet and sat, looking at Estelle’s face through the little opening at the top of the door.

“I’ve got the schedule now,” Estelle said. “We’ll be putting you with one of our bigger guys.”

“What’s his name?”

“Duncan.”

“Is he nice?”

“They’re all nice.”

“That’s fine, then.”

“You’ll be getting breakfast soon, but you might want to get a shower first.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Do you have a hair dryer?”

“I’ll see if we can get you one.”

“Thanks.”

“And then, everyone from last night will be here.”

“What do you mean here?” Hannah asked, wiping and flushing.

“In the hall, at least to start with. To watch the process.”

“The process?”

“Yeah, we have a process for everything. Getting you, bringing you out, getting you set up. We’ll be doing it all by the book.”

Estelle paused.

“So, last chance to back out.”

“I’m not going to back out,” Hannah said.

“You’ve done institutional stuff, right?”

“Often enough. I’ve been put in storage, sent to clinics, got punished a few times, got tortured twice.”

Estelle's wince was pronounced enough to show through the slot in the door.

"Okay, you're on in an hour," she said, closing the panel and latching it shut.

"Okay," Hannah said to the door.

The shower was a simple affair, a spray head flush with the ceiling, a single handle set into the wall to control temperature, and a drain in the floor. No curtain, and just one small shelf at waist level for toiletries, a small bar of plain white soap in a paper wrapper waiting for her.

Hannah bathed with one eye on the door. She had just finished rinsing the conditioner out of her hair when she saw the panel at the door's lower edge open, saw the tray of food emerge into her cell, almost laughed when whoever had brought the food followed it with a bulky hairdryer, angling it several ways before the device made it into her realm.

She finished rinsing, wishing she had a clock so she knew how much time she had left.

She dried, wrapped the towel in a turban around her hair and picked up her breakfast, setting it on the desk and unwrapping the plastic knife and fork that came with it.

The food was almost as good as what was served in the kennels, scrambled eggs and turkey sausage and toast and jelly, with a little cup of orange juice and a chocolate bar she found grainy and guessed held the extra nutrition – protein, calcium, certain vitamins – appropriate for females who were actively breeding.

Done with breakfast, Hannah brushed her teeth, spitting on the dildo she'd left in her sink per instructions, and she pulled off her turban, found an outlet for the hairdryer and went to work on her hair, shaping it a little less thoroughly than she would have liked because she needed to be done with that quickly. She didn't want to be caught without makeup.

The cosmetics in the bag were passable, lipstick and eyeliner and mascara that she put on more heavily than usual, trying to look a little older and more severe than her regular state.

She blotted her lips, smirked into the mirror, fought the butterflies that invariably preceded a performance of any kind, and she settled on her bed to study and wait.

After a few pages in her economics textbook, she heard voices, laughter and excited discourse echoing in the hall, the sounds people made

when they were where they wanted to be, and Hannah's butterflies yielded briefly to the ache of isolation, of being left out, different, lesser.

No, she idly consoled herself, they're here to see me, to watch me. And tonight, when they're all sleeping in guest housing, I might be by the ocean.

The panel opened, revealing Estelle's face, nervousness obvious in her eyes, her blonde hair tied back.

"Hey, Hannah," she said.

"Hi," Hannah answered back, sliding off the bed.

Estelle's face disappeared, immediately replaced by two others, a male and female, peering into Hannah's cell.

The panel at waist height opened next, and then the lowest little door, Estelle narrating all the while, new faces appearing in rapid succession at both apertures, the boys looking a little longer than the girls.

"This is what we call an isolation cell. All new girls spend a week or two in one of these before they're brought into the general population. And these are sometimes used for punishment, and sometimes just to defuse a conflict or let someone get settled down for a few days."

Estelle's face appeared briefly at the window, disappeared, her voice persisting.

"Yes, our girls here are just like girls anywhere. They get jealous, they get irritable."

Hannah stood in the middle of the cell and returned the gazes of the faces at the door with her hands on her hips, believing that was the pose that gave her the most dignity. Huddling on the bed, covering her parts with her hands, cowering in the corner by the door so she couldn't be seen – these were the things a mere research slave would do.

Hannah was a student, a colleague – a scientist – and she was naked and confined here only because she had a special role to play.

"We're going to pretend Hannah is one of our standard inventory, and she's going to let us treat her the same as anyone else," Estelle continued. "Right, Hannah?"

"Yup," Hannah replied, feigning ease with the butterflies suddenly so active in her belly she almost choked on the word.

"Hannah, I gave you a pair of wipes to use, can you get those from the bag?"

Hannah stepped over to the bag on the desk, reached in and pulled out the two little packages that said “anus” and “vagina.”

“Reproduction may be called an inherently unhygienic process,” Estelle said to scattered laughter, echoing from the hall and through the openings in the cell door. “But you’ll see at multiple steps along the way today that we’re doing our best to keep things as tidy as possible. Hannah, let’s do the anal wipe first.”

“Okay.”

“Go to your toilet, open the package, and wipe, front to back,” Estelle said. “Everything’s flushable, so go ahead and dispose of it there.”

Hannah obeyed, no longer looking at the door and the faces that appeared there to watch a girl wipe her rear opening.

“Now vaginal,” Estelle said from somewhere in the hall while Hannah’s colleagues continued to observe, briefly, one after the other.

Hannah flushed both packaging and wipes down and stood, waiting. The butterflies had been stilled for the moment, replaced by a deep discomfort, an unexpected angst.

Cognitive dissonance.

She’d encountered the term somewhere, the sense that one is doing something one isn’t inclined to do, followed by the need to resolve it somehow, either to stop doing the thing, or to adjust one’s thinking to make the thing more palatable.

The adjustment could happen without one’s conscious involvement, an alteration in one’s belief system, one’s general outlook or philosophy or faith – an unwanted, unsought, unavoidable change in one’s essence.

I can’t stop doing this, Hannah thought to herself, hands on her hips again, eyes on the door and the people there. And I don’t want to change.

“These are shackles, for Hannah’s feet,” Estelle said, and Hannah heard the light clinking of chain, and saw that no one was peering at her through the door anymore, that something else had drawn their attention, that the few pairs of eyes she could see were aimed downward, and arms were moving the way they did when people took turns holding something, looking at it, passing it from one to the next.

“Alright, Hannah, can you step up please?” Estelle asked.

This was, Hannah recalled, the moment when at least one visiting subject female had balked, when cognitive dissonance had resolved itself, when the scholar took control and refused to be bound like a mere slave.

Now that she had arrived at the same moment, Hannah felt a sympathy for that unknown female. But she stepped to the door all the same, moved her feet to the port and looked down while Estelle's hands reached through, applying her cuffs.

"Now turn and bend, so I can do a quick visual inspection."

Hannah obeyed, putting her hands on her knees and staring at the floor, trying not to think about what the people beyond the door could see, who was staring at her exposed openings through the slots in the door, and who was politely gazing elsewhere.

"I'm looking for any obvious problems," Estelle said. "Infections, irritation, damage, hygiene."

The inspection took far longer than Hannah thought it should. Was Estelle making sure everyone had a look?

"Okay, straighten up, hands behind your back."

Hannah did as she was told, felt Estelle reach through the port, felt the cuffs close around her wrists, right, then left.

"Okay," Estelle said, "let's take a quick tour of Hannah's cell, and then we'll get her processed."

Hannah stood back while Estelle sprang the padlock and opened the door, leading the other students into the cell, most of them bunching into Hannah's space, a few hovering in the hall.

Hannah stood and watched with a sudden horror as eyes wandered to the prep rod, its shape and girth making clear its use, its placement in the sink making clear it had fulfilled that use.

Frequently after she had been taken, because of what was asked of her or done to her, Hannah resorted to withdrawal, to venturing outside her body to a place where she could watch the naked blonde girl's suffering and humiliation as if watching another person.

Her need to do that had ebbed through the intervening years, as she grew used to things that had once been unimaginable.

But something about this morning's humiliation was pushing her toward that old detachment. It was the juxtaposition that troubled her, the abutment of academics, research, and intelligence against the base and carnal. Was she a student, a researcher, a scientist, a scholar? Or just a filthy girl, collared, confined to a cell at night, and at this very moment standing nude with her hands bound behind her while real scholars looked at her dirty sex toy?

“You’ve probably noticed the thing in the sink,” Estelle said to a little awkward laughter, clearly trying to make light of. “We call it a preparation rod – prep rod for short – something we recommend girls insert and work with a little the night before a visit to the lab.”

Hannah braced herself for the inevitable questions – did she use it, did she like it, did she masturbate with it, did she orgasm? – but they went unasked, probably because they were unnecessary. Instead, Estelle resorted to other unnecessary words, pointing out the bed, the toilet, the shower, the sink, as if Hannah had been supplied with all the comforts of home here.

Hannah’s fellow students all eventually cycled through the cell while Hannah stood mute, waiting until the tour was done, following everyone into the hall and watching Estelle padlock the empty cell closed.

“How are you doing?” Estelle asked quietly, taking Hannah’s arm and guiding her up the hall, the rest of the students following behind.

“I’m a little nervous,” Hannah said just as quietly, adding, “Fear of the unknown.”

“I’ll get you through it,” Estelle promised with a squeeze. “Just follow directions.”

Conversations began and grew louder as they walked, turned the corner and stepped down a new hall of doors with no padlocks, but a hush descended when they reached what Hannah knew was one of the general residential areas.

The walls on either side of the middle path were all glass here, from floor to ceiling, clear but for the hexagons of wire that reinforced every pane.

Beyond the glass on either side of the main hallway ran two, narrower hallways, and beyond that were cages, one after another, a solid wall in the back, bars along the front and sides, with beds and toilets and sinks.

And occupants.

Almost every cage of the two dozen Hannah could see to her immediate left and right held naked girls – white and black, Asian and Hispanic, Arabic and mixed-race females, and two girls caged beside each other with the dark skin, wavy black hair and pronounced noses of Australian aborigines.

Some of the girls were reading on their beds, oblivious to the world around them. Some were asleep, the soles of their feet apparent if they

weren't under their sheets. One girl was on her toilet, one was exercising, running in place, breasts bouncing with every step. Several stood on either side of the bars, conversing, laughing, touching. Two girls exchanged a quick kiss while Hannah watched, and she wondered what the rules were on fraternization from cage to cage. They were probably liberal, Hannah guessed, the inmates encouraged to express any sexual whim within reason, to talk and buss – and more – between the bars, and to miss those privileges when sent to isolation.

The glass muffled any sounds made on the other side, words and laughter reduced to soft hums, and Hannah was reminded of ant colonies exhibited between two sheets of glass at a museum.

Some of the girls looked up, eyes scanning the visitors, lingering on Hannah before they looked away. Two, occupying adjoining cages, appeared to be about six months pregnant.

They had seen all this before, Hannah knew, visitors who walked through their world, who came and went and brought nothing, not food or relief or freedom, who looked at the captive girls and kept walking and returned to their lives.

Hannah knew she was just another visitor in their eyes, a colleague of free people, her chains and nudity most likely a minor, temporary inconvenience compared to the tragedy of their own lives, existences interrupted, minimized, defined only by their ability to contribute corporeally to research being done by other people.

I'm sorry, Hannah longed to say to each of them. Don't hate me. I have suffered too, and my suffering isn't over. And yes, while I'm here to feed my own ambitions, I am also serving other agendas, following the directions of those who want to make you free, make us all free.

Please, please, don't hate me.

Just before they left the residential portion of the hall and the glass walls, Hannah saw a female staff member enter the walkway to her left, approach one of the cages and say something inaudible, to which the girl confined there replied with a smile and, possibly, laughter. She passed out of Hannah's view as the girl rose from her bed and stepped to the bars.

What was wanted of her? Hannah wondered. A status check? A hygiene inspection? Was she going to be chained and brought somewhere? To the lab? To punishment?

Hannah kept moving beside Estelle, the other students talking together behind her, no one speaking to Hannah.

What does one say, after all, to a girl who's about to participate in a breeding demonstration?

Hannah didn't mind. Her thoughts were focused elsewhere, on the blueprint of this building, on what was where, on the lines from an electronic document, and how they corresponded to the place where she was walking now.

She knew where she was headed, generally: to one of the rooms where girls were used for science. Where they were looked at, tested, examined, experimented on, penetrated. There were just a half dozen such rooms, all on this floor, some distance ahead.

But there was only one central punishment room, and that's where Hannah's mind went next, because that's where she would complete her little assignment.

The door would be unmarked or barely marked, Hannah knew. Somewhere on this hall. Finding it was exceptionally simple on the blueprint, when she could search for it among clearly-defined squares and rectangles, free of the distractions of being here in the flesh, free of the distractions of other doors and pictures and bulletin boards and fire extinguishers, of exit signs and people.

No, she thought, shuffling past, her chains clinking against the floor of plastic linoleum tiles, it's not that hard. There it is. There it is, to the left.

This door, this room.

"DISC-01," it said in discreet little black letters at eye level.

There was just a knob on this door, no lock here, nor most likely on the other two doors that, Hannah knew, led into the room from other areas of the floor. There was no need for a lock. Everyone was brought there in chains. Everyone left in chains. Escape was impossible. And no one entered who didn't need to be there.

Hannah opened her ears, straining to hear something tell-tale from behind the solid, windowless barrier. Was that a moan? Had someone just cried out? Was someone talking? Were staff members alleviating boredom behind that door by exchanging gossip or professional laments or updates to policy, while the girls brought there in chains suffered through something far worse than tedium?



Yes, that was the door, Hannah knew. It must be. Remember it. Remember where it stood. For later.

And then, these next few doors belonged to the lab complex, rooms for processing and examination and clinical procedures, conveniently close to punishment. Obey here and go back to your cage. Fail here, and your reckoning is just a few steps away.

Estelle stepped ahead and pulled open a door marked “PRE-LAB,” and Hannah approached, stopping at the entrance to the room, taking in the space with another rumble of butterflies.

## **Chapter 16: The Boxing of Stacey**

Stacey seated in the clinic break room in restraints, wearing nothing but paper panties, studied the box they’d wheeled in and decided it had nothing to do with her. She wasn’t dead, after all. Maybe it held supplies. Clothing. Furniture.

But her heart was thumping, her breath coming thick and fast.

The sense of unreality grew, the sense of being in a dream that didn’t quite feel like a dream, or of being in a nightmare that might suddenly prove to be false – or not false.

“Has this been tested?” one of the men in the blue jumpsuit asked, bending to pull the compliance prod out of the outlet.

“No,” Bridgett said, her voice betraying anxiety. “It said it was optional, so we didn’t do it.”

The man walked up to Stacey, leaned over.

“Hey,” he said.

Stacey, who’d been looking aimlessly around the room – at Bridgett, at the men, at the big box they’d brought, at her manacled feet – looked up at the man’s eyes.

“Hey,” she said, with the sudden hope that all of this was about to be resolved, that he was going to tell her they didn’t need her, they were here for something else, she could go now.

She heard a crackle, like a very small bag of popcorn being popped, and then something cold on her shoulder.

Impossibly cold.

No, hot.

“Ow!” Stacey shouted, looking at her shoulder. “Ow, fuck!”

She'd been touched by the prod.

The man had used it casually on her, as if it were just another thing to take care of.

Her attention was now all focused on the device, forgetting Bridgett and the two men and the box they'd brought.

There was a man's hand holding it. It was ivory, with a red tip. There were two black buttons on it.

The man's thumb slid to the other button and pressed. More popcorn sounds. A bigger bag this time, it seemed.

The prod moved down toward her thigh, blue lightning at the tip.

Stacey watched it with a detached sense of horror, as if she were about to see something bad done to someone else.

"OWAIEEEEEOOOO!" she shrieked, pushing back in the chair, chains rattling as her bare feet scuffed against the floor, attempting in a vain to run backwards.

Stacey's scream subsided, yielding to a choking sob.

"Both settings at 100 percent," one of the men observed.

"I'm sorry," she said, leaning forward, tears dropping on her legs. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

She couldn't see the prod anymore. They seemed to be done with it. Somewhere in her memories, she recalled the mention of a test.

The prod had worked.

"I'm sorry!" she wailed.

She searched the room, looking for someone to accept her apology, found Bridgett standing to her left with her back against the wall, face frozen in a grim, plastic smile.

Things were missing. Her clothes. Normal sounds.

Things were strange. Her sense of place. Her body.

Stacey couldn't stop crying. She'd done something wrong, apparently. It hurt.

"I'm sorry!"

It hurt.

Bridgett stepped forward, handed something small to the men.

Keys.

They were going to set Stacey free now.

Stacey had suffered enough.

Wait. Why was she sorry? She'd done nothing wrong.

After staggering pain, reality shifts, reason goes fluid, morality ratchets down. None of it goes unrecoverable, just a little more difficult to grasp.

Reality had returned. Stacey no longer needed to apologize.

Somewhere, a phone was ringing, the chime coming to her softly, muffled, but she knew it was her phone, a shred of reality, of morality. Her father was trying to call her. And she would be calling him back, as soon as she was free. And she'd make sure he sued this clinic, and these people.

Sued them good and hard.

One of the men knelt before her. The last time a man had knelt like that in front of her while she sat in a chair, she was naked, and she spread her legs and he licked her, tongue against her vulva, his head rocking, her hands on his shoulders, her fingers through his thick black hair, her feet extended in delight, toes against the floor, her entire body gone as stiff as the cock that, a few minutes later, would plunder her welcoming sheath.

Daryn. With a y. He'd told her that as soon as they'd met, a month ago, in mid-December. Daryn, with a y. He said it as if it were a hidden handicap, as if having a y there made him inferior to all the Darrens and Darins of the world.

He was older. He'd been married but was divorced now. No kids. She liked him. They were going to get together this weekend, again. Tomorrow night. Saturday. She hadn't told her father about him, yet. He was picky about her boys.

Daryn.

She heard the sounds of a key turning in a lock, of metal against the floor, of the opening of a restraint. She felt hands on her upper arms, raising her upright, forcing her to stand on trembling legs.

One of the men had brought a box. A big box, almost as large as a coffin. She was half-walked, half-marched to it, raised, and her feet were set within it, her eyes taking in the features here. She saw a small pillow at one end of the box. Or, not a pillow, really. More just a cushion. For the head. And then straps positioned where the legs and arms and torso would go.

"Oh, no," Stacey said, hearing her voice as if it were coming from somewhere else. "Oh, no."

Morality waned again. Why would they do this to her if she didn't deserve it? Reality was fading, other than the immediate sensation of a hand at her left hip. She heard the rip of paper, looked down and saw that her

paper panty was being torn off, ripped off, pulled out from between her legs.

“No,” she sighed, as if to herself.

Still shackled, with her hands bound behind, she was forced to sit.

Her ankles were freed, the shackles removed and dropped on the floor with a dull clank, and her legs were spread and forced against the bottom of the box.

Quickly, with a terrifying speed only possible with considerable experience or training, straps were applied to ankles, knees, thighs, each tightly cinched in place.

Every strap made the same sound as it was secured, a “ZIP” that suggested the passing of soft fabric through a metallic gripping device, a set of biting teeth.

A clenching mouth.

“No,” Stacey protested weakly, the feel of the straps helping her focus on what was being done to her, a gross injustice she didn’t understand but knew was inherently wrong.

One of the men knelt before her with a phone. Not her phone, though. His.

He raised it, seemed to be aiming it toward her face. She stared blankly back.

Someone else was behind her, touching her back.

“Ah,” she said, terrified of being prodded again.

No, he was just writing something, on her skin. What? Why?

Her hands were released, but she was completely disabused now of any notion freedom was imminent. Hands pressed against shoulders, forcing her backwards, into the box.

“No!” she shrieked, her sense of wrongness crystalizing into certainty. “Nooooo!”

Straps were passed around her belly and chest, above her breasts, below them. Arms were strapped, near the shoulders, at the elbows, at the wrists.

“ZIP. ZIP. ZIP. ZIP.”

Stacey raised her head to look at her body, a hand immediately gripping her hair at the top of her scalp, forcing her against the cushion.

“Nooo—!” she screamed until a thick rubber rod was forced between her lips, between her teeth, shutting off the rest of her cry. Held in

place by chains anchored at either side of her neck, it both silenced her and held her head still.

She writhed, shook, grunted, her meager resistance all in vain, the straps unyielding.

Someone was touching her.

There.

Between her legs.

Her vaginal lips were being spread.

“Uhhhggg!” was the only sound she could make, so she made it. She would not be raped in silence. Was that all this was? A very elaborate rape?

It didn’t make sense. None of this made sense. Stacey was losing track of reality again.

No penis came. Instead, she felt the sharp, peculiar sting of a catheter up her urethra.

“Uhhhggg!”

It was, in some ways, an invasion worse than rape, a medical act devoid of medical concern, an intimate act without even the pretense of intimacy, a violation done without her permission, without explanation, and with her body helplessly bound. And not by a single rapist, but by two men she didn’t know, while the clinic’s matron looked on without any apparent concern.

The men continued to attend to her middle.

Something was touching her anus. Something was entering her there.

“Uhhhggg!”

She put things in there sometimes, for pleasure. Sometimes alone, sometimes with someone else. She wanted to do it with Daryn, if their relationship reached that level.

There was no pleasure here, just another degree of invasiveness, another profound violation

“Uhhhggg!”

She could look directly only at the ceiling. She could see the heads of the two men, but she couldn’t see what they were doing.

They had forced something into her anus. And they were leaving it there, a hard plug that made her feel ill.

She felt other things, less distinct than what had been pushed into her. Something brushed her thigh. Something was adhered to her calf. Her bare mound was touched. Something was put between her breasts, taped there, perhaps. Something was put between her feet.

“Uhhhggg!”

The men stood, looked down at her, and the box’s black lid appeared between them, held by four hands, set over her, latched into place with clicks that echoed dully. Ten clicks, maybe twelve, Stacey lost count. Clicks along the sides, above her head, down by her feet.

The parallel with a coffin was now complete.

She wasn’t plunged into darkness, however.

Before her face was a small window of tinted glass, but she closed her eyes because what she saw through it proved dizzying, a whirl of ceiling and wall and doorway as her coffin was raised, rolled through the door and into the hall.

She grunted again, strained against her straps, clenched around the things pushed up between her legs, and none of it did any good.

She opened her eyes again, saw plastic woodgrain and knew she must have been set upright in the elevator, her feet dangling, the straps, holding, each bearing just a fraction of her weight.

From somewhere beneath her – by her feet, it seemed – the chime of her phone began anew, ringing patiently, three times, four, until it was cut short in mid-ring with a gurgle, as if strangled, the sound her phone gave when it ran out of power.

“Uhhhggg!”

## **Chapter 17: A Problem with the Draft**

Druhler Fairchild balanced a plate of sausage and pastries on one knee, the draft of a contract on the other, his contract knee bouncing nervously.

He flipped through the pages once like a speed reader, searching for something and it seems, not finding it, looking up at Maxim with disappointment.

“This isn’t how we discussed it at all,” he said.

“What’s missing?” Maxim asked.

“Everything, shit,” Fairchild replied. “This is calling all my businesses one company. No one knows that, and we can’t say it in writing, for God’s sake. I’m not sure how it works in Russia, but in the US, you can’t hold monopolies, or near monopolies, and I’ve gone to a shitload of trouble setting up shell companies, shell owners, shell boards, making two thirds of it look like someone else’s deal, like my damned competitors.”

Fairchild heaved the entire document into the fire and watched it burn.

“Destroy every copy,” he said. “How many—”

“That’s the only printout,” Maxim said, shifting in his chair, turning to watch fire eat the pages.

“Delete it from your hard drives too, if you please. I’ve got some friends at the FTC who look the other way, but if someone who’s not on my payroll suspects what I’m doing, they’ll tear me a new one.”

“Very well,” said Maxim. “How do you want it spelled out?”

“I swear I told you this,” Fairchild said. “But I can’t put it in writing, so please remember it this time.”

“Yes,” Maxim said, pulling out his phone. “Is it okay if I take notes?”

“Fine, I’m sure you’ll be discreet. Now, you got New Life. That’s the research arm. That’s all me. You can find the name online, the address too. And then Subject Services Inc. That’s mine too. Now, Past the Wire. That’s set up to look like a joint venture, headquarters in Mexico City and New York. It owns a bunch of clinics and storage places and showrooms. Look on the website, use the Mexico City address. And Human Resources. Headquarters in Chicago, advanced medical facilities there and all over the country. And split the money however you want, as long as it comes to the total we agreed to.”

For the next hour, Druhler Fairchild detailed the extent of his empire, the shell companies and proxies he controlled and owned and was expecting to sell this year, while Maxim took copious notes.

## **Chapter 18: Duncan Appears**

Hannah shuffled nervously through the door, taking in the space where she was to begin what was, she realized, the most difficult of the day’s assignments.

The theme of the room, if such a room could have a theme, was cleanliness. Or really, sterility, the smell of alcohol and industrial detergents almost overpowering.

To her right, in the corner, stood a shower. To her left stood a long counter with two sinks and a row of cleaning agents and disinfectants. There were folded towels in three sizes, soaps and brushes and a coiled hose. At the end of the counter stood a floor-to-ceiling cabinet with a pair of closed doors.

In one of the far corners, a standing desk held a PC and computer monitor. In its opposite corner waited two large rolling carts and a stack of curved plastic trays, pink and rounded and large enough to hold a female body, straps arrayed along the edges to keep the occupant still once she had settled within it.

“This is a pre-lab processing room,” Estelle announced. “Everyone but Hannah needs to wait at the door until your feet are wrapped, please.”

Estelle went to the cabinet, opened it, reached into a box and pulled out a mass of blue fabric that Hannah recognized as surgical coverings.

“Slip these over your shoes,” she said, handing the whole wad to the closest researcher, who took two and passed the rest on. “Perfect sterility is impossible, but we try to keep things as clean as possible.”

Estelle led Hannah to the middle of the room, where a single cable hung from the ceiling with four chains dangling from it, each ending in a short hook.

“Wait here,” Estelle said, stepping to the stack of pink trays, lifting one and returning to Hannah.

She set it on the floor at Hannah’s feet while the researchers crowded in, the room too small to hold all of them.

“This is a copulation platform,” Estelle said. “It places the female in the optimal breeding research position.”

Hannah looked down at the smooth plastic tray, wondering how many other females had been bound to it.

“Can everyone see it?” Estelle asked. “Can some of you in the front step out so the people in the hall can see?”

Hannah, focused on the thing at her feet, heard shuffling behind her but didn’t look back.

“Alright, Hannah, head goes here at the top, on the cushion, the rest of you here, kind of obvious, probably. So stand with your feet right here.”



Hannah obeyed.

Estelle removed Hannah's handcuffs. Hannah brought her hands before her, rubbing her wrists, an action that was more reflex than necessity, the handcuffs having bound her loosely, almost gently.

"Sit at the end there."

Hannah lowered herself to the cool plastic, felt Estelle's hand on her shoulder.

"Now, ease back."

Hannah allowed Estelle to lower her, gasping as the platform took her bottom, her lower and upper back, her shoulders, in its bracingly cold contours. Settled now, Hannah studied the straps that lined the edges of the platform, uncertain of their application. She'd been bound more than once to things like this, for shipping usually, but this one was more complicated.

"Now, a very important step," Estelle said, raising her voice.

"Hannah, may I strap you to the platform?"

The wider straps must be for my thighs, Hannah speculated.

"Hannah?"

And these are for my wrists, maybe.

"Hannah?"

What order would they be put on?

"Hannah?"

"Oh," Hannah said with a start. "Oh, sorry. Huh?"

Estelle laughed. More than one of the researchers chortled. Hannah felt like a fool.

"May I strap you to the platform?"

"Oh . . . uh," Hannah stammered, confused. "Yes. Yes."

"Service on the board is optional," Estelle said. "We always ask. If the female says no, she goes back to quarters."

"Are there . . . inducements?" a girl's voice asked.

"There are," Estelle replied. "Females who agree to help out are given the same kinds of benefits as cooperative employees at any workplace. More privileges, improved quarters, treats."

Treats, Hannah repeated to herself.

Let us violate you, let us rape you, pair you with a male you don't know or don't like, and you'll get something nice.

A candy bar?

A can of soda?

Trail mix?

“What if they always say no?” asked a male.

Estelle, kneeling beside Hannah, seemed not to hear the question.

“For the platform to work effectively,” she continued, “the female needs to maintain her position throughout, and the straps help her do that.”

Estelle lifted one of the straps, brushing Hannah’s breast with a swath of Velcro bristles.

“Okay, Hannah, raise your legs as high as you can get them, all the way up to your chest if possible.”

Yes, Hannah thought, obeying, so that’s it. I’ll be doubled up, my holes presented to the boy they bring to me, my legs drawn up, out of the way, nonexistent.

Who would she be mating with?

What was his name? Doug? Donald?

Duncan.

That’s it. Duncan.

Duncan? Who names their son Duncan? Was he Irish? Scottish? Where did they name boys Duncan?

Estelle slipped the end of the strap around Hannah’s left thigh and pressed it against itself to secure it, stepping around the girl to do the same to her right thigh.

She removed Hannah’s shackles and put straps around her ankles.

“This is a keyless positioning system,” Estelle said, looking up from her task. “No chains, no locks, and we don’t call them restraints. They’re just positioners.”

Hannah rocked her legs, found the straps somewhat elastic, with a little give no chain would offer. But they were restraints, of course. Hannah was certain no one believed otherwise.

“That’s right,” Estelle said. “You’ll be allowed some movement on the platform. We’ll talk about the reason for that in the lab. Front group step out, let’s let the people in the hall observe.”

Hannah looked up, realized the people closest to her, with the front row seats for what was being done, were loath to move. Everyone seemed to be waiting for someone else to shuffle away first, people picking up their blue-wrapped shoes but dropping them back again right where they’d been.

Hannah looked up, met a few pairs of eyes, looked away. They might be researchers, she thought. They might be brilliant. But people are

people, and the same things interest everyone.

“Hands here,” Estelle said, pointing to a pair of short black posts on either side of the platform. Hannah wrapped her fingers around them, found them rubbery, foamy, yielding to her grip like stress balls, and she squeezed them and toyed with them, distracted enough that she barely noticed Estelle closing a strap around each wrist.

“C’mon, everyone, trade places,” Estelle said.

Feet finally moved with purpose, one set of Hannah’s fellow students departing, another entering to see up close the girl bound to the pink plastic copulation platform.

“The straps need to hold her just so,” Estelle said. “No adjustment, no alteration. So we bind each female’s wrists to remove the temptation of tampering.”

A nice way to put it, Hannah thought.

Estelle stepped back to the corner and returned with one of the rolling carts, pushing it before her as it squeaked.

While she waited for the next step, Hannah took stock of her position.

The pink tray that held her was designed for comfort, supporting her lower back, curved to conform to the average girl’s shoulders and rear, the foam pad beneath her head providing adequate cushion. The platform angled her pelvis toward the ceiling, aiming her vagina up enough that anything put in there would stay. Her head was also angled up, so she could see between her legs, see anyone who might be standing there, see the little field of golden pubic hair that grew above her opening.

Used to confinement and close restraints, she could probably endure this for an hour without getting restless, three hours before she became frantic.

Estelle stopped with her cart beside Hannah and, standing over her, reached up to the cable and tugged it.

“Hannah, I’m not calling you fat, but there’s no way I could pick you up to get you on the cart,” Estelle said to scattered laughter. “So we’ve got a simple lift to raise you.”

The cable dropped, a whine from a motor somewhere in the ceiling marking its descent, the four chains with the four hooks dropping toward Hannah’s belly.

“A quick tug and it comes down,” Estelle said, holding the chains up before they could coil up on Hannah. “And another quick tug and it stops.”

The motor ceased whining and the cable ceased falling, and Estelle passed the four hooks through four round eyes set into the four corners of the platform.

“Another pull and the cable retracts,” Estelle said, demonstrating.

The cable rose, drew the chains tight, and Hannah felt herself lifting, swaying slightly until Estelle steadied her.

“It goes just as high as it needs to, and it stops,” Estelle said, as soon as Hannah’s ascent terminated. “And then I slide the cart under her and latch the platform at the four corners.”

With four efficient clicks, Estelle clamped Hannah’s platform to the cart beneath it, removed the lifting chains, and stepped around so she was standing before Hannah’s exposed holes.

“Hannah, still doing good?” Estelle asked.

“Everything’s fine,” Hannah assured, to laughter. She knew they were going to laugh. She knew it took people a long time to get used to seeing a naked girl bound before them, and until they did, almost anything the girl said would amuse them.

It used to surprise her, when she spoke in situations like this and they laughed. Now she understood it. She’d been on the other side often enough, worked with bound girls once or twice, had found humor to be a refuge from the pathos.

“We’ve already looked at Hannah’s vulva and anus once,” Estelle said, “but just before a girl goes to the lab, we do one more inspection and a final cleaning.”

Estelle bent, took Hannah’s left labia and pulled it away from her body, stretching it and inspecting both sides before releasing it and doing the same thing to the right lip.

“It’s a final check for irritation, abrasion, infection, anything that means we can’t go forward.”

Estelle spread Hannah’s lips wide, scanning the mouth of her organ, passing a finger over her clitoris, tapping it twice. From there, she spread out the flesh around Hannah’s anus, peering and, apparently, finding nothing.

Hannah did her best to hold still, to refrain from bouncing or raising herself against Estelle's fingers.

She could do nothing about her nipples, which arose and hardened as they always did under this kind of stimulation, and Hannah glanced at them and was glad her knees were strapped just above them, and believed she was the only one who knew she was reacting to the things being done between her legs.

But it didn't matter, she thought. She was no longer capable this morning of being embarrassed, she believed, so she looked at her nipples briefly and returned her eyes to the ceiling.

Estelle was still stirring around, stepping to the sink and the cabinet, returning to Hannah, sliding what looked like a small bowl into a slot in the platform just beneath Hannah's bottom.

"Last step, a quick shave," Estelle announced.

"What?" Hannah blurted.

"I need to remove your hair," Estelle said, standing at Hannah's bottom with a can and a disposable razor.

"All of it?" Hannah asked, blushing at last because she knew her voice had registered mild panic, prompting snorts from those around her.

"Normally, that's how it's done," Estelle said. "It's a hygiene thing."

"Oh."

"I need to at least shave around your opening."

"I've never been shaved there."

"I'll be gentle."

"Just there, okay?" Hannah said, to more quiet snickers.

Hannah didn't know how important her hair was to her until she was threatened with losing it. Why did she care? Why was she embarrassed?

Because, she thought, her pubic hair was like clothing, like a garment of last resort, the only thing she was allowed to wear, often enough, in the kennels, at home in Dallas, at any other place where she was ordered to strip. To be bare there was to be completely exposed, the folds of her vulva, her sensitive pink knob visible to everyone, not just the people she opened her legs for.

Estelle went to work, rinsing Hannah's inner and outer lips with a spray bottle of warm water, dousing her clitoris and opening, applying

cream, scraping her flesh with a “wick, wick, wick,” hair and water and bubbles running across Hannah’s anus and into the bowl while she tried not to squirm.

Hannah’s research colleagues watched her shearing with waning interest, quiet side conversation beginning in the room, in the hall. Someone said something funny, someone else laughed, and Hannah felt another twinge of regret. No one would speak to her while she was like this. Would they ever speak to her again, after seeing her naked, bound and restrained like a lab animal?

Everyone was going to dinner tonight, she knew, to an exclusive club, and she imagined herself being ignored there, out of contempt, out of pity, out of the sense of foreignness that often attended relations between slave and free. And then, Dr. Johnson would rescind his invitation, and the girl named Hannah Loughbridge would be reduced to non-personhood here as in many other places, all her knowledge and intelligence and ambition mere chimera.

Estelle removed the bowl from its slot, poured its contents into the sink, returned to Hannah.

“Okay,” she said, “if everyone will slide into the hall, I’m going to move Hannah down to the lab.”

Estelle pushed from the top end of the platform, and the cart rolled, the wheel squeaked, and Hannah felt herself being transported to her next destination, the place where she would meet the boy named Duncan.

She glanced around once she’d been pushed from the room, caught an eye or two, found it awkward and looked at up, watching the passing of ceiling tiles until they stopped passing and the cart came to a stop.

“Who’s she been scheduled with?” inquired a familiar male voice.

“Duncan,” Estelle said. “We considered Aaron and Mark, but they both ended up in copulation stalls.”

“Duncan’s a good choice,” said the voice, and Hannah tilted her head up to see who was there, found Dr. Johnson, his somber face and knobby body towering over Estelle’s.

“Rinse and collect,” he added, looking only at Estelle, oblivious to the researchers around him, entirely unconcerned about the girl bound on the cart beneath him. “Duncan’s due for another semen check.”

“Yes, Sir,” Estelle said.

So that's it, Hannah thought. I was a passing interest, something Dr. Johnson used for fleeting amusement, a little jolt during an otherwise boring evening. With the new day, the slave girl who attracted him was just another of the female properties his job kept him in contact with. Another set of breeding organs. Another vagina. Another piece of meat that happened, at this moment, to be bound on her back, legs raised, wrists secured, shaved vulva in full, obscene preparation for its most important task today, a demonstrative penetration.

How could any man feel any interest in a girl after he'd seen her like this?

And yet, Hannah continued to stare, eyes turned up in her head to watch the exchange behind her.

And Dr. Johnson looked, ever so briefly, ever so subtly, back into Hannah's blue eyes before he spun on his heel and stepped away.

"What did he mean?" Hannah asked as soon as Estelle resumed propelling the cart.

"Rinse and collect," Estelle said.

"I know," Hannah said, eyes back on the ceiling tiles. "What does that mean?"

"I'll need to put a collection tube up your vagina after Duncan's finished, so we can check what he released."

"Check what?" Hannah asked.

"It won't hurt," Estelle said.

"I know," Hannah said. "What are you checking for? Volume, viscosity, glucose level, sperm count, antibodies, motility?"

"I just send the jar to the lab," Estelle said, laughing. "They'll look for all that."

Estelle whirled the cart around so quickly it left Hannah briefly disoriented, and then they were moving backwards, Estelle pushing open the door to one of the labs with her backside, the researchers massed around Hannah as she was drawn into the room.

Hannah's nose told her this was another sterile place, but with a thin essence of something else, a whiff of something that couldn't be erased with bleach and detergent, the scent of coupling, of male pleasure, of the distinct odor – or really, aura might not be too strong a word – of the penis at work within the vagina.

Hannah glanced around as she was pulled to the middle of the room, finding it almost identical on three sides to the room she'd just been in, with a sink and counter, cabinets and equipment.

But where the fourth wall should be, Hannah spied a gallery, three rows of tiered seats behind a low barrier.

This room was built for an audience, she knew, for people to sit comfortably and observe while two slaves worked at science.

"Everyone, please find a seat," Estelle said, stooping to latch the wheels of Hannah's cart to four catches set into the floor, Hannah listening to each distinctive click.

"We'll be bringing a male named Duncan to Hannah today," she said, stepping to the sink to wash her hands, moving to the wall to flick a switch.

An odd, almost imperceptible vibration passed through the pink plastic of the platform and into Hannah's body, and her perspective began shifting. She was turning, slowly.

"The platform's on a turntable," Estelle said. "We don't always use it, but when we've got an audience, it gives everyone the same view. Hannah, how are you doing? I hope you're not prone to motion sickness?"

"I'm good," Hannah said.

"We used to do four revolutions a minute," Estelle said. "No one liked that, and after a half dozen girls got sick on themselves, we slowed it down to one revolution every two minutes. It still bothers about five percent of our females, but we either don't bring them in when there's an audience, or slip them something for motion sickness a few hours before."

Estelle stepped to the end of the platform, reached down, spread Hannah's vaginal lips and massaged the mouth of her opening.

"Our male should be here any second," Estelle said, talking to her audience while she continued to manipulate Hannah's genitals. "Now . . . there's no way to predict the state of arousal a male will arrive with. Males will sometimes get aroused as soon as they're chained for the walk to the lab, and sometimes they'll show up soft or semi-hard and need a little attention first. Hannah will be partnering with Duncan this morning, and he tends to be very reliable, but he does his best with females he's familiar with, so there's a chance he won't be ready."

Estelle pushed the first inch of her bare index finger up Hannah's vagina, pulled it out with a sheen of lubricant on it and spread the syrup



over Hannah's clitoris with a few quick circles.

Hannah exhaled and bit her lip, the stimulation unexpectedly distracting.

"If he shows up fully erect, we'll want to get him engaged with Hannah right away, with a minimum of preliminaries," Estelle continued, "so getting Hannah's sheath prepared, ideally with her own lubricant, starts before he arrives. Hannah, am I doing it right?"

Hannah inched her pelvis up, the touch of an experienced girl something she had grown to enjoy over the last few years, even if the girl was touching as part of her job, and Hannah was trussed to near immobility.

"Hannah?"

Hannah's mind turned to Duncan, and the kind of boy he might be. Tall and elegant, like Allain? Dark and romantically handsome, like Ramone, who'd been sent back to Brazil? Reserved and older, like Dr. Petrosyan? Tall and knobby and strangely sad, like Dr. Johnson? Asian or Black or Arabic?

"Hannah?"

But what did it matter? They'd couple here, in front of everyone, and then he'd leave and she'd fly back to Dallas and would probably never see him again. They probably wouldn't even get to talk. But she was looking forward to feeling him. It had been since Sunday that she'd held a boy, and it was a sensation she was growing frustrated for, the spreading of her lips, the slow push into her tunnel, the release of juices, first the female kind, then the male variety, the thick white cream that leapt from the penis tip in a half dozen fresh jolts, that leaked out between her vaginal lips afterwards, into her panties when she was dressed, down her thighs when she was nude. Estelle wasn't a boy, and her finger wasn't a penis, but she was doing things. Good things. Hannah sighed and bounced a little more eagerly against Estelle's fingers, trying not to think about what she looked like to the other researchers, turning slowly on her cart, positioned for sex like an animal.

If Estelle kept at it, if she would just pay a little more attention to Hannah's clitoris, Hannah could cum now, before the boy ever arrived. If Estelle did that, it would be okay, Hannah thought.

"Hannah?"

Was Estelle talking? Was she saying Hannah's name?

"Oh," Hannah blurted. "Yes? Yes, Ma'am?"

“Never mind, I think you answered my question,” Estelle quipped, and the audience laughed predictably, and Hannah ignored it, focusing on the sensation between her legs, willing herself to wait until later to feel embarrassed about what had just happened.

Estelle’s fingers slowed, absently stirring the honey at Hannah’s pink opening, touching lightly, maddeningly. Estelle’s attentions were meant only to get Hannah’s vagina wet, any pleasure she experienced incidental, a climax out of the question.

Hannah heard the opening of a door, the tell-tale rattle of chains against the floor, and she turned her head to gaze at a female staff person and the nude male she was escorting.

This was Duncan, no doubt, not white or black or Asian or Arabic, but instead bearing the same Australian aboriginal features she’d seen in two of the girls on the residential hall: dark skin, wavy black hair, a nose like no other nose in the world.

And the eyes. The eyes!

He looked angry. Something about his face as he moved through the room beside his escort frightened Hannah.

His eyes took in the researchers in the gallery, roving over them all with dark malevolence before they moved to Hannah, and he glared at her, looking into her face with barely concealed rage.

## Chapter 19: In and Out

Struggling against her bonds, grunting into the gag between her teeth was doing Stacey no good, either as a method of escape from the box where she’d been confined, or as an expression of defiance. No one could hear her. No one cared.

Breathe, she told herself. Center. You’ve trained for this.

You’ve been to yoga.

Stacey laughed, briefly, shallowly, with a sense of how bizarre this all was, how over the top, before her mind returned to the horror of what had just been done to her.

She felt herself descending in the elevator, nothing visible but the plastic woodgrain of the elevator’s wall.

She heard the door of the elevator whisk open, her box tilt backward. She spun, and now she was looking at the ceiling and upper

walls of the first floor of the office building that housed her gynecologist. She was being pushed toward the back of the building. Not toward the front, where she always entered, but toward the back, toward someplace on the first floor of the building she'd never been before.

When she did deep breathing exercises at the start of her yoga classes with Amina, this was the kind of thing they were intended to prepare her for.

"I have friend in India," Amina told the class a few weeks ago. "She was in terrible, terrible car wreck. With her friends. She's only one who survive. She was in back seat. The car crash into truck, and everyone die except my friend. She tell me, Amina, I breathe deep in the car. I close my eyes, and see nothing but my own breath, in and out, in and out, and still, on the ambulance, in and out, in and out, and it save me."

In and out, Stacey told herself. In and out.

She continued to watch, seeing one of the men step before her box, open a door that led into what looked like a closet, but with a flight of stairs on the right side and, directly before her, a door. The man opened the door and Stacey saw the gray light of deep winter and felt cold air seeping through the cracks in her box.

A black cavern loomed before her. The back of a truck. Fighting terror, breathing, in out, in out, she felt herself propelled into it with a jarring bump, as the wheels of the hand truck crossed the gap from the back of the building to the vehicle.

The box was raised, the hand truck slid out from beneath it, the box lowered, all the way down, and Stacey was on her back now, frigid air seeping into the box from the front, from the sides, nothing to look at but the dark ceiling of a truck.

She heard the men talking, couldn't hear their words, heard the truck door roll down, and her world was plunged into darkness and a new terror, the terror not merely of being stripped and chained, but of being forgotten, abandoned, buried alive.

The muffled noises emanating from Stacey's box were no longer those of outrage and offense, but of desperate fear, of despair, the sounds of the ripping trauma that comes from passing from life to something just short of death from mid-morning to early afternoon on the same day.

She struggled to breathe in around the rubber gag between her teeth, to breathe out, to breathe in again, but with every second or third

breath, she sobbed.

## Chapter 20: Four in Hand

Hannah knew very little about Australian aborigines. She'd see the pictures of the men, some with bones in their noses, standing in a row, in skirts and wooden jewelry, staring defiantly at a camera wielded by, most likely, a European who had come to colonize them, to subjugate, to subdue.

To kill.

Duncan was one of these defiant men, except without the bone in his nose.

Or clothing.

But he was primal, enraged.

Dangerous.

Not quite human.

Some people were, perhaps, best kept away from civilization, by jails or prisons.

Or slavery.

Hannah knew from the sound of his steps that he was bound by the ankles, but his hands were free. Was he angry about his shackles? Or angry about everything? Is that why he looked so furiously at Hannah? Was this the day he would finally break, channel whatever dark forces had come with him from that distant continent, and answer – by visiting his wrath across Hannah's body – all the injustices that had been visited upon him, his kind, his race?

He could do terrible damage with his hands. He could do terrible things with his penis. More terrible, in some ways.

Finished investigating his eyes, she looked, with growing alarm, down at his middle.

Emerging from a thicket of black hair, his penis was starting to harden now, presumably under the influence of Hannah's curves, her blonde hair, her bound limbs.

Her terrified eyes.

"We'll be partnering Hannah with Duncan," Estelle announced casually, and she waved him over, to stand beside her at Hannah's exposed entrances.

The girl who'd brought him went to the wall beside the door, turning to lean her back against it.

"Duncan's been with us almost, what, three years?" Estelle said, looking at the audience.

Duncan nodded, looked at the researchers, looked at Hannah. Or, scowled at Hannah, rather.

Leered at Hannah.

Leered, yes, with a petrifying, furious hunger.

"Will you tell us a little about yourself, Duncan?"

He speaks? Hannah marveled to herself.

"I'll be right with you," he said with another glance at the gallery before he turned to look down at Hannah.

"Miss 'annah, I presume," he said, smiling broadly and so disarmingly he might as well have been a different boy now, the primitive, angry male gone.

"I am," Hannah said, swallowing a different kind of shame, the shame of having thought uncharitable things about someone she didn't know solely because of how he looked. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Duncan."

"Mista' Duncan now?" Duncan said, and he took all of Hannah in, her face and her body and her legs, doubled up against her belly and breasts, and her two obscenely exposed openings, and he kept smiling.

"I try to be polite," Hannah said. "But I couldn't find anything to put on this morning, which was a bit rude, sorry about that."

"Right," Duncan said, looking at Hannah in bemused puzzlement. "Well."

He turned his head back to the gallery but kept his body aimed at Hannah, his penis pointing directly at her, tip just inches from her vulva.

"Duncan," he said to the researchers. "Duncan Maroochy, g'day. Got nicked in Perth a few years back with a gaggle of me mates, did a boat ride, been cooling me 'eels 'ere ever since."

"Duncan was in the first lot of Australian naturals," Estelle elaborated. "The Australian government has an agreement with us to provide an annual quota, and we've found they make outstanding research subjects."

"Big fan a' science here," Duncan said, looking down at Hannah, "and we usually do as we're told."

Estelle stepped beside Duncan and, without any further ceremony or introduction, reached down and gripped his penis.

“You’re okay with the business at ‘and, Darlin’?” Duncan inquired, wincing slightly and thrusting gently into Estelle’s fingers.

“I am,” Hannah said. “Even if it is our first date.”

“Are you crackers, ‘un?”

“Crackers?”

“Smocked up, twice dunked, past the ivy, four in hand, waltzing the —”

“Do all those expressions mean mentally ill?” Hannah inquired.

“’alf do,” he replied. “The other ‘alf mean you’re ‘olding your brew sideways.”

“I’m fine,” Hannah said. “But I appreciate your asking.”

Estelle looked at Duncan, and he looked back and nodded and, again without ceremony, she spread Hannah’s vulva wide with one hand and used the other to guide Duncan up her vagina.

“Oh, oh,” groaned Hannah in mild shock. She had been expecting the laborious pre-intercourse proceedings to play out a bit longer before she took the boy into her body.

Yes, he was thick, and this was a peculiar angle, and he was long, and the floor had turned so that Hannah could see out of the corner of her right eye her two dozen research colleagues, staring intently at the girl in straps and the boy in shackles and the two sex organs finally brought together, the female member giving a wet, pink embrace to the male, the male organ retreating, plunging forward, leaving the female’s body, returning.

Yes, and as natural as the sex was, the rest of it was rather odd, Hannah thought, even by her own liberal standards.

Satisfied that the couple were properly joined, Estelle reached into her pocket, pulled out her phone and tapped it.

“Can you give me 10 minutes?” she asked.

“I believe so,” Duncan replied with a mock pant. Or maybe it was a real pant? Hannah wasn’t sure.

The scowl was back on Duncan’s face, but now Hannah understood it. This was not anger or rage or righteous retribution. This was just how Duncan looked when he wasn’t smiling. Who knew what he was really thinking, but Hannah was confident he wasn’t planning murder. At the

moment, he seemed to be planning nothing but a judiciously timed orgasm, his mouth half open, eyes half closed, penis slicking in and out of Hannah's front chamber with a quiet, efficient "whisk, whisk, whisk."

"Still with me, 'annah?" Duncan asked quietly, a little hoarsely.

"No," Hannah replied, struggling to form the words. "I had to . . . to step out for coffee."

"I get it now," Duncan said, hips bucking as he spoke, and he put his hands on Hannah's inner thighs as though to steady himself, while Estelle hovered and the rest of the researchers sat in the gallery and looked at Duncan from behind now, and Hannah imagined how the thrusts of his penis made his bottom move forward and back, forward and back, and she enjoyed the image and tightened around him.

"What do you get?" Hannah asked.

"There are two kinds of Sheilas who say the things you say," Duncan said. "The bonkers sort, and the brilliant."

"I'm somewhere in the middle," Hannah said.

Duncan smiled knowingly, and there was something different in his next few thrusts. They were deeper, faster, more determined, perhaps, and Hannah responded involuntarily, bouncing her pelvis, struggling against her straps to move, to grind, to writhe around Duncan's member, to force him to stir her insides.

"I mentioned earlier that Hannah's straps offer some give," Estelle said, looking up from her phone, speaking with the dispassionate voice of someone who has seen sex done this way hundreds of times. "Can everyone see Hannah bouncing a little? The positioners are elastic, so the female can adjust somewhat, for increased comfort or pleasure, or to respond to the male."

Hannah smiled up at Duncan, raised her pelvis and gripped him with her vagina, and he answered with a brief smile of his own before returning to his labors.

"Three minutes to go," Estelle said, studying her phone.

"Aye," Duncan grunted with what looked to Hannah like disappointment.

"Keep everything in her," Estelle added. "We'll be doing a rinse and collect when you're done."

"That won't be a problem," Duncan said after a brief gasp.

"Hannah, do you think you can orgasm?" Estelle inquired.

“Yes,” Hannah answered tightly.

“Will you need any help?” she asked.

“Just . . . just . . .” Hannah stammered, looking into Duncan’s eyes. “If you could . . . lean forward a little . . . to press, um . . . me.”

Duncan complied immediately, thrusting his penis into her while he leaned forward, so that the bones of his pelvis thudded against her clitoris.

“Oh, sweetness,” Hannah said, wrapping her fingers around the little posts set into the sides of the platform. “Oh, oh, oh.”

Duncan moved his hands from her thighs to the edges of the pink shell, his forearms pressing against Hannah’s inner legs, his penis pressing against the walls of her sex as he pushed it in and she arched up and down, side to side, and he slid it out for another thrust.

“Time, Miss?” Duncan sighed quietly.

“Release,” Estelle replied, eyes on her phone before she looked up at the gallery and narrated drily. “Research suggests the female orgasm is almost as important as the male’s. Not just for conception, but overall subject health – mental and physical.”

“Ah! Ah! Ah! AH!” Duncan cried almost immediately, and with every shout, he pushed forward, released another jet of semen, and crushed Hannah’s clitoris between their middles.

“UH!,” Hannah grunted back. “Ohyeah . . . ohyeahnopleasegodnojesusyeahohyeah.”

Done shouting, the couple fell silent except for the pants as they worked through the biological impediments of pleasure, mouths unspeaking but bodies still working against each other, Duncan barely drawing his penis back before his next thrust, so that his hips shook almost mechanically while Hannah stirred and twisted to the limits of her straps.

“Okay, okay, okay,” Duncan repeated when he finished ejaculating and found his voice again, and he was still now, penis remaining lodged within Hannah’s chamber, the two new acquaintances looking at each other before Hannah dropped her head to stare at the ceiling.

“Alright, Duncan, ready to withdraw?” Estelle asked.

“Some gals you don’t want to say goodbye to,” Duncan lamented, but he looked down and regretfully pulled his softening member out of Hannah’s body, and Hannah felt the thick gel of their coupling slip through her female opening and run down to her anus.



“Okay, Cassie,” Estelle said, looking at the girl by the door, and she stepped into the middle of the room and Duncan turned toward her and he and his keeper made their way to the exit, Duncan’s shackles ringing against the floor.

“Well done, Duncan,” Estelle said, and he turned and grinned and she clapped, and the audience joined her in polite applause for a male who did what, in Hannah’s mind, males didn’t need applause to do.

“It’s been a pleasure, ‘annah,” Duncan said, looking at her.

“Same here,” Hannah replied, looking down at her strapped wrists. “I’ll clap later, I promise.”

Duncan hooted, his laughter audible from the hall even after the door had swung shut behind him.

“And Hannah,” Estelle said, leading another round of quiet applause that Hannah acknowledged with a brief smile and nod toward the gallery before returning her gaze to the ceiling.

“As soon as I can do a quick rinse and hold, we’ll get Hannah back to processing and off her platform,” Estelle announced.

The floor was still turning, and Estelle was somewhere behind her now, opening a cabinet door and continuing to narrate. “It’s a painless procedure that removes the full ejaculate for study and examination.”

Estelle stepped up to Hannah’s opening and eased something plastic up her hole.

Hannah, still sensitive after Duncan’s ravishing, gasped and bounced her pelvis again.

“I’ll be done in a half second,” Estelle said, pushing the collection device all the way up Hannah’s sheath. Looking at the gallery, she continued narrating. “I’m squeezing just a little fluid into her vagina, and then I’ll retrieve everything Duncan deposited, and jar it up for further study.”

Hannah felt a cool wash, and then the peculiar sensation of having something that wasn’t a penis moved within her sex.

“What will you study?” one of the female students asked.

“I’m not sure,” Estelle conceded. “We did a complete workup on Duncan’s ejaculate a couple of weeks ago, so maybe something they found was worth another look.”

Or maybe, Hannah thought, Dr. Johnson just wanted her cleaned out prior to their time together. What man, after all, wants to find another

man's semen in the girl he's making love to?

But how could he look at Hannah as anything other than a mere lab subject after how he'd seen her in the hall? The question still mystified Hannah.

The device left her chamber and Hannah looked to find Estelle examining a jar of white, milky fluid. She sealed it, capped it, applied a label, and used a marker to scratch upon it whatever code represented the cocktail of things a boy and girl brought to the mix.

Estelle set the jar on the counter, unlatched Hannah's wheels and pushed her out of the lab and into the hall, the rest of the researchers following.

"Have you noticed any consistent variance in semen quality between aboriginals and average donors?" one of the males asked.

"Please hold your questions to the presentation," Estelle said. "I need to get Hannah unstrapped, and then we'll head down the hall to this morning's presentation."

With dizzying speed, Estelle pushed Hannah back into the prep room, oriented her beneath the cable and its hooks, fastened them to her pink tray, hoisted her, pushed the cart against the wall and lowered Hannah to the floor.

While the researchers hovered in the hall just beyond the door, Estelle opened Hannah's straps with a series of ripping sounds, and Hannah sat up, rubbed the places on her legs and wrists where the straps had scored red lines into her flesh, and she stood slowly while Estelle took her upper arm to steady her.

"Do you mind going straight to the presentation?" Estelle said. "We're running a little late, and taking you back to get dressed is going to slow us down another 10 minutes."

"No chains, right?" Hannah asked.

"No, you're done with that, thanks again."

"Glad to."

"And not a problem leaving your clothes off?"

"That's fine," Hannah replied with mild disappointment. Being naked in front of her owners and her owners' friends and her fellow subjects and the people employed to work with subjects was simply a state of being for her, but remaining nude the rest of the morning before her colleagues, her academic peers, would continue to remind them of her

lower rank, of how she was kept and used, of her place in life. Unequal. Inferior.

And, worst of all, academically second-rate.

But then, she had bigger concerns, and Hannah felt her heart catch in her throat, because the time had come to do something, minor in the big scheme, but important to whoever it was she was talking to, and an action not without risk.

Hannah felt her throat tighten, but she forced herself to speak as she left the lab preparation room.

“The presentation is down this way?” she asked.

“Yeah, half a second, and I’ll show you,” Estelle replied.

“I think I saw it earlier,” Hannah said innocently, and she joined her colleagues in the hall and looked at them, looked into every pair of eyes she could catch, wearing the expression of a girl who was equal to them, equal in all things, her collar and its dangling tags a symbol only of her value in other enterprises, irrelevant to her schooling.

“Huh?” Estelle said from the prep room. She was doing something in there, putting things away or arranging them so it would be ready for the next girl brought in to be strapped to a platform.

“The presentation room’s down here,” Hannah lied quietly, certain Estelle could barely hear, heading down the hall slowly, leading her fellow researchers the way sheep can be led, even very bright sheep, when they sense that one of their number feels that they should all walk in a certain direction and that direction seems as good as any other.

Hannah, hands trembling, throat so tight it could not form words, stopped at the door she was looking for, reached down to turn the knob, and pressed with her shoulder.

## **Chapter 21: Men on a Train**

“They’ve cut us by a hundred fifty million,” Fairchild told his sons over lunch in a private railcar somewhere in the northwestern hinterlands, possibly Oregon.

“How did they justify it?” Leston asked.

“They didn’t,” Fairchild said. “He just said new maths.”

“As in, some new mathematical principle they just discovered?” Brighton asked impatiently. “Or—”

“Just new calculations, I believe,” Fairchild replied. “Currency conversion updates, for all I know. But, honestly, I don’t care. They reduced the deal by my net worth and we’re still getting more money than I’ll know what to do with in a hundred lifetimes.”

“So the total is down to 15 point one now,” Leston observed.

“It is,” Fairchild agreed. “Forty-eight percent for me, 26 percent for each of you.”

At the car just behind the engine, a tiny gap in the tracks sucked in a wheel and released it with a knock that echoed through the train. The rest of the wheels passed into the gap in pairs. “THUD-THUD,” pause, “THUD-THUD,” pause, “THUD-THUD.”

The thuds grew louder, closer, until they emanated from directly beneath the man and his two sons, dining alone in the car, the cold, bright winter world outside the windows passing in a gallery of trees and meadows and fields, punctuated with the occasional farmhouse or small dwelling.

“And you’re going to live well, and you’re going to invest it,” Fairchild said, leaning forward and glaring into the eyes of each of his sons. “And 10 generations from now, your heirs are gonna remember you, and thank you for what you’ve done for them.”

“THUD-THUD,” went the wheels of each car, a little quieter and a little quieter, until all the train had moved past the gap and the sound was forgotten by anyone who had bothered to notice it.

“As soon as I have a workable draft,” Fairchild continued, “we can talk about signing. But the first one lumped everything together, and they have to be separate.”

Brighton looked out the window for a time, ignoring the veal cutlet the dining car’s white-gloved stewards had set before him.

“She’s been sold,” he muttered.

“To who?” Fairchild replied.

“Family in Peoria.”

“What do they want with her?” Fairchild demanded.

Brighton crossed his arms and leaned back, smiling grimly because the answer was obvious.

“Well, that ups the ante, then,” he said. “How is that subject court law coming along?”

“I’m making progress,” Brighton said.

“Progress?” Fairchild echoed. “You’ve got Feller, Almgren, Cindle, Buiffer on board?”

“Not all of them yet,” his son replied. “But I think I’ve found someone willing to do a little trading. It’s going to take years to get everything in place, though.”

Fairchild set down his fork, leaned forward and spoke quietly.

“Let me worry about that,” he said. “Just get something on paper. You don’t have to pass it, just give me something to point to, so I can make the case an inquest isn’t worth anyone’s time or trouble, that we’ll be shutting down that kind of thing. And as soon as they take her to a clinic, we’ll get her transferred to our Chicago interest. And then . . . pfft! . . . that bitch gets what she has been asking for since she was a teenager.”

## **Chapter 22: Stacey on a Truck**

The truck, ice cold when Stacey’s box had been laid flat within it, seemed to have at least a rudimentary heating system, and Stacey focused on that for a time, on the slow seeping of warm air through the cracks and vents of her tiny new home, of the puffs of air that warmed her feet and her thighs, of her back against box’s wall, not as cold as it had been, of her subsiding shivers.

The truck was moving, turning, speeding up, slowing. She was going somewhere. Where?

At any moment, the truck might stop, the engine might shut off, the heater cool, and she might be left here, to die. Who, really, was behind this? Had she been taken only because of her third ovary, or was something else going on?

Stacey searched her mind for something that might have happened. Immediately, her thoughts ascended to the fictitious extreme, to the possibility that Daryn wasn’t who he said he was, who lived a double life, one life as a casual lover pretending to be divorced, the other as an international arms dealer, a foreign spy, a mobster, a jewel thief, whose life of crime and intrigue was about to come crashing down, brought to ruin by a lover in a box.

Maybe that’s what the window was for, not so Stacey could see out, but so Daryn could see in, to the terrified, mute face of his new lover, shown to him by men who wanted him to do something.

But what? Assassinate a world leader? Steal jewels? Turn on one of his cohorts?

If Stacey had been kidnapped, it was certainly done in an elaborate way. No, it was all ridiculous. And yet, she couldn't quite abandon the possibility that she would be free as soon as Daryn had met some nefarious demand. Someday, they might even laugh about this.

The truck stopped, she heard the door open, she saw light through her little window, and she waited, half expecting to see Daryn's worried face there.

But Daryn never appeared. Instead, her box was raised upright, she heard the scrape of the hand truck underneath, and she was whirled around and propelled over another jarring gap and into a space of blazing brightness that she recognized as blue sky before she was pushed up a ramp beneath an awning and through a door into a building.

## **Chapter 23: Hannah Makes her Choice**

Hannah, checking behind her to make sure the rest of the researchers were close behind, turned the knob and shoved open the door with her shoulder, entering quickly so at least some of her companions would make it all the way in after her.

"Oh," Hannah said quietly, searching the space around her. "I don't think we're in the presentation room."

No indeed.

This place was fulfilling a higher purpose than the mere imparting of information; it had been built, designed, engineered to impart something far more valuable: obedience.

Immediately to Hannah's right, two girls stood, wrists bound so high to the wall above their heads that only their toes touched the floor, wires running from their nipples to a place along the wall behind them. Three more crouched in tiny cages immediately before Hannah, legs doubled up beneath bellies and breasts, arms pressed to sides, hands clasped beneath chins, three cages stacked upon each other, confinement the injury, being stacked one atop the other the insult.

To Hannah's right, two girls stood in handcuffs and shackles while they were interrogated by a female staffer studying a tablet.

"Two on the wall or one in the hall," the staffer said.

“I don’t know what that means,” said one of the girls, mouth twisted in anguish, eyes red from crying. “I’m new here.”

“You can spend two hours over there,” said her chained companion, tilting her head toward the girls standing on tiptoes against the wall. “Or do a day in an isolation cell.”

“I just got out of there yesterday,” the girl lamented, chin quivering, eyes brimming.

“Do the wall,” the girl beside her whispered, glancing at Hannah and looking away.

The staffer turned, eyes wide with surprise when she saw not just a naked, but an unchained slave girl, along with the gaggle of free people who had barged in with her.

“Uh, are you with, uh, Dr. Plantz?”

“No,” said Hannah, “I think we’re in the wrong room. I think we were supposed to go to a presentation room.”

But instead of turning and leaving, Hannah stepped further away from the door, stopping just before she reached a table whose purpose, to hold someone still for whatever had to be done, was made obvious by the chain and cuff at each corner.

Hannah turned back, arching her eyebrows apologetically, secretly pleased to see that all the researchers were either in the room or just beyond the door, peering in.

“That’s not the presentation room,” Estelle shouted from the hall, her voice growing increasingly loud and increasingly alarmed as she drew near. “This way, everyone. Please!”

Hannah turned, satisfied that she had fulfilled her mission when the two girls against the wall screamed out, one crying unintelligibly, the other shouting “Ow! No! OW!”

Both shook and looked up at their bound wrists, muscles going taut, backs bouncing against the wall before they went still and limp as one.

“What was that?” asked the new girl.

The staffer just shrugged.

“They’re getting their nipples zapped,” Hannah said, joining the reluctantly departing researchers, some turning back, like Lot’s wife, for one last glance at the horror behind them.

“How did you end up in there?” Estelle demanded of one of the male students. He raised his shoulders, his expression a mix of

embarrassment and shock.

No one accused Hannah. No one pointed at her and announced that she was the one who had led everyone else down the hall to the door, and forced the door open with her shoulder, and brought all of them face to face with the underbelly of what they were doing, the necessary evils of what was otherwise an illusion of happiness on all sides, happy researchers, happy administrators, happy lab subjects.

Duncan.

A beautiful, wisecracking Australian with a beautiful accent and a beautiful penis. Had he been the only one they saw, they might have signed up to be lab subjects themselves.

Now they knew.

Here there were tests, examinations, experiments, impregnations.

And cries of agony.

As Hannah followed Estelle and the rest of the researchers down the hall, she fought the urge to smile, to raise her arms in victory, to dance. The obligations of this moment had been weighing on her, more than she knew, for days, for weeks, ever since she was told she needed to do this for the cause, by people she didn't know.

Now, in a sense, she was free.

No one watching the little throng would have known anything untoward had happened, that people had seen what they weren't supposed to see. Estelle led the researchers down the hall with her usual professional efficiency, and they followed with their usual studious attentiveness.

And Hannah followed with the face she usually wore, except on the rare occasions when she was annoyed, or angry, or suffering, or cumming. The face of an inscrutable slave girl who had set her mind and her heart and her discreet visage against things that appeared to her, to any logical observer, all but immoveable, unshakeable, impenetrable.

They walked back through the residential area, and Hannah looked through the glass, at the girls in their cages or being walked through in their chains, with new understanding. Surely, at least some of these females had seen, heard, felt the charms of Duncan the aboriginal. Even now, some of them might be holding within their loins his writhing seed, and Hannah wanted to imagine that a few little wriggling half-Duncans still squirmed within her. Indeed, there must be some left. If he delivered the normal



population of sperm, and Estelle had removed 99 percent, Hannah held in her still throbbing sheath at least a million of his would-be spawn.

Probably more.

Past the place where the girls were kept, past the isolation hall, through another door, the students filed into the room that was truly for presentations, seats set up like the desks of a college classroom, a large, interactive whiteboard mounted on the wall up front.

“Want a towel?” Estelle asked.

“Please,” Hannah replied, accepting a full-sized bath towel Estelle grabbed from a stack on the counter. Hannah wasn’t the first girl to come to a presentation here nude, she guessed, and she took a seat up front and decided to treat this like any other academic experience, like a treasured privilege.

For the next two hours, Hannah and her fellow researchers watched videos, reviewed the history of New Life, which included a single old photograph of Druhler Fairchild, and heard from some of the facility’s specialists, including Dr. Johnson, who spoke a little nervously, a little haltingly, and whose feelings toward Hannah were impossible to gauge as he surveyed the room with his somber eyes, looking at her no more than anyone else.

She maintained an even gaze in return, focusing on the words and the concepts for the most part, allowing her mind to wander only now and then to what the evening might hold, what Dr. Johnson might do or not do – if he had her over at all – what he might look like naked, how he would feel.

He was seeing her nude for the second time this morning. Did he care? Probably not. His professional life revolved around naked females. Maybe, if she did indeed make it to his home, he would ask her to stay clothed.

Lunch was catered, a choice of tilapia or New York strip or tofu. Hannah chose fish and ate at her desk while the presentations concluded and Estelle stepped to the front to go over the afternoon’s process.

Every student had been assigned an advisor, their pairings listed on a sheet Estelle handed out. Dr. Johnson would be advising five researchers, including Hannah, something that didn’t surprise her at all.

“Some topics are available to anyone who wants them,” Estelle said, “and some are more limited, and you can see which is which on

yesterday's handout, so be ready with several ideas from both lists, and we'll give you what we can. Now, Mark, June, Hannah, Olmstead, Freddie, you're in the first group, selected completely at random. You'll see your advisor's room number on the sheet. All the meeting rooms are on this hall, all to the left when you step out."

Hannah stood, watching the eyes of her colleagues run across her body the way eyes will do, and knew she had not been chosen for the first group at random.

"Oh god, I was about to die of boredom in there!" the girl Hannah knew as June whispered to the boy beside her.

"The demonstration was way more interesting," he whispered back, looking at the girl and sticking out his tongue.

Hannah, walking behind them, saw June nudge his arm and tilt her head backward, which prompted the boy to turn and look at Hannah and turn back in a moment of utter awkwardness that Hannah found delightful.

The sheet said Dr. Johnson would be waiting for her in meeting room 3, and she found the brass number plaque and reached for the doorknob and looked down at her naked body and felt the nerves and the butterflies swarm.

Hannah pushed through her fears and pushed through the door, finding Dr. Johnson seated before a laptop at a small, round table in a small room with no windows and nothing on the walls.

"Hello, Dr. Johnson," she said.

"Hello, Ms. Loughbridge," he replied.

Hannah laughed.

"No one ever calls me Ms. Loughbridge," she said, sitting down. She'd forgotten her towel, so she settled her bare rear on the chair opposite Dr. Johnson's.

"When you expect respect, you'll get it," Dr. Johnson said.

"That's not true," Hannah said with a finality that forced him to avert his eyes and, perhaps, reconsider some of his notions.

"I need to know more about that topic," Hannah said, realizing she wanted this meeting done. Awkward silences were worse with some people than others. With Dr. Johnson, they were very bad, because she didn't know what he was thinking. Was he seeing her again the way she'd been this morning, trussed up with her legs doubled over and her holes raised

obscenely? Was he, even now, trying to decide if he could make love to a girl that had been done to?

“Which topic?” he asked.

“The one you told me to do last night.”

“You remember it?”

“Of course,” Hannah said. “I would have brought the printout, but I didn’t wear anything with pockets this morning.”

This would have been Dr. Johnson’s opportunity to laugh, but he held his peace, and Hannah looked into his eyes and saw a slight uptick of sorrow.

“Name it, then,” Dr. Johnson said.

“A Three-Ovaried Female: Data and Observations.”

“Yes,” said Dr. Johnson. “What do you want to know?”

“Where are you getting the female?”

“From inventory.”

“Inventory?” Hannah repeated. “Where?”

“She might come from here,” Dr. Johnson said vaguely. “Or from somewhere else.”

“The description says I’m responsible for her,” Hannah said. “What does that mean?”

“Has your school kept subjects?”

“No,” Hannah replied. “Well, yes. In the kennels. I’m kept there. But there isn’t a place in any research area, that I know of.”

“You’ll need to get your school’s housing certified, and an oversight committee signed up,” he said, adding drily, “so they can step in and rescue her if she brings out your dark side.”

Hannah swallowed and her stomach churned.

“That was a joke,” Dr. Johnson said.

Hannah looked at him and felt her nipples hardening, something they did in the cold, or under stimulation, or when she was afraid, or when she was excited, sexually or otherwise. This was excitement, of the non-sexual kind.

“I thought you liked jokes,” he said, and his eyes went down to her nipples and up again, so quickly as to be almost imperceptible.

“I’ve never managed a . . . a . . . someone before.”

“You got certified on subject work a year ago, did you not?”

“I did, sort of,” Hannah said, adding, “but it was just a friend of mine I brought to the lab one night to take through the protocol. It took half an hour maybe.”

“I wouldn’t have recommended this topic for you if I didn’t think you were ready.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said. “What do I do now?”

“You’ve done it,” Dr. Johnson said, and he looked down at his laptop.

Hannah stared at him, but he kept his eyes lowered to his screen the next time he spoke.

“Tonight?” he said asked quietly.

“Why?” Hannah shot back.

“Why not?” he asked.

“That answer isn’t acceptable.”

“Because I want to, and you’ve only said no once.”

“No chains,” Hannah said quietly.

“Of course not.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, and her mind wandered briefly to how the transfer would be made, how she would go from tonight’s dinner to Dr. Johnson’s aircraft.

Had he said a helicopter?

But that was a secondary concern now, something she considered resolved, while she had academic concerns that persisted.

“What if I can’t get housing there, um, certified?”

“We’ll help with that,” he said. “It’s not complicated, and Corpus Christi has been an enthusiastic research partner.”

“Who’ll be on my committee?”

“Anyone you want. Just tell them. I’m sure they’ll agree.”

“She’ll have to be fed,” Hannah noted. “She’ll need—”

“It’s all the in budget.”

“But I don’t even know how to—”

“You’ll get a manual,” he said. “It’s very thorough.”

Dr. Johnson continued to tap on his laptop, studying it so intently it was as if Hannah no longer existed.

She should have been offended by his sudden distance, she thought, but she wasn’t. She didn’t care. She wasn’t looking for an emotional entanglement. She didn’t need another lover. Truly, she just didn’t want to

spend another night in an isolation cell. That was most of it anyway. And she was curious. And she wanted to put her feet in the Pacific Ocean.

“Are we done, Dr. Johnson?” Hannah asked.

“We are, Dr. Loughbridge,” he replied.

“I’m not a doctor,” she said, standing.

“It’s just a matter of time,” he said, looking up at her, smiling, and her heart stirred unexpectedly, and she chided herself for being so easy to manipulate.

“Oh,” she said, pausing with her hand on the door. “You said I’d be published. I’m going to need—”

“No I didn’t,” Dr. Johnson retorted.

“Yes you did,” Hannah blurted. “You said—”

“I said you’d have a very good opportunity for being published, if you do your work well and the journal accepts your work and you survive peer review.”

“What journal?”

“Princeton International Procreative Quarterly.”

“Princeton?”

“Princeton.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed, almost choking on the words. “Okay, I’ll need—”

“I have your email address. I’ll send you everything you need to know. And I’ll get your prospectus to the right person.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said, and she left the little meeting room with her breasts bouncing and her nipples carving a path through the air before her and her vagina aching, a naked slave girl who at this moment was utterly roiled, smitten, overwhelmed.

Soon, if all came to pass as Dr. Johnson had promised, she would be responsible for another human being.

Yes, she would also get an Ivy League publication, as lead author no less. That was significant in one way. But getting a person – that was also significant.

More significant.

And far more significant than anything that might happen tonight.

Ms. Hannah Loughbridge, who was not a doctor and might never be, was wise enough to see through the flattery of a man driven by – ultimately – the trivial thing he wanted to do to Hannah’s body.

All of that was inconsequential, Hannah thought as she made her way back to the classroom. Tomorrow at this time, she'd be back in Dallas – or on her way to Dallas, anyway – her time with Dr. Johnson a memory.

But somewhere out there, this very moment, in this building or some other building, in some cage or cell or kennel, was a girl with three ovaries, and that was a major thing, because that girl would be brought to Hannah somehow, and Hannah would use her to . . . no, Hannah Loughbridge would not use her. Hannah Loughbridge would work with her, respect her, honor her, treat her in all the ways Hannah herself had not been treated through the years.

The girl would still be a slave. That Hannah couldn't change. But Hannah would see to it that her life was better than it had been. Hannah would be kind, considerate, grateful.

Hannah would be humane.

And Hannah Loughbridge would be published, while still an undergrad, in a Princeton journal.

Hannah Loughbridge, lead author.

Was this not complicity? Hannah asked herself at the door to the classroom. Was Hannah not, by choosing a topic that required the use of a fellow human being, accepting the system, endorsing the institution that had upended her life, robbed her of her dignity, and on occasion made her suffer grievously?

Yes, perhaps. But to achieve, to research, to be published, was to fight.

And were Hannah not to get this girl, the girl with the three ovaries, someone else would. A free person, most likely. Someone cruel, intentionally or by accident.

Free people could be remarkably careless with their subjects, without even knowing it.

Hannah stepped into the classroom, looked at Estelle.

"Got your topic settled?" Estelle asked.

"Yes," Hannah replied. "May I go back to my cell? I'd like to get some reading done."

## **Chapter 24: A Silent Scream**

Stacey watched, dizzy and helpless, through the window of her coffin as she was pushed down a hall, around a corner, into an elevator, out of the elevator and down another hall, through a door that opened with a beep, through another door that opened with another beep.

Her box was lowered again to the floor, all her visual world reduced to a ceiling of fluorescent lights and ceiling tiles.

A girl's face appeared, looking not through the window at Stacey, but at something beside the window. She held a tablet, and she typed into it, and continued to stare.

"They've tagged her as resistant," the girl said, looking up, toward someone else, apparently.

"Uuurgh," Stacey groaned with a mix of fear and hope. She didn't care what they called her, as long as they let her out.

The room was spinning. Her box was spinning.

She felt drunk.

Sensory deprivation. That's what this was. Sensory deprivation. It made people crazy. They hallucinated if it went on long enough.

She focused on her body, on the sensations she could feel, and immediately wished she hadn't.

Her teeth were starting to ache where they bit around the rubber gag. Her anus hurt where it gripped the plug. She wanted the tampon out. The catheter made her feel like she needed to go to the bathroom.

A male face appeared. He looked next to the window, and then into it, to Stacey's face.

Stacey opened her eyes wide, trying to show pain, or desperation; trying to elicit sympathy from him, from anyone.

No, this window was not placed there so she could look out. It was there so people could look in, inspect the confined and go about their business.

Briefly, their eyes locked, hers and his.

She heard a dull sound, a rattle echoing through the walls of her box. One of the latches that held her lid in place had been opened.

"What are you doing?" the girl demanded.

"Getting her out," the male replied, looking through the glass again.

"It's almost four," said the girl's voice.

"Leave her in overnight?" the boy said.

“She’s only been in there since, uh . . . 1 today. And her vitals are fine. She’s healthy enough for it.”

Stacey filled her lungs to scream, but the boy was talking.

“I could use the overtime,” he said. “If you can help me with the first few steps, I’m sure I can get her done by 6 or 6:30.”

“She’s an unverified ovary,” the girl said, and her face reappeared at the window, and she looked in at Stacey, as if one could see a third ovary in someone’s eyes. She looked at Stacey the way one looks at an object, and she looked away.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“We have to verify it,” she said. “That means chair, wand, ultrasound. That’s gonna take an hour by itself. And the paperwork is another hour. And then, everything in between.”

Stacey heard the latch close back, saw the faces disappear, and now she screamed, the sound so muffled as to be nonexistent.

## **Chapter 25: Hannah Advises Zach**

The first thing Hannah did upon being returned to her cell was rush to her toilet, the terrifying prospect that lay before her, the hope and promise and challenge, manifesting itself primarily in her bowels.

She stared at her feet and emptied herself, glad for the solid door and the panels that Estelle had latched closed.

She was about to be given a girl, a human, a living soul, to study. A person she would work with, and work through.

She would be, to this girl or woman – whoever she might be, whatever her name was, whatever race she was – she would be to her as the Petrosyans were to Hannah.

Caretakers, managers.

Owners.

But she would not be cruel. She would not be vindictive or capricious or even inconsiderate. No matter where this female was at this very moment – a factory, a lab, some cold household – she would be better off with Hannah.

She would be a research subject, yes, and a captive in that sense, but she would be a colleague as well. An assistant. A helpmate. A friend.



Hannah would be the master Hannah herself had always longed for, sympathetic to all her needs, not just some of them.

Did the girl like Coke? Did she like sweets? Did she like boys? Was she allowed to dress, and if so, what did she like to wear?

This was all going to be very, very complicated. And profoundly, deeply exhilarating.

Hannah wiped and flushed and went to her bed, forcing herself to focus on economics and, while her mind wandered far more than it often did, she worked her way through 20 pages of dense text before she stopped to rinse her face at the little sink, only the three formulae presented in her reading giving her something familiar to grasp for.

Next came her journal articles, and she pored over them, tables and graphs and data-laden accounts of trials and studies and standard deviations. She wasn't just absorbing information. She was also evaluating the authors' approach, studying the writing, the organization, the language.

Could she write like this? Could she research like this? Could she survive peer review?

No, she was most likely not going to be published. She was young, and inexperienced.

Perhaps Dr. Johnson was toying with her, offering her something she could never have simply to do something to her body he wanted to do.

All of this might be folly, delusion, exploitation. And if he were lying, Hannah could do nothing.

No, she thought, that's not completely true. She could complain to the faculty at the University of Texas at Corpus Christi. Someone might hear her. Someone might care.

"Hannah?" came the voice at the door.

"Yes?" Hannah said, startled, looking up to see Estelle's face at the opened panel.

"Ready to go to dinner? Want a few minutes to freshen up?"

"I'm ready now," said Hannah, her mind pivoting from the journal on her lap to the rest of what awaited her, dinner and then, possibly, a night with Dr. Johnson. She was ready for this. She had enough studying for now.

"You need to pack up all your things," Estelle said, unlocking Hannah's door. "You're not coming back."

"Oh?" Hannah said, not sure how much Estelle knew, not sure if it mattered if she knew.

“Yeah, you’ll be off campus tonight.”

Hannah closed her journal, stacked it up with her textbook, grabbed her shampoo and conditioner in the little travel bottles, and stepped to the door of her cell, following Estelle from there to the room where she’d been undressed and searched, pleased to find her suitcase and her travel bag there, both waiting on the table.

“What’s the place like tonight?” Hannah asked, unzipping her case, pulling out a pair of black panties and stepping into them.

“The Mizzenmast,” Estelle said. “It’s nice.”

“Mizzenmast?”

“It’s kind of nautical.”

“What do people wear there?”

“Anything. Suits, jeans, whatever.”

“Nothing?” Hannah asked, finding a white bra and sliding it up her arms.

“No, not nude,” Estelle said. “Are you being serious?”

“No.”

Hannah reached into her bag, found her white silk halter top, shook it out, hoped it wasn’t too formal, realized she didn’t care.

She shook out her wool, forest green skirt, stepped into it. It fell to mid-thigh, and she smoothed out the pleats, looked for a mirror, remembered this room had none because it didn’t need one.

“What are you working on with Dr. Johnson?” Estelle asked casually.

Hannah continued to study her skirt, checked the back to make sure it hadn’t been creased there, was well aware of the irony: The girl who had been stripped, bound, and subjected to intercourse before her colleagues this morning didn’t want to reveal any more skin than necessary with them tonight.

“I need help getting housing set up for the female I’ll be working with,” Hannah said, coming up instantly with a plausible lie. Lying to a free person was a serious offense, but it was also an inescapable one. Free people shared things in confidence with subjects all the time, and other free people sometimes wanted to be brought into the confidences, and couldn’t be. Hannah had been raised to believe lying was a terrible sin, bearing false witness so immoral God numbered it among the 10 worst affronts. But God, Hannah was certain, had never been a slave.

“He can’t just email it to you?”

“Huh?” Hannah asked, poking through her suitcase for the second of her pumps, black with stiletto heels. She found it wedged beneath a pair of Frontmate jeans she might wear on the plane tomorrow.

“Can’t he just email it to you?”

“Oh, no. I think he’s got some documentation he wants me to have. A floorplan or something, I’m not sure. Maybe some instructions on managing a lab female.”

“He seems happy,” Estelle said.

Hannah bent her knee and raised her foot to slip on her left pump.

“He’s very successful,” Hannah said.

“No, I mean, he seems happy today.”

“I guess today went well,” Hannah said, standing on one shod foot with her hips sharply angled, continuing to deflect.

“He was joking with people back in the classroom, once everyone had their topic.”

“He has a dry sense of humor,” Hannah said.

“He hasn’t told a joke since his wife left him.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, slipping on her other pump and feigning complete indifference. “Maybe he’s on the rebound.”

“Yeah,” Estelle agreed. “With you.”

Hannah looked up sharply from her shoes, smiled and laughed.

“Okay, I see what you’re getting at now. But in case you haven’t noticed, I’m not exactly rebound material.”

“I think you are.”

“You think he’d go steady with me?” Hannah asked, and now she feigned excitement, hope, a schoolgirl crush.

Estelle looked back with surprise, then sympathy, then the narrowed eyes of suspicion.

“If I hadn’t seen you with Duncan, I’d think you were being serious,” she said.

“I am,” Hannah replied.

“Whatever. I have to restrain you to get you to dinner.”

“Of course.”

Estelle retrieved the four-point chains Hannah had worn when she got to town, and she held out her hands and watched them go on.

Estelle stacked Hannah's suitcase and book bag and wheeled them while Hannah shuffled along behind her, through the security doors, down the elevator, and into the cool, relatively fresh air of the basement garage, where a town car waited for them, its engine idling.

Estelle set Hannah's things in the trunk, buckled the girl in beside her in the back seat, and they were off, up from the garage, out from under the building, the sun setting off to the west, the campus beautiful this time of day, a dark blue sky as the backdrop, lights set into the earth to illuminate the buildings and shrubbery and trees that marked the broad drive.

"When did Dr. Johnson get divorced?" Hannah asked as they turned right off the main drive and onto a wide thoroughfare that led to the city's center.

"Six months ago," Estelle said. "Well, separated, he's not divorced yet. He never missed a day of work, but you could tell it hurt. I think it was sort of unexpected. She just left, had him served at the office. He's fighting to keep the kids."

"Kids?"

"Two daughters," Estelle said. "Tweens. Like, 15 and 13."

"Are they there now?" Hannah asked.

"Where?"

"At his house?"

"What house?"

"At his . . . well, I guess . . ." Hannah stammered, remembering that Estelle didn't seem to know everything. "Doesn't he . . . live somewhere in town? Do they live here with him?"

"He's got a few places," Estelle said. "An apartment in town. But I think his girls stay with him on the ocean."

"Oh," Hannah said. "Does someone . . . look after them?"

"Yes, he owns a girl, and some other people."

In the limited time she'd spent anticipating the evening with Dr. Johnson, Hannah had assumed they'd have the place to themselves. She was well past being nervous about whatever awaited her, but this new information would have to be reckoned with.

"So, after dinner," Estelle said, "I'll take you back to the car, and then they'll be driving you to a little unit near the airport."

"A little unit?"

“It’s one of our out-clinics, less secure, easier to get you into and out of and back to the airport, but it’s got a full lab and clinic.”

“What will I be doing there?” Hannah asked, fairly certain she wasn’t really going.

“Dr. Johnson wants to get your blood drawn, do some pelvic stuff.”

“Will it hurt?” Hannah asked, trying to sound worried.

“Mostly not. Needle’ll probably be the worst thing.”

“Okay.”

“And you’ll probably enjoy the pelvic stuff.”

“Why would you say that?”

“I’ve seen your work.”

Hannah snorted and looked out the window, mildly annoyed. This wasn’t something people should feel free to joke about.

The Mizzenmast was indeed a nautical establishment, hook-fisted pirate statues on either side of the drive, a great beached ship beside the faux-weathered building, two enormous anchors guarding the front entrance.

The car pulled up to the door, Estelle helped Hannah out and led her into the building, passing through several checkpoints and past a girl in a tight pirate costume who slipped a phone under Hannah’s silk halter top to scan the chip in her back.

The gauntlet complete, Hannah’s chains came off and were checked at a window next to the maître d’s stand, the same place where people turned in hats and coats.

“We’ve got our own dining room,” Estelle said, leading Hannah through a crowded main room of laughter and boisterous conversation, slave and free eating here, the room smelling of fish and butter and garlic.

The girls reached a door with a porthole in it, behind which sat about half of Hannah’s fellow researchers at a long table headed by Dr. Johnson.

He looked up from a conversation with a female student to his left to stare into Hannah’s eyes, his countenance free of emotion, but the way his gaze lingered said all that needed saying.

Libations had been served, wines and beers and mixed drinks, and Hannah decided she would consume carefully, that she might need her wits about her, during dinner or afterward. But she’d been craving a gin & tonic with Zolfa since she’d been denied it on the flight out Wednesday, and as

she took a seat three places from Dr. Johnson, she nodded quickly to the students around her before waving to the server, a slave girl in her 20s.

The rest of the researchers showed up and got drinks, menus were consulted, Hannah ordered lobster crepes, and as soon as the plates had been deposited, Dr. Johnson stood and raised his wine.

“To knowledge and to truth,” he began, “and to all the excellence around this table.”

Hannah sipped, closed her eyes and swished her mouth around the joy of good gin, and the meal proceeded.

Was anyone haunted by what Hannah had shown them this morning? Traumatized by the trembling voice of the terrified new girl? Troubled by the cries of the two bound girls against the wall? Disillusioned by the inhumanities native to their chosen field of study?

Was Hannah? She’d barely given the sufferers a second thought until now, while she was digging her fork into a plate of crepes. That kind of thing used to spin her to the edges of her mind, whether it was done to her, or to someone else. Especially if it were done to someone else.

Today, she felt nothing. Not the numbness that often followed shock. Not the replays of what she had seen, the fixation on certain extraneous details – the smells, the things on the walls, the way a foot twisted or a hand clenched.

In her defense, she’d been busy. Busy choosing a topic. Busy studying. Busy pondering things. Busy pondering Dr. Johnson, and what he really wanted, and why.

Sometimes, men just wanted a girl’s vagina. Other times, Hannah had come to believe, they wanted something else, for which the vagina was a proxy, a symbol, the token one earned in a game.

Dr. Johnson was in the latter camp, Hannah suspected, an intelligent man who likely had his choice of bodies, but who was going to considerable trouble, and perhaps some risk, to spend time with Hannah.

“Hey,” said the girl beside Hannah quietly. “You were really brave today.”

“I wouldn’t call it brave,” Hannah said with a chuckle. “It was more curiosity.”

“What do you mean?”

“If I hadn’t volunteered,” Hannah explained, “I wouldn’t have seen how things work.”

“It wasn’t just curiosity,” asserted a boy sitting across from Hannah, who was well into his second very tall beer. “Was it?”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked innocently, calmly, while her pulse quickened.

“You seemed to enjoy it,” he said with a conspiratorial grin that might, from certain angles, look more like a leer.

Hannah sensed those around her falling silent, the matter being raised that could not be spoken of.

“What makes you say that?” Hannah asked, arching one eyebrow and smiling at the others, as if confused.

“Well . . .” the boy replied, raising his hands in mock protest, as if the answer were obvious.

“Why do you think I enjoyed it?” Hannah persisted, raising her voice. “I want to know. What happened?”

“Well . . .” the boy stammered. “You, uh . . .”

“Yes?” Hannah said, ratcheting her voice up a little more. “I what? What did I do?”

The table was silent now, all eyes on Hannah.

“Are you embarrassed to say it?” Hannah asked. “Or don’t you know?”

The boy smiled again, but the smugness was gone, replaced by the face of someone who’d stepped on what appeared to be solid ground, now fallen away beneath him, leaving him flailing as he dropped.

“What’s your name?” Hannah asked. She remembered it, but she wanted him to say it.

“Zach,” he said, recovering slightly.

“Well, Zach,” Hannah said calmly, “what you saw was a female orgasm. You might want to remember what it looks like, in case you never see one again.”

This was not the first time Hannah had silenced a dinner table full of free people with her tongue, and she listened to the nothingness that followed as if it had sound and mass, waiting while her words soaked in, while everyone absorbed the fact a slave girl had insulted someone free, and would probably get away with it.

“Oh, oh, oh!” shouted another boy several seats away, finally breaking the silence. “Burn! Burn!”

Laughter broke out around the table, and Hannah's red-faced antagonist raised his beer as if in toast before he drained it.

"Was it helpful?" Hannah asked, turning her attention back to the girl beside her.

"Was what helpful?"

"The demonstration?"

"Oh, yeah," she said, adding cautiously, "Thanks for doing it."

The rest of dinner finished without further event, Dr. Johnson and Estelle issuing final instructions and encouragement, the students standing and hugging, some making plans to go drinking at a nearby bar.

"Ready to leave, Hannah?" Estelle asked.

"Let me pee first," she said, walking with a slight wobble, the drink stronger than she'd expected, its affects lingering unexpectedly.

She emerged from the restroom to find Estelle waiting there, holding out her chains.

Estelle had both ankles and one wrist cuffed when a clump of students passed by.

"Hannah!" one of the girls shouted, giving a tipsy hug to the partially-bound slave girl, as if Hannah had become a celebrity.

Hannah hugged back with the experience that comes from navigating a variety of social situations in a variety of restraints, and when a dozen more stood in line to embrace her, to wrap their arms around her, to feel her spine and her breasts and her breathing core, she responded in kind and believed that she had, so far, succeeded here.

Dr. Johnson appeared after her last wrist was secured.

"Did Estelle explain where you were going tonight?" he asked.

"I did," Estelle blurted.

"Yes," Hannah agreed.

"I'll meet you at the unit," he said. "Just a little bloodwork, and I'll get those printouts to you."

"Thank you, Sir."

"Are you flying your chopper tonight?" Estelle asked.

"I am."

"Dr. Johnson's a pilot," Estelle told Hannah as the three of them made their way past the checkpoints and to the restaurant's exit.

"I'll have to take you flying sometime," he said to Hannah.

"I would like that," Hannah replied. "I'm sure you never get lost."



## Chapter 26: The Fairchild's Solution

"That's murder, Pops," Brighton whispered, head lowered, the window beside him revealing a broad field bordered by a thick forest.

"Don't use that word, that's not what it is."

"But—"

"Sometimes routine procedures result in surprises," Fairchild said. "That's all that's going to happen."

"But—"

"Do you still harbor sympathies?" Fairchild demanded.

"No, but it's just—"

"Let her die to you," Fairchild said. "She's the worst thing that ever happened to you. Let her die."

Brighton looked toward the countryside, back to his plate.

"And get something in writing put in the docket this week, whether you have support or not. Just get it submitted. We're in a hurry now."

"Yes, Sir."

## Chapter 27: The Lid Comes Off

Deep breathing wasn't working.

Nothing was working.

Stacey was in the sort of panic that makes women run from burning buildings.

Or into them.

The sort of hysteria that, were she able to scream, would generate long howls of anguish, broken only by her need to draw in air.

But she could not scream, and she could not move. A day that had begun normally appeared to have broken into shards of something else, unimaginable, too foreign to truly be understood.

Two people she didn't know had just condemned her to a night strapped within a box, a box shut with 10 latches, or twelve, or two. It didn't matter, really.

The strap around her upper left arm was too tight. She wanted the catheter and the plug and the tampon out.

She wanted, desperately, to touch her face.

She heard a door close.

She heard something else. A dull, echoing thud.

A latch?

Another. And another.

Was it the next morning?

Was she dead?

More latches. More thuds. And the front of the box arose, a hand on either side, gripping it, moving it aside, setting it somewhere out of Stacey's view.

The boy appeared, the same one Stacey had seen through the window, but now she was seeing all of him, tall, a little stout, blond-haired, eyes not unkind. The girl's eyes had been unkind.

He reached down, unhooked the gag, removed it from between Stacey's mouth.

Silence.

She could not speak. What would she say? Any word that left her mouth could get the lid fastened back on her coffin.

Wait in silence. Conform.

Obey.

The boy reached down, opened the straps on her left arm, each gripping device disgorging its strap with a mechanical burp as it opened.

As soon as her arm was free, Stacey raised it to her face, rubbing her nose, her mouth, wiping the tears from her eyes.

The boy watched her hand warily until he saw where it landed, returned to his task. He pulled something from her cleavage, something that had been taped between her breasts, a small wire dangling from it. A heart monitor? He set it on the floor beside the box.

He unstrapped her other arm, and Stacey, still forced flat by the strap above her breasts, sobbed into both hands, just a single, quiet "auhh."

The boy stepped to another part of the room, returned and put his hand around her left wrist, and she allowed him to pull it away, drawing it upwards. Her right hand remained over her eyes, and she wept into it.

Something clinked. A terrifying sound.

Stacey pulled back her left hand, wrapped her right hand protectively around it and stared wildly up at the boy.

He was holding a pair of what looked like handcuffs.

"No!" Stacey screamed, all of the fear and pain and violation and injustice of the day embodied in those metal restraints, all her opposition to

everything embodied in that single word, repeated over and over again:  
“NO NO NO NO NO!”

She closed her eyes and continued to scream into her hands.

“NOOOOOOOOOO! NOOOOOOOOOO! NOOOOOOOOOO!”

“Hey, hey, hey!” someone was shouting back. “Damn, calm down!”

Stacey continued crying out, but she opened her eyes and, with her hands on her cheeks, raised her head to look at the boy beside the box, still holding the pair of handcuffs.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Breathe in.

Stacey reduced her cries to a steady rasp, and she stared at the ceiling.

“Would you rather stay in the box?” the boy asked.

Stacey, fighting terror, lowered her head, resting it on the small and completely inadequate cushion, realizing for the first time that her head hurt too, along with everything else.

“It’s up to you,” he said quietly.

Stacey stared, pondered.

“Why—” she began, her voice so harsh it didn’t sound like hers at all. She cleared her throat and tried again.

“Why would I want to . . . stay in there? Why would anyone ever want to stay in there?”

Now that she could speak, now that at least that part of her was restored to normalcy, the words tumbled out.

“Who are you? Where am I? What the fuck is this place?”

Talking helped. Cursing emboldened her. Still bound flat on her back, Stacey felt an outrage-powered surge of adrenaline.

“Let me out of this fucking thing,” she said, reaching down to free herself, worrying at the ends of the strap around her belly, finding the biting mechanism and tugging on it before the boy grabbed her left hand, closed the cuff around her wrist and secured her right wrist a second later.

“Fuck, damn,” she said, looking briefly at her bound hands before she returned to working at her belly strap. “Fuck.”

The boy grabbed the chain between her wrists and pulled it up, until her hands were stretched above her head, her forearms just below her elbows pressing against the top edge of the box.

“Ow. Stop!”

“Then stop trying to undo everything.”

“Fuck you,” Stacey said. “Let go of my hands. Let me go!”

“Don’t touch anything then.”

“Okay.”

He released the chain between Stacey’s hands, and she clasped, fingers interlocked, and brought them down to her belly while she fought another round of tears.

The boy rose, standing beside her box, looking down at her.

“What are you going to do to me?” she asked, because she could find nothing in his expression. There were no clues in his face.

“Transfer you to a holding cell,” he said. “But you have to cooperate.”

“What’s a holding cell?” she asked, sniffing and struggling to steady her voice.

“A residential unit.”

“Like a jail cell then.”

“It’s a holding cell.”

“Can I leave whenever I want?”

“No.”

Stacey stared at the ceiling, trying to understand, trying to weigh her choices.

If indeed she had choices.

No, she didn’t want to be put in the box again. Even having her mouth and her hands free was a vast improvement over that.

“Can I move around in it?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s 10 by 10.”

“10 by 10 what?” she asked.

“Feet.”

“And I’ll be out of this?” she asked, gesturing at the edges of the box. “Completely out of it?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” she said quietly. “What do I have to do to get there?”

“You need to answer some questions and let me restrain you.”

“You did,” she said, looking at her handcuffs.

“Ankles too.”

“Just until I get to the cell?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

“First, confirm your name for me.”

“Stacey,” she said. “Stacey Fairchild.”

## Chapter 28: Chimeras

The town car pulled up to a small but ominous-looking building on the outskirts of Palm Springs, nestled among warehouses and little shops and factories, three stories tall, the upper floors windowless, surrounded by chain link fence and barbed wire.

The driver pulled up to a tiny guard shack, spoke a few words to the woman there, and the gate parted and let them in.

The car stopped in a space beside a row of other vehicles, and Estelle helped Hannah exit, pulled out her luggage and led her to the building’s front entrance, a secure-looking door with a small window at eye level and a sign just above it making clear that only authorized personnel were allowed.

Before Estelle could press the door’s black buzzer, however, Dr. Johnson was there, stepping, dark and tall and knobby, into the floodlights.

“Thank you, Estelle, I’ll take it from here,” he said.

He seemed to have been waiting for them, emerging from a car somewhere nearby.

“Hi!” Estelle exclaimed. “I didn’t see your car!”

“I’ve borrowed one from New Life,” he said, gesturing vaguely toward the row of parked vehicles.

“It’ll take just a minute or two to get her checked in,” Estelle protested.

A jet roared overhead, its wheels down, its lights flashing, descending toward a nearby runway.

“I’ve got it,” Dr. Johnson said, sounding a little impatient now.

“You’ve done enough for today. I’ll see you in the morning. Thank you.”

“Okay,” Estelle agreed, perhaps a little reluctantly. She turned to Hannah. “Hey,” she said, spreading her arms, “thanks again for everything.”

“Sure,” Hannah agreed, hugging Estelle with her shoulders because her chains kept her hands at her waist. “Glad to help out.”

Estelle edged toward the town car while Dr. Johnson took Hannah's suitcase and book bag and turned toward the building's entrance.

But then he stopped, directing dark eyes at Hannah while he watched the town car begin to move back to the gate.

"Have you ever had your blood drawn?" he asked.

"It's happened a few times," Hannah said. "I don't mind if it's for a good cause."

"We'll get a tube or two filled," he said.

The town car reached the gate, and it opened.

"How big is the needle?" Hannah asked, as if this were a real conversation.

"Two inches," Dr. Johnson replied.

"No, what's the gauge?"

The car slipped through the gate, stopped at the street to wait for a break in the traffic, proceeded on, and the gate closed back.

"This way," Dr. Johnson said.

Hannah shuffled after him to a nondescript black sedan. He put her things in the trunk, stepped around to open the front passenger door for her, helped her get seated, buckled her seatbelt, took his seat and started the car.

"17.5A," he said, as soon as they'd reached the street.

"Where is your helicopter?" Hannah inquired.

"At the airport."

"Estelle doesn't know about this."

"Not unless you told her."

"I didn't, but I could have. What happens if she finds out?"

"Nothing," Dr. Johnson said. "She probably already knows, or she will when she sees you weren't entered into the manifest tonight. But—"

"How many girls are in that building?"

"About a dozen."

"Is it nice in there?"

"It's accredited," he said, turning left through a yellow light. "It's a little more open than the main building. And I don't care if Estelle knows, it's just not something I feel should be open knowledge between the two of us."

"What's your house like?" Hannah asked.

"It's on the ocean," he said. "It's got a terrace. Open first floor."

"I want to put my feet in the ocean," she said.

“You can do that.”

“Are your daughters going to be there?”

“Yes, if they’re not asleep. You know about them?”

“Estelle mentioned them, yeah.”

The car’s dashboard light said 9:10.

“When are we getting there?” Hannah asked.

“By 10:30,” he said. “Maybe before.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I want to be in your presence.”

Hannah laughed, because it was not the answer she expected. Or it was the perfect answer, and it was strange to hear it said.

“What do you expect to get from my presence?” she asked.

Dr. Johnson said nothing, turning at a sign that said “Palm Springs Airport, Private Aircraft, Access Restricted.”

“I’ll have to tell my owners about this,” Hannah said.

“Will you give them my name?”

“Not unless they tell me to.”

“Will they mind?”

“No,” Hannah said. “Well, the boy . . . Allain, their son . . . the boy they bought me for . . . he gets jealous sometimes. But that’s how it is.”

“How much did they pay for you?”

“Why are you asking that?”

Dr. Johnson pulled up to a gate, rolled down his window, showed a card to the woman there, and she peered at it, peered into his face, glanced at Hannah, and waved them on, the gate sliding aside.

“How much did they pay for you?” he asked again.

“I’m not going to tell you.”

“I can find it out.”

“Then find it out,” Hannah said. “I’m not going to tell you. And the question’s rude, anyway.”

Dr. Johnson laughed, a loud, gravelly rumble of mirth.

“I’m asking,” he said, “because I want to know what kind of bid to place.”

“Bid?” Hannah echoed.

“How much would they accept for you?”

“No,” Hannah said simply. “No, we’re not doing that.”

“It’s not up to you.”

“Take me back to New Life,” Hannah said flatly.

“It’s closed.”

“Then back to that little clinic place. Now.”

“You’re being serious?” he asked, driving slowly between a tall fence and a long row of hangars and outbuildings.

“Of course I’m being serious. I’m no longer available tonight.”

“Because of what I said?”

“No, because of what you felt.”

“What did I . . . feel?”

“That I’m someone you can just buy. That I’m just a price. That you can—”

“Hannah, I’m sorry,” Dr. Johnson said. “Let me start over.”

The car was silent until Hannah shifted in her seat and her chains rattled faintly.

“May I start over?”

Hannah said nothing, just looked out the window at the buildings to her right. There was a bar here, and a restaurant beside it, men milling about outside both establishments, smoking, drinking from things wrapped in paper bags.

The bar’s name was Lucky’s. The restaurant didn’t seem to have a name.

“Hannah, I’m completely enamored. Infatuated.”

Hannah turned to Dr. Johnson, out of politeness, and arched an eyebrow.

“People don’t know when they’re infatuated,” she said. “They just are.”

“Your application was stellar,” he said, ignoring her assertion. “One of the best I’ve seen this year. Don’t you want that? Someone who knows how smart you are? I know you do. I know your family doesn’t—”

“They’re not my family,” Hannah said. “And if you convince them to sell me to you, you’re not my family either. You’re just an owner.”

Dr. Johnson slowed, pulled up to a small building.

“What if I bought you and set you free?”

“Then I’d leave,” Hannah said, her turn to laugh, the whole conversation reminding her that men were ridiculous, that they wrote poetry for their women and went to war over them and confessed to undying devotion to them and then if you picked at it a little, at whatever it was that



was inflating them, you found nonsense underneath, things in a jumble, like two jokes blended badly into a third, and you just had to laugh or give up.

“You’d leave,” Dr. Johnson said, as if trying to wrap his head around Hannah’s words.

“Of course I’d leave,” Hannah said.

“Where would you go?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’d walk down the street. I’d walk on the beach. I’d walk to get ice cream. And then I’d keep walking, because I could.”

“You want to be free, then.”

“Yes,” Hannah agreed. “Doesn’t everyone?”

“No one’s free,” he said. “We all have to work. We all have to eat.”

“Yeah, but I’m also a slave,” Hannah said, adding after a slight pause, “I’m sorry I didn’t mention that before our, um, helicopter date, but I was afraid you’d lose interest.”

Dr. Johnson laughed again.

Hannah liked it when he laughed, and she suspected that he did it rarely, particularly over the last six months, since his wife had left him.

He wasn’t laughing because Hannah was funny, she decided. He was laughing because he was nervous, and excited, and Hannah was, while not funny, different. He needed different, probably. Different from Estelle, from his estranged wife, from his daughters, from the girls in the lab, from the slave girl he already owned.

Hannah was going to deliver. She liked being different. Or revealing her differences. Everyone was different, of course, but they wore clothes over their peculiarities for the same reasons they wore clothes over their breasts and sex organs.

So they wouldn’t be remembered for the wrong things.

Hannah was used to being naked, to being exposed.

Hannah was used to being remembered for being different. That’s all she needed to care about now. It was a sort of freedom many people lacked.

“You’re going to fly with me, then?” he asked.

“Yes, if you don’t bring up buying me again.”

Dr. Johnson turned off the car.

“Why does that bother you so much?” he asked.

“Wouldn’t it bother you?” Hannah asked, raising her hands to gesture, the clank of her chains ringing in loud counterpoint. “Wouldn’t all

of this bother you?"

Dr. Johnson said nothing, but he turned and studied the girl beside him.

"Is there a bathroom on your helicopter?" she asked.

"No," he said. "But there's one inside."

He opened his car door, stepped around to help Hannah out, but she remained seated.

"You promised no chains," she said.

"On the helicopter."

"No, here," Hannah said, continuing to face forward.

He hesitated for a fraction of a second before reaching into his pocket, fishing out a set of keys.

Hannah raised her hands, watched the cuffs open, turned in her seat and extended her legs, and she shivered as Dr. Johnson unchained her ankles.

This was more than having a pound or two of metal removed from her body. This was more than having her limbs free. An adult man, a wealthy, brilliant doctor – a director at New Life, no less – trusted her.

Respected her.

Believed in her.

Yes, all this was happening because he wanted to do certain things to her body. But if that's all he wanted, he could surely figure out how to do it without granting her unwarranted liberties.

"Thank you," Hannah said, and she rose from the car.

Dr. Johnson threw her chains onto the floorboard, the muted clunk they made an additional confirmation.

He moved to his trunk, pulled out Hannah's things, walked with her to the front of the building, followed her in and turned on the lights.

The building comprised a single large room, equipped with tables and chairs, several desks with PCs, a row of numbered lockers. In one corner stood a fridge and microwave and sink.

"Where's your helicopter?" she asked.

"It's out back," he said, pointing to a door at the rear of the room and sitting down at a PC.

"Where's the restroom?"

"Past the kitchen," he said, gesturing. "I need to fill out some forms online, take me about 15 minutes."

“Okay.”

Hannah lingered on the toilet, looking down at herself, remembering what had been done here earlier today, and what Dr. Johnson had seen when she was bound to the pink plastic platform in the middle of the hall.

Her concerns, that he would no longer like her, respect her, want her after seeing her like that, seemed laughably naïve now. Men were men.

She emerged to find him tapping at the PC, and she took a seat beside the desk, facing him.

He looked up at her, directing two dark, piercing eyes into hers. Examining, inspecting, trying to understand.

Did he look at her like that because of his job? Or did he take his job because he’d always looked at girls like that, at everyone like that?

“Do you have a phone?” Hannah asked.

“Yes.”

“May I have it?”

“For what?”

“I want to see the news, and check on a game I play.”

“What game?”

“Katzink. Have you heard of it?”

“No.”

“You make up a cat character, and she becomes you, and you try to succeed in business. You can make her fur any color. Or a bunch of colors. Even purple and green.”

Dr. Johnson smiled indulgently, and Hannah continued.

“I just made a new cat, who’s pink and white. Pink and white checks, even on her face, so she’s really cute. And she’s a doctor, starting a new clinic. And—”

“What kind of doctor?”

“Family medicine. She treats all animals, even dogs. They get hurt a lot, so she’s been really busy. She’s already doing way better than any others I had.”

“What other cats have you made?”

“One that tried to start a restaurant,” Hannah said, scowling. “And it failed. I think it’s because I’m not good at cooking, in real life. That shouldn’t matter, but it’s like the game knows what you can do, and can’t do.”

Dr. Johnson leaned back, pulled his phone out of his front pants pocket, unlocked it and presented it to Hannah.

“Thank you.”

For a time, Hannah scanned Dr. Johnson’s phone, reading news and dealing with problems at her Katzink clinic while he typed on his PC.

“Here she is,” Hannah said at one point, holding Dr. Johnson’s phone up to him. “I named her Chexopinke, because all the other good names with pink and checks were taken.”

Dr. Johnson glanced at Hannah’s creation and returned to whatever he was doing.

She couldn’t see his PC screen. Much more than 15 minutes passed, she noted, but she didn’t care.

Dr. Johnson cleared his throat.

“One point five million,” he said quietly.

“Huh?” Hannah said.

“I found your tax stamp.”

“Oh.”

“It must be yours, then.”

“Why?”

“Because if it weren’t, you would have said so.”

Hannah looked into Dr. Johnson’s eyes, but she was no longer seeing him.

Something.

There was something here.

Déjà vu. The sudden wash of a new moment masquerading as an old memory, a phenomenon that usually accompanied poor sleep for her.

Déjà vu?

Is that what this was?

Yes? No?

What?

An old, fragmented memory, fleeting, almost completely gone.

Sweet and strange.

Something.

Someone.

From a dream? From something that really happened? Who?  
When?

“That’s an exceptionally high price,” he added. “Not beyond my means at all, but surprisingly high.”

Hannah continued to stare while her mind worked behind her blank blue eyes, grasping at something invisible, something that had happened, or that she remembered had happened, or that—

“Hannah?”

A thing. A time. A person.

A person.

“Hannah?”

“Huh?”

“Did I upset you?”

“What?” Hannah asked, and it was gone, a wisping memory, a cruel chimera that dissipated within the cells of her consciousness like cooling vapor, almost there, almost graspable before its constituent molecules followed their separate paths, leaving not even the trace of a trace, Hannah with nothing but the memory of a lost memory now, the knowledge that she’d almost touched something before it had teased itself away.

“Did I upset you?”

“Huh?” Hannah said. “Oh, no. No. I don’t care. That’s what the Petrosyans bought me for. I don’t care.”

Hannah’s mind gathered itself back up, returned to the matter at hand, to things that might be said or done now that Dr. Johnson had uncovered this little piece of data, and she became annoyed again.

“The Petrosyans didn’t buy me to make money off me,” Hannah said. “So don’t think—”

“Aha!” Dr. Johnson said.

“Aha what?”

“It would hurt your feelings if they sold you for a profit.”

“Why would that hurt my feelings?”

“Because then you’d just be an investment.”

Hannah bit her lip and imagined the day she was brought in chains to the transaction, imagined the Petrosyans there, all four of them, with a lawyer and a banker and someone to inspect her, and they would fill out all the required paperwork and walk away with a check and walk away without Hannah, and all that had taken place between herself and them, the sex and the dinners and the parties and the punishment and the sex, again and again, and the schooling and the arguments and the coming of age and their

generosity and her clothes – and the love . . . yes, the love, such as it was – gone, reduced to a number, as chimeral as that infuriating memory that had just eluded her.

“No,” Hannah said.

She wasn’t going to permit this, wasn’t going to let someone she’d met last night dig like this into her mind and pull out what he’d found and make her look at it.

“No,” she said again, wiping her eyes. “I don’t care about what you’re saying. Something bad happened in Katzink.”

“What?”

“A dog patient got mad,” she recounted, and this was true, a problem she’d been dealing with on Dr. Johnson’s phone. “And he bit a nurse and knocked some things over and jumped out a window when it was still closed, and he did almost ten thousand yarnballs worth of damage.”

“Yarnballs?”

“That’s the Katzink currency.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“I don’t think I should accept any more dogs as patients,” Hannah said, staring glumly at his phone.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Yes.”

## **Chapter 29: From a Box to a Cell**

“Stacey Fairchild,” the boy said, nodding. “Any relation to the Fairchilds?”

“Yeah,” Stacey said, looking up from her box, puzzled. “I’m a Fairchild. So . . . that’s my family name.”

“No, I mean, I’ve heard of the Fairchilds. Here. Or Fairchild. One guy. He owns the place, or runs it or something.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess,” Stacey said. “Yeah, I think my dad did some things for them. They’re like, distant cousins or something.”

“I’ve got to pull your catheter out.”

“Whatever,” Stacey said, and she winced, but it didn’t hurt at all as the tube left her bladder, just felt strange. She raised her head and looked down.

“Where did that go to?”

The boy pulled tape from her calf, held up a bag filled with a yellow liquid that Stacey quickly understood was her urine.

She looked away, disgusted.

The boy took the bag to the sink, returned and reached between her legs again, removing her plug.

“Ow, fuck!” Stacey shouted.

“Sorry, I should have warned you.”

Stacey looked away again, tightening her anus. The sting of having the plug drawn out quickly abated, and after she reassured herself that she wouldn’t be releasing anything, she allowed herself another small dose of relief.

“Hey, my things were in here, near my feet, or between them,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said, raising the green hold kit bag.

“That’s it,” Stacey said, eyes watering with relief. “My phone is in there, and my recharger. I need to charge it up and make a call.”

The boy shook his head.

“All this goes away.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s disposed of.”

“To where?”

“To somewhere. I put it in a bin, and they take care of it.”

“Who?”

“Other people who work here.”

“When do I get it?”

“You don’t,” he said. “I think they just throw it away. Or recycle it.”

As if to demonstrate his point, the boy carried the bag to the counter and set it into a red bin, as Stacey watched with a growing sense of horror.

“That’s my stuff!” she shouted, head raised.

He just shook his head again.

“Fuck!” Stacey said, dropping her head. “Fuck!”

The boy returned to her, holding another pair of cuffs, and began opening up the straps along her left leg.

“What did you do to your ankle?” he asked.

Stacey, still processing what she felt was the wanton destruction of her things, glared at nothing.

“How did you hurt yourself?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Just tell me what happened,” he said.

“I tried to go . . . somewhere,” Stacey said bitterly. “And I forgot they chained me, and the thing around my foot cut me, and it hurt.”

“I’m going to take off your bandage, and redress it.”

“I don’t care.”

The boy peeled the wrap gingerly from Stacey’s ankle. Stacey raised her head in a futile attempt to see the wound, because she’d forgotten if it was bad or not. It stung a little, but the boy was being surprisingly gentle.

“Okay, this isn’t severe at all,” he said. “I’m just—”

“It bled a lot.”

“It doesn’t look like it’s bled at all in hours. I’m just going to put a bandaid on it so your restraints won’t irritate it.”

Stacey, hands clasped over her belly, stared at the ceiling and huffed while the boy cleaned her little cut with something that stung, then he covered it, freed her right leg and chained her ankles together.

“Now, I’m going to undo your chest and your belly, and you’ll be able to sit up,” he said. “But you need to go slow, just like if you’ve been asleep and you’re waking up.”

Stacey lifted her arms so he could undo the strap above her breasts, felt the strap going slack across her belly, raised her legs and angled herself toward the ceiling until she was seated upright, her legs stretched out before her.

“What’s going to happen to me?” she asked, doubling up her legs, preparing to stand.

“Let me look at your code,” he said, standing behind her.

“What code?”

“Your temporary code. It’s on your back.”

“Where?”

“Upper back,” he said, running his finger on a line between her shoulder blades.

“How did that get there?”

“Someone wrote it on you, when they picked you up.”



“I don’t remember that,” Stacey said. “What’s going to happen?”

“I’m taking you to a cell.”

“No, after that. What’s going to happen?”

“Okay,” the boy said, helping her rise to her knees, his hands around her upper arm. “They’ll need to look at you. That will happen tomorrow. To verify you should be here. And—”

“To see if I have that third ovary,” Stacey said.

“I guess. That’s what your document says. You’re a candidate. But it needs to be verified.”

“I don’t think I have one,” Stacey said. “I just have two, I mean. Like everyone else.”

“They’ll check tomorrow.”

“What if they find one? I mean, what if they find a third one?”

“Then you get a number.”

“What does that mean?”

“You get a number. Just that.”

“What after that?” Stacey asked, frightened by the boy’s vagueness.

“Then you go where they need you.”

“Where who needs me?”

The boy helped Stacey stand, continued to hold her as she put one foot over the box’s edge and onto the cool floor, her chain just long enough to cover the distance.

“It could be anyone,” he said.

She brought her other foot out, standing now on her own, looking down at herself, then back to the box that had been her horrible prison since the afternoon.

The thing they had touched her with, the compliance prod, they called it, had been lodged in a little groove along the edge of the box where her feet had gone, and she looked at it and glanced away, the casual way it had been applied to her flesh a memory too difficult to work through at present.

“Feel like you can walk?”

“Uh huh.”

She followed the boy out of the little room where she’d been unboxed, through another room, through a door that opened with a beep after he waved his badge before the sensor, and onto a hall lined with padlocked doors.

Every door featured panels, at eye level, hip level, at the feet. All of them had been latched closed.

“This is a prison,” Stacey said, slowing.

“No, it’s a medical holding facility,” the boy corrected.

“Are people in these?”

“Some of them,” he said. “I can’t say which ones, for privacy reasons.”

“Privacy?” Stacey repeated, looking down at her nude body. A male she’d just met was allowed to see her this way, to do things to the holes between her legs, to chain her, but the location of her cell and the other people’s cells was considered such a sensitive matter it couldn’t be revealed.

They approached a door, the number 643 stenciled in blocky black letters across the top, and Stacey memorized it.

The boy unlocked the padlock and opened the door, and Stacey stepped into a sterile room with white walls, a sink and toilet and shower and narrow bed.

The door clanged shut behind her, and she turned to see the panels opening, the boy’s face at the highest one.

“Come to the door and I’ll take your restraints off.”

“How long am I going to be in here?” Stacey asked, obeying, watching as the boy reached through the port to remove her handcuffs.

“Probably until tomorrow.”

“Then what?”

“It depends on what happens in the lab.”

His hands reached through the lowest port, removed Stacey’s shackles, and the panels over the ports closed one by one, latching shut.

Stacey waited, expecting some final instructions, a final word from the boy, at least a goodbye. She didn’t even know his name. She didn’t know the names of anyone who had been terrible to her today. The girl at the clinic had been anonymous, like the two men, this boy.

Her father would need to know everyone’s names when he sued them into oblivion. She could probably get those later. She knew what everyone looked like.

And her cell number would be relevant. She was in cell number . . . 6 something. 671? 614?

She turned away from the door to survey her tiny space.

This is better than the box.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Breathe in.

This is better than the box. Compared to the box, this is heaven.

There was a mirror over the sink, and Stacey went to it, looked at her face to make sure she was still the same girl.

She pulled at it, and it opened. Inside, she found to her surprise basic toiletries – toothpaste, toothbrush, a shampoo bottle, hairbrush, soap, tampons.

Almost like a hotel.

But on the bottom shelf, she found a pair of dildos, lying end to end, points touching, both white, one larger, one smaller, a bottle of lubricant beside the larger one.

No hotel, to her knowledge, supplied its guests with something you could put inside yourself.

What did males get? One of those padded holes?

She reached between her legs, found the string dangling from between her vaginal lips, removed the tampon that should not have been there in the first place. After a little searching, she found a little metal slot beside the sink that seemed to be for waste, and she slipped the tampon through it and went to her bed.

She wasn't sleepy, suffering instead from a sort of existential exhaustion, a state of weariness born not of physical activity but from the mental kind, the doubt and fear and horror of what had happened to her.

She pulled down the cover, studied the white expanse beneath it until she heard something at her door, turned to see that the lowest port in her door had been opened, and someone was sliding something through it.

Food?

Yes, it seemed to be a tray of something.

She went to it, bent, picked it up, stood, peeled back the foil.

Meatloaf, potatoes, corn, a little brownie.

Room service.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Breathe in.

She went to her bed, pondering the alternating cruelty and kindness of the system that had swallowed her. Kindness and cruelty, both applied at random, the decency just as arbitrary and therefore no more humane than the evil.

They'd given her a brownie.

Why?

To be supportive?

To give her the sugar she'd need, the energy she'd need, to keep functioning, to keep obeying?

They'd given her a dildo. Two dildos, bigger and smaller.

And lubricant.

Why?

To allow her a little pleasure, to give her something to do that didn't require her freedom, that cost them nothing?

She wasn't going to use it, certainly not. Each thing that had been done to her today had diminished her sex drive a little more. Now it was completely dead, she was officially asexual, her vagina simply a hollow chamber, her ovaries – be they two or three – the source of hormones only, to maintain her body's proper functioning and chemical balances.

Didn't hormones come from the ovaries?

A little plastic fork had been wrapped in a paper napkin, and she sat on her bed and dug into her meal and tried to enjoy it.

It wasn't terrible.

There was even, in a sense, some hope in it.

Had the boy not freed her and put her here, the only thing she'd have between her teeth right now was that rubber gag.

She had been freed, at least from mind-altering immobility. She had been fed. Neither were things a condemned girl would get.

She wasn't going to be killed. And by tomorrow, she might be free.

And the first thing she'd do is call her lawyer.

Who also happened to be her father.

And he would sue everyone and everything, until nothing was left. And they'd split the settlement, fifty-fifty.

## **Chapter 30: 'As Serious as a Hangnail'**

“Alright, Brighton, where are we?” Druhler Fairchild asked over a bottle of cognac at Top O’ Chicago.

“First draft of Subject Court Law goes in tomorrow.”

“Please don’t tell me that’s what you named it.”

“No, Sir,” Brighton said. “It’s styled the way we agreed, The Enhanced Subject Accountability Act.”

“Very good. And what about that little problem we’ve talked about?”

“I’m not sure,” Brighton said. “She’s probably still in Peoria, settling in with her new owners.”

“When’s the last time you checked?”

“A few weeks ago.”

The room was spinning, rotating at the pace of one revolution per hour, so that any patron who sat in the same place for at least 60 minutes got a panoramic view of all of downtown Chicago, its skyscrapers, its lesser buildings far below and, further away, its tenements, with Lake Michigan always shimmering to the east.

“Leston,” Fairchild said, turning to his eldest son and pouring another short glass of liquor. “Take this over. I want you to start watching for her. Brighton has enough on his plate.”

“Watching her how?” Leston asked.

“Any way you can,” Fairchild replied. “Families post shit on Look! about their new girls. Hell, sometimes the girls post shit themselves. Find it. Find out about the family. I want to know if they’re going to keep her or if she’s a short-term investment. And you need to look for a chance to call her home. Check with the Peoria clinic every other day at least, and when she shows up there, we make sure she’s sent to Chicago. They know what to do with her.”

“You’re serious about that?” Leston asked, adjusting a pair of round spectacles before eyes that had gone wider than usual.

“As serious as a hangnail,” Fairchild replied, and he lowered his voice and leaned forward to address both of his sons in turn.

“The future belongs to the brave,” he said. “If you’re not brave enough to crack a few eggs, someone’s going to take your future away from you.”

Leston nodded in agreement.

“And that bitch deserves to be cracked.”

Fairchild gazed through the window, watched the flashing lights of a jet pass by on its way to O'Hare, and raised his glass.

## **Chapter 31: Hannah Flies**

No longer in chains, Hannah could manage her own suitcase and carryon, but she decided that was something Dr. Johnson should keep doing, so she walked to the back door, tried the knob, found it locked and looked at him, trailing after her, pulling her things behind him, keys out again.

They made their way into a darkened lot, five helicopters bound by their rotors to the tarmac, a small, single-engine plane among them as well with its wheels chocked.

Dr. Johnson headed toward one of the choppers, blue and white or black and white, she couldn't tell, and he stowed Hannah's things in a small compartment at the back, and he reached up and freed the rotors and stowed the tethers and opened the door for Hannah.

"Hit the light up there," he said, pointing. She followed his finger, barely visible in the darkness, fumbled, found a switch.

"Belts there and there," he said, adding without a hint of lechery, "over the shoulders, around your hips here, and between your legs."

The space was disconcertingly small, just two bucket seats close to each other, with a little room for her feet, and a startling array of controls and dials and pedals where Dr. Johnson would sit.

He climbed into his seat, buckled himself in, and handed her a headset with a microphone.

"Put this on," he said, slipping a second headset over his ears, then leaning forward, flipping switches and adjusting dials.

"Why?" Hannah asked.

"So we can talk."

"I thought we were done talking."

He looked at her, looked down, hit switches, set his feet on the pedals and turned them, pushed a knob, and the craft came to creaking life, a rumble in its guts and a rhythmic sound directly behind Hannah's head, ponderously slow at first, picking up speed, an inert shell suddenly vibrating, rocking, swaying, even while it continued to squat on the pavement.

Dr. Johnson stared at the dials, adjusted something, hit another switch, picked up a handset, blew into it and spoke, his voice so loud in Hannah's headset she pulled it off.

He reached over, pointed to the volume knob, and she pushed it down to 1 and put it back on.

Dr. Johnson spoke again, random letters and numbers, a time, a destination, and he put the handset down and looked at Hannah again, nodding this time, and she nodded back, and he hit the light switch so everything was dark except for his instrument panel and the beacons of the airport.

Sitting in jet airliners didn't prepare her for what came next, the sudden lurch, the shudder, the falling away of the earth.

They rose, paused, rose again, and somehow, by what Dr. Johnson was doing at the controls, they left the airport both vertically and horizontally, the craft describing a wide arc as it passed over darkness before it traversed the air above Palm Springs, the lights and the cars and the black spaces reduced to a patchwork in which individual people couldn't be seen.

"It's beautiful," Hannah said to herself, gazing out at the world in a way she'd never seen it before, taking in the glory of a little corner of America at night, all the more brilliant because it wasn't posing, didn't know it was being watched, its beauty all accidental.

"It is," Dr. Johnson agreed. "I learned to fly for convenience. This was a surprise."

Most of the front of the craft was glass, from above Hannah's head to a place just beyond her toes, and she bent to stare down, the lights of Palm Springs growing scarcer until there was nothing but black desert, punctuated now and then by the lights of a car or a truck or a small dwelling place.

Hannah's mind wandered back to the thing she could not remember, the dream or the real thing, the person or the mirage.

Dr. Johnson had said something that triggered her, and she couldn't remember what he'd said anymore, so whatever that memory was lay separated from her by three degrees now, something that might or might not be, that couldn't be remembered, triggered by forgotten words.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir."

He jiggled something on the console between them, punched a button, jiggled it again, and warm air immediately blew out onto Hannah's bare knees.

"Thank you."

"You really took Zach down," Dr. Johnson said, his voice low and rumbling through the chopper's whine.

"Huh?"

"Zach?"

"Yeah?"

"Remember what you said? To Zach?"

"Oh," Hannah said, this incident easily retrieved from her bank of banal recollections. "Dinner was really nice."

"That was one of your weaker deflections," he said.

"Deflections?"

"Yes, when you don't want to talk about something, you bring something else up."

"You're right," Hannah said. "I don't want to talk about Zach."

"Do you do that all the time?" he asked.

"What?"

"Insult people?"

"I didn't insult him."

Dr. Johnson laughed, loud and hard, the sound vaguely electronic and strange in Hannah's headset.

"What?" Hannah demanded.

"There are four kinds of lies," Dr. Johnson said. "Lies you tell that you know are lies, and they're either believed or they're not believed. That's the first two kinds. Then, lies you tell that both of you believe; and the fourth, lies you tell that only you believe."

"Okay," Hannah agreed, studying a pair of parked cars in a place where she didn't think parked cars should be, headlights illuminating rocks in a jumble, laid upon smooth sand.

"Which one did you just tell me?" he asked.

"You mean, which lie?" Hannah asked.

"Yes."

"I never lie," Hannah said.

Dr. Johnson laughed again. He was surprisingly easy to amuse, Hannah thought.



“Zach goes to Harvard,” he said.

“He was on his second beer,” Hannah retorted. “And the beer glasses were really big, which made his school irrelevant.”

“Is that why you insulted him?” Dr. Johnson inquired.

“I didn’t insult him,” Hannah said. “I put him in his place.”

“His place?”

“Yes, his place . . . of not making me uncomfortable. He made me uncomfortable, so I was trying to help him to remember to not make people uncomfortable. That’s everyone’s place.”

“Estelle didn’t make you uncomfortable?”

“You mean, when she put me on that platform?”

“Yes.”

“Well, yes,” Hannah said. “But that was for a purpose. That’s different. Zach didn’t need to say what he said.”

“How was Duncan?” Dr. Johnson asked.

“You’re making me uncomfortable,” Hannah said.

“What do you mean?”

“How was Duncan?” Hannah said. “Like, we were on a date? How was dinner? How was your gin and tonic? How was Duncan?”

“How should I have asked it then?”

Hannah paused, pondered, forcing her mind back to an academic mode, her words to a research context.

“Okay,” she said. “How was, um, no, wait. How . . . okay . . . okay . . . this: ‘Did our research male fulfill his assignment, um, to your satisfaction during the demonstration today?’ That’s how you should have asked it.”

“Okay, then,” said Dr. Johnson. “Did he?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “He scared me a little, because of how he looked. His face. And then he smiled and talked, and it was . . . you know, nice, really nice, I guess because of the contrast. He got it done. And . . . yeah . . .”

“You climaxed.”

“Yes, once.”

“Alright, a different question now,” Dr. Johnson said. “And I want to see what kind of lie you tell this time.”

“I don’t lie,” Hannah said again.

“How did you end up in the correction room?”

Hannah, studying a faint, mysterious glow at the base of a little hill half a mile away, felt her stomach clench, and she was glad she and Dr. Johnson were not sitting across from each other, drinking wine and staring into each other's eyes, because he would have seen a flash of worry there, of guilt, of sedition.

"Oh," Hannah said, calming her voice. "I thought that's where the presentation was."

"The second kind of lie," Dr. Johnson said. "You know it's a lie, and I don't believe you."

"Okay," Hannah said.

"Try again."

"Try what again?"

"Tell another lie."

"What if I don't?"

"Just do."

"I don't feel like talking about it. I walked into a place where girls were being punished, and it's, um, too traumatic to think about."

Dr. Johnson laughed again. Easy, comfortable.

He was playing. This was one of the ways he played.

"Tell me another lie."

"This one is true," Hannah said. "I heard someone scream when we were walking by, earlier, and I knew what that room was for and I wanted everyone else to know too."

"Why?"

"Because . . ." Hannah began, considering her words carefully, "because it's an important aspect of your methodology that, um, all researchers should be, um, cognizant of, and I didn't see that on the agenda, and I knew it must have been left off by accident. So I was just, um, correcting things."

"Hm," Dr. Johnson said with a dry chuckle that sounded almost like a mechanical click to Hannah over her headset. "Almost plausible."

"Why do you keep track of four kinds of lies?" Hannah asked. "Do you punish girls differently if they tell one kind or another?"

"I don't punish girls."

"Yes you do."

"No, all that's handled by another team."

"What happens if a girl lies to you, then?"

“It’s rare.”

“Fine,” Hannah said. “But what happens if she lies?”

“I refer her to the team,” Dr. Johnson said. “That’s all.”

“And you don’t think that’s punishing them?”

“No,” he said. “I don’t.”

“Okay,” said Hannah. “The fourth kind of lie, where you, um, are the only one who believes the lie? That’s what you just told.”

Dr. Johnson laughed again. “Why do you do it, Hannah?”

“Do what?”

“Why do you push? Why do you insult? And go where you’re not supposed to be? Why do you take the chance?”

The question had occurred to Hannah more than once, and she had her answer ready.

“Every slave wants to know how big her cage is. So I’m not pushing. I’m feeling.”

For a time they flew in silence, Hannah’s mind taking in the darkness and the occasional light beneath her, imagining the lives attached to those lights, the people there, wondering if they were slave or free, happy or sad, contented or restless.

“I have a question for you,” she said.

“Go ahead.”

“When you walked up to Estelle, in the hall, when I was on that copulation platform,” Hannah began, “what did you think?”

“I wasn’t thinking,” he said. “I was talking to an employee.”

“You’re deflecting,” Hannah observed.

“No I’m not.”

“I was lying there, strapped down. Didn’t you see me?”

“I did.”

“So you must have thought something.”

“Hannah,” Dr. Johnson said with a tone of beleaguered patience. “When I’m at work, I’m working. Which means processing a dozen concerns, at a minimum. I saw you, but at that point I didn’t even know if you were coming over.”

“I did,” Hannah said. “I’d decided to say yes by then.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“But I decided you wouldn’t want anything to do with me after you saw me like that.”

“You were wrong,” Dr. Johnson said simply, and Hannah considered that matter resolved.

She wasn’t completely settled, however. With all the challenges of the day worked through, the demonstration done, her topic chosen, issues remained. Not just the broad, overwhelming matter of what lay before her this semester – a research female she would manage and work with and befriend and use to earn a publication – but the immediate challenges of this man and his profession and whatever it was he was working on tonight. People like Dr. Johnson had the power to take people like Hannah, to divert them to other uses, to confine and torment them, to compensate their owners perhaps, or to claim them by right of eminent domain and provide no compensation. The wrong word tonight, a careless gesture, even poor performance in bed, could upend Hannah’s life utterly, remove her from all she treasured.

And yet, she was more curious than afraid. Dr. Johnson said he loved her. As unlikely as it was that he knew what he was talking about, she took it as a sincere expression of care, at least. He would not simply have her bound over to some desolate lab, not without sufficient provocation.

And she would not provoke Dr. Johnson. But she remained curious.

“The third kind of lie,” she said, speaking slowly into the microphone, her own voice sounding a little hollow in her ears. “Where you know you’re lying, and so does the person you’re lying to.”

“Yes?”

“When does that ever happen?”

“Religion,” Dr. Johnson replied.

He shifted his feet slightly, adjusted a lever, and the helicopter banked left, the sensation of being weightless, ungrounded making Hannah a little woozy.

“And marriage.”

They passed over more darkness, reached the edge of the first real neighborhood Hannah had seen since Palm Springs, neat little blocks of housing bordered by tidy streets laid out in rectangles, overlaid by the randomness of shrub and high trees, which grew thickly here.

“That’s Williston,” he said.

“Is that where you live?”

“Yes, when I’m not in Palm Springs.”

Hannah started and reached up to her collar.

“My travel tag only says Dallas and Palm Springs,” she said. “I can’t—”

“Just don’t walk off,” he interrupted. “For ice cream.”

Hannah nodded, but she continued to finger the three tags dangling at her neck.

“The Pacific Ocean,” he announced, and Hannah dropped her hand, sucked in her breath, and stared at an impossible expanse of rippling sea beneath a setting quarter moon, its reflection blazing unbroken until it lost itself in the coarse white surf, a white, undulating border between beach and water.

Dr. Johnson banked left again and followed the shoreline, so that Hannah could stare out across the sea and consider the possibilities.

They banked left again and stopped in midair, hovering over the sea, and Hannah gazed down, saw a yard, following the carpet of green-black with her eyes to the foundations of a home, ornate and beautiful but not overlarge, with a great stone terrace extending from the second floor.

“Your place?” Hannah inquired.

“Yes. Keep watching.”

Dr. Johnson dropped the craft until its struts were even with the terrace floor and no more than 50 feet ahead.

Lights were coming on, downstairs, then behind the doors and windows of the second floor, then across the terrace itself.

A door opened and two girls ran out, jumping and waving, their flannel nighties twisting around their legs.

“Heidi and Imani,” he said. “Heidi’s older.”

A third female, a little older than Hannah, hobbled behind them in the nude, her ankles chained together.

“And that’s our girl, Felicity,” he said, adding with a hint of defensiveness, “she’s only chained at night. Heidi does it.”

Hannah focused on the slave, looking across a gap of 50 feet, but with a practiced eye, speculating on the nature of this girl’s existence.

Felicity was, Hannah guessed, in her 30’s, with jet black hair down to her neck, straight bangs cut across her face, glasses with thick black rims, and an overall demeanor of severity, seriousness, and, quite possibly, intelligence.

She was bought as a domestic female, to help with the daughters, probably within the last five years. Her purpose was not recreational, and

Hannah imagined Mrs. Johnson, whoever she might be, making the selection herself, passing on the younger, more attractive and more expensive girls, preferring that her husband's physical relief remain a station exclusive to her.

But Hannah knew, as certainly as she knew anything about subjects and their masters, that this girl served recreationally. Something about the way she stood, the neat black triangle of pubic hair, the way she put one hand on her hip, something in her distant eyes, behind her glasses: a confidence, perhaps, because serving a man physically gives you a certain power where he's concerned, even if he owns you.

Dr. Johnson had availed himself of her body, surely since his wife had left him, maybe before, Hannah knew. Maybe that's why Mrs. Johnson had left, but Hannah couldn't tell.

Felicity gave a little wave, palm at her waist; a small, ironic wave, as if she knew waving at a helicopter was silly. So she wasn't just severe. She was also capable of sarcasm, cynicism, satire, all mild forms of sedition that only other subjects could recognize. Could she see Hannah in the chopper? Did she know she was there, another slave girl, seated beside Dr. Johnson?

A fourth female stepped onto the terrace, light brown hair with subtle blue highlights, a yellow sundress with a white belt, a woman in her late 30's whose presence there made no sense to Hannah.

"My wife," Dr. Johnson said, turning away from the terrace with dizzying suddenness, bringing the craft to the side of the house, dropping cautiously on a small circle of concrete surrounded by floodlights.

He turned off the craft, flipped on the cabin light and pulled off his headset. Hannah followed suit.

"I'm sure Estelle told you about my wife."

"She said you're separated."

"I wasn't expecting her tonight."

"Would it be less awkward if I flew back to Palm Springs?"

"No, I need you here," he said. "I'm not sure what she wants."

"I don't know how to fly your helicopter," Hannah said. "I was trying to be funny."

"I know. I need that too."

## **Chapter 32: The Wails of a PUMI**

Stacey had no idea when she'd fallen asleep, how long she'd been asleep. The light in her cell was on. Had it been on all night? Or had someone just turned it on, to waken her?

She rose stiffly, the pains of the box lingering, among her teeth where the gag parted her jaws, where the strap had been too tight on her arm, between her legs.

She went to her toilet, rinsed her face at the sink, and went to the door with its latched panels, listening, wondering if she'd been forgotten, wondering if she hadn't, when they'd come for her, what they would do.

The idea that she had any control over this, that resisting or cursing or being angry would help her, was gone from her mind, replaced with an outrage that she would hide by remaining calm, serene, and alert. She needed to remember people's names and all the other details of her treatment, because she knew her father would need that.

What was the boy's name last night, the one who had freed her from the box? She didn't know. He wasn't wearing a nametag.

And what was that girl's name, who was ready to leave Stacey boxed overnight?

If the boy was sued for a million dollars, the girl should be sued for 20.

Stacey didn't consider herself a vindictive person, had rarely availed herself of her father's legal expertise, mostly just used his money.

But this was a violation of an entirely different level.

Stacey heard a squeaky wheel, somewhere in the hall beyond the latched panels of her door, and then sounds she couldn't interpret. Clicking. Metal against metal.

"Hello?" she shouted at the panel at her face. "Hello?"

She heard unlatching, by her feet, she heard the panel down there sigh open, and she knelt to see another tray of food slide in.

"Hey!" she said. "When am I going somewhere? Hello? Hello?"

She pulled the food into her cell and set her cheek against the floor just in time to see the panel shut, hear the latch return her to complete isolation.

"Hello?"

No answer but the squeak of a cart's wheel.

The food was predictable but good enough, a large loaf of heavy bread that tasted powdery and probably included some kind of protein.

Applesauce. One small sausage.

She ate slowly, food giving her the same hope it had the night before. There were people here, wherever here was, who prepared food, and brought it to the cells, to feed the people being held.

She drank from her sink, sat on her bed, pulled off the bandaid and touched her wound, a little red scratch that barely hurt. She stayed on her bed, waiting for nothing, grew weary of that after no more than five minutes, went to the door, heard nothing, finally decided to bathe. If they came for her while she was in the shower, they'd have to stand there until she was done.

She used up half the shampoo in the little travel bottle she'd been given, rubbing it all the way through her black hair, as if the remnants of the last 24 hours were lingering there, and washing it out would make a difference.

At some point in the shower or when she was finished drying off, they'd come and opened her panels. No one was there now, but she saw it at least as a sign of change, if not improvement. At this point, anything different was better than this.

She wouldn't get back into a box, though. She didn't care how many times she was prodded.

She wrapped the towel around her hair, wished she had a second towel for her body, and went back to the ports in her door, drawn by the sounds of industry.

Where there had been an empty, lifeless hall, there were a half dozen workers here now, all in green jumpsuits, standing at three doors.

A padlock was opened, a door swung wide, and a naked female chained hand and foot was escorted out, her restraints rattling as she made her way down the hall.

"Turn, hands behind your back," a female worker demanded at a door just across the hall from Stacey's.

Those were the only words spoken. There was no small talk here, everyone going through motions that seemed routine, numbingly mundane.

Stacey watched as someone behind the door was bound through the ports. And then the door opened, and she almost started when a nude male emerged in chains, his penis soft and bouncing. He didn't notice her, so she continued to stare until a girl's face filled her port.

"Ah!" Stacey shouted, jumping.



“Take off your towel.”

“Huh?”

“Remove the towel. From your head.”

Stacey reached up, unwound her turban and slung it onto the bed.

“Turn, hands behind your back,”

Stacey obeyed, but she would not be silent.

“Where am I going?” she asked, making fists as the cuffs were closed around her wrists.

No answer.

“I just want to know,” she said.

The chains around her ankles tickled as they were applied, stung when the metal touched her wound.

The door creaked open and the girl waved at her impatiently to step into the hall.

Stacey obeyed, slowly, haltingly, afraid of falling, of adding another injury to the insults of the last 24 hours.

“Clinic 3,” the girl said, stepping with Stacey down the hall.

“What’s that?”

“A clinic.”

“So they can look at my . . .” Stacey said, letting the sentence die unfinished. Why remind people of why she was here? Maybe they’d forget and let her go.

And then she’d sue them.

They rounded the corner of an empty hall, voices and the sound of chains ahead telling Stacey there were many here, workers and victims.

When more than one person sued the same people for the same reason, there was a name for it. School something, maybe. Like a school of fish, all moving in the same direction.

No, not school. Something. Some other term.

She should be asking every victim here who they were, how they’d been harmed, if they wanted to sue.

The doors on this hall had been numbered sequentially. Stacey was halted at 3. Clinic 3. Remember that, Stacey told herself.

The staffer opened the door. Inside was a space that looked disconcertingly like the clinic she’d gone to yesterday, the clinic where she’d walked in free and left in a box. There were shelves, cabinets, a sink, and an examination chair in the middle of the room.

“Put your bottom against the edge of the chair,” the staffer instructed.

Stacey obeyed, standing between a pair of stirrups, the full kind that held the whole lower leg, with straps to keep them still. A pair of belts at the sides of the table were positioned where her hands would go, she realized. A brief wave of nausea washed over her as her mind drew comparisons between the exam table and the box she’d been put in yesterday, but she breathed in and out and focused on the differences. She wasn’t in a box now, for example.

The staffer eased her back into the chair, raised one leg, the other dangling by the chain, set her leg into the stirrup, strapped it in place, removed her shackles and stirrups the second leg.

Stacey leaned back until her hands, bound behind her and getting pressed, grew uncomfortable, and she leaned forward.

The girl pulled out a phone, held it up to Stacey’s face, stepped behind her and ran her finger along Stacey’s back, and she remembered she’d been written on there, and guessed the ink had survived the shower. She should have tried to wash it off, she thought. She should have at least tried to read it in her mirror. Temporary ID. A number they were using to identify her.

“What’s my number?” Stacey asked innocently while the staffer undid her handcuffs.

The woman said nothing, just pressed against the front of Stacey’s shoulder, pushing her back into the chair. She picked up one hand and wrapped a belt around the wrist, tightening it. She rounded the chair and did the same to Stacey’s other hand, and then she picked up the handcuff and shackles and stepped out.

Stacey, alone now, stared at the door, expecting it to open at any moment.

A minute passed.

Two minutes.

Five at least.

10.

“Hello?” Stacey called out.

She could hear other voices, other sounds, through the door and walls. There were other girls here, other boys, doing things, having things done to them. But she’d been forgotten, and she was immobile again, like

yesterday, and she was fighting panic and despair and considering the issuance of a blood-curdling howl of ungagged rage when the door finally opened and a man and woman entered, the woman pushing a cart bearing various equipment, as well as what Stacey recognized as an ultrasound.

They said nothing to her, just moved with the cart to the place between her spread legs. The woman opened a tube of lubricant, squeezed out a dollop of clear gel onto her fingers, rubbed it across Stacey's vulva, and opened her lips to push some inside.

Stacey winced but didn't protest, growing increasingly confident they were going to find no more than two ovaries, and she'd be let go and given her things, and she'd be calling her father immediately.

The woman plugged the ultrasound into the floor, powered it up, spread Stacey's lips again and pushed the wand into her chamber, while Stacey rocked her hips and grimaced.

The ultrasound screen was turned away from Stacey, but she watched the man's and woman's faces as they both stared intently.

"Uhh," Stacey grunted as the woman angled the wand repeatedly to the left, the way Kari had yesterday.

"There it is," she said, pointing. "Right there."

"What?" Stacey demanded. "What are you looking at?"

The man pulled a tape measure from the cart, stepped beside Stacey and slid his hand behind her head.

She felt the tape measure around her neck, and she imagined that he was going to strangle her, but he slid it back out and left.

The woman withdrew the wand, passed a few tissues over Stacey's sex, unplugged the ultrasound and followed the man out of the room, and Stacey was left alone again.

"What!" she screamed. "What did you find?"

Stay calm, she told herself, biting off her next shout. Yelling accomplishes nothing. And no one said third ovary. Just "There it is." That could mean anything.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

The door opened. The man returned, with two women. No cart this time, but they were holding things, something metallic and round, something else, smaller.

One of them took Stacey's shoulder, pulling her away from the chair, and she felt her hair being pulled up, felt more hands, something being lowered past her face, something cold against her neck, and then it was done, a circle of metal secured with a heavy click, like the last word in a conversation.

Someone was pinching her back, over her spine, between her shoulder blades. No, someone was stabbing her back. She was being stabbed. She was being killed.

"Ow! Stop! Help!"

They were done stabbing, the knife going no deeper, and coming out it seemed, but the pain lingered, a small sting.

"What did you do?" she asked. "What?"

Stacey leaned forward again, heard the little tink of a piece of metal against the larger ring around her neck.

She was forced forward again, one hand was released from its strap and brought behind her, her other hand was freed and brought back to be joined to it with handcuffs.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "What's going to happen?"

Her ankles were unstrapped, bound with chain, and she was slid off the examination table, a pair of firm hands around each upper arm.

The man stood before her, his phone out, and he raised it and pointed it at her face, pointed it at her breasts, pointed it at her middle. The girls let go of her arms and stepped back and he continued to point his phone at her. He was taking pictures, Stacey realized. He was taking pictures of Stacey's face and body. He stepped to her sides, first the left, then the right, for pictures of her profile – face, breasts, lower down.

He was done and she was shuffled into the hall and around the corner and back to the same cell she'd left that morning, her bedsheets still awry, her damp towel crumpled at the foot of the bed.

The door was closed, the lock applied, the ports opened.

"Chains off," one of the women said.

Stacey turned, her back to the door, feeling the cuffs opening up, one by one, listening to the sounds of a very small improvement in freedom, a single tear rolling down her cheek. This is not what she'd been expecting, and exactly what she'd been expecting.

The panels were latched shut. She stared at them numbly, willing them to open, because she wanted to see something other than the walls of

her cell. They didn't open, so she went to the mirror over her sink, gasping in surprise.

She had been collared. She knew about collars. She'd seen them. Subject collars, worn by people who were subjects. She reached up, looking for the catch, so she could take it off, looking for the keyhole, so she could pick it off. You could pick locks with a paperclip, she knew.

There was no catch. There was no keyhole. Just a place where two jointed pieces of metal had become one, a heavy hinge on one side, the sliver of a gap on the other. She tried to work her fingernail into the gap, found she couldn't. She ran her fingers around the collar while she studied it, noticed that something had been engraved into both halves of her collar, a random series of letters and numbers.

A small blue tag dangled from a ring set into her collar. She leaned forward, letters slowly forming words, forming meaning.

"Stacey," it said at the top.

"Female, PUMI," it said just below it.

At the bottom of the tag were the same random numbers and letters that had been engraved into the collar itself. She checked them carefully, character by character, ascertaining the exactness.

There were no errors. Everything lined up.

For a long second, long enough to draw in her breath, to fill her lungs, she simply pondered. This was interesting. She'd been naked, and now she was wearing a collar, with a metallic blue tag that bore her name.

Stacey, it said. Just Stacey.

And PUMI. What did PUMI stand for again? Someone had mentioned it yesterday. PUMI. PUMI.

Lungs full now, she moved into the next station in her mind. She dropped her hands to the edges of her sink, gripping the white porcelain, and she screamed, a great, wailing cry of anguish, the word "NOOOO!" spoken more than once, interspersed with incomprehensible babbling, weeping, and horror.

Stacey gave up trying to remember the meaning of PUMI, but she knew what the collar meant.

She was a slave.

## **Chapter 32: Arranging a Happy Ending**

“Dad,” Leston Fairchild said over the phone, speaking carefully.  
“The clinic visit’s been scheduled.”

“Peoria?” Druhler Fairchild inquired.

“Yes.”

“You know what to do,” Fairchild asserted.

Silence. A long pause.

“Right?”

“No, Sir,” Leston replied.

“Call Chicago.”

“Okay,” Leston agreed. “And tell them what, exactly?”

“I thought you knew.”

“I thought you’d already talked to them.”

“I have.”

“What did you tell them?” Leston asked.

“Are you on a secure line?”

“Yes. My cell.”

“Call Bonnie there,” Fairchild said, speaking slowly. “Just Bonnie, and give her the ID number, and then say Somnoli and tub.”

“Somnoli . . .?” Leston echoed.

“Somnoli,” Fairchild said again. “Deep sleep, and a nice little high, so subjects’ll take it when they’re not supposed to. And then . . . if you put them in the tub after they’ve gotten hold of it . . . how are you supposed to know it’s in their system? It only takes five minutes to really knock ‘em out, so you take them to the bath and say get in, and as soon as you turn your back, well . . .”

Leston was silent.

“Still there?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“It’s painless. Happiest end you could ask for.”

“Yes, Sir.”

## **Chapter 33: Trouble in House Johnson**

Hannah unbuckled herself, pushed open the door and slipped from the chopper, glad to have her feet on solid ground again, although she would have preferred something more certain to connect herself to the earth than her tallest stilettos. She stood back to watch Dr. Johnson unload her

suitcase and book bag from the back of the craft and haul them toward a walk that led to the home's side entrance.

The light beside the door turned on, and the door opened as they approached.

"Hello!" said Mrs. Johnson, stepping through the door.

"Oh, my," she added, staring at Hannah, eyes wide with either surprise or, Hannah suspected, something more ironic.

Dr. Johnson made a sound in his throat, almost animal-like, that Hannah interpreted as beyond awkwardness, a sort of groan of social despair, the sound a man makes when he's overwhelmed with uncertainty, completely at a loss as to how to proceed.

Hannah considered briefly allowing the little drama of fractured domesticity play out before her, decided there were too many reasons not to, and marched forward, hand outstretched.

"Hello, I'm Hannah Loughbridge," she announced.

"Dorothy Johnson," the woman said, taking Hannah's hand and smiling in a way Hannah didn't like. There was something accusatory in her face, an annoying pretense of omniscience, as if she knew why Hannah had come, what Hannah would be doing tonight.

As if she knew what Hannah was.

Hannah wouldn't have it, and her mind searched for something disruptive to say, something to knock the woman off balance.

"Thank you so much for having me over," Hannah said brightly.

Mrs. Johnson held her smile, but it changed subtly, a shadow of uncertainty now, and her eyes wandered past Hannah's shoulder.

"Hello, Deeter," she said.

"Hello, Dot," he said back, and the two exchanged a quick, light kiss, Dr. Johnson wrapping one arm around his wife's shoulders, his other arm still pulling Hannah's things.

"Hannah was just going to tell me about herself," Dorothy said, smiling accusingly again, victoriously.

Hannah understood. Dorothy saw blonde hair and blue eyes and a collar and had drawn certain logical conclusions.

Logical, but to Hannah, offensive. And wrong.

This is why she hadn't taken a second gin and tonic. Because of the unknown.

“Yes, Ma’am, I’m a researcher at the University of Texas at Corpus Christi,” Hannah said, nodding. “And a student there. And I’ll be studying some things about ovaries, and Dr. Johnson will be supporting me.”

“Dr. Johnson is my husband,” she said, a hint of bitterness in her voice now, the smile persisting.

“Oh,” Hannah said. “That’s wonderful.”

“Why are you here?” she asked.

“Why wouldn’t I be here?” Hannah inquired.

The question, a rhetorical trick she’d learned somewhere, a philosopher’s gambit that proved ideal for slave use as well, knocked Mrs. Johnson completely off her heels, knocked the woman all the way back from territorial jealousy to ordinary hospitality.

“Well, get out of the chill, then,” she said, opening the door wide, allowing Hannah and Dr. Johnson to enter first, locking the door behind.

They passed through a small room that seemed to represent the last stage within a home before one entered the wide world beyond, boots and coats and an inflatable kayak and life vests and water shoes and noodle floats and bikini tops and bottoms arranged along the floor, on hooks and pegs, on shelves.

From there they passed into a brief narrow hall where a thick, short-legged dog was waiting, huffing into Dr. Johnson’s hand, rushing up to Hannah to slip his nose under Hannah’s skirt, grunting when Dorothy yanked on his collar.

Could he smell Duncan? Hannah wondered.

Could Dorothy smell Duncan?

“Hannah, are you old enough to drink?” Mrs. Johnson asked once they’d reached a larger room, a basement proper with a thin carpet on the floor, odds and ends of furniture deposited here and there, the cheaper sort of pictures on the wall – a glowing house, at night in the forest, a dog with its paws on a fence.

“No, Ma’am, not until this April,” Hannah replied. “But I drink anyway.”

“You’re just 20?” she asked, stopping at a narrow flight of stairs and turning to leer at Hannah, and then at her husband.

“Yes,” Hannah said. “I’m still in college.”

“Bentley, come,” Mrs. Johnson said to the dog, and he took the stairs two at a time, Mrs. Johnson going next, then Hannah, and then Dr.



Johnson, who was clearly out of his social depth, so distressed over the unexpected presence of his wife he'd been reduced to a specter of a man, dragging Hannah's things behind him and listening to the words others spoke.

He was waiting for Hannah to snap, she suspected, to be rude or inappropriately funny or indiscreet and make things worse.

No one who looked at Hannah tonight – white silk halter top, forest green skirt, blonde hair down to her shoulders and cut in bangs above her eyes – would guess at the domestic intrigue she'd navigated, the furious, jealous wife she'd reckoned with, the pain she'd suffered.

Suffering was a terrible thing, Hannah knew, but it prepared one for certain events. She was, in some respects, in her element here. Dr. Johnson didn't know that. Neither did his estranged wife.

The stairs opened into a large den, and Hannah followed Mrs. Johnson into it and into chaos.

All the things a girl could want: an army of dolls, of every race but mostly blonde, on window sills, atop furniture, against the floor where they'd been splayed – presided over three dollhouses, a western fort with Indians and soldiers, construction toys, and several small, motorized vehicles. Hannah saw an ambulance, a horse with wheels, a fighter jet with stubby wings.

But there was an air of disuse here. Not dust, precisely, not toys so old they must have been bought a generation ago, but something about the room that suggested no girl had spent time here amusing herself in months, maybe years. A path had been cleared from the basement door to the next door they were walking to, things kicked aside and left there.

It was, to Hannah, a sort of graveyard to a girlhood she'd never known, another sort of death, like the death of the marriage that she was, literally, walking between.

She found it sad. She found Dr. Johnson sad.

Why was Hannah here? Why had she agreed to visit him?  
Sympathy?

No, there was nothing to feel sorry for. He had immolated all his rights to compassion with his chosen profession.

No, Hannah was curious, and Dr. Johnson was her research subject.

"You really need to have Felicity straighten this up," Dorothy said.

Dr. Johnson grunted and said nothing.

“What do you drink, Hannah?” Dorothy asked.

“Zolfa and tonic.”

“She’s got good taste,” Dorothy said, looking over Hannah’s shoulder toward Dr. Johnson.

Dorothy’s first assault, a blatant attempt to embarrass her husband by shaming Hannah, had failed. So now she was trying a different tack: strategic friendliness. Hannah knew this the way she knew the feeling of chains around her ankles. Dorothy would play out her amiability until she believed she had Hannah hooked, and then she would go in for the kill.

The next door led into the kitchen, a large area with two ranges and two stoves and an industrial-sized, stainless steel refrigerator, a granite island the size of a bed, copper pots and pans hanging from a wrought-iron frame, a commercial grade coffee maker, a French provincial breakfast nook. This is where the daughters had chosen to wait to greet their father. The room with the toys was no longer theirs.

Hannah looked at the daughters, noticed Felicity studying her, standing behind the two girls. When she smiled at the subject, Felicity responded with unsmiling stoicism, her nipples soft, her pubic hair thick but trimmed into a perfect triangle.

“Hey, Dad,” said Heidi, the older girl, stepping up after a quick, wary glance at Hannah, and she hugged her father with both arms around his neck, one hand clutching a phone.

Imani set her phone down to wrap her arms around her dad’s waist, and she pressed her head against his chest and closed her eyes, and when she opened them, they bored into Hannah’s so deeply Hannah looked away.

“Deeter, introduce your new friend,” Dorothy demanded, stepping backward toward a liquor cabinet.

“This is one of my researchers,” he said. “Hannah Loughbridge. And Hannah, this is Heidi, and Imani, and Felicity.”

“Hello,” Hannah said, nodding to each of the three females. Heidi smiled back politely, as did Felicity, while Imani continued to stare, sucking up as much information as she could before she decided what to do.

“Hannah is very bright,” Dorothy said, addressing her daughters. “I’m sure your father brought her home to help him on a project.”

“No, Ma’am, that’s not it at all,” Hannah protested, and she sensed Dr. Johnson’s eyes dart toward her, as she knew they would.

“I heard that Dr. Johnson knew how to fly helicopters, and I told him he had to take me for a ride . . . and we ended up here.”

Dorothy turned toward the liquor cabinet, perhaps to hide her smile. She was not fooled, of course. Nor was Felicity, certainly. But there were two young girls here who didn’t need to hear certain things, even if an embittered wife wanted them to.

“Just tonic with my gin, please,” Hannah said to Dorothy’s back.

“On the rocks, I’m sure,” she said, shoulders swaying as she upended bottles.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Call me Dorothy, please,” she said, gliding from the cabinet to the fridge, pushing two tumblers under the ice dispenser, ice cubes ringing and splashing.

“Thank you, Dorothy,” Hannah said, accepting a tumbler, sipping carefully.

Mrs. Johnson had made it strong, of course, barely a hint of tonic water.

“But you are very bright, aren’t you, Hannah?” she asked.

“I work very hard at school,” Hannah said.

“And in her research,” Dr. Johnson added, finally finding his voice.

“You have her studying . . .” Mrs. Johnson began, pausing for full effect, “those girls?”

Aha. There was an issue here, Hannah sensed, something about Dr. Johnson’s work that offended his wife, or that she pretended to be offended by.

“Just one girl,” Hannah clarified. “She’ll be at my school.”

“I’d love to hear more about it,” Mrs. Johnson said, stepping from the kitchen and into a sunken living room, overstuffed couches in designer tan microfiber, black down-filled pillows. “Why don’t we all let our guest tell us about her work?”

The woman looked expectantly at everyone except Hannah, and all followed, her authority clear even if she had taken physical leave of the premises six months ago. She must live nearby, Hannah thought, and she must come by regularly to check on her daughters and the family’s girl, sometimes when Dr. Johnson overnighted in Palm Springs, sometimes when he was home. Clearly, he did not want her here. Just as clearly, he was either unwilling or unable to send her away.

Everyone settled onto the couches with varying degrees of discomfort.

Dr. Johnson, who had left Hannah's things upright in the kitchen, was doing his best not to appear to be occupying the height of misery, wedged into a corner where two sections of couch met, staring dolefully at his lap.

Heidi was the second most unhappy, perched on the edge of the couch with her hands laced around one knee.

Felicity had clinked to a counter beneath windows that looked out upon a blackened sea, retrieving a small rag from a drawer and spreading it out on the couch before settling her anus and vulva upon it, looking on blankly with what Hannah knew was both curiosity and the fear of the unknown. She was certainly aware Hannah wasn't here for the helicopter ride, knew surely that Dr. Johnson had invited her, that Dr. Johnson was therefore very interested in her, that he might buy her, and that he might no longer need the older and less attractive female.

Bentley seemed to be in Felicity's camp, curled up on the couch but with his head raised, watching the gathering with mixed emotions and a darting nose.

Mrs. Johnson and Imani seemed the least perturbed, both staring into Hannah's face, Mrs. Johnson with amused venom, Imani with the eager curiosity of someone who sensed that an adult scandal might play out before she went to bed.

Hannah took another cautious sip of her gin and tonic, stared at the way the lights played through the melting cubes and the liquid that suspended them, and counted herself least distressed of all. Tomorrow, she knew, one way or another, she would make her lunchtime flight back to Dallas, and she would return to her familiar world, and to a spring semester full of new challenges and new promises. Everything that happened tonight was to her a movie she was watching and sometimes acting in, a movie being watched by a few strangers who wouldn't care and would have no recourse if she flubbed her lines or acted badly.

"What kind of girl will you be working with?" Mrs. Johnson inquired as soon as everyone was settled.

"A female with three ovaries is all I know," Hannah said.

"Is that someone Dr. Johnson will get for you?"

“New Life will assign her,” Hannah said, glancing at Dr. Johnson. He nodded in return.

“And you’ll control her completely?”

“No, Ma’ – No, Dorothy, the university will have a say in it. So will New Life.”

“What if she needs punishment?”

Hannah fought the urge to squirm. Yes, Mrs. Johnson knew where to dig, had already read Hannah accurately enough to know where her discomforts lay. This might be a bit more difficult than acting in a movie after all.

But it was a valid question, albeit rude, and Hannah quickly settled on an answer.

“New Life will be sending me a research protocol,” Hannah said with another glance at the nodding Dr. Johnson. “I’m sure that will be covered.”

“So if it says you have to administer corporal punishment . . .” Mrs. Johnson persisted, “you’ll do that?”

“Under the prescribed conditions, yes,” Hannah replied, struggling to sound confident, nonchalant.

“We sometimes have to pop our girls,” Mrs. Johnson continued, pausing before she added, “still.”

Hannah sensed Dr. Johnson, tall and gangly, becoming small and soft in his little place on the couch. Heidi bent to look down at her phone. Imani continued to stare.

“And Felicity too, of course,” she added. “Felicity, when was the last time Dr. Johnson gave you a pop?”

“I think two weeks ago, Ma’am,” Felicity replied without emotion.

“Who spans harder, me or him?”

“He does, Ma’am,” Felicity replied, blinking at the woman, blinking at Hannah.

“Corporal punishment is the best way to improve behavior,” Hannah announced, telling what might be the worse lie of her life, an opinion she did not believe, even remotely. But it had the desired effect, short-circuiting another of Mrs. Johnson’s stratagems.

“Oh, really?” was all she could muster in response, her smile vague now, the smile of a woman who was drinking her own gin and tonic a little

too quickly, perhaps, and who wasn't, Hannah suspected, drinking for the first time tonight.

For her part, Hannah was sipping frequently, but taking a tiny quantity each time, just enough to wet her tongue.

"Yes," Hannah said, nodding. "It's been very good for me, and I've seen it work for others as well."

Dorothy Johnson smiled in the face of another defeat at Hannah's hands, but Hannah knew it was time for the woman's final assault.

"Heidi," she said, "could you get Hannah ready to turn in?"

"Um," the elder daughter replied uncertainly while Dr. Johnson stared at a small place on one hand, his other hand under his thigh. "How?"

"The same way you work with Felicity," Mrs. Johnson said. "Hannah, I'm sure you follow convention?"

"I do," Hannah agreed. "I'm kept in the kennels at the university, and I'm confined at home."

"Are you stayed?" Mrs. Johnson persisted, clearly hoping Hannah was used to unlimited freedom, clearly wishing to inflict a little discomfort, if not outright humiliation.

"Stayed, Ma'am?"

"Yes," she said. "Secured? Placed in re-"

"Oh. Usually not in the kennels," Hannah replied evenly. "But other times, yes. All the time, really."

"Heidi, there's another set of stays where we keep Felicity's things," Mrs. Johnson said. "I know you've seen them."

"Where's the key?" Heidi asked, her voice cracking, because she clearly didn't want to do this. Restraining Felicity was one thing, Hannah suspected. Restraining a stranger – one over whom there was clearly tension between her estranged mother and father – was an entirely different matter.

"The key is probably still in the keyhole," Mrs. Johnson said. "Or Felicity's key will probably work just as well."

This was all Mrs. Johnson had, then, in the end: reminding Hannah of her place, and making sure it was enforced.

By her teen daughter, no less.

Heidi, who arose from the couch and stalked glumly away, was the real victim here, Hannah thought.

“Are you kept nude at home, Hannah?” Mrs. Johnson inquired innocently.

“Yes, and in the kennels as well,” Hannah replied. “Would you like me to undress now?”

“Please.”

Hannah set her half-drunk cocktail on the coffee table before her and leaned over to unbuckle her stilettos, pushing them off one by one with the toes of her opposite foot, standing them neatly side by side next to the couch, glad to at last have them off. She stood and pulled off her halter top, exposing her white bra, and she folded it and set it on the back of the couch, unbuttoned and unzipped her skirt, stepped out of it and set it next to her top. She was unsnapping her bra when Heidi returned with a set of silver restraints in one hand, phone in the other.

The girl focused on Hannah’s feet, kneeling with an open cuff out.

“Let her get her panties off, Heidi,” Mrs. Johnson admonished.

Hannah slipped out of her black panties, set them and her bra next to the rest of her clothes and held still, feet close together, to be shackled.

Heidi had obviously done this many times, securing Hannah’s ankles quickly, neither too tight nor too loose.

“Now, just a few more things to take care of,” Mrs. Johnson said, draining her glass. “Deeter, I forgot my second 401k in my last asset declaration, so we’ve had to amend, and I need you to sign it before my lawyer files it, okay?”

“Yes,” Dr. Johnson said, exhaling with what Hannah sensed was a wave of hope.

“And then,” Mrs. Johnson continued with veiled malevolence, “the girl’s playroom.”

“Yes?” Dr. Johnson asked, renewed fear in his voice.

“It’s a mess, and it’s been like that for months,” she said. “Don’t you think Felicity should have taken care of it without being asked?”

“Well, I—” Dr. Johnson stammered before his wife cut him short.

“I do,” she said. “I think she should have known to do it. Felicity, what do you think? Don’t you think you should have straightened up the playroom?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Felicity agreed.

“Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t have an excuse,” Felicity confessed, with the same blankness that seemed to be her primary mode of dealing with the world.

“What do you think, Hannah?” Mrs. Johnson said, turning her full attention back toward Hannah, still standing before the couch, nude and shackled. “Doesn’t it sound like Felicity needs some improvement?”

Hannah turned to retrieve her panties while her mind whirled.

No, Mrs. Johnson wasn’t done yet, and most likely, she was going to win after all.

Hannah spread her panties out on the couch and sat down on them, checking to make sure her openings were positioned where they needed to be.

“Oh,” Hannah finally uttered, picking up her drink and sipping casually, “I don’t know enough about the rules of the house to say.”

“Three pops, at least,” Mrs. Johnson said. “It probably should be more, but since we have company . . .”

Felicity sat stone-faced.

“Felicity, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Hannah, what do you think?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said.

Sometimes, the only way around is through.

“Deeter, will you do it?”

“Yes,” he said with a resigned wave of his hand.

## Chapter 34: Sleep

Why do things happen?

Specifically, how can the least likely, most impossible thing in the whole world happen?

How could Stacey, free yesterday morning, on her way to a bridesmaid dress fitting as soon as her annual gyno visit was done, how could she have ended up here now?

Saturday morning, locked naked in a cell, only her neck measured, and only so she could be forced to wear a keyless collar.

Why do things happen?

She and Daryn had made tentative plans tonight. Neither wanted to seem too eager, too desperate for another warm body to fill the void, but



they needed each other, Stacey believed.

She needed Daryn.

Daryn needed her.

He'd probably already messaged her on Look!, just a little Saturday morning touch that she would have responded to with a minimum of effort, escalating back and forth until they'd arrived through texts or a brief chat on the phone at a mutually agreeable plan – most likely involving dinner, a bar, maybe a movie, and then a visit to his house, or her apartment.

He had a house. Modest, two bedroom, in an okay neighborhood if you didn't mind rednecks, and he used to share it with his ex. But she loved waking up there with him. His bed was bigger than hers. He had one of those new coffee makers, the kind that don't just brew coffee, they expel it. Or press it. Or something.

And she wanted to be licked again. Fucked too, of course. But she loved the way he licked her, with his whole tongue. Tip into her slot while the rough middle of the organ moved against her clitoris, each part of his tongue delivering something delicious, like they were two different parts of his body, or parts of two different people.

And now she was here.

Without Daryn.

He would send a message or two today, wait for a reply, get nothing, call her, get nothing, maybe even stop by her apartment and not find her and decide she must have moved on, dropped him, ghosted him.

He knew who her father was, though. Maybe Daryn would reach out to him, and he'd get at least a part of the story – that something had happened at Stacey's clinic, and she'd been locked up and he couldn't reach her.

She needed Daryn.

And she needed her father, for other reasons.

Today, she had neither.

And it was all her fault.

This is what people get, who slack their way through high school, who pretend to go to tech school and pretend to study something – accounting, library science, general humanities, etc. – so their dad will keep propping them up, paying for their apartment and their monthly groceries and their phone and clothing while they try to help out by going from one

dead end job to the next – catering, retail, surveying, of all things, until their sweat makes their makeup run and one of the guys laughs at them.

Surveying wasn't bad, though. It paid better per hour than any other job Stacey had held, and there was a logic to it that made sense to her. And she was outside.

Sleep, Stacey told herself. Her new mantra. Sleep. Because just breathing wasn't working.

She got in bed, closed her eyes, heard something at her door, sat up.  
Lunch.

She went to the little tray on the floor, knelt, tore off the cover, found a turkey sandwich, fruit, a little salad with a tiny pack of ranch dressing. A piece of cake.

Carrot cake.

Eat.

Then sleep.

After lunch, Stacey brushed her teeth.

PUMI, read the tag that swung from her collar with every stroke of her toothbrush.

A girl with three ovaries.

PUMI.

Female . . . girl . . . person . . . person . . . of . . .

Person of . . . unique . . . medical . . . interest.

Yes.

If her father sued, he would probably lose.

She didn't want him to sue anyone anymore. She just wanted to hide. To be forgotten in here.

Stacey Fairchild, whose only contribution to the world was having three ovaries, had reached that terrible place in her mind where it was all her fault.

## Chapter 35: A Call to Chicago

"Chicago Subject," said the telephone receptionist.

"Bonnie, please," said Leston Fairchild.

"May I ask who's calling?"

"Uh, Ambitter. Mr. Ambitter."

"Just a moment."

Hold music.

“This is Bonnie.”

“Bonnie, her tag ID is 08910M008. She should be arriving today from the Peoria clinic.”

Pause.

“Somnolix. Bath.”

“Okay.”

Click.

## Chapter 36: Dealing with the Disappointing Felicity

Hannah had told herself to sip her gin & tonic slowly, but the more upset she got, the larger each gulp was.

A sentence had been handed down.

Felicity, the Johnson’s family girl, had been assigned three pops. Dr. Johnson would deliver them. Mrs. Johnson, reeling under the influences of rage, jealousy, and alcohol, had made up the reason for it – a messy playroom.

The reason was unimportant. Perhaps tomorrow, a chastened Felicity would tidy up the room, or maybe she wouldn’t. All that mattered was that Hannah watch Dr. Johnson punish an innocent girl. The icing on the cake was that Hannah was forced to approve of the punishment, painted into a corner by the deceptively clever Mrs. Johnson.

As long as Hannah was a slave, she was vulnerable to this. And if she was going to get her own girl, her own research subject, her vulnerability was irredeemable.

Managing a research female required observation of all aspects of the protocol, including discipline. Hannah had to agree to that, and to feign complete agreement with any other girl’s discipline. Protest Felicity’s punishment and reveal herself for what she truly was: a simple girl, in over her head, too kind or too soft for this, not up for the project before her. Surely, it could still be taken away and given to someone else – more worthy and just as eager as Hannah to do the work – if Dr. Johnson deemed her unfit.

Brilliant.

Had Mrs. Johnson worked through all this beforehand?

Not possible.

She'd come up with all of it on the fly. She'd shown up tipsy to the house she used to share with her husband, found him trying to slip in with a blonde slave, she'd done the math, and she'd gone all in. Slash and burn. Take no prisoners. Burn down the village.

Do not underestimate the destructive powers of a creative, motivated woman.

And Hannah was losing her edge tonight. She probably couldn't win regardless, but certainly not now, with the room a little off-kilter, and Bentley the dog's nose strangely long when she saw him out of the corner of her eye, snapping back to ordinarily length when she looked directly at him.

Felicity was going to be punished, and Hannah would serve as an instrument of her pain, even if Dr. Johnson wielded the stick.

Stop drinking, stop drinking, Hannah urged herself, taking another sip.

No one was getting up. All were waiting for Mrs. Johnson's cue, and she leaned back and turned to Hannah, mock seriousness in her eyes.

"So Hannah," she began, "what do you plan to do with your degree?"

"Doctor," Hannah said. "Medical doctor, I hope."

"That's very ambitious," Mrs. Johnson said. "How—"

"Why do you say that, Ma'am?" Hannah demanded, unable to walk away from certain fights, no matter the conditions.

"Well, I—"

"Do you say that to everyone who wants to become a doctor?" Hannah persisted.

"I . . ." Mrs. Johnson stammered. "I'm not . . . well, it is very ambitious, for anyone."

"Yes, it is."

"How are your grades?"

"Very good," Hannah said. "All A's so far."

"Dr. Johnson got all A's," Mrs. Johnson recalled. "Of course, I was there to help him through medical school. I cooked and cleaned, I drove him to classes when we couldn't afford the parking garage, I—"

"All I had to do was study and go to class," Dr. Johnson agreed.

Mrs. Johnson nodded and slid to the front of the couch, preparing to stand. Perhaps this was all she wanted, in the end, to have her contribution

acknowledged tonight.

“Okay, let’s get Felicity taken care of, and her and Hannah put to bed,” Mrs. Johnson said. “Heidi, Imani, goodnight hugs.”

The daughters stepped to their mother and hugged, tightly, lovingly, a drama of ancient, universal familial bonds to overlay the other drama still playing out, of academic achievement and servile discipline against a backdrop of marital estrangement.

The girls hugged their father, who found the strength to lean forward and wrap his arms around each daughter in turn. And then they were gone, the dog with them, eight feet pattering up the stairs at the far end of the den, eight feet thumping on the floor above, two young voices raised in laughter, and a dog’s annoyed bark. Then doors closing, and silence.

Dr. Johnson stood, leading the way.

Hannah drained her drink and set it down, and she and Felicity clinked behind him, Mrs. Johnson coming last, attending as an observer only, pleased to let Dr. Johnson lead, to direct, as if all this were his idea, the arbitrary punishment of a slave girl a regular part of Dr. Johnson’s domestic routine.

They crossed the den, entering a doorway beneath the stairs, passing through a hall that presented a peculiar combination of domesticity and institutional confinement.

To the left, an alcove held a washer and dryer, shelves lined with detergents, a table with four laundry baskets on it, a stack of neatly folded girl’s jeans and t-shirts. On the right had been installed the bars of a large cage, far bigger than any place where Hannah had been confined. A bed – full size or possibly queen – occupied the far wall of the room, beneath a barred window. A dresser, topped with a mirror, ran along a second wall. On the opposite wall, a door opened up to what Hannah guessed was a bathroom, next to a closet door

Next, Hannah studied the room’s embellishments: three stuffed owls on the bed. The usual music posters, but these were eclectic, one for a long-past classical music concert, one for big band on a Pacific boardwalk, one for ShreekMonk, a notorious heavy metal band. And then, a vase with flowers, possibly fresh, set in the middle of the dresser.

It was the vase that struck Hannah as they passed, the flowers in it, a small taste of the outdoors for a girl who, most likely, didn’t get outdoors as often as she’d like. It held a sunflower. Nondescript wildflowers of

purple and light blue. A sprig of greenery and Queen Anne's lace. Did Felicity pick everything out, buy it herself? Or was it provided for her, a small fringe benefit of her captivity?

"Hannah, how does your family punish you?" Mrs. Johnson asked as they neared a door past Felicity's cage.

"It depends," Hannah replied. She knew the question was meant to embarrass, but she was glad to answer, to express in this way a sort of camaraderie with the girl who was about to be beaten.

Sisters in pain.

"For minor infractions," Hannah said, matter-of-factly, "I'll get shackled in my cage, and I'll just get bread for lunch. But once, they hired someone to . . . take care of something I did that was worse."

"Dr. Johnson feels all of this is best handled within the family," Mrs. Johnson said.

Dr. Johnson pushed open the door past Felicity's cage, flipped on the lights set into the ceiling, and all trooped in after him.

The purpose of this room was obvious, a conventional correction room – a "mean room," colloquially – small and undecorated, windowless, utilitarian, with a tiny standing cage in one corner, a small box beside it, a sturdy table with brackets in the middle, a board with ropes at the corners, fastened to one wall. Whips and rods and canes hanging from pegs along the opposite wall.

No posters.

No flowers.

Hannah breathed in, fighting nerves, as if it were her bottom about to receive correction.

Felicity showed no emotion at all, however, clearly trained for this, stepping to the table in the middle of the room, setting her elbows on it, sliding her hands through the brackets.

Dr. Johnson moved somberly toward her, using both hands to slide the bracket down, tightening it in place with a pair of latches, securing Felicity's wrists.

Hannah took a place beside the door, her back against the wall, as far from Felicity's face – and eyes – as possible.

Directly behind Felicity, she could see only the back of her head, the blades of her shoulders, the small of her back, her full rear and anus, and the discreet slit of her sex, barely visible between heavy thighs.

Dr. Johnson selected one of the narrower canes from its peg and, studying the floor as if instructions were written there, took his place beside Felicity's backside.

No one spoke.

Mrs. Johnson's face had gone blank, almost plastic, but her eyes shifted to Hannah's face briefly, and Hannah did her best to maintain a dignified composure.

Felicity turned to look up, expressionless, at Dr. Johnson, and she spread her feet, drawing the chain of her shackles tight, and she raised up on her toes and tilted her bottom, angling it up, presenting the fullness of her rear to him, and her sexual opening in the process, exposing her curved lips and the slit between them to the room's glaring fluorescent, her vulva bright pink with the strange, terrified arousal that, Hannah had noticed in herself, often accompanied physical punishment.

Felicity continued to stare at Dr. Johnson, and he looked back at her, and Hannah studied his profile and saw just enough sympathy in his face to confirm to her what she already knew, that both were acting out a part orchestrated by someone else, a woman nearly mad with jealousy and . . . and . . . what? isolation? ostracization? loneliness?

Dr. Johnson didn't want to do this, but in the peculiar dynamic that sometimes evolves in certain households, it had to be done.

He drew the cane back, using his whole arm to deliver the first blow.

"Thwack!" went the wood against Felicity's bottom.

Other than the flexing of her buttocks, Felicity remained completely still, a thin red line across her rear the only indication of what had just been done.

"Thwack!" went the cane, as Dr. Johnson brought it hard against Felicity's rear for a second time.

This time, she sighed and dropped her feet flat on the floor, briefly, before rising up again.

"Pop!" went the third blow.

"Uhhh," Felicity sighed, quietly, head dropping, back slumping, and she lowered her rear and her feet, raised her right foot and planted it back against the room's thin gray carpet, her shackles ringing faintly.

"Deeter," said the victorious Mrs. Johnson, stepping past Hannah as if she no longer existed, exiting the discipline room and motioning him to

follow her.

He put the cane back on its peg and trailed his wife through the door, his face dejected, his spirit broken, leaving Hannah standing there, nude and shackled, and Felicity in even more dire straits, her hands bound by the brackets and her bottom reddening around the three lines of her punishment.

Hannah peered out the door, listened to the couple, Mrs. Johnson saying something from the den Hannah couldn't hear and didn't care to hear anyway.

"Should I let you go?" Hannah asked quietly, to be polite.

"Nooo," Felicity replied, stretching out the o in the word, as if making a small joke.

"I'm sorry," Hannah said.

"About what?" Felicity asked, raising her head to stare straight ahead at the wall before her.

"That you got punished."

"Do you think it's your fault?"

"Well . . . yes."

"Push my glasses up," Felicity said.

The request brought Hannah surprising relief. If Felicity was angry at her, she wouldn't ask for this small favor.

"They always make me stay here for a while," Felicity said, raising her head and smiling at Hannah's delicate attempt to slide her glasses up her nose.

"How long?"

"The most was half an hour, I guess."

"What if I let you go?"

"I don't know," Felicity said. "No one's done that for me before. I'd probably get in trouble."

"Do you think I would too?"

"Do you want to?" Felicity asked. "Dietrich knows how to swing that thing."

"Dietrich?"

"That's his name."

"I know. But you call him that? To his face?"

"Yes. He's Dietrich, I'm Felicity."



Hannah stepped away, put her back against the wall again, but at Felicity's side now, not directly behind her.

"How long have you been here?"

"Five years. They bought me on my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday, after Dietrich got promoted, because he was so busy. They didn't know until they brought me home and Dot was looking at my papers. She was saying . . . 'Felicity, it's your birthday! It's your birthday!' . . . And she hugged me and they were all really sweet about it. We went to dinner . . . and . . . they lit a candle for me, and . . ."

Felicity's voice went from shaky to a whisper to nothing, and Hannah looked at her, saw her clench her fists and close her eyes, saw the tear dripping from the bottom of the lens of her glasses, and she understood her pain – a storm of sorrows, really: To be a subject, to be bought, to traverse an intimate ritual with people to whom you are property . . . and then to witness the dissolution of a marriage, the anger, the emptiness, the furious gestures.

Hannah spotted a box of tissues on the shelf by the door, grabbed three, peered into the hall before she returned to Felicity's side to remove her glasses and wipe her eyes.

"What happened?" she whispered, leaning over the bound girl.

"He fucked me, of course," Felicity said. "Not at first, but after a few years. Dot said okay, so he did, now and then. I don't know if there were rules about it."

Felicity lowered her voice. "And then . . . she did it with this guy, this neighbor, and—"

"Free or slave?" Hannah asked, slipping Felicity's glasses back on.

"Free, but I don't think it mattered. Dietrich found out, and, oh my god, he told her to pack her things. Same day. Just put her on the curb, that day."

"Where is she staying?"

"She's got a nice apartment in town."

"But she comes back whenever she wants," Hannah said.

"Not always," Felicity replied. "He'll sort of tell her to leave sometimes. But tonight . . . god, what a cluster."

"What do you mean?"

"I've never seen her like this," Felicity said. "You really brought out the monster in her."

“Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. You’re doing what you have to do. Just—”

“What do you think I’m doing?” Hannah interrupted.

“Getting bought.”

“No,” Hannah said emphatically. “No. I’m. Not.”

Felicity laughed, a little thickly.

“Then what are you doing here?”

“He invited me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Hannah lied.

“He’s never brought a girl home,” Felicity said, lowering her head to stare at her bound hands.

“He said he liked my application,” Hannah said. “It seems like academic interest, maybe.”

“He likes smart girls,” Felicity said. “He’s always trying to get me to read something, or learn about something.”

“Has he suggested school?”

“Yes,” Felicity said, adding with a hint of defensiveness, “but I’m too busy right now, with the girls, and the household, and my own baby, and now, all the fighting.”

“Fighting?” Hannah echoed.

“Yeah. I don’t mean, like, fistfights or even that much yelling. It’s through the lawyers, mainly. But there are disagreements, over the girls, over the money, over me.”

“Over you?”

“Yeah, I’ll be part of the settlement,” Felicity said, and now her voice betrayed a hint of pride. “I had to turn in this official document about everything I do around the house, and what I did for Dietrich and Dot and the girls. Not the sex, though, that wasn’t part of it. And then there was this whole thing about my stays, and—”

“You always call them stays?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah, stays,” Felicity said. “Chains, really, but I don’t call them that in front of the family. No one can say that. They’re just stays. I kept calling them chains at first, and I’d get a little pop every time I did it. Heidi got one too, for doing that. So I always say stays now. And it’s turned into a huge deal.”

“What do you mean?”

“Once it seemed like divorce was for sure, Dietrich had me taken to this place, where they measure you and fit you. Like, total first class.”

“Wait,” Hannah said. “For what?”

“Stays.”

“You mean, chains?”

“Okay, chains,” Felicity agreed. “Wrist measurements, ankle measurements, but not just that. Where the bones stick out, where the tendons are, and they adjust it all and form it to your body. And they have you walk and decide how long the chain should be between your ankles, so you can walk as fast as you need to, just not run. And they make them and then they put them on you, and watch you do certain things, like walk and sit and work in this fake kitchen, and ask you how everything feels, and they make adjustments, and then you’re done and they send you home with a new set, and they were very comfortable, the best I’d ever worn by far, and when Dot came over to pick me up, Dietrich showed them to her, and had me try them on for her, but he wouldn’t give her the keys to them. He told her to buy her own set, and she said no way, because it cost close to two thou to get the duplicates, and so she got really pissed and accused him of trying to restrict her use of me, since he could chain me up and keep the keys, like if he got stuck in Palm Springs and there was an emergency here and I’d been stayed with the new chains, it would be a problem, since she needs me unchained during the day. Back and forth like that for close to an hour, while I’m just standing there, in my full travel stays – I mean, wrists and ankles cuffed, chain between my legs – and he finally gives in, promises never to put them on me, so they’re just in a box in the playroom.”

“So they put us in the old ones tonight,” Hannah said.

“Yeah, because both of them have the keys to those,” Felicity said. “I’ve argued with them over it. I really want to wear the new ones, here and at Dot’s apartment, but he won’t give up the keys, and she won’t get a set, even though she’s got the money. It’s a big power struggle thing. Kind of symbolic, probably.”

Felicity opened her mouth to say something else but shut it as Mrs. Johnson’s voice rang out from the end of the hall.

She entered alone, no tormented Dr. Johnson following her, and she went straight to Felicity’s bottom, pressing her finger against it.

“You’ll do a better job with the playroom from now on?” Mrs. Johnson asked.

“Yes, Ma’am, I will,” Felicity replied.

Mrs. Johnson stepped beside Felicity, ignoring Hannah, all her focus on the family’s girl as she freed her hands.

Felicity straightened, rubbed her wrists, put one hand on her bottom.

“I’ve gotta go now,” Mrs. Johnson said, and she spread her arms, and Felicity hugged the woman who’d just had her beaten, and as far as Hannah could tell, it was a sincere hug on the part of both females.

“And Hannah,” Mrs. Johnson said, turning and spreading her arms wide, and Hannah accepted and returned the hug and decided that some things about other humans were simply too complicated, too fraught, to be understood or even worth pondering.

“You’ll be staying with Felicity tonight,” Mrs. Johnson announced, stepping into the hall, the two girls following her.

Dr. Johnson was waiting for them, holding wide the iron door of Felicity’s cage.

Felicity filed in, Hannah after her, and Dr. Johnson shut the door with a clang and turned the lock.

“Rules?” Felicity asked, turning and stepping to the bars so Dr. Johnson could remove her shackles.

“You may have relations,” Dr. Johnson replied sadly.

Hannah took her place beside Felicity, looking down to watch as Dr. Johnson freed her ankles, slipping the restraints into his pocket before he slunk down the hall toward the den, studying his shoes.

“Hannah, I hope your research goes well,” Mrs. Johnson said with a little wave. “Felicity, I’ll see you and the girls next Friday.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Hannah said.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Felicity replied.

The couple left the hall, another click confirming to Hannah that the door into the den was also locked at night.

“Show’s over,” Felicity deadpanned.

“Mind if I go first on the toilet?” Hannah asked, sidling to the door.

“Be my guest.”

Hannah entered Felicity’s bathroom, flipped on the light, found it small but carefully appointed, wallpaper in a pink and green floral pattern, little sconces on the wall for electric candles, framed pictures of Felicity

and the two girls at various ages, on the beach, beside a redwood, in the desert.

Hannah sat and released, looking up when Felicity appeared at the door and leaned against the jamb.

“Are you tired?” Felicity asked.

## Chapter 37: A Dinner of Pork Chops

Stacy Fairchild, age 23, the girl with too many ovaries; the girl with the overprotective father and the nonexistent mother, she having died after a valiant fight with cancer when Stacey was 12, leaving her daughter – her only child – so devastated, so riven with the memories of what had been and what would not be, that she learned nothing for two years except the searing essence of loss.

Stacey Fairchild, a good friend who could be counted on to show up for other people’s weddings, to perform as a bridesmaid, to get fitted for the gown of that occupation when she was scheduled to do so, even if the dress the bride had chosen was awful, frilly, a one-shouldered purple thing with an odd sort of ribbing across the belly that one of the other girls had called gills.

Stacey Fairchild, a not-so-distant relative of wealth and power, woke from a nap she was certain had lasted no more than 30 minutes, and considered her existence.

She was being held against her will. Or was she? If no one cared about her will, if they ignored her protestations, bound her and pretended they couldn’t hear her when she asked questions, was this really being done *against* her will? Or in complete disregard for her will? Her will was unimportant. All that mattered was that she be held, for whatever it was people wanted with her having to do with her ovaries. Her will wasn’t even relevant.

Dinner came far earlier than she’d expected. Time was doing strange things here.

A porkchop.

Roll.

Butter.

Her father, looking for her, calling her dead phone, even now.

Broccoli.

Dirty rice.  
A third ovary.  
A brownie.  
Daryn calling for her too, longing for her body, her breath, her touch.  
Milk, in a little carton.  
Daryn, longing for the place in her body that led to her uterus, and beyond that, her ovaries, which were overpopulous, and beyond that, the normal girl to whom it all belonged.  
Stacey Fairchild ignored the little plastic knife and fork they'd provided and picked up the pork chop with her hands, which is how she always ate porkchops.  
By the bone.  
She would sit tonight, if she could, as she had before, and Daryn would kneel between her legs, as he had before, and he would work at her with his tongue, the way he did, until she was shaking.  
Stacey sat before her dinner on the floor, cross-legged, working through the meal and imagining with a longing beyond words what she might be doing tonight if she weren't here.  
They'd put two dildos in the cabinet over her sink.  
She was certain of that, strange as it was.  
Large and small.

## Chapter 38: First Felicity, then the Ocean

"Huh?" Hannah asked, staring at Felicity.  
"Are you tired?"  
"Oh, not really," Hannah said, lying again. She was exhausted, but it was more a nervous exhaustion than the weariness that precedes sleep. It was the fatigue anyone would feel after being used in a demonstration in the morning, being handed a major academic prize in the afternoon, flying in a helicopter in late evening, and witnessing a domestic rampage just before bed.  
"Do you think he's coming for you?" Felicity asked.  
"What do you think?"  
"He likes it at night," Felicity said. "I mean, later on. I think he lies down, starts forgetting the day and all the shit in his life, and then he's

ready.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, wiping and flushing. She would cooperate, if he appeared. But each had seen the other at their worst today, Hannah bound to a platform for penetration, Dr. Johnson browbeaten by his wife before she forced him to beat their girl, with Hannah as witness. How could any affection be conjured from such dreck?

Hannah and Felicity traded places, Hannah leaning against the jamb, Felicity on the toilet.

“Do you love them?” Hannah asked.

Felicity, eyes cast down as she drained her bladder, looked up at Hannah as if startled.

“With all my heart and soul,” she said, eyes wide and fierce, as if daring Hannah to doubt her.

Hannah paused, stared back, opened her mouth for the question that must always be asked at a certain point in a meeting between two slaves.

“How did you—”

“I had a preemie,” Felicity blurted.

“Preemie?” Hannah echoed.

“Jason. My love. He was going to die, but I promised the hospital anything and everything, and they kept him alive, and I brought him home, and six months later, they came to collect.”

Hannah brought her hands to her mouth. “I’m so, so sorry,” she said.

“About what?”

“About . . . what happened.”

“You apologize a lot for things that aren’t your fault,” Felicity observed.

“No,” Hannah protested. “It’s just really sad. It’s just—”

“No it’s not,” Felicity said. “My baby lived. It’s paid for. He’s with his dad. And he’s here every other weekend.”

“Here?” Hannah said.

“Here. In the house. With me.”

“In here?” Hannah said, looking back into the room.

Felicity wiped herself, flushed and stood.

“No, he’s got a room upstairs,” she said. “Oh my god, the girls love him. They think he’s their baby.”

Hannah pushed away from the door jamb, stepped into the bedroom, turned back toward Felicity, standing still and letting her hostess decide what would happen next.

Felicity moved slowly toward Hannah, stopping only after their nipples touched and she put her arms around the small of Hannah's back and leaned forward, offering her lips. Hannah took them hungrily, the stresses of the evening melting away before the familiar, comfortable heat of another girl's mouth.

Felicity pulled away and looked into Hannah's eyes.

"He's never seen me locked in here," she said. "He's never seen me in my stays. Dot and Deeter are really good about that."

"Okay," Hannah said, leaning in for another kiss, raising her arms around Felicity's shoulders.

This time, it wasn't just lips on lips. Felicity opened her mouth, and Hannah opened hers, and tongues explored tongues and teeth and lips, and Felicity shifted to the side and angled her pelvis up so her pubic hair brushed the top of Hannah's thigh, and the girls stood like that, in a tightening embrace, hips rocking gently.

"What about you?" Felicity whispered into Hannah's ear.

"Mom was broke, they came to collect, they found me."

"God. How long ago?"

"When I was 18. Two and a half years ago."

Felicity pulled away and flipped a switch on the wall beside the bars, plunging the spacious cage into near blackness, a blue nightlight in the hall barely cutting through the gloom. It was a privilege Hannah had always been denied in her cage at the Petrosyan's. The family controlled the lights in the basement. Felicity also had a laptop, and books on her dresser. Romance novels, mostly, but one book about birds.

Felicity went to her bed, pulled down the covers, her black shape barely visible.

"I haven't washed the sheets in a week," she said.

"I don't care," Hannah said.

"But I always sleep on this side, so your side is clean."

"Thanks," Hannah said, and she stepped slowly to the other side of the bed, feeling her way with her toes and fingers, and she pulled down her share of the sheets and, without further ceremony, the girls climbed up on the bed from their respective sides and walked on their knees to each other,



meeting in the middle with a collision of breasts and bellies and mounds and thighs. And mouths. And two collars, which rang together. And laughter before they joined together so tightly no sound could escape either throat.

“What if he shows up?” Hannah asked, pulling away to catch her breath.

“You’re worried about that?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Hannah whispered. “I’m just not sure what he’d do.”

“Watch,” Felicity said, lowering her head to her pillow and pulling Hannah down with her.

“Does he watch when you’re with girls?”

“I’m hardly ever with a girl,” Felicity said. “He watches sometimes when I’m with a boy, though, even though I give him crap about it.”

Hannah lay beside Felicity, touching her hair, surprised to find her glasses still on her face.

“Do you wear those to sleep in?”

“No.”

“When was your last boy?”

“A couple of weeks. The neighbors loan one of their males to us twice a month or so. God, he’s—”

“And Dr. Johnson watched?”

“No, not with him. Just with new boys. He told me he just wants to make sure things are okay for me. Because of how boys are.”

“And you believe him?”

“I do, but I pretend not to, just on principle,” Felicity said. “When was your last boy?”

“This morning.”

“Damn.”

“For a demonstration,” Hannah said. “At the lab.”

Felicity breathed in and touched Hannah’s shoulder, her elbow, and finally, her breast, her nipple.

“There’s a whole world over there I know nothing about,” Felicity said. “Dietrich doesn’t talk about it, and I don’t ask.”

“I’ll shut up, then,” Hannah said, scooting toward Felicity, feeling for her hair, her ear, her glasses, and finally her mouth.

Felicity opened her mouth and licked Hannah's fingers, sucked two of them when Hannah didn't pull them away, closing her teeth around them, biting gently, licking them, as if they were two penises sprouting from a two-penised boy.

Hannah allowed her mind to wander.

A two-penised boy would be a remarkable anomaly, someone who must be studied, just as surely as a three-ovary girl.

The two should be mated, to see what they would produce.

A . . . what was the word? . . . a . . . a . . . hermaphrodite. With two penises and three ovaries, its parent's biological oddities so genetically dominant both must be expressed, even if the result was of remarkable, unworkable strangeness.

There is no such thing as a two-penised boy, Hannah was convinced. But there were three-ovary girls, and Hannah would be getting one, and she would . . . she would need to be . . . mated.

Not for reproduction, of course. No student researcher would be breeding their subjects. But the girl would need to be given the normal things – food, shelter, medicine, comfort.

Intimacy.

What if three ovaries meant 50 percent more sexuality? Ovaries produce progesterone and three kinds of estrogen, Hannah thought to herself, estradiol, estrone, and estriol. Estrogen increases sex drive. What if the girl they brought her needed a male every day or she'd become edgy, irritable, intractable? What if she, like Hannah, like Felicity, like most female subjects, could work with either gender? Could Hannah serve that purpose? What would the manual have to say about that?

Did Felicity have three ovaries?

Hannah forced her mind to turn, pulled her fingers from Felicity's mouth and wrapped her hand around the girl's shoulder, moving toward her on her elbow and hip until their lips were together again, kissing, touching.

Hannah felt Felicity's hand, on her side, sliding down to her belly, down to her hip, brushing through her pubic hair, and Hannah raised her leg and allowed Felicity full rights to her front opening, and the girl exercised those rights with delicate affection, stroking her lips, pressing against her clitoris, spreading wide her vulva and putting one tentative finger against Hannah's increasingly wet opening.

For a time, the girls kissed like that, fondled like that, Hannah's hand roving Felicity's soft breast, pinching her nipple, firming it up before she pulled her mouth away from Felicity's to suck her breast, her mind wandering briefly again, this time to the child named Jason who, presumably, used to suckle at this place, receiving all his sustenance from this round, red-tipped cafeteria, from this body which, because Jason was alive, was no longer his, was no longer even his mother's, was just being borrowed by both of them until the financial reckoning came, five years ago, that saw mother collared and tagged, bound and transported.

Purchased by the Johnsons, chained judiciously, caged when necessary, spanked when prescribed.

Felicity liked having her nipple sucked, and Hannah sensed her hips moving, rocking against the void, because the sensitive places between her legs had received no attention yet.

Hannah rose up, on her elbow, and Felicity understood, rolling to her back, sliding her pillow under her head, removing her glasses and setting them on the stand beside the bed with a soft, plastic thud, lifting her knees, spreading her legs.

Hannah turned and mounted, moving slowly back and forth, spreading her thighs to lower her vulva, waiting for the feel of Felicity's mouth and tongue against her opening, holding still once she sensed she'd found the optimal position for the girl beneath her, the best angles of legs and hips for the delivery of pleasure to her swollen opening.

Once Felicity's mouth was comfortably engaged, Hannah descended, delivering her own oral charms to her new acquaintance's slit, forcing open the lips with her tongue and tasting Felicity's unique essence, an unusual mix of saltiness, of an undefinable spice, interwoven with the common flavors of girl, an animal muskiness and a compelling sort of sweetness that was its own country, its own continent, a place like no other in the world, delicious and tragic and necessary, the chemistry of all that was most important about the world, for it was here that life began.

While she was tended, Felicity licked aggressively, working her tongue deeply into Hannah's chamber, not just to provide stimulation but also to drink, to pull down the cocktails of Hannah's female spirit. Hannah could feel Felicity's tongue, when it was deepest, curl at the tip before it was withdrawn, forming a tiny cup, a little bucket at the bottom of the well, drawn back, bringing with each pull a single drop of nectar, a tiny splash of

Hannah's distilled character, the bucket flattened upon each return to Felicity's mouth, the honey washing out, spreading, infusing, coating, redefining Felicity's oral potions, her teeth and tongue and the flesh of her mouth, before it was swallowed, where it would redefine Felicity herself.

The girls kept at it like that, saliva and lubricant flowing and mixing, tongues darting into and out of holes, moving to clitorises, pressing and circling and stroking, pelvises rocking with approval, each girl judging with the other's graduated spasms what was good, what was better, what was good again, what was best, yes, what was best and what was very best, very best, very best . . . YES! . . . oh god, ohjesusbeforemewithyourholyywineblessmeblessmeblessme.

Felicity's orgasms came with squeaks, the only sound she could make with her mouth still wrapped around the gates of Hannah's sheath. Hannah's orgasm roared up a second or two after the beginning of Felicity's, and now both girls were writhing and humping, mouths joined to sex organs still, but the rest of their bodies observing no order, Hannah arching her back, lifting and dropping, breasts bouncing against Felicity's belly, Felicity's thighs quivering on either side of Hannah's head, thudding against Hannah's shoulders, the two climaxing females become a single, undulating beast of pleasure, Hannah grunting wordlessly, thinking blasphemies she could not voice with Felicity's thick vulva and coarse hair between her lips, Felicity squeaking apace until the sounds slowly diminished.

Hannah waited until all had passed, until Felicity was no longer writhing beneath her, her legs no longer bucking, and then she untangled herself, rose up and turned and settled back down beside her new lover, and they kissed each other and kissed themselves, kissed the juices each mouth had found between the other's legs, and each breathed out her nose, against the other's cheek, in a soft sigh of approval.

Only as the kiss matured did Hannah glance over Felicity's shoulder to see Dr. Johnson, there in the half light, tall and gangly, wearing only shorts, watching the girls from the other side of the bars.

"Hello, Dr. Johnson," Hannah said, rising up on her elbow, speaking to him with the same casual respectfulness she'd used earlier in the day, at New Life, in his helicopter.

"Hello, Hannah," he replied, also using his customary tone.

“Dietrich, what the hell?” Felicity demanded, turning and sitting up to face her owner.

The dark outline of Dr. Johnson slumped, another woman to challenge him, to criticize him, to express her harsh disapproval.

“I just got here,” he said. “And I can’t see anything in there anyway. Were you making love?”

“Uh, yeah,” Felicity said contemptuously.

“I wanted Hannah’s things in here, so Bentley couldn’t get into them,” he said, gesturing toward a black shape that Hannah guessed were her two bags.

“Thanks,” Hannah said, pausing only slightly before she spoke again. “Are you going to show me the ocean?”

“You want to see it?” Dr. Johnson asked, sounding surprised.

“No, I want to feel it,” Hannah said. “I want to put my feet in the water.”

“It’s cold,” he said.

“I don’t care. It’s just my feet.”

Hannah rolled off the bed and made her way through the darkness to the door of the cage.

“Felicity, are you coming?” Hannah asked.

“No, I’ve already been,” Felicity said with a yawn. “Have fun.”

Dr. Johnson unlocked the door, confirming that he’d brought the key, that he was hoping for this, hoping for Hannah’s visit to his home to be salvaged, at least a little.

“Thanks, Felicity,” Hannah said.

“Sure, sweetie,” Felicity replied sleepily.

“How’s your butt?”

“Hurts a little. It’s always worst the next day.”

Hannah followed Dr. Johnson through the darkened hall into the darkened den, and through another door that led to the balcony where, earlier in the evening, Dr. Johnson’s family had greeted his helicopter.

He flipped on the balcony’s lights, bright enough to make Hannah blink. The air was bracingly cold; this would be a short visit, but Hannah considered it essential, and she followed Dr. Johnson down a flight of steps, neither speaking, past a small wasteland of the outdoor toys of girls who no longer played with outdoor toys – buckets and shovels, a small mermaid pool, several more mechanized children’s vehicles.

Hannah looked across the yard, saw blackness and heard waves, one after the other, like a great, hungry creature waited there, sighing and biting off bits of land and swallowing, over and over again, never sated.

"I'm sorry about tonight, Ms. Loughbridge," Dr. Johnson said in the darkness by the restless sea.

"Why?" Hannah asked, but she didn't listen for the answer, because now she could see the pale edge of the ocean where it broke upon the land, the moonlight bundled up in the foam, the waves rising up and curling down again, and the broad sweep of black water beyond where lights indicated the presence of ships, plying the night.

Hannah grabbed her bouncing breasts and ran to the surf, screaming when the water wrapped its icy grip around her toes. But she did not retreat, only hopped, hands cupping her breasts, feet splashing up water and sand.

"It's freezing!" she announced, making out the silhouette of Dr. Johnson, his feet just short of the edge of the sea.

"It's around 60," Dr. Johnson said.

"It feels colder."

"Are you going to swim?"

"Should I?"

"No, you might die."

"Are you going to get your feet wet?" she asked, shouting over the roar of a wave that broke just a few feet behind her.

Dr. Johnson stepped forward, allowing the water to wash over his feet, crossing his arms and staring out at the sea.

Hannah turned back, moved to him and reached up, unfolding his arms, taking his right hand in hers.

"Don't be sorry," she said, and she reached around him with her other arm and pulled him toward her, closed her eyes and raised her mouth, and he bent and kissed her and a wave pushed the water up to their calves, but Hannah chose to ignore it and Dr. Johnson, it seemed, couldn't feel it, because he didn't stir at all, just breathed through his nose while he and Hannah kissed with open mouths in the inky darkness on the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

"I don't think I should sleep in Felicity's bed tonight," Hannah said, dropping her mouth to Dr. Johnson's chest.

"Why not?"

“She needs her sleep. I don’t want to waken her.”

“I didn’t want to beat—”

Hannah, who’d been expecting these words, reached up and put her finger across Dr. Johnson’s lips.

“It happened,” she said. “It’s over. I want to see your bedroom.”

Dr. Johnson, who might not have been seduced even once in his life, responded predictably, with a tensing of muscles and, moments later, with a single, subtle thrust of his hips against Hannah’s belly, and she could feel his penis there in a way she couldn’t before, and pulled him closer and allowed him to kiss her again while his sex grew and pressed at her belly.

## **Chapter 39: ‘She’s Not Here’**

“Hello?” asked Leston Fairchild into his phone.

“She’s not here.”

“Where did you put her?” he asked, and his voice inflected the word “her” just slightly, because it was a pronoun that referred to a girl he’d just had murdered.

He had crossed a very bright line today, surely as bright as the line one crossed when losing one’s virginity. Or brighter, probably. Or darker.

And now, she must be handled, her lifeless form transported back to her owners, who would receive a full settlement, of course, her sales price plus cost of sale minus depreciation which, after a month, would be negligible.

“No,” said the woman Leston knew as Bonnie. “She never showed up. The clinic has no record of her. They didn’t send her.”

“Thanks,” he said and hung up. This was strange. It would require further study.

Leston Fairchild was not yet a murderer.

## **Chapter 40: Bedroom, Kitchen, Cage**

They returned to the house wordlessly, Hannah first, Dr. Johnson behind her, and they climbed back up to the balcony and rinsed their feet with a hose by the door, and now Dr. Johnson led, turning off the outdoor lights, turning off the indoor lights, so their journey up the stairs was lit only by a few nightlights, one a bug’s smiling cartoon face that, Hannah knew, represented an age that had ended.

Somewhere, behind two of these doors, Hannah guessed, two girls were sleeping.

Sleeping lightly, perhaps.

She and Dr. Johnson maintained their silence all the way to the door at the end of the hall, and he opened it for her and let her enter first, and she took in his bedroom, lit a little more brightly than the hall, with ornate lamps on ornate nightstands on either side of the ornate bed – all things a woman would have picked out, all things a woman had been removed from, for committing the physically identical act Dr. Johnson had performed sans guilt with Felicity.

Dr. Johnson closed the door quietly, and Hannah turned to regard him, his gaunt, angular body, his dark, somber face, and the penis struggling within his shorts to be released and do heroic things. Right now, it lay extended to the left, heavy and thick and barely hidden, looking more like an extra part of his hip than a breeding organ.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked, eyeing her with a mix of lust and suspicion.

“Because I want to,” Hannah replied, knowing her answer was incomplete. Why was she doing it? She could think of a dozen reasons to do it, fewer reasons not to.

Dr. Johnson seemed satisfied with her answer nonetheless, and he stepped forward, looked down at his middle as if noticing the commotion there for the first time, and he pushed his shorts down in front, allowing his genitals to spill out, his penis riding the band of his shorts, swaying and bobbing, jabbing Hannah’s belly until she eased it upward, sandwiching it between herself and him, hugged him and kissed his chest.

“Which position first?” she asked, looking up at him. It was time to get down to business, and that’s what this was, ultimately, in her mind. It was not making love. It was not something mystical and spiritual. And it certainly wasn’t an audition.

The question provoked a sort of spasm of excitement Hannah could feel through Dr. Johnson’s chest, and his thighs, and his penis, and she suspected he never believed this would happen, that it had all been unlikely at best, when he was propositioning her at the reception, and tonight, when it was made completely inoperable by his wife’s performance.

“Behind,” he croaked in a sort of half-whisper, into her ear.



Hannah pulled away, went to the bed, glanced at the room, which was exceptionally neat, nothing out of place, all drawers closed, all framed pictures of the girls and Felicity hung straight and true, a single scholarly journal on one nightstand, something he read before sleep, apparently.

Hannah pulled down the covers of his bed and, without even the hint of ceremony, clambered up, dropped to her hands and knees, spread her thighs and arched her back, raising her vulva for Dr. Johnson's inspection and use.

His first grunt of pleasure came before he was even on the bed, as if he could already feel what he was about to start doing.

Hannah, staring straight ahead, heard the rustle of sheets, felt the bed yield to Dr. Johnson's weight, and then he was behind her, one hand on her rump, the other touching her vulva, well aware both personally and professionally of the need for adequate lubrication.

He spread her lips and put one finger against her opening, tapped her clitoris and returned to her hole, and Hannah felt her heat grow and knew it was time, and knew Dr. Johnson knew it was time.

He didn't plunge, however, didn't force his rod into her chamber in a mad exercise of victory and relief. Now that her body was his, he was willing to proceed patiently, rising on his knees and touching the tip of his penis to the mouth of her chamber, sliding in just the head before withdrawing it, slipping it in again, testing the door of her tunnel and pulling back yet again.

Hannah held still, waiting, letting him take his time.

He brought his tip to bear once more, this time inching it a little further into her body, reaching a pool of fresh, thick honey and pulling out, distributing her juice across her slot and over her lips.

Then back in again, a full third of his member but no more before he withdrew, both hands on Hannah's rump, and his penis hanging in the air, like exotic fruit or an obscene sculpture, just beyond the door to her womanhood.

Hannah, ready for full penetration, forced herself to wait, to allow Dr. Johnson to play this out as he saw fit.

What was he doing? Performing the tease that he'd learned by informal trial and error was the best way to wring pleasure from the act? Or was this something he'd learned, studied, written papers about?

Hannah's mind quickly conjured an academic title: "Stimulation Enhancements of Delayed Coital Penetration."

She hoped he wasn't simply applying a concept. This wasn't the place for science.

He spread her lips with the fingers of one hand and pushed in again, this time putting at least half his penis into her, and Hannah grunted, still a little tender from Duncan's ravishing, and flicked her pelvis and tightened around him, gasping in frustration when he pulled out again, leaving her organ empty, wet, and beginning to throb.

How long was this going to take? Hannah wondered, beginning to pant. At what point does a girl take charge? At what point does she reach between her legs to commandeer the penis dangling behind her, grasp it, angle it up, push back on her haunches and impale herself on it?

She was about to do just that when Dr. Johnson moved, with another parting of the lips and another thrust forward, at last delivering the full measure of his organ to her, burying it to the hilt, provoking a soft cry of surprise and pain from Hannah's throat: "Augh!"

"Okay?" Dr. Johnson whispered, leaning forward to grasp Hannah's right breast and, despite his apparent concern, remaining firmly lodged within her body.

"Yes," Hannah panted. "Yes." She held still while her genitals adjusted to being filled for the second time that day, stimulated for the third time.

"I think," she said with a sigh, "Duncan did a little damage today. Maybe because of the . . . the angle . . . or just the way . . . oh god oh god oh god."

Hannah's voice trailed off, because now Dr. Johnson was hard at work, at last thrumming within her the way she was used to having it done, penis sliding in and almost all the way out before it was returned to her full, wet embrace, the sounds of slicking flesh between her legs, rustling sheets beneath her knees, and the mild pain of having her breast held firmly, like a handle, as if Dr. Johnson were afraid he would fall off if he didn't keep his grip.

Dr. Johnson, thrusting in over and over, allowed his pleasure to follow a long arc – up, up some more, over a bit, across, across, then down, down, down – grunting out and huffing, moaning and shaking, and Hannah could feel his penis thicken and contract and knew that New Life's

illustrious chief of research was now squirting his warm cream into her temple, one white jet after another, as clean and pure as he was corrupt, and it felt good.

It felt good.

But he wasn't finished yet. Hannah felt him ease out of her sheath slightly, by just an inch or two, and he released her breast and put his hand between her legs, working his fingers in between their bodies, just beneath his penis, just before his balls, to the place where her swollen, neglected clitoris hung.

What he'd done to Hannah's breast hurt. What he was doing now to her clitoris was something else entirely, neither pain nor pleasure, instead a cosmic, existential wracking, thumb and forefinger pinching her flesh, pulling and tugging, squeezing, drumming, waves of sensation roaring from her pink middle to the center of her brain, filling every corner of the soft tissue there with something impossible and indescribable.

Hannah dropped her face into the pillow, almost too late to swallow her first cry of terror, and her tags shook and jangled before the pillow smothered them as well.

"AAUUUUUHGGG!" she screamed, her words frantic and muffled. "OHMYGODNO!"

She bucked, arched, squirmed, bounced, drove her face into the bedding as if trying to burrow into it, away from the horror happening at her middle. But she held the place between her legs as still as nature would allow, obedient to Dr. Johnson even in this sudden madness.

"NONONONONO!"

She didn't last much beyond that, her orgasm filling both brain and body with something akin to death. How could her heart keep beating when every cell of her body was suffering through its own, personal orgasm? How could she breathe? How could any brain recover from having its essence stripped away, its role in intelligence, memory, emotion, replaced with the single purpose of flooding her existence with unspeakable ecstasy?

"stopnogodjesussavemeohnononopleasenogod!" Hannah shrieked into the pillow, biting and gnawing and praying to live while, at her other end, her bowels relaxed to near disaster and she felt the first dollop of ejaculate shoot from her organ.

At last, as the sensations yielded to something more like a normal orgasm, she groaned, spasmed and pulled jerkily away, clambering from the

hand behind her, the penis dropping wetly from her chamber, the man kneeling there, and she unfolded her trembling body at the head of the bed, settling onto the pillow she'd been biting, noticing the evidence of her own squirting, her female syrup soaking the place between Dr. Johnson's knees, sheening on the sheets before him, leaving a puddle beneath her vulva, ruining the pillowcase and probably the pillow inside it.

Hannah, deciding the pillow deserved it, wrapped her arms around her legs and gasped into her knees, her rasping breath the only sound as she worked out her existence, confirming first that she was still alive, then that she wasn't ruined, and finally, that she was Hannah Loughbridge, student and researcher and, at the moment, the wet, panting occupant of the bed of Dr. Dietrich Johnson, Director.

Once she felt her breath leveling off, she raised her eyes, found Dr. Johnson still there, still kneeling, regarding her with what looked like academic interest. Had he ever done that before? Did he do it to Felicity? To the girls in the lab? Was it even legal?

"I ruined your pillow," she said to him. "Sorry."

"Ready to sleep?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "That's going to be my only option."

"I love you, Hannah," he said.

"Okay," she said. "That wasn't natural."

"On the contrary," he said. "Science. Very natural."

"You should have warned me," Hannah said, untangling her legs, confirming anew that she was intact, that she was able to move.

She slid across the bed on her bottom, unconcerned about the damp trail she laid, and she stumbled across the room and to the bathroom, huge and well-appointed with furniture and fixtures she didn't care about, and she dropped to the toilet, produced a small trickle of urine and wiped, removing with four wads of tissue most of the thick cream and clear lubricant gathered on her lips, around her vulva, in her golden hair, across her anus.

She flushed and returned to the bedroom, found Dr. Johnson preparing the bed, putting a fresh pillowcase on a new pillow, but leaving the sheets as they were, wet spots and gleaming paths marking the communion of Hannah Loughbridge here.

"I need a toothbrush," she said numbly, wanting something familiar.

Dr. Johnson, penis still half erect, his body still lanky and knobby, found a new toothbrush for Hannah and pointed out the toothpaste, and she brushed her teeth and washed her face and returned to the bed, so tired and so not in love that her eyes closed almost before her head hit the pillow, and she woke in the middle of the night, heard Dr. Johnson sighing contentedly in his sleep, and she fell back to sleep only after she'd confirmed that all this was real.

She woke again, and this time it was dawn, lights peeking around a thick black curtain that Hannah knew must hide a vast window that looked upon the sea, and she longed to throw it wide and drink in the Pacific Ocean by daylight, but Dr. Johnson was still asleep, still breathing gently, so she slipped off the bed and out of his room, determined to find a toilet she could flush without disturbing him.

Gliding nude through the house, unrestrained and unremarked, felt odd to Hannah – indeed, so strange as to seem almost immoral. She could do anything. She could dress and run away. Break things. Steal things. No one had ever shown this much trust in her. She descended the stairs, squinted out upon the den as if she could see the smoke still rising from last night's battle, and slipped into a little water closet just off the kitchen.

She flushed and exited and went to the windows, black last night, now blazing with the first light of dawn, the sand and the perpetual surf and the great sea all visible beyond the balcony, and she remembered standing there and kissing Dr. Johnson the way she might remember going to the library or entering a store, as a thing that was done with a minimum of emotional investment.

She went into the kitchen and foraged, hope yielding to disappointment when she realized there was no fruit here other than that which grew from cans, and only white bread.

But they had coffee, and a coffee maker, and she brewed a pot big enough for everyone and found a cup of strawberry yogurt and decided that would be her breakfast, along with toast, and she went searching for butter.

She was still bent over with her head in the fridge when she heard a bump and turned, startled, to find Heidi standing behind her, wearing a black bathrobe, hair wet from the shower, staring.

"Hi, Heidi," Hannah said, trying to make things seem normal. Maybe Heidi thought they were normal. Hannah didn't.

"Hey."

Hannah retrieved the butter and set it out, and Heidi went to the freezer and pulled out what might have been her last vestige of childhood, a bright yellow box with a picture of a cartoon movie queen and a smiling dog, containing what appeared to be the ingredients of a rudimentary pizza.

Hannah sat down at the breakfast table, not bothering to find a towel to settle onto, and watched as the girl meticulously spread out the little ball of dough, squeezed tomato sauce from a plastic packet, spread out heavily-processed pepperoni, covered it with synthetic cheese, and left it on the counter.

“Put it in for two minutes,” Heidi said, heading back to the den, “and just cut it in half, and I’ll have sugar in my coffee.”

“What?” Hannah said, looking up.

“Put it in for two minutes,” Heidi repeated, rolling her eyes, “and —”

“I heard you,” Hannah said.

“Then why did you say ‘what’?”

“Because . . . because it seemed less polite than saying no,” Hannah said. “But . . . no.”

For a long moment, the two females stared into each other’s eyes, Hannah to emphasize her point, Heidi to work through what that point might be. Understanding things eventually, and clearly put off by them, she shoved her pizza into the microwave herself, pressed the buttons and stared at the machine while she worked out the next thing to say.

Her pizza was still cooking, filling the kitchen with an unexpectedly sweet, yeasty aroma, when she turned to Hannah.

“Are you Daddy’s girlfriend?” she asked, looking at Hannah without expression, having not yet mastered the feigned curiosity her mother had turned into an art.

Her answer didn’t matter, Hannah reminded herself. Nothing that happened this morning would interfere with her return to the Palm Springs airport, and her flight back to Dallas this afternoon.

And yet, tread lightly. You were 15 once, she said silently, a difficult age, made more difficult by family drama, in whatever form it might come.

“Why would you ask that?” Hannah replied neutrally.

The girl considered, staring at Hannah but not seeing her, like a computer working slowly through various algorithms, trying to retrieve the

right combination of words to present in the next interchange.

“What does Daddy do to girls?” she finally asked.

“Huh?” Hannah asked, looking down at her coffee, and back up.

“For his job. What does he do?”

“You’ll have to ask your father,” Hannah replied.

“You were there.”

“Yes,” Hannah agreed. “But I didn’t see him working, not really.”

“What was it like?”

“Why do you ask?” Hannah replied in a variant of her previous non-answer answer.

“One time when Mom was really upset and they were fighting, she yelled about it. Like . . .” and here Heidi did a quite passable imitation of Dorothy, “‘Oh, I know it’s not just professional. I know about you and those girls.’ And Dad started talking really fast and quiet, and I couldn’t hear the words, but I could tell . . . I could tell he was upset.”

Heidi, face darkening with a memory that troubled her, turned to pour herself coffee, put a shocking amount of sugar in it, sat down at the table across from Hannah and stared again.

“What do you do?” she asked.

“I go to school, and do research,” Hannah said.

“Your tag says Recreational.”

“It does.”

“Felicity’s says Domestic.”

“I guess we do different things then.”

Heidi just smiled, knowingly, and Hannah suspected the girl had skated up as close as she dared to the tangled reality around her, and she’d peered from the edge, imagined what she was prepared to imagine, and skated away.

“Did Felicity tell you about her baby?” she asked.

“Yes, his name is Jason.”

“He comes over every other weekend. Daddy says when all this is through, he’ll still come over, and Felicity will still be with us.”

“Huh?” Hannah asked, looking up from the last scoop of yogurt.

Huh?

Heidi tapped her neck.

“When they’re all cut off,” she said

“When what’s all cut off?”

“Your collars.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “When is that going to happen? Later today?”

“God, no,” Heidi said, clearly shocked at Hannah’s ignorance.

“When, then?”

“I don’t know,” Heidi said. “Dad doesn’t either. He just said one day.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

Okay.

Strange.

“I’m going to get Felicity now,” Heidi said. “She has to . . . have her ankles stayed . . . until Daddy gets up.”

“Do mine too, then,” Hannah said without hesitation.

“Why?”

“It shouldn’t just be one of us,” Hannah explained.

“Okay,” Heidi said, getting up from the table. She seemed to have overcome the reservations of the night before, retrieving two pairs of shackles from somewhere upstairs and returning to the kitchen.

Hannah spun in her seat, lifted her knees and watched the shackles go on, almost grateful for the familiar sensation of being bound, happy for the reduction in choices the chain between her ankles represented. Waking up in a large home, free to wander unfettered, felt like floating in space. That much freedom could lead to uncertain things, frightening things.

Hannah put her legs back under the table and waited for Felicity to make her entrance from the hall under the stairs, and she sipped her coffee and pondered.

When they’re all cut off, Dr. Johnson had told his daughter. Not if. When.

What did he know that Hannah didn’t?

Heidi emerged, Felicity shuffling after, ankles clinking together, and she smiled at Hannah as she drew close and hugged her from behind, one breast brushing Hannah’s shoulder, while Hannah remained seated. Felicity found a knife and opened the microwave, cut Heidi’s untouched pizza in two and set it on the table, and Heidi sat and bit into it, cold now, but sliced by a slave, which seemed to be more important to her than its intrinsic essence.

Imani appeared next, Dr. Johnson last, both freshly showered, Dr. Johnson dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, and he nodded to Heidi and Heidi



produced her key and removed shackles from both subject's legs, and for a time the kitchen was a normal kitchen on a Friday morning, where people came to do the things that moved them from the death of sleep to another day of life.

The girls had school, and that topic dominated conversation, because Imani had a test, and Heidi was staying late for a club meeting, and Dorothy would be picking up both girls and Felicity for the weekend, so logistics needed to be worked out, about who would be where when, and what people would be doing over the weekend, and what would happen Sunday when everyone came back to the house on the beach, and Hannah wondered what Dr. Johnson had planned for the next two days, and briefly imagined staying here with him, just the two of them, without children and another slave and a surprise visit from Mrs. Johnson, and they would certainly make love, and he would certainly do that thing to her clitoris again, and she would cry and scream and beg and cum impossibly hard, and when that was done she would ask him everything he knew about everything, her research project and the general science behind it and what he did and all he had learned, and she would put her feet in the water again, and maybe they'd go to dinner somewhere, in Los Angeles maybe, where Dr. Johnson wouldn't be recognized dining with a mysterious slave girl, but her travel tag said nothing about visiting Los Angeles, so she'd be at constant risk and, far worse, if she chose to stay with him, if she chose to do that and the Petrosyans said yes, she would be marking a passage to a new place, an assimilation, an acquiescence to something soft and invisible and unspeakably terrible, because all of Dr. Johnson's knowledge depended on the things he'd done to captive females.

"Hannah?"

Hannah chewed toast and stared at the blue sky beyond the windows and wondered anew about the spring, the project she had taken on, the female with three ovaries she'd be given, and the things she would do with her, to her.

"Hannah?"

She needed the manual. She needed to begin work on this now. This wasn't a test, or a class assignment.

"Hannah?"

This was another person's life.

Someone was saying her name.

“Yes?” Hannah blurted, looking up to see Dr. Johnson staring down at her, clearly bemused.

Hannah looked around the kitchen, saw all eyes upon her. A little worry, a little contempt.

“Sorry,” she said. “Daydreaming.”

“I’m taking the girls to their schools this morning,” he said. “Can you shower in Felicity’s space?”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah said, and she looked at him and he looked back, both maintaining professional boundaries now, no reason to give any more information than necessary, even by subtle cue, to three people who would be spending the weekend with Dorothy Johnson.

“We’ll need to leave for Palm Springs in less than an hour,” he said. “Can you be ready by then?”

“Yes, Sir, I’ll try.”

Hannah stood and followed Heidi across the den and down the hall to Felicity’s cage, grabbing her bags and wheeling them through the door, turning to watch Heidi lock her in.

“It was nice to meet you,” Heidi said, looking at the floor.

“Okay,” Hannah said, realizing with a small lump in her throat that this was probably it for her and this girl; that they would likely never speak again. “Bye.”

Hannah found Felicity’s bathroom adequately equipped, a good brand of shampoo and decent soap and a good hairdryer from Elegante, so she didn’t bother getting anything from her suitcase beyond makeup, and she turned the water on and took her time.

By the end of Hannah’s shower, Felicity was at the sink, brushing her teeth, and Hannah turned off the water and grabbed a towel.

“Hey,” Felicity said, peering at Hannah through the mirror.

“Yeah?”

“Did he . . . do that thing to you?”

“You mean, to my—”

“Yeah.”

“Yes, he did,” Hannah said. “I told him he should have warned me.”

“I don’t let him do it every time. It’s dangerous.”

Hannah laughed, and the two made small talk, shouting over the sounds of Felicity’s showering and Hannah’s drying her hair, and Hannah

tried to imagine this too, occupying this house with Felicity.

No, she told herself.

No.

If Dr. Johnson succeeded in buying Hannah, she would either be kept down here with Felicity, which would be a terrible imposition, or upstairs with the family, which would create assumptions of hierarchy, also terrible.

Why was her mind going to this? Hannah wondered.

Not because the choice appealed to her, of living here, with Dr. Johnson and his family.

But because she had a choice at all. If she truly wanted to, she could probably make it happen. She could explain to the Petrosyans that she preferred to live with Dr. Dietrich Johnson, and be owned by him, and he would pay enough to compensate them for their loss and buy another girl and most likely have plenty left over.

The Petrosyan's had chosen her, and bought her. Now she would choose Dr. Johnson, and be bought by him.

She would lose the Petrosyans, they would lose her, and now she would be living three states away from Mother.

No.

And what would she do about school?

No, absolutely not.

Hannah applied makeup and wrestled with her emotions and smiled, because just knowing she had a choice this momentous was a sort of freedom she'd never known before.

"Hannah?" Dr. Johnson called from the hall.

"Yes, Sir?" Hannah answered back, grabbing the first lipstick she found from her choice of three and rubbing it on. "Almost done!"

She stepped from the bathroom, naked, and looked apologetically at Dr. Johnson before she crouched over her suitcase, throwing in makeup and brush, pulling out panties and bra, jeans and a halter top, socks and flats, slipping everything on as quickly as she could while Felicity dried her hair.

"Bye, Felicity!" Hannah said when Dr. Johnson unlocked the door and swung it wide.

"Bye, Hannah!" Felicity said without bothering to turn off the dryer or step beyond her bathroom, and Hannah slung her book bag over her

shoulder, zipped her suitcase closed, stepped into the hall, and Dr. Johnson locked the cage back.

“See you Sunday, Felicity!” he said.

“Bye, Dietrich!” she shouted.

“Have fun with Dot.”

“I will, thanks!”

“Do you have everything you need in here for the day?”

“Yes!” she shouted.

## Chapter 41: Stacey and the Toys

Stacey finished all of her dinner, more satisfied with it than she thought she should be, and she went to the sink to look at herself, and rinse her face, and look in the cabinet behind the mirror to make sure she had enough toothpaste, and to look at the two dildos, large and small, both white.

The smaller one wasn't big enough to make an impression, Stacey didn't believe.

The bigger one was a little intimidating, thick and long.

Both were subtly knobbed, a pattern of bumps swirling around the shafts, meant to stimulate the vagina slightly, and to please the eye as well perhaps. No penis had bumps like that.

She wondered what they felt like.

She touched the thicker one, looked around her cell to make sure no one had entered, no one was standing somewhere within the walls, watching her, judging her.

She closed the cabinet and, finding no one, planted her feet a little further apart, reached down and touched her vaginal lips, just on the outside, not putting a finger within yet.

She touched her clitoris, ran her finger along both lips, felt the stubble of her pubic hair beginning to return, confirmed that more was growing on her mound.

Then back to her opening, while she stared into the eyes staring back at her in the mirror, looked at her collar briefly, looked back up, and this time she used two fingers to part her lips, using a third to touch her vaginal mouth, imagining the tip of her finger was the tip of a penis.

Daryn's penis.

Finger first, she thought. Then the smaller dildo, to prepare herself. Then the larger one.

The idea excited her, that there could be an established methodology for something so personal, that she was locked in a place where it was understood girls would do this, and the girls would prefer a system, in the same way they'd prefer brownies, and carrot cake.

If she'd been brought here to be killed, or tormented, or abused, would they give her toys to play with? Would they allow pleasure? No. Stacey was certain of that. No.

She looked to the door again, to make sure the panels were all shut. She searched her cell for a camera again, could find no place among the plain white walls and corners where one might have been concealed.

Lips still spread, she stroked her vaginal mouth, used the fluid there to coat her clitoris, circled it, drew forth more fluid, circled again, pressed at one place and then the other, spread her lips wider, far wider than they needed to be parted just so she could touch the wet folds between them.

She settled into a familiar rhythm, touching herself at the pace she usually used during masturbation.

"Uh," she grunted, quietly, tensing her neck muscles, expanding her throat within her collar, feeling the band of metal around her neck, watching the tag swing.

"Uh."

She opened the cabinet and pulled out the smaller dildo.

The training dildo. The opening tool. The preparer.

Now that she had arrived at this place in her mind, she proceeded without further ceremony, bending, spreading her thighs, reaching between her legs to open herself with one hand, the other grasping the dildo at the base, delivering the pointed tip to her opening, sliding it in, sensing the little patterned bumps as her body swallowed it, all of it but the widened base.

"Uh."

Continuing the fantasy that this was all part of an exercise, that the smaller dildo needed to be employed first, to prepare her sex for the thick one, she worked at it dutifully, sliding it in and out, one hand on the sink now to steady herself, the other laboring between her thighs, forcing the toy into her hole, pulling it out, forcing it back up.

"Uh, uh, uh . . ."

She wanted a penis. She wanted Daryn's penis. Daryn wasn't here. No one was here, except Stacey Fairchild.

And she'd exercised her vagina enough. It was ready.

She set the smaller dildo in the sink, admiring the thick, clear sheen her body had coated it with.

She reached into the cabinet and pulled out the thicker one, the longer one, with the thicker base, and she turned to her bed, well aware that this one might make her tremble, might even buckle her legs. She needed to be sitting for this, or lying down.

Or lying on her side. One leg out straight, the other raised high, knee bent, giving herself unimpeded access to the hungry hole, waiting there.

"Uh."

She pulled down her sheets and took her position and thought of Daryn while she looked at herself, working the thicker toy in from behind, around her thigh, into her opening, deeper now, up into her, halfway in before her sex organ complained.

"Uh," she grunted, and she kept pushing, ignoring the pain, stretching herself out, her sheath spread so tight that she could feel every little bump that wound along the object of torment.

"Uh," she said. "Uh. Fuck."

Once it was inside her, she left it for a time, moving her hand around her thigh and to her front to resume her work on her clitoris.

"Uh," she moaned, grimacing. "Fuck. Uh. Fuck."

She rolled over on her back, using her elbows to lever herself across the bed to the wall, pressing her shoulders against the cool cinder block, rising up so she could look at the only part of the dildo visible now, the thick white base, the rest within her, her pink wet walls straining to contain it.

She raised her thighs and grabbed the base, pulling it out halfway and forcing it back in.

"Uh," she groaned, circling her clit, massaging her lips, tugging on them before pressing her clitoris again. "Uh. Uh! UH!"

One hand worked the dildo, the other worked her flesh, and by the tenth insertion of the knobbed toy, she was gasping with the first wave of climax, thighs shaking and fingers dancing over her organ, breath coming in muffled gasps, because she was determined even in a fit of pleasure not to

make too much noise, to draw attention – if indeed attention could be drawn in this place.

“Uhhhh ohhhhh uhhhhh.”

And then it was done, Stacey went limp and closed her eyes, one hand rising to her breast and her hardened nipple while the other continued to hold the base of the dildo, not quite ready to part with it.

The pleasure washing past her now, ebbing, departing, she raised her hand from her breast to her collar, felt the unyielding metal, the little tag that said her name and PUMI.

Something was hurting in her upper back, a little sting where it was pressed against the wall.

Yes, they’d stuck something there, under her skin, this morning, and it still hurt.

Fuck, she said to herself, finding her favorite go-to word in times of anger and stress utterly inadequate in the face of what was being done to her.

Now that she’d resolved her yearning for Daryn, she longed to speak to her father, to hear his voice. Mainly a source of money over the last few years – or really, ever since she’d been born – she was realizing now how emotionally important he was.

She withdrew the dildo from her vagina and laid it, wet and glistening, on the bed beside her, and she wiped her eyes as she imagined telling him what she’d suffered and where she was, begging for rescue.

But where was she? She didn’t even know that.

And what was going to be done to her?

And what should she be doing?

That answer she knew.

Nothing. She could do nothing. This strange system, with its chains and tethers and locked rooms, ensured that she could do nothing.

She looked at the cut on her ankle, a black line of scab, and wondered when it would start healing and itching.

She looked up from it and screamed, “Wow, goddam!” because there was a girl’s face in the highest opening of the door, where the panel had been unlatched and swung wide.

## **Chapter 42: Back to Palm Spring, Back to Dallas**

Hannah pulled her suitcase to the end of the hall before she stopped and looked at Dr. Johnson, and he understood and grabbed the handle of her suitcase pulled her bag off her shoulder and lugged both through the den, through the kitchen and the messy playroom, down the stairs and into the morning air as Hannah trailed behind.

Back they went to his helicopter, repeating the steps of the evening before, Hannah's luggage stowed, Hannah in and buckled, Dr. Johnson checking his craft, speaking into his microphone, giving Hannah her headset with its microphone.

The craft was neither white and black or white and blue.

It was white and gray.

The chopper rumbled and the rotor turned, spun, sped up, and the craft arose, and Hannah looked through the glass as the house and the beach and the Pacific Ocean dwindled in size until they were gone.

Her mind was whirring now, touching on this and that, on the semester before her, the journals and textbook in her book bag that she had still to read, on the way the world beneath her looked completely different in the daytime than it did at night.

On cooking. And science.

On science. And cooking.

That's it.

"I know why I can't cook," Hannah announced, almost to herself. Her mind wasn't on Dr. Johnson much at all as they flew. They'd had their time. It was nice. It was over.

"That doesn't matter," Dr. Johnson said understandingly, his voice thin over her headset.

"What do you mean?" Hannah asked.

"It's okay if you can't cook," he said. "I won't have a problem with that."

Hannah turned her head sharply, to stare at her pilot.

"What?"

"Felicity can cook," he said.

Oh no no no no, Hannah said to herself.

How to stop this?

Ignore, she decided. See if that works.

"Recipes aren't peer reviewed," Hannah elaborated. "So how does anyone know if they're right or wrong? And that's why . . . I don't believe



in them.”

Dr. Johnson chuckled, went silent, and Hannah knew he was trying to think of the next thing to say, and she considered pre-empting it, decided some things couldn’t be stopped, so she waited, mind whirring again.

Something about the little building that Hannah knew they were probably flying to, the place with the desk where Dr. Johnson had looked at a PC while Hannah played with his phone. Something had happened there, disturbing her. What was it? She couldn’t remember.

“Hannah,” he said.

“Yes, Dr. Johnson?” she replied.

“Hannah,” he said again, less formally, as if trying to discourage the formality in her tone.

“Yes?”

“We need to talk about your family.”

“They’re not my family,” Hannah said. “They own me.”

“What will they say?”

“About what?”

“About my offer?”

“What offer?” Hannah inquired, playing dumb, well aware Dr. Johnson knew she was playing dumb, and not caring.

“I’d like to speak to your family,” Dr. Johnson said.

“They’re not my family.”

“The Petrosyans.”

“Okay.”

“What will you tell them?”

“About what?” Hannah asked.

“About my offer.”

“That’s your job,” Hannah said.

“You’ll tell them you’re agreeable?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not . . . agreeable.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” Hannah said, trying to sigh loudly enough that Dr. Johnson would hear it over his headset, “because I’m happy the way things are. I—”

“They don’t appreciate you.”

“I don’t need to be appreciated,” Hannah said. “I need school. I have that with them.”

“I can—”

“No,” Hannah said, reaching that place she least wanted to go, a simple, one-word rejection. “No.”

“That’s it?” Dr. Johnson asked. “You’re not even going to discuss it?”

“No,” Hannah said. “That’s it.”

“I’ll still speak to them.”

“That’s fine. I can’t stop you.”

“What if they sell you to me?”

“That’s their choice. I’ll endure. I’ll adapt. I have before.”

“Living with me, in my home, would be enduring?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “Don’t do it. I won’t be happy.”

“Did something happen with Felicity?”

Hannah laughed.

“Yeah. We had sex.”

“No, seriously. Did she upset you?”

“Of course not. And you’re lucky to have her. I hope you know that. Very lucky.”

Dr. Johnson said nothing, but he sighed into his microphone.

“It’s about Dot, isn’t it?” he said. “What she did last night?”

“No, I don’t care about that,” Hannah said.

“The girls? Did Heidi—”

“No,” Hannah said adamantly. “There’s nothing wrong, with you or anyone else. It’s just, I have my own life, and I’ve . . . built it up, if that makes sense. And I can’t just walk away from it.”

Dr. Johnson fell silent, and Hannah looked down, at the green juniper and the hills on the horizon, and she felt bad for him, briefly, before she reminded herself she didn’t care.

For a time, neither spoke, but Hannah realized she needed something resolved.

“Are you going to take that project away?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“Are you going to take away my research? Because of . . . because?”

“What?” Dr. Johnson queried. “No. Of course not.”

“Did anyone else want that project?” Hannah asked.

“I’m not going to give it to anyone else,” he said. “That wouldn’t even cross my mind.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “But did anyone else want it? I’m just curious.”

“No,” he replied. “Everyone knew what they wanted to work on by the time they came to me. No one wanted to study reproductive supernumeraries.”

“When am I going to find out about what I’m doing?” Hannah asked.

“I’ve already got things in motion,” Dr. Johnson said. “I’ve sent the full research prospectus to Dr. Mandapreet yesterday afternoon, and she confirmed receipt.”

“Dr. Mandapreet?” Hannah asked.

“Dazi Mandapreet. Your research supervisor. Do you know her?”

“I been a model a few times in her classes,” Hannah said. “She does reproductive biology. So I guess it makes sense.”

“She’s looking forward to working with you. She sounded very excited.”

“You talked to her?”

“No. Well, just in email. She knows all about you.”

“I was a model in some of her classes.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Dr. Johnson said.

“Then what are you talking about?” Hannah inquired, suspecting she already knew.

“You pulled some sort of prank, apparently,” he said. “When you won your scholarship.”

“It wasn’t a prank,” Hannah said, simply.

“You’re always trying to get your point across, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “I am.”

“I respect that.”

“It would get old for you though. If you bought me.”

“How does your family take it?”

“Very understanding. I’ve been punished for other things, but not that.”

“Do they punish you a lot?”

“No, not as much as you punish Felicity.”

Dr. Johnson laughed.

Hannah had amused him again. She was glad for that. When she wasn't making statements, or providing recreation, she wanted to amuse.

Because she wanted to be remembered. Collar and all.

Hannah recognized the outskirts of Palm Springs, little trailers and junkyards and a landfill that served the city from its edges.

"Thank you for taking me to your home," she said, sincerely.

"I'm sorry you didn't have a better time."

"I did have a better time," Hannah said. "But I want to go home, and get back to school."

"Where is home for you, Hannah?" he asked.

"The Petrosyan's sometimes, the kennels at school usually."

"How are the kennels?" he asked, and Hannah knew why he was asking, and decided to answer honestly.

"They're good enough," she said. "I've made a lot of friends there. I can get on PCs. But I wish my kennel was bigger, and nicer."

"I could get you into Yale," Dr. Johnson said, his final bid before he landed the craft.

"No," Hannah replied simply, pulling off her headset and waiting while he flipped a surprising number of switches and levers to accomplish turning off the craft.

They exited the craft and Dr. Johnson, pulling Hannah's suitcase behind, asked a man hovering by the back door of the building to secure the chopper, and Hannah followed him in and looked at the desk and the PC where he'd typed last night, and she had played with his phone, and where something had happened that triggered a vague, strange, possibly poignant memory, of a dream or a real thing.

He remained true to his word on the drive back to the main terminal of the Palm Springs airport, allowing Hannah to ride unchained. Content at last to stop trying to convince Hannah to allow him to buy her, they talked about his daughters, what each was good at, where they might go to college, what they might become.

Hannah listened mostly in silence, her mind already on the flight back to Dallas, what the evening held, what the next few weeks would bring.

Dr. Johnson stopped at the terminal curb, set her luggage on the curb while Hannah watched, and he pulled out his phone and she turned to

allow him to scan her back, to let the Petrosyans know she was still where she was supposed to be. But what would the message look like? she wondered. Would it identify the sender of the scan as Dr. Dietrich Johnson?

“Goodbye, Hannah,” Dr. Johnson said, and he didn’t seem as sad as the night before, and Hannah returned his hug before she took her luggage and headed into the terminal, still unchained and at last lugging her own things.

Because she arrived unrestrained, she was allowed to remain free of bonds to enter the craft, and for all the flight until it was time to prepare for landing, at which point she was asked to step into the aisle and hold her hands before her, and her wrists and ankles were cuffed and she returned to her seat, ignoring the stares. The man in the seat beside her was asleep, or pretending to be asleep, throughout the flight, maintaining his slumber even when the four cuffs clicked around her wrists and the chains rattled around her limbs.

Back on terra firma at the Dallas airport, she raised her chin to get her travel tag cut off, and then spent no more than a few minutes in a small subject pen before Laura Petrosyan and daughter Athena appeared, confirming their ownership with a few scans and Laura’s driver’s license, giving Hannah hugs she couldn’t return with her wrists bound near her hips, and taking over luggage duties.

Athena hauled Hannah’s bags to the short-term parking lot while Hannah shuffled beside them, answering questions about the trip and what it meant for the upcoming semester.

Athena’s questions were perfunctory until she realized Hannah would be getting her own female to work with, a subject with three ovaries.

“When is she getting to school?” Athena asked.

“I’m not sure,” Hannah replied, trying to sound nonchalant about something that was stirring her with an increasing case of nervous excitement. “I guess this week.”

“What’s her name?”

“I don’t know.”

“How old is she?”

“I don’t know. They haven’t told me anything about her.”

“Where will she stay?”

“Somewhere in one of the biology buildings, I think,” Hannah said. “They’re supposed to be getting a space ready for her.”

As soon as they reached the highway, Laura looked into her rearview mirror at Hannah.

“Is there anything else you need to tell us?” she asked.

“I partnered sexually three times,” Hannah declared, because she was expected to provide a full accounting of her interactions, receiving a mild punishment once when she didn’t.

“Three different people?” Athena asked, turning back to look at Hannah. She wasn’t leering, however. Now that Athena owned a boy – her second, in fact – sex was no longer the titillating mystery it had been. Hannah’s trysts were still of interest to her, but not objects of morbid fascination.

Of all Hannah’s relationships since she’d been taken two and a half years ago, hers with Athena was the most malleable, the most dynamic. Friends, enemies, frenemies; sometimes as close as sisters; sometimes sharing such cruel words (usually spoken by Athena) that perpetual estrangement seemed the only logical outcome. But Athena, still a teenager at 18, who’d just finished her first semester at the University of Corpus Christi with B’s and C’s, was maturing, growing less emotionally volatile – and possibly more dangerous.

“Yes,” Hannah said. “One male in the lab, for a demonstration, and a female subject last night, and then a free man.”

“Who scanned you at the airport in Palm Springs?” Athena demanded. “It was a new number. Was that the free man?”

“Yes.”

“Who was he?”

“Dietrich Johnson,” Hannah said. “He’s directing the research this spring.”

“He’s the one getting you the girl?”

“His organization is making it happen.”

“So, you did it with him to get a good project?”

Hannah turned her full attention to Athena, blue eyes blazing with an anger that came from nowhere, burning so hot and so suddenly it almost choked her.

“Pardon me, Ma’am?” Hannah asked, biting off the words icily.

“Did you . . .” Athena stammered, perhaps already realizing her error, but too proud to simply retreat. “Did you . . .”

“Did I what, Ma’am?” Hannah asked.

“Well . . .” Athena said, stumbling again, “did you . . . did you . . . you know . . . do it . . . for . . .”

Hannah simply stared, unblinking eyes, unwavering countenance, waiting for Athena to either fall silent in shame or state explicitly what she was implying, the demonstrably false and deeply offensive notion that Hannah needed anything other than intelligence to progress scientifically.

At last, while Athena looked at Hannah’s lap with a frozen half-smile, Laura stepped in. Sometimes, she punished Hannah for being disrespectful to her daughter. Sometimes, she seemed to enjoy Hannah’s assertiveness where Athena was concerned. This seemed to be one of those latter instances, mother waiting a long, awkward moment before rescuing her child.

“Hannah, we’ll let you get your rest through tomorrow,” Laura said, “and Raven will be joining us for dinner tomorrow night. She’s got some wedding things to go over, and she’ll be sleeping here.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said, all her anger evaporating as quickly as it had come to a boil.

“She wants to stay downstairs,” Athena said, looking back into Hannah’s eyes, all her confidence returned as she shared what she no doubt believed was disappointing news for Hannah.

But Hannah didn’t mind at all. She’d spent last night with free reign over an entire ocean-side home, a liberation that had made her nervous. Staying with Raven downstairs, in the pair of cages where they’d been kept and made love a hundred times while Raven was still a slave, was fine with her. She loved her upstairs bedroom, but being there with Raven seemed odd to her, for reasons she couldn’t quite define.

“And we’re going back to Corpus Christi Sunday afternoon,” Athena said. “And you’ll be with Franklin that night.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah agreed, excitement now where fury had been a moment before.

“You need to take care of him,” Athena added. “I’m on my period.”

“Is he already there?” Hannah asked.

“No, he’s somewhere else,” Athena said. “I’m renting him out to breed, so I’m sure he’s having fun.”

And there was that look again, Athena’s perpetual smirk, accented now with a pair of arched eyebrows, studying Hannah’s face, looking for discomfort, or jealousy, or envy, or angst.

Hannah returned the girl's gaze with what she hoped was an infuriatingly disinterested smile. Yes, Franklin occupied a deep, unexplainable place in Hannah's mind. Something about him had stirred her from almost the moment they'd met. Scion of wealth, educated in business and divinity at Ivy League schools, a descendant of European nobility, he'd offered himself as a procreative slave to help his grandfather restructure a tranche of corporate debt. Hannah adored him, however, admired him, even loved him perhaps, not because of his heritage or his diplomas or his parentage, but for other reasons. Maybe because he thought deeply – of love and God and humanity – and spoke his mind to her, openly, freely, brilliantly, as if she were an equal.

He could never speak to Athena that way, Hannah knew. She simply wasn't bright enough to understand, or appreciate.

Pearls before swine.

In a fairer universe, Hannah would have been born a Petrosyan and Athena would have become the slave, and Hannah would have bought and freed Franklin as soon as commercially practicable, and Hannah would have been kind to Athena, far kinder than Athena was to her, and she would have allowed Franklin to couple with Athena for as long as made sense, and even to share whatever wisdom occurred to him as worth sharing, and Athena might have even understood a little of it, poor girl.

Athena had made clear she knew, or suspected, at least, that Hannah and Franklin had built up something in their brief moments together that Athena would never have with him, so she never skipped a chance to remind Hannah that Franklin wasn't hers, couldn't be hers, was Athena's property altogether, and Athena could use him or not, rent him out or not, provide him for profit when so inclined as the brief consort of nameless, ovulating females.

And, when she was so inclined, Athena could confine her male and her family's slave girl together so that they would do what came naturally, and Franklin would achieve relief (as would Hannah, not that it mattered) and he would be spared the lustful preoccupations that could make males forget themselves, and thereby maintain the carnal edge vital to Athena's ongoing satisfaction with him.

Indeed, Franklin was skilled in that realm as well, an honest, sincere bed partner, a reliable deliverer of erection and wet seed, and Hannah shifted in her seat and imagined him within her, and hoped what



she was thinking wasn't too obvious. Indeed, Hannah wasn't at all jealous of Franklin's other duties. She was of course no more faithful to him than he was to her – if faithfulness was even relevant here.

Subjects did as they were told, be it washing the laundry, tidying the kitchen, or sharing their bodies. Franklin and Hannah both had other duties, other privileges, other people to entertain along with their rare, precious time together.

"I wonder how many children Franklin's going to have?" Hannah queried.

"It's still just the two on the way," Athena said proudly, repeating information she'd shared every time the matter was raised. "You know I get a thousand every time he does it, five thousand if she gets pregnant, ten more when a healthy baby comes out. And—"

"Athena," Laura interrupted, because talking about money like this was considered rude in the Petrosyan household by everyone but Athena.

"God, Mom, it's just Hannah!" Athena protested.

## **Chapter 43: Stacey and her Visitor**

Stacy, heart thumping as she regarded the face of the girl peering in through the door of her cell, looked down and realized she was still splayed, thighs still spread in a post orgasmic pose, and the thick, knobbed dildo still glistening incriminatingly on the sheets beside her.

She closed her legs and pretended she needed to adjust the sheets, concealing the toy in the process, well aware it was too late, that the girl must have already seen it, and knew that Stacey had done what she'd done.

"Wellness check," the girl said.

"Huh?" Stacey grunted.

"Wellness check," the girl repeated. "Come to the door."

Stacey slid off her bed, rose a little stiffly, stepped up, tender breasts bouncing. They were always a little more sensitive after an orgasm.

Stacey stopped at the door, peered at the female staffer, wondered what her name was, and if she should also be sued for her role in all this, and if she could be if all Stacey knew about her was that she looked into Stacey's cell.

She needed her father emotionally, but she also needed his professional advice.

“How are you?” the girl asked.

Stacey looked back blankly, finding the question so far afield from her reality she couldn’t begin to form an answer.

“Do you need anything?” the girl persisted.

“I need to talk to my father,” Stacey blurted.

“You can’t do that here.”

“When can I then?”

“It’ll be up to the place where you’re going.”

“Where am I going then?” Stacey asked.

“Texas.”

“What?” Stacey asked. The answer raised far more question than it answered. Texas? Texas?

“Texas,” the girl said again.

“Where in Texas?” Stacey asked, quickly realizing that if the girl responded with a city, it would tell Stacey nothing. “What in Texas?” she asked by way of follow up.

“A school,” the girl said. “How have you been doing?”

“I want to go home,” Stacey said. “I need my dad.”

“That’s up to your next place.”

“Why am I going to a school?”

“I don’t know,” the girl said.

“What school?”

“I don’t know.”

“When am I leaving?”

“Tuesday.”

“Tuesday?” Stacey echoed. “What, what day is it?”

“Tuesday,” the girl said.

“No, what day is it today?”

“Saturday.”

“What happens Tuesday?”

“You leave,” the girl said.

“No, I mean, what will I . . . how will I . . . how will I leave?”

“You’ll be shipped in a—”

“You’re not going to put me in that box again!” Stacey shrieked, seized by a sudden, overwhelming panic.

The girl just continued to stare through the port in the door, Stacey’s terror apparently just another part of her workday.

“I won’t let you,” Stacey said, lowering her voice, her heart still thumping.

“Ask for a transport aid,” the girl said.

“What?”

“A transport aid.”

“What is that?”

“A prescription sedative. You take it right before you’re boxed, and you’ll still be asleep when you get there.”

Stacey’s mind wandered through this new information, her panic barely subsiding. But yes, if she could sleep through the horrors of the box, it would be almost like it hadn’t happened, right? Perhaps there was some hope here.

“What time on Tuesday?” Stacey asked.

“First thing.”

“Do I get to leave here before Tuesday?”

“No, you leave Tuesday.”

“No, I mean, do I have to stay in here . . . in this room . . . ‘til Tuesday? All the time?”

“Probably,” the girl said. “Unless they need to look at you again. Are you eating all your food?”

“Yes,” Stacey said.

“Any medical issues, unexpected pains, other problems?”

“No. What am I supposed to do until Tuesday?”

“Stay here.”

“I know,” Stacey said. “There’s nothing to do in here.”

“What were you doing before you were brought here?”

Stacey bit her lip, because the answer was, essentially, nothing. Not working, not going to school, just living in her apartment.

She was being a daughter, of course. And a friend. Yes. A good daughter. A good friend.

“I was being a bridesmaid,” Stacey said, regretting her words before they were finished leaving her mouth.

The girl, whom Stacey could neither upset nor amuse, kept looking blank-faced through the port in the door.

“You can masturbate,” she said.

“Not all the time,” Stacey said, a ridiculous retort to a ridiculous idea.

“Would you like a magazine?”

“Huh?” Stacey asked, at first baffled by the question. “Oh, yeah. Yeah.”

The girl looked down, beside herself, her arm moved, and she brought a magazine to the port, passing it through.

Stacey took it and looked at the cover, which bore a picture of a dead deer, its antlered head lolling off the opened bed of a pickup truck, a proud and armed man and woman standing on either side of it, butts of rifles against upper thighs.

“Southern Hunter?” Stacey said, incredulous. “That’s what I get to read?” She looked at the date. “It’s almost a year old.”

The girl shut the panel and latched it closed.

“Wait, wait,” Stacey shouted. “Is that why I’m going to Texas? To be with hunters? At a school with hunters? Why did you give me this? Why?”

Stacey waited for the panel to open, for the mystery to be solved, but nothing changed.

“UH!” she shouted, flinging the magazine away, watching it spin into the wall above her bed and drop like a bird full of buckshot, fluttering lifelessly upon her covers, beside the spent dildo.

“Fuck!” she screamed, increasingly aware of how impotent she was, and how useless that word was to bringing relief.

## **Chapter 44: Athena, at Your Service**

Alice Roberson, orphaned at age seven and with no other family approved to take her in, was put on the market at that tender age and bought soon thereafter as a helpmate to Canda Dupre, Laura Petrosyan’s widowed mother.

The girl adapted to her role, becoming a devoted, dutiful and loving surrogate third child to the woman Hannah called Gramma, and she adapted to her new name as well, Raven, so given because of the color of her skin, or the wisdom in her curious young eyes, or both.

Over the years, Raven grew tall, and elegant, and occasionally disobedient, and very occasionally unpredictable. When Gerald Dupre, Gramma’s son, known to his family as Uncle Bear, returned home from war in Korea, emotionally wounded and with a prosthetic where his lower right

leg had been, the outcome was perhaps inevitable: he and Raven fell in love, a coupling Gramma condemned, briefly, until she heard her son laugh.

But Gramma did not free the girl, soon realizing that holding title to her son's soulmate gave her certain powers over him, powers that could force him to live a certain way, to find a job, to make an income beyond his meager military disability payments, to cut his hair. Gramma – born into difficult circumstances before she found a man who knew how to make and keep money – knew how to keep things as well.

And the three of them made their way in the great mansion that was House Dupre – one a wealthy widow, one a wounded veteran, one a collared black slave girl who – like any subject – was shackled, caged and chained often enough, but who drove a car, cooked as she saw fit, and ran the Dupre household.

And Raven served physically, like any female subject of her standing, partnering with male and female, slave and free. Sometimes it was done to serve some purpose, strengthening ties among friends and family or providing relief to someone. Other times, it was meant only to afford Raven a little pleasure.

Raven had mere sex with everyone but Uncle Bear and Hannah, for both of these were the dearest of friends, the closest of those to whom she was close. With them, she made love.

And then, two Octobers ago, Raven was stolen, a murky crime of good intentions that served no one, a gross disruption of three lives, for it left Gramma and Uncle Bear bereft, and it made Raven furious.

For more than half a year, Raven languished in basements, forgotten apartments, outdoor compounds labeled optimistically liberation camps, while her new captors – and they were captors, regardless their ultimate intentions – tried desperately to reeducate her, to convince her to hide, to go underground, to satisfy their definition of freedom.

Within a day of taking her and her car (Uncle Bear's car, really, immediately scrapped) while she was coming home from the grocery store, they cut off her collar clumsily, putting a pale brown scar beneath her left ear, and tore out the ID chip in her back without anesthesia, igniting an infection that left her bedridden for a week until one of her would-be rescuers successfully stole a course of antibiotics.

For more than half a year, they did their best to sell Raven the good life, the free life, but a life Raven knew would be an existence only, as a

perpetual fugitive, for her face would always be known, her bones and her teeth would always be identifiable, and were she caught, her fate would be a week of punishment (the fate of all disappeared slaves, no matter the circumstances of their vanishment) followed by a quick return to slavery, most likely under new and far less benign ownership.

Raven never took to the lessons of her liberators, promising at every opportunity for more than half a year that, as soon as she got free, she would return to the threshold of House Dupre and beg for admittance, and she would endure her week of torture and then restore things as quickly as possible to what they had been.

So defiant was Raven, so disinterested in the freedom she'd been offered, she spent all her time with her liberators as another kind of prisoner, assigned to makeshift cages and kennels, closed up in solid rooms, bound with chains or tethers when she was moved to safer safehouses.

She cooked for them and for herself when she could, but food came premade in fast food bags often enough, and was not always available in any form. Raven lost 10 pounds from October to the following May.

Did she have sex? Did she couple? Were her new captors, not above caging and chaining her, also willing to exploit the pleasures of her body, or provide pleasures to satisfy her demands (Raven could be hungry at times)? Of this she had never spoken, to anyone, not even Hannah or Uncle Bear.

And then came her rescue, by none other than Hannah, whose exploits in the Subject Kennels of the University of Texas at Corpus Christi had won her the attention of other, just as shadowy but less ham-handed freedom organizations.

Hannah, calculating her way through serial acts of breathtaking insolence, obtained from one such organization the temporary address where Raven could be found alone, traded the address with Gramma for the paperwork that forced Gramma to relinquish ownership of Raven, and won for herself the \$75,000 reward supplied by Raven's insurance policy. A non-disclosure and confidentiality agreement, found in template form by Hannah online, modified to her purposes, and signed by both Gramma and Uncle Bear, kept hidden all of Hannah's dealings.

Only Athena – who had a talent for such matters, a sort of sixth sense – suspected what Hannah had done. The rest of the family remained oblivious, ascribing Raven's rescue and emancipation to her unsuitability as

a rescue candidate, and to the vagaries of chance, to forces beyond anyone's ken that sometimes brought slaves home free, and sometimes scattered them to the four winds.

All the rest of the Petrosyans – Ormek, Laura, and their son Allain, the medical student for whom Hannah had been bought as his ready companion – suspected nothing, knowing only that Raven had come home a free girl to Gramma and Uncle Bear, both of them giddy with joy, both a little silent on certain details, and now both playing their part to ensure that the marriage of US Army Corporal (Ret.) Gerald Pontiac Dupre, wounded veteran, to Miss Raven Dupre Roberson, free homemaker and talented chef, would be accomplished this spring with all the pomp and military circumstance of the best and most refined weddings anywhere.

And serving as principles of the wedding party would be Best Man US Army Sergeant (Ret.) Grant “Burger” Lafayette, and Maid of Honor Hannah Loughbridge (Subject), a junior in college at Corpus Christi.

If there was a casualty then, of Raven's abduction, it was not a person, but a thing.

A relationship.

Hannah and Raven were surely not the first two females in history to find their bonds growing strained as one was made free and one remained in her collar.

There were no arguments. There was no acrimony. And Raven professed her eternal gratitude for what Hannah had done, for Raven knew all, somehow. But things were different, made all the more so perhaps by Raven's insistence that, where Hannah was concerned, things must remain the same.

Raven, out of loyalty or gratitude or nostalgia, demanded regular visits to the Petrosyans whenever Hannah was there, where she would set aside running Gramma's household, planning her wedding, loving Uncle Bear – and her freedom itself – to partner with Hannah, locked in the cages downstairs as they had been before, when both were subjects.

As if nothing had changed.

But the lovemaking was different. Hannah sensed it. Maybe Raven did as well.

Mechanical, cautious.

Respectable.

Devoid of the raw spontaneity that, Hannah had often noticed, inspired people who could be sold tomorrow, given away, punished at whim, renamed. Living under clouds of uncertainty made the pursuit of pleasure all the more frantic, it seemed.

So it was with a mix of both joy and apprehension that Hannah passed through the rest of Friday, and Saturday until after late afternoon, locked in her cage downstairs to study and read and enjoy the luxury of solitude, shackled to do chores and partake of meals, all the while awaiting Raven's arrival with one part of her mind.

When the elevator bumped, she rose and went to the bars, smiling her most natural, most hopeful smile.

"Hannah, you decent?" asked a voice from around the corner, not Raven's but Athena's. Of course, Hannah was never decent by conventional standards, almost always kept nude in her cage and elsewhere in the Petrosyan household, but the question was a courtesy the family almost always observed. Were she on her toilet, or masturbating, she could ask them to come back before they moved into view.

"I'm good," Hannah said, smiling a little less brightly as Athena appeared. "What's up?"

"Mom got a call from someone at school, a, a, some woman. Like, Dr. uh, Parakeet or something."

"Dazi Mandapreet?" Hannah inquired, her heart immediately in her mouth.

"Yeah, that was probably it," Athena said. "You know her?"

"She'll be my research supervisor this spring. What did she say?"

"I don't know," Athena said, scowling. "She talked to Mom."

"What did your mom say she said?"

"I don't know," said the increasingly annoyed Athena, who did not have a research supervisor this spring, who did not get calls from any doctor except her gynecologist, once a year. Or really, her gynecologist's secretary.

Stop, Hannah told herself. Take a breath. Don't push Athena. This is an area where she's insecure, for good reason. Meet her more than halfway.

"Okay, thanks," Hannah said, keeping her tone even. "Do you know . . . if she wanted me to call her?"

"Yeah, she did."



“Okay,” Hannah said, proceeding with utmost care. “And, um . . . could I do that now . . . or sometime . . . today?”

Athena fished her phone out of the back pocket of her jeans, pulled a wrinkled pink sticky note out of her front pocket, and passed both to Hannah through the bars.

Hannah went back to her desk and dialed Athena’s phone frantically, still not fully convinced Dr. Johnson would let her have this project if she didn’t let him buy her. Even now, he might be reconsidering, picking up his phone to call Hannah’s school and say never mind. The more Hannah could get in motion now, the more trouble it would be for Dr. Johnson to take her assignment away.

“Dr. Mandapreet!” said a woman with a light, lilting Indian accent.

“Dr. Mandapreet, hello!” Hannah said with unfeigned enthusiasm. “This is Hannah Loughbridge. You left a message for me?”

“Oh, Hannah Hannah Hannah! Yes, we have our work cut out for us, don’t we? Are you on campus now?”

“No, Ma’am, I’m in Dallas.”

“You really need to be on campus.”

“I’m returning tomorrow night,” Hannah said desperately, sensing her project fading into oblivion. “I can be there first thing Monday morning.”

“That will have to do, then,” Dr. Mandapreet conceded. “Do you know where my office is?”

“Yes, Ma’am, Rickenbacker, third floor.”

“Yes, but in the secure part of the building, in the back half. You’ll need your student ID card to get in.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Ten a.m. Monday morning?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Good. A Dr. Johnson has sent me a research prospectus and some other supplies. More will be coming, I believe. You’re going to have to know the prospectus by heart. I’ve glanced at it, but won’t have time to go through it in any detail.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah agreed, so excited she was having to force each word out through her throat. “Of course, Ma’am.”

“Your female will be arriving sometime Tuesday, and her confinement is still being developed, so that will be your first priority

Monday.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah agreed.

“The prospectus is very precise on that. We’re working on a space that will do, I believe, with a few modifications.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said. “That’s very good to hear.”

“Now, you are a subject, correct?” Dr. Mandapreet inquired.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And you reside in the kennels?”

“Yes, Ma’am, except on weekends. Then I—”

“That complicates things just a little. I won’t be there to supervise you in person at all times, so we’ll need to make certain arrangements, at least at the start.”

“Yes, Ma’am, of course, Ma’am.”

“I will expect you Monday at 10 a.m., at my office.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah agreed. “Oh, but can you . . . can you have them release me at 9:30? You just need to call the main kennel number and say let me out.”

“I will, sure.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

“Bye.”

“Bye!” Hannah said, too loudly, before ending the call.

She continued staring at the phone, revisiting every word that had just been spoken, until her reverie was broken by the girl on the other side of the bars.

“Well?” Athena demanded.

“Oh,” Hannah said, passing the phone and the sticky note back through the bars.

Athena took the phone, stuck the note to the steel cross bar. “Uh, I don’t need her number back.”

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed, heart still racing, and she put the note on her desk, affixing it to the surface there. If she had tape, she would have taped it. If she had glue as well, she would have taped it and glued it.

Athena was still standing there, peering in at Hannah.

“Hey,” she said, her features softening in the way they did when she wanted something.

“Yes, Ma’am?” Hannah replied, in the way she did when she was being ironic.

“Do you . . . do you need any help . . . on whatever it is you’re working on . . . with that doctor person . . . and that . . . girl you’ll be studying?”

“Oh,” Hannah blurted, stopping with that single syllable as she worked through Athena’s literal words, and all the deeper meaning hidden among them.

Was Athena offering her services? To Hannah? Where Hannah would be the supervisor, more or less, and Athena would be the underling?

Could such a thing even be imagined?

No wonder the normally glib and assertive Athena struggled to get the words out. This must have taken courage.

Did the research prospectus mention an assistant? Was there a budget for such a thing? And was Athena even remotely qualified to do such work? Or would her appointment to the role represent a strange form of nepotism, a slave girl selecting a member of her owner’s family for some peripheral benefit?

Hannah simply stared, without seeing, as she worked through this modest proposal, remaining oblivious to Athena’s twisting mouth, the moistening eyes – until it was too late.

“Never mind!” Athena shouted, snapping Hannah back to the present, and she spun on her heel, stormed away and hit the elevator button so fiercely Hannah heard it click.

“Athena, wait,” Hannah said too late, annoyance and regret competing for dominance in her mind.

What did the girl expect? An instant appointment? Her immediate, official selection as Hannah’s laboratory aid?

But then, couldn’t Hannah have offered some response beyond a blank stare? Even a “let me check into that” would have assuaged Athena’s insecurities enough to prevent tears and sulking. Now the girl was probably back upstairs, tromping to her bedroom and flinging herself onto her bed to cry alone, interpreting Hannah’s silence as raw, unfettered contempt, hating anew her pampered, empty life where even the family’s slave girl could look down on her, reject her assistance.

Hannah had misgivings, but the idea of getting help from Athena was not out of bounds. The girl certainly knew how to manage subjects, approaching all such tasks – chaining limbs, sleeving penises, inserting

thermometers, confining bodies, helping punish – with consistent, unsentimental aplomb.

Yes, of course Athena could help. Not for pay, certainly, but if Hannah let Athena perform a research chore now and then, who could take issue?

Hannah set her mind to smoothing this over with Athena at her next opportunity, quickly arrived at the best way to do it, and she returned to her desk, getting no more than another 15 minutes of study done before the elevator bumped again and another female voice called out.

But this was a welcome voice, a revered voice, the deep, dulcet tones of Raven, former slave, future wife of Uncle Bear, future daughter-in-law of the woman who once owned her.

“Hannah?” spoke Raven from beyond the corner, mock concern in her voice, as if she feared Hannah might have fled. “Hannah?”

“Raven!” Hannah cried, stepping to the bars, smiling, waiting for her dearest friend to appear.

Raven rounded the corner, nude, hair tied back with a broad white ribbon, thick black pubic hair hiding her mound and opening.

The girls embraced through the bars, bellies touching, breasts and nipples brushing, mouth on mouth, the familiar sweetness of their bodies together, and Hannah hoped this at least – Raven’s physical presence – was something she would never lose, never have to give up, no matter how their statuses changed through the years.

But there were some peculiar rules now, insisted on by Raven.

Raven would wield no key. She would sooner leave Hannah in her cage all evening than free her, and Hannah understood why. Having the power to release someone from confinement went hand in hand with the authority to confine them back, so Raven refused either responsibility.

By the same token, Raven would neither chain Hannah nor release her. And as long as Hannah was nude, Raven would be too.

And Raven, while she continued to accept the nudity imposed on subjects, refused restraints, neither wearing chains, nor permitting Hannah to be bound in her presence.

Raven stood back and smiled.

“How was California?” she asked.

“Good,” Hannah replied. “I got a very interesting research project. Three ovaries.”

“Three ovaries?” Raven echoed, bending to laugh. “Girl, you trippin’?”

“No, I’m being serious,” Hannah said, noting Raven’s expression, one of the new ones she’d returned from her liberation speaking. The people who held her spoke an interesting vernacular, and Raven had picked it up without knowing, perhaps.

“They’re just going to what, mail them to you?”

“Mail her to me,” Hannah corrected.

“Who?”

“The girl with three ovaries.”

“They’re sending you a . . . girl?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t find Athena,” Raven said, changing the subject uncertainly. “So you might be here awhile.”

“Did you knock on her bedroom door?”

“Yes,” Raven replied. “No answer.”

“She’s in there,” Hannah said. “She’s sulking.”

“What did you do to Athena?”

“Why are you blaming me?”

“You and Athena,” Raven said, and she raised her fists before her breasts and tapped her knuckles together. “Always, it’s just . . .”

“It was a misunderstanding,” Hannah said. “I’ll tell you more later. Now go back up and bang on her door until she comes out. I want to help you make dinner.”

The Athena that returned with Raven five minutes later with the key to Hannah’s cage was the overly-sweet-while-clearly-enraged Athena that Hannah liked least, because she was the least predictable, and the most fake. Whom did she think she was fooling?

But she was doing her best to work through her anger without making a scene, Hannah decided, and for that at least she was grateful.

In accordance with Raven’s requirements, Hannah was allowed to go to the kitchen unrestrained, and she set to work with her ankles free while Raven directed things and Athena hovered, chatting with the other girls and, it seemed, successfully recovering from her hurt.

Ormek and Laura arrived home from errands and stepped into the kitchen from the garage, hugging Raven, whose last visit and stay with Hannah had been a week before.

Dinner was Jamaican chicken, something Raven found online, and Spanish rice, a little dry, that Hannah did her best with. Athena threw a salad together just before everyone sat down.

The first topic of conversation, directed by Ormek, was Hannah's trip and the research she'd be doing in the spring.

Hannah explained it all with obvious pride, speaking quickly, passionately.

"Who is managing your work?" Ormek asked, staring into Hannah's eyes the way he did, with barely-concealed love and lust and admiration, because his illicit affections for the family's slave girl were always bubbling just under the surface, his desire constant for more than the very limited enjoyment his wife permitted, an occasional, quick act of copulation through the bars of Hannah's cage, the deposit of an appropriate amount of semen into her chamber, a wordless and affectionless partnering followed by withdrawal and quiet departure.

"Dr. Dazi Mandapreet," Hannah said. "She teaches reproductive biology. I'm not sure how much help she'll be though. She said she's very busy."

Hannah looked at Athena, who was studying her plate.

"If it's okay, I'd like to see if Athena can help me out," Hannah said, and she looked first at Laura, and then at Ormek.

"Studies first," Ormek said, beaming. "But I'm sure Athena would provide excellent help."

"I'm sure she would," Laura agreed. "Wouldn't you like to help Hannah, Athena?"

Of course Dr. and Mrs. Petrosyan were on board with this, if not eagerly supportive. Athena needed things to do at college with her spare time, besides entertaining herself on Franklin, and this would be more constructive, and more beneficial to her progress than that. One of the top students at the University of Texas at Corpus Christi – and that's what Hannah was, certainly – had just enlisted their daughter in a research project.

Athena looked up at Hannah, stared into her eyes suspiciously for a brief moment, saw nothing nefarious there, and nodded.

"Yeah," she said. "If they let me, I think I could help out."

Athena's voice rose, grew more animated. "You know, you can get credit for stuff like that. Working with subjects in the lab. They put it in

your records, as an extracurricular. It's better than sports."

## **Chapter 45: A Missing Girl**

"What do you mean she never came in?" demanded Druhler Fairchild, glaring suspiciously at his son over drinks at one of the tables toward the back of the private Mandarin Club.

"I called, the clinic in Peoria never got her," replied Leston Fairchild. "They said she never showed up, and they never got a call. Her appointment was made, and they never canceled it. Just never brought her."

"Go to the address," Druhler Fairchild said.

"Huh?"

"Go to the home in Peoria. Drive by it. Maybe you'll see her in the front yard, or the window. Something about this is off. We need to know what's going on."

"I've looked up the place," the son protested weakly. "I've seen the street view. It's got a wall, a gate. I'd have to get through that to get to the front door, and even then, I'd probably see nothing."

"Do it," the father said. "Just go. Go and report."

## **Chapter 46: A Confession in the Dark**

Conversation during the rest of dinner focused on the wedding, scheduled for the first Saturday of May. Raven, forced to go nude at home as soon as she reached adulthood, and never much of a fan of clothing regardless, was struggling mightily over the gown she would wear, and the dresses she would put her bridesmaids in.

"It's a spring wedding," Hannah said. "So, spring colors for us. Yellow or pink or rose."

"Oh, god, I want something dark," Athena said. "Forest green. Or black. Black would be perfect."

"No black," retorted Raven.

"If you mix rose and forest green, you get brown," Hannah said. "Maybe that?"

Normally, this would have been an opportunity for Athena to point out how stupid Hannah's suggestion was, because she had a singular lack of appreciation for Hannah's sense of humor. But she just looked at Hannah, a little sympathetically. She was holding off, Hannah realized. She was that

grateful for Hannah's offer to let her assist in the lab. Hannah's willingness to let her help was already paying off.

"Rose and a green belt," Hannah suggested, now being serious. "A compromise."

The conversation turned to other things, the magnetic save-the-date that graced the Petrosyan fridge, the invitations that needed to go out by late February.

And then dinner was over and Laura and Ormek cleaned up while the girls went upstairs to listen to music and speak on whatever topics came to mind.

"Why did you say I could help out?" Athena immediately demanded.

"It seemed like a good idea," Hannah said.

"You just stared at me when I first suggested it, like you couldn't believe how stupid I was."

Raven snorted and went to into Athena's bathroom, while Hannah pulled down Athena's sheets and sat on a towel.

"Athena," Hannah said, wrapping her arms around her legs. "Do you not know by now how I think about things?"

"It looked like the only thing you were thinking about was how stupid I was."

"No," Hannah said. "I don't know anything about how the project is supposed to go. I don't know if I'll need help. I don't know if they'll have to approve who helps. And you might hate helping me after five minutes."

"Okay," Athena said, perhaps just slightly chastened for jumping to conclusions earlier. "Thanks for considering it."

Raven flushed the toilet and emerged from the bathroom in time to listen as the conversation turned back to wedding details. She had nothing to add, allowing Hannah and Athena to debate between themselves the merits and meanings of various colors, the best flowers for a May wedding, and how things might proceed when the groom and best man were veterans, a topic both were able to speak on at length despite knowing nothing on the matter.

"This is making me tired," Raven said, her words understood as the hint that it was time to go downstairs

Athena escorted the two girls to the elevator, rode down with them, locked them in the cages, observed the usual formalities.



“Hannah, do you want the door opened between yours and Raven’s spaces?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Raven, is that okay with you?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Athena offered the key to Hannah, and she unlocked the middle door and gave the key back.

“Lights out now?” Athena inquired.

“That’s fine,” Raven said. “I can brush my teeth in the dark.”

“Night.”

“Goodnight.”

“Bye.”

The light went out, the elevator bumped, and now the only illumination came from the windows set high in the wall opposite the cages, barred windows through which Hannah had gazed countless times, at blue sky during the day, at the stars at night.

The girls fumbled in the dark as their eyes adjusted, Raven brushing her teeth, Hannah moving to her toilet and wondering how it would be done tonight, if it would be passionate or perfunctory.

Hannah flushed, went to her sink to wash up, felt a hand brush her rump and knew Raven would be waiting for her in her bed as soon as she was done at the sink.

“Rose with a forest green belt,” Raven said as soon as Hannah had shut off the water. “It’s growing on me.”

“I think it would look good,” Hannah said. “And deep red roses. Corsages, maybe. Or we could all hold one. Or wear them in our hair.”

“Ooh.”

Hannah saw Raven’s dark form, sitting on the edge of her bed, and she approached her and waited.

“Did you get some sugar in California?” Raven asked, reaching up to Hannah’s vulva, fingers playing lightly across Hannah’s lips and clitoris.

“I did,” Hannah said, spreading her legs and angling her pelvis forward. “Two guys and a girl.”

“You do like your free time, don’t you?” Raven said, spreading Hannah’s lips and putting one finger against her opening.

“One of them wasn’t free time,” Hannah said with a quick sigh. “It was part of a demonstration.”

“People watching?”

“Yes.”

“Your fan club?”

Hannah laughed. “Fellow researchers.”

Raven, with her hand still between Hannah’s legs, leaned forward in the darkness until her nose brushed Hannah’s soft, golden triangle of pubic hair. Hannah jerked when the tongue emerged and danced across her clitoris.

After three deliberate, thoughtful licks across Hannah’s clit and labia, Raven drew back.

“You shaved.”

“They did it,” Hannah said with a whisper in the darkness. “Just around my hole. For the demonstration.”

“You let them?”

“They wanted to shave it all. I said no. I really like my hair.”

Hannah bent, put her mouth against Raven’s and kissed her, the girls uniting, open-mouthed, breathing in and out as one.

But Raven was going stiff again. Hannah could feel it, her lover holding back, going through the motions with tongue and lips while she worked through something else in another part of her head.

What was wrong? Did it bother Raven that Hannah was still a slave while Raven had gone free?

Was it survivor’s guilt?

Still kissing, Hannah reached behind Raven’s head, wrapped her hand around Raven’s neck first, then around Raven’s ponytail, grasping it, holding the girl still while Hannah pulled her mouth away, straightened her back and forced Raven against her nipple.

Hannah was usually more passive than this, allowing Raven to lead, to propose sex, to kiss first, to choose positions, to be the first to bring her mouth to the other girl’s sex.

But Hannah wanted something more tonight. She’d been to a strange place, coupled with three strangers, was pondering a strange future where she would manage someone else; where she would own, in a sense, someone else. Now, she wanted the familiar, the comfortable. She wanted the old Raven, the slave girl, the girl who hadn’t yet been stolen. And Hannah was ready to conjure her back into existence by force, if need be.

Raven sighed out, a sort of quiet gasp, as Hannah's breast and nipple pressed against her lips. She opened her mouth, allowing in the flesh, her tongue stroking Hannah while Hannah felt the heat building between her legs.

Raven felt it too, the heat, the budding lust. Hannah could tell.

Was Raven ovulating? Was she forgetting her place, Hannah's place, and at last simply succumbing to this?

Hannah shifted, forced Raven to her other breast, forced her to lick, to suck.

Raven sighed again, deeper, more intensely, and her hands reached up to bracket Hannah's thighs, pressing against them, climbing up them until they were around her bottom, and Hannah bent and spread her thighs, inviting Raven to keep exploring.

Raven obliged, reaching her hands around Hannah's rear on both sides, her fingers finding the places between Hannah's legs, the soft, private holes, touching and stroking them.

Hannah pulled Raven away from her nipple, forced her head back and kissed again, Raven reciprocating this time with a real kiss, wet and unrestrained, tongue exploring Hannah's mouth as if looking for medicine there, for salve, for life.

Still clutching Raven's ponytail, Hannah forced her back, disengaging her mouth and positioning her friend for further intimacy, Raven on her back with her head on Hannah's pillow, Hannah above her, turned now so that each girl could explore the others' sex.

Raven parted her legs obediently, two thick columns in the dark joined at her wet front chamber, and Hannah brought her mouth down and licked and sucked while her lower half performed its own, independent maneuvers, thighs spreading, pink temple dropping until Raven could reach the damp portico without raising her head, and the two girls delivered pleasure like that, bodies stiff with urgent tension, tongues licking, tasting, cleaning, clitorises swelling and throbbing, until the bodies served up their rewards, two climaxes rollicking through minds and hearts and vaginas, two females whose conditions as either slave or free had been rendered at this moment entirely irrelevant, two sex organs dripping their sweet, musky honey, two mouths drinking, two throats grunting through crushing pleasure, two souls finding a rare peace in a world gone undone.

Hannah held her position, kissing the top of Raven's pubic hair until Raven's breath had evened out, and she turned and lay beside the visitor and wrapped her hand around Raven's belly and kissed her ear.

If Raven fell asleep like this, so be it, Hannah thought. They'd shared a single bed before. And if Raven awoke in the middle of the night and slipped through the door into the adjoining cage, that was fine too.

"That was different," Raven whispered, fully awake.

"I wanted something . . . normal," Hannah whispered back.

Raven laughed. "So this is normal?"

"Of course," Hannah said. "Isn't it to you?"

"Yeah, but not you."

"Huh?"

"You've been different, ever since you got that scholarship, you—"

"Wait," Hannah said. "What?"

Raven paused, breathed in.

"School changes people."

"What?" Hannah blurted. "What? What are you talking about?"

"That's all," Raven said. "You've been through all kinds of things, and it—"

"So have you," Hannah said. "You've been—"

"Shhh," Raven said, reaching her hand through the darkness, putting a finger against Hannah's lips.

"No," Hannah said, pulling away. "I've always been about school. You know that. Nothing's changed with me. You've been—"

It wasn't a finger, or a sound, or anything definable that hushed Hannah this time. It was something in Raven's aura, a motion or a jerk or a packet of disquiet sent through the ether, girl to girl, that forced Hannah to abandon the sentence, uncompleted.

For a long time, they lay there like that, neither speaking, neither sleeping, until Raven drew in her breath deeply, as if her next words required full lungs. But what came out consisted of but three words.

"I was raped . . . by myself."

Hannah, who was prepared to weep over her friend, to cry and curse all evil, struggled with Raven's meaning.

So she held still, hand on Raven's belly, and waited for the next words.

“They wanted . . . me to . . . do it,” she said, and she sniffed, and Hannah peered at her lover’s face in the darkness and tried to imagine its customary serenity disturbed by pain and tears.

“I said no. I said never. I said take me back, set me free and let me go back to Dallas, and they said I didn’t know what I wanted, and they brought me people, boys with big hard dicks and pretty faces. And that’s what they thought. That they could break me that way. That if I let them get me off, I’d give in. And I wanted it. Believe me, every time I jerked off, I held my tits so hard they’d ache afterwards.”

Raven sniffed, swallowed, breathed in and whispered, as if to herself, “Fuck you. Fuck you.”

Hannah waited, trying to follow Raven’s words, hand on Raven’s belly, waiting, when Raven’s whole body shook.

With laughter.

“Oh my god,” she said, almost shouting it in the darkness. “Oh my god, I’m gonna say it. And it’s funny now, to me. Oh, god. So you know what they did?”

Hannah waited.

“They did some research,” Raven said, sniffing, laughing quietly, and she raised her hand to her face and brushed her eyes. “And they found out about you.”

Hannah breathed in, something in Raven’s words vaguely disconcerting.

“They found about you. They found out about our families, and they knew we got together. Somehow.”

Hannah froze.

That Raven and Hannah coupled, had been partnering sexually since literally the day Hannah was bought and brought home, was open knowledge in the Dupre and Petrosyan households. It was done as a matter of course, the girls being confined together, allowed to mate, questioned about it afterwards, asked to account for their orgasms and overall satisfaction with each other. Giving a recreational female regular outlets for her drives was considered, in any home where they were property, a responsible practice, like cleaning the pool or changing the oil.

But outside the families where it was done, it wasn’t discussed, because there was no reason to discuss it. No one in the Dupre or Petrosyan families would need to mention, at church, at school, at work, that they’d

put their girl with someone else's, encouraged her relief, removed the ache from her loins.

So who would know, beyond the two homes, that Raven took as her regular playmate Hannah Loughbridge, the Petrosyan's family girl?

Who would know?

Dimper and Dimper.

The name of the firm blazed through Hannah's mind, for they were the people who had been charged with recovering Raven after she'd been stolen, a charge that included asking polite questions of the free, and very direct questions of the enslaved, direct questions enforced with enough pain to be called torture, enough pain to elicit truth, or something like truth, enough pain to draw out confessions to things that were not even under investigation.

Hannah had admitted her relationship with Raven freely, before they'd bound her to a chair.

It was all supposed to be confidential, of course, what Hannah said, what was said to Hannah, what was done to her, the pain and the torture.

And Raven never knew.

Raven could never know.

Before she'd been taken, Raven had looked up things better left alone, of the policies applicable, of the practices employed, when a subject disappeared. She knew that, were Hannah to ever disappear, she would be interrogated. Thoroughly.

And she was certain, after she'd been stolen, that Hannah had suffered, that others with whom she'd been close had suffered.

She was right, of course, and it was, upon her return home a free girl, the source of so much pain that Hannah was forced to swear to her, over and over again, that it had not been done in her case, that they'd waived torture, satisfied with her professions of ignorance.

Had Dimper and Dimper talked? Had the word escaped, made its way through some route circuitous or more direct, from the locked files of Dimper and Dimper to the ears of Raven's captors? Had they told someone of Hannah's and Raven's regular coupling?

"What?" Raven said.

"What what?" Hannah answered, mouth dry.

"You got quiet," Raven observed. "What's wrong?"

"I'm listening to your story," Hannah said.

“You’re not fooling me,” Raven said. “What’s wrong?”

Lie, Hannah told herself. Lie.

“You said you raped yourself,” Hannah whispered, feigning hurt. “And then you said it had something to do with me. I need you to finish the story.”

“Oh,” Raven said, chuckling again, turning away from Hannah and pushing back, so that the two girls lay close, back to front, Hannah’s arm around Raven’s belly. “Okay, let me finish. But this is gonna be hard to say, and you’re gonna laugh. And that’s just gonna make it worse.”

“I won’t laugh,” Hannah promised, her mouth beside Raven’s ear.

“Anti-Hannah,” Raven whispered in the darkness.

Hannah laughed.

“Bitch,” Raven said.

Hannah couldn’t tell if Raven were joking or truly hurt.

“No,” Hannah said, feeling immediately guilty. “I’m sorry. Just finish your story.”

“That’s what I’m doing. They brought me anti-Hannah.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying,” Hannah complained, struggling not to laugh again. “Anti-Hannah? What’s that?”

“It’s just this girl, alright?”

“Alright,” Hannah said. “Is that the end of the story?”

“No, it’s not. They brought me this girl. A free girl. No collar. And fuck, fuck, fuck, she looked like you. Almost altogether. Hair a little lighter, because they bleached that shit. Pussy hair black, because they didn’t know what you had down there.”

“Didn’t they see my pictures?” Hannah asked. “It’s all showing in the ones they took to sell me.”

“No, you need an account to access all that,” Raven said. “And you can’t just make up a name. That’s all pretty strict. So I think they had to go find you.”

“Find me?” Hannah asked. “Where would they find me?”

“They probably figured out you were in Corpus Christi. I’m sure you’re on some list. And then they’d go look for you, or have someone else do it. I swear I heard ‘em talking about it once. Like, staring at a phone, saying ‘here she is, that’s her.’”

“Wait,” Hannah said. “You’re saying someone came to Corpus Christi and took my picture and then they used it to pick out someone for

you?”

“I’m not saying it, just speculating. Some of it was in code.”

“Code?” Hannah echoed.

“Code,” Raven said. “They looked at me and then someone started saying gargoyles.”

“Gargoyles?” Hannah repeated. “That’s what they said?”

“Or something like that.”

“They were talking about me, then.”

“You’re a gargoyle?” Raven asked, laughing.

“Gargoyle’s is a bar I go to,” Hannah said. “Sometime after lab, at night, if I have time before curfew at the kennels. It’s near campus. They must have taken my picture there.”

“Anti-Hannah,” Raven said. “Gargoyle.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Is that what they called her? Anti-Hannah?”

“No, she said her name was Roberta. She just showed up one day. Taking care of me was her new job, and some other people went away. She said she was in school. She said she was pre-med. It was spring sometime, March or April, and I hadn’t done anything with anyone else since late the last year. So first she acted like she didn’t care, didn’t want me, didn’t make the offer, and I’d just look at her, and think about it, like I was looking at everyone at that point, and then she came into my room, to clean up. She came in naked, because she just had a shower and it was in this old building that got hot whenever the sun was out, and that bitch, she . . . I . . .”

Raven shook again, and Hannah sensed rage instead of humor now. “And so . . . she got me to do it. Fuck. Fuck. Everything. Pussy. Ass. Mouth. Fuck. And I was on my back, and I was cumming, and . . .”

Raven paused, breathed in.

“You know how sometimes, you have to start cumming to know something?”

“Yeah.”

“I mean, know something other than sex? Some kinda high-octane truth?”

“Yeah. Sometimes.”

“It was one of those. I’m shaking and cumming and probably squirting and she’s over me licking and grinding, and that’s when I knew what they’d done, who they were, what she was there for.”

Hannah pressed her hand against Raven’s belly, listening.



“If a boy lies to you, and his lies get you to have sex with him, that’s rape,” Raven said. “Because you’re not having sex with the person you meant to have sex with. You’re having it with a stranger. That’s rape. He raped you. But if you should have known he was lying, if you cum and as soon as you cum you realize what you knew all along, that he lied and you knew he lied and that got you in bed with him . . . you’ve raped yourself.

“I knew she wasn’t in school,” Raven continued, disgust building in her voice. “And I didn’t stop. I let her keep going. I kept going. I came maybe five more times. She came all over me. Real cum. You can’t fake that.”

Raven’s voice was breaking again.

“What else do you call that?” she asked, voice soft and defeated. “When you know someone’s there to fuck with you, and you let them do it? She didn’t rape me. I raped myself.”

“I’m sorry,” Hannah said. “I’m sorry I let them take my —”

“Don’t even say it,” Raven interrupted. “Don’t even go there.”

“Go where?”

“You’re going to blame yourself for going to that place, that bar, and you can’t,” Raven said. “I’m not gonna let you.”

Hannah, silenced by the stridency in Raven’s voice, fell silent.

“The guilt will kill you,” Raven said. “It will not set you free. So don’t take it on. Do what you have to do, and don’t worry about not being perfect.”

“Okay,” Hannah said quietly.

“And hey,” Raven said, yawning and stretching, pushing her legs against Hannah’s. “You gave me what I needed tonight. Thanks for leading.”

“Yeah.”

## **Chapter 47: Stacey Prepares to Wait**

Stacey was certain she’d never sleep, but as soon as the lights were out, she went to her bed, slid the dildo under the sheets to the edge of the mattress, tossed the magazine to the floor, pulled the covers up to her neck and fell into a deep slumber, barely moving, dreaming of vague things,

waking with a start when her hand brushed the toy she'd put in herself the day before.

The lights were on. She could hear sounds. A breakfast tray lay on the floor by her door.

Sunday.

Sunday morning, presumably.

She'd be leaving Tuesday. Early, she'd been told.

Two days to go. Forty-eight hours.

She sat up, confirmed that the thing her hand had touched was the dildo.

She had moved beyond despair, now. This was how it was. She was being kept.

But she'd be going somewhere else, in two days.

In the meantime, she'd eat. The food wasn't bad.

She'd shower.

That girl would visit around dinner time, and this time, Stacey would be ready to talk. She'd ask about the weather. Was it still cold outside?

Maybe she'd masturbate, but she wasn't in the mood for that now.

Stacey didn't consider herself a social person. After her mother died, she closed around herself, and two years later, when she'd recovered enough to be social again, her old friends had moved on.

She'd made some new friends. She was going to be a bridesmaid for one of them. And she did well enough with boys. But much of her life was taken up with streaming TV and social media, binge-watching TV shows old and new, posting what she'd bought to Look!, liking what her friends posted. She would stay up until 2 in the morning most days, wake up at 11, have breakfast when most people were having lunch.

Often enough, her dad would call first thing in the morning and leave a message while he was driving to work and her phone was still off.

"Stacey, you up yet?" he'd ask. "How's the job search going? Did you call that guy (or girl)?"

That guy was invariably someone her dad knew who had a job or who might have a job that Stacey was overqualified or underqualified for.

"Are you thinking about school?"

He asked that a lot, around the time the local tech school was doing registration for the next semester.

Sometimes she'd call him back, when she needed money, and she'd learned how to say hopeful things. Yes, she'd be calling that guy today, yes there were some really interesting classes she'd be looking into, yes her goal for the day was to find three interesting companies to check in with.

Stacey slid off her bed, crossed her cell, picked up her breakfast tray, and brought it to the toilet, setting it on her thighs while she urinated, making of her body an impromptu breakfast table. She didn't like eating on the floor.

She chewed through an egg burrito and looked at the magazine, still lying where she'd tossed it.

It had fallen open, one page dominated by the serious, cat-like face of a horned owl, the other page full of text.

The owl was alive, not dead like the deer on the cover.

Stacey was alive, not dead like girls usually are when they're put into a box.

She would read that article. She would read the whole magazine.

If she was going to Texas to be with hunting people, she might as well get a sense of what they were like. The couple on the cover, holding rifles with scopes and posing with the dead deer, didn't look that terrible. Maybe they were going to eat the deer. If you ate what you killed, it wasn't murder.

## **Chapter 48: Forgotten Memories, Future Plans**

Hannah woke first, alone in her bed, the first light of dawn breaking through the windows. She looked through the bars to the other cage, saw Raven's form under the blanket, rose to go to the toilet.

Sunday morning. The red letters of the clock under the windows said 6:55 a.m.

Tonight, she'd be with Franklin.

A long drive with Athena, then a long night with Franklin. Surely they'd talk, whispering in his cage after Athena had gone to bed. And not just about morality this time, or religion, or people.

They needed to talk about each other.

She had fallen for him since almost the first moment they'd met. She had promised, at the end of that meeting – an assessment, being done

for Athena, of Franklin's sexual proclivities – that she would come for him, that he must wait for her.

It had been part guarantee, part prophecy, for it assumed that Franklin would one day need someone to come for him, and it assumed that Hannah would have the freedom and the resources to be that person.

He didn't need rescuing now. He seemed to be doing fine.

And Hannah's strengths tended toward academics and research, with fewer capabilities in the endeavor of freeing subjects. Or rescuing them. Or coming for them.

What did that even mean, anyway? How did one come for someone else, free or slave?

Would what happened tonight qualify?

But longer term, if they were meant for each other, they would find a way. If all the slaves were freed, Hannah would find Franklin as a matter of course. If Franklin's grandfather succeeded in restructuring his corporate debt, he would buy back his grandson from Athena – it was in the sales contract, not something she could refuse – and Franklin would go free and then . . . what?

Perhaps he'd come for Hannah. Perhaps he'd buy her and set her free and . . .

Hannah sometimes wondered if she were being ridiculous when it came to Franklin, and her mind was going there again when she heard the sheets rustle, looked over to see Raven stirring, sitting up, stretching in the early light.

"Hey, Sweetheart," Raven yawned.

"Good morning," Hannah said back. "Sleep okay?"

"Always, after you."

"You didn't dream you'd been with Anti-Hannah again?"

Raven laughed, husky and loud, and Hannah felt she'd brought her friend back, a little more, from what she'd been through.

There is the suffering the mind remembers consciously, and then the under-suffering, the ways people act in response to pain that they can't control, that they don't even know they're doing.

Like Raven, holding back in bed.

The under-suffering.

There were a million people in America wearing collars, smiling and doing as they were told, Hannah thought, while they under-suffered in

ways that not even they knew, in ways that would long linger, whether slavery were ended tomorrow or not for another hundred years.

Raven went to her toilet, looked up at the windows while she released.

No, not just those under collar. The free suffer too, in their own way, because of what they see and hear.

Because of what they do.

Hannah went back to her bed, sitting cross-legged, turning her mind to the day before her, the night.

“You remember when we met?” Raven asked.

“Like it was yesterday,” Hannah said. “At Gramma’s. You cooked for us, and then you fell into Uncle Bear’s lap and told me he was your boyfriend.”

“Huh?” Raven blurted.

The elevator bumped.

“Hannah, Raven?” Athena called. “You decent?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Raven replied, flushing and going to her bars. Hannah held silent. Something about Raven’s response was troubling her.

Hannah had described her memory of meeting Raven, and Raven had replied merely “Huh?”

Had Hannah forgotten something?

Had Hannah forgotten several somethings?

The light came on, Athena appeared with two plates of breakfast, and she passed them through the slots to the confined girls.

Scrambled eggs, microwaved sausages, toast. Nothing special, obviously thrown together by Athena in the last five minutes.

“Raven, you hungry?” Athena asked.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Raven replied, sitting on her bed with the plate before her. “Thank you.”

Hannah didn’t need to be asked. Her appetite was always good first thing, and she set her plate on her desk and took her first bite.

She thought Athena was going to leave, but the girl lingered. Hannah wanted her to go, so she could continue her conversation with Raven, about . . . something.

About what? What had they been talking about? A memory? Yes, a memory. About . . .

“Raven, when are you going back home?” Athena asked.

“They’re expecting me first thing,” Raven said. “Me and Bear are getting invitations done today.”

“Okay,” Athena said. “Hannah, can you be ready to go in two hours?”

“You mean, back to school?”

“Yeah, back to school.”

“It might take more like three,” Hannah said. “I’ve got to decide what to pack, and get ready.”

“You don’t need makeup,” Athena shot back.

“What?” Hannah asked.

“You’re just seeing Franklin tonight. You don’t need to put on makeup.”

Hannah blushed as she worked through a range of troubled thoughts, of shame and frustration and the yearning for things she couldn’t quite define.

“I’ll be ready,” Hannah said, not wanting to argue about what she needed or didn’t need while Raven was listening. She hadn’t talked about Franklin with Raven. She hadn’t talked about Franklin with anyone.

“Mom wants your temps taken,” Athena said.

Hannah shoved a forkful of eggs into her mouth, stood and slipped her hands through the bracket set into the bars. Athena tightened them, closing the metal around Hannah’s wrists, forcing her into a standing position at the front of her cage, secured there so her door could be opened for cleaning, held in that position so she could be inspected, or spoken to or, sometimes, punished.

Athena left, returned with two thermometers, unlocked Hannah’s cage door and stepped in.

Hannah parted her legs and bent, allowing Athena to slide the thermometers into her chambers, anus first, then vagina.

“Are we going straight to your place?” Hannah asked with a quick glance at Raven. Was this a violation of her terms? Was she offended by this little ritual with the family’s girl? Raven didn’t seem to care, working at her breakfast.

“Yeah, but we’re stopping for lunch somewhere,” Athena replied, pressing her fingers against the two gauges protruding from Hannah’s holes. “I’m having Franklin dropped off early this afternoon, so he should be there

when we show up. And then you'll do it and I'll take you back to the kennels."

"Take me back . . . ?"

"Yeah, to the kennels," Athena said, the impatience in her tone passing from her mouth and down her arm and into her fingers, where it was translated into a shove that pushed the vaginal thermometer deeper.

"You mean, tonight?" Hannah asked.

"Yeah, why?" Athena replied.

"I just wasn't sure," Hannah said, heart sinking, and she lied through her pain, as she had learned to do through considerable experience. "But that's perfect. I've got a lot of things to do in the kennels."

The thermometers beeped, Athena withdrew them and scowled while she read them. Taking Hannah's temperature was a job normally reserved for Darcy, the family's free maid, and Athena had made it clear any time it fell to her that she found it distasteful.

"You're cold," Athena said, recording Hannah's data on a sheet on the wall beside her cage.

"I'm about to start my period," Hannah said. "Tomorrow or the next day."

"You're not going to start tonight, right?" Athena asked.

"Probably not."

"I don't know if it matters anyway," Athena said. "I doubt you're going to get much out of Franklin. He was supposed to do another round with someone this morning."

"Okay."

"Raven, you're free," Athena said.

Raven laughed, slid off the bed and stepped to the bars to offer Hannah a kiss, the girls exchanging a long, open-mouthed farewell. Once Raven had exited the cage, Athena locked both doors back.

"Bye, Honey," Raven said, smiling, but with a little sorrow in her eyes.

"See you," Hannah replied, smiling, with an ache in her heart that felt like it had been turned to hard plastic.

Athena released Hannah's wrists, and the two girls went to the elevator.

"Hannah, be ready to go upstairs to pack in 90 minutes," Athena yelled before the elevator bumped and shut and whisked the two girls away.

Hannah hurried in the shower so she'd have time to make herself up carefully, a touch of shadow around her eyes, an understated lipstick, a little blush.

By the time Athena appeared, she'd stacked up all the things she'd been allowed to keep in her cage – textbooks, journals, notebooks, a box of tampons – and balanced them on one arm while she followed Athena to the elevator and to her upstairs bedroom, one of her favorite places in the world, a room with its own barred window she was allowed to stay in now and then, sometimes to entertain, sometimes by herself.

Hannah had received her share of presents over Christmas: a formal van Minsk gown, three sun dresses for spring by Time & Place, some belts, a pair of flats by Cathedral, two new pairs of jeans, and a new Nature's Army bookbag, jet black this time, with gray/black piping.

She packed what she could fit in her suitcase, put on blue jeans and a cream chamois cloth shirt, slipped her feet into black canvas sneakers, and the girls went to the kitchen to hug Laura and Ormek goodbye.

"We'll see you over spring break?" Laura asked, staring earnestly into Hannah's eyes.

The sentence was inflected to sound like a question, but Hannah heard a command, and knew Laura well enough to sense there was something behind the request.

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah replied.

Laura kept staring.

"A national orthopedic group," she continued, while Ormek looked only at his wife. "North American Orthopedics . . . is doing a conference here that week. We'll be putting up a dozen or so of them here. Sunday through Tuesday night."

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said again, eyebrows raised in innocent curiosity, pretending she didn't know where the conversation was going.

"Some of our guests will be single," Laura continued. "Or traveling alone. And it's sometimes customary . . . when a girl belongs to the house . . . that she . . . do her part."

"Yes, Ma'am, of course," Hannah said politely. "I'll be glad to help. I'm sure I can get away from my project for a few days that week."

"Some of our guests will be respected authorities," Laura continued, as if Hannah hadn't already agreed, as if she still needed to be won over. "Your . . . engagement . . . will be very good. For all of us."



“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said.

“For you as well,” Laura added.

“Of course,” Hannah agreed.

Of course.

Shouldn’t this bother her? Shouldn’t Hannah be troubled every time she was loaned out, procured, offered to friends, family, strangers?

Perhaps, but she felt nothing.

She would perform, and she would feel it. Feel it and enjoy it, often enough.

Cum, if she could.

And she usually could.

That was her payment, then. Orgasm. The fee she received for her services.

No, climaxing was just a part of her payment.

She got room and board in this deal, and she’d struggled enough for board when she and her mother languished in poverty to know this was not a blessing to be taken for granted. Competing in dumpsters for dented cans of meat and castoff produce, getting handouts from church, searching for half-meals in plastic garbage bags behind restaurants the morning after, coming up empty-handed often enough – these were the memories everyone should have, Hannah thought, because the gratitude for mere food never faded.

So besides her orgasms, Hannah got food and shelter, and she got clothing and makeup, and she got school.

She got school.

She gave over her body, grunting and laughing and wresting her own pleasure expertly, and all the while, her mind grew, hard and sharp and wise, expanding as if it were an organ that could change in size, grow erect under the hand of truth, absorbing knowledge and retaining most of it, turning dense and gorgeous, because a mind full of truth and the ability to find more truth was surely more beautiful than any made up face anywhere, any pair of bare breasts, any vulva or mound, whether shorn of hair or bearing a golden thicket.

“And then that Wednesday, Odessa,” Athena announced.

“We’ll see,” Ormek said, staring at his daughter sternly.

“You know what I’m talking about, right, Hannah?”

“Sure,” Hannah said, puzzled. “Isn’t it about a seven-hour drive?”

“Uh, hello?” Athena said. “You can’t drive there.”

“I thought you could,” Hannah said. “Is the highway out?”

“Odessa is in, um, Russia,” Athena said.

“Ukraine,” Ormek corrected quietly, adding even more quietly, sympathetically, “There is an Odessa in Texas.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, her befuddlement only growing.

“van Minsk!” Athena said, nearly shouting.

Hannah looked at her, not even pretending to understand.

“They do fittings there, hello?” Athena said, eyes glowing now, voice quavering with excitement. “It’s their headquarters, and you go for three days and you get a consultant the whole time, and they measure the fuck out of—”

“Athena!” Laura protested.

“Okay, okay, sorry,” Athena continued, not sounding remotely chastened. “They measure everything, like down to the millimeter, and tell you exactly what you should be wearing, and custom-tailor everything, and, and . . . oh my god.”

Athena stuck her fingers in her mouth and, wide-eyed, turned to Hannah and bit.

“Okay,” Hannah said, wondering where Franklin would stay while Athena was gone, if Athena might want Hannah to keep him company, or if he’d be shipped off to breed again.

“You’re coming with,” Athena said, looking directly at Hannah.

“Huh?”

“I swear I’ve told you about this,” Athena said.

“No,” Hannah said adamantly.

## Chapter 49: Stacey With a Magazine

Because it’s all she had to do beside stare at white walls or masturbate, Stacey turned her attention to *Southern Hunter*, the magazine she’d been given during last night’s wellness check.

Was she handed this because she was going to be sent to stay with southern hunters in Texas? Or was it all they had available?

Either way, she approached it with a determination she rarely used for print materials, sitting cross-legged on her bed, flipping to the first page and reading all the words of an advertisement for a big SUV that was

perfect for outdoor adventures, whether or not killing animals was one of the trip's objectives.

By the fifth page, taken up by a long, boring column from the editor about changes to hunting seasons in the Midwest and New England, Stacey found herself longing for her PC and something more social.

"Help, me Daddy!" she'd scream in every medium she could access. Look!, Pixieframe, Wagth'Dog, Householde. Even matchmaker sites. "Female, looking for freedom," she'd write.

There was no laptop, so she returned her eyes to the page, looked up the wall.

She wasn't dumb, Stacey told herself. She always learned quickly in the first weeks of any class, always got 100's on the first quizzes. And then, invariably, she'd learn enough to realize how much she didn't know, how many more areas there were to learn in what she thought was a single discipline, and she'd lose hope of ever being anything but ignorant in whatever it was – math, physical therapy, interior design – and she'd give up.

What's the use?

If she was going to be shipped off to a group of Texas hunters, though (was group the right word? band? clan? gang?), she needed to learn their ways, regardless, and she plowed ahead.

The article about owls was especially interesting to her. Owls were amazing hunters, and they could teach humans about stealth and dedication to the craft.

Armed with the magazine and her own body, Stacey found she had the rudiments necessary to measure out her day, almost tolerably. She was learning to cope, to adapt, to wait until Tuesday.

Lunch would be coming. Then she would read some more.

She could stand by her door and hear things happening in the hall, and she planned to do that on occasion, to listen for voices and footsteps and doors opening and shutting, and locks being locked or unlocked and chains scraping along the floor.

She would take a shower after lunch. Then more reading. Then dinner. After that, the girl would show up for a wellness check.

That would be the highlight of the day – another person to talk to.

Only when the girl was gone and the cover was latched would she return to her dildo and the pleasures it would bring.

How long could she stretch the session out? Half an hour? An hour? How many orgasms could she have?

## Chapter 50: An Argument in a Car

“You’re going with me. We’re both going van Minsking. That’s what they call it. van Minsking.”

“I . . . uh,” Hannah stammered.

“Mom and Dad say I have to go with someone mature,” Athena said, looking at her parents, who looked back impassively, clearly not completely sold on this idea. “So, I’m taking you.”

Athena stared at Hannah, almost daring her to refuse the trip.

“Okay,” Hannah said, smiling now. “Sure.”

Just agree, she told herself. Process on your own time. Save your reservations for later. Refuse later. There is no reason to provoke Athena, particularly in front of her parents, right before the girls embarked on a half-day drive together.

Maybe it would be a good thing. Her van Minsk already all fit just fine, but maybe it would be fun. Maybe when it was just her and Athena traveling together, Athena would be more tolerable. And she’d be going to Europe. Hannah had never been to Europe, and she’d been wanting to go. What were the subject laws like there?

“You’re Athena’s most responsible friend,” Laura said.

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Hannah said.

Friend.

So that’s what Hannah was today. A friend.

Athena’s friend.

Yes, Athena would put her friend in chains in a few minutes and set her in the passenger seat of her car and drive her for six hours back to Corpus Christi, where she’d put her friend in a cage to copulate with her male slave before she drove her friend back to the kennels to spend the night in her own cage.

But throughout, they’d be friends.

Hannah blinked at Laura and Ormek and chided herself.

Be grateful, she thought. Riding with Athena was far better than suffering through a journey of six hours – or probably more – on a truck, chained by her wrists and ankles to the floor of a transport cage.

And then, school awaited. Research. Books. And all the other pleasures of life. Dinners in the kennels with other subjects, sex in the kennels too. And weekends with Allain, going out with his gang, going to the club, to the gulf to put her feet in the water.

As soon as they were on the road, Athena driving and Hannah bound hand and foot in her regular travel chains, her suitcase in the trunk next to Athena's, her books and journals between her feet, Athena brought up Odessa again.

"Okay," Athena began, "here's the deal about van Minsk, and you have to say yes."

"No," Hannah said.

"You said yes to Mom and Dad."

"That was just so we could leave. I didn't want to make them watch us argue."

"Okay, so your deal is—"

"It's not my deal."

"I haven't even said the deal yet!" Athena shouted, shaking the steering wheel, but she didn't sound completely exasperated yet. She was just being dramatic.

"I'm not going to agree to any deal until I hear it," Hannah said.

"And only if I like it. That's why I said no. Don't say I have to say yes to a deal I—"

"Okay, whatever," Athena said. "Here's what happened. You know I've been wanting to go van Minsking in Odessa for, like, a year, right?"

"I think, so," Hannah replied. "It sort of sounds familiar."

"So I told Mom and Dad, let me go over spring break. I'll fly with my own money. And they said no, not unless someone goes with you. They won't let me go by myself."

Athena paused.

"And that's where you come in."

"How many nights?"

"We leave Tuesday or Wednesday afternoon, and fly all night," Athena said. "The next day, they pick us up, and we check into this awesome hotel right near their headquarters, and we go—"

"How much is the hotel?"

"I'm paying for it," Athena said. "We'll be sharing a room. Or it's like a suite."

“Okay.”

“And we go next door, and it’s totally all about us. They don’t just measure you. They talk to you. They take pictures. They watch you walk. You do this, like, this thing where you get ink on your feet and walk on paper, and they study it—”

“Uh,” Hannah gasped, sounding like she’d just been punched.

The panic had come from nowhere. A memory. No, a memory of a memory. Something. Something . . .

“What?” Athena said.

“Nothing,” Hannah said. “I just didn’t understand . . . the paper thing.”

“It’s really simple,” Athena said slowly, as if Hannah couldn’t understand her otherwise. “You walk on this paper after they put black ink on your feet, and then they run your footprints through this computer thing, and it tells you all kinds of things about yourself. There’s a video of it I can show you, if you’re still not getting it.”

“Okay, I get it,” Hannah said icily, panic turning to annoyance, and she shifted in her seat and her chains rang out and she bent over and spread her feet, stretching taut her ankle chain, and she reached between her legs for the book at the top of the stack, her economics book.

“What about that is bothering you?” Athena asked.

“It’s not.”

“You’re a liar.”

“Have me punished then.”

“That was low. Really low.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked.

“I have only ever called you a liar once,” Athena said. “Officially. And I don’t like what happened any more than you did.”

“No, I liked it less than you,” Hannah retorted, spreading her book out on her lap with a definitive clink of chain. “Since it was done to me.”

Athena sighed, accelerating on an open stretch of the highway leading out of Dallas.

Hannah flipped through to her bookmark, tried to read, but her ability to concentrate was ruined by Athena’s irritation and something else, something she was trying to remember and couldn’t.

What had triggered it? Black ink on feet. Black feet on paper. Black footprints.

“You know just how to push my buttons,” Athena said. “You push and you push and you get me to say stupid things, and . . . I swear to fucking Christ you know you’re doing it. You’re keeping score, somewhere in that blonde fucking head of yours.”

Athena drew in her breath, hit the gas, said “fuck” under her breath when the light ahead turned amber and she had to brake.

Hannah stared at the light at the top, turning red, then at the green light at the bottom, unlit and almost black.

“That’s it,” Hannah said. “That’s it!”

“What’s it?” Athena demanded.

“Black ink on feet. On one foot. Foot on paper. That’s what I had to do, for them to know it was me.”

“Oh my god,” Athena spouted, “what the fuck are you talking about?”

“When they first took me. They had to make sure it was me. So I had to give them a footprint. I had to put my foot on a piece of black paper, and then on a piece of white paper, and then . . . they compared it to my birth certificate, and they knew it was me.”

Hannah’s voice was shaking, her mind overcome by the joy of recovering something she thought she’d lost, a relief almost physical in its intensity, like pulling out a splinter. If she could recover this memory, she could recover others. And there were others. Haunting her, brushing her cheek and then dissipating before she could get a good look. Memories of dreams. Or memories of things that had really happened, that her mind had experienced and tucked away for some reason, folded and stuffed into a back pocket, like a parking ticket, or an invitation to a party she couldn’t attend.

Important things, though.

But then, with the relief, there was pain, because 20 years ago, a footprint was taken of an infant female named Hannah Loughbridge, and 18 years after that, that same footprint was used to turn her into a slave. And more than two years beyond that, she was still a slave.

“I feel like I’m losing things,” Hannah said numbly. “I feel like there are other memories I’ve lost. Someone will say something, and I’ll just . . . have this memory, but I can’t catch it. And I don’t know why it’s happening. I—”

“So you’re not going to do the paper thing?” Athena asked dully.

“No, I will,” Hannah said, adding hastily, “if I go. I haven’t said I’ll go yet. You haven’t told me what your deal is yet.”

“Okay, there’s this guy, Arnold, or Arnaud or something.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“He’s a big doctor guy. And he knows people.”

“How tall is he?” Hannah asked.

“I don’t mean big as in tall, god,” Athena said. “Big as in, a big name. Someone Dad cares about, and he’s been trying to get the guy going on something.”

“Does he wear van Minsk?”

“Huh?”

“Does he wear van Minsk?” Hannah repeated. “I’m trying to get why you’re—”

“van Minsk is for girls.”

“Well, I’m trying to get the connection with him and—”

“Fuck, will you please let me finish? Fuck!”

“Sure,” Hannah agreed.

“I’m giving you the buildup, okay?” Athena said, gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles and hitting the gas. “Like, the background. So what comes after makes sense. You’re not supposed to just say the last thing first, okay? You need to give some details. Like, like, preliminary stuff.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“You know that, right?” Athena asked, clipping off the words, struggling to keep her voice even. “When you read all those journal articles and everything, don’t they give you backup? Or background, I mean?”

“They do,” Hannah said. “But usually there’s some connection with the final point.”

“There is some connection!” Athena shouted, staring at the highway ahead, wide-eyed with frustration. “Just let me finish, please. As in, shut the fuck up and let me finish my story, and then it will all make sense in your super-powerful girl brain, and you can stop making fun of me with dumbass questions.”

Hannah looked out the window and pondered the fraught chemistry between herself and Athena Petrosyan. Why had she asked the van Minsk question? Was she provoking the girl on purpose? Was there something wrong with her? Or was it just another way to beat on the walls of her



figurative cage, to yank on her figurative chains, because the literal forms wouldn't budge?

Every time she angered Athena and didn't get punished, her confines grew a little larger, perhaps.

Was that what this was? Hannah was bound and confined, and she in turn tormented and ridiculed Athena, her easiest target. Was Hannah so offended by her condition she lashed out, without even knowing she was doing it?

Athena drew in her breath and spoke again, calmly.

"Mom and Dad explained it to me last night," Athena said. "I don't know all the details. Dad has some ideas about orthopedics, though, that he thinks he could sell or something, and make some money off of. And this, um, guy, he knows how it's done, or knows people, or something. Or whatever, I don't get all the details."

Athena drew in her breath.

"So, he's coming to the conference and Dad said 'Hey, stay with us,' 'cuz this is a huge opportunity for Dad, apparently, and he says back 'Maybe, and hey, don't you have that girl?' and I'm not supposed to tell you this but to some people you're like, this celebrity or something."

Hannah studied the winter landscape, dark green pines beyond a fence and a field, while she worked through Athena's words and arrived, carefully, at a question that was meant only to elicit information.

"So," Hannah began cautiously, "I'm not completely clear yet on . . . the van Minsk trip."

"Okay," Athena said, calmly. "Mom and Dad said my job is to keep doing well in school, and get a firm commitment from you . . . on the conference. And then we can go."

"A commitment?"

"He wants you, okay? And so Dad needs to tell him you'll be there for him. And there will be other people there, and you'll be, um, taking care of them too." Athena paused. "A woman, too. You're okay with that? A woman?"

"Yes."

"So you're just helping out. Like Mom said before we left. Like Mom said. And you were okay with it."

Hannah continued to stare, plumbing her own feelings, trying to arrive at a response that came out clean, measured, understandable to

someone like Athena.

“What do I get?” Hannah asked quietly, simply.

“What do you want?” Athena replied.

Yes, Hannah thought. This was why Athena had been given the job. Because she was the family’s negotiator, the family’s expert in managing and dealing with slaves and slavery. She had a knack for it.

“No chains,” Hannah said. “All the way to Europe and all the way back. No chains.”

“That might not be legal,” Athena said. “I’m not sure how things work there. I—”

“As an owner, you have discretion,” Hannah said. “No chains.”

“Okay, on the plane, yes,” Athena said. “There and back.”

Hannah was silent. She knew Athena was holding out a loophole – the right to chain Hannah once they were on the ground. But she knew she couldn’t ask for that much.

“That’s it?” Athena said.

“I’m asking for that because I want to see Odessa,” Hannah said. “I’m sure it’s nice. I want to see things there, and not just van Minsk.”

“What could be better than van Minsk?”

“I’m sure there are cathedrals there,” Hannah said. “Or castles. Or museums.”

“You would go to places like that instead of getting the best clothes in the world?”

“I would, yes,” Hannah said. “Or, I would do both. I would like to do the fittings at van Minsk too.”

“Fine,” Athena said. “Maybe you can go on the day they want to do the paper thing, since thinking about that makes you all weird.”

“Okay,” Hannah said uncertainly.

What was she really committing to? she wondered.

Her body for a trip to Europe.

But how many people would she be with? How demanding would they be? What would they expect? What if they weren’t satisfied? Or mean?

“Is he nice?” Hannah asked.

“Who?”

“That man.”

“I haven’t met him,” Athena said. “Dad hasn’t even met him. But does that matter?”

“A little, yeah,” Hannah said. “It helps if you can find something to like.”

“Is it hard?” Athena asked.

Hannah turned to look. Athena was staring at the highway ahead, but her features had softened, and she seemed to be feeling something new for the family’s girl. Not compassion, probably, but something akin. Curiosity, perhaps. The kind of curiosity that could be a gateway to sympathy.

“No, it hasn’t been,” Hannah said. “I like everyone I’ve been with. I guess I’ve been lucky.”

“What if we put you with someone you don’t like?”

“I won’t do it,” Hannah said flatly. “Find another girl.”

“You mean that?”

“I do,” Hannah said.

She’d always felt that way, ever since she realized for what purpose she’d been taken, but the words were leaving her mouth with particular emphasis today, because of what Raven had told her last night.

Raven had been tricked into sex with her captors, and it had felt like rape to her, like she had raped herself.

Hannah would not be raped, not physically, not directly.

Nor would she rape herself.

“I’m not going to tell Mom and Dad you said that,” Athena said. “I’ll just tell them you said yes.”

“I might not like him,” Hannah said.

Hannah wasn’t sure why she needed to say this. It was always understood, but something about what Raven had told her last night was bothering her, and she wasn’t sure why. Expressing agency – yes, agency was the word, something she’d heard in one class or other, a term that meant one’s power over one’s own destiny – felt like a salve for whatever vague discomfort was troubling her.

“Okay,” Athena said dismissively, because the question was settled. Thanks to Athena’s unique negotiating skills, Hannah would be serving the guests of the Petrosyan’s in her special capacity, and that would earn Athena the right to go to van Minsk.

“So you’re going with me, right?” Athena demanded. “It’s official?”

“To Odessa?”

“Yeah. Uh, hello? van Minsk?”

Hannah pondered, uncertain. How much studying would she need to do over spring break? Could she leave her girl, the girl with three ovaries, alone for a week while she worked at the Petrosyans and traipsed overseas?

“I can’t say absolutely for sure yet,” Hannah said.

“Why not?”

“They might need me to stay at school, for my research project.”

“When will you know?”

“I’ll try to find out in the next few weeks.”

“Okay,” Athena said, and she reduced her speed to something that probably wouldn’t get her pulled over, and the color returned to her knuckles.

For a time, Hannah studied and Athena drove, the landscape spilling by, Hannah able to focus on her book now, on a chapter with formulas about supply and demand and optimal pricing and, after she wrapped her mind around the notion you could apply formulae to human behavior, she felt right at home, the math making sense.

“Hungry?” Athena asked, slowing and signaling to take the next exit without waiting for an answer.

“Yeah,” Hannah said anyway.

They made their way onto a commercial strip of familiar stores and restaurants and gas stations, and Athena pumped gas, finishing there and driving to the nicest restaurant available, a Daughtry’s Steak House with indoor facilities for subjects, something Hannah was grateful for. And Athena released her wrists at the table, something else Hannah liked, even if her feet were still bound.

Toward the end of the meal, Athena’s phone vibrated, she pulled it out of her back pocket, tapped it and raised it to her ear.

“Hey, Mom,” she said. “Okay. Yeah? What?”

Athena looked at Hannah with an expression that went from puzzled to shocked.

“No way!” she shouted.

Hannah watched Athena’s face, trying to guess what Laura might be saying to her.

For a long, strange moment, Athena returned her gaze, staring into Hannah’s eyes with an unreadable expression before she scowled, slid out

of her seat and whispered, “Stay here.”

Hannah watched Athena stride toward the restaurant’s front door and step into the Texas winter chill.

## **Chapter 51: Another Wellness Check**

As soon as dinner was over, a meal Stacey dragged out as long as she could, she returned to her bed and her magazine, but with one ear for the door, because she knew the girl would be coming soon.

The voice startled her, however, breaking the monotony of her confinement before she knew anyone was there, and sounding distinctly male.

“Hey.”

Stacey looked up, startled.

“Hey.”

It was the boy from the first day, the boy who’d let her out of the box when the girl proposed she sleep there.

Tonight, he’d unlatched the panel without making a sound.

Stacey slid off the bed, set down the magazine, and was halfway to her door before she remembered she was nude. She paused, briefly, before she remembered he’d already seen her naked, and everyone here had already seen her nude if they’d seen her at all, and it probably didn’t matter.

Still, she raised one hand to her breast, draped the other one casually over her bald mound, and stood, staring.

“Wellness check, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, doing well?”

“Uh, I guess,” Stacey stammered, the bluntness of the question surprising her before she decided to answer with her own bluntness. “Am I going to stay with hunters in Texas?”

“Huh?”

“Is that why you, I mean she, the girl last night, gave me that magazine?”

“What magazine?”

Stacey turned, stepped to her bed, grabbed the open publication, turned back, felt her breasts bouncing and decided not to try to cover them this time.

“She gave me this,” Stacey said, holding it up. “Southern Hunter.”

“No,” he laughed. “We don’t give magazines to people for where they’re going.”

“Okay,” Stacey said. “Then where am I going?”

“A University in Corpus Christi.”

“Which university?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “The main one. Hey, are those your meal trays?”

Stacey turned and surveyed her cell. She’d left her dinner tray on the floor under her sink. Breakfast and lunch and the dishes on them were at the foot of her bed. There were several more trays stacked up next to her toilet.

“Am I supposed to wash them?”

“No, you’re supposed to put them next to the slot when your next meal comes, so they can take them.”

“Sorry.”

Stacey gathered up the trays and dishes, some bearing the crusty remains of food she hadn’t finished, and raised them to the port.

“Just put them on the floor next to the slot,” the boy said. “They’ll get them in the morning.”

Stacey set them down, stood.

“Do you have any more magazines?”

“No, I have books.”

“Give me one.”

“Romance or mystery?”

“Romance,” Stacey said, realizing after she’d spoken the word that she had a lump in her throat.

## **Chapter 52: An Offer Declined, a Rule to be Followed**

Athena returned to the table, saying nothing, her expression still incomprehensible, and she paid and returned Hannah’s wrists to her chains and led her out and back to the car.

For a time, the girls traveled in silence, Hannah continuing to try to make sense of economics, Athena driving.

But something else was bothering Hannah.

“What did you mean, earlier,” Hannah said, “by, um, that I’m . . . a celebrity?”

Athena sighed.

“I was waiting for that question.”

“Are you going to answer it?”

“Mom and Dad told me not to say anything. And I shouldn’t have. Because now your head’s going to get even bigger.”

“You think I have a big head?”

“Hannah,” Athena said with the utmost patience, “I think you’re already the vainest person I’ve ever met. And now you know—”

“What are you talking about?” Hannah demanded, almost shouting. “Athena . . . Athena . . . damn you!”

Athena cackled, head raised, eyes closed, no awareness of the road before her.

“Damn me?” she howled. “Did you just say that? Damn me?”

“I am not vain!” Hannah shouted. “Take that back! You can’t say that! You can’t tell me that!”

Athena looked at Hannah, first into her eyes, then at her wrists, as if to make sure she was still chained, as if Athena were concerned about her personal safety. Satisfied perhaps that Hannah hadn’t slipped her restraints and couldn’t throw punches or pull her hair, she turned her eyes forward, and her eyes took on their hardest cast.

“Oh no, Sir,” she said, using the high-pitched, lisping tone she often employed to mock Hannah. “I’m not smart at all, I just work very hard at things. Oh no, Ma’am, I’m just a simple little subject girl, and I get straight A’s and full scholarships and research projects and . . . and . . . seventy-five thousand fucking dollars because I’m just lucky, I guess, oh and, and . . .”

Athena continued, eyes on the highway, body still, but her voice quivering with anger and a faux Hannah lilt.

“. . . and . . . please don’t stare too hard when I walk away . . . because . . . well, all my skirts and jeans are very tight, of course, and I know my ass bounces a lot . . . but I’m not doing it on purpose, it’s just the way I walk. It’s just . . . like everything else . . . something that happens!”

Used as Hannah was to Athena’s diatribes, this one stung, and she bit her lip and looked down at her textbook, torn between defending herself and withdrawing, pulling away from Athena to some remote place in her mind where Athena didn’t exist, even if they were seated beside each other in a car Athena was driving.

Hannah decided to speak.

“I’m not vain.”

“No, you’re not vain,” Athena shot back. “Vain is if you’re all that, and you admit it. Vain is saying, ‘Yeah, I’m hot shit, loser, deal with it.’ But you . . . you’re worse than that. You know you’re hot shit, and you keep denying it. And it doesn’t fool anyone. So you’re not vain. You’re super-vain. Mega vain. It’s the worst kind of vain in the world, because of how annoying it is.”

Athena paused, drew in her breath, laughed bitterly.

“You’ve always been that way,” she continued. “From the very first night. From literally the very first, fucking night.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember right after we brought you home, and I gave you my math homework, and you worked all the problems while we thought you were asleep?”

“Oh,” Hannah replied. “Yeah?”

“And we were so sure you’d been asleep we kept saying that at dinner, and you didn’t correct us.”

“So?”

“You should have been, like, ‘Oh, no, biyotches, I worked that shit!’” Athena exclaimed. “I’m smart, I’m beautiful, and you can just suck it!”

“I would never have said any of that.”

“I know. Because you’re not just vain. You’re mega-vain.”

“Why are you angry?”

“I’m not angry.”

“You sound angry, then. Why?”

Now it was Athena’s turn to bite her lip, to work out her next words before she spoke them.

“He called,” she said at last.

“Who called?”

“Like you don’t know.”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said.

“Dietrich Johnson.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Is that who you were talking to?”

“No, I was talking to Mom, duh,” Athena replied acidly.

“How was I supposed to know who you were talking to?” Hannah asked.



“When my phone rang, and I was sitting at the table,” Athena said, biting off each word, “I said, ‘Hey, Mom.’ Do you remember that?”

“And then you went outside,” Hannah said. “Maybe you were talking to Dr. Johnson out there.”

“I wasn’t,” Athena said. “Just Mom. He asked her how much.”

“How much what?” Hannah asked, sensing she already knew.

“He wants to buy you,” Athena said. “And Mom said you’re not for sale, at any price.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, and her eyes grew moist and her throat closed and she choked out her next words. “But why . . . are you mad?”

“Mom called me because she wanted me to ask you something.”

“What?”

“Do you want him to buy you?”

“No,” Hannah said. “No.”

“Why not?”

“No.”

“You’d get rid of me,” Athena said. “He told Mom he has two younger daughters that really like you. So you could probably boss them around and take them over and turn them into two Hannahs, since I didn’t work out.”

Hannah played Athena’s last sentence through her mind, both the meaning of the words and the sentiment behind them, and she felt all the tension in the car evaporate, because nonsense can do that, and she laughed, leaning back, stretching her chains in a vain attempt to bring her hands to her face, bending over and covering her mouth that way, laughing into her fingers.

She laughed alone, eyes tearing up again, stopping only when a tear dropped onto her book, and she raised up and looked at Athena’s scowling face.

“Is that what you think I wanted?” she asked. “To turn you into me?”

“Why did you just say no?”

“Because I like how things are,” Hannah said, telling a small truth that hid a bigger lie. “I don’t want them to change.”

“You don’t want to be free?”

“Being bought by Dr. Johnson wouldn’t make me free.”

“He’d probably set you free.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I can’t take that chance. And even if he did, if I didn’t have school, I wouldn’t have anything.”

“You care about school too much.”

“I care about it a lot,” Hannah said. “I don’t care about it too much. But I still don’t get why you were angry.”

“When things make me sad, I get mad. Doesn’t everyone?”

“No,” Hannah said. “I just cry.”

Hannah looked out the window, back at Athena.

“So what you’re saying is, you thought I would say yes, and that made you sad, so you got mad. At me.”

Athena angled up her left hip, pulled her phone out of her back pocket and tossed it onto Hannah’s lap.

“Call Mom,” she said, “and tell her what you told me. She wants to hear it from you.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, waking the phone with a few taps. “Can I play Katzink after I talk to her?”

“Yeah, please. When you study, you breathe weird.”

“No I don’t.”

“Yes you do.”

Hannah dialed Laura’s number. Laura answered in the middle of the first ring.

“Hello?”

“Hello,” Hannah said. “Athena said I needed to call you.”

“Yes?” Laura asked.

“To tell you I don’t wish to be sold to Dr. Johnson.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Laura said. “I told him no at first, but then I decided it needed to be your choice.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“We would miss you, Hannah,” Laura said. “Terribly.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said. “Thank you, Ma’am.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Hannah blinked, bent over to run a finger beneath her eyes, stared at her shoes, sat up and sniffed.

“I wasn’t supposed to tell you about the celebrity thing,” Athena said, and her voice came a little thickly, but straining to sound normal,

because she was perhaps feeling something too she couldn't admit. "So forget I mentioned it."

"Why?" Hannah asked.

"I already told you. Because it will make you even more vain."

"I'm not vain. I already told you that."

"Okay, you know what, maybe vain isn't the word for it," Athena said. "But you're something like vain, and Mom and Dad think it's what makes you . . . do things."

"What things?"

"I don't know. I guess like that thing you did at school last spring, with that prize. Or scholarship I guess. I mean, fuck, Hannah, I wouldn't do something that wrinkled in a million years. I wouldn't even think of it. And you just walked in like it was nothing."

Hannah stared at Athena's phone, navigating until she'd opened her Katzink account. The last time she'd played was on Dr. Johnson's phone, last week, and she'd had a mess to clean up when a dog patient got mad. Things were going better now. She had fewer patients, because she was seeing only cats and docile livestock, but they were all cooperative.

"I made a cat with pink and white checks on her face," Hannah said.

"Cool," Athena observed.

"Look," Hannah said, holding up Athena's phone.

"I'm driving."

"Look," Hannah said again. "Her name is Chexopinke."

"Cute," Athena agreed, diverting her eyes from the road for no more than half a second.

For the next hour, Athena drove and Hannah breathed normally and played, raising her fees and decorating her clinic with pictures of African wildlife, which her patients seemed to enjoy.

The sun had all but set by the time they reached Athena's apartment.

Hannah could see Athena's window from the parking lot. The light was on. Franklin had access to his own light, and he'd turned it on, Hannah guessed. Probably so he could read.

Hannah tried not to show any excitement as she ascended by elevator with Athena to the fourth floor, but her insides were all a jumble.

“Frankie, we’re home!” Athena shouted as soon as she’d unlocked the door and pushed it in.

“Mistress!” he shouted back from the portion of the apartment reserved for him, bars on two sides, solid walls on the other two.

Hannah had always found Athena’s apartment boring to the point of drabness, an uninspired collection of gently used furniture – couch, two easy chairs, coffee table and so forth Athena had probably ordered from some estate sale somewhere. Only her mattresses were new.

Hannah followed Athena into the living room, where Franklin could be viewed in all his glory, naked but for his collar, and he rose from his desk and gave Hannah a look that only she could understand, a vanishingly quick, profoundly subtle gaze of irony and mischief, before he stepped to the bars and kissed Athena between them.

“Did you mate this morning?” she asked.

“Once, early,” he said, and Hannah stared shamelessly at Franklin’s penis, and it seemed to be staring back, with invisible eyes in its thick head, leering at her, reminding her of their first time together, their too few, too short other times since.

“Who was she?”

“Black Canadian,” he said. “Ontario.”

“I brought Hannah,” Athena said.

“I noticed,” Franklin said with another ironic smile. “How are you tonight, Miss Loughbridge?”

“I’m fine,” Hannah said, smiling in a way she knew wasn’t subtle at all.

“I started my period right on time,” Athena said. “So you get her for, like, 30 minutes while I run errands, and then I’m taking her to school.”

Athena unlocked Franklin’s cage door, Hannah stepped through, Athena locked it back and Hannah turned to have her chains removed.

Unbound, her travel chains draped over a cross bar, Hannah immediately began undressing, unbuttoning her shirt and pulling it off, kicking off her shoes.

“Did you make a list?” Athena asked.

Franklin, his penis beginning to firm up, went to his desk, grabbed a strip of paper and handed it to Athena.

She surveyed it quickly, looked up and smiled.

“I doubt they’re going to have pomegranates this time.”

"It's just a request," Franklin said.

"Okay, see you in a few," Athena said, and she whisked out of her apartment, shutting and locking the door behind her.

"Groceries," he explained.

"It's been awhile," Hannah said, not concerned about Athena beyond the fact she was gone. "I think since October."

"The holidays are a very busy time for . . . what I do."

"Why?"

"Sometimes I'm a Christmas present for the girls I breed with," he said. "Sometimes I'm a Christmas present for their owners. Conception is, either way, the gift that keeps giving."

Hannah laughed at Franklin's understated brilliance, slid her jeans down and stepped out of them, unhooked her bra and let it slide down her arms, pushed down her panties, and hung everything over the crossbar.

She turned to him, smiling, and glided toward him, reaching for his waist, basking in the essence of the boy.

This is beauty, she thought, raising her mouth to his. Franklin, holder of a bachelor's degree from Yale, a Harvard divinity degree, might not qualify for the fashion magazines where the boys were all thin and dark. He was stocky and fair, with short and wavy strawberry blond hair. But everything he looked at with his thoughtful blue eyes, he looked through, with a deep, gentle understanding, and after he understood it, he integrated it with the rest of his knowledge, and then he spoke, and Hannah drank in his words, and loved them. And loved him, she believed.

Hannah opened her mouth to Franklin, but he kept his closed as their lips touched.

At first she didn't care, covering his cheeks, his chin, his forehead with kisses while she pressed the golden fur of her mound against the tip of his penis.

But Franklin wasn't kissing her back. He was just standing there, like an Easter Island head, with an expression so inscrutable it might be lust or the inescapable serenity of deep wisdom, or mere apathy.

"Franklin?" she said, leaning back and looking at him, puzzled.

"Athena has requested no kissing," he said. "You can kiss me, that is. But I can't kiss back."

Hannah looked at him, certain he was joking.

"Athena's gone," she said.

“She doesn’t like to watch.”

“She watched once,” Hannah said, knowing as her mouth formed the words that this was not a logical argument, that she had just said nothing, burdening Franklin’s ears with nonsense.

“Rules of the house,” Franklin said.

“Forever?” Hannah asked.

“I doubt it,” Franklin said. “But you do have a knack for making that girl insecure.”

“It’s not my fault,” Hannah protested weakly while she constructed, in her mind, a tolerable narrative for the loss of this element of Franklin’s passion: Hannah was superior. Athena was inferior. Of course Athena wouldn’t want Hannah kissing her male. And of course Franklin would understand all that, and he would withhold his mouth in the knowledge that the girl before him was the right girl, the best girl, his girl, Athena his mere owner.

“How would you like your relief delivered?” Hannah asked, trying to make him laugh with her flippancy. He smiled, but there was something else in the expression, something she wasn’t sure about, and then he answered, as if she’d asked a serious question.

“I’ll kneel behind you,” he said.

Of course, Hannah thought. Less temptation to kiss. Actually, no temptation to kiss, since it would be physically impossible. If something was impossible, could it even be called temptation? Was it a sin to not do something only because one couldn’t?

Hannah went to Franklin’s roughly-made bed, pulled down the covers and clambered to her hands and knees, turning her head to peer at him, arching her back and raising her hairless vulva to him, presenting the slit of her female chamber door.

“You’ve been shaved,” Franklin observed, climbing onto the bed and kneeling between Hannah’s knees.

“Just around the opening,” Hannah said. “I wouldn’t let them shave any more of it.”

“Who?”

“New Life,” Hannah said. “I was there last week.”

“For what?” Franklin asked, and Hannah felt his fingers at her lips, opening her, spreading her, tapping the mouth of her organ with the tip of his penis.

Hannah sighed, waiting for the thickness to open her body. But it didn't come. Something was wrong. There was no lubricant. Hannah was dry, her vagina not preparing itself for the entrance of Franklin Fulmer the Third.

Hannah shifted on her knees, spreading her legs, inviting Franklin to continue to explore. He understood, reached down to her clitoris, stroked it, pinched it gently, and Hannah rocked her pelvis, because what he was doing felt good, and she wanted to be aroused.

"New Life," Franklin said, fingers still on her vulva.

"I'll be doing research for them this fall," she said, pride blending with the distress over her uncooperative body.

"Why did they shave you?"

"A demonstration."

"A shaving demonstration?"

"No, they shave people they bring into the lab."

"Wait," Franklin said, his fingers still between her legs, but stroking absently now. "You're doing research for them, or you're being used in research *by* them?"

Hannah didn't want to talk about this, didn't want to elaborate, but there was apparently no way around it. Franklin wanted to know. Perpetually curious, of course, he always wanted to know.

"I was there as a student researcher, to do a tour," she explained, arching her back slightly. "But because of . . . my status . . . I was also eligible to do a . . . breeding demonstration. So I did that, and they had to shave me."

"A breeding demonstration," Franklin echoed, clearly not understanding.

"A boy named Duncan went inside me," Hannah said. "And everyone watched. And then we were done."

Hannah bit off the last sentence, hoping Franklin would sense that she wanted to be done with the conversation as well, and he seemed to understand and resumed his concern with her hole, stroking her lips and clitoris gently, touching his tip to her vaginal mouth.

She couldn't see his penis, so she had to imagine it, as it had been the first time they'd met, when she was assessing him sexually, a project conventional people would call scandalous that Hannah remembered as

profoundly innocent, two strangers meeting, working diligently together, following instructions in a sincere effort to measure something.

His penis was delicious that day, as remarkable as his wit, pushed into her mouth, her vagina, her anus, then cleaned and sent up her vagina again. He came twice, the first unexpectedly, the second of his own volition, filling Hannah's chamber, his cream spilling out.

"Uhhhh," Hannah groaned, deep and gutturally, as Franklin slid between the soft tissues of her sex.

"Oh god, sorry," he said, immediately pulling out. "I thought you were wet enough."

"No, go back in," Hannah said. "I'm fine. Just a little sensitive right now. I'm supposed to start my period tomorrow."

Franklin hesitated, so Hannah took things into her own hands, reaching between her legs and grasping his member, pulling him forward and forcing him into her sheath. He grunted uncertainly, so she pushed back for emphasis, trying not to groan again as she took all of him in, swallowing him to the base of his manhood.

Franklin, satisfied this was indeed Hannah's will, went to work with gusto, thrusting and bouncing, shaking and stirring within her, twisting and grinding while Hannah arched and panted.

For a time, it was only sex, wordless coupling, speechless pleasure, but with a carnal, rhythmic poetry all its own, and Hannah waited until she sensed that Franklin's tension outweighed his pleasure, and she bucked and squeezed his penis into submission, the rod swelling, the tip flaring while his body delivered three shots, four shots, five, of hot, white, expensive semen into her loins, groaning through his pleasure while she fell still, patiently accepting all of his load.

She would not be cumming, she knew, at least not here. If they couldn't copulate face-to-face because that raised the chances they would kiss, she would not be able to orgasm without masturbating, or being masturbated. And she wanted to talk now, not climax. She wasn't sure how much time they had.

Franklin withdrew, but he remained on his knees behind her, and he reached between her legs and touched her clitoris, but Hannah wheeled away, sidling to his pillow without any concern for what was leaking out. If he set his shoulder on their mingled juice tonight, while he was trying to sleep, good.



“Do they bind the girls you breed with?” Hannah asked.

Franklin said nothing, so Hannah looked at him.

“Do they?”

“Why are you asking that?”

“That means yes,” Hannah said.

“It’s not that simple,” he said.

“I didn’t say it was simple,” Hannah replied.

“Why are you asking?”

“Because they bound me,” Hannah said. “I’m just curious.”

“Did they ask your permission?”

“Yes.”

“And you gave it?”

“Yes. They strapped me to a platform. And then the . . . boy . . . asked too.”

“Alright, then,” Franklin said, clambering over and sitting next to Hannah, his hand around her rump. “That’s more or less how it works in my world. And I don’t look any deeper than that.”

“I thought you always looked deeper.”

“There are some things where you have to look away, until you can figure out how to forgive yourself.”

“You’re not forgiving yourself?”

“I’m a piece of a hideous machine. Until I can forgive the machine, I can’t absolve myself.”

“Break the machine,” Hannah said.

“Of course.”

“Are you causing trouble?” she asked quietly.

“If making copies of my DNA is causing trouble, then I’d like to think so.”

It wasn’t the answer Hannah was looking for. He followed it up with admonishment.

“Please don’t tell me you’re doing anything bad,” he said. “I’m not sure you’ll get away with another performance like the one last spring.”

“No,” Hannah said, pausing to consider her next words. “I’m doing little things, though.”

“Like what?”

“I can’t say,” Hannah admitted. “But it’s not bad. It’s just meant to generate compassion.”

“Compassion?”

“Yes. If everyone knew what—”

“Everyone?” Franklin interrupted.

“Yes, if people could just see what’s going on, they’d—”

“Only a third,” Franklin said, interrupting again.

“Only a third what?”

“Only a third have the capacity to care enough to make any changes. Another third can’t care for anyone outside their own little spheres. It’s just not in their genes. And the last third . . . they don’t work that way. They’re somewhere else.”

“Then it’s hopeless.”

“No,” Franklin said. “It’s always been that way. Wake up the third who have the ability to care. Get their attention, and they will change the world. They have changed the world, over and over.”

Franklin squeezed Hannah’s rump. Was that against the restrictions? Was there a parallel here, between Athena’s rules about what Franklin could do with Hannah, and Laura’s rules about what Ormek could do with her? And would Franklin, in the end, see what he could get away with, just as Ormek had? Hannah dismissed the thought before it could bother her, or lead to troublesome ideas.

“When things go dark,” Franklin continued, “it’s not because the third who are incapable of caring have suddenly appeared. They’re always there, and they contribute in their own way while they wait for their chance. When things go dark, it’s because the feeling third aren’t watching, or they’re distracted, or they’re feeling guilty or, worst of all, they’ve decided to despair.”

The lock sounded, the door opened and Athena entered, poking her head around the wall to look at the couple. She smiled, clearly pleased to see them this way, seated platonically beside each other, even if they were nude.

“They had pomegranates,” she announced. “Hannah, can you get ready to go?”

Hannah looked at the floor and felt profoundly empty, even as another pearl of Franklin’s semen oozed out of her chamber. She compared what she’d lost to a pearl of wisdom, and sighed to herself.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said, rising to pull on her panties, slip on her bra.

“You guys did it, right?” Athena asked from the kitchen, grocery bags rustling, cabinets slamming shut as she put groceries away.

“Yes,” Hannah said, because Franklin offered no answer. She finished dressing and waited at the door of Franklin’s cage until Athena put her back in her travel chains and let her out.

“Bye, Franklin,” she said.

“Bye, Hannah.”

“I’ll be back in another 30, honey,” Athena said. “And I’m gonna make us both dinner.”

“Brilliant,” he agreed, returning to his desk, drying penis swinging between his legs.

## Chapter 53: Stacey and the Novel

Stacey had asked the boy doing the wellness check for a romance novel, and that’s what he’d given her.

But as soon as she saw the cover, she realized this wasn’t the adolescent fare she’d grown up with. A woman was seated on a bed, presumably nude, turned away so only the side of one bare breast was visible, a thin sheet barely covering her lap. She was looking at the silhouette of a naked man, also facing away, but his handsome face half-illuminated in a mirror.

Clearly, they’d just had sex, or were about to have sex. But more was going on, an open satchel on the bed with bundles of cash spilling out, the hilt of a long knife visible.

*The Cold Trail of Pablo Vasquez*, read the title. Romance and mystery, she thought.

Stacey sat on the bed, adjusting pillows and her sheets with the book clutched in one hand. She leaned back, felt a pinprick where her skin touched the wall, remembered that’s where they’d embedded the chip, and she raised the pillow to cushion the little injury. She looked down at the stubble growing above her vulva and realized she was getting used to being naked.

Comfortable, with her back against the wall and her legs crossed, she flipped to the first page, found it a boring history exposition of a place called Jalisco, possibly fictitious, and kept flipping, looking for something else.

She found what she was seeking by the 20<sup>th</sup> page, a detailed encounter between a girl named Maria and a shady man, possibly a murderer, named Pedro.

In an ancient Mayan mountain tomb where they had inexplicably become trapped, the two decided after a few minutes of conversation about their plight to make love in the glow of Maria's electric lamp.

The writing was vague, a little guarded, but there was enough there for Stacey, aching for something to break the loneliness.

In the book, Pedro's penis was referred to invariably as his manhood, and Maria's vagina was always her love, and the bringing together of the two was called union. But there were other details – Maria's pert nipples, her thighs casting shadows on the tomb walls as they lifted and parted, Pedro's climactic gasps after 10 minutes of energetic unioning – and Stacey took this to heart, hand passing from her own sex to the sore on her ankle, which was healing and starting to itch, then back to her hole, wetting itself and swelling. She didn't need the dildo tonight, just her fingers, pulp fiction, and a hungry imagination turning a few words into something she could believe in.

"Aaaaah," she gasped as the orgasm wracked her body. "Aaaaah."

## **Chapter 54: Fittings in a New Lab**

Hannah, back in the kennels after a holiday absence of nearly a month, had a late dinner by herself in the cafeteria.

With the start of classes scheduled for Thursday, four days from now, few students or subjects had returned to campus yet, and Hannah chose not to join any of the few students gathered around two tables in the corner of the room.

Hannah didn't know any of them, and she didn't want to talk anyway. She felt empty to the point of anguish, her vagina ironically full to the point of needing to be discreetly wiped while she ate, her soul – or whatever it was that stirred within her and generated her dreams and sorrows and passions – flat and comfortless, as if it had just fallen from a great height.

Something was wrong. Something had gone awry. Somewhere.

It would be five days before she'd see Allain again, getting out on Friday afternoon to spend the weekend with him.

And sex with Franklin was . . . just that. Only that. No lovemaking at all. Athena had seen to it. Would there come a time when Athena would allow their coupling only when they were separated by cage bars, as Laura had dictated for Hannah and Ormek? The thought sickened Hannah, and her last few bites of dinner were forced down.

But at least they had talked. Franklin had shared his thoughts, and Hannah had listened. He had given her some things to ponder.

Hannah put up her tray, walked down to her hall, waited at her kennel door until the little click told her she had been seen and her door was unlocked. She stepped in, pulled it closed and waited for the second click, telling her she was confined for the night.

She turned, surveyed the little space that was her home for most of the school year, and her spirits immediately lifted, for someone had set a large brown package on the little shelf beside her bed, at the front of her kennel.

“New Life,” said the return address.

She hefted it, reveling in the weight of what she knew must be her research prospectus, addressed to her in care of Dr. Mandapreet, wrapped in heavy brown paper and clear tape, wrinkled and smudged during its trip from California.

After admiring the package, holding it out before her with both hands, Hannah tore it open on one end, reached in and pulled out a thick, soft-cover manual with a letter paperclipped to the cover.

“Dear Miss Loughbridge,” the letter began. “Please find attached your prospectus for the following research project: ‘A Three-Ovaried Female: Data and Observations.’ On behalf of all of us at New Life, I welcome you to our family of researchers and investigators. Congratulations! This is a significant achievement.”

The letter went on to remind Hannah how serious her commitment was, in particular because she would be working with her own research subject, and it spelled out the general calendar of the research, reporting requirements and deadlines.

“The research prospectus is not a set of suggestions, or an occasional reference piece. It is a detailed, day-by-day guide for your endeavors that you will need to be intimately familiar with, from cover to cover. Plan to know it as well as you know any academic materials you are tested on.”

The letter was clearly a form document, probably written by someone on New Life staff. But it had been signed, in blue ink, by Dr. Dietrich Johnson himself.

Hannah looked at Dr. Johnson's signature, wondered what he thought when he was signing it.

The letter was dated Friday. He'd probably signed it that afternoon, soon after their meeting, before Hannah had stayed with him, before she'd met his wife and his slave girl and his daughters, before she'd summarily rejected his purchase offer, delivering her terse answer through Laura.

He wouldn't take her project back, Hannah decided. He wasn't that petty.

Hannah lost all track of time as she went through the prospectus, flipping through information that was already familiar to her, studying the technical sections in detail, making mental notes of words and concepts she didn't feel she knew well enough.

There were going to be a great many demands on Hannah, but some as well on the research subject. Managing her, taking care of her, winning her compliance – these were areas of dark uncertainty, and Hannah blamed those matters for the malaise that had been following her all day.

The immediate concern was housing, which was carefully spelled out in the document and mostly common sense to Hannah. It was the section she was reading when the lights went out at midnight. She swore to herself, put the prospectus on the shelf where she'd found it, went to her toilet in the gloom and returned to bed, finding comfort in the cool, familiar sheets, closing her eyes and, deciding not to masturbate, falling immediately into a deep sleep.

Sometime that night, Hannah found herself before the great stucco façade of Saint Mary Magdalena Cathedral, staring up at it in broad daylight.

Abandoned by the Catholic Church a decade ago, left with just a single part-time caretaker, it stood not far from campus, beautiful and empty, watched over at the corners by four gargoyles of carved stone, crouching vigilantly on knife-like talons, tongues jutting from jagged teeth, smiles set into fantastically ugly faces, monsters set there to protect God's house from other monsters.

Hannah had come to it once at night to meet someone, a woman who never showed herself or gave her name, who had somehow seen the

video of Hannah's rebellious scholarship ceremony, who had told Hannah where to find Raven, who had suggested there were many campaigns underway, to end slavery and free the subjects. Shame would be the primary tool, and Hannah had agreed to help, performing minor acts of sedition where she could, barging into the New Life punishment room under their instructions, and waiting to do more, wanting to do more.

Hannah entered, found herself in the great, hollow nave, staring at stained glass that blazed with sunlight, each panel depicting . . . what?

Hannah studied the glass, expecting to see saints, instead finding naked subjects, male and female, sex organs exposed, collars around necks, chains between ankles.

She recognized some of them, some were strangers. One was herself, staring with the blank-eyed innocence of all stained glass saints, one hand raised in a gesture, as if she were expounding on something, the other by her side, holding something. Something strange. Strange and bloody. She stared until she knew what it was. A single ovary.

She turned, noticed a doorway, entered, found a well-lit spiral of stone steps, climbed it, round and round, until she'd reached the cathedral's spired rooftop, standing on a small platform where a gargoyle crouched.

It was alive, its ribs expanding and contracting with breath, its head jerking this way and that, looking, looking.

Hannah did not fear it, in her dream, and she stood still and waited for it to notice her, standing naked behind him, unfettered.

Soon enough, its leering face with its dangling tongue turned and stared, gazing into her eyes for a long, quiet moment.

It rose, shuffled around to face her on the small platform, and Hannah saw that it bore an erection, a long stone penis pointed at her, meant for her.

Still, she was not frightened, understanding that this was her role, her function, her sacred duty. Indeed, this would be an exchange, and a fair one in her eyes. Accept the gargoyle, and get what she wanted.

She considered turning her back on him, falling to her knees, facing away from him and allowing herself to be consumed that way, as Franklin had to do by Athena's dictate, as Dr. Johnson had done.

No.

From the front.

The platform was small, smaller than a bed. Staring at the beast, Hannah dropped to her bottom, kicking her legs out, her feet touching his. She leaned back on her hands, on her elbows, dropped until her back rested on the smooth stone, and the gargoyle lowered himself, kneeling between her thighs, looking down at her vulva, at her closed lips, looking back into Hannah's face, puzzlement where there had been macabre vigilance before.

Hannah understood. He wished to use her, to ravish her, to take her, but not to damage her, and her lips needed to be spread. Were he to perform that small task with his curved, pointed claws, he would surely tear her. Given his strength, the cruelty in his face, the complete lack of anything human in his eyes, why would he be so solicitous? Hannah wondered.

Hannah reached down, parted herself with two fingers, and watched while the beast dropped, lowering its haunches, adjusting its penis, delivering the tip to her door, pressing forward, impaling her slowly.

Hannah groaned, opened her mouth, tried to cry out, but no noise emerged.

The gargoyle buried himself, pulled out, pushed back in, worked within her chamber for what felt like no more than a minute before he raised his head and howled, his shrieks rolling across the cathedral's weed-lined plaza, filling the larger town, bouncing against the walls and roofs of Corpus Christi, his penis pulsing, shaking, spitting seed within Hannah's sheath.

Hannah found her voice now, screaming through the raw, violent orgasm she had neglected to give herself earlier, and with the waning shudders of the climax, Hannah understood what she had done. She had yielded her pink treasure to a monster, stone-like and leering, sharp-toothed and long-clawed, full of destruction.

And gentle. Gentle.

Because one must be gentle with a resource one wishes to use over and over.

Hannah pulled up her legs, drawing her knees to her chest, as if she were back at New Life and bound once again to the coupling platform, and she placed the soles of her feet against the gargoyle's belly and – even as her chamber throttled his thick member, and accepted its final jolts of semen – she pushed with all her might, forcing the beast out of her vagina, the monster flailing with wide-eyed confusion as his momentum rocked him backward and over the edge of the platform, and he screamed as he fell, a



cry of climax-tinged despair, or sorrow, or mystification, that ended only with the sound of shattering stone, and Hannah felt, briefly, sorry for him, and she clambered up and leaned over the edge of the platform to look down at the white impact gouge in the plaza's gray stone, the fragments of her erstwhile lover radiating outward from there in a spray of chalky, fading lines.

Satisfied that he was no more, pity yielding to a sense of necessity, Hannah crouched on all fours and turned her attention to the city beyond the plaza, for now she was here to watch, to study, to learn.

Hannah came rarely in her sleep, and when it happened, it invariably woke her. She heard herself moan, jerked beneath her sheets, sat up with a start and looked through gloom at her still-pulsing vulva, and she grabbed it to rub away the last vestiges of climax, glanced around her kennel and remembered where she was, and that she'd had a dream, and it had been vivid and arousing and disturbing, and she went through the details in her mind and rolled over, sleeping again until the light came on in her kennel and she looked at the battery-operated clock Allain had given her and confirmed it was 6 a.m.

She went to her toilet, listened while the doors unlocked with a series of clicks, from one end of the hall to the other, 40 spaces where slaves were kept until it was decided they could step out.

Hannah flushed, splashed water on her face, grabbed the prospectus and went upstairs to breakfast, dined alone and studied, all her attention on the materials before her.

From breakfast, she went to the PC lab in the lounge, opening her account, sending a quick email to her mother letting her know she'd been returned to the kennels and was learning about her research project, and hoped they'd see each other again soon.

Mother was no longer content with being a legal assistant, Hannah had learned over Christmas. She'd done so well in the paralegal program, and at her internship in a small law firm in Fort Worth, that she'd decided to take the advice of a female lawyer her age and go to law school, at a small but well-regarded program in downtown Dallas.

Hannah pulled herself away from the PC's reluctantly at 8:45, showered, reported to the locker rooms to be scanned, to visit her locker for the first time since the holidays, to dry her hair, to dress in jeans and a red

sweater, to put on what little makeup she had time for, and a little before 9:40, she was allowed out into the cool, bright morning air to cross campus.

Instead of climbing the stairs just inside the main door of the Rickenbacker Biological Sciences Annex Building, Hannah walked down the building's central hall until she reached the desk that guarded the building's rear elevators and stairwell.

"I'm Hannah Loughbridge," Hannah announced to the guard there. "I belong here."

The guard, a heavysset black woman, consulted a list on a clipboard.

"ID?"

Hannah, accustomed to presenting her collar and its federal or kennel tag, instead slipped her student card out of her back pocket and handed it over.

The guard passed it under a barcode reader and, satisfied that Hannah was who she said she was, waved her through.

"Take the first elevator on the left," she said. "The other one's getting repaired today."

"Thank you," Hannah said.

By the time she'd reached Dr. Mandapreet's office on the third floor of Rickenbacker, all her misgivings had evaporated, and she tapped on the door with an eagerness that, she hoped, didn't express itself too audibly.

"Come in," said a musical voice.

Hannah entered, smiled at the Indian woman typing on her computer.

"I'm Hannah Loughbridge."

"Hannah, how nice to see you," the woman said, standing.

"Hello, Dr. Mandapreet," Hannah said, stepping into the office and bowing slightly in deference. "Thank you."

Dr. Mandapreet's face fell.

"Where's your prospectus?" she asked.

"In the kennels."

"You should have it?"

Hannah's mouth went immediately dry.

"We don't have time for you to go back and get it," Dr. Mandapreet said with a scowl, "come with me."

Hannah, all her optimism shattered, followed her research director into the hall, around a corner, through a door that beeped open with a badge

the woman wore around her neck.

“When were you planning to read it?” Dr. Mandapreet asked.

“I have been through it,” Hannah said. “Last night and this morning.”

Dr. Mandapreet waved dismissively, marching toward what sounded to Hannah like electric tools. A drill, perhaps. And clanking. A thud, a rattle.

A door ahead was open, light spilling out, sound spilling out as well.

Hannah followed the doctor into a room about the size of one of the smaller labs, bisected by a row of bars that ran from wall to wall, floor to ceiling, the place where the girl with three ovaries would be confined, kept, caged. In the middle of the bars stood a door, also of bars, open, with what Hannah could tell was a new lock and bolt, shiny and unused. There would be keys to this lock. Hannah would, most likely, be given one. She swallowed.

The girl with three ovaries would have a sink, toilet and shower. A second toilet and sink were visible through a door on the lab side of the room. These would be Hannah’s to use.

Two men labored here, both free, campus carpenters, Hannah assumed. One knelt within the cage, watching water flow from the sink, adjusting the valve beneath. A second was in the lab area, installing cabinets. There was a refrigerator here, an examination chair in the corner, a desk with a microscope, several office chairs, a ring inlaid in the middle of the floor, a cart bearing boxes and tools and, wherever work had been done, the thick white powder that floors and walls yielded when they were drilled, nailed, disturbed.

“It’s almost done,” Hannah noted with surprise.

“This room has seen similar projects before, but it’s been a few years,” Dr. Mandapreet said. “We are very pleased to have it brought into service again.”

She turned to Hannah, dark eyes somber.

“You need to take this seriously, Ms. Loughbridge,” she said in a tone of thinly-veiled disapproval.

“I will,” Hannah said. “I take everything seriously.”

“Dr. Mandapreet?” said a female voice from the hallway.

Hannah turned, spotting a thin girl in jeans and a parka, rolling a box on a cart.

“Jody, please come say hello to Hannah Loughbridge,” Dr. Mandapreet said. “Hannah, Jody is my assistant this year, and you’ll be working with her too.”

“Hello, Jody,” Hannah said politely, eyeing the girl. She looked familiar, possibly someone Hannah had seen in a class or two, or maybe during a class demonstration.

“Hi, Hannah,” she replied brightly. “Nice to finally meet you!”

“What do you have there?” Dr. Mandapreet asked.

“It’s the bed you asked for,” Jody said, “I got it from—”

“Is that inflatable?” Hannah asked as the girl pushed the cart into the room.

“Yes, it’s a—”

“No,” Hannah said.

Jody laughed, continued pushing the cart.

“The prospectus calls for a standard twin bed,” Hannah said.

“Unless it’s temporary, this isn’t the right thing.”

Dr. Mandapreet turned to Hannah and raised her eyebrows.

“So you did look at one thing in the prospectus, apparently.”

“I looked at everything,” Hannah said simply, struggling to keep her voice even, her expression blank, while her heart thudded in her chest. How many more corners were they going to try to cut? And were they doing it because the researcher was a slave?

“Then you surely must have looked at the objectives?” Dr. Mandapreet asked.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah replied. “We’ll be identifying interventions that exacerbate or ameliorate conceptive indicators. Hormonal or physical. And quantifying impact as a function of measured intervention.”

Dr. Mandapreet gazed at Hannah before she turned to Jody.

“We’ll need a standard bed,” she said.

“Check at the kennels,” Hannah said. “They should have a few spares. Mention me if you need to, it might help.”

Jody nodded and left, pushing her cart into the hall.

“And what will we be measuring?” Dr. Mandapreet asked.

“Hormones in urine and blood throughout the cycle, menstrual patterns, vaginal attributes, temperature, and subject’s self-report.”

“You have read the prospectus,” Dr. Mandapreet said.

“Yes, Ma’am, in detail.”

Dr. Mendapreet stepped over to the man affixing the cabinet.

“When can you do her fitting?” she asked.

“Now,” he said, turning to look at the doctor, then to regard Hannah. “I have everything I need.”

Hannah watched the man turn to the cart, slip a padlock into his pocket, pick up a box that rattled as he lifted it, tear it open and pull out a long, coiled chain, drawing it all forth, a single cuff at the end, opened, like a claw.

“We’ll give you all the length you need,” Dr. Mandapreet promised. “Both I and Jody will have keys.”

Hannah nodded, and the man knelt by the ring set flush in the middle of the floor, blowing on the white powder around it that indicated it was a new fixture, installed earlier this morning, most likely. He passed the end of the chain through the ring, passed the padlock through the links, and peered at Hannah while he raised the cuff.

Hannah stepped up and looked down, watching him raise her jeans leg and encircle her right ankle with the cold metal, listening as the mechanism clicked within itself, feeling the unyielding grip of a steel restraint.

“Let’s see if it’s long enough,” Dr. Mandapreet said. “Walk around, Hannah.”

Hannah, fighting the sudden shame that landed with a thud in her mind on occasions like these – sometimes expected, sometimes arriving by surprise – took tentative, rattling steps around the lab, walking into her little lavatory, entering the cage and walking there, the man doing the plumbing on his knees twisting his knees out of her way.

The chain was more than long enough to allow her full access to her research space. As long as she was in this space, it was a meaningless hindrance, hardly a restraint at all. It would keep her from leaving the lab, of course, but she didn’t want to leave the lab.

“Once you get your class schedule figured out, you’ll need to post regular hours here,” Dr. Mandapreet said. “And Jody or one of the other assistants will be here to tether you and, when your hours are up, to set you free.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said.

The man handed a set of keys to Dr. Mandapreet, turned and resumed his work on the cabinet.

“Are you satisfied with everything, Hannah?” she asked.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah replied. “Thank you so much.”

“How will you be spending the rest of your day?”

“There are a few more concepts in the prospectus I want to know more about,” Hannah said. “So I’ll be looking those up. And I need to take care of some things before classes start.”

“We’re expecting our girl tomorrow by noon,” Dr. Mandapreet said. “But she could be as early as 10. So I’ll have you signed out from the kennels by 9.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said. “Thank you.”

## **Chapter 55: Stacey and Another Box**

Stacey slept in on Monday. Each time she woke, she dropped her head back on her pillow and slept another round. Breakfast had come, sitting untouched by the door, and all her old trays had been taken.

When she saw a second tray beside the first, she guessed it was past noon and rose, slowly, stiffly, thinking nothing until she went to the toilet and her urine reminded her that she was a prisoner here, a slave, a victim.

There would be nothing to fight today, nothing but four walls, trays slid under her door, a face at the port this evening.

Tomorrow, she would go to a new place. Tomorrow, she could fight. Maybe her phone would be waiting for her there, at the school in Texas. Maybe her clothes as well. She could call her father there. She could always hope.

She still had a vague sense that she’d be staying with hunters in Texas, regardless what the boy had said.

She returned to the novel, this time reading from the first page, enduring the historic exposition, moving onto the plot, finding it more interesting and less romantic than she’d expected.

Time passed. She napped in mid-afternoon. Dinner came. She showered, talked to the girl from two nights ago, learned nothing new, was told to be ready to go right after breakfast.

“I’ll get those pills, right?” Stacey asked.

“You want a transport aid?”

“God yes, if I’m going in a box.”

“Okay, I’ll note that.”

Stacey read until she was tired, washed the dildo and spread herself out on her bed, playing with it, massaging it, licking it, watching the port to make sure it stayed closed, placing the toy between her breasts, and finally pushing it up her vagina, sliding it in and out until she received one of those inspirations that came only when she was sufficiently aroused, and she dropped the larger dildo, went to her cabinet for the smaller one and, breathing heavily, oblivious to her place or condition, she slipped it first up her vagina to wet it, then eased it into her anus, gasping as it slowly opened up her bowels, an invasion she always found unpleasant and strange until the object was fully inserted, at which point her vulva sang and her clitoris thumped.

A few more quick strokes with the thicker dildo in her sex was all it took, a heavy orgasm roaring through her pelvis and her back and her lungs, and she cried out, once, rolled over and went to sleep.

“Cuff up,” someone was saying.

“Huh?” Stacey said, starting, raising her head, the lights in her cell blazing.

What time was it? Where was she?

“C’mon, you were supposed to be ready,” said a female voice.

“Sorry,” Stacey replied, the particulars of her situation dawning on her quickly now. “Can I pee?”

“Make it fast.”

Stacey sat on her toilet, fighting dizziness while she drained, looked at her bed and the two dildos she’d made love to last night, and decided she didn’t care that they were lying there, exposed. Someone else would find them and have to clean them. She’d be gone, forgotten.

Stacey flushed, drank from her sink, walked to the door and noticed a breakfast tray there. How long had it sat, waiting to be consumed by the dozing prisoner?

“Turn, hands behind your back,” said the girl, opening the hip and lowest ports.

Stacey obeyed, felt the cuffs close around her wrists, felt the shackles grip her ankles, heard the door open, and realized she was terrified.

“When do I get my pill?” she asked, stepping into the hall.

“I don’t know,” said the girl, leading Stacey down the hall to a secure door that opened with a beep when she waved her badge.

They passed through another door and into the room where Stacey had first arrived at this place, the room where her box had been laid, where she might have spent the night if the boy had not intervened.

The box was back, and a girl was kneeling beside it, spreading out the straps, preparing it for Stacey’s body.

Stacey drew in her breath, horrified, issued a desperate gasp, a sort of “aaauhh,” and she froze, the terrors of this confinement as palpable as if it were Friday again.

“C’mon,” said the girl, taking Stacey’s arm.

Stacey pulled back, tried to twist her elbow out of the girl’s grip, but that just made her grab tighter, with both hands, one on her elbow, one on her upper arm, near her shoulder.

“Ow, ow, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Stacey mumbled, shuffling numbly to the box, her consciousness flashing off and on in places, her awareness of self, of time and place, faltering.

The girls helped Stacey sit, strapped her legs down with the belts and the biting mechanisms.

“I’m sorry,” Stacey continued to mumble, noticing that the thing they called the compliance prod had been tucked into its little groove, a foot-long, ivory tool of unfeeling cruelty, with a red tip and two black buttons along the side. “Please, no.”

Stacey’s handcuffs came off. Her shackles were removed. She was pushed back, whimpering, while her arms and belly and chest were strapped, while things were taped to her body, to her calf and the place between her breasts, while things were put inside her, a tube up her urethra, a plug up her anus.

“NOOOOOO!” she screamed as the restraints, feeling precisely as they had on Friday, yanked her back to the present horror. “NOOOOO!”

She was gagged in mid-scream, her cries muted to impotent groans as the rubber rod was pressed and locked between her teeth.

“UHHHH!” she grunted, as the girls raised the lid, put it into place, latched it with a dozen clicks at least, maybe more.

How long? Stacey tried to ask, the sounds her mouth made unintelligible, even to her. Where’s my pill? Where’s my sleeping pill?

Nothing.



Emptiness.

No, there was a small window to look through. Stacey stared through it, watching hands move, faces appear and disappear, watching the room tilt and vanish, as her box was hoisted and pushed, through a door, down a hall, onto an elevator, off the elevator, through more beeping doors.

Breathe, she told herself. Breathe.

They're going to let me out, like they did last time. I'm not here to die. I'm going to Texas, today. Breath in. Breath out.

No, this was not terrible. It wasn't hellish, she thought. She would come out later today, and in the meantime, she would have no choice but to rest, to sleep.

It had been the fear of the fear that had gripped her since she'd first been told she'd be boxed again. But familiarity had sapped her mind of the fear. She knew what this was now.

Stacey believed. She would endure.

Hunters. She was going to stay with hunters. Why did she believe that? Who had told her that?

Owls.

She closed her eyes. She didn't need a pill to sleep. She was still tired. They'd woken her too early. She'd planned to sleep until lunch.

Owls.

The next time Stacey opened her eyes, she knew from the rumble against her back and the gentle rocking of her box that she was airborne, flying to Texas, flying to a place where she'd be freed.

Through her window, she could see nothing but an expanse of gray plastic, and she guessed that the cargo hold had been left dark so that its occupants could sleep. Stacey wondered if anyone else were confined here with her, if there were other girls in other boxes, going to Texas, or somewhere else, through Texas.

Wait, was she going to Texas, or to some layover point? If it weren't a direct flight, she'd land and take off again. She tried not to think of itching, of places on her body she couldn't scratch.

Think of something else. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Sleep.

Stacey woke to a jolt, a bounce, another jolt, and knew she was landing.

She opened her eyes wide, experiencing familiar sensations in an unfamiliar way. Taxiing, stopping, taxiing, stopping again.

Waiting.

The gray field through her window brightened, and she heard creaks and thumps and voices and knew they were coming for her, for her and all the cargo in this space.

Thumps. Things moving, sliding, bumping.

And then it was Stacey's turn, someone pulling her box sideways, angling it up at the end that held her feet, lowering it and raising the other end. She saw a man's face, saw the opening in the side of the plane, was wheeled through it, saw a blue sky, felt the cool air, cool but not cold, and imagined this was what winter felt like in Texas, that she had arrived, that she would be freed and . . . and . . . she would figure out how to speak to her father, and he would have her freed. And then, they would talk, about what a lawsuit would look like. How do you sue people whose names you don't know, whose addresses are a complete mystery?

Stacey was wide awake now, and hungry. She'd missed breakfast. It must be getting close to lunch.

Her box was wheeled down a ramp, up another ramp and onto a truck, and laid flat. Darkness enveloped her as the truck door slammed closed.

The truck rumbled to life, moved, stopped, moved. Stacey could usually tell when she was turning, when she was going straight. She could even guess at her speed.

The truck stopped and beeped as it backed up. The door opened. Light. New faces, two men.

Her box was raised, rolled beneath a blue sky, forced over a jarring gap, wheeled into a building, onto an elevator, ascending, stopping, down another hall, stopping again and laid flat, where she could see a ceiling and a fluorescent light.

Somewhere nearby, someone knocked on a door.

"Come in," spoke a muffled voice.

Stacey heard a door open.

"Are you Hannah Loughbridge?"

"I am not," said a woman with a foreign accent. "Is that for her?"

"Yes, in care of Dazi Mandapreet. Is that you?"

"Yes. We're expecting a shipment."

“May I see your ID?”

“Of course.”

Stacey heard the squeak of a chair, footsteps, less distinct sounds, then a girl’s face appeared, looking down at Stacey through her window.

Stacey blinked.

“She looks conscious,” the girl said.

“Tell everyone she’s here,” said the accented voice.

Stacey waited, anxious but not terrified, believing that this ordeal was about to end.

For a moment, there was silence, then more footsteps, running this time.

A blonde girl’s face appeared, looked at her through the window, twisted in horror.

“She’s awake!” the girl exclaimed. “Help me!”

The blonde girl’s face disappeared, and Stacey heard a latch come loose, then a second, then a third. Another face appeared, the impassive face of a dark-haired girl.

“No no no, get her into the lab first!” said the accented voice.

“Show the men where she goes.”

Stacey’s heard latches being closed back, and her box was raised and wheeled forward.

“Was she supposed to get here wide awake?” said a female voice.

“They were supposed to give her something for the trip,” said a second voice, high-pitched and urgent to the point of panic, the voice that Stacey suspected belonged to the blonde. “She must have been in that thing for hours.”

“She probably slept,” said the first voice, calmly. “It’s gonna be fine. She’ll be out in, like, a minute.”

Stacey was wheeled into a small room. She saw cabinets, and bars, and then another ceiling, more fluorescent lights.

A door closed. Latches came loose in a frenzy, two at a time, three at a time, and stayed open this time. The cover of the box came off. Stacey blinked against the light, six dark shapes silhouetted above her that resolved into humans – two males, a heavyset, older Indian woman, a rail-thin girl with brown hair, a black-haired girl. And the blonde girl, who dropped to her knees and worked at Stacey’s gag, struggling with the catches until it came loose on one side and Stacey spat it out.

“Auck!” was her first sound.

“How long were you in there?” the blonde girl asked, putting her hand on Stacey’s head, stroking her hair. “I’m so sorry. How long were you in there?”

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” Stacey said, fixating on the blonde girl, because she seemed the most engaged, the most involved, the most upset. “Sorry. Sorry.”

The blonde reached down, unhooked one of the straps around Stacey’s arm. Her motions were jerky, almost violent. Her eyes were wet, her lips curled the way they do before a girl starts to cry.

If something wasn’t upsetting her so much, the girl would be pretty, Stacey thought.

No, she would be beautiful.

She’d made herself up expertly: dark eyeliner, a little blush on high cheekbones, blue-pink lipstick. Her hair had been cut recently, professionally, feathered on the sides, bangs across the forehead, a little girlish perhaps, but not unprofessional. And she was wearing a navy designer dress, hemline at mid-knee, neckline just open enough, the kind women wore in high-class offices, the kind her dad’s colleagues wore, but this one had a little extra flair, yellow piping around the neck, a black folded blossom above the left breast. Van Minsk? Was she wearing van Minsk?

And a collar. She was in a collar. Was it fashion? No. There was no latch, no keyhole. Two tags dangled from it.

The blonde was a slave.

Stacey stared at the tags, swinging from the collar above her, one plastic, in front, with the girl’s picture on it, the second, like Stacey’s, of blue metal, but hidden and unreadable.

“Help me get her out,” the girl commanded, voice slightly calmer.

The rail-thin girl and the black-haired girl both obeyed immediately, struggling with straps, opening them, struggling anew, while the Indian woman watched.

The two men had left, or had gone to some place where Stacey couldn’t see them.

The black-haired girl fingered Stacey’s collar.

“It says Stacey,” she said. “Is that your name? Stacey?”

“Yes.”

The blonde girl slid down to Stacey’s middle.

“I’m going to need to take some things out of you now,” she said, with a slight, pretty lisp.

“Yeah,” Stacey said, the only word she could speak, all of this too confusing for her to make sense of.

All the straps were off now, and Stacey rose to her elbows and raised and spread her legs, watching the blonde remove the catheter, carry the bag of urine toward a small washroom, and then turned to survey the room.

Behind her was a row of bars, with an open door in the middle, like a jail cell.

The men hadn’t left. They were still here, standing against the wall in the corner, waiting for something.

The blond returned, reached down and touched the base of Stacey’s anal plug.

“I need to pull this out,” she said. “Are you ready to relax?”

“Oh, god,” Stacey moaned, lifting up and grimacing. “Go ahead.”

The blonde, with exquisite gentleness, removed the plug and took it to the washroom. It hadn’t hurt at all.

“Do you think you can stand?” the blonde asked when she came back.

“Yes,” Stacey said, and she pivoted, set her feet on the floor, lifted herself by the edge of the box and slowly rose, the blonde holding one arm, gently, compassionately.

“Do you need a shower?” the blonde asked.

“Why would she want a shower?” asked the black hair.

“After you get shipped, it’s the best thing for feeling normal again.”

“You were shipped?” Stacey asked, turning to look at the girl beside her, who – now that her face was no longer twisted in despair – seemed very out of place here.

“Yeah,” she said. “They gave me a pill for my longest trip, though. You didn’t get anything, right?”

“No,” Stacey said, focusing on standing straight, realizing for the first time she was the only naked person here among six strangers, two of them male. She looked at the floor and kept talking. “They said they would, but when I asked about it this morning, I never got one.”

“What time did you start your trip?” asked the black-haired girl.

“I have no idea. After breakfast sometime. Before lunch.”

“It’s almost 11,” said the black-haired girl. “We were going to have something catered.”

“Catered?” Stacey repeated.

“Yeah, from Four Seasons. You like steak?”

Stacey shook her head. None of this was making sense.

“Where do I . . . shower?” she asked.

“Right in there,” the blonde girl said, pointing to the space past the bars, with the open barred door.

She stepped forward, and the blonde girl slowly detached her hand, allowing her to move under her own power through the door, into the space with a chair and a single bed and a sink with a mirror and a toilet and shower, with two thick towels and two bars of soap, still in their wrappers, and five bottles of hair product, both shampoo and conditioner.

“Stacey?” said the blonde girl.

Stacey turned and raised an eyebrow.

“I’m going to close and lock this,” said the blonde.

Stacey continued toward the shower without answering, without offering even a gesture, and she turned on the water, testing the temperature, ignoring the sound of a metal door clanging shut, a bolt being slid into its slot.

The pressure was good, the water going hot after less than 30 seconds, and once it was at the right temperature, she stepped beneath it, closing the little plastic curtain around her, opening a designer soap that smelled like mint and something unexpected, oatmeal and honey perhaps, and she examined the hair products, all new and unopened, one for body, one for dry hair, one for a lustrous sheen, one for dynamic bounce. Madrido. Dr. Descartes. FlavorSilke. Really expensive brands, the kind they use at the best salons, the brands you have to go to a specialty store to buy.

The blonde girl was right. Showering helped. She chose lustrous sheen, worked it into her scalp, rinsed, grabbed the Madrido conditioner, let it sit in her hair while she soaped up everything, her face, her breasts and belly, her thighs and between them, rinsing again, soaking, standing beneath the water, getting clean, letting everything wash off her, all that had been done to her, the cruelties large and small, all washing down the drain between her feet while she tried to come up with the questions to ask when nothing made sense.

Still questionless, she turned off the water, pushed the curtain aside and reached for a towel.

The blonde had slid a chair up to the bars, sitting on it with a thick, paperback book or manual spread out on her lap, curving over her thighs while she peered down at it, still as a statue, as if oblivious to anything around her.

“What’s your name?” Stacey asked, settling on the most obvious question first, the simplest question.

The girl looked up suddenly, as if startled, focusing on Stacey before she spoke.

“Hannah,” she said.

## **Chapter 56: A Mystery, and an Angry Phone Call**

“There’s no house there,” said Leston Fairchild, settling into his seat in a private room at Sparrow’s, looking at his father and his brother over escargot and crepes.

“Just an empty lot?” Druhler Fairchild asked.

“As of three days ago, yes. Even the wall was gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“The house that had been there was torn down on Friday,” Leston said. “A neighbor confirmed it.”

“Who owned it?”

“Someone bought it two weeks ago, and—”

“Who?” Fairchild demanded, his voice somewhere between outrage and panic.

“I went to the courthouse. A Delaware S corp. Owned by a trust. No names on anything I could find, other than a lawyer in Wyoming who said he knew nothing about it other than some people called him out of the blue and asked him to draw up papers.”

“Did he know who the people were?”

“He said he couldn’t reveal it. I’m not sure he knew.”

“Leston,” Fairchild said, tamping his voice down. “I gave you a simple assignment. And you’re blowing it.”

“I’m trying to tell you,” Leston protested, his father’s disappointment cutting deep. “Someone – some organization – bought it and tore everything down. The neighbor said it took less than a day.”

“What do they know about the . . . girl, then?”

“I asked who lived there. She – the neighbor – she never saw anyone after the last people moved out six months ago.”

Fairchild frowned, pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket, looked at it, answered.

“Hello?” he said.

“Who?” he said. “Who?”

He paused, listening.

“Blaise? Blaise Fairchild? Wait. Slow down, slow down. How are you, Blaise?”

Fairchild looked at his sons and raised his eyebrows.

“Blaise, stop yelling, I don’t understand you.”

Fairchild listened, pursing his lips.

“What about your daughter?” he said. “Slow down, slow down. What about your daughter?”

Fairchild paused again, listening.

“Have you been drinking?” Fairchild asked. “And who gave you this number?”

Leston Fairchild, analytical, and Brighton Fairchild, political, watched their father’s face tighten as the person on the other end of the line began shouting so loud Fairchild had to move the phone away from his ear.

“Stop screaming,” Fairchild said calmly. “Stop screaming, so I can understand you.”

Fairchild listened.

“Stacey Fairchild,” he said, patiently. “Okay, that’s your daughter. And she . . . do you know where she is? Okay, you don’t. Okay, I understand. Wait now. Ovaries? Three ovaries?”

Fairchild listened.

“Someone must have ordered that. Yes, a girl with three ovaries. Someone must have ordered it.”

Fairchild listened. “No, Blaise, I don’t know anything about it. No, Blaise, these things happen. I don’t know where she is. No. Do you know how many people work for me? How many sites I operate?”

Fairchild’s phone, held at arm’s length, practically vibrated with screams.

“I’m having dinner with my sons,” Fairchild said when the screams subsided. “If you’ll listen— If— If— Let me speak. No, I—Let me speak—



Let me speak! Alright? Alright? Listen. She's not lost. No, she's not lost. Her name will turn up in the federal database. Yes, a federal database. Search Federal Subject Database. That's all. Search that. Type in her name. She'll show up on it within a week, two at the longest."

Screams.

"Okay. Calm down. Okay. I'll make some inquiries. She's probably gone to a school, or a lab, or a—"

Screams.

"For god's sakes, Blaise, calm down. She'll be fine. You'll hear from her. I'm sure of it."

Fairchild paused, listened.

"No, I can't just set her free. That's not how it works. If we set every girl free with a father who—"

Screams.

Fairchild hung up, turned his phone off, and scowled at his sons.

"Do either of you remember Blaise Fairchild?"

Leston and Brighton shook their heads.

"Distant family. Did a little work for me, on the PUMI law in Kansas. Eminent domain. That was the theory. And it worked. And I paid him, well. Now he thinks I owe him something."

The sons nodded, eyes a little wide, as they sometimes are when people are confronted by the pure, unadulterated distillment of the pain they have caused, the reduction to a single exquisite point of the harms they are party to, the tears and the groans and the intermittent screams.

"But what the hell, he's family," Fairchild said, sighing, and he pocketed his phone with trembling fingers. "So I guess she is too. Brighton, look her up. Call around to the labs."

"What's her name?"

"Stacey Fairchild."

Brighton tapped the name into his phone.

"And Leston," Fairchild said, "I'm taking over this shit with . . . that other girl. I'll find her. Just email me everything you found out, to my personal email."

"Yes, Sir."

## Chapter 57: Four Days Ago

“Where did everyone else go?” Stacey asked, bending to rub the water off her calves and thighs.

“I told them to leave,” Hannah said. “You needed privacy.”

“Who were they?”

“Jody, Athena, Dr. Mandapreet. I don’t know who the two men were, they were just—”

“Why were they here?”

“Who?”

“Everyone.”

“Dr. Mandapreet is my research supervisor. And Jody works for her. And Athena is . . . my assistant.”

Stacey, passing the towel across her back while her breasts swung before her, wound it around her hair, stepped up to the bars and looked down, because there was something off about the girl, or the room. A chain lay across the floor, one end fastened to a ring set into the middle of the floor. Stacey traced its length with her eyes, following the loops and coils. It seemed to terminate just beneath Hannah’s right foot.

No, it terminated at her ankle.

Hannah was chained to the floor.

Stacey tried to keep her face from registering surprise, but it was impossible not to as she raised her eyes to Hannah’s face.

Hannah smiled back, as if she knew exactly what Stacey had seen, and didn’t care that she’d seen it, and had other things to worry about.

But everything Stacey saw just made things stranger, more deserving of explanation.

“What are you, then?” Stacey asked.

“Principal investigator,” Hannah said.

“Yeah,” Stacey agreed, “but . . .”

“I’m a junior at the University of Texas at Corpus Christi,” Hannah added.

“Okay, but . . .” Stacey said wrapping the towel around her hair and gesturing toward the collar around her own neck.

“I’m a subject, yes,” Hannah said. Having to say the words seemed to make her impatient.

“My tag says P-U-M-I,” Stacey said, reaching up to finger the tag dangling from her collar.

Hannah smiled again, a little sadly, it seemed, and leaned forward, sliding aside the plastic tag with her picture on it, revealing a metal tag like Stacey's with "Hannah" at the top and "Female, Recreational," just beneath it.

Stacey laughed.

"It says Female, Recreational."

"That's my, um, purpose," Hannah said, releasing her tags and leaning back, staring up at a place over Stacey's head.

"Recreational," Stacey said. "Like, hunting? Or—"

"Sex," Hannah blurted, eyes going just a little hard, a little impatient again.

"Sex," Stacey repeated, looking puzzled.

"I'm used for sex," Hannah said. "That's my job. Sex."

"Wait," said Stacey. "Like . . . sex slave?"

"I'm a recreational female," Hannah said, staring with blazing eyes now, the color rising in her cheeks.

"Oh, oh," Stacey said, and her face grew hot. "God, I'm sorry. I didn't know. I didn't understand. I—"

Stacey bit her lip, looked down, waiting for the girl to speak, the silence eventually becoming painfully awkward.

"Can I ask another question?"

"Yes. Always."

"This doesn't seem that, you know . . ." Stacey gestured toward the lab around her, "recreational."

"No, this isn't part of that. This is what I want to do. It's part of my education."

"Okay," Stacey said, and she grabbed her chair and slid it over, so she and Hannah were facing each other through the bars, Stacey nude except for her collar and turban, Hannah in what, Stacey was becoming certain, was van Minsk. "Who chained you to the floor?"

"Jody," Hannah said.

"Why?"

"Convention," Hannah said, and her eyes blazed anew, for a fraction of a second, at Stacey, or at something beyond Stacey.

"I need to read you a letter," Hannah said, and she held up the book in her lap so Stacey could see the cover. "It might explain some things."

Stacey stared, at the logo for an organization named New Life, and at the title of the manual: “A Three-Ovaried Female: Data and Observations.”

Hannah opened the book, flipped through a few pages, began to read.

“Dear Research Subject,” she began. “We are pleased with and grateful for your participation in this important project. With your cooperation, this study will uncover vital data about the functioning and stimulation of the female reproductive system, particularly as it relates to ovulation and effective reproduction interventions.

“We ask that you give this effort the support it deserves, that you obey instructions, that you submit graciously to data gathering, and that you speak and behave respectfully at all times.

“Your compliance will be rewarded at the discretion of your research director, and disobedience will be punished through established, accredited protocols.

“Thank you.”

Hannah finished reading, looked up at Stacey.

“When is it supposed to be over?” Stacey asked.

“The letter?” Hannah asked. “That’s it.”

“No, the research.”

“The research will finish with the semester. In May.”

“What will you be doing?”

“It varies,” Hannah said, and now she seemed a little evasive, a little uncomfortable. “I’ll need to take your blood. And . . . a urine sample. And look . . . inside you.”

“Uh . . . inside me?”

“Inside your vagina,” Hannah said, forcing the words out.

“Where will I stay?”

“Here,” said Hannah.

“This is a lab,” Stacey said, not quite comprehending yet that this was a place where she could live. Her last place of confinement was temporary. Surely this one was too.

“It’s a residential lab,” Hannah said, and then she blinked and seemed to be reconsidering her answer. “But we’ll see about letting you out sometimes. That should be possible. We all just need to . . . get used to everything first.”

“Where do you live?” Stacey asked.

“In the kennels during the week,” Hannah said. “Here on campus.”

“They call them kennels?”

“Yes, that’s what they’re called.”

“Are they like this?”

“No, they’re smaller, and the showers are down the hall. And they’re less private.”

“But you’re here now,” Stacey said. “And you weren’t on a chain earlier.”

“I stay with my . . . owner, on the weekends. Or he’s sort of like a boyfriend. His family owns me. His parents do. And when I’m with him, there are certain rules, and when I’m in the kennels, there are other rules, and at my owners’ house, there are rules, and here, there are rules too, and you just have to learn them, wherever you are at the time.”

Hannah looked up, aiming earnest blue eyes into Stacey’s dark ones, as if waiting for her to agree.

“This is all new to me,” Stacey said.

“How new?” Hannah asked, and briefly, very briefly – so briefly even she probably didn’t know she’d done it – she winced, her mouth twisting into a strange, uncomfortable grimace before it returned to its natural state, upturned at the corners.

“Since Friday,” Stacey said. “They took me Friday.”

“For this?”

“They didn’t say. Just took me.”

“Oh,” said Hannah. There it was again, a sort of twist in her face, her eyes, her mouth. “Which Friday?”

“The Friday just past,” Stacey said. “Like, what’s today, Tuesday? So, four days ago.”

“Where were you?” Hannah asked, her voice changed, soft, weak. More breath than speech.

“At the gyno,” Stacey said. “Near Topeka, where I live. Or lived. They were jabbing my pussy with that thing, and this bitch . . . well, I thought she was a friend, but this bitch says, ‘Hey, you’ve got three ovaries, I have to report that.’ And the next thing I know, they’ve got this bag out, and they’re pulling things from it and telling me I can’t leave, and then I get chained up, and—”

“Which Friday?” Hannah asked.

“Four days ago,” Stacey said again.

“You said that,” Hannah said in a slow whisper. “Sorry. What . . . time . . . on Friday?”

Stacey looked into Hannah’s face. Something strange was going on there, around her left eye. It was twitching.

Hannah raised her hand, put a finger against the lower lid, and the manual slid between her thighs, and she jerked as if she’d been shocked when it rapped against the floor.

“Mid-morning,” Stacey said, looking at the book, which lay open between a pair of black suede flats with the kind of floral designer stitching that drives the price up close to \$300 per pair. “My gyno appointment was first thing, and then I was supposed to go to a fitting, for a bridesmaid dress. But instead, they stuck me in this box. Same one I came here in, but I didn’t know what it was. I thought they were going to kill me. God, I was screaming until they gagged me.”

Hannah was looking at something. Stacey’s left breast, perhaps. And her face was white, and her mouth was open, her eyes glassy and wet.

“Oh god, Hannah, are you sick? Hannah?”

Hannah blinked, raised her eyes slowly to Stacey’s.

“What did they say?” Hannah asked, quietly, almost as if she were forcing the words out.

“What did who say?” Stacey asked.

“The people who they . . . when they . . . when you were . . . when because . . . your ovary . . . did they . . . who for?”

“No,” Stacey said, not sure she understood the question. “Look, do you need to lie down? You don’t look well. No, they just said something like, um, someone put in an order, or we just got an order or something, I don’t know. It was all a blur.”

Hannah rose abruptly, grabbed a bar to steady herself and shuffled, white-faced, toward the little bathroom in the lab part of the room. With every second step, her chain slithered and hissed behind her, and Stacey watched and listened, alarmed for the welfare of this strange girl she’d just met, who wore van Minsk and a chain around her ankle and seemed to have come down in astonishing speed with a very serious illness.

Hannah stepped into the washroom and reached out, with a glance at Stacey, to grab the doorknob, pulling it toward her.

But she couldn't close it. The gap between the floor and the bottom of the door was too narrow to allow for her chain, and it caught. She opened the door and pulled it toward herself again, but it caught the same way again, with a clunk and a scrape against the white tile floor.

She gave up, leaving the door slightly ajar, invisible to Stacey but audible to her, and the sound of retching filled the lab.

First there was the gurgle, then the "aurwgh" as Hannah's belly contracted, then the sound of the bowl filling, then a cough. These were all things Stacey had heard, and witnessed on occasion. She'd even held hair, at least twice, but there was a third time someone thanked her for doing so that she couldn't remember.

These were all normal sounds, if distressing. But then, after the cough, there was a little wail, a sort of strangled, coughing cry, the sound of a girl with a broken heart.

Three times it happened, Hannah vomiting, coughing, and then crying, sucking in her breath and weeping, ever so briefly, ever so quietly, as if she didn't want anyone else to hear.

Stacey heard the toilet flush. She heard water run. It ran for a long time, perhaps five minutes. There'd been no one to hold her hair, and Stacey felt for the first time a deep sympathy for Hannah, fortunate in some ways, perhaps, but a sex slave, and chained at times too, and at this moment, sick, and very alone.

"Hannah?" Stacey said. "Hannah, babe, you okay?"

The water turned off, and Stacey heard the sound of paper towels – one, two, three – being pulled from the dispenser, used, wadded up, tossed. Then more towels, used and thrown out.

Hannah exited the washroom looking like someone else, face so pale it was almost green, all her makeup gone now, eyes red, hair wet where, Stacey guessed, she'd had to rinse the vomit off. And a dark oval where the end of her wet hair touched her dress on the right side.

Hannah, without looking at Stacey, moved back to the chair, sat, picked up the manual and returned it to her lap, each motion slow, deliberate, as if she were a sluggish machine, learning these actions for the first time. Or as if she were weary with the weight of the ages.

"Hannah?" Stacey whispered. "God, you okay? Hannah?"

Hannah finally looked up, into Stacey's eyes, struggling to focus at first, looking but not seeing, until at last she seemed to perceive the girl

before her, and her face composed itself into an ironic, tragic smile, and she said nothing.

“Bulimia, right?” Stacey said, reaching through the bars to touch Hannah’s knee.

Hannah flinched, so Stacey pulled her hand back.

“I’m sorry,” Hannah said, and she looked at Stacey and her eyes filled with tears.

“Look, Hannah, it’s okay,” Stacey said. “I’ve known bulimics. Oh, god, I mean, sorry, I mean, uh, people who had bulimia. Please don’t apologize. It’s okay.”

Hannah smiled again, set her manual on the floor, got up, went to the bathroom and retrieved a length of toilet tissue, returning to sit while she dabbed at her eyes.

She breathed in, a great filling of her lungs, and sat back, and grabbed her thighs, one hand on each, squeezing them so tight her knuckles whitened.

“Okay,” she said, exhaling, drawing in her breath.

“Okay,” she said again, speaking to herself, and she shook her head and looked at Stacey, as if willing herself to recover, to feel better, to carry on.

“Are you okay?” Stacey said. “Look, if you need to do this later, I can—”

“No,” Hannah said. “It’s okay. It just . . . happens sometimes.”

“Have you talked to a doctor about it?”

“It’s not something a doctor can help with, probably,” Hannah said, and she sighed, and grabbed her legs again, and her eyes went wide, as if something hurt, as if she were remembering something terrible, as if she were being burned.

“What about you?” Stacey asked.

“Huh?” Hannah asked, trying to focus.

“How long for you?”

“How long for what?”

“When were you taken?”

“Oh. Two and a half years.”

“Where were you?”

“I was with my mom, in her apartment. They came to collect on all this debt she had, and I was part of what they took.”



Stacey raised her hands to her mouth, her face transforming to a look of horror.

“Did they put you in a box?”

“No,” Hannah replied, “A little cage. It wasn’t as bad as what you got put in. But it was—”

“Your mom saw?” Stacey asked, and her eyes filled with tears.

“It’s okay,” Hannah said, waving dismissively. “It was nothing.” But she choked again and raised the tissue to her face and looked down, grimacing with what seemed to unbearable pain, eyes closed, lips curled outward.

“Hannah, Hannah, babe,” Stacey said, and the naked girl reached through the bars, and this time she took Hannah’s leg and Hannah did not flinch. This was something Stacey did. She comforted people. She comforted friends, acquaintances, strangers. She held hair. She touched knees and shoulders. And in comforting today, Stacey forgot the strange conditions of the present, and she comforted herself.

Hannah was a tough case, though. Something powerful was eating at this girl, something fierce and unspoken.

Hannah breathed in again, struggling to regain her composure, succeeding for the moment.

“So . . .” she began, and it seemed to be a difficult question, something she had to power through. “What were you doing?”

“When?”

“On Friday.”

“I was at the gyno, and then—”

“No,” Hannah said, pausing. “I mean, what were you doing . . . in your life?”

“Nothing,” Stacey said.

Nothing.

This was the truth. A terrible truth, so unpleasant Stacey would say anything except this, to anyone who asked. “I’m going to school” in the fall, or in the spring, or the summer – whichever season was coming next – “to study . . .” and then fill in the blank. Interior design, med tech, teaching, real estate.

It was all true, the way any prediction is true. Plans could change. Things could come up. There could be problems. But on the day of each prophecy, the future seemed easy, and certain.

Or the alternative: “I just started a new job.” Shoe sales. Legal clerk. Property manager. Legal assistant. House painter. Law office mail girl. Half her jobs came from her father’s lawyer friends. They worked out no better than the ones she got on her own.

Nothing.

Why could she say to Hannah what she could say to no one else?

Because Hannah was a sex slave, a lonely girl with bulimia or something worse, who at the moment was on a chain?

Or was it something peculiar to Hannah? Even if Hannah weren’t collared, weren’t restrained and used for sex, Stacey might have given her the same answer.

Hannah seemed like someone you could talk to. There was something in her eyes that understood.

“Were you in school?” Hannah asked, her voice returning, the color in her face slightly restored.

“Sort of, a little,” Stacey said.

“What were you studying?”

“Nothing,” Stacey said, smiling. She was getting used to this, to confessing to this girl. “I mean, nothing, and everything. I’d take a few courses and get bored. Or more like, what’s the use?”

“Were you . . . in debt?” Hannah asked.

“No, no, I was fine,” Stacey said. “Daddy took care of things.”

“Daddy?”

“My dad. He’s a lawyer. Really good, too. He’s been helping me out while I got my plan together.”

“Your plan?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah,” Stacey said. “I feel like I must be good at something. I’m just trying to figure it out. And Daddy gets it, for the most part. He’s been very patient with me. And he’s going to take care of this.”

“Take care of this?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah, get me out.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m leaving.”

Hannah frowned, bent and picked up the manual, opening it and setting the damp tissue in the fold, like a bookmark.

“How are you leaving?” Hannah asked.

“My dad,” Stacey repeated, surprised that Hannah didn’t seem to be getting this. “I just need to talk to him. I can do that, right?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “You can write him a letter.”

“Can I call him?”

“I don’t have a phone,” Hannah said.

“Someone does. I saw one in that other girl’s pocket.”

“She shouldn’t have had that in here,” Hannah said. “Letters only. You can write five letters a month.”

“I just need to write one,” Stacey said. “Do you have paper?”

“I can get you some,” Hannah said. “And a pen. And an envelope.”

“What if I just walked out?” Stacey said.

“You’re naked.”

“Get me some clothes then,” Stacey said, and she leaned forward and smiled conspiratorially.

“I can’t do that.”

“What would happen?”

“You’d be caught.”

“What do you mean?”

Hannah leaned back and breathed out, and her eyes went wide again before she narrowed them and stared at Stacey through the bars.

“Has anything been explained to you?” she asked. “Since last Friday?”

“I don’t know,” Stacey said. “They talked to me a little. They gave me a book.”

“What kind of book?”

*The Cold Trail of Pablo Vasquez.*

“A novel, then.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t terrible. I was sort of reading it in that place where I was being kept.”

“So no one explained what happened if you leave . . . without authorization?”

“No.”

## Chapter 58: Hannah Explains

“There are people who make a living out of finding girls who have escaped,” Hannah said. “If they see a collar, they can scan that chip in your

back, and it will tell them if you're wanted, and they can take you in and . . . punish you."

"How would they know I was wanted?" Stacey asked, sensing, for the first time since she'd been in that cell, the little twinge of the chip in her back. She reached behind her, barely able to put one fingertip on the little lump where it had been embedded.

"It gets reported."

"Who reports it?"

Hannah paused, grimaced ever so slightly before she looked up.

"I would have to," Hannah said. "Anyone who helps someone escape gets in trouble. Serious trouble."

"Tell them I overpowered you. I'll tie you up. Look, you could—"

Hannah scowled so fiercely Stacey closed her mouth.

"You'll get a week of punishment when they find you. And then they can sell you to someplace worse."

"What's worse than this?" Stacey asked.

Hannah laughed, briefly, bitterly, before her throat emitted a kind of strangled sound and her face went serious and she spoke.

"Lots of places."

"You've been to them?"

"Some. Or they've been described to me. Factories. Big labs. Terrible homes."

"I need to talk to my dad," Stacey said, and for the first time that day, she felt the shadow of panic, of hopelessness.

"I'll get you paper," Hannah promised, pausing before she spoke again. "Don't talk about escaping again."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's not allowed. It will get you punished."

"Punished? For a week?"

"No, that's just for an actual escape, or attempt, or even if someone takes you against your will. It would be less for that. But it will hurt."

"Hurt?" Stacey echoed, eyes wide. "What are you talking about?"

"Punishment," Hannah said simply.

"Like . . . body . . . punishment?"

"Yes," Hannah said. "Corporal."

"Wait, wait," Stacey said, and she sat up and tucked her hair behind her ears. "You're talking about . . . some kind of . . ."

“Yes,” Hannah said.

“Like what?”

“It varies,” Hannah said.

“It’s been done to you,” Stacey asserted.

“Yes.”

“What did they do?”

“I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Did anything break? Do you have scars?”

“It doesn’t leave marks,” Hannah said. “On your body.”

For a long time, the two girls just looked at each other, the blonde girl with a sort of deadened blankness, the other with a burgeoning expression of horror.

“Okay,” Stacey said, an almost-buried memory recurring to her.

“They did something to me, while I was still at the gyno. This kind of white rod thing, with blue sparks. And they . . . and they touched it to me . . . for no reason . . . just to make sure it worked . . . and . . .”

Stacey fell silent, looked back up.

“You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Hannah replied, looking through the bars with a face carved from wood, molded from plastic, nothing else there, no emotion.

“They’d do that to me for a week?”

“Not just that, probably,” Hannah droned, drawing in her breath, as if forcing herself to continue. “I’ve never met anyone who’d been through it. And you’re not supposed to talk about it, anyway.”

“How many days if I just say I want to escape?”

“Not days. Maybe hours. But it’s still not worth it.”

“I tried to get my phone,” Stacey said, and she pointed down to the little, healing wound on her ankle. “To call my dad. And I got cut, but I didn’t get punished.”

Hannah looked down at the injury, and she winced and closed her eyes, as if Stacey were pointing to the bloody stump at the end of her leg where a foot used to be.

“It’s not that bad,” Stacey blurted. “It’s healing, it’s healing. I was just pointing it out because, I guess, it was really bad for me to do that, and I didn’t know.”

Hannah slid her chair up and motioned Stacey to raise her foot, to push it through the bars, and Hannah took it gently and placed it in her lap

without any concern for her dress.

“Flex your foot.”

Stacey pointed her toes outward.

“Flex,” Hannah repeated. “Bend your foot up, toward yourself.”

Stacey obeyed.

“Does it hurt?”

“No.”

“Wiggle your toes,” Hannah said. “Fan them out and move them in a wave. Right. Does that hurt? Does that hurt?”

“No,” Stacey said. “No. Are you thinking I broke something?”

“You’d know if something was broken,” Hannah said, and she tapped two places at the front of Stacey’s ankle, under the injury. “Extensor digitorum longus,” she said. “Tibialis anterior. You need them, to walk with. So if anything hurts there, please let me know.”

“Is that van Minsk?” Stacey asked.

“Yeah.”

“You wear it every day?”

“No. But today, because . . .”

“Because of what?”

“You,” Hannah said.

“I don’t get it.”

“You’re . . . a special person,” Hannah stammered, eyes going blank again. “In my life. So I wanted . . .”

“Who bought it for you?”

“My owners,” Hannah said. “For Christmas.”

“They’re rich?”

“Yes.”

“Are any of them doctors?”

“Yes. The dad is.”

“I knew it. And he taught you stuff?”

“I look at his books sometimes. He’s into orthopedics. But his wife’s family has a lot of money too.”

“When did they buy you?”

“Two and a half years ago.”

“Oh yeah, you said that. And they’ve owned you the whole time?”

“Yes.”

“How much did they pay?”

“That’s sort of a rude question,” Hannah said. “Sorry.”

“Oh, sorry, sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“Why is it rude?” Stacey asked, and she pulled her foot back to her side of the bars, and reached up and pulled off her turban and threw the damp towel onto the floor.

“Because if it’s low, it’s embarrassing. If it’s high, it’s embarrassing.”

“And if it’s average, it’s embarrassing too.”

“Yes,” Hannah said, nodding, and smiling for the first time since she got sick.

“Hey,” Stacey said, “are you feeling better?”

“I’ll be okay,” Hannah said, and she shook her head again, as if trying to clear out a memory, or a pain. “I just . . .”

“Hey,” Stacey said.

“Yes?”

“I’m going to get out of here, okay?”

Hannah just stared.

“But it’s not about you. This just isn’t for me. I hope I didn’t hurt your feelings.”

“No.”

“And I know you want to work with me until, what, um, May?”

“Yes.”

“So it would ruin your project if I got out before then?”

“Probably.”

“But I have to leave.”

“It might not be that easy,” Hannah said. “I just . . . don’t want you to be disappointed.”

“Don’t you try to get out?”

Hannah peered into Stacey’s eyes, as if gauging her, and she drew in her breath the way people do before they say something important, but in the end, she spoke but a little. “It’s complicated,” she said.

“I do yoga,” Stacey said back.

Hannah nodded, looking a little puzzled.

“It’s helping me get through,” Stacey explained. “Deep breathing. Getting centered. Being in the moment.”

“I’m glad you have that, then,” Hannah said, with just a little life in her voice.

“I’m ready for anything,” Stacey said, blinking and nodding, looking determined. “If it takes awhile for Daddy to get me, I can . . . I can do this.”

“We’re not going to ask that much of you,” Hannah said.

“Can we go over it again?” Stacey said. “I wasn’t listening that much before.”

“You mean, the letter?”

“Everything,” Stacey said.

Hannah picked up the manual, spread it out on her thighs, flipped to a page near the front, and read.

“Dear, um, Stacey,” Hannah read. “We are pleased with and grateful for your participation in this important project. With your cooperation, this study will uncover important data about the functioning and stimulation of the female reproductive system, particularly as it relates to ovulation and effective reproduction interventions.”

“Whoa, wait,” Stacey said. “Reproduction. I am not getting pregnant.”

“No,” Hannah agreed. “You aren’t.”

“You . . . your letter, keeps talking about reproduction.”

“We’re studying your ovaries,” Hannah said. “But we don’t have to get you pregnant to do that. It’s just that your ovaries are part of your reproductive system.”

“Okay, go on.”

“We ask that you give this effort the support it deserves, that you obey instructions, that you submit graciously to data gathering, and that you speak and behave respectfully at all times.”

Hannah looked up. Stacey blinked but had no questions.

“Your compliance will be rewarded at the discretion of your research director, and disobedience will be punished through established, accredited protocols.”

“Okay, stop there,” Stacey said.

“That’s the end of the letter,” Hannah said.

“Disobedience will be punished. I heard that this time.”

“Through established, accredited protocols,” Hannah noted.

“What does that mean?”



Hannah flipped deeper into the manual.

“We have a choice of what approach we use,” Hannah said, and she turned the book around so Stacey could read the title at the top of the page – “Discipline”, with a the vague list of infractions beneath it: disrespect, resistance to methodology, failure to report – and the three approved disciplinary sources: Federal Discipline Standards, Chapter 12 and 14C, The Fest-Morrow Corrective Guidelines, and the Port Protocol, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition.

Stacey leaned back, because the page told her nothing, and Hannah set the manual back on her lap.

“There shouldn’t be . . . any reason . . . ever,” Hannah stammered, voice leaden. “I don’t want to do . . . it.”

“Athena does,” Stacey blurted.

“Athena?” Hannah said, looking startled.

“That girl. Athena. Something about her.”

“What about her?” Hannah asked.

“Do you know her?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Two and a half years,” Hannah said.

Stacey pondered the answer before she spoke again.

“Wait, that was when . . .”

“Yeah. She’s my owner’s daughter.”

“Oh god, I’m sorry,” Stacey said, realizing she’d blundered grievously.

“Why are you sorry?” Hannah asked.

“Well . . . you’re sort of . . . I don’t know.”

“You’re right,” Hannah said. “She’s helping me. It’s my project, but she volunteered.”

“You have to do what she says?”

“Not in here,” Hannah replied.

“Okay, then,” Stacey said, leaning back, her breasts holding their position, straight out, nipples firm. “What are my days like?”

Hannah drew in her breath, closed her manual and set it on the floor.

“I’ll be taking data from you every day,” Hannah said. “Blood, urine, temperature—”

“Blood?”

“Yes, I’ll be drawing. Twice a day the first month, then once a day.”

“I can handle that,” Stacey said guardedly. “What about urine?”

“You go to the toilet with a sample jar.”

“Temp?”

“Thermometers. And I’ll track your cycle. And I’ll need to interview you every day too. And record it all.”

“You said vagina earlier.”

“I have to look at you there, yeah.”

“How?”

“Vaginal scope.”

”What’s that?”

“It’s small, and it just goes inside for about 10 seconds. It won’t hurt.”

“During my period too?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Stacey said, “so what are you trying to find out?”

“A lot of the data is going to the research sponsors. But the hypothesis is a three-ovary reproductive system, when subjected to measured interventions, can provide quantitative and qualitative data about ovary and reproductive function we can’t get from conventional paired—”

“Okay, okay,” Stacey said, holding up her hands, and then she bent over, rested her elbows on her knees and spoke to the floor. “I know this is important to you. And I’m sure you’re very smart. But this isn’t my thing. I don’t like this. I don’t think it’s right.”

“Welcome to the resistance,” Hannah said, so quietly Stacey wasn’t sure she heard the words.

“Huh?” she asked, looking up, into Hannah’s eyes, which were glowing with something new, something that hadn’t been there, before or after she got sick.

Hannah sat, frozen, expression unchanging.

“Huh?” Stacey queried again. “I thought you said something.”

Hannah remained silent, a strange, complicated, troubled, lonely girl.

“Okay,” Stacey said. “How much time will you be here?”

“Two to three hours per day,” Hannah replied. “Data gathering and input. And there will be other people here.”

“Input?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s the PC?”

“It’ll be brought in later today. It’s getting set up in IT.”

“Will I get to use it?”

“No. It’s just for research. It’s just hooked up to the research company.”

“Can I have a TV?”

“A TV?” Hannah echoed blankly, as if the request were incomprehensible.

“Yeah, to watch stuff on.”

“I could give you things to read.”

“I want a TV.”

“Other people will be here,” Hannah said.

“Sixteen hours a day?”

“No.”

“Look,” Stacey said, leaning forward and staring directly into Hannah’s eyes. “Four days ago, I lived on my laptop and my TV. And I’ve gone four days with nothing. And if you want my cooperation, you gotta do some things for me. You said I get rewards, right, for cooperating?”

“Yes, that was in the letter, and we’ll honor it.”

“So, a TV. Where I can pick what I watch. I was in the middle of the fifties, and there’s this western from then, it was called Sheriff Max Wright and I was just getting into it.”

“I’m not sure how that would work,” Hannah said. “I can’t promise that.”

The door into the hall thumped three times, and Athena’s excited, muffled voice sounded through it.

“Hannah, open the door!” she shouted. “The food’s getting cold!”

## **Chapter 59: Lunch and Samples**

Hannah stepped over, punched something into a pad beside the lab door, and swung it open.

Athena and Jody pushed through with a cart, and the lab filled with the odors of seasoned, steaming food.

“Hungry?” Athena asked.

“Yes,” Stacey said, realizing she was indeed, very hungry. “I never got breakfast.”

“Sorry it took so long,” Athena said. “You told me you didn’t want steak, so we had to change the order.”

“I did?”

“Yeah, I asked if you liked steak, and you just looked at me. So it’s chicken and fish.”

Athena pulled containers out of white bags, setting them onto a desk and table.

“Can she come out for this?” Athena asked, looking at Hannah, still seated before Stacey on the other side of the bars. Hannah turned to look, and Athena started. “Uh, where’s all your makeup?”

“It came off.”

“How?”

“In the sink.”

“Okay, do you want to tell me why you washed all your makeup off in the sink?”

“I wasn’t feeling good, and so . . . it came off.”

“That makes no sense,” Athena said, eyeing Hannah suspiciously before she returned to the previous topic. “So, do you want Stacey out or not?”

Hannah stood and turned, looking at Stacey awkwardly.

“Uh . . . do you . . . if you . . . because . . .”

“Oh god, Hannah,” Athena said, stepping up to the bars. “Stacey, do you want to sit down with us, or stay in there?”

“Be with you,” Stacey said, and she moved to her locked door and grabbed the bars.

“Okay,” Athena said, “then we have to put something on your feet.”

“What do you mean?” Stacey asked.

“We have to chain your ankles together.”

Stacey recoiled, dropping her hands from the bars, face registering shock.

“This is new to you?” Athena queried.

“It’s all new to me,” Stacey said quietly. “I was—”

“Okay,” Hannah interrupted, stepping quickly over to the bars, her chain dragging behind her. “It’s going to be policy, starting out. But we’ll see how things go, and—”

“That’s fine,” Stacey said. “Let me out. Do what you have to do.”

Hannah looked at Athena expectantly, nodding.

Athena looked back at her, mouthing, with gross indiscretion masquerading as its opposite, “This is part of your job.”

“I’ve never done this before,” Hannah whispered back, Stacey remaining puzzled as she followed the conversation.

“You should know how it’s done,” Athena said firmly, all discretion set aside. “Everything’s where we put it yesterday.”

Hannah drifted over to the cabinets, her chain dragging behind her.

“I think it’s okay if yours comes off,” Athena said. “It’s just for when you’re here alone, right?”

Hannah ignored her, opened the cabinet door, which ran from the floor to almost the height of the refrigerator beside it, revealing a series of chains hanging from hooks, as well as other things Stacey tried to study in the brief moment before Hannah grabbed a set of shackles and shut the cabinet door.

What had she seen? Stacey asked herself. A cane? A rod? A whip? All three? Who had put them there? Had she caught a glimpse of the real Hannah behind that door, the truth behind the pretty face, beneath the blonde hair? Was that really Hannah, sick and lonely and sad and soft-spoken, with kind eyes and a veneer of compassion, keeping her true nature hidden behind a flimsy door she sometimes had to open?

“Where were you before?” Athena asked.

“You’ve worn something like these before, right?” Hannah blurted, striding to the cage door.

“Yes,” Stacey replied, grabbing the bars and putting her feet together.

Hannah’s face was strangely flushed, covered with sweat. Was she getting sick again? She knelt, reaching through the bars to put on Stacey’s shackles, fumbling with them, dropping a cuff before she got them applied, and she stood, slipped her hand into a little pocket at her hip and pulled out the key to the cage door, opening it wide and smiling weakly, with glistening lips.

Stacey shuffled over to the table and sat, while Athena served, setting out sturdy paper plates and cups of iced tea, shoveling out panko-encrusted trout, crabbed-stuffed baked chicken, Philippine blue rice, a Tahitian vegetable medley, and cinnamon-oat rolls.

“Jody, will you tell Stacey a about yourself?” Hannah said, a little breathlessly, as she took her seat beside the naked girl.

“Oh, right,” Jody said, looking slightly surprised. She turned to Stacey briefly, looked away. “I’m from a little town in west Texas. St. Lawrence. I’m a junior, and I’m majoring in biology. This semester, I’m working as an academic assistant to Dr. Mandapreet, so I’ll be helping . . . with you.”

“And then, Athena,” Hannah continued, “I told Stacey about our . . . relationship, and that you’ll be helping out too, but there’s a lot about you she doesn’t know.”

“Athena Petrosyan,” Athena said, nodding and gesturing at Stacey’s plate. “You’re going to eat something, right?”

Stacey picked up a plastic fork and drove it into her fish.

“I’m from Dallas, I’m a sophomore, I don’t know what I’m majoring in yet, blah blah blah,” Athena said, and she laughed with her mouth full. “Now, you need to know about Hannah, because she’s a complete fucking lunatic.”

Hannah sounded slightly hysterical as she laughed, and she smiled and glowed and her face stopped sweating as Athena regaled the three other girls at the table with a thorough accounting of Hannah’s exploits: her habit of speaking with the maximum insolence she could get away with; her frequent arguments with Athena, which she occasionally won; and the grand finale, her performance last spring at her scholarship recognition.

“She showed up in front of, like, 200 people with—”

“It was about 50,” Hannah interrupted.

“And she’s naked and has these chains on, even though she could have dressed, and she announces to everyone that she has to go get punished, and she’s talking about nipples and, oh my god oh my god, everyone’s just like . . .”

Athena dropped her jaw and stared at everyone with her mouth and eyes wide, the quintessential expression of mortified shock.

“I live-streamed it,” Athena continued proudly. “It was the best thing on the internet that day. The best thing! And then they censored it, because it was too awesome I guess, and so now you can’t find it anywhere.”

“I heard about that,” Jody said, smiling at Hannah. “People were talking about it.”

“What was the point again, Hannah?” Athena asked. “You had some message you were trying to make, right.”

“It was about the scholarship,” Hannah said. “It didn’t seem fair.”

Hannah looked at the clock on the wall above the cabinets.

“Thank you for lunch, Athena, it was really good,” Hannah said.

“Now, um, I need to get some samples from Stacey, and I’d like to do it in private, so, can you, um . . .”

“You want us to leave,” Athena said.

“Yes. That’s it for today. Jody needs to check in the rest of the inventory, and then, can you come back in about an hour to open my cuff?”

“Yeah,” Jody said.

“And bring paper, a pen and a small envelope,” Hannah said. “So Stacey can write her dad.”

“Okay.”

“Can you get me a TV?” Stacey asked, looking directly at Athena with something akin to desperation in her eyes.

“A TV?” Athena replied. “What kind?”

“Any kind,” Stacey replied. “Bigger is good. I can’t have a PC, but I want to watch shows, so I’ll need the internet. I like new stuff, and old stuff too. I go to EasyChair for anything that’s not new, and the usual movie channels for the rest.”

Athena pulled out her phone.

“Okay,” she said, “there are two decent wireless networks in here for students. I just need to get you a screen and remote, and I guess an account. I’ll work on that.”

“Thank you, Athena!” Stacey said, intentionally smiling at the dark-haired girl as if she’d just made a best friend, because she wanted Hannah to notice. Hannah didn’t seem to see or care, however, staring down at her fists with her mouth tight, as if suffering from that same private illness that had been haunting her since soon after they’d met.

Athena loaded up the cart with the refuse of lunch, wheeled some of it to the fridge, put the trash in the bin, and paused.

“Hannah, are you going to tell us the combination now?”

“No,” Hannah said, stepping over on her tether to push a code into the keypad, blocking it with her body.

“You said you’d tell us yesterday,” Athena complained.

“It needs to stay secure,” Hannah said tensely. “I can always let you in.”

Athena and Jody left, and Hannah escorted Stacey back to her cage, locking her in and removing her shackles, depositing the restraints in the same cabinet where Stacey believed her punishment tools were hanging, she couldn’t see anything this time, past Hannah’s body.

Hannah turned to another cabinet, studied its contents, began drawing things out.

“Is it okay that I asked Athena for a TV?”

“Yes,” Hannah said absently.

“You hate her, don’t you?”

“No,” Hannah said, piling up things in the crook of her elbow.

“It’s okay if you do,” Stacey said. “I hate some people too. I don’t know their names, but I want my dad to sue them. For what they did.”

Hannah said nothing, just returned to her chair in front of the bars.

“I’m sorry I said that,” Stacey said. “I just sort of sensed some tension, there.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Temperature first.”

Stacey sat down across from Hannah and opened her mouth.

“It’s not oral,” Hannah said, smiling awkwardly.

“Oh, yeah,” Stacey said. “You mean, there?”

“Both places,” Hannah said.

“Tell me what to do.”

“Stand up, turn around and bend over,” Hannah said, plucking two digital thermometers from the bundle in her arm. “That would probably be easiest.”

Stacey obeyed, putting her hands on her knees and waiting.

As she’d been before with the plug and the catheter, Hannah was gentle, inserting the two thermometers into Stacey’s body, anus first, vagina second, holding each in place.

“What else do I have to do?” Stacey asked, staring at the floor, hands just above her kneecaps.

“Urine,” Hannah said.

“Okay.”

“And I have to draw some blood.”

“Yeah.”

“And then, I need to have a look . . . in . . .”



“You’re new at this,” Stacey asserted.

“Yes,” Hannah admitted.

“What if you hurt me?”

“I won’t hurt you,” Hannah said.

“But you have no liability, if you do,” Stacey said.

The thermometers beeped and Hannah withdrew them and took them to the washroom.

“You’re covered by the school,” Hannah said as the water ran.

“And New Life.”

“What’s New Life?”

“It’s the research company I’m doing the project for this spring.”

“You’re going to disinfect those things, right?” she asked.

“I already did,” Hannah said, stepping to the door to show Stacey a cup of solution holding both thermometers, the rest of her research supplies still balanced in the crook of her arm.

Hannah returned to Stacey, pulled a small cup from her bundle and passed it through the bars.

“Now you get to pee.”

“Oh boy.”

Stacey went to her toilet, unscrewed the lid, put the cup beneath her vulva and tried to release, struggling for a moment to open her bladder before the urine flowed.

“Ow,” she said. “It stings.”

“What stings?”

“Peeing,” Stacey said. “Because of the catheter, I think.”

“Let me know if it doesn’t stop hurting,” Hannah said.

“How full do you want it?” Stacey asked, looking down.

“Halfway is good,” Hannah replied.

Stacey finished urinating, screwed on the lid and stepped over to Hannah, offering her the dripping container.

“Can you rinse it first?” Hannah said.

“Sorry, yeah.”

Stacey went to the sink, returned with the cup, now dripping only with water, and Hannah set it on the counter and retrieved a pair of rubber gloves, needles and tubes, and a rubber strap from the dwindling collection in her arm.

“You’ve had blood drawn?” Hannah asked, sitting down in the chair and waving Stacey over.

“Yeah,” Stacey said, sitting to face Hannah. “A few times.”

“Do you faint?”

“Not if it’s done right.”

“You faint if it’s done wrong?”

“No, I was joking. I’ve never fainted.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Put your arm through the bars.”

Stacey complied, and Hannah put the needle between her teeth and tied the rubber strap around Stacey’s upper arm. As Stacey’s veins began to bulge, Hannah pulled a little package from her arm, opened it and used an alcohol wipe to clean the crook of Stacey’s elbow, the process leaving a cold, evaporating circle.

Hannah dropped the wipe on the floor, pulled the needle from her mouth, removed the cap and bent to study Stacey’s arm, breathing with what was obviously a severe case of nerves.

“Wouldn’t this be easier out there?” Stacey asked.

“I guess,” Hannah said, lowering the needle to Stacey’s arm.

“I can only come out with those chains on?”

“No, that’s . . . just to . . . start,” Hannah said, driving the needle into Stacey’s vein, withdrawing the plunger, pulling the first sample into the barrel of the syringe.

“Ow.”

“Sorry,” Hannah said. “I’ll get better at this.”

“It’s always going to sting,” Stacey observed.

Hannah pulled the first barrel off the needle, capped it, set it with a shaking hand on her lap, attached a second barrel to the needle and drew again.

“Why two?” Stacey asked.

“One has an allosteric inhibitor, and the other has a prothrombin.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Stacey said.

Hannah pulled out the needle, set it on the floor, pressed a cotton swab to the little hole in Stacey’s arm and covered it with a bandage.

“One makes your blood coagulate,” Hannah said, picking up things from the floor, putting the tubes of blood and the container of urine in the fridge, slipping the needle into a biocontainer, moving around the lab on her long, hissing chain, like a ghost who could make just one sound.

“Are you afraid I’ll bust through the door if my feet aren’t chained?”

Hannah finished her work, went back to the chair to sit across from Stacey.

“What they tell us,” Hannah said, drawing in her breath and staring into Stacey’s eyes, “is that it’s done to keep us from being stolen. You don’t have to believe that. But if I lose you while you’re under my care, I get in trouble. If Dr. Mandapreet loses me while she’s supervising me, she’s in trouble. If either one of us go away, the school’s in trouble. So everything we do is just to . . . keep people out of trouble.”

“What would be easiest for you?” Stacey asked.

Hannah looked away, considering her answer, perhaps.

“Well, probably a tether,” she said. “Like mine.”

“Okay,” Stacey said. “For as long as I’m here. It’s up to you.”

Hannah grimaced with whatever strange pain was haunting her today, and Stacey stood, went to the toilet to clean her vulva.

“A few more things,” Hannah said. “I need to look inside you, and then interview you.”

Hannah rose, stepped to the cabinet, pulled out a narrow, pointed rod.

“You’re doing that through the bars too?” Stacey asked.

“Same as temp,” Hannah replied, and she opened a small package, pulled out a thin rubber sheath and slipped it over the rod.

Stacey turned and bent, hands back on her legs just above her kneecaps, and she stared at the floor while Hannah parted her lips and slid the small device up her vagina.

“What does that do?”

“The lining of your vagina changes during the month,” Hannah said. She withdrew the rod, and Stacey turned and watched as Hannah pulled the sheath off, dropped it into another sampling jar and sealed the lid.

“Now, some questions,” Hannah said, rising to deposit the jar in the fridge, returning with just a legal pad and a pen from the cabinet, spreading the manual out on her lap, the legal pad balanced atop it.

“How are you doing?” she asked, looking up, and there was no hint of a smile amidst the tragedy of her makeupless face.

“I’m okay,” Stacey said. “I can keep going.”

“I need to ask you a bunch of questions,” Hannah said. “Some are a little personal.”

“That’s okay.”

“When did you start menstruating?”

“Twelve.”

“Overall, are your periods regular?”

“Overall, yes, but maybe twice a year, I have a 10-day period, or maybe it’s two periods, I’ve never been sure.”

Hannah scribbled some notes, looked up.

“Have you ever been pregnant?”

“No.”

“Have you ever taken hormonal birth control pills?”

“Yeah, for about three months. My periods went crazy, so I quit and got an IUD.”

“Do you have an IUD in now?”

“No, that just hurt, and I bled a lot, so I had it taken out too.”

Hannah scribbled some more.

“Now I just ride,” Stacey said.

“Ride?” Hannah queried.

“I don’t worry about it. I just let it happen.”

“Do you want to get pregnant?” Hannah asked. “That’s not a question from the list. I’m just curious.”

“Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t. Maybe it would give me a purpose, I don’t know.”

“Back to the questions,” Hannah said. “With what gender do you identify?”

“Female.”

“Do you consider yourself straight, bi, homosexual, something else?”

“Straight.”

“Are you sexually active?”

“Yes.”

“How often do you have intercourse in the average month?”

“Depends on the month.”

“Last month, then?”

“More than average,” Stacey said. “I’ve met this new guy, Daryn, so it was maybe two to three times a week, except when I was having my

period.”

“When did your last period end?”

“Middle of January. Maybe the 10<sup>th</sup> or so.”

“Do you usually orgasm during sex?”

“Always, one way or another.”

“Do you masturbate?”

“Yeah.”

“How often per month?”

“Depends on the month, but most days I do it. Are you going to read what I write to my dad?”

“Yes,” Hannah replied.

“Why?”

“It’s what happens,” Hannah said. “My owners read everything I send my mother, and everything she writes back. Or they can.”

“Is your mom okay?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, and her eyes filled with tears, and she reached into the place in the manual where she’d wedged her tissue and brought it up to her eyes, dabbing. “Sorry, sorry, I—”

“No, it’s okay.”

“I just . . . I love my mother, and she’s . . . suffered a lot . . . because of me.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. My mom died when I was twelve.”

With that last revelation, Hannah seemed to sort of collapse onto herself, spine bending, hands on her face, tissue near her mouth, her nose, her eyes, and she hooted with despair for a long minute before she coughed and wiped her nose and looked up sheepishly into Stacey’s worried eyes.

“I’ll be okay,” Hannah said. “Things have just been . . . stressful. I’ll be okay.”

A thunderous boom sounded from the door into the hall, and Hannah jerked so violently she dropped her book and her legal pad, her tether writhing behind her extended foot.

“Hannah, let us in!” Athena shouted through the door.

Hannah allowed entrance to Jody and Athena, Jody bearing a thin stack of university letterhead, a pen, and a handful of envelopes, and Athena delivering a stack of magazines and an enthusiastic update on Stacey’s TV.

“I’ve talked to everyone!” she said, passing the magazines through the bars to Stacey, still seated. “We can get you a TV, 45 inches, or maybe 55. And it’ll run on wireless, 10 gigabytes a second. No problem streaming anything you want. You’ll have a keyboard so you can search for stuff, and a remote control too!”

“When are they installing it?” Hannah asked.

“The next few days, they promised,” Athena replied. “But I got those magazines from one of the breakrooms. Do you like magazines?”

Stacey looked down at her lap, a half dozen publications stacked there from the last six months – fashion and gossip, a general science publication, a newsmagazine, something about kids’ crafts.

“I’m learning to read them,” Stacey said.

“We’ll need her door open when they’re installing the screen,” Athena said.

“She can wear my tether,” Hannah said back, and she turned to Stacey. “Do you have everything you need?”

“When are you coming back?”

“I’ll check on you at dinner time,” Hannah said, tucking the manual under her arm, eyes downcast, every word seeming to require great effort. “But I need to go back to the kennels for now.”

“When can you mail my dad’s letter?”

“If you have everything ready, I’ll send it tonight, or first thing in the morning. I need to check with Dr. Mandapreet about letting me out later tonight, so if I can’t get back here, she’ll check in.”

“Okay.”

Jody opened Hannah’s cuff, and Hannah, back bowed under some invisible weight, face blank with something akin to despair, took her tether and coiled it neatly in the middle of the room, ushered her two colleagues out and locked the door, leaving Stacey to consult magazines and begin the letter to her father.

## Chapter 60: A Name on an Envelope

Oh, HannahHannahHannahHannahLoughbridge.

What have you done?

Hannah, naked again, curled up under her sheets in her little kennel, curtain drawn tight, wept as silently as she could manage, the tears flowing

down the left side of her face and onto her sheets.

Pure tears, no makeup to blot the wash.

Pure tears of self-revulsion.

Tears of ambition.

And pride.

An innocent girl named Stacey sucked up into the hideous mouth of the beast that was American slavery.

No.

No, not just innocent.

Her mother dead when she was 12. Her life aimless ever since, her heart so broken all she could do, all she wanted to do, was watch TV and post things on the internet.

More than innocent. Deserving of something good, of one break in her life, of one day of hope.

The universe owed her an apology. Instead, it had given her this.

Maybe she knew. Maybe she knew, somewhere deep in the dark alleys of her mind, that one day, a girl named Hannah Loughbridge, a horrible, ambitious, selfish girl, would agree to study a girl with three ovaries.

And Stacey . . . Something . . . since Hannah didn't know her last name yet . . . would be that girl.

Why go to school, why learn a profession, why work on anything worthwhile, if your destiny was a collar and chains and a cage in a university science building?

Hannah writhed beneath her sheets as if on fire, biting her fist, her pillow, her forearm, praying to die, to disappear, to wake up from all of this, a strange, horrible dream.

Yesterday . . . a week ago, a month, a year. How she wished she could go back. Not to change the course of her life, for that might prove impossible. But just to taste, one more time, if even for a few seconds, the innocence she had known, to occupy one more time the mind and body of a girl who had not plucked up another innocent life.

Stacey will never be free. No father, no matter how good a lawyer, can get his daughter's collar cut off. And 10, 20, 30 years from now, when Stacey falls to her knees and asks her god why, there will be no answer. Because this was not the act of a god, or a devil, or simple fate.

If Stacey received the true answer to her question, it would come in the form of a face. The face of Hannah Loughbridge.

No.

One.

Must.

Know.

No one. Not Stacey. Not any fellow slave.

No Petrosyan.

Not Athena. Most of all Athena.

Never never never never.

Athena CANNOT know.

Not that Athena would care. If anything, Athena would be impressed. Anyone could buy a slave. Hannah had MADE one.

Hannah, with the dark arts of science and knowledge and the scientific method, had turned a free girl into a subject, surely something Athena dreamed of doing, the way she dreamed of all her terrible things, of buying and selling, profiting and commanding, restraining, using.

Now Hannah commanded, and restrained, and used.

Used.

Hannah used.

Hannah had become . . .

become . . .

become . . .

Athena.

Hannah shrieked into her pillow, wishing she could howl to the sky in solitude, atop some great mountain where no one could hear her, because every scream reduced her pain just enough, just a little, by just that modicum that pulled her torment back from utter self-immolation to something slightly less, to the pain of someone who wishes every moment to die, to cease to exist, but can still raise herself, still sit up, still move one foot beyond the other, still step, stoop, lift things and set them down and speak and breathe and toil.

Hannah uncoiled, slowly, and she slid the sheets down and drew forth her legs and rose up, sitting on the edge of her bed, staring between her feet at the floor.

Stacey must be fed.

Stacey must be tended.



If Hannah Loughbridge died, there would be no one to take care of Stacey, and she would die too.

No, Stacey would not die. It would be worse. If Hannah died, Stacey would be a slave without portfolio, a girl who'd been collared and chained for no reason. Perhaps she'd be shipped to another lab. But if no one else needed a girl with three ovaries, she'd probably just be placed on the open market, sold to the highest bidder.

Stacey was pretty, with dark hair and full breasts and the pouty mouth some girls get because they spend all their lives whining, and other girls get because they spend all their lives mourning.

If Hannah ceased to exist, Stacey would be sold for recreation, a three-ovaryed sex slave.

No, not recreation. Breeding. A girl with three ovaries might be a particularly good breeder, and she'd spend her life alternating between giving birth and being strapped to plastic copulation platforms while boys plumbed her depths and deposited their seed and left.

Maybe she'd get Duncan, now and then. Or someone as kind and funny as Duncan.

Tending to Stacey would not bring redemption, Hannah knew. Nothing would ever ever ever bring redemption to Hannah Loughbridge. But for as long as the poor girl was under her care, Hannah must be decent, must be kind. Hannah must love Stacey with all her heart and soul and mind.

And then, when Stacey was done here, and taken away to whatever next her fate held, Hannah could wither away, dissipate, crumble down to her own definition of nothingness.

Yes.

Hannah rose, crossed her tiny kennel to look into the mirror, expecting to see her true face there, evil, corrupt, grotesque.

But no, it was the same blue-eyed face, the same high cheekbones, the same blonde hair. Her eyes were red, of course, her hair tousled by the bed. But she was still what people, in their perpetual idiocy, called beautiful.

This would most likely be her face, always. Nothing could be done about it.

But Hannah would know. Hannah knew what she was.

And so did one other person: Dr. Dietrich Johnson.

He might not know today, perhaps, how Hannah had obtained Stacey, but if he did a little digging, he would learn where she had come from, how the PUMI order he'd placed had been fulfilled, how Hannah's research girl had been obtained.

Would he tell? No, probably not. Because he didn't care. Taking and using girls was his stock in trade. He'd made that deal with that wretched corner of the universe long ago, and seemed to be at peace with it.

Now Hannah Loughbridge had as well. Unwittingly, perhaps, but only because she chose not to employ her wit. She knew she was going to be given a girl with three ovaries. Where did she think the female would come from? What lab would part with such a girl? Had Hannah engaged even a minor fraction of her brain to this small question, she would have come to understand immediately. To ask for a girl with three ovaries is to cast a wide net, among the slave, among the free. And there are more free than slave. Cold probability dictates from which pool the girl must come.

HannahHannahHannahHannahHannahLoughbridge.

You have raped yourself.

Hannah stared into the mirror, regarding her face, wondering at its contours, its angles, its openings.

Would she ever smile again?

Yes, for pictures, probably. Yes, when she was told to smile.

Would she ever have sex again?

Of course. But she would no longer enjoy it. She would pump out fresh lubricant under the proper stimulation, for such was a biological inevitability. And she would groan and writhe through orgasm, for she always found that difficult to prevent.

And she might even smile when the pleasure rocked her.

But no, she would no longer enjoy, not really. Every gasp would be accompanied by the knowledge of evil, the remembrance of the girl she had caused to be taken, the pouty, tragic face of Stacey.

It would always be with her, this thing, and it could never be spoken of, to any lover, to Allain, to anyone she was mated with, slave or free. And this was the worst kind of loneliness, to have sinned a hot, burning trespass, to know the relief that might come from confession, and to be deprived of that relief.

She needed to be tortured.

Yes, she realized, confession was impossible, but pain was not, and it would indeed provide another kind of relief.

Imperfect though it was, it was all she had. She needed to be brought back for interrogation at the agency that questioned her after Raven had disappeared. They'd spread a white cream on her thighs, placed electrical wires against her hips and breast, provoked cries of misery and weeping confessions of inconsequential things.

Bound to a chair, bladder loosed, a puddle beneath her thighs, urine sliding into the drain between her feet, she'd begged for mercy. Today, were she back there again, she would beg for continuance. She would scream only when it stopped, because the sting of doing great evil with impunity was, in her moral reckoning, worse than any other crime.

Hannah continued to look at her face, reconciling herself to this visage, this innocent array of flesh and teeth and hair, and the thin traces of tear-washed makeup that hid a hulking monster.

And then she smiled, because she must learn to pretend. She must relearn the things that had come naturally in the days before she had fallen.

Smile. Speak with confidence. Learn. Orgasm.

And suffer, in silence and isolation. She must not die while Stacey was hers. And if she must not die, she must continue on, as if all were normal.

She'd asked Dr. Mandapreet to have her released from the kennels at 5, to feed Stacey, and check on her. Her little battery-operated clock told her it was 10 minutes till.

Hannah soaped her face, brushed her hair, made her bed and opened her curtain. Someone down the hall was having sex, a girl grunting rhythmically while her lover thrust within her. Hannah grasped her bars and listened, and felt what was being done as if it were happening to her. She'd started her period yesterday, a tampon within her, its string dangling between her lips. Except for the weak orgasm she'd had during her dream of the gargoyle, she'd received no relief since Saturday night, with Raven. So now, yes, she wanted this. So corrupt was she, so mindlessly carnal, that even as she contemplated the gross harm she had done to another soul, she longed for orgasm, and the filling passion of a male between her legs and up her vagina.

"You are repulsive," she said, mouthing the words to herself. "And no one can know."

Donovan, one of the kennel workers, showed up to release Hannah from her kennel just before 5, and she dressed in the locker room and exited and walked across campus under a gray Texas winter sky in early twilight, forcing herself to take each step, because if another life weren't dependent on her, she would turn around, and walk in a straight line until she'd reached the Gulf of Mexico, where she would keep walking across the sand and through the surf until she drowned. Or in a straight line to the Saint Mary Magdalena Cathedral, where the doors might be unlocked and she could climb up to the roof, to the tower, to the platforms, where the gargoyles sat, hunched and watching, and where she would throw herself off and leave her own little starburst of white powder and broken gravel, because that's all she was made of, really.

She'd had a dream about them. Yes, a few days ago, she reminded herself. Gargoyles. One gargoyle. A gargoyle had fucked her. She'd allowed it. Had he fucked her, or had she fucked him? Who was the object of a fuck? It depended on who, really, was doing it. Just because the girl was entered and could accomplish the task without moving didn't mean she wasn't in charge, didn't mean she wasn't the one doing the fucking, while her partner was entirely fucked.

Just as they'd finished, Hannah had pushed him off, shoved him with her feet and her widespread legs to the plaza below, and he'd been surprised and sad and cried out in sorrow as he fell, and he'd broken into a million pieces, and she looked down at him, and then she'd taken his place.

She'd taken his place.

Now she understood.

She approached the great columned façade of the Rickenbacker Hall and wondered if they needed a gargoyle, a girl to preside over the roof, watching for . . . what? Bad science? Corrupt biology? Utterly venal slave girls?

Dr. Mandapreet was gone, but Jody was waiting for Hannah in a little alcove further down the hall, and the two girls walked together to the lab and the third girl confined there.

"Hey, Stacey," Hannah said in a fair facsimile of breeziness, entering the lab first.

"Hey," Stacey said, sitting up. Evidently, she'd been sleeping, but the pile of magazines on the floor along the edge of her bed suggested she'd given all of them at least a first, cursory look.

Hannah went to the fridge.

“Do you mind leftovers?” Hannah asked.

“No, that’s fine,” Stacey replied gamely, reminding Hannah of how quickly the extraordinary and strange in this world of hers, the world in which people owned people and held people’s lives in their hands, could become routine, mundane.

Hannah drew forth the bag Athena had prepared earlier, stepped to the bars and passed it in.

Stacey set it on her bed and grabbed a sheet and envelope that had gotten tangled within her covers.

“What building are we in?” she asked.

“Rickenbacker,” Jody replied.

“Rickenbacker what?”

“Rickenbacker Hall of Biology,” Jody said, getting it right enough that Hannah decided not to correct her.

“What floor?”

“Third.”

“What’s my room number?”

“It’s not really a room number,” Jody said. “It’s just a lab.”

“What’s this school called?”

“The University of Texas at Corpus Christi.”

Stacey ignored her dinner, plucked a magazine off the floor and set a sheet upon it, shaking her head and nodding as she wrote and Hannah watched, first dashing off a letter, then scribbling out something on an envelope.

“I need these mailed now,” Stacey said, stepping to the bars to hand everything to Hannah.

Hannah looked down at Stacey’s letter first, eyes flickering over the captive girl’s careful cursive script: “Dear Dad: I’m in the Rickenbacker Biology Hall, on the third floor, in a lab room. It doesn’t have a number, just ask for the lab. I’m in Corpus Christi. At the University of Texas. Please come get me now! Love, Stacey.”

Hannah looked up from the note, breathed in.

“He can’t just come get you,” she said.

“He needs to,” Stacey said, standing at the bars and staring at Hannah with the hard eyes of someone who sees but one path forward.

“If you write this, he’ll think he’s just supposed to come and get you,” Hannah said. “He won’t be able to.”

“You don’t know my dad,” Stacey said.

Hannah breathed in, pushing through the pain to do what must be done, say what must be said.

“Can you just add a PS, at the bottom, that says he might not be able to get you?”

“That would give him options,” Stacey countered, staring into Hannah’s eyes with absolute certainty. “He doesn’t get any options.”

Hannah stared at the letter, considering, pondering. She’d mail the letter tomorrow. It would reach him next weekend, or maybe sooner, depending on where he was. So he’d show up here sometime after that, unless he already knew how things worked. And if he already knew, he wouldn’t bother. He’d just send a letter to his daughter saying sorry. Because he had no options. No options, anyway, unless he could afford to buy his daughter back. And how much was a girl with three ovaries worth, anyway? Scientifically, she was priceless.

Hannah looked at the envelope, addressed to Blaise Fairchild, Esq., at Fairchild and Dalton, at an address in Fairlawn, Kansas.

Blaise Fairchild.

She studied the name. There was something familiar about it.

Blaise.

Blaise Fairchild.

Fairchild.

Fairchild.

FAIRCHILD.

“Blaise Fairchild,” Hannah said, steadying her voice. “That’s your —”

“That’s my dad. A very big-time lawyer in Kansas. He has three offices, and other lawyers work for him.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “I’ll send it the way you wrote it. I’ll put it in tomorrow’s mail.”

“Can you overnight it?”

“No,” Hannah said, not sure there was a budget for that, not interested in finding out, because she needed time to look something up.

“But it should be in Kansas by Thursday or Friday.”

“You promise you’re going to mail it, right?”

“I promise,” Hannah said. “It’s policy. It’s practically a law.”

“Okay.”

Hannah turned to leave, remembered something from her manual, turned back.

Stacey had returned to her bed, opening the bag of leftover Four Season’s lunch.

“Hey, I need you to do something,” Hannah said, trying not to blush.

“What?”

“I need you to write down, every time you . . . orgasm.”

Stacey laughed, a sharp, nervous laugh of outrage.

“Why?” she said simply.

“It’s part of the research.”

“It’s personal,” Stacey observed.

“It will be kept private,” Hannah said, certain that was true. “But it’s something we need to know.”

“Who’s we, anyway?”

“The research team.”

“Who’s on the team?”

“Me,” Hannah said. “And Dr. Mandapreet. And Jody. And Athena. There will be a committee here too. And New Life. They’re—”

“New Life?”

“A research firm.”

“We’ll see,” Stacey said.

“It’s part of complying with the project,” Hannah said. “It’s very important.”

Stacey nodded, pulled out a container of chicken and shrimp and rice, set it on her bed, opened it and pushed a fork into it.

“Have everything you need?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah.”

“Goodnight.”

“See ya.”

Back in the kennels, on one of the PCs in the subject lounge, it took Hannah less than half an hour to learn what she needed to know about Blaise Fairchild, Esq.

What Hannah found did not make her any less guilty, any less evil or selfish. It was not absolution.

But the universe, in this small instance at least, was not quite as capricious, as unjust, as Hannah had believed when she had lain and wept, curled up in her bed, and dreamt of dying.

## Chapter 61: An Unexpected Caller

Hannah slept fitfully, waking more than once to worry about Stacey, if she were too hot or too cold, if she'd gotten enough leftovers, if she would sleep well in a new place.

A little after three, suffering from cramps, she changed tampons on her toilet, found that her vagina was wet and slick as she pushed up the fresh hygiene, and masturbated there, quickly, without any satisfaction, just a quick, panting release to enable sleep, so that she would not show up tomorrow at Stacey's cage in a bedraggled stupor, jabbing at her arm with the needle, sampling her vagina with careless thrusts, leaving the thermometers in too long.

There was another dream about the roof of the cathedral and the stone hulks there, but it was a vague dream, without theme or conclusion, and Hannah awoke a little before 7 with a sense of deep failure and an aching isolation.

She heard the door at the end of the hall open, and she went to her toilet and wondered why a staffer would be here this early.

The footsteps stopped outside her kennel.

"Hannah, you awake?" whispered the voice Hannah knew belonged to Tammy. Why was Tammy here?

"Yeah, just a second," Hannah whispered back, and she pulled out her tampon and replaced it with another, and she wiped and flushed and went to the bars, pulling her curtain aside. "What's up?"

"Someone here to see you."

"Who?" Hannah asked. "Why?"

"No idea," Tammy said, providing the standard answer. Even if they knew, they wouldn't say.

This could be bad. The only reason she'd be summoned at this time of the morning was for an emergency. Allain had been hurt in a car wreck last night. Gramma had died. Something had happened to someone else – Athena, Laura, Ormek.

Franklin.



Hannah's mouth went dry, and she followed Tammy out of the hall and up the stairs to the little rooms where inmates of the kennels could meet with free visitors, separated only by a thin but, so far as Hannah knew, impenetrable sheet of plexiglass.

Tammy opened the door, and Hannah stepped in, wide-eyed, to come face-to-face with a complete and utter stranger, a tall, heavysset man with thick black-and-gray hair, wearing round glasses, a designer golf shirt, black shorts, brown leather loafers without socks.

He seemed startled by Hannah's appearance, and Hannah knew with the sixth sense one develops as a slave that he'd had few direct dealings with subjects, wasn't comfortable with nudity, didn't expect Hannah to show up undressed this morning.

Suspecting there'd been a mistake, Hannah stepped into the middle of the little space, put her hands on the chair before her and said nothing, just raised her eyebrows.

He was standing close to the plexiglass, arms at his sides, facing her. Hannah put his age at mid-forties. She looked into his eyes and saw a deep weariness there.

"Hannah Loughbridge?" he asked.

"I am," Hannah said.

"I'm Blaise Fairchild," he said, spitting out his name, tossing it through the glass like an attack.

"Oh," Hannah said. "Oh."

"You have my daughter," he said.

"I haven't . . ." Hannah stammered, mind struggling to focus on something entirely different from what she had expected, to pivot from fear to . . . this. Her first attempt to respond rationally was a complete failure: "I haven't even sent the letter yet."

"What letter?" he demanded. His voice came out in a growl, and Hannah was glad there was a sheet of plastic between herself and this man.

"Your daughter . . . Stacey . . . Stacey's your daughter, right?" Hannah queried.

"She is."

"She wrote a letter. To you. And I was going to mail it today."

"I'm already here," Mr. Fairchild said. "And I'm not leaving without her."

“That’s what her letter said,” Hannah spoke, stumbling through the words. “She wanted you to get . . . to come and . . .”

Fairchild stared.

“I told her,” Hannah said. “I tried to tell her, it’s not . . . it’s not—”

“Youbringmemygoddammeddaughter nowdoyoufuckingunderstand me bitch!?”

Hannah stared, breathed in, looked through the plexiglass at the man, whose hands were balled into fists at his side now, as if he were a moment from punching, smashing his fist against the divider and breaking into her half of the meeting space.

“If you yell,” Hannah said, finding something to focus on, speaking with confidence for the first time, “it’s my right to end our session, and they can show up and ask you to leave too.”

“I want my daughter,” he said, growling again, but more quietly now.

Hannah looked him over again. His shirt bore the crest of House Moutain, positioned not on the left breast, but on the right, just to make the point. His shorts were a wool blend, without logo, a discreet but expensive brand, Hannah was certain. She looked at his belt, leather strips woven into an intricate pattern.

And Hannah thought about who this screaming man was, the man who had just called her bitch.

She’d been called bitch before, of course. Many times. She’d gotten used to it.

“Sir,” Hannah said, “may I excuse myself?”

“To do what?”

“I need to get something. It will take about 5 minutes.”

“You’re not coming back,” he growled, and he passed his hand through his hair and stared at Hannah, looking not angry or malevolent now, merely desperate, despairing, hopeless.

“I’m coming back,” Hannah said. “In five minutes.”

“Just tell me where she is,” the man said, voice breaking, and he placed his hands on the plexiglass and leaned forward, and Hannah saw tears there now, rage converted to deep sorrow. “Just tell me where she is!”

“She’s not in this building,” Hannah said, and she turned and opened the door behind her and left, shutting it against other sounds, a gasp of desperation, a slap against the glass.

Hannah staggered down the hall, steadied herself with one hand against the wall, as if she were on a boat in rough seas, or a plane in turbulence.

She was not frightened. She was not even particularly upset. All her passions had been given over in this moment to seething rage.

She went to the lounge, nodding at the sleepy student seated at the information desk, storming into the area where the PCs were kept, retracing her steps to the same data she'd found the night before, and she hit print this time.

"That's mine," she said, back at the information desk, and the sleepy student handed over the sheet. "Do you have a pen? A red pen?"

She handed Hannah one of the pens lying loose on the counter, Hannah uncapped it and circled something on the sheet, handed the pen back.

"Thanks."

Then, back down the hall, back to the meeting room, back before the father of Stacey Fairchild, PUMI.

Blaise Fairchild, Esq., was seated now, glasses off, and he was swinging them around by the piece that went around one ear – nervously, the way an agitated animal paces in a cage – and he looked up from them when Hannah entered and stared at her, puzzled, regarding her naked form and then the sheet in her hand.

Hannah sat and leaned forward.

"Start with yourself," she said, struggling to speak, her throat closing with rage.

He jerked himself straight in his chair, staring at Hannah with what almost looked like fear.

"Huh?"

Hannah slapped the sheet in her hand against the glass so fiercely Fairchild flinched before he leaned forward to read it.

She couldn't see his face. She didn't want to see his face, see his eyes scanning the paper, watch as his eyes focused, as his face registered familiarity, because what Hannah was showing him was his own professional profile, published to his own law firm's website, a glowing description of his academic history and his impressive professional and charitable endeavors.

Hannah wanted him to see just one thing, though, and that's why she'd circled it in red. It was a short item, just one of a dozen bulleted achievements:

“Worked closely with Kansas Beneficial Research, LLC, to develop a new theory of eminent domain, enabling a revolutionary statewide pilot with national implications in subject-focused research, keyed around the acquisition of medically-unique individuals for innovative, vital and life-saving discoveries.”

Hannah heard something from the other side of the divide. A deep, quiet sigh. A soft gasp of despair. A vocalization, from another throat and another perspective, of the things Hannah had felt as well, since she'd learned the truth about Stacey Fairchild, and the part Hannah had played in upending her life.

But it was all worse, for him. Because Stacey Fairchild was his daughter.

Hannah lowered the sheet, pulled it from the glass, spread it out on her bare thigh.

“Let me explain,” Hannah said, looking up at Fairchild with blazing blue eyes, struggling to keep her voice even. “Your daughter . . . Stacey . . . is medically unique, because she has three ovaries . . . Did you know she had three ovaries?”

Fairchild didn't reply.

“And she's been acquired. And now she's a subject. And she'll be used in research.”

Hannah crumpled the sheet and let it fall to the floor.

“You do remember doing that work?” Hannah said, and she looked at the place where Blaise Fairchild had been sitting and found instead a broken, deflated man.

He looked up.

“I was part of a team,” he said weakly. “There were three of us working on it.”

Hannah glared at him, and she knew neither of them believed he was even remotely absolved.

“They told me it would be a few a year, just the . . .” he said, and his voice trailed off before he took in a breath and continued, quietly, haltingly. “Just the . . . medically nonviable . . . who'd need to be . . . taken care of . . . anyway.”

“How much did they pay you?” she asked softly.

Fairchild opened his mouth and seemed to be trying to speak, but all Hannah could hear was “Uh, buh, uh, uh.”

“Did they hire you because you were family?”

Fairchild’s eyes came to life, briefly, as he looked at the naked girl on the other side of the plexiglass.

“Are they family, Mr. Fairchild?”

For a long moment, he said nothing, eyes pointed at Hannah but not focusing on her, staring at something miles away while he looked in the direction of a nude girl with a tampon string dangling from her vulva.

“What should I do?” he asked at last, passing his hand through his hair again.

He wasn’t crying. He wasn’t enraged. He was lost. Trying to adjust to something he’d helped create, realizing he had none of the requisite equipment for a moral question of this magnitude.

This was the moment of reckoning for Blaise Fairchild, that singular breath of time that comes, once or twice in each life, when the truth of what one has done appears before one’s eyes, solid as stone.

Hannah had won.

She didn’t want to win. She wanted to start her day. And she had her own terrible truths, her own reckoning to work through.

But then, here he was, demanding her presence, screaming obscenities at her, implying violence, if not overtly threatening it.

And now, strangely, he was asking for help.

“Have you been driving all night?” Hannah asked him.

“Yes.

“Go back home,” Hannah said. “Get some coffee and go back home. There’s nothing you can do here. Just talking about trying to take her back is probably a felony. And listening to you talk about it is . . . worse than a felony for me.”

Hannah stared, willing Fairchild to understand her meaning. He looked back, and she believed he did.

“I’ll put her letter in the mail to you,” Hannah continued, “and you can write her back, to the return address on the envelope. She can write five letters a month.”

“Just five?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, not interested in arguing the point. “Five.”

“What are you going to do to her?”

“I’m already doing it,” Hannah said. “She got here yesterday. Blood sample, urine sample, vaginal sa—”

Fairchild buried his face in one hand, waved her to silence with the other.

She held her peace until he looked up, a wild pain in his eyes.

“Where are you keeping her?”

“She’s confined on campus,” Hannah said. “She’s secure. She’s safe. She’s—”

“Is she collared?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, without hesitation, for these were the kinds of truths it was impossible to soften. “She has her own space. We’re getting her a TV. We’re—”

“A TV?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, pausing slightly, because this was a difficult word, but it also needed to be said. “For her cage.”

“How big it is?”

“I think 45 inches.”

“No, her . . . space.”

“Oh. Bigger than most. Bigger than mine. I guess 20 feet by 10 feet. It has a shower. It has a—”

“Are you a P-U-M-I?” Fairchild asked, spelling out each letter.

Hannah shook her head, leaned forward and pulled her kennel tag aside, allowing Fairchild to read her metal government tag. He peered and straightened, looking at her, mystified, and Hannah knew he understood.

“Why did you get her?”

“It’s my project.”

“What project?”

“My research project. I’m gathering reproductive data.”

“Then you’re a . . . a . . .”

“A student,” Hannah said. “Pre-med. I’m going to be a doctor.”

It’s always strange, how words can leave one’s mouth before one fully ponders them, and Hannah heard what she said before she fully considered its meaning, and the import struck her like a tangible force.

I’m going to be a doctor.

Yes.

I’m going to be a doctor.

Hannah breathed in, marveled at the sound of those words.  
And believed them.

And then she weighed them. One girl must become a slave, so another slave might become a doctor. There was a cruel justice in it she would have to consider later.

Blaise Fairchild had not left. He was staring at her. He needed to be dealt with. He needed to go away. She was done with him.

“I’ll tell Stacey you were here, if you want me to,” she said.

“Yes,” Fairchild said, nodding slowly. “Yes. Tell her I came for her, I came to free her, but it’s not as easy as I thought, and I’m going to work on it from home, and I . . . I . . .”

Fairchild raised his hands to his face and wept, howling through his fingers.

Hannah waited until his cries dwindled to quiet sobs.

“Depending on how things go,” she said, “there can be a meeting.”

“A meeting?” Fairchild said thickly, looking up.

“Yes,” Hannah said. “Here, on campus. As a reward to her. If she does well.”

“When?”

“Maybe in a few weeks. Or a month.”

“Is she naked?”

“Yes.”

“Will you give her clothes?”

“If she earns them.”

“How long will your project last?”

“All semester. Until May.”

“Where will she go after that?”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said, speaking the most terrible truth of all. “That’s someone else’s decision.”

Fairchild gaped at her, silently, as if buried under soil, and his struggle to be unburied seemed to be almost physical, shoulders hunching and unhunching, back straightening before it bowed.

“Is she doing okay?” he asked, softly.

“So far,” Hannah said, and her hand raised of its own accord to her collar, to finger her own tags. “It will be an adjustment. It always is.”

“Will you tell her . . .” Fairchild said haltingly, “how sorry I am?”

“Of course.”

“So you’ve told her what I did?”

“Huh?”

“You told her about . . .” Fairchild said, voice fading as his eyes went to the sheet of paper crumpled on the floor.

“Oh,” Hannah said. “No. No. Of course not. No. She doesn’t need to know about that.”

Fairchild looked through the plexiglass, mystified.

“She loves you,” Hannah said. “You’re her hero. She’s been talking about you since we . . . since she got here. I have no reason to try to take that away.”

Fairchild stood abruptly, chewing his lips and, Hannah knew, wrestling with his own demons. He took one last look at Hannah, sitting impassively, and he looked down at the plastic chair that had held him, drew his leg back and kicked it, as if it were a soccer ball, or a snake, or himself.

It was an impressive kick, the chair propelled to a place halfway up the wall, spinning and bouncing away from it to strike the plexiglass before the flinching Hannah, bouncing from there to the other side of his half of the meeting space, rolling until it hit the wall, where it ricocheted twice in a tight arc before it whirled to a stop.

Fairchild turned, passed through the door with a gasping groan, shut it behind him, and was gone.

Hannah slipped out of her half of the meeting space, headed to breakfast.

Yes, by signing up to study another human being, she had done something terrible. Yes, she could appreciate the thoughtlessness of her action, the selfishness.

The evil.

But the guilt was no longer attacking her with nail-sharp, retching self-disgust.

Evil occupied a spectrum. She stood at one point on it. Blaise Fairchild stood elsewhere.

What would Franklin say about this? she wondered.

Or had he already said it?

Something, Sunday night. What had he said?

Look away, he’d said. Yes. Look away from the horror, until you arrive at the way to forgive yourself.



“I’m a piece of a hideous machine.”

Yes, he’d said that. Hannah remembered those words verbatim.

And then: “Until I can forgive the machine, I can’t absolve myself.”

Forgive the machine, Hannah said to herself, picking up a tray before the breakfast line. Forgive the machine.

Even while you’re trying to break it.

She sat down with a full plate at a table by herself.

With classes set to resume tomorrow, the cafeteria had grown a little louder and more boisterous, a table of naked subjects laughing by the windows, a girl standing and dancing, showing that she could make her breasts revolve in different directions by twisting at her waist and rotating her shoulders. She bowed for the applause and returned to her seat.

There was so much more Hannah could have said to Blaise Fairchild. So much more he could have said. She was sorry about his wife, of course. He wasn’t wearing a ring. He’d stayed a single widower after he lost the mother of his child, dedicating himself to his profession and his daughter’s welfare.

They were partners in crime, Hannah and Blaise Fairchild, he playing an important role in the taking of many girls – how many Hannah could only imagine – and Hannah playing a central role in taking one of them, the girl who also happened to be Fairchild’s daughter.

His crime was worse.

Hannah’s was bad, but his was worse. Hannah was very glad he had come today.

She hoped Stacey wasn’t already up, hungry and waiting for food. The university had a budget for feeding the girl, but the logistics of it were as yet not worked out.

That would be one of Athena’s jobs. Breakfast and lunch. And Hannah would handle dinner.

Athena would get the code to the lab, Hannah decided with a sense of resignation, and she’d be there alone with Stacey, and soon enough, she’d know what Hannah had done.

Or would she? As the fiercest sting of her guilt ebbed, the terror of being found out faded as well.

But how had Blaise Fairchild known where to find his child? Hannah hadn’t even sent the letter yet. And Stacey’s status probably wouldn’t be posted to the federal database for another week.

Were people talking? About Stacey? About Hannah?

## **Chapter 62: Bargaining with a Slave Girl**

Hannah was let out of the kennels at 8, wearing practical blue jeans and a practical yellow sweater and just enough makeup, bearing a few supplies in the bag slung over her shoulder, and she made her way across campus to Rickenbacker Hall, past the back entrance desk and its single guard, up to Dr. Mandapreet's office.

No one answered Hannah's knock, and Jody wasn't in her little space. Fine. No one would be tethering her this morning, at least at the start, and that was their problem. They knew Hannah was scheduled to visit the lab this morning. Maybe they'd already decided chaining her wasn't necessary. She wouldn't be fleeing the lab, that was a given to anyone who knew her. Where else would she want to be?

Of course, while she was in the lab, she was Dr. Mandapreet's responsibility. And if Hannah vanished – a simple escape, or stolen by others – that would be on Dr. Mandapreet. Losing an asset worth 1.5 million dollars wasn't something anyone wished added to their vita. Did Dr. Mandapreet know Hannah's sale price? Probably not, but she knew enough about the girl to be certain it was at least several years' pay.

Hannah pulled a yellow legal pad out of her bag, tore a sheet in half and wrote two short, identical notes: "I got to the lab this morning about 8:15."

She slipped one under Dr. Mandapreet's door, set the other on the desk in Jody's alcove, and strode down the hall to the lab where Stacey was confined, punching in the code and entering.

She'd brought the keys to Stacey's cage and restraints, kept with her clothes in her locker, but she wasn't expecting to need to use any of them.

Entering the lab, the first thing she noticed were that the lights were blazing. No one had thought to turn them off, forcing Stacey to sleep beneath an illumination of midday intensity.

And there she was, the girl a lump beneath her sheets, magazines scattered on the floor beside her bed, an empty box of leftovers there too, only her black hair visible from under the covers.

“Stacey?” Hannah said softly, through the bars, setting down her bookbag.

“Can you turn the lights off?” Stacey said without stirring.

Hannah went to the switches by the door, pressed both down, plunging the lab into near blackness, save for the red Exit light.

Believing she had enough light to enter yesterday’s data, Hannah went carefully through the dark to the lab’s small laptop, powered it on, opened it, confirmed it was connected to New Life, and she stared at the scribbles she’d made on the legal pad yesterday and found she could read most of it in the darkness.

The New Life interface was peculiar, many fields for data that had nothing to do with a girl with three ovaries, and the places for things like temperature and interview answers not always where one would expect. Hannah labored at it without thinking about time, learning the system and entering data, before Stacey stirred and grunted and Hannah noticed the time at the lower right corner of the laptop. Almost 10:30.

“Fuck,” Stacey muttered to herself, picking her way through the gloom to her toilet. “God, what the hell, why?”

“Hey,” Hannah said quietly.

“What? Who?”

“It’s Hannah.”

“Shit, how long have you been there?”

“Since I turned out the lights,” Hannah said. “About two hours—”

“We need to fix the light thing,” Stacey said.

“Okay,” Hannah said. “You have some outlets in there. We could get you a lamp.”

“I thought you were going to come back and turn out my light last night.”

“Sorry, I was kenneled.”

“Do I have to get up now?” Stacey asked, flushing and stepping to the bars, a gray outline with thick black hair and a black triangle of stubble at her middle.

“I’d like to start,” Hannah said. “May I turn on the light?”

“Wait,” Stacey said, going to her bed. “Okay.”

Hannah looked at Stacey and almost laughed, the girl nude except for her bedspread, which she’d wrapped around her head.

“You’re going to take that off at some point, right?”

“Yeah, gradually,” Stacey said.

“Your dad was here,” Hannah blurted, rising to pick her way to the light switches.

“What?” Stacey said, almost shrieking through the blanket. “When? Where?”

“I saw him at the kennels. He wasn’t here long.”

Hannah hit the lights at the same time Stacey tore off her sheet to reveal a squinting, tormented face.

“He left?” she screamed.

“Yes, he’s going back to Kansas. He said—”

“He was supposed to get me!” Stacey howled. “Why did he leave?”

Hannah immediately wished she hadn’t had breakfast, because now it was churning in her belly, fighting to come up.

Stay calm, she told herself, returning to her laptop, sitting, turning in her seat to face Stacey, moving stiffly, mechanically.

“He can’t just . . . come and take you away,” Hannah said, and she noticed the edge in her voice, the hint of impatience that she hadn’t meant to put there.

“Is he still here?” Stacey demanded, eyes suddenly wild, and she stepped to the bars and grabbed them. “Is he still here? Let me out so I can see him! I need to see him.”

Stacey grabbed her door and shook it, rattling it on its frame.

“Just let me out! Just let me out!”

Hannah merely looked on, her unexpected annoyance growing from the dark place in her mind where it had sprouted.

Yesterday, Stacey had seemed resigned to all this, her father and his legal prowess a longer-term plan, her immediate concerns getting a TV, adjusting to nudity and the minor, occasional demands of being used in research.

But the knowledge of her father’s proximity had apparently opened other doors in Stacey’s psyche: A familiar face, so close. The presence of her protector. The hope of immediate freedom.

Stacey shook her door again, looked at Hannah, staring back at her impassively, bowed her head and wept.

“What did he say?” she asked quietly, through choking sobs.

“We only talked a short time,” Hannah said, telling a minor lie. “I told him you were fine, and—”

“I’m not fine!” Stacey shot back.

Hannah looked up but chose not to argue. When Stacey was quiet, Hannah would speak. When Stacey shouted, Hannah would fall silent. Hannah had information Stacey wanted, but she would have to behave to get it. This was a kind of training, Hannah realized, teaching Stacey without words a term of their partnership.

Stacey seemed to accept the condition, because she could not do otherwise.

“What did he say?” she asked again, voice forced to evenness.

“He was very upset,” Hannah said, believing Stacey would want to know that.

Stacey nodded and winced.

“He said he would go back to Kansas and try to get you free.”

Give her a little hope, Hannah thought. Something to cling to.

This is what it is, Hannah’s and Stacey’s fates thrown together, by chance, or accident, or some sort of cosmic justice. Hannah was growing weary of everything, of moral challenges, of considering how the world might otherwise be, of talking to people about difficult things.

“When can I get out?” Stacey asked.

“What do you mean?” Hannah countered.

“You said I could get out. I could meet my dad. I want to do that.”

“It’s up to me,” Hannah said simply.

It’s up to me.

I am your de facto owner, even if title to your flesh is technically held by New Life, or some other subsidiary of the Fairchild empire.

You are my property.

How easily we fall into the habits of people we couldn’t understand yesterday.

“What do I have to do?” Stacey asked.

“Nothing, really,” Hannah replied. “Let me take your samples.”

Hannah tapped a few keys on the laptop, launching the little data gathering app, waiting for it to open up, when a message appeared in the lower right corner of the screen.

“We need to talk,” it said, vanishing a second later.

“We need to talk.”

“We need to talk.”

The third time it appeared, Hannah clicked it, opening up a small chat field.

“Who are you?” she typed.

“You know who we are.”

“No I don’t,” she wrote.

“Did you bring them to the torture room?”

Hannah paused, stared.

How could they have broken into this system, of all the systems in the world? This was New Life’s proprietary network. It must have a half dozen layers of security.

But then sometimes, hiding just beside the beast is a brilliant place to hide.

Hiding within the beast is better still.

“I did,” Hannah typed.

“We know you did. Well done.”

“Then why did you ask?” Hannah tapped out.

“Gargoyle,” it wrote. “Thursday night.”

“You mean Gargoyle’s?”

“Yes, Gargoyle.”

“Why?”

“7,” they wrote. “You possess an invaluable asset.”

Hannah studied the screen.

“You’re in danger,” the words stated.

“From what?”

“We’ll go over it Thursday night. The danger isn’t immediate.”

“Okay.”

“Be careful, bye,” said the screen, and the chat interface vanished.

Hannah paused, stared, wondered.

You’re in danger, they’d said.

Of course I am, Hannah thought. It’s not even worth mentioning

You possess an invaluable asset, they’d written.

What did that mean?

Were they praising Hannah’s academic abilities? Her courage? Her flair for the dramatic, her knack for the pointed gesture?

No, of course not, Hannah thought sheepishly, remembering Athena’s words from the drive Sunday: “No, you’re not vain. You’re super-vain. Mega vain. It’s the worst kind of vain, because of how annoying it is.”

What asset then?

What invaluable asset did she possess that would make the people in the computer need to talk to her?

Oh, Hannah thought. Of course.

Stacey.

Stacey Fairchild.

“You’re breathing weird,” Stacey said from her bed.

Hannah looked up, at the naked girl in the cage, sitting on her bed with a magazine on her lap.

What would they want with Stacey Fairchild?

“Hey, Hannah?”

As Hannah continued to stare in the direction of Stacey, not seeing her at all, her mind wandered through a dozen scenarios, some merely interesting, some terrifying. Hannah might be asked to stage an escape, in which Stacey would be given over not to her father but to someone else, to a group that would hold her hostage, not for money but for justice, for the end of slavery.

“Yo, Hannah?”

But did Blaise Fairchild have that power? He couldn’t even free his own daughter, much less shut down the entire institution.

What then? Why then?

“Hannah? Hannah?”

Hannah looked up, hearing the echo of her name spoken by someone else.

“Huh?” she asked. “Oh, sorry, I was . . . thinking about something.”

“Yeah, you sorta seemed out of it.”

“Are you hungry?” Hannah asked.

“I will be,” Stacey said. “My first meal of the day is usually lunch.”

“Let’s get our samples done, then,” Hannah said, rising, going to the cabinet to retrieve supplies.

“When can I get out?” Stacey asked, remaining on her bed.

“We’ll see,” Hannah replied.

“You want me to cooperate, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s our deal. I cooperate. I get out.”

“Not today,” Hannah said, setting the supplies on the table. “Soon.”

“Soon might as well be never,” Stacey said, hunched on her bed, a sudden intensity in her eyes. “Tonight.”

“What do you want to do?” Hannah asked, and the realization of how unqualified for this she was burst forth upon her all in one moment. She had no skills, no training, no natural abilities when it came to the control and discipline of a fellow slave.

Why did they give her Stacey Fairchild? Why couldn’t they have shipped some docile girl to her from New Life, or some other lab, a long-term slave who knew how things worked, who wasn’t going to resist, whose father wasn’t going to show up screaming at Hannah in the kennels?

And now, Hannah was caving to her. Asking her what she wanted to do was an obvious concession. Hannah should have said no, simply no.

“Hannah, let us in!” shouted Athena from the hall, and the girl pounded on the door for good measure, and Hannah realized that, in this moment at least, the existence of Athena Petrosyan, the presence of Athena Petrosyan in her life, was a good thing.

Hannah went to the door, punched in the code, allowed Athena and Jody access.

“Stacey!” Athena shouted, dropping her bookbag and a bright orange bag of fast food on the table next to Hannah’s laptop, and she went to the bars, and Stacey left her bed, and the two girls hugged through the bars as if they were old friends.

“They’re supposed to be here in, like, 15 minutes,” Athena announced.

“Who?” Hannah asked.

“The TV people,” Athena said, returning to the table and pulling open the bag of food. “Me and Jody have been busting everyone’s asses on this.”

“They’re coming now?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah, I pulled some strings,” Athena said, setting four foil-wrapped, cylindrical items on the table next to the collection of Hannah’s research supplies. “Stacey, how does 55 inches sound?”

“Seriously?” Stacey asked.

“And breakfast burritos for everyone,” she said. “But first . . .”

Athena unzipped her book bag, pulled out panties, bra, green jumper.



“I think these will fit you,” she said, passing them through the bars. “Hurry up and put them on, and then we have to put that chain on you so the guys can do their job.”

Stacey looked at the clump of clothing in her hand as if she'd never seen clothes before. Hannah looked at them too, and saw subversion, a challenge to her management of things. Hannah hadn't authorized clothing, and if Stacey refused to remove them afterwards, certain aspects of data gathering couldn't happen.

Athena seemed to read Hannah's mind, turning to her as Stacey pulled on her panties, drew the bra up her arms.

“It's like, all these guys who will be coming in here,” Athena said. “We don't need them looking at her naked.”

But Athena was necessary. Hannah understood that now. When it came to dealing with slaves, the girl possessed as second nature what Hannah couldn't learn in a lifetime. Hannah had played a role in that education, of course, but she'd learned in the course of things only how to be a slave, not a mistress.

Stacey stepped into the jumper, went to the mirror and looked at herself as she buttoned it up.

Athena picked up the end of Hannah's tether, coiled neatly the way Hannah had left it, in the middle of the lab floor, and she went to the door of Stacey's cage.

“Tether okay, or would you rather wear your shackles again?”

“Tether's good,” Stacey said, standing at the door.

“Hannah, let her out,” Athena commanded. Hannah complied, and as soon as the door was open, Athena bent to apply the cuff.

“Hannah, when do we get to show Stacey the town?” Athena asked.

Stacey stepped out of her cage, took her place at the table, unwrapped a burrito, and stared at Hannah expectantly.

“Me and Stacey were talking about that when you showed up,” Hannah said, well aware her authority had been all but vanquished since Athena's arrival.

“Tonight!” Athena shouted. “Classes start tomorrow, it'll be our last stand! Oh my god, there's this awesome new place, it's right around the—”

“Gargoyle's?” Hannah ventured.

“Oh, god no, that place sucks. No it's, uh, something like, um, Raisinetter, but two words, and it's—”

“Raison d’etre,” Jody corrected. “It’s French.”

“Yeah, French,” Athena agreed. “I haven’t been there, but it got this awesome writeup on Corpuscle. All these French drinks. Stacey, you wanna go?”

“Stacey has to do some things first,” Hannah announced.

“We made a deal,” Stacey said.

“Okay,” Athena said. “Jody, you coming?”

“When?” Jody asked.

“Six o’clock,” Athena said. “Dinner. I’m buying.”

“I’m there.”

Hannah looked at Stacey, and Stacey looked up from breakfast and smiled broadly and sincerely for the first time since they’d met the day before.

Was this not a form of resistance? Was not granting a new subject girl outrageous liberties a small, temporary overthrow of the system?

But what if Stacey wandered off? What if she vanished or were stolen? What if her father, already teetering on the edge of unhinged guilt, decided to do something truly mad with her? He probably had the resources to put her on a plane and fly her somewhere beyond the subject return treaties of the United States.

And that would be a disaster, for Hannah in particular. When slaves disappeared, the slaves they were closest too got the most of what might be called, euphemistically, scrutiny. But even if torture couldn’t force Hannah to admit collusion, the loss of Stacey would have occurred under her watch. She could be sued. The Petrosyans could be sued. The University of Texas at Corpus Christi could be sued. And other forms of punishment would be inevitable. Hannah’s academic career would most likely be over.

No, this was a terrible idea.

No.

“You’ll love Franklin!” Athena gushed. “He’s super smart, but, but, really wise too, you know? He has all these degrees. And he studied God until he decided God wasn’t real. Okay, that wasn’t that smart, I guess. But anyway, he’s cool, you’ll like him.”

Athena turned to Hannah, eyes blazing with excitement.

“Hannah, we’re doing this, right?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said.

## Chapter 63: A Conversation About a Girl

“Bonnie?” asked the man on the phone.

“Yes.”

“Is this a secure line? You’re not at work?”

“No.”

“I need help with something.”

“Okay.”

“You know that girl we’ve called you about, 08910M008?”

“Yeah.”

“Her name’s . . . her name’s Baye Cardiff. And she’s missing.”

“She was never brought to the clinic.”

“I know. And whoever bought her listed a home in Peoria that just got torn down. A nice house that someone bought, and then they just tore it down.”

“Who bought it?”

“That’s what I don’t know. The owner is listed as First Park Inc. But that’s just a division of Strategic Fold, and then there’s another owner, and a partnership thrown in, a lawyer who won’t talk, and the more I dig, the more people are going to get suspicious.”

“Okay,” Bonnie agreed.

“So if they call again, get some contact information, keep them on the phone, keep them talking, find out all you can.”

“Okay,” Bonnie said, and she paused. “There’s a history here, right?”

“Yeah,” Fairchild replied.

“Can you tell me . . . I mean, it would help to know, possibly. I—”

“Some shit happened between her and Brighton. That’s all that needs saying. Long time ago. Long time.”

“Okay, I’ll look into it.”

“Thanks,” Fairchild said.

“No problem.”

“And Bonnie?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s not beyond the bounds of possibility someone’s fucking with us.”

“Why would someone fuck with you?”

“God only knows.”

## Chapter 64: A Television

“But I need my data,” Hannah added, looking at Stacey, who had already made her way through half the breakfast burrito.

“That’s the deal,” Stacey nodded, chewing.

Athena and Jody each took a burrito and stepped back, deferring to Hannah in this area, and Hannah was grateful for that.

“Does it matter what order it’s done in?” Stacey asked, setting her left arm on the table while she continued eating with her right hand.

“No,” Hannah said, picking up the band and wrapping it around Stacey’s arm, sterilizing the flesh as the veins bulged beneath it, picking up a needle and plunging it in while Stacey held still but hissed quietly in pain.

The next bang on the door came just as Hannah was putting the bandage on Stacey’s arm, and the sound made Hannah jump in a way that, had it come a few moments sooner, might have led to a grievous injury.

“Damn, Hannah, nervous enough?” Athena quipped, going to the door. “Who is it?”

“Jeff, with the monitor,” said a male voice.

“Hannah, open the door!” Athena shouted. “Stacey’s TV is here!”

Hannah rose, opened the door to three men in their twenties, wearing dark blue chinos and light blue shirts with the university logo and their names stitched across the breast, and they entered, the last one pushing a cart with a large flat box on it, resting on its edge.

Hannah watched the men, guessing this would be one of the more unusual of their assignments, and they looked back at her and Stacey, seated facing each other at the table, all following the chain that ran from Stacey’s ankle to the middle of the floor.

Stacey looked at the men briefly, looked away, her face hard, angry – or terrified? Her demeanor had completely changed as soon as the men entered, her shoulders drooping, eyes wide like someone being hunted.

Hannah stared at Stacey, knowing this pain, knowing what it was like to be plunged, body and soul, into a world both frightening and incomprehensible, a world all the more confusing because cruelty could follow kindness at a moment’s notice, sometimes both coming from the same person, the same hand.

I did this, Hannah thought to herself. This is my fault.

I'm sorry.

The men spent close to 45 minutes installing Stacey's TV and explaining its operation to her, leaving her with a large, black remote control.

As soon as they were gone, the door locked after them, Hannah put on a pair of latex gloves and handed over an empty urine cup and Stacey, still tethered, went to the little bathroom on the lab side of the room and pulled down her jumper and panties, not bothering to shut the door as she released her sample.

"Hannah sort of has a crush on Franklin," Athena announced.

"Is Franklin your boyfriend?" Stacey asked, setting the cup on the sink, wiping and pulling her clothes back up.

"No, my subject," Athena said.

"Subject?" Stacey repeated, stepping toward Hannah, open cup in her hand, tether ringing behind her.

"Subject," Athena said. "I bought him last year. He's mine."

"You bought him?"

"Yeah. He was an investment, but he also happens to be awesome."

"Can you cap and rinse it?" Hannah asked, only mildly annoyed by Athena's serial indiscretions.

"Oh, sorry, yeah," Stacey said, her mind clearly on other things, but she made it back to the bathroom, sealed and rinsed the sample cup and returned to Hannah.

"Now, temperature," Hannah said. "Do you want it to be just you and me?"

"I don't care," Stacey said, and she unbuttoned her jumper again, pushed it down her legs along with her panties, bent and put her elbows on the table.

Hannah stood, slipped the thermometer's into Stacey's openings and held them in position with one finger, resting her hand on the girl's bottom.

"We need to be back by 9," Hannah said, feeling the need to recover at least a little control over things, looking pointedly at Athena.

Athena could easily stay out until past midnight, even on a school night, and that wouldn't do. On this detail, Hannah wasn't willing to budge, and Athena seemed to sense her conviction and refrained from challenge.

“Do you drink?” Athena asked, turning her full attention on Stacey.  
“Yeah, sometimes,” Stacey replied, hands clasped on the table beneath her.

“How ‘bout tonight?”

“I don’t know. I’m not a big drinker.”

“How old are you?”

“23.”

“How long have you been a subject?”

“Since Friday,” she said, while Hannah looked down at her laptop and bit her lip.

“Friday?” Athena echoed. “You mean like, um, five days ago?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh my god, what were you doing before that?”

“Nothing,” Stacey said.

“Okay, then,” Athena said, eyes revealing a little puzzlement, along with a rare hesitancy while she searched for the next thing to say.

“That’s like Hannah,” she said, finding her voice. “We got her probably four or five days after she was made a subject. That’s when I met her officially. Although I scanned her before then, in this showroom place. And we brought her home and knew she would probably freak out, so we had another girl spend the night with her, this girl—”

“No you didn’t,” Hannah blurted.

“Huh?” Athena said.

“I spent my first night alone.”

“No you didn’t,” Athena said. “Oh my god, no you didn’t. We had Raven brought over, and—”

“No,” Hannah said. “We went to Gramma’s and Raven cooked for us, and—”

“That did not happen the night we brought you home!” Athena shouted. “I remember it like it was yesterday! You came home, you chilled in your cage for awhile and – oh yeah, you did all my math problems, and I said you were a savant and you got pissed because you thought I was saying you were retarded, and then you tutored me and then you went back to your cage and Mom put Raven down there too and . . . you guys did it, of course.”

Hannah fell silent, Athena’s words reviving dark snatches of memory that had been buried almost beyond reach. It might be true. It all

could have happened. It probably did happen.

“I thought I met her . . . and Uncle Bear . . . on the same night,” Hannah protested weakly.

“No, Uncle bear was not there,” Athena said. “That was at that auction, a few nights—”

“Auction?” Hannah repeated, and she was lost again, something hovering just out of reach, memories of things that had happened, that had been done to her.

Important things.

“I think they beeped,” Stacey said, still bent over the table, Hannah’s hand still on her rump, finger still holding the thermometers up her chambers.

“Oh, oh, sorry,” Hannah said, pulling out both thermometers, glancing at the numbers, and she sat to enter them.

Auction.

“Should I dress again?” Stacey asked, straightening, but leaving her panties and jumper piled around her feet.

“You’re okay doing the sample now?” Hannah asked, looking at Athena and Jody.

“I don’t care,” Stacey said, bending, elbows back on the table.

Hannah picked up the vaginal scope, slipped the sheer, condom-like sheath over it, stood and pushed the rod up Stacey’s vagina.

“Did you masturbate since I was here yesterday?” Hannah asked.

Stacey said nothing, her only answer a slight flick of her pelvis, the shifting of one foot.

“Sorry, I have to ask about that,” Hannah said. “It’s part of the study.”

“And I have to answer?”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

Stacey clasped her hands and lowered her head, her black hair hanging down almost to the table.

“Yeah,” she said quietly.

“How many orgasms?”

“Two.”

Hannah looked at Athena, hoping she wouldn’t say anything off-color. But when Athena next spoke, her words were conciliatory.

“It’s normal to forget stuff,” she said.

“I don’t like forgetting,” Hannah said, glad for a change in topic. “I don’t want it to be normal.”

“But when you’re under stress, or going through something new, people forget,” Athena said. “They went over that in psychology. So Stacey, if you think you’re forgetting something, you probably are.”

Hannah withdrew the scope and pulled off the sheath, putting it in a sample cup, labeling it and putting the jar in the fridge.

“What happens to all that?” Athena asked.

“I’m going to mail it to New Life,” Hannah said, sitting down at the laptop to enter the last round of data. “Every week or so. But I’ll be researching some of it too, once they examine everything and can tell me what kinds of things they want me to look for.”

Stacey bent to pull up her clothes, but Hannah stopped her.

“You need to undress,” she said, feeling the authority in the room swinging back to her now that Stacey’s TV was in place and the focus had returned to research.

Stacey stepped away from her clothes and slipped off her bra, setting it on the table, leaving her panties and jumper on the floor, and she headed back to her cage, her tether ringing behind her, looped through the discarded clothes that followed her in a clump.

Hannah pushed the door closed behind her and locked it.

“Do you have the tether key?” she asked Jody.

“Yeah,” Jody said, stepping over, kneeling to remove Stacey’s cuff, and she pulled the chain and cuff under the cage door and handed it to Hannah, who coiled it neatly in the middle of the room, next picking up Stacey’s discarded clothes, folding them and setting them in the cabinet with the supplies.

“You’re coming back at 6?” Stacey asked, hands wrapped around the bars of her door, and Hannah looked at her and saw anxiety in her eyes, fear, uncertainty – all the things that go along with wanting something and being afraid it would be denied, or being afraid you’d get it and not like it after all.

“Yes, definitely,” Athena said. “I’m going to bring you some better clothes, too. And a coat. It’s supposed to be cold tonight. Watch TV while we’re gone. I want to know how it does.”

“Okay,” Stacey said, and she went to her bed, stepping over the magazines and the leftover food, picked up the remote control and hit the



power button. And with a speed Hannah found impressive, Stacey found something she wanted to watch, a woman and boy from the 50s speaking to each other about a missing cat while a laugh track blared in the background.

“Bye, Stacey!” Athena shouted. “See you in a few!”

Stacey waved without looking, and Hannah removed her gloves and picked up her bag and followed the other girls out, and Athena and Jody went back to their cars in the nearby parking garage while Hannah headed to the bookstore to get some final supplies for tomorrow’s first day of classes, and from there she went to the library to wander the shelves and, if possible, try to find one of the plush chairs where she could study her economics book without being kicked out. Kenneled subjects, clearly identifiable by the white plastic tag hanging from their collars, were welcome to check out books, but they were expected to read them in the kennels. Hannah had been asked more than once to leave the library’s study areas, even if there were plenty of vacant spaces. The librarians and their student minions were particularly strict about that on weeknights and during exams.

Hannah believed she could escape notice on the day before classes started, however, the library almost vacant, and as luck would have it, one of her favorite seats on the second floor – tucked away in a discreet corner, near a window overlooking one of the campus squares – was available, and she settled into it, slipped off her shoes and pulled up her legs, slipped her book out of her bag, and opened to the bookmark.

Immediately, in what was normally one of her happiest time, alone with a book, her mind turned to Stacey, and all the joy of the moment dissolved.

Stacey had no window. She had no sunlight. She was sitting on her bed, watching some awful TV show. Separated from her father, from her lover, from her life.

Because of Hannah.

Hannah looked out the window, seeking solace in the blazing winter sunlight, seeking forgiveness in it in the way people had been asking to be absolved of their sins through all the days of humankind.

It would not come. There would be no relief here, no forgiveness, not only because the sun could not speak, but because Hannah’s crisis had nothing to do with the sun. Hannah’s trespass was against Stacey.

Stacey, and only Stacey.

No god, no matter how infinite in power, could take away what Hannah Loughbridge had already done to Stacey Fairchild, unless that god could turn back time. And if there was a god who could turn back time, who could set and reset and guide everything so that all were granted infinite chances to get things right before advancing to the next place . . . well, how could anyone learn from that?

“I learn, then,” Hannah said to herself, quietly, her hand on a page she could not yet bring herself to read, and her pain eased, if but slightly.

People merely do not kill, they do not rape and rob and pillage, and they call themselves virtuous on the basis of what they do not do.

But all the while, people partake.

They share, they join, they commune.

They drink from the trough of life.

And all that they suck bears the corruption inherent in a free existence, in a universe that moves only forward.

Eventually, innocent as they may be as children, they grow numb to the taste of evil, drinking around or through it.

There is sin, Hannah told herself, in every operation, in every deed, in every act of consumption. And yet we must consume, bite through the germ that would be green life, bite through the flesh of the animate, enjoy safety because there are prisons and machines that kill, wear on our shoulders things cheaply made by impoverished and subject hands.

We must use and do and be, or die.

The requirement, then, is not to walk unsullied through the world, for that is impossible. The burden of sentient life is to know first, and then to feel. To know all the links in the chain that runs from one's own life to all the others, to know who will be harmed, and how, and then, to feel that harm as if it were your own, and to judge it thereby. I will do this thing, which will do a harm I can countenance, but I will not do that other, because I can see the faces where the links of my chain end, and I do not like the way they grimace.

Hannah had known.

She knew that her three-ovaryed girl must come from somewhere, most likely a place of innocence, but there was prestigious research at hand, and perhaps a publication, and she had stepped up to the festering trough and imbibed and ignored and could not taste the misery, until it was too late.

Hannah had known.

And now, in a building a few hundred yards away, a girl who was free a week ago languished in a cage at the dawn of a lifetime of servitude while her father crouched on the threshold of madness.

Forgiveness was impossible, for Hannah Loughbridge.

But there were more choices.

Hannah, for as long as Stacey was her charge, could soften the blows, cut the burden, mitigate the anguish.

Stacey needed a light, Hannah suddenly remembered. She couldn't make the girl sleep another night under fluorescent. Could they buy something on the way back from the restaurant? Was there a place you could buy lights anywhere within a mile of campus? Something simple, a cheap lamp she could plug in next to her new TV.

Hannah looked out the window. Something was going on down there, one of the sororities throwing a pre-semester spirit event, Hannah guessed. A dozen girls stood in a circle, clapping, several dozen more standing around them and cheering them on. Hannah couldn't hear them clap, couldn't hear what they were shouting, the glass muffling the sound to nothingness.

Any one of these girls might have three ovaries, or rare hormones or strange blood, so none of them were truly free, as long as there were subject laws and people – like Hannah – who gained from those laws through intention or ignorance.

I am doing what I do for all of you, Hannah said, studying their little ritual. I am doing it for myself, for Stacey, for every free girl, and free boy, and for all the slaves, male and female, and if at last the laws are changed and we all go free, I will have done what I must do.

That is all.

If there is a god who judges, who weighs virtue and vice in each life, he or she might yet condemn me, because I am wise enough to know what harm I do, for such is the burden of intelligence.

And I can feel the harm as if it is being done to me, for such is the burden of strength.

And I prefer to feel otherwise.

Some people are wise without feeling. Some feel without being wise. The outcome is the same.

Instead, know. And Feel.

These seemed like important ideas to Hannah, and they would not have occurred to her without the impetus of Stacey. Is that what the world was about, then – to truly learn, you must watch another suffer?

You must *make* another suffer?

What did the mystery people want with Stacey? Hannah wondered, but until she knew, she could not fret over it, and she cast her eyes down to the page and found she could read now, that there would always be pain, but there was at least a way forward.

Tonight she would go out with the other girls, and tomorrow – if Stacey had not fled and Hannah was not ruined – she would go to Gargoyle's, and find out what they wanted, and decide then.

Hannah packed up her things when the library clock said 5:50, and headed through brisk winter air under the first hint of twilight, back to Rickenbacker.

## Chapter 65: From the Lab to the Car

The television used to be a solace to Stacey, a refuge, a place to go to withdraw from a demanding, unpredictable, disappointing world.

Today, it wasn't working.

The world, crushing her when she was 12, toying with her ever since, looking askance at her dithering, her excuses, her weakness, had finally taken a bite. Now she was captive, in the mouth of a machine she didn't understand, a strange, sad blonde girl deciding her fate.

Hannah.

She was still in college. Younger than Stacey. A slave herself.

And setting the rules.

Mostly setting the rules. Athena seemed to have some say as well. Not officially, but she was a natural leader, more assertive, and Hannah's owner as well.

Stacey, sitting on the bed, turned off the TV, crossed her legs and set her chin in her hand.

This was something, she thought to herself. This is a job. Or a role, at least. Or . . . something. A reason. An assignment, permanent, because she could not quit it, because the keyless ring of metal around her neck would not come off.

More than once when she'd quit or lost a job, Stacey's father had threatened to cut her off, to stop buying her food and paying her rent.

That time had come, she thought bitterly. You're off the hook, Daddy.

Stacey leaned over her bed, grunting, reached for one of the fashion magazines, which by the third page had so infuriated her with its trivialities she flung it against the bars, gasping when it spun neatly between them and continued into the lab, striking the table with the laptop and falling to the floor.

"Oh, shit," Stacey said under her breath.

Would this be considered an act of sabotage? Defiance? Petulance? And was any of that punishable? Would Hannah return to the lab by 6, see the magazine on the floor and decide Stacey wasn't ready to go out? Or might she decide Stacey needed a little correction, drawing out one of the implements in the supply cabinet and bringing it to bear against Stacey's body?

Stacey slid off the bed, stepped to the bars, reached through them, found the magazine just beyond her fingertips.

But she couldn't be blamed for this. Who were these people, after all, wearing the latest fashions, being made up, posing in front of walls with meaningless corporate names and logos on them – Perseus, Nova Tribe, Forward Mark, Bruggio? Could they not speak out, protest, against the injustices suffered by others? Did these people not know what was being done? Or did they simply not care?

Fuck them. Fuck them all. Posing and prancing while people like Stacey sat in cages, while people like Stacey lost their mothers at the age of 12, and drifted through life, and watched incredible amounts of TV because the world held nothing else of interest for them.

But the TV wasn't working for her today, and Stacey stared at the magazines on the lab floor, and then at the darkened screen, and felt guilty. Athena had worked hard on this, had given it to Stacey like a gift, and Stacey had no use for it.

But for now, she simply couldn't take the laugh tracks, the banal dialogue, the utterly predictable plots. There was, for perhaps the first time in her adult life, something more important to think about.

She leaned over, peered at the magazines fanned out around her bed, sat back up and wondered if she had forgotten anything since she'd

been taken, the way Hannah seemed to have done. She went through everything in her mind, forcing herself to relive those first moments, when Kari had found that third ovary, had reported her, when Bridgett had stormed in to tell her she couldn't leave, to have her stripped and chained.

When those men came to force her into the box and put things in her and bind her like a doll in a package, only her face visible.

Wait, she thought. One of them hurt me. One of them hurt me. He jabbed me.

"Ahh!" Stacey cried to herself as she struggled to dredge up the memory, the worst of the day, of someone hurting her for no reason, zapping her leg while he looked into her eyes.

She could do nothing. Seated with her hands cuffed behind her, she couldn't resist, couldn't fight back, couldn't scratch the man's eyes out.

She looked at the little, fading pink scratch at the front of her ankle.

Yes, that had happened too. She was trying to get a phone, to call her father, and the chain on her ankle had stopped her, and she'd stumbled, wearing nothing but a ridiculous paper panty, falling to the floor, topless, legs twisting, torso bent, breasts bouncing like dark burlesque.

"Ahhhh!" Stacey wailed, because the pain had descended upon her, from her own memory, her own mind, like raw fury, and she collapsed on her bed and hugged her pillow to her face and understood why sometimes people forget.

Her sobs subsided, she moved the pillow from beside her face to under her head, and a great weariness overtook her. And – not because she was lazy, aimless, accustomed to a life of doing nothing – but only because she'd slept poorly last night under bright lights in a new place, she slept.

Her sleep was restless, the lights still bothering her, but it was better than the TV, or trying to read something she didn't care about, and she kept her eyes mostly closed until she heard the voices in the hall, and the rattle of the lock at the door, and she moved groggily, rising on one elbow to see who was there.

Hannah entered first, the strange, pretty blonde girl, and she smiled at Stacey and waved but said nothing.

Athena entered next, dressed for business, black skirt and blazer, cream shirt and tights, black loafers, and she was bearing a long, clear bag over her arm, something navy blue within it.

Jody, who obviously wasn't from money, had on blue jeans, a white button down and a what looked like a boy's jacket, dark tan and boring.

"Hey, Stacey!" Athena shouted.

Stacey sat straight up, nodded, drew up her knees and wrapped her arms around them.

"How was the TV?" Athena asked.

"It works great," Stacey said. "But I was sorta tired, so I slept."

"Did you watch anything?"

"Yeah."

Stacey clambered off her bed and went to the toilet.

"What did you watch?" Athena asked, and she stepped to Stacey's cage and hung what she'd brought over a crossbar.

Stacey didn't know what she'd watched, didn't care, but didn't want to say that, so she said nothing, and Athena got tired of waiting for an answer and changed the subject.

"I brought you Berth & Stamps," Athena announced. "It's a dark plaid you're gonna love."

Stacey wiped and flushed and washed her hands and face at the sink, took a long look into her eyes.

"There's makeup behind the mirror," Athena said. "If you want it."

Stacey pulled the mirror aside, found basic toiletries and makeup, including very good brands of eyeliner, lipstick, blush. There were tweezers, and a brush, but there were no dildos, which was at the moment more of a disappointment than she would have let on.

While the girls talked about their classes and the boy named Franklin, Stacey dashed a little color on her face and turned to the clothes Athena had brought.

"Did you bring underwear?" she asked, unwrapping a navy-blue dress with a short skirt and long sleeves, the belt a conventional white.

"Get her underwear, Hannah," Athena commanded, and the blonde sex slave obeyed, blank-faced, retrieving Stacey's bra and panties and passing them through the bars, turning to notice the magazine Stacey had thrown through the bars, stooping and picking it up and setting it on the table without seeming to care how it had landed there.

A pair of black pumps had been tied at the bottom of the bag, and Stacey put them on as soon as she'd pulled up her panties.

They were a passable fit, and she practiced balancing in them while she pulled her dress over her head, and when she backed up to the bars to get zipped up, she breathed in and smiled, because wearing clothes like this was something she'd missed.

"Before I zip you up, I need to scan you," Athena said.

"Scan me?" Stacey said, turning to see Athena with her phone raised, her intentions utterly opaque to Stacey.

"The chip in your back," Athena said, and she tapped the place between Stacey's shoulders where they'd stung her on Saturday, and she shivered because it was a memory she'd almost lost, and it was a terrible memory.

"Okay?" Athena asked.

"Okay what?" Stacey said.

"Can I scan you?"

"I guess," Stacey said. "What's supposed to happen?"

"Nothing," Athena said. "It just sends your information to my phone. I'm just asking because it's polite to ask. But I need it for if you go out with us. Because . . . if you . . . if we can't find you, I can just send it out to 911 and everyone gets it in a split second, and they'll . . . find you probably right after."

"Okay," Stacey said.

"Hannah explained all that?"

"Yes, she did, go ahead," said Stacey, and she felt Athena's warm phone brush her back, and then whatever scanning was supposed to accomplish seemed to be done, because Athena slipped her phone into the side pocket of her blazer and zipped Stacey's dress, and Hannah unlocked the cage door, and the four girls headed to the door of the lab and into the hallway and toward the elevator.

"Franklin's in the car," Athena said, punching the down button.

"He's looking forward to meeting you. You're going to love him."

"Okay," Stacey said, and she pictured a man like the men who had hurt her and boxed her, and she didn't want anyone named Franklin with them tonight, and she felt a rush of anxiety, as bad as on the first day of any job, as bad as on the last day on any job, when she knew she was going to get fired or was going to have to quit, and she wasn't sure she wanted to go out anymore.



“I’m not saying you’ll fall in love with him,” Athena clarified. “At least not tonight. He’s sort of an acquired taste. Except for Hannah.”

The elevator door opened and the four girls squeezed in, Hannah looking at Athena with something almost scowl-like on her face, Jody with her phone out, tapping it and ignoring everything else.

“You know it’s true,” Athena said, accusing eyes pointed at Hannah. “You fell for him. You fell hard.”

“I fall for everyone,” Hannah said.

“Bullshit, not like that.”

“How do you know?” Hannah asked.

“I know you well enough to see when you’re falling hard and when you’re just . . . doing it.”

“You don’t,” Hannah barked, and her eyes went hard and the color rose in her cheeks, rivaling the blush she’d put on.

“Hannah, Hannah, chill,” Athena said. “God, you are so easy to provoke.”

Hannah breathed out and scowled at the floor.

But Athena wasn’t done, apparently.

“Okay, how many people have you been with?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Hannah replied impatiently. “I don’t keep count.”

“You’re a math genius,” Athena replied. “I’m sure you have the number somewhere. So let’s say, 30 guys, conservatively, right? And, uh, 15 girls, and—”

“Just because someone’s good at math doesn’t mean they count things in their life,” Hannah said, voice rising, and she turned toward Athena now in a posture that almost looked like aggression, like she was about to start swinging. “And it hasn’t been 30 boys,” she added, “and don’t —”

“Oh, I knew you knew the number, you—”

“I. DON’T. COUNT,” Hannah said, speaking in a quiet seethe that shut Athena up for the rest of the elevator ride.

Was Hannah a lesbian? Stacey wondered. And is that why she was upset, because now her secret was out, now Stacey knew that Hannah had been with girls? Was Hannah going to want Stacey? Was it expected for sex slaves to attach themselves to anyone convenient? And was Stacey highly convenient, locked up in a cage, alone, naked, for hours? Had Hannah been with Athena? With Jody? With the Indian lady?

What kinds of things happened in this world, the world Stacey had been forcibly dragged into?

Stacey's mind continued to whirl as the girls left the elevator and clip-clopped past the security desk and to the building's exit. The conversation of school matters resumed, and Hannah's composure returned as she recounted a story about a biology professor Athena would be taking a class from this semester.

They fight like sisters, Stacey thought to herself, stepping with a strange, deceptive freedom into the cool Texas night air, all the sky black except for a thin band of pink-yellow visible between two buildings.

Stacey had been to Texas a few times, once as a child, once to attend a concert as a teen, and she'd always found it an exotic, exciting place, far more interesting than Topeka, Kansas. This wasn't Dallas, of course. It was Corpus Christi. But this city was on the Gulf of Mexico. Would she ever see the water?

Athena took the lead, the rest of the girls following her, Hannah staying close by Stacey's side, and they drew near a car in the near-vacant lot beside the building that had become Stacey's new home, and Stacey looked back at the structure, its multiple stories and dark windows, seeing it for the first time.

Ahead of them, in the car, there was a man in the passenger seat, and he pushed open the door and emerged, rising, dressed in a black suit and a loose tie, looking like one of the lawyers at Blaise Fairchild's firm when they had to work late and someone brought out a bottle of port to keep everyone glad to be there, if not focused.

Just like one of the lawyers, except for the collar, and the handcuffs, which kept his wrists bound before him.

He smiled disarmingly, and Stacey convinced herself he would do no harm. He looked nothing like the men who had been cruel, wasn't dressed like them, wasn't free like them.

"You must be Stacey," he said, focusing on her and taking a step in her direction before Athena blocked his path and whispered something quietly to him.

Stacey heard clicks, the jangle of chain, and Athena stepped back, revealing a handsome, stocky, well-dressed boy who was now free of his restraints.

“Hi,” Stacey said, feeling shy in a way she never had before in situations like this. It wasn’t fear, exactly. Just nerves. Or anxiety. Or something.

“Franklin Fulmer,” he said, stepping forward again, this time with Athena’s blessing, and he took Stacey’s right hand in both of his, and she looked into his eyes and found caring, and kindness, and intelligence, and ceased to be afraid.

“Franklin will be up front, so everyone else has to squeeze in the back,” Athena announced, and the girls quickly obliged, Stacey sitting on the right, Hannah in the middle, their hips touching.

“Now, Stacey, how long have you been a member of the subject classes?” Franklin inquired before the girls had finished fastening their seatbelts.

“Pardon me?” Stacey asked.

“Franklin wants to know how long you’ve been . . .” Athena clarified haltingly, “. . . when they put that collar on you.”

“Oh, it was—”

“I’ll have to translate for Franklin all night,” Athena said. “If you don’t get something he says, ask me.”

“Okay.”

“How long, then?” Franklin asked.

“Oh,” Stacey said. “Since Saturday. Or, that’s when I was collared. They took me Friday. But it wasn’t official until Saturday.”

Hannah sniffed, leaned back and hunched her shoulders, as if beset by pains no one else could sense.

“Sorry,” Stacey said reflexively. “Am I too close?”

“No, no, that’s okay,” Hannah said. “I just guess my, my back’s a little stiff or something, so I—”

“You carry too many books around,” Athena asserted, easing her car out of the parking lot and onto a deserted campus side street.

“That’s probably it,” Hannah said. “But I’m fine. It was just a twinge.”

“What were you doing before?” Franklin asked.

“Kinda nothing,” Stacey replied, more embarrassed by giving that answer to Franklin than to anyone else the last few days.

“School, job?” Franklin persisted, turning to look directly into Stacey’s eyes.

“Franklin’s not nosey,” Athena said, feigning exasperation. Or possibly truly exasperated. “He just has to know everything.”

“That’s okay,” Stacey said. “My dad said I’m still trying to find myself.”

“Said?” Franklin repeated.

“Oh, he’s still alive,” Stacey blurted. “It’s just that—”

Stacey’s voice broke, and she uttered a soft gasp of heartbreak and put her face in her hands. But she didn’t weep. She was determined not to cry about something that Franklin and Hannah seemed to take in stride.

“Sorry, sorry, it’s just . . . he was here today, and—”

“What?” Athena exclaimed. “When was he here?”

## Chapter 66: Raison d’etre

“Today,” Stacey said. “Dad talked to Hannah, and then he left.”

“God, Hannah, you talked to Stacey’s dad? Today?”

“Yes.”

“When, this morning?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said, eyes blank in the darkness, staring out the front windshield.

“Does he live here or something?”

“No,” Hannah replied. “He drove from Kansas.”

“What did he want?”

“Stacey.”

“No, I mean specifically, what did he want?”

“He wanted to bring Stacey home with him,” Hannah said, barely inflecting her words, her eyes glistening in the light of a pair of oncoming headlights.

“Uh, so you had to talk to him about that?” Athena said.

“Yes. He was upset.”

“Wait, wait,” Athena said. “Where did you see him?”

“He came to the kennels.”

“You mean, he came to the kennels to talk to you? In one of those little meeting rooms?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my god, you were naked, then.”

“Yeah.”

“He must have been—”

“Athena?” Hannah interrupted.

“He must have been—”

“Athena,” Hannah said more sharply.

“Huh?”

“Can we talk about something else? It was hard to see him, and it’s upsetting Stacey too.”

“Whatever,” Athena said. “But look . . . can you just tell me when that kind of thing happens? Me and Jody. And Dr., Dr. . . uh.”

“Mandapreet.”

“Yeah, her too. I feel like you should make a report when shit like that happens.”

“There’s nothing in the manual about that,” Hannah said.

“It doesn’t have to be in the manual!” Athena shouted. “This is just normal behavior. When someone’s dad—”

“There’s nothing normal about any of this,” Franklin interrupted, silencing Athena immediately. “There is no etiquette for what Hannah experienced this morning.”

“Well, it’s just—” Athena protested weakly.

“Hannah has just taken charge of a girl with three ovaries, for research purposes,” Franklin said matter-of-factly, as if describing the plot of a poorly-written television show, “and she was confronted, unexpectedly. Hannah, Stacey’s dad was unexpected, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Unexpected, and I assume quite passionate. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“And Hannah had no choice – polite and demure as she might be – to send Stacey’s—”

“What does demure mean?” Athena inquired.

“Reserved,” Franklin said. “Shy. Modest. Of—”

“Ahhhh!” Athena screamed as if she were being bitten by a snake lurking under the gas pedal. “No fucking way! No fucking way! Oh my god, Hannah is, is, none of the above!”

“She—” Franklin began.

“No,” Athena said, almost spitting the word. “No. No. I know Hannah better than you. Hannah is, like . . . you never see it coming. Oh my

god. You think you know her, and then, and then – Oh my god, Hannah, no offense, but – you’re just, I don’t know, you’re just . . .”

Athena, unable to finish her sentence, cackled and drove.

Hannah said nothing, sitting in the back seat and staring impassively forward, and Stacey got the impression Hannah had heard things like this from Athena before, and didn’t care. Hannah was what she was. Complicated. Very bright. Troubled.

And, Stacey thought, deeply at odds with her life as someone else’s property.

Is that what made Hannah strange? That she hated who she was?

Stacey looked out the window, trying to process, trying to process, and not succeeding. All of this was too foreign. Other-world foreign. No frame of reference. And she agreed with Franklin. There was no precedent, no etiquette, no guide. She had no idea how she would address her father the next time she saw him. Even that was an unprecedented challenge.

“I take your point,” Franklin said calmly. “But regardless of Hannah’s . . . demeanor . . . there is no social convention for that situation. Hannah was faced with a free man . . . Stacey, what does your father do?”

“He’s a lawyer in Topeka. Very successful. Look him up. Blaise Fairchild.”

“Fairchild?” Franklin repeated. “Fairchild?”

“Yeah, Fairchild,” Stacey said.

“Any relation to . . . ?” Franklin ventured.

“Who?”

“Druhler?”

“Who?”

“Druhler Fairchild?”

“Is he super rich?” Stacey asked. “’Cuz my dad did some work for some rich Fairchilds a few years ago. He told me they were distant family. But I don’t—”

“What kind of work?” Franklin asked, turning to stare at Stacey with bright, inquisitive eyes.

“Athena, does this place we’re going to card?” Hannah asked. “I want wine tonight.”

“I’ve heard they don’t,” Athena replied.

“Where did you hear that?” Hannah inquired.

“What did your dad do for Druhler Fairchild?” Franklin asked again.

“I don’t know,” Stacey said. “It’s probably on his—”

“I just heard it,” Athena barked impatiently. “Probably on the page that talked about it.”

“They’d put that online?” Hannah asked.

“He’s got a professional profile online?” Franklin asked.

“God, Hannah, I don’t know,” Athena said. “Why do you care anyway? You never get carded. They don’t care about subjects. And, shit, you look like you’re 30 when you make yourself up.”

“I don’t look 30,” Hannah protested calmly.

“Right. You look 45.”

“Do you even know anyone who’s 45?” Hannah demanded, and she punched the back of Athena’s seat, and Franklin turned his eyes from Stacey to Hannah, and he looked for a long moment at her face, and he turned away and for some reason ended his interrogation of Stacey Fairchild.

“Shit, Hannah, could you please just lay off?” Athena said, pounding her steering wheel. “For just one night, could you just go with things, and not try to figure everything out and be logical and piss me off?”

“Sorry, Ma’am, it won’t happen again, Ma’am,” Hannah said without the merest hint of sincerity.

Athena hissed, grabbed her steering wheel and looked at Franklin.

“I’m not going to let her do it to me tonight,” she said quietly. “It only happens because I let it. It only happens because I let it.”

Franklin laughed, a loud, healthy, comfortable laugh.

“What?” Athena demanded, almost shrieking at her male. “What?”

“No, no, you’re right,” Franklin said. “It only happens because you let it.”

“But you know she’s doing it to me, right? Right?”

“You and Hannah have a . . . special relationship,” Franklin replied. “I don’t always understand it.”

“Stacey, Jody, you see what’s going on, right? You’re girls, so you have to know. You can tell what Hannah’s doing?”

“Uh,” Stacey stammered. “I guess she’s making you mad?”

“Yeah, yeah, but you see how, right?”

“No,” Jody said, speaking for the first time since she’d gotten into the car. “It’s beyond me.”

Athena sighed loudly and slowed down, reaching their destination, a sort of rustic French bistro with “Raison d’etre” spelled out in gothic letters across the building’s upper façade.

“We’re here,” Athena announced, parking and turning off the car. “And just because I’m the only one who knows what Hannah’s doing doesn’t mean she’s not doing it. It’s part of her evil brilliance.”

Stacey looked at Hannah’s profile, illuminated dimly by the lights of the restaurant, and noticed the slightest smile. Or was it a smirk?

As soon as they were shown to their table and handed menus, Athena looked around the table and grimaced before aiming her eyes at Jody.

“You’re smart, right?” Athena asked, using a tone that made clear she wasn’t done with her anti-Hannah crusade.

“Well, book smart I guess. Mostly A’s.”

“I guarantee you,” Athena said, speaking loudly enough to be heard by all at the table over a lively accordion tune, “if you lived with Hannah . . . if your family got her or something . . . in two weeks, she would be driving you crazy.”

“My family wouldn’t do that,” Jody said.

“Do what?”

“Get Hannah,” Jody said, looking up briefly at Athena before gazing back at her menu. “They don’t believe in it.”

“Don’t believe in what?” Athena asked.

“Um . . .” Jody began, “getting people.”

“You mean, like slavery?” Athena asked. “How could they not believe in that?”

“They say it’s wrong,” Jody said, looking back at Athena with a sudden certainty in her eyes. “And it’s going to end soon anyway.”

“It’s not wrong, and it’s not going to end,” Athena announced, not quite angrily, but very stridently. “It does too much good.”

Athena looked at Franklin.

“Okay, full disclosure, Franklin disagrees with me about that. And there are examples where it wasn’t that great for someone. But . . . major, major case in point: Hannah.”



The waitress showed up and everyone placed a drink order, alcohol available for all who asked for it. Only Athena got carded, a challenge she resolved with a fake ID.

“Hannah,” Athena continued. “She was totally broke. I mean, starve your face broke. And now she’s got a full scholarship and a research project and an assload of money.”

Stacey watched as Hannah opened her mouth to speak, closed it and looked down at her menu, saying nothing.

“There’s a bigger question to slavery than if it will end,” Franklin said, pausing dramatically before he continued. “How did it start?”

“Franklin has a theory, of course,” Athena said, and she looked at her male with what Stacey read as unfettered admiration.

Franklin drew in his breath, looked around the table, as if to gauge the interest in what he had to say.

Briefly, at that moment, Stacey forgot there was a collar at her throat, her name listed next to her owner’s on a government record somewhere, her name listed next to a number as well. It was a strange, unlikely gathering, surely the oddest she had ever joined. Unfamiliar with the peculiar institution of slavery before last Saturday, except for the occasional sighting of someone collared in a car or out shopping, tonight she was one of them. One of three slaves, in fact, outnumbering the two free people at dinner.

“Boil the whole human race down, all the history and all the people, to a single individual,” Franklin said. “In his formative years, he gets everything. The freedom to kill, to rape, to pillage, to take whatever he wants and leave filth behind. And then you get civilization, and he has to start giving things up. He can’t kill anymore. He has to stop raping. He’s not allowed to steal. Now, he’s okay with that, sees the logic of it. But then he has to give up more things. Every time civilization advances, he loses something. He can’t dump chemicals in the oceans anymore. Every decision has to be made deliberately. He has to pay taxes for things he doesn’t like, and some of it goes to people he doesn’t like. He has to follow a long list of rules to run a business. Science says his god is a lie. Queers and the lesser races get all the same rights he does. The same rights, the same respect. He can’t have slaves anymore. And he’s finally had enough. He’s finally reached critical mass. He’s outraged. He’s so angry, and so hurt, truth doesn’t matter anymore. Nothing matters anymore, except how pissed off

he is. So he's stamping his feet and sticking his fingers in his ears and screaming 'no no no no!'"

Franklin paused, looked around the table, and Stacey realized she had no idea what Franklin's story was, how he had come to be here. Had he ended up like Hannah, so poor there was nothing to do with him but put him in a collar and sell him to Athena? He was obviously bright, and refined, and he looked good dressed as he was. He was, in fact, beautiful, one of those males Stacey had always before looked through, because there was no match, no possibility of a relationship, too wide a gulf between the two people they were, she and those other boys. Daryn was her speed. Divorced, a working man.

"Isn't he brilliant?" Athena asked, and she put her arm around Franklin's shoulder and he turned to her and the two exchanged a brief kiss.

"I haven't gotten to the punchline," Franklin protested.

"Go ahead, go ahead," Athena said.

Drinks arrived and all raised their glasses in a toast.

"To a new semester!" Athena shouted.

"Hear hear," agreed Franklin as glasses clinked, and he waited until everyone was sipping and swallowing to continue. "Now, the punchline. Our angry, aggregated-humanity person might be screaming utter nonsense, complete madness, but he's doing it with deep conviction and rabid passion. Once you invent a god who's in charge of truth along with everything else, truth becomes whatever you believe in. And people defer to that. When in doubt, when you're afraid, follow the person who talks the loudest and speaks in the shortest sentences. So he runs for office and he gets elected and he makes the laws conform to his fury."

Franklin took a sip, paused.

"And slavery is how he's chosen to express himself, on this planet, in this universe. Somewhere else, it might be pollution, or CO2, or mass incarceration, or atomic war, and he's dabbling in all of that too here, of course. But slavery wins. He's restored to its full glory an artifact from his salad days, and it feels good, and that's all that matters, truth and humanity and decency be damned."

"So Franklin and I disagree on this," Athena said. "Obviously. Because I think the, the subject laws are totally decent, and very humane. Right, Hannah?"

Ask me, Stacey thought. Ask me what it's like to be probed and violated and boxed and chained and collared. Ask me what it's like to be caged, to be forced to submit to the drawing of blood, the taking of urine, the insertion of something up my sheath and anus.

Stacey, who was not averse to voicing strident opinions among the right crowd, held her tongue in this instance, however, waiting for Hannah to speak.

Hannah had ordered a gin and tonic with a special kind of gin, and she cut her eyes to Athena and smiled and sipped, slowly, before she lowered her glass and spoke.

"Are we going to Odessa in March, Ma'am?" she asked quietly, respectfully.

"Yes, we're going," Athena said, looking around the table with enthusiasm. "Odessa in, um, Uke . . . Uke something, not in Texas. To see van Minsk. That's where their headquarters are. We're both going to get fitted. Super fitted, and it will be amazing, and we will be amazing."

I could go, Stacey thought. I could get up and leave. Just walk out the front door and into the parking lot, and from there to the sidewalk that runs in both directions beside the street. I could probably outrun them, if they followed me on foot. I've done yoga. I've done kickboxing. I might be able to run a mile. I can't outrun Athena's car, though. But if they didn't follow me or couldn't keep up, I could find a stranger with a phone, and dial Daddy's number and tell him to come get me. He would do that. If he drove all night, he could be here by morning. And I would hide somewhere, and come out and find another stranger with a phone, and tell Daddy where I was hiding. Maybe a coffee shop. Or a dumpster behind the coffee shop. And I could pop out just as he pulled up and jump into his car and scream "Drive!" and we'd go back to Topeka together.

But they'd be looking for me. Athena promised that. As soon as I ran, she'd put the word out. And I have this collar on. And that thing in my back. So I couldn't go to my apartment, that's the first place they'd look. And Daddy's place is the second place they'd look. We'd have to leave the country. I'd always be running. I could never come back to America. And Daddy would be running too. He wouldn't like that. He might pay my way onto a flight, then, but he's not going to go with me. He'll tell them he doesn't know where I am. And that's if they don't catch me five minutes after I run out of the restaurant. And then what happens, if I'm ever caught?

Punished, then to a factory? To labor? To a place where I'll never see Daddy?

Used for sex, like Hannah?

No.

Stay.

No.

How can you be used for sex anyway? What does that mean? What do they say to Hannah when it's her time? How do they make her do it? Do they threaten her, beat her if she says no? Is it rape? Is Hannah being raped? What does she call it? What do they call it?

Poor girl.

They had chicken and steak and seafood, familiar meats rendered by French approaches vaguely unfamiliar, and they talked and lingered around the table, Athena not ready to leave before everyone had something sweet to end the night.

"So, Stacey," Athena began once desert was on the table, crème brulee and strawberry crepes and, at Athena's insistence, five small glasses of cointreau. "Do you like Franklin?"

Stacey, puzzled, looked at Athena, at Franklin, back to Athena.

"Yeah, sure," she said.

"Do you like sex?"

"Huh?" Stacey said.

"Okay, sorry," Athena said, not looking at all apologetic. "Personal question, I know. But if you like Franklin, you know, in a certain way . . . and you like sex . . . I could, um, bring him to you."

Stacey felt the color in her cheeks rise, but she couldn't put her finger on what she was feeling. Scandal? Shame? Passion?

Athena looked at Hannah, who was digging into her desert, looked at Jody, who was watching the exchange with mild curiosity.

"I checked with Hannah. It's allowed in her prospectus thingy, so she's fine with it. And Franklin—" Athena paused, leered at her male, and he looked back at her, a slight smile on his lips. "Of course he's fine with it. It's what he does, after all. And he's really good at it."

"Wait," Stacey said, her insides stirring in a way she struggled to interpret. "Are you . . . are you saying?"

"Yeah," Athena said, nodding. "In your ca— in your space. You could, you and he, together."

“Okay,” Stacey heard herself saying, and she knew her face was red, which everyone could see, and her ovulating middle was swelling, and no one could see that, and it was the place between her legs that won out, that propelled her toward the unimaginable conclusion of an unimaginable conversation. “That would be fine.”

Athena smiled.

“We have to watch,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Me and Hannah,” Athena said. “We have to be there. Hannah for you, and I need to, you know, sort of supervise certain things Franklin does like that, if I can.”

“Okay,” Stacey said simply.

“Hannah will give you these pills, afterwards, just in case.”

“Just in case what?” Stacey asked.

“You know he’s like, a professional, um, breeder?”

“Uh huh.”

“So, he’s good at it, but that’s not part of the plan with you.”

“I thought pills like that were illegal,” Stacey said.

“We got a research waiver,” Hannah said flatly.

## **Chapter 67: More Bargaining with Stacey**

Despite Hannah’s misgivings, her decision to let Stacey out seemed, in hindsight, to have been a good one, and they brought back close to two meals worth of leftovers in doggie bags for the fridge in the lab, and Stacey returned to her cage, undressing and stepping into it without protest.

“We were going to get you a light,” Hannah noted as she locked Stacey’s door, in what was her greatest disappointment of the evening. She had been determined to remember that.

“What was that thing Athena was talking about?” Stacey said, turning to the bars.

“You mean, mating with Franklin?”

“Is that what you call it?” Stacey asked.

“It’s one of the terms,” Hannah said. “Did you not understand what she was proposing?”

“I’m not sure. I felt like I did at the time, but now I’m . . . I’m not sure.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “It’s up to you. Always. If you want to do it with him, you can. You don’t have to, but—”

“In here?” Stacey said. “With you and Athena watching?”

“We’ll be here,” Hannah said. “I have to be. I’ll be studying, and Athena will be on her phone probably.”

“Does that not seem strange to you?”

“You don’t want to do it?” Hannah inquired.

“I’m not saying that. I just want you to admit that it’s . . . different.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Yes, of course it is. But it’s all things you get used to. You adapt. I’ve adapted.”

Hannah sat down to her laptop, powered it on, turned it back off, stood to go.

“Sorry again about your light.”

“Please just turn off the overhead,” Stacey said. “I can turn on the TV if I need to see something.”

Hannah, done with Stacey, reported to the kennels before 10 that night, feeling a little flushed from the two drinks Athena had bought her, and she stripped in the locker room and made her way to the security room, where she was randomly selected for a contraband check.

Nearing the end of her period, she pulled out her tampon and threw it away and, scowling at the floor with her hands on her knees, held still while Bud pushed two gloved fingers into her vagina, changed gloves and used one finger to probe her anus.

Satisfied that her chambers held nothing untoward, he let her go to the toilet to wipe and re-tampon herself, and he sent her on her way.

From there, Hannah went straight to her kennel, locked herself in, collapsed on her bed and fell into a deep sleep, the machine in her mind that manufactured dreams declining to torment her tonight, sparing her the phantasms of randy rooftop gargoyles, girls with too many ovaries made cruelly captive, distraught fathers kicking chairs when, really, they should have kicked themselves. And girls, raping themselves.

She awoke before the lights came on, made her way to her toilet through the darkness, breakfasted early, showered communally down the hall and headed off to her first class, at 8:30. She departed the kennels with a bookbag on her shoulder and a bounce in her step that lasted almost a

minute before she remembered the girl who had been taken from her own world and thrust into Hannah's, the girl who was probably asleep in her cage at this moment, who would wake and watch TV and dream of freedom and her father.

Thoughts of Stacey yielded entirely once Hannah was seated, however, listening to course introductions, reviewing syllabi, getting her first week's assignments, speaking quietly to those sitting near her. Her classmates spoke as peers to her, but invariably, eyes flickered from eyes to collar and back to eyes, and she knew they recognized the gulf that lay between her and them. Almost as invariably, there were whispers as she passed in the halls and slipped through doors, a hissed "there she is" or a surprised "she's taking philosophy?"

When one shows up naked and chained to receive a scholarship, Hannah had learned, and when one makes a fool of the system in the process, people go out of their way to remember you, and to talk about you, even if they have no interest in talking to you.

Hannah made her first trip to Rickenbacker a little after noon, finding neither Dr. Mandapreet nor Jody in their spaces, heading to the darkened lab, opening the door quietly.

"Stacey?" Hannah asked quietly.

"Yeah?" Stacey replied from somewhere behind the bars, her voice surprisingly clear, not groggy at all.

"It's Hannah. Want the lights on?"

"Yeah," Stacey grunted.

Hannah flipped them on, and Stacey grunted again, said something under her breath that might have been a curse, groped her way off her bed and, with one hand shielding her eyes, went to her toilet.

"Are you hungry?" Hannah asked, stepping to the bars while Stacey urinated.

"I guess. Whatcha got?"

"Leftovers from last night."

"Oh, yeah. That would be good."

Hannah went to the fridge, pulled out the doggie bag and passed it through the bars.

Stacey took it without thanks or any other sentiment, returned to her bed and opened the bag, retrieving clamshell containers and pulling the food out with her fingers, pushing anything she found packaged there into

her mouth with no discrimination, and the faded odors of last night's dinner wafted from her cage into the rest of the lab.

"Is it good?" Hannah asked.

"I can't live this way," Stacey said, a chunk of something dark brown clinging to her cheek. Was it an onion? Hannah wondered. Gravy covered beef? Burned asparagus?

Stacey was staring. Still chewing, but staring at Hannah through the bars, with deadened eyes, and Hannah put her hand on the table to steady herself, because it reminded her of something, something terrible, and unspeakably sad, and just out of reach.

What?

WHAT?

"I'm sorry," Hannah said, staring back.

She had mourned enough for this girl. She was starting a new semester, and she had classes to worry about, and research to do, and the mysterious people to deal with tonight, and right now, Stacey was simply the owner of a data resource, a producer of blood and urine and hormones and behaviors that Hannah was expected to keep track of for other people, and if she did well enough at it, the other people would be happy and she might continue to advance, even to get a publication.

Stacey was going to have to take care of herself.

The way Hannah had.

Indeed, Hannah had overcome far more than Stacey to get where she was today.

"What else do you want?" Hannah asked, her own eyes leadenly, and she looked at the clock on the wall. She had 15 minutes to talk and collect data.

Stacey made a face that might almost pass for a smile, as if she were sensing a comradeship with the fellow slave that Hannah knew, at this moment, wasn't there.

"It's weird," Stacey said, shrugging her shoulders before she found part of a baguette and raised it to her mouth. "I used to see Daddy maybe once a month, and it was always a pain in the ass, because I had to park downtown, and then I had to explain my latest bullshit. Now I can't stop thinking about him. I just want to hear his voice. I just want to hug him."

Stacey's voice broke and she looked down, mouth trembling, chin shaking, before all went still, as if the lower half of her face were in a



mighty struggle against the urge to wail.

“I used to love having nothing to do, just watching TV all day.”

Hannah nodded without sympathy, because such a life wasn't, in her mind, living at all.

“Now I just want out. I don't even know what I want to do. I just want out of here.”

“Like last night?” Hannah asked.

“It didn't help,” Stacey said. “I'm sorry, but I knew I was coming back here. How would you feel?”

“I spent my first week in a cage I could barely sit up in,” Hannah shot back, a sudden anger surprising her, her words surprising her more. “All I had was a bucket.”

“I'm sorry.”

“And they put my cage in a big room full of them, stacked up 20 feet off the floor, and you'd spend hours there. A lot of the day, and all night. All Sunday. With no privacy. People all around you.”

“I'm sorry,” Stacey said again, and her eyes registered not so much sympathy as despair, a sort of emptiness.

She doesn't feel sorry for me, Hannah thought, as much as she regrets that this is her life now too.

“Let's get everything done,” Hannah said, going to the supply cabinet, drawing out the things she needed.

Stacey complied with her sampling, and Hannah worked efficiently, finishing things up with a few minutes to spare.

“Thanks,” Hannah said, turning away, heading for the door. “I'll be back at dinner time for . . . data. Any requests?”

“More of this,” Stacey said, gesturing toward the bag on her bed. “Can you put it in the fridge though, until then?”

Hannah obliged, turned back.

“You're still okay with mating?”

“With Franklin? Sure. Fine. Maybe soon, before my period starts.”

Hannah left and headed down the hall toward the elevator, and Stacey's face followed her, haunting her with eyes that no longer cared.

She had seen those eyes before. Where? In her own face, in one of the mirrors she looked into after she was taken?

Where?

Where?

Mother.

Yes. Mother. Back came the memory, buried deep but not entirely gone. Mother was arrested because of what she'd done at the moment Hannah was taken, removed by force from their squalid apartment to settle years of the debt Mother had racked up and never settled. Mother had punched a deputy sheriff. Mother had bloodied his nose, in fact, and he'd arrested her, as normally happens when women visit disturbances upon the bodies of peace officers, and there'd been a mugshot, which Athena had found soon after the family bought Hannah, and she'd shown it to Hannah, and Hannah had looked into the eyes of her mother and found them bitter and lifeless. Not angry or hopeless or sorrowful.

Almost dead.

Like Stacey's.

Debt had killed Mother.

Three ovaries had killed Stacey.

The face a person wore when suffering such a death said nothing to anyone, outwardly. But Hannah, who had put on that face once or twice herself, knew that it burned inwardly, pushed death and emptiness through the front of the skull and into the brain, and from there to the rest of the body.

It was not permanent, however.

Mother had resurrected herself, was now pursuing a law degree.

And her daughter would someday, somehow, be a doctor.

Resurrect thyself, Stacey, Hannah thought.

Resurrect thyself.

Hannah descended in the elevator and turned her mind toward the matters of the day, classes and assignments and schedules and getting her books through the kennel.

Only as late afternoon arrived and her Thursday biology lab ended did she return her focus to the two greatest demands of the day – getting Stacey's second samples, and appearing at Gargoyle's by 7, for whatever it was the strange, secret resistance people wanted.

And there was a third concern this day, minor perhaps but underlying everything else. It had been several days since her last orgasm, and while she tended to refrain from extensive pleasure while bleeding, she normally performed quick relief sessions on herself every second or third day during menstruation. And it had been long enough.

Tomorrow, she told herself. Friday night. Allain will come for me, and I'll be fresh and ready and I'll order him to ravish me, to show me no mercy, to open me up and violate me and grind me down until we're both crying against each other's shoulders.

She would masturbate tonight, though, she decided, and she reminded herself of that assignation throughout the rest of the day, reassuring herself that she was not taking a pleasure she didn't deserve, that as horrible as she was where Stacey was concerned, the past was the past, and now the future lay before her, and Stacey needed Hannah's best performance as much as Hannah did, and Hannah would not be at her best if she were distracted by frustration and unrequited arousal.

At 5, Hannah crossed campus to the student cafeteria, got a chicken sandwich and a small salad to go, paying for it with her own money, then on to Rickenbacker, where she made her way up to Dr. Mandapreet's office, found it empty but found Jody waiting for her in her little alcove, tapping on her laptop.

"I need to feed Stacey and get her samples," Hannah said, shifting her book bag from her right to her left shoulder. "How do you want to handle this?"

"I don't care," Jody said with a dismissive wave. "If Dr. Mandapreet asks, I tethered you, but don't worry about it."

Hannah, who tried to appreciate any unexpected freedom, went to the lab with a shadow of gratitude and found Stacey watching TV, the volume up, an annoying laugh track blaring in between insipid dialogue.

"Can you turn that down?" Hannah asked, and she grabbed her day's supplies from the cabinet and pulled a chair up to the bars, passing Stacey's bag of dinner through, setting it on the floor.

Stacey shut off the volume altogether, slid off her bed and accepted the urine cup from Hannah. "How often can I get out?" she asked.

"How often do you want out?" Hannah asked.

Stacey said nothing, just went to the toilet and held the cup under her vulva, the cup and the toilet water beneath it ringing dully with a heavy stream of fluid.

"Did you hold it until I got here?" Hannah asked.

"Yeah, sort of."

"Thank you," Hannah said. "How often do you want out?"

“Is this like, another deal?” Stacey asked. “I do what you say and I get out a certain number of times?”

“Let’s not call it a deal,” Hannah said. “I don’t want to write anything down.”

“Okay,” Stacey said. “But you know what I really, really want?”

“No, what?”

“I want to see Daddy. I want to hug him. I want to hear his voice. That’s what I want.”

Hannah looked through the bars at the girl who was, for all intents and purposes, her property.

Her possession.

Someone over whom she held ultimate authority over, regardless what titles of ownership or research protocols or federal paperwork might say.

“I can make that happen,” Hannah said, once again the words leaving her mouth before she considered them. “I can call your dad.”

“When?”

“I can’t say. I’m not going to say. But it won’t be today. I don’t want him driving at night.”

Stacey laughed, suddenly, surprisingly, and she rose from the toilet, capped her urine sample and strode over to present it to Hannah.

“You need to rinse it,” Hannah said. “Always wash it off.”

“Sorry.”

“And it would be good if you . . . sort of tidied up your space on occasion.”

“Sorry. I’ll do it before I go to bed tonight.”

Hannah finished her data gathering, Stacey cooperating fully as her blood was drawn, temperatures were taken, her vagina was sampled, she answered her questions. Despite her unhappiness over her current situation, she was masturbating to orgasm at least once per night, a positive sign, Hannah believed.

Finished with the day’s research, Stacey returned to her TV, aimlessly chewing her chicken sandwich, and Hannah went to her laptop to enter the data, glancing repeatedly at the corner of her screen for any new messages.

No one had anything to say to her tonight, at least through her laptop.

It was almost 6:30, and whomever she was talking to was probably already at Gargoyles, or hovering around it, and not in a place where they could send secret messages through her research PC. Not that they needed to. Hannah was coming.

“Bye, Stacey,” Hannah said, rising from the desk and looking at the girl, who was done with dinner, the bag and the food wrappers tossed on the floor to join the other refuse of her meals.

Stacey glanced over, returned her eyes to her screen.

“Lights off?” Hannah inquired at the door.

“Huh?” Stacey asked. “Oh, yeah. Yeah.”

Hannah’s last vision of the lab before she headed to Gargoyles was of a darkened room and a girl slouching naked on a bed, her eyes reflecting the flickering light of something on TV.

## **Chapter 68: Another Assignment**

Hannah arrived at Gargoyle’s about 6:55, found a table in the back and pulled out her philosophy book.

The crush of assignments hadn’t yet begun this semester, new as it was, so the little dive, which specialized in beers and didn’t worry much about food beyond burgers and fries, was busy for a Thursday night.

Hannah ordered a pale ale and a cheeseburger and scanned the crowd, who all seemed to be college-aged. Were the mystery people here? Was that one of them, the girl in the green felt trench coat tapping on her phone by the bar? Or him, the boy in a white shirt and loosened mauve tie? Or him, in jeans and a light blue t-shirt, looking for all the world like he threw everything on a few minutes ago because he wanted a beer? Someone here was watching, had noted her arrival, was getting ready to communicate with her in some way.

Who? Who?

Hannah peered at her book but found herself unable to read it, and when her drink and her burger came, she drank and took giant bites and raised her eyes and thought about Stacey and her meals and the mess she was making of her cage.

They hadn’t given her a light or a trash can.

She could put all her food debris in one of the fast food bags, of course, but she’d chosen to just dump everything around her bed with her

unread magazines. Maybe she didn't care, but Dr. Mandapreet would, if she ventured into the lab, and Hannah imagined the admonishment she would receive, Dr. Mandapreet saying in her lilting Indian accent that Hannah needed to do better, that Stacey was a girl, not an animal, and her cage needed to be kept clean.

Tomorrow at lunch time, Hannah would speak to Stacey about gathering her trash, bagging it up and passing it through the bars so Hannah could dispose of it. That would have to be part of their deal. Keep your cage clean or never see your father.

Fair enough.

And obscene enough.

And absurd enough.

Like Hannah's life.

Hannah paid, finished her beer and her dinner and, as she had last May, in her last meeting with one of the mystery people, she went to the bathroom, locked the door, pushed down her jeans and panties and watched the crack under the door.

The little folded note showed up before her bladder was half-empty, and she flushed and pulled everything up and unfolded and read it, unsurprised by its contents.

"The cathedral, like before," it said in a neat blue script.

Hannah slung her bag over her shoulder and slipped into the cool evening air, crossing several bustling streets on her way to the gray, abandoned hulk of Saint Mary Magdalena Cathedral.

She paused before its grand façade, looking up at its stained glass – all black now – and its stone towers, and then at the plaza at her feet, half expecting to find the crumbled remains of the gargoyle she had destroyed in her dream.

There was no rubble here, just an empty beer can rolling in the wind, two tattered grocery bags, brown weeds poking through cracks in the concrete.

Hannah, as she had before, pushed open an arched, oaken door, stepping through it into a blackness broken only by a path of tealights that she knew, from past experience, led to the confessional booth where she would receive her instructions.

They passed through a sanctuary bathed in gloom and into an alcove where a final candle drew her to the little closet where the faithful

used to confess their sins.

She sat, set her bookbag by her feet.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hannah,” said a whispering woman’s voice, made raspy to conceal her identity. The same woman as last time, Hannah thought, middle-aged, passionate, caring.

Sinless.

“Yes,” Hannah agreed.

“Tell me about your girl.”

“What girl?” Hannah asked, mouth going dry, stomach clenching. Did they know what Hannah had done? Were they here to condemn her? Or were they judging her in silence?

“You know.”

“Her name is Stacey,” Hannah said.

“Tell me her full name,” the woman said, quietly, patiently, like a teacher. If she knew Hannah was being evasive, she didn’t seem to mind.

“Stacey Fairchild.”

“You understand her significance?”

“I do,” Hannah said. “She’s a Fairchild.”

“Do you know about her father?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “Blaise Fairchild. He’s a lawyer in Topeka. He —”

“I assume you’re familiar with the PUMI concept?”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

“The law depends on a certain extension of eminent domain,” the woman whispered. “Blaise Fairchild—”

“We talked about that,” Hannah interrupted.

“Yes,” she said impatiently. “He’s very wealthy, and very unpredictable, and there’s a chance he’s going to find out who you are and —”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “He’s already—”

“He was involved in creating the law that took his daughter,” the woman continued. “Eminent domain. He—”

“I talked to him about that,” Hannah interrupted again.

“With whom?”

“With Blaise Fairchild.”

“I don’t think Stacey Fairchild knows anything about it,” the woman said.

“No, Blaise Fairchild,” Hannah said.

“What about him?”

“I talked to him,” Hannah said. “About his work with, um, Kansas, um, Benefit something, on eminent domain. A legal theory. And he—”

“Yes, he may be coming after you,” the woman hissed.

“He already has,” Hannah said. “He’s been here. We talked.”

There was a long silence, and Hannah saw a glow through the screen and guessed the woman was consulting her phone, or perhaps texting someone.

“You’re saying you talked to Blaise Fairchild?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “I’ve been trying to say it for awhile.”

“When?”

“Yesterday morning.”

“Where?”

“Here,” Hannah said. “I mean, in Corpus Christi. At the university. He drove all night. He came to the kennels in the morning and asked for me, and I talked to him.”

“Where in the kennels?”

“In a kennel meeting area. It’s separated by glass, so we talked that way.”

“How did he find you?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did he want?”

“To take Stacey home.”

“What did you tell him?”

“No.”

There was a brief pause before the woman spoke again.

“Does he understand the irony of what has happened?”

“You mean, about the law he helped with, and now Stacey’s been taken as a PUMI?”

“Yes, does he—”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “I told him.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s on his profile, at his lawyer company website, so I printed it out and showed it to him.”



“During your meeting with him?”

“Well, it wasn’t really a meeting,” Hannah said. “He showed up and screamed at me and called me a bitch, so I left and got a printout and held it up to the glass and he read it.”

Hannah paused.

“And he was quieter after that.”

Hannah heard the sharp intake of breath, and then a sort of short, sharp gasping, not unlike the sound people make when they cum.

Was she crying? Or laughing? Or having an orgasm?

The faint light of a phone continued to glow through the screen, almost pulsing as Hannah imagined a hand passing over it, links being pressed, words being typed.

“It’s gone,” the woman said, hissing strangely, the sound of furious, righteous anger almost unhuman when it drank victory, even a small victory like this. “He’s deleted it, in shame. There’s nothing about it on his profile now.”

“It was there yesterday,” Hannah said.

“Of course it was. Tell me what he said.”

“He cried,” Hannah replied.

“Yes, yes,” she hissed through the screen.

“He kicked a chair. And he asked me if I was going to tell Stacey . . . about what he’d done.”

“Are you?”

“No,” Hannah said.

“Why not?”

“Because it would be mean . . . to Stacey.”

“How did you feel?” she asked.

“About what?” Hannah asked.

“About your interactions with Blaise Fairchild.”

“Feel?” Hannah asked. “There wasn’t really a feeling. I was very busy. So I was annoyed. I didn’t like being called a bitch.”

Hannah stopped and pondered, remembering as if from a very long time ago the searing pain she’d felt the night before.

“I was a little scared too, though,” Hannah said, remembering that Fairchild had startled her at first. “I was afraid he might come through the glass. I guess that’s part of the reason I got the printout. To calm him down.”

The glow grew brighter beyond the screen, and Hannah sensed the woman typing, punching keys, communicating. How long would this continue?

Hannah sat and waited, patiently. She guessed it was about 8:30. She didn't need to be back in the kennels until 11. She wanted to study, but this was more interesting than books at the moment.

"You continue to impress us, Hannah," the woman said at last.

"Who is us?"

"We may have a very difficult assignment for you, soon."

"Like what?" Hannah asked.

"But you must do something for us in the meantime," the woman continued, ignoring Hannah's questions.

"What?" Hannah asked.

"We don't make this request lightly," the woman said. "What I'm about to ask of you has been approved by six others, as well as myself."

"You mean, you were talking to them just now, on your phone?"

"Yes."

"Okay," Hannah said.

"Let me begin this way," the woman said, and Hannah heard a squeak and guessed the woman was shifting on her side of the screen.

"How might we make the best use of Stacey Fairchild, given who her father is?"

Hannah pondered. She was using Stacey for research, and possibly a publication. Any other use eluded her.

"I don't know."

"We already have his attention," the woman said. "We already have his shame."

"Yes," Hannah agreed.

"But we don't have . . . his public contrition."

Hannah worked through these words, uncertain of their meaning.

"We want him to confess, to repudiate, to beg forgiveness. We want him to break ranks out of desperation. We want him to sue the others of his ilk."

"Yes," Hannah agreed, not sure how that could be accomplished.

"How might we push Blaise Fairchild to that next level, Hannah?"

Hannah thought, briefly, came up with nothing.

"I don't know."

“He’s already upset. He’s already been humiliated.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What can we do to make him mad enough, repulsed enough to act as he must, to play his part in the destruction of . . . all of this?”

Somewhere, deep in her mind, Hannah knew the answer, and her stomach knotted in response.

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “I don’t know.”

But she did know, and when the woman spoke her next words, Hannah slumped back in the old confessional without any further shock, and her stomach relaxed.

“Your assignment is to torture Stacey Fairchild.”

## Chapter 69: Signed Out

Hannah reached beside her hip and grabbed her bookbag, not because she wished to leave, but because she needed to wrap her hand around something real.

She stared into the darkness before her, then looked toward the screen, no longer glowing with the operation of a phone on the other side.

“And you need to record it,” the woman said. “The entire session. For uploading to us. You—”

“Her mother died when she was 12,” Hannah said mechanically. She was beyond tears now, beyond pity, regarding the question before her without passion or any further reasoning. She was merely a list giver at the moment, a presenter of another course, speaking not out of a sense of sympathy or humanity, but entering her words into the official account only to make sure the woman on the other side of the screen, and those with whom she was communicating, knew all the facts before the sentence was finalized.

“We know about that,” the woman replied.

“And she’s sort of . . . struggled . . . through her life,” Hannah continued. “She just watches TV. When you ask her what she does, she says nothing. I mean, she says something. She says nothing. I mean the word nothing. She—”

“Yes, Hannah,” the woman interrupted gently. “We know. We know.”

Hannah stared into the darkness, lightened only by candles that flickered against the floor on a thin trail leading toward the cavernous sanctuary.

“You’ve been tortured,” the woman said.

“I have.”

“How many of you are tortured every day?”

“I don’t know.”

“How long will Stacey be a slave?”

“All her life.”

“Will she be tortured all her life?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “Probably. Occasionally.”

“Which would you prefer,” the voice of the woman whispered, “to be tortured one more time, and then to be set free, or to be tortured . . . probably, occasionally . . . for the rest of your life?”

Hannah said nothing. The answer was obvious.

“Even Stacey Fairchild would make that choice, if she knew it was hers to make.”

Hannah stared into the gray blackness.

“Don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, pausing, drawing in her breath. “But what if it doesn’t work? What if it doesn’t end?”

“Then you will have tortured someone for no reason,” the woman said. “You will not be the first person to make a terrible decision that bore no fruit.”

Hannah looked down, could almost make out her hand, gripping the strap of her bookbag.

“But it is the essence of courage, to try,” spoke the voice.

“How should we do it?” Hannah asked, and she wondered at this conversation, arranging the details of sin through a screen where sin had always before been confessed and absolved.

“You have been given a research protocol, correct?”

“I have.”

“Follow it. I’m sure your girl will be disobedient. And if she’s not, disobedience can always be imagined, or fabricated.”

“That’s not torture,” Hannah said. “It’s just discipline.”

“You have been fooled by euphemisms.”

“Don’t claim to know the difference between discipline and torture,” Hannah shot back, “until you’ve done both.”

“I’ll give you that,” the woman conceded. “So I’ll leave the details to you. Make it dramatic, for an audience of one. Whom you’ve apparently met.”

“I did meet him.”

“Okay. I’ll email you the file destination.”

“When do you need it?”

“The sooner the better. We’re preparing a package.”

“A package?”

“Yes. Now, there’s something else we need,” the woman said.

“Uh huh?”

“There’s a woman at New Life named Fran Guespert.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“She’s not important. But she’s a link to one of the directors.”

“Which one?”

“He’s a man named Dietrich Johnson. He’s been in charge of research for about five years. He might have been in the same building when you were in Palm Springs. Fran Guespert works closely with him, and if you—”

“I met him,” Hannah said.

“Ms. Guespert?”

“No, him. Dietrich Johnson.”

“Where?”

“At New Life.”

“How?”

“He introduced himself to me. He managed all our research assignments.”

“Do you think you could speak to him again?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “Professionally only.”

“What do you mean?”

“He tried to buy me.”

“What do you mean?”

“He called my owners and said he would pay them whatever they wanted. They refused.”

“You’re being serious?”

“Yes. This all happened.”

There was a long pause. Hannah sat and breathed and wandered through the memory of her time with Dr. Johnson. Her mind hadn't lost a shred of it, she believed. The helicopter, his words, his daughters, Felicity, the sex, the ocean, the ex.

"Could you get them to reconsider?"

"No," Hannah said. "I refused too. I'm not going to do that."

There was another moment of silence behind the screen.

"How well do you know Dietrich Johnson?"

"I spent the night with him."

"When?"

"Last week."

"Where?"

"At his house."

"What did you learn?"

Hannah laughed before she answered.

"Nothing."

"Hannah," the woman whispered wearily. "If you're being serious – and I'm not sure you are – you do understand who this man is?"

"I do," Hannah said. "But I wasn't there to . . . learn anything. He wanted to take me home, and I didn't want to spend another night in a cell at New Life, so I went."

"Did you . . ."

"Did I what?"

"So you . . . had relations?"

"After he finished in me, he did something to my clitoris that made me squirt all over his bed."

"You need to let him buy you," the woman said.

"No."

"Please."

"No," Hannah repeated, her mind quickly working through whatever angle this woman was stuck on. Yes, it would be perfect, a committed member of the resistance sharing a bed with one of the leading lights of the Fairchild empire, a man responsible for turning hundreds, maybe thousands, of girls into captive lab subjects.

He designed the research, he managed them, and he saw they were appropriately punished, even if he denied it.

Yes, it would be perfect, until Dr. Johnson found out Hannah was spying on him from beneath his roof, at which point she'd either be caged somewhere and forgotten, or sold to the worst place he could think of.

Or, worse yet, simply bundled up and taken to the lab, where she'd be bound daily to plastic copulation platforms, bred and tested and worked over, forever.

"Hannah," the woman urged.

"No," Hannah said. "We're done discussing it."

The faint glow of a phone emanated from beyond the screen.

Hannah could hear breathing, the rustling of clothing, the fleshy tap of fingers against hard plastic.

"Alright," the woman agreed. "Alright."

Hannah tightened her grip on her bookbag, preparing to leave.

"We might have another assignment for you," the woman whispered. "Far more difficult than anything else you have done."

"Like what?" Hannah asked suspiciously.

"It would involve traveling. Are you going overseas anytime soon?"

"Um, no," she replied. "Oh, maybe. Odessa. In March."

"Overseas," the woman repeated.

"That's what I'm talking about," Hannah said. "Not Texas. Odessa, Ukraine."

"Why there?"

"Van Minsk. They do fittings. My owner's daughter wants to go, and take me. It's tentative, though."

"It could work," the woman said. "You've got a flair for the dramatic, and an ironic poise when you're naked most people don't have fully clothed. But if you're chosen, you'll be facing the performance of your life."

"Tell me more."

"The mouth of the beast," the voice said. "That's all you need to know for now. You'll be hearing from us about it, maybe. Definitely about that video we talked about."

"Okay."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Hannah rose, picked her way through the darkness and back to the cathedral's creaky door, pushing through it, across the plaza and back to the kennels, where she was scanned and checked in, stripping in the locker room, walking to her little space where she was locked in, leafing through a textbook, trying to concentrate on the words, finding she couldn't.

She needed to work through what had been asked of her. She needed to process everything that was happening – not just the order to torture Stacey, but the rest of the conversation too, the request that she record it and upload it so it could be sent to Blaise Fairchild.

“Hannah.”

Had things become so desperate that forcing a father to watch the torture of his daughter was justified?

Yes, they had. And Stacey was proof. If she could be taken, anyone could. Stacey must suffer, so no one else would. Maybe. If it all worked.

“Hannah.”

But what of Odessa? What was that about? The mouth of the beast?

The woman's words were so meaningless Hannah decided to dismiss all of it. She already had enough to think about.

“Hannah.”

It won't be torture, Hannah decided, reaching an important point in her mind. It won't be called that, and I won't think of it as that. We'll just be applying the discipline protocols from the research prospectus. I'll tell Stacey it's required. I can find a rule she broke, or make one up. If I don't punish her fairly, I'll say, I could lose my research project. No, something worse than that. If I don't apply the prospectus as outlined, I could be punished. More severely than her.

All of which could be true.

“Hannah!”

“Oh,” Hannah said, jerking her head toward her bars, startled to find Tammy there, looking into the kennel with an air of indulgent annoyance. “Hi, Tammy.”

“Someone here to see you.”

“No,” Hannah said sharply, immediately panicked. “No.”

“What did you take?” Tammy said. “You need to tell me now.”

“Nothing,” Hannah said. “Nothing. Well, I had a beer. That's all, one beer.”

“You're acting like you're on something way stronger than beer.”



“I know, sorry,” Hannah said. “I’m just super distracted, and some things are happening in my life right now, and I’m not going to meet with anyone, because I know who it is and I’ve already spoken to him and it was horrible.”

“Not someone to talk to you,” Tammy said. “Someone wants you to come out to them. Someone on the list.”

“Who?” Hannah asked. “Allain?”

“I don’t know. Someone on your list.”

“Athena?”

“I said I don’t know.”

Hannah looked at Tammy and said nothing, her heart still thumping, breath still fast and shallow. Surely, Blaise Fairchild could figure out a way to get on Hannah’s approved list, or just forge it. And he was just mad enough this morning to do something awful. Maybe he already knew about the plans for his daughter. Maybe the woman who’d talked to Hannah at the cathedral was working for him, or reporting to him. Ridiculous, but possible.

Or maybe he’d kidnap Hannah, and hold her hostage until his daughter was freed. It would probably make the mystery people happy, if it made the news. And Stacey wouldn’t have to be punished after all.

“You can refuse,” Tammy said. “That’s your right.”

“I’ll go,” Hannah said, “but if it’s someone I don’t want to see, I’m coming straight back in.”

“That’s your right too.”

Tammy unlocked Hannah’s kennel door and Hannah walked out, went back to the locker room, got scanned again, put her clothes back on and eased through the door that led into the high-ceilinged lobby of the kennel building, well-lit and pleasant, complete with a mural of farmland, all designed to conceal what the rest of the building looked like and what happened within its barren walls and tiny kennels and cages.

Hannah scanned the space, her eyes quickly settling on a girl by the window, something about her vaguely familiar.

The girl turned, as if sensing Hannah, and when their eyes locked, she smiled nervously, took a step forward, stopped and almost seemed about leave.

“Beth?” Hannah said, striding confidently forward, all her nervousness gone, replaced by a broad smile and bouncing steps. “Beth!”

How are you?"

Beth smiled in turn, and she spread her arms as Hannah approached, and the girls embraced, Hannah's mouth against Beth's forehead.

"Weren't you supposed to get me out a year ago?" Hannah asked.

"You don't know how much courage this took," Beth said, and Hannah understood.

Beth was in medical school, one of Allain's classmates, a girl deeply traumatized at the age of 14 when she got drunk at a party, wandered outside, slurred her English and got mistaken for an illegal immigrant.

She spent three hysterical days naked in a subject center, much of it confined to a tiny storage cage until her identity was verified and her mother was found. But Beth's scars cut deep, among their manifestations a stilted sexuality, compounded by her guilt over lesbian desires. Hannah, in a single session with Beth more than a year ago, had been granted access to Beth's lonely world of elaborate fantasies and oblique longings, joining her in the insertion of anal plugs, giving her what was perhaps her first sexual kiss, delivering cautious oral pleasure.

Beth had been promising for more than a year to call on Hannah in the kennels, and she was indeed on the list of people who could summon her, but things kept coming up: shyness about signing out a female sex slave, for starters, demanding studies at other times, and something going on more recently with Beth's roommate, on whom Beth had long maintained a secret crush.

Hannah and Beth saw each other, but only when Allain's gang met for dinner or drinks on the weekends.

"Why tonight?" Hannah asked her as they turned to head out of the lobby and into the cool Texas night air.

"Is it okay?" Beth asked. "Should I have checked first?"

"I'm just finishing my period," Hannah said. "But no, I needed something else to do. I was having trouble concentrating on my textbooks."

"Okay," Beth said quietly as they walked side by side, students trudging toward them on the way to dorms and the library. "No expectations. I just wanted to show Vickie I had the nerve to do it."

"Vickie?"

"My roommate."

"The nerve to do what?"

“To get you,” Beth said. “I’ll talk about you sometimes, and when she found out I could get you, she said I had to.”

“Why?”

“Uh,” Beth said with chuckle, “she wants to meet you.”

“I need to know what you’re expecting,” Hannah said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve never been with two girls.”

“No expectations,” Beth said again. “I just want to introduce you to her.”

“I never got any training for that,” Hannah said. “I’ve never—”

“Hannah,” Beth said, and she stopped and put her hand on Hannah’s shoulder, turning Hannah gently to face her.

“Can we just be friends tonight? Can you just come over and chill?”

Could she?

Could Hannah Loughbridge treat this evening as strictly a social occasion? Could she turn her mind away from the steady but unspoken obligation implied by the words engraved into her tag?

## Chapter 70: Triangles

“I’m sorry,” Hannah said, putting her hand over Beth’s, which was surprisingly cold. “I’ve always assumed things would be a certain way if you got me. And I wanted to be there for you.”

“You’re here,” Beth said, releasing Hannah’s shoulder and, in what seemed to be an act of great courage, taking her hand to lead her onward.

“Just come home with me for awhile, and meet Vickie.”

“Okay. What’s she like?”

“She’s really nice. Kinda bi. Shy like me. I think you’ll like her.”

“Okay, good.”

“Have you had dinner?” Beth asked.

“Yes.”

“What time do you have to get back?”

“11.”

“Okay, it’s almost 9, so you won’t be staying long.”

“Sure,” Hannah agreed.

The girls walked on, hand in hand, until they reached Beth's car, and Hannah relished the pleasure of shutting her car door for herself, putting on her seatbelt, and not holding still to have her limbs chained.

"Plasticity," Hannah said as Beth left the parking lot.

"Huh?"

"It's something they talked about in psychology. The ability to think about something else, sort of. To adjust to new information."

"Okay."

"When you're under stress," Hannah explained, "plasticity goes down."

"Why are you bringing this up now?"

"Because when I saw you, my mind went to one place," Hannah said. "My . . . role. And when you mentioned Vickie, it just stayed there. And you had to grab my shoulder to move me past it."

"You're under stress, then?"

"Yeah, from the start of classes and all," Hannah said, telling such a fraction of the truth her words were in essence a lie.

"You're okay? You wanna come over?"

"Yes," Hannah said, a little sharply. Beth was annoyingly tentative where Hannah was concerned, proposing something, getting agreement from Hannah, and then checking in repeatedly, as if she were certain Hannah wasn't being honest, as if she believed Hannah was weak and dithering, consenting to things because she was told to, accepting her use, complying with her rape.

"I'm up for anything," Hannah said. "I'm glad you got me. I couldn't study. And it's . . . been awhile."

"How long?" Beth asked.

"I haven't been with anyone since Sunday night," Hannah said. "And then, I got my period, so I've kind of held off masturbating. So this is —"

"Who with?" Beth asked.

Hannah held her tongue.

"Oh, god, sorry," Beth said. "I can't believe I asked that. Shit."

"I don't mind the question," Hannah said. "I just always have to think, about who I was with, and who I'm talking to. If I can say, I'll say. If I can't, I won't say anything."

"What are the rules?"

"If I was with another slave, I can tell anyone. If I was with a free person, I have to be a lot more careful. But I'm expected to tell my owners about everyone, free or otherwise. And then, Allain doesn't want to hear about things, so I sort of hold back with him, unless he asks me directly. Even then, though, I only tell him about other slaves, not free people. Now, since you're a friend, I can tell you about anyone, but I would expect you to be . . . discreet."

"Of course."

"And then, with Athena, I say what I want. Nothing's any of her business, and she knows it."

"Why?" Beth asked.

"To annoy her. To manage her."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, of course."

"What is it between you and Athena?" Beth asked.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"No, it isn't. Athena's one of the sweetest people I know. Why pick on her?"

Hannah laughed, a great explosion of humor.

"Try being a slave in her family," Hannah said. "For one day."

"Okay," Beth agreed. "Say no more. And that whole thing with Franklin is kind of weird too."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't get their relationship. It seems like—"

"He's an investment," Hannah interrupted. "She's making money off him. Breeding, and then, she's going to get more—"

"I know about that," Beth said, "but when we were out the other night and they showed up . . . they just seemed, like . . . really close."

Hannah bit her lip and looked out the window.

"I guess," Hannah said after a pause. "But, do you want to know who I was with Sunday?"

"If you can tell me."

"Him."

"Who?"

"Franklin."

"God, what?" Beth said. "Does Athena know?"

"Yes," Hannah laughed. "Of course. She ordered it."

“Are they breeding you?”

“No,” Hannah said, laughing again. “It’s just, Athena was on her period, and I hadn’t started yet, and she likes to keep Franklin . . . happy. So she put us together while she went to get groceries.”

For a time, the girls rode in silence, Hannah remembering her session with Franklin with a mixture of pleasure and regret. He couldn’t even kiss her.

“He seems kind of pompous,” Beth said at last.

“Franklin?”

“Yeah. If you get him started on certain subjects, he just sort of . . . talks.”

“He’s really smart. He’s got two degrees. He—”

“But that doesn’t mean he knows everything about everything. When he talks, he acts like he does.”

“That’s one of the things I like about him,” Hannah said. “That and – this is going to sound weird – the way he plays video games.”

“What do you mean?”

“When we’re out and he’s had a few beers, he’ll get on one of the games, and he just gets this look in his eye, like all his intelligence is focused on this one weird thing – sliding boxes around to catch falling fruit, or fighting someone as a tyrannosaurus with these really dumb little arms.”

Beth pulled into her apartment complex parking lot, turned off the car, pulled out her phone and began texting.

“I’m letting Vickie know we’re here.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

Beth tapped her phone, paused, tapped again.

“She might be . . . naked,” Beth said.

“I’m used to that,” Hannah said, peering up through the windshield, trying to remember where Beth’s apartment was.

“Should I tell her to dress?”

“No.”

They climbed the three flights of stairs, Hannah coaching herself through a mild case of nerves while she wrestled with her mind’s persisting implasticity. No one’s expecting anything, and even if they were, Beth of all people wouldn’t complain if I didn’t want to perform, or couldn’t perform.

But I do want to, Hannah told herself, and that’s where the nerves came from. Performing with no expectation of pleasure made things

simpler, in some ways. Going through the motions with two girls was a little more complicated than doing it with one. Trying to wrest an orgasm during a three-way tryst, with one girl a stranger, increased the challenge.

But did she deserve this? Hannah asked herself as Beth slid the key into the lock. Hannah had decided earlier in the day she needed to cum tonight, and deserved the joy of private masturbation, but did she deserve what she believed she was being given, two female bodies?

Beth struggled with the door a bit, pulling the key out and pushing it back in, turning the knob, pushing and turning the knob again before it finally yielded and she pushed it open, Hannah following her.

Yes, Beth was nervous too.

Hannah thought Vickie might be waiting out in the open for them, draped seductively over the couch perhaps, or standing somewhere within the apartment's tidy living room with no clothes and a clenched jaw, but there was no girl here in either posture, the door to the second bedroom closed, a slight waft of incense from somewhere the only sign of inhabitation.

"She doesn't want to come out until we're both undressed," Beth whispered, guiding Hannah to her own bedroom, shutting the door and unbuttoning her shirt.

Hannah pulled off her sweater, shaking her hair loose, slipping off her bra, kicking off her shoes and pushing down her jeans and panties. Beth took a little longer to get nude, and when she finished, she self-consciously arranged her clothes on the bed next to Hannah's clump of garments, and Hannah marveled at Beth's uniformly olive skin, gazed at the black hair that draped her shoulders, at her neatly-trimmed triangle of black pubic hair.

Beth looked up, into Hannah's eyes and smiled tightly, a little guiltily, as if the two were about to embark on an amusement park ride that only Beth enjoyed, and she pushed open the bedroom door, looking back to make sure Hannah was following.

The living room was still empty, Vickie's bedroom door still closed, and Beth went to it and tapped lightly.

After a brief pause, it opened, and a tall, naked girl, her skin at least a shade darker than Beth's, presented herself.

She turned to Beth, smiling uncertainly, pretending she didn't know Hannah was there, so Hannah took the opportunity to wander the girl's

body with her eyes, from her blue painted toenails to her completely shaved mound and vaginal slit to her b-cup breasts and her almost-black nipples.

She was a pretty girl, with dark, slanted eyes and a full mouth, lips coated with a pale pink lipstick.

Beth looked at Vickie, and Vickie looked at Beth, and Hannah realized the girls had reached an exceedingly awkward moment that only she could remedy.

“You must be Vickie,” Hannah said, holding out her hand. “I’m Hannah.”

Vickie turned, blinked as if seeing Hannah for the first time, and she looked down and reached out, taking Hannah’s hand into her own, smiling while her eyes reciprocated Hannah’s examination, searching Hannah’s form from top to toes.

“Hi, Hannah,” she said simply. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Hannah’s kind of stressed,” Beth said, finally finding her voice. “I told her she could just chill.”

“I’m okay with anything,” Hannah said.

“We could talk on my bed, maybe,” Vickie offered, and she stepped backwards into her bedroom, and Hannah followed her in, the room what she expected, neat and feminine, with a poster of an anime girl on the wall and a rainbow-striped unicorn on the bed, the only light coming from a lamp on the nightstand, a thin stick of incense burning on the dresser, its tip glowing dull orange.

Vickie moved to the left side of her bed, Beth sidled past Hannah and went to the right side, and Hannah went to the foot, waiting for someone else to do something.

What were they expecting? What did they want? How could three girls make love all at the same time anyway?

What little of the nerves Hannah had brought to this gathering were completely gone, replaced by the disconcerting puzzle of what was supposed to happen next. There was the question of physicality, how three bodies could be coupled in a position of sustained, mutual pleasure; but there was also the challenge of how to begin the engagement with two girls who had most likely never brought a third to their partnership, slave or free.

Hannah was trying to think of something to say when Vickie spoke.

“We have an idea,” she said.

“Okay,” Hannah said evenly.



“About how it could go,” Beth added.

“Sure,” Hannah said.

“But do you want to kiss first?” Beth asked. “Or, or, do you want to do anything? I know I said you could just chill, and now we’re not . . .”

“Tell me your idea,” Hannah said, intentionally sounding a little breathy, as if she were beginning to feel the lust of the moment. She wasn’t, of course. She needed something familiar, a handhold of sorts, before she could climb to that place in her mind. She could be moved by a regular lover, arousing, whispered words, an erect penis, even if the penis swung between the hips of a boy she’d just met. Here, she had nothing except a bed with a black comforter, two naked, uncomfortable girls, and hints of patchouli and sandalwood.

“A triangle,” Vickie said with an air of finality, as if that explained everything.

Hannah raised an eyebrow, looked at each girl and smiled, doing her best to convey the message that this sounded like a great idea and she was definitely on board, but just needed a little more guidance.

“Can we show you?” Beth asked, and now her voice was breathy too. Sincerely so, Hannah suspected. In her one other partnering with Beth, Hannah had noticed that the girl could slide deeply into arousal with very little provocation, her eyes going half-closed at a moment’s notice.

“Yes,” Hannah said.

Beth climbed up on the bed first, lay on her side and looked at Vickie.

Vickie paused, bent as if about to clamber up on the bed herself, straightened as if thinking better of it, looking for all the world like a girl trying to convince herself to plunge into a frigid lake.

Beth looked up, waiting, Vickie bent again, and this time she followed through, raising a knee to the mattress, climbing up, crawling on her knees to Beth and, with one quick, furtive glance at Hannah, she lowered herself, positioning herself at Beth’s middle. Beth raised her leg and Vickie dropped her head to Beth’s lower thigh, using it like a pillow as she moved her mouth into position at Beth’s opening, her tongue emerging to explore Beth’s hair, her vulva, the dark flesh around her opening.

Beth gazed at Hannah, eyes struggling to focus, hips rocking under Vickie’s attention.

“And then . . . you . . .”

Hannah understood, joining the fray as Vickie had done, one knee up on the bed, the other following, moving her body into position, head on Vickie's thigh, leg under Beth's head, mouth at Vickie's opening, leg raised for Beth, tongue against Vickie's mound, pelvis adjusted to accommodate the position of Beth's mouth, and finally, lovemaking, three girls simultaneously giving and receiving oral pleasure, the repeated slick, slick, slick of tongues against increasingly wet holes, all the preliminary awkwardness gone now as the soft flesh around and within three female chambers thickened and went raw pink.

Beth, who could barely bring herself to touch Hannah in their first session a year ago, had learned some things, had studied, had grown in both knowledge and passion, her tongue at first mushing across Hannah's folds and her golden brown hair before it forced itself aggressively within, parting her lips and plunging into the depths of Hannah's pleasure slot.

Hannah grunted, tilted her hips against the pressure, and remembered that Vickie's organ, laying just before her, had undoubtedly received this same attention from Beth many times.

Could Hannah do this? Could she perform as well as Beth? She wasn't sure, but she wanted to make clear she was trying. Until now, she'd just concentrated on licking Vickie's hairless mound and the top of her slit, where her clitoris swelled between a pair of heavy, dark lips. But now Hannah redoubled her efforts, running her tongue along the dark groove from clit to entrance, tensing it and wielding it as much like a penis as she could manage, forcing open the slit and running her tongue against the soft flesh within the chasm, savoring the essences of Vickie's womanhood, the subtle flavors that a girl makes and hides until she's ready to share.

Hannah found sugar here, and a spice or two, and that strange, animal muskiness that always seemed out of place on a person who could dress and reason and drive a car.

Beth was moving back and forth now, driving her tongue up Hannah's vagina with maddening insistence, then withdrawing it and forcing it against Hannah's clitoris, delivering a half dozen rapid licks before returning to Hannah's hole for another wash of her lubricant. After several rounds of that, Beth's rhythm changed, her tongue pushing deeper, then resting while she grunted out, a quiet sigh against Hannah's split, and Hannah realized Vickie must be doing something to her, grinding out with mouth against genitals, and Hannah pressed forward, not wanting to be left

behind, her tongue as firm as she could manage, exploring Vickie's hole and the wet pink flesh within it, Hannah almost drinking from her, tongue scooping out fluids after every insertion, sampling this next, deeper essence, the soft, clear honey of a girl's pleasure.

All in sync, all in a state of carnal devotion, the three girls worked at each other, sensed each other's pleasure, and propelled each other to ecstasy.

Hannah, ready to orgasm all day, came first, Beth's attention unstoppable, and she groaned out but spoke no words with the fullness of Vickie's vulva against her teeth.

"Uhhhhh," she gasped, writhing against the bed, leg high and pelvis pressed forward, the world spinning as she was tossed by a ragged joy too intense and too obscene for words.

Something Hannah did while she came – mouth closing, breath coming sharply, tongue quivering, jaw jutting outward, seemed to drive Vickie to that next place, and she came second, her pelvis shaking and her throat uttering desperate, helpless groans of pleasure.

Beth, as host and organizer of the threesome, seemed to be holding her release until last, but as soon as she sensed her roommate's orgasm, she allowed herself to follow, gasping against Hannah's golden hair and engorged pussy lips, crying out for a rescue that would not come.

When it was over – when the three girls' bodies went limp, legs still splayed, heads still on thighs, wet mouths not far from wet chamber doors – the first response beyond hard breathing was Beth's.

She laughed.

Hannah raised her head to look down at her friend's grinning face.

Beth rose up her elbow, closed her eyes and laughed again, loud and healthy.

"How long have we been talking about doing it this way?" she asked, looking at Vickie, who rolled onto her back and rose up on her elbows beneath Hannah's resting head.

"Months, at least," she said.

"We just needed to find the right person," Beth said, and she clambered onto her hands and knees and crawled over to Hannah and, smiling broadly, she lay down beside the slave girl and wrapped one arm around her upper back and leaned forward for a deep, urgent kiss, mouth wet with Hannah's juice against Hannah's lips and teeth and tongue, the two

sharing a long, open-mouthed kiss while their bodies rocked, breasts and hips touching.

Hannah closed her eyes and forgot about everything, her classes and her books and the girl in the cage and the girl's desperate, guilt-wracked father and the punishment Hannah was going to have to mete out for a larger purpose she could only guess at, and she thought only of the taste of Beth's kiss, the way the chemistry of Beth's mouth mixed with the chemistry of Hannah's and Vickie's vaginas to make something else altogether, a cocktail that Hannah worked to experience, the heat of Beth's body pulsing beside her on the bed.

When Hannah at last pulled away to look into Beth's eyes, she smiled and whispered, "You kissed me."

"Yeah?" Beth said, inflecting the word as a question instead of mere agreement.

"You didn't kiss me the last time."

"Yes I did," Beth said.

Hannah didn't pretend to recall every kiss, every fondle, every lick of tongue, every insertion of penis into vagina or anus, but Beth was a special case, a troubled girl with whom Hannah had partnered sexually but once, and the details of that fraught coupling were not so easily erased.

Hannah was sure she was right, but this wasn't something she wanted to argue about, so she held her tongue and wondered at the habit of human minds to sometimes remember, and surprisingly often to forget, that which attended difficulty. And kissing had represented raw difficulty for Beth, Hannah knew, an act that at one time was deeply associated with trauma and frustration and the shame of being a lesbian.

There had been non-sexual kisses of course, in particular a long smooch a year ago at a bar, requested by Hannah as part of her role as Beth's self-appointed therapist. Beth had obliged and, Hannah believed, benefitted.

Hannah planted one more kiss on Beth's lips, still a precious gesture because it was now so casual, and she slid off the bed, keeping her vulva away from Vickie's covers so she wouldn't smear the girl's bedding.

It was almost 10:15 according to the little clock next to the bed.

"Curfew's at 11," Hannah announced. "Think you can get me back home?"

“You call the kennels home?” Beth asked, rolling off the other side of the bed.

“During the week, yeah,” Hannah said, stepping into the living room, where Vickie, still nude, had gone to sit, leafing through a news magazine on the couch without anything beneath her vulva. Maybe she’d already wiped, Hannah thought, or maybe she didn’t care.

Hannah stepped up to the girl and leaned over, kissing her smiling lips for the first time.

“When can we do that again?” Vickie asked quietly.

“Anytime Beth comes to get me,” Hannah said. “Thank you.”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” Vickie said, raising one eyebrow in what Hannah interpreted as an expression of irony.

## Chapter 71: A Question

The next morning, Hannah found Athena waiting for her by the door of her first class, philosophy.

“Hey, Athena,” Hannah said.

“Tonight?” Athena asked, eyes glowing.

“Tonight what?”

“Franklin with Stacey.”

“Yeah, fine,” Hannah said, stepping away from the door, not wanting her classmates to hear this conversation. “She’s ovulating so now would probably be a good time.”

“You’re not jealous?”

“Jealous of what?” Hannah asked, backing up to go to class.

“Bring him at 5?”

“No, 7. Let me get her sampled and fed first.”

“Okay.”

The bell rang, Hannah took her seat, Dr. Keel walked up to the whiteboard and uncapped a black marker.

“IS SLAVERY WRONG?” he wrote.

Hannah, usually attentive in a class that purported to answer the Great Questions, sat up and felt her heart thump.

A girl raised her hand, and Dr. Keel nodded to her.

“Yes, Miss Mkumbe?”

“For the sake of argument,” she said, pausing, “no.”

“For the sake of argument,” Dr. Keel echoed. “Why preface it that way?”

“Because I don’t want people to think I’m evil.”

“Slavery is evil then.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You did,” Dr. Keel said. “And it’s what people do. They bury their truth because they fear ostracization more than they fear losing their truth. The pain of ostracization is comparable to physical pain. There is no pain in losing one’s truth.”

Dr. Keel paused.

“In fact, losing your truth can feel good enough that some people make it a lifelong habit.”

Miss Mkumbe grimaced, as if she’d been caught at something.

“Miss Mkumbe has thrown down the gauntlet,” Dr. Keel said. “Two gauntlets, in fact. She said slavery is not wrong, and then she said, not quite so directly, that slavery is evil.”

Dr. Keel scanned the classroom, a relatively small gathering, no more than 25 students signing up for this course.

“Mr. Starkey,” Dr. Keel said. “Miss Mkumbe has said slavery is not wrong. Stand up. Argue in favor of her assertion.”

Hannah looked at the boy she knew informally as Ted, watched him rise slowly, hesitantly, clearly not wanting this burden.

Fully upright after what seemed a great effort, he put his hands behind his back and cleared his throat.

“Slavery is not wrong,” he said, “because . . . people need things . . . from other people.”

Hannah thought someone might laugh, but all held their peace, and she guessed all maintained their silence because to do otherwise might attract attention. No one wanted to be called on, not for this question, not while Hannah Loughbridge was here, the only subject in the class, her presence representing the ultimate answer to the question, the reality of what was otherwise concept only.

“So if I need something,” Dr. Keel said, “I may demand anything I want of someone else, and it is right that they oblige?”

“I’m not sure,” Mr. Starkey admitted.

“Thank you, Mr. Starkey,” Dr. Keel said, and the boy sat before the professor continued.

“If I need meat, am I right to butcher someone else, another human being?”

“That’s cannibalism!” a girl behind Hannah gasped.

“Yes, there’s a name for it,” Dr. Keel said. “As there is for slavery. A name by itself doesn’t make something right or wrong.”

Dr. Keel scanned the room again, as if trying to find the right student to call on next, but Hannah knew what name he would speak next before he opened his mouth, and she balled her fists and tried to prepare.

“Miss Loughbridge,” he said. “Please stand.”

Hannah stood, heart thumping, breath not coming at all until she remembered to inhale.

“Is slavery wrong?”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah replied quietly.

“Explain.”

“It isn’t . . .” Hannah began. “It’s not just . . . the word. It’s what goes with the word. It’s . . .”

Hannah sucked in her breath, considered passing on the question, excusing herself with the explanation that this was hitting too close to home, that she wasn’t equipped to treat as an academic matter the very fabric of her existence.

“Take your time.”

Hannah breathed in, breathed out, allowed the voice of Dr. Keel, sometimes edged with impatience, sometimes – like now – comforting and sonorous, to soothe her.

“Cannibalism . . .” Hannah said, struggling to organize her thoughts. “It’s what you have to do . . . to eat someone . . . that’s the part that’s wrong. Because you have to kill them. You have to kill them. And cut them up. After they’re dead, ideally.”

Laughter.

“And slavery . . . it’s . . . you have to do things . . . to someone too.”

“What do you have to do?” Dr. Keel inquired, and his features, usually as stern as iron behind steel-framed glasses and a silver goatee, softened just enough, just that smidgen that told Hannah that here was perhaps someone sympathetic, and it emboldened her.

“You have to collar them,” Hannah said, and her hand rose to the ring around her neck, and her fingers brushed the tags dangling there. “I mean, that’s what they do now, in this time. And then . . . they get . . . we

get . . . kept . . . in cages, even though we didn't do anything wrong. And we have to wear chains. Sometimes. Or a lot. And if . . . and if . . . someone needs something . . . they should just pay for it."

"You go to college," Dr. Keel observed.

"I do."

"Would you go to college if you weren't a slave?"

"No, Sir."

"Would you give up college if it meant you could go free, you could have your collar cut off?"

Hannah bit her lip and squinted, because her left eye was twitching.

"Thank you, Miss Loughbridge," Dr. Keel said.

"No," Hannah said.

"Pardon me?" he said, raising his eyebrow at her.

"I'm not done speaking," Hannah said.

Dr. Keel smiled, gazed around the classroom.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced. "Miss Loughbridge hasn't finished speaking. And given her value, she should hold the floor until she's done, don't you think?"

No one spoke.

"How much did your family purchase you for, Miss Loughbridge?"

"They're not my family," Hannah blurted, finding her voice as the color rose in her cheeks.

"How much, though?"

"That's considered a rude question."

"One point five million dollars," Dr. Keel announced, to gasps and swiveling heads, her classmates studying her in a new way, as if looking for gold strands growing amidst her blonde hair, as if she bore the face of an immortal goddess, or as if – for those who knew or guessed her purpose – she held more than a mere penis chamber between her legs, but a true paradise, with little spring blossoms in place of pubic hair, a faint, welcoming glow at her vulva. "It's not hard to find, if one knows where to look. Miss Loughbridge has been objectively valued at the price of an above-average mansion. And yet, here she is, just a girl, sitting quietly among us, here to—"

"I have suffered," Hannah said. "I've had things done to me that would never be done to a free person. And . . . asked of me . . . that you would never ask of anyone else. But I . . . adapted. So I can't . . . imagine



any other way. But maybe there would have been, where I would still be in school, but without the suffering and . . . everything else.”

“Well said, Miss—”

“And I was one of the lucky ones,” Hannah continued. “For everyone like me . . . there are a hundred, or a thousand, maybe . . . who suffer more, and get less than I’ve been given.”

Dr. Keel looked at Hannah, expression blank.

Was he enlightened? Amused? Enraged?

Her answer complete, she sat and the discussion continued, Hannah speaking no more while her classmates held forth with new courage on the subject of slavery, the arguments in her jumbled words cited more than once by her fellow students, albeit without the passion, without the flushing of cheeks or the quavering of voice.

The bell rang, and the others gathered their things and rose to leave, and Dr. Keel looked over his glasses and said quietly, “Miss Loughbridge.”

His meaning was clear, and Hannah reported to the podium with her bag over her shoulder, waiting with her nerves on fire until the room was empty, save for her and him.

He turned to Hannah and lowered his head, looking over his glasses, directly into her eyes.

“You taught them more in two minutes than I could have in a month of lectures,” he said. “The seeds of the best philosophy emerge from outrage and provocation. Thank you for letting them see that.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah said, and she turned and left with the vague mix of emotions that torment one who has delivered a great moral point while her own existence wallows in the sins of the age.

I have made a difference, Hannah told herself as her shoes echoed in the empty hallway. Maybe I am good. Or mostly good. Maybe what they have asked me to do isn’t that wrong. Maybe Stacey won’t even care. It’s just, in essence, a spanking. Worse has been done to me. Far worse. Stacey won’t care. Why should she? She’ll get just enough punishment to upset her father and satisfy the request of that resistance group. Stacey’s been treated well, and she knows it. Even with this, her treatment is, overall, excellent.

Stacey won’t care.

And tonight, she gets Franklin.

“Hey, Stacey,” Hannah said that evening, a little before 6.

“Hey, Hannah,” Stacey said, turning down the volume on her TV.

“Franklin can be here at 7,” Hannah said. “Is that still good?”

“Yeah,” Stacey replied, a little thickly it seemed.

“Sample first, and then dinner,” Hannah said, setting her bookbag and a bag of food on the table.

“Okay,” Stacey said, sliding a chair up to the bars to have her blood drawn.

“And, um, kissing isn’t allowed,” Hannah said.

“Seriously?” Stacey said, giggling nervously.

“Yeah, one of Athena’s rules.”

Hannah proceeded efficiently through sampling, but she was still entering data on the laptop, and Stacey was still eating on her bed when Athena pounded on the door at 6:45 and Hannah rose to let her in, Franklin in tow, unrestrained.

He glanced at Hannah, a little ironically, Hannah thought, but no words were spoken.

Franklin undressed at the counter next to the cabinets, stripping nude, stepping to the cage door, penis hardening.

Stacey shoved her food back into the bag, set it on the floor with the other refuse, stood beside her bed, looking at Franklin solemnly. Athena unlocked the door and he passed through, moving toward the girl, penis straight out now, bobbing with every step.

Hannah turned back to her laptop. Athena sat at the table across from her, pulled out her phone and pretended to look at it while her eyes darted to the couple in the cage.

Hannah heard whispers, the rustling of sheets, saw out of the corner of her eye a kissless embrace, hands wandering over bodies while the couple seemed to agree on what was to be done.

Stacey turned toward the bed, lay on her back, spread and raised her legs, and Franklin clambered over her, first positioning his penis over her open mouth, lowering it into until Stacey grunted, indicating that half his length was all she could hold comfortably.

Franklin lowered his own mouth to Stacey’s vulva, holding her legs while he tended to her folds and her opening, head dropping with every third or fourth lick when, Hannah could tell, he was driving his tongue deep into her female chamber, tasting and cleaning and preparing her for his manhood.

Hannah heard a grunt, a sigh, and she mistyped a line of data and cleared it and tried again.

The couple finished with oral in less than five minutes, and Franklin turned above the girl, waiting for her to widen her legs and raise her pelvis, reaching with one hand to part her lips, taking his shaft in her hand and directing it into her slot with the other.

“Ooooooh,” Stacey cooed, sounding as if she were about to cry, reminding Hannah of the thin line between ecstasy and tragedy, and she reached up and grabbed Franklin’s arms just beneath his shoulders. “Oooooohh.”

Franklin rose up, dropped back down, slowly, quickly, slowly again, working the research female’s sheath with mechanical precision until, after almost 10 minutes of grinding, precision became impossible and he simply pounded, Stacey issuing a quiet “uh, uh, uh” with every thrust, Franklin breathing out but otherwise silent until the moment of truth when, Hannah knew as if she could feel it herself, he cried out a single “Ahhh!” and his penis enlarged to its widest girth and his urethra flooded with semen, propelled by the contractions of his organ deep into the hole of Stacey Fairchild, spurts of his priceless essence poured apace into the girl’s priceless reproductive infrastructure while she succumbed, legs spreading, straightening, bending before they extended again, one foot striking the wall beside her bed.

“Auuuughh, auuuuhh!” she groaned, hands still affixed to his arms. “Oh yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah!”

Franklin continued to thrust until, Hannah knew, he’d gone too soft to work his way inside her anymore, and he rose up and sat on the bed.

Stacey angled herself up, positioned her pillow at her back and leaned against the wall, looking down at her feet.

“C’mon, Babe,” Athena said, stepping to the door of the cage and unlocking it.

With a quick glance back at Stacey, who remained still with her eyes fixed down, he stepped out of the cage, put on his clothes and went to the door of the lab.

“See you, Stacey,” Athena said. “Bye, Hannah.”

Stacey looked up, smiled.

“Bye.”

They slipped through the door, let it shut, and Hannah turned to face the girl in the cage.

“Okay?” Hannah inquired.

Stacey looked into Hannah’s eyes, looked down at her middle which, Hannah was sure, was oozing the juice of coupling.

“I came,” she said simply.

“I know,” Hannah said. “I’m not asking about that, though. I want to make sure it’s okay. Everything.”

“I came,” Stacey said. “I’m not sure about anything else. I’ll have to think about the rest of it.”

## **Chapter 72: Five Pops**

This is not terrible, Stacey told herself when she woke up sometime in mid-February, turned on the lamp beside her bed and crossed her cage to reach her toilet.

This is not terrible.

No one is asking anything of me. I watch TV, I read, and sometimes I get let out.

And I finally have the approval from my father that I lost when I turned 13.

And I get sex with Franklin a few times a month, his wit and charm and legacy of wealth – and his expertly-wielded penis – delightful enough that the boy named Daryn is all but forgotten.

And Hannah is a sweetheart. An absolute dear. Complicated, yes. A little troubled at times, definitely. But she has done everything she can to make this easier for me.

And, who knows? Maybe I’ll go someplace more interesting after this is done. Maybe someone like Hannah’s family will buy me, partly for research, partly for . . . other things. You could do worse than the Petrosyans. You could do worse than Athena Petrosyan. You could definitely do worse than Allain Petrosyan, tall and beautiful son of a doctor, making his way through medical school.

Did Hannah even appreciate him, though? Stacey sensed impatience there, unease, something missing, even when the girl sat as close to Allain as physics would allow, laughing into his ear, holding his hand.

If a family bought me, maybe they'd let me stay dressed all the time. Maybe they'd dress me in van Minsk.

Or maybe Daddy will buy my freedom, if they'll let him. If they don't need a girl with three ovaries anymore. And he can pay enough.

But that last possibility made Stacey nervous. To simply be restored to her previous life meant, probably, returning to her father's disfavor, and an existence, like before, of – if she were to be honest – doing nothing.

It was Wednesday. That meant Hannah would be arriving a little before noon, to sample and deliver lunch. Maybe Athena would be with her. Jody too.

Athena wasn't complicated at all. She was always enthusiastic, always excited about something, always wanting to do the next thing. And she was free, because she could be.

Nothing could be taken away from Athena.

Everything could be taken away from Hannah. That must be what's bothering her. Or one of the things that was bothering her.

Stacey was lost in a documentary about an ancient Greek war when the door opened and Hannah stepped in.

"Hi, Hannah!" she said, turning down the volume and sliding off her bed. "How were classes this morning?"

"Hi," Hannah said.

Stacey could tell, immediately, that something was off. Hannah was more bothered than usual.

Hannah set her bookbag down on the table, Stacey's lunch next to it, sat down at the desk, turned on her laptop.

"Still sleeping well?" Hannah asked absently.

"I am," Stacey said. "No nightmares at all so far this week."

Hannah poked at the keyboard, biting her lip, so tense Stacey could almost feel it through the bars.

"Hey," Hannah said, suddenly, turning to look at Stacey, forcing a sort of fake-smile-grimace. "Um . . . we need to talk about something."

"Okay," Stacey said uncertainly.

"Your, um, space," Hannah said, looking at the floor of Stacey's cage. "It's kind of a mess."

"Yeah," Stacey agreed. "Sorry, I—"

"It is something I asked you to take care of," Hannah interrupted. "And you didn't really . . . do it."

“Okay, yeah,” Stacey said again, and now she was looking at the floor of her cage. Three empty fast-food bags crumpled in the corner. A container with half a salad in it, lying open, the once-green spinach leaves now all wilted and almost black. A tampon she’d used during her last period lying next to the toilet.

Wrapped in toilet paper, of course. But still.

There were a half-dozen magazines on the floor, two paperback novels. And a dildo, something Athena had bought for her, unwashed and gleaming, in the middle of her bed.

She’d been told to clean things, sort and stack things, bag her trash up and pass it over to Hannah, or carry everything out on her own when she was tethered and her door was open. She’d been asked more than once to clean up, but she’d rarely made the attempt.

“I can do better,” Stacey said, turning to pick up a handful of food wrappers.

“But I already asked you, before,” Hannah said.

“I know. I’m sort of . . . I forget. I’m sorry.”

“You need to be punished.”

Stacey looked at Hannah, startled by her words, wondering if she were joking, but Hannah just stared back, without expression, without emotion.

“Punished,” Stacey said.

“Yes.”

“Okay, how?”

“Corporal.”

“What does that mean?” Stacey asked, and the first wave of mild panic washed over her mind, the first sense that there was something she needed to remember, something she needed to do, or prepare for, something she’d forgotten.

“Corporal punishment,” Hannah said. “It’s covered in the prospectus.”

“What kind of corporal punishment?” Stacey asked, voice rising, and her mind went to that moment from what felt like a hundred years ago when the man zapped her leg and she screamed because of how bad it hurt. “What are you going to do to me?”

Hannah said nothing, which was far worse than a detailed description of suffering, and Stacey moved to deep lament, words coming

from multiple places in her mind.

“Okay, wait,” Stacey said. “Can we talk about this? I didn’t . . . I didn’t know you were . . . “

“It needs to be done,” Hannah said, resolutely, eye twitching like it sometimes did, face a mask of regret and dread. “I could get in a lot of trouble . . . because of your space.”

The poor girl, Stacey thought. She hates this, but she has no choice. If Dr. Mandapreet came through and saw Stacey’s mess, they’d probably punish Hannah. Hannah could lose her project. Maybe get kicked out of school. And spanked. And it would all be Stacey’s fault.

“I’m sorry!” Stacey shouted. “I’m sorry! I just, I don’t even have a trash can! I’m trying. I’m trying! It – it’s been really hard. My dad. My dad. Daddy! Oh god, I’m so sorry!”

Struggling to stifle her sobs, Stacey turned to survey her cage through eyes so tear-flushed they were almost sightless, and she felt her way to each offending item she could find or feel, a crumpled bag, the used tampon, the spinach salad, a spread and creased fashion magazine she had no use for.

“I’m sorry,” she groaned, over and over, wadding things furiously into both hands, stooping, standing, stooping. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

She stepped over to the bars. “Can I give it to you now? Please?”

Hannah merely sat at the table, a few feet away, motionless, as if turned to stone.

“Hannah?” Stacey implored. “Can you take this? Please?”

Hannah moved slowly, standing, drawing near, her face coming into focus as Stacey wiped the tears from her eyes.

Hannah’s face was white, her very nature reduced to something else altogether, the essence of pale sickness. Even her lips were white.

“Hannah? Hannah? Oh my god, are you sick again? Hannah?”

All Stacey’s self-pity vanished before the horror that was Hannah Loughbridge.

Hannah looked down, at her hands, at Stacey’s hands, and she accepted the refuse between the bars and moved slowly to the trash can in the corner, and she knelt and pushed the garbage down into it, so much of it that some spilled out, and she picked it up and forced it atop the rest, and it stayed this time, and she stood and turned and looked at Stacey.

“A little . . .,” Hannah stammered, trying to get the words out, voice so soft Stacey had to strain to hear her voice. “A little later . . . today . . . me . . . and Athena . . . will . . . do it.”

“What?” Stacey asked. “What?”

“We’ll talk about it,” Hannah said and, still white-faced, stepped to the table. “It’s from the prospectus.”

She looked at the table, seemed startled when she noticed the bag with Stacey’s lunch.

“Oh,” she said, picking up the bag and offering it through the bars. “Here. Your lunch. It’s one of those chili dogs from the cafeteria you like. And salad.”

Stacey accepted the meal and brought it to her bed, opening the top and peering in.

“Do you want to get your samples first?” Stacey asked.

“Huh?”

“The samples? Now?”

“Oh,” Hannah said leadenly. “Yes. Okay. Yes.”

Stacey put the bag on her bed, the odor of a favorite meal triggering recognition, but no pleasure, no anticipation, no watering of mouth.

She went to the bars while Hannah retrieved her supplies, and the two girls, slave researcher and slave research female, went through the motions, neither speaking, the researcher corpselike, the research female somber.

Not knowing was the hardest part. A shock to the leg? Or some other body part? Or one of those canes or whips that hung in the cabinet, never used and almost forgotten? Or something else?

Athena would be participating, Stacey reminded herself, as if that were a comfort. But no, that was worse. Not knowing what would be done was bad. But having it don’t by two girls she thought were friends, two females she had come to rely on for her physical and mental and social health – that was excruciating.

Had all this – the friendship, the support, the kindness – been an act, a charade? Ultimately, was Stacey simply something else the two girls had to manage?

Cage, chain, feed, inspect.

Allow out, sometimes.

And punish.



After Hannah left for class, pausing at the door for a quick, funereal wave, Stacey tried to work past the fear and shame, trying to see Hannah's perspective.

The girl is a slave. She is just as much at risk of being punished as I am. I know for a fact she has been punished. She has to do this, to protect herself. To progress. To manage me. Or to look like she's managing me.

But Stacey couldn't quite reconcile things. Something was missing. Hannah's explanation didn't quite square. Why was she doing this? Did she really have to?

When she finished her lunch, Stacey placed everything back in the bag, pressing it flat, folding it and pressing again, making a small, neat rectangle of waste in the front corner of her cage, to be delivered to Hannah as soon as she returned.

Maybe she could yet be spared, if she showed a commitment to improving. This is going to happen only once, regardless, Stacey told herself. Just being told she was going to suffer had changed her, she noted, had made her more obedient.

She turned on her TV, remembered the joy with which Athena had delivered it, and wiped a tear with one hand while she searched programming with the other, settling on "Mr. Beasley," a sitcom from the 70s she'd seen countless times that she chose because she needed something predictable.

She watched five episodes back to back, switched to an animated cartoon about a princess, but she kept one eye on the clock, knowing that Hannah and Athena were likely to appear at their regular time, a little after 5.

When the door opened, Stacey turned the TV off altogether, went to her toilet, watched as just Athena entered, bearing dinner in a bag, one of the plastic bags that indicated better food, something from one of the restaurants near campus.

"Hey, Stacey," Athena said. "Hungry?"

"Not really," Stacey said.

"Hannah told you about that, um, thing we need to take care of?"

"Yeah," Stacey said, feeling her anxiety ease. Something about the way Athena put it, as just another chore, another task, made it easier to contemplate. Athena wasn't nervous about this. Hannah had acted as if she

were delivering a death sentence. Athena was treating it casually, like just another thing to get done.

“Is it just you?” Stacey asked.

“No, Hannah will be here in a few,” Athena replied, “but she told me to get things started.”

For Stacey’s first three weeks of confinement at the university, only Hannah had the combination, but she’d since given it to Athena, and now the Petrosyan girl showed up on her own a few times a week, delivering food, but not doing any research. Drawing blood, taking temperatures, inserting the probe up Stacey’s vagina, that all remained strictly Hannah’s purview.

“What are you going to do to me?” Stacey asked.

“Five pops on your rear,” Athena answered, still casual, still not remotely bothered by what she was saying. “Cause you left your space a mess.”

“I’m sorry,” Stacey said. “I’m going to—”

“I don’t care,” Athena said. “That’s Hannah’s stuff to worry about. I’m just here to help and bring your dinner.”

“Okay,” Stacey said, her mind completely transformed, from the panic of earlier to a rational reflection on pain. This will be like going to the doctor, she told herself, where if something’s going to hurt, they let you know up front, and you prepare for it, and you get through it. Shots in the mouth hurt. Vaginal procedures hurt too, especially when someone decided to look for the third ovary.

“Please don’t hate her,” Athena added, opening the cabinet door where the implements of discipline were kept. “She is really, really upset about this. She’s barely—”

“She has to, right?” Stacey asked, stepping to her bars. “If she doesn’t, she—”

“Yeah, I guess so. She takes stuff like this super seriously, because it matters so much to her. School, I mean. And anything related to school. It’s the most important thing in the world to her.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“But worse has been done to her, believe me,” Athena added.

“What do you mean?”

“She got 10, I guess you’d call them lashes or whatever, all over her back, her ass, her legs. God, she was shouting and crying, like ‘Ow,

stop! Help!”

“You were there?” Stacey asked, eyes filling with tears as she pondered the strange cruelty of this world, and the suffering of Hannah, the strange quiet girl whom she struggled to imagine screaming in pain as she was beaten.

“Yeah, I just had to tie her,” Athena said. “Someone else did the punishment stuff.”

“Who?”

“Some guy Mom hired. I don’t know his name. He just does that.”

“What for?”

“She took a pill. I gave it to her. But she took it.”

“I’m sorry,” Stacey said, and she went to her toilet and pulled off a length of tissue, wiping her eyes with it, blowing her nose. “I’m so sorry.”

The door clicked, and Athena looked at it, looked back at Stacey.

“Don’t say anything about it,” she whispered. “She doesn’t like being reminded.”

The door opened and Hannah entered, bag over her shoulder, worried eyes going straight to Stacey’s, which were wet and red.

Hannah grabbed the door, as if to steady herself, clinging to it briefly before pushing it closed.

“I got her baked Alaskan from Tolstoy’s,” Athena announced.

“Okay,” Hannah said, entering the room slowly, her mind clearly on other things. “Thanks.”

Stacey wiped her eyes again, longing to say something, to comfort this girl, to take away her pain.

“Punishment first, then dinner?” Athena asked.

“Yes,” Hannah replied, setting down her bookbag. “She needs to be . . . extended.”

“What does that mean?” Athena asked.

Hannah raised her arms over her head.

“Okay, okay,” Athena said. “So, like, tied? Or chained?”

“Chained,” Hannah said quietly, looking at the clock, at Stacey’s darkened TV, at everything but Stacey.

Athena stepped to the cabinet, opened the door where Stacey’s restraints were kept, drew out the handcuffs, stuck her index finger through one of the closed cuffs and whirled it before her.

“How about the tether for one ankle?” Athena proposed.

“That’s fine,” Hannah said.

Athena picked up the neatly coiled tether, stepped to the cage, knelt and wrapped it around three bars to shorten it, and Stacey walked slowly into position, planting a foot by the bars and waiting while Athena closed the cuff around her ankle.

“You never got the key to this, right?” Athena asked.

“No,” Hannah said. “Since I guess it’s still supposed to be used on me. Jody has one, though. She’s at her desk right now. You can let her know we’ll need it in a few minutes, when it’s done.”

When it’s done, Stacey thought. Soon.

“Okay, hands up, I guess,” Athena said.

Stacey obeyed and Athena reached up, wrapping the handcuffs around the highest crossbar, cuffing each of Stacey’s wrists, the girl stretched out helplessly against the bars of her cage now, her breasts sticking between them, nipples hard.

Athena went to the cabinet, where the punishment things were kept.

Hannah stepped over to her laptop, tapped the keys, brought it to life, tapped more keys.

And then she turned it, pointing it so Stacey could see the screen.

Hannah had never done that before. The laptop was always turned to the side, its glow a faint sliver she could barely see, could never read.

A blue light appeared above the top of the screen, next to the little black dot that Stacey knew was the machine’s dark eye.

Its camera.

The camera was on.

“Why is the camera on?” Stacey asked, pulling reflexively against her handcuffs.

“This has to be documented,” Hannah said blankly, as if delivering lines from a play she wasn’t acting in particularly well.

“For who?”

“For the sponsors of the research,” Hannah said. “New Life.”

“Why?”

Hannah bit her lips and delivered another line, poorly.

“In matters of discipline, documentation is required.”

Athena unlocked the cage door. Stacey looked at her, saw she was bearing a short rod, no longer than her forearm.

Stacey looked back at Hannah, pulled against her restraints again.

“Who’s going to see it?” she demanded.

“Probably no one,” Hannah said. “But I have to document it.”

Athena stepped into the cage, took her place beside Stacey.

“Five, right?” she asked.

“Yes,” Hannah said. “But first . . .”

“Huh?” Athena asked impatiently.

“Stacey,” Hannah said, looking into the girl’s eyes for the first time.

“Can you go over how you . . . were disobedient?”

“Uh,” Stacey said, looking at the blue light, convinced her punishment was going to be broadcast far and wide, that even now, everyone was watching.

What if her father was out there somewhere, staring at his computer, waiting helplessly for his chained, naked daughter to be disciplined before the world?

Stacey swallowed.

No, Hannah couldn’t be that evil. No, Hannah said she had to document it. Maybe if she didn’t, she’d be punished. But no one would see this. No one was watching. No one would see.

“Okay,” Stacey said, voice quavering but otherwise under control.

“I sort of . . . made a mess. I left things . . . everywhere. And . . . and . . . I’m sorry.”

Stacey looked to the side, leaning her head forward to peer around her arm, at the corner of her cage, where she’d compacted her lunch bag.

“And . . . I’m going to try to do better.”

“Okay,” Hannah said blankly.

“Ready?” Athena asked.

“Go ahead,” Hannah said, facing Stacey, biting her lip.

Stacey felt the rod against her bottom, just a sensation of touching before the pain arrived like a breath of fire and spread out across both her cheeks.

“Ooh!” she shouted.

Another pop landed, this one burning immediately.

“Oh, fuck!”

Stacey was hopping on her bound foot when the third pop landed, Athena swinging with a level, even stroke. On the fourth blow, Stacey shouted and grunted, hands pulling at her cuffs, body writhing, and she was still turning in her restraints when the fifth swat landed.

“Ahhhh!” she cried, arching her back and sucking in her breath.

Athena, finished, left Stacey’s cage, went to the cabinet and hung up the rod, shutting the cabinet door with an air of finality. Hannah locked the cage door and opened Stacey’s wrist cuffs.

“Can you get Jody?” Hannah asked, and she returned to her laptop, spun it to its normal orientation, typed on it.

“I’m going to get her and then I’m off to the library,” Athena said. “I’ve got a group project.”

Hannah nodded but said nothing.

“See ya, Stacey,” Athena said.

“By, Athena,” Stacey said. “And thanks . . . for dinner.”

Stacey, still bound by one ankle to the front of her cage, stood with her hands wrapped around the bars, her bottom stinging, but no longer intolerably, and she stared at the wall over the refrigerator, feeling strangely numb, no anger toward Athena or the girl sitting at the table, no shame for herself. In the end, this was just something that happened, a painful annoyance.

A necessity, perhaps.

Stacey would change. Stacey would make herself change.

Jody entered while Hannah was still typing, and she unlocked Stacey’s cuff and noticed the bag of food on the table.

“Does she get dinner now?” Jody asked.

“Go ahead,” Hannah said, her voice weak, her lips white, the deadness of her eyes returned.

Jody passed the meal through the bars, and Stacey took it, planning even as she opened the bag how she would fold and compress it once it was empty.

She sat cross-legged on her bed, naked, the cool sheets a comfort against the pangs of her rump, and she set food out and tried to savor the smell, and Hannah allowed her to finish her meal and clean up before the sad slave researcher went slowly to her closet for her usual supplies, returned to the bars, face a mask of blankness as she took Stacey’s temperature, drew her blood, collected a urine sample, inserted the probe up her sheath and inspected the results with a microscope that she had begun using a few weeks ago.

“Are you okay?” Stacey asked, chewing her food.

The question seemed to startle Hannah, and she looked at Stacey wide-eyed before she recognized her and offered a weak smile.

“Yeah,” Hannah said. “I guess. How are you?”

“I’m good. I’ll keep everything neat, okay?”

Hannah nodded sadly, turned off her laptop, rose and picked up her bookbag.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said. “Want me to turn off the light?”

“Please.”

## Chapter 73: A Welcome Third

It was mid-February, the semester proceeding as they always did, Hannah immersed in classwork, and her research with the girl she usually kept in the cage but sometimes, weekly at least, allowed out to dine, to drink, to mate with Franklin when Athena was on her period and Hannah was otherwise disposed, and once – only once, so far – to visit with her father at the Four Seasons, where he wept into her shoulder before he composed himself and bought dinner for his daughter and Hannah and Athena, an odd meal all the odder for how natural it was, Hannah and Athena talking about school, Stacey talking about the news she sometimes watched on TV, the conversation elevating to laughter more than once before it ended with another round of shoulder-borne tears and the return of father to Topeka, daughter to cage.

Things were stable, the days predictable now, another successful semester well underway.

But Hannah was not at peace. Not remotely.

Only when she had lost it did she realize what had been truly most important to her: her unyielding, unwavering sense of right and wrong.

At some point, her flickering candle of morality, burning through the winds of cruelty and pain, guttering under torture, laying flat amidst chains and bars, before humiliations large and small, had gone out.

She could not name the day, the hour, when it has hissed and ceased to glow, when a crook of smoke rose from its bent and blackened wick.

Maybe it was in first class on that airline, when she shared with nonchalance the raw scandals of her existence, with a total stranger. Maybe it was at New Life, when she allowed them to bind her to a platform for sexual penetration while her peers watched, so she could barge into a

punishment room. Maybe it happened in Dr. Johnson's bed, where she succumbed to coarse pleasure with a man whose abuse of girls like her was done institutionally, by rote, by decree and protocol and prospectus.

Or it had happened when she said yes to the study of a three-ovary girl? Or engineered that girl's punishment? Or positioned her laptop so that the punishment could be recorded, for strangers who whispered through confessional screens in the darkness and worked at uncertain purposes?

Or had it been happening all along, slowly, imperceptibly, every time she was chained, every time a door clanged behind her, every time she was beaten or insulted or fucked, the slow dissolution of that nature she had built without knowing she was doing so, the character she had formed on her own, taking from a Bible verse here a tenet of goodness, forming from some adage there a new pillar of her beliefs, building in her heart a whole framework of decency from the words of Jesus and of those who followed him or built upon his assertions.

Now, it was all gone, and Hannah, in late March in her junior year of college, age 20, found herself navigating the universe without a rudder, wandering its echoing halls without a tether, the chains that often enough bound her wrists and ankles no longer of any consequence.

For now, it seemed, she was capable of anything, the restraints that held her body an illusion, the moorings that not long ago secured her mind and heart and soul all snapped.

The mystery people weren't helping. They wanted more from her, using her research laptop and her Look! email account to tell her things, show her things, ask new things of her that terrified her, that laid out before her a set of tasks above an abyss of emptiness that shook her to her foundations.

I can't do this, she said more than once to herself over the next few weeks. I can't play this role. I can't face . . . those people.

"I'm going to miss Stacey," Athena said, driving through the outskirts of Corpus Christi in March.

"Between Jody and Dr. Mandapreet and Eileen, I'm sure she'll be fine," Hannah countered.

"I'm sure she'll be fine too," Athena said. "I'm just saying I'm going to miss her. You know, talking to her, going out with her, having her



over.”

“Oh, yeah,” Hannah agreed, raising her eyes from the book in her lap to look out the window toward a brilliant, bright Friday afternoon. “I will too.”

“You seem distracted,” Athena said.

“I probably am,” Hannah admitted. “I’ve got two tests and a paper due the week after spring break, and I’m not going to have the time I need to prepare for either of them.”

“You’ve already mentioned that,” Athena said. “Like, five times. But I’m talking about, for the last few weeks, or maybe a month. You just seem . . . like there’s something else you’re working on.”

“Just school,” Hannah said defensively, and she rose her hand to pass her fingers casually through her hair, forgetting until her arm stopped with a clink and a sharp jerk that she was in her usual travel chains, ankles bound together, wrists cuffed, a chain running from her feet to her hands.

She folded her hands and dropped them onto the crease in her philosophy text, the words therein making perfectly logical sense while they offered not the merest guide for anything she should do or not do.

“See, like that,” Athena said. “It’s like you don’t even know when you’re chained anymore.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s going on?” Athena demanded.

“Nothing,” Hannah replied, her forehead immediately growing hot, and she prayed the sheen of anxiety sweat wasn’t obvious.

“I know you’re working on something,” Athena persisted. “I can always tell.”

“I’m not,” Hannah lied, struggling not to kick her feet, not to wring her hands.

“Is it about the conference?” Athena asked. “Just tell me if it is.”

Hannah at first opened her mouth to offer a definitive no, but immediately thought better of it.

“Okay,” she said simply.

“Really?” Athena asked, turning and staring at Hannah wide-eyed. “You’re nervous?”

“I am,” Hannah lied.

“Oh my god, you’re seriously worried about it?”

“Sort of,” Hannah said. “I’m just not sure what to expect. That always makes me nervous.”

“Everyone’s going to be cool,” Athena said. “And I’ll be there for you. And Mom’s got one of the best managers.”

“It’s just not something I’ve done before,” Hannah said.

“It’s nine or maybe 10 people in three days,” Athena said. “Haven’t you done that before?”

Hannah played the question through her mind, just as Athena had spoken it.

Haven’t you done that before?

It was a simple question. Not an accusation, not the setup line of what passed for humor to Athena when it came to the family’s girl.

Just a question.

And it had been spoken with a hint of sympathy. Not contempt, not crude amusement, not lecherous curiosity.

Sympathy.

A year ago, six months ago, Athena would have voiced the question in an entirely different way. “What’s the big deal?” she would have demanded. “I know you do it like that all the time!” Or, “God, quit pretending, I’m sure you can’t wait to get it!”

Athena was no longer afraid of sex, or afraid of Hannah’s sexuality. So the topic no longer prompted discomfort masquerading as scorn, or a sense of inferiority that could be assuaged only by ribald insult.

Instead, the girl was being . . . nice.

Which made what Hannah was going to do to Athena next week that much worse.

Worse, that is, if Hannah cared.

But she didn’t.

She was beyond redemption, no longer concerned about anything, no longer letting herself feel.

She was as well aware as ever of the pain and the ways they were caused, but she had to concentrate to perceive the sensations of suffering, and even when she turned her mind to it, it was all intellectual, a mental accounting of evil that could not break through to the ossified gray tissue where her compassion used to lie.

Redemption, too, was an artificial construct, without emotion, without sensation.

How much torture must I suffer to make myself right with the universe? Hannah asked herself.

It depended, came her answer, on which god was doing the reckoning, and how they accounted for things. But no god could be a god without at least the rudiments of fairness. And the answer they would give must be somewhat consistent.

How much torture must I suffer?

A lot, each of them must answer.

“I have done it that much, a few times,” Hannah said slowly. “But I usually knew everyone. Or at least most of them.”

In truth, Hannah didn’t care at all. The Petrosyans were hosting a dozen or so people during next week’s medical conference. Five had expressed an interest in Hannah’s attention. A sixth was wavering. More might sign up. Hannah would be made available from Sunday evening after dinner to Tuesday at 5 p.m., mostly in hour-long increments for whoever scheduled her, and then she would wash up, dress, finish packing and leave with Athena for the airport. She’d have sex with strangers, and then she’d travel to a place she’d never been before. Two kinds of adventure, both interesting in their own right. She didn’t care. Indeed, it would give her bargaining powers she needed.

Their flight would depart Dallas-Forth Worth for Heathrow at 8:30 Tuesday night, was scheduled to land before noon local time the next day. If their next flight was on time, they’d make it to a dinner reception Wednesday at the ancient palace that served as van Minsk’s headquarters, and then on to a medieval hotel next door to rest before two days of fittings, measurements and consultation. There would be tours, something Hannah had insisted on, then back in the air Sunday morning, back in Texas Sunday night.

The only true uncertainty over the next eight days concerned next Saturday, for everything that had been asked of Hannah was to be seen to that night.

“Do you want me to manage you?” Athena asked. “We can tell Samantha we don’t need her. I don’t think it’s that complicated.”

“Didn’t you already pay her?”

“Half down,” Athena said. “And since when do you care about how much money we spend anyway?”

“I care,” Hannah protested. “I don’t want you to waste it. It’s fine if she does it.”

“Look, I’ll be there for you, if you need me,” Athena said, and she reached over and took Hannah’s manacled hand in hers and smiled. “And then, you’ll be done and, oh my god, we’re going to van Minsk.”

Hannah squeezed Athena’s hand and smiled, very briefly, very sincerely, and she turned her eyes to her philosophy text and found it all entirely comprehensible.

An hour out of Dallas, Athena’s phone rang, and she pulled it from her back pocket and raised it to her ear.

“Hello? Hello? Oh my god, Delilah? Shit, Delilah, is that you?”

Hannah heard the voice of the girl born a boy, the slave who did the best hair and makeup in Dallas, and she smiled, sincerely again, for Delilah was a philosophy text all her own, a bastion of the beauty that follows and surrounds those who insist on being aggressively good.

“Yes, Hannah’s sitting right next to me, why?” Athena asked.

Delilah said something and Athena scowled, tapped a few buttons on her phone and set it on her thigh.

“Hannah?” came the voice of Delilah, filling Athena’s car.

“Hello, Delilah!” Hannah shouted.

“Oh, sweetheart, have you taken over the world yet?”

“No,” Hannah said. “I’m not really even trying.”

“Well, shame on you,” Delilah said. “Now, the reason I’m calling is I heard you girls were in town for spring break and I wanted to see if either of you would be requiring my services.”

“Wait,” Athena said suspiciously. “You’re calling us?”

“I’ve got a quiet week so far,” Delilah said. “I was hoping I could spice it up a little.”

“You’re telling me you need business next week?” Athena said with an air of disbelief.

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you,” Delilah said, a note of impatience in her voice.

“Since when did you ever have to call anyone for business?” Athena said. “I thought you were always booked six months out?”

“Honey, take it or leave it,” Delilah said. “Think you might want any help this week?”

“Well, Hannah’s got some work to do up until Tuesday afternoon,” Athena said, “but I don’t know if she needs fixing up at that level.”

“That’s okay, I’m not really that free until Wednesday.”

“We’re leaving for Europe Tuesday night,” Athena said. “So, can we take a rain check? Please?”

“I’ll always be there for you,” Delilah said. “Au revoir.”

“Okay, bye,” Athena said.

“Hey, by the way, where are you going?” Delilah said.

“Only van Minsk,” Athena replied, thumb hovering over the hang up button on her phone. “The capital of everything good you could ever wear.”

“Oh, that sounds marvelous.”

“We’re doing the whole thing,” Athena said. “Two days of fittings and consultations, and then they’ll special order us perfect clothes, and we pay retail.”

“Oh, you’ve got to take me with you,” Delilah said.

“If you were there,” Athena said with deep reverence, “it would be the most amazing thing in the world.”

“Are you being serious, Honey?” Delilah asked.

“Huh?” Athena said.

“Do you want me with you?” Delilah queried. “Are you being serious?”

“What are you saying?” Athena demanded.

“I told you,” Delilah said. “I’ve got some open days the end of next week. And I’d love a little trip to Odessa. I’ve heard it’s heavenly this time of year.”

“Do not fuck with me, Delilah,” Athena said, scowling at the phone on her thigh.

“Okay, never mind then.”

“Are you saying you’d go?” Athena said. “Wait, are you saying you would actually go to Odessa with us?”

“If you want me.”

“You’re being serious?”

“Can’t you tell when I’m being serious, after all these years?”

“You’ll go? I mean, you’ll be there? To fix us up? Both of us?”

“Honey,” Delilah said. “I’ll fix you both up once. Whichever night you chose. Just once, ‘cuz I’m gonna have some of my own things to do.”

“Ahhhhhh!” Athena screamed, pounding her feet so vigorously against her floorboard her phone rocked off her leg and down next to her seat.

“Oh, fuck, don’t hang up, don’t hang up!” Athena pleaded, peering at the dark space next to her seat before she returned her eyes to the road. “I just lost my phone. Fuck. Can you hear me? Can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear, Buttercup,” came the voice from somewhere near the floor, slightly muffled.

“How much?” Athena shouted. “How much?”

“The usual rate,” Delilah replied. “The two-girl package price.”

“Ahhhhhh!” Athena shouted again, and she grabbed Hannah’s hand and stared at her with wet eyes and a frantic joy.

“Okay. Okay. Let me call you when I get home, so I can give you our flight information. You have to fly with us. On the same flight. First class. Okay? Okay?”

“Of course.”

“Oh my god, Delilah, I love you!”

“Love you more,” Delilah said. “You two be good, okay? Hannah, still sweet as summer syrup?”

“No,” Hannah said.

“I’m sure you’re lying,” Delilah said. “Bye now.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

As soon as the line clicked dead, Athena bounced in her seat, hands rocking the steering wheel, the car weaving down the highway.

“We are going to kill it!” she exclaimed. “Pictures. Okay? Pictures! van Minsk will take them. That’s something they do. And, oh my god, I’m going to have hundreds made. Professional, social everything!”

“When?” Hannah asked, her voice betraying no excitement over either receiving Delilah’s handiwork or seeing Delilah herself.

Delilah had stayed true to who she was.

Hannah had not, and Delilah – armed with a sixth sense about things like this – would be able to tell.

## **Chapter 74: The Girl Who Called Herself Samantha**

They reached the Petrosyan's stately home, nestled among a tract of similar dwellings in one of Dallas' newer neighborhoods, and Laura and Ormek greeting Hannah with hugs before Athena escorted her to her cage downstairs to get her travel chains off, to strip and get shackled.

Back upstairs, nude and bound by the ankles, Hannah provided dinner assistance to Darcy, the family's free maid, and then the three Petrosyans and Hannah took their seats at the smaller dining room, partaking of shrimp and grits, salad and fried vegetables.

"Hannah," Laura said, smiling brightly as she almost always did when speaking to the family's slave girl, "Allain called this afternoon, from Miami Heart and Lung, and he made me promise to tell you he already misses you."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Hannah said, nodding. "If you speak to him again, please let him know the same on my behalf."

"Of course," said Laura, drawing in her breath the way she always did when she needed to move to a more important, potentially more difficult topic.

"And you feel ready for the conference this week?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah assured, noting to herself that Laura's phrasing implied something that was decidedly not true. Hannah wouldn't come anywhere near any medical conference this week. She would neither attend, nor present, nor lecture, nor discuss. Her role was to remain at home, where the people who were going to the conference would make use of her.

"You had thought your . . . cycle . . . might coincide," Laura said.

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said, looking down at her lap without any indication of shame, looking past her lap to the blue towel that always draped her chair. "I started ovulatory discharge just before lunch today."

"Perfect," Laura said. "We'll be banding you tomorrow afternoon, but tonight, you may —"

"Banding?" Hannah repeated.

"That's what Samantha calls it," Laura said, pausing to take a bite of chicken. "It involves a cover of your vulva and clitoris, maybe some other things. It's something Samantha recommended, to boost your . . . eagerness. She'll be bringing a few things for you to try on."

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said.

"Would you like relief tonight, or tomorrow, or both?" Laura asked.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah replied. “Both if possible.”

As they talked and dined, Athena squirmed, waiting for the right moment to share her news.

“You may use one of your toys tonight,” Laura continued. “Let Athena know which one to get for you. But tomorrow, before you’re banded, we’ll need to limit you to stimulation by hand only. That’s something else Samantha recommended.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Guess who’s—” Athena blurted.

“I believe you know Samantha,” Laura interrupted.

“Ma’am?” Hannah queried.

“Samantha says she’s worked with you, and she’s looking forward to seeing you again,” Laura said.

“No, Ma’am,” Hannah said. “I’ve never done conference work.”

“Then maybe in some other capacity?”

“No,” Hannah said. “I’m sure she’s mis—”

“Guess who’s coming to van Minsk with us!” Athena nearly shouted.

“Oh, who?” Laura said.

“Delilah!” Athena announced.

“Why?” queried Ormek, looking suspiciously at Hannah.

Don’t go there, Ormek, Hannah thought. There is nothing to be jealous of, where Delilah is concerned. Yes, she still has her penis, but she is a girl, and has never indicated any but a professional interest in me. Enthusiastic and heartfelt interest, admittedly, but professional all the same. You and I have had our time, and we might yet again, restricted as it will be under Laura’s rules. But please don’t get jealous of Delilah.

“That’s the weird part,” Athena said. “She just called me, out of the blue while we were driving up this afternoon, and asked if we needed her, since her calendar was open. Which never happens to Delilah, ever. And then, I told her, we’re going to Odessa. And she wants to tag along!”

Athena fanned her face, looking a little faint.

“But the most important part,” Athena continued breathlessly.

“She’s just charging her standard rates. Her two-girl price! In Odessa! So, so, I’ve been figuring it all out. We’re going to get pictures. On Saturday. After they fit us, and dress us. And Delilah fixes us up her way. Then, pictures. Portraits. Everything. Oh. My. God.”



Laura smiled indulgently, while Ormek scowled, and Hannah read his face and understood. He wanted his share of her during the conference, and Laura had said no. Everyone would get Hannah in Ormek's house except the man who owned the house. And now, during the second half of the week, someone else with a penis would get Hannah. Even if all Delilah was doing was hair and makeup, Hannah's body would be hers.

The universe must seem, to Ormek at this moment, obscenely unjust, Hannah thought, and she sipped her wine slowly and reminded herself that the universe was unfair because that's how it was, and she didn't feel sorry for Ormek.

Or anyone.

Athena was singing as she and Hannah cleared the dishes after dinner, and she was still humming as she brought Hannah down to her cage, locked her in and removed her shackles.

"Which dildo do you want?" Athena asked, not even the merest shadow of the smirk she used to wear whenever Hannah's sexuality came up.

"The bigger one," Hannah said.

"I'll be back in an hour with it," Athena promised, heading to the elevator. "And I'll be turning off the lights then, okay? So don't get all pissy about it."

"Okay," Hannah agreed, sauntering to her desk, opening her economics textbook, turning to a page of problems she needed to work through.

An hour later that felt like 15 minutes, Athena reappeared with Hannah's bigger toy, passed it through the bars without comment, then reached out her arms, and the girls shared a hug through the bars that, considering the barrier, felt surprisingly sincere to Hannah.

Hannah was on her bed before Athena turned out the light, and she was in position, head on her pillow and her legs spread and raised, before the bump of the elevator told her Athena was gone.

The dildo found a ready hole, her ovulatory fluids thick around the rim of her vaginal mouth, the toy sliding in immediately and, with a few more pushes and a few grunts of welcome discomfort from Hannah's throat, penetrating all of her, its hard plastic tip thumping against her cervix, its rough shaft tormenting her pink walls, its garish testicles slicking against the wet flesh between her pleasure hole and anus.

Knowing that this would be taken away from her tomorrow – that her vagina and her frantic little clitoris would be covered for a day to ensure she entertained their conference goers with a sufficient hunger – increased the urgency of her relief, and once her sheath had adapted to the toy's girth, she drove it within her diligently, using one hand to pound her sex while she tickled her lips and clitoris with the other, and soon she was gasping though a hard, shaking orgasm, legs splayed and bobbing like the wings of a butterfly against the mattress, ribs rising and falling as she panted and sucked and arched her back as if something in her bed was trying to grab her.

Barely had she finished with her first orgasm than she was at it again, churning her insides with the fury of a girl for whom nothing else made sense but this, the hot calculus of a wet, pink organ quivering around rough plastic, and this time as she came she screamed, just once, a sharp little cry that might have sounded like death to anyone who didn't know what the slave girl was doing in the Petrosyan's basement.

Lying still now, she listened to her own rasping breath, in and out, in and out, oxygen in, carbon dioxide out, and she wondered which molecules passing through her nose and over her tongue were the ones that had come from her middle, from that darkness between her legs, and she drew the dildo out and tossed it onto the floor, slipped her legs under her sheets and soon fell into the dreamless sleep of those who didn't care.

She awoke several times from fitful dreams, rising only when she saw the dawn breaking through the barred windows that stood in a row at the top of the basement wall.

This will be a good day, Hannah told herself. I will study. I will meet the conference manager, Samantha something, who seems to think she knows me. I will start packing for Odessa. And, in my mind, I will review what I have learned, and rehearse what I must do there, the things I must do first to Athena, and then to . . . the other people.

Hannah went to her toilet to ponder and remember, went to her shower when daylight grew sufficient, and when Athena came to bring her to breakfast, she had been washed clean and her hair was almost done.

"Samantha will be here after lunch," Athena said as she drank coffee and Hannah picked at a plate of fruit. "And she'll go over everything then."

"Okay," Hannah said.

“You still nervous?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said.

“It doesn’t seem like it.”

“I am, though,” Hannah said, and it was true, more or less. But she wasn’t nervous about Samantha. Or the conference.

Hannah spent the morning locked in her upstairs bedroom, picking out clothes for the trip because she wanted to, tidying up because she had to, dusting the oft-vacant space and changing the sheets and moving the stuffed animals to the bookshelf because this was one of the places where she would be serving over the first half of the week.

Athena shackled her and brought her to lunch, and the girls joined Laura for sandwiches and fruit salad and yogurt, and they were not quite finished when the doorbell rang.

“That must be Samantha,” Laura said. “Hannah, will you get it?”

Hannah rose, shuffled in her chains to the front door and opened it wide, forgetting as she often did that the person at the door might be the mailman, or the cable guy, or someone selling faith, who had tried the door set into wall around their property and found it open and made their way to the house and knocked.

But no, it was a girl, maybe in her mid-20s, strawberry blonde hair tied in a ponytail. She was a solid-looking girl, big-boned but feminine and curvy, in jeans and a white button-down, and she was pretty, with high cheekbones and bright eyes under dark lashes and black eyebrows.

“Hi,” Hannah said.

“Hey, Hannah!” the girl said, smiling broadly.

“Are you Samantha?”

“Yes,” the girl said, looking surprised, stepping forward as if expecting a hug, stopping short. “Don’t you remember me?”

Hannah smiled and cocked her head to the side, staring quizzically.

“No.”

“I’m Samantha,” she said. “I managed you! Samantha!”

“You never managed me,” Hannah said. “Bye.”

She shut the door and returned to the table.

“Who was that, Hannah?” Laura asked.

“She said her name was Samantha,” Hannah said. “She said she managed me, but she didn’t.”

“Did you let her in?” Athena demanded.

“No.”

“Hannah, shit!” Athena said, cackling with exasperated amusement. “Seriously, what the hell?”

Athena jumped up and left the room, and returned a few minutes later with the girl who said she was Samantha.

Hannah ignored her, focusing on the last bites of lunch.

“Hannah,” the girl said quietly, standing next to Hannah’s chair, looking down at her.

“What?” Hannah asked, staring at her empty plate. Something was wrong. Her eyes were wet. She couldn’t see.

“Hannah, may I sit down?” the girl who called herself Samantha asked.

Hannah looked at the empty chair beside her, and the girl seemed to take that as a yes, because she sat, breathed in, reached out, drew back her hand, reached out again and put her hand on Hannah’s forearm, lightly, gently, just before the elbow.

Hannah looked at the hand and its light blue nails, and up the arm and into the eyes of the girl who was touching her.

“What do you want?” Hannah tried to ask, but her voice came out so weak as to be almost inaudible, because her chin was trembling and her throat was closed almost shut.

Samantha stood, said something or gestured something, and she and Laura left the room.

“Hannah, what the fuck?” Athena hissed. “What is happening? You said you could do this. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Hannah said, picking up her napkin to dab at her eyes. “I just don’t think that girl should be here.”

“She’s here to manage you.”

“She never managed me,” Hannah said.

“Okay, fine,” Athena said, “but she’s here to manage you now. For the first time, ever. Okay?”

“I already told you I could!” Hannah croaked, and she slapped her hand on the table and stood so abruptly the chair almost fell over behind her.

“Whoa,” Athena said, making a T with her hands. “Okay, time out. Reset.”

Hannah moved so she could hold the back of her chair, and she glared at Athena and struggled to understand what was happening.

Something was bothering her. Her eyes were filled with tears. She could barely speak.

“How ‘bout we go downstairs?” Athena said. “Just for a second. Are you done with lunch? Just for a few minutes, to talk?”

“I don’t care,” Hannah said.

“Okay, then, let’s go,” Athena said, and she backed away from Hannah, toward the kitchen, and Hannah followed her to the elevator, her shackles clinking as the two girls crowded into the little space and Athena hit the down button.

Hannah thought Athena might start talking, but the girl said nothing, just waited until the elevator opened in the basement, and she led Hannah back to her cage. Hannah entered, went to her bed and curled up on top of the comforter, and Athena closed and locked the door.

“Hannah?”

“Huh?”

“Are you okay?”

“I think so.”

“Is there . . . is there something . . . about that girl?”

“What girl?”

“Samantha.”

“She doesn’t need to be here,” Hannah said. “That’s all.”

“She said she’s worked with you before. Maybe something happened?”

The elevator bumped.

“She’s just lying here,” Athena said, and Hannah knew Athena must be speaking to Laura.

“Hannah, I’m so sorry, I’ve sent her away.”

Hannah opened her eyes and looked at the wall.

Why were they being nice? Why were Athena and Laura being so understanding?

“She said they had something of a history,” Hannah heard Laura whisper. “At the place where we bought her.”

“Like what?” Athena whispered back. “What the hell did that girl do to Hannah?”

“She said there were some difficult moments,” Laura replied. “Not unusual in that kind of place. But she thought maybe Hannah hadn’t gotten over them.”

“In that case, she should just be pissed,” Athena said, her whisper clearly audible to Hannah. “God knows Hannah knows how to be pissed at someone. But that’s not what it is. She says she doesn’t know her. She’s never met her.”

“Sam says she slapped her,” Laura said. “It was just to—”

“What?” Hannah blurted from the bed, eyes wide, staring at the wall.

A long silence followed before Laura found her voice.

“Hannah,” Laura said, “Samantha said you—”

“You called her Sam,” Hannah said. “You said Sam.”

“I meant Samantha.”

“Why did you say Sam then?”

“People named Samantha can be called Sam too,” Athena observed.

“Where is she?” Hannah asked.

“She left. I sent her away.”

“Bring her back!” Hannah shrieked from the bed. “I remember! I remember! Tell her to come back!”

## **Chapter 75: Memories and Fixations**

Hannah screamed, a sharp, piercing cry of terror, followed by convulsing sobs, because the memories were coming back now, all of them in one great mural of fear and hope and pain, a swirling mass of recollections bound up in the strawberry-blonde hair and pretty face of the girl named Samantha, the girl Hannah knew as Sam.

Sam.

Sam.

What have we lost together, Samantha? What have I lost that you still keep?

Bring back my memories, Samantha.

Sam.

Hannah’s sobs ebbed as she processed the memories of those first days as a slave, the good, the bad, the indifferent, all coursing through her

mind as if fresh, as if they were all happening to her again, now, all at the same time.

“Hannah?”

Sam had indeed been her manager. Not for a conference, though. Sam was there to manage her sale, to tell her how things worked, to get her made up, to bring her to training and her assessment.

She and Sam had made love. What? Why?

“Hannah?”

No, it wasn't making love. It was training. Sam had taught Hannah how to have sex with a girl. Sam had been her first, the two coupling under Sam's patient guidance.

Hannah had forgotten it, forgotten everything. Why?

“Hannah?”

And then . . . and then . . . Hannah had gotten in trouble. Someone heard a stray, innocent comment, about escaping, and they'd punished her.

Sam had punished her.

No, Sam had told her she was going to punishment, but someone else had done the work.

Someone else had done the work.

Hannah groaned, deep and guttural, and bit her pillow.

But this was done. It hurt, but the pain and stress and fear were shadows of the real thing, two and a half years ago, and Hannah had worked through it, felt it, and was done.

“Hannah?”

Someone was there, saying her name.

Hannah whirled around in her bed to look out the bars of her cage.

It was that girl.

Samantha.

Sam.

Just her, standing at the bars, staring in at the nude girl who was curled up on her bed, still shackled.

“Sam,” Hannah said, and she turned, angled up her body, set her bound feet on the floor and sat up, arms crossed over her breasts.

“Remember me now?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” Hannah said, wiping her eyes with her fingers, her voice level. “Hello.”

“I thought you’d be cool with this,” Sam said. “I sort of thought we were okay, at the end. I—”

“I forgot,” Hannah said. “I’m forgetting things . . . that bothers me.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “I’m really sorry. I’m glad you remembered, though. I never forgot you. I always wondered how you were doing. So when I saw they’d listed you for management this week, I called, because really, I liked you, and—”

“You’re not seeing me at my best,” Hannah laughed, and she stood and went to her toilet for tissue, pressing it against her eyes.

“They said you’re in school,” Sam said. “They said you got a scholarship. They said you’re very, very good . . . at everything.”

“I work hard at whatever I try,” Hannah said.

“If I’d known it was going to bother you, I wouldn’t have—”

“They kept calling you Samantha,” Hannah said. “You were Sam to me. But either way, you should have . . . reached out to me. You should have checked with me first.”

“Okay, sorry again,” Sam agreed. “So I gave Laura some other names. Someone should be able to pick up where I left off, maybe even get here before dinner, so—”

“What?”

“I’m leaving. As soon as we’re done talking. Full deposit back too. I insisted. I shouldn’t have assumed you’d be okay with this.”

“No, it’s fine,” Hannah said. “Stay.”

Sam narrowed her eyes at Hannah suspiciously.

“A half an hour ago, you slammed the door in my face,” she said. “Why—”

“I didn’t slam it,” Hannah argued. “I just closed it.”

“Okay, but you seemed mad . . . or something. And when you manage someone for something like this, you’ve got to work really closely together. Intimately might not be too strong a—”

“We were intimate,” Hannah blurted.

“I was training you,” Sam countered.

“Is that all it was?” Hannah asked.

“Please don’t tell me you’re still working through things like that,” Sam said.

“I’m not,” Hannah said. “I just said it because it was a memory I lost, and then it came back to me, and it’s weird, sort of.”



“Okay,” Sam said. “I’m glad I helped you with your memory things. But I’m going to leave now.”

“Please stay.”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“Then why did you come back?”

“Because Mrs. Petrosyan called me in my car and asked me to. She said you were screaming for me. So I came back to let you scream in my face, and be done with it.”

“I didn’t ask for you to yell at you,” Hannah said. “You’re a connection. You’re like a link, to another world, where I was, and I forgot it, and I don’t want to forget. Anything.”

“So you want to talk about old times?” Sam asked, smiling ironically.

“I don’t need to,” Hannah said. “All the old times already came back. The good and the bad. But you were, overall, good. So I’m ready—”

“Just overall?”

“You need to work through that?”

“No,” Sam said. “I get it.”

“You slapped me.”

“I remember. It was to save your ass.”

“I know. Thanks a bunch.”

Hannah stepped to the bars, put her arms through them, Sam at first startled by the hug but eventually reciprocating, Sam startled again when Hannah reached up, grabbed her by her ponytail, forced her head back and pressed her mouth against Sam’s, the two girls in a brief, open-mouthed kiss that ended when Hannah drew back.

“You never forget your first,” Hannah joked.

“There’ve been others?” Sam parried with mock jealousy.

“Uh, yeah.”

Hannah went to her sink, looked into her mirror, rinsed her face, dried it and began putting on eyeliner.

“Seriously,” Sam said, leaning against the bars. “How have you been? Good? Okay?”

“Good, overall,” Hannah said, looking at Sam in the mirror.

“Sometimes bad, but mostly really really good. I try to be grateful.”

“You seem good,” Sam said. “You look good. You sound good. And Laura couldn’t stop singing your praises. When I told her I worked

with you at the start, she just went off, about how sweet you were, how shy, how you've just blossomed since then."

"They've been good to me," Hannah said. "Mostly."

"So, you really wanna do this?" Sam said.

"Yes," Hannah said. "With you. Not that I know what this is, really. It's my first time. But you were always clear with me. You were always straight. I trusted you then, hard as everything was. I trust you now. And then . . . I feel like this is helping . . . my memory thing."

"Okay, let me talk to Mrs. Petrosyan," Sam said, eyes and voice brightening. "She still might say no. She and her daughter were really —"

"Athena."

"She and Athena were really upset. They thought I must have done something terrible to you. So they still might send me off."

"Okay."

Sam left and Hannah sat on her bed.

It probably would have been better if someone other than Sam had been contracted to do this. Better for Hannah's emotional stability, anyway, because the appearance of Sam had triggered an overwhelming cascade of unexpected feelings, some of them on the anguish spectrum.

No.

No, this was good. This was necessary. One must not forget. One must not allow oneself to forget, even if it hurt.

Was this a virtue? Had Hannah Loughbridge, late descended into gross amorality, discovered a new form of goodness in the midst of her capitulation to nihilism? Was not a stark reckoning with one's buried, hidden, denied truths an act of courage?

An act of . . . goodness?

"Hannah?"

"Yes, Ma'am?"

Laura rounded the corner from the elevator.

"How are you doing, Sweetie?"

"I'm fine," Hannah said, standing and running her hands through her hair. "I just . . . I had forgotten some things, in those first days, and Samantha brought them all back, all at once, and it sort of hurt. But I'm glad. I'm glad."

"Shall I send her away?"

“No,” Hannah replied firmly. “She was fine to work with before. I’ll be glad to work with her again. I just had to get things . . . resolved.”

“You’re sure?” Laura said. “We can find someone else to manage you. Or Athena says she can do it.”

“I’m sure Athena could,” Hannah said, mindful of how her words might be conveyed to Laura’s daughter. “But I want her to enjoy spring break, and relax a little before the trip. I’m sure Sam would let her help out, though.”

“I’ll send Sam back down,” Laura said. “She said there’s a lot to go over.”

“Yes, Ma’am, thank you, Ma’am.”

Laura left Hannah standing at the bars of her cage, and Hannah decided simply to hold there, with the unyielding metal against the meat of her shoulder.

She looked at the books on her desk, her rumpled bedspread, the bright blue March sky out the windows, and she waited until the little clock on the table opposite her cage said 1:30.

Had they sent Sam away after all? Had Sam changed her mind?

Hannah decided not to worry about any of it, and she went to the book on her desk and opened to a chapter on infectious diseases.

She was doing all this as a favor to the Petrosyans. Or, more accurately, as payback, for all they had done for her. But if it fell through, she decided, that would be their problem, not hers.

Ten minutes into her studies, just as she was starting to find the material deeply engrossing, the elevator bumped.

“Hannah?” called Sam.

“Yeah, I’m over here,” Hannah replied.

“We still good?” Sam asked, coming into view, dragging a wheeled suitcase behind her.

“I don’t know,” Hannah said, laughing. “Are you moving in?”

“This takes all kinds of supplies,” Sam said humorlessly, lowering her case to the floor and kneeling to unzip it. Hannah sensed stress and immediately regretted everything that had come before. A job serving as the intermediary between a slave girl and a bunch of people who wanted to use her was already hard enough, Hannah guessed. But this time, piled on top of the natural rigors of the job, was Hannah’s unexpected drama.

“Sorry about before,” Hannah said.

“No problem,” Sam said. “The biggest surprise in this job is when I’m not surprised.”

“Do you ever see the humor in it, though?”

“All the time,” Sam said without smiling, and she drew out her phone and tapped it.

“Okay, you’re at nine cards so far,” she said.

“Cards?”

“Formal requests. They’re called cards, I guess because sometimes they’re done on paper. But all that information isn’t something that should be left lying around, in my professional opinion, so it’s all going to live on my phone.”

“What’s on a card?” Hannah asked.

“I can’t show them to you.”

“I didn’t ask you to show me. I just want to know what kind of things are on them.”

“It’s ID, requested time, catalog selection, and special requests.”

“Catalog selection?” Hannah repeated.

“Yes, I sent them a list of options, and they picked from it.”

“Options?”

“Things they can do with you.”

“You sent everyone a list of things they can do with me?”

“Yeah, a couple of weeks ago.”

“Hmm,” Hannah said. “I didn’t get to see that list before you sent it. Maybe it went to a different Hannah Loughbridge?”

Sam breathed in and eyed Hannah dolefully, opened her mouth, seemed to reconsider, shut it, then opened it again to speak.

“We’re going to go over everything now,” she said. “You can say no to anything. But it’s all standard. The kinds of things I’m sure you’ve done before.”

“Maybe,” Hannah said. “I can’t be sure since I don’t know what you told everyone.”

Sam sighed, ran her finger across her phone.

“Vaginal sex?” she asked.

“Okay.”

“Anal?”

“Fine, depending on penis size.”

“Oral, male or female?”

“Yes. Both is fine.”

“Strap-on with female?”

“Sure.”

“Okay,” said Sam, “those are the easy ones. Now, two of the females didn’t choose from the catalog. One just asked for ‘Comradeship.’”

Hannah laughed. “I don’t know that position.”

“And another female said ‘Just See.’”

“What does that mean?”

“Chances are,” Sam said, “these aren’t lesbians. But even if they are, they’re girls, so they’re not committing to anything until they see how things go. Most of the men know what they want, obviously. Put the penis in one of the holes, move it for awhile, cum. Females, a lot of times they have no idea. They got my email, and they’re curious.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“Now, there are a few more unusual requests, so I saved those for last.”

“Go on.”

“Picnic.”

“Picnic?”

“Yes, a middle-aged man wants to start with a picnic. Outside. Wine and cheese.”

“I’d like that,” Hannah said with a chuckle. “It sounds almost innocent.”

“And then, there’s a request for an auction.”

“Auction?” Hannah echoed.

“Yes, it’s not unusual. They bid with real money, and the winner gets you. Usually it’s . . .”

Sam continued to talk, but her voice went quiet in Hannah’s mind, because something else had emerged that demanded her attention.

Auction.

Something about an auction. Some old memory. When? Where?

“ . . . discipline room.”

“Huh?” Hannah said.

“What do you mean huh?” Sam inquired.

“I drifted off a little, but I heard you say discipline room.”

“A special request. Laura told me there’s a discipline room upstairs. Someone wants to take you to it.”

“Why?” Hannah asked sharply.

Sam looked up from her phone and stared, as if the answer were obvious.

“No,” Hannah said. “Never.”

“Duly noted,” Sam said, tapping on her phone before she dropped her hands to her sides, the phone tapping against her leg.

“Wherever possible, I’ll give you an hour between cards. But—”

“Cards,” Hannah said. “You mean people.”

“Think of them as cards,” Sam said. “That’ll make it easier.”

“We’ll see,” Hannah said.

“Sunday night is going to be busy, though. The first night is always the most popular when it’s a conference or something else going on for a few days. People want you before the event starts, while they still have time on their hands. So it might just be partner, douche, partner, douche for a few hours after dinner Sunday.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“Laura said you’re ovulating.”

“Yes, I started yesterday.”

“A lot of fluid?”

“Enough,” Hannah said, looking down at her vulva.

“I’ll have lubricant if you need it, of course. You’ll want some for your anus no matter what.”

“How many want anal?”

“Just one.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll be with you throughout,” Sam continued. “I’ll be staying—”

“Not while I’m with people,” Hannah said.

“Not in the room, no, but I’ll be hovering. I’ll be within earshot if there are any problems. And I’ll be spending the night.”

“Where?”

“One of the small rooms on the top floor.”

“It gets hot up there.”

“I’ll open a window if I need to,” Sam said with a dismissive gesture. “I’ll handle your food, your restraints, confinement, discipline.”

“Discipline?”

“I’m sure we won’t have any issues,” Sam said. “And I’ll—”

“No,” Hannah said, an incomplete memory pulling her up short.  
“Stop there. Discipline.”

Sam looked at the ceiling and sighed.

“I’m giving you my standard spiel, okay?” she said. “If you don’t —”

“Don’t what?”

“You know how things work,” Sam said. “Just follow —”

“I don’t know how this works,” Hannah said. “If someone’s not happy with me, if I say no —”

“Uh uh,” Sam interrupted, shaking her head. “Everyone you’ll be with got my email, and I spelled it out very clearly. They treat you with respect. They stop when you say no. They let you leave if you want. They get what they get, and if all you do is sit there, they’ll be happy. Or they should be happy.”

“Then what do I get disciplined for?” Hannah demanded, deciding to ignore Sam’s attempt at a compliment.

“C’mon, Hannah, you know the rules,” Sam said, dropping one hip and shifting on her feet with obvious exasperation. “Don’t punch anyone. Don’t insult the guests. Be moderately respectful.”

“Moderately?”

“That’s as much as I’m going to ask of you,” Sam said. “You being you.”

“You used to torture people,” Hannah blurted.

“I used to work the discipline room.”

“Okay, you can call it what you want. I call it torture. And you did it.”

“Long before we met.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Hannah said.

“You’re just remembering that?”

“Yes. My memory is a little spotty on certain things.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “Can we continue?”

“What does . . . what form does discipline take?”

“You’re going to fixate on this?”

“Fixate?” Hannah said, voice rising. “Did you just say fixate?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“You used to torture people. You —”

“Discipline.”

“So if you’ve got some kind of thing in that suitcase, I don’t think asking to see it and understand how it works, so I can decide for myself if it’s torture or not – I don’t consider that fixating. Common sense would probably be a better word.”

## **Chapter 76: Unlocking a Panel, Locking it Back**

Sam turned back to her suitcase with another heavy sigh, rummaged around and pulled out a short rod, about the length of her forearm – the same length as what Stacey had been beaten with.

“I have used this exactly once,” she said. “Three pops on someone’s rear, and I’m pretty sure she wanted it.”

“Thinking people want torture makes your job easier, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, Jesus Christ,” Sam said. “Can we please continue? Or are you just trying to get rid of me as unpleasantly as possible?”

“Stay.”

“I should go.”

“Your choice,” Hannah said, “but I sincerely want you to stay. I also sincerely need to work through a few things.”

“Okay, fine,” Sam said, straightening and tucking in her shirt, pulling down her sleeves, adjusting her bra straps at her shoulders before she looked at Hannah with her expression reset to neutral. “And I’ll be banding you. Did Mrs. Petrosyan mention that?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “What’s banding like?”

“It’s a covering for your sex organ, among other things. Have you ever had something like that done?”

“I guess,” Hannah said. “I wore something once that covered my hole but not my clitoris, so I could still masturbate and have oral done, I just couldn’t be penetrated.”

“Okay, let me get your shackles off, so you can try these on.”

Hannah stepped to the bars and allowed Sam to free her.

Sam stooped to her case. “I brought three for you to look at. They all cover everything. Hole, vulva, clitoris. You know that, right?”

“Yes.”

“I never know what people have been told,” Sam said apologetically, drawing out a network of chains. “Every family uses their own words for things like this. And they hint when—”



“I’m supposed to sleep in that?”

“Yes, it’ll go on before dinner tonight, and stay on until after the reception tomorrow.”

“The reception?”

“Yeah. Just a little party for every card.”

“Every person.”

“Yeah, every card.”

Sam offered the contraption to Hannah through the bars, but Hannah refused it, arms crossed over her breasts.

“I already know I don’t want to wear that one,” she said. “Do you have anything that’s not made out of chain?”

Sam dropped what she was holding and picked out the other two, the one in her left hand a set of hinged metal segments, the other a collection of brown leather thongs and straps attached to a clear plastic cup.

“That one,” Hannah said, pointing to the leather option.

“You’re okay with leather against your skin for 24 hours?”

“I’ll be fine,” Hannah said. “It’s better than chain or that, that suit of armor thing.”

“Okay, put it on,” Sam said, passing it through the bars, “and then I’ll adjust it and you can tell me what you think.”

After a quick inspection, Hannah concluded that the plastic cup was the garment’s central feature, the thongs and buckles and clamps all designed to hold it firmly against her sex organ.

She slipped her legs through the openings and pulled the cup to her vulva.

Bent to conform to the curves of her middle, with panels, keyholes and slots, the cup was cool against her skin, extending from just in front of her anus to several inches past her vulva, her clitoris thoroughly unreachable when it was in place and its panels were shut and locked.

“It’s complicated,” Hannah observed.

“Let me get it set, and then I’ll go over everything with you and Mrs. Petrosyan,” Sam said.

Hannah stepped up, holding the device’s leather belt in place, and Sam reached through the bars and tightened the belt around Hannah’s waist, shortened and adjusted the thongs, passed everything through small brass buckles, and gathered all the attachments in front, securing them with a single padlock.

“How does it feel?” she asked.

“Tight,” Hannah replied.

“Try to get to your clit.”

Hannah reached down, making a half-hearted attempt at stimulating herself, abandoning the effort as futile.

“When was your last orgasm?” Sam asked.

“Last night. I had two.”

“Did you use an object?”

“Yes.”

“You can get relief one more time, and that’s it until tomorrow night.”

“Now?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah, step up.”

Hannah moved to the bars, and Sam knelt and drew a set of keys out of her pocket.

“You’re not taking it off?” Hannah asked.

“No, just opening up the relief panel. Grab the bars and open your thighs.”

“Seriously,” Hannah said, complying, “that’s what it’s for?”

“Yeah,” Sam replied, inserting a small key into the hole and turning it. She held the panel in place with her thumb and withdrew the key before allowing it to drop between Hannah’s legs.

“Can you reach your clitoris now?” Sam asked.

Hannah, widening her legs, reached between them and put two fingers into the opening.

“Um, yeah,” she said.

“Can you masturbate to orgasm like that?”

Hannah circled her clitoris, pressed on it, found her opening and put a finger inside.

“It’s not ideal, but yeah.”

“Okay, go ahead,” she said. “I’m going to get Mrs. Petrosyan, so we can go over things.”

“Why do they call it banding?” Hannah asked, as Sam departed for the elevator.

“Huh?”

“Why is this thing called a band?”

“Officially, banding refers to other things,” Sam said. “Be right back.”

Hannah went to her bed, raised her pillow against the wall and sat against it in her standard masturbation pose, legs spread wide, one hand at her middle, one around her breast.

This could be done, but it wasn't easy. When she wasn't given a toy, she preferred to alternate between three forms of stimulation: two fingers against her clitoris, two fingers up her vagina, then four fingers making circles against her vulva. The opening wasn't big enough to attend to her lips the way she wanted, so she focused on her clitoris, with the occasional insertion of a finger, prompting a rush of new lubrication over the ovulatory fluid she'd been oozing all day.

To Hannah's dismay, the elevator bumped while she was still in the midst of things, her focus disrupted by the voices of three females – Sam, Laura and Athena – entering the realm that she wished was hers alone at the moment.

“Hannah, you finished?” Sam asked.

“No,” Hannah said flatly.

“Anyway, I'm good with the fit,” Sam said, rounding the corner, the women deciding as one that Hannah's privacy in this regard was unimportant. “It's definitely not slipping over her hips, and the cup is set the way it needs to be.”

Hannah glanced at them, turned her gaze to her feet and continued negotiating with her sex organ, wishing she had hurried, hoping the unwelcome arrival of three observers wouldn't make climaxing impossible.

“The frustraters go in at four tomorrow,” Sam continued. “And her bands go on just before four-thirty, and then I'll bring her upstairs to get introduced to everyone, and at five, she goes to her first card.”

Hannah was only half listening as she worked at her slot and knob, her lubricant making a mess of everything she could reach.

“Frustraters?” Athena asked.

“Believe it or not, that's the official name,” Sam said. “One up each hole. They're designed to be just short of unbearable, so don't expect her to be at her witty best while she's being introduced.”

“So she'll be dumb, finally?” Athena asked, a hint of the old contemptuous delight returning. Hannah's sexuality no longer provoked Athena, apparently, but the imminent spectacle of her stupidity did.

“She’ll be distracted,” Sam clarified. “At least.”

“They’re just called frustraters?” Athena asked. “Not, like, the Super Frustrater 3000 or something?”

“The people who make them might have given them special names or numbers,” Sam replied, treating the question like a serious inquiry. “But everyone just calls them frustraters.”

“She’s going to try to pull them out,” Athena warned.

“She’ll be bound,” Sam said. “Handcuffs in the back. You really can’t do one without the other.”

“You’re just banding her Sunday?” Laura asked.

“Probably before her first card every day,” Sam replied, “and whenever else I think necessary.”

Hannah had the sense she should be distressed about something, but the fact they seemed to be busy with a conversation amongst themselves helped, and she reached the point of no return when Sam began talking about the guests.

“I’ve got nine cards so far,” she said, “which is very doable.”

“Uh,” Hannah grunted.

“Even if a few more come in, I don’t see a problem with scheduling.”

“Ah, ah, ah,” Hannah sighed quietly, trying to keep her legs from shaking, but she couldn’t control either hand, one squeezing her breast so hard it almost hurt, the other operating through the hole in the cup, pushing her clitoris one moment, plumbing her vagina the next.

“And there are a few who can see her during the day,” Sam continued. “Someone’s bringing their daughter, and she’s not doing much of the conference, so I’ve got her signed up for Monday afternoon.”

“Uh, uh, uh,” Hannah grunted, shaking through the climax, only mildly concerned at the moment that the women had stopped talking and were watching her finish.

Hannah leaned back, panting and staring at her feet, feeling self-conscious again.

“Done?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” Hannah gasped.

“Okay, come to the bars when you can and let me close you up.”

Hannah slid slowly off the bed, legs weak the way they always were after she came, and she grabbed the bars and spread her legs, and Sam

reached into her pocket, drew out her keys and knelt.

“Hey, can you wipe up a little first?” she said.

Hannah turned, went to her toilet, sat and urinated, then used five wads of tissue to clean what of her vulva she could reach.

When she returned to the bars, Sam motioned the women to look. Athena knelt and Laura bent, each peering at Hannah’s bound loins.

“This will stay closed until the frustraters go in,” Sam said, returning the panel to its closed position, locking it in place.

“Frustraters?” Hannah asked. She’d heard something about them but wasn’t sure what they did.

“What happens when she goes to the bathroom?” Athena asked.

“Turn around and bend over,” Sam instructed.

Hannah obeyed, resting her hands on her knees.

“The cup shouldn’t interfere at all with defecation,” she said, touching Hannah’s anus, then tapping the cup. “There’s plenty of room for that. And then, urine is channeled toward the back, although some will spill out around the panel too.”

Sam tapped the cup again.

“Hannah, after you urinate, you’ll want to wipe everywhere you can reach. Along the sides, around the panel, and in the back too, anus and everything near it.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, and she turned and went to her bed, sitting on it and gazing at her tightly-secured middle, her golden hair trapped beneath the clear plastic cup like strange golden foliage in a tiny terrarium.

“You’re doing great, Hannah,” Sam said.

“Thank you so much, Hannah,” said Laura.

“Tuesday night!” Athena said. “Just make it to then, and I’m taking you to van Minsk!”

Hannah looked up, smiled weakly.

“You need anything else?” Sam asked.

“No,” Hannah said with a small wave.

“Okay, rest and get used to the cup,” Sam said. “I’ll be bringing you up to dinner in a couple of hours.”

The women departed, Sam still talking as they left, summarizing the cards she’d received, mentioning the girls who’d asked for something vague, the desire of one man for anal.

Hannah tuned out the voices, went to her desk, opened up her philosophy book and wished she could skip all of this, the conference service, being bound, going to Odessa.

Going to Odessa.

Dinner was a cheerful affair, the conversation animated, Athena peppering Sam with questions, and Sam replying in general terms about her profession because, Hannah knew, the details really weren't fit for an upper-class dinner table. Or any dinner table at all, really.

Sam prepared Hannah's meal, concentrating on protein-rich chicken, a salad with just oil for dressing, and no carbohydrates other than a spoonful of rice. Everyone but Hannah got red wine, and she looked at the bottle each time it was upended and longed to wrap her mouth around it and drain it, to forget about everything that lay before her.

Immediately after dinner, Sam escorted Hannah back to her cage and locked her in.

"You still okay with this?" Sam said.

Hannah reached down and tugged at her belt resignedly.

"I'm committed either way," she said. "But yes, it's fine."

"I'll be back down to turn off your light at 11," Sam said. "You have what you need?"

Hannah gestured toward the pile of textbooks on her desk and nodded.

"A good night's sleep is key for this," Sam said. "And then, I'll be back around 7 to bring you to breakfast."

"Okay," Hannah said.

"Bye," Sam said, turning, and the elevator bumped and she was gone for the full two hours while Hannah plowed through a good portion of her spring break assignments, taking notes and working problems and outlining most of her paper and blissfully forgetting everything else in the world until Sam's voice startled her back to the present.

"Hannah, still good?" she asked, standing at the bars.

"Yeah," Hannah said, rising from her desk and going to her toilet for her first release with the cup between her legs.

The urine flooded the cup and soaked her vulva and her confined hair before it rushed out across her anus, warmth first, turning immediately cold.

"Okay," Hannah said, "I officially hate this thing."

“Wipe thoroughly,” Sam advised. “And sit for while to let everything drain.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “And hey, could you please call out to me as soon as you get off the elevator? Before you can see me? That’s sort of a house rule.”

“Sure, sorry.”

“Good night.”

“Night.”

Hannah slept well enough, although the leather around her waist, the thongs and the cup of sturdy plastic woke her up briefly more than once, forcing her to sufficient consciousness to remember what they were and why they were there. There was no temptation to masturbate, however, which made sleep a little easier, and she awoke a few minutes before 7 and went to her toilet to empty her bowels, finding that Sam has spoken accurately, the cup resting well out of the way of her rear hole.

She was still wiping when the elevator bumped.

“Uh, Hannah?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said. “Just finishing up.”

“Finishing what?”

“I’m on the toilet.”

“Want me to come back?”

“I don’t care,” Hannah replied.

Sam flipped on the light and Hannah blinked at the vague shape of her manager at the bars, dressed the same way she had the night before, in jeans and white button down.

“Did you even take off your clothes overnight?” Hannah asked.

“Yes, I changed,” Sam said, sounding a little put out. “This is my work uniform. My job is not to be noticed. All the attention should be on you.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “What’s the plan today?”

“Are you hungry?” Sam asked.

“Yeah.”

“I’m going to bring you protein now, and lunch at noon, but I want you to stay down here until the reception at four.”

“Okay.”

“Do you mind that?”

“No, I love it,” Hannah said. “I’m trying to get a lot of schoolwork done before everything starts.”

“Mrs. Petrosyan says you’re going to Odessa Tuesday night.”

“Yeah,” Hannah said. “van Minsk, for a fitting and pictures.”

“Cool,” Sam said. “Let me get you food.”

Protein was eggs and bacon, along with grits and juice.

“When should I shower?” Hannah asked, sitting at her desk to eat.

“At 2,” Sam replied. “Still hate that thing?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, tugging at the belt around her waist. “Do I have to wear it when I’m washing up?”

“No, it’ll come off until you’re dry, then you can make yourself up, I’ll take a look at everything, and at four I’ll put everything on.”

“Everything?”

“Yeah. That belt, the frustraters, the bands.”

“Frustraters?”

Sam retrieved her phone from her back pocket, stared at it.

“Hey, Mrs. Petrosyan needs something, be back at lunch.”

“Okay.”

It was Athena, and not Sam, who brought Hannah a bland protein bar and a handful of vegetables.

Hannah rose from her desk to accept the meal.

“Your lunch sucks,” Athena observed.

“Where’s Sam?” Hannah asked pointedly, because she didn’t want to deal with Athena at the moment.

“She’s letting me help out,” Athena said, holding the plate at the port but not passing it through. “But if you want her to bring you lunch instead of me, I’ll go get her.”

“Would you mind?” Hannah asked, only half-jokingly.

“Remember how I used to call you a fucking bitch?” Athena asked, a sudden malevolence in her eyes that Hannah recognized and, often enough, intentionally provoked.

“No,” Hannah lied.

“I did, though,” Athena said. “A lot. Whenever it was appropriate. And then Franklin told me to stop, so I told him I would, and I have.”

“Do it just once more, for old times’ sakes,” Hannah said.

Athena raised the plate to the port and Hannah took it.



“Sam’s going to be back at two to take that thing off so you can shower,” Athena said, departing for the elevator. “And she said I can watch her put everything back on.”

“What’s everything?” Hannah asked, answered only by the elevator’s muted bump.

Hannah ate and studied and tried not to think about her restless vulva, bound up now for almost 24 hours while she ovulated and urinated, leaking a cocktail of fluids that, despite her best efforts, she couldn’t completely wipe, meaning she put smears on the black vinyl of her chair every time she sat.

As she finished her meal around 1, she began to sense the presence of visitors in the house, more footsteps than usual on the floor above, the rumble of wheeled suitcases, an unfamiliar voice or two, barely audible, raised in laughter or an enthusiastic greeting.

At just before 2, Sam was back, slinging a small bag onto the table beneath the windows, and Hannah stepped to the bars for the welcome removal of her cup.

“How are you doing?” Sam asked, unlocking the device. “Ready for this?”

“I’m not not ready, if that answers your question,” Hannah said, pushing the belt to her feet, passing it to Sam, looking down at her middle with relief, and she went to her shower and turned it on, putting her fingers in the stream and waiting for it to run hot.

Sam inspected the cup and belt, drew a pack of wipes from her pocket, opened it and passed one of them over the side of the cup that had been pressed against Hannah’s vulva. She used two more wipes to clean the rest of the garment, sanitizing the leather thongs and the belt.

“I need some wipes for my chair,” Hannah said.

“Use a towel.”

“I use my towels for other things,” Hannah said, stepping under the spray and running her fingers through her hair.

“Don’t close the curtain,” Sam said.

“Why not?”

“I need to make sure you don’t masturbate,” Sam said, setting the belt on the table.

Hannah, ears channeling torrents of warm water, heard enough of Sam’s answer to know she’d said exactly what Hannah had expected, and

she reminded herself not to be annoyed, that while she was just an object for now, it was part of a bargain whose terms she had agreed to, and benefitted from, and it would be over on Tuesday night, and she'd go to Europe and do things that weren't part of any bargain the Petrosyans had consented to.

## Chapter 77: Frustrated

For the next hour, Sam stood outside Hannah's cage, intermittently supervising the slave girl and tapping at her phone.

Hannah was allowed to dry her own hair and apply her own makeup, although Sam occasionally made the call on things. Sam asked for a light pink lipstick, for example, after Hannah picked Tonic Rose, and she requested thicker eyeliner than Hannah usually wore.

"Is this all your taste or something someone asked for?" Hannah asked.

"It's all research-based," Sam replied. "It's what generally works the best for this kind of thing."

"Define 'works'," Hannah said.

"Everyone leaves happy," Sam said.

"Me included?"

"You get whatever you want," Sam said. "That's understood. But when you're getting what you want, your partners usually are too. Mrs. Petrosyan confirmed that."

Hannah leaned into the mirror with mascara in her hand, studied her work, touched it up, turned to stare at Sam.

"Done?" she asked.

"Yeah, you look great," Sam said, mind obviously on other things, and she tapped on her phone and went to the table to get the belt, returned to the bars.

"Let me look at you," she said.

"You're seeing me," Hannah said.

"Your vagina," Sam said humorlessly.

Hannah stepped to the bars and spread her legs, and Sam knelt, peered up at Hannah's sex organ, spread her lips and tapped the flesh, nodding, apparently satisfied that her mouth and sheath were ready for the burdens they were about to bear.

The elevator bumped as Sam began retrieving items from her bag, setting them on the table, and Athena appeared seconds later, hair done up, wearing a black cocktail dress, tall red pumps, and an understated coating of makeup, light pink on her lips and a little eye liner.

“How’s it going?” she asked, looking at Hannah’s bare middle.

“Fine,” Hannah said impassively.

Sam turned back to Hannah with a small pair of scissors.

“Let me shape your bush a little,” she said.

Hannah opened her legs and looked down, watching as Sam trimmed the edges of her pubic hair.

“You should get Delilah to do this,” Athena said. “Do you know her?”

“I do,” Sam said. “We work together all the time.”

“You should have called her, then. She’s an expert in pussy hair.”

Sam grunted, snipping carefully around Hannah’s clitoris, and Hannah assumed the budget didn’t include a visit from Dallas’ best stylist.

“Maybe she’s busy packing,” Athena said. “For van Minsk.”

“Is she selling van Minsk now?” Sam asked absently.

“No, packing,” Athena said. “As in traveling. To van Minsk.”

“I don’t get it,” Sam said, and Hannah tried not to flinch as the manager ran the scissors along the top line of her fur.

“She’s going to van Minsk,” Athena said. “In Odessa. In Russia, or wherever. To fix us up. ‘Cuz we’re going too.”

Sam looked up from her work, surprise evident.

“She’s going with you to Odessa?”

“Yeah, she wants to do us up on our last day, Saturday, so we’ll be insanely hot, and we’re going to take pictures and then go somewhere and kick some major ass. We’ll be posting pictures, so look for them.”

Sam continued to stare, at Athena, at Hannah, before she leaned back to view her work, seemed satisfied with it and brushed the loose hair from Hannah’s mound and vulva.

“Delilah would have cut it shorter,” Athena said.

“That’s because she’s an expert,” Sam said, and she went to the table and picked up something small and returned to Hannah.

“Okay, open your legs and tilt your pelvis forward.”

Hannah obeyed, watching as Sam reached through the bars, spread Hannah’s vulva and tapped her clitoris, forcing the little organ to stir and

rise up. As Hannah sucked in her breath, Sam pushed back the hood and fastened a black band around the delicate flesh.

“Uh,” Hannah said, pulling her middle away instinctively.

Sam moved to the table to retrieve the belt.

“Okay, back on,” she said, passing the belt through the bars.

Hannah clenching her jaw as she adapted to the binding around her clitoris, slipped on the belt and held still while Sam tightened it, secured the cup at her genitals, and padlocked it all securely.

Athena looked at Hannah with an eagerness Hannah found strange, and probably best to ignore.

“Getting used to it?” she asked, her eyes bright.

“Used to what?”

“Having the belt on.”

“Yeah,” Hannah retorted. “Sam said she brought two. Why aren’t you wearing yours?”

Sam went back to the table, returned to Hannah with her hands full. She knelt, setting everything beside her leg, Athena dropping beside her to watch.

“Okay,” she said, “turn around and put your bottom against the bars. I’m going to put in your anal frustrater first.”

“Anal frustrater?” Hannah asked, turning and bending.

Sam picked up a small rod, twisting up no more than two inches from a small black base, and slid it up Hannah’s anus, clamping the base to the back of the cup.

Hannah tightened her hole around the device, found it mildly distracting at worst.

“Alright, turn around and stand up straight.”

Hannah obeyed, watching as Sam unlocked the panel over her vulva, let it swing open, and she raised a second twisting rod, much longer than the first.

“Wait,” Hannah said. “You’re putting that in me too?”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “Up your vagina.”

“What is it?”

“A vaginal frustrater.”

“Seriously, Hannah,” Athena said, “you were there when she was telling us about all this.”

“No I wasn’t.”

“You were sitting right there!” Athena said, pointing at the bed.

“When I was masturbating?”

“Yeah,” Athena said, “right there.”

“Maybe I was a little distracted then,” Hannah said. “Because of what I had to wear while I was doing it. Let me see it.”

Sam handed over the object. It was about five inches long, loosely spiraled, its tip doubled over on itself to make a loop. Its base was fairly thick, with clamps on three sides and what seemed to be the housing for a mechanism inside, small gears visible through holes on the top and bottom. A much smaller rod protruded from the fourth side of the base, and Hannah eyed it warily, something about it bothering her, until she decided it must just be another sort of clamp.

Among the gears, a small light glowed.

Hannah handed it back, grabbed the bars and angled her pelvis forward. Quite ready to end the moratorium on genital stimulation, she spread her legs and welcomed the object into her sheath.

Sam inserted it slowly, clamping it in place.

“How do they feel?” Athena asked, smiling lecherously.

“Just like what they are,” Hannah said. “Two curly rods, one big and one small.”

“What’s two plus two?” Athena demanded.

“Four,” Hannah replied. “Why?”

“They’re going to take about half an hour to reach full operation,” Sam said, looking patiently over at Athena, and she rose and went back to her bag, pulling out a bottle of blue nail polish and passing it through the bars.

“You should be able to put this on,” she said. “If you hurry.”

“What happens if I take too long?” Hannah asked, studying the bottle, looking for a disclaimer about its quick-drying properties.

“Think you can get it done in 15 minutes?” Sam asked.

“Probably.”

Hannah went to her desk, opened up the bottle, used the little brush to apply the polish to her left thumbnail. It smelled and behaved normally, and she looked at Sam, who was tapping on her phone, and at Athena, who continued to stare at her with a smile that looked almost frozen.

Hannah felt a slight twinge deep in her vagina, tightened reflexively and looked down, half expecting to see that the frustrater had dropped out,

but it was still clamped in place.

“What are you looking at?” Athena asked.

“I’m trying to decide if I should paint my bellybutton,” Hannah said before passing the polish over the nail of her left index finger.

“No you’re not,” Athena said.

“How do you know?” Hannah asked, squirming slightly in her seat when the anal rod seemed to move.

“No one puts fingernail polish on their bellybutton,” Athena said.

“It would look dumb.”

Hannah passed the polish thickly over her left middle fingernail, raising her hip slightly when she felt something brush her clitoris, because she guessed she was putting too much pressure on the cup.

“I chose blue because it matches your eyes,” Sam said.

“Is that research-based too?”

“No, that one’s my idea,” Sam said. “We’re allowed a little creative license.”

“You’re moving in your seat,” Athena observed.

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed. “People sometimes do that.”

“I mean, a lot.”

Hannah continued on her nails, ignoring the two females on the other side of the bars, adjusting the angle of her hips on occasion as one or the other of the things inside her chambers moved or spasmed or did whatever it was they were doing. They weren’t frustrating, though, just a little annoying, mostly, but the rod in her anus moved when she was painting her right ring finger and made her smear a little polish on her skin below the quick. Something touched her clitoris again as she was finishing her right pinkie, making her miss again, and she sighed, capped the polish, stood and went to her toilet to wipe up the mistakes.

“How did you do?” Athena asked.

“Fine,” Hannah said, turning and holding up her hands.

“What are you going to try to do now?” Athena asked.

“I’m going to study,” Hannah said.

Hannah stepped to the bars to hand the polish back to Sam, pausing before she returned to her desk because something was happening between her legs that very briefly threatened to buckle her knees.

“They’re supposed to move, right?” Hannah said. “That’s not a tactile hallucination?”

“Yes,” Sam replied. “They’re sensing and responding to you. It takes awhile for them to get your patterns programmed.”

“What’s a tactile hallucination?” Athena asked.

“When you feel something that isn’t really there,” Hannah explained.

“Oh, it’s there all right,” Athena said, nodding emphatically.

“I’m feeling something against my clitoris,” Hannah said, pushing away from the bars and striding quickly back to her desk, gripping the back of her chair before she rounded it and sat.

“It’s got an attachment for that,” Sam said.

“Didn’t you see it?” Athena asked.

“I guess so,” Hannah said, and she leaned back and peered through the plastic at her vulva, at the black band around her clitoris, because she needed to know what was going on.

She looked up, confirmed that Athena was studying her with an intensity that struck Hannah as almost hunger-like, and Hannah knew she was feeding that hunger with what she was doing now, but she needed to understand what was happening.

Yes, the black band had forced her clitoris out and away from her body, working in tandem with the tiny little rod. Even as she watched, the rod bent upward, as if under the power of a mischievous ghost, and tapped her extended clit once, very gently, but not imperceptibly.

“What are you looking at?” Athena demanded.

“This doesn’t feel like the right size,” Hannah said. “I think I’m wearing yours.”

“You really want me to wear one too, don’t you?”

“It would build character.”

“I have character.”

Hannah opened her book, planted her elbow on the desk and made a fist as she tried to flip to the right page.

“Uh,” Hannah said, leaning back and forward.

Sitting wasn’t a good idea with these things in, Hannah realized, and she stood and bent to read the book.

That didn’t help either.

Walking might help.

She picked up the book and stared at it as she paced, beside her bed, to the toilet, back to her desk, ignoring the burning eyes of Athena.

After a particularly sharp pang from within her vagina, Hannah tossed her book onto her bed and stepped behind her chair, grasping it tightly and holding still on the theory that movement was provoking the things in her, but it did no good, the little rods continuing to stir her insides maddeningly, the clitoral rod tapping against her flesh slowly, stingily, just a touch now and then. If it worked like it was supposed to, she thought, it would begin pounding her and she'd orgasm and be done with it. But this was infuriating.

Hannah, stung by another pang, grunted and bent to inspect the cup between her legs, the female parts she could see gone hard and pink, the attachments tormenting her holes and clitoris. Could she pull either one out? Or disable them? Not that she wanted to. That would earn her punishment. She just wanted to see them, to look at them, to understand how they worked and what they were doing.

"Okay, it's time," Sam said.

When the rod in her vagina stirred, the light emanating from the black base seemed to grow stronger. Or did it? If she studied it, she might be able to detect a pattern, so she could at least predict the stimulation, if not prevent it.

"Hannah?"

She tightened, first her anus, then her vagina, then both. None if it worked. She wasn't strong enough to break the rods, or even hold them still. Instead, it felt like they were wriggling more with every squeeze, executing tiny movements like the whirrings of insect wings, or the frantic quiver of antennae.

"Hannah?"

"Huh?"

"Come to the bars so I can put your cuffs on," Sam said.

"Take it off," Hannah blurted, straightening, bending again.

"Come here."

Hannah staggered over, grabbed the bars with one white-knuckled hand.

"I want it off."

"Turn away from me and put your hands behind your back," Sam instructed, revealing no sympathy.

Hannah obeyed, Sam applied the cuffs quickly to Hannah's wrists, and Hannah turned to face her.



“Take it off,” she pleaded, hopping on one foot.

Sam picked up something small from the floor.

“Come closer.”

Hannah obeyed and Sam grabbed her right nipple, tugging it until half her breast had been pulled through the bars.

“Ow,” Hannah said, the mild pain not nearly enough to distract her from what was happening between her legs.

With a single fluid motion, Sam applied a small clear, elastic band to Hannah’s erect nipple.

“What’s that for?” Hannah asked, looking down.

Sam ignored the question, jerking Hannah forward by her left nipple, banding it as well.

“Ow.”

“Now you know what banding means,” Athena said, nodding wisely. “If you didn’t before.”

Hannah looked at her, down at her swollen nipples, back into the delighted eyes of Athena.

“Hey, Hannah,” Athena began.

“What?”

“What’s two plus two?”

“Who wants to know?”

“You don’t know, do you?”

Hannah scowled.

“Okay, then, who was the first president?”

“There’s a history book upstairs.”

“Just say it.”

“No.”

“I’m making a formal order. You have to.”

“George.”

“George who? George who?”

“... Washington.”

“Say his full name.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Say his full name.”

“No.”

“What’s the square root of, um, 90?”

“It’s . . . irrational.”

“Oh my god, you’re losing it!” Athena shrieked. “You’re dumber than me!”

Hannah looked at Athena briefly, decided it was less trouble to ignore her than to try to teach her something she should have already known.

“When does all this come off?” Hannah asked, standing in the middle of her cage, slightly bent, the bands on her nipples a new torment that no longer distracted from the stimulation between her legs, but added to it, her whole body being turned into a canvas of anguished hungers.

“Right before your first partner,” Sam replied.

“Who is it?” Hannah asked.

“A big big deal,” Athena blurted.

Sam turned toward Athena and looked at her sharply.

“Sorry, sorry, wasn’t supposed to say that!” Athena confessed in a mock cower under Sam’s withering gaze, but the girl seemed truly contrite, and Hannah, in her diminished state, knew why. Athena was supposed to be good at the management of subjects. A central tenet of subject management was discretion. And Athena had just been grossly indiscreet, an embarrassing error in its own right, but one that could also get her kicked off Hannah’s ad hoc management committee.

As quickly as it appeared, however, Sam’s wrath evaporated, and she stood and unlocked Hannah’s cage.

“You don’t need to know anyone’s name,” Sam said, motioning Hannah to leave her confinement, taking her arm and guiding her across the carpeted floor to the elevator. “If they tell you, that’s their decision. But just try to think of them as cards.”

Athena trotted forward, hit the elevator’s up button, held it open for Sam and the staggering slave girl.

“What if she kills someone?” Athena asked, hitting the button for the second floor.

Sam looked sharply at Athena again.

“I don’t mean murder,” Athena said. “I just mean, what if the frustraters make her too frustrated, and when you take them off, she goes crazy and, I don’t know, tries to shove someone’s whole body up her pussy?”

The elevator closed, and Sam looked at Hannah, ignoring the question.

“You’ve got five cards tonight,” she said. “Five, seven, and then nine, 10 and 11. I’ll give you as much of a break as I can between the last three.”

Sam was tense. Hannah, diminished as was her capacity, could feel it in the hand around her upper arm, the way she was looking at Hannah, the way she responded to Athena.

Had things ever gone wrong at this moment in an assignment? Hannah wondered, staring blankly at the faux wood of the elevator’s side wall and trying not to think about the middle part of her body. Maybe girls sometimes arrived at the reception and made an ass of themselves, or half the people lost interest once they saw the actual goods.

Or maybe Sam’s anxiety was about Hannah herself, an irreverent, unpredictable girl with a tongue that could go sharp on occasion. Surely Sam had been warned. Maybe they’d even told her about her school prank.

If Hannah failed, it would be Sam’s fault.

“Hannah,” Athena said as the elevator rose.

Hannah bit her lip and turned, staring at Athena wide-eyed, the girl’s voice bringing her back to the agonies of the present.

“Remember, just dicks and, um, other small stuff up you, not whole bodies.”

Hannah wanted Athena to shut up, but she could think of no words to make that happen.

“What’s 11 squared?” Athena asked.

“121.”

Athena paused, doing the math in her head, nodding.

“What’s the capital of Austin?”

“Texas,” Hannah said.

“Ah!” Athena exulted. “Austin is the capital of Texas, duh!”

Athena was still cackling with delight when the elevator door opened.

Hannah heard voices, glasses clinking, laughter, jazz on the sound system as Sam brought her from the elevator to the second floor lounge, a large, open area with a pool table, easy chairs and bookshelves, a place where Hannah had spent many treasured hours reading, pulling down more books, reading anew, naked and shackled and, in her mind, completely free.

This is where Ormek kept all his medical textbooks. She'd read most of them.

The conversation faded quickly once its attendees noticed the arrival of Hannah, nude except for the belt and the clear plastic cup, her hands bound behind her, her eyes marked with a peculiar anxiousness.

## **Chapter 78: Maxim Calls**

"Fairchild."

"Hello, Druhler," said the familiar, accented voice of Maxim.

"Maxim! I never know when it's you."

"I'm using a scrambler," Maxim said.

"Good. What's new?"

"We're ready to sign," Maxim said.

"And pay?"

"As spelled out in the agreements, yes."

"When and where?" Fairchild asked.

"Next Saturday 6. A private dining room upstairs from Aolial."

"How you spell that?"

"A-O-L-I-A-L."

"Got it."

Please bring your sons. Everyone will need to sign."

"Of course. What city?"

"Odessa."

"Ukraine?"

"Odessa."

## **Chapter 79: A Reception, and the First Card**

Laura and Ormek detached themselves from a small gaggle in the corner to conduct what Hannah decided must be the first event in an affair like this, the owners' inspection of the property.

They stepped up to Hannah, leaned back in an exaggerated demonstration, taking everything in.

They didn't hug, but Laura, beaming, put a hand on Hannah's shoulder and looked into her eyes.

"This is our girl, Hannah," Laura said, turning to the throng.  
"Athena, will you do the introductions?"

Athena stepped beside Hannah and cleared her throat.

“Hannah’s 20,” she announced, her voice betraying the slightest quaver, probably not something anyone but Hannah noticed. “We’ve had her since she was 18, so for more than two years. She’s in pre-med at Corpus Christi, and she got a full scholarship this year, because she’s ridiculously smart.”

The objects inserted into her body seemed to be taking a break at the moment, affording Hannah a chance to look down, and to see herself as those at the reception saw her.

The cup curved up from just in front of her anus to an inch or two above her clitoris. Sam had left her pubic hair thick, so it curled beneath and around the plastic as if it had been growing there for centuries, slowly bringing the object into its wild embrace.

Hannah’s nipples extended almost obscenely from her breasts, a condition all the more scandalous because the bands forcing her erect were invisible, creating the illusion of a girl madly enflamed without visible provocation.

Hannah scanned the room. There were more than a dozen people here, men and women, from college age to what Hannah guessed was 60ish, a breadth of races – black, white, Asian, uncertain. But all were well-dressed, the younger in ties or blazers, the older in full tie and suit, all the women in gowns or office attire.

“Oh,” Athena said. “And wi-fi. If you didn’t already get the password, this week it’s something everyone should be able to remember. Hannah20. That’s her name and age. Capital H. Hannah20.”

“Thank you, Athena,” Laura said. “Hannah’s looking forward to making everyone’s stay as pleasant as possible, as we all are. If you have any questions or requests specific to Hannah, please check in with Samantha.”

Laura gestured toward Sam, who had retreated to the edge of the room, looking entirely out of place in jeans and white button down. Hannah glanced at her and felt, briefly, sorry for her and her status as a mere functionary, the humble procurer of a girl’s body, hers a role of ancient disrepute, regardless the wine and jazz and nice clothing attendant tonight.

Both frustraters moved within Hannah’s chambers, and a second later, the little attachment fondled her clitoris, and Hannah, having no need

to hide her distress, her urgent need for relief, grimaced and bent at the knees, her hands, bound against her bottom, balled into impotent fists.

Sam stepped up, taking her place next to Athena.

“We have a few more openings,” Sam said without a hint of impropriety. “Email me your requests and I’ll see what I can do, or feel free to speak to me in person. I’m in a room on the third floor. You’ll see my name taped to the door, and if it’s not open, please knock.”

Sam knocked the air and continued.

“Whenever possible, I’ll band Hannah prior to an appointment, but we can’t do that to her before every assignment . . . for logistical reasons.”

Some of the younger people laughed quietly, but the humor was lost on Hannah, gasping wide-eyed, bending and digging her blue fingernails into her palms as the devices turned against her body, twisting in her holes and caressing her clitoris.

“. . . and humanitarian.”

Another ripple of laughter washed through the room.

“Hannah’s very sensitive,” Sam added, “so I’ve got everything she’s on low, and intermittent only.”

Hannah shifted her hips and immediately released a thick river of girl cream between her thigh and the left side of the cup, the fluid racing down her inner leg, pausing, racing again until it reached her knee and stopped there, tickling her leg. She wished she could wipe it, not because it embarrassed her, only because it was annoying.

Hannah surveyed the eyes, caught several which quickly looked away, caught a few more staring at her breasts, and her belly, at the wet place between her legs, but most were focused on Sam as she spoke.

“I want to remind everyone, as I did in my email, how important discretion is. Please respect Hannah, and please respect your colleagues, and keep what you know about her services to yourself.”

Respect Hannah? Hannah thought, playing the request through her mind. Respect Hannah?

Something was wrong here. Something didn’t add up.

Respect Hannah?

The frustrater groped her clitoris, forcing her to set the question aside for another day.

Sam retreated, and Laura and Athena looked at Ormek as he stepped up.

“Friends, welcome,” he said, speaking for the first time, his voice strong and confident.

He had taken a place in front and to the left of Hannah, so she could see him in profile, back straight, dark hair curled perfectly above his forehead, a half-drunk glass of red wine in his hand.

“When I was growing up,” Ormek said, “on a farm outside Nirsehir, sometimes we had nothing, and sometimes the earth was kind. But my father greeted everyone – stranger, friend, brother – the same way, with the same words, always: *tehk saheep oldgum senin*. All I have is yours. This week, I greet each of you, you who are our guests, the same way. *tehk saheep oldgum senin*. Enjoy the conference. Enjoy our home. Enjoy our hospitality. We’ll serve dinner at 7 every night, so please break bread with us whenever you can . . . and help yourself to the fridge when we’re not looking.”

Ormek’s audience laughed politely, and he turned and swept his arm out toward Laura and Athena before he stepped back to put his arm around the bare shoulders of the naked family girl.

“*tehk saheep—*”

Hannah squealed and hopped on her toes, breasts bouncing, because all three of the tools between her legs had moved in unison, their concern for Ormek’s speech nonexistent. He turned, squeezed Hannah’s shoulder, and the assemblage laughed at last with volume and sincerity.

“*oldgum senin*,” Ormek concluded.

With scattered final words, a last cheers or two among clinking glasses, a hug here and there, the attendees took their leave, drifting out in ones or twos until the room was empty but for Hannah and Sam. Even Athena had left, and Hannah guessed Sam had asked her to go, that this next moment was not meant for unnecessary eyes.

“Doing okay?” Sam asked, stepping next to Hannah and taking her arm.

“Let’s go,” Hannah said through a clenched jaw.

Sam led Hannah to the elevator, pushed the button, brought her to the third floor, never speaking as she escorted her to the third door on the right. The sparest of the floors in the Petrosyan mansion, and the floor where Hannah went for severe punishment, it was still elegant, sconces set along the walls casting a dim, equal lighting along its length.

Hannah heard voices, muffled, from behind the doors here, wondered how many of the people at the reception were couples, and if either – or both – had signed up for her.

Hannah felt her cuffs open, sensed the opening of the padlock in her belt, sighed as the frustraters were withdrawn from her chambers, the belt removed from her waist, the plastic cup taken dripping from its position between her legs.

“Bend,” Sam whispered, her voice as quiet as the clink of metal, the creak of leather.

Hannah obeyed and felt something cool against her anus, cleaning her, making her acceptable to the person on the other side of the door. She smelled alcohol and wildflowers, and she reached up and removed the bands around her nipples, pulled off the attachment at her obscenely swollen clitoris, and handed everything to Sam.

Sam knocked three times gently while Hannah squirmed. Having the frustraters up her vagina and rectum was terrible. But the sudden, yawning emptiness she felt when they were pulled from her body was worse, and she longed for their return, terrible as they were. This was, she imagined, like addiction.

The door opened, a small, worried woman appearing, dressed in a navy blue bathrobe.

She looked at Sam, stuck her head out the door and peered up and down the hall and, satisfied there was no one watching, looked at Hannah, deep into her eyes, and she smiled and reached out her hand and Hannah took it and allowed herself to be brought into this woman’s domain, a small room lit by a single scented candle.

Wildflowers again.

The woman shut the door and locked it, untied the belt of her robe, pulled it open and dropped it to the floor, exposing a body that, when clothed, would be called petite, when naked, might be called bony, or even gaunt, except for the slightly rounded belly of motherhood. She was in her 40s, maybe her early 50s, Hannah guessed, barely over five feet tall, with thick black hair loose upon her shoulders, a carefully trimmed strip of black pubic hair above her vulva, breasts small but well-formed, the result of judicious surgery most likely.

Who was she?



Athena had described her as a big deal. But what did that mean? Doctor? Researcher? Something else? Hannah knew better than to ask. And Hannah didn't want to ask anyway. She wanted to cum.

The woman stood mute before Hannah, as if in supplication, passively, arms by her sides, looking up at the slave girl with dark, reverent eyes.

Hannah smiled, reached up gently to the woman's shoulder, put her hand behind the woman's neck, pulled her forward and lowered her head until their mouths were touching, and when Hannah opened her mouth and licked the woman's, she groaned quietly and parted her own lips, and the two kissed like that while Hannah pressed her swollen vulva against the woman's jutting hip bone.

The woman, feeling the heat and water at Hannah's slit, seemed to understand the girl's need, and her hand drifted, to Hannah's rump, to her thigh, to her thick golden muff and, at last, to the slit beneath the hair, and with a little more exploration, she found Hannah's angry clit, tapping it, squeezing it, circling it, and the two kissed with their mouths while Hannah rocked with her pelvis, the woman's fingers doing all the things the frustrater had refused to, grinding against her flesh and slicking through her folds and dancing along her swollen member until Hannah was just, just, almost . . .

"Lick me," Hannah commanded with a tight, urgent groan, pulling her mouth just far enough away to speak. "On your bed. I'll be on top."

The woman spun away, seemed to lose her balance, put both hands on the bed to steady herself, pulled down the sheets and lay flat on her back, legs raised, knees bent, mouth taut.

Hannah slid into position over her, dropping her vulva roughly onto the woman's chin, lifting up and holding still.

But the woman didn't go first for Hannah's pink trench. Instead, she began along Hannah's inner thigh, tongue making tiny strokes where Hannah's lubricant had oozed out.

"I've been wanting to drink that," the woman whispered hoarsely, her breath pulsing against Hannah's leg, "since I saw you leak it."

Hannah grunted and lowered her vulva, hoping her meaning would be clear.

It was. Immediately, the tongue that had cleaned Hannah's thigh set to work against her vulva and clitoris, thrusts so quick they felt almost

mechanical, a stimulation so intense Hannah at first almost jerked away.

The climax came fast and hard, roaring through Hannah's tortured loins, forcing her vulva and sheath and uterus and anus to spasm as one, Hannah grunting and rocking her pelvis and – mindful of the need for discretion – doing her best not to scream or let rip her standard line of orgasmic profanities.

Satisfied, at least temporarily, Hannah devoted herself to her partner's pleasure, wrapping her arms around the woman's narrow thighs, forcing them apart and putting her tongue against the hole, thick with heat and fluid, and Hannah worked at the woman's mysterious, deep musk, cleaning and stirring and wondering how many bodies had passed through this place, and what age each had achieved, and if they had any inkling tonight that their first door into the world was being tended by a blonde slave girl.

The woman's body stirred, her hips bucked and her ribs heaved between Hannah's knees, and she was done, her body limp, the union complete.

Hannah raised her leg and angled it over the woman's body, slid to the edge of the bed and sat there, looking at the candle and its perfect yellow flame, no breath of moving air to disturb it, and she waited for whatever was supposed to happen next.

"I tell five thousand people what to do," the woman whispered, sheets rustling as she rolled to her side.

"Only during the day," Hannah said. "I'm sure they do what they want the rest of the time. Unless they're slaves."

The woman gasped, breath blasting out before her throat rattled with what Hannah realized was laughter, her whole body shaking.

"Are they slaves?" Hannah asked.

"No," the woman said, clearing her throat as her laughter subsided. "We were told you were very discreet, and very insubordinate."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Hannah said politely.

"Do you know who I am?"

"A woman on a bed," Hannah said, turning to study her partner's face. Had she seen it on the news, or in a picture somewhere? No, she was a complete stranger.

"They didn't tell you?" the woman asked, rising to one elbow.

“No,” Hannah replied, turning away to study the candle’s flame again, flickering slightly, as if it sensed a disquiet in the room. “Nor did I ask. Because I don’t want to know. And you don’t want me to know.”

“Why don’t I want you to know?” she asked.

“Because if I’m tortured, I’ll tell,” Hannah said.

“You won’t be tortured.”

Hannah turned to regard the woman, and their eyes locked, and the woman seemed to understand, and she dropped to her back and stared at the ceiling.

“They wouldn’t ask you about me, would they?”

“They might,” Hannah said. “Or they might ask me the worse thing I know, and I’d say it to make them stop what they were doing. And you might be the worst thing I know.”

The woman laughed at the ceiling, sighed and pulled her legs up to her chest, bent her knees, straightened them, and grabbed her calves.

Pilates, Hannah thought.

“I go days at a time without an orgasm,” she said, “without ever laughing. I—”

“That’s your fault.”

“Huh?”

“That’s your fault,” Hannah repeated.

“I was trying to thank—” the woman said, voice rising.

“Did you think it was strange, what Sam – Samantha – said to everyone,” Hannah interrupted, “about how everyone should keep what happens to themselves, to respect my privacy?”

“I didn’t think about it.”

“Exactly,” Hannah said. “It was just words. But why would she say them? While I’m standing in front of everyone being . . . tickled . . . and leaking and everything. I had no privacy. But she was acting like my privacy mattered as much as yours.”

The woman sat up, spread her legs, bent her knees and grabbed her feet, forcing her soles together.

Hannah glanced at her, turned back.

“I’m trying to figure that out,” Hannah continued, “because it’s one of those things that seems normal for someone to say until you start thinking about it, and then it gets weird.”

“You don’t give the slightest fuck who I am, do you?” the woman asked.

“Not at all,” Hannah said.

“You don’t know how good that feels,” she said, bending until her nose reached almost to her thumbs, and she breathed out and straightened.

“I needed this,” she said. “God, I needed this. Will you let me thank you?”

“Thank the Petrosyans.”

“Please tell me you had some choice in the matter,” the woman said.

“I did,” Hannah said. “I did.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Hannah said. “Will that be all, Ma’am?”

“I’d fire anyone who talked to me the way you do,” the woman said, “but I—”

“Maybe that’s why you don’t laugh,” Hannah retorted, “and you don’t cum.”

“Let me finish,” the woman said, an edge in her voice.

Hannah held her peace.

“I feel human right now. With you.”

“Congratulations,” Hannah said.

Three quiet raps on the door told Hannah she was done, and she stood, but she turned back to the woman, bent and kissed her forehead.

“I’m going to want you again,” the woman said, reaching up to squeeze Hannah’s shoulder.

“I think there’s still room on my schedule,” Hannah said, and she turned and went to the door and opened it, finding Sam there.

She followed Sam back to the elevator, neither speaking until the door slid closed behind them.

“How did it go?” Sam asked.

“Why did you tell everyone I was subordinate?” Hannah asked.

“I didn’t use that word,” Sam said.

“What word did you use?”

“What word should I have used?”

“No word,” Hannah said. “I don’t appreciate—”

“People need to know, Hannah,” Sam protested. “So they can opt out if that’s not their thing. Or opt in. She opted in. And I assume you were

awful to her.”

“I’m not awful,” Hannah said. “I’m truth.”

Sam snorted, and the elevator door opened and she stepped out, walking with Hannah back to her cage.

“Anything you need to wash out?” Sam asked. “I’ve got a douche.”

“No,” Hannah replied, moving to her desk. “And you’re not putting that thing on me again tonight.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

“Will I be with any males tonight?”

“The rest are males,” Sam said.

“Why did you say what you did,” Hannah asked, “about my privacy? Like it mattered?”

“It’s just part of the script.”

“Who wrote the script?”

“No one really wrote it. It’s just something you learn to say. One of the formalities.”

“I think it’s strange to say, but I’m not sure why.”

“You can’t masturbate,” Sam said. “Okay?”

“I wasn’t planning to,” Hannah said.

“If anything really bad happens,” Sam said, “you’ll tell me, right? If you piss someone off? Or they—”

“I’m going to piss everyone off,” Hannah promised, flipping open her economics book, delighting in the ability to look at a textbook page without having something moving in her holes. “Apparently, because of what you told them, they’re all counting on it.”

## **Chapter 80: A Conference, and a Little More Freedom**

Hannah had imagined the next two days would be consumed with sex, in all its varieties, and including all its physical and mental demands. But by the time Sam banded her Monday, just after dinner, she found herself with more free time and more leftover mental capacity than she’d expected, or even wanted.

The people – the cards, as Sam called them – were simple to please. If they just wanted sex, she’d let them do most of the work, putting forth her own effort only when she decided it was her turn to cum, clambering on top, legs straddling hips, blue fingernails biting into white or bronze or

black shoulders while she straddled faces or impaled herself on penises of varying shapes and lengths and thicknesses. Sometimes she didn't cum, and that was fine. Sometimes they didn't, and that was fine too, but when they chose to release up her front chamber and she left a room or the bed of her own room with the semen spilling out between her lips, it was handled efficiently, she going to her bathroom to douche while Sam watched.

If they wanted to talk, she would say what she pleased, and they would laugh, because she knew how to say what could be said, and knew what not to say. Walking that fine line was an art form, and she was a master of the art, and that's how she was different. It wasn't that she was less respectful than other subjects. No subject truly respected their owners. It's that Hannah Loughbridge had made a study of the possible, of finding the walls of the cell, the edges of the envelope, and she was always, always pushing.

The auction was held the second night, in the lounge. Preparation began at 9:30, when Sam and Athena came to Hannah's cage to band her.

"Ready, Hannah?" Sam asked, setting her equipment on the floor.

Hannah, her vulva locked out of reach, rose from her desk, declining to answer, but she went to the bars, Sam removed the belt, and she and Athena knelt.

"Vulva up," Sam instructed, and Hannah spread her legs and angled her pelvis forward while the girls worked together on the other side of the bars to get her clitoris bound up and extended. Athena did most of the work, spreading Hannah's vulva, stimulating her clitoris to its full passion, and at last applying the black band under Sam's patient guidance.

"Uh," Hannah protested quietly, biting her lip.

So Athena would be setting her up this time, Hannah realized, her body being used as Athena's textbook, each chamber and all her most sensitive areas of girl flesh a chapter of knowledge.

That done, Sam wiped down the belt and cup and gave it back to Hannah, and she pulled it up and held still while Athena learned how to tighten and lock it.

Hannah turned and bent, presenting herself resignedly for the next step.

"Put the anal one in first," Sam instructed, and Hannah felt the little rod, tentatively probing her rear hole.

After a little pushing and prodding, the anal frustrater was inserted and clamped in place, and then the much larger vaginal rod was slowly, cautiously inserted.

“You won’t hurt her,” Sam said. “Just push it in with a steady motion, assertive but not aggressive. The female knows what’s being done and she’ll adjust if she needs to.”

Once the frustraters were in and clamped, Hannah straightened and turned, expecting to be greeted by Athena’s leering face. But the girl was the image of sober concentration, taking the bands from Sam and, after some guidance, pulling Hannah’s nipples through the bars, forcing them to harden, and securing each with the clear elastic.

Hannah turned and put her hands behind her back. Athena’s application of the handcuffs showed no uncertainty at all, the cuffs going on quickly, one after the other.

“We’ll take you upstairs at 10,” Athena said.

“How long will I have everything on?” Hannah asked, sensing the first movements of the frustraters and resigning herself to at least an hour of discomfort.

“You should be going to the winner as soon as the auction’s over, about 10:30,” Sam said, and she and Athena stayed and watched over the next half hour, saying little, as Hannah grew increasingly provoked, sitting or lying on her bed, rising and pacing, grunting and moaning as her discretion dwindled and her frantic irritation grew, until she was escorted from her cage.

Sam served as auctioneer, Athena as assistant, and Hannah as the sole item on the block, arriving a little before 10, standing almost naked with her hands bound behind her back before a dozen people, some come to bid, some come to watch.

Hannah hopped, squirmed, balanced on one foot and gasped while the bidding dragged on and her chambers and her clitoris screamed.

Bidding was done by phone, everyone in the room tapping on the auction app, the bidders impossible to distinguish from those just there to watch the process unfold on their screens.

Even in an auction, the discretion of the participants was honored while the girl being offered represented a complete violation of privacy.

“Very good, everyone,” Sam said. “We have a winner. But don’t put your phones away quite yet. The winning party has agreed to let me finish

Hannah here if we can raise another five hundred dollars. Fifty apiece should just about—”

“What are you talking about?” Hannah croaked, squinting at Sam.

“I’m going to turn you up,” Sam replied, staring at her phone.

“Okay, we’re at 200. Okay, 300 more to go. Okay, 250. 275.”

“What does that mean?” Hannah inquired. “I didn’t—”

The rest of her words were choked off as the frustraters did their steady work.

“425,” Sam announced. “Hey, can a couple of you, um, you and you, come help with Hannah?”

Two of the bigger men stepped forward.

“Either side of her, that’s right,” Sam said. “Now, hold her upper arms. She’s going to buck. \$450. \$450 now. That’s right, don’t squeeze. Both hands. That’s right.”

The men wrapped their hands around Hannah’s arms, firmly but not overly tight.

Hannah looked at them both. One smiled at her, one looked away, and she began to understand what was about to be done, and a part of her was glad and a part of her despised it.

“No,” she said feebly. “I didn’t—”

“500!” Sam announced. “525! 550! Keep giving! It’s going to an animal charity in Wales. Keep giving! 600! Okay, Hannah, here we go.”

Everything between Hannah’s legs exploded at once, the anal frustrater spinning, the vaginal frustrater taking on a life of its own, the little clitoral rod pounding without mercy against her tender, extended flesh.

“Auhhh, god no, stop!” Hannah screamed, jerking backward, bound hands clenching, reaching for her bottom, for the place beside her anus where, if only her fingers were long enough, she could grab the end of the cup and push it away or rip it off or crush it into dust.

“sweetjesusinheavenpleasenomakethemstopforgivemeimsorryforgiveme!”

Hannah, the first wave of orgasm wracking her body and mind, pulled up her legs, wanting to curl up on the floor and die there, but the men’s strength proved equal to her weight and her writhing, and she hung in midair, legs wheeling impotently against nothing while she groaned and shook, hair flying, breasts bouncing, thick ejaculate flooding her cup and spilling from it, down her legs, through the panel, to the floor.

“nopleasenogodnonononononononoauhhh!”



“Okay, okay, it’s off, set her down,” Sam said.

Hannah, gasping for air, eyes opened wide but seeing nothing, was allowed to crumple to the floor, curled up on her side, rocking slowly.

“725,” Sam announced. “Thank you, everyone. I’ll be delivering Hannah as soon as she can stand up. Good night.”

The room emptied of all but Sam and Athena, and Hannah’s gasps subsided, and she pressed her cheek against the plush carpet and tried to think only of how that felt.

“Okay,” she said quietly to herself. “Okay,” she breathed.

“Hannah,” Athena said, crouching before her, looking almost worried.

“Huh?” Hannah breathed.

“You okay?”

“I don’t know.”

“You did good.”

Hannah rolled to her back, arms bound uncomfortably behind her, and looked up at Athena.

“I was faking,” she said.

“Bullshit,” Athena shot back.

Sam knelt beside Athena, peering at the slave girl.

“Hey, doing alright?”

“I should have been told,” Hannah said, drawing in her breath. “I should have—”

“I told her not to say anything,” Athena confessed. “Blame me.”

“You raised 3,750,” Sam said, “plus that extra 725. It was really—”

“Just take me where I’m going,” Hannah said, drawing up her legs and struggling to sit up.

“Can you stand?”

“Probably.”

“Can you walk?”

“I’m not sure.”

Sam and Athena helped Hannah to her feet, holding her arms while she took her first tentative steps, guiding her to her bedroom, where she was uncuffed and unbanded and wiped and taken to her bed, her sex organ still swollen, still hungry.

The door opened and the winning bidder, a stout older man, stepped in, shut the door behind him and nodded politely before he headed to the

closet to undress, hanging his things beside the van Minsk and the Harvest Moon and the Goforth,

He'd won not just an hour with Hannah, but a full night with her, and he joined her in bed naked and wordless and she coaxed his already firming penis up with her hands and tongue as he lay on his back, and he almost cried when she climbed atop and took him into her furious, dripping slot, and she came first, after no more than three minutes of writhing above him, a string of awful profanity ripping from her mouth, after which she slowed, milking him gently, pushing him to the shaking ebullience of what might have been the first orgasm of his life, so happy did he seem.

Spent for a time, they lay wordless in the half-light until their deep breathing ebbed.

"What did Samantha write about me," Hannah asked, "in the email she sent to everyone about this week?"

The question seemed to surprise him and he turned his head to look at her with eyebrows arched, although the rest of his substantial frame remained motionless on her bed, and he held his silence.

"She said something negative," Hannah said. "I want to know what it was, and no one will tell me."

"I don't advise reading gossip about oneself," he said, with a slight British accent, looking back at the ceiling. "It's never worked out for me."

"You've done it?" Hannah asked.

"Nature of the beast," he said. "Rather like looking at the hell end of a Bosch. You can't not look, and you study every inch of it, and you're no better for it when you're finished."

"I don't believe in hell," Hannah said.

"Which one?"

"The one in the Bible."

"Which one?"

"There's only one hell in the Bible."

"Oh no, there are dozens," he said.

"None of them, then."

He laughed. "Would you like some advice?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Don't fall for blanket dismissals," he said. "Of anything. They're easy and they're wrong, and you'll miss out on grace, occasionally."

“There is no grace in hell,” Hannah said. “In any form from the Bible.”

“You’re wrong there too,” he said, adding after a pause, “I was the one who asked to take you to the discipline room.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” he countered.

“Are you trying to sound like a philosopher?” Hannah asked. “Because you just sound sort of dumb right now.”

“There’s the girl we were warned about,” he said, laughing hard enough to shake the bed.

“No,” Hannah said. “Tell me why.”

“I wanted a tour. That’s all. I wanted to know.”

“Know what?”

“How it worked, what it looks like, what you—”

“Like looking at hell in a Bosch painting,” Hannah said. “You told me it didn’t make you any better.”

While he laughed, she turned her eyes to her desk, where her first laptop still sat, its original and only remaining purpose accessing her first semester of online courses at the University in Austin. The machine reposed there like a door into another world now, a place she no longer needed to go.

A little sad.

“Okay,” she said, drawing in her breath, turning back to him, “I almost never get taken there. But once I had this pill—”

“What kind of pill?”

“Legal. Prescription. It puts you to sleep. But if you’ve been drinking, it makes everything spin, and that’s what I did, and I got caught, so I went up there with Athena and—”

“Athena?”

“The dark-haired girl. She’s the Petrosyan’s daughter. The one helping out this week.”

“Ah, yes.”

“And she tied me stretched out, facing this board, with my legs spread and my hands way up over my head, and a man came and beat me – back and bottom and legs.”

“What did he beat you with?”

“A sort of whip. It didn’t break the skin.”

“Did you scream?”

“Well, yelled, kind of. It hurt, yeah. But not knowing was the worst part. How many I’d get, how long it would last, what else he’d do. And Athena made me take the pill the night before, so it wasn’t really my fault.”

Hannah wasn’t surprised to see the man’s penis growing, and he turned and followed her eyes and sighed.

“The philosopher in me is infuriated,” he said. “The theologian in me curses the gods. And the monster wants you again.”

“Get on,” Hannah said gamely. “I’m still recovering from those things I had to hold.”

“Brilliant,” he said, climbing above her with surprising speed. “Oh Jesus, brilliant, brilliant, I’m sorry.”

“But promise me you’ll tell,” Hannah whispered. “Tell someone what they did to me. Tell anyone.”

“I will.”

This time, he came first, but his manhood continued to plumb her depths after he’d spilled his second round of seed within her, and Hannah raised her legs and grabbed his hips and forced him to please her, her voice quietly begging the heavens for solace, for peace:

“ohjesusnogodhellnoPLEASEdamnstopstopno.”

And he continued to thrust long after she’d cum, and then he rolled off and lay beside her, and she slipped off the bed to turn off the light, returning to him and trying to remember something about an auction.

Something.

Something.

The memory wouldn’t come, try as she might while she drifted off to sleep, try as she might again when she awoke the next morning.

But mostly during the 48 hours of the conference, when she wasn’t sleeping or serving or struggling to dredge up old memories, Hannah studied, taking advantage of every moment between cards to review, to read, to work on her paper.

And to go over the other things in her mind, the things she must do in Odessa.

Or might do in Odessa.

She lacked email at the Petrosyans, and couldn’t drink beer in the back corner of a college hangout while she waited to be summoned to an

abandoned cathedral; so if everything had been canceled, she wouldn't know it until she got to Europe and received word, or received nothing.

She didn't care either way. She had done enough for these people, more than enough, some of it terrible, and it was all on principle alone because nothing about their plans made sense or seemed likely to affect any change.

With her extra time, the time when she wasn't serving, or studying, or remembering the details of her assignment in Odessa, she worked on that other question.

Why did Sam mention my privacy? Why was she acting like it mattered? Why would that be something that was always said? As if I'm like them?

But then, why am I even necessary? If they want sex this week, why not do it with each other? Why not hire Sam, not to schedule the delivery of a slave girl, but to arrange the partnering of free people with each other? Why is there so much shame and secrecy and denial when free people have sex, or don't have sex?

Hannah felt none of that, of course. It was understood what she was, what she did, and on that first night, she had stood almost nude at the reception before the people in clothes, and she leaked and winced through enforced stimulation and felt no shame and was not expected to feel shame and did the things they wanted and she wanted and it was all true, all completely true.

So when Sam asked everyone to respect Hannah's privacy, that was in effect a lie Sam was telling everyone, a lie they were all accepting, one of those lies that must be told that no one believes.

If people could simply say to each other, I want you, so if you want me, we could enjoy something mutual and it would probably be nice, or if it isn't, at least we'll know . . . if people could say that, there would be no need for girls like Hannah, for recreational females, for all the other things like that, that people do.

But no one can say that. Men can't because . . . why? And girls can't because . . . again, why?

The brilliant act of intimacy is a gift whose wrapping never comes completely off, and the heavy paper that covers it up doesn't say happy birthday or merry Christmas, but all the worst words, whore and pervert, sick and disgrace.

“Why do you need someone like me?” Hannah asked one of the men, a well-connected resident from New York, on Tuesday afternoon after he’d finished in her.

“What do you mean?” he asked, sitting up in bed, back against the wall, Hannah seated beside him.

“Couldn’t you just do it with someone else here? One of the other women?”

“How would we arrange that?” he asked, the humor evident in his voice.

“Cards,” Hannah said.

“Cards?”

“I mean, a list. Before you get here, sign up on your computers or your phones, like you did to be with me. But with each other instead. Say what you want, and schedule it. Someone like Samantha could put it all down.”

“No girl would sign up for that,” he said.

“Why not?” Hannah asked, but she knew the answer. Any girl who agreed to such a thing would subject herself to scorn.

But why was that?

Why?

She finished with her last partner a little after 3 on Tuesday. She’d done 13 sessions altogether, with eight people, whom she could never call cards, no matter what Sam said.

Tingling slightly, but not aching, dripping semen that didn’t need to be douched out this time, she followed Sam to her cage to shower for the trip.

“Would you work with me again?” Hannah asked, turning to watch Sam lock the door.

“In a heartbeat,” Sam said.

“What did you write about me?” Hannah asked. “What word did you use?”

“Rude,” Sam replied, unblinking.

“Rude,” Hannah repeated. “That’s awful.”

“I talked to Mrs. Petrosyan about you, and that’s the word we agreed on. Rude.”

Hannah turned on the water, put her fingers under the stream.

“So, bye,” Sam said.

“Oh,” Hannah said, stepping back to the bars, hugging Sam through them, forcing another open-mouthed kiss on the girl before she pulled away, and she wondered if Sam could taste the distillation of two days of sex, the essence of the mouths and penises and vaginas her mouth had touched.

“Bye.”

With a final wave, Hannah went to the water, drew the curtain and luxuriated in a washing she was doing only for herself.

If she wanted to masturbate, she could.

Laura and Ormek were waiting for her, standing at the bars and looking in, when she pulled the curtain back and stepped out to dry off. Both were smiling.

Hannah smiled back.

“Thank you, Hannah,” Laura said, which was all that needed to be said or could be said.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah replied.

“This has been a very good week for me,” Ormek said. “A very good day.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Hannah said, wondering who had agreed to what, if the woman had arranged something, or one of the older men had granted a concession of some kind, and if Hannah had truly contributed to it at all, if there was a true quid pro quo, or it was all implied, that admitting someone was giving Ormek something of monetary or professional value in exchange for permission to fuck his recreational female was in such bad taste it could never be acknowledged.

“Is there anything you’d like, Hannah?” Laura asked.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said. “No more chains in the car. No more shackles here, or overnight at Allain’s.”

“Except as punishment,” Laura said.

“Of course,” Hannah agreed, and it was done. She would, for the first time, walk freely throughout the Petrosyan household. She would no longer wear chains on her wrists and ankles every time one of the Petrosyans drove her somewhere. She would sleep in Allain’s bed, next to Allain, with her feet unbound.

Free, then.

Almost free.

## **Chapter 81: A Meeting in the Air**

The word went out immediately. When Athena came to bring Hannah upstairs to her bedroom to dress and do final packing, the shackles hanging on the peg beneath the windows weren't even mentioned. Hannah left her cage unbound and went forth encumbered only by nudity and a collar until she reached her room and pulled on underwear and jeans and a t-shirt and a blue sweater and practical flats for traveling, and she was just touching up her lipstick and mascara, Athena sitting on her bed and babbling about some Saturday night event in Odessa she was determined to crash when Delilah pounded on the door.

"Athena, bitch, you better let me in!"

Athena almost fell as she raced to the door, screaming before she opened it, screaming more after she threw it wide and gazed upon the tall, slender, biologically masculine but utterly spiritually feminine presence of Delilah.

"Oh, you made it, you made it!" Athena shouted, hugging the girl.

"I said I would, Chilidog," Delilah retorted, planting a garishly painted mouth on Athena's cheek. "Oh my god, now look what you made me do. Everyone's going to think you've been whoring it up with Tammy Faye."

"Who's that, who's that?" Athena asked, running to Hannah's mirror, laughing at the perfect lip mark on her face.

"Someone you don't need to know," Delilah said, storming into the bathroom and grabbing Hannah from behind while she leaned over the sink. "Hannah Loughbridge, how's the world's sweetest and most innocent girl ever?"

"You really think that?" Athena sneered. "Oh my god you—" Delilah silenced Athena with a wave.

"Run along and wash your face, Cornflake," she said, "or they'll make us fly to the Ukraine in the luggage compartment."

"We have to go in 15 minutes," Athena said, slipping out of the bathroom. "Make Hannah hurry up for once."

"She's the least of my worries, Deviled Egg."

"Why do you keep calling me food?"

"Because you're so scrumptious I want to eat you."

"That's weird."

"Fine, Oven Mitt, be something practical."



As soon as Athena shut the bedroom door, Delilah's mirrored face turned to stone, her smile vanishing, her eyes wide with fear and accusation.

Hannah looked at her, looked away, continued applying lipstick.

"What's going on?" Delilah hissed.

Hannah grabbed a tissue, pressed her lips together against it, smiled into the mirror.

"God dammit, Hannah," Delilah whispered through her teeth, "I will not be any part of this if it's going to end up with you dead or tortured."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hannah said, briefly making eye contact with Delilah in the mirror, noticing for the first time that the beautiful face, made up the way only she could do it, was drawn and pale.

Delilah knew things. She had a sixth sense, particularly when the people she loved were in danger. And she had always loved Hannah. Which is why Hannah wished Delilah wasn't coming.

Delilah lowered her red mouth to Hannah's ear.

"Do you honestly think I didn't have any appointments this week?"

Hannah, staring into the mirror, turned her face to the left, to the right, smiling and scowling and simpering, as if ignoring the question. Meanwhile, her mind began whirring.

"I, personally, ruined a woman's 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, and I'm breaking the heart of a soloist at the Dallas Philharmonic, plus two brides who became bridezillas before I could hang up . . . but they told me I had to go with you."

Delilah peered at the door into the bedroom and added with a furious whisper. "And you know exactly who I'm talking about."

Hannah's mouth opened and her eyes went wide, as if she'd just been stung, as if she'd just been electrocuted, as if the frustraters were back in, turning and groping all at once, and she spun to look directly into Delilah's eyes.

"Why?" Hannah mouthed, not daring to speak the word.

"I have something to give you after I make you up Saturday, that's all I know," Delilah said.

"What?"

"Can't say."

"Okay, talk later," Hannah whispered, glancing at the door.

A scowl crossed Delilah's face before the smile returned, her demeanor transitioning so suddenly it left Hannah briefly disoriented.

"Let's put your hair up, Babydoll," she said, her voice returning to its full and buoyant volume. "Most of it tied in back, but with princess ropes."

"Princess ropes?" Hannah asked.

Delilah bound most of Hannah's hair in back with a forest green scrunchie, but she left two thick bunches hanging to frame her face.

"Practical and beautiful, the whole package when you fly," Delilah announced. "You ready to go?"

Hannah nodded into the mirror, turned, entered the bedroom, threw a handful of makeup supplies into her open bag, zipped it up and slid it onto the floor.

Delilah went to the bedroom door, turned the knob, found it locked.

"Athena! Oh my goddess, Sweetheart, I'm sorry for calling you food, please don't leave us here to die!"

Delilah pounded on the bedroom door, turned and scowled at Hannah.

"I'm sure you don't know the combination," she said.

"I don't."

"Athena, help us, don't leave us here, we're sorry!" Delilah screamed.

"I'm not the only one who knows the combination, Jesus!" came Athena's exasperated voice from the other side of the door. A moment later it opened, Athena's annoyance evident before her face softened. "Seriously, I was going to let you out. Or Mom could have if I died or something."

"I know, I know," Delilah said, barging into the hall with Hannah in tow. "I just panicked for a second."

The girls bade farewell to Laura and Ormek in the lounge with sincere hugs, bodies and bags were pressed into the elevator, and then into Delilah's car, where Hannah sat without chains for the drive to the airport.

After baggage was checked and tickets were issued, Hannah and Delilah had but one more indignity to suffer, being diverted to the subject security wing while Athena went through the standard line.

They were allowed in through a narrow gate to a pen where any uncertainty about their luggage or their persons could lead to an invasive search through their things or their clothes or their bodies themselves.

Hannah and Delilah were waved toward a table at the far end of the room, passing a naked black male suffering the examination of his genitals, a girl in nothing but her panties explaining parts from what looked like several cell phones they'd found in her suitcase.

"Hello, Sweetheart!" Delilah exclaimed, hoisting her suitcase before the woman standing on the other side of the table. "I wonder if you could be a dear and do a lab analysis on two of my meds?"

The woman raised an eyebrow and looked down, watching Delilah unzip her case, ignoring Hannah as she opened up her own bag.

"You see," Delilah said, reaching into a side pocket and pulling out two small containers, "I packed up a little something to calm my nerves in one of these old jars, and my estrogen in another, and they're both white and powdery and I can't tell these bad boys apart."

Ignoring Delilah, the woman pulled out a stack of leopard print panties, set them on the table, removed a pair of thigh-high leather boots, slid aside a trench coat.

"Seriously," Delilah said, the edge growing in her voice, "if I can't tell these apart, I'll be swinging low sweet chariot when I'm trying to upgrade my tits to third degree jiggle, and I'll be—"

"Everything back in, close it up," the woman said, sidling over to Hannah's bag to paw through her clothing, her shoes, her bras and panties.

"The lab closed today?" Delilah asked, disappointment rolling off her tongue.

The woman, finished with Hannah's things, waved them to the next stop, where, by virtue of appearance perhaps, they received nothing more than a pair of thorough friskings, hands on rumps, up skirts, against breasts and bellies, Delilah's penis earning some extra attention before they were pointed to the last step of the process, receiving travel tags.

"Chin up," said the brusque woman, using plyers to affix a large, cherry red plate of metal to Hannah's collar, to Delilah's collar.

"What does my tag say, what does my tag say?" Delilah shouted when they'd made it through subject security and back into general airport traffic.

"It's all capital letters," Hannah said, leaning forward and fingering the metal. "It's your name and number, and then DALLAS, TX, USA – MADRID, ES – ODESSA, UA."

“God help me if there’s a bargain on Simpemax Cream in Vladivostok,” Delilah warned.

On the jet, Hannah and Athena were seated beside each other, Delilah two rows back, all in first class, in a section where the chairs could be turned into beds.

Athena put her carry-on above, slid her purse beneath the seat in front. It clinked as she kicked it with her feet, Hannah looking down casually.

“Yes, I brought your chains,” Athena said. “Just in case.”

“Just in case what?”

“In case I feel like it,” Athena replied. “No chains on the plane, here and back, that’s our deal. But if . . . if . . . well, I’m in charge of you, and if something happens to you, I’m fried.”

Hannah stared out the window.

“So if I ask you to wear them, you just do, okay?”

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed.

“You know what Dad got, right?”

“No,” Hannah said. “They just said thanks.”

“Medical director for Ortho-Barre. Other stuff. A good conversation about a patent. But medical director for Ortho-Barre was the main thing.”

“What’s Ortho-Barre?”

“A big national chain of clinics, and Dad gets to decide all this stuff, and he has a bunch of other doctors working for him, and this big committee too he’s chair of, and . . . you know . . . you didn’t hurt.”

“Will he have to move?” Hannah sniffed, continuing to look out the window.

“No, he keeps running the clinic at Pallisades Medical, but he’ll go to Seattle a couple of times a month, and he’ll run things from his office, and do online meetings. And, I’m not supposed to know this, but oh my god, the money.”

Athena was, obviously, gushing with pride.

Hannah was jealous.

College junior Hannah Loughbridge, pre-med, was professionally jealous of Dr. Ormek Petrosyan.

It was the most ridiculous thing she’d ever felt. It was as ridiculous as that time Ormek was jealous of one of Athena’s friends, because she was

going to spend the night with Hannah.

But Hannah wanted Ormek's job.

Or a job like it.

Someday.

Slave girls didn't get jobs like that, however. They might become doctors, even specialists, but never medical directors.

Of anything.

No, it wasn't that Ormek had gotten the job. It's that Hannah had helped, allegedly at least, by lying down and spreading her legs, or getting on top of someone and spreading her legs.

What penis had she wrapped herself around, what vagina had she licked that propelled Ormek to this proud new achievement?

Ormek got medical director.

Hannah got douched.

"Hey," Athena said, putting her hand on Hannah's shoulder, the gesture unexpected, the next words even more so. "You'll get your time."

Hannah continued to stare, watched a woman in a yellow vest, standing beneath the wing, looking up at the sky.

No.

Athena could not possibly have any sense whatsoever of what Hannah was feeling. To the Petrosyans, to Athena in particular, Hannah was just a smart slave girl who dabbled in school because she had nothing better to do. Athena could not possibly know what Hannah was really feeling, could not even comprehend the heights of Hannah's ambition.

No.

The plane lurched backward, turned, taxied, took off.

Hannah got the window seat and watched Dallas disappear, the earth miniaturize, the sun set with unnatural speed, the beauty of the American South at night distill itself down to lights dispersed like galaxies, clumps of illumination here and there, darkness everywhere else, and as soon as the fasten seatbelt went off, Delilah was in the aisle.

"Who's up for a bathroom run?" she asked. "Athena?"

"Uh, the bathrooms are right back there," Athena said, pointing behind her. "I can probably go on my own, when I need to."

"Please," Delilah begged. "I'm afraid to go by myself."

"And they're for just one person," Athena added. "You have to go by yourself."

“Hannah,” Delilah said, clasping her hands between her breasts, “are you going to humor me, or are you going to be mean like Athena?”

Hannah marked her place in her magazine and stood, stepping over Athena’s feet.

“Have fun,” Athena said.

“We will, and you’re going to miss it all,” Delilah retorted.

The restrooms were placed just forward of the curtain that separated coach from first class, two on each side. Hannah found an empty one, opened the door and turned to find Delilah pressing behind her, pushing her into the tiny space and bolting the door closed.

“What are you going to do?” Delilah immediately hissed.

“I’m not sure anything,” Hannah said. “I haven’t heard from them in weeks.”

“I heard from them this morning,” Delilah whispered. “Trust me, it’s still on.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“You’re not going to be a martyr,” Delilah said. “I won’t have it.”

“It’s not up to you.”

Delilah sucked in her breath, eyes wide with horror.

“No, Hannah, no,” she hissed. “This isn’t you. You’re beautiful and brilliant and smart, but you’re not . . . a radical. They’re going to break you . . . if you live.”

“If they could break me,” Hannah said. “I’d already be broken.”

Delilah leaned back, hand fumbling for a tissue from the dispenser, her eyes filling with tears.

“I knew you were going to say that,” she bawled quietly into the paper. “I knew it. So I bought a new tear-proof liner and . . .” she looked with despair at the tissue in her hand. “Oh, it’s working.”

She looked at Hannah.

“Are people going to get hurt? Is it . . . terrorism?”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Oh no, not at all. I’m just going to talk to some people.”

“Who?”

“I can’t say.”

“Not just any old people then?” Delilah said, a half-smile on her face, the relief in her voice palpable. “Someone special?”

“You could say that, yes.”

“But it’s still dangerous. Admit it.”

“Things like this always are,” Hannah said. “But it’s just talking.”

“Do you need to pee, as long as we’re here?” Delilah asked.

“I could, but not with you here.”

“Honey, I trimmed your pussy hair fifteen minutes after we met.”

“I remember that,” Hannah said. “But no, it would be weird, and there’s not enough room here anyway.”

Hannah paused before she repeated her words.

“I remember that,” she said slowly. “I’ve lost some memories from the first few weeks, I think. But I remember you that day, like it was yesterday.”

Delilah’s eyes filled once again with non-streaking tears and she spread her arms as wide as the restroom walls would allow, drawing Hannah into a desperate bear hug.

“Nothing’s gonna happen to you, Babydoll. Nothing nothing nothing.”

Hannah hugged back with all her strength.

“It’s okay if it does,” Hannah said. “It might resolve some things.”

Delilah pushed her back, holding her shoulders and staring into her eyes.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve had to do some things . . .” Hannah said softly, wincing.

“What? You mean about the conference you just did?”

“Oh, no,” Hannah said, snorting. “Not at all. Other things . . .”

“Mean things?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve got every excuse,” Delilah said, nodding. “And I’m sure you had your reasons.”

“Okay,” Hannah said. “Get out so I can pee.”

Dinner was surprisingly good, given it was just chicken served on a plastic tray, and the red wine Hannah drank to help her sleep was good enough, and she and Athena turned in when the cabin lights were dimmed at 10, and she slept fitfully and missed her normal bed and got up to urinate at some point in the night, and saw through the open curtain into coach one of the circles of hell, a mass of humanity going to Europe seated almost upright, some with masks over their eyes and lolling heads, some reading, some awake and staring and obviously unhappy, and she reminded herself

to be grateful for the small things before she returned to her seat, where she slept soundly until the plane bumped down hard in Madrid.

“Hannah, damn you, do that somewhere else,” Athena mumbled groggily.

“Do what?” Hannah asked, flat on her back, staring at the bright crack around the window panel, which indicated a dawn she wasn’t quite ready for.

Athena rolled, sat up, rubbed her face and looked down at Hannah, puzzled.

“Never mind,” she said.

## Chapter 82: Girl Gods

The girls tramped together through Madrid customs, all three filling out forms and going through the line together because Spain didn’t split subject from free.

They were on the next plane by 9 that morning, all seated in the same row, all staying awake for breakfast, ordering coffee that proved particularly strong.

They reached Odessa by noon, had lunch by the water, checked into their hotel by 3:30.

The next three days were a whirlwind to Hannah, most of it spent at van Minsk, whose public headquarters occupied a refurbished palace with a second floor mezzanine overlooking the black sea. To Hannah’s relief – and Athena’s thinly-veiled disappointment – there was a great deal more to do at van Minsk than get measured and fitted. The girls, Delilah in tow the first two days, received crash courses in fabric weaving, silk production, dyeing and coloring, and the ways the artists of van Minsk (they were called artists, not tailors or designers) used artificial intelligence and a “dynamic color wheel” to bring together incongruous hues and shades and fabrics in the uniquely van Minsk way.

“All the things that are beautiful today were very strange, if not ugly, long ago or not so long,” announced a stocky Ukrainian woman with square glasses and green hair, standing before a classroom Wednesday evening. “Vision is not to know what is beauty today. Vision is to know what is tomorrow will be beauty.”



The good people of van Minsk, well aware that at least half their product ended up across the shoulders and around the hips and under the feet of subjects, treated Hannah and the other slaves as equals, no distinction made between servant and free in the measuring or the consultation or the high tea at 2:30 each afternoon or the way the girls and women – a dozen or so making the rounds with Hannah and Athena at any given moment – were spoken to by staff, and Hannah felt an equality there that had eluded her at almost all the other places she had been, for all her life.

All the fashion tourists were invited to blacken the soles of their feet and take ten steps on a broad strip of white paper, the marks they made subsequently fed into a computer scanner and analyzed for posture, gate, evenness of step – and the best footwear for it all.

Hannah, as soon as she'd completed the walk, turned to look at the black marks she'd made, remembering vividly the footprint she'd given to prove she was Hannah Loughbridge. That print conformed to the tiny print on her birth certificate and gave the authorities what they needed to declare her a subject, under collar, for life. She barely understood what was happening when she created that first print, had not the remotest conception of what would happen next.

She'd survived those days of wrenching change – the loss of her mother, the dissolution of the world she knew, the ripping away of her relative freedom – by imagining she would be bought by a man who would love her, free her and marry her. Nothing had gone as she'd wanted or expected. And yet, as she watched two workers carefully pick up the sheet and feed it reverently into a slot for scanning, she accepted that this is how things were, and she could have done worse. And she might certainly do worse eventually.

They stayed at The Orlovian, a boutique hotel two blocks from the palace, Hannah and Athena splitting a two-room suite one floor down from Delilah, walking to van Minsk first thing in the morning through chill late-winter air, finishing by 4, touring a cathedral or square or museum at Hannah's insistence before or after dinner. Delilah showed up now and then in the evening, but she hadn't signed up for the official fitting and her interest seemed lacking in the fashion anyway, and she remained vague about what she was doing during the day, but Hannah suspected it involved either sex or intrigue or both, and she thought no more on it because

Delilah's sexuality was a mystery to her and she preferred that it stay that way, and the less she knew about intrigue and Delilah the better.

All of it, of course, was mere buildup to the grand finale, the great Saturday event where Athena would buy her new perfectly fitted wardrobe in the morning and put on the best pieces after lunch and Hannah would get a few things too and Delilah would make them up and they'd have pictures made at van Minsk and then Athena was determined to crash an international economic gathering at an ultramodern brick and glass high-rise hotel and office building.

Her ultimate objective wasn't clear to Hannah, but it wouldn't matter. At 7, Hannah's objectives would take over.

Saturday morning, Athena bought five complete outfits, one for the classroom, two for going out on Saturday night, two for formal job interviews.

Hannah bought jeans in two shades of cyan, front and back, and a charcoal gray business suit, the broadly pleated skirt down past her knee, the jacket full of pockets where she could place so many things – makeup, money, phone (if she ever got one), checkbook, medicine, credit card (if she ever got one of those) – that it was by itself a statement, a garment of power and independence and accomplishment. Were she ever asked to participate in a conference because of her mind, and not her body, this is what she would wear.

Athena was beside herself, trying on one thing, then a second, then back to the first again, twirling before the three-paneled mirror and squeaking with her hands over her mouth while Hannah watched and waited and made short, nervous trips back and forth to the café where they served free chai and espresso under a domed medieval ceiling.

And Hannah thought and rehearsed and remembered and longed to finish this day without disaster or failure, and in her heart she felt sick because of what she was about to do.

On the way back from one of her chai trips, Hannah stopped to lean against a deep-set window where she could see spires and flat roofs and the glinting Black Sea.

"Buttercup," said someone huskily just behind her, and she spun around to find Delilah there, wearing an uncharacteristically mannish trench coat opened to reveal a black smock and gray slacks, face almost makeup

free, looking more like a worried boy than any version of Delilah Hannah had ever met before.

Immediately they hugged, Delilah burying her face in Hannah's shoulder, hands fumbling around her coat before they met at her lower back.

"Oh my god, you look amazing," Delilah whispered. "I put it in your lower left coat pocket. Make sure to use all of it."

"Are you going to lunch with us?" Hannah asked.

"Of course," Delilah said. "And then back here, and you are going to be two goddesses, embodiments of the miracle of beauty."

"I can't wait."

"What are you doing tonight?" Delilah asked, turning to look out the window, her arm around Hannah's back.

"Athena still wants to crash that United Nations party, and then I think we'll come back here and . . . she'll go to bed."

"What time?" Delilah asked, voice tense and strange.

"Around 7," Hannah said, struggling to speak evenly even though it didn't matter, no one was close enough to hear the quaver of her voice.

"No change in travel plans tomorrow?" Delilah asked.

"Nope, leaving in late morning, flying all day."

"Get back to Texas, please," Delilah begged. "And take me with you."

Lunch was in a nearby café with tall windows looking out on a broad boulevard drenched in sunlight, and Athena babbled excitedly about the rest of the day while Hannah and Delilah listened, each given to their own thoughts.

Back at van Minsk, however, Delilah brought forth her regular character in a bright, well-equipped salon.

The girls took their seats, Delilah wrapped their new clothes with sheets up to their necks, set up her equipment, circled them both, then bent first before Athena, took her face in her hands and whispered, "Girl God."

She shuffled to the next chair, repeated the ritual with Hannah.

"Girl God," she said. "From the earth to the heavens."

"Shouldn't it be goddess?" Athena asked.

"Girl God," Delilah replied.

For the next two hours, Delilah labored, sculpting hair, painting faces, maintaining a steady patter that filled Hannah with a mix of joy,

because Delilah's spirit was the greatest miracle in the room that day, and dread, because she wasn't sure if she'd ever again benefit from its presence. The closer drew the evening's assignation, the more nervous she became, the more ways she could imagine things going badly, ending disastrously, for either of the slaves in the salon today, or both of them.

When she could, Delilah kept her clients from seeing themselves in the mirror until her work was done, and the van Minsk salon was set to humor people like Delilah, floor-to-ceiling mirrors on the sides of the room but nothing in front of the chairs, where clients could see themselves.

Delilah finished, pulled off the sheets and shrunk back.

"Can we look?" Athena asked, not bothering to wait for the answer as she slid off her chair and hopped to the mirror.

"Oh. My. God," she groaned, staring at another girl's face, the face of a woman, the face of a god.

"Hannah!" Athena barked, turning to study the approaching slave girl. "Look! Look at yourself! Look at me!"

Hannah studied herself in the mirror dispassionately.

Why had they sent Delilah to do this? How did it help anyone, or anything, for Hannah to be made up like this? Did they want a beautiful corpse, if corpse she must become by night's end?

"We are," Athena sighed reverently, "unstoppable."

Hannah laughed and looked at another girl's face laughing, a girl who was beautiful when she laughed, although she certainly didn't feel remotely unstoppable. She was still flesh and blood, her mind still error-prone and vulnerable and ravaged by memories whole and missing.

"Wait," Athena said. "It's blinking. The makeup's blinking!"

"You both got Galaxy," Delilah said, stepping behind them. "It's been passe in the states for a few years, but it's still knocking 'em dead across the pond."

Hannah stepped in to study her face. Yes, microscopic lights, yellow and orange and green, were coming to life across her nose and over her cheeks, almost invisible in the salon's fluorescents.

"How long will they stay on?" Athena asked anxiously.

"Hours," Delilah said. "At least. They're powered by your skin."

"Turn off the lights!" Athena shouted.

Delilah stepped away, the room went mostly dark, and the little lights on Hannah's face bloomed like dawn, and she studied them closely,

then stepped back, and the glow gave her hope, for it did indeed look the way a distant galaxy might, reminding her that she was very small, and everything else was very big, and the things she was about to do should not, ultimately, matter much to anyone.

Or it looked like a city on a mountain at night, a place where she could live, and be worthy, and hide.

“We’ve got to go,” Athena said. “Now.”

“Where is this hootin’ holler?” Delilah asked.

“I don’t know,” Athena said, taking Hannah’s hand and leading her to the lounge’s broad doorway. “Hotel Creimeux is all I’ve got. We’re going to cab it.”

“Good luck!”

Athena’s first stop was the photographer’s studio, where she twitched impatiently while the photographer finished with a German girl.

To Hannah’s surprise, Athena was satisfied with a 15-minute session of shots, Athena alone, Hannah alone, each standing, seated upright and reclining, then the girls together, standing and seated, knees touching, and finally Athena seated while the family’s faithful slave girl stood behind her, hand on her lady’s shoulder.

“You can use those however you want,” Athena said, filling in and handing over the picture form. “I checked the publicity box.”

Athena turned to Hannah.

“C’mon,” she said. “Let’s go kick some United Nations ass.”

“How long are we staying?” Hannah asked as their cab muddled through a congested street between two rows of five- and six-story buildings.

“As long as it takes,” Athena replied majestically, eyes fixed on the road ahead.

“To do what?”

“To fuck with everyone,” Athena replied, “and probably change history.”

It was almost 5:30, and Hannah was starting to get nervous. She was sure they’d make it into the Creimeux lobby, and might even make it to the reception’s entry, where presumably they’d be turned away, Athena’s hopes dashed. But if they weren’t, how long could all this drag on? And would they be in a place where Hannah could obtain drinks for them both?

Because of the peculiar strength of the drink Hannah would offer Athena, they needed to be within five or 10 minutes of a taxi stand when the first sip was taken, and Hannah needed to be back at their own hotel by 7. But if Athena succeeded at whatever intrigue she was planning, Hannah would need to go to plan B.

And she had no plan B.

As they neared the hotel, traffic slowed to a crawl, a long line of limousines in front of them, each pulling up, its doors being opened by top-hatted footmen, its passengers being disgorged, men in black tie, women in a range of dress, some of it terrible in Hannah's eyes.

"Maybe we should get out now," Hannah proposed.

"No," Athena said flatly. "I want them to get our doors for us."

The wait seemed interminable to Hannah, but it was probably no more than 10 minutes until they reached the plaza that fronted the Creimeux, sliding out only after their doors were opened.

"This way," Athena panted, leading Hannah by the hand between a fountain and a bellhop stand, through the two-story arched glass entryway and into a lobby of profound scale, ceiling at least four stories high, mosaics and stylized arches and inset lights casting varied shades of grace upon the mortals below.

"This way, this way," Athena said, pulling Hannah along, toward the thickest bundle of black-tied men and horribly housecoated women, breaking through their ranks to arrive at a table draped in United Nations blue where 10 staffers sat in a row, checking names, issuing passes, answering questions, and allowing the select to pass through to the well-guarded doors behind them.

Athena barged up to an unoccupied female staffer.

"Hello," she said. "Do you speak English?"

"We all do," the girl replied with a Brooklyn accent. "What can we do for you?"

"This is Hannah Loughbridge," Athena said, gesturing toward Hannah. "Secretary Burleson is expecting her, but his office didn't get her registered, so I'm trying to see if we can get this straightened out."

The girl tapped out some things on her laptop, looked at Hannah.

"I find no Hannahs on the list whose last names start with an L," she said.

“Exactly,” Athena said. “Secretary Burleson’s office never got her registered, but he’s meeting with Bolivia in a few minutes, and Hannah is expected.”

“I can’t let her in if she’s not registered.”

“If Secretary Burleson comes out and says to let her in, could you?”

“Probably.”

“Okay, let me find him,” Athena said, rounding the table and heading toward the doors.

“Miss?” the girl said, watching Athena go. “Miss!”

Athena stopped, looking not chastened, not caught, not about to be arrested, but appearing for all the world like a mid-level functionary, albeit an exceedingly well put together mid-level functionary, who was suffering yet another interruption in her urgent mission.

“Huh?” Athena asked.

“You can’t leave her unattended,” the girl said.

“Oh, right,” Athena said. “Do you have anything you can put her in?”

“Let me check.”

The girl got up and approached a detachment of fatigued officers. One of whom broke away, stepped over to Hannah and pulled a set of handcuffs from a side pocket in his tunic.

Hannah turned and put her hands behind her back, but he motioned her to turn and hold them out in front, and he bound her that way, the cuffs warmed by his body. This was no more than a symbolic restraining, Hannah decided. If she disappeared, the girl at the table would be able to say she’d followed protocol. Hannah would still be gone, but no one could say the United Nations hadn’t tried to keep her.

“Stand over there,” the girl said, pointing to a place along the wall, and Hannah obeyed, content to forget herself for a moment, hands clasped before her middle, fingers turning links in the chain, mind setting aside her cares, taking in the humanity within which she was enveloped, the sound of a thousand people talking in a dozen tongues, wearing the uniforms and gowns and costumes of an event of regional, if not global significance.

When the door beside her opened into the official reception, she perceived another layer of commotion, more refined, more select, a martial tune seeping out, as if world leaders couldn’t congress without that kind of music to lubricate their words.

It was almost six, Hannah knew, the blue Odessa sky of late winter visible to her through the arched glass cross the lobby.

If Athena's tossed out we'll leave, Hannah thought to herself, go someplace for drinks, and I'll do what I must do. If Athena's arrested, I'll be arrested too, and she'll go to jail and call the consulate and get out in an hour or two, and I'll be stripped and tethered to the floor of some holding pen, and I might be there overnight, or I might be there for a month while the international paperwork gets sorted out. And I'll be done with them. If I make it back to Corpus Christi, and they email me or message me for some new project, I'll say no. This is too stressful. I've done enough.

Athena returned, by herself, not being hustled out between two soldiers, not being escorted by a true mid-level functionary whose job it was to show interlopers the door. Just alone, looking as beautiful as she had in the salon at van Minsk, but now with a flute of champagne in her hand.

She stepped up to the girl at the desk and handed her something small and the girl stared at it and nodded her head and motioned to the soldier, who stepped over and freed Hannah.

"Come on, they're waiting," Athena said, and she took Hannah's hand and pulled her through the door, into an entirely rarified exhibition of power, a place of peaked general's caps and tall men in bowties and patent leather, of women in gowns that sometimes flowed like waterfalls from shoulders and breasts and hips, and sometimes clung like earth to backs and bellies, but who all carried in their faces and spines the knowledge of authority, and Hannah paused before it while the eyes turned to her, and she knew what she was to them, something strange and unlikely, an entirely made up, beautiful, exquisitely dressed slave.

The room was large, perhaps 500 people here. There might have been a collar or two besides hers, but Hannah couldn't see any.

"Get a drink and blend in," Athena whispered with an elbow to Hannah's ribs. "I've got a plan."

## **Chapter 83: Hallowed Ground**

"How did you get us in here without the secretary?" Hannah asked.

"I had his card," Athena said.

"You got his card?"



“No, I made his card, a few weeks ago, in Corpus Christi,” Athena said, obviously very impressed with herself and trying to act like she wasn’t. “When I came out, I told the girl at the desk he couldn’t break away to tell her to let you in, but that he gave me his card to give her. I wrote ‘Hannah’ on it too, like a man would.”

“Where did you get the champagne?” Hannah asked, following Athena into the press, nearly brushing elbows with a tall man in a dark gray tuxedo who glanced at her as she passed before he resumed a conversation.

“People have them on trays,” Athena said. “You just take one as it goes by.”

“Yours is almost gone,” Hannah said. “Do you want another?”

“Whatever,” Athena said absently. “I’m looking for people.”

“I’m going to find a drink,” Hannah said, edging away from Athena. “I’ll get you another.”

“K’ bye,” Athena said.

Hannah spotted a tray laden with red wine, drifting through the room on the bent arm of a female server, no collar visible.

“May I take two?” Hannah said.

“Sure,” the girl said, lowering her tray.

Hannah grabbed two glasses by the stems, one in each hand.

“You’re drinking them both?” she asked, her accent neutral American.

“No, one’s for my owner,” Hannah said.

“Who’s your owner?” the girl asked, hoisting the tray back to shoulder height.

“Just another girl,” Hannah said. “You don’t know her.”

“I might,” she said. “I know most of the people here.”

“How?” Hannah asked.

“I work with them in New York.”

“I thought you worked for the hotel.”

“No, I’m volunteering this week to help out. Tonight I carry trays, other nights I do harder stuff.”

“What’s this conference about?” Hannah asked.

“You don’t know?”

“No,” Hannah said, heart catching in her throat. She should know what was going on here, shouldn’t she? Admitting she didn’t could get her kicked out, and Athena with her.

“I mean,” Hannah added quickly, “I know it’s something with the United Nations, but I didn’t know I was coming until today, so I didn’t do any research beforehand.”

“Moms and kids are dying in the sub-Sahara,” the girl said. “Water. So they’re developing a comprehensive plan. Drones with echo modules to spot wells, solar-powered drills and pumps, water purification strategies, education.”

“The whole week is just on that?”

“Yes,” the girl said. “The plan is to save 5,000 lives, give or take, in the next three years . . . give or take.”

“Why are there soldiers here?” Hannah asked. “I mean, at the reception?”

“Some of the areas are conflicted, so they’re here to work that angle, to keep the doctors safe.”

Hannah understood now.

This was hallowed ground. For as long as these people were here, this room of uniforms and black tie and gowns, well-appointed or otherwise, was a sacred space, and she silently cursed herself for who she was and what she had done, and for disparaging any of these people, even if she’d done it only in her mind.

Hannah Loughbridge, set down by happenstance in the midst of this gathering, was the profanity here, the unspoken curse, the creature who did not belong.

So was Athena.

Where was the girl?

Hannah cast her eyes over the room, didn’t find Athena, but noticed a long table against the nearest wall, lamps on either end, a floral arrangement in the middle.

She’d gotten Athena a drink. Now she needed to find her.

She stepped to the table, set both drinks down, reached into her coat pocket and drew out the thing Delilah had dropped in earlier.

It was a little glass tube with wax stoppers wedged into both ends, an innocent-looking white powder shifting within.

Hannah pulled out a stopper, turned with one of the drinks in her hand, sipped, looked for Athena and didn’t find her, looked at a man staring at her until he looked away, turned back and emptied the powder into the second wine.

As the last few flakes of powder dissolved, like white islands yielding to a rising blood-red sea, she spun and made her way back into the throng, dodging this way and that, determined to find the Petrosyan girl, hopeful she hadn't already been kicked out.

To her surprise, Athena was not just still very much present, but holding forth before a half dozen men and women, one of them a female officer with a single star on her cap. Did that mean general?

"You can do so much more with private enterprise," Athena declared as Hannah neared. "And if you got subjects involved—"

Athena was holding an empty wine glass. The champagne flute was gone. Was this her second drink? Or her third?

"Subjects?" a round man shorter than Athena echoed, looking up at her.

"Well," Athena said slowly. "Owned people."

Hannah arrived in the awkward silence that followed. For she was one of the owned people, offering her mistress a drink.

"We don't use subjects," said one of the women, an older lady in a black, silver-sequined gown.

"Hey, Hannah!" Athena said.

Athena took the proffered wine glass and sipped gracefully, the embodiment of a young sophisticate but for the empty glass in her other hand.

"Hannah would be perfect," Athena boasted. "She's a genius. She could probably figure out everything you're trying to do in Africa in half a day."

"We don't use subjects," the woman said again.

"Why not?"

"A variety of reasons," the woman said. "What did you say your name was?"

"Athena. Athena Petrosyan. And this is Hannah. She's . . . with me."

"And what is your role with the water initiative?" the woman asked, while the other guests looked on. Hannah, trying to look bored while she fixated on the amount of wine Athena was drinking, glanced at the faces briefly and understood their sentiment: indulgent amusement.

"We don't really have a role," Athena said. "But Hannah would be great. And you'd need me to manage her. And I could manage everyone

else, too.”

“How did you get in here?”

“Oh,” Athena said, taking a slow sip of wine. “We sort of crashed it.”

“Then maybe you should consider—” the short man barked before the woman beside him put her hand on his arm.

“Miss Petrosyan,” the woman said. “Would you please show yourself out?”

“We have to leave?”

“You do.”

“Can I finish my wine?” Athena asked. “Hannah just got it for me.”

“Of course.”

Athena downed half the glass, turned, reconsidered and turned back.

“Look me up if you like my idea,” she said. “Athena Petrosyan. Dallas, Texas.”

“We’ll be sure to do that.”

The girls made their way to the exit, albeit following Athena’s meandering whims as she snatched something wrapped in bacon from one tray, a sausage puff from another, set her empty wine glass down on a table and approached a man who looked vaguely like her father.

“Are you a doctor?” she asked, interrupting him in mid-sentence.

“No,” he said, looking first at Athena, and then into Hannah’s eyes. “Why, do you need one?”

“No, I was just wondering.”

As she sauntered, Hannah faithfully in tow, Athena continued to consult her wine, taking broad swigs with every third or fourth step.

Hannah barely sipped, content to leave most of the wine in the glass, content to leave the near-full glass on the table when they left the reception hall.

Athena set her empty glass next to Hannah’s, turned and raised her hand.

“Yes,” she exulted, waiting for Hannah to raise her hand in turn, the two palms meeting with a quiet pop.

“So . . . that was a success?” Hannah queried.

“Uh, yeah,” Athena said, taking Hannah’s hand in hers and leading her back to the glass doors of the hotel lobby. “And I’m just getting started.

There's this place called the Elysium not far from here where ambassadors and other big dicks hang out where I'm gonna—"

Athena lost her footing briefly, pressed her hand against a column, turned and smiled at Hannah.

"Power high!" she exclaimed, eyes bright with enthusiasm, not remotely embarrassed. "I'm so kicking ass tonight!"

"Do you want to take a taxi?" Hannah asked.

"God no, I want people to see us," Athena gushed, tugging Hannah into the cool night air. "We're like two, um, chairs . . . um, bears . . . Wait. Where was I?"

Athena traced a short arc left while her body seemed to want to go straight, leaning oddly into the curve.

"Damn, the wind on this ship is gonna blow me overboard," she said.

"Is that, um, Elysium place this way?" Hannah asked, grabbing Athena by the upper arm, guiding her down to a broad promenade, thick with people, that lay between the hotel's shrubbery and the street.

"It's by the . . . the . . . the rainbow I think," Athena said, looking up toward the twilight sky. "Wait, it's all red. Rainbows are supposed to have . . . blue . . . I think."

Hannah, tightened her grip on Athena's arm and steered her to the curb.

"A cab can get us there," Hannah said.

"No," Athena protested, resisting feebly. "I want to . . . fly."

A single girl stepped before them, raised her arm, quickly summoned a cab that zipped up to the curb.

"Delilah?" Athena said to the girl, who opened the door and helped bundle Athena into the vehicle's back seat. "That looks just like Delilah."

"It might be," Hannah said, sitting next to Athena and returning her hands to Athena's upper arm. The girl on the curb took the seat up front.

"The Orlovian," Delilah commanded.

"Delilah?" Athena mumbled. "Delilah? Make Hannah not hurt my arm anymore."

Neither Hannah nor Delilah said anything in response and Athena, without any stimulus beyond the faces and cars of downtown Odessa, dropped her head, a single string of saliva dropping from her lower lip.

"Get me a tissue," Hannah said.

Delilah's hand appeared almost immediately, and Hannah patted the girl's face and leaned back, breathing heavily, knuckles almost white around Athena's arm.

The trip back to the hotel was mercifully short, but nothing else was easy.

Athena was sound asleep, pure deadweight. Delilah paid the fair and leaned into the back seat, taking one shoulder, leaving the other to Hannah, the two girls hauling the sleeping third out and onto the curb.

"What?" Athena barked. "What?"

"Night's over, Honey," Delilah said. "You knocked 'em dead."

"Who?"

"Everyone you met," Delilah said. "It's almost midnight. Now let me get you to the elevator."

"Ohhhh," Athena said weakly.

Delilah, Athena's arm wrapped around her shoulder, turned to glare at Hannah, terror in her eyes, and she pointed toward a black van, idling across the street, and mouthed the words "That's your ride," before she turned to hustle the limp body of Athena Petrosyan through the ornate double doors of The Orlovian.

Hannah, heart thumping, crossed the street, stepped onto the sidewalk and approached the van, its door sliding open noiselessly as she neared.

She glanced at the two men in the front seats and settled into the long seat along the vehicle's side.

An overhead light came on, so bright it made her squint.

The man in the passenger seat turned to regard her as the door slid closed.

"You're late," he said.

"I've been busy," Hannah shot back.

"Do you know what to do?" he asked.

Hannah looked at him, looked away, feigning annoyance to hide her fear.

The light turned off, plunging her space into grayness.

"Take off all your clothes," he said.

## **Chapter 84: Into a Private Dinner**

Hannah leaned forward, angling her coat off and down her arms.

“Where are the hangars?” she asked.

“We don’t have them.”

“I was told you’d have hangars,” Hannah said. “I need something to hang my clothes on.”

“Why do you care about your clothes?” the man asked.

Hannah looked up sharply.

“I just got this suit, and I want it taken care of,” she said, setting her coat down and unbuttoning her blouse. “It needs to be waiting for me when you pick me up.”

“Clothes are that important to you?”

She continued to study him, his face lit by the headlights of a passing truck.

He was smirking at her through round glasses, his long black hair tied behind his head, an upturned black mustache beneath his nose, his outfit as casual as Hannah’s was professional, a gray tracksuit with red trim.

“Baubles,” he added.

Hannah leaned forward to pull off her blouse and unclasp her bra, her cheeks burning.

“How much time will it take to get there?” she asked.

“Twenty minutes.”

“Define bauble,” she said.

“You want to talk about this?” he asked.

“No,” Hannah said. “But you seem to.”

“Alright, very well,” he said, his accent hard to place. Maybe Russian. “A bauble is something that causes needless distraction from—”

“Like sex,” Hannah said, kicking off her heels.

“Huh?”

“Like sex,” Hannah said, twisting to release the button on her skirt’s right side. “Needless distraction. Sex.”

The man in the front seat blinked.

“Or you,” Hannah said, slipping off her panties and tossing them onto the pile. “You’re not driving. You’re not helping. Needless distraction.”

The driver, stopped at a red light, turned to stare at Hannah.

He was black and bearded, looking distinctly American, in a brown leather jacket, black button down and red tie.

Suddenly he smiled, disarmingly, and hooted with laughter as he turned and hit the gas.

Maxim, facing forward now, raised his head to join his colleague in mirth.

Something was funny.

For a time, they drove in silence, except for the occasional chuckle of one or the other of the men.

“Do you have any last questions for me?” the man asked finally, turning to stare at Hannah.

“Yes, where do you plan to get my hangars?”

“A serious question?” he asked, smirking.

“There are department stores around here,” Hannah said. “Ask.”

She looked at the pile of clothes, picked up her bra and panties and stuffed them into the pocket of her coat, and she arranged everything else neatly on the bench beside her, skirt and coat and blouse laid out, shoes side by side on the floor.

“Your bag is under the seat,” said the smirking man.

Hannah peered between her legs, found a courier’s bag in medium leather, a long leather strap with distressed brass fittings.

“Valence Hall,” she said, running her finger across the logo, distinct enough she could see it in the dark. This was as much a bauble as her suit, but she said nothing.

She unclasped the flap, peered inside, felt by trembling touch what she expected to find, a tablet, a thick sheaf of paper, and three pens.

“Do not argue with him,” the smirking man said.

“Argue with whom?”

“You know whom.”

“Why would I argue with him?”

“Because it’s your nature,” he said. “It’s how you survive. It’s why you’re in this van tonight.”

Hannah nodded.

“You’re young, so you still believe that—”

“You don’t know what I believe,” Hannah blurted.

“Please,” he said, raising his eyebrows, no longer smirking, just looking like someone who needed her cooperation for something he considered very important.



“You believe – or, okay, maybe you believe – that the worse someone is, the longer they have been terrible, the more readily their ideas will fall to logic. And you would be the opposite of correct. Because the people who do terrible things day after day must dispense with logic to survive, in the same way that you have dispensed with politeness to survive. You are about to meet a man who has worked a lifetime to construct a complete artifice from superstition and the pieces of the universe he has been given. You cannot defeat him with any words that have ever been created or placed in order.”

Hannah raised the bag’s strap over her head, dropped it to her left shoulder, the brown leather cool against her bare hip.

The men in the front seat spoke quietly to each other, their voices inaudible to Hannah, but the smirking man was holding his phone, a small map glowing on it, and Hannah suspected they were nearing their destination and talking about that, and she thought of Athena, sleeping it off, and she felt a terrible pang of guilt for depriving the girl of whatever it is she’d hoped to accomplish tonight, as nonsensical as it might have been.

The van stopped. The door clicked and slid open.

“Good luck,” said the smirking man.

Hannah rose, bent, went to the opening, looked back.

“Take ‘em down, Girl,” said the black man.

“Find hangers,” she said back, and she stepped onto the street, first looking down at the pavement for glass and metal.

There was nothing there that could tear her soles, but the cobblestones were rough and cold and she sucked in her breath.

The van sped off and she adjusted the bag, guiding the strap between her breasts, noting that her nipples had gone hard, the way they did in the cold, and when she was aroused or agitated. She was definitely two of the three at present.

She gazed around the narrow alley where she’d been deposited, a single lamp on a post to her left, scooters parked beneath a window near it. She was alone but for a man walking his dog, a girl on a bike approaching her in silhouette.

The walls that lined the alley on either side were a patchwork of brick and stone and cinder block, each edifice three or four stories high, probably built and added to and torn down and built up again countless times in the last few centuries.

Before her stood a black door, non-descript, solid, metallic.

She knocked on it. It opened and a Chinese man's face appeared, peered into her eyes, looked down at her body, then her collar, returned to her eyes. If her nudity surprised him, he didn't show it, moving back and allowing her to pass.

She stepped through a narrow hall, the sounds of a busy kitchen to her right, voices speaking in at least one foreign language, the smells of rich European cooking wafting with the light through a cracked door, and reminding her that she was hungry.

Why did the smirking man provoke her? Did he mean to set her on edge?

Yes, she realized. She was feeling hard now. As hard as her nipples. Sharp. Mean. He'd been pushing her buttons strategically, driving her to the performance she needed. That's why they'd laughed. Because he'd elicited from her what they both wanted, an angry, rude, brusque slave girl, and when they'd drawn her out, they laughed, because they thought it was funny when a girl, naked except for her collar, hurled insults.

She reached a dining room, romantically lit, a few couples speaking quietly over wine and small plates, a few eyes cast her way, as they always were, a man by himself in the corner, talking to his phone.

A girl sat at a desk near the front entrance to the restaurant, and Hannah approached her with her hand curled around her bag.

The girl looked up, looked down at Hannah's golden triangle of pubic hair, looked back up.

"The Alexander the Great room," Hannah said.

"What business 'ave you there?" she asked, her accent distinctly French.

"Maxim sent me."

"You are not Maxim?"

"Maxim is a boy's name," Hannah said. "I am here in his place."

"I was told only Maxim to go there."

"That's fine," Hannah said. "I'll have Maxim call them tomorrow and say you wouldn't let me in. What's your name?"

The girl scowled and stood, picking up a thick ring of keys and turning to open a door behind her desk. "Follow me, but if they says you are not coming in, you 'ave to go away."

They climbed a narrow staircase to a long hall lit by candle sconces, voices emanating from doors to the right, to the left.

Hannah counted a half dozen doors before they reached the Alexander the Great Room, its name in brass letters at eye level. The girl unlocked the door just enough to put her head in.

“Someone ‘ere isn’t Maxim but she say ‘e send her,” she said.

“What’s her name?” a male voice asked.

“Hannah,” Hannah said, struggling to raise her voice above a whisper.

“‘er name is ‘annah.”

“Fine.”

The girl pushed the door open and stepped back, and Hannah walked in to a small, private dining room, a table large enough for eight, but only three men seated there.

“Hello,” she said, stepping in, throat so tight she struggled to say the word, and she looked into three startled men’s faces, one older, seated at the head of the table, and his two sons, both seated to his right.

To the older man’s left, a full plate waited, steak and gravy and mashed potatoes and a medley of vegetables, beside it a small plate with bread, a small salad next to that, a glass of water without ice, an empty wine glass.

The men’s dishes were half empty, the red wine in their glasses half gone, a bottle in the middle of the table.

Hannah went to the empty setting and pulled the strap over her head, setting the bag on the table.

“Where’s Maxim?” the man barked.

“He couldn’t make it.”

“Who are you?”

“Maxim’s friend.”

Hannah pulled the chair out and sat down, feeling the slightest twinge of guilt as she placed her bare openings against the chair’s silk. Tempted to set the napkin beneath herself, she set it above instead, over her lap, picked up a fork and dove into the salad, looking into each man’s eyes as she chewed.

They were normal men. Mortals.

Sitting here, their bodies entirely separated from the evil they had birthed and nurtured, they looked utterly human – the avuncular Druhler

Fairchild, the outgoing Brighton, the analytical Leston.

Three normal people, Hannah told herself, like the Petrosyans and all their wealthy friends, like Dr. Johnson, like the great people she had bedded just a few days ago.

She had seen their faces, felt their breath, tended to their sex organs, witnessed their foibles, heard them groan and felt them writhe through the vagaries of orgasm, and such people no longer frightened her, or intimidated her, or even impressed her much. At least when she could see them in the flesh.

Three normal men.

“I don’t like this,” the elder Fairchild said.

“You’re not going to,” Hannah replied.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We’ll get into it,” Hannah said, looking at her bag. “Let me eat first.”

“Where’s your owner?”

“Texas.”

“You’re American.”

“Yes.”

“Why are you naked?”

“Because I took my clothes off. It’s one of your rules, I think.”

Hannah looked at the men again, each staring back at her.

She took another bite of salad, chewing, returning gazes until they looked away.

Eating helped. Moving her mouth to do something other than talking helped.

The timing was up to her.

If what happened next got her kicked out by the Fairchilds, she wanted to leave with some food in her belly.

“We’re here to do business, correct?” Fairchild said, his tone softening, sounding almost hopeful.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“After I’ve had some dinner,” Hannah said, looking up again before she directed her attention to her steak, separating a thin, medium-rare slice from the end. “I’m hungry.”

After the second bite of steak, Hannah unclasped the bag and pulled out the tablet, tapped it on.

“What’s this?” Fairchild demanded.

“A show,” Hannah said, popping out the little strut in the back of the tablet, setting it upright before her audience, hitting the only icon on the screen, for a video.

A girl appeared immediately, a collared slave, sitting naked in a plastic chair, her wrists and ankles chained together, the wall behind her blank, just an expanse of white.

Hannah guessed her to be about 30, her eyes young but her skin a little weathered, lined faintly, the skin of someone used for outdoor work.

“What’s your name?” asked a woman’s voice.

“Baye.”

“Baye what?”

“Baye, um, Cardiff.”

The girl was thin, her face a little long and narrow, but with makeup, she would be as pretty as any other. She smiled when she said her last name, adding, “I just went by my first name, or my number, at the orchard.”

“What was your number?”

“Zero Zero Eight. It’s the last three numbers on my collar.”

She attempted to raise her hands, as if to point to the number engraved in the ring around her neck, carved into the tag dangling there, but her wrists were bound to her feet with a leg-length chain, stopping her hands at breast height, and she seemed embarrassed and leaned back.

“How long were you at the orchard?”

“Since I was 19.”

“What were you doing before then?”

Hannah looked at the Fairchilds, at each face in turn, all three frozen, as if carved from a solid material, none chewing, none showing any expression, jaws clenched.

“I was a . . . a teacher. An assistant teacher, I mean. At an elementary school.”

“What did you do at the orchard?”

“I picked produce. Nuts. Almonds. Cabbage.”

“Is that all you did?”

“No,” she said, closing her hands and looking away, her legs shifting, her chains rattling.

“What else did you do?”

“Well,” she began, clearly uncomfortable. “They said . . . I could be recreational . . . I could go somewhere else. Because I was . . . bored. And so I . . . practiced, sort of. With the . . . others there. And got assessed. Men.”

“You had sex?”

The girl smiled awkwardly, leaned forward, looked to the left of the camera, where presumably her interrogator was sitting, and she nodded.

“I was training,” she said. “I was getting better. It’s just . . . I was a little nervous . . . anxious.”

Her voice trailed off, she drew in her breath and spoke again.

“Is that why you bought me?”

“I didn’t buy you.”

“Is that what I’m for?”

“No.”

“Then what am I for?” Baye asked. “Why am I here?”

“How did you go from teaching to the orchard?”

“I didn’t pay my bills.”

“You went broke?”

“No, I had the money. I just . . . I don’t know . . . I . . . no one was getting it. I was paying for things. I thought I was. But no one got the money. It was really weird. Car, apartment. Student loans. And . . . so . . . they picked me up, and . . .”

The girl closed her mouth and grimaced, working through what Hannah sensed was an ancient pain. Ancient but still raw, still unresolved.

“Why didn’t they get the money, Baye?” the woman asked. “Do you know?”

“I . . . screwed up, I guess,” she said, offering a little laugh at her own expense.

“What was life like at the orchard?”

“The work was pretty hard,” she said. “Ten hours a day six days a week in the summer, eight and six in the winter, Sundays off, the room once a month, or sometimes more.”

“The room?”

“Where we were punished. If we’d been bad. Or they just liked us to go once a month anyways.”

“How were you punished?”

“They just . . . they’d pop our bottoms. Or whatever.”

“What did you wear for work?”

“Sometimes a little . . . they called them shifts, when it got cold enough. But most of the time, we were all naked.”

## Chapter 85: The Movie Continues

There was something artless about Baye Cardiff, Hannah thought, something innocent, naïve, as if the part of her that was ready to become a woman had been stunted, as if her personality had frozen within her at age 19, the demands of orchard work requiring no further advancement of disposition.

That would be me, Hannah thought, if I’d been sold for agriculture instead of recreation, if I’d gone to a farm instead of a rich family’s home.

I would still be innocent.

Like her.

“Baye,” the woman said, pausing. Her voice might have been familiar. Could this be the voice from the cathedral? Hannah wasn’t certain.

“Baye, what if I told you someone arranged to divert your funds?”

The girl sat, stared.

“What if I told you we have evidence that someone placed a fiduciary directive on your bank account?”

“I wouldn’t know what that was,” she said, spreading her bound hands.

“We have evidence that someone got hold of your bank account, and when you sent out payments, they went . . . elsewhere, and notices got blocked, and mail was taken.”

“Why would that happen?”

“Did you ever get in a fight with anyone?”

“No. Well, little fights sometimes. There was a girl . . . she got the room almost once a week, but she never learned, and she kept working little schemes, like taking things, so I’d—”

“Did you fight with anyone before you got sold to the orchard? When you were still free?”

“Huh?” she said, shaking her head slowly. “Oh no.”

“I don’t mean a fight . . . with your hands,” the woman said patiently. “I mean an argument. Or a—”

“Oh, yes, the day they took me. I argued with everyone. But it didn’t change anything.”

“Did you ever have words with Druhler Fairchild?”

“Druhler Fairchild?” Baye said, looking up as she pondered the name. “Okay. He’s family, sort of. Second cousin or something.”

“Yes, but did you have words with him?”

Baye leaned forward, clasped her hands, rested her elbows on her thighs and stared at the floor.

“Not really words . . .” she said, gazing down.

“What happened, Baye?” the woman prodded, gently.

“It was with his sons,” Baye replied, speaking slowly. “Not with him.”

“What about his sons?”

“They’re really rich,” she said, smiling again, leaning back. “They had this big house. And we all would stay there sometimes, different family. And his sons . . . Les . . . Lest . . . and . . . Brighten . . . Brighton . . . Brighton and Leston.” She nodded as the memory of names returned to her. “They were older, and we were there, and . . .”

Baye sucked in her breath and looked to the left of the camera, smiling awkwardly, her face contorting with a wincing regret.

“This is hard to talk about,” she said. “It’s sort of . . .”

“What did they do, Baye?”

“I was 14.”

“What did they do?”

“We were all drinking,” she said. “We got something from the liquor shelf upstairs, and we were in the basement.”

“Did something happen after that?”

Baye nodded, her mouth curving in a tight, toothy smile of a regret.

“They,” she began. “Well, you know . . . they . . . There was a bed. So they . . . Both of them. On me. One. And then the other . . . Because . . . Because.”

Baye stopped at that word. There was nothing that should follow. There was no because.

“Baye, may I ask you a very personal question?”



“Um, yeah, I guess.”

“Did Leston Fairchild penetrate your vagina with his penis?”

Baye looked to her left, frowned, looked back.

“Yes.”

“When you were 14, and he was 20?”

“Yes. I guess he was 20. That’s what he said.”

“Did Brighton Fairchild penetrate your vagina with his penis, when you were 14 and he was 18?”

“Yes.”

“Did you want them to do that to you?”

“Not really. I guess not. No.”

“You were 14.”

“I was. So that made it sort of illegal.”

“It was illegal. Completely.”

“But it bothered me too,” Baye said. “Not just because of the law. I knew they were rich. And they let us stay in that house. But I, sometimes . . . nightmares. I felt bad. It sort of bothered me, about sex after that. Any time I did it. And there was a guidance counselor at the school where I was teaching. And he said, go talk to them. It was wrong. Tell them how you feel. It could help you heal. So I . . . so I did. I sat down with Mr. Fairchild. But I remembered just one then. Just Brighton. It was later that I remembered Leston. So I told him only about Brighton.”

Hannah heard Fairchild suck in his breath. “You too, Leston?” he whispered.

“What did he say?” the woman asked Baye, the video continuing.

“He was very nice. He said he’d look into it. He said he’d help me. We made another appointment. He called me a few times. He said he was very concerned, but very busy, so we talked every now and then over a few months, and he asked me to . . . to talk to him only . . . and we’d—”

“How soon after that did you get picked up for not paying your bills?”

“Huh? Oh, I don’t know. A half a year. Maybe less. I don’t know.”

“What if I told you Druhler Fairchild put the fiduciary directive on your account?”

“Huh?”

“He put the fiduciary directive on your account.”

“He did?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“That’s why we’re talking today, Baye. But we think it was . . . to make you go into default . . . to have you taken. To protect his sons.”

Hannah leaned forward. She’d never seen this girl or this video before. The three men seated at the table were completely forgotten as she watched Baye Cardiff process.

“So he . . . sold me?”

“No, not directly,” the woman said. “Your creditors did. But it was because of what Mr. Fairchild did that you got sold.”

“Why?” she asked.

“To protect his sons.”

The girl stared, eyes focused on something distant now, a sort of horror creeping into her face as she tried to work this new information into her understanding of the universe.

“But that would be . . .” she stammered. “To do that to someone . . . that would be . . .”

“Do you know what Mr. Fairchild does?” the woman asked.

“I think prisons, and he owns some other places.”

“His companies run most of the slave facilities.”

“Does he own the orchard?”

“No.”

“Okay, but . . .”

“Baye, you don’t have to believe me right now, but we have the paperwork, on that fiduciary directive, and I can show it to you.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow. We’re going to free you.”

“Huh?”

“We bought you to talk to you, and to set you free.”

“Huh?”

Baye’s eyes were fighting to focus on something, the woman beside the camera perhaps, the camera itself, her gray eyes looking directly into the lens.

“We have limited funds for this,” the woman was saying, “but you were someone we wanted to set free. And we wanted to talk to you. So tomorrow, if you want, you’ll—”

“What will I do?” Baye said.

“Go back to your parents,” the woman said. “We contacted them this afternoon. They are very happy.”

“Oh, god,” Baye said, her face breaking, eyes going immediately wet. “Okay. Yeah. Okay. Thank you. Thank you.”

Baye looked down at her feet, sliding forward and backwards in her chair as her chains rang out, with the look of someone struggling to absorb information after a decade of absorbing very little.

“Baye,” the woman said.

Baye continued to rock.

“Baye, will you do what we say?”

“What?” Baye said, staring at her feet.

“We’re going to take off your chains, and give you clothing, if you want it.”

“Okay. Okay.”

“But we’re going to confine you tonight, to keep you safe. And you need to follow our instructions. Sudden freedom after so many years can be very difficult.”

“Okay,” said the rocking girl, and Hannah wasn’t sure if Baye understood or not.

“And tomorrow, we’ll cut off your collar and take out your chip. And your parents said they can be here by 3 to bring you home.”

Baye’s shoulders shook, her head dropped, and an unearthly wail emanated from the little speakers on the tablet and into the Fairchild’s private dining room.

“Is that okay, Baye?” the woman asked. “Baye, is that okay?”

“Yes,” she said, before she issued another guttural howl.

The screen went black.

Hannah looked at the men. No one was moving. No one was, quite possibly, breathing. Druhler Fairchild was utterly still, one elbow on the table, one hand on the arm of his chair, his elbow up.

The screen came to life again and Stacey appeared, bound to her bars with her arms stretched over her head, to be punished for making a mess of her cage.

“Why is the camera on?” Stacey asked, and she looked up and yanked on her handcuffs.

“This has to be documented,” said a girl’s voice. Hannah’s voice, but there was something strange about it. Electronically distorted. Deeper.

A little monstrous.

“For who?”

“For the sponsors of the research,” said the monster. “New Life.”

“Why?”

“In matters of discipline, documentation is required.”

“Who’s going to see it?” Stacey asked.

“Probably no one. But I have to document it.”

A dark-haired girl stepped into the cage, took her place beside Stacey. Athena’s face had been blurred out, but Hannah knew who it was.

“Five, right?” said the strangely modified voice of the dark-haired girl.

“Yes. But first . . .”

“Huh?” asked the dark-haired girl.

“Stacey. Can you go over how you . . . were disobedient?”

“Uh,” Stacey said, pausing to swallow. “Okay. I sort of . . . made a mess. I left things . . . everywhere. And . . . and . . . I’m sorry. And . . . I’m going to try to do better.”

“Ready?” the dark-haired girl asked.

“Go ahead.”

A dull thud sounded as the dark-haired girl swung her rod.

“Ooh!” Stacey shouted, body jerking, breasts swinging between the bars.

Another thud.

“Oh, fuck!”

The girl hopped, the sound of a chain ringing, then another thud, and Stacey groaned out and pulled at her handcuffs, still moving when the fourth and fifth swats landed.

“Ow!”

The screen went black, and then a single word appeared in a simple, sans serif font: “Discussion.”

Hannah looked at the men blankly, watching their stony faces.

“Do you know who that was?” Hannah asked.

The men seemed to waken, eyes diverting from the screen to Hannah, who looked at them briefly before she turned her attention to her steak, slicing off another sizeable chunk.

None of the men ventured a guess, so Hannah put the meat into her mouth and looked at them, saying between chews, “Stacey Fairchild.”

She waited a moment for the name to sink in, slicing off more steak, chewing, cutting.

“I think you know her dad,” Hannah said helpfully. “Blaise Fairchild.”

“I know who her father is,” Druhler Fairchild growled, finally finding his voice.

“He did some work for you,” Hannah said, digging into the mashed potatoes for the first time. They were salty and buttery, overall a well-done accompaniment to the meal. “Eminent domain. We’ll be sending him that one.”

“What do you want?” Fairchild demanded.

“Can we watch a little more first?” Hannah asked, upending the wine bottle, pouring a judicious quantity into her glass. The tablet still said “Discussion” but she was done discussing, so she sipped her wine, full of floral notes, and with a good finish. She reached for the bottle, turned it, angled it up to read the label. Goethe. A Bavarian wine. She was surprised it wasn’t French.

The tablet screen went dark, brightened again, and Druhler Fairchild appeared, sitting in a room of elegant furniture, a plate of food in his lap, the camera mounted somewhere above his head, the smirking man from the van sitting across from him.

Hannah listened as Fairchild explained his creation of the modern subject system, mapped out his dreams for a global empire of slavery that others would have to build, a hundred million under collar in America alone, watched him throw a contract into the fire because it listed all his monopolistic holdings in one place.

There was more. A girl getting taken under the PUMI law, crying and screaming as she was chained in a medical clinic lounge because they’d found something in her body, never specified, that someone wanted to study.

There were other, briefer vignettes – grainy footage from a punishment clinic where two girls hung and cried, male and female slaves discussing their lives, their treatment and mistreatment, the labs where they’d been studied, the hours they’d worked or spent having sex on command, and then pictures of the politicians who’d enabled it all, enacting and enforcing Fairchild laws, shown standing proudly beside the Fairchilds, father or one of the sons or all three.

The screen faded with the ominous words, “More to Come,” before it went to black.

Was Hannah’s scholarship performance one of the more to comes? she wondered. Would a video of her, naked and chained, accepting a scholarship and talking about being punished, make the library of shame?

Hannah reached into the bag, pulled out a set of contracts, thicker and weightier than the tablet.

“Sign these,” she said, spreading them out, drawing out three pens from the bag.

Fairchild seemed almost relieved, picking up one of the documents, bound across the top, flipping through the pages.

“This was all a joke, right?” he said, looking over at Hannah. “Just a little insurance policy?”

“Sure,” Hannah said. “Go ahead and sign.”

Fairchild arrived at the last page, frowned, set down the contract, opened up another, flipped to its the last page, frowned again.

“They’re all for zero dollars,” he said.

“Of course they are,” Hannah said. “That’s all it’s worth.”

“If we sign these, you’ll get it all for nothing.”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “That’s all it’s worth.”

Druhler Fairchild narrowed his eyes at Hannah, the only one of the three men still engaged. Leston and Brighton seemed to have shut down, arms crossed, eyes on near-empty plates.

“We won’t sign this,” Fairchild said. “Tell Maxim to call me.”

“Maxim sent me.”

“Why would he send a slave whore to do his business?”

Hannah smiled and took another sip of wine.

“I am as you made me,” she said.

“I didn’t make you,” Fairchild laughed, clearing his throat. “I wrote some laws and got them passed. I wrote a business plan. And then the people did what people do, naturally. They made you. It takes a village. They made you. Not me.”

“I would rather be a slave whore all my life,” Hannah said, swallowing, “than spend one minute like you and your . . . co-dependent spawn.”

Leston gazed at her, looked away. Brighton continued to stare at his plate.

“Anna,” Fairchild said, smiling, his voice going soft, his demeanor suddenly as fatherly as any man’s. But he’d mispronounced her name, Hannah noticed. That’s the way the French girl had said it. She decided not to correct him. “Let’s start over. I know you’re a smart girl. I know you are. Let’s start over. You don’t understand because no one has ever explained it to you. And you’re living it, and that can be hard. But . . .” Fairchild raised his hands and spread them, as if spreading out a banner, or a map, “. . . look at the big picture.”

Hannah continued to eat, listening.

“What do you do with the ones who can’t make it? What do you do with them? Billions of people who aren’t smart enough or born well enough to self-sustain in a global economy. What do you do with them?”

Hannah pondered.

“Charity?” she ventured.

“Charity,” Fairchild repeated, and he burst into what seemed like a sincere fit of laughter, peering at each humorless son in turn.

“The government, then,” Hannah added.

“Government,” Fairchild repeated. “Worse than charity. The government keeps half, the other half gets wasted on the worst people.”

Hannah stuck her fork into her vegetables.

“Your thinking is flawed by your politics,” he said. “But I believe you came by them honestly. You just lack the right exposure.”

Hannah looked at him, looked away, put her fork in her mouth.

“Have you ever had a formative moment?”

Hannah pondered, quickly arrived at an answer. “Yes, when I was 15. My father wanted to marry me off to a man I didn’t—”

“Times Square,” Fairchild interrupted bitterly.

“Times Square?” Hannah echoed.

“I was 14. A year younger than you were. With my father. And they were having some kind of rag, rag, uh, drag party. That’s what they called it, but all it was to me was a bunch of goddam faggots, wearing things no one decent would ever wear, things that shouldn’t even be legal, ass-showing cock baskets and little gay belts and . . . and . . .”

Fairchild lowered his head, making a fist with the hand beside his plate.

“Hey, little man,” he said, affecting a high-pitched, effeminate come on. “You look like you’re running the circus!”

Fairchild paused, looked up at Hannah, grimaced.

“Goddam perverts, not a one of them my neighbor, not a one of them deserving anything from my hand. Lump them in with the rest, the lazy, the weak, the whiners.”

He looked at Hannah, smiled faintly.

“Charity is a sin.”

“Is that from the Bible?” Hannah inquired, raising her wineglass to her lips, her hand shaking.

“It is. From the Third Testament.”

“I’m not familiar with that part,” Hannah said.

“You’ve read the first two testaments?”

“I have,” Hannah said. “Almost all.”

“You haven’t read the most important parts,” he said, shaking his head and wagging a finger at her. “I’m sure you haven’t, because the message of the Third Testament derives entirely from the first two, and its authorship, every day, right now, by all the good Christians of the world, is as much a miracle, is as much inspired, as the first two.”

“This sounds like something you’re making up,” Hannah said.

“Oh no, not at all,” Fairchild said, shaking his head, looking down and turning his plate, jabbing at something with his fork, changing his mind and setting down the fork with a clatter. “The planet is full, and we can’t all be in charge. Just a third bear the burden of ruling. The rest have it easy – serve. Serve and be content. And God decides who is who. No sparrow falls against God’s will, no dollar changes hands without His blessing. The elect are known by the dollars he gives them.”

Fairchild leaned back, folded his arms, glanced at his frozen sons, turned back to Hannah.

“Money is proof.”

“Money proves nothing,” Hannah retorted. “That’s not even how proof works.”

“Did you ever go to school?” Fairchild asked, smiling indulgently.

“Yes, I’m in college now.”

Fairchild’s eyes registered a very brief surprise before he continued.

“Then you know all the false gods of knowledge.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Hannah said. “I’m studying biology. Pre-med.”

“Ah, one of the worst, then,” Fairchild said. “False gods, all of it.”



“It’s just information,” Hannah said. “It’s just science. It’s reality. It’s just—”

“Anna,” Fairchild interrupted. “Science has exceeded its mandate. Reality is a lie.”

Hannah took a sip of wine, looked at the three men, swallowed.

“Are you going to sign those contracts now?” she asked, gesturing toward the documents splayed across the table.

“Of course not.”

“Then everything I showed you will be published.”

“When?”

“Tonight,” Hannah replied. “Tomorrow. That and much more.”

“That’s blackmail.”

“It’s really not,” Hannah said. “It’s more like . . . reality.”

“You’re bluffing,” Fairchild said. “Send Maxim. I want to see Maxim.”

“I’m working for Maxim,” Hannah said.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Sign or don’t sign,” Hannah said. “Maxim isn’t available.”

“Then we’re done here.”

“Yes,” Hannah agreed, and she pushed the last of the steak into her mouth, rose and slid the tablet back into the courier’s bag, but she left the contracts where they were, and she stepped to the door.

To her surprise, the elder Fairchild joined her, entered the hall with her.

She looked at him, and he smiled.

“You called my sons spawn,” he said.

“I did,” Hannah agreed, heading toward the stairs. “After you called me a slave whore. And I said co-dependent spawn.”

“It was rather rude.”

“It was,” Hannah agreed, slipping into a restroom at the top of the stairs. “But it seemed to fit the moment. So what words would you use to describe what you do? Rape? Exploitation? Cruel—“

“A calling from God,” Fairchild said, and he moved past Hannah and trundled quickly down the stairs, phone to his ear.

## Chapter 86: Article 44

By the time Hannah reached the small dining room at the bottom of the stairs, her narrow path down the hall had been blocked, not just by Fairchild, standing with his feet apart and his arms folded, but by the girl from the desk as well, standing in front of Fairchild, wearing an expression of awkward assertiveness.

“You need to wait, Miss,” she said. “For the politzee.”

“The what?”

“The police,” Fairchild said. “Article 44.”

“What’s Article 44?” Hannah asked, but she didn’t wait for an answer. She turned toward the restaurant’s main entrance, reaching for the doorknob just as it opened, a man in a yellow vest and, under it, a blue uniform entering, the chill night air of Odessa in March blowing around him and against Hannah’s body.

“That’s her!” Fairchild announced, pointing victoriously.

“Come with me,” he said.

“No,” Hannah replied. “Why?”

“Article 44,” Fairchild said, startling Hannah by speaking inches from her right ear, his belly brushing her elbow, his malevolent speed a strangely terrifying thing to her at the moment. “Ukraine’s a signatory. Unaccompanied foreign subjects who don’t appear to be engaged in legitimate endeavors may be confiscated and shipped back to their owners.”

“I’m not unaccompanied,” Hannah said to the officer, ignoring Fairchild. “My owner is in town, in Odessa. She’s at the Orlovian. She’s—”

“Does she know you’re here?” Fairchild asked.

Hannah ignored him, panic and anger forming a potent cocktail in her mind.

“I just need to go back to the hotel,” Hannah said. “I have a ride.”

“She just spent the last hour trying to extort us,” Fairchild said, his voice rising. “With what’s in her bag.”

Hannah gripped her bag with one hand, reached around with the other to unclasp it and reveal its non-incriminating contents when the officer took her by her wrist, his grip frighteningly strong.

“Ow,” she said.

“Outside, Miss,” he said, and he opened the door and, still holding her wrist, pulled her outside, the air gone from almost tolerable to briskly cool in the last hour, Hannah immediately shivering.

She was standing on a wide street, as busy as the alley behind the restaurant was quiet. Two lanes of cars bustled in either direction.

A group of youths sidled past her and her captor, staring.

Somewhere, Hannah thought, on the other side of this row of buildings, a van idled, its two male occupants waiting for her to appear.

A car with a flashing yellow light pulled up and stopped, and the man escorted her to the back door. He opened it, reached over and raised the bag strap over her head and, holding her bag in one hand, used the other to push her into the car.

It was all done so quickly, so efficiently, Hannah didn't fully understand she'd been detained until she looked at the vehicle's doors. No handles, no window cranks or buttons, a sheet of thick plastic separating the front and back seats.

No escape.

She gazed out the windows, saw the black man with the red tie strolling as if disinterested, but when their eyes met, he raised his eyebrows in an expression of concern.

Hannah answered with a shrug and a smile.

They'd told her not to argue. She'd argued.

That's probably why this had happened. If she'd just been the messenger, Fairchild wouldn't have gone to the trouble of invoking that article. But she'd angered him, and this was his revenge.

It was a stupid, petty act, but it would cause Hannah inconvenience.

There would be no van ride back to the hotel. Her new suit would remain neatly arranged on the seat, until it slipped off and got kicked and trampled.

A heater was rattling somewhere under the front seat, blasting a stream of hot air against her shins.

She sat upright, unashamed, her bare breasts visible to those in other vehicles, pedestrians on the sidewalks. A few ogled, or merely stared. She stared back, growing more furious.

She wasn't angry about Fairchild's decision to summon the police. She wasn't even angry about how Fairchild had lived his life, all the people suffering because he had found a way to make money off them.

She was angry at the human mind itself, so vulnerable to believing lies when they served even the most trivial of purposes – or no purpose at all.

She looked up again. The man with the red tie was gone, but now Fairchild himself was there, on the curb, looking at her with an air of supremacy, of deep self-satisfaction, as if the naked slave girl in the back of the police car represented his life's work.

Hannah looked back and smiled, sympathetically. She had just presented, with a few swipes across a tablet, a devastating visual distillation of all the misery and horror he had created, all he had done. She had just presented evidence that his two sons were, at least once, rapists.

Surely, the face he bore at night on the Odessa sidewalk was bravado. Or self-delusion.

Or superstition.

Perhaps seeing Hannah locked in the back of a police car had reassured him that all was as it should be, that God had tested him briefly with a slave whore armed with damning videos, but she had just been disposed of, and so too would everything else.

Fairchild frowned at Hannah, reached into his pocket, pulled out his phone and stared at it.

He pressed the screen with his thumb and raised it to his ear, said "Hello" loudly enough that Hannah could hear him through the glass, and something came through his phone that reduced his demeanor to, briefly, reality.

The expression lasted for just a flash. Hannah would have missed it had she not been staring at him. A kind of sick horror, the face one makes just before one begins vomiting, a sort of existential weariness, eyes half shut, mouth half open, chin pulled back, head tilted earthward.

And then Fairchild raised his eyes and recovered, impatience or possibly anger in his eyes.

"Blaise!" Fairchild shouted, moving the phone away from his ear. "No, Blaise, no. No one's seen it! No one's gonna see it! Yes, I saw it. Someone just showed it to me. A private showing. On a tablet . . . all part of something else, don't worry about that. Blaise, Blaise, get yourself together! Blaise—"

Fairchild looked back at Hannah, who was still staring at him from the car, and he whirled and went back into the restaurant, leaving Hannah to ponder.

Blaise.

Blaise Fairchild.

He'd just witnessed the punishment of his daughter.

What time was it in Kansas?

Odessa was eight hours ahead of Texas, Hannah knew, and in the same time zone as Kansas. What time was it in Odessa? Hannah had lost track. Eight o'clock? Nine? So it was 4 or 5 a.m. in Kansas, maybe a little later. Hannah imagined Blaise Fairchild, waking early, seeing the message on his phone, checking it, becoming hysterical, and calling his distant relative to scream.

But wasn't revealing the video to Blaise Fairchild a conditional consequence, Hannah wondered, something Maxim and his people would do only if Fairchild refused to sign?

Fairchild had refused to sign, of course, but did they already know? Did Maxim know?

Of course he knew, Hannah realized. Of course. They all knew. Somewhere in the leather courier's bag, a little speaker had been secreted, listening to Hannah, listening to Fairchild.

Perhaps the speaker was in the tablet itself.

They'd heard her argue after telling her not to do it, but what did they expect?

And they all knew what Fairchild had done – or refused to do.

So it had already begun.

And Hannah had been there.

Yes, Druhler Fairchild had seen Hannah Loughbridge detained by the politzee.

But Hannah Loughbridge had watched his face fall.

Only when the driver got in and the car moved did it occur to Hannah that she hadn't been chained. She was still naked, but her wrists and ankles were free. Was she a prisoner, or more just a girl they needed to deal with administratively? She wasn't familiar with the article Fairchild had referenced.

The drive took 15 minutes, the car turning off a side street, approaching a high gate. The gate slid aside and the car proceeded through.

The driver stepped out – dark-skinned, smiling, Hannah perhaps the most interesting thing he'd dealt with tonight. He unlocked the car's back door, motioned Hannah to step out, and she followed him into the building's side door and down a narrow hall.

He slipped her bag onto a shelf, unlocked a door, pulled a notepad from his shirt pocket, and touched her chin, motioning her to raise it.

She looked up at the ceiling while he fingered her tags, scribbling her ID number down before he pointed into the room.

She entered, found herself in a supply closet, cleaning bottles, stacks of paper, printer supplies, two old swivel chairs, a mop and bucket, a drain in the middle of the floor.

The door closed behind her, clicking as the lock was turned. She went to it, looked through the little window at face level, saw an empty hall with a bulletin board, recognized her number on a sheet pinned to it.

She felt nothing now. No fear, no shame, no anger.

She had stared into the abyss, the empty eyes of a man profiting from the suffering of others, a man who called his work godly.

She had shown him horrible things, he and his two sons. Horrible things, to specific individuals, to people en masse.

She was done. If she never left this room, she didn't care.

She had no idea how any of this would play out, and she had no way to affect it. That's where the peace came from, the sudden apathy. There was nothing to do, so she had no reason to try.

She paced, from the shelf to the bucket, bucket to shelf, back to the bucket, and realized that if she was kept here long enough, the bucket would be her toilet.

If she was kept overnight, Athena would wake up and miss her. If she was kept here longer than that, she would miss her flight.

A bucket. Something about a bucket.

She sat down in one of the swivel chairs. It was old but not broken, and she pushed it toward the middle of the floor and spun around in it. When she drove her heel into the floor with enough force, and at the proper angle, she could complete five rotations before friction slowed her to a stop.

Why don't people who all wanted sex just have sex? she asked. Why did everyone need Hannah's body when they all had plenty of other bodies they could have enjoyed?

The answer arrived in a flash.

Because of men.

Men wouldn't stand for it.

Men want girls, of course. Men always want girls. But they don't want the girls to want other men, so when the girls want other men, the men

hate the girls, and when men hate girls, they hurt them, either with force or with words.

With shame, with derision.

Men would get a lot more sex if they hadn't invented cultures in which independently-directed female lust was despised. Eventually, even independently-directed female lust, in sufficient quantities, could blanket the world with comfort and joy.

But for now, the way things were, you needed girls like Hannah, for whom derision and shame were irrelevant.

It was all men's fault.

Hannah spun, propelled herself backward into a shelf, spun, and thought of Baye.

That was a terrible story. Worse than Hannah's. Even worse than Stacey's. A girl who was raped at 14, who complained, and who for that minor act had her finances ruined, who was made a slave and sent off to do agriculture.

There were times in Hannah's life when she might cry over such a thing. Right now, she felt nothing.

What time was it? Could she sleep?

Hannah noticed a light switch by the door, flipped it off and on, flipped it off again. When it was off, the window in the door cast a twilight glow upon the room.

A bucket.

When had she first relieved herself in a bucket?

Immediately after she'd been taken, even before she'd been collared. She was held in a small cage for hours.

No, days. She spent days in that cage, with nothing but a bucket to empty into, removed regularly by her first owner, Mrs. Alvarez.

Another distant memory, this one recovered easily. Some others remained so elusive Hannah wasn't even sure if they were real memories, or memories of things that had never happened. But it always felt good when a memory came back.

Hannah spun, the experience of rotating in the darkness novel again.

Tired of that, she pulled up the other chair, put her feet up, tilted back, stared at the ceiling, and fell into a light sleep, stirring and waking at

odd times, looking around, stretching, arching her back, remembering where she was and closing her eyes again.

“Out!” someone shouted, and Hannah looked down and saw that she was giving birth – one, two, three, a veritable litter of little stone gargoyles, emerging from her vagina one after the other, Athena shouting “Out!” as each one crowned, pulling them the rest of the way from her body, showing them to her. One looked like Franklin, one looked like Ormek, one like Athena, then all of them looked like Hannah.

“Out!”

Hannah shuddered, turned toward the sound of the voice, saw a woman standing at the open door.

“Go now,” the woman said.

Hannah shuffled off the chairs, stretching again, noticed the bucket and stepped over to it, planting a knee on either side of it, her opening positioned above.

She looked at the woman, blue-uniformed, yellow-vested, and the woman looked back, waiting while Hannah emptied her bladder.

Done, Hannah entered the hall, took the bag, slung it over her shoulder and let the woman guide her down another hall to the building’s front door, the sun barely up.

They’d held her overnight.

Hannah stepped into the late winter air, not freezing but distressingly brisk for someone who wasn’t wearing anything. The door closed behind her and locked – a sound which was, under the circumstances, as disconcerting a sound as being closed into a place.

Hannah found herself shivering on a cold side street in Odessa, with just a tablet in a bag. No money, no way to get back to the hotel, no directions.

Bare feet.

She paused and looked both ways along the street, wondering if the van from last night might have been waiting for her. No such luck. It would have been nice if they’d waited.

She estimated the temperature at a little over 50 degrees, warm for this time of year.

She started to walk.

She would find a busy street. Perhaps a taxi would pick her up, and she could get money from her room and pay for the trip.



Walking helped. She was hungry, but moving warmed her a little, and she walked faster, peering at the sidewalk for glass, nails.

A car whizzed past, its windows dark.

She heard voices, two men, distant but nearing with surprising speed.

She turned to see them approaching on bikes, dressed by black spandex suits, one in his 30s, one older and grayer, similar enough looking that Hannah guessed they were father and son.

They stopped talking as they neared, and Hannah guessed it was because of her.

She watched them pass, two pairs of eyes on her.

“Hello,” she said.

“Do you speak English?” the older man asked without an accent, braking and dropping his feet to the pavement, the younger man following suit.

“Yes, are you American?” she asked.

“Yes, you are too?”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

“How did you end up out here?”

Hannah laughed.

“Long story,” she said. “But I need a ride.”

Now the men laughed, at each other, before the younger man became serious.

“You’re okay, right?” he said. “I mean, you’re not . . .”

“I took off my clothes for a meeting last night, with some people,” Hannah said, and she put her hand under her bag and lifted it gently, hoping it would lend credence to her story. “It was supposed to make a point, I guess. And then the police picked me up, but they let me go this morning. And now I’m trying to get back to the Orlovian.”

“The Orlovian?”

“It’s a hotel, not far from the sea.”

The younger man pulled out his phone, looked at it.

“Nice place,” He said. “It’s about five miles from here, through Kirksk Plaza and along the 8-7.”

He looked at Hannah again, up and down.

“You must be freezing.”

“Walking helped,” she said.

“Think you can balance on the pegs?” he said, pointing to a pair of rubber-coated protrusions on either side of his rear axle.

“I can try, thanks,” Hannah replied, stepping up, sliding her bag around so it rested against her lower back, and she stepped up onto the pegs.

“Hold my shoulders,” he said. “As tight as you want.”

The men were both experienced cyclists, zipping around side streets, crossing bridges, slipping through alleys, almost never stopping.

Hannah clung to the man’s shoulders, shivering, feet and legs registering every bump in the road, wanting desperately for the trip to be over, to get inside, to get her clothes on again.

“Where do you live?” he asked through deep breaths.

“Texas,” she said, trying to still her chattering teeth. “My owners are in Dallas, but I go to school in Corpus Christi.”

“School?”

“The university there. Pre-med.”

“You’re going to be a doctor, then.”

It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes,” she said, gratefully. “Why are you in Odessa?”

“Family vacation,” he said. “Mom always wanted to get to the Black Sea, and Dad and I love riding through old cities, and my daughter’s old enough to get excited about van Minsk.”

For the last third of the trip, the sun hung low on the horizon, spilling through the cracks between buildings and walls, warming Hannah’s skin, or creating an illusion of warmth that was almost as good.

When they passed before the van Minsk palace, Hannah remembered her suit sadly, wondering if she’d ever see it again.

A few moments later, they were at the Orlovian.

“Thank you so, so much,” Hannah said, shaking with the first phase of hypothermia, but deeply relieved. “Thank you, I’m going to run inside now. Thank you.”

“Sure.”

She made her way into the hotel’s lobby on shaky legs, shivering desperately, and approached the registration counter.

“I’m Hannah Loughbridge,” she said to the bemused clerk. “I lost everything last night, including my key, but I—”

The man turned away abruptly, passed through a door, returned with her suit and shoes in a clear plastic bag.

“Can I give you this?” Hannah asked, unslinging her bag and laying it on the counter. “Someone might come for it. Whoever asks for it is welcome to it. I don’t need it anymore.”

The man nodded, picked up the phone, dialed and spoke.

“She’s back,” he said.

Hannah dashed into the bathroom.

By the time she emerged, dressed, still shaking but feeling hunger now too, Delilah was in the middle of the lobby, staring dolefully at her.

Hannah approached slowly, puzzled, sensing things had happened.

“Real quick,” Delilah said as soon as Hannah was within earshot of the girl’s quiet, leaden voice. “The Odessa police called the Petrosyans, the Petrosyans confirmed you were theirs and you were okay, and they called me to ask basically what the holy fuck after Athena never answered, and I went and banged on Athena’s door and her fucking highness herself answered looking none too pleased and a little green besides and when she realized you weren’t in your bed where you were supposed to be it was oh my fucking god call everyone from subject services in Texas to Odessa police who had no idea to the United Nations and you are officially a runaway and she knows you slipped her something and fuck this is going to hurt.”

## Chapter 87: A Family Meeting

Hannah swallowed.

The shaking had stopped, or seemed to have stopped.

She could hear nothing but a sort of echo, see nothing but a kaleidoscope of moving patterns of color where the Orlovian lobby had been a few moments before.

A runaway.

Seven days of punishment.

Or worse.

Slipping a narcotic into one’s owner’s drink was considered exceptionally bad form.

Seven days of suffering, at least.

Hannah sensed Athena's presence before she could focus on the girl, her form crossing the lobby toward her from the elevators, making a beeline, a sound emanating from her throat that was not necessarily speech.

The form stopped inches away from Hannah.

"Were you trying to kill me?" she asked quietly. Her voice came out strained, as if she'd been crying, or she was so enraged only a mighty act of emotional dampening could keep her from doing something everyone would regret.

"No," Hannah said. "No, not at all. No."

"Why did you poison me?" she asked.

Hannah knew Athena was staring at her, but she couldn't see the girl's eyes, or her face at all. She looked like she had in the video the night before, her facial features obscured so Blaise Fairchild wouldn't know who had beaten his daughter.

"I didn't poison you," Hannah said. "I gave you something to make you sleep."

"Why?"

"So I could do something I needed to do."

"What?" Athena demanded.

"A thing."

"What?"

"I'm not going to say," Hannah replied calmly, trying to see Athena's face. Somewhere, in Hannah's periphery, Delilah watched, and gave Hannah strength.

"You have to tell me."

"I'm not going to," Hannah said.

Athena uttered a sad, squeaky sigh.

"Everyone thinks you were trying to escape," Athena said.

"Who's everyone?"

"Mom and Dad. And Allain too, once he wakes up."

"I wasn't," Hannah said. "I wanted to come back earlier, and then the police picked me up."

"I know. They called Mom and Dad. Why did you have your clothes sent back here?"

"So I could put them on this morning."

"No, why did you take them off?"

"I didn't need them for what I was doing."

“Were you having sex?”

“No.”

“Did you go somewhere?”

“Yes.”

“Did you talk to people?”

“I’m not going to say.”

“I reported you,” Athena said, voice going tragically quiet.

“Officially. I had to, or they wouldn’t look for you. I figured you said fuck it. Fuck Athena, fuck everything. I knew I’d never see you again. I knew —”

Athena bit her last words off with a sob, and her face materialized, the puffy, red-eyed face of a girl who had oscillated between terror, rage and a broken heart since she’d awakened this morning.

She spread her arms and embraced Hannah, bawling on her shoulder, the cathartic tears of someone who realized all the worst things she’d thought were wrong.

Hannah felt nothing, could feel nothing.

She’d been numb since she’d looked into Druhler Fairchild’s eyes, watched him take the call from Blaise Fairchild, watched him slump, briefly, over the abyss of his own making.

What more could she ask for, than to feel that?

Seven days of pain, at a minimum. A week.

She deserved it.

She’d wanted torture. She’d wanted a moral purge, a reckoning, for all the ill she had worked in the last three months, her desperate ambition blinding her to everything else.

She’d wanted it conceptually, at least. Now that she was confronting it in the flesh, she wasn’t so sure. How long would she have to suffer before she felt absolved? An hour? A day? A week? Or even then, would she be unredeemed?

Hannah, with Athena beside her, was allowed to eat unrestrained from the hotel’s continental spread. She showered in the room, dressed for travel, and packed, sealing her suitcase and immediately being put in the travel chains Athena had brought, wrists and ankles cuffed, a chain running from feet to hands, all the freedom she had earned through the conference gone, voided, negated.

What would happen when she returned to Texas? It wasn’t unusual for runaways, after they’d finished a week of punishment, to be sold. Trust,

even when one party owned the other, was essential to any relationship. If the Petrosyans could no longer trust Hannah, they would have no choice but to put her on the market, and her documented attempt to escape must be included with her file. Who would buy a runaway?

Hannah shut the fear of being sold out of her mind, her numbness expanding to an existential extreme.

There is no feeling, there is no future, there is nothing.

But pain.

And truth.

The truth will not set you free, however. It just hurts.

Delilah, sitting five rows back on the flight to London, kept to herself, her spirit silenced but for one brief moment when Athena was in the bathroom and she slipped up and whispered into Hannah's ear, "There are rumors about what is done in those places. Never ever let them give you a pill."

Hannah nodded and Delilah slipped back as quickly as she'd come.

Athena barely spoke at first on the flight, mourning apparently.

Hannah wasn't sure if she was upset about being given a narcotic, about almost losing the family's girl, or if she was troubled by the ordeal that awaited that girl.

Hannah sat in her chains and continued to feel nothing, but once they'd reached cruising altitude, she reached into the bag at her feet and pulled out a textbook and surprised herself by being able to study, to make sense of a difficult section of her economics textbook, to absorb information.

"Mom and Dad are trying to get you into the Bruche Institute."

Hannah pretended she didn't hear, because she didn't know what Athena meant, so her mind filled in the blanks with terrifying possibilities.

The Bruche Institute.

A special school? A facility for the mentally ill or the personality disordered? A laboratory looking for a healthy blonde to study and breed?

"I know you heard me," Athena said. "Your weird breathing changed."

"Okay," Hannah said. "What's the Bruche Institute?"

"For your seven days," Athena said.

"Oh."

"It's supposed to be the best place to go . . . for that."

“Oh.”

“They forgive you,” Athena said. “They wanted me to tell you that. They forgive you.”

“Were they upset?”

“Uh, yeah, Mom was crying and Dad was talking loud in the background, and they were both practically yelling at Franklin about what he knew, and—”

“Franklin?”

“Yeah, Franklin.”

“How was she yelling at Franklin?”

“He’s at home. He did a few days of breeding and I had him shipped back to Dallas. So he’s downstairs, and Mom yelled at him about anything he knew, and so I was shouting ‘Mom, Mom, chill,’ so she put me on the phone with him, and then I was just crying, and then Dad got on the phone, and he could barely talk at first, but then he got super-practical, and he just went down the list.”

Athena chopped one hand with the other as she continued.

“We have to report her. I’ll call the number for an international subject watch. Athena, you tell the front desk to let you know if she shows up, then you call the Odessa police, then the US consulate, and then the airport. Every airport has a number for that. And so I’m calling and calling and Delilah’s hysterical so she’s just taking a powder in her room as far as I know, and I’m in the middle of the last call when the front desk rings my room to tell me you just showed up.”

Athena leaned back, closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, fanning her face.

“Then I called again, and Mom says, first thing, first thing, ‘I knew she’d come back. I knew it. It was just another one of her pranks.’ That’s what she said. Prank. Franklin wasn’t that charitable. Then Daddy ran to his phone to see if he could cancel the subject watch, but it was too late. You were gone too long. So that’s how it is. But the Bruche—”

“Franklin wasn’t that charitable?” Hannah asked, trying with all her might to sound casual while her vision narrowed and her heart skipped.

“Yeah, you know,” Athena said. “He was scared too. And I guess pissed. Because he could get in trouble, because of you. When someone disappears, they ask everyone else—”

“What did he say?” Hannah asked, choking on the words.

“Oh, you know, just the obvious,” Athena replied.

“What did he say?”

“Okay, okay . . . just that . . . something like . . . ‘This is what Hannah does. She uses her good looks and her intelligence to get away with things, when she’s not leading with her vagina, and it’s all innocent, just her stirring things up to—”

“What?” Hannah interrupted.

“What what?”

“You said . . . leading with my vagina. What does that mean?”

“Yeah . . . you know . . .”

“I don’t know.”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No, it’s not,” Hannah said, even though it was, even though it was obvious and it was terrible and Hannah Loughbridge was, at that moment, five miles above the deep plains and the wild steppes and the smoking factories of Europe, dying.

“You know,” Athena said with a sort of awkward, dismissive chuckle, as if she was realizing only now this was not a thing that should have been shared. “He never means anything bad. He just says it sometimes. A few times is all. Because of . . . because of . . . what you do. Like, the way you walk when you’re naked. You lead . . . you lead . . . well, maybe you should ask him what it means.”

Hannah was silent, because she could not speak.

So this . . . is what it feels like to have a broken heart.

It hurts.

Oh, it hurts.

HannahHannahHannahHannahHannahHannahLoughbridge.

Oh, how it hurts.

Recreational females aren’t supposed to get hurt, not like this.

Whips hurt. Prods hurt. Humiliation hurts. But romance, no. Recreational females are expected to tuck their hearts away and live and breathe and fuck all in the same motion, and no boy and no girl can ever claw through to that little place where they keep the soft parts, but Hannah had opened that door once, just a crack, to a boy named Franklin Fulmer the Third, and now . . . it hurt.

Torture me, Hannah said in her mind. Torture me. Please. Do something that hurts worse than this.



“The Bruche Institute,” Athena continued breezily, and Hannah knew she just wanted to change the subject, because she had at least a little empathy and knew she’d stung Hannah and perhaps believed Hannah – with at least seven days of punishment awaiting her – was already suffering enough. “They don’t just punish, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Or, I mean, they do that, but it’s, like, holistic. Everyone’s involved. The family. Everyone has to go.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked, because this was an image disturbing enough to break through the anguish growing roots in her soul.

“I don’t mean that,” Athena said with a laugh. “I just mean, at the start. There’s like this whole meeting. We all sit down. For a talk. Just a talk. And after that . . . you go in. Just you.”

“Okay,” Hannah said dismissively, and Athena fell silent, so she returned to studying, found that even a broken heart couldn’t prevent her from academics, although her mind wandered more than before.

Would anything come of it? she asked herself after every third or fourth page. Was what I did last night all for naught, just a little exercise for the amusement of others?

She had at least part of her answer at Heathrow. Chained and shuffling through the American terminal on the way to their connecting flight, she glanced at the TV, her battered heart stirring when she saw Baye on an overhead TV, her breasts blurred out, her mouth moving. The sound was off, but Hannah knew what she was saying, because the Fairchild sons appeared next, photos of Brighton and Leston, and then, not a photograph but a portrait of Druhler Fairchild himself, seated, looking proud and dignified, if not a little smug. And then, immediately after the portrait, a picture of a document, gray and mundane, with things being highlighted on it: Fairchild’s name, a signature, the words “FIDUCIARY DIRECTIVE.”

Athena’s eyes were aimed at the floor, but Delilah was looking, and when Hannah turned to her, she raised one eyebrow, and Hannah nodded.

They were waiting for her in Dallas. Hannah was instructed to remain in her seat, Athena and Delilah, permitted to stay with her. Once everyone else had left the craft, two federal marshals and a Texas state trooper walked up the aisle, read Hannah’s collar, scanned the chip in her back, took a picture of her face and, while she was still wearing the chains Athena had brought, they put a leather belt around her waist and shackled

her ankles together. Only then was Athena asked to remove Hannah's original restraints, so that Hannah's arms could be positioned behind her, her wrists secured in cuffs fastened to the back of her belt.

With a final quick hug from Athena and Delilah – Athena's embrace warm, Delilah's an essay in compassion and sorrow and support – Hannah was hustled off the plane, into the terminal, through a door with no knob, only a keyhole, then down two flights of stairs, through a long, bare, dimly-lit hall, and into an idling van and the little cage in the back, a little bigger than her body, not even tall enough for her to sit up in.

Her arms were as numb as her heart by the time she was brought somewhere for processing, which involved being unchained in a tiny room, being stripped, having her mouth and anus and vagina searched, losing her travel tag and having it replaced by another tag she wasn't given the opportunity to read. Then she was shackled again, handcuffed in front and marched to a tiny isolation cell with nothing but a toilet, a faucet near the floor, a pallet for a bed, and a slot at the bottom of the door for food.

They left her chains on. No one spoke to her. No one told her what would come next. She never cried. She never showered.

Hannah sat on her pallet for hours staring at the wall, blocking out any thoughts of anything but her sin and the impending punishment that might serve as expiation or might not. She tried not to think about school, or Stacey, or the classes she was missing, or her neglected research, or the Fairchilds, or Franklin.

Occasionally, her thoughts turned to the United Nations reception and the people there and their mission, because that might one day be another form of redemption, to participate in such service, and it wouldn't hurt at all.

The lights never turned off, but she could tell time based on the food that was brought, eggs in the morning, a sandwich at noon, a casserole for dinner.

Her first meal there, Sunday night, was dinner.

Then three meals Monday.

Just after eggs on the third day, Tuesday, they opened her cell and ordered her out, and she looked with relief at the unsmiling faces, because this was better than what she'd come to know, and they bound her and caged her as before and, after a trip that lasted what she guessed was an hour, she was walked – shackled, handcuffed in front, disheveled, foul, and

hopeless – into a small conference room with a woman she didn't know sitting at the far end of a rectangular table, Laura and Ormek on one of the sides, Athena and Allain on the other.

“And here's our girl,” the woman said, rising to offer her hand, Hannah taking it without smiling. “How are you, Hannah?”

Hannah gazed at the four Petrosyans briefly, and each looked back at her, perfunctorily, because smiles and nods or anything approaching a normal greeting would be strange.

“Please take a seat, Hannah, here at the head of the table,” the woman said, pulling out a chair.

Hannah, chains rattling, dropped into it and set her bound hands in her lap.

“Would you like something to drink, Hannah?” the woman asked. “We have lemonade, and root beer.”

“Root beer,” Hannah said, looking up to see three pained smiles and Athena's face, her expression less readable.

The woman stepped to a small cooler, reached in and pulled out a can, opening the top with a pop, setting it before Hannah.

“Thank you, Ma'am,” Hannah said, wrapping both hands around it and bringing it to her mouth. It was sweeter than anything she'd had in days, and she allowed herself to savor it.

“So let's get right to business,” the woman said. “I'm Diane, and I'm a program coordinator here at the Bruche Institute. And Hannah, you're here because you've been scheduled for a minimum of 168 hours of corrective improvement.”

The woman spoke brightly, as if Hannah were receiving an award. She was older, perhaps 50, with blonde-colored hair and big glasses that made her look kindly, even innocent, just like the words she was using.

“First of all, Hannah, do you have any questions about why you're here?”

“I don't,” Hannah said, taking another sip, staring at the table.

“Why don't you tell us, then?”

“Yes, Ma'am,” Hannah said. She'd been expecting this moment, and the words flowed.

“I went to Odessa, with Athena,” she began, and she nodded toward the girl. “Odessa, Ukraine, I mean. And I wanted to do something by myself our last night there. Saturday night. So I put something in Athena's drink to

make her fall asleep, and then I went to do that thing, and I wanted to get back to our hotel a little later that night, but the police picked me up and held me until morning, and so I was late, and I got reported as a runaway. But I did come back to the hotel as soon as I could. But I shouldn't have given Athena anything to make her fall asleep, and I shouldn't have left at all without her permission."

"And where did you go?"

"I would prefer not to say."

"Hmm," Diane said, pursing her lips. "That's something we really wish to know, Hannah."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"So we have two aggravating factors, and one mitigating factor," Diane said, raising her hands to count things off on her fingers. "You came back of your own volition. That's important."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"But you gave your owner a narcotic without her knowledge or permission."

"Yes, Ma'am, I did."

"And you refuse to say where you were."

"I don't refuse," Hannah said. "I would just prefer not to."

"You refused before," Athena blurted.

"Please," said Diane, gesturing mildly at Athena, and she turned her attention back to Hannah.

"Your decision to use a sleeping potion plus your voluntary return can be considered offsetting factors," Diane said. "But your refusal to say where you were adds to our . . . difficulty. Without that information, you'll receive another 48 hours of correction. For a total of 216 hours."

"Yes, Ma'am," Hannah said, "I'll tell you where I was."

## Chapter 88: Confession

Hannah drew in her breath, breathed out, sensed the stiffening of backs among those from the Petrosyan household.

Diane nodded encouragingly.

"I was at a restaurant in Odessa called Aolial. In a private dining room upstairs. The food was very good. And I was meeting with a man named Druhler Fairchild, and his sons, Brighton and Leston."

“And these are all friends of yours?” Diane queried.

“No, Ma’am, not at all.”

“Were you there to have sex with them?”

“No Ma’am, not at all.”

“Then why were you meeting with them?”

Athena, who’d pulled her phone out as soon as Hannah said the names, gasped.

“No way,” she whispered to herself, staring wide-eyed at the screen. “No fucking way.”

“Athena, we can hear you,” Laura admonished gently, her eyes focused on her daughter, clearly curious about what Athena had found.

“I needed to tell them some things,” Hannah replied. “And show them some things.”

“And what did you need to show them?”

“I would prefer not to say.”

“You do need to answer all my questions, or you will be considered non-compliant.”

“Time out,” Athena said, staring at her phone. “Hannah’s bullshitting. Uh, Druhler, uh, Fairchild, is some billionaire business guy. Or lots of millions, anyway. And . . . and yeah . . . and Brighton Fairchild is a senator. So, uh, Hannah, you can do better than that.”

Hannah took another sip of her root beer while Athena scrolled.

“Oh, wait. *Was* a senator. He resigned yesterday. Oh shit, oh shit, he’s a . . . a fucking pedophile. Some girl. I saw the headline this morning I think. This is like major news. Oh shit, oh shit . . .”

Athena continued to scroll, and Hannah looked at her and, briefly, quietly exulted. This was tangible. This was real.

Diane cleared her throat, blinked.

“You said *Druhler* Fairchild, Hannah?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I did.”

“The Druhler Fairchild who chairs our company’s board of directors?”

“I don’t know that specifically,” Hannah said. “But he runs a lot of companies in the slave industry, and—”

“Subject industry,” Diane correct.

“Slave industry,” Hannah said flatly. “So, probably.”

“Let’s humor you for a moment,” Diane said, and she was no longer smiling, no longer speaking lightly, enthusiastically. “Let’s assume you’re not delusional, or blatantly lying, or trying to intimidate me. What exactly did you share with Mr. Fairchild?”

“Things about . . . the evil he’s done.”

“He is a respected businessman,” Diane said.

“Of course he is,” Hannah replied. “They all are.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Have I satisfied your requirement?” Hannah asked. “That aggravating factor?”

“No, you lied,” Diane said, and the smile returned to her face. “You —”

“I didn’t lie,” Hannah said.

“You can’t possibly —”

“Diane,” Laura said quietly, but with the tone that had shut many women up before her, many men as well.

Diane looked at Mrs. Petrosyan.

“Let’s not dismiss Hannah’s claim out of hand,” Laura said. “She can be . . . surprising.”

Hannah looked at Allain, for the first time, and their eyes met, and his danced a little. As grim as all this was, he could not hide his admiration for the girl who had been his lover for more than two years. His family’s property, a subject with a federal ID number, a girl who had been systematically punished before. But also his lover.

“You could probably check it,” Athena said. “Since you work for him. You could call him up and ask, ‘Hey, Mr. Fairchild, did this blonde girl show up and have dinner with you in Odessa and, you know, pull some gnarly crap?’”

“Let’s continue,” Diane said with a polite but dismissive nod toward Athena.

“No,” Hannah said. “168 hours or 216?”

“216.”

It was the answer Hannah expected, but she wasn’t going to simply accept it.

“You’re not going to at least ask around?”

“No,” Diane said. “I’m not going to ask Chairman Fairchild if he met with a subject in Odessa Saturday night. I’m not —”

“Coward.”

“What?” Diane asked.

“Coward,” Hannah repeated. “I called you a coward. Because you are one.”

“Hannah,” Diane began, speaking icily. “I can add more hours if you like.”

“Is that in your job description, Diane? To violate the federal subject discipline mandate for personal reasons?”

Diane leaned back and blinked, looking a little like she’d been punched. She blinked again, straightened her back, breathed in, frowned and smiled, as if resetting her existence before her next words:

“Let’s move on, shall we?”

“If that’s an actual question, no,” Hannah said, raising her root beer to her mouth.

“It’s not a question.”

Hannah set down the can with a faint metallic ring.

“Alright,” Diane said. “Alright. Now . . . we . . . we see each subject’s time here as . . . restorative. Not just retributive. A trust has been violated. Your owners are hurting. They need to have confidence you have been truly corrected. It requires a team effort. It’s a two-way street.”

Hannah simply listened, numb again. She hadn’t prevailed, and she knew she wouldn’t. What she’d said was for the Petrosyan’s benefit.

Nine days. Not seven. Nine days.

“Hannah will receive four to six corrective sessions per day, of between two and five hours per session,” Diane continued, her demeanor returning to its earlier confidence as she slipped into a patter that, Hannah was certain, she’d delivered many times before. “She will receive a minimum of seven hours per day in her berth, for sleep. And then, each session will feature a series of coordinated methodologies. Hannah might receive a series of lashings, for example, on her back and buttocks, while secured in stocks, or suspended by one or more limbs. She might be framed and stretched without further corporal administration, or placed in isolation with clamps or shock leads on her breasts, fingers or labia.”

Hannah looked at the Petrosyans, none of whom were looking back, all staring at the table, at nothing, faces drawn and tight. Even Athena’s.

“We are accredited by the American Subject Discipline Board,” the woman droned on. “But we also hold a Level 3 Certificate in humane standards from the Perry-Tolley League, which requires a precise application of corrective discomfort throughout the subject’s regimen. You may read more about our methods under the standards tab at our website, but briefly, we operate on a discomfort scale of 1 to 10. Our objective for each of Hannah’s sessions will be a minimum range of 4 to 6, with brief periods within a range of 8 to 10.

“Now, here is how we’re different, and why we consistently receive the highest ratings from our clients. We don’t just return subject to their owners chastened and contrite. They come home improved. They come home whole, physically, and psychologically. Nothing we do will cause lasting injury. We don’t break the skin, and Hannah’s bruising will be limited to areas covered by normal garments until they heal, in a week to 10 days. Unlike many facilities, we do not discourage vocalization during sessions, and Hannah will be welcome to express herself, but the regimen is calibrated to protect the voice. She may be slightly hoarse when she—”

“By vocalization, you mean screaming, right?” Hannah interrupted.

“Vocalization,” Diane said, blinking.

“Talking then?” Hannah said. “Having a conversation? Reciting the Lord’s Prayer? Or screaming?”

“Some of our guests do consult prayer,” Diane said, “and we don’t discourage that.”

“By guests, you mean the people you torture.”

“I have explained what we do here,” Diane said, her smile frozen. “Whatever words we use here, and whatever is done, is up to us. You may use your own words, keeping in mind that your presence here is the result of poor choices you have made.”

“Ma’am, I have a question,” Athena said, raising one hand, her phone in the other.

“Yes?”

“I can’t find the standards tab. You know, where you list the details of your methodology?”

“Search standards.”

“Aha,” Athena said, returning to her phone.

“May I have your full attention?” Diane asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Athena said, setting down her phone. “Sorry.”



“I mentioned earlier that this would be a team effort, and that’s something else unique to the Bruche Institute. Hannah’s discipline is not pre-determined. Both she and you will have the opportunity to alleviate her experiences here. Each day, Hannah will be given her assignments, and she will have the option of going to her sessions with minimal escort and complying with instructions there, and that can shave minutes, and eventually an hour or two, off her session times. But this is where you come in.”

Diane paused, looking into each of the Petrosyan’s faces before stopping at Athena’s.

“Now I want you to look at your phone.”

“Yes, Ma’am?” Athena said eagerly, tapping the device to life.

“Go to the REGIMEN PARTNER tab.”

“Found it. It’s just a login.”

“You’ll receive a user name and password before you leave, and you’ll need to check in regularly there – at least every two hours – between 8 a.m. and 10 p.m. You’ll find Hannah’s daily schedule there, her compliance score, details on each session, and any notes the session manager wants to provide. It will be updated on average four times per day, and you’ll have three hours after an update to acknowledge it. Failing to acknowledge within the required window will have no impact, but acknowledgment may lead to a reduction in Hannah’s next session.

“Hannah will submit one letter of contrition per day, and it will be posted to your account, and you may accept or reject it. If you reject it or don’t reply, her next session will be extended. If you accept it, her session will be reduced.”

Diane leaned back and smiled.

“Teamwork,” she said. “All of you are working together to get this done, to get Hannah through, and to bring her home a new girl, a better girl.”

Hannah grimaced and looked at the Petrosyans, Ormek and Laura on one side of the table, Allain and Athena on the other, and now all of them looked back at her with at least the hint of a smile, because it was understood that this too would pass, and Hannah would suffer, and come home, and recover, and this would be forgotten, and whatever it was she was doing would be forgotten, and she would move on to her next prank

and if there were any suffering to be had as a result, it would all be borne by her.

“The Bruche Institute differs from other practitioners in another important way,” she continued. “Research, some of it conducted here, indicates that intermittent correction is more effective in improving attitude than constant correction. So we will provide between one and two full restoration breaks per day, where Hannah will have a chance to relax, dine in peace, and visit with other guests.”

“What’s the rule on narcotics?” Hannah asked.

“What do you mean?” Diane asked briskly.

“Will I be expected to take any medications?”

“Have you been prescribed any?”

“No,” Hannah said. “And if I’m expected to take anything while I’m here, I’ll need a formal prescription, and you’ll have to enter it into that account you mentioned, so the Petrosyans can see it.”

“Of course,” Diane agreed, smiling and nodding as if Hannah were her best friend, as if they had never disagreed about anything.

“Now, we’re almost done,” Diane said. “Do you have any preferences regarding Hannah’s sexual release while she’s with us?”

Ormek cleared his throat. No one else made a sound.

“We understand that recreational females can be . . . highly charged . . . even during a corrective week,” Diane said. “And depriving either sex of release can inhibit performance upon completion here. So we try to accommodate each guest’s desires, within the limits of our regimen and owner preferences.”

“I think Hannah should be able to do whatever she wants,” Athena offered, and she looked at her parents. “Is that cool?”

“That’s fine,” Laura said.

“And she also, sometimes, uh, likes to use a . . . thing.”

“A marital stimulant?”

“Yeah, sure,” Athena said, smiling because the term seemed to be amusing to her.

“We can issue her one. And she can also partner with other guests during full restoration breaks, if—”

“Whoa, wait,” Athena blurted. “You mean she can, um, um, do it for, um, real, with a guy, when you’re not torturing her?”

“We correct and improve,” Diane shot back immediately.

“Okay, okay,” Athena agreed. “But you’re saying, that like, between, um, sessions, when she comes out or gets done or whatever and, like, and a guy there is, you know, he has some spare time on his hands too, and you just let them, like, they . . .”

“If I understand you,” Diane said, smiling indulgently, “yes.”

“Awesome,” Athena said, nodding at Hannah. “She’ll be doing that. And it’s okay.”

Hannah stared at the table, not wanting to catch Allain’s eye at the moment.

“But we reserve the right to place limits when indicated. We have found that females in particular will use excessive masturbation as a means to distract from the effectiveness of our regimen. So if we feel Hannah is abusing her masturbatory privileges, or if we see any damage to her female tissues, we will . . .” Diane looked at Hannah. “. . . we will harness or bind you as necessary, in addition to your scheduled program.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said.

“Are there any questions?” Diane asked.

No one had any, all the Petrosyans mute, as was Hannah.

“Very good. I’m going to step out for five minutes, and let everyone say their goodbyes, and then we’ll get Hannah started. Her first session has been scheduled for right after lunch, so you’ll need to log in by mid afternoon to help Hannah with her progress.”

Diane rose, left the room, shut the door behind her.

“Okay, why did you meet with those Fairchild people?” Athena immediately demanded. “Cuz I know you did. I know you did.”

Hannah picked up her root beer in two bound hands and drank.

“Hannah,” Laura said, “are you trying to . . . accomplish something?”

Athena laughed at her mother’s turn of phrase.

“I know you are,” Athena said, conspiratorially. “We’ve been talking about it nonstop for the last three days. You were up to something. And now, it makes perfect sense. You found out those guys would be in town, and that’s why you wanted to go to Odessa. To meet with them. To give them crap. To get in their faces. And make them shut it down or something.”

Hannah looked impassively into Athena’s eyes.

“Hannah,” Laura said quietly. “Are you trying to . . . make it all . . . end?”

“Make what all end?” Hannah asked, turning her full attention to the woman.

“All this,” Laura said. “The subject system.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Nailed it!” Athena announced with delight. “She’s a fucking radical. I knew it. She’s with some—”

“Hannah, why?” Laura said, looking at the family’s girl with true pain in her eyes.

“Because it’s wrong.”

“It has been so good for you,” Laura said. “Hasn’t it?”

“Yes, Ma’am, parts of it have. And parts of it haven’t. And for some people, it’s not good at all.”

“Have you always felt this way, Hannah?” Ormek asked.

Hannah turned to him, opened her mouth, tried to speak, found she could not. Something in Ormek’s eyes, or in her history with the man, or her history with the family, from the moment they met her, chained by one foot to the showroom floor, and all that had happened since, her confinement and restraint, her achievement and success, the small humiliations and the grand victories, the sex and the pain and the pleasure and the slow, elaborate process of discovering who she was, who she really was, all of that came cascading down in one moment upon her consciousness.

Have you always felt this way, Hannah?

I have felt a hundred things a day, she thought. I have exulted, I have mourned, I have lusted. I have loved your son while I hated what brought us together, and hated your daughter and tormented her for my own purposes and loved her for reasons I can’t explain. I have worn van Minsk and worn chains, sometimes at the same time. I have gone naked day after day, in front of all of you, in front of your friends and your relatives and total strangers. And through it all, through it all, I have dreamed and worked and made myself anew, over and over again.

What have I felt, Ormek? What have I felt, Laura and Athena? Tell me, Allain, when we made love or I slept beside you or you treated me like an equal with your friends or you chained me, how did I feel?

I don’t know.

I don't know how I felt.

I wasn't feeling. I was doing. I couldn't risk feeling.

I felt once. One time. For a boy named Franklin.

And he betrayed me, casually, without even knowing he was doing so, talking about me like . . . a stranger . . . to a girl named Athena.

And now I am broken. More broken than this wretched place can ever make me.

I never felt, not really. I swam with the monsters, in the primordial soup in which feelings are irrelevant, and I became . . . them.

Athena.

Laura.

Druhler Fairchild.

Yes.

I am . . . Druhler Fairchild.

Hannah raised her hands to her face and wept, her whole body wracked with sobs, her shackled feet twisting beneath her chair.

She felt an arm around her shoulders, looked up to find Athena there, her own eyes wet, the Petrosyan's daughter crying for . . . what? Why would Athena cry? Why would she care?

Hannah stood, accepting hugs from Laura, Ormek, Allain, unable to reciprocate with her hands bound before her, and she knew she must reek of unwashed confinement and look like the ragged ends, and she didn't care.

"Have you talked to Mother?" Hannah asked between sobs into Allain's shoulder.

"I have," he said, with his customary coolness, the mask he used to hide how he really felt, about Hannah and her suffering and the forces beyond them that had made them one. "I told her you had a great time in Odessa, but you were dealing with things and she'd hear from you soon."

"Okay, okay," Hannah said sniffing, urgent to share these last instructions before the five minutes were up and she was taken back. "Tell her . . . tell her I've been put on restriction in the kennels. I . . . tell her I broke a rule. Minor. I was rude to one of the workers, and I'll be on restriction for . . . for nine days."

Hannah wept again, still crying when Diane returned to walk her from the room, down a blank, utilitarian hall, like many of the halls Hannah had traversed since this life had begun, through a door as secure as any of

the other doors used to keep Hannah and her kind in place, down another hall, lined with more doors, each stenciled with its own label: Guest Berths 512; Discipline B-4; Guest Berths K; Discipline 8Z.

No rhyme or reason to the room designations.

Did they know how much that would bother Hannah? And people like Hannah? Intelligent, logical people who believed the earth should have order and fairness and kindness?

At Guest Berths LF, Diane stopped, opened the door, revealing 10 tiny spaces in two stacks, each a space with a little mat and a little pillow where a girl could lie down and do almost nothing else.

Ragged faces peered at her from three berths, a dark-haired white girl, two black girls, faces blank, taking in the information of Hannah, the truth of Hannah, and nothing more. In a fourth berth, a girl slept, olive-skinned and oblivious.

“You’ll be in LF4,” Diane said, pointing to a berth four spaces up, just below the dark-haired girl. “You’ll sleep here, and rest here. Six feet by two feet by one foot high. You’ll come to see this space as a refuge. Relieve yourself in the pan to your left, and keep the lid closed.”

## Chapter 89: A Cup of Air

The wait, the preliminaries, the anticipation, was always worse than the reality.

Hannah had learned that lesson over and over since she’d been made a slave two and a half years ago, and she was learning it again here, while she hung by her feet in a small gray room, alone, touching the floor with her bound hands and paying for her sins.

Three hours, that’s what she’d been told.

Three hours.

This was medicine.

The clocked ticked.

Salve for a corrupted soul. A treatment, in essence, that hurt, in the same way medicine sometimes hurt.

Healing.

If this was eternity, it would not be terrible. It was too mundane even to make the final cut in the hell end of a Bosch.

They'd be coming to her in the second hour. She'd been told that. 10 strokes. So when they arrived, a man and woman in earnest conversation, wearing black jumpsuits, Hannah didn't flinch.

The woman was holding the cane.

The man was speaking.

"Antitrust," he said. "Turns out Fairchild owns way more than he's supposed to, and someone spilled the beans, and now the feds are taking a look."

"What's antitrust?" the woman asked, stopping to look at Hannah. "Hey."

"Hey," Hannah said, bending up to look back at the woman, her voice sounding strange coming from an inverted throat.

"We're doing 10 on you, okay?"

"Okay."

"It's what they call it when they go after someone that has a monopoly, or something close," he said, standing in front of Hannah. He planted his boot on the chain between her wrists, his hands on her thighs. "Fairchild had one the whole time, they just found out about it."

"Turn her just a little toward me."

Hannah felt the hands against her thighs, positioning her.

"Ah," she said when the cane landed against her bottom. "Ow," she said for the second. "Ow. Ow. Damn!"

They finished and left.

Antitrust.

Ten swats.

Monopoly.

It hurt, but Hannah had felt worse.

She touched the floor again with her bound hands, the concrete cool against her fingertips.

She pushed off, swung, let friction reduce her arc until it was nothing.

They're talking, Hannah thought. They don't care what we hear. Three nights ago, I dined at the peak of their world, and watched the faces there fall. Today, I'm watching it from the other end, down in the trenches, hanging upside down, while they talk, and punish.

Am I absolving myself?

I received 10 slaps with a cane for trying to free the slaves. Stacey got five for a messy cage.

Yes, I am absolved for what I did to her, that one time.

But I'm still guilty of other things. Of making her a slave.

How much suffering will that cure require?

I don't know. But I'm not there yet.

But I am healing.

Healing.

"Dear Ormek, Laura, Allain and Athena," Hannah wrote that afternoon in a little room with three laptops, bolted to the desks.

"I have been, and remain, deeply grateful to you for all you have done for me. I believe I may have failed to make that clear this morning.

"Thank you.

"But I am not one Hannah. I am at least two, the Hannah who is grateful, and the Hannah who knows how much people suffer."

Hannah bit her lip and blinked away her tears, her fingers flying across the keyboard, its keys blackened with the grime of countless suffering subjects, the black letters on the keys faded to gray, the S and E and T almost gone altogether, the daily tapping of contrite slaves wearing down everything they touched, even as they themselves were worn down.

"Any of us who have an opportunity to end this must take it, even while we serve without question the rest of the time. I'm sorry I gave Athena a sleeping pill. I shouldn't have done it.

"Love,

"Hannah"

That night, body aching with a dozen unfamiliar pains, Hannah put her head on the little polyester pillow and closed her eyes, for the first time in months, without guilt.

Healing.

And for the first time in seven days, she felt something between her legs, the mild stirrings of weak lust.

Her last orgasm was a week ago, a Tuesday afternoon that felt like a century ago, with one of the conference people. Her sexuality utterly sapped, and with the distractions of Europe and van Minsk and, most of all, the impending confrontation with the Fairchilds, she had abstained.

Then, in the holding pen where she was taken as soon as she returned to America, she had felt nothing, wanted nothing, believed



nothing.

Now, after her first day of punishment, she was feeling things again, the hunger only one food could satisfy. She rolled to her belly, not wanting to be obvious under lights just a little dimmed for the night, and she slid her arm beneath her belly and reached for her hole, spreading her lips, massaging, roiling her clitoris, tapping and circling and pinching and exploring her female treasures until the inevitable, and she struggled to control her breathing and fought not to spasm, and then it was done, a small, satisfying visit to that little playground of joy where her legs met.

She slept restlessly on the thin mat and the thin pillow, dreams of police waking her in her tiny space, where she could hear the steady breathing of the victims sleeping around her.

The next day began early, a blur of suffering and relief.

First food, then hanging by her wrists with nothing but her toes touching the cold floor, then a minor beating, next electric shocks against her ribs that made her cry out, lunch, a session in a black box, masturbation and two orgasms in a small cell with a thick toy under the supervision of a bored woman. Then dinner, another message of contrition, hanging by her ankles.

The Petrosyans accepted each of her letters and checked in dutifully, reducing Hannah's punishment by fifteen minutes here, a half hour there.

Hannah did her part, appearing without resistance wherever she was scheduled, holding forth her body, her hands and feet and backside, for correction.

And Hannah listened, because people were talking.

It was when they talked that Hannah lived, and felt.

She had struck at the head of the beast, and the beast had smiled and called the police and declined to sign her contracts.

But down here, under the clay feet of the monster, at the price of pain – an acceptable price, a restorative price – she could see the cracks, hear the brittle substrate slivering, sense the machine staggering above her.

And, eventually, she could feel it looking for her.

"They're making noise about selling," one man said to a second while they passed rope around her wrists. "But no one knows who the buyer's supposed to be."

“I think Fairchild wants out. All that shit about his kids. You know, ‘Yeah, my son’s a senator, biyotch,’ and then the next day, ‘Never mind, he raped a 14-year-old. And so did his brother.’ So he’s just going to get out and go somewhere and forget everything until he’s dead.”

“There are times I want to do the same thing,” said the other, raising Hannah until not even her toes could touch the floor. “My wife’s always hated me for working here, but now she’s not even talking to me. Hey, can you spread your legs?”

Hannah obeyed and the man knelt, applying small, sharp-toothed clamps to her left and right inner labia.

“Uh,” Hannah said, gasping in surprise at how sharply she felt the pain. “I was promised you wouldn’t break the skin.”

“They’ll be off in five minutes,” he said. “Nothing’ll break before then.”

Later that day, two women conversed beside a coupling cage while Hannah mounted a male facility guest who looked up blankly at her. She held him on his back while she raised and lowered her middle over him, taking him into herself slowly, deliberately, savoring the moments, and listening.

“You won’t hear a peep out of that family,” one of the women was saying. “The men, anyway. They’re the Fort Knox of information. But one of the wives is pissed. She didn’t know she was married to a pedophile. And she’s talking to her friends, and her friends are talking to everyone. The boys want to sell, supposedly. Get out and take their money and hire lawyers to clear their name.”

“Good luck with that one.”

Hannah felt the boy tense and thicken, and she responded by grinding her clitoris against his pubic bone, her vagina quivering with climax while he, wide-eyed now, awake and alive and groaning, was still shooting his seed into it.

“Finish up, just one orgasm each,” one of the women directed.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Hannah said.

“Dad doesn’t want to sell, though. But they hold the majority of it, so it’s up to them.”

“I’d love to be a fly on the wall at their family dinners. Awkward.”

Hannah didn’t hear all she wanted to. The conversations got increasingly furtive, hushed and urgent, until by Friday every worker at

Bruche seemed preoccupied, performing their duties with minimal enthusiasm, beating and clamping and shocking and binding as if they'd rather be doing anything else.

"Where's Annette?" someone asked just outside the computer room.

"You didn't hear? They canned her last night."

"Shit, no way, what happened?"

"No one wants non-voluntary human-based research anymore. Just boom, it's over."

"Wait, that was a whole department."

"Yeah, 20 people gone."

On Saturday morning – four days done, five to go – Hannah lay stretched out on a table in a small room, alone, waiting for nipple leads, when two women entered.

"And then there's that girl," one of the women said. "All they have to go on is she's blonde and built and her name's Anna."

"And what's her significance?"

"She crashed a party in Moscow. All the main Fairchilds were there – dad, his two sons, all their wives – and basically blackmailed them, on the spot. Naked."

"Naked?"

"Yeah, as in subject naked. Had on a collar. She—"

"Wait, a slave did it?"

"Yeah. Showed them some kind of home movie, told them it goes out unless I get a million, and they told her no and so . . . it's been coming out all week."

"Shit. Didn't someone look at her collar?"

"Apparently not. It's brilliant, really. Send her in naked. She was all that, tits swinging, ass jiggling, the whole nine yards, supposedly, so the men were all forgetting themselves."

"And now they're looking for her? Why?"

"Maybe they want to know who sent her, where she got it all. Or maybe just get even, I don't know. She said she was from Texas, so they're looking everywhere, but especially here. I've been called twice. 'Do you have any Annas? Or maybe Annies? Any blonde girls with attitude, and probably some education? Not just now, but ever?'"

Hannah said nothing, not even mustering a decent scream when the clamps flooded her torso with juice.

“They ought to offer a reward,” said the first woman, removing the clamps and stepping to the middle of the table. “Spread for me.”

Hannah widened her thighs to the limits of her restraints and the woman parted her lips and peered at the opening of her sex.

Finding no signs of overuse, she removed her fingers from Hannah’s opening, and Hannah marveled, now her suffering was over and she could think again, at the ways truth sometimes makes its way unscathed through a system in minutes, and sometimes staggers and falls, and when it rises, it’s distorted and bent, and no one recognizes it.

“If they offered a decent reward, I’m sure they’d get plenty of girls to question.”

The second woman peered at Hannah’s tag.

“I found a Hannah,” she said. “At least it rhymes. How much do I get for her?”

The briefer snatches of conversations Hannah heard in passing were just as telling.

“ . . . whole shelf was cleared off last night at Rx Emporium – nothing whatsoever you could buy from Glamcorp, because of the slave labor, and . . . ”

“ . . . I told her I had a job at a secret munitions factory, because I wouldn’t get a second date if she knew I worked here . . . ”

Saturday afternoon, while Hannah typed out her fifth letter of contrition, Diane appeared.

“Hannah,” she said.

“Hello, Diane.”

“You told me a story when I checked you in, about where you were the night you disappeared. Do you remember it?”

“I do. It was truth.”

“Where did that meeting take place?”

“In the private dining room of a restaurant in Odessa called Aolail.”

“Who was there?”

“Myself, and Druhler, and Leston and Brighton Fairchild.”

“What was discussed?”

“Baye Cardiff, contracts, other things.”

Diane stood and left, and Hannah’s blood ran cold.

Within five minutes, another woman appeared, a face Hannah hadn't seen before.

"Let's take your picture," she said.

Hannah grimaced. A smile was impossible. The picture was taken and the woman left.

Within 15 minutes, Hannah was returned to her berth, feet shackled, hands cuffed behind her back. All the other berths in the room were empty now. Everyone had been taken somewhere else.

For hours, she lay there. No punishment, no torture, no conversation, no dinner, and she knew they knew. She imagined Druhler Fairchild, glowering over the picture of the girl at the Bruche Institute punishment facility, recognizing her immediately from Aolial in Odessa, remembering how she had confronted and insulted him and his sons, set out the contracts with \$0 on all the bottom lines. Now she was the lowest of slaves, suffering at the hands of people who worked for him.

But knowing she was enduring a standard term of punishment wouldn't be good enough for Druhler Fairchild. He was a cruel, vindictive man, attributes that had served him well for decades.

Let it be quick, Hannah prayed, speaking in her mind to whatever god managed the final days of forgotten slave girls.

"Bath time," said a woman, speaking quietly after the lights had dimmed for the night.

Diane.

Of course. Who better to exact the Fairchild's revenge?

She unlocked Hannah's berth and helped her to the floor.

"I didn't know you had baths here," Hannah said.

"We have a few. It's your turn."

"Okay," Hannah said, stomach rumbling with hunger and terror.

They walked to an unfamiliar part of the facility,

"How have things been so far?" Diane asked.

"Why don't you ask the people torturing me?" Hannah ventured.

"Why are they doing that to you, Hannah?"

"Because I made some very poor choices," Hannah said, the irony in her voice so mild it was probably imperceptible.

Two tubs, stainless steel, stood side by side in a small room of white tile, white counters and cabinets, and stainless steel fittings. One of

the tubs had been filled with water, wisps of steam rising from its shimmering surface.

“We’re going to let you take a little something, and get you all washed up,” Diane chirped.

“Take what?” Hannah demanded, standing there helplessly, hands still bound behind her, feet fastened together.

“It’s just a supplement,” Diane said, turning toward the counter, doing something there Hannah couldn’t see.

Good.

She’d be poisoned, then drowned. A painless death. No interrogation. No more suffering here. No more suffering at all. No more sin. With her last breath, she would know she was dying blameless. She had taken much from the world, but she had given everything.

There must be a camera here, somewhere, she thought. Fairchild would want to watch.

Hannah swept the room with her eyes, immediately spying the laptop, open on the counter, the little blue light on.

She glared, giving Fairchild one more face to remember, this one without makeup, framed by blonde hair unwashed for a week.

Should she curse him? Make a speech? Protest?

No.

Make him wonder what her final thoughts were.

He will always wonder.

What are my final thoughts? Hannah wondered. Mother. Only Mother. I will miss you, Mother. You will cry for me, but I will miss you too.

Diane turned back to her, a little paper cup in one hand.

For a woman carrying out an order of profound evil, she looked wrong. Nervous. Even coy.

She raised the little paper cup, allowing Hannah to peer into it.

It was empty. There was nothing in it.

## **Chapter 90: ‘Things are Happening’**

Diane grabbed Hannah by hair at the back of her head and pulled.

“Alright, Hannah, open up.”

Hannah did as she was told, opening her mouth, holding it open while Diane raised and upended the cup of air.

“Let me see it on your tongue,” Diane said, bending, peering at Hannah’s closed lips.

Hannah opened her mouth.

Without turning her back, Diane retrieved a cup of water, brought it to Hannah, raised it to her lips.

“Wash it down.”

Hannah drank, coughed more than she needed to, understanding with a soul-shaking thrill that this was a charade, a ruse, a show, and she was the star. She drank some more water.

“Let’s see,” Diane said.

Hannah opened wide and Diane peered first, then ran her finger everywhere – between Hannah’s teeth and gums, under her tongue, along the roof of her mouth.

“Drink a little more.”

Hannah drank and coughed.

“Alright, into the tub,” Diane said, easing Hannah to the edge, helping her swing her bound legs over the side, lowering her into the hot water.

“I need my handcuffs off,” Hannah protested, acting affronted.

“They’ll stay on,” Diane said.

Hannah looked down at the water, swirling above her breasts, her legs undulating, her feet rendered to pieces by refraction.

“How are you feeling, Hannah?” Diane asked.

“A little dizzy,” Hannah replied, lolling her head. “What was in that pill?”

“It was a supplement.”

Hannah held still, closed her eyes, opened them as if it were difficult to do so, while her heart thumped.

Why are you doing this, Diane? Because you are not a coward after all? Or have things changed so much it’s safer not to kill me? Is Fairchild, like all the great, fading potentates of old, the last victim of his own lies, his minions seeing a truth lost to him?

“How are you feeling, Hannah?”

Hannah opened her eyes, looked straight ahead, closed them again, hoping this was the reaction her non-existent pill was supposed to produce.

She heard a click, the quiet gurgle of something at her feet, realized the tub was being drained.

Diane had moved to a place near what looked like faucets and other controls mounted on the wall. Hannah pretended to gaze about blankly, drunkenly, but she'd seen enough to understand.

"Hannah?"

Hannah kept her eyes closed.

"Hannah?"

Nothing.

"Hannah?"

Hannah heard a few quick steps, felt a pair of hands on her shoulders, pushing her gently down into the tub, the water just over her hips now. Had the drain not been opened, she'd be submerged.

The hands remained there, holding her, drowning her.

She remained still, waiting.

She felt the breath on her ear before she heard the words.

"You're dead, Sweetheart. Do not speak, do not talk, do not move."

Hannah nodded slightly, but she remained otherwise lifeless when Diane left, returned, her footsteps joined by a second pair, a wheel squeaking.

"Careful," was the only word spoken, Diane saying it to someone else as Hannah was raised from the tub by four hands, two around each upper arm, her head lolling convincingly, she hoped, as she was laid roughly across a gurney and covered by a white sheet.

"I can get her to the morgue," Diane said. "Thanks."

A male voice grunted, a door closed. Was that an accomplice? Or someone who thought the warm, pink body was truly dead? Surely he knew this was no corpse.

Another minion, awakened to a truth that had escaped his master.

The gurney squeaked and rolled, turned corners, traversed silent hallways.

Hannah sensed herself arriving in another room, where the cart stopped.

The sheet was moved aside, the cuffs were opened, chains taken away, and Hannah was rolled onto her back, a pillow slipped under her head before the sheet was replaced.

"Stay here," Diane whispered. "Things are happening."



## Chapter 91: Out of the Morgue

Hannah lay still, wishing she could hear something, anything.

But the room was, appropriately, deathly still.

She remained under the sheet for as long as she could, eventually pulled it from over her face, stared up through the gloom, lit only by an exit light, at a gray ceiling.

Diane didn't say stay covered. She just said stay here. In this room. On this gurney, presumably.

Lying still, Hannah allowed her mind to wander. How many dead girls had lain in this room, she thought, before they were returned to distraught owners? How many of those dead girls had been murdered?

Diane had defied a direct order, Hannah knew, to spare her life. Was the organization turning against itself? Why? What was happening beyond the walls of this bitter place?

Hannah drifted off to sleep, dreamed. Someone was looking for something, or someone.

"This is the only place we haven't looked for her."

"That's the morgue!" a female screamed. "She's not in there. She can't be in there!"

"If they did that . . . if they did that!" shouted a man, his voice coming choked, near hysteria.

It was a party in Hannah's dream. They were getting ready to beat on a pinata that looked like a gargoyle and hung not by a cord in its back but by its wrists, or its ankles. They had to find something first, however, and got very excited. A door opened, the voices got louder.

"There she is," sobbed a woman. "Oh my god, oh my god, those bastards! Aaauggghh!"

Hannah jerked under her sheets, turned, blinked in the sudden brightness of fluorescent lights.

"Hannah? Hannah? Oh my god, she's alive. She's alive!"

Hannah sat up, clutching the sheet to her breasts instinctively.

"What's going on?"

"They sold," said the woman. "All of it. They signed all the contracts. Just the two sons signed, but that was enough. You closed the deal."

"Okay," said Hannah groggily. "So I'm done here?"

The woman laughed. “You’re done . . . with everything. We’re getting collars cut off as fast as we can get through them. Chips are going to take a little longer.”

Hannah stared into the woman’s eyes. She was young, with a Southern accent, definitely not the one from the cathedral. What she was saying made no sense.

“Hannah, Hannah Loughbridge. It’s over. We won. You won.”

The woman spread her arms, leaned across the gurney and hugged Hannah. Hannah hugged her back, and felt nothing.

Numbness.

Emptiness.

A novel place, utterly new in Hannah’s mind, formless and void.

“What time is it?” Hannah asked.

The woman laughed, pulled out her phone.

“8:15. We got here a little after 7. We’ve been letting people out and looking for you. We’re very sorry we didn’t wait for you in Odessa. We had no idea you’d get reported as a runaway. We had no idea all this would happen.”

“They were going to kill me.”

“They think they did?”

“Yes. Well, no . . . a woman named Diane decided not to. But some people wanted me dead. And they might still think I’m dead.”

“Who?”

“Fairchild, probably.”

“Bastard.”

“So everyone’s . . . going free?” Hannah stammered.

“Just about. We’ve got teams all over the country, letting people go, giving them clothes, giving them the news.”

“Wait, you’re breaking into houses to—”

“No, residences will happen another way, today it’s just the facilities, the labs and the—”

“Stacey!” Hannah screamed.

“Stacey?” the woman echoed.

“Are you going to school labs? Like where one person is there, at a college lab?”

“No, just the Fairchild facilities right now. They’re all over the country.”

“I have to let someone out. She’s in Corpus Christi. I need to go there!”

Hannah slid off the gurney, leaned against it, grabbed at it for balance, almost fell when it rolled. She dropped the sheet and stormed out of the morgue nude.

“Hannah, we have clothes for you!” the girl shouted, following.

“I need a phone,” Hannah said, whirling. “Give me your phone!”

The girl complied and Hannah pounded the phone’s face.

“Athena?”

“Hannah?” Athena said. “Whose phone is this?”

“Someone who just came to the place I’m at. They’re saying – we’re all free.”

“Yeah,” Athena said. Her voice was dull, leaden.

“I need to get to Corpus Christi!” Hannah shouted. “I need to let Stacey out.”

“Okay.”

“I need you to drive me.”

“I’m already in Corpus Christi,” Athena said, voice flat. “I can’t take you.”

“Are you okay?” Hannah inquired.

“Yeah, sure.”

No, Athena was not okay.

Sudden freedom could be jarring. Losing one’s slave girl could be just as bad. Hannah didn’t care. Athena’s reaction to all this was the least important thing in the world to her right now.

“How can I get to Corpus Christi?” Hannah asked.

“You were working with those people,” Athena said, her voice still flat, but the words coming quicker. “You helped make this happen.”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “I don’t know what’s been happening. I’ve been getting tortured all week. I’ve been—”

“Because you drugged me!” Athena screamed. “God damn you! I took you to van Minsk, I did everything for you, I took care of you and . . . and . . . and the whole time you were planning it all out. I saw all the videos. Everyone’s been watching them all week. And there’s the one with Stacey there, that you made, and you can tell it’s me practically, and the one I took of you for your scholarship too. You’ve been working on this for a year, at least. With them! You liar, you fucking bitch, you—”

“Athena!” Hannah screamed into the phone, silencing the girl.  
“Look at things from someone else’s perspective for once in your fucking life, and grow the fuck up!”

Hannah hung up the phone, dialed a second number.

“Mother?”

“Hannah?” came the desperate reply. “Hannah, is that you?”

“Yes!” Hannah said. “Yes!”

“Where are you?”

“I’m at . . . I’m at this place, um, um, the Bruche Institute. It’s in Dallas somewhere. Look it up. Look it up.”

“Wait, wait, let me see,” Mother said. “Okay . . . okay, I found it. I can be there in half an hour. Half an hour. Oh my god, Baby, I’ve been going crazy all week. Why didn’t you call me? Where have you been?”

“I’ve been here,” Hannah said. “I couldn’t get to a phone.”

“I called Allain, and all he could say was he didn’t know anything. What’s been going on?”

“Just pick me up,” Hannah said. “Can you get me to Corpus Christi? Can you take me today, now?”

“You mean, for school?”

“No,” Hannah replied. “Well, yes, but that’s less important. Right now, I have to let Stacey out. The girl in my research project. I need to let her out.”

“I’ll be there in 30 minutes,” Mother said. “Please wait for me, okay?”

“Yes.”

As soon as Hannah hung up, the phone vibrated again. Hannah looked, recognized Athena’s number.

“Hello?”

“Hannah, it’s Athena, don’t hang up.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry,” Athena said. “I’m sorry. For calling you a fucking bitch. And I’m sorry for everything.” Athena paused before her next word.

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “I need to go. My mom’s picking me up.”

“Wait wait!” Athena shouted. “I need to tell you some things. Mom wants to talk to you.”

Hannah paused, swallowed.

“What does your mother want with me?”

“She knows you need to pack for school,” Athena said. “So you need to come by and get your suitcase and your things. And . . . you can keep your bedroom.”

Hannah found her vision narrowing down to a cross of white grout between the morgue’s wall of pale green tiles.

The true meaning of freedom was seeping into Hannah’s mind piece by piece – she could see Mother whenever she wanted; she could set another slave girl free – but this didn’t fit.

“I don’t understand,” Hannah said.

“It’s fine,” Athena said. “Mom gets it. She explained it to me. She says everything you did, it was because you felt like a victim, and—”

“I *was* a victim,” Hannah snapped, and she hung up and handed the phone back to the girl.

“Hannah,” the girl said. “I know you have to go, and see your mom. But things are going to be complicated.”

“I understand that,” Hannah said. “I can adapt.”

“No, complicated for you in particular. What you did . . . your meeting with the Fairchilds – that’s part of the story. A big part. No one knows it was you yet, but they’re asking, and it’s going to come out.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, her stomach grumbling with hunger and a new kind of fear.

“Do you know where the showers are?”

“No,” Hannah replied.

“You know where the red doors were, that led to the admin wing?”

“Yes.”

“They’ve been propped open. Everything’s been propped open. Showers are in there. And then, there are donuts and breakfast burritos and coffee in the cafeteria, and clothes too. The best we could find in the time we had. Just take whatever fits.”

“Where are all the people?” Hannah asked.

“The people who worked here?”

“Yes.”

“Gone. We showed up this morning, told them we were the new owners and they wouldn’t be needed any longer.”

The girl smiled.

“Who are you?” Hannah asked.

“Millie,” she said, and she stepped forward and spread her arms, and Hannah hugged her again with all her might, because this body she embraced was truth, something she could feel, and she was happy.

Mother’s car, a battered, blue Japanese compact, was idling by the curb when Hannah left the Bruche Institute through the front doors. She squinted at a bright sun she hadn’t seen in a week, reveled in the seasonably cool air, walked between two statues vaguely shaped like female bodies, passed among wide-eyed, slack-jawed former slaves in ill-fitting clothes trying to figure out what to do with their first moments of freedom.

Cars were pulling up. People were getting in them. A bus arrived, its occupants singing something loud and boisterous. A drinking song, perhaps.

“Get in, get in!” a girl screamed from an open window. “Everyone! Come with us!”

“Where are you going?” a girl answered back.

“It doesn’t matter!” she screamed.

Hannah, face flushed, in department store bra and panties, a tea-stained white sundress, sky blue flats and a black belt, made her way to her mother’s car, pulled open the door and slipped in.

“Hello, Hannah.”

“Hello, Mother.”

They kissed, too much to say to each other for them to know where to begin, and Mother pulled into traffic.

“We need to go to the Petrosyans first,” Hannah said.

“Why?”

“To get my clothes and books. And Laura wants to talk to me.”

Mother had never been to the Petrosyans, but she seemed to know the way.

“Why were you at that place?” Mother asked.

“To be punished.”

“Why?”

“Escape attempt.”

“Really?”

“No, it was a misunderstanding,” Hannah said, running her fingers through her damp hair. “Long story. I can explain later. Tell me what’s been happening.”

“It’s been all over. In the news, online, everywhere.”

“Did you watch it?” Hannah asked.

“Oh, Honey, over and over. All the things they did, and – oh, and you, Baby. You! From the scholarship. You were in there. They blurred your boobs out, though.”

“Was there a girl getting punished?”

“A lot of girls were getting punished.”

“A dark-haired girl, tied to some bars? And another girl spanking her?”

“Oh . . . I think so, yeah.”

“Could you see the girl’s face?”

“No, that was blurred out. Her chest too. And definitely the girl doing the spanking.”

Hannah sighed with relief.

“I stayed up all night to look at it, when it all came out,” Mother said. “I think everyone did. The server kept crashing. All the horrible things, and the horrible people behind it, and —”

“Horrible people?”

“Those Fairchild people. Someone got them to more or less admit two of them raped an underage girl, and then their dad – the main Fairchild, who started it all – made her a slave to shut her up. It was all recorded, the meeting with them. And that tipped the scale.”

“Tipped the scale?” Hannah asked.

“People were upset about the abuse, but all that could be explained away,” Mother said. “But that girl, Baye, uh, Baye Car . . .”

“Baye Cardiff.”

“Yeah, that’s right. How did you know that?”

“I just did.”

“Those boys raped her, and their father made her a slave. They tried to deny it all, had their lawyers say it was a lie, but that recording they made. He said, ‘You too, Leston?’ That’s what that man . . . Drew, um, Drew . . .”

“Druhler Fairchild.”

“Yes, right. That’s what he said. ‘You too, Leston?’ Everyone’s been saying that. It’s a whole punchline now. Because Mr. Fairchild thought it was just one boy who raped her, but it was both his sons.”

“What’s been happening with all of us, then?” Hannah asked.

“It’s done,” Mother said, gripping the steering wheel, and she paused and swallowed.

“It’s done. Laws are in the works. It’s already outlawed in Washington and New Hampshire, and a bunch of other states are working from a template the resistance people created. But it doesn’t matter. If you’re a business with slaves, no one will darken your doors or buy what you make. If you own slaves, you might as well be walking around wearing a kitten fur coat. The owners are getting the collars cut off as fast as they can, and they’re all trying to say they took good care of their subjects, and most of them were destitute, and—”

“Like me,” Hannah said.

“Oh, Sweetheart, you don’t agree with them, do you? Please tell me you don’t agree with them.”

“I’m not going to be bitter,” Hannah said. “I’m just going to see it for what it was, and move on.”

There was silence for a time as Mother navigated the Petrosyan’s neighborhood.

“You know the way?” Hannah asked.

“Of course,” Mother said. “I know their address better than I know my own.”

“They’ve offered me my room,” Hannah said quietly.

“What room? Who?”

“The Petrosyans. You know, I had a cage downstairs, but a normal bedroom upstairs, where they would let me stay sometime. They’ve offered it to me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I’m still trying to figure things out.”

Mother pulled up to the curb before one of the neighborhood’s smaller mansions, perched behind a high brick wall.

“Okay,” Mother said after a long pause, “I think I know why. What were you when they owned you?”

“A . . . sex slave.”

“Yes, but beyond that. What were you?”



“A . . . decoration,” Hannah said. “Status.”

“Exactly,” Mother said. “And you still are.”

“How can I be —”

“No, no, hear me out. There was a girl — older than you — her family had her collar cut off Tuesday, before things really got wild. But she’s still living with them. She was on the news. She said she was happy, that they had always treated her well. If your former slave stays with you, it makes you look good. It’s . . . another kind of status.”

Hannah bit her lip and looked out the window.

“What should I do?” she asked quietly.

“Whatever you want,” Mother said. “It’s up to you now.”

“Well, I need to go back to school, so staying with them is sort of a moot point, I guess. Until summer.”

“You could stay with me, but I’m a little up in the air right now,” Mother said. “I might have a little apartment on campus, or it might be just a dorm room.”

“Congratulations on that, in person,” Hannah said, not wanting to say more. Mother was leaving Roger and his family to go to law school, and her employer was helping out, paying for a place to stay near classes, and well away from the mobile homes where she’s lived for two years.

Leaving Roger was painful, but Hannah understood. Mother was growing. Kind as he was, Roger wasn’t changing at all.

Mother hit the gas, reaching the Petrosyan house a few minutes later.

“Mother,” Hannah said, pausing. “Most of my things are in my room, and you can follow me up there, but I’ll need to get some books out of the cage, and I don’t want you to see it. I don’t want you to have to remember that. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Hannah and her mother went to the door in the wall, found it open, went to the front door.

Laura Petrosyan answered.

“Hello, Hannah. Hello, Martha. Please come in.”

Laura stepped back, allowing Hannah and her mother to pass.

The woman who’d had Hannah beaten, who’d made the rules about when she’d be chained and shackled, who sent her off to be kenneled,

who'd punished her in a hundred small ways over the last two and a half years, smiled warmly, and Hannah smiled back.

"I understand you spoke to Athena this morning," Laura said, following Hannah toward the stairs.

"Yes, Ma'am, she told—"

"Laura, please."

"Oh," Hannah said. "That will take some getting used to. But yes, she said I could . . . have my room."

"What do you think you'll do?" Laura asked.

"I'm not sure yet," Hannah replied, moving up the stairs she never took when she was shackled. "I know I'm going back to school today. And then, we'll see. But thank you."

"We would like to continue contributing toward your schooling," Laura said.

"That's very nice of you," Mother said, sounding startled. "Very nice."

"Thank you," Hannah agreed. "I'm not sure how things will be, at school. Because of everything."

"They're taking collars off in the kennels," Laura said.

"Stacey's has to come off first," Hannah said. "Then mine."

"Stacey?"

"The girl in my research project," Hannah said.

## Chapter 92: Ripples in a Pond

Halfway to Corpus Christi, with three hours of talk behind them – of the past, the future, what Hannah would do, what worried her, what she most regretted – the conversation turned back to the Fairchilds.

"He said some horrible things," Mother said.

"Did they show who he was talking to?" Hannah asked.

"No," Mother replied, "they edited out everything but what he was saying. People are curious about that. There's a rumor it was his wife, or a friend. One website said it was a slave girl."

"It was me," Hannah said.

"That's right, Honey, I know you did your part."

"No, it was me, personally," Hannah said. "I think it's okay to say now. It's supposed to come out."

“You.”

“Yes, me. I was there, in Odessa, having dinner with the Fairchilds. Just the three of them. We argued, and I gave them contracts to sign. The sons signed in the last few days. Or I guess yesterday.”

Mother drove another five miles before she spoke.

“Please tell me you’re done with this sort of thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“You could have been killed.”

“I almost was.”

“What do you mean?”

By the time Hannah got to the part in the story where she was being pushed down in the tub – albeit a half-drained tub – her mother was crying, and they pulled off for lunch and she composed herself over hamburgers.

“What if you miss the adrenalin?” Mother asked once they were back on the road.

“What do you mean?”

“People who do the things you’ve been doing . . . it’s hard for them to let it go.”

“Oh,” Hannah laughed. “No. That dinner with them was, at most, two hours, and I never want to do it again. I just study and take tests. There’s nothing to miss. I promise.”

“I’m not just talking about . . . those men,” Mother said, pausing. “That thing you did at your school, at the scholarship event.”

“I do what I think is necessary,” Hannah said. “I’m not cliff diving. If I take a chance, it’s for a reason.”

“Okay.”

“The adrenalin is just a byproduct.”

“Okay,” Mother said. “Where are you staying tonight?”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said, the first time the question had occurred to her. “Maybe the kennels. But I’m not sure they’re even open.”

“Couldn’t you stay with Allain? Or Athena?”

Hannah sucked in her breath.

“No, not Athena. No.”

“Why not?”

Hannah waved her hand dismissively and looked out the window at Texas in early spring. Some things were too difficult to discuss, even with one’s mother.

“Allain then?”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “Everything’s changed. I don’t want . . . I don’t . . .”

Hannah put her hands in her face and wept before she continued through sobs, “I don’t want to sleep in his bed . . . I don’t want to make love to him . . . I don’t want sex, at all.”

“You need to find yourself,” Mother said quietly, instantly, and Hannah breathed in and knew Mother had been waiting to say these words, waiting for the right moment to speak this wisdom.

“You don’t think I have?” she asked, sniffing into a tissue from Mother’s purse.

“Not completely, no.”

“What’s missing?” Hannah inquired.

“Are you going to get married one day?”

Hannah laughed as boisterously as she’d cried a few moments before.

“Finding yourself means you’d be able to hear that question without laughing.”

“That’s minor,” Hannah said. “I’ve found myself. I know myself. Don’t you think?”

“Of course not, Honey. How could you have? You stopped going to school when you were 15. You never had an adolescence. I—”

“I had an adolescence,” Hannah said sharply.

“No you didn’t.”

“Sort of one,” Hannah said, and she saw herself playing video games, late at night, on a beanbag, with . . .

Who?

Where?

When?

Someone.

Friends had come over. They all talked, about regular things. They watched TV together.

The memory shimmered before her, almost reachable, and then it was gone.

Gone, like all the rest.

“I . . . don’t know,” Hannah said slowly. “I feel like I did. I . . . I have these memories, and they pop in and then I try to grab them and look

at them like normal memories, and they vanish again.”

“You never had an adolescence,” Mother repeated. “And I failed you, again and again.”

“Please don’t, Mother. Please.”

“The worst thing I did,” Mother continued, “was telling you to adapt. Telling you adapting was good.”

“It got me through. I remembered your words in the hardest times, the most embarrassing times, and it really helped.”

“We’re not supposed to adapt,” Mother said. “Remember that hymn, Steadfast for You?”

“Yes, sort of.”

“Steadfast,” Mother said. “It means never bend, never yield, never compromise. Never adapt.”

“That sounds awful.”

“Maybe, but I taught you to adapt for my own purposes. It was my way of making you okay with a poverty that just got worse and worse.”

“I don’t care why you did it,” Hannah said. “It was what I needed to hear.”

Mother was silent for the right amount of time before she spoke again.

“I’ve been talking to Allain.”

“When?”

“All weekend. This morning. Right before I picked you up.”

“About what?”

“He says you’d be welcome to stay with him, if you wanted to. I know he wants you to.”

“I don’t want to,” Hannah said. “He’ll want things I don’t want to give right now.”

“I think he’ll understand.”

“Beth,” Hannah said. “Beth!”

“Who’s Beth?”

“A very good friend. She never treated me like a slave. Just a friend. And sort of a girlfriend. We even had fights.”

“Will she want things from you?”

“Maybe,” Hannah said, “but she’ll understand if I say no. I think I remember where she lives.”

They reached campus around 4 that Sunday afternoon, Mother getting the okay to follow Hannah past the security desk of the Rickenbacker Biological Sciences Annex Building, up the elevator, to the lab.

To Hannah's partial relief and deep disappointment, Stacey was gone, her cage door open, her TV still on, her cage as messy as it had ever been, food wrappers and half-eaten plates of food around her bed, magazines and books in piles, a letter to her father, just "Dear Daddy, I really need to hear from you. I think—" and then nothing more. Hannah imagined Stacey watching the news, obsessively, realizing that her freedom might come, could come, would come.

The laptop was still there, open on the table, and Hannah scooped it up and left, returning to the car, directing her mother to Beth's apartment, climbing the stairs with Mother in tow, knocking on the door.

"Hannah?" Beth shrieked. "Oh my god, Hannah?"

Hannah and Mother entered, quickly made arrangements to spend the night, Mother on the couch, Hannah in bed with Beth. They talked well into the evening over chai, just the three of them, as Beth's roommate was gone for the weekend, and then Hannah and Beth lay down together, naked, side by side, and kissed and whispered but did nothing else.

"I'm not going to do anything until I get my collar off," Hannah said quietly, voicing a decision she had made on the drive with Mother.

"When is it coming off?" Beth asked.

"I don't know," Hannah replied.

"Why are you waiting until then?"

"Earlier today, my mother said I needed to find myself. I didn't know what she meant then, but I think it has to do with sex. All the sex I've ever had in my life was as a slave, so I . . . don't really know what sex is."

"Do you regret what you did with me?"

"No," Hannah said. "I'm not saying I regret anything. But definitely not with you. That's why I'm here."

Hannah said goodbye to her mother early the next morning, a happy farewell, because when and how they would be together again was entirely up to them.

As soon as she was in the car to go to school with Beth, she asked for her phone.

"I need to call someone."

“Okay.”

Hannah went to Blaise Fairchild’s website, dialed the number.

“Blaise Fairchild, please,” she said.

“Mr. Fairchild is in a meeting. May I ask who’s calling?”

“Hannah Loughbridge.”

Thirty seconds later, Hannah was connected to the man himself.

“Yes?” he said, the blandness in his voice hiding what Hannah knew must be mix of deep sentiments.

“Is Stacey’s collar off yet?” Hannah asked.

“Why are you asking?”

“Because I won’t have mine removed until hers is gone.”

There was a long silence before Fairchild spoke again.

“It came off last night.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said, moving her thumb to hang up the phone.

“Hannah,” he said, quietly.

“Yes?”

“Why did you have her beaten?”

“I didn’t have her beaten,” Hannah said. “I beat her.”

“No, the girl who beat her had dark hair. Was that you in a wig?”

“The girl with dark hair just held the rod. I beat her.”

“Why?”

“Her cage was a mess.”

“That’s not the real reason, is it?”

“What did you do to free your daughter?” Hannah asked.

A long pause followed her question, before he spoke again.

“Is that why it was done?”

“Her cage was messy.”

“That’s not the real reason, is it?”

“No,” Hannah confessed.

“It worked.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asked.

“I sued.”

“You sued?”

“I sued. Filed the preliminaries, anyway, action to follow. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“No, I wanted everyone free.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. Sell or I file.”

“I’m lost,” Hannah confessed. “You were going to sue the university? The clinic where Stacey got taken? The—”

“What?”

“You were going to sue everyone who . . . hurt Stacey?” Hannah queried cautiously, wondering if he’d come after her, wondering what it was like to be sued.

“No, no,” Fairchild said impatiently. “No one can sue anyone for engaging in standard subject operations. That’s part of the settlement. I was suing for Baye.”

“Baye?”

“Baye Cardiff. Pro bono.”

“Oh,” Hannah said. “Oh. The girl they . . . raped. That Mr. Fairchild put that financial thing on, that—”

“Yes. A decade of false imprisonment and lost wages. And rape, and rape collusion, and conspiracy, and—”

“You said you were going to sue them for Baye, and that’s why they signed?”

“It seemed to help,” Blaise Fairchild said.

“So, Baye was letting you represent her?”

“Yes. And I got her some money. A lot of money, really. Out of court. Fairchild screamed, but he paid. He knew I had them, because of what you did.”

“What I did?”

“Rescuing Baye. Digging up those documents. Interviewing her.”

“I didn’t do that.”

“Your people then.”

“Okay, but I don’t even know who they are.”

“They put some pressure on me. But I would have done it anyway.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Repudiate the Fairchilds, publicly,” Fairchild said. “That’s what they said I had to do. Admit what you did and disavow them, or we release the unredacted video of Stacey.”

Hannah swallowed.

“So I said how ‘bout I sue them for what they did to Baye? And they said yeah, that’s even better.”

Hannah allowed herself a brief smile.



“Hannah?”

“Yes, Blaise?”

“I’m not getting through this.”

“Through what?”

“What I did.”

“The next time someone like Druhler Fairchild comes to you, will you—”

“I’ve dropped five clients,” he said. “I’ve—”

“Does it feel like redemption?”

“It’s weak tea. It feels like nothing. It—”

“Do you know why Stacey was taken?”

“Yes . . . three ovaries.”

“I ordered a girl with three ovaries, for my research project. She was taken from her gynecologist appointment the next morning. And I’m going to have to live with that the rest of my life.”

Hannah could hear Blaise Fairchild breathing. She listened for a time before she spoke again.

“Did we do terrible things, Blaise?” she asked, answering her question herself because he remained silent. “Yes, but that’s no longer the question.”

Hannah paused, gathering her thoughts before she continued.

“You and I both dropped pebbles into the pond, for our own purposes, without thinking about the rest, and the ripples hurt people. We should have known better. I think we did know better, both of us. But here’s what I think matters more. I’ll never drop another pebble without looking at the whole pond. It’s a promise I’ve made, to the universe.”

Fairchild said nothing.

“How’s Stacey?” Hannah asked.

“Recovering. Doing well. Surprisingly so. She spent a few days crying, but she kept watching the videos that came out, and she gets it now, she understands what you were doing, what everyone was doing and . . . she says she understands you now. And she’s grateful.”

“I’m glad,” Hannah said. “Bye.”

“Bye.”

Hannah hung up the phone, but she held it between her hands as Beth drove.

“That was Stacey’s dad?” Beth asked.

“Yeah.”

“Fuck,” Beth said with a laugh. “Anyone else you need to call?”

“No. Thanks for letting me use your phone.”

Between classes, Hannah went to her professors to salvage her work for the semester. She’d missed a paper deadline, tests, several quizzes, a week’s worth of lectures, but everyone was accommodating, and by the end of the day, she believed she had a path to maintaining straight A’s, a goal that would take precedence over all others, even redemption.

Her last meeting of the day was with Dr. Keel, her philosophy professor. She found him a little after 5, in his subterranean office in the humanities building, his door open.

“Dr. Keel?”

“Hannah!” he said, rising, placing his hands together as if in prayer and offering a quick, ironic bow. “Please shut the door; please take a seat.”

Hannah sat and he stepped out from behind his desk, taking the chair beside her. He looked at her and blinked.

“You’ve got until Wednesday to get your affairs in order,” he said.

“Pardon me?”

Keel laughed, leaned back and waved his hands.

“Fame is like a death,” he said. “One person dies, another is born.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“We’re doing another drop on Wednesday, probably after lunch time. Your full meeting with the Fairchilds. That faked murder in the tub. Some other things. There’s no way we can hide your identity any further.”

“Wait,” Hannah said. “You’re part of—”

“Yes,” he said. “How could I call myself a philosopher if I weren’t? But it was all very compartmentalized. I didn’t know they were talking to you until a few days ago.”

“And now you’re speaking for them?”

“Yes, I got the assignment. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“What do I need to know?”

“Just that,” he said. “It comes out Wednesday some time. What you say after that is up to you.”

“So I’m done, then?”

“Done with what?” he asked.

“With the resistance,” Hannah said. “Or whatever it was called.”

“Of course not.”

“Tell me what to do,” Hannah said.

“Do you want a lecture?” he asked.

“What’s the alternative?”

“Platitudes.”

“Lecture then,” Hannah said.

Dr. Keel leaned back, crossed his leg and locked his fingers around his knee, looked at Hannah, looked over her head.

“Once advanced civilization – once the collective – reaches a certain age,” he began, “once it brings its grace to the required number of generations, it’s taken for granted. And once you take something for granted, you no longer see it as a package deal. You demand what you like and refuse what you don’t. You expect peace and freedom and a ridiculous quality of life compared to everything that’s come before, but you object to paying for it, to any rule that inconveniences you, to group deliberation, to diversity, to sharing civilization with anyone you consider unworthy.”

Hannah nodded.

“Don’t underestimate the sense of loss some people feel. The miracles of modern life are invisible to them. All they can see are the outrages against their sense of order and propriety and superstition, and they will fight with all the passion of the deeply aggrieved, and often enough, they will win. And those like us – the third who were born or raised with a different way of seeing – some of us give up, some of us look away, some of us join them, out of fear or convenience. The ones who keep fighting – we’re the ones who will write history.”

Dr. Keel set his foot back on the floor, leaned forward, smiled.

“You’ve been fighting,” he said. “I would guess for years.”

“Yes,” Hannah agreed.

“You may think you won a war, but it was just a battle. The war never ends.”

He leaned back and passed his hand through his hair.

“Lecture done.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said.

“Now,” he said, and his demeanor grew serious, sad. “How are you doing, Hannah Loughbridge?”

Hannah looked at the floor.

“Scarred,” she said. “I guess.”

“You just finished a week of torture.”

“Four days,” Hannah said. “It started Tuesday after lunch, ended Saturday afternoon when they figured out who I was and decided to kill me.”

Hannah paused. “And yes, it hurt, and I’ll probably keep having nightmares. But I went in there numb. I was already scarred. I’ve done some terrible things, so there was a part of me that wanted it, that felt like I deserved it.”

Dr. Keel just shook his head, granting her absolution without needing any more information. Was forgiveness so simple?

“And they talked, right in front of us. While they were doing . . . their things. I concentrated on that, on listening, on watching it all come down. And I knew it would end. My suffering for sure, but the system too, probably, and I knew I’d be back here, either way. And my . . . my family . . . forgave me. So there was physical pain. But not, um, spiritual or mental or whatever.”

“Yes,” Dr. Keel said, standing. “I want to believe you’ll recover, you’ll be well.”

Hannah rose, put her bag over her shoulder.

“Maxim says hello, by the way. And well done.”

“Maxim?”

“He drove you to your meeting. In Odessa.”

“Oh, yeah. I found him annoying.”

“All part of the plan. We needed you on edge. We needed you to go in with attitude, for the best performance.”

“I was told not to argue.”

“They knew you would.”

“Okay,” Hannah said, not surprised by his answer. “What did I miss last week?”

“It’s all in the syllabus,” he replied. “Just do the readings. There are some study questions to go over. But I’m going to change a few things up, with your permission.”

“What?”

“I want to show the video, with you and the Fairchilds, and talk about it. It includes your voice, but not your image, except your hand and, very briefly, your torso, when you set it up and packed it away.”

“That’s fine,” Hannah said. “But how does that fit with class?”

“You got Fairchild to sum up the philosophy of the aggrieved,” Dr. Keel explained, counting off on three fingers. “Charity is a sin. Reality is a lie. Money is proof. Brilliant.”

Hannah laughed. “Oh yeah. Well, feel free then, if you can make anything of it.”

“I want to extend the ontology unit we covered in January,” he said. “They hate reality because the earth is finite and she’s started saying no, and these are people who don’t like being told no, so they’re rejecting reality altogether, turning unsustainable consumption itself into an article of faith, sustainability into a profanity . . . out of spite or to prove her wrong or both, and they’re consuming everything, even to the point – until a few days ago – of consuming lives.”

Hannah shivered.

“From all of us, Hannah,” he said, offering his hand. “Thank you.”

## **Chapter 93: A Date with Allain**

Hannah was too busy for the next two days to do anything but get caught up in her classes, but Wednesday night, she went to the kennels, closed except for the high-ceilinged lobby with its bucolic mural, a new set of equipment parked there, two volunteers, college-aged, male and female, operating the saw.

With thousands of collars coming off every day, the process of removing them was getting more efficient, and Hannah lay on the table for no more than half an hour, ears plugged, eyes goggled, staring into the darkness with her arms crossed.

When it was finished, the removal felt like anticlimax, more like taking off a piece of oft-worn jewelry than the sweet liberation she had dreamed of for years.

“I want to keep the tags,” she said as she sat up, rubbing her free neck for the first time in two and a half years.

“Uh, why?” asked the girl, cutting through the ring from which they’d dangled.

“I never want to forget,” Hannah said.

“Most people do.”

“I don’t,” Hannah said, accepting the clinking metal. “I’m not done fighting. When I think I need to, I’m going to wear them again.”

The red tag they'd put on her as an escapee was still there:  
"HANNAH RUNAWAY 7 DAYS MIN."

She studied it, fingered her federal ID tag, stroked the smooth plastic of the kennel tag, with the tiny picture of her face.

The girl dropped the collar into a plastic bin, where it made a dull sound, a strangely sad sound. Sometimes, when she had made love with another slave, when the passion grew hottest and the bodies writhed beside each other, the collars would strike and ring together. She would never hear that sound again.

"What are you going to do with the collars?" Hannah asked.

"You want that too?"

"No, I was just wondering."

"They'll get melted down and sold. They're part of the settlement. About fifty dollars per collar."

"The settlement?"

"One million people went free last week. Average value per slave was almost fifty thousand. So that means fifty billion in lost assets to make up, and—"

"A lot of that's paper losses only, though," Hannah countered. "There's no real value to slaves being used for status . . . and recreational value – how do you put that on the books? Of course, there will be some one-time goodwill write-offs, but those won't affect operations or earnings."

Hannah considered, her mind whirring through questions she hadn't pondered until now.

"The banks financed billions in loans, though, most of it collateralized," she continued, speaking to herself more or less. "My owners took out a loan for me, I know. And now there's no collateral. So there will be some, um, institutional defaults, unless the fund helps out the lenders. Not that they deserve it."

"Where did you read about all that?" the girl asked.

"I'm taking an economics course."

"Where?"

"Here."

"Here? At Corpus Christi?"

"Yes."

"You're a student here?"

“Yes.”

“Wait, oh shit, wait. Hannah?”

“Yes.”

“Hannah, the girl in Odessa?”

“I’m here,” Hannah said.

“Oh my god, it’s you,” she said, staring into Hannah’s face as if seeing it for the first time. “They uploaded a bunch of stuff this afternoon. Hannah. Hannah Loughbridge.”

She turned to her fellow volunteer, leaning against the wall, tapping on his phone, waiting for another former slave to decollar.

“Rob, Rob!”

“Huh?”

“It’s that girl! It’s Hannah!”

Rob put his phone away and stepped over.

“It’s you, right?” she said. “You’re the one who met with the Fairchilds? The one that lady pretended to kill? Holy fuck, that was you, right?”

“Yes,” Hannah said, and she accepted a hug from the girl, a handshake from Rob, and was on her way sans collar and without further discussion, a behavior she repeated constantly for weeks after, her focus on school, her celebrity a distraction she didn’t need or want.

“Maybe I’ll give interviews after the semester’s over,” she told Beth and Vickie over dinner in their apartment a few nights later. “Maybe I’ll write a book, starting with the day Mrs. Alvarez put me in a cage.”

“How much detail will you put in it?” Beth asked.

“All of it,” Hannah replied. “All I can remember. But I’ve forgotten a lot. I’ve forgotten . . . people, I think.”

“Lovers?”

“I think. I’ll see a face sometimes, a stranger’s face, and wonder . . . was it you?”

“You remember . . . me, right?”

Hannah laughed. “All of it. All our fights too.”

That night, when the girls lay down to sleep, Hannah and Beth nude beside each other, Hannah reached out first, while they were kissing goodnight, and she cupped her hand around Beth’s breast. When Beth sighed and arched her back, Hannah lowered her mouth to Beth’s nipple, sucking it to full attention while the heat built between her legs.

Yes, Hannah thought. It is like it was. I can do this. But now it is mine, to have and to hold, to keep and to stay, to indulge and set aside as I see fit.

Beth seemed to understand, holding still, acting as Hannah's blank canvas, returning kisses when they were offered, touching Hannah's breast when hers was touched, waiting until Hannah was on her knees, running her tongue back and forth along Beth's slit, to touch Hannah's wet opening. And she waited until Hannah chose to be above her, positioning vulva and anus directly above Beth's mouth, to engage her friend's holes with her tongue.

The orgasm took longer than either girl expected, but Beth held forth, determined, and the girl eventually stroked her friend's clitoris to a hard, desperate orgasm, Hannah squirting and shaking and praying, "thankyouthankyouohmygodnononothankyoummmmmm."

Beth came soon thereafter, prodded to climax by Hannah's steady tongue as it worked her clit, teased her hole, pressed her clitoris again and again.

"I feel like you took my virginity," Hannah laughed when it was over.

"It's that different?"

"It is," Hannah said. "Everything's different. I'm having to learn how to live again."

The girls fell asleep in each other's arms.

On the drive to school next morning, Beth breathed in and spoke, cautiously.

"You know, I've been hearing from Allain."

"Of course," Hannah said.

"He wants a date. Just a date."

"Okay," Hannah said.

"Okay, like, whatever, or okay, I should tell him to call you?"

"Go ahead and give him my number," Hannah said, touching the new pink smart phone tucked into her back pocket.

Allain didn't call. Instead, he texted:

"Hello? Hannah?"

"Hi. Allain, right?"

"Yes. How are you?"



“Good. Back on track with school. Nightmares only a few times a week.”

“Nightmares?”

“It happens when you get tortured.”

“I’m sorry,” Allain wrote. “So sorry. This would be a lot easier in person. Dinner? Just dinner? Saturday?”

“Pick me up at Beth’s,” Hannah replied. “7”

Allain showed up early, hugged Beth, hugged Hannah, and brought her to his car.

They talked about school, classes, assignments on the drive to the club, where Allain had reserved Hannah’s favorite table, overlooking the gulf, and they watched the sky turn red and drank from a bottle of Hannah’s favorite sauvignon blanc.

After they were done ordering, Allain turned to Hannah and squinted.

“Do you want to know how I’m known now, in the medical school?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“The guy who used to own you.”

“Congratulations,” Hannah said, glass in hand, looking out across the water.

“That’s all you’re going to say?” he asked.

Hannah couldn’t tell if he were upset or being ironic.

“I don’t know,” she said, turning to face him. “What else should I say?”

Allain looked hurt. Or frustrated.

“Hannah?” exclaimed a woman with a loud Texas accent. “Hannah Loughbridge? My goodness, child, is that you?”

Hannah looked up, smiled. “Nice to see you.”

“Very brave, what you did,” she said, with a glance at Allain. “Your husband must be very proud.”

“Please,” Hannah said, grimacing, and using exactly the tone designed to shut a woman like that up.

The woman turned away uncertainly.

“You want to know what Uncle Bear says about you?” Allain said when the woman was gone.

“No.”

“No what?”

“No, I do not want to know what Uncle Bear, or anyone else in the world, has to say about me,” Hannah said.

“It’s not bad.”

“I don’t care.”

“It’s not bad.”

“Whatever.”

“He said, he was trying to figure out when you stopped being, in his words, a slave, and became a free girl who happens to let people chain her up on occasion.”

“I really wish you hadn’t told me that.”

“Why not?”

“You don’t know how things like that sound. To someone like me.”

“I would go further than Uncle Bear,” Allain said.

Hannah studied his eyes, found hurt there, but maybe a little anger too.

“Go ahead.”

“I think you were playing us,” Allain said. “All of us.”

Hannah swished the words around in her mind and burst out laughing.

“Playing you?” she repeated. “Like I just walked in off the street and started, what, um, scamming you? Is that how you’re going to remember all this? You’re the victims? You bought me naked in that showroom as part of my evil plan?”

“Hannah,” Allain said. “I’m doing everything I can to rebuild our relationship. You don’t . . . you don’t know how much I love you. And it’s not because of your looks. We could have bought a hundred pretty girls. Or that assessment score. You are, quite literally, one of the smartest people I know. One of the bravest. And you’re just . . . just this side of insane, which is probably one of the sexiest things about you.”

Hannah smiled, sipped, allowed him to continue.

“But you were . . . with me . . . all those weekends, and at the same time, you were . . . working on everything else . . . and I feel . . . betrayed.”

“You should look up the definition of betrayed,” Hannah said, surprised by the edge in her voice. Why was she angry? This angry? Was it something about what had happened to her, what had been done to her? Was it something about Allain?

“Okay,” Allain said, stopping because their plates had arrived, the server setting them down, the room captain close behind.

“Everything good so far, Mr. Petrosyan?” the captain asked.

“Yes, excellent.”

“Mrs. Petrosyan?”

Hannah’s vision narrowed and she felt her cheeks burning. She was on her feet before she knew what she was doing.

“What did you call me?” she demanded, her face inches from the captain’s.

“Oh,” he stammered. “I’m sorry, I . . . I . . .”

“I am Hannah Loughbridge,” she said. “I’m sure you won’t make that mistake again.”

“No, Ma’am . . . Miss. No.”

Hannah returned to her seat and dug into crab on the half shell, ignoring Allain’s startled eyes until she took her first bite.

“Hannah,” he whispered. “Hannah. What was that?”

“For almost 21 years, people have been looking at me and making assumptions. First, that I was poor. Then, my collar and my tag told them all they needed to know. No one gets to make any more assumptions about me.”

Hannah took another bite.

“I’m sorry if I hurt his feelings, but if he thinks I had to go straight from slavery to marriage, he is both wrong, and offensive.”

Allain sighed and rested the side of his face on his hand, his dinner untouched.

“I don’t feel like I know you anymore,” he said. “Or, I’m not sure I ever did. That’s what bothers me the most. You were someone else the whole time. You were plotting, scheming. You got everything, and—”

“I got nothing,” Hannah said. “Not at the start. I just happened to be born with the right equipment for the . . . situation I found myself in, and I decided to use that equipment to make things better and . . . it worked.”

Allain picked at his dinner, dejected.

“I’m sorry,” Hannah said. “Maybe we should pretend we’re on a first date. Let’s pretend we really don’t know each other. Let’s—”

“Athena says you have a lot of money,” Allain said. “She thinks you got it from—”

“That’s not a first date question.”

“I didn’t agree to the terms,” he said. “And then, Dad.”

“What about dad?”

“Were you . . . doing it . . . with him?”

“Allain,” Hannah said, fork paused halfway to her mouth. “I have a phone, and a debit card now, and if I walk to the elevator, no one’s going to stop me.”

Hannah put her fork in her mouth, chewed, looked into Allain’s face.

“And I’ll go back to Beth’s, and . . . and put this date out of its misery.”

Allain surprised Hannah with his laughter. Something about her answer amused him.

“How long are you going to stay with her?”

“I don’t know. Until she gets tired of me. I can get my own apartment around the start of next semester, and I’ll probably do that.”

“Why do you have to wait that long?”

“Former subjects have to show they can handle their own accounts for a while. Six months is recommended. A phone does that. So does my card.”

“Are you going to stay with us in Dallas over the summer?”

“I’m not sure,” Hannah replied. “Me and Athena are kind of iffy right now, I don’t care to see Franklin if he’s still around, and you’re not winning any points either.”

“What’s wrong with Franklin?”

“He said some things about me to Athena, she passed them on to me, and they hurt.”

“What did he say?”

“We’re done with that topic.”

“Okay, but you know why Athena’s upset?”

“Because she’s Athena.”

“Well, yeah, but it’s more than that. She told me and swore me to secrecy, at least where you’re concerned.”

“Why?”

“Because she knew you wouldn’t approve. She wanted to work in the industry. The subject industry.”

“I’m not surprised,” Hannah said. “But she’s right. I wouldn’t approve.”

“She was good at it. She kind of had a knack.”  
“Maybe she could be a prison guard.”  
“No,” Allain said seriously. “Different field altogether.”  
“I was joking,” Hannah said. “Tell me about your residency.”  
“Interviews are going well. I might end up in Chicago, or Seattle, or near Jacksonville.”  
“That’s great.”  
“Want to come with?”  
“No,” Hannah said flatly. “No.”  
She looked up at Allain, saw pain, made all the worse by his failing attempts to mask it.  
“I think this is too soon,” Hannah said. “There are just layers of baggage here I’m working through. You’re working through it too. We need some space.”  
“Really? You’re going there? We need space?”  
“I don’t know how else to put it,” Hannah said sadly.

## Chapter 94: Sorbonne

A week after her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, in mid-April, Hannah found herself aching, existentially bored.

Classes were going well. She was on her way to another round of straight A’s.

And she had nothing to do, no larger aim, no higher calling, the torment of unspent adrenalin.

Mother was right.

She consented to an interview with Graileys, a weekly news magazine with a popular website and, most importantly to Hannah, a strong presence in seven languages and 15 nations, most of which were following America’s lead and dismantling their own slave systems, and needed to be encouraged.

The interview lasted, off and on, a week, and most of the pictures were taken at the Petrosyans over the third weekend in April, where Hannah agreed to be photographed in front of the house, in her bedroom, and in a bikini by the pool, but not naked there or even topless, despite the assurances that nothing would show.

Delilah did the makeup, of course, the girl nearly hysterical with joy as she turned Hannah into someone else. But her collar was still on and wouldn't come off, she vowed, until her father, who had sold her into slavery as soon as she declared herself a girl while still a teenager, relented 100 percent. He was at 95 percent so far, Delilah confided.

The article gushed over Hannah's chains-to-academic-riches-to-helping-bring-down-an-empire story, presented the Petrosyans in a very favorable light, and was mostly accurate where it mattered, particularly regarding the treatment of slaves, and Hannah was happy with the effort.

The weekend with the family went well, and two weekends later, Raven married Uncle Bear, Hannah stayed at the Petrosyans when she wasn't serving as maid of honor, and her time at the home went well.

Laura and Ormek had adapted to the unlikely role of Hannah's quasi-parents, Franklin was gone, called to his dying grandfather's side, and Allain was in and out with interviews and school, mostly out except for the day of the wedding itself.

Hannah flew through finals week, some of the A's low, but all indeed A's, and after it all, she returned to the Petrosyans and to her bedroom, where she shut the door and lay in bed and cried for the first day, because something was missing, or very, very wrong.

She came out after midnight, ate leftovers in the kitchen alone, returned to her room, lay awake and cried and finally opened the old New Life laptop to look for summer work.

"Paid experience required," said the help wanted ad for a veterinarian's assistant.

"Paid experience required," said the ad for a server, for a department store clerk, for a fashion consultant.

Hannah saw the phrase a dozen times before she understood what it meant. Former slaves need not apply. You might have worked 10 hours, six days a week in a factory, in an orchard, in a home where your duties ran from laundry to scheduled intercourse, but if you weren't paid for it, you weren't needed.

Hannah shut the laptop and went to bed seething, staring at the ceiling until her anger exhausted her, and she slept until 2 in the afternoon, finished the plate of food she'd scavenged the night before, and opened up her computer.

Could she have friends? Could she reach out to anyone she had known as a slave, and get a job that way? Athena's friends? Allain's? Contact someone older, but not quite as old as Laura and Ormek?

She went into her Look! account, a rudimentary page she'd created a year ago that had embarrassed her at the time because there was no way to crop out her neck and the collar. She'd posted three pictures of herself and given up.

It was still there.

She went from there to Raven's page, found some beautiful wedding shots of herself, added those. Raven's page included pictures taken by others, so she searched her name, first among the wedding pictures, then on all of Raven's page, and then on all of Look! itself.

Such was the price of celebrity that the same pictures appeared, over and over in the accounts of other Look! users, of her face from the Graileys piece; pictures of her at the scholarship event, nude and chained; her picture next to Fairchild's, next to Baye Cardiff's, next to Raven's at her wedding. People posted them because she was attractive, because she was inspiring, because they wanted to have sex with her.

She kept scrolling, surprised to find, far down in the search results, a picture from a trip to Guadalupe that Beth had posted of the group on a mountain, Hannah topless, hands over her breasts.

She kept scrolling, stopping again, this time at a girl with her chin resting on a calculus book. A blonde girl. Smiling. Collared but not nude. In a black t-shirt.

"Hannah Loughbridge, cool friend," it said underneath.

The picture had been posted by someone named Abigail Morrison. There was no date, just a frustratingly vague "Posted 2+ years ago."

Hannah clicked on Abigail's name. "Account No Longer Active" appeared.

Hannah studied the face of the girl. She looked impossibly young. And happy. She was a slave. But there was, in her eyes, something unexpected.

Grace.

Confidence.

No, not just confidence.

Smugness.

Who?

Who was she?

She was . . . Hannah.

But how? When? Where?

Hannah sucked in her breath, stared at the picture, moving her head from side to side, half expecting to see more of the kitchen wall behind her.

There were other clues. Her makeup was a little worn, but beautifully done. Beautiful. Only Delilah could do makeup like that.

But a calculus book? She'd never owned one like that.

Who? Where?

Hannah stood, cradled the laptop and stormed out of her room and down the hall.

"Athena?" she said, knocking on the door? "Athena?"

"God Hannah, what?" Athena said, her bed creaking before she threw the door wide and appeared, wearing a long t-shirt.

"Where was this picture taken?" Hannah asked, turning the laptop around.

"Fuck, I don't know," Athena said. "And why are you naked?"

Hannah looked down, confirming Athena's observation.

"I forgot to dress. Where was this picture taken?"

"It's you with a calculus book," Athena sniffed, leaning forward.

"It's from college, duh."

"It says it was taken more than two years ago. I wasn't in college then. And I never used this book anyway."

"Okay," Athena said, "it says it was taken by, uh, Abigail, uh, Morrison."

"I don't know who that is," Hannah said. "And her account's shut down."

"I went to school with her," Athena said. "She was one of the smart kids, but I had her in PE, and—"

"Why did she take this picture? How did she take it? Where?"

"God, Hannah, just chill. Look, are you okay? Mom's kind of worried. You're not even coming out to eat."

"I got leftovers last night, I'm fine, how do I get in touch with Abigail?"

"Uh, she's going to think that's weird. She'll probably have no idea what you're even talking about. People take pictures of people all the time, and they just—"



Athena paused, looked up at Hannah.

“Hannah, seriously, you’re crying about this? What? What?”

“I just want to know,” Hannah said, choking out a sob. “I need to know. I don’t know why.”

“Okay, wait,” Athena said, looking up, squinting. “So, Abigail probably has a Profyle page now. She went to Harvard I think, so I’m sure she’s got a big bunch of braggy stuff there. Or you could look up some of her friends. She hung out with Matthew, uh, Robertson, Alex Helmand, Anton Mazeloff, Felix—”

“Wait, wait,” Hannah said. “Say the second name again. Alex? Alex?”

“Alex Helmand. Another brain. He got in at Yale, but he spent a semester there and then he went to Paris. Sorbonne or something. He had to learn French like, instantly.”

“Alex,” Hannah said to herself. “Alex . . .”

“So maybe that’s his book,” Athena ventured.

“Why would that be his book?”

“When you spent the night with him. You probably found it and said, take my picture with this book, loser!”

“Why would I spend the night with him?”

“He got you at an auction.”

“What auction?”

“God, fuck, Hannah, are you on drugs or something? This is like, practically yesterday.”

“The picture says it was posted 2 plus years ago.”

“Yeah, but it’s something you should, you know, you should not have any trouble remembering. A few days after we bought you, we went to this party, all the subjects were auctioned for some charity, Alex got you for like, \$5,000 or something, or I think more, you went to his house, you probably did things with him, and then you came home.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, and she leaned against Athena’s door jamb. “Oh. Oh.”

“Coming back now?”

Hannah whirled away, went back to her room, set the laptop down on her desk and threw herself on her bed, crying through a wave of memories that rushed like water through a door in her mind, bolted shut for years, flung open today, flung so wide and so fast it hurt.

Yes, she'd been with him. Made love to him. He'd made the money to bid on her by getting A's, a deal with his father begun in elementary school.

He'd been a virgin. Hannah had taken that from him. Or given that to him. He seemed grateful. He ejaculated three times within her that night.

He'd had no idea what to do. Hannah, a novice herself but a fan of relations from the moment she'd first had sex a week before in the stacks, had directed things for the most part, undressing him, encouraging him, showing him she was wet, until he finally pounced, mounting her on top, driving into her, soaking her, deliciously. Next, she mounted him, for her one orgasm of the night, and then they played video games for a time, after which she taught him how to have sex with her from behind.

He was brilliant. Like Hannah, he'd only ever gotten A's. He was taking college classes while still a junior in high school.

Hannah had stopped crying. The memories were coming back in an orderly way now, one after the other, the way memories should.

He'd missed two years of school with leukemia. He'd made up a year, but the damage was done. He was vulnerable. Like Hannah, he was on the outside looking in. He wasn't poor, no. His father owned furniture stores, his mother was an attorney. But their house was no mansion. Comfortable, but nothing like the Petrosyans. He wasn't a member of his school's highest social echelon. Athena had made that clear at the time.

And Hannah had liked him.

Hannah Loughbridge and Alex Helmand had shared something deep, beyond sex, a connection. Two outsiders, sharing something precious together.

And then she'd . . . gone home.

How?

Had she walked back to the Petrosyans?

No, of course not.

How had she gotten back home?

He'd wanted to buy her. He looked up her price. One and one half million dollars. Impossible. And the Petrosyans wouldn't have sold her for that anyway or, probably, for much more than that.

Not only would he not buy her, they most likely would never meet again.

“Hannah!” came Athena’s voice as she knocked on the door.  
“Hannah!”

“What?”

“I figured it out! I figured it out!”

Hannah rose from her bed and opened the door.

“What did you figure out?”

“Why you’re so weird. And annoying.”

“Why is that?”

“You have split personality!” Athena announced.

“No I don’t,” Hannah said, slamming her door.

She turned, surveyed her room, looked in her closet, pulled out her suitcase and tossed it on her bed.

“I’m being serious,” Athena said through the door.

Panties and bras. Ten of each should do. Black, white, light blue.  
She put on a black bra, black panties.

“Think about it. How could you forget something so basic?”

Jeans. Four pairs. One pair to travel in, the rest to pack.

“It happens to people. It’s okay.”

Six blouses. White button down to put on, the rest in the bag.

“Maybe it was because you were poor, and, you know, you being you. You never had nice clothes.”

Seven belts. Every color of the rainbow. She put on the black one.

She packed two sweaters, two fists full of socks, boots and shoes and sandals and slippers. She put on the brown leather boots. She packed pajamas, a dark green plaid set Mother had bought her last Christmas that she’d never worn.

“And so it bothered you. I mean, you’re vain. I’m not saying it in a mean way, but if someone is, you know, vain, in a good way . . . in a good way . . . and they go for years wearing, you know, sort of crap, that could trigger, like mental stuff.”

T-shirts. White, pink, light blue.

Black.

“We did what we could for you, but it was probably too late.”

A black t-shirt that said Helmand Furniture.

She’d always had it, had worn it now and then under certain sweaters in winter. The words on it had meant nothing to her, but her fingers

shook and her eyes blurred as she picked up the garment now, felt it, opened it.

A sacred souvenir.

“I’m not trying to be mean, Hannah. I’m trying to help you!”

Mrs. Helmand had given it to her the next morning. Hannah had been walking around their house in just panties, and it seemed to bother the woman.

“Hannah? What are you doing? Hannah? I know you’re in there, doing stuff, because it’s sort of loud. I know you can hear me!”

Hannah went to her bathroom, snatched makeup and toiletries by the handful, tossed them in the bag. The three tags were there, on her sink. The federal tag. The school kennel tag. The runaway tag. She packed those as well.

“Are you Hannah right now? Are you someone else? Um, Suzie? Betty? Dawn? It’s okay. It’s okay! Sheila? Barbie?”

Hannah went to her closet, chose the van Minsk jean jacket with the two blue denim panels, the shoulders and back in pink, picked up her school bag, put her laptop and cord into it along with more makeup and backup panties, and she zipped up her suitcase and slung the school bag over her shoulder and opened her door.

Athena was there, eyes widening when she saw the suitcase.

“Hello,” she said slowly, calmly. “I’m Athena.”

Hannah barged past her, went to the elevator.

“You’re going somewhere? Where are you going? Hannah? Are you Hannah right now?”

The elevator opened. Hannah stepped in, rolling her suitcase after her.

Athena followed.

“Where are you going?” Athena demanded. “You have to tell me. You need to tell me. Just, to be polite. You’re the politest person I know, when you want to be, so this should be easy.”

“The Sorbonne,” Hannah said.

“Huh? Wait, that school in, um, France?”

“Paris.”

“Paris? You’re going to Paris. Why?”

The elevator opened. Hannah pushed out, through the kitchen, through the smaller dining room, through the den and foyer to the front

door, out to the driveway, through the wall and onto the curb.

“Hannah?” Athena said, continuing slowly, deliberately. “Are you Hannah right now, or another girl? What’s your name? What’s your name? Carly? Francis? Oh, oh, Spartacine? Spartacine? If you hear your right name, just nod, okay?”

Hannah pulled out her phone, found a Rover 15 minutes away, summoned it.

“Hannah,” Athena said, stepping before her, staring into her eyes, enunciating every word. “This is a seizure. It’s okay. It happens. You’ve been through a lot. So, I think you have two personalities. Maybe more. It’s normal.”

Hannah played the memory of Alex through her mind over and over again, his voice, sex with him, his home, the impromptu calculus lesson he’d delivered, the video game they’d played, the auction that had started it all.

He was freckled.

Athena was still there, saying things. More girls names, possibly.

But Hannah saw only Alex, piercing blue eyes that themselves spoke of deep intelligence.

Freckles. Wavy, strawberry blond hair.

The most beautiful boy she had ever seen.

Why had she forgotten him?

How had she gotten back from the Helmand’s to the Petrosyan’s?

“Okay, wait,” Athena said. “It’s because of Alex. You’re going to the Sorbonne because you think Alex Helmand is going to be there? Because if you are, that’s fucking insane. This is a total seizure. Because that is a really dumb plan. He might not even be there. And it’s this big school, probably. You’re just going to walk around?”

Hannah stared at the curb, looked across the street, azaleas blooming early under the windows of the great house there.

“Hannah, I was watching what you did on your phone, so I know you called a Rover. I wasn’t trying to invade your privacy. I did it for medical reasons. So if you don’t talk to me by the time it shows up. I’m going to grab you, or tackle you, or start screaming or something, also for medical reasons.”

Hannah sensed a disruption, turned to face Athena. The girl was staring at her, frantic and wide-eyed.

"I'm fine," Hannah said. "Please just let me go."

A wave of relief washed over Athena's face, followed by more concern.

"Okay, okay, but you have to pass a test first."

"A quick one," Hannah said, staring at her phone. The car was five minutes away now.

"Who is Franklin?"

"Franklin Fulmer the Third," Hannah said.

"You remember him?"

"Everything," Hannah said, trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

"How did you meet?"

"I did a sexual assessment on him, for you. And, by the way, I never got properly thanked by you for fucking a complete stranger. You just emailed me accusations, and then you—"

"Okay, you passed, you passed," Athena said, holding up her hands. "But I was asking because he said you were weird around him the last time he saw you, and that's—"

"There were some things he said about me, to you."

Athena stepped back, raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, yeah. That bothered you?"

"It did."

"But you . . . you really liked Franklin for awhile, I think," Athena said. "I thought—"

"He reminded me of someone," Hannah blurted.

"Whoa," Athena said. "Want me to tell him that? Damn, that's mean girl stuff. Want me to tell him that?"

"I don't care what you tell him," Hannah said.

Athena drew out her phone, pounded on the screen.

"Hey," she said, cradling the phone against her jaw. "Talk to Hannah, she's having convulsions." She paused before she added impatiently, "No, not like actual convulsions. She can talk. She can talk. She's just more, it's like a seizure or something. No, she can talk, I already said that. But she's saying weird things, and doing weird things, and I'm not smart enough to get it, so now it's your turn. Fix her."

Athena shoved her phone into Hannah's free hand.

"Talk."

“Hello?” Hannah said.

“Hannah,” said Franklin.

“Hello, Franklin.”

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Hannah said. “I just need to leave. And go somewhere. Why don’t you—”

“Are you alright?”

“I feel fine,” Hannah said. “I feel better than I’ve felt in days. In weeks. I—”

“Everything’s gone to shit in my world,” Franklin interrupted.

“With me out and granddad’s deal all fucked, the company’s just about into receivership, and now he’s—”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, and I don’t have time anyway,” Hannah said. “I—”

“Let me finish,” Franklin said. “Please let me finish. There’s a point to the story.”

“Okay, but I’m waiting for a car.”

“My world is coming down around my ears, my grandfather’s at death’s door, and people want to know about you. ‘Oh, you know Hannah Loughbridge? You know Hannah?’”

“Allain’s having the same experience,” Hannah said. “I’m sorry for your inconvenience.”

“What is it, Hannah?”

“I’m getting a ride. Maybe to the airport. Maybe—”

“No, what is it, with me? What happened that—”

“Leading with my vagina?” Hannah said. “That’s what you think? Leading with my vagina?”

“Who told you that?”

“I’ll give you one guess,” Hannah said, looking into Athena’s unreadable eyes as the girl stood before her, arms crossed.

“I didn’t mean . . .” Franklin protested, stammering, at a rare loss for words. “You know I . . . you’re just . . . it’s so . . .”

Hannah allowed him to flail before she spoke again.

“I learned a lot from you,” she said, quietly, silence on the other end of the line now. “You gave me hope when I really needed it. And I thank you for that. Sincerely. But I don’t think . . . I don’t . . .”

Hannah closed her eyes against the tears and handed the phone back to Athena.

“Hey,” Athena said, phone pressed to her ear. “I know, I was watching. Thanks for trying. Okay. Hey, talk again in a few? Yeah, let me figure out what’s going on, and I’ll call ya. Still coming back Sunday? Okay, cool. I’ll call about 4. Okay. Okay. Love ya.”

Hannah studied her phone, wiped away a tear, watched the Rover navigate the little virtual map of the Petrosyan’s neighborhood.

“Okay, I’m just trying to understand,” Athena said, pocketing her phone, holding up her hands. “Franklin reminded you of Alex? That’s it? Franklin reminded you of Alex? Okay, yeah, I can see that. And so for some reason – I’m not saying multiple personalities right now – but for some other reason, you forgot about Alex, mostly, and now you’ve just remembered him and you’re going to find him?”

“Yes, more or less,” Hannah replied.

“Somewhere in France?”

“Paris, yes.”

“And you don’t think that’s fucked up?”

“It’s freedom,” Hannah said, remembering the girl from the bus the first morning of liberation, when someone asked where they were going: “It doesn’t matter!” she’d screamed.

It doesn’t matter.

“What am I supposed to tell Mom and Dad?”

“Exactly what is happening,” Hannah said. “And tell them thanks. I’ll try to reach them, or you, to let you know how I’m doing, once I get somewhere.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Maybe a few hours, maybe longer. I don’t know.”

“Have you gotten your chip taken out?”

“No.”

“Don’t you need to?” Athena asked. “Doesn’t it bother you?”

“Not at all.”

“Raven had hers taken out.”

“It was taken out against her will, and they didn’t use anesthesia and she got an infection.”

“They weren’t doctors. You would go to a one of those clinics, where they —”



“I am not going to any former subject clinic, ever.”

“Okay, okay,” Athena said. “Last question. Did you and Allain break up?”

“We were never together,” Hannah said, staring at her phone, looking up the street. “My ride’s here.”

Hannah turned to Athena, hugged her and kissed her on the cheek.

“I love you, Athena,” she said before she pushed away. “I’m sorry for tormenting you. I shouldn’t have done that.”

The car stopped, the driver’s window down.

“Where to, Miss?” he asked with an Indian accent.

“Helmand Furniture on Grande first, I think,” Hannah said.

“First?” he asked, stepping out to put Hannah’s suitcase in the trunk.

“Do you have anything else to do for the next few hours?”

“It’s all you,” he said, smiling.

Hannah slipped into the back seat, offered Athena a final wave, the girl looking on with teary eyes and a face paused between deep concern and the first realization of tragedy, and they were off.

## **Chapter 95: Meetings Near and Far**

As they drove, Hannah tapped furiously on her phone, first going to the Helmand Furniture website, quickly finding the name of Alex’s father, Peter Helmand, listed as proprietor, his smiling picture bringing back another lost portion of the memories.

She hit the number.

“Peter Helmand, please.”

“He’s in a meeting.”

“He’s there today?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, bye.”

Hannah continued to tap. Airline schedules. Maps of Paris. The Sorbonne. Alex Helmand. Alex Helmand. He had no Look! page, no public presence at all she could find.

“We’re here,” the driver said.

“I should be back in a few minutes,” Hannah said, sliding out.

“I’ll keep the meter running.”

“Please.”

Hannah stepped in, approached the first person she could find who looked like they worked there, an older man in a suit.

“I need to see Peter Helmand,” she said.

“I think he’s in a meeting,” he said, looking her over curiously.

“Could you please tell him Hannah Loughbridge is here, and I need to talk to him?”

“Oh,” he said, startled. “You?”

“Yes, Sir, me.”

The man disappeared. Three minutes later, Peter Helmand appeared, striding toward Hannah quickly.

“Hello, Hannah,” he said, his face so pained she thought he might be ill.

“Hello, Mr. Helmand. Is Alex at the Sorbonne?”

“He is. Exams are over today or tomorrow, I think, but he might be staying for the summer.”

“May I have his address?”

“May I ask why, Hannah?”

“It’s complicated. But I need it. Now.”

“15 and a half Rue Malebranche,” he said, spelling it.

Hannah punched the address into her phone.

“Would you like the postal code?” he asked.

“No, thank you,” Hannah said, turning. “I can find that.”

“Hannah,” Mr. Helmand said.

Hannah stopped, looked back at him.

“I hope you’re well. I’ve seen the news about you. About everyone. I’m glad. I—”

“Thank you,” Hannah said, rushing back to the car.

“Airport,” she said, and she resumed tapping on her phone, ignoring the calls and texts, from Athena, from Laura, from Allain.

But she texted her mother as soon as she had the tickets in hand, for the last coach seat to Madrid, connecting from there to Paris tomorrow at 3 local time, arriving in the city in late afternoon.

“Mom, going to Paris, more later, I love you!” she texted.

“More adrenalin?” Mother texted back almost immediately.

“I don’t know,” Hannah replied. “Maybe. Probably.”

Past security, Hannah went to a bookstore, asked for a book on learning French.

“We don’t carry them anymore,” the clerk said. “Just use your phone.”

“How?”

“Search ‘learn French’. You can download it once you pay, pronunciations and everything.”

She chose “Munson’s Thorough French” over lunch, was already on lesson 3 by the time she boarded her flight in early evening.

There was no bed this time, just a seat that reclined slightly, and she remembered seeing the people in this part of the plane when she’d flown to London on her way to Odessa, and she was glad to be among them. Suffering was not a terrible thing.

Having slept until after lunch that day, Hannah wasn’t tired, and she plugged earbuds into her phone and studied French for 10 hours, landing in Madrid in mid-morning, passing through customs, buying breakfast and strong coffee, reaching Paris at 3 in the afternoon. More customs, retrieving luggage, heading to the street and hailing a taxi under a bright summer sun.

A boy was sitting outside the address Mr. Helmand had given her, smoking a cigarette, perched on the stoop of an ancient, ornate, slightly tilted apartment building.

Hannah left the car, retrieved her luggage, approached him.

“*Où est Alex Helmand?*”

“He’s that way, at the Capon,” the boy replied in English, not fooled by Hannah’s day-old French skills, and he pointed down the street to his left.

“What’s the Capon?”

The boy smiled and held an invisible bottle to his mouth.

“How far?” she asked.

“60 meters, no more. Maybe 70.”

“Do you go to school with him?”

“*Oui*. ‘ow, do you know ‘im?”

“I met him several years ago, when he was in high school. *Gue penses-tu de lui?*”

“What do I think of ‘im?” the boy repeated. “You mean, of Alex?”

“*Oui*.”

“He is very American, but very intelligent nonetheless. And trying hard to be French.”

“May I put my things somewhere here?”

“*Oui*,” the boy said again, rising, lifting her suitcase, and she followed him into an ancient, darkened hall, centuries of black grime on the ceiling and high along the walls, and he put her things in a little janitor’s closet.

“*Merci*,” Hannah said. “*Merci*.”

She passed through the door, onto the street, really more an alley, the buildings here crowded tight on either side, a thin strip of blue light overhead that she gazed at before she made her way to a sign hanging by one hook that said “Capon,” a dozen crowded tables set beneath it, laughter and French pop filling the air.

Hannah scanned the diners and drinkers, spied hats and long dark hair on male and female, a girl’s blonde hair tied back with a band, more blonde hair free, but only one head of strawberry blonde locks, belonging to a boy with his back turned, wearing a pink golf shirt, untucked.

The boy raised his shoulders in a shrug, ducked his head and said something in fluent French, and the three boys and a girl at the table with him laughed.

The girl began a sentence in French, looked up and saw Hannah approaching, and closed her mouth.

The others followed her gaze, one boy after the other, until finally, Alex Helmand, a glass of beer in his hand, turned in his chair to see what everyone was staring at.

His eyes met Hannah’s when she was less than a foot away, standing just behind him, looking down at him.

“*Bonsoir*, Alex,” she said, working hard to affect the natural lilt of native French.

Alex’s face registered a range of emotions, first puzzlement, then recognition, then something less clear. Fear, perhaps, tinged with regret.

Hannah had no idea what she expected, but his reaction disappointed her.

“Hannah?” he said quietly, setting down his beer.

“Yes. It’s nice to see you, Alex.”

A chair was proffered, the girl tapping Hannah’s shoulder and pointing to it as a boy set it behind her. Hannah sat beside Alex and clasped

her hands between her thighs.

“How have you been?” she asked, peering at him and smiling.

“Hannah,” he said, leaning toward her and grimacing. “Could you do . . . whatever you’re here to do, or say . . . in private?”

Hannah studied his face, confused. What else had she forgotten? Was there a second tryst, an email, a letter, some important aspect to their relationship still escaping her?

Hannah heard whispers, shushing, more urgent whispers, and looked over at Alex’s compatriots, who were all staring at a phone.

“‘annah?” asked the girl, holding out the phone toward her, open to the article from Graileys. “‘annah, uh, uh, Log-a-breej? Is this yourself?”

“*Oui.*”

Her answer created a wave of excitement, more tapping on phones, whispers.

She looked back at Alex.

“I’ve forgotten a lot,” she said. “I’m not sure what you mean. I’m here just to—”

“‘allo, ‘annah?” said the girl, leering. “Are you a lover to Ay-lex?”

Hannah answered by not answering, one of the things she’d learned as a slave, turning and looking with the merest smile on her face, giving the girl her answer without violating Alex’s privacy.

“*Oui!*” she exclaimed. “I tell you all, no?”

Alex stood, and Hannah took in his full length.

The day they’d met, he was still carrying baby fat, a little scrawny otherwise. Now his face was leaner, hungrier. The fat was gone, his chest filled out, his legs athletic in a pair of black gym shorts.

“Can we talk in private for a few?” he said, holding out his hand.

Hannah took it, stood and followed him as he wove through the tables, led her across the street to an ancient stone wall, black with the crust of ages. He leaned against it with his hands in his pockets, and faced her.

“Dad emailed me he saw you yesterday,” he said. “I was expecting a letter. Why did you come?”

Here was none of the adolescent awkwardness she’d remembered. Alex Helmand, was poised, confident, and obviously deeply troubled.

“To see you.”

“You flew from Texas to see me?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve always sort of wondered,” Alex said, “If you would ever come for me. I’ve been waiting for you. In a way.”

Hannah smiled. This made sense, at last.

“No,” Alex said when he saw her expression. “You remember what happened, right?”

“It’s been coming back to me, in pieces.”

“So you don’t remember everything?”

“No, not yet.”

“Can I . . . can I take your hand again?”

Hannah held both out, and he wrapped his around them. His hands were warm, gentle. The hands she remembered.

“I’m going to tell you what I did,” he said solemnly, “and then I’m going to let go of your hands, and you can do whatever you want with them.”

Hannah studied his face, mystified.

“Okay.”

“Hannah Loughbridge, I raped you, and I’m sorry, and I going to spend the rest of my life . . . doing better.”

“Ah,” Hannah said, holding her hands still within his. “Okay, okay. I see. Guilt. Everyone the system touched came away with it. Everyone decent. But it’s okay. If that was a bad thing, I did bad things too. But it’s okay.”

“It’s okay?” he said. “Do you even understand what I just said?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “I’d forgotten, for years. But yes, just yesterday, I found that picture of me with your calculus book, and I asked Athena, and she helped me piece it together. There was—”

“Athena Petrosyan?”

“Yes.”

“How is she?”

“Good, she’s in school at Corpus Christi. Passing so far.”

“Great.”

“So, there was this party,” Hannah said, “and there was this auction, and the Petrosyans put me up, and you won the bidding for me, and I went home with you, and I . . . took your virginity.”

Hannah laughed at the phrase she’d used, because it sounded so ridiculously innocent now. “And then we—”

“Hannah, we chained you, and I raped you.”

Hannah stared into Alex's eyes, sensing a deep, unspeakable pain.

"That's not how I remember it at all," she said quickly. "You didn't know what to do. I undressed you. I . . . kissed you, and . . . sucked you, and—"

"I forced you back, on my bed, and . . . did it. It's why you forgot. I can still see your eyes. I can still hear—"

"Alex, Alex, stop," Hannah protested, and she pulled her hands from his so she could exchange places, her hands outside his now, enveloping them, squeezing them.

"Maybe you could, technically, call it rape. But it didn't feel like rape. I don't remember it as rape. I didn't feel forced. If anything, I seduced you. And then we played video games. Do you remember that? You brought me into your world, as an equal. You invited friends over, and we just talked and watched TV. Do you remember that? We were kids, both of us, sucked into this horrible, horrible machine, and we made the best of it."

Hannah squinted into Alex's eyes, repeating softly, "We made the best of it."

"Then why did you forget it until yesterday?" he asked quietly.

"I'm still trying to figure that out," Hannah replied. "And I'm still trying to remember how I left your house, because I think that's related. I can't remember, and it's really bothering me."

"Allain picked you up."

"Huh?"

"Allain. Allain Petrosyan. He pulled up after lunch in his BMW, and you left with him, and he—"

"Uh," Hannah said, because she was almost seeing it now. Almost.

"I just left with him?"

"Well, yeah, after he, um, you know, chained you."

"Uh," Hannah said again, louder, as if she'd been punched, because that was coming back now, the memory of how she left.

She looked down at Alex's belly before she closed her eyes, his hands still in hers, and she felt the sting of tears she didn't want to wipe, and her jaw shook.

"Hannah, what?" Alex said, sliding his hands out of hers so he could wrap his arms around her shoulders, and she pressed her eyes into his solid chest for a moment, pulled her face away to make sure she wasn't

putting mascara onto his pink shirt, and she remembered she hadn't applied makeup in three days.

And she remembered she hadn't had sex with anyone but a girl in months and, very briefly, she allowed herself to think about Alex, and how it had been, and what it might be like if there were ever another time.

"I liked you," she said, looking up. "Some of it is easy to explain. You were nice, and really smart. You got me for sex, but you left it up to me. You let me lead, and you need to understand how important that is, why it felt consensual even if you don't remember it that way. And there are so many things you could have said when I . . . when a sex slave . . . asked you to explain calculus. But you tried to teach me; and you let me meet your friends . . . and some of it I can't explain, why I felt like I did . . . but . . . I wasn't finished with you. I wasn't finished finding out about you. And to be taken away, in the middle of that, at the very start of that . . . in chains. Like it was normal. It's why I forgot. Because it hurt so much, I'm sure, and there was already so much pain. I'm sure I thought about you, afterwards, and it hurt worse and worse, because I'd just met someone maybe I could spend the rest of my life with, and they took me away, and I knew I'd probably never see you again. So I just shut it out, and forgot about it. Completely."

She looked up, saw Alex's eyes were wet, and he was struggling mightily with the urge to cry, with his friends across the street and probably watching, and she pulled away, so that they were no longer touching at all.

"Or almost completely," she continued, more quietly. "I would . . . scream sometimes . . . and bi—" Hannah's voice trailed off, because this wasn't the time to talk about what she'd done in bed with someone else.

"Okay," she said, wiping her eyes and smiling. "That's what I needed to say. I get it now. That's why I came here, just to see you again, and say those things. If I'm bothering you or upsetting you, I'm sorry. Maybe coming here was selfish, because I feel so much better, and it's hurting you. But if what you did was bad, I did some terrible things too. But I can go now. I'll be sad, but I'll go in peace, because you let me talk, and you helped me fill in the gaps."

Alex continued to struggle with his emotions, biting his lip and looking into her eyes.

"But I have to ask," she said, offering a small, self-deprecating laugh. "Did you feel anything? Is that all you remember about it, is that you



think you—”

“There’s a giant box in my head with Hannah Loughbridge written on it,” Alex said. “That’s how my analyst describes it. There’s a—”

“Analyst?”

“That’s what they call psychologists in France. I’ve been seeing her every week since about a month after I got here. There’s a lot of guilt, but I’m glad I was with you too, and . . . that I lost my virginity to you. So I remember that, and I’m glad for a second, and then I just end up feeling more guilt. But I can’t stop thinking about you and . . . Do you remember how I found out what you got bought for?”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “Yes, I do now. You played a trick on me. You said a number, and I said I wasn’t sure if that was my price, and you said, ha, caught you.”

“Because I wanted my parents to buy you,” Alex said, face twisting in self-revulsion. “I play those moments over and over—”

Hannah grabbed Alex’s arm. “You feel bad about that?”

“Yes. I wasn’t even—”

“I thought it was sweet. That’s all. That’s how I remember it.”

The relief in Alex’s eyes was almost palpable, his body relaxing with her touch, her words.

“It’s why I left America,” he said. “I couldn’t stand to see the collars, because they reminded me of you, so I decided to go to a school in a country where they didn’t have slavery.”

Alex bit his lip, closed his eyes and grimaced.

“My parents didn’t get it. Mom would ask about you, say things about you. I never told her how much it hurt. I think my dad knew. I got the sense of some guilt there. But Mom would say things like, ‘Oh, Alex, do you remember the Petrosyan’s girl? She’s in college now. Such a sweet girl. You should have her over again,’ or ‘I saw Laura Petrosyan at the mall last week, and she says their girl – you know, Hannah – just got a full scholarship.’ And now you’ve done something else. She sent me the link to some story about you. I couldn’t open it. There was a picture in the link, so I saw your face, and I let myself stare at it for a minute, maybe a couple of minutes, and then I closed it, because it hurt too much.”

Hannah laughed.

“Yeah, they did a decent job with it. It’s the only article I’ve done so far. I think your friends found it, while we were talking.”

“No, they found it last week, once it got published in French. It’s a big story over here. The people who were afraid France was going to fall were literally in the streets when it all collapsed in America, and they’re still gobbling up every piece of news about it from the states. And then, they saw that you were in Texas, and said I must know you, since I’m from Texas too.”

“So you lied and said you didn’t know me?”

“I never lied,” Alex said. “I just told them Texas is huge.”

Alex looked over at them, catching the girl’s eye first. She raised her glass at the couple across the alley, and the rest of the table followed her gaze and did the same, staring with mock solemnity, glasses raised in the evening air. Alex nodded back, smiled. They kept staring, and the girl raised her shoulders and her eyebrows in the universal gesture of a question.

“I think she wants us to kiss,” Hannah said.

Alex, as abruptly as he had before, the first time he’d taken Hannah carnally, wrapped his arm around her shoulder, and she turned to him and embraced him, and they kissed for all the world to see, mouth to mouth, breathing into each other’s faces, earning a polite round of ironic applause from his friends.

“She’s been a lover, hasn’t she?” Hannah asked, looking up at him, smiling.

“You can tell?”

“I developed a sixth sense about that kind of thing in my last . . . job.”

Alex laughed. “Yeah, we’ve been together, a few times. She’s a sweetheart. Some French girls love Americans. But she’s not . . . you.”

“Your beer’s getting warm,” Hannah said. “And I need something to drink, and I’m starving, and I want to practice my French with your friends.”

“You’re not half bad, by the way. How long have you been studying?”

“On the flight over.”

“That’s the way I did it.”

“Hey,” Hannah said. “I don’t, um, have a place to stay tonight. Could you . . .?”

“Of course. I can sleep on the floor.”

“Or whatever,” Hannah said. “But thanks. I’ll try not to wake you up screaming.”

“That happens?”

“Yeah. I’m . . . yeah,” Hannah stammered, struggling to say the words, forcing them out. “I’m . . . damaged.”

“I don’t know anyone who isn’t,” he said.

Hannah nodded, smiled, awash in communion.

“How long are you staying?” he asked.

“I just got a one-way ticket.”

“We’re all taking a train to Salzburg day after tomorrow, to celebrate the end of the term,” Alex said. “Wanna come?”

“God yes.”

END

### **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks to S., whose invaluable contributions ranged from catching typos to inspiring major elements of this and other books in the Female, Recreational series.

And to Hollow Well, a gifted proofreader and brilliant writer, whose encouragement and support extended well beyond a talent for finding typos.

And to everyone who read these books and found them worthy, of either praise or criticism. Every word of comment published to date at Amazon and Goodreads has been read, typically more than once.