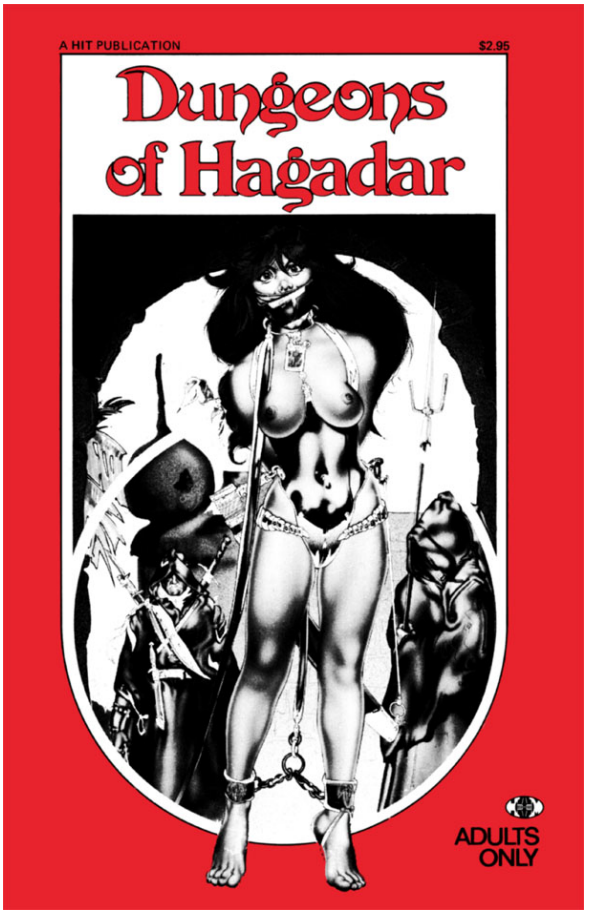


Dungeons of Hagadar

by F.E.Campbell




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All the characters and events are fictitious. No resemblance to real persons is intended or should be inferred.

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Chapter One

The Kidnap

The handcuffs were as foreign to the place as Coca Cola signs and the Wurlitzer in the cafe. An engraving in the bright chrome gave its origin as Japan. Virginia studied it with the same wondering disbelief she had bestowed upon most of North Africa. The handcuffs, however, were a more personal concern than all the other incongruities combined. One of its bright cuffs was locked tight around her right wrist whilst the other clasped itself within the massive circle of an iron ring set in the crumbling yellow stone of the wall, the shade from which offered her only solace in a situation that should have belonged only on a television screen.

She had repeatedly called out. But the stone and the brassy sky absorbed her distress with contemptuous indifference. She cursed her temerity in exploring the street of crumbling ruins so far on the outskirts. The tour guide had warned her! Her wrist watch said she had been cuffed in this enforced stand for close to an hour. It seemed an eternity. She bestowed one more glare of personal animosity upon the steel circling her wrist. It seemed incredible she must stay there leaning against a crumbling wall in a North African town because of so trifling a bond. Fretfully, she deliberately hurt herself by ineffectual tugs.

"Don't come off easy, do they?"

The feminine voice held laughter. Sight of its owner intensified Virginia's shock. She did not match the masonry.

"I expect I can get you loose in a minute, ducky, don't panic."

English. About her own age. Incredibly attired in a quasi-military uniform . . . scanty! Its main features, bare knees and a beret. To complete an outrageous ensemble, she carried a clipboard and pencil. She surveyed the handcuffed girl with a bright and intelligent interest but without surprise.

"All I did was ask him the way!" Virginia's relief was no match for her indignation. "He looked civilized but this is what he did to me! I kicked and fought and screamed . . . ! After he'd gone I kept calling . . . ."

"They're an odd lot," the pseudo-majorette agreed absently. "I'm Stephanie Pitfield. Please call me Stevie. What's your name?"

"Virginia Ryder. Gee, am I thankful."

Stevie wrote the name on the paper the clipboard held. "And your age?"

"I'm twenty-seven. But what . . . ?"

"That's my age too. Nice time for a girl. We're not so silly . . . ." The pencil busily inscribed. "Who's doing your tour? And what hotel?"

"I bought a ten day Plimpton. The hotel's the Alcazar – but what's it matter! Can you get this thing off my wrist?" Stephanie Pitfield wrote busily. The questions continued, offhand and casual. Virginia answered them impatiently. "I'm not applying for a job, y'know," she said with some acerbity.

Stevie laughed as though something amusing had been said. "Just a couple more, love, and we're through. How about a nice cup of tea?" Her pencil scribbled rapidly. After the final question she nodded as though satisfied. "Hold it just a moment, ducky, I'll be right

back."

In angry dismay, Virginia stared at the space where her disappointing rescuer had stood. The cuff bit her wrist mockingly. The hot silence and her helplessness made the uniformed girl seem no more than a mirage appropriate to a ridiculous relic of the past. She was saved from tears by Stephanie's return.

He was Arab. But of the West. His voice was Oxford. The uniformed girl treated him with deference. "Mr. Waleed Jazrawi," she introduced portentously, "Miss Virginia Ryder."

It was too absurd! The formality of an English drawing room in this sun-baked insanity! Virginia managed a stilted, "How d'you do," and felt silly.

Mr. Jazrawi now held the clipboard with her vital statistics. He was attractively handsome but preoccupied, in the manner of a businessman diverted to deal with an unexpected side issue. He spared an appraising smile and nod. "Admirable!" He approved. "Miss Ryder, it is a pleasure. With Miss Pitfield you are in good hands." He made a quaintly formal bow.

"Isn't he groovy!" the military maid exclaimed vivaciously when he and the clipboard had gone. "One of those chaps who manages anything." She held up a tiny key. "He even managed this. I wouldn't have known where to go."

Tension deflated. Virginia sighed in an immense relief. Stevie's cheerful English voice offset her attire and the departed presence. "The tea will be heavenly," she said with a great thankfulness. "I've been frightened, really frightened! That man who did this to me . . . ! It makes no sense."

"Probably going to come back with a nice box to carry you away in," Stevie chuckled wisely. "Hold still, love, and turn your wrist . . . ."

It was a good moment when the tiny key went into the tiny orifice. "May as well take the exhibit with us." Stevie's voice was businesslike as the released circlet fell away from the ring in the wall. "Just turn a moment, love – like this . . . ."

It happened very quickly. Virginia's thankfulness was so great she had turned too far before realization. By then it was too late. Deft fingers pulled her hands together behind her back. The free cuff clicked jubilantly around the free wrist, now no longer free. Both cuffs were tightened with a quick and knowing pressure.

"What the . . . !" Virginia swung round in furious accusation to confront an amused smile. "Why . . . ?"

"I think you know, dear."

Virginia knew. The quiet voice was more deadly than a shout. She discovered she was panting in a realization she did not wish to confirm. But confirm she must! Wide-eyed, she demanded, "What have . . . I mean, who are . . . ?"

"You've been kidnaped, Virginia. Isn't it exciting?"

In disbelief at such impotence, the two wrists fought their link as, previously, the one had fought the ring in the wall. Virginia could not even see her bond, and yet was helpless.

"Terribly frustrating, love," Stevie consoled soothingly. "I know. I've been there myself. You'll get used to it."

"I won't!" The captive stamped an angry foot. "Take the horrible things off me. Let me

loose!"

The demand rated no reply. "Come along to the car, Virginia," the girl in the beret said winningly. "We can talk as we drive."

"Where d'you want to take me?" Virginia was wary.

"You'll see, dear. It's not a long drive."

"I refuse. This nonsense has gone too . . . ."

"You have to, Virginia. You know you have to." Stevie's quiet assurance fed the glaze of revolt. Determinedly, Virginia sat on the ground.

"I'll sit here until you come to your senses," she declared. Looking no higher than a pair of attractive bare knees, she twisted and pulled futilely with joined hands.

"It would be nicer if you come along." Stevie's voice was wistful.

"Well, I'm not going to!"

The thumb and finger on her ear lobe were a shock. Virginia squealed. Under the impetus of their insistence she scrambled back erect.

"Once you're handcuffed there's always a way, love."

Pained and shamed, Virginia conceded defeat as a girl's thumb and finger led her into captivity.

"Such nice slim ankles! They'll take the other pair."

The confinement of the car hindered her fight. Stephanie Pitfield was unexpectedly strong. Virginia's ankles felt bruised in the clutch of metal.

"Saves you wondering about a quick spring," Stevie said practically; "Damned useful things, handcuffs."

"Am I allowed to know anything?"

"Don't sound so bitter, love. You've become merchandise. The boss is going to sell you. The slave trade is one of his best lines."

"White slave?"

"The term's out of date. You girls come in all colors. Last week we got an American negress – mmmmmm!"

"That man! The one who handcuffed me? He works for Mr. what's-his-name?"

"Of course."

"Where do you fit in?"

"Kidnaped same as you, ducky. But instead of selling me they offered me a job. Damned interesting! I wouldn't give it up for the world."

"And that absurd uniform?"

Stevie giggled, pleased. "I designed it myself. Mr. J wanted something different. I do quite a lot of odd jobs. It gives me status."

The captive in the front seat of the slowly moving Mercedes leaned forward against the pull of her prisoned arms and surveyed her linked feet. With ankles locked like that she could not even walk, certainly not run. Resentfully, she settled back to view her piquant companion. "I might believe what's happening," she said slowly, "if it was not for you. You don't fit. You're nice. You'd never sell an English girl into slavery."

"Yes, I would. Doing you a kindness actually."

"Stevie, I'm frightened. Don't frighten me any more."

"If I had a pill for being scared I'd give it to you, ducky." Stephanie Pitfield spared a comradely grin from her driving. "I felt just the way you're feeling when they grabbed me."

"Have a little pity then. Unlock these beastly things and let me go."

The appeal was defeated by the wall. In the wall a massive double door, opening by remote control into a Moorish patio. The Mercedes came gently to a halt. "Welcome home," said Stevie flippantly. "If I unlock your ankles are you going to be silly?"

Virginia wriggled her shoulders. "How can I be anything?" she demanded petulantly. "If you weren't – well – one of my own sort, I'd be in screaming hysterics. I don't understand you, treating me like this."

She was patted gently like a fractious child. "This way, love," Stevie coaxed. "The next bit is a real giggle."

The next bit was a middle-aged woman with an amused grin. It took place in a boudoir as extravagantly improbable as its owner's uniform. The bathroom was pure Hollywood.

"I don't want a bath," said the captive firmly.

"Comes with the package, love. Don't fuss."

The two of them undressed her. Motions of revolt were quickly quenched by warning witticisms or strong fingers. Her hands remained cuffed at her back, rendering resistance futile. To be removed, her dress must be torn. It was done, laughingly, against her protest.

"You won't need it, dear. Stop mourning."

The woman bathed her. Virginia sat or stood as ordered and endured the lathering with bad grace. The uniformed renegade lounged comfortably and watched.

"You've a super shape, ducky."

"Is there any possibility this is a bad joke?" the naked girl asked coldly. "And can you tell this woman to stop rubbing my vulva? I'm sure it's well scrubbed."

"She's just being friendly, dear. If things don't hurt, don't complain."

If she could have had her hands, the sitting before the huge mirror could have been fun. Upon its counter lay all the things by which a feminine heart was quickened. But with her arms behind her back and strange and foreign fingers in her hair Virginia felt like a delinquent child.

"You're going to be more beautiful than you've ever known, love." Stephanie's voice was

pensive. "Oh, and in case you're worrying, there's no lustful, fat Pasha waiting in the next room to break your maidenhead."

"I haven't got a maidenhead!"

"I didn't really suppose . . . ! My, you are cross, aren't you!"

"So would you be if – "

The trapped tourist's exclamation was lost. Bathroom sounds lasting but a few minutes preceded shock. When Stevie returned she was as naked as Virginia herself. She was very lovely, firm, supple and lithe.

"Move over, love. The bench is big enough."

It was ample. In the mirror, Virginia's startled eyes left her own reflection and beheld her countrywoman's deft and practiced skill at work upon a loveliness already without a flaw.

"We slave girls have to keep up appearances, y'know."

"You're not a slave."

"In my own way, or Mr. J's way, I am, ducky."

It was humiliating and it was miraculous. The mirror disclosed the birth of houris. "Four of the loveliest breasts in the world of Islam," Stephanie proclaimed complacently. "Which pair d'you like best?"

"Yours. They're conical and pert."

"See, you're interested! I like yours. They're round. Yours are going to get painted a dark red."

"Aren't yours?"

"Not today. For dress occasions they get painted black. You should see the eyes glitter."

The shocks came in a measured procession. Painted and bejeweled, armlets and collar, the handcuffed girl was prompted to rise. Stevie preceded her to the door.

"But clothes! Stevie!"

"We're already dressed, dear. This is the lot."

"We're naked!"

"Not to worry."

Virginia worried. The hand was insistent. She followed.

It was a mezzanine lounge. The scents of the garden drifted in the hot air between the wide columns of the open balcony. It was a spacious delight of leisure and repose. Towards the far end was a cage, a thing of bronze symmetry too large for aught but . . . !

"I'm not going in there!" said the nude captive flatly.

"Yes, you are, dear."

Virginia surveyed the wide mesh of bars with awe. It might confine but it did not punish. The rugs and cushions were lush. Upon a tabouret lay fruit and confections . . . ."I'm not a canary!" she protested.

"Yes, you are, pet. You just don't have feathers."

"Stephanie, stop this – now!"

For answer, the laughing mentor herself stepped through the open door. From behind the bars, she beckoned, "Come along, dear. Don't knock it 'til you've tried it."

Without Stephanie Pitfield it would have been impossible. But now, as though hypnotized, Virginia took the first tentative steps back into the Arabian Nights. She knew herself physically helpless, the handcuffs ensured that. But there was something . . . ! Shrinking inwardly, she stepped through the portal.

The door did not slam. There was a quick exchange in the local dialect, in which Stevie proved surprisingly fluent. The servant smiled broadly and walked to a cabinet. When she turned back she held a golden shackle.

It was absurd and all wrong and out of character. Virginia was annoyed that her preconceptions were constantly dissolved. Her companions seemed vastly amused when Stephanie proffered her hands at the open door to have them clasped by the heavy but exquisitely chased gold bands which closed upon her wrists with a solid click and joined them by a very few shining links. The door slammed shut. A padlock was thrust home. The smiling woman went away.

"Phase one, darling."

Stevie held up her bracelets and their chain, studying their quality with pride. She kicked cushions to her need and gracefully reclined. A happy prisoner.

"I am not impressed," Virginia declaimed.

"You should be, love. Nothing ordinary about this."

"If this charade is for my benefit, please stop."

"It's for your benefit all right, Virginia. And it's my idea. Want to hear the alternative?"

"I'm not interested."

"Y'are, y'know! It's easy told. A pair of grinning bullies haul you out of the car. They strip you naked and toss you into a miserable little stone room where you sit on the floor with a collar round your neck, not lovely things like these but a metal band that chafes, and a chain to the wall. And there you sit. Once a day a kid comes and changes the pail and gives you fruit. At the end of a week you're so damn lonely and frightened you'd welcome Dracula."

"Is that what happened to you?"

"Right! I wouldn't wish it on a dog. It took me a couple of weeks and no end of beatings to get promoted to where you are now."

"You mean, I ought to be grateful for – this?" Virginia swept her pinioned shoulders disdainfully at the bars.

"Well, I can understand you not jumping for joy. But, actually, yes." Stevie eyed her

fellow captive's pout wistfully. "Don't high hat me, love. I'm your friend."

"Beat you! They beat you . . . ?"

"Often and lovingly, and with a whip on my bare skin. It hurts more than you'd ever believe."

"But that's . . . ." Virginia was aghast.

"No, it's not." The girl in golden chains made a gesture of deprecation. "It's their quaint way of being kind." She sighed. "The hell of it is there's no other way to get us to face facts. Girls, I mean! We're so cocksure of our inviolability."

"I'm not cocksure! Not at this moment . . . !"

"Yes, you are, Virginia. You keep talking like some Victorian grand dame. You'll have to be whipped. Sorry!"

"Stephanie!"

"You'll feel better afterwards, dear. For heaven's sake sit down. Don't stand there like the Statue of Liberty."

"I don't want to sit down. I want to go back to the hotel."

"Suit yourself, pet. But neither of us are going anywhere. We're both locked in. Even me."

"I don't understand you. You're playing some game."

"I'm a bell wether, sweets. I lead the lambs to slaughter – in this case, slavery. You'll miss me when I'm gone."

"But why are you chained?"

"Lovely, aren't they?" Stephanie Pitfield held up the golden links. "They're heavy and I can't get them off. But they're a symbol. Tells everyone what I am. I'm owned."

"So – all right! But you held your hands out – invited?"

"Proves my authority, pet. Not every girl can get herself shackled in gold."

"Will that woman take them off if you tell her to?"

"Of course."

"Why won't you tell her to take off my handcuffs?"

"You don't need hands. And there's symbolism there too. What could you do with your hands if you had them?"

It was true! Caged, there was nothing. Virginia gazed around her feminine prison and at the luxury therein. It reeked of female. Some mischievous hand must have sprinkled perfume lavishly. She was a naked bird in a pretty cage. "Well, then, why can't my hands be fastened in front? This – with my arms behind my back all the time . . . !" She shivered. "I'm so rotten helpless!"

"That's part of the drill, pet. After you've learned a few lessons you'll graduate to something like I'm wearing now."

"Lessons! What does that mean?"

"I think you know, Virginia."

She knew! Knew also, that without the insouciant presence of the girl who shared the cage she would be facing a reality totally frightening. Somewhere not far away the tour guide and the hotel and the police would be looking for her. But she would not be found! She had been whisked out of one life into another. Events had moved beyond her comprehension. Catching up with them promised pain. In apologetic dismay she voiced her thoughts: "It isn't real. I can't believe any of it. I don't see why I'm worth all this trouble . . . !" She looked at Stevie beseechingly.

"I know, love. You're expecting a nice London bobbie to stalk in and say: 'You can't do that there 'ere!' England's so safe, so sane and respectable. He'd have a key and remove your handcuffs and give you a nice cup of strong tea." Stephanie Pitfield chuckled. "I kept thinking of it all through my first days."

"But why me . . . ?"

"The mirror told you that, ducky. Now I'll show you something else."

In a single fluid motion the girl with the golden chain stood erect. In swift motion her fingers caressed a shocked Virginia's shining black triangle, then rose and touched the dormant nipples. "One, two, three," she said solemnly. "Remember that count always."

Virginia stood, wide-eyed, and watched the next demonstration. Stevie spread her legs. She gathered the slack of her golden shackle in one hand and used the other to slip a finger lengthways within the lips of her vulva. A thrusting pelvis ensured a frank display. She smiled up at Virginia's disapproving stare.

"Sometimes we'll say to ourselves: 'I'm a girl!' Or well think of ourselves as 'A Girl.' When we do this it's terribly different from a guy saying: 'I'm a man.' With him it's just acknowledging his gender, but not with us, love! We're a girl, plus two breasts, plus one cunt . . . ."

"Oh, Stevie, not that beastly word!"

"We have to use it, dear. Orders! They like it!" The mentor was enjoying her dissertation. She patted her pudendum lovingly. "No one will pay a penny for a man's thingummy. But for this plump little slit here the sky's the limit. In the market where you'll be sold I'd expect Mr. J to collect about twenty thousand pounds for each of your nipples and the same for your cunt. You're a sixty thousand pound package, love."

"I don't believe it!"

"You will! In the oil countries money's nothing matched against the breasts and cunts you and I have got."

Virginia was aware of primal stirrings. To be so desired! Even commercially! She could not repress a thrill. Her voice was wondering. "You mean these stories . . . ? I have to stand naked on a block, and there's an auctioneer with a whip . . . ?"

"Not quite, pet. Bit more finesse with Mr. J. That's where this cage comes in. A client looks you over in here – you can't hide. If he likes what he sees, you'll be let out to serve him drinks and show him how well trained you are."

"But I'm not well trained!"

"You will be, love! Sorry about that too!"

"Are you well trained?"

" 'Fraid so." Stevie's smile belied the incongruity of her words. "I've been whipped so much I try to please. Being whipped hurts."

"But you're too happy . . . ! I don't believe . . . ."

"I'm lucky, pet. This job! A steady flow of lovely cash into a Swiss account, and my freedom in seven years."

"You're free now!"

"Only to perform Mr. J's business. If I made a dash for it or went to the local police I'd be brought back and punished so damn bad they'd have to nurse me back to health so I could start over – a wiser and obedient girl."

"It's – it's – How d'you know?"

"I saw it happen to my predecessor. When she was up and about again they sold her. The purchaser was a guy who admired whip marks. There were some on Ethel she'd wear for life."

"Is that the so-called training? To break a girl by cruelty?"

"Gosh, no, it's more than that. You'll be shown how to behave. Most of the cruelty only comes if you won't learn." Stevie giggled. "If too many clients turn you down or complain about your attitude they start whipping you after every rejection. It's a tremendous incentive to a girl to get herself sold."

Virginia conjured visions in her head. They were stark! As yet, not entirely to be believed. Dazedly, she asked, "And when I'm sold . . . ? What will the buyer do with me?"

"First off he'll become your Master, and that's what you'll call him. You'll do anything he wants. I guess you can think of most of 'em. He'll provide the Pill. Mostly they don't want you pregnant."

"It's beastly – horrible!"

"There's silver linings sometimes, ducky. Keep your chin up. You may be purchased by a tall, dark and handsome who'll keep you in the lap of total luxury. Or by some old buffer who just wants you for a pet."

"Help me – Oh, Stevie, you must! Stevie, let me go free!"

"Do you want me scarred for life, darling?"

"But you must come with me!" To Virginia it seemed so obvious. "Properly dressed we can be safely away and in a part of town where no one's going to dare assault us. It's just minutes. I know. I walked it. Stevie, please . . . ?"

The golden links clinked musically. Their owner sighed. "Ducky, call me selfish. When they bring us back you'd be whipped and tossed in that little room I told you about – that's

all. But I'd be tortured. I know some of the things they'd do to me. I just can't face it."

"But they won't bring us back! How can they?"

"The police, silly. Mr. J owns 'em." Stevie made a gesture of despair. "Don't you see! I'm trusted. I've accepted the trust. If I renege I become less than the dust A creature for contempt. They wouldn't see what they did to me as cruel, only just."

Virginia did see. It was so plausible as to be frightening. The bars around her became more solid. When the servant woman came and unlocked the door she knew herself lost. "Don't leave me alone!" she begged. "Oh, Stevie, not alone – in a cage! And my hands . . . !"

When the golden bands were taken from Stevie's wrists she turned and placed her freed hands on captive shoulders, her mouth sought pleading lips and kissed them tenderly. She nuzzled an ear and whispered. "Don't think too badly of me. Sometimes I wake up in the night and cry." A moment later she was gone. The door closed, the padlock snapped.

The naked, chained Virginia fought back her tears.

Listlessly she kicked cushions and reclined. Ruefully she recognized her refusal to cry was a feminine acceptance of the skills by which she had been enhanced. Tears would stain her cheeks, and she had no hands with which to repair the damage. Fretfully she sought to use her locked hands. But they were lost, held in mockery behind her back. When Waleed Jazrawi appeared she was glad she had not wept.

His voice was as urbane as his smile. "Please don't rise. I will draw up a chair." With chin on folded arms upon the back, he asked politely, "Do you find the exposure of your breasts trying, Miss Ryder?"

"Yes."

He nodded, amused by her blunt affirmation. "Do you wish to dispose of the usual threats, protests and pleading?"

"I won't bore you." Virginia's voice was bitter. "Miss Pitfield has explained what I can expect."

"You are an unusually beautiful young woman."

"You will get a good price for me."

"If your present attitude of reason continues you could be one of the priceless ones. It would please me to share some of this bounty with you." He gestured away his own suggestion. "But it is impractical. One of the benefits of your new condition is that you have no need of money."

"Could I have my hands, please?"

Her request was disposed of by the same careless gesture. "It is important they stay where they are. It aids your awareness. Remember, all that happens to you now is a phase. It will pass."

Their civilized exchange made a mockery of the cage and the handcuffs. Or was it the other way around . . . ? Uneasy under the dark scrutiny, Virginia wriggled to kneel erect, then asked the question uppermost in her fears. "Why must I be whipped?"

"Awareness."

"To break my spirit?"

"To bend your pride."

"I don't want to be whipped." Virginia's eyes pleaded with her voice. "Maybe my reason isn't what you think . . . ." She twisted her shoulders impotently. "I won't look nice when it's happening to me. I'm a girl, and I don't want to look – untidy – and scream – and sweat – and make an ass of myself."

"You confirm my best hopes of you, Miss Ryder."

"But you'll still have me whipped?"

Jazrawi's eyes glowed approval. "After it has been done you will understand."

Fighting fiercely for her flesh, the kneeling captive strove to stare him down. Her eyes as level as her voice. "I can sell myself. I promise! Allow Stephanie to give me instruction . . . ?"

She had captured his interest. Pulling demonstratively against her handcuffs she pressed home her small advantage. "These things on my wrists – and this cage . . . ! They tell me all I need to know. A girl who also must be whipped would have to be stupid."

"And you are not?"

"I will make your customers desire me."

Jazrawi laughed delightedly. "You almost convince me, Miss Ryder. In fact, you raise a query. It touches my vanity. Is selling yourself preferable to – staying as you are?"

"No, it is not! I can imagine hateful men – doing things . . . !" She wriggled fretfully. "Stephanie told me that after each failure to sell myself I'd be whipped as encouragement to try harder next time."

Waleed Jazrawi nodded thoughtfully. "You and my impudent Stevie are a precious pair. Allah has made me blessed. But tell me . . . ? Supposing I leave you as you are?"

The captive's heart leaped. If she must be owned, Jazrawi was most eminently eligible. Cautiously, she acknowledged. "If I am to be a prisoner I would think myself lucky in this cage."

"Ah!" Mr. J was pleased.

"Forgive me for wanting my hands. And to be clothed . . . ." Virginia smiled coaxingly. "Even the smallest trifles . . . ?"

He chuckled. "You are thinking of houri transparencies."

Virginia gambled with a single word. "Even those – lord!"

Laughing, he left her in her cage.

Chapter Two

Between the Bars

Virginia's arms remained behind her back. The handcuffs locked her wrists without respite. Twice a day she was taken from the cage, her needs attended by a grinning servant woman who vouchsafed few words from an uncertain vocabulary and performed the most blushing intimacies with cheerful unconcern. The second afternoon brought the demonstration.

"It's pleasant here on the terrace, Mr. Halat. A Scotch and soda?" Gowned as for an evening at the Savoy, Stephanie Pitfield drifted into the captive's range of vision.

"Ah, you are most kind." Mr. Halat was Arab, he was a plumpish middle age. From behind thick lenses he spied the cage. "And a pretty bird!"

They stood and gazed at her. It was a cruelly naked moment, tempered by Stevie's cautious wink. Virginia's hands strained at their cuffs in their instinctive need to hide something from Mr. Halat's interested appraisal.

"Virginia has just been acquired, sir. She is not yet trained."

"But she is for sale?"

"Yes, sir. I believe her price to be high."

"Mmmmmmm – Could she, perhaps . . . ?"

"Stand up, girl!" The peremptory command came with the feminine flicker of an eyelid. "Show yourself properly."

With the moral support of Stevie's amusement, the girl in the cage rose slowly to her feet. Under an impulse she could not name she tucked in her tummy and thrust out her breasts. She did not look at the interested male but only at the laughing girl.

"Slow circle! Gracefully now . . . !"

Virginia obeyed. The cage protected her. Halat could only look. She was secretly proud of her performance.

"Nice. I like it!" Mr. Halat nodded approval. "I will talk to Jazrawi." He bestowed an amiable leer upon his escort. "And now, Miss Pitfield . . . ?"

Breathless, Virginia watched the incredible. She remembered Stephanie's story of the hateful room and the whip. What she now beheld was the end result. Would she too . . . ? One day . . . ?

Charmingly, Stevie took her guest by the hand and led him to a chair. Falling to her knees she kissed the hand and then bent further and daintily bestowed a similar tribute on each of the male shoes. Without pause, she drifted to the bar. "You're a Scotch and soda, sir, I remember?" she asked brightly.

"You are most kind. I am honored." Mr. Halat radiated goodwill.

The tray and the frosty glass was tendered on bended knee. Stevie looked up at her guest adoringly.

"You will join me, Miss Pitfield?"

"Thank you, sir." The adoration doubled. "And the girl in the cage . . . ? Could I perhaps . . . ?"

"By all means." Mr. Halat disposed his host's alcohol with a lordly gesture. "Tell her to stand erect. I wish to enjoy . . ."

Virginia had never drank so fast or so gratefully. Female eyes exchanged sympathy as a free feminine hand tilted the glass for captive lips. This time, Stevie's wink was broad before she returned to duty.

"You would like to see my nakedness, Mr. Halat?"

"You are most charming, Miss Pitfield. I will be honored."

Virginia wanted to giggle. It was all too absurd and could not possibly be happening. Over the rim of his glass, Mr. Halat frankly gave his full attention to her pubic hair and breasts. Without waiting to be told, she widened the gap between her legs. Let him look, damn him! She was thankful for the cage.

Mr. Halat was overwhelmed with riches. A naked beauty in a cage and a second houri about to bare her charms for his delectation. He gulped gratefully and diverted his gaze to a serenely smiling Stephanie. Virginia looked too.

It was pure art. Virginia wondered what agonies had been used to convert suburban female flesh into such willing submission. At what point of pain had Stevie discovered this fluid grace, this warmly sensuous giving of herself to a man she would not, once, have spared a glance upon? Miss Stephanie Pitfield divested herself of covering by saucy motions to quicken the pulse of Mr. Halat and start a small fire within the loins of the watching girl. Naked, she became an ivory statue of exquisite quality.

"Do you like me, Mr. Halat?"

"You are a visitor from Paradise, Miss Pitfield."

"Another drink, lord?"

"Ah, yes! And the maiden in the cage – she too."

Another tilting of a glass and gulping swallows. The almost imperceptible shake of Stevie's head to warn against protest at a slave girl's travail. Mr. Halat glowed and sipped in happy anticipation.

"Do I remember right, Mr. Halat, you enjoy whipping me and fucking me?" Stephanie's voice was dulcet.

"Thank you, yes. In that order." Mr. Halat beamed graciously.

"There are two whips here, lord, a single thong and a triple lash. There is also a nice cane and a lovely riding crop."

"We will use them all," said Mr. Halat magnanimously.

The bright girlish voice quavered only slightly as it inquired, "I expect you'd like to bind me for my whipping?"

"You deem it wise, dear child?"

Stevie blushed prettily. "I think I can manage to bend over for maybe six with the cane, lord. But beyond that I expect I ought to be tied." She made a small gesture of apology. "It does hurt terribly . . . ."

"Ah, yes, of course!" Sympathy and approval were nicely blended in Mr. Halat's understanding. "First I cane, and perhaps crop, that nice round rump – and then the whip. For the binding, you may call a servant. It is not fitting . . ."

"Of course, lord!" Miss Stephanie Pitfield was instantly contrite. "Forgive me?"

"Of course, of course! I will whip you but a little harder."

The motions were infinitely sweet for so grim a prelude. Stevie gathered two wicked lengths of crop and cane upon a silver tray and, kneeling, proffered them to the pudgy man who would use them to stripe her skin. Mr. Halat accepted them graciously.

Virginia was trembling, her eyes riveted incredulously upon a feminine performance she felt sure she could never emulate. A serenely smiling Stephanie took up position in the center of the rug, separated her feet slightly, then bent and touched her toes.

Mr. Halat whipped the tautly presented bottom seven times. Thrice with the cane and four times with the crop.

Virginia winced with each blow. The whirring slice and its impact on girl flesh was a sound like no other. Fascinated, she beheld the skin blazon in response and ridge itself into burning weals. The whipped maiden flinched and swayed but did not fall under the slow, cruel cuts. Her breath came in heaving gusts through which she replied politely to her torturer's suave observations.

"It is most painful, I hope, dear child."

"Yes, lord, the pain is very great."

"You have my permission to scream, dear girl."

"Thank you, lord. I will try not to offend your ears."

Mr. Halat sighed and struck with care. "I wish you were for sale, Miss Pitfield. You mark superlatively. Have you any idea of the price to tempt our good Jazrawi?"

The bent over nudity swallowed a moan of pure pain. "I am greatly honored, lord. But I have been told I have no price."

"That you are priceless . . . !" Mr. Halat slashed the tight cheeks doubly hard in frustration. "Perhaps Miss Ryder . . .?"

"She has not yet been trained, lord."

"So you said. But that is a task in which I excel. Does she share your tolerance of striped skin?"

"Miss Ryder has never been whipped, lord."

"Ah, so! I must indeed speak to Waleed." Mr. Halat paused in his backswing. "Perhaps, with your assistance, I might place a few marks . . . ?"

"I do not have the key to her cage, lord. Only our Master . . . ."

"Hmmmmm!" The guest shook his head in irritation, but measured the submissive female

posterior with renewed interest. His savage blow drove the bending girl to a sustaining step forward, a lapse she instantly corrected. "I would like you to describe your present sensations," he requested blandly.

"My loins are on fire, lord. The pain of each blow sickens me. The pain is spreading. I realize you are whipping me with great competence, sir. Thank you."

Virginia knew that she and her cage had ceased to exist for the whipper and the whipped. They were in a world of exquisite sensation all their own. There was an almost visible sharing in the giving and acceptance of agony. A oneness of purpose, to give and to receive. That there was neither guilt nor enmity did not matter. The girl and her pain were an end in themselves, rendering all else trivial.

"I am pleased with you, Miss Pitfield. When I whip your back you may wear your bra. I hold your nipples in great esteem."

"Thank you, lord. You are kind to me."

The crop thrummed sickeningly to implant the seventh striation upon innocent skin. The punished loveliness moaned quiveringly, her hips swayed to absorb their burn. There was silence.

"Perhaps refreshments . . . ?" Mr. Halat's largesse was expansive. "You have my permission to rub your bottom, Miss Pitfield. I understand some comfort is derived . . . ?"

"Thank you, lord." Blushing, Stevie fought back a compulsion to massage her scalding cheeks. Since he had made a point of it she had no wish to display the weakness. Falsely smiling she tripped daintily to the bar.

The captive in the cage was satisfied to be ignored. The two drinks had been, for her, more than enough. If she had to stand and display herself stark naked it was best she be sober. She tugged at her locked wrists in what had become an automatic reflex, and wryly wondered how it would feel to again possess her hands. She watched the play beyond the bars. The first act was over. This was the intermission.

"To sit would be painful," said Mr. Halat dryly. "It is best to kneel."

"It is proper that I kneel before you, lord. I am a slave."

"A most worthy slave, Miss Pitfield, acceptable to Allah. Sip slowly and enjoy. You may refill at will."

"I am grateful, lord." The kneeling maiden flushed and twisted awkwardly. "May I ask, lord, why you address me formally? I am only a slave girl and do not merit . . . ."

Mr. Jazrawi's pudgy guest nodded, pleased. "Ah, yes, you are perceptive." He sipped and reflected. "I think we have here a thing psychological." He beamed down at the kneeling white girl without animosity. "It is but thirty or forty years ago since you called us wogs and we saw you as gods and goddesses, Remote and omnipotent. It is good for an Arab hand to wield a whip upon white skin. Upon a white girl, for it was the females who sneered with the greatest scorn of what we were. So now when I whip the naked Miss Pitfield I chastise a race."

"I understand, lord."

"And you do not hate me?"

"No, lord. It is the turning wheel of history."

"Why do you not now plead with me to spare you the whipping?"

"My whipping is inevitable, lord."

"You are of rare quality, Miss Pitfield." This time the Arabic sigh was heavy. "Perhaps, after all, it is you who win . . . ."

"No, lord. I will scream. I cannot stand the whip on my naked back."

"You are already forgiven. I take it you have been much whipped?"

"Yes, lord, I have been much whipped. I am well trained."

"I am curious. Could you have achieved your present equanimity, Miss Pitfield, without the aid of lashes?"

"No, lord. I did not believe this at first. But it is true."

"And Miss Ryder? She does not believe . . . ?"

"How can she, lord? A few days ago she was free and clothed."

The Arab, head nodded reflectively. "The situation is delicious. Do you not find it so, Miss Pitfield?"

"It is highly erotic, lord."

"You feel a stirring in your loins?"

"Yes, lord. I am ashamed of it, but it is there."

"I am glad. It betokens well."

"Do you wish to whip me now, lord?"

"We drink again first. There is no hurry."

"And Miss Ryder – in the cage?"

"She is not to be whipped. She has no need."

"She is probably as frightened as I, sir. What she is watching must shock . . . ."

"Get her tipsy then. But you, Miss Pitfield, you are not frightened?"

"I am trembling, lord. I know you will whip me well."

They drank their drinks. Virginia was surprised and grateful. She longed to throw her arms around the girl whose affection reached her through the bars. She swallowed her potent potion and watched her companions outside the cage resume their roles. Mr. Halat seemed prone to psychological reflections.

"I have explored my enjoyment of your surname and title, Miss Pitfield – I find these things of interest. But in this matter of whipping your delectable person I am less certain of motives . . . ."

Stevie sipped and grinned. "I'm afraid it's universal, lord. Girls are being whipped in

every city in the world. I am told some even enjoy it. I think it's purely sexual and aesthetic."

"Aesthetic, Miss Pitfield . . . ?"

"My Master tells me there is beauty in our cries and in the stripes upon our skin."

"Hmmmmm, I suppose he is right – undoubtedly! A sly fox."

"Women bear children and we bear the lash, lord. It is our fate."

"Few bear it as exquisitely as you, child. You would light a fire in a Mullah." Halat looked down shrewdly. "Are you sure you are not of the sisterhood who find joy in their pain?"

"I am not one of them yet, lord." Stephanie Pitfield looked up at her temporary owner earnestly. "But I hope to enter their ranks one day." Her smile was shy. "I – I – I think I have known the first stirrings."

"Beneath my whip . . . ?"

"No, lord, it is too soon. I wish it otherwise but I will scream . . . !"

He shrugged regretfully. "Perhaps then we should start . . . ?"

It had been done before. Virginia was sure of it. The precision of experience was in every move. Stevie rose to her feet and dropped a sweet, small curtsy to her lord. She went to the doorway and clapped her hands. To the familiar smiling servant her orders were crisp.

"Aliesha, I am to be whipped."

The frame was solid and forbidding. It was pushed into position on oiled castors.

"You must tie me tight, Aliesha. Hands and feet."

"Not your feet, dear child." Mr. Halat raised a halting hand. His voice was an apology. "A small conceit of mine, Miss Pitfield. I like to see you kick. It is an added spice . . . ."

"Of course, lord."

When the girl about to be punished bent to retrieve her bra Virginia gasped in shock as the taut, tight bottom proclaimed its wounds. In the few moments of drinks and conversation the livid strokes had changed from scarlet to purple. The pain of such inflictions must have been atrocious. But there was no sign of agony as their bearer raised the twin cups and smiled upon her lord.

"With your permission . . . ?"

"With my permission, Miss Pitfield. I treasure them as do you yourself."

Stephanie donned the scanty refuge for her breasts, drawing tight the straps to hold it safe against her writhings. Thus adorned, and looking quaintly out of proportion with her one erotic covering, she asked briskly, "Should I face your chair or be bound with my back to it, lord?"

"You will face it, dear child."

Again the small curtsy. The naked girl whose breasts were close held by the two cones of a skimpy bra turned to stand between the stout timbers. Her arms rose.

"Remember, Aliesha – tight!"

"Tight, Miss Stevie. Aliesha knows."

Knowing hands plied rope upon slender wrists, their owner gasping as the cords bit, standing on tip-toe to aid the servant in her task.

"Thank you, Aliesha. I can't get loose. You may go."

"No!" Halat's voice was reverent. "It is she who will use the whips. I want no distractions while we face each other, you and I."

"But, lord . . . !" The bound girl's eyes were wide in appeal. "I wish it was you who marks me. I would be honored . . . ."

"And I too, Miss Pitfield."

"Then, please . . . ?"

"Aliesha is most competent, Miss Pitfield. She will flog you well. Bear with a foolish man's conceit – I wish to watch."

Stephanie sighed, her breasts were heaving. Her voice was vibrant with emotions but was firm. "You hear our Master, Aliesha. Prepare yourself. There are two whips. Use both of them on my back." There was an agonized pause before the final instruction. "Whip me hard."

The serving woman was by nature impassive. But Virginia saw joy in the dark eyes as Aliesha shrugged out of her robe and revealed herself naked to the waist, a muscular body, firmed by labor. Sinuously she fetched the whips from their hook upon the wall. Stevie's eyes followed her from beside a tethered arm as she selected the single thong and allowed the triple scourge to fall to the rug to await its turn. Then, resolutely, she faced the watching man and smiled.

"You may start my whipping, Aliesha."

From the start, Mr. Halat's injunction brought reward. As the single leather wrapped around the slender waist, a free leg untrammeled by bonds rose in agony, bending and twisting in its mute expression of pain, and finally kicking at nothing in a desperate instinct to alleviate its owner's anguish. The eyes of the watching man glowed. Miss Stephanie Pitfield moaned and threw back her head as her nudity strained . . . .

For the girl handcuffed in the cage it was cruelly frightening to watch. But a fascinated compulsion denied the closing of her eyes. Instantly, she recognized Aliesha's skill and Aliesha's dedication. Thew and sinew plied the whip with deadly precision across the lovely ivory of Stevie's back. Soon Stevie began to scream.

Halat sat hunched forward in his chair, intent and fulfilled as Miss Stephanie Pitfield writhed and her nakedness became dewed with the sweat of pain. He watched her arms tug against their bound wrists and her legs and thighs perform their bizarre gavotte. Sometimes the tip of the whip would curl around bare ribs or under straining armpits to snap a scarlet brand where none should be. The screams were a symphony of all his dreams. Stephanie was a most satisfying slave, tendering to her master the ultimate in joy.

From time to time the whipped girl would catch his gaze and there would pass between them a message neither could name. The moments were fleeting as the whip cut and slashed, but in them there was understanding, an absence of subterfuge, a shedding of

hypocrisy. They were a man and a girl. The girl was being whipped because the man desired it so. It was that simple.

"Thank you, lord, for having me whipped."

Aliesha was gone. The cruel frame had been trundled out of sight. The whips hung back upon the wall. Once more Miss Stephanie Pitfield knelt before her lord. In a hasty memory of duty, her hands flew to the clasp of her bra to toss it aside, releasing her white breasts to proclaim their immunity against the carmine striations criss-crossing her nakedness.

"You were superb."

"Your praise honors me."

"You have learned our ways and our idiom."

"Lord, may I bathe before I serve you with my body?"

"No, girl, you may not. Your sweat is glorious beyond the arts of Paris. No vial could contain such potency. You sear a man's soul."

"Shall I conduct you to a room, lord . . . ?" Halat laughed.

"For your privacy or mine?"

Stevie flushed. "Virginia is so new, lord. It will be . . ."

He was delighted. "She can watch us through the bars. You said yourself she needs training."

The whipped girl slid down upon her back. She opened wide her knees and thighs and held out welcoming arms.

"It is said a well wealed maiden makes love most ardently," she said without blushing.

Nakedness improved Mr. Halat. Chuckling, he asked, "And you believe it?"

"We will both believe it," said the girl who had once been Miss Stephanie Pitfield. "Come, lord, I am open. Enter me."

The girl in the cage tried hard to close her eyes. But, for some reason, they remained open.

Chapter Three

Mission of Pain

"But he was plump and middle-aged and an Arab and . . . . Oh, Stevie . . . !" Virginia was distraught.

"I did what I had to, darling. You'll have to do it too."

"I'll never be able to – not ever! Not even if they whip me to death! Oh, Stephanie, I just don't know . . . !"

"Look, Virginia, I had myself chained back in the cage with you like this for a little Anglo

Saxon sympathy. Don't I get any?"

Contritely, Virginia fought her handcuffs. "Of course you do, darling, I'm a beast – but I can't put my arms around you! Oh, damn!"

"Never mind, pet. I'll put my arms around you. I can lift my shackled hands over your head – like so. There! Oh, this feels better. I'm going to lay my head on your shoulder and cry. Do you mind?"

The handcuffs were cruel at such a time. Virginia desperately wanted her arms but could not have them. She contented herself by snuggling close and kissing whatever of her whipped companion she could reach. Stevie wept into the warm comfort of neck and shoulders.

"I bet you think I enjoyed it," she sobbed accusingly.

"I don't know what to think."

"Well, I didn't! Being whipped like that's beastly."

"But all the rest . . . ? Oh, Stephanie . . . !"

"All right, so I liked being fucked! I'll admit it. A slave girl takes her pleasure where she can. You will too. You'll see!"

"I won't! Not ever! Oh, Stephanie . . . !"

"Don't keep saying 'oh, Stephanie' like that! You make me feel all – soiled! I'm just a slave girl who's learned her trade well and did a good job. Halat offered half a million dollars for me and got turned down."

"But did you have to – so – I mean . . . ?"

"A slave girl does a good job or she gets whipped."

"But you got whipped anyway."

"Not the real punishment whipping. There's no blood on me, is there! If I'd balked my back would be cut to ribbons."

"Is that all our life's going to be – whipped and whipped?"

"No. Jazrawi's reasonable. That's the first time I've been whipped in a month. Didn't notice any marks, did you? These weals I've got now will be healed before I get the next lot – unless I ink my blotter."

"But you will be whipped again – sometime? Even you?"

"It's an occupational hazard, love."

"It's beastly and it's awful!" Virginia suddenly tensed. "Didn't you say I had to be whipped? Some ceremonial thing to – to – to get me started, or break me in, or something?"

"'Fraid so, ducky. There's no getting out of it."

"It won't work with me. I'll just die."

"You won't, y'know. You'll live and learn. Same as me."

"And get sold to a fat little Arab!"

"Most of 'em aren't fat. They're a highly civilized lot, really. But they don't believe in women's lib."

"What will I be? A sort of whore?"

"That's the wrong word, dear. Whores get paid." Stephanie managed a giggle. "Concubine would be better. Or odalisque, if you want to be high hat."

"Stevie, why do you make Aliesha chain your hands when you have her lock you in with me?"

Stephanie sniffed away the last of her tears and musingly bit her distressed companion's ear. " 'Spose I thought it would make you feel better. You know, the two girls together thing! Then once, long ago, they kept me chained like that a helluva long time, weeks and weeks, . . ! I got used to having them on my wrists. They don't stop me doing anything. 'Spose I wear 'em for old time's sake."

"You like them!"

"Don't make me feel so guilty, pet! Sure I like 'em. Does it matter?"

"I don't know," said Virginia wearily, "but wearing them says you're a slave, just as these handcuffs behind my back say I'm a prisoner. We're both – both . . . ."

"Is 'doomed' the word you're looking for?"

Stephanie's dry query brought Virginia back to reality. It was unkind to nag at this girl who had sought only to help. Stevie was in the cage with her now, her only friend. Desolately she damned her handcuffs, and sought consolations in the frictioning of breasts and the hungry warmth and wetness of lips. Soon they made love and went to sleep, linked in the comfort of Stevie's shackles.

Slumber cures and heals. In the half-consciousness of waking, Virginia made up her mind to face and to accept the facts of her captivity. She had little hope of emulating Stephanie's insouciance but she could try. Her good resolution led to the inevitable query.

"Stevie, when do I get whipped?"

"I'm not sure, ducky."

"But it's you who orders it done, isn't it?"

" 'Fraid so."

"Well, then . . . ?"

"I've been putting it off," Stephanie admitted. "I thought I'd let it ride until our Master jacks me up about it."

"Then you'll be punished too."

"No, maybe not. He's not cruel like that." Stevie looked commiseratingly at her troubled fellow captive. "Or do you want to get it over with? I know how it can be . . . ."

"I – I think so. Am I silly?"

"The sleep did you good, didn't it?" Stevie laughed. "And no, you're not silly."

"Darling, please lie on your tummy so I can see what the whips and the canes and things did to you. I want to face this and know I won't die."

Amused, the whipped girl did as requested, cocking one eye up at Virginia's shocked face. "See, not a drop of blood," she consoled.

"And I can't touch them!" Virginia mourned. "Darling, they're awful! Do they still hurt?"

"Not really," said the female connoisseur of pain slowly. "They'll be tender for several days – I won't sleep on my back. But I've found it strange . . . the awful, unbearable agony only lasts a little while. That's why it's so terrible when they lay one lash on top of another fast. It builds and seems unending. But if they pause between each stroke it drags on and on and on, so I don't know which is worse."

"Stevie, dear." Virginia's voice was coaxing. "Please have me whipped tomorrow."

There was a wry relief in Stevie's reply. "Okay, darling. Tomorrow I'll make sure it happens." But it did not happen like that at all.

* * *

Waleed Jazrawi had a gift for comfort. He lounged in the chair as though it had been made for him alone. The cheroot he smoked seemed more useful as a pointer than for the solace of nicotine. He pointed it now at the girl behind the bars.

"You found yesterday instructive, Miss Ryder?"

"Stephanie has been kind to me, lord."

"Ah, my title! You tread cautiously, dear girl."

"Should I not, lord? I am a slave."

Jazrawi nodded in pleasure. "You are almost too perfect, my dear. You English have a word for it – am I being cozened?"

Virginia tugged at her locked wrists and twisted her shoulders in coy admission. "Yes, lord. Today I am to be whipped. If I could avoid it I would."

"An admirable precept, Miss Ryder." The cheroot left a trail of fragrance as it was airily waved. "But our beloved Miss Pitfield has scheduled your initiation flogging for this afternoon at two p.m. It would hardly be politic for me to intervene."

"I am your property, lord."

He laughed at her persistence. "And so the responsibility is mine! Ah, yes! It had been my intention to be present while you collected your scars."

Virginia's pulse quickened at his use of the past tense. But he had used a frightful word. She gazed through the bars in dismay.

"Scars, lord?"

"A figure of speech, child. Within three weeks your delightful skin will be without blemish."

"And will you not watch me whipped? Or whip me yourself, lord?"

"You wish me to?"

"Yes, lord. Do not ask me why."

He laughed at her earnestness. "You fear your darling Stephanie's loyalty precludes mercy. Whereas I, a susceptible male, might weaken."

Virginia wriggled and blushed. "If you say so, lord."

Jazrawi was pleased with her. Virginia sensed it, sensed also an undercurrent. Impetuously, she pleaded. "After I have been whipped, lord, keep me as your slave as you have kept Stephanie Pitfield. Do not sell me."

Waleed Jazrawi nodded, his eyes intent upon the caged girl as though in confirmation. "You would serve me?"

"Faithfully, lord."

"You have come so far so soon?"

Virginia met his level gaze. "Stephanie has convinced me I can never escape." She rattled her handcuffs. "And so have these! Therefore my greatest wish is to serve you. I will be loyal as she is loyal."

"And wear one of her uniforms, no doubt?"

"Please, lord, please . . . ?"

"You are impudent as she. I should thrash you both daily but I will not. Suppose I set a task . . . ?" His eyes glowed. "A task by which you were not whipped this afternoon at all . . . ?"

"Oh, lord . . . lord . . . !" Virginia was breathless.

"A disagreeable task in which you would know both fear and pain."

"Yes, lord?"

"I am a businessman, Miss Ryder. A most strange proposition has come my way. I could employ you profitably. But you would find no freedom."

"I would not be sold?"

"You would not be sold. I am flattered that this matters to you."

"And I would not be whipped?"

"For the moment, Miss Ryder, let us stop talk of whips on your delightful skin."

"And I would be taken from this cage, lord?"

"You can scarcely serve me within, dear girl."

"I wish to serve you, lord." Waleed Jazrawi clapped his hands.

* * *

The two men were as American as the Stars and Stripes. They assessed her gravely. Virginia liked them on sight, and wondered why they might not rescue her. Presumably they would not.

"Mr. David Winston: Miss Virginia Ryder." Waleed Jazrawi was comfortably in his element.

The older man, who should have been at least a President, acknowledged the introduction with a formal inclination of the head. The cold eyes tripped, not her clothes but her mind. He was curious.

"And Mr. James Thorsen . . . ."

He shook her hand. Virginia had impressions of West Point, Palmolive soap, and cowboy movies. James Thorsen was nice. She wished he would pick her up and carry her off into the sunset.

Seated, Virginia knew herself the center of interest. She wondered what would happen if she made a quick dash for the door. Instead, she blushed and tried to look as though she knew what was happening.

"Mr. Winston and Mr. Thorsen are members of the United States Diplomatic Service," Waleed Jazrawi informed portentously.

"How nice," Virginia conceded, and felt an idiot.

"Assisting the local Consulate." David Winston's amendment was almost a declaration of independence.

"In a situation of much embarrassment," added Mr. Jazrawi happily.

"Perhaps I should outline the pertinent facts?" The older man sounded tired. Virginia sensed distaste in his weariness.

"If you would be so kind." Waleed Jazrawi was obviously enjoying himself. He bestowed upon his quaking feminine possession his most benignant smile.

Winston's regard was enigmatic, his words slow. They were intended to shatter unfounded hope. "We have sought Mr. Jazrawi's help, Miss Ryder, in the full knowledge of certain unorthodox aspects of your own personal situation. We are not here to help you, but are under the necessity of asking you to help us."

"That's what you call laying it on the line," Virginia said, smiling brightly at James Thorsen. She still cherished a hope he would pick her up and carry her off to Colorado or New Hampshire or even Utah. "What do you want me to do?"

Mr. Winston was not yet through with his preamble. His intonation was earnest. "We understand you are not a – ahem – a free agent, Miss Ryder?"

"I belong to Mr. Jazrawi. That is to say, I am his possession." Virginia remembered the whip, and smiled cheerfully. "Were you considering rescue?"

"No."

The single word was a thunderclap. It told all. Free of bonds, Virginia suddenly felt bound.

"This contretemps is remarkably delicate." James Thorsen bridged an awkward gap. "We are grateful to Mr. Jazrawi."

"Exactly!" David Winston recaptured the floor. "Miss Ryder, you have walked into the middle of an international incident."

To Virginia it was more Arabian Nights or a paperback about espionage, its cover showing a bare beauty in dire distress. She mutely counted the few days since she walked free, a tourist young woman bent upon pleasure. And now this!

Stephanie had been moral support only. "Darling, I don't know a thing except you've got to be clothed and look pretty."

She had stepped from the cage almost with regret. It had been both haven and prison. But the unlocking of her handcuffs had been pure delight, an ecstasy only slightly tempered by Stevie's warning.

"They'll go back on, ducky. And don't say goodbye to the whip either. It's never far away."

"But not today!" Virginia bathed in euphoria. "And I'm going to wear clothes again? And I won't be handcuffed?"

"That's right, darling." Stevie had looked at her doubtfully. "And for goodness sake be careful about running away. I don't want you all cut up."

Virginia faced the incredible. "You mean I may have a chance? That I'll walk free the way you do?"

"I think it's possible. Oh, ducky, do be careful!"

That had been that. Virginia's recall was dispersed by the cold precision of David Winston's summation.

"We face a situation in which an American woman, a woman of about your own age, the wife of a man whose name is a household word, has been indiscreet to the point of allowing herself to be caught in flagrante delicto with a citizen of this country, a politician in deep disfavor with the present regime." David Winston paused for breath.

"So I suppose her husband's going to divorce her?" suggested Virginia helpfully.

Mr. Thorsen and Mr. Jazrawi laughed at her innocence. David Winston did not. "I wish it was that simple," he continued heavily. "I suppose you've heard of the Imam?"

Virginia had vague memories of recent news. "That holy man they call 'The Leader'?" she asked hesitantly.

"There are a lot of names for him," Winston said dryly. "The polite Arabic terms could be Imam, Mufti, Hadji, Murshid, and a few more. But we can call him 'The Leader.' In a wave of religious fervor he has taken control here and governs the country from a mountain fortress in the interior. He entertains strongly archaic attitudes about sex."

"He doesn't approve of it," said James Thorsen brightly.

"He is of the Old Ones," Mr. Jazrawi contributed noncommittally.

"He is rabidly nationalistic and not prepared to make allowances for foreign mores." Winston sounded more tired than ever. "This Rannigan woman . . . ."

"Rannigan!" Virginia was shocked. "But isn't Rannigan the . . . ?"

"Yes, he is!" Winston retorted testily. "This idiot wife of his has got us into a peck of trouble. She's in the local lock-up along with her political paramour. We fully expect the Hadji to make some sort of example of her, a gesture partly fanatic and partly political."

"They're not even in the same cell." James Thorsen's sympathy was open to suspicion.

"The administration is highly moral," Jazrawi reproved.

"Can't they just impose a stiff fine?" Virginia was bemused.

"No. We have been told her penalty will be corporal or penal. She has not yet been sentenced. The Leader is taking his time and letting us stew. Consular representations are ignored."

"But don't you have a fleet of battleships or something . . . ?"

"Battleships need fuel. The Imam has it! If only this was thirty years ago!"

It was taking shape. A sinister chill crept up Virginia's spine. Today a great nation would barter honor for oil. Roberta Rannigan was in a bad spot. The Marines were unlikely to land. Knowing the answer, she still asked the question.

"But why tell me?"

"We wish to put you in her place."

Three pairs of male eyes focused on an outraged girl. Breasts heaving, Virginia sought for scathing words. "It's not fair! I haven't done anything. It's Mrs. Rannigan who's had all . . . ."

"Had all the fun?" James Thorsen supplied helpfully.

"It is not a laughing matter. We cannot allow this to happen."

"But can't some American girl be a heroine? Why me?"

"I offer immediate service," said Mr. Jazrawi proudly. "Speed and a warm understanding with our police is what you call of the essence."

"The exchange is practical. The Hadji is far away. No one who matters here knows Mrs. Rannigan by sight. Only the local police, and they are as embarrassed as ourselves."

"So, to keep the oil flowing you're prepared to sacrifice a girl?"

"Yes."

"Me!"

"Try and see yourself in perspective, Miss Ryder."

"I can see myself in some horrible prison with lice and rats and then some frightful sentence at the end of it."

"Your sacrifice is dwarfed beside the implications, Miss Ryder."

"And you did have an appointment for this afternoon," said Waleed Jazrawi thoughtfully.

Trapped, Virginia vented her scorn against the bastion of Winston's diplomacy. "You don't care about me, do you? You know how and why I'm here. You could take me back to the Consulate with you and send me home. But you won't. You'll let me stay prisoner for life so tankers can continue to break up and spread oil on our beaches . . . !"

"Come, come, Miss Ryder, you are overwrought."

"And impolite," said Jazrawi ominously.

"Look, don't let any of us enlarge this beyond what it is," Thorsen intervened hurriedly. "There still exists the possibility the Imam may relent. It could drag on for a few weeks, then end in some face saving gesture." He bestowed upon Virginia a frank and boyish smile. "It's what I'm banking on, and if you could see it that way too . . . ?"

Virginia looked from one to the other. "Actually, I have no choice, do I? I don't know why you're being so polite . . . ."

"Your willing cooperation is vital, Miss Ryder. A distraught or declamatory woman could reveal our subterfuge and precipitate an even greater exacerbation."

"You mean I've got to pretend I'm happy!"

"No, of course not. Be as sullen as you wish. Say as little as possible."

"I do have permission to visit," said Mr. Thorsen.

"When do I start?" said Virginia.

"The chief of police is in the anteroom," said David Winston kindly.

"A very nice man, an old friend," said Jazrawi, "He will not be too unkind."

Captain Mussa had deep, dark eyes and well-tailored uniform. His smile conveyed infinities of comprehension. He produced handcuffs.

"We don't need those," said Virginia tartly.

Captain Mussa replaced them in his pocket, bowed and prepared to leave.

"Oh, very well! If it's that important . . . ." Petulantly, Virginia offered her wrists .

"Behind the back, please." It was suddenly important James Thorsen should not see her thus shamed. But, blushing, Virginia turned her back and allowed her hands to be circled and locked in steel. Ruefully, she recalled Stephanie's warning . . . . Only two or three hours, and once more her arms were pinioned behind. "I hope I am now helpless enough for your approval?" she enquired acidly, her eyes upon the young man from America.

"I will now take you to the prison," said Captain Mussa. His hand upon her arm was firm but not unkind.

At the door, the captive girl held firm and turned to survey the waiting men. Only Waleed Jazrawi failed to look sheepish. The two from the Consulate were obviously as shamed as she herself.

"I'll be seeing you," James Thorsen said awkwardly.

"You will come with me," said Captain Mussa, "Now!"

There seemed nothing more to say.

"I anticipate no trouble, Miss Ryder." In the car the Captain seemed less formal.

"Then why handcuff me like a criminal?" Virginia's query was feminine and resentful.

"I refer to the deception, Miss Ryder. The handcuffs are routine. They often obviate a greater humiliation. Subduing a recalcitrant female is – untidy."

"I suppose you're well aware I've been kidnaped?"

"Of course! Jazrawi is an old friend. With him you are in excellent hands." Sharp eyes turned in approval. "But I express admiration for your ability to – understand."

"Simple, isn't it? I do what I'm told or I'm whipped."

"True! But still, not all women . . . !"

"How the devil do you all manage to be so cruel and so kind?"

"We accept the precepts of Allah, Miss Ryder. You of the West exhaust yourselves with the irrelevant."

"This prison I must inhabit? Have you made it at all bearable for Mrs. Rannigan, or for me?"

"Alas, no. The orders were explicit." He smiled reassuringly. "But it is not a dark dungeon below the earth." He coughed deprecatingly. "You will see little of me, it would not be fitting. We have a wardress for our women prisoners. You must obey her. She will treat you as she treats the others, but with less favor. I am sorry."

Virginia sighed. "What you're saying is you'll abandon me?"

"It is the wisest course. For me to show an interest would be to focus attention."

The handcuffs hurt Virginia's wrists. She was far from happy. But the Captain's courtesy eased conversation. "Isn't the attention of half the world on Mrs. Rannigan already? An American woman in a prison – here!"

Mussa laughed easily. "The attention is upon the prison and upon the Leader. Poor Mrs. Rannigan is, like yourself, a pawn. Fortunately for us, the press is excluded. As for American women, would it surprise you to know we have four more behind our bars?"

"You mean you kidnap them!" Virginia was aghast.

"Oh, please, Miss Ryder!" Mussa's remonstrance was paternal. "They have been arrested, tried, and sentenced in courts acceptable to the international community. One is a shoplifter, a tourist paying her expenses. One an expensive courtesan who drank too much champagne and then struck the wrong man with the bottle. Another is a spy. The fourth is

a journalist who wrote disagreeably seditious articles about our political and economic institutions and had the temerity to offer them for sale within our borders.

The United States Consulate could find no fault with our treatment of the cases."

It was a new and dreadful world! If only she had not strayed so far from safety that day in the sunlight! Virginia sighed despondently and clinked her chain. "How long will it last?" she asked wanly. "For me, I mean – in prison?"

"That is with Allah, Miss Ryder." Virginia wished it were.

"I will be sentenced, won't I? This – this Leader, the Hadji, he won't let me go . . . ?"

"Almost certainly."

"And my – they'll call it punishment, won't they? What will it be? Please don't tell me you don't know. You must have some idea."

"I have an idea." Mussa turned in commiseration. "But your time in the cell will be no happier for sharing it."

"There have been other women . . . . I remember reading! Women who are your own nationals but have offended. Horrible things were done to them . . . public humiliation . . . ."

"Our Leader believes it is as Allah wills," said Captain Mussa gently.

Chapter Four

Prison

The cell could not be said to stink. It simply had a disagreeable smell. Three of its walls were stone blocks, the fourth was barred, robbing the occupant of privacy. There was a covered pail and a cot without blankets. The small grated window was too high to offer a view. Virginia hated it all.

Rabbah was neither fat nor huge. She was muscular, lithe, and bored, her manner faintly contemptuous. She made Virginia feel like a recently acquired appliance requiring attention. If she was curious about the exchange she gave no sign. She accepted her new captive with polite deference to her superior and a knowing glance, almost of complicity, upon her charge. Of the legendary Roberta Rannigan there was no sign.

Virginia suspected the hosing down and the penetrating of her anus and vulva by an inquisitive finger was more for the wardress' diversion than an insistence on routine. Captain Mussa was now gone beyond her ken. There was no one to whom to appeal. She endured the indignities in a prudent silence.

In the bath house, relieved of handcuffs, Virginia had meekly obeyed the order to undress. When she was allowed a rough towel after the cold deluge she used it briefly before firm fingers possessed her arms, drew them back and clicked the cuffs once more upon her wrists. She stood, trembling. A naked girl, helpless, trying hard not to cry. A scanty, but surprisingly white wrap was tightened and pinned above her breasts. It was given the semblance of dress by a strip of the same stuff around her waist, tight enough that she did not appear pregnant. She was then pushed into the cell and the barred door slammed with a metallic emphasis. When she turned to speak, Rabbah was gone.

Miss Virginia Ryder, recently of London, England, stood and surveyed her prison, loathing every block and bar. If she sat upon the cot she would cry. She felt no impetus to anything, not even to press against the bars to observe whatever might lie beyond. She felt a lost microcosm in a hostile universe. Her cage and its cushions were on another planet.

Domicile in confinement is only rarely conducive to peace of mind. To Virginia it seemed hours before Rabbah reappeared. By the time the wardress put her key again in the lock she was seething with indignation. Her demand was instant. "Take these handcuffs off me, you've no right . . . !"

"Stay on." Rabbah was a woman of few words.

"But I'm locked up! There's no need!"

"Is orders."

"Who's orders? I demand to see . . . !"

"No demand. You behave."

"Behave! What else can I do!" The disturbed captive studied the unconcerned features of her jailer, searching for sympathy. "It – it's not civilized to keep a prisoner chained like this! Nobody does it any more, not anywhere!"

"Is only handcuffs."

"They make me helpless!"

Rabbah nodded, her lips faintly amused. "I fix."

She did not fix. She went away. When she returned she held something, the sight of which caused Virginia to take an involuntary step back. "No! They're too absurd. This is too much!" Her protest was swallowed by the stone.

"You sit. Stick out feet."

"No! I refuse!"

Rabbah shrugged, her voice a jeer. "Refuse! You very silly. How you refuse?"

It was true! She could refuse nothing. Presumably she would be cuffed into submission if she did not obey. Miserably, she sat on the cot and extended her unshod feet, her shoes had been taken with her clothes.

"You soon learn. Is good."

The fetter was surprising, gleaming chrome in a place of rusty iron. It was absurdly heavy, its links thick, the anklets wide. They locked upon her slenderness like hungry jaws, more than snug, closing with a fearsome snap of finality.

"This is too absurd! It's – it's – medieval!"

"You wear." Rabbah smiled for the first time, eyeing her work with obvious satisfaction. "I teach."

A long time after the clang of the door and the turn of the key, the captive ruefully examined her new accouterments. Locked upon her ankles they would be a constant reminder from the wardress to keep quiet, to never indulge in protest or complaint.

Evidently her role was to say nothing and to accept whatever was done to her. In curiosity she rose and made a clinking circle of the cell, her steps short and snubbed and loaded with shame. On the cot again, she shrugged in distaste and resignation. What did it matter! In this small sterility behind the bars there was nothing she could do, even with her hands and feet untrammeled. She would wait for things to happen. She was a pawn.

Through the night she slept the deep sleep of nervous exhaustion. The metal locked upon wrist and ankle discommoded her surprisingly little. In the morning the weight of steel was taken from her ankles and her cuffed hands shifted from back to front.

"You behave." Rabbah's injunction could have been commendation or threat. "In day you have hands."

Virginia knew the pathetic gratitude of those who have little to be thankful for. Shrewdly, she surmised that if indeed she was to be allowed visitors it was deemed politic to appear in minimal discomfort. But her "thank you" was sincere.

"Man come. You say you happy." Rabbah delivered a forbidding stare. "You no say bad things."

James Thorsen came towards mid-day. Rabbah would have left him beyond the bars had he not expostulated. Sulkily, she gave him entry and went away. His fresh forth-rightness was like a clean wind in the sad little cell. They stood awkwardly, two young people aware more of each other than of the prison or their problem. Virginia broke the silence.

"Thank you for coming. I need someone. I'm not finding this easy."

He took her linked hands and patted them paternally. Shrugging ruefully, he pulled them apart against their single link. "I'm sorry they do this to you," he said regretfully. "But they think they have to. It's been discussed. This is a compromise."

"At night they're behind my back and my feet are chained." She could not keep the plaintiveness from her voice. "It's – it's out of the dark ages."

"Are you abused – hurt?" He was distressed.

"I suppose not," she admitted. "It's just that I'm so helpless and useless. I don't know how I'll stand up to it if it goes on for days and weeks."

They sat on the cot, one at each end, facing each other, still a little shy. Virginia was aware of his eyes upon her breasts. The wrap was tight and it was thin. Her nipples proclaimed themselves proudly. Thorsen jerked his attention from them and shared her blush.

"It's a lousy spot to put a girl in!" he exclaimed savagely. "They should have let Roberta Rannigan take her own medicine. She's safe now and laughing."

"I still don't see how the deception can be hidden," Virginia said slowly. "Surely someone's going to find out."

"Not here. Remember, the news hounds are excluded. The Rannigans and our government will simply stop making a noise. The Hadji is far away and well satisfied an American woman is locked and chained in here – awaiting his pleasure. He's got his own troubles."

"But the prison staff and the other prisoners?"

"Captain Mussa's got that all fixed. By the way, you may be given exercise in the yard. But the other inmates you'll see will be the ones who never set eyes on the lovely Roberta – Damn her!"

"Is she that beautiful?"

"Not more than you, Miss Ryder. But in a different way."

"I'm puzzled why you couldn't have contrived an escape for Mrs. Rannigan. With the Captain and the money . . . ?"

James Thorsen shook his head bitterly. "Oh, sure, we could have done it for her and we can do it for you. But that leaves our holy Hadji up in the mountains jumping up and down on his hair shirt. The Leader wants an incident, a sacrifice. He wants to rub our noses in the dirt and see just what insults we're prepared to take for his holy oil. Right now, our government is not prepared to cross him. They see you as a very small price to pay for keeping the valves open." He surveyed Virginia sadly. "Sorry . . . !"

Virginia sighed. "In a way I can see their point," she admitted hesitantly. "Maybe if I'd been able to approach this heroically I could feel righteous and get a glow. But it's all so – so . . . ."

"Sordid?"

Thorsen supplied the word with more of the same bitterness. Perplexed, he gazed at Virginia and she at him. She raised her hands for him to focus on the handcuffs on her wrists, and asked the question neither wished to face. "There will come an afterwards. What about me then?" As though under the impetus of a blow, Thorsen rose and paced the floor, troubled and ashamed. "Winston and I have talked of this," he vouchsafed. "We've been told to leave the whole scene alone as none of our business. You're expendable."

"You know I've been kidnaped?"

"Oh, sure." He gestured irritably. "There's you and that other English girl, Stephanie Pitfield. You've been enslaved. There's no other word for it. And you're not the first. I'd guess Jazrawi snares at least one girl a month, probably more. But Jazrawi's a useful man to know. He can oil the bearings of what we call diplomacy. We won't cross Jazrawi either." He paused in mid-stride. "Has he been cruel to you?"

"I suppose not – by his standards. If I have to be a slave I'd just as soon be his – unless you'd like to buy me?"

"I'd have bought you yesterday!" His vehemence was sincere. "But he gets anything up to a million for a girl like you. I don't have a tenth of that!" He grinned ruefully. "And I can't put you on my expense account."

"I was scheduled to be whipped yesterday afternoon if this hadn't happened. It's a pleasant little ritual he employs to let a slave girl know she's a slave. A sort of awful warning not to step out of line."

She had wanted to shock. But Thorsen simply shrugged. "We know it all," he admitted. "And so do the other consulates of their own nations. The British, for instance. It's fobbed off by the cynical assumption that if a girl gets into such a jackpot it's probably her own fault. Sometimes this is actually true."

"Was it my fault?"

"In a way. You'd been warned. You walked off alone."

"And that makes me guilty?"

"Not you. But some girls would be cherishing a dream of a handsome sheik and a tent in the desert. Girls like a bit of flirting with wickedness – I suppose we all do! Except guys like Winston."

"But what's going to happen to ME! I'm ME! I matter to ME!" Virginia looked up at the troubled features of the male. "Don't you see! You're absolutely my only hope. I'm held such a close prisoner I'll never meet anyone else. If you can't help me escape I'll be a slave for life, sold like a canary in a cage . . . whipped! Oh, damn!"

"Virginia, don't!" Her cry of agony had reached him for sure. He drew her to her feet and pressed her cheek against his shoulder which she promptly wet with tears. Her cuffed hands and pert breasts were tight against his chest. Virginia never wanted to move again. James Thorsen smelt delightfully of all the nice things advertised on T.V. He held her tight and patted her back gently. "I will do something," he avowed firmly. "I will! I promise!"

"What?"

"I don't know." His voice was still firm but it was unhappy. "I just don't know! But I'll do something!"

Virginia wept more cheerfully. It was a beginning.

* * *

The cell was doubly dismal after James had gone. The captive girl could think of him by his first name now. It was comforting. Like a hidden file with which to cut the bars. Someone knew and cared, someone outside! It was sunlight in the dark.

Rabbah was not sunlight. When she came she carried rope. Thin white nylon lengths portending ill. Her face and her voice accused.

"You make complaint."

"Oh, Rabbah . . . ." Virginia sought for words but found none.

"You say you no like chain. Is bad."

"Rabbah, I only said . . . ."

"So Rabbah tie. Maybe you like."

Virginia knew she would not 'like' at all. She longed to plead, to beg, to assure, to say she was sorry! But before the dark aggrieved eyes she was mute. Between she and the wardress there was a mystic female understanding. There was nothing to say.

Her handcuffs were unlocked and set aside. "You use pail."

Shame and the joy of being without bonds! Virginia experienced both under watchful eyes. Returning to meet her penalty, she said soberly, "I'll apologize, Rabbah, and I'll promise."

"Too late. You turn around."

Palm to palm, the cords cutting her wrists! "Rabbah, oh, please! That's far too tight!"

"Must be tight. Rabbah punish." Punishment was implicit! Useless to protest the binding of a nearly naked girl in a locked cell. The rope was not to inhibit escape. It was to teach a lesson. Virginia stood meekly while the strictures circled her elbows. "Ouch! Oh, Rabbah . . . !"

"You stand still! You keep quiet!"

"But it's far too tight! It hurts terribly!"

Her answer was the cinching of the cords. Her bare elbows met and were clamped as one. Virginia's shoulders moaned and the safety pin strained to hold the sarong above straining outthrust breasts. The nylon bands were positioned, one by one, and drawn into the taut skin. A final knot was patted lovingly.

"Oh, Rabbah! Oh, please . . . ?"

"Maybe you talk less?"

"I promise! Oh, Rabbah, untie me – or tie me not so tightly."

"We teach bad tongue too!"

It was not possible! It was all a nightmare, a dream from which she must soon wake . . . . ! Virginia beheld the ping pong ball and the drug store spool in disbelief.

"You open mouth."

The small, white sphere slipped easily upon her tongue. But when Virginia closed her lips her mouth seemed full, even her cheeks.

"You press lips tight. Keep still."

How easy to obey! The captive girl was a mannequin, adjusted to please the whim of another. Virginia pressed her lips tight against her teeth. The wide band of adhesive covered all and was thumbed hard down to mold it fast into every contour of her chin and cheeks. Miss Virginia Ryder had become most competently mute.

Rabbah sat on the cot and surveyed her work contentedly. "You hurt. You keep quiet. Is good." She approved complacently.

Virginia made small sounds through her nose and shook her head emphatically. To be bereft of speech was torture and hard to adjust to. Her elbows burned with a furious fire.

"You stay long time. You learn."

More head shakings. More pathetic sounds. Wide, shocked eyes.

"You no be too scare. Rabbah know what she do."

Was it kindness? A reassurance? In the pain of this travail Virginia was prepared to clutch at any straw. She had been reduced to nothing, a nonentity.

"I not enemy. I teach bad girl."

Perhaps in years to come she would laugh. There was something vaguely engaging in this Arab woman. But there was no laughter now, only pain and hopelessness. The tightly

bound girl watched her keeper leave and lock the door. The coming hours would be long and hard to bear. She was so tightly bound she possessed no independent movement at all, only her head. The small ball was an enemy within her mouth, her cords relentless. Accepting her punishment, she lay upon the cot on her tummy and tried to think about James Thorsen. Perhaps . . . ! Perhaps . . . !

Before the darkness there came a cruel, false hope. But Rabbah's smile was belied by another rope. Another command. "You stick out feet."

Virginia stuck them out and watched them bound. Hard and tight and with he knot where she could not see it. Then her knees! Roped close and firm in a useless emphasis of impotence. She shook her head, her eyes dolorous and pleading. But the wardress chose not to see. Now, to lie supine upon the cot was a necessity. She could not stand without danger of falling to the stone floor. This time, after Rabbah had departed, the trussed captive wept long into the night, her elbows screaming at the injustice of the cords.

Morning brought release from the reprimand of rope and a return to the relative innocence of handcuffs. As Virginia endured the sweet agony of the peeling of the strictures from her flesh she foresaw a problem – James! Her elbows and knees were too deeply wealed to heal in hours. Rabbah admired the purple grooves.

"You learn lesson, eh?"

"Yes, Rabbah." Meekly: "I won't complain again."

"Much worse next time."

"Thank you. I'll try and behave."

* * *

"What the devil!" Thorsen was aghast. The sarong hid nothing. Ankles, knees, wrists, and elbows all proclaimed the prisoner's punishment. The man and the girl gazed at each other askance, both aware of impotence. Both aware of a need of caution.

"I complained yesterday. I mustn't complain. It's forbidden." Virginia looked at her only friend imploringly, longing to say more but fearfully certain Rabbah was listening in the passage.

James Thorsen swallowed his anger. His silent nod conveyed understanding but his voice carried censure to hidden ears. "It need not happen again tonight . . . ?"

"Not if I'm a good girl. James, help me be a good girl. Rabbah's really very kind to me. I want to please her – honest!"

Thorsen considered the humble peace offering enough. He switched topics. "We're continuing representations for your release. We're not optimistic about that but it may spur the holy Hadji into deciding on your sentence."

"It will be something beastly, won't it?"

"Goodness knows." His tone held some of the weariness of David Winston. "The main value of his statement lies in telling us what we face, and in putting a time limit on your imprisonment here."

"But you can't do anything, can you? Isn't that the reason I've been – used? Because it's

hopeless?"

Her companion shrugged disgustedly. "We can always hope. The Hadji does slightly value world opinion. Our weakness is that nobody loves the good old U.S.A. About half of those who know about this incident would be amused to see you get a life sentence in a dungeon."

"James . . . !" The handcuffed girl was horrified. "Could it . . . ? James, could it be . . . ?"

"Hell no! I'm using metaphor. He'll want something shorter and sweeter and more dramatic." James patted her shoulder, "Look, let's stop talking about this. Take a bit of comfort from me telling you, right now, that if the silly ass throws too big a book at you well stage something dramatic ourselves."

"Like what?"

"Virginia, we're playing it by ear. Drop it – okay?"

"Okay," she agreed reluctantly. "But, James . . . ? Is there a chance the British government might ransom me? I mean buy me from Jazrawi? Or the Americans . . . ?"

"We tried 'em, Virginia. They turned us down. Said it would create a dangerous precedent." He laughed shortly. "I suppose they've got a point. With an assured purchase, Jazrawi and the rest like him would enlarge their scope. No girl would be safe anymore. The payments would deplete any treasury."

"I haven't got much of a future, have I?" said Miss Virginia Ryder with a cheerfulness she did not feel.

Her captivity assumed a pattern. Punitively chained at night, handcuffed by day. She was taken for exercise and made to jog around a small high-walled yard with several other women whose dark eyes examined her handcuffs and herself with only a faint curiosity. Virginia's only milestone in this captivity was her increasing dependence on James Thorsen's daily visits, and in them an increasing warmth. The situation was romantically potent. Easily and naturally they fell in love. On the twelfth day the Leader made up his mind.

Virginia knew instantly. The news was written on Thorsen's face. "The holy son of a bitch!" he said savagely. "He's sentenced you to be whipped."

Virginia was strangely calm. It was as though she had known. Her actual sentence no more than confirmation. "It's what you all expected, isn't it?" she asked without emotion.

"Sure, it is," Thorsen admitted readily, "but we thought we'd hidden it from you – no use anticipating . . . ."

"You forgot I was a slave. I was made to understand a lot. I've been expecting to be whipped. It's no surprise."

His arms had become familiar and immensely comforting. Holding her now, James Thorsen whispered vehemently in her ear. "You're pretty damn wonderful!"

"James, I'm a realist. Slave girls have to be."

"It's so bloody unfair! It shouldn't happen!"

"But it will happen. And I expect I'll live. Stephanie told me so much. She – she – she made me watch her being whipped. I'm experienced."

"You're not. No girl like you can be!"

"Well, are you experienced?"

"Of course not! It's all too bloody bizarre!"

"Well, then . . . ." Virginia felt pleasantly maternal. She knew her emotions numbed, and was content to leave them so. "Just keep holding me, James. That's all I need. Hold me always . . . ."

They exchanged the silent communion known only to lovers until Thorsen asked diffidently, "Did you read any of those news accounts of other girls and women . . . ? There's been a number."

"A couple," Virginia admitted. "They helped me guess."

"The Hadji's gone back a couple of centuries. They whipped everybody for everything back then. In a way we're lucky. He's ordered the bastinado for two women who indulged in the Rannigan woman's pastime . . . ." James paused, considering. "I don't know much about that either. But I gather there's always a doubt as to whether the victim ever walks properly again."

"I expect I'll sleep on my tummy for awhile."

"Dammit, sweetheart, don't make light of it!"

"Why not! D'you want me in hysterics! I easily could . . . !"

"All right!" James nibbled her ear and then kissed her for a long time. Surfacing breathlessly, he imparted dolorously: "It's to be done in public. Like the others. A sort of Roman holiday."

Virginia cringed at grisly mental visions. "But how can they? This place is half modern, and all the tourists – surely . . . ?"

"Oh, he's smart enough to have figured that – or someone else is! You're going to be taken to Beni-Dahran. Quite a population to turn out for the show, but safely remote. For damn sure, no journalists."

"The Hadji . . . ? Will he be there to watch me whipped?"

"Hell no! The old boy hates women. Your sentence and the U.S.A.'s reaction is all he's concerned about."

They clung to each other, the stone and the bars momentarily forgotten, closing from their minds the inevitable final picture until Virginia thought to ask: "Is there something more I should know? Details . . . ? Or just how terrible . . . ?"

"Twenty strokes with a whip. That's what!" Thorsen told her savagely. "The old bastard left nothing to chance – or mercy!"

Considering her sentence, Virginia realized her own naivete. Twenty! Was it death, or life, or something between? Would she be scarred . . . ?

"There's different whips, aren't there?" she asked slowly. "I've read of some – they sort of flay a girl . . . ?"

"They won't use the kurbash. They haven't on any of the others. It will be bad enough, but they don't want to be accused of total brutality. There was one foreign woman, a Frenchwoman, who offended. We made enquiries. She was terribly marked, but nothing that wouldn't heal."

Terribly marked! To have to be thankful she would be no more than 'terribly marked'! The world was insane! "And when I've been whipped . . . ?" Virginia asked pathetically.

"The consulate has permission to have a car there to pick you up – after the hour."

"What hour?"

"It seems you have to stand on display for an hour. We haven't been able to do anything about that either. Then, ostensibly, we whisk you back to the consulate – Roberta Rannigan, that is! In actuality we deliver you back to Jazrawi."

Virginia examined the disposition of her person. The shameful hour of exposure was abstract and irrelevant. The rest was not. "It seems incredible," she mused slowly, "the U.S.A. delivering one of its own into slavery."

"It wouldn't have happened a few years ago," James said vehemently. "This lousy oil and stinking politics!"

For a moment, whimsy possessed her. "Suppose I struggle and refuse to be returned to Jazrawi? Suppose I make a fuss? Leap out of the car?"

"That's all been thought of." James shook his head sadly. "They've employed Rabbah to be your escort. You won't have any clothes and you'll be suitably restrained."

The desire to laugh was hysterical, it had to be! Virginia quenched it. "Good old handcuffs?" she asked with wry humor. "Are you going to be present?"

"I intend to be – and with a blanket!" He held her at arm's length, shaking his head in frustration. "But there's no hope. Captain Mussa and a policeman will be there too – the consulate knows how I feel."

"So back to slavery for poor little Virginia!"

"Don't joke! I'm working. I'm not going to give up. There has to be some way! There just has to be!"

Virginia cuddled against him once more.

Tomorrow was tomorrow!

Today there was no whip.

Chapter Five

Beni-Dahran

The state did well for Beni-Dahran. It excelled itself for the bogus Roberta Rannigan. Virginia travelled to the place of execution in a brand new Cadillac. With her was Captain' Mussa and a stolid policeman. But there was also Rabbah – immensely important and

severe, doing her duty firmly for all concerned.

The girl to be whipped disputed nothing. She wished she wore more clothes than the wrap and the safety pin. She wished her wrists were not handcuffed behind her back. She wished her ankles were not heavy with leg irons. But these things were to be expected. They were no worse than she had surmised.

"You no run," said Rabbah.

"Some obvious routines cannot be avoided," Captain Mussa deplored.

"I don't mind. Honest I don't! I understand."

"You are a remarkable young woman, Miss Ryder. I commend your courage."

"It isn't courage," Virginia admitted. "It's these chains you've put on me. I can't cut and run. If I could I probably would."

"You could be hysterical but you are not. I am grateful."

"I expect I'll scream when they whip me. Is it permitted?"

The Captain allowed himself a smile. "It is permitted. In fact, it is desired. If you wish to cheat the spectators you could keep quiet."

"Is it – possible?"

"For a fanatic – it has been known. For you, I think not."

He was a nice man, kindly. Virginia played her only card. "After it's been done to me, Captain, and you're taking me back . . . ?" She put her heart into her wide eyes. "Couldn't you deliver me back to the Americans, or the British? Please . . . ?"

"Alas, no!" His regard was paternal and sad. "Surely you realize? There is my duty. And Waleed Jazrawi is my friend."

She nodded without disappointment. "You are an honorable man, Captain . . . . I had to ask."

"Of course!" He was pleased. "You would be foolish not to try. It is for this we keep you chained. We know what must be in your mind." He gestured deprecatingly. "May I make the observation that all slavery is not cruel. Some young women like yourself have found unexpected happiness. Jazrawi is not an unkind man. He does with you what he must."

"He will have me whipped. He told me so."

"But not soon! Not after . . . !" Captain Mussa waved away the possibility with an expansive arm. "It will be later when you are healed. When your training resumes."

Virginia quashed a giggle. Farce and horror! How close they had become! Resolutely, she closed her mind to the thing soon to happen. But, suddenly, the unutterable loomed. She had to ask.

"Captain, I know I am to return with you and Mr. Thorsen. Will Mr. Thorsen be present to see me whipped?"

The Captain patted her benignly. "You do not like the thought, eh! You will be pleased to know he refused the privilege."

Virginia's heart surged with thankfulness, then almost stopped.

"But I have to tell you, Miss Ryder, his superiors insisted. Mr. Thorsen will be among the audience. He too has his duty."

"Then, truly, I will not wish to scream."

"Do not punish yourself, child. He thinks you will not know of his presence. Perhaps I should have lied."

"Will I be able to see him – while it happens?"

"Possibly. Being of the consulate he will be privileged. The Leader will make sure of it."

"Do we drive straight to – the place?"

"I fear not. This too gives me shame, Miss Ryder. The Hadji spares you nothing. You will walk the final mile."

"In chains!" Virginia could feel the world slipping from beneath her feet.

"In chains!" Captain Mussa's voice mourned. "It is symbolic, Miss Ryder. Remember, you are the absent Mrs. Rannigan. As such, you are the United States to all who see your shame. Our Leader extracts his pound of flesh."

She did not matter! Virginia shrank from the knowledge. She had become a symbol. But she was still a girl who could feel pain. It was cruelly unjust. The Hadji did not even consider her as a person. Yet she was sentient and would scream . . . !

"I am afraid we are now very close," said Captain Mussa.

It was phantasmagoria, an incredulity deserving only giggles or the blasts of guns. Virginia's stricken gaze swept the dusty outskirts of a desert town, a few sad palms, some urchins, curious but frightened. Prominent in the foreground was a grizzled, emaciated old Arab on a donkey. The Cadillac and those who emerged from it seemed definitely out of place. When Rabbah unfolded the Stars and Stripes and shook out the creases, Virginia could well believe Old Glory had never been unfurled in unlikelier circumstances.

"Is by special order," said Rabbah proudly.

"This shames us all," said the Captain sadly.

The captive girl instantly guessed. It was a piece of flamboyancy in keeping with the Leader's hate. But it would be upon her flesh. She looked at her companions and shrugged. All of them were helpless. Virginia turned her back to the watching men while Rabbah loosed the pin and allowed the white shift to fall to the sand. For a moment the English girl stood naked. A humiliating moment followed instantly by another.

"But, Rabbah, you've only one flag – and it's not large!"

"It goes round hips – so! I pin tight so it not fall."

"But, Rabbah, it only covers . . . !"

"United States flag cover English cunt." It was the first time the wardress had come close to humor.

"But my – my . . . ?"

"People allowed to see bad girl tits."

It could not be! Surely not such a degradation on top of what was already waiting for her! The handcuffs still locked her arms behind her back, between the anklets on her feet a chain swirled to snub short each step. Disregarding, for the moment, her naked breasts, Virginia turned in desperation to face her only possible ally.

"Captain, I am almost naked! Surely, in this land, it is never permitted – a woman . . . ?"

"I have said it, Miss Ryder. We are shamed. You understand, of course, it is political."

She understood! She was the bearer of a flag. She and the brightly colored cloth about her loins were to share abasement. Yet she had never been naked in a public place. What girl had! The scrap of fabric pinned on her now was a deliberate mockery.

"Rabbah, please . . . ? Cover my breasts . . . ? With anything?"

"Breasts bare. Is order."

The handcuffs exerted a mockery of their own. Virginia's hands strained at them in an urgent need to protect her breasts from male eyes. It was the Captain who placed her plight in perspective.

"You are very beautiful, Miss Ryder. Do not be ashamed."

"But, Captain, I – I . . . !"

"You are among friends, even if we do not seem so. Our car will follow slowly. There will be an escort. You will not be touched by the jackals."

It was Rabbah who adjusted the rope upon her neck, knotting it with care. Its considerable length led to the ancient on the ass who took a couple turns of it around one wrist and kicked his equally venerable steed into motion.

"He has orders to move slowly," Captain Mussa consoled.

"Is nice long chain on feet," Rabbah encouraged. "You soon learn walk. You move up quick so plenty rope."

Such solicitude! It was like parting from friends. But the first moments during which Virginia walked, solitary, towards her fate were an absorbingly anxious scramble to avoid tripping, to learn to cope with the noisy lengths swirling with each step, to blot out the vision of falling and being helpless while the rope tightened . . . ! By the time her hobbled paces were matching those of the animal to which she was tethered, children had found others and were no longer at a respectful distance. There were also adults . . . . Well at her back, the soldier marched importantly, his rifle in prominent display. Far behind, the Cadillac crept forward in stops and starts. The punishment procession was slow but it was on its way. Roberta Rannigan and the Stars and Stripes moved abjectly towards disgrace.

Miss Virginia Ryder, naked save for the national emblem draped across her loins, proved a major attraction for the residents of Beni-Dahran. A lustful American woman receiving her just desserts was a gala occasion. The Hadji knew his people! Profit would accrue to all except the chained girl at the rope's end. The chained girl was of no consequence other than to provide the female body upon which to heap the obloquy of holiness and politics. If

the body was beautiful it was a bonus.

The town and the crowd grew in equal proportions as the ancient on the ass stalked proudly through the streets. Virginia paid little attention to either. Her feet were bare and vulnerable, demanding a quick eye and agility upon an unpaved surface well littered with objects on which she had no wish to tread. The rope tether round her neck was a constant menace she dared not fight. On more than one occasion she tripped and fell. But her startled cry always brought the donkey to a halt. The grave old eyes watched her stumble awkwardly back upon her feet. None helped. The march resumed.

About a mile, the Captain had said. Virginia could believe it ten. Her feet were cut and filthy and her ankles chafed raw by the metal shackles in which they were locked. By the time the central square of Beni-Dahran was reached she was ready to weep in despair. She was led to a halt beside the raised platform with its gaunt stark frame. Looking up at it she saw her fate.

Other soldiers joined her own. Captain Mussa took charge, conferring with local officials, disposing the military to keep the avid audience at a workable distance. Rabbah re-possessed the rope from a gnarled hand and used it as a leash.

"You come."

The command was redundant. Virginia followed where she was pulled. She was warmly grateful for the Captain's supporting hand as she negotiated the steps with cautious hobbled uncertainty. Once upon the platform he stood aside. Rabbah tied her rope carelessly to one of the upright timbers and produced keys.

A sea of faces! Virginia accepted the cliche. Faces were everywhere, all of them lusting for her breasts. Wherever she turned her nipples evoked a sigh of longing. Suddenly in possession of her hands she refused to use them to cover anything of herself. Instead, she stood and massaged her wrists as her eyes wandered in search of James. She could not see him. Immediately below was a section for the V.I.P.s. Roped off. Chairs. He was not there either. She was at once glad and sorry. That he should behold her like this was unthinkable. Yet, on the other hand . . . !

Virginia's limbs were free, the chains taken away. She stood on the platform, tethered by her neck like a dog. Escape was so totally impossible it did not enter her mind. "You drink."

It was good to have her hands again. Gratefully, she took the mug Rabbah offered and drank it all. Fruit juice and alcohol! She did not care.

"Rabbah, may I have another?"

"Is okay. We get you drunk." Rabbah gestured contemptuously at the upturned faces. "They think you get water."

The second drink was enough. Its value to the lonely girl was more in the knowledge of goodwill than as an intoxicant. She smiled her thanks and got a brief smile in return.

"Now you get fix for whip."

Two soldiers. Rope. A ladder! It was austerely functional. Rising from the platform were three timbers. One up from each of two sides, one across the top. A goal post. A gibbet. A scaffold. A frame . . . ! The girl to be whipped realized it had many uses. She watched the ladder placed and the soldier mount. Rabbah untied the leash and led her to center stage.

"You stand still. Be good girl?"

"While you fasten me? Yes, of course."

The soldiers waited while Rabbah officiated. Virginia proffered her hands and watched her wrists carefully circled by several strands, a separate rope to each.

"You lift up."

The end of comfort. The end of a brief freedom. The beginning of something too awful to think about! Virginia held up her hands in surrender. A moment later the ropes were drawn through the waiting rings and tensioned. Knots were tied, far above her head where she could only look longingly. She stood with arms widespread but not suspended on her toes as she had feared.

"I tie feet."

The soldiers departed with their ladder. Rabbah bound chafed ankles and drew them well apart to rings in the platform.

"Rabbah, why my feet? I was helpless . . . ."

"So you show cunt."

It was an honest answer with a dreadful implication. Before Virginia could voice it, the impossible happened.

"Must be naked. Rabbah sorry."

Old Glory fluttered to the boards. The wardress pocketed the pin. A shocked girl realized the truth of Rabbah's statement. Virginia's pubic hair proclaimed its black triangle in cruel exposure. The audience cheered. Desperately she tugged at her pinioned feet but could not close her legs. Her sex was in plain view for anyone at all close to the platform. She had been spread purposely – to be shamed!

"Your cunt show real good," Rabbah consoled quaintly.

"Rabbah, please free my legs. I'll still be helpless. The way my feet are tied – it's obscene."

"You no hurt much. You lucky. You let be."

"But, Rabbah!"

"You sooner hang by wrists – feet kick?"

"No, oh, no! Oh, Rabbah . . . !" The stripped girl was burning in shame before a thousand eyes. "Isn't it my back that's to be whipped? I don't need to be naked! Oh, please . . . ? Now I've been shamed, put the flag back on my hips?"

"Maybe whip all over. Not just back."

Virginia could feel herself curling up inside. "They won't whip my – my – front, will they? Oh, Rabbah, not my breasts!"

"Maybe not breast. Bottom for sure! Can't have cover."

The Stars and Stripes seemed likely to stay on the ground. Virginia looked down longingly at the crumpled flag. Her exposure was so utter she was still in shock. When Rabbah went down the steps and left her alone her nakedness intensified a hundredfold.

It was part of the punishment – the wait! It gave the crowd their money's worth and would be good for votes. It was a kick on the shin of the United States; a million miles away and quite oblivious to what was happening in Beni-Dahran. Perhaps only James Thorsen would know the full facts of what was being done with Mrs. Roberta Rannigan. Even he was not yet visible.

The concentrated interest in her vulva almost burned Miss Victoria Ryder between her legs. A thousand eyes focused upon the juncture of her thighs. Strive as she would she could not bring her legs closer together. Her feet were separated by perhaps twenty inches, but it was enough. Those closest to the platform looked up hungrily and were denied nothing.

She could move but little, a swaying of her hips, a twist of shoulders, the tossing of her head. Slowly it was borne upon her awareness that her feet had been left upon the boards for a reason. Suspended, she might be unconscious by the time the whip arrived, certainly her wrists and hands would be in pitiable condition. But, tied as she was, she could stand all day with no damage beyond fatigue. Perhaps that was what they would make her do.

Thoughts of the whip upon her nakedness were now impossible to repel. Never in her life had she been thus exposed. Even her personal explorations of herself in her bedroom mirror had never been so frankly revealing. It was as though Rabbah had discovered zones of eroticism hitherto unknown and put them blatantly on view. She was blushingly conscious of dark shadowings in her armpits. Prison had provided no razor. Tied thus, her armpits were starkly open. The dark, shining eyes roved, feasting here and feasting there upon each fleshly evidence of her sex.

For the tied and tractioned girl there hovered one other positive factor beyond the whip. When the Hadji's message had been cut upon her skin she would be returned to Jazrawi. Thought of Stephanie was comforting. But what then! It would be no more than a fresh beginning. She would not be done with whips or cords or chains. The cage was, absurdly, the safest refuge of them all. A girl wishing herself caged! It was crazy! Grudgingly, she conceded to herself her intention to persuade Jazrawi to enlist her as he had enlisted Stevie. She judged the chance of a benevolent protector purchasing her to be remote. But even Stephanie Pitfield was whipped! There was no escape.

One hour or two! The bogus Mrs. Roberta Rannigan could not tell. Upon the platform of her punishment time was abstract. She stood there stretched in the sun, the soldiers stood their guard, the citizens ogled her cunt and breasts. Virginia stared out across the square striving not to see the hard packed lust below.

Virginia had expected a diversity of emotions when confronted by the executioner with his, or her, whip, but plain, ordinary embarrassment was not one of them. She felt it now.

"Mrs. Roberta Rannigan – Mr. Kahffrah . . . ." Captain Mussa, too, was embarrassed. His eyes implored prudence.

Mr. Kahffrah was total incongruity in Beni-Dahran. His suit was Brooks Brothers, his after shave Old Spice, his English colored but flawless. The whip he held could have come only from one of the better craftsmen of the world. Virginia spared it a shocked scrutiny, then turned her attention to the man who held it.

"Mrs. Rannigan, I am honored."

How, in such straits, could a girl say 'pleased to meet you'! Virginia compromised with a primly British "How d'you do." Then added, in pure bravado, "Is it you who's going to whip me?"

"I have that privilege, Mrs. Rannigan. Our Leader has sent me as a special envoy."

"Mr. Kahffrah is prominent in our Department of State," Captain Mussa supplied helpfully.

"The Leader felt this sacred task should not be delegated to one of lesser rank," said Mr. Kahffrah sententiously.

As usual, in this land of absurd contrasts, the giggle hovered. The naked girl looked hastily at the whip and was cured of levity. She heard her voice uttering the inane.

"It's kind of you to take the trouble, Mr. Kahffrah."

"It is no trouble, Mrs. Rannigan. It is a pleasure."

She was sure it was! A pleasure envied by all those down below. "I believe your people are remarkably stoic under – well – what is going to happen to me, Mr. Kahffrah," Virginia offered nervously. "I'm afraid I won't be. Please forgive . . . ."

"Ah, you are thinking of screams?" Mr. Kahffrah said expansively. "Please give full vocal expression of your sensitivity, Mrs. Rannigan. None will think the worse of you. In fact, our audience will be highly appreciative."

"Am I allowed no covering . . . ?"

"It would serve no purpose, madam."

"I am thinking of my breasts . . . ."

"Have no fear, Mrs. Rannigan, I am highly skilled." Mr. Kahffrah beamed confidingly. "I flog the female members of my family weekly. You will be whipped with great precision."

A farcical stalemate to the stilted exchange was intercepted by Rabbah with a tray. For the men, the drinks were in tall, frosted glasses, for the delinquent woman, an earthen mug which Rabbah tilted gently to helpless lips until it was gone.

"Thank you, Rabbah, oh, thank you . . . !"

The end of the waiting was close. The wardress tested her knots, then patted the swell of a naked breast before she departed with her tray. The Captain took position to one side of the platform. Mr. Kahffrah provided one more bit of Opera Bouffe.

"Will you forgive me if I remove my jacket, Mrs. Rannigan?"

"Please do, Mr. Kahffrah. It is very warm."

The posts provided everything. Virginia watched her executioner hang his coat upon a convenient nail. When he picked up the whip and nodded affably she dared look no more. Instead, she raised her head and closed her eyes.

Miss Virginia Ryder had never been whipped. A month ago the suggestion would have been considered a nasty thought and thrust into oblivion. Fleetingly, now, she wished there had been time for Jazrawi to carry out his promise. Surely the whipping she would have received under Stephanie's supervision would have been nothing like this! It would have been an introduction to pain. It was a cruelty of fate that her initiation was to be in a public square of a desert town where mercy took no part in punishment. Mr. Kahffrah's arm was strong. No doubt he had been warned not to spare the rod . . . !

The Captain intoned the count in Arabic. Virginia paid no heed. She heeded nothing

but an awfulness of pain beyond all previous comprehension. There was, about the whip, a peculiarly personal animosity. It bit and cut her with intent, choosing its own places on her flesh, wealing her skin at its own caprice. No part of her was denied to its voracity. And she could not move . . . ! For her there was no escape. The ropes and the scaffold creaked their testimony to her writhings. Her wrists screamed against her surges beneath each blow, but Virginia counted their suffering well spent in return for the strange release of what small motion she could contrive within her bonds. She existed in a world of blazing agony without horizons.

She had screamed a number of times before she heard her voice and knew it for her own. She had expected to be shamed by screams but they did not matter. Her nakedness ceased to matter. Nothing mattered except that Mr. Kahffrah should stop whipping her. Her life had narrowed to that single focus, the cessation of the blows by which the Leader imparted his testament to the West. But it was too remote. Virginia was certain the beat of the thong upon her nudity would go on forever. Why should it stop! It could go on and on and on. Everyone but she herself was enjoying the scarlet and purple stripes mounting steadily upon her skin.

Rabbah had been right, her derriere was favored. The slashing blows across her back were bad enough, the whip curled wickedly. But across her bottom it took a vicious delight in wrapping a hip and venting its final venom on soft thigh, taut belly, or swollen pudendum. The lips of her vulva screamed their own civilized protest against such barbarity and became bruised and inflamed. The tied girl tugged impotently at her ankle tethers in shocked dismay. Her screams pealed out across the square as the sweetest music in the world. Sometimes they were drowned in cheers.

Twenty! Someone had said twenty strokes! Surely twenty had come and gone long since! Virginia turned a beseeching glance back over a wracked shoulder. She tried to speak but moaned instead. Mr. Kahffrah obligingly paused.

"You are bearing up remarkably well, Mrs. Rannigan."

Was she! Virginia did not believe. She was sure she was on the verge of hysterics, unconsciousness, perhaps death itself. Her breasts were heaving spasmodically. She was bathed in sweat, streaked with it as with the whip. "How long . . . ? How many more . . . ?" She gasped with little hope.

Rabbah answered with the mug. The whipped girl drank its contents chokingly but to the last drop. As the wardress held the rim to her lips their eyes were close. Virginia saw pity and heard the whisper. "Not long now. You do real good."

What was "real good"? Virginia could feel only shame in her own behavior. There was no heroism in writhing and screaming. The whip had reduced her to animal responses. If only she could keep still and keep quiet! It was a pretty fancy, no more!

"You are a strong woman, Mrs. Rannigan. My congratulations." It was Captain Mussa.

Strong! That meant more strokes before unconsciousness. It would have been better to be weak. Virginia moaned and pleaded piteously: "Don't whip me any more . . . oh, please, no more . . . ."

The whipping of Mrs. Roberta Rannigan resumed.

Rabbah was gone. The alcohol was a weak ally against the lash. The naked girl's screams pealed out all the anger, the fear, the injustice, and the pain of innocence. Mr. Kahffrah cut her deftly up between her thighs.

It is to be supposed that, high up and remote in his mountain fortress, the Hadji smiled.

Chapter Six

Roberta's Rescue

"I feel an absolute asshole, Corey, and that's the truth of it." Roberta Rannigan looked at the brushing of her hair in the big mirror. To one side she could catch the sardonic regard of her husband. "Someone ought to do something about that poor damn girl."

"Like what?" Corey Rannigan's voice projected disgust.

"Send the Marines, or make a payoff."

"Marines never get sent anywhere any more, and religious fanatics don't take bribes. Besides, by now your poor girl has probably had your whipping for you. It's too late. Tomorrow you can be seen out and around again, pretending you've got a sore ass."

"So, she's taken my whipping for me! But it's not too late to save her being returned to that damn slave trader. Dammit, Corey, we owe her!"

"You owe her."

"So, all right! I've got my own money, haven't I!"

"Forget it. That guy deals in millions. Anglo Saxon cunt's at a premium over there among the oil fraternity."

"We could at least try. Bargain a bit . . . ."

Corey Rannigan stretched lazily. He was a large man, gravely good looking, cynically tolerant. "Try it. You can deal with Winston and Thorsen at the consulate. We haven't been banned or deported, and I've got business before we go back to the States. The Hadji's made his point. He won't arrest you again."

"I wish that silly bastard would. I got cheated."

Corey Rannigan examined his wife without shock, only a weary amusement. "Believe me, Roberta, you could have stayed in that lousy jail for life for all the effort I'd have made to get you out. Damn good spot for you."

His pique fell on deaf ears, but his wife mused aloud as she brushed. Her mind was back behind the bars. "That Rabbah female . . . ! She was a dream. The things she did to me . . . ! You've never given me that many orgasms in your whole life."

"I'll buy you a whip and a pair of handcuffs for your birthday, Robbie." Rannigan's dry promise lacked humor.

"And never use either," Roberta accused. "Honest, Corey, that cell they put me in was yummy, and all those chains . . . ! And then to get whipped in public at Beni-Dahran . . . wow! That girl doesn't know how lucky she is. The poor thing's probably hating every moment."

"All women aren't perverts."

"Corey, don't use that beastly word! My thing isn't a perversion at all. It's just being properly female."

"I'm sure you can hire someone to beat you. I'm damned if I'm going to."

"There you go again! Way out, missing the significance. It has to be for real." Roberta sighed in self-pity. "I staged the whole scene. I had it made. Garradah and me in bed and the cops walk in. They swallowed the bait hook, line, and sinker." She sighed wistfully. "They hauled me off to the clink in handcuffs – groovy!"

"That poor man's still in jail."

"They'll let Garradah go. It's the girl I'm concerned for."

"How d'you know she's not like you?"

"She isn't! I asked James Thorsen. I think he's fallen in love with the poor creature. He's certainly hell-bent on getting her freed, but the State Department has ordered him to lay off. They're declaring her expendable."

Rannigan chuckled. "Have you told him how he and Winston robbed you?"

"How could I! And anyway, don't laugh. It's not funny."

"It is to me. Such a serious and noble pair! I had to play along. How the devil does a man like me tell the diplomatic corps his wife likes being chained up like a dog and getting her ass whipped!"

"No, I suppose you couldn't. But that's a damn poor way to describe – you do twist things so . . . !" Roberta sniffed disdainfully. "That still leaves Virginia Ryder up the creek. What are we going to do about her?"

"Nothing. The consulate warned me too. Forget her. I'm told some of these girls get sold into a pretty good life." Corey laughed at a sudden whimsy. "Mind you, if you want to make a reverse swap, I'm quite willing. Jazrawi might consider you a worthwhile property, and the girl might make me a better wife than you ever have."

"Very funny! Think of something practical."

"That is practical. I wouldn't mind giving Jazrawi something to boot. I like the idea."

"Well, I don't! It would be just my luck to be sold to some 'do-gooder.' "

Rannigan grinned. "I wouldn't mind talking to Jazrawi. I'm sure we could negotiate your sale to a first class S.O.B. who'd beat you daily and make you kiss his feet."

"You exaggerate. Don't be horrid."

"You're a damn beautiful woman, Roberta. Too bad you're not normal and satisfied with a good fuck."

"I am normal! I am . . . ! It's you! Look, Corey, let's stop this bickering and do something to help. That girl's getting her back flayed on my account! How much did you have to pay this chap Jazrawi to put her in my place?"

"Too damn much! And that's the end! No more!"

"Money wasted," Roberta mourned. "Those damn fool government do-gooders! Cheating me out of the most incredible experience a girl could ever have."

"You want a back all bloodied and cut, and goodness knows what else?"

"They won't go that far. They're still susceptible to world opinion. Those other women survived okay."

Corey Rannigan surveyed his wife. Roberta was the most beautiful thing in his life, one of the most lovely women he had ever known. Yet she eluded him, defeated his ardour with a fantasy, a conjuring up of a depth of eroticism in which he could not believe and could not share. "You can't see it as a picnic," he pointed out soberly. "You're too anxious to get this Virginia girl off the hook. You must figure she's going to have a bad time – even after she's been whipped."

Roberta examined the erotic pictures in her mind. For her, ecstasy! For other girls only screams and despair. She had sensed the desolation of the cell and the chains on ankle and on wrist. This girl whose back was being whipped to save her own might spend her days in tears. She turned and faced her husband. "Corey, I can go to a quarter million. You do the same. Maybe if I work hard enough on David Winston I can get them to ante up something. How 'bout it?"

"No. Roberta, they've asked me to lay off. It's finished, done with, chapter closed. In a week we'll be back in the U.S. The whole thing will fade."

"I'll see that girl forever."

"She's not the first, and she won't be the last. These fool women practically asked to be kidnaped. There's quite a trade in them. It doesn't bother anyone but you." He rose heavily and shook his head at her as at a child. "Don't forget. We're due at the Danish Consulate at seven p.m. They'll think you've just been delivered home. You should get a thrill out of telling them lies . . . ." He left his wife alone.

The fantasy was one of Roberta's favorites. Dressed in torn scraps of nothing she was marched to her fate between two male guards, their hands harsh above her elbows. There were a lot of people and there was The Place. The Place was always terrifying! In The Place there stood The Post, the whipping post to which she was always tastefully tied so as to display her female attributes to the best advantage. Sometimes she was tied with her back to The Post, which was very spine-tingling for it meant she was to be whipped on her front. On other occasions she was bound so as to compress her abundant breasts against the timber. Always her legs were tied well apart.

This was the prelude. The next palpitation in her loins came from the stripping away of the scraps beneath which her breasts and cunt had found a scanty refuge. Naked, she stared around at the hungry faces and shared with them a deep and satisfying joy.

Her executioner was in the grand tradition. Black tights and hood, his eyes glittering through their slits. He usually found an opportunity to whisper in her ear a promise of ravishment later in the dungeon where she would be chained. Roberta deviated from the norm only as regards the whip. It was never a nine-tailed cat with metal in the thongs. Instead, it was a black and tapered snake of infinite suppleness, to mark her well but destroy nothing of her charms. When she came to the first few of her hundred strokes she spasmed violently and clutched desperately at her crotch – moaning. In her moan there was something of despair at a dream never to be fulfilled.

* * *

Waleed Jazrawi was a man not easily surprised. He beamed across his office desk with total benevolence.

"Your wish does you much credit, Mrs. Rannigan."

"Dammit, the way I see it I owe the girl."

"It is a heavy debt to bear, Mrs. Rannigan." He sighed gently. "Have you any idea of the sum?"

"Not really. Let's cut the crap. How much?"

Waleed Jazrawi sighed again. Western women were so crass, no sense of what was proper. He allowed himself a momentary vision of his visitor's bottom being soundly caned. "I suppose you are aware of Miss Ryder's situation?" he asked cautiously.

"Sure, I am. She's been made a slave. Yours." Roberta fixed him with her no-nonsense glare. "You buy and sell 'em, don't you? At a profit?"

"I have negotiated some – transfers, Mrs. Rannigan."

"Sure, you have. After you've kidnaped the poor little bitch in the first place."

"Western maidens have a tendency to stray . . . ."

"All right, so it's their own fault sometimes! I'll concede the point. How much for Virginia Ryder? What's her ransom?"

"Please, Mrs. Rannigan! Kidnaped! Ransom! These are terms we never employ. I find them offensive."

"Okay. You're offended. How much?"

Mr. Jazrawi's eyes became dreamy. "Should the young lady be placed upon the block I would expect the bidding to start at a million U.S. dollars."

"Horseballs!"

Mr. Jazrawi was shocked. Foreign women were an offense to Islam. His mental vision now included washing out his visitor's mouth with soap. "You find the figure too low or too high?" he inquired gently.

"It's robbery! Outrageous!"

"This matter has been gone into before, Mrs. Rannigan. There were two gentlemen from the consulate – and your husband. Surely they explained . . . ?"

"Sure, they did, the S.O.B.s! They won't do a thing. I'm here on my own. They don't even know I aimed to visit you. I've got a few bucks of my own . . . ." She looked across the desk with genuine wistfulness. "I hoped maybe you'd be reasonable – kind."

"Because you are a very beautiful woman, Mrs. Rannigan? And young?"

"Gee, thanks! Well, does it help?"

"Do you buy your car or your jewelry because of it?"

"That your way of saying no?"

"Miss Ryder is merchandise."

Roberta Rannigan had a vision of her own. It was of a long line of marching Marines and crisp military orders. "I could probably dig up half a million . . . ?" She gave her host a wrinkled frown. "Is this Ryder girl all that beautiful?"

"No more beautiful than you, Mrs. Rannigan." Jazrawi's tribute was sincere. His voice softened. "Why impoverish yourself? I would like to persuade you that Miss Ryder's life will not be a procession of agony. Your concern is needless." He pressed a button.

Roberta viewed the resulting girl and her costume with heightened interest, summing it up in a hushed, "Holy cow!"

"Mrs. Rannigan . . . Miss Stephanie Pitfield." In supple motion, the girl sank to her knees before the visitor, possessed herself of a nylon sheathed ankle and kissed the expensively-shod foot. In the same flow she was once more erect, turning to the man behind the desk. "You sent for me, lord?"

"Lord!" Roberta's exclamation boiled. "Who the devil's a lord?"

"Myself," said Mr. Jazrawi modestly.

"I am Mr. Jazrawi's property," volunteered Stephanie demurely.

Roberta Rannigan looked from one to the other. The girl's attire was vintage Flash Gordon, but the rest of the tableau seemed improbable. "You mean you can't pack up and go home?" she demanded.

"No, lady."

"What's stopping you? And don't call me lady."

For answer, Stephanie turned her back. A moment later she was naked. Roberta gasped at Mr. Halat's whipmarks, still in purple evidence. She sat in stunned silence while the unlikely trifles were replaced to flaunt the slave girl's charms. Twisting awkwardly under amused regard, she asked stiffly, "That how he keeps you in line?"

"There are also stone walls and bars, Mrs. Rannigan, and a cage for naughty girls . . . ." Stephanie Pitfield was obviously enjoying the grisly inventory. "I am now completely trained and know my place."

"I'll be damned! It – it's too way out!"

"The training is painful, Mrs. Rannigan. But, as you see, I have emerged in good health."

"Miss Pitfield has shown unusual intelligence, Mrs. Rannigan. I have promoted her as my assistant," added Mr. Jazrawi.

"I suppose those whipmarks were medals?"

"I acquired those in a subsidiary diversion, Mrs. Rannigan."

"Well, have your fun." Roberta felt sure she was being hoaxed. "But how about letting me meet this girl I'm trying to save from a fate worse than death?"

Complicity flashed between master and slave. "You have Miss Ryder hanging by her thumbs?" he asked suavely.

"Yes, lord. I allowed her to stand on her toes for ten minutes. She is now fully

suspended."

"That's not the way you told it to me." Roberta flashed at the smiling male.

"Miss Ryder has been delinquent and has earned discipline. She would be humiliated to have you observe her naked under punishment."

"Oh, come off it! You're stringing me a line – both of you." Roberta frowned at Stephanie's serenity. "If you think you can't walk out of here it's because he's got you buffaloed some way – beat the hell out of you, I suppose. But you hold my hand when I go and no one's going to stop us."

"Someone would, Mrs. Rannigan. Please don't meddle. You'll only get me punished – and yourself embarrassed."

Roberta snorted. This pair was impossible. "For a girl who gets whipped and kept a prisoner, you look awful damn happy," she accused.

"I am happy. My training is past. I am now greatly privileged and live in gorgeous luxury."

"And get well screwed, I'll bet!"

"By a great diversity of cocks," Stephanie acknowledged sweetly.

"Mine too," said Mr. Jazrawi.

"I am sure none of this seems quite real to you, Mrs. Rannigan," Stephanie Pitfield said soberly, "But it is real, quite incredibly real. A girl, like me; once she is taken, kidnaped if you like, has no hope of escape. She is wise if she gets through her training as quickly as possible and tries in every way she can to please her master, her owner. I'm going to ask you to believe me when I tell you I too have hung by my thumbs, been flogged, chained in a dungeon . . . . It takes a girl so long to shed her past, to realize we don't rule the roost here, that we have no rights at all except those our master cares to give us."

"You have to like it, you just have to!" Roberta affirmed with conviction. "Don't tell me you aren't getting a charge out of this right now."

"A sensible girl comes to like it very much."

"You get hot pants?"

Stephanie grinned at the frankness. "Well . . . I suppose . . . ."

"The idea of a man owning you that way! It has to be – juicy?"

"Would you like to be owned, Mrs. Rannigan?"

"Hell no! I'd slosh the guy in the chops! But the idea of it! I can see how it could be a real cunt crinkler."

"Mrs. Rannigan, please!" Jazrawi was shocked.

"Sorry, I forgot about Allah and Islam. I'll watch it."

"The matter of your mission," Jazrawi said thoughtfully. "I am impressed by your sincerity. I have thoughts – oh, by the way, you have a car parked somewhere, a taxi

waiting?"

"No. I was trotting around the Souk window shopping. I walked here on impulse. Why, what's it matter?"

"Our beloved Stephanie can drive you home. The trust imposed in her will help you understand."

"Thanks. As far as I'm concerned she's just a girl who likes her ass whipped and a good screw. No mystery."

"I suspect you yourself, Mrs. Rannigan . . . ." Jazrawi smiled most charmingly. "But never mind!" His hand sought pencil and paper. "Could I ask you a few questions? Believe me, they are pertinent to your purchase of Miss Ryder."

Roberta brightened. It would be a feather in her cap to go home with Virginia Ryder . . . even if the damn girl was on a leash. She answered the questions absently. Most of them seemed irrelevant, but what the hell . . . !

In silence, Jazrawi studied his notations. The two females watched, the air electric with their expectancy. With studied diffidence, he looked up at the one who was his slave. "I think the cage, dear child."

"Yes, lord."

Stephanie smiled engagingly. "May I show you the way, Mrs. Rannigan?"

"You mean I'm being shown the door!"

"Far from it! You will be amused . . . ."

Mrs. Roberta Rannigan could not remember a more irritating interview. You went around and around the bush and got nowhere. But her curiosity was piqued. She followed.

It was exquisitely Moorish. Light and airy. A vast, long mezzanine furnished with the studied carelessness of elegance, a balcony above the patio.

"I don't really believe this," said the woman with a mission. "I have to be dreaming."

The cage blended unobtrusively with the decor, the implacability of its bars mellowed by its profusion of cushions and invitingly open door.

"If you will remove your clothes before entering, please?" Stephanie Pitfield stood hospitably beside the portal.

"You mean me! Some sort of religious thing – like the mosque?"

Stephanie giggled. "Not really. But a girl has to be naked before taking up residence."

"Residence! Hell, I've got a hotel suite – What goes . . . ?"

"This will be your home for awhile now." She had known! For several minutes she had guessed! Yet it was so wildly improbable. Breathlessly, Roberta followed the momentum of normalcy. "I'm not getting in any lousy cage! Why should I?"

"I think you know."

"This is nuts! I'm leaving."

Stephanie's voice was almost dreamy. "You will be intercepted. There will be a scuffle, you will become untidy and bruised. But by all means try it if you wish."

"You mean I'm kidnaped?"

"Yes. Try and not feel too badly about it."

"Horseshit! Surely that grinning son of the sand downstairs doesn't think he can get away with adding me to his inventory!"

"He does and he will, Roberta. Remember the questions?"

"I must have been out of my tree!"

"They disclosed that when you left your hotel you vanished. You have said and done nothing to lead a search here. By my master's reckoning you are a gift from Allah."

"Master my arse!"

"He will master you. Never doubt it."

"Dammit, you're on his side! Don't be such a bitch. Help me walk out of here."

Stephanie nodded understandingly. "I know, how well I know! Okay, make your run for it or your walk – or whatever. I'll follow along to save you getting too badly roughed up."

They stared at each other. Two girls separated by a philosophy. Shrugging in irritation, Roberta headed for the stairs.

The man was large. He stood with folded arms, eyeing her assessingly. Behind him, a woman – waiting. The angry woman paused in her precipitate descent. No one moved, no one spoke.

"If I were you I'd come back up, ducky."

Roberta could think of things to say. But, in silence, she returned to Stephanie at the top of the stairs. "Okay, you've made your point," she said stiffly. "What now?"

"I told you what now, dear."

Roberta Rannigan enjoyed her own small vulgarities. She enjoyed and used the authority of the Rannigan name. Yet she knew she was a girl, twenty-eight, frightened, possibly in danger, her self-control slipping. But she was aware, too, that between her legs there was a fire. It was not yet hot enough to burn the rest into oblivion, she had need of a friend. "I'm scared, Stephanie – I'm scared . . . ."

"Of course you are, pet. Here, let me hold you . . . ."

They clutched. Into the hollow of a feminine throat Roberta whispered, "Have you guessed – about me?"

"Of course I have."

"Keep holding me. I'm tingling as though I'll explode."

"I'll hold you, dear. There's no rush. Remember, it's happened! No decisions to bother

about."

It was immensely comforting. Stephanie exuded a radiance, a spiritually feminine strength. It was good to thrust breast against breast and give the fantasy a chance to emerge from the shadows. After a little while the newly acquired merchandise whispered, "I'm going to have to, aren't I?"

"Sure, you are, pet. No big deal."

"Naked?"

"Always naked. It's part of the training. There's some hardware too."

"Chains?"

"You'll adore them."

"Will I! Oh, Stephanie, I'm not the bossy bitch I acted downstairs. I'm a little girl lost. Half of me wants to get into that cage and the other half says no way! Am I being silly?"

"Just making the adjustment, dear. If you can get hot panties out of slavery right at the start, you're going to be way ahead of most."

"You mean, to other girls – it happens?"

"Sure. It's a female thing. It happened to me. Took a helluva long time, though. You're lucky."

"I suppose I ought to – start?"

"Mmmmmm, I guess so. Not much point in not starting. Take it easy. Nudity bother you?"

"Not with you it won't. But I don't know . . . ."

"You'll get used to the men. That's the main benefit of the cage – Wowie, where did you get that gorgeous shape?"

"Oh, I don't know. Is it really that good?"

"You know it is! It's super. The Master's going to flip."

"I know it's nice. I sort of like it myself." The now naked girl looked at her mentor beseechingly. "Look, the way my pussy is acting right now I am going to be able to step into that cage telling myself it's just for a giggle, for an hour or two. That after awhile someone's going to let me out and send me home. Will it happen?"

"Not with that figure. You're priceless!"

"My figure's no better than yours."

"I'm priceless. My Master has turned down all sort of offers. Here, darling, you have to turn your back for a moment."

"Handcuffs . . . ! Oh, Stephanie . . . ?"

"Handcuffs are so convenient, pet. And behind your back so you can't cover anything.

You get tied with rope when you've been bad. Rope hurts. And now the great moment. Do you want me to push behind?"

Almost lightheartedly, Roberta Rannigan took the fatal step, then another. She turned back to watch her companion snap a padlock and turn a key. The open door had closed to become sort of the encircling bars. "I've become a slave," she said wonderingly, "A slave girl . . . !" She tugged testingly at the steel cinctures on her wrists. "I can't get free of these things, and I can't get out of this cage . . . ."

"Right, ducky. Hits you all of a sudden. But you're still privileged. Try those cushions, they're yummy."

"I've just remembered Corey," Roberta said dazedly. "Funny I never thought of him till now. He'd get a tremendous charge out of seeing me like this. Not sexual. Just a 'serve her damn well right' reaction. Damn shame he's going to be cheated."

"How d'you feel about getting your initiation whipping tomorrow, love? With you there's not much point in delay."

Heat flared in captive loins. She was not to be cheated after all! There would be the hooded man or one to take his place. Roberta Rannigan flung the past from her like a discarded cloak. She laughed at the girl beyond the bars. "Sure, I'd love it." In pure bravado, she added, "If it was you who'd whip me I'd ask for it today."

"You won't like it, y'know! It hurts like blazes."

"Want to bet?"

"We can't. Slave girls don't have any money." They left it at that.

Chapter Seven

Surrendered Slave

In the end it was her wrists that became the enemy. From time to time Virginia looked up at them longingly. So near and yet so far! The circling ropes were deep in her flesh, her fingers numb. Their pain had taken over from the whip. She would not have believed this possible but it was so. The blazing agony of Mr. Kahffrah's strokes had not lived on too long after he had departed, after his final courtesy:

"You have behaved remarkably well, Mrs. Rannigan. I will report your understanding and excellent responses to our Leader." He bowed in grave formality. "It has been a privilege to whip you."

"Thank you, oh, thank you . . . !"

"I am sorry you must still stand." Captain Mussa was distressed.

"I don't mind – so long as it's over."

All that had mattered was that her whipping stop. To stand in the bondage of her ropes had seemed a small thing in comparison to her burning back and buttocks. But time is cruel. As the pure agony of wealed flesh slowly faded the insistent nag of wrist and ankle had come to mock the punished girl. Her parted loins ached and longed for the decency of touching thighs. Virginia had forgotten nudity. Nakedness did not matter any more.

Mostly she rested her head against a strained arm, eyes closed. Now she had been whipped, the crowd was no longer dense. People came and went, enjoyed her open femaleness, then moved on. Sometimes she opened listless eyes in a vague hope of change. Time passed, a lot of time. No one came to offer rescue or pity. Virginia's need for release became obsessive to where she considered resuming her screams of desolation . . . .

"Surely the poor girl's been punished enough?" It was the voice of James Thorsen.

"Let us say that she has." Captain Mussa sounded anxious. "As far as I know the witnesses have departed. Miss Ryder has remained on view for over two hours past the time of her punishment, and she is painfully tied."

Virginia was suddenly surrounded. Rabbah with the mug. The Captain busy with a knife. As she sagged after the severing of the ropes she was scooped into the waiting arms of James. There was a blanket. As she was carried to the car, the hurt of her wounded back against his arms was heaven, a sensory deliciousness she wanted to continue forever. She sighed in ecstasy as she was kissed. As the car gathered motion Virginia Ryder fell asleep.

It was the dead, dead sleep of utter exhaustion and of pain. The whipped girl clung to it in desperate need. From time to time there were interruptions. Sounds, the motion of the car, voices. Virginia repulsed them all, nestling in her lover's arms, and later on the seat. Covered by the blanket. For the moment at peace. A joyous ecstasy of freedom. Tomorrow did not exist.

The hours fled in darkness. Virginia neither knew nor cared when the blanket tightened to make her a happy cocoon, warm and secure. The scarf over her eyes was a part of it. The male voices speaking English were a part of it, piercing her oblivion. But not for long. It was not until she was picked up and carried, then stood upon her feet, that she opened her eyes.

She was blind. Something covered her eyes. When she raised her hands to take it away they were possessed by strong fingers, her whipped back was thrust against wood, handcuffs clicked to secure her arms behind a post. When the blanket was taken from her she protested urgently but a hand covered her mouth in admonition. A rope circled her waist and was cinched, another rope captured her ankles. Once more Virginia Ryder was helpless. She held still and tense as fingers worked on a knot at the back of her neck, but the blindfold did not fall away, it had only been loosened. There was a scurry of feet, male laughter, the roar of a departing car. Then silence.

"James . . . ?"

Her voice shivered into nothingness. There was nothing to hear. In panic she writhed and tugged – uselessly! In a terrible need to see, Virginia flung her head back and forth, frictioning the bandage against the post at her back until the loosened knot relinquished its hold and the strip of cloth fell to the sand. She blinked in early morning sunlight.

Nothing.

She explored that to which she was bound. It was a post, of no great dimension, presumably driven into the ground for her benefit alone. By straining and twisting she could survey the full perimeter of her world. An uninspiring mediocrity of desert, sand and clay, and pathetic grass, some low hills in the distance. Off to one side a sizable rock left behind by a passing glacier long ago. The possibility of help was nonexistent.

If only they had not used handcuffs on her wrists! With rope there is always hope that somehow – some way . . . ! But against the bite of handcuffs there is none. These had been clicked together tighter than need be. They hurt slightly. To escape their grip was impossible. Even if the ropes were cut from waist and ankle she would still remain prisoner

of the post.

Panic and hysteria hovered but were kept at bay by an all-consuming puzzlement. There was no way James would do this to her. But who had, and why? What profit could there be in leaving a naked girl tied to a post in the middle of a desert? Above all, where was James Thorsen, and the Captain, and Rabbah? The sounds penetrating her long sleep took on a sinister connotation. Something had happened – something bad!

Fighting for control, the bound girl examined herself. The ropes were tight and snug in her flesh – useless to fight them! Here and there she could see the livid weals where Mr. Kahffrah's whip had curled and cut. Her back was tender against the timber to which she was bound. It was a personal inventory in which she found no comfort.

Jazrawi! But surely he would not have this done to her! By the standards of this strange land she was still his property. By now she should have been delivered back to his chains and his cage. For profit he might have her bound thus. But where was the profit? Unless, of course, it pleased someone to bind her to a post set in the sand to leave her there to die! It was a spectre all too easy to envision. Virginia looked down unhappily at her breasts. They were not bound but their contours had been briefly marked by the whip. She struggled fretfully to see them shiver in the sun.

It seemed many hours, but may have been no more than two when the car became a spot in the distance, a spot rapidly growing in size, aimed directly at herself. Virginia's nakedness held tense, waiting – breathless.

It was the usual Cadillac. But it held only one man, a big man. Virginia sensed him as American, the type who builds bridges, arranges mergers, or runs for president. He was casually but expensively dressed, his features cynically amused.

"Hi! How're you doing?"

Most greetings are inane, but the captive heart leaped at its confident sound. She was too breathless with emotion to reply.

He stood and surveyed, not so much her nakedness as her plight. His eyes were shrewd and speculative. "You enjoying that? Being tied to that post, I mean." It was a polite inquiry.

"Of course not!" Outrage overcame embarrassment. Virginia forgot her nakedness. "For heaven's sake get me loose – please!"

"Okay!" He grinned confidingly. "Thought I'd ask. Wouldn't want to spoil a good thing."

"You call this a good thing! I thought I'd been left here to die! Your coming! It's too wonderful. I'm – I'm . . . ."

"I'm sure you are," the newcomer said dryly. "Your name happen to be Virginia Ryder?"

"Yes, it is. How did you . . . ?"

"Mine's Rannigan – Corey Rannigan."

"How do you do?" Absurdly, Virginia tried to offer a hand but could not move. Suddenly the import struck home. "You're – you're the one who paid for me to – to be whipped! Instead of your wife!"

"Don't hold it against me, kid. You weren't even a name back then."

"Take a look at my back and see what you did to me."

Rannigan circled the post slowly, pausing at the rear. She heard his indrawn breath. "Holy cow! They sure did have it in for us, didn't they! Those marks ought to be on Roberta, not you."

His casualness irked. "Well, they're on me!" Virginia retorted. "Would you please untie me – please!" Aware of helplessness, she tried to sound more friendly. "And cover me up," she added pathetically.

Rannigan made no response. He was more concerned with explanations. "Don't feel too bad about Roberta. She's the reason I'm here," he said earnestly.

"I don't even know your Roberta. Aren't you going to get me loose?"

"Sure, sure!" He regarded her quizzically – seeking. "You're quite sure you're not getting a charge out of the spot you're in?"

"Oh, Mr. Rannigan, please!" Virginia blushed in emphasis. "I want to be untied so bad it hurts."

"Ah." He sounded only half-convinced. "It was me who arranged this, y'know. You don't have to go back to slavery, or Jazrawi." He paused, studying her response. "Unless you want to, that is."

"Why on earth would I want to! Oh, Mr. Rannigan, I'm so thankful you're here! But how . . . ?"

Corey Rannigan chuckled. "Cost me some more money . . . . There's a bunch of guys I know – they come in handy. I told 'em to slip Thorsen the wink. The rest of whoever was in the car with you make good, reliable witnesses. You've been kidnaped."

"Kidnaped – again!"

"Sure. By parties unknown. You've vanished. Sorry about the cloak and dagger stuff, but it obviates the pointing finger. Nobody's guilty. Even Thorsen won't be suspect."

"But why tie me like this?"

"My boys high-tailed it for the border. They needed to ditch you quick, and I had to stay out of sight. But here I am now to make the pickup. You've been delivered in good order."

Virginia's hopes soared. It was a miracle. Freedom! She had been returned to the world. In the wonder and glory she forgot she was still tied. She looked at Corey Rannigan with worshipful respect.

"You owe this to my little girl." He seemed concerned she should know where her gratitude belonged. "Roberta felt guilty as hell. The whole damn fool business was her doing . . . ." He chuckled. "She doesn't know about this. I'll give you to her as a present. I want to watch her face when she sees your back."

Thankfully, Virginia saw Corey Rannigan flip open the knife. Gloriously, the ropes fell away from ankles and waist. At the rear she heard him swear.

"The damn fools have used handcuffs on you!"

"Yes. Everybody uses them. I suppose they keep me more secure."

"But I don't have a key!"

Virginia giggled in hysterical happiness. "But can't you use a bit of wire or something? I've heard . . . ."

"Yeah, I know! A lady's hairpin! Shit, I don't even have a bit of wire."

Another giggle was squashed by realization. The handcuffs kept her wedded to the post! The ropes had just been fancy dress.

"The silly assholes!" Corey sounded more amused than angry. "Look, honey, hold yourself sort of loose – better still, sit down and lean forward."

It was surprisingly possible. Looking back over a shoulder she saw her rescuer open his assault. Against it, the post was soon a casualty. It had been neither large nor deeply driven, just enough to anchor her helpless.

"Hold still, kid."

The bit of timber was tossed aside. Strong hands lifted Virginia to her feet to receive a brotherly kiss on the cheek and a paternal pat on her bottom. She glowed and radiated joy.

"Mind wearing those fool things while we drive home?"

"Right now, Mr. Rannigan, I wouldn't mind wearing anything."

It was his turn to blush. "Honey, I'm a bigger asshole than those boys. No key, no wire, and now no blanket. All I've got is my jacket. But with those things on your wrists you can't even put it on. Just sort of drape – ?"

"No, we won't bother. Honest, Mr. Rannigan, being naked isn't all that awful after a girl's been leered at by every Arab in the desert. I've got used to it."

"Well, it seems pretty damn . . . ."

"If you enjoy me please look all you want."

"Honey, you're putting me on!"

"No, I'm not. I'm beginning to wonder what all the fuss has been about all these centuries. A girl's just a girl. Try being whipped in public. It's a sure cure for prudery."

The Cadillac smelled of money. Its comfort absorbed her nakedness with benign resilience. They talked as the desert receded.

"I'll take you back to the suite first, honey. You just have to meet Roberta."

"Naked?"

Corey chuckled. "Hell no, I've had an idea."

Virginia was satisfied. She was in good hands. She hoped he enjoyed her breasts and bush.

"After that, do you want to go to the British Consulate?"

"Won't I be an embarrassment to them?"

"Mmmmmm, well, maybe you're right. Take you back to the States with us next week if you like – nice holiday?"

"I haven't any money, Mr. Rannigan."

"You don't need any." His laconic statement spoke volumes. "And call me Corey." He chuckled in amusement. "There's something nuts somewhere, kid. I mean, you not having any money. You any idea what your market value is with these slave traders?"

"Some. It makes me curl up."

"Jazrawi was talking in sums above a million."

"It is nuts! Haven't they any girls of their own?"

"Sure, they have. They trade in them too. But not for big money. It's the combination of their oil and your white skin does it. There's an extra erotic kick in it for 'em."

Virginia recognized a reaction within herself. A man, many men, would pay a million dollars to possess her body and subdue her mind. She remembered her own subservience to Jazrawi. A couple of days in a cage and she was conditioned. A girl was merchandise. The whole fabric of slavery became understandable. "I'm going to have to make an adjustment all the way back again," she said slowly. "They took me a long way. Mentally, I mean."

"They whipped hell out of you."

"They'd turned me into a slave before that. It's strange . . . ! Something inside a girl responds." She grinned. "Don't tell the women's lib I said that."

"You'd better talk to Roberta about that," Corey said soberly. "Roberta's got a thing. It's baffled me."

"Is that why you asked me those funny questions?"

"Sorry about that. But I've been buffaloed so long I do have to wonder."

"You mean your wife enjoys . . . ?"

"She thinks she would. It's a notion."

"But I've heard of it. Someone told me . . . ." Virginia was conscious of a blush. "Don't think badly of her. I'm afraid we all . . . ."

"We?"

"I think there's a bit of it in all of us."

Corey grinned. "I'd like to deliver you to her just the way you are. But I'm going to have to find you a dress before we hit the hotel. But afterwards – if I could contrive it – would you go along?"

"Of course I would. I'm so grateful to you I'd do anything."

"Careful, honey."

They looked at each other and laughed, sharing a blush.

When Corey Rannigan parked outside an unobtrusive house after reaching the town, Virginia crouched low while he was gone. When he returned he tossed clothes into the back seat and held up a key, a very tiny key.

"It's a whore house," he explained. "Every whore house keeps handcuffs for their fun and games, and extra keys. Turn your back."

Another ecstasy! Virginia massaged her wrists and adored the omnipotent male. Blithely she slithered into the back seat and began to dress.

The hotel accepted Virginia without a raised eyebrow. She was a little awed by its magnificence. The lush splendor of the suite was daunting. The suite was empty.

It took two days and nights for Corey Rannigan to accept his wife's disappearance. Roberta had vanished and left no clue. He phoned James Thorsen.

It was a reunion of lovers. Rannigan tolerantly left James and Virginia alone for an hour before reminding his visitor they had a problem. Thorsen's reaction was swift.

"Don't tell Winston that Virginia's here. Don't tell anyone."

"You mean they'd want to give her back to Jazrawi?"

"Of course! It's a contractual thing . . . ."

"I'd sort of figured that. The holy diplomatic word, eh! The girl doesn't count."

"Keep her out of sight until I can get her on a plane to England."

Virginia was aghast. "I don't want to go back to England. I want to stay with you."

"All right. Stay in this suite. The State Department is sending me back to the States now the job's done. I'll take you with me. Well get married."

Corey Rannigan withdrew for one more hour. He was an understanding man. When he returned he asked the obvious: "Is she safe even here?"

"You mean I can be kidnaped again or arrested or something?" Virginia demanded in wide-eyed dismay.

"If you are seen, and recognized." James patted her reassuringly. "But the way Corey's handled this you've beautifully vanished. Jazrawi and the Captain will suppose you've been snaffled by someone in the same line as himself."

"That's the impression my boys were told to leave," Corey said proudly. "And now, what about my wife?"

"Jazrawi." Thorsen's single word was succinct.

"You mean in retaliation?"

"Hell no! She probably wandered into his office trying to make a deal. I'm basing this on what you've told me of the way she felt about Virginia. He realized she'd left no tracks so just kept her. It's so outrageous and blatant, he's safe. No one's going to point a finger in his direction. And anyway, even if they did . . . !" Thorsen shrugged dramatically.

"Dammit, my wife?"

"Figure it his way. The lady is already in hot water. There will probably be some sniggers and a splurge of innuendo. The State Department won't appreciate another round."

"I'll get my boys again – !"

"Don't. Jazrawi's place is a fortress. Even if they got in he's got dungeons under dungeons. He'd call the cops – an outraged citizen! Some of your chaps might get shot."

"You mean Roberta's gone! Fini!"

"Until she's sold. Then we have a chance."

"Can't I ransom her?"

"Try. But it will run into millions. Your wife is a very beautiful woman."

"The son of a bitch!" Corey clenched his fists. "And we're not even sure it's him?"

"About ninety percent, Corey. Take it easy and try money. Jazrawi's easy to talk to. Hell give you a drink and a cigar."

"With my wife chained in his basement!"

"There's just the possibility of him being burned up over the loss of Virginia. It might prompt him to hold on to Roberta just for meanness – and any vague suspicions he may have."

"She's there because of me," Virginia contributed unhappily. "It's all got twisted." She bestowed a rueful grin on her rescuer. "You've lost your wife and got me. It started the other way around."

"Look, no acting the little heroine." Both men shook admonishing fingers. "None of any of this was your fault."

"But just the same she's where she is because of me."

"It happened, it's done! No tears."

"Hell keep her in a cage and whip her. I was there."

"Virginia, stop it!" Thorsen's tone was sharp. Corey Rannigan patted Virginia's shoulder consolingly. "Don't fret, honey," he said gently. "Remember what we talked about in the car? Hell, I can't even be sure the silly little so and so hasn't walked into something of her own accord. Maybe she's having a ball." He turned and winked at James. "I told you about it?"

"You told me. I suppose it's possible. But surely she'd have left a note."

"And have me banging on the door with the cops! No, she wouldn't want it that way. It all has to be authentic. Damn!"

The trio sat in silence – thinking hard.

* * *

"You shock me deeply," said Waleed Jazrawi, "I am distressed."

"Like hell you are," said Corey Rannigan. "What's her price?"

"If it were not for your sadness I would feel offended."

"Then be offended. Can I see Roberta? Can we talk terms?" Rannigan flowered. "Remember, I've already written you a check for services rendered – the rental of some poor damn girl you've picked up."

"You received value, Mr. Rannigan. My associate – the young woman provided was more than adequate."

"I'll grant you that, Jazrawi. We had one satisfactory transaction. Now let's have another."

Mr. Jazrawi studied the ceiling and puffed blue smoke. His voice was more than affable. "Even if I knew where your wife was, her price would be beyond your means." He gestured apologetically. "The cost of young women these days . . . ! It is inflation – the oil."

"I can talk a million dollars."

"How generous." Mr. Jazrawi sighed. "How fortunate your wife is to be so loved."

"Cash. Stock certificates. Gold?"

"You are more than kind. But might we, for a moment, digress?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"The matter of the young woman presently living with you in your suite, Mr. Rannigan. In chaste virginity, of course."

The silence seethed. The battle had been joined. Corey fired his smallest cannon. "I don't know what you mean. What girl? I've had up one of the hotel maids . . . ."

"Her name is Miss Virginia Ryder, Mr. Rannigan. I have been robbed."

Corey sensed a worse defeat than he had expected. How the devil had the bastard found out! It would be the staff, no doubt, some bell-hop for a couple of bucks. "You're telling me that some girl of that name is your property?"

"You know she is. Your State Department was grateful for the fact a few days past."

"Go on, I'm listening."

"I want Miss Ryder back."

"You're talking swap?"

"Alas, no."

"What do you want then?"

"I want the young lady to walk into my home of her own free will – or perhaps yours."

"You're not making sense."

Jazrawi waved his cigar and smiled at the trail of expensive smoke. "Should Miss Ryder fail to return here within a few days, the body of your wife would be delivered to you for burial. Should you be curious you could make an examination to reveal the variety of distresses causing her demise."

"Even you wouldn't go that far. There's a limit . . . ."

"Did I say it would be me, Mr. Rannigan? The culprit might be anyone."

A perfect understanding. Jazrawi smiled, Corey frowned. His mind was computing rapidly. "You're still not making sense," he pointed out, controlling his temper. "Right now I've got one and you've got one. The way you suggest leaves you both. What would I get out of it?"

"The knowledge your wife was supremely happy."

The answer was too pat. Jazrawi knew! Again they locked glances. "I am aware of Mrs. Rannigan's sexual inclinations," Jazrawi explained gently. "She has been kind enough to take me into her confidence."

Rannigan sensed defeat. Defeat at the hands of the girl he was striving to save. "Carry on," he grunted. "What comes next?"

"I am not without experience in such matters," Mr. Jazrawi conceded modestly. "But I will confess to amazement. You have possessed a treasure beyond price."

"Go on. Continue."

"But have you not known – realized?"

"I am not interested. Drop it."

"With such a psyche as Jasmine possesses . . . ."

Corey looked blankly at his enemy. "Who the hell's Jasmine?"

"Ah, forgive me. The name Roberta is ill-suited to so feminine a creature as your former wife, Mr. Rannigan. I have taken the liberty of christening her 'Jasmine.' She approves."

"You've got your bloody nerve. But let's hear the rest."

Jazrawi nodded. His manner was almost kind. "As I was saying, a girl possessed of such a nature as Jasmine's cannot be spoken of in terms of a million or two. For some men she would be a new dimension. I am thinking now of a sum in excess of ten."

"What you're really saying is 'no dice'?"

"And any settlement would be contingent upon Miss Ryder's delivery to me in good condition."

"Ever hear of a man driving too hard a bargain, Jazrawi?"

"Your State Department is impotent, Mr. Rannigan. The world knows it. You are alone."

"Why this concern about Miss Ryder?" Corey gazed across the desk, puzzled. "She's just a girl, a nice girl."

"Stripped naked she becomes far more."

"I wouldn't know."

"She has a quality as has my Stephanie. They are of the priceless sisterhood."

Rannigan needed time to think. He must talk to Thorsen. Dourly he fell back on cynicism. "So, okay. You leave me nothing. Let's start fresh from there. If I can't buy what I want, you tell me what you can sell me for what I can afford."

"You would be wiser, and it would be cheaper, to make your purchase in the United States, Mr. Rannigan. I can arrange to have someone phone you there if you wish."

"Never mind. Tell me where I'm at right now."

"Let us say four days, Mr. Rannigan. Three is such an overworked number. The return of Miss Ryder within four days."

"You know I'll move heaven and earth . . . ?"

"Of course. I do not mind. I respect you."

"But if I lose I can be sure my wife will be happy?"

"Believe me, Mr. Rannigan, it gives me pleasure to make you that pledge. It will be honored. You are an adversary I admire."

"Yet you have no mercy?"

"It is inappropriate. We are discussing merchandise."

"We are discussing human lives."

"That would be in the United States, Mr. Rannigan. Here it is called merchandise."

"May I see my wife?"

"No."

"Do you want me to beg? I will."

Jazrawi shook his head regretfully. "In the circumstances in which she is placed at this moment Mrs. Rannigan would not wish you to see her."

Corey Rannigan knew defeat.

"It is but the fortune of war," said Waleed Jazrawi. "Four days."

Chapter Eight

The Training of Jasmine

In stepping into the cage, Roberta Rannigan had flung her inhibitions to the winds. She did not want them back. Perhaps sometime but not now! Right now she wanted to wallow in sensation, the deepest sensual sensitivities she had ever known. Immediately, when Stephanie had disappeared from view, she threw her nudity upon the cushions and writhed

in wanton abandon, glorying in the cuffed hands she could not use, thrusting breasts and vulva into resilient silk until she cried out in climax.

Sleeping briefly, she awoke and explored her cage. She could not get out. Never, never would she escape from behind the bars. They held her lovingly with the implacability of total imprisonment. She rubbed her breasts against them, teasing her nipples. Then thrust a foot between, pushing it out until her thigh was tight held. Next the door. It mocked her shoulder and repulsed her foot. Roberta caressed its bars lovingly with a flushed cheek. Its locks were forever. She was captive of the cage.

Roberta saved the handcuffs for the last, much as a child will savor a tid-bit lovingly until the last. She could not see them well. But she did her best with twistings and strivings so as to behold the tightly clasping chrome upon one wrist and then the other. The effort brought with it a delicious hurt, a gift from Stephanie. For moments she toyed with the mischief of tightening each cuff a single notch. She supposed it was something she could do. The steel bands would then pain her constantly, they were already snug. She abandoned the whimsy with amused regret. Locked in a cage she could not go for help. Like a swimmer diving into the surf she, once more, flung her nakedness upon the piled cushions and made the sensuous strivings of a girl in heat.

"I am pleased to see you happily employed, Mrs. Rannigan."

Roberta tensed into immobility at the amusement in Jazrawi's voice. The vulgarity of 'caught with her pants down' flashed momentarily. She blushed like a child. A man was undoubtedly looking at her raised bottom and between her legs. The last thing she wished was to turn over, but she could hardly greet her visitor with a rear view. She rolled over and sat up, burningly conscious of the loss of hands.

"Ah, thank you! How lovely you are! Would you be kind enough to stand?"

For inspection! The new shipment was to be checked over. Roberta knew her choice: to behave as an adolescent or as a woman. She chose the latter. Not yet accustomed to hands locked behind her back, she rose with less grace then she would have wished. She faced the man beyond the bars with a mixture of defiance and female excitation. She had never felt more naked, nor had she found in nudity a greater joy.

"The legs slightly apart, please. Ah, thank you . . . !" Waleed Jazrawi allowed himself time to absorb the total loveliness of his latest acquisition. Satisfied with his frontal inspection, he slowly circled the cage. The woman within knew he could have told her to turn and exhibit herself, but this was best. He would see every facet of her bare caged femininity at his leisure. Mrs. Roberta Rannigan stood demurely to be looked at. Her only sign of tension was her clenched fists pulling against their single link. "D'you like me, Mr. Jazrawi?"

"You are a dream from Allah. I am greatly blessed."

"I think I have nice breasts."

"They are twin hills of delight."

Roberta knew mischief. "And my pubic hair? It's such a bush. Perhaps you would wish it shaved?"

"One does not fell the palms at an oasis."

"Thank you. It was just that I'd read somewhere about slave girls not being allowed hair down there."

"You regard yourself already as a slave, Mrs. Rannigan?"

"Well, I am in a cage . . . ! And I'm naked, and my hands are chained behind my back . . . !"

"Ah, I see your point. You are a realist. By the way, you will now address me as 'lord' – in the manner of our beloved Stephanie."

Roberta swallowed hastily. She had come instinctively close to the vulgarity of 'up your ass!' But her loins rewarded her surprisingly when, in utter docility, she said, "Yes, lord."

"You will similarly honor any gentleman interested in your purchase."

"Yes, lord. I will remember."

"I find your sweet submission open to suspicion, Mrs. Rannigan. You are normally a woman of force and character."

"I'm wondering about it myself, lord." Roberta imparted a look of dewy-eyed frankness. "I'm experimenting."

"With me?"

"Well, I suppose . . . but mostly with myself. I may as well lay it on the line. This – this that's happening to me right now is something I've longed for all my life."

"Stephanie and I had caught a glimpse . . . ."

Roberta twisted prettily in her need of expression. "Maybe in a few days I'll be cured and screaming and kicking the bars . . . ! This is what I have to find out. Am I nuts – lord?"

"You are priceless – a jewel."

"You don't mind . . . ? You're not going to laugh at me? Or be extra cruel?"

"I am never cruel. Sometimes I punish. As for laughter . . . ! One does not treat beauty with guffaws."

"Suppose – suppose . . ." The caged girl smiled winsomely at the man who owned her life. "Suppose my fantasy fades, wears out, and I find myself just a girl who hurts . . . . What then?"

"It will not happen. I am wise in such matters."

"But if it did? Would you set me free?"

"No."

Roberta sighed in ecstasy. "You say all the right things, lord."

There was between them now a rapport. Impossible yesterday, today for real. How easy speech became when one was honest! "I am in a dither of lust, lord. I am ashamed of myself. Do you want your feet kissed – or anything?"

Jazrawi laughed delightedly. "You are a challenge, Mrs. Rannigan. A challenge to a man's potency and far beyond."

"Open the door, lord. Use me. I am only a slave."

"Ah, but no! It is not you who invite me, Mrs. Rannigan, to use that lovely body. It is I who order you."

"Order me, lord."

"I should punish you for your presumption." Jazrawi beamed at his concupiscent slave. "A slave girl longs for cock. It is her sustenance, she dreams of it when languishing in her chains. It is her reward for good behavior. Can you understand that, Mrs. Rannigan?"

"I understand it, lord. It is as it should always have been."

"Good. I will honor you from time to time. Mostly you will rub your cunt against the cushions and dream your fantasies."

"Thank you, lord."

"Or perhaps you and Stephanie . . . ? I am not a dog in the manger with my slaves."

"Thank you, lord. In you I am lucky."

"Remember it. Cherish well your cunt. It is mine."

"I will remember, lord. Please use it often."

"Use what?"

"My cunt, lord."

"Always say the word, Mrs. Rannigan. No prudery."

"My cunt, lord. Cunt, cunt, cunt! See, I strive to please and to obey. I am on fire. I plead humbly: please use me, lord."

"And if I prefer your mouth?"

"My lips are yours, lord. I will give you joy."

"Even though there is none for you?"

"There will be joy for me in serving you, lord." Roberta knew herself in the grip of a more fervid lust than she had ever known. She strained against her handcuffs in pure ecstasy. "Give me the benison of your cock and I will use it with all the skill I know, lord."

"Or that which nestles between the cheeks of your ass, girl?"

"I will bend for you. I will do anything."

Waleed Jazrawi surveyed his treasure with deep content. There was almost no sum he could not ask for this submissive. Roberta was both fire and ice. No man would resist her. He spared a thought of sympathy for the man who had owned this glory and known it not. Testingly, he sardonically asked, "And Miss Ryder . . . ? Have you forgotten this poor plaything of an Arab's greed?"

Roberta knew guilt. She had forgotten – completely! Shyly, she made the admission. "I no longer fear for her, lord. In your chains she should be content."

"As you are?"

"Yes, lord. Never set me free."

Jazrawi chuckled. "Mrs. Rannigan, you are what your compatriots call 'just too much.' Stephanie tells me you have asked to be whipped?"

"Tomorrow, lord."

"Because you know it must be done to you?"

"Yes, lord. But also because I wish it." Roberta looked up shyly. "I will confess this too: it is the fulfillment of a dream."

The slave dealer laughed. "You see yourself writhing exquisitely beneath the lash, moaning as you climax?"

"Yes, lord. Am I foolish?"

"Not foolish, child. Simply in the grip of passion. You will hate every stroke. You will scream in anger, and pain, and outrage. The whip is a leveler, reducing us all to what we are."

"It is something I must discover, lord. Thank you for having me whipped. When it has been done to me, whatever my response, I will be wiser than I now am."

"You are quite incredible." Jazrawi nodded thoughtfully. "You have made me, too, concerned for tomorrow. Would you wish me to be present when you are cut with the leather, Mrs. Rannigan?"

Roberta was surprised. "I had thought it you who would whip me." Disappointment was in every word.

"It is not fitting," he replied stiffly. "Aliesha will flog you. Do not fear her hand will be light."

"What about Stephanie? I'd love to be whipped by Stephanie."

"If I wished to punish Stephanie I would compel her to whip you. Not otherwise."

"She would not spare me, lord. I know she would not."

"True! But she would wish to. Perhaps another time." Jazrawi chuckled. "I assure you, you will find Aliesha's hand a match for your libido."

The fire within Roberta's loins had become an agony. To dampen it she asked, "Lord, will you truly sell me? I do not want to be sold."

"Child, I cannot keep you in that cage forever."

"I wouldn't mind."

"You think that now – Besides, I am a businessman. There is no profit in a caged girl."

"There could be much pleasure."

"I am served by Stephanie. How many slave girls can a man employ?"

"I am happy, lord. For the moment that is all I know."

Jazrawi nodded. She was exquisite. He would fuck her now but it was better to keep her in the heat of lust. His voice was gentle. "It is unseemly I should call you Mrs. Rannigan."

Roberta considered. "It is sort of silly. I'm no longer 'Mrs.' anything. How about Roberta?"

"The name does not please me. Nor does it suit you. I am going to name you Jasmine."

Again the flood of fire! The slave girl in the cage could believe herself reborn. Her loins flared in welcome. Jasmine! It was too, too perfect – Jasmine!

"Lord – oh, lord . . . !" She was choking with emotion. "It is – it's so beautiful! I would never have dreamed . . . !"

"You are Jasmine."

"I am Jasmine, lord." She sank to her knees under a compulsion purely instinctive. "My name is Jasmine – Jasmine – Jasmine . . . !"

Jasmine was still kneeling when her Master went away.

* * *

"The time has come, darling. Isn't that what they're supposed to say on death row when they open the cell door?"

"Oh, Stephanie, is it that bad?"

"Every bit that bad, ducky. You'll scream your head off. That's what I did. Gollies, how I screamed! I knew for sure I'd die. That's why it does us so much good. Everything afterwards doesn't seem that terrible."

Jasmine knelt up from the warmth of her cushions. Her whole being tingled in erotic anticipation. Through the night and during Aliesha's ministrations of the morning she had thought of little else but her fantasy. The hooded man and the whipping post had accompanied her into dreams, not as a nightmare but as a living experience from which she had no wish to wake. The heat within her sex kept fear at bay. Mischievously she looked up through the bars.

"Do I walk to execution like a good little girl or are there lovely guards holding my arms?"

"You're overheated, ducky. With your hands behind your back I can handle you easily. A hank of your hair – or an ear." Stephanie giggled. "Or a firm pinch on one of your nipples, and you'll be anxious to trot along to where it happens."

"Was that the way with you?"

" 'Fraid not. I was stupid. Two of the staff carried me. I kicked and screamed all the way. I even bit one of them. I got extra for that."

"Stephanie, I'd love that. Can't I have it?"

"No, you can't. And if you persist in this lechery I'll start you on a program of cold baths – with ice!"

Nothing could quench her fire. Jasmine was sure of it. In concupiscent joy she watched and listened to the click of locks. When the cage door swung open, her mischief boiled over again.

"I refuse to move, darling. I like it in here." Stephanie did not answer. This was a delicious game she was quite willing to play. When she stepped into the cage, the girl to be whipped flung herself face down upon the cushions.

"See, you can't make me. Even handcuffed I'll kick." Jasmine was throbbingly happy.

Stephanie deftly thrust a hand. Thumb and finger captured their prize. "Ups-a-daisy, Jasmine," she admonished severely.

"Ouch! Oh, damn! That's not fair!"

"What's not fair?"

"Well, I thought you'd grab my hair – I was going to kick. Ohhhhh! Oh, shit, that hurts!"

"I've scarcely begun to pinch."

"Let go! I just won't – Ahhhhhhah – Oh, wowie! All right, all right!"

"You think Jasmine might condescend to leave her cage?"

"Oh, shit! Jasmine will condescend to do anything." The balky slave rose nimbly erect. "Let go of my tit. Oh, Stephanie, please . . . ?"

The Mistress released the scarlet bud. "I know you had to try that. D'you feel better now?"

"Gollies, yes! Oh, jeepers . . . !" Jasmine was sheepishly contrite. "Dammit, that hurts! Why the devil couldn't Corey have done lovely things like that to me!"

"You married a gentleman. What you need is a lusty Arab." Stephanie flicked the scarlet nipple. "You're a randy bitch."

"Mmmmmmm . . . !" Jasmine was still shaking her head at the pain. In wonder, she confided, "This having my wrists handcuffed behind my back . . . ! It's out of this world! It makes anything, absolutely anything, ten times as yummy."

"It won't make the whip ten times as yummy. Come along."

Jasmine was aglow. Her burning nipple imparted ripples of intense sensation into every crevice of her being. She looked proudly down at its hard erection as she followed where she was led. At journey's end she gasped in delight. "Stephanie! Oh, Stephanie, you must have known – a post!"

"Fit your fantasy, ducky?"

"Mmmmm, does it ever! Oh, I'm so happy!" Stephanie Pitfield felt two emotions: tolerant amusement and pure, unadulterated envy. She herself had become quiveringly erotic, but never like this! Under the lash she still screamed. She was no longer sure about Jasmine. "Aliesha will tie you," she said briskly.

"Oh, sure. Some sort of social distinction, isn't it?" Jasmine's eyes surveyed the huge

room, scanning the stone walls and all they held. "Holy cow, Stephanie, this is a torture chamber!"

"That's right, pet. Nothing too extreme. But everything hurts."

"Do I get the lot?"

"Only if you're a bad girl. Put your arms around the post as though you're in love with it."

"I think I'd like to try everything – just once."

"Don't be absurd! Want me to get an ice cube and push it in your pussy?"

"It wouldn't last ten seconds in there. Look, darling, my nips are all squashed against the wood. Is that . . . ?"

"It's intentional. Your breasts don't get whipped first time around. Remember, you're merchandise."

It was too good to be true. Too utterly perfect. Jasmine contentedly surrendered her unlocked wrists to Aliesha's competence. They were crossed and bound, then drawn high to a hook until she was on tip-toe. Her feet were kicked apart and her ankles tied to the wooden base, then the narrowness of her waist firmly roped and cinched. "Mmmmmmm – Oh, darling, I can't move."

"The better to whip you, dear."

"Oh, golly . . . ! Gee, I feel naked! I say, Aliesha, it's you who's going to whip me, isn't it?"

"Yes, lady."

"Well, not too hard, eh? I mean . . . it's my first time."

"Always hard, lady."

"Oh, wow! I say, Stephanie, use your influence a bit?"

"Certainly not. It won't do you any good unless it's hard. Turning chicken?"

"No . . . but, owwwwwwooooooww, it's so drafty! And I can't move a muscle."

"You just think you can't. Actually, you're wriggling deliciously all the time. Don't stop."

The naked Jasmine tested her bonds. Everything was excruciatingly tight, deeply and satisfyingly harsh. She was the maiden bound, the damsel in distress of her fantasy. She could relinquish the hooded man without regret. There was a quality about Aliesha even more sinister. She recalled a line she had read somewhere: "It takes a woman to hurt a woman." A woman was going to weal her flesh. She was going to be flogged! Whimsically, she pondered the difference between being flogged and being whipped – a difference in degree? Or perhaps the whip itself? It did not matter. Right now nothing mattered save that she was fastened, quivering, to a whipping post. She peered around the timber to deliver a quip to Aliesha, but Aliesha had disappeared.

It was impossible. It was outrageous. It was indescribably painful. It was something for which Jasmine was totally unprepared. Jasmine did not scream, striving desperately to infuse normalcy into her trembling utterance.

"Gosh – I'm – I'm sorry . . . ." She could not check a moan. "You were right. It's too awful. I can't take it."

The second stroke turned her moans into sounds she did not want to hear, and her gasping words into a pathetic plea. "Oh, stop it, don't hit me again. Honest, I can't handle it. You may as well let me loose."

The whipping stopped.

"Okay, ducky. Feel a bit more humble?"

"Yes – oh, yes . . . !"

"A girl's in shock with the first few. It gets better as you go along."

"I can't go along. Stephanie, you know I can't." The captive of the post fought her ropes in panic. "Don't let Aliesha hit me again. She mustn't!"

"Don't be silly now." Stephanie kissed a bare shoulder. "Not that I wasn't damn silly myself. Aliesha's gone to fetch our Master. You don't want him to see . . . ."

"No! Not a man! Not while I'm like this!"

"Like what, pet?" Stephanie's query was innocence itself.

"Well – well – like . . . ."

"You're beautifully tied, y'know. You look gorgeous."

"Do I?" Gratitude welled. "Do I really?"

"Of course you do, silly little Jasmine. And with two scarlet lines across those ivory shoulders . . . ! I'll let you in on a secret: You've excited me close to orgasm. You're just too – too . . . !"

The fire was back, fed my female affection and the spreading scorch from the two weals upon her skin. Jasmine rested in her bonds, her cheek against the wood, her eyes closed. Somewhere the hooded man was chuckling at his skill. Deliberately she twisted, exploring helplessness. The cords repaid her with sensual delight.

"You should be able to rub little pussy against the poll, darling."

Jasmine managed a snicker. "I've tired. But I'm too tight. I can get the Venus mound and lose a few pussy hairs. But if I did get my cat full on I'd explode instantly."

"Want me to help?"

"Better not, darling. If you're going to keep on whipping me I'd best conserve my lust."

"My, my! I hope you've noticed. You're back to normal." Stephanie was amused and delighted. "Want to be untied?"

"Noooooo . . . oh, Stephanie, what an idiot I am!"

"No, you're not. You're just making me envious as blazes. Right about now I was howling disgracefully."

"I do seem to recall a great deal of sound on that occasion." Aliesha and Jazrawi returned into view. He took stock of the post, the girl, and the ropes with approval. "But you were a pleasure to whip, dear child. You always will be."

"Thank you, lord. Will you whip Jasmine?"

"Perhaps a few strokes." Waleed Jazrawi ran the coil of the whip through loving fingers. He laughed into the apprehensive eye the bound girl turned back over a bare shoulder. "Would Jasmine like her Master to whip her?"

"Yes, lord." It was a whisper, but loud enough.

It was different with a man. Thrusting her forehead against the post, pledging herself she would not scream, the slave girl named Jasmine moaned and moaned again as the whip cut net back, not in search of blood but of humility. The male arm was stronger, the blows more painful, but they were numbed by the eroticism of sex. A man was whipping a girl, a slave was being lashed by her Master. All was well with Jasmine's world. She did not scream. She climaxed again and again. Her moans were interpreted by all present. Jazrawi knew himself the beloved of Allah.

"You still find joy in slavery, child?" His hand explored her Wealed back.

"Yes, lord."

"You have permission to ask me to stop whipping you."

"I do not want it, lord. You will stop when it pleases you."

He sighed. "Always perfect. You are the reincarnation of Scheherezade. I will let Aliesha whip you now."

"Please, no, lord!" Jasmine looked back, fearful of his wrath. "I want you to whip me – only you."

Two women and a man surveyed the scarlet striped nudity in awe. It glistened now with the sweat of pain. From it emanated wave after wave of musk. Its bound contours and striated skin made it beautiful beyond words.

"Choice is not for slaves, Jasmine." Jazrawi's gentle chiding held menace.

"I plead, lord. I do not choose – I plead."

"You could regret your plea."

"No, lord. Never!"

"Very well I can deny you nothing."

Waleed Jazrawi whipped the slave girl, Jasmine, steadily for a long, long time.

* * *

"You're getting the full treatment, pet. Our Master ordered it."

"I don't mind."

"You're something for the book, Jasmine my sweet. You've been tied to this post five hours."

"Have I!" The whipped girl's voice was tired but contented. "I'm not going to pretend it hasn't seemed quite a while. Am I going to be whipped any more?"

"Goodness no! It's your introduction, remember. Not a punishment." Stephanie kissed a damp cheek. "I'm going to untie you."

Jasmine hugged the wood now heated by her flesh. It had been an enemy, now it was a friend. The post and the ropes had enabled her to bear the pain. She loved them both. "Back to the cage?" she asked hopefully.

"Gosh no! You're in training, darling. The worst comes first."

"I don't need training," Jasmine said without complaint. "I think I was trained before I was born."

"Our Master spoke of this, ducky. But we agreed it would be best for you to get the works, even though you're the most erotic material he's ever seen."

"I don't mind . . . . Ooooops, I said that before! But honest, I don't mind. I'm incorrigible."

"If I hadn't seen you whipped, I'd be giving another warning. You've had the pain. Now you'll get the dismals. I'm curious."

Released from the last rope, Jasmine flexed ecstatically. The 'afterwards' made being bound doubly rewarding. It was a glorious bonus. Having indulged her limbs, her fingers sought her bottom. "Gollies, I'm all ridged! They're tender and – raised?"

"They soon go down, ducky, just a day or two. The marks take longer."

"Want my hands in back?"

"How did you guess! But there's no rush. Enjoy yourself."

Jasmine enjoyed herself in the truest sense of all. For the moment she was pleasantly detached from her body. She played with it wonderingly with a new sense of possession of something precious. Its responses were incredible, every sense tingling. Then, pleasurably, she turned her back and stood erect while Stephanie handcuffed her wrists above the swelling curves of her streaked behind.

"Sort of silly," Stephanie admitted. "It's only for a moment. We're moving on to phase two. Try not to hate me."

"Oh, darling, don't be silly! I'd sooner it was you than Aliesha. With you I'm pure les. With her I'm just a slave girl getting pushed around." Jasmine grinned mischievously. "I bet I can guess what comes next"

It was a short journey, mostly down to the forbidding door. At sight of the ancient, metal-studded timbers Jasmine knew she had guessed correctly. "It's a dungeon," she opined cheerfully, "and I'm going to get put in it."

"Right first time, ducky." Stephanie was busy with an immense key. She pushed the barrier with a slim shoulder to force it creakingly open. "I never got to like this place," she admitted. "It still gives me the willies."

"Wowie!" The handcuffed girl stood breathless, enveloped in warm, stale air, her enraptured gaze absorbing every detail. "It is for real, isn't it?" she asked in a hushed voice as though fearful the dark stone prison would disappear.

"It was too damn real for me, ducky. I spent most of my time crying or seeing ghosts."

"Mmmmmmm, oh, Stephanie, how long does this one last?"

"I mustn't tell you, pet. Sorry. That's part of the deal. Slave girls are never told anything."

Jasmine peered into the darkest recesses of her prison. It was all the storybooks come true. It was also deliriously frightening. "What does a girl do in here?" she asked quiveringly.

"Nothing. You just sit and long to get out. It's awful. You're all the time listening for the door."

"Rats and mice . . . ?"

"None." Stephanie grinned at the enraptured face. "Sorry 'bout that, ducky. But the stone's solid. There's no way . . . ."

"Do you leave me a book or something?"

"Good gosh no! This is a dungeon, darling. And anyway, it's mostly too dark to read. After I've gone and bolted the door the lights dim, and that little grating up in the wall doesn't give much."

"Gollies!" Jasmine was absorbing atmosphere fast. "Could be a bit of a bore, I suppose."

"Tell me tomorrow. I'm curious how you'll react. You're not the average inmate, y'know. You're ten jumps ahead of me, the way I was, right at the start."

"But, Stephanie, there's no cot or anything . . . ?"

"Sleeping on the stone's a remarkable experience, love."

"Oh, wow!" Jasmine had never felt a stranger blend of pleasurable excitement and dismay. "Don't I even get a blanket?"

"No." Stephanie was amused. "Of course, there are the playthings!"

Jasmine guessed instantly. "More than just these handcuffs?"

"About fifteen times more."

The woman who had been Roberta Rannigan stood trembling. But the tremors were not of fear. She had been guided to the far corner and stood looking at the chains and gleaming metal bands. She made a wry admission. "If you lock those things on me, darling, I'll burn up with pure lust."

"They're quite lovely, not rusty relics," Stephanie conceded. "If only they weren't so damn heavy. They're purely punitive – to teach us a lesson. Here, it's time to lose your handcuffs."

Jasmine stretched her freed arms luxuriously. "I won't be doing much of this, will I?" She mourned without noticeable dolor. "Okay. How do you want me?"

"It's a sort of combination set," Stephanie tittered. "Just stand still, pet. I'll do the work."

Totally absorbed, the heat spreading from her loins, the slave in training watched herself being chained. She remembered the pictures: Heavy shining anklets joined by equally heavy links. From each anklet a chain to a central ring. From the ring chains reaching to her wrists. The metal wristlets coupled by other links. It was a complete ensemble, making her flexibly helpless. The weight of metal would tell her every moment of the day what she had become.

"You can do a hobbled walk, ducky. And fiddle a bit with your hands."

Jasmine tried. The rattle of links was loud in the confined space. "But – but I can't raise my hands! I can't scratch my nose!"

"You can if you bend way down. If you sit on the floor and tuck your feet back against your pussy your hands are home free. That's the way you eat."

"Do I get to eat?"

"Bread and water and an apple That's all. Like you said, ducky, it's for real. Ready for the next bit?"

"Stephanie, not more . . . ?"

"Uh-huh. But seeing it's you I'm going to take a chance. Stand still. Chin up."

The collar was like the rest, punitive. It locked around Jasmine's slender throat forbiddingly. Its only virtue was the polish and the rounded smoothness of its edges. It was threateningly snug. At its back dangled a ring.

"There's a chain that fixes you to the wall, darling. But we'll give that a miss. It weighs you down terribly so's you're always wanting to hold it up. You can look on the collar as jewelry."

"I can't even reach up to feel it."

"There's a lot of things you can't do, love. Now, this goes round your tight little tummy."

"This" was a belt of thin shining steel. It constricted the captive's palpitating middle and closed shut with finality. "There's supposed to be a chain from this too," Stephanie said busily. "But you can do without it. This and the collar really do something for you. You're gorgeous!"

"But nobody to see!" Jasmine's lament was genuine.

Stephanie giggled. "Our Master may come and have a look at you. And there's always me."

"Darling . . . ?" Jasmine was suddenly anxious. "Could you be punished about the chains . . . the ones you haven't put on me?"

"Hell never notice, pet. You're too damn lovely." Stephanie kissed the full red lips. "That about completes your outfit. Aliesha will bring the water and the apple. For Pete's sake don't try and bribe her or offer her your cat. She has the authority to whip the slaves, and she's embarrassingly conscientious."

The closing of the door and the thud of locks was all Stephanie had promised. The light dimmed, menace lurked. The silence was total. "You're a bloody fool!" Roberta Rannigan chided herself. "What a hell of a jackpot to get yourself into!" Then added, deliciously,

"What a bloody marvelous, wonderful, glorious, cunt-warming jackpot! Poor Corey! If he could only see!"

The slave girl, Jasmine, essayed to walk. It was possible but not rewarding. Determined to extract sensation to the full, she made her hobbled and metallic circle of her prison. Stopping at the door, she thrust with her shoulder against its timbers, finding it as solid as the stone of the walls. Back at her starting point, she slithered to recline on the floor. The stone was cold. She leant against the wall. That, too, was chill. Bringing her ankles back she used the slack of her chains to raise exploring hands to her collar. It felt both rich and implacable. So did the band about her waist. She sighed in wonder at her blessedness.

It took an hour or two for Mrs. Roberta Rannigan to surface from the welter of concupiscence engendered by her condition. She did not do so in panic. Ruefully she thought of her husband. Would Corey strive to rescue her? Or shrug her off as finding only her just desserts? Conscience and decency would compel him to try. Roberta smiled wistfully at visions of his earnest concern. But Corey would never match Jazrawi's price. She was safe. She rattled a chain as though to assure herself this was so.

But what of herself! Whether Jazrawi sold her or kept her for his own amusement she would remain a slave. Was it truly for life! It did not seem possible – and yet! It was an intangible on which she refused to ponder. The question most vital was, could she continue to wallow in this vibrancy of lust for the rest of her enslavement! At the moment she was throbbingly happy, but she was adult enough to remember those first few strokes of her whipping. They had dissolved lasciviousness utterly, leaving only pain and an urgency to escape. Thoughtfully, her shackled hands sought her wounds. The ridged flesh was tenderly responsive. Lust flared anew. Promised another whipping she would feel only sexual excitation. At the mere thought she found herself quivering. Therein lay her answer. Mrs. Roberta Rannigan was now Jasmine the slave! Leave it at that.

Instinctively, Jasmine's hand sought the juncture of her thighs. But she pulled it back. She would conserve her heat. Let it build into the lovely visions. Let it make her long for whatever Jazrawi would order done to her next. Tumescence would be a warm companion through the dungeon night. Jasmine the slave girl kicked at her chains and laughed.

Chapter Nine

Jasmine's Dungeon

"I know I shouldn't have come," Virginia apologized. "But after that phone call . . . !" She looked from one to the other of the three male faces, ending up with Corey Rannigan. "I guessed you'd be here at the Consulate. Discussing . . . ."

"I wasn't going to tell you, honey."

"That S.O.B. ! He knows the weak spots." James Thorsen frowned at the girl he loved. "Look, sweetheart, you're not going to do anything silly?"

"He's bluffing," said David Winston heavily. He fixed a cold accountant's eye on Virginia's agitation. "You had a pretty good look at the bastard. Would you say he was a man who killed?"

"No."

"I share your opinion, Rannigan. We may have one hell of a time getting your wife out of Jazrawi's clutches, but she is not going to die."

"Can you guarantee that?" Corey's voice was cold.

Winston dismissed emotion with a wave of the hand. "It's essentially a matter of ransom – money. Have you got enough?"

"Dammit, man, we know where this asshole lives. We know he's got Roberta somewhere in that house." Corey Rannigan glared. "D'you mean to tell me we can't go in there and get her out? There's the police, there's this Hadji idiot – and hasn't the U.S.A. got a navy?"

"Neither representations or force will be employed," Winston said stiffly. "It has all been explained. Let be!"

"I can get a bunch of boys . . . ."

"You will do nothing of the sort. That was all very well at Beni-Dahran or in the desert. Try it here and you're in trouble – and we'll help make the trouble. Force is out."

"It's really simple . . . ." Virginia felt a small girl among giants. "All he wants is me."

"He's not going to get you," Thorsen said forcefully. "Understand this, Virginia, no heroics."

"But Mrs. Rannigan did it for me! She's where she is because she tried to help me. I owe her."

"You don't owe her nothin', honey." Corey reached and patted a disconsolate shoulder kindly. "That gal o' mine is where she is because she's a screwball. Needs her ass paddled."

"You could say the same about me," Virginia mused. "I wandered off all alone that day. I had to be crazy . . . !"

"Regardless of that, honey, Roberta and me owe you for Beni-Dahran. If Winston here wasn't such a prude I'd have you show him your back."

"Please . . . please!" Winston intervened testily. "Let us deal with relevance. Phone Jazrawi and get a price. Basically, it's a price on both girls. He evidently regards Miss Ryder as his own property. By the standards of his society I suppose she is."

Corey Rannigan picked up the phone. When he put it down his face was grim. "Fifteen million in U.S. dollars." His voice was shocked.

"Hmmmmm, it's a lot of money." David Winston showed no emotion. "D'you have it?"

"Not handy. I'd have to scrape and borrow. It would knock me down on my knees."

"And we can't help you money-wise, Rannigan. Too dangerous a precedent . . . ."

"Shit, man, you don't help me anyway from Sunday. Hell, if I was a citizen of Monte Carlo I'd get more aid!"

Virginia sat, bemused by male anger and sums so vast she could not envision them. Her female logic dealt with it all concisely. "I shall go back to Jazrawi," she declared firmly. "It's very simple. It doesn't take any heroics."

"Like hell you will!"

"Honey, now listen to reason . . . ."

"The girl has the right idea," said David Winston. "It gets us over a hump. We take it from there."

"No way!"

"Dammit, Winston!"

Virginia wanted to giggle. Men could be so noisy, and they were making their own problem. Females saw things so much more clearly. "I think I've made up my mind," she said shyly. She held up a hand to still their anger. "Look, I haven't talked much about – about what happened to me when I was kidnaped – about Jazrawi." Her tone became apologetic. "It's all sort of Arabian Nights and absurd, but it's different from what you think. You'd have to be an Arab or a girl to understand it the way it is. When I go back I won't be tortured or stuff like that . . . ."

"Virginia, stop that!"

"Honey . . . !" Corey was truly shocked.

"Miss Ryder is making a lot of sense." David Winston was in the ascendant. "You are both acting as though she is lost forever. Actually, negotiations – bargaining – and perhaps some small pressures . . . . She and Mrs. Rannigan could quite possibly be back with us within a week or two."

"You see," said Virginia proudly, "It's simple."

The silence could be felt. Each one present viewed the fate of two girls from their own eminence. Virginia saw herself back in the cage with the date of her initiation whipping well advanced to accommodate her already wealed back. Perhaps she need not be whipped again at all! She added, helpfully:

"There's Miss Pitfield . . . . I think you know about her. She was kidnaped too. She comes from close to where I lived. She's sort of – graduated. She works for Jazrawi, has all the freedom she wants. She's one of the happiest girls I ever met." Her voice trailed away, shattered against male egos.

"Bunch of kooks," from Corey.

"Such a testament should surely reassure . . . ?" from Winston.

James Thorsen looked somberly at his superior and said nothing.

"I think it would be best if I took a taxi," said Virginia.

* * *

Life is an abundant provider of anti-climax. Fate has a penchant for the ridiculous. Virginia was required to wait in the ante-room of Jazrawi's office. Mr. Jazrawi was busy with a client but would see her in a moment. She sat demurely under the eye of the receptionist waiting to be kidnaped for the second time. She decided, comfortably, she could not rightly be called a runaway slave. Her Master would have to make his own assessment. She smiled up brightly at the interested regard of the dark-eyed client as he left.

"A triumph of reason," Waleed Jazrawi proclaimed as they sat at ease, his desk between. He pushed a button. "Let us drink to this so happy occasion."

"Thank you, lord." Virginia felt the centuries slipping away from beneath her feet. "Would you like me to undress?"

"You are being mischievous. That is good. But naked in this office!" He swept the suggestion into limbo. "That poor girl out there might not survive Islamic shock."

They clinked their glasses. Virginia knew she was enjoying herself. She cocked a quizzical eyebrow. "To slavery . . . ?"

"To slavery!" Jazrawi glowed and sipped. "You have grown up. Beni-Dahran marked not only your skin. I am very proud of you."

"I needed that drink," Virginia admitted. "May I have another, lord? I'm suffering from guilt. Only one man was willing for me to come back to you."

"Ah, the stern Mr. Winston, no doubt?"

"Yes, lord. I'm afraid the others thought me wanton."

"And are you – wanton?"

"I honestly don't know, lord. Do you?"

"You are wanton in David Winston's office. Here you are a jewel in the crown of mankind." Jazrawi waved an all encompassing hand. "Perhaps it is a matter of geography . . . . Perhaps it is that Allah is compassionate."

How strange a rapport! The Consulate was another world. This man to whom she was delivering her body seemed more comprehensible than the three she had left behind. Timidly, she asked, "Lord, are you still going to sell me?"

"That bothers my little slave, does it not?" He was laughing at her concern. "I cannot tell you, for I do not know."

"Will I still be whipped, lord? The training?"

Jazrawi's eyes searched her soul. "Do you wish to be?"

"Your wish is mine, lord. I am a slave."

"Virginia Ryder, you are an endless delight." He thumped the desk for emphasis. "With a dozen such as you I could rule the Earth."

"And Mrs. Rannigan, lord? Is she – is she . . . ?"

Jazrawi chuckled. "Mrs. Rannigan may surprise you. I believe her to be very happy."

"I've never met her, lord. That's funny – considering . . . ."

"I am sure we can arrange a meeting. Tell Stephanie. She'll arrange it."

"Lord, what of me now? I take your time. Should I not be – I mean, my clothes – handcuffs . . . ?"

"Why not go and find your beloved Stephanie, my dear? You know the way."

The implication caught the slave girl unaware. Wide-eyed in rapture, she asked, "Lord, you mean – walk free?"

"Of course."

"I should be chained . . . ."

"Why? Stephanie walks free." He was enjoying her confusion.

Virginia floated on a cloud of rapture. She had a mental vision of the three grave faces she had left behind. If only they knew! Shining-eyed she gazed at her smiling Master. "Lord, I am to be trusted . . . ? Like Stephanie?"

"If you wish it so, dear child. I will probably spoil you outrageously." His smile held an even deeper amusement. "But then, you may not even wish it. You must talk to Stephanie."

Dazed, the English girl followed instinct, a sense of what was appropriate to the occasion. Her eyes never leaving his, she rose and circled the desk. Kneeling, she sought his hand and kissed it, her lips lingering long. "I will serve you, lord. I promise." Her voice was a whisper for her lord alone.

Virginia found her way. It did not matter if she took a wrong turn. The servants who saw her smiled, perhaps they knew! It was a strange sensation. She was fully dressed. She had her hands.

"He's in love with you, ducky." Stephanie affirmed with feminine conviction. "I had a suspicion."

"You mean the marrying kind of love?"

"Could be, pet. You'd better start learning the Koran."

"Oh, Stephanie . . . ! That's nuts."

"It isn't if he says so." Stephanie wagged a warning finger. "And don't you forget that. Several times after I got promoted I got uppity. I got whipped each time. You've become privileged but you're still in Islam. Watch it!"

"What will I do with myself? Gee whiz, Stephanie!"

"Don't be a worry wart. I can always put you in the cage."

"Would you . . . ? Would you really?"

"I don't see why not. I'm supposing I still outrank you. But that's something I have to find out. Now you're a princess, are you still willing to take my orders?"

"Oh, Stephanie . . . ! From you, of course! Yes, yes, yes!"

"Supposing I tell you now to touch your toes for six with the cane? Would you do it?"

Eagerly, Virginia bent and flipped up her dress. From close to the floor she inquired, "Want my panties down?"

"No. I won't be too rough on you."

It was a rueful shock for the bent-over girl when her companion selected a cane and used it across the exposed derriere with zest and vigor. "Just one stroke for now, ducky."

"Oh, thank you – oh, wow!" Virginia hugged her wound.

"Thanks for getting the one or for not getting the six, love?"

"For not getting the six. Gollies, Stephanie, you sure can hit!"

Suddenly they were in each other's arms, breast on breast, lips passionately glued, pelvises thrusting. It was as though they could never again separate their bodies.

"If I'd given you the other five I'd have climaxed on the spot."

"I know!" Virginia was breathless. "Me too. Oh, darling, isn't this wonderful! Aren't we lucky!"

After their love had panted its way into content and they lay side by side, Stephanie placed a gentle finger on a naked arm. "I've just had the most wonderful notion, darling. Why don't we both go and visit these anxious chaps you left dithering? Imagine their faces!"

Virginia giggled delightedly. She could picture all too well the male incredulity and David Winston's suspicion. "We couldn't, could we? I mean – wouldn't it be out of bounds?"

"Nothing's out of bounds, ducky, so long as we come back here in good time."

"I'd be scared. They might hold on to me by force, for my own good, of course! But our master would think I'd tried to escape."

"Escapes and staying out all night are strictly taboo, darling. I refuse to even think about them. You'd best blot 'em out too. I told you about the punishment. It's too awful to think about."

"I'm in an odd sort of spot," Virginia pondered. "I'm frightened of this freedom. Darling, don't you see . . . ? James and the others – they'll see it as my duty to escape or try and help Mrs. Rannigan escape. They'll expect me to betray my master without a qualm, and by their standards they're right. But I can't do it. There's no way . . . !"

"Just two different worlds, pet. Forget it. I had to."

"Stephanie, if you see me getting a far away look in my eyes, lock me up?"

"With pleasure."

"If I feel nobility coming on I'll tell you and ask. But maybe I can't trust myself. I'm going to keep thinking of James, and Mrs. Rannigan's hurt look."

"Okay, pet. It sounds crazy, but it makes sense." Stephanie reached over and pinched a pink nipple. "Look, dear, you're naked now. Stay that way. It helps."

"I want to."

"And how about handcuffs? They'd help some more."

"But then I'm so dependent on you. I can't do anything. They make me almost helpless – not that I mind."

"You can wear 'em in front."

"But wouldn't our master think me ungrateful? He's given me my freedom."

"Your master will be amused by anything you decide to do – so long as it's within the rules. You're a tremendously lucky girl. Remember that. Talk about privilege . . . !"

"I'm not quite believing it yet," Virginia admitted. "Say, Stephanie, will he make me sleep with him?"

"Probably. But he's got three wives and quite a few slaves coming and going. The poor chap has to spread it a bit thin. I only get honored occasionally. Of course, there's always the clients."

"And what about Mrs. Rannigan? Is there some sort of mystery?"

Stephanie chuckled gleefully. "I'll let you find out for yourself. Want to go visit?"

"Won't she be suspicious of me, walking free?"

"You'll be naked, and I'll handcuff you in back. That'll be good enough credentials."

"Stephanie darling, what's so odd about the poor woman?"

"Poor woman, my foot! As for the oddity, I'm not sure you aren't infected yourself. I am myself sometimes. My master laughs and says it's when I'm in heat. Go get yourself a pair of handcuffs."

"I don't know where they are."

"Go find out. Who knows, you might be told to handcuff me sometime!"

Virginia cheerfully found the silver bracelets. She discovered a great many other spine-tingling objects as well.

"Want me to put them on myself?" she inquired impudently.

"Sure, go ahead."

"I'd sooner you handcuffed me, darling. I turn to jelly when I hear the clicks."

"Come here and turn around. For being saucy you'll wear 'em a notch too tight."

"Mmmmmm . . . gorgeous! Now I'm safe from temptation. Stephanie, am I nuts? I feel so beautifully secure."

"You are beautifully secure. Come along, ducky. We go downstairs."

Standing before the massive door the newly naked girl was trembling. Virginia was vividly alive with sensation. Conflicting loyalties had thrust her into a maelstrom of swirling emotion whose core was happiness. This forbidding portal should have daunted her, but it did not. Instead, she was consumed by curiosity. There was a quiet smile on Stephanie's lips as she turned the key.

"There you are, ducky. You're on your own."

A loving hand at her back, Virginia was gently but forcibly inserted into gloom. The door thudded at her back, imparting ominous sounds. She tugged, instinctively, at her handcuffs and blinked in the dim light. There was a rattle of chain.

The woman was naked, she was beautiful, she was loaded with metal. She rose, clinkingly, from the stone floor to greet her visitor, her hands constrained low at the level of her waist.

"Mrs. Rannigan?"

"And I bet you're the girl who . . . ?"

"That's right. I'm Virginia. What on earth have you done to deserve . . . ?"

"Oh, these!" The dungeon's prisoner made metallic sounds. "I think they're part of the treatment. Haven't you had the treatment yet?"

"Only a small dose." Virginia quickly spanned the distance between them. "Oh, you poor thing! All that chain! It must weigh a ton."

"Aren't they groovy! And I can't see your hands – are they . . . ?"

"Yes, they're handcuffed." Virginia turned to exhibit her pinioned wrists, her fingers working helplessly.

There was a shocked gasp. "Your back! That's what they did? What should have happened to me . . . ."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Rannigan. It's healing beautifully."

"Oh, Virginia, I feel a bitch. And don't be formal. Call me Jasmine. That's my new name. I'm a slave."

"I'm a slave too." Virginia laughed. "I can see what Stephanie meant about you! You're having a ball!"

"Aren't you?"

The question was shrewd and direct. There was nothing coy about the wife of Corey Rannigan. "Yes, I am," Virginia admitted forthrightly. "I suppose we have to be nuts, but who cares!"

"Seeing your back, and those handcuffs, and you – Mmmmmmm, I'm on fire!" Jasmine sank noisily to the stone. "Come on, I'm sure we can make love somehow. A sixty-nine with you on top. I'm so glad Stephanie popped you in here. I was wondering if I should play with myself."

They giggled and wriggled like kittens, cheating their chains by ardent ingenuity and avid tongues, radiating heat and musk. After the last gasp and sigh they slept.

Their day was alive with laughter. It was as though their nakedness radiated light in the gloom. The dungeon became, for them, a trysting place, a bower of feminine passion. They discovered, quaintly, that of the two of them, and in spite of her weight of chains, Jasmine had the greater freedom. A girl with her hands behind her back can do little. The two girls giggled away their handicaps and performed for each other such female rites as their lithe flexibility made possible. At night they slumbered in deep satiety, heating the stone on which they were forced to lay.

Sometimes they talked. In one such time Jasmine exhibited a rare anxiety. "Darling, poor dear Corey . . . . I often think about him."

"And I think about James Thorsen."

They eyed each other solemnly without heartbreak. They knelt naked on the stone, their breasts glistening from the laving of their lips. "I've put hickeys all over you," Jasmine giggled.

"No more than I've put on you." Virginia eyed her work with pride. "But you're thinking we ought to do something?"

"What can we do?"

"I think Jazrawi might let us send a letter."

"You mean, telling them to lay off? That we're quite happy the way we are, thank you. To just forget us?"

"It would be the kindest thing." Virginia wrinkled her brow. "Stephanie and I talked about it. The trouble is they'd think we wrote it under coercion."

"Could Stephanie go and talk to them?"

"They wouldn't believe her." Virginia wriggled her shoulders in frustration. "I could go – Yes, honest, I could! But I'm not going to be disloyal to Jazrawi – and I'm scared they'd hang on to me some way . . . ." She shrugged resignedly. "What we're up against is an excess of nobility, good intentions."

"I suppose the three of us are an outrageous trio." Jasmine's eyes sparkled. "Isn't it nice! But I'd like to put Corey out of his misery." She cocked an arched eyebrow. "I wonder if our Master could donate some dumpy little slave girl – you know, a real cheap one – to go and comfort him and maybe make him understand."

"No Caucasian male is ever going to understand you and me in here." Virginia clinked her handcuffs. "They'd all have kittens at the mere sight of those chains on you."

"Your pussy hair's all glistening again."

"So is yours – and if your nipples stand up any more they'll pop."

"I'm exhausted. I can't possibly make love again for at least ten minutes."

Virginia sighed. "We're the realists. I wouldn't have thought so once. Slavery's made me a woman. Poor James!"

"Mmmmmmm, I'm wondering about being sold." Jasmine grinned at her fellow captive. "Wouldn't it be awful to be bought by some kind old geezer who just wanted to give us a good home and sleep with us once a month when his Moslem wives gave him a night off!"

"Being sold's a lottery." Virginia wrinkled her nose. "Best not worry about it." She laughed. "That's one of the good things. What is done to us is done to us, we don't have anything to say about it."

"I hope I get bought by a real horny guy. Corey wasn't all that enterprising."

"Stephanie told me we could get purchased by a woman. She says they're the crudest."

"Mmmmmmmm! I wish we could both be purchased by Stephanie and go on like this forever."

"Jasmine, you're insatiable. What you need . . . ."

Virginia broke off short. They key had turned in the door lock with a resounding snap. Both prisoners turned expectantly.

It was Stephanie. A wide-eyed Stephanie, panting. Leaving an open door, and without a word, she hastened to unlock Virginia's handcuffs. Pressing a key into a startled hand she said urgently, "Help me get Jasmine lose. Then, both of you, run like hell and get dressed. We're in trouble."

Stephanie's perturbation prohibited chatter. The girls busied themselves with keys and anklets. Shining steel bands fell away from Jasmine's flesh. Two naked girls stood erect, their eyes questioning.

"But, Stephanie, what the . . . !"

"It's the Army. They've taken Jazrawi. They're going to execute him. And there's the police . . . . We're all arrested!"

Chapter Ten

The Ropes of Rabbah

No one could doubt the sincerity of Captain Mussa's sigh. It held apology. "I have no choice," he said sadly. "Forgive the handcuffs – and whatever else must happen . . . ."

With hands behind their back, the three women stood respectfully before his desk. They shared their own self-pity with this well intentioned officer of a regime suddenly berserk.

"I think we understand, Captain," Stephanie Pitfield consoled. "Just be as kind to us as you're allowed to be."

The Captain motioned irritably. "Allowed is the word. I am not allowed, I am ordered. Miss Pitfield, I am shamed by what must be done to you."

"Will it be worse than last time?" Virginia asked wanly.

Another deprecating wave of a hand. The Captain leant back in his chair disgustedly. "The man must be insane," he confided. "I could be executed for saying that, so I say it only to you. Our leader, the Hadji, has now declared war on all who deal in women, and what is worse, upon the women themselves. He labels them whores."

Three pairs of female hands tugged at handcuffs while their owners waited in dismay. Captain Mussa resumed his lament.

"Slavery and slave trading, in the manner of Jazrawi's operation, has been an institution in this part of the world from the very beginning. There are many such as he, though Jazrawi is the most reputable and esteemed of all. Of late years it has functioned out of sight; what you would call underground. But it has flourished. The oil money has made possible the buying and selling of the quality of yourselves."

"Gee thanks . . . !" Jasmine sounded miffed.

"I can appreciate your dolor, Mrs. Rannigan. This is your second time around. But, to continue, our leader, who I fear suffers from a pathological antipathy for females, has chosen the slave trade in much the manner in which Hitler used the Jews. He will make dramatic headlines by cruelties to a segment of society no one is going to be too much

concerned about. I understand the consulates are making representations to the United Nations, but nothing will come of that except debate. The traders themselves are being arrested and will be executed without trial. My friend Jazrawi – my heart bleeds."

Three girls surveyed a bleak vista. "What about us?" Jasmine asked hopelessly.

"I do not yet know. For the time being you are to be held in prison. I do not think you will be executed. The Hadji will most likely think up something distressingly dramatic. He has a flair for showmanship, and is not adverse to using sex for publicity. Keeping the rabble pleasantly excited buys votes."

"Thank you for telling us." Stephanie was awkwardly polite.

"Does that Rabbah woman get a go at me again?" Jasmine asked disgustedly.

"I fear so, Mrs. Rannigan. She has received instructions from authorities above my own . . . but I will intervene in anything too drastic. And now . . . ." His finger reached for the button.

"Three pretty girls. Two old friends. Is nice!" Rabbah pushed open the cell door and watched three disconsolate young women pass through to behind the bars. "Three pretty whores . . . !"

"Rabbah, you know better . . . ."

"Our leader say you whores – you whores. Very bad girls."

"Have it your way. Look, Rabbah, do we have to have our hands behind our backs?"

"I take you one at a time. I hose you. Afterwards no handcuffs." The wardress grinned at Jasmine. "You first."

"Oh, shit! That lousy ice water . . . !"

"You come quick or . . . ."

"Okay – okay!" Jasmine cocked a warning eye at her fellow captives. "She's got a bruiser she can call. It's best to be good little girls . . ."

Singly they were hosed and robbed of their clothes, then returned to the cell attired in the brief wrap and belt. "Three safety pins," Jasmine exclaimed disgustedly, "without 'em we'd be bare."

The door clanged shut. Rabbah turned away but was stopped by Jasmine's indignant: "Hey! What about our hands? You said . . . ."

The wardress grinned amiably. "Rabbah forget. I go get rope."

Virginia guessed. Her heart sank. Handcuffs were pure comfort compared to bound wrists. When their jailer returned, all three girls eyed the loops of cord with dismay. This would be the beginning of the Hadji's revenge upon their sex.

"You stand still. You make no fuss."

It was strangely demeaning to watch Stephanie bound. She had been their mistress, their mentor and Jazrawi's aide. Now she was less than slave. She shrugged her bare shoulders,

resigned, stood erect, and crossed her wrists behind her back. They saw her wince as the cord bit.

"I fix you all good."

Rabbah fixed them all good! To complain to her was useless. They waited until after she had gone.

"We might be able to untie each other if we work at it," Stephanie suggested doubtfully. "Back to back, want to try?"

"Not me," said the former Mrs. Rannigan.

"We couldn't get out of the cell," Virginia mourned, "and she'd be sure to punish us."

"Huh, we don't need to be tied at all," Stephanie asserted. "It's just meanness. I'm so sick with anger I could cry."

When night came they had cause for tears. "Bad girls have bad time," Rabbah informed righteously. "Rabbah make hurt."

It was an honest statement of intent hard to contest. Virginia stood, dejectedly, while her hands were tied palm to palm and her elbows joined. It was a brutal binding, its motive not restraint but pain. When all three girls were similarly bound a grinning youth carried out the cot.

"One cot no good for three. You sleep on floor," Rabbah explained cheerfully.

"Please, Rabbah, we'll do anything. Please – not like this all night." Jasmine's voice was far more humble than Mrs. Rannigan's had ever been.

"I not finish. You stand still."

They stood in desolation while their ankles were tied.

"Rabbah, it's too tight!"

"Be better when you not stand. Now I give you shame."

The shame was swift. Three pins were loosed, three sheaths of cotton whisked from three nudities. "You see each other's cunt and tits – everybody see!" It was as though she had bestowed a gift.

The men came instantly, they must have been waiting. The staff! Perhaps even some of the inmates. They paused and eyed their fill of white beauty. There were comments and laughter. It was not until they had departed that Stephanie hopped precariously to place her back against a wall. "We can't stand all night," she wailed, "and I'm not sure now to get down without falling. But I wasn't going to let them see me make an idiot of myself."

"But, darling, if we get down we can never get up, not tied like this! Oh, damn that woman! And that idiot up in the hills . . . !"

One by one they slithered to the concrete. There was no thought of striving for freedom. The elbow tie defeated everything. Moaning, they edged together in a corner and tried to sleep. There was nothing else to do.

Morning brought busy fingers on their bonds and their jailer's grin. "Now you wear pretty wrap and nice handcuffs." It was not hard to figure; they were going to have a

visitor. Since they were now handcuffed in front, they spent a relieved hour massaging each other's rope burns.

It was Captain Mussa. He held a sheet of floridly engraved paper. Waving it at them, he said sadly, "It is not good news."

"We hadn't expected any," Virginia told him helpfully. She felt sorry for him.

"This is your sentence. It has just arrived from the Hadji himself. It is my duty to read it aloud to you."

They waited politely, hearts pounding.

"It is not original," Captain Mussa apologized. "Our leader is a most conventional man. He has chosen the interior capitol city of Hagadar. I understand it contains a suitable – facility."

Virginia wondered if this was what was described as 'breaking it gently.' She was trembling.

"You are all to be whipped, a public flogging."

"But I've already had that!" Virginia was indignant.

The Captain raised a silencing hand. "Ah, yes, but the leader takes no cognizance of individuals. He has no concern with them save as members of a fraternity or a sex." He paused diffidently. "He has, however, decreed that any woman whose person bears evidence of a recent whipping shall receive, instead, the bastinado."

Virginia felt her stomach curl. She came close to wanting to retch. It was too awful! The soles of her feet . . . ! They were going to beat the soles of her feet . . . ! She gazed askance at her companions, and then realized that they too . . . ! All of them bore whipmarks upon their backs.

There was a shocked silence. Since protests were useless there was nothing to say. The Captain was embarrassed by their dismay. He took refuge in a further reading of the Hadji's venom.

"After the sentences have been inflicted," he paused and apologized, "I fear you can see this only as a hypocritical inconsistency. After the punishments are complete the women are to be sold at a public auction. The proceeds to go to charity."

"But then we will be whores! That's the sort of men who'll buy us!"

Captain Mussa kept silent. He had nothing to defend. Before stepping from the cell he turned, sadly. "Perhaps I should tell you, it may make your own fate less – awful. At dawn today my old friend Waleed Jazrawi and all his colleagues were beheaded in Hagadar's main square." He folded his proclamation and departed. Rabbah locked the door without comment. Even she seemed shocked.

"The son of a bitch!" Jasmine was no longer the concupiscent slave. She was the American Mrs. Corey Rannigan. "The bastinado! That's where they whip the bottoms of our feet, isn't it?"

" 'Fraid so."

"But they can't! It's too – too – it's out of the dark ages. They've probably rounded up

dozens of girls and women . . . ! They can't flog us all."

"Why not?"

"But world opinion! The United Nations! Surely . . . !"

"You heard what the Captain said. To the world we'll just be a second hand collection of females who probably haven't been any better than they think we should have. The press will be grateful for a nice sexy tid-bit. Can't you see the line: 'Delinquent Women Flogged in Public.' Or maybe: 'Islam Triumphs Over Loose Morals.' Nobody who doesn't actually know us is going to give two hoots."

"But we aren't scarlet women! We were kidnaped!"

"If there was a judge we could try telling him."

"But, this bastinado thing! Will we be able to walk?"

"I don't know, darling. I've never had it. But we'll find out."

It was James Thorsen who answered the question. He appeared unexpectedly, and was not allowed to enter the cell. He talked, angrily, through the bars. "Oh, sure, we've made inquiries. There's been other cases. None of them were crippled. We are told there is some small consideration given to females who get the lousy deal. It will be bad enough, but no permanent injury." He gazed in agitation at their distress. "That wasn't very comforting, was it?"

"Best we know."

"We're working on it," he hastened to assure, "but the only way we can do anything is by bribery, and the department doesn't like it."

"So we get our feet whipped?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" He stalked up and down outside the bars like a caged tiger. "Corey Rannigan's my only real hope. The department can tell him, but he doesn't have to listen. He's got the money . . . ." James looked sheepish. "I've got forty-five hundred in the bank. That's not enough to bribe a baby sitter in this screwball place."

"Does Corey know I'm here?" Jasmine asked plaintively.

"I haven't told him." Thorsen spoke directly to the kidnaped wife. "Do you want me to? I can probably arrange . . . ."

"Gosh no!" Jasmine's reaction was shocked. "Have Corey see me in a lousy cage! Handcuffed like an arrested whore! Wrapped in a bit of torn sheet! He'd laugh his head off."

"He wouldn't, y'know. If he thought he could get away with it he'd break down the wall."

Virginia felt sorry for the Rannigans. Jasmine's lust for submission was dampened now. But her emotional joy in her bondage had been too strong never to return. Half guiltily she looked inward at herself. Whatever battle Corey fought, he was not likely to win. Helpfully, she offered: "I don't think I'd want a husband to see me like this either."

"I'm seeing you." Thorsen looked her squarely in the eyes.

"You haven't kissed me." It was an evasion.

"Come here, you!"

They kissed through the bars. Virginia could not get her arms between, but James could. It was a comforting embrace.

"Would you like to kiss us too?" Stephanie asked pathetically.

Laughing, he kissed the eager lips puckered at him willingly from within the cell. He felt the tremendous need of reassurance in the prisoned girls, and was sad. He dared not tell them how little he, or anyone, could do.

"And what about being sold afterwards?"

"We've searched that out too," James said slowly. "If we knew where the auction's to be held, and if we could get Corey in there, we might have a chance. I'm told the type of person likely to want to bid in such a deal won't have millions to toss around." He made a grimace of distaste. "Seems like the Hadji's smear has lowered your status and your price."

"Isn't that good? I mean, for Corey?"

"Sure, except for two-things. We've got to get him in there, and then there's the danger Jazrawi did too good a job on his advertising. A chap in the know tells me there's almost a legend grown up about an incredible houri." He flushed. "I don't know which one of you . . . ."

"I expect it's me," said Jasmine modestly. "The boss was in love with the other two and didn't want to sell 'em."

"Then it's you he'll need the millions for."

Jasmine shifted uneasily. In this temporary absence of pain, and under the normalcy of James Thorsen's tailor, her libido was making its existence known between her legs. Dolefully, she appealed to her fellow prisoners. "Look, girls, can you tell him about me? I'm damned if I've got the gall."

Stephanie looked embarrassed. "Don't look at me," she admonished.

"If I could be alone with James, I'd try," Virginia said lamely.

"That's a fat lot of good!" Jasmine complained. "None of us are likely to be alone with anybody until some old bastard buys us and takes us to bed."

Thorsen laughed. "I think I know what you're talking about," he admitted. "Corey asked me questions, sort of fishing. I put two and two together."

Virginia felt an outrageous excitation. She had a mental vision of their wedding night. She was presenting a pair of handcuffs and James was locking them on her wrists. Hanging on the wall was a whip. She reproved herself guiltily and was glad he could not read her mind.

"Don't make a big thing out of it," she said stoutly. "It's probably just part of being female." Hastily, she added, "And Jasmine's very, very female."

Thorsen captured her gaze. "You too?" he demanded bluntly.

"A little – some!"

If it was the end Of everything he gave no sign. Awkwardness was dissolved by Jasmine's anxious wail. "Can you get across to him some way? I mean, tell him that if some oil baron bids on me let me go. Use his money to buy Stephanie and Virginia. I could just be lucky and be happier than going back to the States."

"No decent man's going to . . . !"

Thorsen's response was cut short by the ringing of a bell and the advent of Rabbah. "You go now. You had long time."

James Thorsen shrugged disgustedly and waved a wry farewell. It was only after he had gone that Virginia realized she might never see him again. The tears flowed. She hid them behind her linked hands and wept in a corner of the cell.

"Is good bad girls should cry," Rabbah said piously. As an afterthought, she added, "Tomorrow you be take to Hagadar."

After the wardress had dropped her bomb and left, Jasmine's bitterness overflowed. "Shit, we're sunk. Nobody's going to give a sweet F.A."

"What can they do!" Stephanie mourned. "What's happening to us is legal in this country. Who's going to buck that!"

"They could send in the Marines. Roosevelt would have."

"He's been dead a long time, pet. So's the British Empire. We're just silly girls who should have kept our cunts at home."

"That's the beginning and the end of everything, isn't it!" Jasmine mused in morbid eroticism. "We girls have got a pretty little slit in the flesh underneath our tummy, and the whole damn world tries to get in there – except Corey," she added bitterly.

"What about the ones who just want to whip our bottoms?"

"Oh, they'd end up in our cunts too," Jasmine affirmed in feminine conviction.

"And there's the tit men. Breasts are big for most."

"So, okay, we're a pretty package. All sorts of goodies for the boys. We even smell good – except a few days a month. We're the real reason they build bridges and towers and roads and go to war."

They argued and talked. Three lost girls keeping the ghosts of Hagadar at bay. It filled their day until Rabbah came in the evening with their cords.

"Now I make bad time for you, eh!"

They had no answer. They simply waited for what she would do to them.

"I no tie elbows."

They were without hope, but it was something.

"I do the hog-tie, eh!"

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" Jasmine had no concern for caution. "Don't be such a bitch, Rabbah. Look, be nice to us tonight and I'll suck your cunt."

Rabbah recoiled. "You bad girl for sure! Rabbah has husband for such things. Rabbah punish. You get elbow tie too."

Virginia and Stephanie watched the cruelty. They had never felt more impotent. Soon their turn would come. Jasmine was crying now, but standing erect for her arms to be bound. Rabbah's cords captured and noosed the slender wrists, then the elbows. Their indrawn breaths were in sympathy with Jasmine's wince as the cords bit.

"Rabbah, can I say I'm sorry? Apologize?"

"It make no difference."

It was agonizing to watch the beauty of Jasmine slip to its knees and then lay its breasts upon the stone.

"Rabbah, please . . . ! I'm sorry – I'm sorry!"

"Is good bad girl sorry. By morning very sorry."

It was hateful to watch; this intentional cruelty to something so beautiful. A cord snared wrists and ankles and drew tight. Jasmine was lissom and flexible. The cord was drawn tight and knotted. She reposed, arched, her weight upon tummy and breasts. She rolled sideways, gasping. "Oh, Rabbah, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts . . . !"

Stephanie and Virginia allowed themselves to be tied. They made no remonstrance, even when the cord bit deeper than it need. They were being punished for a fanatic's dream. They were powerless to prevent the bite of the cords that would keep them hurting through the night. Their breasts hard against the stone they endured Rabbah's indignities, then fell sideways to seek a comfort they would never find.

"You be good girls now, eh!"

"Yes, Rabbah."

When the wardress was gone they tried to reach each other, but they could not move. Intermittently they slept.

The ride to Hagadar would remain forever indelibly imprinted on their memories. It was by truck, and some over-zealous patriot had come by inspiration. Six girls each side, back to back, seated. Planks had been fixed for them to face. In the double planks the half circles becoming one. A set for the ankles and a set for the wrists! Each girl positioning her limbs before the planks were joined. When it was done she sat with arms and legs outstretched and held immovably at wrist and ankle. It was immensely effective and immensely cruel. Stationery it would have been bad enough, but under the jolting motion of the vehicle on the dirt track it was a constant punishment to wrist and ankle and to the bare seats of the prisoners. Each girl looked at her neighbors ruefully and prepared to suffer. The ride took ten hours. By the time it was done cheeks were tear-stained and skin chafed raw.

Virginia suffered with the rest. On one side of her, Stephanie, on the other side an Arab girl, weeping. She pondered the uselessness of such suffering and thought, lovingly, of James. She remembered the dungeon and Jasmine's fervid love. She thought of Jazrawi's trust and Jazrawi's affection . . . it was all gone. Everything was gone! She was only a girl in a truck being taken to have the soles of her feet whipped until she could not stand.

She thought of the auction in which she would be sold. It was every woman's fantasy, for her it would be real. Hope is eternal. From it she drew comfort. Perhaps her owner would be kind. It was possible. She had been told it was possible. Resolutely she closed her mind to the other side of the picture. She would become a chained slave maiden for an old man's

pleasure. It was the best she could expect.

The jolting of the truck was too much for the safety pins. One by one they surrendered the scanty shields of female secrets. Virginia cringed as she felt hers give way and her breasts come into view. She was quite helpless to halt the fabric's fall, but she wriggled as best she could to aid gravity in persuading it to drape her pubic hair. Not that it mattered! They were all female and in the same boat – but eventually there would be men. Looking up and down the prisoned line she had never seen so many bobbing breasts at one time in her life.

"Never mind, ducky." It was Stephanie's whisper. "Your two are the best of the lot."

It was a small comfort. The captive girls sat miserably and gazed at where their wrists and ankles became a part of the planks. Their hands and feet were somewhere on the other side – lost! It was the most demeaning of all the bondages they had known.

Hagadar did them proud. The slave traders had been caught with an inventory of over seventy girls. Six trucks slowly emptied their cargoes of hurt and bewildered nudity. Some had rescued their safety pin and hastily covered themselves, others were yanked too hastily to the ground to rescue anything. Virginia guessed it as more than chance that it was the white girls who were bare, the others being allowed to retrieve their pathetic rag.

They were dealt with methodically. Immediately after their feet hit the ground soldiers held them steady while their hands were tied behind their backs. None struggled, they were too exhausted and dismayed, too stiff and hurt. They were herded into a wired enclosure, its heavy mesh and steel posts as implacable as iron bars. It was probably a storage place for valuable machinery, but had been cleared for the occasion. Its eight foot height and guarded gate made thoughts of escape ludicrous.

They were evidently on the outskirts of the town. Virginia guessed why. Even so, there were a scattering of interested spectators around the wire. Sanitary arrangements was a narrow, shallow trench over which they could stand astride and squat. There was no privacy, nothing but a thoughtfully designed shame.

But it was in the matter of food and drink that the Hadji's venom found its most contemptuous expression. A couple of long troughs were set ten feet apart. Into one was poured water, into the other a sort of mush, an unattractive porridge. They could eat or go hungry as they chose. If they ate they did so on their knees and without hands.

"Going to try it?" Jasmine asked dejectedly.

"Our hair will fall in. Look at that girl there now."

They dealt with the problem by kneeling for each other so that lost bound hands could fumble and tie the lovely tresses into an unsightly knot. Then they knelt and lapped up enough of the goo to keep hunger at bay.

"Look!"

Stephanie nodded to where two girls stood back to back, busily working with desperate fingers. They broke apart, one of them with hands free holding up the untied cord. Instantly, she went to work on the wrists of her friend. They were too engrossed to see the soldiers.

There were two of them, casually stalking. When the delinquents saw their peril they fled, but were trapped in the corner of the compound. Cowering against the wire they pleaded and cajoled, they tried laughter and tears. Both were white, both naked. The men stood stolidly until the rash pair fell into panting silence, then they motioned. Hopelessly, the girls held out their hands.

It was very simple. It would be effective to inhibit enterprise. The wrists were tightly bound. Each girl was thrust with her back to the wire. Her arms were raised until she stood on her toes., then her hands were tied to the mesh. They would stand thus through the night. Two white statues as a warning to the rest. No girl could help them.

Jazrawi's three slaves exchanged glances of disgust. As usual, Jasmine summed it up. "We haven't got a hope, have we!" she exclaimed bitterly. "Not a single fucking hope . . . !"

There was no answer.

Chapter Eleven

The Coffle

It was a grand march in Africa's oldest tradition. Long light lengths of chain. One end fastened round the lead girl's throat, five feet back looped and padlocked round the next slender neck, and so on down the line. It was a coffle of slaves, belonging to a century past. The seventy women whom the Hadji had labeled whores made an appealing and pathetic cavalcade for the edification of Hagadar. The citizenry was appreciative of the free spectacle. They cheered. Some threw stones. But this amusement was swiftly discouraged by the military escorts. The chained maidens were reserved for better things ahead.

Virginia remembered Beni-Dahran. This was even less kind. The chain and padlock were heavier on her neck than had been the rope. She walked between Stephanie and Jasmine. Stephanie, in front, was doing what she was doing herself, twisting at bound wrists in a fretful wish to cover taut breasts from lustful eyes. Angrily, Virginia stopped her painful striving. What did it matter! If she got her hands free she would be punished! And anyway, how silly she would look holding them up to cover what everyone knew was there.

It was a magnificent square for the purpose. Balconies and windows were at a premium. The freeloaders were marshalled behind roped barriers. It was obviously a holiday. The platform in the center was for the V.I.P's. Chairs were already in place. The national flag was everywhere. The girls to be whipped stood in helpless dejection in their bondage while their fate was bandied about by shouting soldiery. Gradually order became manifest.

For the girls to be whipped there were posts. For those to be bastinadoed there were two rails close to the ground, one for knees, one for ankles. It was all medievally functional. Within Virginia's tummy the butterflies fluttered in panic.

Every girl in the coffle was now stripped naked. Immediately there was a babble or argument. It had been assumed there would be few backs sufficiently marked by the whip to relegate their owners to the whipping of her feet. But it was now evident the whip had been used on most. Few maiden backs were without stripes. They came in varying degrees of severity, but most were marked. The Army faced a crisis – too many posts and not enough rails! Their officer met it with a personal inspection of female skin. Virgin flesh was hastily set aside in a group steadily enlarged by the inclusion of girls whose weals were not severe enough to meet whatever criteria he used as guide. Among them fell Jasmine and Stephanie. Virginia watched them go, in gladness for them and agony for herself. Her own inspection evoked a babble of enthusiasm. Her fate was never in doubt. Conscientious fingers examined the knots on her wrists and tightened them.

The binding and whipping of seventy girls is no small task. But Hagadar's day had been set aside for the gala event. The crowd watched happily while the elite guard worked busily with cord and rope. Street venders hawked Coca-Cola and dates. The chairs on the platform slowly filled with the upper echelons of the Hadji's favor. Virginia stood

disconsolately with a slack chain padlocked around her neck and her wrists hurting from a cord too tightly tied. Here and there along the length of the chain stood others like herself, their wealed backs and buttocks proclaiming their prior punishments. She counted up to fourteen. All were frightened. She wondered if her own fear of the rod upon her feet showed as vividly.

The posts were set wide enough apart to provide the populace with an adequate view of each girl's flogging. Braced from the top was a short horizontal in the nature of a gibbet. Beneath its far end was a metal ring from which the whipped girl would hang by her wrists. She was thus totally exposed, both for the lash and for the enjoyment of those who watched. Virginia watched, in a numb incredulity, as post after post received its feminine burden. She beheld the bare strained arms of Stephanie and Jasmine as the two girls stood painfully upon their toes. When every post was arrayed with its nude victim the marshalled symmetry of breasts and buttocks took to itself a strange and fearful beauty.

Binding for the bastinado was simple. Virginia was laid upon her breasts. Her hands remained tied above the curves of her bottom. Her knees, slightly separated, were tied to a rail, then her ankles to the one above. The soles of her feet gazed whitely at the sky. She could raise her head, she could look around. But she could make no effective motion whatsoever. Her feet she could not move at all, only her toes.

Suspense seemed of the essence. Nothing was hurried. An impressive V.I.P. made a speech from the platform. Another read a proclamation. The final irritant was a band. It played the national anthem lustily and with panache. The girls awaited their punishments, hurt and frightened and well aware their nudities were being discussed and compared.

"Miss Ryder, I believe. This is indeed a pleasure."

It was, inevitably, Mr. Kahffrah. He seemed genuinely pleased to again meet a former delinquent. Virginia strained to look up at him, absurdly grateful for a friendly voice. She searched for an appropriate greeting. "Hello, Mr. Kahffrah. Are you going to whip me again?" she asked politely.

"Indeed yes, if you would like me to."

"Well . . . ." How ridiculous she felt! "I expect I would – if you want to and – and – and it's in order."

"Have no fear of protocol, Miss Ryder. I am here by the leader's command."

"But won't you get awfully tired? I mean – seventy
girls . . ."

He was delighted by her naivete. "How kind of you to consider that," he said gently. "But, no, I am here in a supervisory capacity only. Those who will wield the whips and the cane have already been delegated."

"The cane?" The butterflies fluttered anew.

"A thin cane is used on the soles of your feet, Miss Ryder."

"Oh . . . ." It seemed an unprofitable topic so she let it drop. Her eyes widened in apology. "If you're in charge, Mr. Kahffrah, I shouldn't have asked you . . . ."

He waved a lordly hand. "Think nothing of it. I am honored by your trust."

"Everyone said you did a wonderful job on me last time."

"In that case it is only fitting." He gazed down at her tied nakedness. "I must admit to some pride . . . ."

Virginia was suddenly stricken. "Mr. Kahffrah, how did you know my proper name?"

Kahffrah enjoyed her dismay. "Ah, we know more than your consulate believes. Our secret police are not inept. But have no fear! A purpose was served for all, an intent made clear."

"You mean whipping me sort of rubbed the nose of the U.S.A. in the dirt . . . ?"

Kahffrah chuckled, pleased. "Do not bother your head with politics, Miss Ryder. Your innocence, from any angle, is assured."

"But I'm going to get the bottoms of my feet beaten just the same!" Virginia could not hide her bitterness.

Kahffrah was squatting beside her now, intimately close. He shrugged in deprecation. "You and seventy others," he pointed out. "You are a victim of history." He sighed. "It is to be hoped this will be your last exposure. You have simply been unlucky."

"I'm going to be sold?"

"Yes."

In a flash of impulse she pleaded, "Buy me?"

The Hadji's lieutenant shook his head regretfully. "You do me honor, Miss Ryder, but I could not purchase even your left foot. You will fetch millions. All three of you from Jazrawi will fetch millions."

"But how do you know?"

He shrugged. "I know. Believe me, I know!"

"I thought we had lost face, caste, status, by this public degradation. Who wants a girl with beaten feet?"

"Your feet will heal. So will the backs of those others." He smiled down at her, musingly. "There have come to Hagadar nine names I know. The yearly income of each is in excess of one billion American dollars. You three will not go cheap."

"Such men will stand by and watch us beaten?"

"The power of the Hadji dwarfs theirs a thousand fold."

Virginia's loins blossomed into a flare of heat. It was outrageous but it was so. Millions! A man would pay millions of dollars for Virginia Ryder from a London suburb . . . ! Humbly, she asked, "If I am bought by such a man, how will he use me?"

"Probably with kindness. I know I would."

"I wouldn't be whipped . . . ?"

Kahffrah laughed at her earnestness. "All men whip their girls sometimes, Miss Ryder. Remember, this is not England." He smiled down at her encouragingly. "I doubt you will find it too hard to bear."

"Will I find today too hard to bear?"

"Yes." There was a tense silence before he added an enigmatic, "Possibly."

Into a lengthening silence Virginia whispered, "Thank you."

"For what?"

She tried to smile. "I'm not sure . . . for staying with me and talking, I suppose."

"Surely you do not thank me for the cane?"

"Should I . . . ?"

It was his turn now to smile. Rising to his feet he gazed down. Then left her with a single word. "Possibly."

Virginia watched him go. It was absurd to call him friend. He was going to beat her! And yet . . . ! With his departure she knew only a terrible loneliness. She caught the curious stare of the girl bound next in line. They exchanged sad smiles.

It appeared the bastinado was to be last. It was the dessert, the icing on the cake of agony, the piece de resistance in a feast of pain. The girls with bound feet would have to wait their turn. It was an extra penalty. Before the cane found their soles they would have to watch the whipping of fifty-six feminine backs and bottoms, some of them belonging to girls they loved. It was a piquant prelude properly evaluated by the audience.

Seven men with whips! Fifty-six naked girls in a line of taut expectancy! A bugle blared in triumph. The first of the executioners positioned himself behind a naked back, his arm swung lustily. A girl screamed.

Eight lashes! One each on the back of eight girls as the whipper moved leisurely down the line. Then the second of the punishers cutting the first girl with her second stroke, and on in sequence. At intervals of eight the seven whips took up their task so that each nudity must writhe and wait while seven of her sisters received their weal before her own back, in its turn, received its cut. Reaching the end of the line the first whipper made a leisurely return to girl one at the starting point. A table with liquid refreshment waited to reward his labor before he resumed his place in the procession. It was orderly and well staged to keep both the girls and their audience tense, alert and in suspense. A long drawn out pleasure, except for those who bore the pain.

The fourteen maidens who awaited the bastinado watched or hid their eyes according to their natures. Virginia could not combat a compelling fascination. She had to see – she had to! Stephanie and Jasmine stood on their toes within her range of vision, nakedly awaiting their stripes on backs already marked. They teetered and swung against the hurt of their wrists. Sometimes they turned to gaze back at her and try to smile.

Few girls accepted their lash without response. But the diversity of response up and down the line made a kaleidoscope of flashing legs, twisting torsos and flailing feet; a colorful pattern of motion. Some gasped under the blow, some screamed, some moaned. It was a play in which the cast was immensely versatile. The audience applauded any particularly fervid attempt to escape the thong.

Jasmine and Stephanie screamed lustily and kicked with gusto. Virginia suspected they were putting on a good show in the belief that to play stoic would be taken as a challenge. She wondered, wryly, if she should scream mightily for Mr. Kahffrah – but then, she would probably scream anyway, and as for moving, she could not move!

The girls whose backs were being whipped faced a hazard. They had been tied, perhaps purposely, so as to enable them to twist and turn, or even to raise themselves from the ground by their tied wrists. The whippers were impartial. If they found a girl facing them instead of presenting her back they whipped her front instead. They whipped whatever of a girl was most handily offered. For the crowd it was a delightful diversion, for the girls an additional agony across breasts and bellies. No doubt the Hadji would be well pleased with Mr. Kahffrah's report.

Twenty lashes each! It took a long time and many screams. But even when it was done the whipped damsels must still be hung by their wrists to provide a backdrop for their sisters whose breasts were hard against the ground and whose feet pointed to the sky. The executioners retired to a well earned rest. Their place was taken by two fresh faces whose owners flexed limber canes lovingly in muscular fingers.

Some girls looked back appealingly at the men who would cane their feet, others stared glumly at the ground. _ In these inflictions there was no leisurely approach. One man whipped a girl's feet until she had received her quota. Then moved on to the next apprehensive beauty awaiting his attention. From the first blow the girls screamed piteously. The cane and the men who wielded it were without mercy.

"I will not make you wait and wonder, Miss Ryder. Let us get it over with."

Kahffrah had come up on Virginia's blind side while she was watching in horror what was being done to her companions. Before she could turn to greet him, the cane thrummed and struck her right foot. She screamed and writhed as though an electric current had galvanized her into frenzy. The second cut along the length of her left sole sent her into contortions of sound and motion beyond control. But her ankles remained securely bound. Her foot had not moved an inch. Both small soles offered them- selves pathetically for the cane.

A brief pause and a whisper to penetrate her moans. "Scream and struggle to your limit, Miss Ryder – please!"

It was absurd, a cynical cruelty! She was already doing both. Tied as she was she could do no more. Turning her head to question she felt the next blow slice her flesh . . . .

There was something wrong. It hurt abominably, but compared to the first strokes was a very ordinary pain. It was easy to scream and easy to writhe. But still . . . ?

"Louder and harder – you must!"

Suddenly she understood. Kahffrah was being kind. But he needed her support. She screamed and heaved to the limit of possibility. The cut of the cane this time was hard enough to aid her in her effort. Perhaps it was a reminder!

Mr. Kahffrah caned the soles of Miss Virginia Ryder's feet with care and precision. It was not easy to hit them hard enough to satisfy an audience, yet lightly enough to avoid injury. Virginia's pain was atrocious, yet as she screamed through it she knew she would still walk when it was done. The screams and writhings of the other girls whose feet were being beaten was continuous. It diverted some of the onlookers' attention. She was not the only source of erotic joy. The canes rose and fell in cadence to a cacophony of feminine dismay.

"Congratulations, Miss Ryder."

Kahffrah's words reached Virginia through a mist of pain. The soles of a girl's feet are never grateful for a beating, no matter how kind its intent. Hers felt as though they were buried in hot coals. She felt pangs of sympathy for the others who had been whipped full force. She could only vaguely envision pain greater than she had received.

"Is it over?" She could not believe.

"It is over. You behaved admirably."

"Thank you – oh, thank you!" She turned tear-stained cheeks to face his grave regard. "How can I thank you . . . ?"

"You have thanked me. It is enough."

"But why . . . ? What have I done to deserve . . . ?"

He laughed amusedly. "I am not sure I know. Perhaps because you trusted me and were pleased to have my visit . . . . Who knows! Perhaps because you are one of the most beautiful women in the world."

The heat surged between Virginia's thighs. Kahffrah's tribute was a tender sincerity. For the moment she loved him. "Am I – am I really – that beautiful?" She was wholly female.

"Even more than I can tell. But now I must warn you. When you are untied remember – you cannot walk. You must crawl or be carried. You can watch the others and suffer whatever they suffer."

"Yes, oh, yes!" She strained to turn more of herself toward him. But Mr. Kahffrah was a wise man. All she saw of him was his retreating back. Virginia Ryder relapsed and relaxed. It was good to know she need scream no more, Her breasts nuzzled the sand, her cheek rested on it. Her bound wrists throbbed, her caned feet burned to match an inexplicable fire within her sex. But, joyously, in her mind she repeated over and over, "I can walk, I can walk, I can walk . . . !"

Chapter Twelve

Hagadar

Corey Rannigan was disgusted. He looked at Thorsen and Captain Mussa without favor. He sounded tired. "Well, at least this lousy hole – what d'you call it – Hagadar! It's got a decent hotel and civilized drinks. Let me pour another?"

"No, I've had enough." Thorsen was no happier.

The Captain held up a restraining hand. "Nor for me." He surveyed his companions sympathetically. He could guess the picture in their minds.

"Well, I'm going to have another." Rannigan poured a sizable mix and drank half of it at a gulp. "I'll bet I'm the only red blooded American in history to sit on a balcony and watch his wife get a flogging." He looked around as though for an enemy. "There she was, strung up naked and whipped! And I didn't do a thing, not a fucking thing!"

"There was nothing you could do." Captain Mussa was fearful of complications. Rannigan was a large and forceful man, and he had money! "Mrs. Rannigan was one of many. We must remember that. And we must remember the presence of the Army."

"Oh, sure! We remember it all." Corey turned heavily to James. "You enjoy seeing that gal o' yours stripped and having her feet whipped to shreds?"

Thorsen gestured as though blotting the scene from memory. "Let's not talk about it," he pleaded. "It does no good. I curl up inside at thought of what I'm supposed to be and what I am. But it's over. Today the U.S.A. took a shellacking. Let's deal with tomorrow."

Corey turned. "You sure we can get in on this damn auction?"

Mussa brightened. "You have been specifically invited," he said with satisfaction. "There appeared to be genuine goodwill." His voice changed in deprecation. "I cannot be sure, of course, the degree in which the thought of an American bidding on his own wife appealed to those in charge of arrangements. The situation is unique and – erotic."

"I'll say it is!" Corey was little comforted. "And all the high brass will be there, eh? The ones with dough?"

"I'm afraid so. Yes."

"Shit, I can't outbid those bastards. I've done business with some."

"There is a possibility they may show sympathy, a kind of chivalry . . . ."

"Good gosh! To think a man with the money I have has to look for pity from some oil-slicked sheik!"

"There is one other thing, Mr. Rannigan." The Captain hesitated. "I think Mr. Thorsen can tell you better than I."

Corey looked at James. "What the hell d'you know I don't?"

"Probably nothing. It's a case of putting it on the table."

"About Roberta?"

"Yes. I could never discuss it anywhere except in this bizarre nightmare."

"You talking about her ass whipped – and handcuffs and stuff?" Corey's voice was heavy.

"Yes. I've learned something of it from Virginia."

"Virginia's a damn nice girl."

"So's Roberta."

"All right! Put it on the table."

"Allow Roberta to be sold without contest. Use your money to buy the other two."

"You have to be nuts!" Corey looked from one to the other of his companions as though betrayed. "Sell my wife down the river . . . ?"

"She herself made the suggestion. It comes from her. Roberta wants it. That's the thing to remember, Corey: ROBERTA WANTS IT!"

"In a pig's ear."

"She even went one better. You may as well hear it. She wants you to let her be sold. Then you buy Stephanie Pitfield. She says Stephanie will make you a better wife than she ever could."

"And you get the girl free? I pay the shot?"

"That's up to you." Thorsen waved wearily. "I have no money. I can't do it. And I won't ask."

"This Pitfield, I've met her. She's special. How the hell d'you expect me to buy her for a wife – supposing I could?"

"Remember where we are, Mr. Rannigan," Mussa interposed gently. "You would receive legal documents with her. She would be your property and subject to your will."

"You mean I keep her on a leash!"

"You could. But I know Miss Pitfield well. She would not contest her status. I think that even in the United States she would not contest . . . she would be grateful. She is a young woman I esteem most highly."

"You buy her then."

"I couldn't buy her big toe. You know that."

Corey paced the floor. "You're serious about Roberta, and I'm not as mad at you as I should be. She gave me enough hints." He shook his head in bafflement. "There's just no way I can go along with her nutty notions. You really think she can be happy with one of these oil bozos . . . ?" He turned to Mussa. "Will the guy actually beat her every day and hang her up by her thumbs?"

"There will be discipline. I am afraid it is part of . . . ."

"Okay – okay! I don't want to hear." Rannigan slumped back into his chair and poured another drink. "Ill admit this has me buffaloed. And behind it all is the possibility none of us can do a thing. After the auction those three gals will be led off somewhere in chains and that's the last we'll ever hear of 'em. Right?"

"It could be so."

"You're damn right it could!"

"I have a small influence, Mr. Rannigan. Suppose I persuade those in charge to auction your wife first, then Miss Ryder, then Miss Pitfield?"

"How does that help?"

"Relinquish your wife. Do not bid on her. Your abstinence may be appreciated. Then concentrate on Miss
Ryder. If you are outbid on her there remains Miss
Pitfield. Perhaps . . ."

"You trying to marry off the poor kid?"

"I am trying to be a realist, cutting losses and computing odds."

"Hell, Mussa, we're talking about three of the most beautiful women in the world. None of 'em's going to go for peanuts."

"You have more than peanuts, Mr. Rannigan."

"There isn't any other way," James Thorsen said with finality. He shook his head as

though dazed. "Corey, you can pour me that drink."

"No other way!" said Corey slowly. "I'll be a monkey's uncle . . . !"

* * *

For Virginia it was heartbreaking to watch the removal of the other girls with whipped feet. Their agonized stumbles, their falls, to watch them crawl instead of walk, to hear their dismayed cries as they tried to stand. One by one they were dragged or carried from the scene. Her own soldier was kind. Perhaps he felt sorry for her. He simply freed her feet and picked her up. She did not have to act. He carried and deposited her in the truck. He did not untie her hands. All the girls were left bound. But only their hands! It was cynically assumed they would not run.

The cell was bare. Two pails and some planks. Holes in the planks told Virginia what they were for. Six girls, none of them friends. All were naked and shy about the pails and their use. They asked each other questions none of them could answer. They were fed lavishly and given a small pill which they gulped thankfully but without joy. A sudden concern for their well-being was understandable. They had become merchandise. All were beautiful.

There were metal slots for the planks. The first was fitted, and the girls told to lie on their backs and place their wrists back and into the half circlets. When this was done, and none demurred, the second plank was fitted above the first. Half circles joined to embrace the already chafed wrists to make them a part of the wood itself. Six naked girls in a row, their arms back and well apart. It was a cheap and simple helplessness. Through the night no girl would leave her bed.

There was more! Virginia reflected bitterly there was always more. When a girl was merchandise the world was filled with objects for her discomfort. Swiftly and deftly a soldier tied her ankles to rings in the floor, not too far apart but enough. Now she could scarcely move at all.

"They didn't need to tie our feet too," she muttered fretfully to the girl beside her. "This damn thing they've got our hands in . . . ! We couldn't get loose."

"I expect he'll untie our feet." The girl grunted disgustedly. "Then tie 'em again after."

The import of the exchange took a moment to sink in. When it did Virginia surged against the fastenings making her helpless. She had never felt more naked or more vulnerable. She turned in dismay to demand:

"You mean . . . ?"

"Sure. We're going to be fucked. The whole lot of us. Somebody's probably selling tickets."

"How do you know?"

"The soldier told me. Hell be one of them. The Army's going to get a reward for valor."

"And we've just got to lie here – on our backs with our feet apart – waiting?"

"Sure. Unless you've got a better idea. You a Houdini or something?"

"But it's – it's . . . !"

"Sure is, kiddo. Brace your butt. We're in for it."

They came in a group, boisterous and a bit tipsy, not quite believing their good fortune. They examined their prey and found it good beyond heart's desires. None of them in a lifetime would have rated a girl so beautiful. Sheepishly, they untied feminine ankles.

Virginia's fate was a smallish clerkly type, quieter and more serious than the rest. Thoughtfully he tied her feet and thrust them back against her so that her knees rose to encompass him on their side of the age old posture that is the beginning of life. Carefully he positioned himself between the warm thighs and against tight breasts. Virginia said nothing. Silence was bad enough.

"You gasp. You pretend I fuck."

It was as big a shock as Kahffrah. The helpless girl could feel no penetration, she could feel nothing. She understood his careful positioning of her feet. From either side her sex would not be visible. And anyway, who would bother to look! They were all too busy. Once again, the sibilant whisper in her arm from lips almost in the ear itself.

"We talk. Not fuck,"

At least it was a reprieve. She whispered, "Yes."

"I let you loose, I get money?"

This time her affirmative was more urgent.

"I found out. Men here. They look for you. They pay?"

"Yes! But free me now. I will get you money."

He treated her request with the silence it deserved. "Money first. You tell me names. I find."

Virginia named the three who could play savior. Her impotent rapist practiced them on his tongue. Urgent with unexpected hope, she pleaded, "But how can you free me? If you won't now, how can you later?"

"Not now. I lift plank, all six come free. Is silly. My brother work in prison. We fix real easy."

"When?" Her heart was in her mouth.

"Not tomorrow. Next day. Tomorrow I make deal."

It was logic she could not contest. Suddenly remembering, she simulated the spasms and moans of a successful orgasm. Other similar sounds and motions were taking place on every hand. Conscientious hands pulled down her feet and re-tied them to the rings. Once more she was stretched and helpless. Her ravisher made a vague motion with his hand and was gone. Virginia hoped no one but she noticed he had not removed his pants.

The morning shattered hope. The auction was to be that day. Virginia had supposed they would be given time for their wounds to heal, but a laughing female servant told her the bidding would be more brisk for a girl with cut feet or wealed back. It was a tradition. Sometimes girls were deliberately whipped or hurt before going to the block. It was an erotic tid-bit to excite the bidding.

The bath, the perfumes, the attendant, the cosmetics and the boudoir would have been pure joy elsewhere. Now they were a prelude to she knew not what. On the morrow she

would not be in the prison to be rescued. Virginia's only comfort from her mild-mannered rapist was the knowledge that Americans were in Hagadar – James!

In the process of being made beautiful she was freed of all bonds. She was told simply and sincerely that any escape attempt would be punished by both flogging and branding. It made her choice easy. She added her own skills to those of the maid to enhance her desirability. Black nipples and a scarlet cunt came as a shock, as did the final ornamental chains linking her wrists. But, looking in the mirror, she could not repress a thrill that flared her loins. A gossamer transparency of gauze was draped over her shoulders . . . . Miss Virginia Ryder was ready to be sold.

They had been taken to an estate beyond the city. The house was huge and stood alone. The auction room was not a packed and serried mass of sweating males. The company was relatively small and discreet; perhaps thirty men. The auctioneer was a business type who appeared to speak several languages. The girls were kept below, then taken up one by one as they were sold. But, by obvious design, Jasmine, Stephanie and Virginia were herded together and taken to meet their fate as a group.

Jasmine was first. Her experience had been the same as Virginia's, but there was no chance to compare notes. She was taken immediately to the makeshift dais and stood thereon in full view. There was no need for her to be stripped. Her ornamentation did no more than accentuate her nakedness. Her breasts and cunt proclaimed themselves. In the grip of an emotion she knew all too well she stood erect, nipples pointing, scornful of creatures who were only men. She was magnificent. There was a general gasping of indrawn breath.

Jasmine saw her husband instantly. He lounged easily among the millions. There flashed between them a huge question mark of a glance. Her heart went out to him, not in love, but in gratitude for all the good and secure things he had tried to give her. She felt strangely shy beneath his scrutiny. Corey would see no beauty in the manner of her preparation, only vulgarity or what he would call indecency. He had never understood his possession of one of the world's most lovely women.

The men who would seek to buy her were a mixed lot, courteous, reserved, grave. They scrutinized her navel, her pubic hair and her nipples with flattering attention. But it was detached, impersonal. These men were experts in what they dealt. Knowledge of her status as the most costly merchandise on earth sent the heat deep within her loins. Tearing her eyes from her husband, she cocked an enquiring eyebrow at the auctioneer. He understood instantly, returning her the slightest of nods. In a welling libidinousness, the woman who had been Roberta Rannigan cut the knot to separate her life.

It was no strip, no tease. It was pure beauty, the epitome of Woman. Jasmine knew herself, and imparted her knowledge to the men below. She moved but little, yet the movement she did make slowly revealed every crease and crevice, every curve and plane of her loveliness. When her pelvis protruded her cunt it was not obscene, nor was there lust in the jutting of her breasts. When her loosely chained hands rose to lift and splay out her hair her attributes became a living flame. The gossamer fell from her shoulders to the rug. For moments she held herself thus, divorcing Corey Rannigan, sundering the past. She was Jasmine, Jasmine, Jasmine . . . ! She adored the name. She adored her nakedness. Negligently, half smiling, she slowly turned to give the watching men a full and unrestricted view of her wealed back and the stripes across the sweet curves of her derriere. Tautly on her toes she flexed her deltoid muscles and swayed gently from the hips. The moment was electric. She turned to face the men. Mrs. Roberta Rannigan was now ready to be sold.

It was not noisy but there was tension. Most bids were by nod or a raised finger which Jasmine found hard to follow. She remembered the well meant words of the serving girl: "The one who bids may not be he who buys." It was like being blindfolded and picking a number.

It began at one million and rapidly progressed to two. Jasmine was grateful to the auctioneer for delivering half his patter in English. A slave girl likes to know her worth. She stood insolently, chained hands clasped behind her neck, eyes roving impudently over those who made the signs by which her life henceforth would be shaped. It was not until her price went beyond six million that the auctioned slave looked again at her husband. Corey Rannigan had not made a bid. It was not until she was sold for twelve million five hundred thousand that he bestowed on her one single agonized glance, then looked away. It was the last she saw of him.

The price was dazzling, incredible. Jasmine was dazed and trembling with pride and lust and feminine lubricity. Absurdly, she had not seen the final motion. A severe, lean, middle-aged man who she instantly dubbed an accountant took charge of her with quiet authority. Outside the auction chamber two women waited, dark-eyed and curious. With infinite respect they unlocked one wristlet and locked both hands behind her back. They draped a light cloak over her nakedness and led her to the waiting car. It was not a Cadillac. It was a Rolls Royce. In the back seat her ankles were locked with handcuffs. She sighed in ecstasy.

It was a dream come true.

Stephanie's reassuring hand on Virginia's arm was an anchor in a storm. "It's going to be all right, ducky. Can't you tell? We're not going to a brothel. Jasmine's got it made."

It was a hasty whisper before another hand led her into the audience. It was a diversion. A serving girl circulated drinks. Virginia recognized showmanship. She was to be well displayed. Rejecting coyness, she looked each prospective owner in the eye and archly clinked her chain. Her breasts pouted as did her full red lips, the black nipples were an instant success. In an hour she might be whipped, but for these moments she was Queen. She would never know whether it was by accident or design the guiding hand led her to Corey. It did even better, it placed a frosty glass in her fingers and disappeared.

"Hard to believe, eh!" Corey was numbed.

As gracefully as she could with chained wrists and a glass in one hand she placed sympathetic fingers on his arm and said what she knew to be true. "You mustn't feel badly. She's happy."

"How d'you know?"

"I do know. Trust me." She twinkled at him above the rim of her glass. "Remember, I'm a woman."

Corey shook his head. "You trying to tell me you're happy too?"

"I'm not as certain as Jasmine was. Right now I'm frightened."

"Who the hell's Jasmine?"

"The girl who was your wife." Virginia used the past tense boldly. "She was given a new name. She is much in love with it."

"But you're still Virginia?"

" 'Fraid so. Perhaps I was not loved as much." She faced him squarely. "Why did you come? It must be torture . . . ?"

"I'm going to buy one or both of you gals, if it busts me," he said belligerently. "Thorsen would have come but they wouldn't go for him. He's got no dough and he's political." He

eyed her dourly. "You ready to be sold, honey?"

Demurely, Virginia lifted chained hands. "I have nothing to say about it."

"I didn't mean that. Apart from being scared, how d'you feel about this whole screwball deal?"

"I'm excited. I know that must offend you, I'm sorry." The hand returned and led Virginia to the dais. Corey became another face in the audience. Insouciantly she turned her wealed back for them to see. Taking the transparency from her shoulders she held it at a distance, then let it fall. Effortlessly and with immense control she lifted one foot, bent back at the knee to display a bruised and inflamed sole . . . .

The first bid was eleven million dollars American. Virginia had used the right word – exciting. She should have been shamed but she was not. Nudity became her, she gloried in it. She was honest enough to wonder if she would fetch more than Jasmine, feminine enough to hope she would. The auctioneer knew that never again would he sell women such as this trio Allah had placed within his hands.

Corey was flushed and ill at ease. In America he mattered. Here, he suspected, he was viewed with faint pity. He was only a millionaire. His bid of twelve was quickly capped. At sixteen million dollars he retired. Miss Virginia Ryder was sold into slavery for the neat figure of an even eighteen million dollars.

She was not led away. The hand simply exchanged her for Stephanie. They looked at each other in incredulity, perhaps for the last time. When the exquisite Miss Pitfield smiled at those who desired her body, Corey Rannigan tried again.

"Twelve million."

Corey Rannigan did not buy her. Once again he was outbid. For the second time a slave girl was sold for eighteen. He stalked from the room, flushed and angry – defeated by oil. There was a flurry of excited whispering which died into disinterest when a dusky doe-eyed damsel was prompted to the stand.

He was not tall, dark and handsome. He was not an eagle-eyed desert sheik. He was Captain Mussa and Rabbah. "It is not as planned." As usual, he eyes them in sad apology. "It is our leader – but we can talk in the car." He gave them his familiar frustrated wave of the hand. "I have to ask you to submit to Rabbah. Do you mind?"

They minded, but did not demur. They were dazed. "I hurt," Rabbah promised amiably.

She was as good as her word. Virginia and Stephanie stood, gloriously desirable, the most costly females in the world, while she bound their hands and arms with the hated cords in the hated way. First the wrists, then their elbows. Tight, tight, tight . . . !

"Captain, there's no need. We could do what you ask! Please . .: ?"

"Ah, that I know. But this is orders."

"The Hadji again?"

"Yes. I do regret . . ."

"But we've just been sold!"

"Yes, that is true." He groped for words. "I am not fully informed. There are, I fear, what

you call 'the wheels within the wheels . . . ' At the moment it seems complex, but the orders are firm."

He was a decent man, wishing them well, but almost as helpless as they themselves. Stephanie twisted unhappily "Rabbah, you don't need to tie us this tight. It's beastly."

"Rabbah do good job."

"I know. But there's no need! Captain, please make her loosen these ropes a bit."

"I am sorry!"

They were hustled to the car.

"I will reassure you at the start about Mrs. Rannigan." The Captain was obviously relieved to have some good news. "Mrs. Rannigan is not involved in this – incident. She is now safely away to her new life."

"Who bought her?"

"His name does not matter. He is wealthy and of certain – tendencies. I was aware of them and was able to inform him of Mrs. Rannigan's, er . . . psyche. Is that the word?"

"I expect it will do. Captain, I know I'm a bore, but these ropes hurt something fierce!"

"Rabbah is most conscientious."

"She should take up torture for a living."

"You very rude." Rabbah was indignant. She lifted their ankles on to her lap, one pair at a time, and bound them with venom. "Rabbah nice. You both bad girls."

The naked captives exchanged glances of desolation. In the moonlight the desert sped past on either side. They dared not speak again of their pain . . . . Rabbah would think of something! Virginia was close to tears. Her bound arms were thrust into the corner of expensive upholstery. They hurt outrageously as did her ankles.

"Can't you tell us anything, Captain?" she asked plaintively.

"You are about to meet the Hadji."

It was a bombshell. But despite their frantic questioning he would say no more.

Beyond the windows of the car the speeding desert showed a desolation to match their own.

"You be hurt much bad," said Rabbah happily.

It was a sizable tent. There were two sentries. It stood lonely in the moonlight, holding only menace. There was a truck and a car. Inside there was no Eastern splendor, only sand and, incongruously, an office desk. Behind it sat a man.

They had seen his pictures in the papers: hollow-eyed and ageless. He was of the past, a reincarnation out of the centuries. The Haik he wore separated him. His English was correct – without warmth.

"I wished to look at you."

The two captives kept an uncertain silence.

"I understand you have been whipped. Turn around."

They displayed their backs. Virginia gave him a bonus by raising her whipped foot.

"Hmmmmm!" It was as though a shopkeeper had offered inferior goods. "Can you understand that you are filth?"

"We are innocent. We have done nothing."

"You are women – whores."

"Our governments – the consulates . . . !"

"Trash! I spit on them." Bored, the Hadji clapped his hands. To the responding sentry he spoke swift Arabic. The man departed.

"We are not whores! We just aren't! Please!"

"Has no man pierced you?"

They were silent, discomforted, guilty!

"You see! You are whores! You are a shame in Islam."

"We were kidnaped, made slaves. We have just been sold."

He waved it aside. "I know your histories. It shames our manhood."

"But what can we do? We're so helpless."

The Hadji's words dripped acid. "You can ply your trade." He turned to Mussa. "Captain, if you wish to sit in the car I will understand."

It happened very quickly. The Captain went, two soldiers came. The Hadji's words were crisp. "These are the two most costly whores in Islam – fuck them!"

Upon her back on the sand, unable to extricate her bound arms, arching her back to accommodate her tied elbows, Virginia knew the spread legs of her nakedness obscene. The Hadji's dark eyes took note of her cunt and of Stephanie's. She could feel his loathing. When her soldier mounted and penetrated her she closed her eyes. The pumping thrusts easily brought the Army into orgasm. But for the girls there was none.

"They are whores. Pay them"

Two grinning soldiers parted with two large coins, thrusting them deep into the two used cunts. When they left the Captain returned.

"You may rise."

Virginia and Stephanie struggled to their feet, utterly shamed.

"What has been done to you?"

"We have been fucked."

"Why were you fucked?"

"Because we are whores."

"Now you will be whipped."

"But we have been whipped – terribly!"

Two slender posts had been planted. To Virginia they looked familiar. Relieved of Rabbah's cords, she embraced one of them and had her crossed wrists retired on the other side. The Hadji had evidently lost interest. He remained in the tent with the Captain. It was Rabbah who instructed the military. "You whip them good."

The men whipped them good. But Rabbah insisted. "Harder! Much hurt! Get arse and between legs."

The soldiers were happy in their work. The girls were not. Tied as they were they had some freedom. It was an enemy. Whatever their twist or gyration it achieved no more than to expose one more feminine secret to the thong. In desperate agony they hugged their posts, fearful to move. The whips cut at their flesh relentlessly, seeking the tenderness they could not hide. It was not until they began to slump against their bonds that the blows ceased.

The soldiers resumed sentry duty. Rabbah released the two sobbing nudities. "You go inside. You show backs and arse."

Virginia and Stephanie went into the tent and displayed their flayed skin. There was blood, One flogging on top of another had been too much for maiden flesh. They stood before the fierce eyes, naked and depleted.

"What has been done to you?"

"We have been whipped."

"Why were you whipped?"

"Because we are whores."

"Return to Rabbah."

Rabbah tied them back against their posts, the wood unkind to their whipped flesh. Hands behind, waist cinched tight, ankles apart and bound with cruelty. Their pubic hair proclaimed their sex wantonly in the light of the moon.

"You no get loose," said Rabbah.

It was true. They could never free themselves from her knots. When the Hadji emerged they viewed him without hope.

"You have a choice. A brothel in Hagadar for the rest of your lives – or death?"

It was not a choice at all. Dully they condemned themselves.

"The brothel."

His voice was triumphant, a chant of Islam. "The choice of a pair of whores. You are harlots. You will not go to the brothel. You will die." The Hadji turned on his heel and

waved a command.

Within ten minutes the tent was stowed, and all its gear. Three vehicles roared away across the sand. In a vast loneliness two posts and two bound and naked girls stood starkly in the pale light.

"He didn't kill us . . . ?" Stephanie was dazed with pain and shock.

"Yes, he did," Virginia said wearily. "We're tied like this to die."

There was a logic about it – Hadji logic. They had been defiled, flogged and condemned to death. He had chosen them as the instruments of his revenge on womankind.

"But Captain Mussa – surely!"

"Poor old chap! He won't dare. He may manage to slip a word to James, but by the time they find us we'll be dead."

"It's going to be bloody awful, but we'll last several days."

"Will we! Jackals, vultures – the sun!"

"Virginia, don't! Don't talk like that! There is hope. There must be. Maybe we'll be found. I'd sooner be fucked for the rest of my life by a stray Arab than die against this post." Stephanie wrenched against Rabbah's work. "Can you get loose, darling? I don't think I can."

"Of course I can't! I can't, I can't . . . !"

Nonetheless they tried. It was in the midst of their frenzied striving they heard the sound.

"Should have done this right at the start," said Corey Rannigan. He waved at James Thorsen and at the eight men in battle dress with automatic rifles. "My boys! Piss on diplomacy."

It was a miracle! They were not going to die! Virginia, still tied to her post, looked at their rescuers in wonder. "But how?"

"Good old Mussa! He must have guessed. He passed the word. I gotta do something for that old bastard. He's a prince!" Corey seemed to have expanded to twice his size. "This is my kind of action at my kind of price. I can afford a war." He shook his head disgustedly. "Seems like I can't afford a gal."

"How about untying us?" Stephanie asked brightly. "Stay as you are awhile and enjoy the feeling," James Thorsen suggested sardonically. "We wouldn't want to spoil a good thing."

"James!" Virginia was blushing.

"Yeah! You excuse us a minute. I want to take after that skinny S.O.B. and teach him a lesson." Corey chuckled. "Might get me a barrel or two of oil outta the deal. I'll whip his boney ass."

"We can't do it, Corey!" Thorsen was suddenly the diplomat. The State Department hovered. "We can't go shooting up a head of state – even if he is a fanatical asshole."

"You can as far as I'm concerned," said Stephanie Pitfield.

"Yeah, me and my boys. Hell, we're loaded for bear."

"No! Dammit, I'd love to. But it's out, out, out!" Virginia loved him. But he would make an obstinate husband. She wondered if she should not take Corey and let Stephanie have James. But that wouldn't do either – Corey disapproved. Her blush deepened.

"Go and beat the pants off him," she said mischievously. "Stephanie and me, we'll wait."

"Let's get out of this blasted country," Thorsen said peremptorily. "The border's a good hundred miles. You may have a chance for some shooting yet."

"Don't dash off and forget us," Stephanie reminded acidly.

"Think we oughta let 'em loose?" Corey had become a small boy, teasing.

"We could come back in the morning."

"James!" Virginia felt enough was enough.

"You say something, sweetheart?"

"Nah, she's just sounding off. She likes it the way she is."

"I don't," said Stephanie Pitfield firmly. "Do I have to say please?"

"Mebbe I'd better let you gals in on a secret," Corey confided expansively. "You couldn't tell, but it was me who bought you both. Eighteen apiece. After you'd gone my boys staged a little raid and got my dough back – leaves me in the clear. Doesn't bother my conscience none. But I got me a paper. I got title to you both."

The ensuing silence was pregnant with male delight. Two bound damsels exchanged uncertain glances. They remained cautiously mute.

"I bought me a pair of slave girls, Thorsen." Corey Rannigan guffawed heartily. "I don't need 'em both. Take your pick."

Stephanie Pitfield cocked a wise eye at her new owner. "Is this our cue to be very humble – lord? How abject would you like us?"

Virginia's loins were on fire. Ravishment, flogging, rescue . . . ! All the emotions engendered were drowned in a wave of tumescence. She was panting, too choked to speak.

"Now that's what I call a cracker jack slave girl," Corey boomed. "C'mon, Thorsen, which d'you want?"

"I had been thinking of Virginia," James said carelessly. "But I don't like the sound of the way she keeps exclaiming my name."

"James!"

"See, she's done it again! Definitely a character defect – bossy!"

"All right! All right!" Virginia felt herself pink from head to toes. "I'm a slave and I'll do anything you want. Please untie me."

"Ill obey you both," said Stephanie. "These ropes . . . !"

They were untied. Everybody hugged everybody. Even the mercenaries got bussed.

"May as well get going," Corey suggested. "'Course, I got me quite an investment . . . ." He paused ponderously. "Wouldn't want to run no risk . . . ." His hand crept to a pocket.

It had the air of inevitability. Virginia turned around and put her hands behind her back. The warm steel felt like coming home as it bit her wrists. She hoped she could delay orgasm until inside the car.

"Well, if you're nervous about me!" Stephanie sparkled impudently and presented Thorsen with her back and wrists.

"There's a lot to be said for this," Corey said expansively. "Keeps 'em in their place. Dammit, Thorsen, you haven't said which one you want."

"I haven't made up my mind," said James Thorsen cheerfully.

Virginia Ryder smiled demurely. She hadn't decided either.

They went to the waiting cars.

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