

Academy Girl

Book 2: The Applicant

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CHAPTER 1

Amy finished blowdrying her hair and stepped out of her bathroom, feeling refreshed from her post-workout shower. As usual, she examined her nude body critically in the full-length mirror. She compared herself with the hi-res digital pic she'd taken of herself, awkwardly holding the camera out to the side aimed at that same mirror, a month earlier when her exercise equipment had first been delivered.

It does look like my tummy's getting firmer, she told herself, looking back and forth between herself and the picture. Abdominal muscles starting to show. She turned slightly to look at her backside. No sag left in buttocks. Glutes getting firmer. She turned back. Maybe my breasts are a little higher. Hard to tell.

My body doesn't have to be perfect now, she reminded herself. Or even next week at the Academy interview. Three years to get it into perfect shape. Dean Porter will just want to see potential. And commitment. I'll convince him I've got commitment out the wazoo.

She sighed and lay back on her bed, taking a rare moment to relax. She was surprised she wasn't more nervous about the interview. She smiled to herself. Nerves are for people who don't believe in themselves.

She tilted her head back to look at Miranda's head, on the flat shelf topping the headboard of Amy's bed, and rolled over on the bed to see her right side up. Amy gently brushed away a strand of hair that had fallen across Miranda's right eye. "You knew I could do it before I did," she whispered to Miranda. "I won't let you down."

Amy jumped slightly, startled at the knock on her door. She glared at it. "Who?"

Andrew's voice betrayed a slight annoyance. "Who do you think?"

She sighed, shaking her head. Could have been Dad, could have been James. Andrew always thinks he'd the world's only person. "Minute."

She decided Andrew wasn't worth the time it would take to throw on a pair of shorts and a top. She reached into her bathroom for the towel she'd used after her shower and wrapped it around herself, using one hand to hold it closed in front of her breasts. Out of the corner of her eye she automatically examined her bare shoulders in the mirror. They seem bigger, she thought. Maybe broader. I should have measured some things earlier so I could tell.

She unlocked the door and opened it, giving Andrew a sour look. "What do you want?"

Andrew's eyes went wide, his throat showing a visible gulp. He seemed to be flicking his eyes over whatever bare skin was available to be seen. Oh, come on, Andrew, she thought. You've seen lots of girls with nothing on at all. And have I acted like I'm at all interested? "Well?"

"I -- I..."

Amy blinked. Andrew was acting oddly enough lately, but it wasn't at all like him to stammer.

Andrew seemed to gather himself. "I was thinking you ought to get one of those genetic tests. Most people do at your age, you know."

Amy frowned. She knew about the tests, which screened for any known genetic diseases that might be passed along to one's offspring. What she didn't know was why on earth Andrew would care if she had one. She squinted at him, trying to read his expression. "Andrew, of all people who might need one of those tests, I'm at the bottom of the list. You know I'm going to the Hanging Academy. I'm not going to have kids, and I'll be dead in three years." She kept her voice low. She hadn't told her father about the Academy yet. That would be delicate. It was within his rights to forbid her to go. The Academy wouldn't admit any girl against her parents' opposition.

He shook his head. "You don't know you're going there... Amy." It still sounded strange to Amy when he used her actual name, in place of whatever demeaning epithet he'd been about to use. "You haven't even interviewed yet."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, thanks for all the moral support and encouragement. I thought you wanted me to go there!" The only reason she'd told Andrew was that she assumed it would be his fondest wish. She'd be out of his way, a slave, unable to keep any money, or any possessions at all other than a few personal items she could keep in her room at the Academy. All of Dad's money would go to Andrew. Amy had even pointed that out to Andrew, as if he couldn't figure it out himself, promising she wouldn't try to get something out of Dad beforehand and give it away to a worthy charity. Amy had hopes that she might, for whatever it was worth, get some help out of Andrew. So far, his biggest help had been not passing along her plans to Dad.

"I -- Well, I do, yeah. But you have to think about what happens if you don't make it. You'll feel like shit, and you won't want to do anything. You might as well do the test now, especially since it takes a couple of months to get the results. If you don't get in the Academy, then you can get some good news afterwards to cheer you up. You know there's probably nothing wrong with you genetically, and the tests will show that. You can get married, have kids. Life goes on, right?" Andrew seemed to become aware he was babbling. "I'm just thinking about what's best for you."

Amy choked back laughter. "I'll alert the news media to that. Anyway, if I wanted to, I could get married and have babies without the tests. You know they aren't required."

Andrew seemed to hesitate, not quite sure how to go on. Amy was sure Andrew was working hard to avoid giving away his real motives -- successfully, so far, as Amy had no clue where this was all coming from. "Maybe, but lots of guys want to see the results of the tests before they commit. You know, they've got so many women to choose from. They like to feel safe."

Amy tried to find a way in behind the facade by digging deeper. "Andrew, why could you possibly want me to get married?" She didn't bother to mention the obvious: if she did marry, half of dad's money would not only pass out of Andrew's hands, it would, in a sense, leave the family altogether as Amy started a new one with an outsider. That part of the fortune would remain with Amy's husband, forever out of Andrew's control, after Amy was eaten.

Andrew shook his head and repeated, "Look, I'm just thinking about what's best for you."

Amy sighed, seeing she wasn't about to get a straight answer. "Well, I appreciate that. Thanks."

Andrew looked at his watch, and looked relieved at seeing a natural way out of the conversation. "Hey, I've got a date. Anyway, you've got all this free time, now that school's over. Why not just pop into the clinic tomorrow?"

"Okay, okay, fine. If it'll get you off my back, I'll go tomorrow. Now get out of here and let me get some clothes on."

Andrew gave her something of his old smirk, looking at her towel. "You look dressed enough already."

Amy rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right." She stepped back to close the door in his face.

CHAPTER 2

THREE NIGHTS LATER

Amy sat at the long side of the big dining room table, seeing her dad at one end to her left, Andrew at the other end to her right. She was bemused by the whole scene. Her dad, apparently, had taken to heart that thing he'd read in a magazine a few months ago, about having family dinners now and then to "solidify relationships." Like a little hearty dinner talk every Sunday would make up for years of benign indifference.

She looked up as James carried in a steaming platter of meat from the kitchen. "James, is that Miranda? I was hoping there was some of her left."

James nodded as he set the platter in the middle of the table. "The last of her meat, Miss Cameron. I supplemented the leftovers with some fresh girlmeat from the market. Snuffed just this morning."

Amy stiffened. Frowning, she asked, "Can you tell which is which?"

Apology was written over James's face. He must have easily been able to read Amy's expression. "I'm sorry, Miss Cameron. It's all mixed together now."

Amy ground her teeth. Nothing could be done about it now. She reached for the serving fork, and speared a slice of meat from the platter. It looked like shoulder meat, and she thought there had been some of Miranda's left when she last checked.

Andrew and his father were in a conversation over some details of Dad's business. Andrew was going to take a management-trainee job with Cameron Industries next year. Amy wondered whether Andrew's seemingly inexhaustible supply of wild oats would be used up by then. While they talked, Amy took some salad from the bowl, ignoring the potatoes. She had been trying to avoid starches, among various other classes of foods.

As she swallowed a bite of meat, convincing herself it did seem to taste like Miranda, she heard Andrew say, "Amy and I went ahead and got those genetic tests Friday, Dad."

Amy looked up instantly, puzzled by the news that Andrew had gone in for testing himself. She started to ask him about it, but stopped when she saw the look on her father's face. Preston Cameron was positively beaming.

He pounded a fist on the table joyfully. "That's great! I'm really glad you two have worked out your differences. I've been noticing it in the last month or so, but this really tops it off. Marriage is a wonderful thing. It'll be nice to see the family start growing."

Amy looked quickly back and forth between Andrew and her father, confused. What the hell was Dad talking about? Then it all came clear in her mind, the way it all connected together. She sat bolt upright suddenly with a gasp, and almost inhaled the lettuce she'd been about to swallow. She coughed in a panic, choking, feeling James behind her patting her back. She could hear James ask Preston, "Heimlich, sir?"

She finally coughed the lettuce out, and held up her hand, and rasped, "Sorry, I'm okay, I'm okay." She saw the others looking at her with concern -- well, Andrew had that smirk again, now that he saw she was safe. She coughed again. "Really, I'm all right. It's over."

That was why Andrew was so hot on the idea of Amy getting tested. Somehow Amy had missed the obvious. Why hadn't she been sufficiently suspicious to begin with? Sure, a lot of people had the testing, for some good reasons that didn't apply to Amy. It's all just a voluntary thing. It's just for information, to eliminate some worries. The only people who were required to have it...

She rested her head on her hand, trying to clear her head, while Andrew and Dad resumed their conversation. Andrew had gone back to asking about Dad's business, aiming the tiniest smile in Amy's direction, daring her to bring the conversation back to its previous subject.

The genetic tests were only required when a brother married a sister. It ensured that they weren't both carrying a recessive genetic defect that would show up in the babies.

Andrew's been telling Dad we might get married and start a family together -- and now Dad thinks I've agreed to it! I've got to straighten this out!

She opened her mouth to speak, and stopped herself just in time. She realized, suddenly, that the conversation she was about to initiate would be difficult to complete without mentioning her Academy plans -- and if she didn't, Andrew probably would, especially if Amy was wrecking whatever scheme Andrew had cooked up. Maybe he wouldn't, but she couldn't take the chance. And Andrew had known that. That was what the little smile was about. He'd wanted to taunt her by talking to Dad about the tests right in front of her, knowing how Dad would react, and knowing Amy couldn't afford to say anything to contradict Dad's current impression.

Amy knew she should have seen the signs. Ever since that day, when she came home from the mall following her major makeover, and Andrew, for the first time in his life, had looked like he had the hots for her... Amy squeezed her eyes closed. The way he looks at me in my room from the hallway sometimes, so I started closing my door more often. The way...

Oh no! She almost groaned out loud, remembering another thing she'd been ignoring.

She looked up at her father. "Dad, I, uhh... Well, I'd feel better if I could lay down for awhile."

He gave her an understanding look. "Of course, sweetheart. Will you be back down for dessert?"

"I'll... uhh, I'll try. Sorry to wreck dinner."

Preston held up his hands. "Don't even think about it. We're just glad you're okay. Come back down if you feel like it."

She nodded, turned and forced herself to walk slowly from the room. When she reached the stairs, she took them two at a time, trying to be quiet so they wouldn't know how panicked she felt.

She eased Andrew's door open a little wider so she could enter. She tried to calm her heart. She just had to check one thing, and it would only take a few seconds.

Years ago, when Andrew had been -- oh, fifteen or so, Amy had started hearing strange noises from his room -- odd, breathless grunts, really. She had laughed when kids at school had explained it to her. Exploring his room later, her curiosity pushing her audacity, Amy had discovered, under his bed just out of sight, a magazine, turned to a picture of a gorgeous, voluptuous naked woman with such a clear "Come here, I want you" look on her face it may as well have been written there in visible letters. The next day, Amy and her twelve-year-old classmates had giggled over the idea and pretended to stick their fingers down their throats.

Andrew had never known Amy had discovered his secret vice, and he had stopped doing it several years ago, when his fantasy girls had been replaced with any number of real ones. Suddenly, lately, very quietly so that only ears that were familiar with the sound could have picked it up, Andrew had started doing it again.

It's probably in that same place, Amy thought. Old habits.

Dropping to her knees and reaching under the bed, Amy closed her fingers on a single sheet of paper. She turned it right side up and looked at it, and felt a sudden violent chill as she focused on the image on the page. It was essentially what she had suspected. Only worse. A lot worse.

It was a picture of Amy, as she'd anticipated, printed out of Andrew's computer. Andrew had taken this picture himself, and others, just last week at her high school graduation. In several shots she was beaming at the camera in her cap and gown. Andrew had suggested she take off the regalia and drape it over her arm.

Amy had been fully, though casually, dressed under the gown. She was going to be at a party with some of the girls from school that evening to celebrate, and had worn, underneath her gown, her favorite cute lacy top, showing lots of cleavage, and a short skirt, knowing nobody could tell how much informality the gown was covering, and not wanting to bother to change outfits before she went to the party. She was grinning at the camera, so happy that day she didn't care who was holding it. That was the picture she was holding in her hands now.

The knowledge that Andrew had been masturbating to a picture of her was bad enough. But he'd done a little bit of digital manipulation to the image before printing it.

In the picture, Amy was wearing a slave collar. Amy saw now that marriage was not an accurate description of what Andrew had in mind.

She had no idea how long she'd been standing there, holding the picture. She whirled when she heard a noise behind her. Andrew was standing in the doorway, glaring at her.

If he'd expected her to fly into a guilty panic at being found in his room, he was profoundly disappointed. In a tight, raspy whisper that owed nothing to her earlier choking, Amy said slowly, "Close -- the -- door!"

Andrew looked so surprised at her reaction that he actually began to back into the hallway. Amy shot him an exasperated look, her teeth clenched. "No, you ass! Close it behind you! Close it with you in here!"

Andrew seemed to be recovering some of his characteristic disdain during the time it took to follow her order. The smirk was nearly back. "Found what you were looking for, I see."

Amy took a couple of deep breaths through her nose, and spat out her words through a tight jaw. "Andrew, there is no way I'd marry you, and I'm sure as hell not going to be your breeding slave!" She shook the picture at him.

Andrew held up both hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Fine, fine, just keep it down, okay?"

In a slightly lower voice, she said, "Okay, I'll keep it down, but only because I've got my own reasons. I don't give a shit what you want."

He raised his eyebrows. "Is that what I get for offering to help you?"

She squeaked, "Help me?? How??"

"Will you let me talk?"

She stared at him, as if daring him to make a move and risk getting his arm torn off. "Go on."

Patiently, but as if he had to feel his way along that unfamiliar virtue, he started, "Look, I want the same thing you do. I'm probably just better at thinking out the what-ifs than you are." He stopped, waiting for an interruption. Amy simply went on glaring at him, so he continued.

"Nothing's changed... Amy. I do want you to go to the Academy. And you know why."

Cautiously she said, "Well, of course. The money."

He nodded. "Duh. There's no reason to lie about that."

"Like you lied about why you wanted me to get gene tested?"

He grinned and shrugged. "Would you have done it if I'd told you why?"

"Of course not!"

"Well, there you go. I had a reason to lie. I don't have one for saying I want you at the Academy. It's obviously in my interest."

She threw up her hands. "Then what the hell is this all about? Why do you want Dad to think we're getting married?"

"I told you. I'm thinking about what-ifs, before it's too late. I swear I won't say a word to dad about the Academy, and when you tell him I'll support you. But what does happen if you don't get in?"

"I *will* get in."

"Amy, get a grip for just a minute. All the girls who apply think they're getting in. A lot of them don't. *Most* of them don't. Then what? What happens when you get that rejection? Go running to that guy, what's his name, Scott? The guy you met at the mall? Get a little comfort from him? Get married to him?"

She sighed, exasperated. "I've been with him like three times. It's just for fun. He knows we're not getting married because of..." She stopped, blinking.

Andrew grinned. "Because of the Academy? Try to keep up, Amy. We're tripping through the what-if world now."

She raised her voice for a moment, then remembered to keep it lower. "Okay, I don't know, I don't know. I don't have my whole life planned out."

"You think you do, but only if things go your way. Will you admit you might get married? I know you want to get away from here. And I know with your money you can stand out among all the other girls looking for husbands. That and..." He looked at the picture still in her hand, and snickered. "Okay, I admit I think you look a lot cuter lately. Since you're holding the evidence. See, look, I'm being totally honest with you now."

She had forgotten the picture for the moment. She looked at it again, and winced at the thought of how Andrew had been using it. "So you're saying this..." she waved it at him, "...isn't your first choice? You'd still rather see me go to the Academy than get me in a collar?"

Andrew snorted. "Hey, I never bagged the babe in the magazine either. I'll live."

So he *had* known she'd found that. She pushed the insignificant thought aside. "Then I still don't get it. What's the charade with Dad about me marrying you all about?"

He shook his head. "I didn't say it's a charade. It's the alternative."

"What??" She didn't need to think about keeping her voice down this time. It came out as a hoarse croak.

"Look." His veneer of patience was starting to decay around the edges. "What I'd *really* want most is to roast you now, but you know how Dad is about that. He thinks a woman should have children before she's eaten. So roasting is not going to happen, not until you have kids, and if you have them with someone else, I'm screwed. I want you to be a slave, one way or another, because then your fate is out of his hands and all the money is in mine. If it's the Academy, then that's simpler for me. I don't have to take care of you, and convince dad I'm treating you well, I'm more free to keep doing what I've been doing, et cetera, et cetera. But if you don't get in the Academy, I can't take a chance on what you might do instead. I don't want you taking Dad's money with you to give to the first guy who wants to marry

you. Now Dad thinks that's going to be me. You saw Dad tonight. He loves the idea. You going to disappoint him?"

She looked at him sideways. "He's thinking of a more traditional marriage, isn't he? That I'd be your wife, not your breeding slave. Right?" She couldn't believe she could calmly discuss either possibility. She was just looking for a wedge to break the whole idea apart.

"For now, yeah. That's why I want you to volunteer to be my slave. He'll be fine with it, if it's your idea."

She clenched her hands into fists, crumpling one corner of the picture. "Are you crazy??"

He glared at her. "Let me say this all really slow. I've said I'll help you with Dad about going to the Academy. And I will. But I want something in return."

She knew something like this must be coming. But something still wasn't making sense. "I thought me getting into the Academy was its own reward, for you. Why do you need something else?"

He sighed and looked at the ceiling. "Why are you so..." He stopped, seeming to remember his promise to avoid insulting her gratuitously. He took a deep breath. "I do want that. As much as you do, maybe more. But you probably won't get it. If I can't get some guarantee that I'll come out okay if that happens, I need to look for other options. I've got another one, but you wouldn't like it. I don't like it either, but I'll do it if I have to."

She stared at him, her stomach twisting in knots. "Wh-what are you talking about?"

He met her stare, his eyes boring in on hers. "I've got names of some people. If they go into action, you'll feel the sting of a sleep dart, somewhere, sometime in the next few days. By the time you wake up, you'll already have been through the surgery to convert you to a puppygirl. After that you'll be sold to one of these people's clients. Most likely somebody who likes to break and train unwilling puppies -- see, there's a reason why these owners don't go through regular petgirl channels. After a few years missing, you'll be declared legally dead. See, one way or another I'm going to be Dad's sole heir."

Amy was slowly shaking her head, her mouth open. In a stunned voice, she said, "You'd never do that to me. Not even you could do that."

He shrugged. "I don't want to. I'd have to pay for the conversion surgery myself, and the rest of these guys'... services. I'd really rather have you in the Academy or else here as my slave. Either of those would be free. But I'll do it, I'll spend the money, if I don't get a guarantee some outsider won't end up with half of Dad's fortune." He grinned unexpectedly. "Isn't it weird? There are three different things that can happen to you, and I think your order of preference is exactly the same as mine, even if it's for different reasons. Who would have thought?"

Amy struggled to control her emotions. She hadn't lost the Academy. Andrew wanted her there. He'd even help. But the alternatives... She cleared her throat. "So what kind of... guarantee are you talking about?" Great, she thought. I said it without my voice trembling.

Andrew reached over to his desk and picked up a sheet of paper. "Tomorrow we can take this to a lawyer, and get it signed and witnessed. Look it over now, see what you think."

Amy absently dropped the picture of herself on his bed as she reached for the paper Andrew was holding out to her. She read the document slowly, concentrating on every word. "I, Amy Cameron, being of the age of consent for voluntary slavery, do offer myself as a slave to Andrew Cameron, the offer taking effect if I fail to be admitted as a student to the Hanging Academy. Done this sixteenth day of June..." There were spaces underneath for her signature, Andrew's, and those of two witnesses.

She tried to breathe calmly. Assembling the sentence in her head so she could say it without stammering, she asked, "And what if the gene tests show we shouldn't have kids?"

Andrew shrugged, a smile twisting the corners of his lips upward as he perceived he'd won. "You'd still be my slave. I'd find some other duties for you. And maybe do an insemination. Dad still wants to see kids. You know gene tests come out okay about ninety-nine percent of the time, though."

Amy stood looking at the contract for several minutes, silently. There had to be a way out of this. "Could I look into other slavery options? That'd work okay for you, right?"

Andrew shook his head. "Outside my control? With somebody you choose, who might decide to set you free later? Uh-uh."

"Can't I... Can't I just tell Dad I don't want any of his money? I'll just make it on my own?"

Again, Andrew shook his head, his smile growing wider. "That's not your call. You know that. Dad wouldn't just say, 'Okay, I'll cut you off without a penny,' just because you asked him to. And what happens if you get in trouble later and change your mind?"

There had to be something she could do. Miranda would have found a way out of this, Amy felt sure. Amy knew she couldn't tell her dad, not now. The time wasn't right for him to find out about the Academy. If she was finding, now, that she didn't know Andrew as well as she'd thought, she still knew her dad. His inevitable opposition at this point would kill her dream. "What if I... tell your friends... you know... our little secret?" She felt little hope her blackmail, so effective before, would have any use here.

She wasn't mistaken. Andrew shook his head and laughed. "This is too big a deal to me, for that to carry any weight. Don't bother using up your trump card on this. Save it for something where it'll work."

She closed her eyes and sighed. He'd thought of everything. Even that. He was right. She couldn't afford to waste it on a petty revenge.

Maybe she could salvage one thing, she realized. "While I'm waiting to hear from the Academy... no sex, okay? No kissing, no displays, especially in front of dad. And James is always here, and he'd probably pass it on. I want Dad to think it's more natural when I tell him I'm going to the Academy instead of marrying you. Like... the relationship just wasn't working out, and my heart was always really set on the Academy. See what I mean?"

Andrew bit his lip. His eyes wandered down to the picture lying crumpled on his bed, and over Amy herself, roaming up and down her body. He obviously didn't want to give in on the point, but realized Amy actually was making sense. At last he said, "Okay. I'll wait on that." His skepticism about her chances of Academy admission finally worked in her favor -- he obviously felt sure he'd have her eventually.

Marginally relieved, but realizing at last to her dismay that there was no more ground she could recover, she clenched her teeth, stifled a moan and said in a rasping voice, "Okay, I'll sign the thing tomorrow." Before then, she told herself, maybe she could come up with a way out of it.

Andrew grinned broadly and opened the bedroom door for her. He looked down at the picture on his bed again. "You've kind of mangled my picture. Don't worry, I'll print out another."

Amy muttered, "I'm sure," as she trudged down the hall to her own room.

She knelt on her own bed, alone at last, communing with Miranda's head as she did so often. Stroking Miranda's hair gently with the backs of her fingers, she said, "I controlled him a little, on the sex thing, but that isn't enough. He won too much. I'll learn, okay?" Amy sighed deeply. "It won't matter. I'm still going to the Academy. You'll be proud of me." She kissed Miranda's lips and dropped down to lie on her bed, on her back, her fingers laced behind her head. She cleared all thoughts of Andrew from her head, and went over her mental checklist in preparation for her interview, now just three days away. After fifteen minutes she sat up, reached up to her headboard, picked up a video disk whose cover showed two women locked in a tight embrace, titled "How To Make Love To A Woman," and slid it into her player. She had another disk covering male/female sex, but she knew that many of her customers at Academy parties would be women. As the disk began playing, she picked up a pen and pad to take notes. She wanted to have some new things to try the next time she hooked up with a girl at the club downtown.

CHAPTER 3

Amy sat slumped in the passenger seat as Andrew drove her home from the lawyer's office, late Monday afternoon. It had taken all her energy to act eager and willing as she signed Andrew's slave contract, mindful of Andrew's warning that if she looked as if there were any duress, and if the lawyer exhibited any visible suspicion that Amy didn't want to sign, Andrew would just take her to another lawyer. The signing, Amy knew, had to be done to Andrew's satisfaction. The alternative of being whisked away to spend the rest of her life as a stranger's mistreated puppygirl, losing forever her chance at the Academy, made Amy take her own role in surrendering her freedom very seriously.

The worst part had been when the lawyer's assistant had come in to sign as the second witness. The woman had looked over the contract, and on seeing the names asked Amy, "Oh, are you married already?"

Amy had forced a smile. "He's my brother."

The assistant had beamed at Amy. "Oh, that's really special. I was just thinking how often we work with people having divorces, with all the anger and loss. It's so nice to be part of a happy event for once. Did you always want to be your brother's slave?"

"Uhh, no," Amy had replied. "It's kind of a recent thing."

"Well, I'm glad you two can be close. One of my friends has a brother, and they can hardly stand each other." To Amy's relief, the woman had finally signed the contract and gone back to her office, waving a cheery goodbye to both of them.

In the car now, Amy reminded herself that the contract would never go into effect anyway.

It still upset her.

In her hand, she clutched an envelope containing her copy of the contract. It would do no good, she knew, to find Andrew's copy somehow, wherever he might hide it, and rip it to shreds. The lawyer had one in her files.

Slaves, of course, were often taken with no contract at all, and sometimes with little or no consent on the part of the slave. There were other ways to prove ownership, in accordance with various local customs, and it was rarely questioned in any case. This contract, unassailable as a fake for the good reason that it wasn't one, was mainly for Dad's benefit. It wasn't enough that Andrew could satisfy the authorities that he owned Amy. It would take more than mere possession to prove his ownership of her to Dad.

After a long silence, Amy muttered to Andrew, "I'd tell you this makes me even more determined to get into the Academy, but it doesn't. I couldn't possibly want it any more than I already did."

Andrew snorted and shook his head, his eyes on the road. "Wow, that hanging bitch really wrapped you around her little finger, didn't she?"

Every muscle in Amy's body suddenly was seized in a cramp as she whirled her head to look at Andrew, her mouth a wide O of shock. He could never have heard Miranda say that phrase! Amy looked at his face as closely as she had ever looked at anyone's. There was no sign of irony written on it. He had only used a commonplace way of expressing his perceptions, and gave no evidence that he knew what that particular metaphor meant to Amy.

What it meant to Amy.

Her entire day with Miranda passed through her mind in a flash, every word, every event, every gesture. The way Miranda had made the most significant men in Amy's life behave in exactly the way Miranda had wanted them to. The way she had brought them under her control. The way she had wra-- ... Amy suddenly didn't want to hear that phrase again, not even in her head.

And the way Miranda had somehow steered Amy, who before that day had barely even known what the Hanging Academy was, into a passion for attending the Academy that overwhelmed every other possible future ahead of her. Do I really want to go, she suddenly found herself asking. Or did Miranda... put that into me somehow?

Silent the rest of the way home, Amy threw herself through the front door of the house and bounded up the stairs. Flinging her bedroom door closed behind her, she bounced onto the bed on her knees, facing Miranda's head.

"Miranda! Is it me or is it you?? Were you helping me or controlling me? Did you see something inside me, or did you put the Academy in there yourself? Tell me! Tell me!!!"

Miranda's head was silent.

I can't do it, Amy told herself. I can't go to the interview. It's less than two days away, it's in the morning day after tomorrow, and I can't do it. Dean Porter will read me like a book. He'll know how confused I am. He'll know I don't understand where this need came from, the need to be an Academy girl. Miranda! What did you do to me?? Did you work your magic on me? Was it just because I was the last girl you'd be able to talk to in your life? I wasn't really special to you, was I? Was I just somebody available you could mold in your image?

Amy hugged herself on her knees on the bed, her face rubbing the sheets, crouched in a fetal position, her body wracked with sobs. Miranda, help me, help me!!

I'll just cancel the interview, Amy told herself. There's no point. I can't go in there like this. I can't pass the interview, not messed up like I am.

She suddenly realized she would be Andrew's slave as soon as she cancelled. She couldn't get in the Academy, and that meant the contract was in force. Her whole life was in ruins. Just days from now her brother would own her, he would have her body as he'd been wanting to. He would use her, force her to service him, would impregnate her, probably over and over for years to come.

She fell over on her side and, fully clothed, still in a fetal ball, she sobbed until she exhausted herself and fell asleep.

* * * * *

Her head pounding, her eyes feeling rough and red, Amy awoke. For a moment she thought it was still the same afternoon, but she saw that the sun was slanting through her bedroom window at a morning angle. I slept through the whole evening and night, she realized, not particularly interested in the revelation. Not particularly interested in anything. Her eyes wandered vaguely around the room, the only part of her body that wanted to be awake. She didn't move any other muscle. She couldn't summon up the will.

Tuesday morning, she informed herself just to summarize the state of the world. Interview tomorrow. For what it's worth. Something associated with the girl she had thought she wanted to be. It didn't relate to her now.

She didn't move at the sound of the knock on the door. James's voice came through the wooden panels. "Miss Cameron? Is everything all right? You've usually had breakfast by now. I don't believe you went to dinner either."

She sighed, trying to decide whether to answer. I guess I'd better, she thought. He'll just get more alarmed. Maybe food would be more inviting once I'm looking at it, she reasoned. In a croaking voice that added credibility to what she was saying, she called out, "I'm not feeling very well, James. Could you maybe bring something up here?"

"Certainly, Miss Cameron." She heard his footsteps recede down the hall and the stairs.

A few minutes later she was looking at a tray laden with a bowl of cereal, a fruit salad, and a glass of orange juice. No, she concluded, I was wrong. It doesn't look any better than it sounded. I have to eat something, though. She picked listlessly at a bit of sliced fruit sticking out of the salad.

"Should I call a doctor, Miss Cameron?" James was still standing there.

She shook her head, and winced at the ache across her forehead. "Probably just a little bug going around. I'll be okay later. It's okay, you can go." She hoped that wasn't too brusque. She didn't like to be rude to the only person in the house who seemed really to care about her.

"Yes, Miss Cameron." He nodded and left, leaving her as alone as she wanted to be.

She made herself finish most of the breakfast, since it seemed to be making her head feel better. The next fifteen minutes were spent in internal discussion over whether a shower would help. She finally shrugged and managed to creep into her bathroom.

The shower did seem to raise her energy level, though when she came out, she found it was still too depleted for her to put on clothes. She locked her bedroom door to keep Undesirables out, and lay back on the bed, trying to avoid looking at Miranda.

The thought came to her at last: if I can't have the Academy, maybe that doesn't necessarily mean I'm stuck with Andrew.

After a few minutes she sat up, as creakily as if she were an eighty-year-old man, and made herself go to her desk and turn her computer on.

She began searching online for all the information she could find on the laws of slavery. There were some details of law that applied differently to voluntary or involuntary slaves, though the bulk of the laws applied equally to both. She went from one reference source to another, trying to find something that might get her out of her contract with Andrew.

Several times she shoved herself away from the desk in frustration, only to come immediately back and continue the search. There had to be *something*.

She pulled her mind away angrily every time it tried to wander to the Academy.

But if I never wanted the Academy, a tiny voice within her argued, why do I feel this gigantic hole inside me? Why do I feel like the emptiness inside is exploding out to consume me?

Stop it, she told herself, we're not thinking about that. We've got a job we're doing here. Concentrate on that.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She had to lean back so they wouldn't splatter on the keyboard. Absently she wiped the snot from her nose.

Miranda would know what to do. She always knew what to do.

Stop talking about Miranda!! She did something to me! I don't know what it was! She... magicked me somehow.

Amy gritted her teeth and thrust the Academy out of her mind again.

Everything she found in her computer search seemed to weigh against her. She had voluntarily signed the contract. Claiming she had changed her mind later carried no weight. She couldn't show she'd somehow been tricked into signing -- the fact was, she knew exactly what she'd been doing and why. She could claim duress, tell about the threats Andrew had made if she didn't sign, but she had no proof of that either: her claim that Andrew had said there were vague "people" who would kidnap her and sell her as a puppygirl would sound paranoid, and would go up against Andrew's word that he didn't even know there *were* people like that.

Morning wore away into afternoon, and frustration decayed into hopelessness as the hours passed.

I'm going to be Andrew's slave, she told herself over and over. There's no way out. In fact, in a sense I already am, if I'm not going to the inter... *Stop thinking about the Academy!!!*

She buried her face in her hands. Miranda, help me! No! I've got to help myself. There has to be something I can do!

The thought sprang into her mind: the law is one thing, and Dad is another. If the law can't help, maybe he can.

He doesn't even know yet that Andrew wants me as a slave instead of a wife. Sure, Andrew was probably right, Dad would be fine with that once he saw the contract. And the contract itself was binding in any case, whether Dad liked it or not. But it wasn't in effect yet. Andrew, Amy told herself, will be expecting me to wait until I get a rejection from the Acad... from that place, before either of us tells Dad anything, and by then I'll definitely belong to Andrew. But right now I don't, yet. Andrew won't imagine I'd spill everything to Dad right now, and blow off... that place. But that place doesn't matter now, does it? Does it?

Does it? She kept asking herself.

Dad might be really mad at me. For not telling him I'd applied to... that place, for signing a contract and then trying to get out of it. A contract is a contract, in Dad's world. She could hear his voice. I thought you were more mature than that, Amy. She could already hear him saying it. Maybe you need to be a slave, if you don't have a good mind of your own.

But maybe he'd be mad at Andrew. Andrew had, after all, not been 100% straightforward with Dad either.

There had to be a chance of that. It was the only chance she had.

Her stomach grumbled, reminding her she had eaten only a bit of breakfast in the last twenty-seven hours. Her head was pounding again. She got dressed, and went down to the kitchen to throw a girlmeat salad together.

She went back up to her room after eating, to plan what she'd say to Dad. She'd show him the contract, of course. Maybe the picture of herself to which Andrew had added the slave collar, though that didn't really reveal anything but Andrew's interest in her as a slave, which the contract proved anyway. She'd have to explain the part in the contract about... that place, so she tried to decide what she'd say about it.

She sucked in a quick breath when she heard Dad come through the front door downstairs, and heard James greet him. Let him settle in, she thought. I still haven't figured this out completely. She decided to organize her thoughts by jotting down a set of notes.

Two hours later, she thought she had it. She did have to tell him about the puppygirl threat, as paranoid as it sounded. The burden of proof might be a little different with Dad from what the authorities would demand by law. She had a tentative order written down for the points she wanted to make.

Nervously, she took a deep breath, and headed down the stairs, with the envelope holding the contract.

Dad was in his recliner in his library, his dinner finished, taking out his one after-dinner cigar, a bottle of brandy within reach.

Amy cleared her throat. "Dad?"

He looked up at her, pulling a match out of the ornate box on the table beside the recliner and striking it into flame. "What is it, sweetheart?"

Amy's eyes were drawn to the match, still hissing as the powders were igniting on its head. Somehow, everything else in the world faded away, as if the theater lights had been turned down, leaving only the flaming match. Amy stared at it, fascinated.

The tiniest spark started that fire, thought Amy. All that energy, all that heat, has been waiting to burst forth since the day that match was made, set free now by that almost invisible spark.

The spark didn't have that energy in it. It just released what was stored in the match.

Amy's eyes widened, hypnotically intense.

Miranda was my spark.

Miranda didn't do anything to me. All of that energy, all of that fire, all of that consuming need to be part of the Academy. It was all inside me.

Stunned, she realized that Miranda had never once made anyone do anything. She hadn't made anyone want anything. She had only seen what they had really wanted, and by knowing it, by talking about it, had let the want come to the surface from within them.

Miranda hadn't tricked Andrew into "playing nice" with her. She had simply reminded him how much he wanted to impress his friends, and made him conscious of it. And that consciousness led him to act the way he did.

Miranda hadn't made Amy's dad slow down and take his time with her. She had found a reason why he would want to do that.

Long before Amy had known Miranda, before Amy had even known what the Academy was, she knew now that she had wanted it, needed it. It struck Amy, who remembered her one day with Miranda in exquisite detail, that almost the first thing out of Amy's mouth when she met Miranda was, "You're really going to let Andrew hang you?" Miranda could very easily have seen something in Amy's eyes at that moment, when Amy spoke that question. The fuel for the fire, for the passion Amy had never known was there, had been waiting inside Amy, like the powder on the match, from the moment she'd been born. Waiting for just a spark to set it burning.

And then she had met Miranda.

Now Amy felt the fire burning again.

She returned to the here and now suddenly, hearing her father, after a pause to light his cigar, asking again, looking a little puzzled now, "What it is, Amy?" She realized only a few seconds had gone by.

"Uhh, uhh... oh, sorry, nothing. I was going to ask you something, and then I realized I already knew the answer. Silly." She grinned.

Her dad snorted. "Glad I could help."

“Oh, you did. More than you can imagine.” She turned and raced back up the stairs, leaving her dad looking more puzzled and then setting the puzzle aside, with a “who understands kids?” shrug.

Amy threw the envelope with the contract carelessly on her desk and jumped onto the bed on her knees. She picked up Miranda’s head and cradled her friend tightly against her chest. Tears streaking her cheek, she said, “Thank you. Miranda, thank you so much. I understand now, I really do this time. I’ll make you proud of me. I’ll be the best hanging girl ever, and not because you want me to be, but because *I want to be!*”

She set Miranda’s head back on the shelf, and lightly brushed Miranda’s hair back in place. “I need to make sure I’m ready for my interview now.” She quickly sat at her desk and started making notes for herself.

CHAPTER 4

Amy reached for her purse, wanting to take one last look at her notes. She stopped her hand as her fingers touched the paper. I don't need it, she told herself. I know what's on there. She rubbed the folded paper with her fingertips, withdrew her hand and closed the purse.

She was sitting in the outer office of Dean Porter. The director of admissions, Ms. Bennett, had conducted Amy here from her office, leading her first to a heavy door that she opened by swiping a magstrip card through a reader. I'm in the student area! exulted Amy as the door closed and locked behind her, and Ms. Bennett started leading her through a maze of corridors behind it. This is where Miranda lived! And where I'll live, Amy told herself, until I'm sold to be hanged!

Amy was wearing the same outfit she'd worn when she picked up her application. She decided it gave the right message -- serious, not flirty. She closed her eyes and repeated the mental exercise she'd been practicing all morning, suggested by an article she'd read. I've already done the interview, she told herself. It went great. I'm remembering it now.

It seemed to help. Thoughts of Andrew, of the consequences of failure, were pushed to the background.

She jumped only slightly when she heard the sudden buzz on the dean's secretary's desk. Amy looked up to see the secretary smiling at her. "You can go in now, Amy."

Amy smiled at her, her heart thumping but not nearly as badly as she'd expected. I've already done it. This is just remembering. At the door she hesitated. I should probably knock, she thought. She did so, and heard a voice saying "Yes, come in."

Dean Porter was rising from his desk, holding his hand out, a smile on his face. "Nice to meet you, Amy." He shook her hand and gestured towards a chair in front of his desk. She sat, putting her purse on the floor beside her. Again resisting the feeling of wanting to look at her notes one more time.

The dean sat back down, leaning forward with his arms on his desk, but looking basically friendly, not at all predatory. "Well, Amy, I've read your application, of course, and I'm very impressed with your grades. There's one question we don't ask on the application, because I like to hear it straight from the applicant. Putting you on the spot, a little. Tell me, why do you want to be a student at the Hanging Academy?"

Amy smiled. She was ready for that one. During all her speculations on what questions she might be asked during the interview, that one seemed obvious. "I've thought about that a lot, sir. Not because I didn't know, but because so much crowds into my head when I think about it. The main thing is... a really good friend of mine said to me one time, that when I thought about my goals in life, that a goal is something I needed to find inside of me, and it should be the thing I want the most of all. I really understand that. It can't be something someone else picked out for you, because you can't stick with that. And I know what I want the most. I didn't find it by... sort of an elimination process, like deciding all the things I don't want to be and saying, hmm, what's left? I know it because I feel it everywhere inside me, not just in my head. It's in my heart, my fingers and toes, my..." she giggled briefly, "...my neck, that what I want, what fills me up with meaning and gives me a goal to follow, is the Hanging Academy." She took a deep breath, and smiled. "I'm here in the Academy because the Academy is in me."

The dean blinked, and smiled. "Okay, I'd say that's an answer." He looked down at a folder on his desk. "I was interested to see that you've participated in two hangings already, as a sub-assistant. At least I guess that second one must have happened by now, though it hadn't yet when you filed the application. You did go to that one, right?"

Amy nodded. "Yes, sir. That was for Beth Downey. And the first was for Miranda Warren."

"How did you come to be involved in those... oh, wait." He rubbed his head as if trying to verify his memory. "Cameron. Are you related to -- what was the name -- Alex Cameron?"

"Andrew, sir. He's my brother." In general Amy always wished she could deny a relationship, but at least here it helped her explain what had happened. "Well, my father actually bought Miranda, but he put her in Andrew's name."

The dean nodded. "So that hanging was at your home."

Amy nodded again. "Yes, sir. She did a really wonderful job. Oh, and Beth too, of course. Beth had so much energy! She needed all of that." Amy had been concerned that dwelling too much on Miranda might put her on dangerous ground. If it seemed to the dean as if Amy's commitment to the Academy dated only from little more than a month ago, that could call its permanence into question. Inside, she knew that in some sense, she had been waiting to go to the Academy her entire life. She simply hadn't been conscious of it until recently. But in any case, it was better to avoid too much talk of Miranda.

Porter chuckled. "I'm sure she did. I was just recalling that six men bought her."

Amy nodded, her eyes wide. "Four of them did her inside the tent, and two of them played her master and his chief slave captain, so she gave them oral sex right up on the stage while she was begging them to spare her life. Oh, I don't know if you know, she was doing the runaway slave scene."

He nodded. "I recall that, yes. And Miranda was the princess. So you've seen two different scenarios, not just the two hangings. Did you prefer one of them?"

"I wanted to wait on that until I saw more of them. Oh! That reminds me, I was going to ask. I noticed there weren't any Academy students at either hanging, just graduates like Beth to help Miranda, and Steffi to help Beth. Do students go sometimes? It seemed like that would be such a valuable learning experience."

The dean nodded. "On occasion, to observe, but meanwhile our students do get experience performing partial hangings in front of real audiences, at the parties. You know about the parties?"

"Yes, sir." Miranda had mentioned that one girl was always hanged to death at each party, but not the others practicing partials. Of course, at that point Miranda had been trying to explain why many students didn't graduate. "I can see that's invaluable, but I thought maybe seeing the real cream of the crop in the one performance they'd trained so long for, the one that it's all about... just seeing that would be such an inspiration for all the students. And they could really be part of it! In the Runaway Slave, for example, it seemed like something was missing. There must be some other slaves to witness the runaway's hanging -- that would be why the runaway's master is hanging her, so the other slaves

can see it and be terrified of the consequences of a failed escape..." Amy stopped and grinned. "I'm sorry, I'm letting my mouth run on."

Porter waved his hand, "No, that's fine. So you're saying students could fill that role, and they'd have the experience of not just seeing a hanging show, but actually being part of it."

Amy nodded vigorously. "Yes, sir! And the roles they play would add to the realism at the same time, so the audience could get even more out of it. In the Princess show, a student could be... the princess' personal maidservant, who is captured in the scullery with the princess, and she's dragged in along with the princess and cries as she watches her mistress dying. Something like that."

The dean looked at Amy thoughtfully, biting the side of his lip. "I have to admit we hadn't really thought of all the advantages participation could have, beyond just witnessing the show. As I said, students do attend the shows on occasion, but... well, I can see we've got to put some thought into this."

Amy beamed at him, proudly. This really has to help!

Porter pulled his thoughts back to the present. "Now, your application doesn't mention it, but I assume you've had some practice of your own at hanging already."

Amy fought to hold her smile. This was another question she'd considered obvious, and she'd thought a long time about how she might win her way back from the disadvantage this put her at. Lying to the dean was out of the question -- he and the staff would know immediately that she'd never done it before. "No, sir."

The dean's right eyebrow went up. "Never?"

She shook her head, managing still to hold onto her smile. "I've wanted to *so* much, really. But I told myself, you've got the best instructors here at the Academy. I know you can teach me techniques I could never have found on my own, and if I did it myself, I knew I'd get into some bad habits I'd have to unlearn after I got here. Like if you taught yourself to drive a car, and then a driving instructor at school started sitting with you and saw all these things you were doing that weren't safe, and told you to do things differently, but the habits were so ingrained by then that it was really hard to stop." She grinned. "I should be saying me, not you. That's actually me. Anyway, in hanging, bad habits would mean you never survive to graduation!" She fixed her eyes on his. "And I'm going to graduate." She said it with all the conviction she could muster.

He smiled at her. "All right. Now, I'd like you to do something for me. Stand up please."

She did, trying to settle her stomach which was suddenly twisting inside her. She thought she knew what must be coming next.

"Now take off all your clothes."

She had guessed correctly. One absolutely requirement of all graduates, besides unparalleled prowess at erotic hanging, was that the graduate must present a body that would arouse the witnesses at a show immediately, independently of what she was doing with it. And besides the body, she must have a

complete lack of self-consciousness about showing it. Amy suspected she was at a disadvantage again on both counts, notwithstanding Andrew suddenly being hot for her -- she had only recently made any efforts to develop her body, and equally recently gained any experience at showing herself naked to anyone.

She had worked to prepare herself mentally for this. As soon as he spoke the words, she reached up to unbutton her blouse, smiling, while telling herself, I've already done this, it went really great, he liked my body, it was fun. I'm just remembering it now. She kicked her shoes away as she peeled off her blouse and unhooked her bra, her mind almost blank now on the present, insisting to her it was really past. She unzipped her skirt and let it fall to the floor, and without hesitating pulled her panties down and kicked them gently to the side with her foot.

Naked now, she looked down at the dean, and smiled as she saw him nodding slightly. Her confidence blossomed full-force when she heard him say, "You've been doing some working out, haven't you?"

She beamed at him. "Yes, sir. Right now I'm working on my tummy and my butt." She tensed her stomach muscles to bring out her abdominals, then turned around and poked lightly at her left buttock with her finger. "I just got the exercise equipment recently, so I'm not where I want to be yet. And I know you've got better equipment and professional instructors, so I'm really looking forward to that." She had decided not to say anything about her breasts. She suspected strongly that a lot of admission candidates found their breasts the feature of their bodies they were most insecure about, and she wanted to project the impression of being all right with them. Amy knew hers were the same size as Miranda's -- not as firm now, but the dean would know she could get to that state.

The dean nodded. "When we get applicants who have seen one of our hangings, they're usually concerned that they don't match up with the graduate physically. I'm not so interested in what you are now, as much as I am in where you might be able to go from here. I've got a good eye for what you might look like in three years." He gestured. "You can sit down again, Amy. Don't get dressed yet. And keep looking ahead."

He walked around behind her, and she sat patiently, waiting, not trying to follow him. Of all the things in the interview, this was the one thing she had known for certain to expect -- Miranda had demonstrated it for her.

"Now, don't react to what I'm about to do. I'm going to put my hands around your throat and squeeze, and I want you to keep your hands in your lap and resist trying to reach up."

"Yes, sir." Amy closed her eyes and tried to keep breathing evenly as her heart thumped.

She suppressed a squeak of excitement as she felt his palms gently press on either side of her neck, the tips of his fingers very lightly compressing her windpipe. She wanted not to react at all, as if this were all a matter of course. Miranda had done it from in front of her, so this was a little different, but Amy still felt confidence based on that earlier experience.

She had been hoping she could feel the same level of excitement she had when Miranda had done it -- yes! As it became harder to draw a breath, she felt the beginnings of the same floating sensation, the same... she remembered using the word "exultation." It came on her more quickly than it had with

Miranda, as if that earlier experience had sensitized her to it. She had known to expect it this time. She couldn't breathe at all now, and felt the joy bursting from her, covering her skin, making her tingle between her legs, at her throat, in her head... She didn't know how long it went on. Time was the least important of all her perceptions. Eventually, as before, redness started to press in from the sides of her field of vision, and she wanted to swim towards it, feel it cushion her all around like a bed of flowers...

The dean let go suddenly, and Amy slumped forward slightly and gasped for air, almost automatically reaching up to her throat and steeling herself against the instinct, not sure she was supposed to do that even now. She locked her fingers around the arms of the chair, breathing deeply, starting to return to normal.

Without her having noticed his movement, she saw suddenly he was crouching in front of her, looking down between her legs. She followed the direction of his gaze, and grinned as she understood that he was seeing what he was looking for: beads of milky liquid coating her vaginal lips. It wasn't just a matter of her being able to accept being strangled. He needed to know how excited it made her.

The dean stood, smiling, and walked back behind his desk and sat. "Well, it has been a pleasure meeting you, Amy. You can get dressed now. Do you have any questions before you go?"

Amy reached for her panties and pulled them on, suddenly feeling an explosion of excitement welling up in her. It's over! I think I did it! I didn't forget anything, and I said everything I wanted to say! "No, sir. I just wanted to say it's been an honor meeting you and... if it's okay to say this, I hope I meet you again."

He chuckled. "Nothing wrong with saying that, Amy. Now, you know we have many more interviews to do, and we don't notify anyone of admission until we complete the process, right?"

Amy finished dressing quickly, and was doing the last buttons on her blouse. "Yes, sir. Ms. Bennett said August 15?"

"Around then, yes. We do get some of the rejections out earlier than that. It's easier deciding on some of them, of course."

"Yes, sir. I'll be looking forward to hearing from you." She grinned cautiously. "I think."

He held out his hand and she shook it. "Best of luck, Amy, no matter what."

"Thank you, sir."

"Ms. Bennett should be waiting for you in the outer office." He smiled. "She hasn't been there this whole time, but she knows about how long an interview lasts. She can take you on a short tour of the facilities, if you want."

Amy's eyes grew wide. "Oh, yes, sir!"

* * * * *

Amy stood transfixed in the doorway of the gym, her head turning slowly to take in the sights in front of her.

All of the girls were wearing similar uniforms, consisting of nothing more than a trim bra, smaller and more revealing than a sports bra, especially of cleavage, but appearing to give very adequate support, and shorts that looked like cotton and were only a little longer than full panties, but looser at the bottom while hugging the hips. Most of the girls wore very lightweight sneakers, though some were barefoot. Ms. Bennett had explained the class colors to Amy. The uniforms were white for the first year students, aqua for the second years, and for the third years a deep, beautiful blue that looked like the sky away from the sun just after sunset.

There was a class distinction in the girls' collars as well. The first and second year students wore loose, silvery metal rings around their necks, doughnut shaped except for being very thin, probably only a quarter-inch thick, that rested at the bottoms of their necks, while the third years had cloth chokers like the ones Miranda and Beth had worn. Amy hadn't seen any up close enough to read them. She asked Ms. Bennett if the collars all had the girls' names on them. Ms. Bennett responded that those of the second and third year students did, while the first years' collars identified each of them only as "Slave Girl."

Amy nodded, understanding the pride the girls must feel as they advanced through the various uniforms and collars.

The nearer end of the room was filled with various pieces of exercise equipment, many of them occupied by students, their skin glowing with sweat as they went through their exercise routines, chatting with each other to pass the time. At the farther end, attracting most of Amy's attention, was an array of nooses with platforms underneath them, similar to the ones Miranda and Beth had used at their hangings. That makes sense, thought Amy. They get used to a particular type of platform, which sinks at a certain rate. That makes it easier for them to time their breathing before they lose their footing on it and start hanging from their neck.

At present a group of first year students was gathered around the nooses, apparently a class in progress. It was evident that a young woman, dressed in the same style as the students except that her bra and shorts were bright red, was the teacher for the class. If there's an emergency, thought Amy, the teacher is very easy to spot. The teacher herself looked barely older than the students, and Amy suspected she was probably a recent graduate, waiting to be sold for her own show -- Miranda and Beth had both done the same work after graduation.

At a distance of about a hundred feet, Amy wasn't able to hear what the teacher was saying, with all the nearer voices in between, but Ms. Bennett had stopped here, and Amy knew this was as close as any outsider would be allowed to get. As Amy watched, rapt and wide-eyed, one of the students, a pretty, slender redhead, naked, her hands cuffed behind her, mounted one of the platforms. They must always do it naked, Amy thought, right from the first. So they get used to doing it that way. The teacher arranged the noose around the girl's neck and started speaking to her, touching the back of the girl's head for a time as if explaining some part of the technique being demonstrated, occasionally turning to speak to the other students, probably to ask questions for them to respond to, or to explain some facet of the art. At last the teacher pulled the lever and, for the third time, Amy watched an Academy student hanging.

This one, not surprisingly, wasn't nearly in the class of Miranda or Beth. As she kicked awkwardly, the teacher gave her some instructions, and Amy could hear the other students contributing comments. After about five minutes, by Amy's watch, the girl was already slowing, her kicking more spasmodic. Amy found she was rubbing her mound as she watched. She was thrilled to see the performance, even though the girl's time didn't come close to Miranda's or Beth's. I'll be able to do it this long by the end of my first year, she thought. At least, I guess I'd better be.

The student, though tiring, did look as though she could go a little longer, but the teacher brought the platform back up, and the girl's feet, desperately straining downward, touched the surface and took her weight once more. She began breathing in great gasps as the teacher loosened the noose, nodding her head as the teacher spoke to her, probably a critique. At length the teacher patted the girl on the arm, and unlocked her handcuffs. The girl went to retrieve her clothes and the teacher turned to another girl.

Next to Amy, Ms. Bennett spoke. "Are you ready to go, Amy?"

Amy took a deep breath. "I don't ever want to leave, but I guess I'd better. I just hope I can come back."

Ms. Bennett smiled. "I hope so too, Amy." She led Amy back through the corridors, a few times passing students coming the other way, in twos and threes, chatting and laughing on their way wherever they were headed. Amy tried to read their collars, but they were past her too fast.

At last they reached the heavy door through which Ms. Bennett had conducted Amy into the restricted area of the school. As she had on entering, Ms. Bennett took out the magstrip card and swiped it through a reader, opening the door. Amy felt as if she were leaving part of herself behind when she walked out through the door. She had to come back here to live the rest of her life. She *had* to.

In her car at last, Amy felt the bubble of excitement within her burst out of her, like a thousand gaily colored balloons falling out of the netting in the ceiling at a big celebration. She pumped her fists over her head and let out a shout. I did it! I did it! I got through and didn't screw up!

But I won't know if it's good enough. Not for weeks.

Fumbling with her purse, she pulled out her cell phone. She hadn't planned to make a call. She hadn't planned anything post-interview, hadn't imagined herself that far into the future of the day, so focused had she been on this one event.

She shouted joyfully into the phone as soon as it was answered. "Scott?"

"Amy, hi! Are you..."

"Scott, could we go to a movie or something? Then come back to your place later? I have to unwind."

"Umm... is that good or bad? I was going to ask how the interview went."

"I think it went okay. I think, I think, I think. Anyway, I didn't mess up or spill coffee all over his suit or anything like that. It's over now, and I feel like I've got all this energy!"

Scott laughed. "The energy part sounds good. There's a matinee at the Rally 16. Want to see 'Hired Gun'? Molly Thackerey's last role. They snuffed her during filming. One o'clock?"

"That sounds great. I'll meet you at the box office. See you in a bit."

* * * * *

They lay together in Scott's bed in his off-campus apartment, naked, stroking, kissing. Amy felt relaxed. No worries about Scott's purposely absent roommate barging in. Scott brushed back a strand of Amy's hair. "You know I'm just really glad we could have some times together. Nobody hopes you get in the Academy more than I do."

She giggled. "That does sound like you're trying to get rid of me. But I do appreciate that, I really do."

He shrugged. "Even if it wasn't for that, I'd always know you could get drafted tomorrow, say. Or your dad could decide to eat you. There's never such a thing as forever. Except memories. Remembering you will be no problem."

She kissed him. "That's really sweet."

He grinned. "Hey, can you do that pussy-suck thing?"

She giggled and kissed him again. "You like that, huh?" She had found it in a book that gave it a long, clinical-sounding name.

He rolled his eyes and grimaced. "Naw, hate it."

"Yeah, right." She got up on her knees, straddling him. "So? Turn over." Underneath her he grinned and rolled onto his back, his erection standing straight up.

She eased herself down on him, taking him inside her. She sighed as she felt his full length within her, then tightened her vaginal muscles as she pushed her weight upward with her knees. He groaned at the intense sensation, as if a mouth deep enough to take his full erection and narrow enough to hug its full length were sucking on his shaft. She let go and slid down on him again, then tightened and rose again.

Through gritted teeth, he managed to say in a tight voice, "You're getting better at that every time... AHH!"

"You're a good... ooh!... practice partner... aiee!"

Silent now, except for sighs and grunts, she worked a little faster, the combination of movements getting easier as she fell into a rhythm. She squeaked as he reached up for her breasts, cupping his hands around them and gently squeezing them in time with her motion.

Faster now... everything smooth, flowing, slick with her fluids, gripping, sliding... there now, there, there... THERE!!!!

Amy went over the edge first, shouting and quaking, and the spasming of her internal muscles along his shaft set him off with a shout echoing hers, spurting into her, filling her. She threw her head back, her mouth open wide in a silent cry as she felt him moving within her, so warm and wet between her legs where her whole world existed for an instant.

She collapsed forward onto his stomach and stretched out on top of him, both of them spent, grinning weakly and giving each other soft kisses.

He said softly, "See, that's what I mean about memories."

She laughed and kissed him again.

CHAPTER 5

Amy lay on her bed at home that evening, trying to get her mind on the movie she had rented for her TV, a comedy in which one woman goes through a series of misadventures trying to keep her appointment with the guillotine, while another woman mistaken for her is nearly snuffed in her place. Amy tried to concentrate on the story, but her mind kept wandering. She had felt wonderful after her interview, and certainly while having sex with Scott at his apartment, but now every point of concern kept crowding back into her mind. How important was it that she had never played any hanging games? Dean Porter seemed to like her naked body, but did he really? Would he say so if he didn't? Did the dean, despite her efforts at redirection, figure out that she'd only been conscious of her need to go to the Academy for barely over a month? How many minuses did she really have?

She groaned, audibly, when she saw Andrew looking in through her door. She had meant to close it. And lock it. And barricade it with steel bars. "What do you want?"

"So how did the interview go?"

She sighed. "Okay."

"Come on, Amy. You know I really do want to know. Just give me an impression."

She sighed more heavily. "I thought it went really well. I answered all his questions, showed him my body, let him choke me. I felt good about it after."

"You don't sound like you feel good now."

"You know me. Am I the Optimism Queen?"

Andrew looked at her, and seemed to come to a decision. He brought his hand from behind his back, showing a small, transparent capped bottle and shaking it. "I need you to take a capsule for me."

Her jaw dropped as she gave him an are-you-crazy look, and then she burst out laughing. "So you've decided poison is the way to go? After all I've done for you?"

He gave her an impatient look. "Ignoring the question of who would want to poison his next meal, why would I kill you? Okay, yeah, I know I've got a reason, but look at all the drawbacks. I imagine the law would be with me, you being my sister and all, except they'd want to know if it was okay with Dad, and there you have it. Even if the law lets me off the hook, and even if I could find some foolproof way so they don't even know it was me that did it, Dad would know somehow. Or suspect. Why would I even want to take a chance of his suspicion falling on me, when I can get you out of here just by sending you off to the Academy?"

"Thought you assumed I wasn't going to get in."

"Well, I've got that covered too, don't I? Except for one thing -- suppose you get your rejection letter and just decide to disappear? That's fine if you stay away and get declared dead, but I can't count on

that. I can see you showing up suddenly with some fancy lawyer who manages to find a way to void the contract. Or at least be a pain in the butt.”

“You think too much, Andrew.”

“Oh, right, and you don’t? How much time have you spent on all that Academy crap in the last month?”

Amy lay back on the bed, her fingers laced under her head. “Touche’.”

“Look, I just need you to take one of these capsules for now. They’re slave trackers. Have you heard of that?”

Amy wrinkled her nose. “I’ve heard of tracking slaves, but not with pills. What the hell are they?”

“The latest wonder of bionanotechnology. They’ve just come out with them for general usage. When the outer skin of the capsule dissolves in your stomach, inside there’s a tiny GPS transceiver that signals your location. I can go to a Web site on my computer and track you by that -- the frequency is a little different for each capsule, and I write down the code on the capsule and log in using that. Find your location within about ten feet.”

She sat up and looked at him in silence, and finally lay back and said, “Bullshit. My body would flush it out in a day.”

“Look, hold on...” He went back to his room, and came back in a moment to hand her a sheet of paper. “Somehow I figured you wouldn’t trust me on this. I ordered this stuff online. Here’s a printout of the invoice. Go to this Web site and read about it.”

She dropped the paper on the bed beside her. “Later. I’m busy.”

He looked at her sourly. “Yeah, you look busy. Anyway, by tomorrow, Amy. This is the last bit of assurance I need that you’ll be around when I own you. That guarantee, remember?”

She sat bolt upright and glared at him. “I thought we were done with that. That’s what the contract was for.”

“Yeah, the contract is one thing, but what stops you running out on it before I get a chance to enforce it? I want this one last thing, Amy. Then I’ll stay out of your way till you hear from the Academy.” He smiled. “I’ve got used to this idea of waiting on the sex till I own you. It’ll make that first time that much more fun.”

She gritted her teeth and turned away from him, turning up the sound on her TV. She wished she could stop him from even hinting he wanted to get her into his bed, but it was too trivial to use up her blackmail on that. “Get out. And close the door.”

He pointed at the paper on her bed before closing it. “Read about it.”

She sighed and tried to concentrate on the TV. The paper Andrew had given her caught her eye. She started to crumple it, then stopped suddenly with a gasp.

Andrew, when he'd reminded her of his need for a "guarantee," was doing more than just stating what he was looking for. He was reminding her of the alternative. If she refused to set his mind at ease on the possibility of her not making the Academy, he was, no doubt, still prepared to set her up for the kidnapping he'd spoken of before. To have her carried off and made a helpless puppygirl for some stranger who would be happy to train her with a whip. She would be gone before she heard from the Academy.

Her lips compressed in a hard line, and she muttered "Shit!" between them. She turned her TV off, and her computer on.

It was easy to find complete information on the product Andrew had bought, as described on the invoice. She read about it, and cross-checked it on several other reliable Web sites.

The capsules were for real. On being ingested by a slave, the outer covering, as usual for a capsule, dissolved in the stomach. Inside the capsule, the tiny GPS transceiver, powered by a chemical battery that would last nine months, signaled the slave's location. The transceiver was enclosed in an outer coating that was biochemically compatible with the cells in the digestive system -- in fact, it attached itself to the cellular walls of either the stomach or intestines, gradually being absorbed into them, safe from being ejected from the body as unused waste. Removing it required major surgery, but after the slave was snuffed it came out automatically during the gutting process before cooking. In its experimental stages there had been no cases of ill effects on the test subjects. Before its battery gave out -- six months was the recommended time -- the slave simply swallowed another capsule.

Up to today, Amy's feeling of certainty about admission to the Academy had persuaded her not to bother planning an escape if it didn't work out. But she had to admit the idea had run across the back of her mind.

This would make it impossible.

On the other hand, her fretting over the results of today's interview aside, she still did feel her admission must be inevitable. It had to work that way. How could she, with Miranda's help, have finally discovered her lifelong dream, only to have it snatched away from her?

And of course, if she did go to the Academy, it was irrelevant whether Andrew had made her swallow a slave-tracking capsule. If she was at the Academy, Andrew had no use for the tracker. He'd know exactly where she was, for what it was worth, even without it. Nothing Andrew had asked her to do, from signing the contract to ingesting the tracker, made any difference once she was admitted to the Academy. And Amy did believe him when he said the Academy was his preference -- she would be completely, permanently out of his way without the slightest effort on his part.

Even that didn't really matter, though. The fact was, she didn't have a choice. She believed him on the puppygirl threat, his one stated way of taking her Academy dream away if she didn't cooperate with him. She couldn't afford not to believe him.

Pushing her chair back angrily from her desk, she turned off her computer and grabbed the invoice. Down the hall, she pounded on Andrew's door.

When he opened it, she snarled, "Are you going to be tracking me all around town, wherever I go?"

Andrew looked genuinely surprised. "Why would I give a shit where you spend your time every day? I'll just feel better now if I know I can find you when the time comes. I'll test it once in awhile to make sure it's still working. If I watch your progress while you walk around the house, will that violate your precious privacy too much?"

"Can I wait till early August?"

Andrew shook his head. "Who knows when the Academy might mail out the first rejections? I'm sure they've had girls apply that they wouldn't want within fifty miles of the Academy. How long does it take them to figure *that* out? If you're going to do it, do it now." He fixed his eyes on hers. "Otherwise I need to make other plans."

She tried to stare him down while her fury pointlessly rose. Forcing her voice to calmness, she held out her hand, open palm up. "Okay, give me the thing."

Andrew's eyes lit up. "Okay, but not quite like that. Come over here." He backed away from his door to let her in. He ducked quickly into his bathroom, ran some water, and emerged with a partly-filled drinking glass. He set it on his desk, next to the tiny bottle of capsules. On closer examination, Amy saw that the bottle held just two capsules.

Andrew looked in his desk and found a small square of paper. Opening the capsule bottle, he shook one of the capsules out onto the paper. Bending down, he rolled the capsule slightly until its code number came into view, and wrote it on the paper. Then he picked up the paper, folding it into a small valley with the capsule at the bottom, and brought it towards her.

Amy reached for it, and Andrew jerked it away. "Nope, nope, nope. Don't touch it, and don't lift your hands to your mouth. I don't want you palming the little bugger and pretending to swallow it. Then carrying it around in your pocket so I'll think it's inside you. Tilt your head back and open up."

Rolling her eyes, Amy did as requested. Andrew lifted the square of folded paper, tilted it, and let the capsule roll into her mouth.

Keeping his eyes on her as he backed towards the desk, he recovered the glass of water and brought it to her. "Keep looking up. And keep your hands down." He held the glass to her mouth and tipped some water in. "Now swallow."

Amy didn't have much of an alternative, other than choking. With a sinking feeling, she swallowed the capsule and felt it slide down her throat towards her stomach. It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter, she told herself. I hadn't even made plans to run away anyway. Where would I go?

"Now say, 'The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.' "

She nearly choked anyway. “What??”

“Just say it.”

She rolled her eyes, shaking her head, and repeated the nonsense.

Andrew nodded. “Fine. You could only say that clearly while you were trying to hide a capsule under your tongue if you were a trained ventriloquist. Just making sure you swallowed it. Now don’t mind me if I follow you back to your room.”

“What? Why?”

“Just go back to watching TV or whatever you feel like doing. I just want to make sure you don’t stick a finger down your throat and barf the thing up in the next twenty minutes. After that it won’t matter.”

Amy walked stiffly, her hands clenched into fists, back to her room, where she flopped on her bed and turned the TV back on, starting up the movie again. She lay on her stomach, her chin propped on her fist, her eyes looking in the direction of the screen, not seeing it, while Andrew lounged in her doorway, slouching against the frame, a study in relaxation.

The movie reached its predictable ending, with the woman who was supposed to be snuffed finally arriving just in time and straightening everything out. All came out happily, with a final scene in which the right woman’s head falls into the cushioned basket, looking towards the camera with a relieved smile on her face before her eyes glazed over.

Amy’s eyes kept trying to wander up towards Miranda, and she’d pull them back, quickly. She felt too ashamed to look at her friend. Miranda would never, ever let anyone do to her what Andrew was doing to Amy, Amy thought miserably. She’d never let a man tie her up in knots so tightly she couldn’t shake loose. I know Andrew, Amy screamed within. I know him better than Miranda ever did! Why can’t I handle him any better than this? Or at all, in fact?

After a time, Andrew straightened up and walked back to his room. Amy knew the time had passed when she could do anything about the tracking device now lodged permanently in her body, giving out its signals for the next nine months. Long before it died, Amy would be Andrew’s slave. Probably secured so that he didn’t even feel a need to bother giving her another capsule. But he would anyway.

A tear rolled down Amy’s cheek, and she lay her head down on the bed. Why today of all days? The interview seemed to go so well, and she’d been so excited. But now her earlier misgivings came crashing back on her more intensely than before. She pictured Dean Porter going over application folders with the director of admissions. Not this one, they’d agree. No experience. Never tried a hanging game in her whole life. Didn’t even think about the Academy till a month ago. Too flighty. No commitment.

She buried her face in her hands and cried. Quietly. Quietly enough that she could hear Andrew in his room. The jerk, jerking off.

* * * * *

Over the next few weeks, Amy's confidence gradually returned. Andrew, amazingly, left her alone, almost entirely ignoring her. It must be that he thinks I'll get in! she told herself. It's understandable he wanted a contingency plan in place, but he doesn't think he'll have to use it. It's the middle of July now. A month till I hear. He knows what's coming.

The biggest problem now weighing on her mind was her father. There was still that problem of his permission. The Academy's offer of admission, she knew from their literature, was contingent on parental permission. It might be a tricky legal point as to whether the slave contract she'd signed would be in force if the Academy accepted her application but then Dad said no.

She made an appointment with the attorney who had witnessed and certified the signing. Andrew and I, Amy told her, both know how important the Academy is to me, so that's why that condition is in the contract. Does the contract take effect even if the Academy says I'm in but my father won't let me go? Yes, the lawyer explained. The Academy's own stated policy made it clear that admission wasn't final without the consent of the parents. Or surviving parent, if only one is alive. Thank you, Amy said, I just wanted that clarified. I didn't want to end up in some legal limbo, but I guess everything is taken care of.

Yes, Amy thought at home, all taken care of. Wonderful. She had to persuade Dad to let her go to the Academy. She had known that, of course, but had not been sure of the full consequences of failure. She knew now.

She knew when to tell him, of course: after the letter of acceptance came, no earlier. It was crucial to show him she wasn't dreaming, that the Academy really wanted her. But knowing *when* wasn't telling her *how*. He could easily get mad if she presented him with a done deal, worked out behind his back. He wasn't happy with that sort of thing. She had to have the right way to present it.

She did go back to considering telling him *before* the letter came. She soon discarded that idea, reminding herself that, from his point of view, that was not only working behind his back, but on top of that it was backing out on the agreement to "marry" Andrew. When the time came, she needed Andrew to back her up by saying he knew the Academy was what she really wanted. He had promised to do that. She wasn't sure what the promise was worth, but she did believe he really did prefer she go to the Academy. If he didn't, he could have wrecked her chances with Dad already. But under no circumstances would he help her before the letter arrived.

I need that picture, she suddenly thought. That fake with me wearing a slave collar. I've got to show Dad that Andrew wasn't being upfront with him. That and the contract. Or no, maybe not the contract. It looks like I signed that voluntarily. I'll tell him Andrew was tricking me into being his slave, instead of marrying him like Dad thought. Dad won't like him being dishonest about that.

Andrew was out on one of his evening rambles, so there was no problem about getting into his room. Amy went in and reached under the bed, nodding to herself when her fingers found the sheet of paper. She pulled it out and looked at it.

She blinked in surprise. Wrong picture. She bent down to look under the bed. There was nothing else there.

She looked at the picture again, her lip curling in disgust. It was a drawing, very realistic, almost of photographic quality, but not quite. It showed a blonde woman, wearing a slave collar, kneeling in front of her master, sucking on his very erect manhood. She was very pregnant, perhaps near delivery -- obviously a breeding slave. The picture was drawn from a point of view just behind the master's hips, showing the slave's tear-streaked face and the front of her body down to her knees on the floor. Her hands were behind her as if tied or cuffed, and one of her ankles was visible, showing a shackle to which a hobble chain was attached. And all of her visible skin surface, other than her hugely swollen belly, was striped with whip marks, including her rounded breasts, themselves looking full to bursting, ready to produce milk. Her pregnancy suggested she must have been his slave for many months, yet the whip marks, some faded and healing over time, others fresh and angry red, suggested the whipping was constant in her life, that she still tried to resist her master's orders. Or perhaps that she just didn't follow them quickly enough or enthusiastically enough to suit him.

Amy's eye was drawn to a handwritten message in the space below the drawing:

"Amy -- like it? I'm impressed with this artist's work. I've contacted him about doing some custom work."

Amy threw the drawing down suddenly as if it had burned her fingers. Andrew, obviously, had known she would find the pic. What does his message mean? Is he telling me he's going to do this to me? Why tell me now? Dad wouldn't like it, would he?

She stormed back to her room -- she knew it was pointless to bother putting the picture back in its place -- and sat in her chair, irritably kicking her foot against the desk, her arms folded, hands gripping her upper arms tightly to prevent them from pounding on things, until Andrew came home.

She jumped out of her chair as she heard him come up the stairs, and followed him into his room. She closed his door, breathing hard through her nose and glaring at him.

Andrew smirked as he saw the drawing lying on his bed. "Pretty good stuff, isn't it?"

She snarled at him in a hoarse whisper, "Andrew, you know that's not what you made Dad think was going to happen. He's not going to go for this crap, not if he sees you lied to him! When you show him the contract, I'm going to show him this!" She darted forward and snatched the drawing before he could react.

Andrew laughed. "How will he think I lied to him?"

"He thinks we're going to be husband and wife!"

Andrew raised an eyebrow. "Is that what he thinks? That we'll get married? I never actually used that word with him."

Amy's hands clenched tightly, the drawing crumpling in one of them. "You know that's what he's assuming, though. *He* used the word 'marriage.' Why would he think I want to be your slave? Especially *this* kind of slave?" She waved the paper at him. "He wouldn't think what we've been doing makes any sense. If we're getting married, obviously we're waiting for the gene test results to come back first. Why

bother with that if I wanted to be your slave? If a woman agrees to be a man's slave, it's not so she can make babies with him! That's way down on the priority scale."

"That's not true. Lots of guys keep breeding slaves."

"Yeah, if their wives can't have babies, or if they want to sell the kids. None of that applies here. He thinks we're trying to start a family together!"

Andrew grinned and shrugged. "Sounds like you're doing more assuming than he is. How do you know what he thinks?"

"About a family? At least he said that much, remember?"

Andrew started to respond, then blinked as if another thought had occurred to him. "Well, if he's got the wrong idea, I should just clear it up. I saw him in his library when I was coming in. Hold on, I'll be right back." He opened the door and trotted down the stairs, his hands in his pockets, looking casual. Amy followed him partway, stopping at the foot of the stairs in time to see Andrew disappear through the door to the library.

Andrew's voice, a little muffled by the intervening walls but still clear enough, said, "Say, Dad, Amy and I were talking, and it occurred to me we might have left the wrong impression about what we were thinking. It's not that we're getting married. We're talking about her being my slave. We do want to see how the tests come out, though. We're hoping to do some breeding."

Amy's jaw dropped. She knew she couldn't run in and contradict Andrew. All he had to do was whip out that contract, and there was no response to that that Amy could summon up. He might even do it tonight. That would bring the Academy secret out, at the worst possible time. Amy sat on the bottom step of the stairs, her last hope being that her father would have some reason to object to her slavery.

Amy heard her father grunt. "That's fine, son. As long as it's okay with her."

Okay with me! Andrew has the proof that it is! Amy buried her face in her hands.

She looked up and saw Andrew backing out of the library, saying, "I'm glad that's cleared up. See you tomorrow, Dad," and their father grunted in reply.

She turned and ran back up the stairs and into her room, throwing herself onto her bed. By the time she remembered to go back and close her door, Andrew had already returned to his own room.

He knows he won another round, she thought furiously. He doesn't have to say anything.

Calm down, she told herself, calm down, calm down. I still have the Academy. If Andrew had wanted to, he could have blown the whole issue wide open right then, tonight. He must not want to. I'm going to the Academy. Andrew wants me to go. He's just having fun playing with my head. If I'm miserable, he's happy. But I'll be out of his way in a couple of months and all this garbage will be over with.

Thinking about the Academy, her confidence rose. It had its ups and downs, but it was up lately. She was conscious of all of the issues that counted against her, but she had gone back over the interview minute by minute in her head and convinced herself she'd handled them very well.

They'll take me, she told herself, I know they will. She had a feeling Dean Porter had decided already, right while he was talking to her. She dwelt on some of her best moments over and over. I know I did great, she thought.

I still have to think how to tell Dad about it. But I can find a way to handle Dad. I've still got several weeks.

CHAPTER 6

Of the two identical-looking letters with the return address of the clinic, Amy took the one addressed to her. She'd been expecting it -- it was early August, and the report was due about now. Opening it, she read, with a sinking heart but no great surprise, that neither her genes nor Andrew's exhibited any predispositions to any known diseases that would make reproduction dangerous. Andrew had asked the clinic to link his results with Amy's, resulting in a report on the advisability of the two of them mating with each other.

Amy sighed, thinking she might be the one person in the world who wouldn't think a letter like this was good news. She was sure it would make Andrew's day. Destroying his copy of the letter before he saw it was pointless. He'd just call the clinic eventually anyway.

I've got to do something fun tonight, she thought, to get my mind off this. It occurred to her she hadn't been to one of the hook-up clubs in awhile. That idea sounded better and better the more she thought about it.

* * * * *

Amy lay back against the end of the bathtub, in the bathroom of the tiny apartment, as the girl sharing the tub with her soaped Amy's breasts with a sponge. Amy closed her eyes and sighed. "This was a nice idea, Gina. Thanks."

"You looked like you were tense about something. I know a warm bath always relaxes me."

Amy opened one eye. "I looked tense? Compared with what? You just met me."

Gina smiled. "Lean forward, let me do your back." She reached around Amy with both arms and ran the sponge softly over her back, rubbing her with her other hand as well. "I saw you a few times before in the club. I kept meaning to say hi to you or something, but you always got with somebody else first."

Amy smiled. "I guess I always feel like I have to work fast. I don't have much time left in the outside world."

"When was it you go to the Academy?"

"I'm supposed to hear from them late next week. Definitely by Friday, anyway. The fifteenth. But classes don't start until September."

"Well, tomorrow's Friday, so that's exactly a week. No wonder you're nervous. Lift your left leg up."

Amy sighed as her new friend spread soap on her thigh, using both hands, stroking slowly. She thought about bringing up the extra reasons she had for feeling tense, but she felt too nice right now to want to think about Andrew. He hadn't said much to her since that day he'd told Dad she was going to be Andrew's slave. Maybe he'd run out of new ideas for tormenting her. He'd find out her future next week when she did. "What about you, when do you report to the Breeding Farm?"

“A couple of weeks. It’s funny, before long we’ll both be slaves.”

Amy had a sudden chill. I’ll be a slave, yeah. But whose?

Gina caught Amy’s brief shiver. “Should I run some more hot water?”

Amy shook her head. “I want to get out pretty soon anyway.”

Gina frowned. “You’ll stay here awhile though, won’t you?”

Amy smiled and stroked the girl’s cheek. “Don’t worry. I just mean my skin’s getting all pruny. Anyway, yeah, we’ll be slaves. That’s part of why I wanted to be with somebody like you tonight. It’s getting so close to the time, I don’t want to start any relationships I can’t keep. We’re both in that same boat.”

Gina nodded. “I just want to have some nice times before I go.”

Amy raised one eyebrow. “You’ll have some fun there at the farm, you know. I mean, all the girls are impregnated the old fashioned way. And you’ll have lots of girlfriends to play with.”

Gina giggled. “You won’t exactly be celibate where you’re going either. But you know what I mean. I’ll have the same friends for a long time. That’s a nice thing, but I wanted to...”

Amy leaned back once more, smiling. “I know. You don’t have to explain.” Amy looked at Gina’s trim body, marveling to think how much of the rest of her life this girl would spend pregnant. All of it, really, except for brief breaks between litters. I’m glad she’s happy with that, thought Amy. Not my kind of thing. “How many babies do you think you’ll have?”

“From what they said, probably about sixty or seventy. They’ll raise them on the farm, they’ve got their own schools there and all that. I’ll get to spend time with my kids, and they’ll know I’m their mom. I like that. Anyway, I’ll get about three months between pregnancies, so that’s about one litter a year till I’m thirty-five, and then they’ll eat me. With their fertility drugs, each litter will be usually four or five babies. Maybe six sometimes, if I respond really well to the drugs. Probably all girls, of course. The action of the drugs makes it almost unheard of to have boys.”

“I’ve read about that.” Amy shook her head in amazement. “So many kids. Imagine how much food you’ll be responsible for. Long after you’ve been eaten yourself.”

Gina grinned. “I know. I never felt... well, so useful before. So important. You know?”

Amy rubbed the girl’s hip. “Yeah, I know you’ll do great.” She leaned forward and kissed Gina, and then stood up, the water cascading down her legs. “Let’s dry off. Hand me that towel behind you.”

They patted each other dry, then left the towels on the rack and came out of the bathroom into Gina’s small bedroom, naked, holding hands. Gina, her eyes looking down, said shyly, “So... what do you want to do?” Amy could see she was smiling.

Amy turned to face her and put both hands on the girl's hips, drawing her towards her. "Let's make a baby."

Gina laughed. "Silly, we can't!"

Amy giggled. "Well, we could try." She pulled Gina with her and fell onto the bed, Gina whooping with surprise. Amy rolled on top of her, tangling their legs together and covering Gina's mouth with her own, loving the feeling as she began rubbing herself against Gina's smooth, soft skin.

* * * * *

Amy squinted at the sunlight coming through the blinds. Beside her, Gina stirred sleepily, her left arm and left leg draped over Amy, her breasts pressed against Amy's. Amy's upper right thigh was rubbing up against Gina's crotch, her right hand resting on Gina's left buttock. Amy kissed Gina, and the girl's lips curled up in a smile. Gina opened her eyes in a squint and said "Hi" in an early-morning voice.

Gina suddenly twitched in alarm. "What time is it?"

Amy looked at the clock. "Nine-thirty."

Gina sat up abruptly in panic. "I have to be at the restaurant at ten! I forgot to set the alarm!" She jumped out of bed and ran to the bathroom, grabbing some clothes along the way.

Amy called out, "Do you need a ride?"

From behind the door, Gina answered, "No, it's just down the street."

Amy got out of the bed and started looking for her own clothes. As she dressed, she said, "I really did enjoy it last night."

Gina came out of the bathroom, looking hurried but smiling. "Me too." She had thrown on a uniform, brushed her teeth and done the most cursory touchup of her makeup. "I guess I'll skip taking a shower. We got clean enough last night."

Amy giggled. "We got kind of sweaty afterwards."

Gina echoed Amy's giggle. "Yeah, but we licked all that up."

Both of them dressed now, Gina stood uncertainly in front of Amy. "I'm so sorry I have to get out of here so fast. Forgive me?"

Amy smiled and brushed a stray strand of Gina's hair back in place. "Of course. Listen, have a wonderful life at the Breeding Farm. Lots of happy little babies."

"And you have a wonderful, satisfying life at the Academy. I know you will, though."

"Thank you." Amy kissed her, her lips lingering on Gina's.

Gina sighed, her eyes closed. "If you keep doing that I'll never get out of here."

Amy gave her a hug and let go. "I'm feeling the same. But you better go."

Gina took Amy's hand as they walked to the door, and kept it until they reached Amy's car parked in the street in front of the building. She turned to face Amy there, and gave her one last peck on the lips. "Bye."

"Bye, Gina. Good luck."

"You too!" Gina called out as she ran down the street.

Amy sighed as she got in her car. She felt very warm inside. She thought for a moment about seeing Gina one more time before the girl left for the Breeding Farm, but again, she reminded herself about not wanting to get too attached to any outsider. She was sure Gina felt the same way. Amy would leave it as something nice to look back on.

She had hardly driven a block before her cell phone rang. She looked at the caller ID. Shit, she thought. Pushing the Talk button, she said irritably, "What do you want, Andrew?"

"That's what I like to hear, but maybe in a different tone of voice."

"Live with it. What are you calling for?"

"I'm glad to see you finally got moving. I thought you'd stay there all day."

Amy was puzzled for an instant, and then anger exploded inside her. "You said you weren't going to track me!!"

"I said I didn't care where you spend your time. Today I did. There's something I want you to see. I'll give you directions for getting there."

Amy blinked. "Like I'm going to drive where you tell me to?"

"You'll want to see this, Amy. Trust me. It's just a little piece of property I've got a line on. You didn't think we're going to keep living with Dad, did you?"

Somehow Amy hadn't given it much thought. "So you've found a place?" The idea appalled her, not so much for its unexpectedness, but as a reminder of what loomed over her if she didn't make the Academy.

"Yeah. You're almost to Highway 81. Turn south on that."

Amy wrinkled her nose. "It's out of town?"

"A ways, yeah."

“You’re there now?”

“I’m at home. I wanted you to get a first impression on your own. There’ll be a lady there to show it to you, though. I’ll call her as soon as I get off the phone with you to tell her you’re on the way. She’ll be waiting there.”

“And I should do this because...?”

“Like I said, you’ll want to see this. Don’t do it for me, obviously. Do it because you’ll get some valuable information.”

Amy remained almost terminally dubious, but she didn’t have anything else planned. It was ridiculous to think Andrew might be directing her to kidnappers. He had no reason to do that at present, and in any case kidnappers could find her easily enough no matter where she was, with Andrew’s help. They didn’t need her to drive to them.

It was just like Andrew to make a big production of this. Well, just one more week, she reminded herself, and he’ll be off my back. “I’ve turned onto the highway...”

“I know.”

Amy gritted her teeth. She had given almost no thought to the tracker since that night. It infuriated her that Andrew could tell exactly where she was at any moment. “So what now?”

“Keep going. Fifteen miles out you’ll come to a little road named Plum Lane that goes to the right. Turn on that when you get there. Now let me get off and call the lady.”

“Glad to.” She drove on, steaming internally.

She reached Plum Lane, finding it was a barely paved road that wound through densely packed trees. In a moment her phone rang again. She answered it. “I guess I don’t need to bother to tell you where I am.”

“No. You’re coming up on a little car path on the left. It doesn’t have a name. See it?”

Amy slowed. “Kind of a dirt path with ruts?”

“That’s it. Turn there. You should find a car parked about a half-mile down that. Tell the lady you’re Amy Cameron. She’ll show you around.”

Around the forest? Amy couldn’t imagine there were places to live out here. The path bounced the car from side to side. It was easily wide enough for one car, but two would be pushing it. She wondered if she’d have to back up to get out. “I see the car.”

“Okay. Talk to you later.” His smirk almost visible through the phone, he broke the connection.

Shit, thought Amy. She put the phone away and stopped her car behind the other one.

As Amy stepped out of her car, a woman in a suit got out of the other one, turned towards Amy and held out her hand, a professional smile on her face. "Hi, I'm Tara Berkley." She shook hands with Amy. "You must be Amy."

Looking around with a profoundly puzzled expression, Amy said, "Ummm, yeah." There still weren't any buildings in sight.

"Let me show you the place." Tara laughed. "There's not much else to do out here."

Together they walked about fifty yards, winding their way through the trees. Suddenly, a house did come into view. It was a small one, single story, obviously only a few rooms. Amy asked, "Is that it?" She cringed at hearing herself ask such a stupid question. What else could it be?

"Well, not the part I was going to show you, no. That would be Mr. Cameron's house." It took Amy a moment to figure out she was referring to Andrew. "This is the part Mr. Cameron wanted you to see."

To Amy's befuddlement, Tara bent down and inserted a key into something in the ground -- Amy couldn't see clearly what it was -- and grasped something among the leaves. Turning what seemed to be a handle, she lifted upward. A section of ground came up like a doorway into the earth, about six feet long, about three feet wide at its hinged end. Under its earthen cover, the door looked like very thick steel, with a thicker layer of padding underneath it. It was somehow counterweighted so that Tara could lift it easily.

Amy saw that at the front edge of the opening that the door had revealed, there were steps leading down into the ground. She shook her head, wide eyed. She tried to deny the forebodings telling her she knew exactly what this was for.

Tara said, "I'll go down first. I know where the light switch is."

Amy was still shaking her head as Tara descended into the pit in front of her. Something told her she should run back to the car, get out of here and never come back. But I have to know, she thought. I have to see.

The darkness below Amy's feet suddenly showed a faint glow. "Don't worry, Amy," Tara called out. "It's really well-built. The steps are solid."

I'm sure everything's solid, thought Amy. Fighting off the urge to escape, she put her foot on the first step and started down.

At the bottom of the stairway, she found herself in a rectangular room, about fifteen feet square, with concrete block walls interrupted, incongruously, by what appeared to be small ordinary vents near the ceiling. The floor was concrete as well. The ceiling was heavily padded. As the door swung closed, its own padding was flush with the rest of the ceiling, making the door nearly undetectable, except for a numerical keypad near the top of the stairs.

Tara saw the direction of Amy's gaze. "Combination lock, in case the key is lost somehow. I could tell you the combination, but I'm sure Mr. Cameron will be changing it."

No kidding, thought Amy.

Tara gestured at the walls in a slow turn. "Everything's soundproofed, of course. The vents connect with the air conditioning system in the main house, by way of underground ducts leading from it, and the air circulation is very quiet. Hold your breath for a moment. You could just about hear a pin drop."

Amy found herself absolutely assured of the quality of the soundproofing.

The concrete walls, Amy saw, were not featureless. At various places, iron rings were embedded in all the walls, as well as in the floor.

One corner of the room was occupied by a closet-like space, about four feet square, protruding into the room. Amy walked over to the large door on one side of it, another thick steel affair.

Within, there were the same nearly-bare concrete walls, again with vents for air circulation, and again sporting embedded iron rings. Amy blinked in surprise to see a shower head coming out of the ceiling.

Tara came up behind Amy. "This can be used as a cell, and it doubles as a shower and toilet area." Amy suppressed a gasp as she saw the hole in the floor, about six inches across. Evidently the toilet. Tara saw her looking at it. "That goes to the house's septic system."

Amy stepped away from the closet/bathroom, feeling sick. I might have something for the septic system to take care of in a minute, she thought. She knew, instinctively, that Andrew would mostly keep her chained up in that tiny closet, without light, outside sound, or any other evidence the rest of the world existed, except when he wanted to use her.

Tara beamed at her. "That's about it, really. Do you have any questions?"

Amy waved her arm to indicate the whole area, including the house. "How... how did this all... get here?"

Tara smiled again. "We're specialty builders. Our contractors can build slave quarters to order, or generic models like this one. We pick out out-of-the-way settings like this, and put up the house and the slave quarters. People are very happy with our work. Now..." Tara made her own gesture, indicating the concrete bunker. "...this is for you, right? I see you're not a slave right now, but I believe you will be soon, if I understand correctly?"

Absently, Amy nodded, too stunned to go into detail.

"Well, you'll find this just perfect. Clearly this is entirely voluntary on your part, so I know you must be excited. Now..." She looked around. "I don't think Mr. Cameron intends to bring in very much furniture, other than the chains and shackles, of course. We don't provide those. I think he said there would be a bed. He should be able to get one in here, though he might have to disassemble it to get through the opening. Will he do that, do you know? Our people might be able to help."

In a tiny voice, Amy said, "Oh, I'm sure he'll want a bed."

Tara took another look around, and sighed in satisfaction. "Really, you won't find more effective, secure, but reasonably priced slave quarters anywhere else."

Amy's brain was running in neutral, and the mention of price generated an automatic response. "How much is the rent?"

Tara wrinkled her nose. "Rent? I don't understand."

Amy wondered where the communications breakdown was happening. "How much rent is Andrew paying for this?"

"Oh! I see what you're thinking. No, we don't handle rental properties. Mr. Cameron is buying this property."

Amy gasped and whirled. "What??"

Tara nodded. "I can see you're concerned about the expense, but I assure you it's really reasonable. Mr. Cameron put down a thousand dollar deposit yesterday, and he's promised to provide us with the remainder of the down payment as soon as he completes the financing arrangements. I believe that will be late next week. You should be able to move in by Friday."

Amy bit her lip. "Is that... refundable?"

Tara shook her head. "No, not in a case where the purchaser is using it to hold the house."

Amy was staggered. It wasn't that surprising Andrew was trying to buy the house himself, rather than simply let Dad pay for it. Amy's father had always said he hoped she and Andrew would continue living with him, so he wasn't likely to spring for a house, though that was not to say Dad wouldn't help out if Andrew found himself having trouble with the payments. At present, Andrew might be able to sell a few of his possessions and come up with enough for a down payment. In fact, he probably wouldn't have taken this step if that weren't the case. But it was the fact he had put a significant amount into this already that floored Amy. Andrew loved spending money, but under no circumstances would he just throw it away. How could he have already spent a thousand dollars just in case Amy didn't get into the Academy? Amy's mind whirled with the implications.

Tara looked at her watch. "I'm really sorry, I do have another appointment I need to get to. Let me give you my card..." she pulled one from her purse, "...and you can give me a call if you have any questions."

Amy followed Tara up the stairs, waiting as she unlocked the trap door with a key. Tara waved Amy past and stayed behind to turn off the light, emerging at last to close the door. After it was closed, Amy still couldn't really see it, even knowing where it was.

At the cars, Tara stopped Amy and said, "Wait, there's one thing Mr. Cameron wanted me to give you." Tara reached into her car and pulled out a large yellow envelope which she handed to Amy. Tara shook hands with her and said, "Well, I hope all your needs or fantasies can be satisfied here. We're always very proud of our work."

Amy nodded vaguely, for the moment not able to speak. She sleepwalked to her car, and followed Tara as she made a turnaround in a driveway to the main house Amy hadn't seen.

This doesn't make sense, Amy told herself again and again. Andrew would never do something like this without knowing for sure...

That was her answer, Amy thought, nearly driving into a tree as she came to full realization. He is sure. This is not something that hinges on what the Academy says. Andrew's first choice is this, it's always been this, and he's going to make sure it happens. He is going to sink my admission so I have to end up here. It's easy enough -- he just has to show Dad the contract before I'm ready, maybe as soon as tonight. I know how Dad will react when Andrew springs that on him. He'll be mad I didn't tell him about the Academy, and I don't know what to tell him to somehow make it all better. He'll close his mind. He'll say, no way am I going to let you run off from this family when I thought all along you wanted to have babies with your brother...

Amy stopped the car and cried. All this time, she told herself, I kept saying, Andrew must be with me on this, he wants me to go to the Academy, he would have told Dad already if he didn't. I was just fooling myself. It was all just an elaborate cat and mouse game for Andrew. How he must have loved that! He must have laughed himself to sleep every night thinking, another day closer to yanking the rug out from under her. I've got her so totally fooled.

Amy's eyes fastened on the yellow envelope Tara had handed her, now sitting on the passenger seat. His first gloat, no doubt. Furiously Amy reached for the envelope and tore through the sealing flap.

Inside were several sheets of paper, the top one of which consisted of a full page drawing. Amy recognized the style at once -- that same artist whose work Andrew had delighted in showing her earlier.

As Amy focused more closely on the subjects of the drawing, she began shaking her head, her stomach churning, chanting aloud No, no, no, no...

Andrew had said he was contacting the artist about custom work. It appeared he must also have sent the artist photos of himself. And of Amy.

The woman in this drawing was Amy. Her skin tones weren't quite right, and the shapes of some parts of her body below her head were wrong as well -- the artist hadn't really had complete information -- but the face was Amy's, the hair was hers. In the drawing, Amy was on her back on a bed, naked and spread-eagled, wearing a slave collar, her extremities secured by chains and shackles, her face contorted with anguish, shining with streaks of tears. Andrew, his face turned slightly to the side so that it was recognizable, was naked as well, laying on top of Amy, coupled with her, the bunched muscles of his buttocks and legs suggesting he was thrusting deep inside her. All the area around Amy's crotch and the sheets below it were whitened with goo, no doubt excess semen from many earlier rounds of Andrew's sexual use of her.

Below the drawing, a message in Andrew's handwriting said, "Our first night together, Amy. In my bedroom at Dad's house, before I take you to your new underground home. Each time I finish, I'll lie on

top of you and rest until I'm ready to go again. I'm looking forward to finding out how many times I can do it in one night."

Numbly, her stomach twisting, Amy looked at the second sheet. It was a reproduction of that first drawing by this artist Andrew had shown her, the whipped, crying, nine-months-pregnant slave, kneeling, wrists bound behind her, ankles hobbled with chains. Giving her master oral sex. But this time, the slave was Amy.

There was a message under this one as well. "I'll feed, water, and use you daily in your underground room. In a few weeks your contraceptives will wear off. We both know Dad will be really happy with the grandkids. I'll probably get a house-slave to take care of them all."

Amy was shaking her head, her fingers trembling as she held the drawing. She looked at the third and last sheet. It was another drawing of her, again showing the whip marks and bulging, child-bearing tummy. She was seen from behind this time, the handcuffs visible behind her. She was on her knees again, servicing Andrew again -- from behind, in this one. Andrew was standing, facing away from the artist, and Amy's face was pressed into his buttocks, her nose against his anus. An inset in the drawing showed a closer view from underneath, with Amy's tongue flattened against the back of Andrew's testicles, licking him there. This one, Andrew apparently had decided, needed no comment.

Amy lunged against the car door as she pulled the handle, throwing herself out of the car onto the dirt road just in time before throwing up.

The emptying of her stomach seemed to clear Amy's mind, at least slightly. Her nausea was pushed aside by anger.

She spat to clear her mouth and clenched her fists. I can't give up now! she thought. I've worked so hard!

Breathing hard, she got back in the car and slammed the door closed. She put the car back in gear, and billows of dirt flew up behind the car as she spun the wheels and started the car moving.

CHAPTER 7

Amy ran up to her room, slammed the door closed, and jumped onto the bed. Luckily, Andrew didn't seem to be around. She was sure she couldn't handle that. She put her hands on either side of Miranda's head. Help me please, Miranda.

She tried to blank her mind, to be as receptive as possible. Miranda, I need you. I need you. I need you.

For a long time, she felt nothing. Suddenly, images flooded her mind. Unexpected images. She didn't understand.

And then she did. Her mouth gaped. Is that the key to Dad? His button to push? Will that work?

But I don't have a letter from the Academy. I have to have that.

She stiffened suddenly. Yes! Yes!

She jumped off the bed and recovered her car keys. She fumbled in her desk drawer and extracted her copy of the slavery contract. She thought about taking the pictures in the yellow envelope. No, she decided. I don't need those. Minutes later she was racing to the Academy.

* * * * *

"Could I see Ms. Bennett? Is she here?" Amy bit her lip, looking almost desperate. Minutes later, she was in Vonda Bennett's office.

Ms. Bennett shook hands with her. "It's nice to see you again, Amy. You understand I can't tell you anything yet, right?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. But I wonder if you could do something for me."

"What is it?"

"You have a form that an applicant's father would have to sign when she's accepted, right?"

"Well, yes, but we'd usually send that out with the letter of acceptance..."

"Oh, I understand that, ma'am. But could you give me a copy of that form? I'm not sure if my dad will be home next week, and I'd like to get that form in as soon as I can." She rationalized the fib by telling herself that there was no way to be altogether sure that her father would be available. Anything could happen, right?

Ms. Bennett looked at Amy for a long time. "I see what you're saying, Amy. If I give it to you, do you understand that doesn't mean you've been accepted?"

"Yes, ma'am. This is just in case."

Amy's heart pounded as Vonda Bennett opened a drawer in her desk. "I can't really see a reason not to give you this. As long as you do understand you're not admitted yet. We just haven't decided one way or another."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll hold onto it until I get a letter from you."

Ms. Bennett pointed at the form. "You see that it has to be notarized."

Amy nodded. "That's no problem, ma'am. Thank you so much."

* * * * *

Amy walked into the main office of Cameron Industries. Her father's secretary, Miss Barron, looked up as she entered. "Oh, hi, Amy. Do you need to see your father?"

Amy nodded. "If I could, please."

While Amy was waiting, she quickly took out the Academy's permission form and filled in her name on it. Miss Barron looked up from her phone, and nodded to Amy. "You can go in."

* * * * *

Her father looked up from his desk. "Is everything okay, Amy?"

"I think so, Dad. Could we sit on the couch?" Amy didn't want to talk to him as he sat behind his big desk, as if she were trying to sell him something. She wanted, as nearly as possible, for the first time in her life, to talk to him as an equal.

It was strange, sitting beside him on the sofa in his office. Always before, even at home, she had felt as if he was giving her an audience, as one of the subjects of his kingdom. She took a deep breath. "Daddy..." She hadn't called him that in years. She felt there was a good reason for doing so now.

He looked at her puzzled. "What is it, sweetheart?"

She turned to face him fully. "Remember at Miranda's hanging... the way everybody looked at Mr. Warren? Her father?"

That had been the subject of Amy's mental images when she touched Miranda's head. Again and again, from every angle, she was seeing Kevin Warren.

Amy's father nodded tentatively, not sure yet where this was going.

Amy went on, "I mean, the way everybody saw how proud he was... not just that, though. It's like... everybody was in awe of him. Because they felt that way about Miranda. I think everyone looked like they thought he had done such a great job, raising such an amazing daughter. You saw that, didn't you? I mean, you did so many things for him! You weren't expecting to do that, were you? The way you let him

take such nice cuts of her meat, and then you let him take your role in the play! Why did you do that, Daddy?"

Preston Cameron looked towards the window of his office, deep in thought, and finally nodded. "I know what you're saying. It did seem that he deserved it. His daughter was something special."

Amy leaned closer to him. "Daddy -- would you like to see people look at you that same way? With nothing to do with all your money, or everything else you've accomplished..." Amy waved her arm to indicate everything around her. "...but for a different reason? That everyone thought you had really done well, raising a talented daughter?"

Preston looked directly at Amy for the first time. "What are you saying, honey?"

"I'm saying... if your daughter could put on such a special show, just like Miranda did... wouldn't that mean something to you? Seeing people look at you just like they looked at Mr. Warren?"

Her father's eyes sprang wide open. "Honey, have you been admitted to the Academy?"

She held his eyes. "Not yet, Daddy. Almost. I'm really close, though. I've been through the interview with the dean, and I think I have a really good chance."

"I thought... well, aren't you going to be Andrew's breeding slave?" Preston seemed to be trying to keep up with the shifting landscape of his daughter's life.

Amy shook her head. "I haven't been sure that I could get into the Academy. I had to have a fall-back position. You understand?"

Preston did indeed understand a cautious approach to business. Then a thought occurred to him. "Andrew already put down a deposit on a house for the two of you."

Amy nodded. "If I get in the Academy, I'll pay him back the thousand dollars. I know he was counting on me being there for him, but this is bigger."

"So you don't really want to be his slave?"

"Well, it's not my first choice. Here, let me show you something..." She pulled the envelope with the contract out of her purse. Taking a deep breath, she removed it from the envelope and let him read it, holding the breath.

Preston bit his lip. "This is dated a couple of months ago."

Amy nodded. "I've known for a long time what I really wanted to do. Andrew understands that too. He knew I wouldn't sign this if it didn't say my number one priority was to go to the Hanging Academy. Daddy?" Her hand covered his. "It's really, really important to me."

"But... well, you know I was hoping for grandchildren."

Amy sat up straighter. "Daddy, if it works out that way, if I don't get in the Academy, I promise I'll give you the best, sweetest grandchildren anyone ever had. But if I don't do that, you know Andrew will have kids. Right?" She held his eyes until he nodded.

She took a deep breath. "Daddy, this is what I want more than anything in the world. If I don't get it, then I belong to Andrew, totally and completely. But before anything else, I want this. I want it for me, and I want it for you too. So people will think, look at Preston Cameron. He's done a lot of things, but wow, his daughter put on a show I'll always remember."

Her father was silent for a time, looking out the window. He turned back to Amy at last. "You need me to do something, don't you?"

Amy put the contract back in her purse and pulled out the Academy form. "You understand, I'm not admitted yet. But if I am, then I have to have your permission to go there."

She handed him the form. It had the Academy letterhead, and looked very official, as indeed it was. She held her breath again, watching him intently as he read it over. An endless time seemed to pass.

Amy tried to read his face, to judge his leanings on the issue. When she felt nearly sure the balance was starting to tip her way, it was time to give it one last push. She pointed to one line on the form, the one in which the Academy offered the student's parents some remuneration in return for enslaving their daughter. With a playful smile on her face, she said, "See, they'll even give you money for me. Who knows when that might come in handy?"

Her father burst out laughing, something Amy had seen rarely in her life. He got up from the sofa and pushed the button that connected him with his secretary. "Miss Barron, could you get a notary up here from Human Resources?"

Amy pumped her fists, saying silently, Yes, yes, yes!! Miranda, I did it!!

* * * * *

Amy rested on her bed, smiling as she heard Andrew come up the stairs. She knew he'd look in on her.

Andrew grinned from the doorway. "So, what'd you think of the place?"

She looked up at him disinterestedly. "Looks pretty typical for slave quarters. I don't expect I'll see it again, though. I'm going to the Academy."

His eyes suddenly narrowed. "You got a letter?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. Next week, I guess."

His smile returned. "Doesn't matter. I'm telling Dad about the contract tonight." His eyes glowed, waiting for her reaction.

She shook her head. "Don't bother. He's seen it."

She loved the way his face fell. "What?"

She sat up and looked directly at him. "I showed him the contract. He knows I want to go to the Academy. He's signed a form to say it's okay."

She almost laughed out loud at seeing Andrew's jaw drop. "You said haven't been admitted yet. Does... does he know that?"

She smiled benignly. "He knows everything, Andrew."

She finally did laugh as he ran downstairs. He was gone long enough to verify everything with his father, and finally trudged back up.

She called out, "See, Andrew?"

He reappeared at her door, and snarled at her, "This doesn't change anything. You still don't know if you're in or out. And if you're out, you're mine."

She nodded. "I've got a deal for you."

"No! I'm not letting you out of the contract!"

She shook her head. "It's not about that. Look, it's probably still a week before I hear anything. I want to propose something. Will you listen?"

He glared at her for at least a minute, and finally muttered, "I'm listening."

She nodded again. "Okay. Look, I can't do anything about it if I'm not admitted. I understand that. I belong to you then. The law will back you up. Dad will back you up. I'd be a runaway slave if I tried to get away, and I can't go anywhere without you finding me. I get that."

Grudgingly, he nodded. "Keep going."

"I want you to stay away from me until I hear from the Academy. Here's what I'll do in return. If I get in, then I'll give you the thousand you put down on deposit on the house. I told Dad I'd do that, and I will."

"And if you don't get in?"

She took a deep breath. "Have you got the shackles and chains for the corners of your bed yet? You know what I'm talking about. Like in the drawing. I know you wouldn't wait till the last minute to get them. You're planning to use them next week."

His eyes glowed. "I've got them. So?"

"And a collar? You've got a slave collar already, right?"

He was breathing faster, seeming to anticipate where this was headed. "Of course."

“Could you bring that in here, please?”

Andrew blinked in surprise, and returned to his bedroom, reappearing moments later, bearing a heavy metal collar similar to the ones Amy had seen in the drawings. “Okay, here it is. So?”

Amy looked over the collar reluctantly, biting her lip. It was one of the kind without a release mechanism. At present it had plastic stays to keep it from closing accidentally. Once in place around her neck, it would lock permanently, never to be removed. Amy closed her eyes and shivered. “Are the shackles self-locking? I could put them on myself without a key, right?”

Andrew was now sure where this was headed, judging from the sudden bulge near his belt. “Yeah. So?”

“Okay. If you leave me alone for now, don’t even talk to me until I hear from the Academy, don’t track me when I go out, then here’s what I’ll do. I already said what I’d do if they say yes, and there’s something in it for you in that case. If they say no...” She paused, not believing she was saying this, but knowing everything was lost anyway if the word from the Academy was negative, “...then I won’t fight you. I’ll make it easy for you. Go ahead and install the chains on the bedposts of your bed. If the Academy says no, I’ll sign over the ownership of my car to you, and leave my debit card and PIN number here on the bed. You’ll have everything that’s mine. And then I’ll strip naked, go into your room, cuff myself spread out on the bed like in the picture, and wait for you. I’ll leave the slave collar on your bed so you can put it on me yourself.” She looked at him, watching his expression. “Okay?”

He stood looking at her, gradually breathing harder as the mental images took over his mind. Finally he said, “Deal.”

* * * * *

Amy spent Saturday, Sunday, and Monday going through all her possessions, deciding how to dispose of them. She threw a lot of things away, while setting some aside to give to friends -- in that category, mostly clothes. She started a list of everything she wanted to take with her to the Academy, starting with Miranda’s head. There were several small odds and ends that were her memories of her mother. Those went on the list too.

Andrew stayed out of the house most of the time. When both he and Amy were present, they circulated through the house like planets in entirely different orbits. Even at dinner on Sunday night, Andrew managed to hold back from responding to anything Amy was saying. Her dad had a lot of questions about the Academy. Amy answered them while Andrew picked at his girlmeat and potatoes.

Amy relished the freedom from Andrew’s infliction of himself on her life, but shuddered thinking of what images were passing through his head. The things he was planning to do with her if the news from the Academy was bad.

* * * * *

Late Tuesday morning, James, as was his custom if he found the mail before Amy or Andrew did, sorted through it. He came upstairs with some pieces for Andrew, and dropped two envelopes addressed to Amy on her bed.

Amy was sitting on the floor of her closet, going through the last remaining possessions in it and dropping them into boxes according to whether she'd discard them, keep them, or give them to friends - several boxes in the last category, each with a friend's name on it. Taking a break, she stood up, stretched her back, and went to see what mail she'd got.

The first of the two letters was from her bank, a monthly statement. She had torn the envelope open before her eye caught the return address on the other letter.

She froze, her breath catching in her throat. I don't think this could be good, she thought, getting it this early.

She picked up the envelope with shaking fingers and sat on her bed, staring at the ornate printed "The Hanging Academy" in the upper left, the "Miss Amy Cameron" with her address in the lower right. She felt the letter with the tips of her fingers as she bent it. I don't think there can even be two pages in there, she told herself fretfully. There should at least be that parental consent form besides the letter offering admission. This *really* isn't good.

She tried to insert her finger into the tiny space of the flap that was unsealed, to tear the letter open, but her finger was shaking too badly. She spent several minutes looking for a letter opener, and finally just ripped the end as carefully as she could, trying not to damage the contents.

It was, indeed, a single sheet. She tried not to unfold it, but it unbent on its own far enough that the words "We regret to inform you" were seared into her eyeballs before the rest of the words were blurred by tears.

She didn't even notice herself sliding off the edge of the bed to sit heavily onto the floor, the bed at her back, hugging herself, her face buried against her knees as she cried. And that was even before the full weight of the news sank in. Andrew. She was his slave as of this moment.

I know he'll keep me in that little closet, her inner voice wailed. Naked, in the dark, chained so I can hardly move. Waiting there until the next time he wants to use me.

She could feel her bladder letting go, the warm dampness spreading through her panties.

She looked up, sniffing, her breathing still erratic with sobs. The boxes. I can ask Dad to get those to the right people. And throw away the stuff I'd been going to take with me. Those things only mean anything to me. Except Miranda's head. Andrew will want that back.

That thought brought a fresh round of crying. On top of everything else, Amy had failed Miranda.

The collar, she thought. I'd better get that out. Andrew kept his end of the deal. I have to keep mine. It doesn't matter. I can't get out of it anyway.

She retrieved the collar from the dresser drawer in which she'd put it and dropped it on the bed, then stood shakily in front of the bed and began taking off her clothes, automatically throwing the soiled panties in the hamper. I don't need these anymore, she thought. I'll never wear clothes again.

Naked, she knelt by the bed, dropped her upper body onto it and started crying again. The image of that drawing, the first one in the yellow envelope, showing Andrew on top of her as she lay stretched out helpless on his bed, took shape and texture in her mind. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut, trying to shut the image out, but it remained. That's really going to happen, she moaned to herself. Tonight. "Our first night together." In just a few hours that will really be happening.

I need to go to his room now, she thought. Cuff myself to his bed and wait for him.

She tried to make herself get up, go to Andrew's room. Just a few minutes, she promised herself. Just a last few minutes in freedom, in my own room. Then I'll go.

She felt something scrape lightly against her fingers, and she opened her eyes to see what it was. The Academy letter. Her fingers reached out for it on their own. She was somehow unwillingly compelled to look at it again, as a soldier after a battle must keep examining a fatal wound. She unfolded it to read it fully.

Her mind was so jangled that several minutes seemed to pass during which a tiny voice within her could only say, something's wrong here, while the rest of her mind ignored it. Gradually the tiny voice shouted louder. Something wasn't registering right.

At last the image her eyes were seeing filtered through the debris of her mind into her consciousness.

The letter, at the top, was addressed to "Miss Marla Cannady," at an address entirely different from Amy's.

Amy reached out convulsively for the envelope, saw again the "Miss Amy Cameron" printed on it. Of course the envelope is addressed to me, she thought. That's how it got here. But it had somebody else's letter in it.

Her breath heaving in and out of her, Amy grabbed for her phone, making five attempts to punch in the Admissions Office number with shaking fingers before she finally got it right, feeling herself start to pass out from hyperventilation while the call rang through.

"Admissions. Can I help you?"

Amy had to get her breath under control before she could speak. "C-Could I talk to Ms. Bennett, please?"

Amy felt her chest, feeling the pounding of her heart, trying to will it to slow down as her call was transferred. "This is Vonda Bennett. Can I help you?"

"M-Ms. Bennett, this is Amy Cameron."

"Oh, it's nice..." The voice on the phone paused. "Are you okay, Amy?"

"I - I don't know. I got a letter from you today."

The voice was now very puzzled. "We haven't sent one to you, Amy. Are you sure it's from us?"

Amy nodded, as if Ms. Bennett could see that. "It's got your return address, and letterhead, and all that. The envelope was addressed to me, but inside the letter was for..." She looked at the letter again. "...Marla Cannady."

Amy heard a horrified gasp at the other end of the line, followed by a whispered, "Oh, no!"

"Ms. Bennett, is it possible the letters got mixed up in the envelopes? Like this Marla Cannady got mine?"

"No, Amy, nothing like that. Your letter hasn't even gone out yet. I've got it sitting right here on my desk with some others we were going to send out tomorrow. I think... let me check something."

Amy could hear Ms. Bennett striking keys on her computer keyboard, finally saying under her breath, "Oh, yes, that must be it." Aloud to Amy, she said, "Marla Cannady's name is right under yours in our applicant database. Sheila... I mean, somebody must have selected the wrong line on the screen when we were printing out envelopes. Oh, this is... I am *so* sorry, Amy. This never happened before. I feel so bad this happened! Listen, if you would, just destroy that letter, okay? We'll print out another one for Marla and get it out in the mail today."

Amy needed to clear her mind completely of her earlier panic. "So... I'm not rejected yet, right?"

"Amy..." The voice paused. "I wouldn't normally do this, but I know this upset you really badly, and that is *completely* our fault. I think we owe you a little bit beyond just apologizing. As I said, I have your letter right here. Would you like me to read it to you?"

Amy felt an excitement building within her that far exceeded her earlier despair in intensity. She was aware she could fall off a cliff if the coming news wasn't what it sounded like, but she had to hear. She said slowly, "Ohh-kayyy..."

With a slight smile in her voice, Ms. Bennett said, "This one is addressed to Miss Amy Cameron. And it starts out, 'Dear Amy: We are very happy to invite you to be a member of next year's entering class at...'"

Amy's arms shot straight up over her head, the phone in one of her hands so that she lost contact with the voice reading her letter to her, and she shouted out ecstatically at the top of her lungs. Feeling her fist clenching the phone, she hurriedly brought it back down to her ear. "I'm sorry, I was just... Oh, thank you so much!!!" A fresh stream of tears followed the tracks of the old ones down her face. "I promise I'll be the best... Oh!" She looked around the room. "I've got so many things I have to do! Ms. Bennett, will you still be in your office later, maybe about..." She looked at her clock. "...four?"

"I'll be here until five, Amy. And I'm glad I can be the first to tell you congratulations, and I want to say again how sorry I am about the mistake."

"Mistake? Oh, THAT." Amy had honestly forgotten. "Please don't worry about that. There's no way you could have made me any happier. I need to go now, but I'll see you later today."

"I'll be looking forward to seeing you again, Amy. Goodbye."

Amy said goodbye, closed the phone and stood up. She quickly tugged on her clothes, over fresh panties. First, she thought, about fifteen minutes more of closet stuff.

She actually finished the sorting in ten minutes, and took the discard box down to the trash bin downstairs. She came back up for her car keys, looking at the boxes of things she was giving away. She ran back down to ask James to get them to the right places -- she'd written phone numbers under the names.

She took out her phone and dialed, muttering under her breath as she heard it ring, "Be there be there be there..." As soon as it was answered, she shouted, "Scott? Alan?" She wasn't sure whether Scott or his roommate would pick up.

"It's me, Amy. Is everything okay?" Scott's voice.

She laughed happily. "Better than okay. Will you be there for a little while?"

"Sure. Should I ask what's up?"

Giggling, she said, "No, I'll surprise you. Since I'm sure you could never *possibly* guess what I'm this happy about."

He laughed. "No idea at all. Are you coming over now?"

"Be there in a few minutes. Is that okay?"

"Sure..." Amy lost the rest of what he had been going to say as she closed the phone and ran down to her car.

CHAPTER 8

She felt relaxed, finally, holding Scott close in bed, the sweat from their lovemaking mixing together. His eyes looked so big, so close. She smiled and kissed him. "So you know this is our last time, right?"

He returned her kiss. "I know. This has been really, really nice. I just feel lucky we could meet and have this time together we could remember."

She sighed. "I'm lucky too. And I'd give anything to stay here all day, or just another hour. But I have to go." She looked at him with a sad face.

He reached out with fingers from both hands and pulled both corners of her mouth upward, making her giggle. "Don't give me that frown. The reason you have to go is... *you're in the Academy!*"

She pumped her arms in delight. "I know!!" She kissed him again, and stood up to round up her clothes.

He watched her from the bed, his head propped on his elbow-supported hand. "I know you can't even call me, because you can't talk to anybody on the outside. But I'll be imagining what you're doing while you're there, making new friends, practicing hanging... just being happy. I'm so glad you got that chance!"

Dressed now, she bent down and kissed him one more time. "And I'll always imagine you've found a way to be as happy as I am right now. I hope you do!" She straightened up, reaching behind her to open the door. She gestured with her hand. "Turn around and face the other way, okay?" She hurriedly brushed at her eye.

He did. When he turned back around a moment later, as he expected, she was gone.

* * * * *

She drove to the offices of Cameron Industries, and rushed up to the main office. A few minutes later she was in her father's office.

As he stood up behind his desk, she ran around it and wrapped her arms around him. "I got in, Daddy!"

Preston Cameron beamed at her. "That's great, honey! I'm proud of you."

Amy gasped, not from the sentiment itself, but from realizing she had never, in her life, heard her father say that to her.

She looked up at him, her face serious. "I'm leaving to go there now, Dad."

He looked surprised. "I'd had the impression you didn't start there until September. Am I remembering that right?"

She nodded. "I know, Dad. But there isn't anything in my life more important to me than being there, and there's nothing left that I have to do here. I'm sorry to cut a month off the end of the time I could spend with you, but you understand, don't you?" Her eyes pleaded with his. "Don't you?"

He looked steadily at her, saw the look in her eyes. "I do now, I think."

"Dad, thank you for everything you've ever done for me, you and Mom both. And..." She grinned at him. "See you one more time in about three years. Okay?"

He returned her smile. "Looking forward to it, sweetheart."

She gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Bye, Daddy. Wish me luck!" She turned and ran out the door, turning, as she ran, to blow him a kiss. She heard him call out, "Luck!" as she went out the front door into the hallway.

She drove at excess speed to the bank, walking out with a thousand dollars in cash from her account. Speeding home, she ran up to her room. She grabbed the Academy letter and envelope, and ran downstairs to use her dad's shredder. After destroying the letter, she nearly fed the envelope into the shredder as well, but stopped herself, giggling. No, I've got a place for this.

She took it back up to her room, emerging a few minutes later with a small handbag filled with the few possessions she was taking, and a large box containing her most important possession of all. She'd noticed the other boxes, with the names, were already gone. James had no doubt moved them downstairs.

In the hallway, she put her things down on the floor for a moment, and went into Andrew's room. She tossed the slave collar onto the bed. Then she arranged the ten crisp hundred-dollar bills from the bank in a sunburst pattern around the envelope, with its Hanging Academy return address, Amy's name prominently displayed. She was so glad Andrew wasn't home, though that was normal this week -- he was avoiding contact with Amy as much as possible in the interests of keeping a deal from which he had a lot to gain. She wished she could see his face when he saw this, but she needed to be safely away. She picked up her possessions again, and walked back up the hall, taking one last look at her bedroom. It had been the one corner of the world that belonged to her, for as long as she could remember.

She sighed and went down the stairs and, emerging from the house, took a last look at it as well. Then she put her things in the car and sped down the drive towards the street. Heading for the Academy.

She wasn't supposed to report to the Academy for a month. Andrew would be anticipating that she would remain at home that month.

Amy knew, with absolute certainty, that if she did wait, if she gathered all her things and said all her goodbyes and drove to the Academy in September, she would never get there. That month would give Andrew all the time he needed to make his plans for intercepting her, or to have someone else do it.

She visualized it very well, even dreamed very vividly about it. Andrew's style, she felt certain, would be to knock her out with a drug, most likely administered by a dart. She would wake up in the dark, in that tiny underground closet, in chains. In a slave collar. All hope lost. Even her father wouldn't know she was

missing. He would assume she was at the Academy, and knew she couldn't contact him from there. He would never guess she was Andrew's badly-treated sex toy, secured underground where no sound she made could escape, where no one who didn't know exactly where she was could possibly find her.

There was only one way to avoid that ghastly future.

She drove, with screeching tires, into the Academy parking lot, looking at her watch. She had known she was running behind, but she had made it in time.

Out of breath, she entered the Admissions office, startling Sheila with the sight of a slightly bedraggled girl carrying a huge box under one arm and a handbag in the other. "Sheila, is Ms. Bennett still in?"

Sheila, looking as if she wondered what sort of emergency this could possibly be, picked up her phone and buzzed Ms. Bennett's office. A moment later, Vonda Bennett came out. "Oh, Amy, you made it. Is..." She stopped, puzzled. She hadn't expected Amy to be quite so encumbered.

Amy managed an exhausted smile. "Hi, Ms. Bennett. Could we go into your office a minute?"

Ms. Bennett nodded. "Of course, Amy." She gestured for Amy to follow her.

Amy sank down into the chair in front of the desk in the office, relieved that she could stop moving at last. She reached into her handbag and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. Despite her exhaustion, excitement bubbled inside her. The paper completed her access to her dream. "Here's my parental permission form." She put it on the desk in front of Ms. Bennett.

Ms. Bennett picked up the form, looked over it and nodded. "I'll put this in your folder, Amy, and your admission is complete as of now." She looked at Amy with a puzzled expression. "I know this can't be the reason you're here." She looked at Amy's handbag and the larger box on the floor.

Amy nodded. "Ms. Bennett -- I really, really hope this is possible. Could I stay here, at the Academy, until classes start?"

Vonda Bennett's eyes shot open wide. "Why, Amy?"

Amy had resolved to tell as much of the truth as she could. "It's really a long story, and I'll tell you everything, if you need me to do that. The short version is, I think my brother is a danger to me."

Ms. Bennett's eyes narrowed now. "Why would he be a danger?"

Amy sought for a way to say it. "He had... other plans for me, instead of being here."

Ms. Bennett looked at her, and slowly nodded. "I understand. I think. We haven't really done anything like this before. I'd certainly have to consult with Dean Porter on what our policies would be."

Amy nodded. "I understand that completely, ma'am. If this helps, could you tell him that I have over five... no, I'm sorry, over four thousand dollars in my savings, and I'll give that to the Academy? Here's my debit card..." she put it on the desk, "...and I'll write down the PIN number. And my car is out in

front. Here are the keys..." she put those next to the card, "...and I'll sign my ownership over to the Academy too. And if there's a job you want me to do, like... well, I'm sure you have your own cafeteria, obviously, and there must be people working there. But any job, really. I'll do it."

Ms. Bennett's jaw dropped briefly as Amy went through her offers, but she closed it quickly. Tapping a pen on her desk, she said, "You know there's a security issue, don't you? There are... well, it's no secret that we have secrets."

"Yes, ma'am." Amy's heart soared. It sounded as if Ms. Bennett was seriously considering it! Amy was sure Dean Porter would see the sense in it if Ms. Bennett did.

"So you understand that, once we let you stay here, even for a night, we can't let you leave? None of the first-year students leaves the secured area at any time, and even after that it's only rarely, under controlled circumstances."

Amy nodded. "I know, ma'am. I'm prepared to... well, you must have some forms the new students sign, when they commit themselves to be your slaves."

"Of course, but Amy... we don't have them do that until after they have an orientation session, where we make it very clear to them what they are committing to, and that it's irrevocable." She leaned forward. "You know that every student at the Academy either graduates or else is hanged?"

Amy looked directly at Ms. Bennett's eyes. "I know, ma'am. And I'll commit to everything, right now. I'm offering myself as the Hanging Academy's slave. I don't need the orientation, or time to think it over." She smiled. "I'm going to do both of those things. Graduate and be hanged. I'll do one of them first, then the other."

Ms. Bennett finally laughed. "You drive a hard bargain."

Amy laughed too. "I learned that from my father."

Ms. Bennett picked up her phone, and punched a number in. A moment later, she said, "Dean Porter? I have an incoming student here with an unusual... proposal."

A few minutes later, after explaining to the dean all that had happened, Ms. Bennett hung up. "He wants us to come to his office. Are you ready to go there?" She rolled her eyes. "I guess I didn't need to ask."

"Yes... oh!" She pulled out her cell phone. "Can I make one call? I know I won't be allowed to do it from inside."

Ms. Bennett nodded, and Amy punched in the number. "Hi, Scott?"

"Amy?" Even Ms. Bennett, from where she sat, could hear the surprise in the voice.

"I'm here, at the Academy. They're about to let me in. Scott..." She'd planned to say something else. Several something elses. She didn't expect what came out of her mouth. "I love you."

There was no hesitation in the reply. "I love you too, Amy."

She closed the phone without saying another word, and held it against her cheek, feeling its warmth. She'd thought about telling him how great it had been, and that she'd always remember him. But she'd done all that already. There was only one thing they hadn't said to each other, and now that was done.

She handed the phone to Ms. Bennett. "I'm ready."

* * * * *

EPILOGUE

Amy distributed her few possessions around the dorm room, humming to herself. Her handbag was nearly empty now, its former contents on shelves and in drawers. She paused several times to look at herself in the mirror, wanting again to see the metal ring circling her neck, with its engraved "Slave Girl - Property of the Hanging Academy" showing backward in the reflection. She thought the Academy's slave collars were the most beautiful she'd ever seen.

Since the school year, running from September to September, was nearing its end, there were several empty rooms in the First Year dorm wing. Dean Porter had had a staff member bring a first-year uniform and collar to his office. Amy turned now in front of the mirror, tearing her eyes away from the collar to admire how the white short-shorts and bra made her look. Andrew would probably split his zipper if he could see me! she thought.

She looked back at the collar again. She would never, ever forget the moment when Dean Porter had locked the collar in place around her neck. She replayed it in memory once more now, feeling the same tingle.

She loved the room as well. There was plenty of shelf space, though Amy suspected the shelves would be full of schoolbooks and instructional disks before long. There was a TV with a puzzling remote. From some of its markings, it looked as if it might be used to select movies and satellite radio stations as well as cable channels, but Amy decided to postpone experimenting with it.

Much more fascinating was the sturdy-looking ring in the ceiling, no doubt meant for a rope, and a platform of what Amy had come to realize was the standard type for trained hanging girls, tucked away under the TV cabinet. Amy felt she was almost squirting between her legs. The dean had told her she wasn't allowed to try hanging herself until she'd been in classes, even if the students in the dorm volunteered to help. But at least maybe she could watch some of the girls here close up as they practiced.

She tried to figure out the purpose of the apparatus sitting folded up on a small shelf, one of them on the wall over the head of each bed. She'd find out soon enough, she was sure.

Behind her, she heard movement at the door of the room. Two girls, one blonde, one with reddish brown hair, wearing white bra-and-shorts outfits and "Slave Girl" collars identical to Amy's, were looking in at Amy with matching dumbfounded expressions. Clearly, they thought that nothing could be farther

from the realm of possibility than to suddenly see a new classmate, eleven months into the year. The blonde asked wonderingly, "Who are you??"

She walked towards them, her hand held out. "I'm Amy Cameron. I'm really in the next year's class, but the dean is letting me stay here until classes start in September. It's a long story."

The darker-haired girl looked at Amy with a sour expression, not moving to respond to Amy's offered hand. "I'm sure it is."

Amy bit her lip. She should have thought of how unlikely it was that a close-knit, family-like group of students would accept a stranger suddenly thrust into their midst. She slowly put her hand down.

The blonde said, "And you're going to be in a room by yourself?"

Amy nodded. "I can't participate in any hanging practice until classes start, so the dean didn't see a need for me to have a partner. It's just as well, I guess, because there aren't any to choose from. As far as I know, nobody else will get here until next month."

The dark-haired one sniffed. "This was Sandy's and Bonnie's room. After Sandy got hanged at a party, Bonnie moved in with Katie and Marcia."

"I'm sorry to hear about Sandy." With so much tension in the room, Amy felt a need to touch something more comforting. She'd saved this bit of unpacking for last anyway. She turned to open the large box and reverently lifted out its occupant.

Behind her she heard two simultaneous gasps. Turning back, she saw the dark-haired girl in a half-crouch, her hands covering her mouth, her eyes wide. The blonde was staring open-mouthed. She whispered one word, with almost no wind behind it. "Miranda!"

Both girls now entered the room, walking slowly, carefully, almost stumbling over one of the beds in their concentration on the head Amy was holding. The dark-haired girl asked softly, "Where did you get her?"

"She was hanged at my house. I got to know her there." She sighed as one of her special memories of that day came back to her. "She let me oil her skin before she went out to be hanged."

The blonde looked at Amy in awe. "You did her oil?"

Amy nodded. "While Beth was doing her hair, and tying her hands."

The dark-haired girl reached out, and hesitated, looking at Amy. "Can I touch her?"

Amy blinked. "Sure."

The girl put her fingertips on Miranda's hair, stroking it very lightly.

Her eyes still glued to Miranda, the blonde said, still almost in a whisper, "She was our kicking coach, one of them, until she went to do her show. She was *so* good at it. Nobody else could do it like her."

The dark-haired girl giggled. "We all wanted to find out what exercises to do so our bodies could look like hers."

The blonde looked at Amy at last. "Do you... we were going down to the caf -- the cafeteria, that is -- to get some pizza. Do you want to come with us?" She held out her hand. "I'm Linda."

The dark-haired girl held hers out. "I'm Elaine. Laney, usually."

Amy smiled and shook hands with them. "Sure." She set Miranda's head on the shelf nearest the bed.

Linda started to the door, and turned back suddenly. "Oh, they did give you a food card, right? I guess they must have. How else would you eat?"

Amy looked in one of the drawers and found the newly laminated card, still warm, with her picture on it and the words "CLEARED FOR ALL MEALS." She put it in the necessarily shallow front pocket of her shorts, and nodded to Linda.

Linda smiled. "That's a relief." She gestured for Amy to follow her to the door. "We'll want to hear about Miranda's hanging. Every detail." Laney nodded, falling in behind Linda and Amy.

Amy started, as they walked down the hall, "Well, you know she was the Princess, right?" ...

End of Book 2

Read about Amy's first year at the Hanging Academy in Book 3, "Arrivals."