

# Academy Girl

## Book 3: Arrivals

---

*By Cardaniel*

©copyright 2007 by Cardaniel

All Rights Reserved

## Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1	3
CHAPTER 2	12
CHAPTER 3	17
CHAPTER 4	22
CHAPTER 5	33
CHAPTER 6	38
CHAPTER 7	48
CHAPTER 8	54
CHAPTER 9	61
CHAPTER 10	72
CHAPTER 11	79
CHAPTER 12	84
CHAPTER 13	90
CHAPTER 14	95
CHAPTER 15	99
CHAPTER 16	106
CHAPTER 17	111
CHAPTER 18	118
CHAPTER 19	127
CHAPTER 20	131
CHAPTER 21	137

## CHAPTER 1

Amy scrunched around trying to get comfortable, sitting in the recessed alcove, looking through the metal grill into the auditorium. She could see the admissions director, Vonda Bennett, checking off names on a list as the girls entered the auditorium, urging them to sit in the front rows. Amy thought they must be nearly all here -- she counted sixty-three girls now... no, here was another.

Amy wasn't allowed in the auditorium for the orientation session -- the aud was outside the Academy's secured "student" area, which she couldn't leave for at least the next year -- but she wouldn't have missed it for anything. She wanted to feel she was part of the class, not missing any experiences the other girls had, and that meant somehow attending the orientation, even though she already knew everything the rest of the girls were going to be told.

There was a pleasant murmur of voices from the girls, interrupted by frequent giggles. A few of the girls obviously knew each other from high school, but most were strangers to each other, trying to get to know the girls around them with whom they would become a quasi-family for the next three years. Amy shook her head in wonder, thinking about how more than half of these girls wouldn't survive to graduation, looking at the faces trying to guess, based on no information, which ones would make it.

Most of the girls were dressed very casually, though some wore semi-formal looking dresses. Amy suspected each had few other clothes to wear, now, than the ones they'd chosen for orientation -- by now they'd either given most of their possessions away, to friends or younger sisters, or had boxed them up in preparation for doing so, as Amy herself had before leaving home. They would not be keeping any of their original clothes here, other than, in some cases, outfits the staff would approve as being sexy enough to wear to the parties. Other than that, each girl would have only the official uniform shorts, bras, panties, socks, and sneakers issued by the school. Amy had several sets of those, all identical, which she had been wearing for a month.

Ms. Bennett looked down at her list, apparently confirming that all the girls were present. She looked up at the grill behind which Amy was peeking in, giving Amy a smile and a little wave, then signaled to Dean Porter, who rose and approached the lectern.

Amy's heart pounded. This is it! she told herself. I can start feeling like a student now, instead of an interloper!

The dean looked out at the faces of eager and slightly nervous students, who gradually quieted after a few moments. He smiled.

"On behalf of the Hanging Academy, I'd like to welcome all of you to Orientation. I've met all of you individually within the last few months, and it's my pleasure to be able to congratulate you on the achievements that have earned you a place in our student body."

There were a few suppressed snickers, girls no doubt whispering to their neighbors some joke on the phrase "student body," but everyone settled down quickly, paying close attention to the dean.

He continued. "I know that you all know why you are here. And there is very little I can tell you that you shouldn't already know. I trust that each of you has received our student handbook in the mail in the

last month, and I hope each of you has read through it carefully. Did anyone not get one?" He waited to see if any hands were raised. None were.

He nodded. "Good. Now, I just want to say a few things to you personally, all of which you should know from reading the handbook. Foremost, I want to reiterate something you must each be very clear on. All of you who accept admission will be hanged. I hope that you can reach your goal of performing as an Academy graduate, but many of you will not. It is my hope, though, that every single one of you will, by your death, serve a greater purpose than merely providing food. Some of you will be hanged in classroom demonstrations, and you will help every one of your fellow students learn more about the craft and art that you will all be trying to perfect. Some of you will be chosen to die at one of our parties, in front of an audience who will appreciate your performance very much, and such a demise may be very nearly as satisfying to you as if you had done it as a graduate. But none of you, once you accept your admission to the Academy tomorrow morning, may withdraw as students. You are making a very serious commitment, which I hope each of you will carefully consider after you return home tonight. Discuss it with your parents, your siblings, and anyone else with whom you feel a special bond and trust.

"If you do decide to join us tomorrow, you will become the property of the Hanging Academy, upon signing the admission forms. At that time, we will issue you your new uniforms and slave collars, your books and videos for your classes, your food cards for the cafeteria, your schedules of classes, and a room in the First Year dorm. That will take up quite a lot of the day, of course. The rest of your time tomorrow will be free, so that you can meet your roommate, get acquainted with her and your other colleagues, and become familiar with the grounds. Classes, of course, will start the following day, Monday."

Amy shivered with excitement. Just two days until my classes begin!

The dean continued. "Once you have entered the secure area, you will not be allowed to leave it, but we do have quite a large campus, and you will hardly find that the scope of your life is really very limited." He smiled. "I think our upper-class girls would probably tell you that your studies won't leave you very much time to go anywhere anyway."

There was quite a lot of nervous laughter at that.

"I want also to point out," he went on, "That though you will have a great deal more freedom than almost any other slave, you should bear in mind that, once you join us, you will indeed be slaves. You have seen in the handbook that we do have strict rules of behavior, our Conduct Honor Code, and you have read about the penalties for Level 1 and Level 2 violations of the Code." He paused, probably as aware as Amy was of the sudden tension in the room. "Now, you'll be reassured to know there have been no Level 2 violations in the last..." He stopped to think. "Is it ten years now, Vonda?"

The girls turned to look at Ms. Bennett as she answered, "A little more than ten, yes."

The dean nodded. "In the last ten years there have been no Level 2 violations, and I'm sure I can count on all of you to extend that interval into the indefinite future. I know all of you are responsible young women, and will uphold the Conduct Honor Code as a matter of course." He beamed at the students, who seemed to relax a bit.

“When you return tomorrow morning, you will all assemble here, again. You will do your signing in here, and then we will conduct you into the student area to finish getting you checked in.

“Now, that completes our orientation session.” He smiled. “We told you in the letter it would be brief. You can see you can trust us.” More laughs. “Before I dismiss you, I’d like to see if any of you have questions.”

A brown-haired girl in the second row raised her hand. “Not that I’m planning to get sick...” Some of the other girls laughed. “...But I saw in the handbook that I’ll need a medical excuse from the nurse before I can miss classes. How... I’m not sure how to say this... How strict are you?”

The dean nodded. “Jackie, is it?”

The girl smiled at being remembered. “Yes, sir.”

“I think I understand you. As far as enforcing the rule, we’re very strict indeed, but I think you meant how hard is it to be certified as being actually ill. Is that right?” The girl nodded. “All I can say at this point is that our nurse is very understanding. She is going to be looking for some sort of sign of illness, but I think the upper class girls will confirm that she doesn’t just jump to the conclusion that you’re malingering. Of course, as you’ve read, you’ll be responsible for making up any missed assignments, workouts, or practices.” He paused. “Have I answered your question?” The girl nodded again. The dean saw another hand raised, a slightly heavy dark-haired girl this time. “Yes? It’s... Maria, I think?”

The girl said, “Yes, sir. I’ve got a question about the heavy-girl program. You’ve said you hope to get two or three girls in each class to volunteer for that?”

The dean nodded. “Yes, we do on occasion get requests for a larger graduate to put on a show. That requires, on the part of the girl, a special regimen in addition to the training all students go through. Over the three year training period, the heavy-girl students go through additional physical exercises, to promote a greater degree of muscular development -- they actually have quite low fat ratios in their bodies -- including, of course, further work to strengthen their neck muscles. They also each have a special diet to support their participation in the program. No student is forced to join the program, and in some classes we have three or four, and in some classes none at all. I take it you are considering volunteering for that?”

The girl smiled. “Yes, sir.”

The dean returned her smile. “You can sign on for that tomorrow, during check-in.” He looked around again. “Any other questions?”

A girl near the end of a row, on the side nearer Amy, raised her hand. Amy blinked as she focused on the girl from the side. She was a truly stunning blonde -- she didn’t look like Miranda, but she had that same quality about her. The girl was sitting with her arms folded under her breasts, now raising one arm briefly to signal the dean before resuming her posture.

The dean saw her. “Yes... Megan?”

The girl nodded briefly, seeming to take it as obvious that the dean would remember her. "I've seen the rules about class participation, but would we be allowed to skip a class if we already feel like we know the material?"

The dean looked briefly irritated, but regained his smile. "No, you'll be expected to attend all classes, other than those from which, as we've discussed, you've been excused due to illness. Your presence, if you are familiar with the material being discussed, can always be of inestimable worth to those students less familiar with it, since you can share your knowledge with them in class discussions."

The girl, Megan, sighed, quietly saying "Yes, sir," in a somewhat grudging way.

Amy shook her head slightly. The quality in Megan that reminded Amy of Miranda only extended to her looks. Amy wondered if there would be an attitude problem. Tentatively, she assigned Megan to the "won't make it" category.

The dean looked around. "Are there any other questions?" After waiting a few seconds, he smiled. "Well, that concludes today's program, then. I look forward to seeing all of you tomorrow. All of you must be present, here, in this room, not later than 9 am. Until then, I wish you a good day." He smiled at the room generally as girls began standing, some of them now walking up the aisles to the exit as others started talking in groups.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy left the alcove and made her way back to her room. The First Year wing in the dorms was nearly deserted, most of the students having cleared out their things to move to their new rooms in the Second Year wing. Amy looked in Linda's and Laney's room, in which the staff had already exchanged their one large bed for the two standard smaller beds, and grinned at seeing Linda filling a box with the last of her possessions. Amy exclaimed, "You got your new uniforms!" Linda was wearing the aqua-colored bra-and-shorts outfit of a second year student.

Linda beamed at Amy. "And the collar! Come and look at it!" She reached up to push up her metal collar a little higher for Amy to see.

Amy came into the room and bent slightly to get a better look, reading the collar out loud. "Linda - Property of the Hanging Academy." Amy looked back up into Linda's excited face. "That is so cool! You finally got your name on it!"

Linda giggled. "So -- Slave Girl," giving Amy a little dig to emphasize the difference in their collars, "How did the orientation go?"

Amy smiled and shrugged. "Same as always, I imagine. You probably remember what it's like. Say, did you guys have any... like... attitude trouble in your class? Any I'm-just-way-above-all-you-peons kind of things?"

Linda rolled her eyes. "Well, you know there's always going to be one or two like that. The ones who cruised through high school and thought they were always hot stuff. Or they've done hanging before, and they figure they know all about it. Why, did you see one?"

"Maybe... I don't know. I should probably give her the benefit of the doubt. I'll start meeting them all tomorrow, I guess."

"Yeah... Oh!!" Linda's eyes suddenly went big. "I just thought. You'll be totally by yourself in this whole empty wing tonight! Everybody in our class has moved!" All the students Amy had met in the First Year - now Second Year -- class had been eager to change rooms as soon as they were allowed to. Since the Second Year class always had fewer students than they had originally entered with, the Second Year wing had fewer rooms -- and each, in consequence, was a little larger than the First Year rooms.

Linda shook her head. "Look, Amy, you just can't stay there by yourself. I'd be so spooked! Spend the night with me and Laney. We'll get out the rollaway." Since there was often an odd number of students in a class, it frequently was necessary for a student to share temporarily with two others, at least until another member of her class was hanged. Every dorm room had an extra rollaway bed for that reason. "I need to get some hanging practice done, and you can help with that. Then we'll get some popcorn and watch a movie. It'll be fun!"

Amy grinned. "Like you have to talk me into it? Oh, after classes start, I can still come over and see you guys sometimes, right? You won't be all too far above little First Year wimps?"

Linda smiled archly. "Well, of course we'll be above you, dear. Except when you want to be on top."

They were both overcome with laughter. Amy had done some sexual play with several members of the class, but most often with Linda or Laney, her first and closest friends in the First Year... no, again she reminded herself, Second Year class.

Linda sighed, and picked up her box, taking a last look around the room. "I guess I'm done here. Want to come down and see our new room?"

Amy thought, then shook her head. "I'll be down there after dinner, okay? First I want to do a little reading. While it's really, *reelly* quiet. I'm trying to get ahead a little for classes on Monday."

"Okay." Linda leaned towards Amy and kissed her. "We're in room 12. About seven?"

Amy gave Linda's hand a squeeze. "See you then."

Linda shifted her grip on the box. She looked around the tiny room as she walked to the door. "Tell whoever's in here next they've got a lot to live up to."

Amy came out of the room after Linda. "I'll tell them it's a bad luck room. Everybody who lived in it got hanged." She kissed Linda and gave her a little shove, laughing. "Okay, get out of here. This is my territory now."

Linda laughed. "Drink in the ambiance of your superiors." She shuffled her grip again on the box and walked down the hallway.

Still giggling, Amy walked down to her room. Inside it, she pulled her History of Hanging book from the shelf, her textbook for the course of the same name she would be taking. She was just starting it. She felt sure it would be fascinating.

\* \* \* \* \*

Linda climbed up on the platform, naked, the noose brushing against her shoulder. Amy stepped up beside her, grinning, swinging the end of the rope casually in her hand. First year students often used handcuffs to secure their hands behind their back, but from the second year on, ropes were always used, though they took longer. Amy loved helping her friends with hanging. Linda crossed her wrists behind her back, so Amy could tie them.

Laney looked up from below them. "I want to see how you do with setting the noose by yourself, Amy."

Amy bit her lip and looked at Linda. "Is that okay with you, Lin?"

Linda nodded. "You've done it enough with Laney checking. If you're way off I'll tell you, but otherwise I won't say anything."

Amy took a deep breath. "Okay. Laney, just be ready on the emergency button, okay?" The ring in the ceiling from which the noose was suspended was held in place by a mechanism, the "rope drop," which let go instantly if a red button on the wall was pushed. Usually a hanging girl signaled with her foot if she wanted the platform back up, but if she seemed to be in trouble her roommate would push the button for immediate release.

Amy pulled some slack out from the coils of rope in the hangman's knot and dropped the rope over Linda's head, afterwards tightening it in place. Her tongue thrust out through the edge of her lips as she concentrated, she spent at least a minute trying to get the knot exactly where it should be, deciding finally she couldn't do it any better. She looked at Linda, looking as if Linda might yell at her for forgetting everything they'd taught her. "Is that okay?"

A tiny smile flicked the corner of Linda's mouth upward. "I'm not telling. You'll just have to wait and see if I live through this."

Amy gave Linda an exasperated look, feeling she wanted to punch Linda's arm but not wanting to break her concentration so close to the hanging. She suppressed the feeling of wanting to fiddle with the knot a little more, and hopped down from the platform. "If you die, I am going to be so pissed at you!"

Linda snorted, and looked down at Laney. "Tell me when it's eight minutes."

Laney nodded. "Yeah, but I'm bringing the platform back up after nine no matter what."

Linda nodded at Amy. "Amy, you pull it."

They had let Amy pull the lever before, but it still felt like a privilege. Once more, she bit back the instinctive question, "Are you ready?" It was never asked at a real hanging. It was the hanging girl's job

to be ready. Amy saw that Linda's body was very still, calm, waiting, breathing slowly and deeply. Amy reached out and pulled.

Amy's eyes were glued to Linda as the platform on which Linda stood slowly sank towards the floor. It thrilled Amy, every time, to be standing so close, watching the slack vanish from the rope, the girl pulled up onto her toes and finally losing contact with the platform, hanging by her neck just a few feet from Amy. Amy backed off slightly to give Linda some room to kick.

Amy focused her attention on Linda's head, watching the rolling motion she made with it as she wriggled at the end of the noose. Amy had known, watching Miranda's hanging, that the head roll must be something significant. Linda had explained to her that it was the most important part of the art -- hard to master while doing all the other movements, but crucial to success. As Amy had suspected at Miranda's and Beth's hanging, the girl being hanged was actually breathing, and it went beyond that. As she rolled her head from side to side, left, back, right, back, left, repeating, her weight was pressing hard against the loop of rope around her neck on one side, and the pressure was minimized on the opposite side. When the back of her neck was pressing hardest against the rope, the front eased up enough for her to draw a breath through her compressed windpipe, while rolling left and right eased the pressure on her carotid arteries enough to keep some blood flowing to her brain. The rolling of the head had to be done in a rhythm that was compatible with the girl's heartbeat, but practice gave the girl a feeling for that -- she wasn't so much literally feeling the tempo of her heart, it was more of an assessment of what felt right to her. That was one of the many reasons it took so much practice to become truly expert at it.

Another part of it, also acquired only through long practice, was making the jerking of her legs look sufficiently random that it took the attention of onlookers away from the more organized head-rolling. In a sense, it was similar to a magician's misdirection: getting the audience looking at the wrong thing so that they missed how the trick was done.

The hanging couldn't be prolonged indefinitely, even in theory. The grip of the noose around the neck *did* interfere with breathing and blood flow, to such an extent that the hanging girl couldn't keep going forever. But if she did her job well, she could buy an astonishing amount of time while making do with the resources of air and blood that she did have.

As always, Amy felt an intense tingling as she watched Linda kicking and writhing, and felt herself getting so wet between her legs she knew she'd have to run back to her room for a change of panties afterward. Certainly not now, though. She couldn't take her eyes away from the enthralling sight of her dangling friend. She began, as usual, to feel a phantom pressure against her own neck, and a breathlessness that intensified her arousal.

How will it feel to do it myself, Amy wondered, for the hundredth time. Will it be even more intense than when Miranda and Dean Porter choked me? Will I be able to concentrate on the movements I have to make if I get *that* caught up in the sensations?

Amy loved watching Linda's muscles straining, as if she was really fighting for her life. Linda's neck muscles bulged, not yet as strong as Miranda's, but with a year of practice behind her to build them so that, even without her breathing trick, she could last much longer in the noose than any normally developed person, and could tolerate the need for those muscles to support her body's entire weight for astonishing periods.

At last Amy heard Laney say, "Eight minutes." Linda looked down, managing a smile with some effort, and waggled her right foot, the signal to bring the platform back up. Amy looked at Laney, who gestured with her head towards the lever. Amy quickly pulled it, in the opposite direction from before, and the platform rose gradually, to the point that Linda was able to put her weight on it. Amy jumped back up onto it and loosened the knot on the noose.

Linda, breathing raggedly and deeply, closed her eyes, her lips curved upward into an exhausted smile. When she had recovered her breath sufficiently, she opened her eyes and looked at Amy. "I am so horny right now!"

Amy giggled. "What, is it my job to fix that too?"

Linda kissed her. "Get your clothes off and we'll see how you do."

\* \* \* \* \*

#### THE NEXT MORNING

The murmur of voices in the hallway awakened Amy. She tried to stay still, not wanting to wake up Laney, who was lying full-length on top of her, the side of her head nuzzling against Amy's. Amy loved the feel of Laney's naked body covering her own, like a warm, silky, heavy blanket. Amy had only meant to close her eyes for a moment last night after she and Laney made love, but she must have been more tired than she'd thought. The excitement of hanging Linda, of having sex with her afterwards, laughing all through the movie as she shared popcorn with both girls, then discovering that Laney wanted to take a turn with her in bed, all took a toll on her energy.

They'd never managed to get the rollaway bed pulled out.

Amy heard a suppressed giggle from beyond the door, and rolled her eyes. She knew something must be up. Laney must have heard it this time, as she began stirring, accidentally jabbing her elbow into Amy's side. Amy heard Laney mumble "Oh, sorry, Lin. I mean Amy," sleepily, and felt her start to push herself up.

Something pulled on Amy's neck, and Laney dropped back on top of her. They both said "Ow," irritably, and Laney muttered "What the hell?"

Amy frowned, puzzled. "Our collars got stuck together somehow. Hold still." She reached up to feel along the metal surfaces, trying to figure out what projection on them could possibly have snagged. Her fingers found a loop of string, wound several times around both collars, tying them together. Moving her feet, she suddenly realized her ankles were tied as well -- not to each other, but her left to Laney's right, her right to Laney's left. She groaned, muttering "I can't believe this," and shouted, "Linda!"

From just beyond the doorway, Linda almost fell into the room, breathless from trying to keep from laughing out loud, finally releasing it. Behind her, at least half a dozen of the other girls looked in over her shoulder, all giggling in delight, watching Laney and Amy try to figure out what they could move. The attached collars and string-bound ankles were the extent of their bondage, but it was hard for them to

find a way to move. Laney had to tip her head back and brush her nose past Amy's to look at the doorway, a wry grin on her face. "You know I'll get you back sometime."

"You and me both, Laney," Amy said, her hands on Laney's hips, trying to decide if the bed was wide enough to turn Laney off to the side without her falling off the bed, pulling Amy along with her. It appeared it wasn't. The girls hadn't had time yet to get the two narrow beds replaced with one wider one. "Linda, what am I supposed to do with a naked girl stuck on top of me?"

Linda almost collapsed on the floor, totally overcome with panting laughter now. She managed to sputter, "You guys were so sound asleep, I couldn't believe it! I might as well have hogtied you while I was at it!" The girls behind her laughed more loudly.

Amy sighed and closed her eyes. She knew by now this was part of the package when getting to be friends with Linda and Laney. She finally started laughing herself, pointing her finger at Linda. "Linda, I'm going to turn my imagination on full time. I will get you back. I'll go easier on you if you get us out of this *now*."

Linda pushed her lips into a pout, losing it several times to giggles. "Well, if you're going to be *that* way..." She got out a pair of scissors and snipped the string around the girls' collars, then freed their ankles.

Laney pushed herself up with her arms, and Amy slid out from underneath. She bent to retrieve her clothes from the floor.

Anita, one of the girls laughing from the doorway, said in a mock-belligerent voice, "Hey, what's a white uniform doing in this wing?"

Amy smiled as she pulled her panties and shorts up and reached down again for her bra. "The dean sent me here to get all the Second Years to shape up. You know what they say, the students keep getting smarter every year."

Anita resumed giggling. "Not this year. I heard them say, 'Hey, what's left in the bottom of the barrel to scrape up?'" She and the other girls finally retreated, still giggling, down the hallway, knowing the show was over.

Amy finished adjusting her bra and slipped on her socks and shoes. Sitting up beside her, Laney, still naked, was rubbing the last bits of sleep out of her eyes and yawning. Amy put her arm across Laney's back, leaned over and kissed her. "I'm going back to my room to brush my teeth and pee. Tell Linda." Amy looked at Linda, her eyebrows arched. "To whom I'm not speaking at present."

Laughing again, Linda sat on the bed next to Amy. "You're not really mad, are you? Didn't you ever do something because you couldn't resist? You guys looked so cute like that!"

Amy put both arms around Linda and leaned her head on Linda's shoulder. "You'll never know if I'm mad until my revenge is complete. Breakfast after I get back?"

"Sure."

## CHAPTER 2

Amy was lying on her stomach on her bed, resting her upper body on her elbows, reading intently from the general anatomy book propped up against the wall in front of her, occasionally highlighting important points with a yellow marker. She looked at her watch. Eleven am -- time, she suspected, for her classmates to start showing up.

For several minutes, as if on cue, she heard growing murmurs and louder conversations starting in the hallway, and saw white-clad students walking past her door, looking for their own rooms. Amy got up to stand in her doorway to see the students arrive, most of them with bags, boxes, or suitcases of possessions, each girl comparing a slip of paper she was holding to the numbers above the doors.

One girl walking past caught Amy's eye -- the blonde from yesterday, Megan, the one who'd seemed... Amy wasn't sure "snotty" was the best word for it, but it was a close fit. Seeing her walking, especially in the skimpy school uniform, made her even more attractive than just seeing her face. She had big, high, perky breasts, the sort of well-defined abs that Amy was approaching but hadn't quite reached, hips that swayed sensuously, and beautiful long legs which were another thing about her that reminded Amy of Miranda. Amy felt a sudden rush of physical attraction to the girl, muted an instant later by memories of her performance yesterday. Today Megan had a sour expression on her face as she walked by, kind of a do-I-have-to-live-with-these-idiots look, which further solidified Amy's negative impression of her. Amy was relieved to see Megan walk past her and enter a room two doors farther down the hall.

Moments later, Amy recognized the brown-haired girl who'd also asked one of the questions at the orientation. Amy smiled at her. "Jackie, right? I saw you yesterday."

The girl smiled back. "Jackie Eason. You're...?"

Amy held out her hand. "Amy Cameron. Which room are you in?"

Jackie looked at her slip of paper again. "Room 27."

Amy pointed down the hall. "It's close to the end, down that way. I hope nobody has to triple up. There's only thirty-one rooms."

Jackie shook her head. "I heard seven girls decided not to come. It ended up being fifty-eight girls in the class."

Amy nodded. "I guess they know from experience how many will come back after orientation." She shrugged. "It seems weird, somebody not coming. After all that work to get in!"

Jackie nodded agreement. "I think it was partly that bit about the Honor Code, and violations and all that. You'd think they'd all have read about that in the handbook, and they knew they were going to be slaves here. But I think seeing the place and meeting everybody made it all seem... I don't know, more real. I can see some girls not being ready for that big of a step. Getting cold feet at the last minute."

Amy looked down at Jackie's feet and smiled. "Not cold, huh?"

The girl laughed. "Not a chance! I've wanted to be here since I was, I don't know, twelve. It was this or be dancer. I guess I decided I liked..." She giggled. "...this kind of dancing."

Another girl came up behind Jackie, looking at the room number over Amy's head. She grinned, happily, and said, "Hi, I'm Shawna. Are you Megan?"

Amy blinked. "No. Are you sure this is the right room?"

A puzzled look crossed Shawna's face, and she looked back down at the paper she held. "Oh, wait!" She laughed good-naturedly -- her whole personality seemed bubbly. "Eighteen. I don't know why I was thinking fourteen."

Amy smiled and pointed. "A little farther down."

"Thanks!" The girl grinned and shrugged. "See you later, I guess."

As the girl disappeared into the room two doors away, Amy shook her head, muttering, "Better her than me, I guess."

Jackie raised her eyebrows. "What?"

"Oh..." Amy hoped Jackie wasn't one of Megan's old friends. "That blonde girl, Megan. Did you see her yesterday? She's in that room. The one Shawna went in."

Jackie made a face. "Yeah, I remember her. Maybe she'll lighten up later. Anyway, it's nice meeting you, Amy. I'd better go down and see if I've got a roommate yet."

Amy smiled. "Sure. Talk to you later."

As Jackie moved down the hall, another girl was approaching from the other direction, doing the room-number-compare like all the others. She stopped in front of Amy. She was pretty -- well, they all were, of course -- a small, slender girl with short brown hair, lighter than Amy's. The girl looked nervously up at the room number over the door. "Are you..." She looked at her slip of paper again. "...Amy?"

Amy smiled. "Amy Cameron, yeah. I guess you must be my roommate." Amy backed away to give the girl room to come in.

The girl relaxed and followed Amy. "I'm Susan Fennel." She shook hands with Amy while looking around. Her gaze took in the two small beds, the meager shelf space, the television, the hanging platform folded up underneath it. In the far wall of the room, a window looked out on the Academy's courtyard, the great square area surrounded by the school's buildings. From the doorway the girl could see into the tiny bathroom on her right, just large enough for a shower, sink, and toilet. "It's not real big, is it?"

"Wait till our other roommates show up -- just kidding," she added hurriedly, seeing the look on Susan's face.

Susan suddenly saw the head on the shelf over Amy's bed. "Oh, who's that?"

Amy turned and smiled. "That's Miranda. I get a lot of inspiration from her. She's an Academy graduate. I saw her do her show."

Susan's eyes flew open wide. "Really? And you got her head??"

Amy nodded. "She was hanged at my house. My dad bought her." Amy preferred to leave Andrew out of the story.

"Oh, and he let you keep her because you were coming here?"

"Not... well, something like that, I guess."

"She's... I mean, wow, she's really pretty!"

Amy smiled. She loved hearing Miranda complimented. "Yeah. Everybody thinks that. Me too, of course."

Susan continued looking around. "I guess you've got that side of the room."

Amy nodded. "Is that okay? I've been here awhile."

Susan nodded absently. "I don't care. Really." She looked at Amy more closely. "I'm not remembering you from orientation."

Amy shook her head. "When I said 'awhile,' I mean I've been here for a month."

Susan's jaw dropped. "How did you manage that?"

Amy shrugged. "Long story. I just really couldn't stay at home. I haven't been in classes, though. I'll be starting from the same place you are."

Susan's attention was caught by the apparatus on the wall above her bed, matching the one over Amy's. "What's that?"

Amy turned to look. "Oh! That's the neck trainer. You must have read about that. You haven't seen one before, though. Let me show you how it works."

Amy climbed onto her bed, squatting down with her back to the wall at the head of the bed, and began unwinding the apparatus. "I've got some friends in the Second Year, and they showed me how to do this. I wasn't allowed to do any hanging, but this is safer. But you're still never allowed to do it alone."

Amy opened the wide, thick collar and wrapped it around her neck. In front, at its top, it bulged outward to make a shelf for her chin to rest in. In back, it pressed firmly against the back of her skull. "It doesn't squeeze your neck at all, and you can easily breathe with it on. It's made to hold up your head without the squeezing." With the support collar in place, Amy put her arms back against the wall, wrapped her hands around two handles next to either hip to support herself, and carefully straightened out her legs along the surface of the bed. Finally she eased herself down and let go of the handles. The weight of her

upper body was now supported by the collar, distributing the force as tension in her neck muscles, her butt hovering a few inches off the surface of the bed -- that is, she was hanging by her neck, without choking.

Susan's eyes widened. "How long can you do it for?"

Amy grimaced and reached back for the handles, pushing herself back up. "Sorry, I can't really talk when I'm hanging in the thing. Anyway, I've got to where I can stand it for about ten minutes, maybe twelve. You know, we're supposed to start out doing it a half hour total every day -- in short pieces, like five minutes or whatever, just so it adds up to a half hour. You're supposed to break it up less as your neck gets stronger, like two fifteen-minute intervals, say. After a couple of months it'll go up to sixty minutes a day. It's not that big of a deal -- you can read or watch TV while you're doing it, so it doesn't take you away from other stuff you could be doing. You need to be able to do the whole sixty minute stretch at one time by the end of the year." Amy pulled her legs back, and removed the collar. "You want to try yours? I'll help you put it on."

Susan looked doubtful. "I don't really have to do it until tomorrow, do I?"

Amy blinked. "Have to? Don't you *want* to??" Amy wanted to ask "What else are we here for?" but didn't want to rush the girl. She understood how overwhelming it was to be starting a whole new life.

"Later, maybe." Susan put down her bag of possessions and sat on the other bed, looking uncomfortable.

Amy folded up the neck trainer and put it in its niche, and sat on her bed facing Susan, smiling at her, trying to put her at ease. Amy had felt like the little sister during her time here. This was her first chance to feel like a veteran. "Tell me some things about yourself. Have you tried hanging before? I still haven't yet." She gestured up at the neck trainer. "This thing doesn't count."

Susan smiled. "Oh, yeah. I used to do it at home. All by myself -- really stupid, I know." She grinned sheepishly. "Then I volunteered for the role of Janeen when our school drama club put on the play 'The Wrong Woman.' You know, she's the one who gets arrested for murder and hanged before they find out somebody else did it. The hanging scene was really cool. I was really hanged, and kicked for about half a minute before they pulled a curtain in front of me to end the scene, and then afterwards I'm stretched out on a carving table, dead, when they get the call to stop the hanging -- too late, of course."

Amy's eyes lit up. "Wow, you've even done a show! That must have really been fun. Of course, by the time you graduate, you can do it *lots* longer than that." Amy looked up at her shelf. "Miranda did it for thirty-one minutes."

Susan goggled at Amy. "Thirty-one! Are you kidding me?"

Amy grinned, always proud of Miranda's accomplishment. "See, when they tell you you can do twenty or twenty-five, always tell yourself, I can go longer."

Amy saw that Susan was looking down at her bed, obviously a little dismayed at its small size, as she had been with the room earlier. "We could get a bigger one for both of us later, if that'd be better."

Susan colored a little. "I guess this is a good time to tell you, I..." she hesitated. "You're going to be my roommate, so I guess I'd better tell you. I don't really like sex with girls much. I like men a lot better."

Amy blinked in astonishment. Even in the outside world, sex between women was the common form, since there were so few men. But here... "Uhhh, I wasn't really talking about sex, just trying to see what would make you more comfortable, but..." Amy waved her arm around to indicate their surroundings. "Susan, there's nobody but girls here!"

Susan nodded. "I know. I guess I am a little weird in some ways. Hanging is... well, it's the only thing that's ever made me feel really sexy. I mean excited-sexy. I just..." She shivered, obviously imagining herself dangling from the noose. "As far as sex, I can get by between parties. There'll be guys at the parties."

"Well, true. But you know they have women at the parties too. And whoever rents you at one of the parties, you have to try to satisfy them. You don't have to succeed, but you have to *try*. We get graded on that. What are you going to do?"

Susan shrugged. "When I have to do it, I'll do it. And I really think I'll do a good job of it. I'd just rather not do it when I don't have to."

Amy wondered if Susan was accustomed to doing anything she didn't have to. That didn't seem like quite the right attitude for a slave. Amy was about to suggest that doing well at anything required practice, but realized that would sound as if she was trying to serve her own purposes. Amy didn't feel a strong need to get Susan in bed. She was very happy with Linda and Laney, and knew she'd soon get close to the girls in her own class as well. Jackie seemed really nice, for example. Amy decided to let the subject go. "Did you eat anything yet? It's close to lunchtime, if you want to go grab something."

Susan smiled. "That sounds good. Oh -- do I need that meal card thing?"

Amy nodded. "You can't get food without it."

"And I just have to show that and I can eat anything?"

"Right. Obviously you don't want to overdo it. Weight is really important in hanging, and if you start getting above your ideal weight, they take the card away and replace it with ration tickets for healthy foods, in limited portions."

Susan stood up, smiling again. "I guess you must know where the cafeteria is. You can show me."

Amy stood and smiled too. "Sure."

## CHAPTER 3

TEN DAYS LATER

Amy was shaking with excitement, as she and the others in her group formed a circle around one of the hanging platforms in the gym. Finally!! she thought. I get to hang today!!

The academic classes for the First Year students contained about twenty students each, but Hanging Practice was restricted to groups of nine or ten, so the girls could all gather closely around the hanging platform, and so that instruction could be, to some extent, individualized, or at least not mass-produced. While the same girls would be in Amy's academic classes until the quarter ended in three months, membership in the hanging classes was periodically scrambled, so that over time every girl could watch every other girl hang, and be watched by every girl. For hanging, the Academy believed strongly in girls sharing their knowledge.

Up until today Amy's group had only watched the teacher hang during each class meeting, listening to her describe her head movements, with all of the students gathered around her, watching intently as the teacher dangled and kicked for a few minutes, barely breathing hard afterwards. Today, at last, the students would be allowed to try it for the first time.

Amy had stripped and set her uniform on the floor, folded neatly on top of her sneakers, and joined the circle as each student took a turn, going in clockwise order around the circle. She could feel the wetness start between her legs. She hoped it wouldn't run down her leg, but she noticed shiny-looking trails already down some of the other girls' thighs, telling Amy they were as excited as she was.

As the girl to Amy's right stepped up onto the platform, Amy stepped up with her to put handcuffs on the girl's wrists, and to put the noose around the girl's neck, under the teacher's supervision. Previous girls had done considerable fumbling with the rope, while the teacher explained the proper positioning to them.

Amy smiled as the teacher said, "Amy, it looks like you've done that before."

"Yes, ma'am." Though the teacher herself was just a few years older than Amy, it seemed natural to address her with respect. Graduates *should* have respect. "A couple of the Second Year girls have been showing me how."

The teacher nodded, and Amy jumped down from the platform. The teacher looked up at the girl on the platform, who was having a hard time controlling her breathing, but looked determined, if nervous. At last the teacher pulled the lever. I'm next, thought Amy, next one up!!

Keeping one eye on her watch and the other on the girl kicking as she hanged, the teacher remained silent for now. After just sixty seconds, the teacher pushed the lever back.

The girl nearly fainted before Amy could get the noose off her, but her mouth had an ear-to-ear grin. The teacher said a few things to her as she stepped down, unlocking her handcuffs and handing them to the girl to Amy's left.

Amy more or less leapt onto the platform, calling out in her mind to Miranda, I'm here , Miranda! I'm going to do it!

Amy closed her eyes and worked on reining in her thundering heart as the girl holding the handcuffs locked them around Amy's wrists behind her. Amy quivered as she felt the girl drop the loop of rope down over her head, and giggled as it got caught for a moment on her nose. That seemed to relax her. She opened her eyes and looked straight ahead as the girl tightened up the noose, and waited while the teacher corrected the girl's placement of the knot. At last the girl jumped down, and Amy was alone on the platform.

A tingle shot through her as she felt the surface she was standing on start to descend. A light tug on her neck grew quickly stronger, pulling her up onto her toes. Amy knew she would remember, the rest of her life, the feeling as her toes slipped along the surface and lost contact with it, in the same way that she remembered her very first orgasm.

Amy felt, more than she had ever felt in her life, that she was at home.

It wasn't as hard on her neck as she'd been expecting -- the exercises with the neck trainer in her room were already paying off. Immediately she felt the intense rush of arousal flood through her body, the same way it had when Miranda and the dean had choked her.

Her fears that she would forget all the movements she was supposed to be doing, in the excitement of the moment, proved groundless. She did have to think about it, and promised herself it would all become automatic with more practice, but she did manage to wobble her head from one side to another. Much more natural was the kicking, her feet instinctively seeking support in all possible directions, unable to admit they would find none.

For at least fifteen seconds, she estimated, she couldn't breathe at all, and worried that she wasn't doing the movement right. She probably wasn't, but suddenly she found she could take in air in tiny sips, letting it out slowly afterwards. It really works!! She exulted.

She was less sure about the blood coming up in her arteries. She understood perfectly well that breathing, alone, was worthless -- unless the oxygen she was breathing into her lungs could somehow get to her head, she might as well not even be breathing at all. When she started hanging longer, she knew, she would be able to sense the signs of lack of oxygen to the brain. With practice, she would learn to adjust her movements so those warning signs would go away.

She didn't realize her minute was up until the floor of the platform suddenly bumped against her toes. Her feet desperately sought out the now rising surface, but her mind was screaming No, it can't be over yet!!

She stood solidly on the floor of the platform at last, with a huge grin on her face, listening to the teacher, nodding her head at the teacher's comments, carefully filing them away in her mind for the next time. Amy wanted the next time to be now!

She waited, feeling more alive than she had ever been, watching the girl behind her mount the platform. Beside Amy, the girl who had gone before Amy had the same look on her face that Amy did. Amy

impulsively hugged the girl, surprised at herself for doing it -- she knew the girl's name was Jenny, but Amy had barely even spoken to her before today. But they both wanted to share the feeling.

Minutes later, Amy watched Megan step up to the platform. Amy almost gasped in admiration. She hadn't seen Megan naked before, and Amy felt a flush of desire that she realized was not simply left over arousal from her own hanging earlier.

Megan looked confident and matter-of-fact about the process. She did share all the other girls' excited look, the first time Amy had seen her anything other than stoic, but it was somehow muted, and Amy felt positive Megan was not doing this for the first time in her life -- she looked as though she were used to it.

From the moment Megan was hoisted off the descending platform, Amy saw there was something different about her. She definitely had the head movements down, and her legs seemed, like the other girls, to kick out desperately in search of something to support them, but there was more going on. Megan started thrusting her hips forward in an almost hypnotically erotic way, and after a moment, her leg kicking became less random -- she threw them out wide, then swung them around and forward, as if she were throwing them around a lover. Around her Amy could hear several of the girls gasp. Amy thought she might be one of them, but she wasn't sure.

It hardly seemed as if the performance could only have been a minute long -- it seemed much longer to Amy, but maybe that was because she was watching it so intently.

I've got to try some of that, thought Amy. It wasn't more sexual than Miranda's performance, but Megan had done some things Miranda hadn't done.

I have to see if I can do that. I'm just starting. Megan's obviously got experience, but I'm going to catch up with her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy sat on the bed in Jackie's room, leaning back against the wall, her knees drawn up. Sitting to her left, Jackie thumbed the up-channel button on the TV remote. Jackie's roommate Erin sat to Amy's right, her arms wrapping her shins. Amy, caught up on her reading for classes, was glad of a chance to spend time with Jackie, as well as an opportunity to get to know Erin. Erin was one of the quiet girls in class, rarely contributing to classroom discussions, while Amy and Jackie had developed a friendly competition to see which could manage a quicker response to the teacher's questions.

Jackie paused on one channel long enough to determine the show was a girlhunt. She looked at Amy with raised eyebrows that solicited Amy's approval for staying with the show.

Amy shrugged. "Okay, I guess. Think these things are rigged, like they say?"

Jackie frowned. "I don't know if I'd pretend to be hunted if I knew for sure I was going to get caught and eaten at the end. I'd like to think there was some real chance of winning."

Amy nodded. "Me too. Maybe they really recruit a different sort of contestant from what they claim, though. Different from us, for one thing. Supposedly the girls in the hunt are the super-adventurous type, loving the challenge, but maybe they actually dreamed of being actresses, and they like the idea of ending their lives with one big 'Let's pretend' kind of thing."

Jackie looked thoughtfully at the screen, on which a pretty naked girl jogged past one of the many hidden cameras in the jungle, crouching to avoid low-hanging branches, pausing just at the edge of camera range to listen for the sounds of pursuit. It did indeed appear likely that the girl knew exactly where the camera was. "So maybe they are kind of like us, that way. We're actresses, sort of. I mean, we're going to put on a scripted show at the end."

Erin spoke up unexpectedly. "I'd rather think of us as athletes."

Amy smiled. "Yeah, I'll go with that. The hanging script adds to the audience's enjoyment, but they'll really be there to see us use our bodies in a way that most people can't -- we'll have had years of physical training for it."

Jackie grinned and waved the remote. "So should I find us a football game?" Both other girls laughed.

Amy brushed her hand along the surface of the bed. "You guys didn't waste any time getting the one bed."

Jackie laughed. Out of the corner of her eye Amy could see Erin smiling and blushing. Jackie explained, "We just both like to keep warm at night."

Amy laughed, as Jackie looked at her curiously. "How are things going with Susan?" Jackie asked. "I saw you've still got two beds."

Amy didn't want to say anything that might make Susan's sexual preferences appear odd. "She's really sweet. I like her a lot, but I think she just takes awhile to get to know. There's no hurry. Lots of the other rooms still have two beds."

Jackie gave a sly smile. "Like Megan and Shawna?"

Amy groaned. "Poor Shawna. I imagine she's finding there are some people you don't *want* to get to know." Amy had been finding her earliest impression of Megan was still holding up. Like Amy and Jackie, Megan made her presence felt in the classroom, though generally in more negative ways. She was often quick to correct other students' erroneous statements, with a smirk that expressed her satisfaction at being able to put another girl down. Other times Megan didn't have to say a word. The smirk, or an exasperated groan and rolled eyes, were sufficient to do the job, while the teacher made the correction herself.

Erin shuddered. "Jackie, don't bring the mood down by talking about her. It's bad enough being in the same class with her for the next three years. I don't even want to think what it's like sharing a room."

Jackie nodded. "Okay, this is a Megan-free zone. Anyway, luckily there are still people I *do* want to get to know better." She brushed Amy's arm with her hand, smiling.

Amy looked down at Jackie's hand on her arm. Her lips curled into a smile. "Isn't my butt making the bed warm enough?"

Jackie leaned closer. "I think we can do better."

Amy turned to Erin, wanting to make sure. "Okay with this?"

Erin smiled. "Asking you here was my idea. I get you after."

Amy shivered with a sudden tingle between her legs. She turned back to Jackie, her voice suddenly breathy. "Sounds fair to me."

Jackie leaned still closer. Amy found Jackie's lips warm and soft.

## CHAPTER 4

Amy sat at her desk in her room, looking over her returned test paper to see what she'd missed. She was reasonably satisfied with her score of 98, but each student in the Anatomy and Physiology class was required to turn in a short report on her errors, saying what the correct answers should have been. On Amy's paper there was a red mark against the name she had written next to one of the muscles on a diagram of the chest and lungs. She smiled and shook her head. She'd remembered not feeling sure about that one.

Amy didn't know most of the other girls' scores, but she'd seen Megan, sitting two seats ahead in the row to Amy's right, put her paper into her notebook with a smirk -- not before Amy had seen "100" written at the top. Amy had been able to see some other scores for nearby students, a couple in the low 90's, a few more in the 80's. She sighed with relief. She was used to scores like this in school, but had been worried that she was entering a different level of competition.

Amy looked up as Susan came into the room. By the look on Susan's face Amy could tell something was wrong. "Susan? Okay?"

Susan sat abruptly on her bed and pulled out her own test paper. Amy had seen Susan color slightly when the paper had been handed back, but didn't know her well enough to be able to tell quite what the reaction meant. Her feelings were more on the surface now.

Susan handed the paper across to Amy, and brushed at her eye, seeming to be fighting to keep from tearing up. "I've never got scores in school like that before."

A large number of red marks jumped out at Amy's eye as she looked at the paper. The score at the top, 72, didn't seem that bad, but then a lot of the questions, especially the multiple choice part, had seemed fairly easy. At least to Amy. "Most girls I knew in high school would be happy with a score like that."

"I'm not most girls! I always got A's! High school was always just easy stuff. I hardly even had to study for it! I read all the material for this, but it's not sticking." A tear did manage to escape Susan's brushing finger and dribble down her cheek.

Amy had been wondering if something like this was coming. Susan did indeed spend time studying, but Amy never saw her marking up the book or taking down notes while reading. Or flipping back and forth to try to connect ideas together. Amy suspected high school might have been sufficiently easy for Susan that she hadn't really been forced to learn to study. To Amy, studying came naturally, but one thing clear about Susan was that she had a hard time making herself do things her heart wasn't in. "Well, look, it's just one test. It's kind of a new environment here. You'll get used to it."

Susan's lip was quivering. "We've got that Chemistry test tomorrow. I'm just not getting that at all." She took the test paper back from Amy and threw it down on the bed. "I don't get why we need to take Chemistry anyway! We're supposed to learn to hang, not do experiments in a chem lab!"

Amy smiled. "Well, I guess the way I'm seeing it is, our lives depend on chemicals. Especially when we're hanging. I think we can probably get a lot out of learning what oxygen is and how it works in our bodies." She stopped as Susan shot her a sour look.

Amy thought a moment about how to word her offer. She didn't want to just say "Want me to help you?" since she didn't want to sound superior. And Susan couldn't be used to needing that sort of help. "Ummm... I'm kind of confused about those last chem assignments, too. If we worked together we could help each other."

Susan looked up, her eyes shimmering with tears now. "That... yeah. That would be good." She looked yearningly at the rope hanging down from the ceiling ring. "Could we practice hanging first? I'd feel better after I do that."

Amy knew it would relax Susan. It did seem to be the only thing that really made the girl happy.

Amy closed the door of the room -- most of the girls did that when they practiced hanging -- and hunted for the handcuffs while Susan discarded her uniform. Amy had found Susan looked really attractive when she was naked, but Amy didn't intend to force herself on the girl. Amy hooked the platform out from under the TV with her foot, and centered it under the rope.

She followed Susan up onto the platform and put the rope around Susan's neck. She reminded Susan, "We only get to do it for sixty seconds." Susan nodded that she understood.

Moments later, as Susan lost contact with the platform and began to kick, Amy, as always, felt her own arousal rising. She forced it down. She'd practice hanging later. I've got to help Susan first, she told herself. She needs that a lot more than I need to have some fun.

There was a knock at the door. Amy called out "Hold on!" and kept her eyes on Susan. Amy wondered if Susan had seen Megan hang yet. Amy decided to tell her later some of the things Megan had been able to do.

Amy's watch beeped, and she raised the platform. Susan sighed yearningly as Amy loosened the noose. Amy knew she'd want to do it again before they went to sleep. More than once, probably. Amy intended to take at least one turn, but studying came first.

Amy went to see who was at the door. Linda was standing there. "Amy, want to come watch 'Headhunters'?" It was one of their favorite TV series.

Amy ducked out into the hallway with Linda and pulled the door closed. She whispered softly, "I'll try to get with you guys later, but I need to help Susan study. She's kind of worried about her grades."

Linda nodded. She whispered back, "See you in awhile." She kissed Amy and trotted back up the hall.

Amy reentered the room, smiling. "Feel like a little fun with chemistry?"

Susan laughed. Hanging had really done her a lot of good. "Okay. Let's use my book." She sat at her own rarely-used desk, waiting as Amy pulled her own desk chair over. "I'm really not getting the stuff about

electron shells in the atoms. I mean, what are the shells supposed to be made of? I thought atoms themselves were what everything was made out of.”

Amy sat down. “Well, they don’t mean the shells are something physical. It’s just a way of thinking of it that helps explain what the electrons are doing...”

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy started carrying her tray towards the table Linda and Laney were sitting at in the caf, but stopped when she spotted Megan sitting by herself. Amy sighed heavily. It’s worth a try, she thought.

Megan looked up as Amy reached the table. She didn’t look too welcoming, but Amy was resolved. “Mind if I sit with you?”

Megan shrugged, and pulled her tray back slightly to make room for Amy’s on the other side.

Amy looked for an opening. “How are the eggs?”

Megan looked down as if actually examining them. “Scrambled.”

Okay, Amy thought, enough of that. “I can tell you’re not big on small talk, so I’ll just say it. Could you go a little easier on some of the girls in class?”

Megan looked surprised. “Me? What did I do?”

“It’s... Oh, you know what I’m talking about. Those little snorts and shaking your head when somebody asks a question in class. I know it hurts Susan, and I’m sure it makes the others feel bad too.”

Megan gave a short laugh. “Well, when they ask stuff like ‘If the protons all repel each other, why do they stick to each other in the nucleus?’, what am I supposed to do?”

“You know that’s not a dumb question!”

“Yeah, if somebody hasn’t read the assignment. It talks about that right in there.”

Amy shook her head. “You know everybody’s working hard. We’re all trying to learn a lot of new things all at once. You just don’t have to be... nasty. If you’re not happy with somebody’s question, just let it go.”

Megan put a forkful of eggs in her mouth. “I could tell you that you don’t need to keep being nice to everybody all the time.”

“That’s not something I do because I feel like I have to. I’m just being the way I am.”

Megan nodded. “Well, there you go. So am I.”

Amy searched for *some* way to get through. "You know how hard the school works to try to make sure everybody learns something from everybody else. You're so good at all of this -- *all* of this. You could raise all of us to a higher level if you'd try to help. Laughing at everybody just pushes them down."

Megan took a bite of a sweet roll. "You're not as bad as the rest. You've got some good moves when you're hanging. Why don't you help them?"

Amy tried not to react to the compliment. "That's the point! I do! At least I try to."

Megan smiled. "Guess they don't need me then." She finished the sweet roll.

Amy stared at her for a minute, then gave up. She stood and picked up her tray. "See you in class." Megan gave her a vague wave.

Amy went over to sit next to Linda. She felt soiled, like she did after talking to Andrew.

Before Amy could say anything to Linda, she noticed Jackie had come up and squatted next to Amy's chair. Jackie put her hand on Amy's shoulder. "Thanks for trying, Amy."

Amy sighed. "For the record, it didn't accomplish anything."

"Some things need to be done anyway." Jackie patted Amy's shoulder and went back to her own table.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy stood beside her mailbox and pulled her one-month report card out of its envelope. She couldn't help feeling a little nervous, though she knew her grades were good.

The card showed her grades for the first month of classes, including hanging practice, as well as a score based on her time spent on her exercise program at the gym. At the bottom was an overall average, and a class rank. Amy's eyes shot open. She was number two in the class! She felt elated that all her work was paying off so far.

She didn't need to ask around to figure out who was number one.

She felt she was almost floating back to her room. I can handle the Hanging Academy! I'm one of the top students!

She noticed the door to her room was slightly ajar. Hope Susan's in there, she thought. And I hope she got some good news.

Amy entered the room and stopped abruptly.

Susan was there, on her bed, pressed back against the corner of the walls, her knees drawn up, the back of her hand against her mouth as she gnawed at it nervously. Tears were running down her cheeks.

In front of her, Amy could see Susan's report card on the bed, out of its envelope.

Amy closed the door of the room and walked towards Susan slowly. "Susan? Are you okay?"

Susan seemed to hunch farther into herself, and shook her head.

Amy wasn't sure what to do. She gestured towards the card with her head. "Do you want me to look at it? Or not?"

Susan nodded her head briefly, more tears welling from her eyes.

Amy sat on Susan's bed and picked up the card carefully, as if it were a snake that might or might not be dead. She knew where to look first.

Susan's class rank was 55, out of 58. She was in the bottom five.

From the bottom five, this month and every second month thereafter, one of the five names would be chosen at random, and the chosen girl would be hanged at a class demonstration. This month's demonstration was scheduled for tomorrow.

Amy squeezed onto the bed next to Susan and put her arm across her shoulders. The girl seemed to melt against Amy. "Susan, it probably won't be you. You know that. Look, after dinner we'll figure out what to do to bring your grades up higher. Okay?" Amy tried to get Susan to look in her direction. "Okay?"

Susan looked at Amy vaguely for an instant and then away. Amy looked at the card again. "I mean, one thing we could get higher right away is your gym participation. You just need to start logging more time on the equipment. You know you can do that."

Susan shrugged, sniffing. "S'boring."

"I know, Suse. I get bored too. But it helps make us what we want to be. Our bodies have to be perfect. We're Hanging Girls!"

"I know, I know." Susan ground her fists into her eyes.

"And then later we can work on some assignments together. I don't mind, really. It helps me too." Long gone was any pretense that Amy and Susan were at the same level academically. Susan could see through that easily by now.

Susan sighed. "Thanks, Amy."

Amy was about to go on when the announcement speaker in the room made a slight crackling sound. The girls were used to that. It preceded announcements made to all the rooms.

This one seemed strange, though. It was Gail, one of the two "dorm sisters," graduates who acted as immediate supervisors for the First Year girls, and she was speaking very softly. "I need to see Susan Fennel in my room, please." Amy felt sure the announcement hadn't gone to any of the other rooms.

Susan let out a gasping breath. "Amy? Come with me?"

Amy reached up and stroked Susan's hair, the first time she had done anything remotely like that. "Sure. Look, this probably doesn't mean anything. They'll tell you it's not you. They'd have to tell all the candidates, no matter what. They wouldn't want four of them worrying all night for nothing."

Susan managed a smile. "Yeah." She scooted towards the side of the bed and took Amy's hand. Amy didn't think Susan intended to let go of it anytime soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

The dorm sisters, Gail and Bridget, recent graduates, shared a room just around the corner from the First Year dorm hallway. Gail opened the door to Amy's knock. She looked a little surprised to see Amy, but nodded slightly when she saw Susan beside Amy. "Susan, come in. Do you want Amy to come in with you?"

Susan nodded. Amy could feel Susan squeeze her hand more tightly.

The room was larger than a student room, and had a table with chairs around it in addition to the usual dorm furnishings. Bridget was already in one of the chairs, resting her chin on the backs of her hands, her elbows on the table. Amy and Susan took the seats nearest the door as Gail sat across from them.

Amy tried to read both girls' faces before either spoke. Her heart sank. Gail broke the silence. "Susan, I think you already know what I'm going to say."

Still silent, Susan nodded again. A new tear rolled from her eye, following the tracks of the others.

Gail sighed. "I know it can't feel very good, being the first. Every girl here has dreams of going much farther than this. But I want you to know that you'll be doing a great service to the Academy. And I promise that your body and your meat will be treated with all of the honor and dignity you've earned by serving the Academy."

She stopped, waiting for a response from Susan. Susan nodded once more and said in a tiny voice, "Thank you."

Gail bit her lip. "The demonstration is scheduled for 11 am tomorrow. Would you be ready by then? It could be postponed up to an hour if you need more time."

Susan shook her head slightly. In that same tiny voice, she said, "No, eleven is okay."

Bridget spoke up. "We'll be up early tomorrow. If you have any requests for who you'd like to have speak at your banquet, or who should get any particular cuts of your meat, please let us know." She looked at Susan sympathetically. "Okay?"

Gail spoke again. "Do you have anything you want to ask now?"

Susan shook her head.

Bridget asked quietly, "Do you want us to leave you alone for awhile?"

Susan took a deep breath, and shook her head. "Could I go back to my room now?"

Gail reached out and held the one hand Susan had available that wasn't clutching Amy's. "The Academy will always remember you, Susan."

Susan said, "Thank you," again.

Amy suspected it would be her job to get Susan moving. She stood up, giving Susan's hand a very gentle tug upwards. She looked at both Gail and Bridget. "Thank you. I know that was hard."

Gail gave her a small nod and blinked back a tear of her own.

Susan was standing, now. Amy rubbed her own shoulder against Susan's, and whispered, "Let's go, Suse."

\* \* \* \* \*

Back in their own room, after Amy closed the door, Susan let go of Amy's hand and sank onto her bed, in a fetal position. Amy shook her head. We can't have this, she thought.

Amy sat beside Susan on her bed, and put her hand on Susan's nearer shoulder. She said softly, "We're women, hon. We're all ready to be eaten at a moment's notice."

Susan shook her head against the bed, and said in a tired voice, "It's not that. You know it isn't. I'm as ready to die as any woman. It's just..." She ground her palms against her eyes. "I never failed at anything before!" The tears were flowing freely now. "I was always one of the top students. It came so easy. Too easy, I guess. I didn't know how to handle it when it got hard."

Amy watched her roommate crying for a minute. Then she shifted her hand down to Susan's farther shoulder and started tugging on it. "Sit up, babe. Sit up for me."

Susan slowly sat up on the bed, not because she wanted to but because she had, at this moment, very little will of her own. If Amy wanted her up, she'd be up.

Amy moved around to sit between Susan's legs, wrapping her own legs around Susan's waist. She put her hands gently on either side of Susan's face. She wanted Susan's full attention -- wanted to be so directly in front of Susan that it was impossible for Susan to look anywhere else. "Susan, listen to me. You are not a failure. You know there were over three hundred girls who applied for admission this year. Only sixty-five of us got in. You're the cream. When the cream comes to the top, some of it gets drunk first. But you are part of that cream."

Amy was glad to see that brought a tiny smile. It vanished quickly, though. "Then why do I feel like a failure? I'm the first one out. I barely made it through a month!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Amy saw Miranda's head. She closed her eyes for a moment, drinking in the inspiration Miranda always gave her. She opened herself up to Miranda.

Suddenly Amy saw beyond the surface of Miranda's head. To what lay underneath. Within.

Amy opened her eyes and looked at Susan again. "You know, just because you're here, just because you earned your way here, just because you're an Academy girl, you get something that goes beyond what most women ever dream of."

Amy was glad to see she seemed to have Susan hooked. "What's that?"

"You know for almost all women, the biggest thing they can have, the thing that can make them happiest of all, is knowing that their bodies will become part of all the people they love the most. Not every woman gets that, but it's what they dream of. You have more than that."

Susan's eyes went wide. "What is it?"

"Every girl in our class will carry part of your body around with them, as part of their own, but... we'll also have you in our heads. And I *don't* just mean we'll remember you. We will, of course. But the knowledge we have, the training we have, everything that makes us what we're trying to become -- part of that will be what we learn from you, from your hanging." Amy took her hands off Susan's face and touched her own head with them. "You'll be part of my body, and you'll also be part of my mind. In the most important part. You'll be part of my identity as a Hanging Girl."

Slowly, the corners of Susan's mouth twitched upward. She said, softly, "Yeah." She sighed then. "I still just wish I could have... you know, put on a show. I know what you're saying, but... you understand what I mean, right? I love hanging, but there's more to it than just that."

Amy swallowed her instinctive response that Susan had already done a show, something Amy suspected few of her classmates could say. That would just remind Susan of her lost dreams of reaching a higher level...

Amy's eyes shot open. "You were Janeen before. What if you could be again?"

Susan looked lost. "What?"

"Tomorrow, what if it could be more than just a demonstration in front of all your classmates? What if we put on a show for them? *That* show. You already know all your lines. You could write down mine for me."

Susan's wide-eyed stare matched Amy's. Amy hoped Susan was following her. Amy relaxed as Susan's lost look slowly turned to excitement. "Yeah! YEAH!! Let me think if I'd need anything... wait!" She frowned. "They wouldn't let us do that. We can't mess around with a demonstration."

"We wouldn't have to mess with it! Once you're up in the air, would you act any different? I mean, when you're hanging, you'll try to do the best you can no matter what, right?"

Susan nodded excitedly. She fingered her lip, thinking. "In the play, I wore kind of a ragged dress, more like a gown, that they ripped off me just before the hanging."

Amy laughed. "I've seen something like that. But..." She tried to think how they could obtain an appropriate prop on short notice. "We can make do with a bedsheet. Anything else?"

"Amy, really, what if they don't let us?"

Amy jumped off the bed and grabbed Susan's hand, almost yanking her towards the door. "Let's ask Gail and Bridget."

Amy threw the door open and together they pounded down the hallway, almost knocking flat one of the girls who was just coming out of her own room at the time. After they rounded the corner, Susan herself pounded on the dorm sisters' door. "Gail? Bridget?"

Gail opened the door in a hurry. "Is there a fire? Why aren't the alarms going?"

Susan laughed. She blurted out, the words almost running together as one, "Gail Amy and me want to put on just a quick little show before the demonstration it'll just take a few minutes please can we do that?"

Gail stared at her as Bridget came up behind her. "Could you go through that again, a little slower?"

Amy said, "Gail, we have just this little short show from a play we want to put on, just before we do the demonstration. It won't take anything away from the demo. Like the kind of show you'll put on when you're sold, only scaled down. Please?" Amy gave both girls her most winning look.

Gail looked at Bridget, neither of them knowing what to say. Finally Bridget said, "Let me call the dean." Their room necessarily had a phone for internal use.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy and Susan returned to their room, holding hands again, giggling. The dean had said yes.

Susan ran for her bed and waved Amy towards her. "We still have to plan some. I'll write down some lines for you, like you said."

Again, seeing Miranda's head reminded Amy of something. "What about your hair?" Her memory of Beth putting Miranda in "princess" mode filled her mind. "Did they do anything to it for the play?"

Susan shook her head. "Not really. Just regular me."

Amy laughed. "Well, you had to go back to school the next day. But you're a prisoner. Your hair should be really short. Prison cut."

Susan nodded emphatically. "Right! Amy, you cut it. Make it look really raggedy, like they didn't care how they cut it."

Amy almost went to her drawer for some scissors, but stopped. "Wait. We can't make it look ugly. Your head is going to be in the Hall of Honor forever!"

"Oh yeah!" Susan sighed, grinning. "I didn't want to end up there, but it sounds really good right now." The Hall of Honor was inside the secured area, not the public area - it was maintained for the students, so they could see the girls who had gone before them and given their lives for the school. The head of every girl who had been hanged at a demonstration or at a party was displayed in the Hall, each in its own separate niche, each niche with special lighting that was never turned off. Her name was engraved on a plaque, with the date she died, and there was a drawer underneath containing handwritten notes from students in remembrance of her. Every girl in the school had visited the Hall, many of them more than once.

"Let's do this, then. In the morning, we'll go to the hairdresser." The school maintained, for students, at no cost to the students, who of course had no money anyway, a permanently staffed hair salon, which became very busy just before parties. Luckily, there was no party this week. "They can figure out just how to do it."

Susan nodded again. "Yeah! Oh, this is so..." Susan stopped and blinked several times, looking at Amy intently. She reached out and put her hand on Amy's hip. "Amy, you're the best roommate anybody ever had. You've done so much for me, even before today, and I think maybe I've kind of taken you for granted a little. I want... maybe you don't want to. You've never said." Susan's hand was lightly stroking Amy's waist now. Her face, Amy now saw, was lightly flushed.

The way Susan was rubbing Amy's hip, accompanied by the look in her eyes, left no doubt what she meant. Amy felt a flush of her own spread through her body. She was suddenly aware of a desire for Susan that she hadn't felt before. Nobody in her class but Megan had made Amy feel that way before, and with Megan the feeling was tainted with repulsion for the girl's personality. "Susan, I thought you said you didn't like doing it with girls."

Susan shook her head, her eyes never leaving Amy's. "You're not a girl."

Amy laughed. "I always thought I was."

Susan leaned closer. "You're just a person who's very special." Susan's flush grew deeper, and her voice came out quavery and husky. "This is my last night, and I want to make love to you. I want to see you, and hear you, and feel you, and smell you, and taste you, and nothing but you, all night long."

Amy smiled, her lips parted, breathing in quick, shallow sips. To answer Susan's question of whether she wanted to, Amy reached behind herself and popped the clasp on her uniform bra. As the cups fell into her lap, she absently swept the bra aside onto the floor.

Susan grinned, her mouth wide open, and popped off her own bra.

They fell towards each other then, giggling as their arms battled momentarily to see whose could get around the other first. They held each other tightly, their breasts pressed together, their open mouths locked together and moving against each other, both girls making soft moaning sounds as they pushed each other's arousal higher.

\* \* \* \* \*

They had stopped giggling long ago. It was almost hypnotic, being so close to each other. After their first orgasms, it had been Amy's idea, eagerly subscribed to by Susan, to try to maintain each other on a plateau of arousal without falling over into another orgasm.

They were lying naked, motionless, on their sides, locked together in an embrace on Susan's bed, facing each other, in what Amy thought of as a "double fetal" position -- each with her knees drawn up, each with her right leg between both of the other's, right upper thigh pressed snugly against the other's sex. Their open mouths were pressed together, each girl breathing sufficient new air through her nose while they shared breaths back and forth through their mouths. The fingers of Amy's right hand were threaded through the hair on the back of Susan's head, and she could feel Susan holding the back of her own head. Amy had never before felt so absorbed in the body of another person. This, among her life's memories, Amy knew, would be one of her favorites.

## CHAPTER 5

Amy woke up to the sound of Susan's alarm. 7 am. Amy's head was between Susan's legs, and she could feel Susan's head snugly held between her own legs. Amy managed to slap the alarm off without disengaging from Susan. Both awake now, they licked each other to one last orgasm, and finally withdrew from each other.

They sat together on the edge of Susan's bed, Susan holding Amy as Amy stroked Susan's hair and kissed her.

Susan smiled. "Big day today, huh?"

Amy laughed. "Your biggest ever. Let's take a shower, and then you write down what you want me to say, and I'll make a list of what we need to get done."

Susan nodded, and took Amy's hand and led her into the bathroom. Their tiny shower stall wasn't meant for two, but they squeezed in together and soaped each other, giggling as they rubbed each other's most private parts.

For half an hour, they both sat at their own desks, scribbling things down on a notepad between pauses for thought. Susan turned around at last to look at Amy. "I'm done. You?"

Amy sighed. "I always get to the point where I feel sure I've forgotten something, but can't think of anything else. I'm there now, I guess. Oh!! I know! What should I do with your stuff?"

Susan thought a moment. "Just keep it, and anything you don't want, throw it away or see if anybody wants it."

Amy raised her eyebrows. "You sure? What about your family?"

Susan shook her head. "I left my sisters everything I wanted them to have already. Really, everything here is yours now. Okay?"

Amy smiled. "Okay."

Susan put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, I need to tell Gail or Bridget when I want my family told, right?"

Amy spun back to her list. "There! I knew I was forgetting something. You know they can wait till the end of the year, right? They'd deep-freeze a cut of your meat and get it to your family then. I'm guessing that's what you want, right?"

Susan sighed and nodded. "I'm okay with dying today, except I just didn't want my family to know I crapped out quite *this* fast."

Amy nodded. "The school understands that. I think most girls want to wait on telling their families until the year is over. Anyway, we can tell the dorm sisters on the way to breakfast. Feel like breakfast?"

Susan grinned. "Sure. One last meal."

\* \* \* \* \*

Susan held Amy's left hand with her right all through breakfast, awkwardly eating with her left. Amy waved at Linda and Laney when they came in. The two Second Year students came over to Amy's table once they'd got through the serving line.

Linda smiled at Amy's roommate. "Hi, Susan." She blinked as saw why Susan was eating lefthanded. "Didn't know you guys were getting this close. Are you going to get a single bed?" She beamed at Amy, happy for her.

Susan burst out laughing. "I guess that's one thing you don't need to put on your list, Amy." Amy joined her laughing.

Linda looked at Laney to see whether she got the joke, then looked back at Susan, mystified.

Susan laughed again, seeing the look. "You guys are going to be eating me for dinner tonight." She paused. "Oh, wait. I think only the First Years eat me, right?" She looked at Amy.

Amy nodded. "I think that's what the handbook said. When a Third Year dies, they share her meat with the Second Years, but there's just so many First Year students they pretty much finish off the girl themselves."

Laney's jaw dropped open. "So you're the First Year's demo today? I'm..." She stopped, looking at Susan. "I was going to say 'I'm sorry,' but I'm not getting a feeling I need to."

Susan looked at Amy and grinned. "Well, I'm okay with it." She raised Amy's hand to her lips and kissed Amy's fingers. "Amy thought of a way to make it a lot better."

Linda and Laney fell into the same puzzled looks as before.

Amy said, "We're kind of putting on a little show before the demo. Nothing as elaborate as the Hanging Girl scenarios the graduates go through, but just to give it some of that feeling."

Tina, one of the First Years, was walking by, heading for the service line. She stopped, her jaw dropping. "Susan? It's you today?"

Susan nodded eagerly. "We're going to have a little fun with it first."

Tina looked at Susan with admiration. "Well, I'm really sorry you had to go so soon. I wish I could have got to know you better. But I promise I'll always remember you." She bent down hugged Susan.

Susan gave her a surprised look and a smile. "Thank you. And don't just remember me, okay? Remember what you learn from me today." She tapped Tina's head and squeezed Amy's hand.

A smile spread on Tina's face. "I think I see what's helping you deal with this. And I will remember." She hugged Susan again, and went on to get her breakfast.

It took just a few minutes for the word to spread around the cafeteria. One by one nearly all of the girls, including the Second and Third Years, left their tables to exchange a few words with Susan and give her a goodbye hug -- probably twenty of them altogether. Far to the left, Amy could see Megan, looking bemused and shaking her head slightly. Amy was glad Megan didn't come over and spoil the mood.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the door of the hair salon, the girls discovered it wouldn't open until nine. Susan threw up her hands, exasperated. "What should we do till then? Are there other preparations we need to make?"

Amy shook her head, a smile suddenly appearing on her lips. "Got a better idea. This way."

As soon as Susan determined where they were headed, she gasped. "Oh, yeah!" She started leading, pulling Amy onward.

Susan opened the door of the Hall of Honor slowly, a look of awe on her face. "I was here before once, but I didn't feel like this. Now it's kind of... personal."

Within the Hall, the displays of heads were arranged somewhat similarly to the stacks in a library. On entering, the girls came into a narrow walkway between two sets of shelves on either side, consisting of the niches, in stacks of three from near the floor to just above eye level, in which the honored heads of former students resided. At the end of the walkway, a left turn revealed further walkways, bearing more recent heads as one came farther from the door. Eventually one came to a partially-filled row, with open space beyond it for sacrificed students of future years.

It was even more difficult than in a library to speak loudly in here -- a hushed voice was all most of the girls could muster when they visited.

Susan read the plaque in one of the niches nearest the door. "Belinda Masters." She looked at the date, whispering, "Amy, can you believe she's been here for eighty years? Well, maybe not this same room. I suppose they probably moved the Hall somewhere along the way when they needed more space."

Amy looked at Belinda's head, and stroked the girl's hair softly. "The plaque says she was nineteen when she died. She does look like that. She was born almost a hundred years ago!" Amy shook her head, marveling.

"Let's go see some of the newer ones. I want to see if I can figure out where I'll be." Susan pulled Amy along with her again, eager to explore. She did walk slowly, though, feeling the weight of history that filled the air, as heads of former students looked towards her from both sides as she and Amy passed by.

Amy stopped at the entrance to one row. "I think this is the last one that's been used so far..." She squinted. "Yeah, I see blank shelf space down at the far end. This is where the latest ones are." With Susan still holding her hand as if she'd never let go, Amy started down the row.

They stopped as they arrived at the end of the heads. On the shelves behind them, heads filled the niches all the way to the far wall, but the heads in front of them came to an end here.

Susan took a deep breath, wide-eyed, as she reached out tentatively into the empty niche in front of her. It was on the second of the three levels of niches. The niche immediately below it contained a pretty blonde girl's head, the one above it was empty.

Amy looked at the plaques for the heads immediately to the right. "Let me make sure..." She looked at the dates, muttering under her breath, "Okay, this was the last one here, and this one was just before her..." She straightened up. "Yeah, I see the order they're doing it. They'd put your head in this one."

Susan bit her lip. "That's one more bad thing about being the first in our class to go. I've never met any of the girls here. I'll be with all these... strangers."

"Well, there'll be more of our class here soon, you know. They'll be grateful for a familiar face. You'll be kind of a... trailblazer, I guess."

Susan giggled. "You always find a nice way to look at it." She turned her back to the niche and pressed her neck against the shelf at the base of the niche. Amy understood Susan wanted to see what she'd be looking at after her head was mounted here. Susan pointed across the aisle. "I'll be looking right at her the whole time." She stepped across the aisle. "Jayne Morrow. She's been here... six years, I guess. Oh!!" Susan pointed at the date on Jayne's plaque. "She was the first in her class to go too! We've got that in common. Let me see what's in her drawer."

She pulled open the small drawer at the bottom of the niche. Within it were folded sheets of paper, some with little hearts drawn on them. Susan opened one of the sheets, and read it out loud. "'Dear Jayne: I wish I'd had time to get to know you better...'" That seemed to be a common sentiment. "'...I'll always remember your sweet smile.'" Susan looked at the girl. "Right now she's just got that little smile preserved heads usually have, but she does look happy. Think so?" She looked up at Amy.

Amy nodded. "Like she was somebody who always saw the best in everybody."

Susan put the note back and closed the drawer. "She'll be kind of like my partner here. For..." Her eyes widened. "How long will I be in this room, do you think?"

Amy grinned and shrugged. "I'm trying to picture where this room is in relation to the outside of the building. I have a feeling when they need more space they'll just be able to expand the room, instead of moving you all to a bigger place. So you might be here for..." She blinked in astonishment at the thought. "...centuries!"

Susan gawked at her. "For real?? Like in two hundred years other girls might come in here and see my head here? And see my name, and maybe read the notes I got?"

Amy nodded, open-mouthed. "Isn't it cool?"

Susan took a deep breath. "Wow!" She fastened her eyes on Amy. "You'll come and see me, won't you?"

Amy gave her an exasperated look. “Well of *course* I’ll come and see you! What do you think, I’m just going to forget about you? I’ll come in here every chance I get, as long as I live, especially if I’m feeling down, because remembering you will always bring me back up again.”

Susan threw her arms around Amy and squeezed tightly against her, whispering “Thank you, thank you!”

Amy held her for a long time. Finally she said, “Hey, the hair salon should be open. We better get moving.”

“Oh! Right!” She took Amy’s hand once more and together they left the Hall of Honor and ran down the hallway.

## CHAPTER 6

Susan did a slow turn, sighing. Amy said nothing, knowing Susan wanted one last look around the room they had shared for a month. Susan said, "I hope you get a roommate who can lift you up as high as you can go. I know you'll be one of the best ever."

Amy smiled. "There's never any guarantees. I don't know if I'll even graduate. All I know is that when I do go, whether it's as a graduate, or at a demo or a party, you'll be there with me."

Susan turned to look at Amy. "What do you mean?"

Amy fingered the envelope on her desk. Susan knew what was in it -- she'd seen Amy collect it, at the hair salon. "When I'm hanged, I'm going to have a strand of your hair wrapped around my collar. You'll be just a couple of inches away from the rope."

Susan put her arms around Amy and squeezed her tight, tears running freely from her eyes now. "Shit. I wasn't going to cry, but that is just so sweet. Thank you."

Susan finally let go and looked up at Amy. "I'm ready. Do we have everything we need?"

Amy nodded. "We do here. Think a minute to see if you forgot anything you wanted to tell Gail and Bridget."

Susan shook her head. "There wasn't really that much to tell them. I got it all written down." Susan looked at the room again, then turned and grinned at Amy. "Let's go do it."

Amy turned and picked up the rope from her bed as Susan popped off her bra and slid her shorts and panties down her legs. Naked now, Susan put her hands behind her back, her wrists crossed, and waited for Amy, who started wrapping the rope around both of her roommate's wrists.

Amy frowned in concentration, muttering, "I wish they'd let you use the crotch rope. You deserve to have a chance at an orgasm while you're hanging."

Susan giggled. "I feel so tingly right now, I think I can do it without that. Just seeing everybody watching me will help. Doing the show will help too. Thank you again, so much, for that."

Amy finished the knot between Susan's wrists. "Try to get out of that. I don't want you to get loose and mess up the demo, and everybody blame me for it."

Susan tugged hard at her wrists, her forearm and shoulder muscles straining. "Yeah, that's good."

"Not too tight?"

Susan laughed. "It doesn't matter if my hands go to sleep before the rest of me."

Amy picked up the bedsheet and bit her lip. "I'm trying to think what's the best way to do this. Hold on." She laid the sheet out flat on her bed, put a rope across the middle of it, and folded the sheet across the

rope. Lifting the sheet up at the fold, she draped it over Susan's back with the fold at the top, and wrapped the fold around Susan's neck, the loose ends of rope projecting out from either side of it. Amy tied the rope loosely in a slipknot around Susan's neck, closing the sheet in front of Susan's chest. She wrapped one more rope around the sheet at Susan's waist, to hold the sheet closed down there, tying another slipknot. Susan was shrouded in the sheet down to her knees. "How's that feel? Is that going to stay?"

Susan walked around the room tentatively. "I think so, if I don't make any sudden big moves."

Amy looked at the clock by her bed. "Five to eleven. We better go." Amy reached for her electronic clicker, which all students had been told to bring with them to the demo, and clipped it to the waistband of her shorts. She put her pen and her small notepad in her pocket, and looked up to see Susan was looking at her, smiling. "I'm the one student who doesn't have to worry about that stuff today."

Amy smiled back and stood in front of her. "Yeah, you'll probably be the least tense student there. Ready?"

Susan stood on her toes and kissed Amy, one last time, a long, soft kiss. Amy suddenly remembered Miranda's last kiss with Beth, and her eyes stung. I know just a little now, she thought, just a shadow, of how they felt then.

Susan broke off the kiss, and looked lovingly at Amy, their eyes just inches apart. "Funny to get so close so fast. Good time for it, though, right?"

"Wouldn't have missed it for anything."

Susan turned suddenly, and walked towards the door. She stopped, and giggled. "Oops. A little help here."

Amy laughed, and reached for the doorknob. "You're acting more like a princess than a prisoner. Got me doing everything for you."

Susan stepped out into the hall, letting Amy catch up with her so they could walk side by side.

Just in front of them, Heidi, from three doors down, burst out of her room and started running down the hall. She gave Amy and Susan a quick glance, then stopped suddenly. "I guess I'm not late, if you guys aren't there yet."

Susan grinned. "Can't start without me."

Heidi gave Susan a puzzled look. "What's the sheet for?"

Amy answered, "Part of the show. You'll see in a minute."

Heidi smiled. "Your hair looks really cute that way, Susan."

Susan beamed at her. "Thanks. It feels kind of weird. I don't exactly have time to get used to it. I love the way they made it look, though." At the salon, they had cut it down to about a one-inch length, while shaping it at the edges so that it still looked unquestionably feminine. Susan had had Amy hold her arm in front of Susan's neck to block Susan's view in the mirror from the neck down, Susan then admiring her new hairstyle for several minutes, seeing what her head would look like mounted in its niche.

Heidi backed away, smiling. "I better get there so I can get settled before it starts. Really looking forward to your show, Susan."

"Thanks."

Heidi gave both girls a little wave before turning and sprinting away.

Susan took a deep breath. "I hope I don't disappoint everybody."

Amy rubbed Susan's shoulder. "I know you won't."

Amy paused at the door of the demo room, taking in the sight -- she hadn't seen it other than empty before. Her heart pounded, stimulated by the drama of the situation and contemplation of her own role in it.

What appeared to be the entire First Year class was gathered on four rows of benches circling the hanging platform, above which the noose hung down, ready for Susan's neck. The benches were semicircles, actually, four on either side of the platform, with small gaps between the semicircles affording walkways. The nearest of the benches was barely four feet from the spot on the platform below the noose, slightly elevated to give the students a better view, with each succeeding row slightly higher than the one in front. No student on any of the benches was more than about twelve feet away from the noose.

Amy looked at Susan, and saw that her face was glowing with excitement. Susan whispered in a voice full of wonder, "They're all here for me!"

Amy grinned and whispered back, tapping her own head, "Remember, you'll be in here for all of them, always. You'll be part of their identities."

Susan sighed and leaned her head on Amy's shoulder. "Thank you again. You've made this a really special day."

Amy shook her head. "No, you've done that."

At present the girls on the benches were chatting with each other as they waited -- none had yet noticed Amy and Susan in the doorway. Cindy, one of the teachers, in her red outfit, was calling the roll, reaching the end of the list, when she spotted Amy, and held up her hand as a signal to wait where she was for the moment. Barbara, another teacher, walked towards the door.

Several girls on the far side saw Amy and Susan now, and suddenly broke into applause, joined by the others around the room, the ones on the near side twisting around to see.

Susan flushed and giggled, burying her face against Amy's shoulder. Amy smiled and turned her firmly back to face the room. "Come on, Suse. Just another performance of the play."

Susan whispered, "This is just a little more intense, Amy."

"It's exactly what you wished when you were doing the play, isn't it? When you were hanging, you imagined it was for real, right?"

Susan shivered and grinned. "You know it."

The applause faded, and the conversations resumed at a more intense level than before. Cindy reached the end of her list of names and nodded, then cleared her throat and held up her hand for attention. The murmuring of the gathered girls gradually faded.

Barbara met Amy and Susan at the door. She smiled at Susan. "I was going to give you kind of a pep talk. Do I need to?"

Susan smiled back and shook her head. "I'm okay. Are we starting?"

Barbara turned back towards Cindy and nodded, and looked back at Susan. "Not quite yet." She fished something like a cloth band out of the small pocket of her shorts. "I need to put this on you."

Barbara lifted the band up towards Susan's throat, and Amy recognized it as a cloth choker, similar to the ones Miranda and Beth had worn at their hangings. Amy suspected it had the same purpose. "Is that a pulse monitor?" She pulled down the bedsheet slightly from the back of Susan's neck to help give Barbara room to overlap the Velcro pads that fastened the choker.

Barbara nodded. "We'll need it for the lesson today." She smiled again and gave Susan a quick kiss on her cheek before turning and walking back towards the middle of the room.

Cindy was addressing the waiting class. "Everybody get out your clicker. Did anyone not remember to bring theirs?" She waited, but no one spoke. Some of the girls shifted in their seats, fishing their clickers out of their pockets; some had already been holding theirs. Cindy nodded and went on. "I would suggest not taking notes during the hanging. We'd prefer that you pay full attention to what's going on, without being distracted by trying to write anything. During the hanging, some of you may have suggestions for Susan, but please don't just speak out. Raise your hand and wait until Barbara or I point to you. It's possible we might not want you to say anything right at that moment. Understood?" She waited for nods, and continued.

"Today, the one thing we want you to be watching for especially is the moment of Susan's death. At the instant you think Susan's heart has stopped, push the button on your clicker. The signal from your clicker will be time stamped in the computer, and compared afterwards with the actual time of death. The closer you are, the more points you'll score as your grade for this demo. Okay?" She waited again for positive responses.

Cindy looked towards the door and smiled. "This is a little unusual, but I'm sure you all know Susan and Amy intend to put on a little show for you. Can you tell us a little more about it, Amy?"

From the doorway, Amy said, "It's just a little scene from a play Susan did in high school. If any of you haven't seen the play 'The Wrong Woman,' it's about a woman who's hanged for a murder she didn't commit." Amy shrugged. "I guess that about covers it. Oh, none of you need to say anything during the show. It'll look like Susan wants you to say something, but you're not supposed to."

"Are you ready, then?"

Amy took a deep breath and looked at Susan. "Are you?"

Susan took her own breath. "Amy, I just want to say again thanks for everything. For last night, and making this easier for me, and... just for being such a great roommate." She grinned. "I won't wish you luck. You don't even need that. I know you're going to graduate."

Amy tapped her own head. "If I do, it'll be because I have you up here with me."

Susan grinned and stood on her tiptoes to kiss the taller Amy. "You know that means everything to me." She gestured then with her head. "Okay, let's go."

Amy patted Susan's shoulder, and then her own chest to trying to settle her pounding heart, as Susan walked -- more properly, trudged, into the room, her head down. Amy followed her towards the student-encircled platform, and through one of the two narrow walkways towards the center and the platform, between the semicircles of seats.

Susan stopped as she entered the inner circle and stopped by the platform, at last looking up at the noose. She let out a moan and her knees buckled. Amy caught her and held her up until Susan stood on her own again.

Amy had the first line. "Janeen Forest, according to the authority of the state, the hour of your execution is here." It sounded a little stilted to Amy, but real executions weren't really much less formal. "In front of these witnesses, you will be hanged for the murder of Roger Penney. Do you have any final words?"

Susan turned slowly, with a hopeless look towards the onlooking students. She's really good with this, thought Amy. Well, I guess she's done it enough.

In a low but somehow penetrating voice, no doubt coached by the school's drama teacher, Susan said, "I didn't do it, I didn't do it! Why doesn't anyone ever believe me?"

From behind her, Amy said, "Your trial was long ago, and the time for arguing your case is over."

Susan snapped, "You asked if I had any last words! I just want to know if one person here believes me. Sally!" Susan looked vaguely in front of her. "You knew Roger. You know *me*! How can you think I would do this?" Amy couldn't tell who Susan was looking at -- most likely she was carefully looking between students so none would think they were being addressed. The original name in that line was "Sandy," but there was actually a student here named Sandy, and Amy and Susan decided they needed to change the name.

Out of the corner of her eye, Amy saw Megan with her characteristic smirk. Amy glared at her and gave her a tiny headshake. Megan responded with a lift of her eyebrows and a shrug. Amy was glad Susan wasn't looking in that direction.

The students, including Megan, were completely hushed. Aside from Megan, they seemed awed.

Susan's shoulders slumped. In that same, low but penetrating voice, she said. "Just one person to believe me would be enough. I could be at peace with my death then, if I had the faith of just one person."

Amy stepped up onto the platform. "Janeen Forest, turn to face me." Susan slowly turned, and backed off for a moment as if she intended to resist, then shook herself, squared her shoulders and stepped up, as if resigned to her fate and determined to die with dignity.

Amy reached out and pulled on the ends of the slipknots holding the bedsheet wrapped around Susan. She tried to make the unveiling as dramatic as Miranda's, but the lack of springs made that impossible. So she did her best, flicking the sheet off Susan's shoulders with her fingers so that it flew back behind her, settling to the floor just off the platform. She fought down a smile as the murmurs from the watching students told her she'd carried it off adequately. They'd been denied permission to oil Susan's body, as the staff decided that would interfere with the students' concentration on the hanging process, and in the absence of sunlight it wouldn't have been as impressive as the truly stunning image of Miranda's body glowing in any case. Susan, of course, didn't have a body like Miranda's either, but, to Amy's delight, Susan, now naked, was suddenly standing so proudly, her eyes so alight with excitement and anticipation, that Amy could sense the air of astonishment enveloping the room.

Amy had to shake herself to get herself moving again, and worked to still the slight tremor in her fingers as she reached for the noose, and dropped it down over Susan's head to settle on her shoulders. Amy nearly laughed as she saw Susan's expression while Amy was tightening the noose around her neck -- Susan was fighting to stay in character as the frightened, forlorn Janeen, but her eyes showed how thrilled she was to be allowed, at last, to carry out her role to what should always have been its true conclusion. Amy knew that if she laughed, Susan's pressed-together lips would split into a grin that would ruin her performance.

Amy took some time adjusting the knot to just the position she wanted. She knew that it wasn't, strictly speaking, necessary in this situation to make sure Susan could survive as long as possible, but she knew that the longer Susan could stay conscious and kicking, the happier she would be. At last Amy was satisfied, and managed to catch Susan's eyes just before stepping off the platform. Susan mouthed a very minimal "Thank you" that couldn't have been seen by any of the others. Amy wasn't sure for a moment what gesture she could give without breaking character herself. Under the guise of giving the noose one last check, she let one hand drop and gave Susan's shoulder a squeeze.

Amy stepped down from the platform, and noticed Susan taking a deep breath -- probably not in preparation for her air being cut off, thought Amy, so much as an acknowledgment to herself that she was standing alone now, naked in front of all of her classmates, waiting to be hanged.

Amy said her last line, "It is now time to carry out the sentence of the court," and looked at Cindy questioningly, gesturing with her head towards the lever. Cindy responded with a small shrug, gesturing

towards Amy as if asking if she wanted to do it herself. Amy blinked, looking at Cindy with a “for real?” expression, and saw Cindy give her a tiny nod.

Amy had never actually snuffed anyone before. She’d known that if she stayed on after graduation as an instructor she would probably hang a student or two before she was sold for a show, but that was off in the distant future. She felt doubly honored, in that she doubted that many Academy students had ever been given the privilege of snuffing their own roommates.

Concentrating on the moment so that she’d always remember it, she reached out for the lever and pulled it back, afterwards stepping back and squatting down in the space between rows of seats so as not to block anyone’s view. She heard Susan let out a small gasp on feeling the platform start to descend, after which Susan remained silent, concentrating on her breathing, until letting out a barely audible squeak as the noose pulled her up onto her toes, and finally the normal, natural slight choking sound as the rope tightened around her neck and squeezed her airway closed, her toes losing contact with the platform.

It was hard for Amy to tear her eyes away from Susan as the girl started to kick, her body automatically trying to find some support, but Amy took a quick look at the faces of her fellow students as they watched the hanging. Amy realized that many of them had never been so close to a terminal hanging before, probably having seen them only on TV, or from a greater distance at a public hanging, and in any case never before watching someone they knew personally. If they had seen their mothers, older sisters, or friends snuffed, it had most likely been by a standard beheading. It was one of the rare advantages in experience that Amy had held over the rest of them.

All of the girls were staring intently, not wanting to miss any details, and probably would have been doing so even without the classroom assignment requiring their close attention. Like Amy at present, many of them appeared barely able to breathe as they watched -- Amy knew that in her case, she had come to feel so strongly connected with any girl who was hanging that it always affected her breathing.

Amy looked back at Susan, noticing that the girl was forgetting some of her lessons. The necessary movements should have been automatic to Susan after her practice in the last several weeks, but possibly in her excitement she was imagining herself back in her role in the high school show, performed at a time when she knew no technical details about hanging. Amy was about to raise her hand, but saw Jackie’s hand shoot up to catch Barbara’s eye. After Barbara nodded to her, Jackie called out urgently, “Susan, remember the head movements! You’re not doing it enough!”

Susan was, indeed, doing little organized head-rolling, and was very likely not breathing at all. She wasn’t able to give a sign that she’d heard Jackie, other than that she did lean her head back and start rolling the back of her neck from side to side against the rope. Amy breathed a sigh of relief at seeing Susan’s form improve.

The rest of Susan’s movements were instinctive random jerks and kicks. Amy could see the muscles of Susan’s back and arms strain as she tried to free her hands, her breasts bouncing as a result of the effort. Amy blinked with a sudden insight. She had assumed all along that the reason all practice hangings, as well as this real hanging, were done by the girl naked, was that it helped them get used to being that way in preparation for their final show, some years in the future. But it occurred to Amy now that, as with so many things here, it was also part of the learning process for the students who were

witnessing a hanging or practice. Watching the muscular strains and contortions of a hanging girl gave any onlooker that much better feeling for what was involved, and the instructional staff didn't want any part of that lesson lost by being covered up with clothing.

All of the girls had seen Megan's stunning erotic moves, but Susan had so far not tried any of them in practice. Amy thought about suggesting to Susan that she try something of that nature, here in her final opportunity, but decided that this was Susan's time, and that she should continue with whatever she felt most comfortable with. Amy knew it had to be thrilling for Susan to see such rapt attention among her peers for her final performance, and Amy didn't want Susan's concentration disrupted by having to try something she didn't feel ready for. Only a few of the girls, including Amy, were beginning to work some of Megan's routine into their own practice. Amy had had a limited amount of success, but like the rest of the girls she found it nearly impossible to concentrate on Megan's type of sexual thrusts simultaneously with her "survival" moves, and her hanging time dropped off significantly when she tried to copy Megan.

It occurred to Amy to pick up the discarded bedsheet and put it in a crumpled pile on the platform, directly below Susan's kicking feet. She backed away quickly afterwards and resumed watching.

As Susan's spastic kicking started to slow, Amy took a quick look at her watch. Only two minutes so far, and Susan already seemed on the way out. Amy knew Susan was capable of more, but she was no doubt too distracted, and hadn't started well. She, like the rest of the class, had started getting a feeling for the breathing trick, and had done three minutes easily in practice in the room with Amy.

Amy fingered her electronic clicker and fastened her whole attention on Susan's wriggling body, determined to spot the exact moment of death.

In about another minute, Susan stopped moving. The inevitable stream of urine cascaded down from between her legs, most of it falling on the bedsheet to be absorbed rather than splattering. The electronic clickers made no sound, but Amy could tell by their movements that several girls had pressed the buttons on theirs, signaling the computer that they believed Susan was dead. Amy thought them a little premature. A slight kick of Susan's right foot caused several girls to groan, no doubt those who had used their clickers, though admittedly it might be due to random electrical surges in Susan's nervous system. About fifteen seconds later Amy pushed the button on her own clicker, responding to an undefinable feeling that life had departed her friend.

A flurry of whispers was brought to a stop by Cindy's hand raised in warning, and the room full of girls watched in silence as Susan's nude body hung limp by the neck, gently swaying back and forth like a slow pendulum.

Barbara broke the silence at last. "The system is telling me... let's see. Megan came closest to identifying the instant of death. Could you tell us what you were looking for, Megan?"

Amy had seen Megan sitting leaning forward, not bored for once, as absorbed as any of the other students in the spectacle of a real hanging, but now she sat hunched with her fist supporting her chin, the expression on her face returned to normal for her. Megan said quietly, "Shoulder relax, to put it non-technically."

Barbara gave a small nod, looking slightly surprised, and responded, "Could you go into a little more detail?"

Megan nodded back. "Generally the shoulder muscles are tensed all through a hanging. It's an instinctive response to the effort to get air, even after loss of consciousness -- it's not under conscious control. You have to be looking for it to see it, because it's just a very slight change, but at the moment of death they finally relax. It happens after the bladder release. Holding your bladder isn't required for survival, and the body lets go of it to concentrate on trying to find air."

Marcie, in the row behind Megan, asked irritably, "Where'd you read that?"

Megan answered in a bored voice, "Flanders," naming the text the First Years used for their Hanging Techniques class.

Marcie, still more irritably, said, "I haven't seen anything about that in there."

Megan shrugged. "'s in chapter twelve."

Lucy snarled, "We haven't got to that!"

Megan gave her the standard smirk. "Doesn't mean you can't read it."

Cindy held up both hands in a calming gesture. "Okay, okay, enough. The demonstration is over, but before you go I want you all to show your appreciation to Susan, even if she can't hear you."

Amy quickly stood and clapped her hands, and in seconds all of the girls were standing and applauding. Amy beamed, and felt, somehow, that Susan was indeed able to hear it. Amy felt very proud of Susan. She'd gone out just the way she'd wanted to, and had earned every bit of the applause.

As her classmates began filing out, Amy sat on the edge of the platform. She felt very strongly that her roommate shouldn't be left alone, hanging dead in an empty lecture hall. Amy looked up as Cindy said uncertainly, "Amy? Did you want to take her down yourself?"

Amy shook her head. "I'm just going to stay with her, if that's okay. She loved hanging so much, I think she'd want to do it for as long as possible today."

Cindy shrugged and smiled. Amy thought this may not have been the first time Cindy had seen this reaction in a roommate. "Okay. The kitchen staff will be here in twenty, maybe thirty minutes."

Amy nodded back. "That's no problem."

Cindy smiled. "You and she did a good job this morning. I've never seen a demo quite like that."

Amy laughed. "Beginning of a new tradition, maybe."

Cindy laughed with her. "Probably. Well, I'll see you at the dinner."

Amy waved as Cindy left the room, the last person to go. She brought her feet up onto the platform and wrapped her arms around her shins. Her head was at about the level of Susan's foot, and Amy rubbed her cheek fondly against the side of her roommate's foot. She said quietly, "You were great today, roomie." She picked up the bedsheet and tried to wipe most of the pee off the insides of Susan's thighs. Then she sat back down and settled in to wait for the staff.

She leaned away from Susan's dangling foot and looked up. She'd never seen a hanging girl from this angle, and she rubbed herself between her legs absently, surprisingly aroused by the unusual visual stimulation. The pendulum swinging of Susan's body was gone now, and she simply hung quietly, motionless, peaceful. Amy smiled, thinking how excited Susan would be if she could see herself this way.

Amy sighed. Somehow she felt closer to Susan now than even last night, when they'd been making love. She felt pride at being able to share such a happy exit with her.

Amy was startled when the door opened and two women entered, pushing a long, wheeled cart, obviously slaves from the kitchen. They were equally startled to see Amy. The one on the left, a blonde, opened her mouth, stammering uncertainly, "Umm... We're here to get her to the kitchen and start processing her. You're, uhh... done with her, right?"

Amy stood, stretching to get the kinks out from sitting motionless so long. She realized she'd been staring up at Susan, her mind almost empty of thought, for an unknown amount of time. "Oh, sure. I was just keeping her company until you got here."

The other slave, tall with reddish-brown hair, pushed the cart to the platform and looked up at Susan, saying to Amy, "I imagine you want to save that rope."

"Oh! Right." Amy sighed, looking at Susan. "We've got to take you down now, roomie." She untied Susan's wrists, letting Susan's arms swing to her sides, setting her body into the pendulum motion once more.

The blonde swung the lever forward to raise the platform. "You were her roommate, then? Want to help us get her down?" She stepped up onto the platform after it reached the level of Susan's feet.

"Sure." Amy hopped up onto the platform, and wrapped her arms around Susan's waist to hold her upright, giving her one last hug as the blonde loosened the noose and slipped it off over Susan's head. Together they carefully lowered Susan onto the cart on her back. Amy arranged Susan's arms with her hands over her stomach. "You'll take really good care of her?"

The blonde smiled. "Sweetie, we'd get cooked ourselves if we didn't treat the students with respect, but it just comes naturally anyway. Most of the staff are here because we wanted to be students. We didn't make the grade, but we just wanted to be part of the Academy somehow. It's kind of... well, disappointing and satisfying at the same time, if you see what I mean."

Amy nodded. She knew exactly what the girl meant. She leaned down and kissed Susan one more time, whispering, "Taste good, hon."

## CHAPTER 7

Amy carried her lunch tray towards Linda's and Laney's table, feeling drained. On top of not getting much sleep in bed with Susan last night, the adrenaline that had carried her through the morning had deserted her. She wished she could go back to her room for a nap, but she had a class at 1:00.

Both Linda and Laney were smiling expectantly as Amy pulled out a chair and sat. Linda spoke first. "So? How'd it go?"

Amy smiled and sighed, feeling her exhaustion still more once she was off her feet. "She was great. I know she would have wished she could have lasted longer, but it was pretty understandable that she didn't. She's the lucky one. At least she gets to rest now."

Laney looked at her sympathetically. "Long night, huh?"

Amy nodded. "I'll sleep about ten hours and get over it... oh, shit." She frowned. "I have to figure out whose room to live in." She had understood that from the start, but had pushed it out of her mind with all the hubbub of Susan's sendoff.

Linda cleared her throat. "We were meaning to talk to you about that..."

Amy looked up, realizing what Linda was going to say. "We can't do that. They wouldn't let us."

Laney shook her head. "No, it's okay, we checked. There's no rule that says a First Year can't share a room with Second Years. The question got all the way up to the dean, and he said it's okay."

Amy's eyes lit up. "That'd be..." She stopped, as her mind spun, conflicting thoughts flashing through it.

Linda squinted at her. "Amy? You'd want to, right?"

Amy sighed and rested her chin in her hands. "I'd love to live with you guys more than anything. Except..."

Linda bit her lip. She and Laney sat silently, waiting. They could see the fight going on inside Amy, and sensed it was the wrong time to push her.

Amy groaned and shook her head. "Okay, listen. I love both of you. You're the best friends I've ever had. But... I know I need to live with other girls in my own class."

Laney shook her head, puzzled. "What difference does it make?"

Amy's eyebrows knit as she tried to put it in words. "... well, I'm glad you know me well enough that this won't offend you, because it won't surprise you. You're both really important to me, but nothing's more important than being the best Hanging Girl I can be. And I learn more by being with First Years. They're studying the same material I am, and... it's like we all need each other. I understood a lot of that science stuff better by helping Susan with it -- it was really cool the way a lot of it straightened out in my head

because I was trying to explain it to her! I wouldn't have that if I was with you. You see what I'm saying, right?"

Both girls looked at Amy in silence, and finally nodded. Linda said, "But you'll still come and see us and spend the night sometimes?"

Amy laughed. "Maybe you *don't* know me, if you had to ask."

Laney held up her hand suddenly and held her head still, her nostrils flaring. She smiled. "Smell that?"

Amy sniffed. "It does smell like girlmeat, but isn't it too soon? Hardly seems like they've had time."

Linda shook her head. "Remember the kitchen staff has a lot of experience, and a bunch of people working. It doesn't take them long to gut and stuff one of the girls. That's your roommate slow-roasting in there."

Amy sighed. "I wish you guys could come."

Linda shrugged. "If there's any leftovers, we might get some. Probably not, though, with your class still being so big. Save us a couple of bites if you get full."

Amy nodded. "I'll have them box up a few slices or something. I probably have some privileges, with her being my roommate."

Laney grinned. "Okay. So tell us all about the demo."

Amy sat a moment, deciding where to begin. "Have you ever seen the play..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy quickly gathered her notes at the end of her afternoon class, intending to stop Jackie on her way out, and looked up in surprise to see Jackie and Erin standing by her desk. Jackie spoke first. "Have you found anybody to room with yet?"

Amy laughed. "Maybe I have. If you were about to invite me."

Jackie laughed with her. "Yeah, I was talking with Erin. We'd love to have you."

Amy grinned. "Well, that was easy. Let's go talk to Gail and Bridget."

The dorm sisters weren't in, when Amy and the other girls arrived at their room -- the note on their door said they were at the kitchen to help with preparations for Susan's banquet. Amy shrugged. "I need to get some studying done, and start getting my stuff together to move it. Let's try them again after dinner."

Jackie nodded. "Sure. See you then."

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy hadn't heard so much noise since coming to the Academy. Other than the demo, it was the first time since orientation that the whole First Year class had been gathered in one place, this time at rearranged tables at one end of the cafeteria, and there was none of the nervous, hushed atmosphere that characterized both the orientation session and the demo -- this was a big roomful of girls in high spirits.

The kitchen staff, dressed for the occasion in short dark dresses with lacy aprons, had brought out salads first, causing hardly a break in the conversations around the tables, but the whole group of students burst into applause as the platters of steaming girlmeat were brought out at last.

As Amy watched the nearest platter make its way from hand to hand down the table towards her, each girl jabbing a slice of Susan with a serving fork, she saw the head cook coming towards her, after Gail, sitting with Bridget at one end of the table, had pointed out Amy's location to her. The cook stopped behind Amy and smiled. "Amy?"

Amy looked back at her, puzzled. "Ummm, yeah." The platter was above her eye level, and she couldn't see what was on it.

With an elaborate gesture, the cook set the platter down next to Amy's plate. Stunned, Amy saw that it supported two entire breasts. She could tell they were Susan's, now browned with a hardened honey-glaze reflecting the room's lights. She whipped around to look at the cook again. "Is this... did Susan tell you to give me these?"

The cook nodded happily. "She left that request with your dorm sisters today, and they passed it along to us."

Amy looked back at the platter. A girl sometimes specified that a particular person should have both her breasts -- usually her husband, her wife, or a sister she was especially close to. That Susan would want Amy to have them was a significant honor. Amy knew Susan hadn't really got close to any of the other students. But still.

Bridget, by this time, had left her seat and walked down the table to stand beside the cook. She laughed, seeing the look on Amy's face. "Caught you a little by surprise, did it?"

Amy nodded wordlessly.

Bridget reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded note. "She asked us to give you this."

Amy unfolded and read the note. "Dear Amy: I know that you will always have me in your head, like you said, but I want to be in your body too. You've made my last night and last day soooo special, in a way I never imagined anyone could. I'm trusting them to make me taste really good \*giggle\* Thank you so much for everything. All my love, Susan."

Tears rolled down Amy's cheeks as she folded up the note and put it in her own pocket. She looked vaguely at Bridget and the cook. "Th-thank you."

Bridget smiled and patted Amy's shoulder, and both women went back to their places, Bridget at the table and the cook in the kitchen.

Amy brushed away the tears and picked up a knife and fork. She stopped, suddenly realizing all the girls at the table were staring at her. Across from her, Jackie smiled and said, "Love always tastes better when you're not expecting it, they say."

Amy gave her a shaky grin and sliced off a mouthful of breast meat.

\* \* \* \* \*

After dinner, Amy, Jackie, and Erin went again down to Gail's and Bridget's room to get approval for the new rooming arrangements. Bridget had gone down to the gym for a workout, but Gail was in her room, studying the script for her hanging, which she hoped to perform in the near future. Gail simply ascertained that all three girls were happy with the arrangement, though it was hard to imagine why they'd be there if they weren't. As they turned to leave, there was a knock on the door. Amy, closest to the door, opened it, and was surprised to see Shawna, Megan's roommate, standing there in tears. Not so much surprised at the tears -- one might expect that from anyone who shared a room with Megan, and Shawna, who had struck Amy as being bubbly and upbeat when she first met her, had become steadily more withdrawn as the weeks went by -- but just by her presence. Amy looked at her sympathetically. "What's wrong, Shawna?" She could easily imagine.

Shawna sniffled out, "Is Gail or Bridget here? Oh, hi Gail," she went on, looking past Amy and the others. "Gail, is there any way to switch roommates?"

Gail answered, "Well, sure, if it's okay with everybody involved. What's wrong?"

Shawna sat on a nearby bed and started crying harder. "I... I just can't stay with Megan anymore. She makes me feel so... like I just can't do anything right." Her shoulders shook with sobs.

Amy sat beside Shawna on the bed and stroked her shoulder. "You just have to stop listening to her, Shawna. You know there's nothing wrong with you. It's just Megan being Megan. She makes everybody feel that way. You're just closer to the line of fire."

Shawna looked up at Amy, her eyes flashing. "I know! That's the problem I'm trying to fix! Let her shoot at somebody else for awhile!"

Gail cleared her throat. "Have you talked with Megan about this? Maybe she has some ideas about who she could... get along with better."

Shawna wailed, "She doesn't even know I'm here. And it's not like she'd tell me anything personal. Can't you just pick out somebody to stick her with?"

Gail shook her head sadly. "It can't work like that, Shawna. Everybody's already spent a month building a relationship with their roommates. We can't just step in and wreck that."

Shawna burst out furiously, "So I have to be wrecked then? She can just live by herself! I know she'd be happier without some idiot sharing her room!"

Gail said patiently, quietly, "It can't work like that either, dear. There's so much training all of you do in your rooms, and you have to have a partner for it. Only the dean could approve a girl living by herself, and I can't imagine him doing it." Amy had lived by herself in a room for a month, but she knew that was different -- she hadn't been a student yet, and wasn't even allowed to do the things for which a partner was needed.

Shawna let go of her hardest sobs yet. "I can't do it, I can't! Please!"

Amy, still rubbing Shawna's shoulder, looked up at Jackie and Erin. "Could we go out in the hallway for a sec?"

Both girls blinked at her. "Umm, sure."

Amy followed them out, closing the door, and said in a whisper, "I couldn't ask you in there, with Shawna sitting right there, but is there any chance you'd be willing to let her room with you awhile?"

Jackie looked back in puzzlement. "I'm pretty sure they wouldn't let four girls share a room, even if we wouldn't all drive each other nuts in a week in that tiny space..." She stopped as she saw Amy shaking her head. Jackie's jaw dropped. "No, Amy. Stop. You're thinking of doing something crazy. There's got to be another solution..."

"Jackie, Shawna needs out and Megan needs a roommate. And I need a roommate. This will fix everything."

Barely able to keep her voice down to a strangled squeak, Jackie burst out in astonishment, "Why would you even think of rooming with Megan??"

"Why would anybody, Jackie? But somebody has to."

"But why you??"

Amy couldn't believe the idea had come out of her mouth any more than anyone else could, but it somehow had a logic of its own. "I could learn so much from her..."

Jackie shook her head violently. "She'll beat you down like she has Shawna. You'll be back here crying in a month. A week!"

Before Amy could reply, they could all hear a fresh burst of sobs coming out through the door. Amy sighed and looked at Jackie again. "You can hear her, right? You can imagine how it's been for her. If they make her keep on sharing with Megan, she'll volunteer for the next demo, and solve her problem that way, but that *still* leaves Megan needing a roommate. Jackie, think of everybody we know..." Amy waved her arm back towards the First Year hallway. "Is there any other girl you can think of who's going to say, 'Oh, sure, I'll room with Megan'? You know it's me or it's nobody. And it *has* to be somebody."

“Amy, you don’t have to sacrifice yourself just to solve an administrative problem. Let the dean figure out what to do!”

“Jackie -- *I can learn* from her.” She turned to Erin, always the quieter of the two. “Erin, you might as well say what you think. I’m taking a poll to see if everybody thinks I’m nuts.”

Erin bit her lip. She looked at the door, from which Shawna’s sobs could still be heard. Obviously the girl’s distress had gotten to her. “I guess... Well, I don’t want to see you end up like Shawna, but...” She took Jackie’s hand. “Jackie, I think Amy’s a lot stronger than Shawna. She’ll be okay. And if she’s not, we can help her then, but Shawna needs help right now.”

It was obviously hard for Jackie to give up the idea of having Amy in their room, but she’d come to appreciate Erin’s sensitivity. And she had a good idea how stubborn Amy could be. She sighed. “Okay. I wasn’t looking forward to having a basket case room with us, but I guess we can manage.”

Amy snorted. “I’ll get with you as soon as I’m another basket case. Let’s tell Shawna and make at least one person happy.” She opened the door.

## CHAPTER 8

Her heart fluttering, Amy adjusted her grip on her box of possessions, with Miranda's head balanced carefully standing upright on top, so she could knock on the door. Technically, she thought, this is my own room now. I shouldn't have to knock. But she supposed it wasn't really her own room until she had been in it at least once.

There was no response to her knock. She supposed Megan had gone down to the gym. Amy pushed open the door, and in her startlement nearly dropped the box. Megan was there, on her bed, looking in Amy's direction -- she hadn't answered the knock because it was very hard to talk in the neck trainer.

Amy frowned, walking into the room and depositing her possessions on the other bed. "I don't suppose there's any point in reminding you we're not allowed to use that alone."

Megan put her hands on the handles on the wall to push herself up and take the stress off her neck. "Suppose any girl's ever actually died using one? I don't mind rules when they make sense." She let herself back down again, once more supporting her upper-body weight with her neck muscles.

Megan had shrugged indifferently when she'd been summoned to the dorm sisters' room and asked whether the new arrangements were okay with her. Most likely she regarded any roommate as little more than a mechanism to make hanging practice possible. It probably doesn't even matter that my first words to her as a roommate were a criticism, Amy thought. Megan, Amy told herself, was one of that small number of people whose self-assurance was genuine, not a cover for insecurity. Any critics of her behavior or techniques were automatically wrong, and no cause for concern.

Amy sat on the bed that would be hers, wondering if there was some way to establish a relationship on a more friendly basis. She cleared her throat. "I really like those moves you do when you're hanging. I keep trying them, but I can't breathe right when I'm doing them. Do you think you'd be able to give me some pointers?"

Megan, clearly annoyed at being interrupted once more, pushed herself up again to speak. "I don't really have any magical training secrets. I don't have some way that I do it. I just do it. Now could you give me a few minutes here?"

Amy sighed. "Sure." She stood and decided she may as well start distributing her possessions, beginning by reverently putting Miranda's head on the shelf that corresponded with the one it had occupied in the room Amy had shared with Susan. Amy had nearly finished getting her things settled in when Megan decided she'd finished with the trainer. Amy could hear Megan behind her, putting the device back in its holder, and heard Megan's curious question, "Who's that?"

Amy turned and saw that Megan was looking at Miranda's head. Megan, thought Amy, had to be the only girl at the Academy who wasn't aware of Amy's possession of Miranda. One after another, it seemed every girl in the school, including the Second and Third Years who had known Miranda personally, had made the pilgrimage to Amy's room to see Miranda and reminisce about the girl they'd all admired. Somehow Megan had been out of the loop, but maybe, thought Amy, that wasn't as surprising as it seemed. Students had learned very early on how pointless it was to try to engage Megan in small talk.

Amy smiled, as always when the warm memories of her day with Miranda came flooding back. "This is Miranda. She graduated from here the year before last -- the Third Years now were First Years when she was finishing. She was hanged at my house."

Amy had never before seen Megan impressed by anything. Megan's eyes were fastened immovably on Miranda now, her mouth slightly open. "She's a graduate? You saw her do her show?"

Amy nodded eagerly. "I even got to help."

Megan seemed to pull herself together. "That's pretty cool." Amy could almost visibly see the girl's barriers falling back into place, as if by conscious effort.

It was frustrating on many levels. Beyond the practical need to get to know her new roommate better, Amy still found herself physically attracted to Megan, yet was constantly repelled by the girl's closure to standard human contact.

Amy was suddenly appalled at herself -- somehow she had avoided considering the possibility that she had had sexual reasons for deciding to room with Megan. Her only conscious thought, beyond the need to help Shawna, was that she could give herself a chance to learn from the girl whose hanging techniques far surpassed those of anyone else in the class.

Okay, fine, she thought. Don't lie to yourself about this anymore.

In any case, she told herself, she could meet neither her physical nor her intellectual goal if she couldn't somehow crack the shell that surrounded the girl. Trying quickly to catch Megan before she was totally inaccessible again, Amy said, "I'm going down to the gym to get in some workout time. Want to come with me?"

Megan shook her head. "Going to watch some hanging vids."

Amy thought about staying to watch the videos with Megan, but after her invitation to the gym, changing her plans would look like a pathetic attempt to ingratiate herself. She suppressed a sigh and said, "Okay, see you later."

Megan had already turned to a pile of video disks on her shelf, and made no response. Amy left, shaking her head, furious with herself.

Following her workout, Amy went to Linda's and Laney's, and spent the night. As she lay between them, she had limited success remembering that Linda was Linda and Laney was Laney, and that neither naked body snuggled against hers was Megan's.

\* \* \* \* \*

I wish I wasn't so nervous, Amy thought as she pulled off her shorts and panties and dropped them atop her bra on her bed. It's not like Megan hasn't seen me hang before. That was in group practice, though, she argued with herself. I've never done it alone with her before. She'll be my entire audience, and even if she doesn't say anything, I know she'll be critiquing me in her mind, noticing all the things I'm doing

wrong and feeling superior. I hope she *does* tell me if I'm doing it wrong, Amy thought. That's the biggest reason for having a partner to practice with -- well, other than having somebody to keep you from dying, of course.

Amy caught herself nearly grinding her teeth as she watched Megan strip off her own uniform, to stand naked waiting for Amy to step up onto the platform. It wouldn't be so bad, Amy thought, if there was any possibility at all we might play some sex games eventually, but I have to look at that body and think Damn, can't touch.

It was two days since Amy had moved in with Megan, and Amy had procrastinated on suggesting hanging practice as long as she could. She and Megan, in fact, had barely said ten words to each other in the two days. Amy had slept in the room with Megan last night for the first time, telling herself it would eventually feel more natural. Amy and Megan both slept nude, Megan with no evident self-consciousness, nor any obvious awareness of what seeing her that way was doing to Amy. Amy herself had lost any shyness about showing herself to anyone else, and in fact felt a growing confidence that other girls were admiring her body in the gym as she continued sculpting it the way she wanted it, but she still didn't feel in the same class with Megan. As Amy lay in bed, a fantasy, no doubt hopeless, of sharing Megan's bed and intimacy had begun to overwhelm her, and Amy, under the bedsheets, had put a finger between her legs and worked herself to the tiniest and quietest orgasm she could manage. She felt fairly sure Megan hadn't been able to tell.

Amy turned now and stepped onto the platform, and blinked at seeing Megan holding a length of rope instead of handcuffs. Megan noticed Amy's surprise, and shrugged. "I just like it better. Doesn't matter to me if it takes longer."

Amy nodded, and turned away with her hands behind her. Megan secured Amy's wrists quickly, and hopped onto the platform to pull the noose down over Amy's head, tighten it and adjust it. Amy turned to look at Megan. "Four minutes, okay?"

Megan gave her a little smile. "Sure." Amy could read the smile: what, only four minutes? Amy had gone longer in practice, but wanted to try some of Megan's moves, at the cost of a little time.

The instant Amy's feet left the platform, she knew she'd made a mistake. She'd been concentrating so hard on visualizing the hip thrusts and leg swings she'd wanted to make that she hadn't filled her lungs enough before swinging. She tried to make up for it by sucking in as much air as she could, as her head-rolling against the rope permitted it, but didn't have enough experience with the technique to get caught up to where she needed to be. Furious with herself, she waggled her right foot in the standard gesture barely a minute after getting noose-borne. She felt the platform come up to support her, knowing her face was redder than the hanging would account for. Damn it!! she screamed inside. She tried to avoid looking at Megan, but couldn't manage to miss the girl's eyes looking the question at her.

Amy took a deep breath and sighed. "You know you've seen me do a lot better than that in class. I just messed up." With anyone else, Amy knew, she would have laughed it off. Nobody else, though, was Megan, and nobody else could have induced such deep humiliation in her. "I want to try it again. Give me about five minutes to catch my breath, okay?"

Megan nodded, her usual smirk on display, and sat on her bed, pulling a book from her shelf and opening it.

Amy sighed again, deeply, closed her eyes and worked to calm herself. Okay, she told herself, forget the fancy stuff. Just do a hanging long enough to get *some* degree of respect. Keeping her eyes closed, she tried to convince herself it was Linda sitting there on the bed, waiting to hang her and then give her some advice afterwards. She let Linda's voice play like a recording in her mind, friendly, joking. There, okay, it was working. Amy said softly, "Okay, let's do it." She nearly tacked the name "Lin" onto the end of the sentence, barely stopping herself. "Just let me go till I signal to stop."

This time, once aloft, Amy knew it was okay. She felt, as she always did, except for her last attempt moments earlier, at home in the noose, excited by its tight caress of her neck. She imagined herself as Miranda, visualized the gawking crowd of Andrew's friends in front of the stage. As she kicked, she reminded herself of the way Miranda had turned herself in mid-air so everybody could see her back. That's another thing I need to learn how to do, and I will, she promised herself. That and Megan's stuff, but that's for later, I just need to get the basics down now...

A feeling of faintness came on her at last, frustrating her as it reminded her she couldn't do this forever. She waggled her foot once more, and gasped in a huge lungful of breath the moment the platform supported her and the tension eased. As soon as she could talk, she looked down at Megan, a little surprised to see it was indeed her and not Linda, and asked, "How was that?"

"You mean time or style?"

"Well, both, but mainly the time."

"I got it at 5:45."

Amy's eyes sprang wide open. "Really?" She had never managed more than five minutes before.

Megan nodded. "Yeah, but as far as style points, you weren't desperate enough. It was almost like a slo-mo film of a hanging."

Amy almost laughed. Okay, she thought, maybe I overdid the calming exercises. "I was just going for time," she lied. The fact was she had really hoped to show Megan a little more in the way of hanging style, at least to the extent she had already learned it, though avoiding anything new. "I'll kick better next time."

Megan was already untying the rope around Amy's wrists. "If you say so."

Amy sighed. Okay, she thought, Megan can read every move any Hanging Girl makes, so no more trying to put anything over on her. Amy hopped down from the platform, to see that Megan had already turned away, her hands behind her holding the rope towards Amy.

Amy gritted her teeth as she tied the rope around Megan's wrists, unable to keep her knuckles from brushing against those perfect buttocks, promising herself she'd work off the sexual tension later with Linda and Laney.

As she followed Megan onto the platform and took hold of the noose, a feeling of awe washed over Amy unexpectedly. In a few years, she thought, this girl will be famous for hanging. She'll put on the most incredible show anybody's ever seen, and I get to be the one putting a noose around that neck now. Stop it, she screamed at herself. Don't add "worship" to the bubbling stew of feelings you've already got about your roommate, you've got to get through three years with her somehow. Amy wondered for the hundredth time, as she adjusted the noose, how badly she'd screwed up by volunteering to partner up with Megan. She hopped down from the platform, gave Megan enough time to prepare herself, and pulled the lever.

Somehow seeing her in class had not been sufficient preparation for watching her up close, alone. The impact of watching Megan's thrusting hips, her legs intertwining and wrapping around those of an invisible lover, was increased by the knowledge that Megan was performing for Amy alone -- and the fact that it was all show, that Megan had no physical interest in Amy, somehow didn't detract from the illusion that Megan was making passionate love to her.

Amy was so consumed in wonder that she almost missed seeing Megan waggle her foot, and only then did Amy realize her hand was down between her legs, furiously rubbing her pussy. She reached for the lever, and saw that her hand was slimy with juices from between her legs. Almost panicked, she rubbed it more or less dry on her hip and reached to push the lever with her other hand.

With half her mind, Amy was astonished to see that Megan, though covered in a sheen of sweat, was breathing evenly, though harder and deeper than usual, as she stood once more on the platform -- Amy or any of the other girls would be gasping for breath at this point. The other half of Amy's mind was clamoring for a chance to reach the climax she'd been so close to. She received another shock as she looked at her watch. "Uhhh... Ten minutes. Ten oh four, really." Amy wasn't sure Linda, or any of the other Second Years, were doing it that long yet.

Megan nodded briefly. "I know."

What the hell, Amy's mind shouted, has she got a clock in her head along with everything else?

Amy's needs suddenly took control, and she bolted into the tiny bathroom and threw the door closed, her hand quickly plunging again between her legs. Her next conscious thought didn't intrude until after her whole being had been shaken to the core by orgasm, and that thought, as the throes died away, was: What's she going to think of *this*? I can't face her. I'll have to stay here in the bathroom for three years.

Well, at least I won't die of thirst, she thought, looking at the faucets, choking back a sudden giggle. And I'll be clean. Maybe she can slide food under the door.

She must be used to this reaction, Amy suddenly realized, sensing that Shawna had undoubtedly spent time in this same bathroom under the same circumstances. Did Shawna run in here every time, Amy wondered, or did she give up trying to hide it?

Her face even redder than after her first aborted hanging attempt in front of Megan less than an hour earlier, Amy finally pulled the door open. Megan was still standing on the platform, her hands tied behind her, as Amy, her embarrassment increasing still further, realized she hadn't released the girl

from the noose yet. Megan looked at Amy with the usual smirk, that ever-present smile-equivalent of laughing at someone rather than with them. Amy gestured vaguely. "I'm sorry, I had to..." No lie could possibly work here, Amy knew. "Well, I just had to."

"Uh-huh. Anything else you have to do before you let me down?"

Amy opened her mouth to apologize again, then thought, what's the use? "Ummm... no, that about covers it." She walked around behind Megan and started untying her wrists.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Amy, slow down," Linda gasped, clamping her arms around Amy's waist to hold her still, as Amy, on top, rubbed her pussy urgently against Linda's. "Let me get some kind of rhythm going."

Amy tried to stop moving, groaning as her hips continued twitching helplessly. "I'm sorry, really. We're not going to be able to come together tonight, I don't think. Could you get me off first? I promise I'll make you feel really nice after."

Linda snorted and rolled her eyes. "I'll hold you to that. Fingers?"

Amy, her eyes squeezed shut, shook her head briefly. "Just lift your thigh up between my legs, and let me rub against it. I'm almost there." Amy let go a heartfelt moan as Linda did as requested, following it with breathier ones of gradually higher pitch as she ground herself against Linda's upraised leg, soon stiffening suddenly and clamping her legs tightly on Linda's, a piercing "eeeeeeee" of pleasure bursting from her throat.

Amy collapsed on top of her friend, burying her face in Linda's hair, ashamed their sex play couldn't be a more collaborative effort. Her voice muffled by the hair, she moaned, "Sorry, Lin. She's just getting me so horny I can't stand it."

Linda rubbed Amy's back. "You want a vibrator or something?"

Amy shook her head. "No, I've got you." She gasped then and raised her head abruptly, looking into Linda's eyes. "I'm so sorry, hon! See, that's what she does to me, she's wrecked my tact too! I just made you sound like you're a sex toy! You know I love you, right?" She held Linda's eyes with a pleading look.

Linda smiled. "Goes without saying. Anyway, I'd like to think I can beat out a vibrator any day."

Laney, sitting on the floor leaning back against the side of the bed, reached back absently over her shoulder and stroked the back of Amy's thigh, with the hand that wasn't using a highlighter to mark words and phrases in her textbook. Laney had an uncanny ability to concentrate through anything, whether it was the unwatched TV show in front of her or her roommate and their best friend making love behind her. It was the result of growing up with six sisters. "Amy, just ask Megan if she wants to do it with you. Who knows?"

Amy shuddered. "It wouldn't work. I don't even like her! It's just her body and her face that are making me nuts, and that stuff she does when she's hanging. Seeing her sprawled naked on her bed with her

nose in a textbook. Coming into the bathroom to take a shower while I'm peeing." She shook herself violently to clear the images out of her head, making Linda grunt out an irritated "Hey!" underneath her. "Anyway, if we did play, I know it'd be like she was just granting a favor to one of her worshipers, which she assumes everybody is."

Linda stroked Amy's hair, hoping to calm her. "Just talk to her, then. Find some common ground. Maybe there's something likeable deeper inside."

Amy sighed. "I can't talk to her. I mean, I've tried, but there's nothing she's interested in talking about with me, or anybody else. The only thing in the world she cares about is hanging, and she won't talk about that either! It's like she's some big hanging corporation, afraid of giving away trade secrets. And I'd be interrupting her reading. I swear, she's had half the books in the library in there with her at one time or another, so now she's working on the other half. At least she's dedicated. I do admire that much."

Laney, in a muttered voice that showed half her mind was still on her studies, asked, "So what's she read about?"

Amy shrugged. "Anything. Everything. About hanging, I mean, as far as I can tell. I think she's got some kind of program going. I mean, the subject of the books kind of shifts over the days. Maybe there's a pattern, but I don't see it yet. Last night she came in lugging eight or nine medical texts, mostly hanging-related. She was going back and forth between them, and she didn't even hear me when I asked if she minded if I turned the TV on. Didn't seem to hear the shows, either. When she took a bathroom break I tried to see what she'd been looking at. A couple of them fell open to chapters on the carotid arteries, so I guess she was trying to coordinate all the info they had on that. No idea what for, though." Amy sighed again. "Let's not talk about it anymore. It's not helping."

Linda smiled. "Okay then, you said something about making me feel really nice."

Amy laughed. "There, much better subject. What do you want?"

Linda stretched her arms out beyond her head. "I really feel like some tongue."

Amy giggled and waggled her tongue at Linda. "Thith one?"

Linda grinned. "That's the one. It owes me one."

"One or more." Amy backed off down Linda's body, stopping with her head between Linda's legs. After a few minutes of being licked, Linda clenched her fists and moaned. Amy tried to keep her tongue on that spot and pushed in deeper.

## CHAPTER 9

Amy and Megan stripped off their uniforms for another evening's hanging practice. It was becoming their habit to do it after dinner. Even without the arousal of watching Megan hang, Amy had still not succeeded in suppressing the flutter she felt when she saw Megan naked, but she believed at least there were no visible signs of it. Not that she had any hope of hiding her reaction when Megan's turn came to hang.

As Megan secured the rope around Amy's wrists, Amy had a vague feeling that Megan was acting oddly. Megan had never fumbled with the rope before, and she looked slightly flushed. Probably has some new move she wants to show off when it's her turn to hang, Amy decided. I know she thinks it's the funniest thing when I still run into the bathroom after her little show. I wish I didn't have to. I know she knows I'm masturbating in there, so it's not like I'm managing to keep any secrets. But I'll be damned if I'll let her watch.

Amy managed to push thoughts of Megan out of her head as she felt the platform descend to leave her hanging by the neck. As always, it was the one time in any day when the pressures of schoolwork could be put aside, and she felt... self-realized, she decided was the word for it. When I'm hanging, she thought, I'm being the most innermost me I can possibly be. Doing what I was always meant to do.

As usual, she tried a little of Megan's hip-thrusting. She felt she was getting better at it, yet, as quickly as ever, the first signs of hypoxia brought her concentration back to drawing air into her body and giving her blood a path up to her brain. Don't worry, she insisted to herself as always, you've still got nearly three years to learn how to do it right.

It occurred to Amy that Megan was standing a little farther away than usual, her arms folded across her chest, looking at Amy with an unblinking concentration that exceeded any amount of attention Amy had seen in her before.

Amy was tiring sooner than she had lately. Megan's odd behavior, she speculated, was probably disrupting her concentration. She wriggled her foot to signal Megan to let her down.

To Amy's astonishment, Megan continued staring at her. Amy angrily waggled her foot again, and reached out with her leg to try to kick Megan, but the girl was standing just out of her reach.

Amy's heart suddenly raced, and she could feel its beat throbbing in her neck. She's going to kill me!

Amy's last kick had twisted her so that she could see Miranda out of the corner of her eye.

Miranda! Give me some help now! I can't die now! I've got to graduate, I've got to get to my show!

Amy rolled her head frantically, trying not only to breathe but somehow to call out for help. There were other girls so near, just on the other side of the walls on either side of the room. She couldn't seem to make any louder sound than a light choking noise that seemed hopelessly muted, too soft to penetrate the walls, and too similar to the sounds all the girls made at some point while hanging to be interpreted as a sound of distress anyway. She struggled meanwhile to free her hands, but Megan, despite her fumbling, had Amy's wrists wrapped in rope as securely as ever.

In twisting towards Miranda, Amy had lost sight of Megan. In a way that was good -- Amy didn't have to watch that maddening intense stare, and the immobility of the only person who could save her. She tried blindly kicking back in the direction in which she thought Megan should be standing, but the girl was still too far out of range.

Amy could only look helplessly at Miranda. The room seemed to revolve, yet Miranda was still in view. It must just be dizziness. Amy wasn't even sure her legs were moving anymore.

Through a slight haze clouding her vision, Amy suddenly was aware that Megan was standing right next to her, reaching up towards her with her arm. Though her face and neck were feeling numb, Amy could sense that Megan's fingertips were lightly on her neck. Like she's taking my pulse, thought Amy... no, not *like* that. That *is* what she's doing. She wants to know when I die.

Miranda!! Amy screamed in her mind. Give me some strength for just one second!!

Amy lashed sideways with her foot, catching Megan in her stomach and sending her stumbling backwards onto her bed with an astonished look on her face, her shoulder thumping loudly on the wall. Amy bent her head back as hard as she could, putting all the pressure she could on the back of her neck and managed, finally, a loud choking "Arrgh!" sound.

That's all I can do, she thought miserably, all hope fading out along with her energy. The redness closed in, and sound vanished. Unexpectedly the thought flashed through her head: I never told Daddy to make sure Scott gets some of my meat! Then everything went away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy felt lips covering hers, forcing air into her lungs. She jerked and started coughing, and heard a triumphant voice shout, "She's awake!"

She opened her eyes, squinting against the bright light in the ceiling, and felt the floor spin around under her back. She saw it had been Bridget kissing her -- no, she realized. Giving her mouth to mouth. Nothing personal.

Amy's hip and the back of her head hurt. Her neck ached, and she tried to reach up with her hand to soothe it, but found her wrists were still tied, her arms pinned under her back as she lay on them. She closed her eyes to stop the spinning, and became aware of being addressed. Bridget's voice, worried. "Amy? Amy? Can you hear me?"

Amy decided it was important to answer. "Wha... Okay... yeah." She breathed deeply, feeling her head begin to clear.

"Amy... Do you know where you are?"

Amy gave her a faint smile. "Academy."

"Do you know what day it is?"

Amy tried to get her brain up to full speed. “Had... A&P class s’afternoon. I guess it’s Wednesday. Can’t be Friday. I’d be happier.”

She opened her eyes. Things in the room seemed more stable now, and she could see the relieved grin on Bridget’s face. Surrounding her was a circle of girls, as many as could fit in the room, and behind them more girls in a line stretching to the doorway and into the hallway. The noose lay in a loose tangle on the floor beside Bridget. Megan was sitting on her bed with her arms folded, biting her lip, looking scared.

Bridget straightened up into a kneeling position beside Amy. Standing behind Bridget, Gail was the nearest person, her arms held out to try to keep the girls on that side back. She said grimly, “Okay, who found her?”

Jenny, from the room next door, nervously raised her hand. “I was in my room, and I heard this banging noise, and then some other weird noise. Then it stopped. I... I waited to see if there was anything else, so I could figure out what was going on...” She looked miserably at Amy. “I’m sorry, Amy, I know I should have come in sooner.”

Amy struggled and at last sat up awkwardly. “Could somebody untie my hands?”

Bridget quickly bent to do that, and Amy reached up to her neck and coughed again. The throbbing feeling was already receding. Her fingers brushed the smooth metal of her Academy slave collar, and she drew strength from it. I’m alive! she thought. I can still graduate! I can go out the way an Academy Girl is supposed to!

Gail looked at Jenny. “Was she hanging when you found her?”

Jenny gulped and nodded. “Sh-she was just limp. You know, unconscious. And...”

Gail’s jaw clenched. “And where was Megan during all this?” Gail was clearly mystified as to how anything like this could have happened.

“She...” Jenny pointed at Megan. “She was just standing there, with her hand on Amy’s neck. She wasn’t doing anything else. I ran over to the wall and hit the release button.” A tear rolled down Jenny’s cheek. Amy suddenly realized that was why her head and hip hurt -- from the fall to the floor.

Bridget bolted suddenly to her feet. “What???” She stared at Megan, her jaw hanging loose. “Anybody else see that?”

Darla raised her hand, visibly shaking. “I - I was right behind Jenny. Then I went and got you guys.”

Megan stood, wringing her hands, her voice quivering. “Look, I was just trying to...”

Gail snapped at her, “Save it!” She was visibly shaking with anger. “You can tell it to the dean tomorrow. If you were about to say why you were doing it, I don’t think that’s going to matter. He’ll have to approve, but I think he’ll agree with me this is a clear Level 2 violation. For now I want you to follow me to the detention room.”

Megan's face went utterly white, her breath now coming in quick pants. A stream of urine cascaded down from between her legs. "N-no, please, wait..."

Level 2. The threat in the back of every student's mind. Not that any of them constantly fretted about it, nor even gave it much conscious thought -- they were all sure they could never do anything *that* bad. But, Amy reflected, Megan had done it, to a point beyond the possibility of any explanation saving her. And it looked to Amy as though Megan, for all her usual obliviousness to the consequences of her actions, seemed to understand that now.

Tomorrow, following the dean's approval, Megan would be executed. She would be hanged, as indeed would all of the girls here eventually, but not in the sensual, satisfying way to which all of the girls aspired.

Megan would be led from detention to an adjoining room, naked as for any hanging, her pretty Academy slave collar taken away from her and replaced with a dull generic slave collar. In the middle of that room, her hands would be tied behind her in the usual way, and her feet as well -- there would be no sensual kicking -- and she would be blindfolded. A noose would be secured around her neck. All witnesses except the designated executioner and the dean would leave the room. The trap door would then open under Megan's feet for the Long Drop, and she would plunge downward a dozen feet, into a darkened room beneath the execution chamber, her fall ended by the rope breaking her neck. No one would see her actual hanging -- that was the most fearsome feature of all to any Academy student, who lived for the day she could perform her last dance in front of an enthralled audience. There would be no dance, no performance, no culmination of all her training. There would simply be a quick death.

Afterwards, her body would be given to a meat processing plant, and her meat would be ground up for distribution in anonymous cans. Her head and bones would be reduced to ashes.

Everything she had dreamed of, every shred of honor she had sought as an Academy Girl -- all of this was lost. The Academy did not even so much as record the names of the girls in the past who had earned this punishment. They were written out of the history of the Academy.

Amy found she was looking at Miranda, as she always did when she felt a need for guidance. And to her own astonishment, Amy found herself opening her mouth. "Gail... It was my idea."

Gail whipped around to stare at Amy. "Wh... What?"

Amy kept her eyes fixed on Gail's, understanding what she was doing, though barely knowing what her words were going to be until they were out of her mouth. "I asked her to let me go until I passed out. I wanted to see... you know, how long."

Gail continued staring at Amy, now completely unable to speak. Out of the corner of her eye, Amy could see Megan equally stunned, wide-eyed, jaw slack. All of the girls around her, in fact, who had been looking at Megan in astonishment, had shifted that same look to Amy -- except for Jackie, who shot Amy an exasperated look, with her jaw clenched and her head shaking slightly. Amy could tell Jackie knew exactly what had happened and what Amy was now doing.

Amy herself was still trying to decide exactly why she was doing it. She had no worries that Megan's death sentence would be transferred to herself. It was clear that Amy had suddenly changed a case of Attempted Murder to Teenagers Being Really Stupid. She had saved Megan's life, at the expense of exposing herself to the lesser punishment that was about to come. She knew what that would be, as well. She tried to understand what made Megan worth it.

Bridget caught Gail's eye, held up one finger and then used it to gesture back and forth towards Amy and Megan. Gail nodded and cleared her throat. "As dorm sisters, Bridget and I don't need the dean's approval to declare a Level 1 violation. Intentionally experimenting with hanging to the point of unconsciousness without prior approval from higher authority is a clear violation." She brushed Bridget's arm. "Hon, would you secure the dorm and shut down the systems? I'll get the key to open up the equipment closet and get them set up." She turned to face the students clustered around the half of the room nearest the door. "Everybody, out of this room and back to your own. Amy, Megan, stay here until I come back."

Like toothpaste being slowly squeeze from a tube, the students made their way out of the room, followed by Bridget and Gail.

Megan, still pale and wide-eyed, her voice shaking, started out, "Amy, I..."

Amy glared at her, her jaw clenched, held up her hand, palm out, and shook her head. At first sight of the expression on Amy's face, Megan froze. They waited in silence for Gail to return.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy had to keep telling herself, I didn't do anything wrong, I didn't do anything wrong. It didn't help. She still felt paralyzed with shame -- not that she could move anyway.

Gail had returned with the key to the closet at the far end of the corridor, beyond the last dorm room, and pulled out two punishment stocks, one for Amy, one for Megan. Amy was secured in hers now, bent over at the waist, her neck thrust through a hole just big enough for it between the two wooden boards that were now locked together, her wrists similarly held in smaller holes in the boards on either side of her head. Down below, she was standing on her feet, with her ankles held in holes about a foot apart between another two wooden boards, her feet invisible beneath them.

Megan was secured the same way, next to Amy, facing the same direction, towards the back wall of the corridor. Behind them, Amy could hear the murmured conversations of the other students, waiting to take their turns participating in the punishment. That Amy couldn't see them should have helped, but didn't -- it only served to make her that much more self-conscious, knowing they were looking, in some cases giggling, at her exposed, vulnerable butt, as she helplessly mooned all of them. Megan and Amy had both been naked for practice anyway, which saved a small amount of time -- the Level 1 punishment was always received naked.

The worst part, thought Amy, was having to suck on the handle of the paddle that the girls would be using, making sure her mouth didn't lose its grip on it. There would be added punishments for dropping it.

Gail had pulled up a chair and sat to Megan's left -- Amy was to the right of Megan -- and announced, "Okay, everything's ready. I'm going to keep time, for now -- Bridge, could you take over about halfway through?" Obtaining assent, Gail went on, "Okay, who's first?"

Gail waved her arms to quiet the hubbub her question had created. "Let's go in order of room numbers, back to front. You guys just decide who goes first from your room. I want to do three minute intervals. That will get us done in about three hours. So it'll be awhile before we get to the front rooms. While you're waiting for your turns you can go back to your rooms, or you're welcome to stay and watch if you want."

Amy couldn't hear anyone leaving, for the moment. Presumably all fifty-five girls would be watching, at least for now. Her sense of shame and embarrassment flared up again, full-force. She had never before been punished for anything, at any school she had ever been to. It wasn't in her nature to get into any sort of trouble. And certainly she'd never been to a school that offered a punishment resembling this.

But I'm not just a student now, she reminded herself. I'm a slave. Amy loved being owned by the Academy, but slavery did have its drawbacks.

Gail spoke again. "Okay, room 29. Who's first?"

Amy groaned. Things were already bad enough, but they were now about to get worse.

Gabrielle, a girl Amy didn't yet know very well, came around Amy to the front. As required, Amy lifted up her head to "present" the paddle to Gaby, who took it out of Amy's mouth, looked at Amy sourly as she wiped a bit of spit from the handle, and took it back behind Amy. Amy squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth preemptively, but was unable to stifle the yelp of pain as the paddle slapped stingingly against her buttock. Gaby came back around with the paddle, and Amy, with the first of a long line of tears trickling down her cheek, said to Gaby, as required, "I'm sorry." Gaby nodded and replaced the paddle in Amy's mouth before moving over to Megan and repeating the process.

It was hard to tell, since the physical sensation was absent, but Amy thought the slapping sound of the paddle against Megan's buttock was louder than the one for herself, and that Megan's squeak of pain was louder than her own. That was some comfort, anyway.

Gail watched three minutes tick off on her watch before letting Gaby's roommate take a turn.

Bridget had locked the doors of the dorm, so that none of the girls could leave to go to the caf for a snack, or to one of the rec rooms, or the library, or the other dorms where they might have friends. She had also turned off the entertainment system. All of the girls were missing any favorite TV shows for that night, couldn't watch a chosen movie, nor even listen to music. The fact that all of the girls were being punished for something Amy and Megan had done, albeit to a less painful degree than Amy and Megan, ensured that every girl was pissed off, some more than others. And they all had just the two targets on which to take out their irritation at the unfairness of their loss of privileges -- the girls who were responsible for it.

In any case, every girl was required to participate. If any girl administered an especially light, token swat, Gail could require her to give the rule violator another, more sincere one.

The fifth girl to take a turn was Jackie. Amy felt an especially strong surge of shame that a close friend could see her this way -- she held up the paddle for Jackie to take, but closed her eyes to avoid looking at her.

As Jackie went behind her, Amy tensed again, preparing her already-sore buttocks for the now-familiar sting. She flinched as she felt something tap against her butt, and then heard the loud slap accompanied by a harder bump against her butt, but unexpectedly, there was no pain to go with it. She realized that Jackie, with her actions sufficiently shielded by her own body from Gail and the onlooking students, had put the back of her hand against Amy's butt, before swinging the paddle and hitting her own hand with it. Amy, full of gratitude, the more so knowing Jackie's palm must really sting like hell right now, resolved to do something very nice for Jackie the first chance she got.

Erin and Shawna did the same thing Jackie had done -- in Shawna's case, Amy knew the girl felt she owed Amy so much that this was the least she could do.

Of course, none of the girls performed the same trick with Megan, and Amy could hear Megan's gasps of pain as Jackie, Erin, and -- even harder -- Shawna gave Megan her swats.

Unfortunately, the conspiracy of Jackie, Erin, and Shawna didn't seem to have spread any farther -- the girls knew they were exposing themselves to a possible violation of their own by defrauding the dorm sisters during a punishment. Once Room 27 had completed its participation, the real swats started again.

Amy, her face awash in tears as the punishment went on, the pain in her buttocks going deeper and lasting longer between swats as time went on, and at last becoming continuous, tried to get her mind off her humiliation by thinking over what she would say to Megan after it was all over. Her anger at Megan burned as redly as her buttocks, and she kept her eyes on Megan, other than when she was offering the paddle to each girl in succession. Megan, for her part, kept her face turned away after her first look at the expression on Amy's.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy had no need to keep count, since she knew who occupied most of the rooms and could easily track the painfully slow progression to Room 1. After three endless hours it was over. Bridget having taking over supervising, Gail went down to unlock the dorm doors as Bridget released first Amy, then Megan from the stocks.

Amy groaned, her hands pushing against the small of her back as she straightened up from her long-enforced bent over position, and shortly heard Megan do the same. All of the rest of the girls had retreated to their rooms, or had taken advantage of their regained freedom to go somewhere else more entertaining, despite the late hour -- by now it was after 11 pm.

Megan looked apologetically at Amy, started to speak, and seemed to realize they were in a place a little too public for that. She started towards their room, but froze at a barked "No!" from Amy.

Amy walked down the corridor, past their room and the contrite-looking Megan, and growled a tense "Come with me" at Megan as she passed.

Megan blinked. "Let me get some clothes on, at least."

Amy stopped, turned, and glared at her, and hissed through gritted teeth, "Come with me!" She spun back around and continued down the hallway, not looking to see that Megan was following, able to hear that she was. The girl owed Amy far too much to argue with her now.

They continued wordlessly, as Amy led Megan to the Hall of Honor. The cleaning staff was long gone. Amy and Megan could be alone here for hours.

Amy yanked the door open and walked in, moving past the revered heads until reaching a point where the greatest number of heads were visible at once, and snarled over her shoulder, "Close the door!"

Megan shakily pulled the door closed and approached Amy. She hurriedly started speaking. "Amy, I can explain..."

"Bet you can't!"

Megan was talking so quickly the words ran together, probably knowing Amy would cut her off soon and wanting to get in as much as possible. "I was reading about the carotids and of course the rope cuts off the flow of blood but I saw all those studies were done a long time ago and I couldn't find any that involved girls with Academy training and I thought maybe with the sort of muscular development Hanging Girls get in their necks it might be possible that some blood was getting through and there might even be some new exercises we could do that would make the flow even stronger so we could last longer..."

"And you thought you'd test out your theory on me without even asking?!"

"Would you have said yes?"

"Of course not, because the whole thing is nuts, and there's no way I'd risk my life..."

"It wasn't a risk, I was like two seconds from hitting the release button when Jenny came busting in..."

"Look where we are!"

Megan blinked. "What?"

"Look around you. See where we are?"

"Well, yeah, but what..."

"I wanted you surrounded by girls who are better than you."

Megan looked irritated. "Better how? They couldn't have been better at hanging or they wouldn't be here..."

“They’re better human beings! And they’re better students, too! They knew what the Academy was about! You’re headed towards ending up in this room...” Amy stopped for a moment to seethe, and continued in a voice husky with fury, “...and I can’t stand to think of somebody like you in here. These girls deserve their honor!”

Megan stared at Amy. She moved her mouth wordlessly for a moment, and finally managed to sputter out, “I’m not going to be here! I’m going to graduate!”

“No, I don’t think so. You don’t even know how thin the thread is you’re hanging from.”

Megan’s eyes shot open in panic. “Y-you’re going to tell the dorm sisters what really happened?”

“It’s a little late for that, isn’t it? If I admit I lied to them to cover up, I could be in as much trouble as you’d be!”

“Look, Amy, I understand you’re really, really mad. I never thought the thing would blow up like this, and I’m really sorry. Could we go back to the room, calm down, get some sleep and talk about it in the morning?”

Amy shook her head violently. “We’re not going back to the room until you convince me I should still take the risk of being your roommate.”

Megan held up her hands, trying to find some gesture that might have the calming influence her words did not. “If that’s a problem, I can try to find somebody else to room with...”

“Are you kidding?! Who the hell else would room with you now? Look, there are girls in this school who know me a lot better than you do, and I know for a fact they’ve figured out what really happened. They know I’m not stupid enough to do what I said I did, and too stupid to let you hang for what *you* did. They’re going to spread the story around, and no matter what the official version is, every girl in this school is going to know what you did.”

Megan looked stunned. “B-but... I’ll explain to them what I was trying to do. It was really stupid, I’m sorry, I’ll never do anything like that again...”

Amy threw up her arms. “You idiot! After all this you still don’t even know what rule you broke! With all your reading, did you miss that part of the handbook? Never thought any of that would apply to you?”

“What are you talking about?”

Amy pounded her chest to emphasize each word. “YOU... BETRAYED... MY... TRUST!!! Every girl who’s hanging trusts her partner because she has no control over her own life! When I tell you I want down, I expect to be let down! I *have* to have that trust. Right now you have to tell me why I should. I guarantee nobody else trusts you now. If you want to keep living, you’d better start convincing.”

Megan shook her head. “The teachers know how good I am. Everybody does. They aren’t going to want to lose me. They’ll train me alone, I can get practice with the teachers...”

“No, because no matter how good you are, as soon as they figure out what all the students think of you, they’ll know what I already know, and you’ll be hanged at the next demo!”

“What do you mean? What do you know?”

Amy’s clenched hands shook at her sides. “That you’re a cancer at the Academy! You’ve already got most of the girls doubting their own abilities, from all that crap you do in class. They’d be learning more if you hadn’t already convinced them they can’t. And now you’ve showed them that a partner might not be trusted. What if they start wondering that about their own roommates? ‘Can I really trust her with my life?’ How can they keep doing hanging practice if they’re worried about that? You’re a disease that’s spreading its way through the student body.”

Megan’s face, so recently streaked with tears during the punishment, was wet again with a new flow of them. “S-so why did you save my life, if you think that?”

Amy closed her eyes. “I don’t know. It was a mistake. It’s too late to take it back. I think I was thinking you could be the best Hanging Girl ever, but you can’t. You’re the best in our class right now, but others will get better while you coast on the plateau.”

Megan thrust out her jaw defiantly. “I *will* be the best ever!”

“No! Because you keep yourself totally outside the process, the learning process. I know you won’t ever be as good as Miranda. She kicked for thirty-one minutes! You’ll never get there!”

Megan’s eyes flew open wide. “Thirty-one is impossible!”

Amy pounded her chest with her fist. “*I was there*, remember? I watched her do it! And you know why she could do it? Because she shared with everybody around her. She taught the other girls, she learned from them -- from her roommate and everybody else. That’s what you don’t do, and that’s why you’ll never be the best. All you’re going to do is bring the Academy down. It’s going to crash and burn because of you.”

Megan shook her head. “You’re overstating it so much...”

“Am I? What happens when our class graduates, and they do crappy shows because you shot down their confidence in themselves and their trust in their partners? What happens when people don’t want to pay anymore for Academy Girls because they just aren’t as good as they used to be? You know how much it costs to train us for three years, feed us, entertain us, do everything they do for us? How can they do that if they can’t sell us anymore at the end?”

Megan was shaking. “That’s not going to happen!”

“Don’t tell me! Tell them!” She waved her arm to indicate the dozens of heads visible from where they stood. “What’s going to happen to them when the Academy closes? When everything they died for is gone?”

Amy was about to go on, but she suddenly realized she had finally said something that got through. Megan was whipping her head left and right, her eyes blinking rapidly, her breath rasping.

Megan suddenly threw her arms up to her face, covering her head as if the ceiling was collapsing on it. She sank to her knees, saying shakily, "Stop looking at me! Stop looking at me!"

Amy, not sure what was going on, opened her mouth to remind Megan she'd already seen her naked dozens of times, but realized then that Megan wasn't addressing her. Megan was talking to the heads.

Megan curled up further against herself, into an almost fetal kneeling position, shouting in a steadily more panicked voice, "Stop looking at me!! *Stop looking at me!!*"

Amy, glad to see some sign that Megan was human, reacted instinctively, reaching down to pull Megan into a half-crouch by her armpits and pulling her at a stumbling run farther down the back corridor of the room, past the last occupied aisle and into a not-yet-used area. As she stopped and Megan sank back down to her knees, still repeating the "stop looking" litany, Amy knelt in front of her and, with an effort, pulled the girl's arms away from her head. "Megan! Look at me! They can't see you from here! It's okay! Open your eyes and look. They can't see you!" She slapped gently at Megan's cheek, then harder until Megan finally jerked back, opening her eyes and looking around. Megan's hyperventilating lungs gradually came under control.

Amy held Megan's eyes for a moment. Then Megan's face crumpled, she threw her arms around Amy and buried her face against Amy's shoulder, her body wracked with sobs. Amy let her cry for a long time.

## CHAPTER 10

Both girls had settled closer towards the floor, still on their knees, the backs of their thighs now resting on their calf muscles, Megan still clutching at Amy tightly with her teary face pressed against Amy's neck -- there was no possibility of either girl sitting, using the floor to support her bruised, agonized tush. Very gradually, Megan's crying abated, and she spoke suddenly, as if Amy had asked a question.

"I was eight years old when I found out what I was meant to do." Megan's voice was choked and hoarse, constantly interrupted by sniffles, and muffled by Amy's hair, but Amy could understand her. "My Aunt Serena was a Hanging Girl. She graduated from here. Did you know that? No, you couldn't. I never told anybody that. I never tell anybody anything." Megan shook her head slightly, and paused for a prolonged bout of sniffing.

"Anyway, Daddy and Mom got invited to Aunt Serena's hanging. They knew the guy that bought Serena, and the man figured my mom would want to be there. They were sisters."

Just like my dad inviting Kevin Warren to see Miranda's hanging, thought Amy. I guess that must be kind of a standard thing. Only the idea that Megan had had a life before the Academy took Amy by surprise.

Megan's voice grew slowly stronger. "I didn't care one way or another about going, it just wasn't that big of a deal, but my parents always thought I should have a lot of experiences, and they didn't see any harm in taking me. Aunt Serena had stayed with Mom and Daddy a couple of times when she got weekend furloughs from the Academy in her Third Year, and she was so sweet, and so happy, and so pretty, and I really loved her. Anyway, Daddy just explained to me we were going to a barbecue to eat Aunt Serena, and there'd be a lot of guests and she'd put on kind of a show, and he wanted me to understand Aunt Serena wasn't really an escaped slave, that was just part of the show, make-believe. I promised him I understood that.

"So we went, and I stood right in front of the stage because I was the smallest person there, and... and my whole life changed.

"I'd seen girls hanged before, of course, everybody has, but they weren't anything like this. I can't say I exactly understood about sex, just kind of a vague idea, but I understood about... attention. About people paying attention to you, really noticing you, being totally fascinated and enthralled by what you're doing. Every kid understands that and wants it. And standing there, I caught on about connecting with people, that you could be performing in front of a big crowd of people and somehow, some way, be able to make each individual person feel like you were performing for him or her alone."

Amy nodded, surprised. That's a lesson Megan had definitely learned, she thought.

"Anyway, every minute, every second of watching Aunt Serena hang is engraved in stone in my memory. I can call up any image, any sensory impression from watching the show and live it again. It was... well, obviously you can tell, it was the biggest thing that ever happened to me or ever will happen, until I do my own show.

"I don't even really remember the barbecue after. We must have stayed, and I'm sure I must have eaten some of Aunt Serena, but I was like in a daze. That night at home, I told my dad, Daddy, I'm going to do that. How can I learn to do that?"

"Probably, just for a few seconds, my dad thought it was just a standard kid announcement, like 'I'm going to be a nurse' or 'I'm going to be the President of the World,' but I'm sure he saw something in the way I said it. I mean, you know how intense I can be."

Amy finally spoke. "No kidding."

"Well, Daddy knew I was serious, so he went out and got some books. They were big-people books, not kiddie books, but I was always pretty smart. Books about hanging, I mean. You can't get most of the hanging books the Academy uses on the outside, but you can still get some pretty detailed and useful info. Plus stuff like anatomy, and chemistry, and physics, like we study here, those are available to anybody. If I didn't understand something in the books, if it was too complicated and grown-up for me... well, I'd just take what I could get, what I could understand, and promise myself to understand the rest later. I'd always find I understood more the second time through than I did the first time.

"I got so into it, spending so much time with it, that Daddy took me out of school. I was home-schooled. My mom did the teaching until I was fifteen, when we ate her, and then Daddy hired a tutor.

"If I'd fall behind in my standard school studies, Daddy would take away my Hanging books until I got caught up. I didn't let that happen very often. So I learned a lot of stuff, besides hanging. I didn't have any high school grades when I applied to the Academy, so they used the scores on my college entrance exams. I kind of blew the top off those."

One thing you didn't learn, thought Amy, was socializing. There's a little more to school than books. She wondered whether Megan understood that.

"And of course, I wanted to practice actual hanging, too. It took me until I was twelve to talk Daddy into letting me do that. Eventually I think he realized I'd start doing it on my own, all by myself -- he could forbid me to do that, but he knew that wouldn't work forever. It was either let me do it in the open or I'd endanger my life in secret. So he hired a coach for that.

"Of course, by the time I was a teenager, I knew more about sex, and I recognized that was a big part of what Aunt Serena's show was about. So I started working on getting that into my act. By that time my coach decided I was too much of a natural for him to interfere with anything I tried doing. After a couple of years he stopped finding much new he could tell me about hanging. I was doing it all.

"My parents were always so totally supportive. Mom loved that I'd been so inspired by her sister, and Daddy always told me I was born to be the best ever. They never pushed me, it wasn't like that. You know, like those big tennis stars who never even liked the game, but their parents never let them think of anything else but being the best tennis player ever. My parents just knew... they saw what it meant to me. They saw they couldn't stop me even if they wanted to."

Megan stopped talking, long enough for Amy to think her story was over. Amy had just opened her mouth to respond when Megan spoke again. "Amy..." Amy could hear the quaver come back into

Megan's voice, knew that the tears were starting again. "This is the most important place in the world to me. You don't really think I'm going to wreck it, do you? My Aunt Serena was here. She must have been in this very room sometimes. And I've got a little sister. She's only nine. Maybe she'll want to come here. She's not into hanging, but maybe she'll get excited about it after she sees my show. Amy, please tell me I didn't mess everything up." Her shoulders heaved, and her body shook with sobs again.

Amy felt a strong need to have Miranda's head with her. Amy hadn't known why she saved Megan, but she felt now that Miranda had known why Amy needed to do it. Amy tried, as the next best thing, to fix the image of Miranda in her mind, to make her so real Amy could almost reach out and touch her.

Amy shifted and pushed Megan gently away from her shoulder, and brushed the hair out of Megan's eyes so she could look at her. Megan's eyes, reddened and still seeping tears, didn't want to meet Amy's. Amy said softly, "Megan... look at me."

She waited patiently for Megan to comply, and went on. "Megan, you're probably the smartest person I've ever met. And you've done so much with it, you've learned so much. But you missed some things. It's not your fault. You didn't have a chance to learn them. You understand?"

Megan, looking as if she feared Amy might slap her, whispered, "What things?"

"I guess the biggest thing is that you didn't go to school for so many important years. You didn't learn how to... *be* with people. I mean, I'm sure you went places, like probably parties, clubs, the mall..." She looked questioningly at Megan. After a pause, the girl nodded.

Amy continued, "But you could pick and choose when and where you wanted to go, and who you wanted to be with. You missed having to deal with people who were around you all day, whether you wanted them to be or not. People competing for things you wanted, or people who had something they were willing to share with you, or... all those situations. You just know you want to be the best Hanging Girl ever, and now suddenly you're surrounded all the time with a lot of other girls who want the same thing, and you never learned how to handle that kind of thing. You're just now dealing for the first time with situations you were supposed to be learning about when you were nine or ten, and the only method you've got right now is to bull your way through the enemy, shouldering them all out of the way so you can get where you want to go before they get there.

"I really meant it when I said you can't be the best Hanging Girl by being that way. By not wanting to share with other girls, teach them stuff and learn from them. You need them! You really do!

"Look, I know this will be hard. I think I've gotten to know you a little, especially tonight. Most of the girls here would say Megan is just Megan, she's the way she is, she can't change. But they don't know how determined you are, and that you'll do anything you have to do if it means being a better Hanging Girl. You just never knew before that this needed to be on your list of Things To Do: You have to share. You have to get to know the other girls, and let them get to know you. And you have to believe that they want to be the best too, and you have to understand that's not a threat to you. You have to stop trying to beat them down.

"I'm not even going to ask if you think you can do all that. I know you can, because you believe me when I tell you you can't be the best without it. Right?" She raised an eyebrow.

Megan hesitated only an instant, and nodded.

Megan was still meeting Amy's eyes only for brief periods. Amy said again, "Megan, look at me. Keep looking at me."

Megan fixed her eyes on Amy and nodded.

Her eyes boring into Megan's, Amy said, "There's one more thing. Megan... You have to tell me if I can trust you."

No hesitation this time, Megan nodded. "Yes."

Amy sighed and closed her eyes, suddenly feeling exhausted. She winced. "My knees are killing me, and I can't sit down. Do you want to go back to our room?"

Megan gave her a tiny smile, and brushed a tear away. "So you want to still be my roommate?"

Amy couldn't hold down the corners of her mouth. She stood and reached down for Megan's hand with her own to help her up.

As they passed the first aisle of heads, Megan suddenly said, "Wait."

Amy looked at her questioningly.

Megan was looking around her. She put her hand on Amy's arm. "Why don't you spend the rest of the night with your friends, Linda and..."

"Laney."

Megan nodded. "Yeah. Okay? I'm going to stay here."

Amy sighed in exasperation. "You're going to spend the night here, by yourself? Megan, I thought we figured out you need to stop trying to do stuff alone..."

"Not alone." Megan twirled her hand to indicate the heads surrounding them. "I'm going to be with them. I have some things I need to tell them, some... promises I need to make. It's just between me and them." She gave a shy smile that was far from her usual smirk. "Tomorrow, live people."

Amy laughed, and slowly nodded. She gave Megan's hand a squeeze. "See you in the morning."

Megan returned the squeeze. "And Amy? Thank you. I can't ever thank you enough for saving my life, but I can try. And... it wasn't a mistake. I'll show you."

Amy said huskily, "I know you will." She thought about hugging Megan, but she knew the girl wasn't quite the hugging type. She squeezed her hand again and backed away, smiling, turned and found her way out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy softly opened the door to Linda's and Laney's room. In the dim light filtering through the window from the courtyard, Amy could see her friends in bed, apparently asleep, their arms and legs tangled together, the sheet only half covering them. Amy crept to the bed and tried as quietly as she could to pull out the rollaway bed underneath.

Laney, on the far side of the bed nearer the wall, opened her eyes halfway, and said sleepily, "Amy? What's up?"

Amy held her finger over her lips, whispering, "Shhh. It's okay. Just go back to sleep and don't wake Linda." She eased the rollaway bed out, wincing at the creaking sound it made. She muttered "Shit" to herself when she saw Linda start to stir.

Linda wriggled onto her back in Laney's arms and squinted upward, croaking, "Amy? Get tired of Megan or something?"

Amy shook her head. "Nothing like that. Tell you in the morning. Go back to sleep."

As Amy continued pulling the rollaway bed out, Laney wriggled slightly away from Linda. "Forget that thing. Just get in here with us."

Amy usually slept between them when she spent the night. She shuddered, knowing one of them would be pressed against her raw butt. She quickly said, "Just give me some room on this side, okay? I'll be asleep in five minutes anyway. Too tired to play."

Both girls wriggled towards the wall, and Amy gratefully slipped into the bed, pressing against Linda's back. As she draped her arm over Linda, snuggling against her to get comfortable, Laney mumbled, "Tried to see you tonight, but the First Year dorm was all locked up. Somebody get paddled?"

Amy, tiredly, her voice muffled in Linda's hair, said, "Morning. Tell you everything in the morning. Promise." That was her last memory of the night until the alarm clock woke her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy, awake and alert quickly, backed carefully out of the bed, facing towards the stretching Linda and Laney, wishing she'd taken the time to stop by her room to put on some shorts, then realizing the girls would have been suspicious anyway if she'd worn anything to bed. She sighed, knowing she couldn't hide her condition now. In the sunlight streaming in through the window, the bruises on her rump would be clearly visible. She'd have to tell them what had happened. The true version. There was no way the official version would work.

Linda climbed out of bed next and in seconds was behind Amy on her way to the bathroom. Amy rolled her eyes and gave up. She had her friends on both sides of her now. There was nowhere she could turn without one of them seeing.

She groaned as she heard Linda gasp, and turned in time to see her friend's hands fly to her mouth. "Amy!!! It was you?!"

Laney was sitting up in bed, as Amy turned, Amy's backside now visible in that direction. She heard Laney say, "Wha..." and then echo Linda's gasp.

Amy sighed. "Okay. I can explain..."

Over the next few minutes, as Amy talked, the expressions on both her friends' faces darkened, their brows drawing closer together, their jaws thrust outward, the breath whistling through their noses, their hands closing into fists. At last Linda said in a low voice through her clenched teeth, "I'm going to kill her."

Amy held her hands up, palms out towards Linda. "No, wait. I had a long talk with her last night and..."

"A talk?! What'd she say, 'I'm sorry I screwed around with your life'? What else would she say?"

From behind Amy, Laney shouted, "Why in the world did you save her? Was it worth it? I'm not even talking about that..." She gestured at Amy's butt. "Was it worth it that she's still alive now, after what she did?"

Linda interrupted Amy's response. "At least you're not going to room with her anymore. You'll stay with us for now, right?"

Amy bit her lip. "Well, you see..."

Laney gasped. "*You're still going to room with her?!*"

Amy waved her arms in a closing-in gesture. "Would you guys get next to each other? I don't need you hitting me from both sides."

Linda reluctantly returned to the bed and sat on the edge. "You do need your head examined, though. Would you..." She stopped abruptly as Amy stamped her foot.

Amy glared at them. "You're the best friends I'll ever have. Just for a minute, I need you to listen. Friends do that for friends."

Laney opened her mouth and closed it. Linda looked at Laney, then nodded briefly at Amy.

Amy sighed deeply. "Okay. I spent a long time last night with Megan, and we talked. She knows there are things she hadn't understood about... well, life. She knows she did wrong. She knows what effect she's been having on the other girls. I... learned a lot about her last night. I know things about her she never told anybody. I know why she's been the way she is. And I know she can change. I *know* it. There are reasons why I know it. You had to be there. I was there. I know it will be awhile, maybe a long time, before you trust her. But trust *me*. I'm asking you, please, just believe in me. Okay?"

The two girls on the bed looked at each other again. They both looked back at Amy and nodded.

Amy sighed again, with relief this time. "Okay. Now let's just talk."

Linda raised her hand. Amy blinked at the classroom-like formality and asked, "What?"

"Can I pee?"

Amy bent over and covered her face, tears rolling from her eyes as she laughed. She gestured towards the bathroom. "Be my guest."

## CHAPTER 11

As they sat in the cafeteria having breakfast -- Linda and Laney sat, that is, while Amy, her buttocks smeared underneath her panties with a salve Linda had produced from her bathroom cabinet, got marginally comfortable with one knee on the chair and the other foot on the floor -- the loudspeaker crackled to life, in Gail's voice. "I need all First Year students to come to the Demo Room at 8:30 am. Demo Room, 8:30."

The clock on the wall said 7:50. There were no classes until 9. Linda looked at Amy. "You guys had a demo a couple of weeks ago."

Amy returned Linda's puzzled look. "I remember. Better than anybody else, in fact. Do they..." Her blood ran cold. "No. Oh no. Shit." She jumped to her feet and ran out of the caf.

She pounded down the hallway and threw open the door of her room. "Megan?" She whipped her head around, looking for signs Megan had been there. Nothing was visible in the bedroom, but Megan rarely left anything lying around. In the bathroom, she felt the towel. Wet. Megan had showered, but now was gone somewhere.

She ran back up the hall, rounded the corner, and pounded on the dorm sisters' door. "Gail? Bridget?" No response.

Where is she, where is she, what is she doing? She's volunteered for a demo, hasn't she? Is that what all that talk last night led her to? Where is she?

Amy ran to the Hall of Honor, running breathlessly past the first aisle of heads, looking down each successive aisle as she came to it. No Megan.

She stopped at last, bent over, to catch her breath. She walked up the last occupied aisle, stopping at Susan's head. "I wish you guys could tell me what happened here last night. What did she say to you? What's she going to do? Did she promise she'd do one last service to the school and make up for the shit she's done? DAMN it!" Amy turned to run out, but stopped herself. She turned back to Susan and petted Susan's hair softly, bending to kiss her late former roommate's cheek. "Love you, hon. I'm not going to let another roommate join you in here just yet."

As she ran out of the Hall of Honor, it occurred to Amy at last that, if the meeting in the Demo Room had anything to do with Megan, she was probably there now. She took the next turn in the corridors and ran down to the Demo Room.

She burst through the door, obviously startling Gail, Bridget, and Megan, who seemed all to be making adjustments on the noose hanging in the center of the currently-empty circles of seats. Amy shouted, "Megan, there's no reason to..." She stopped suddenly and blinked. "What the hell is that?"

It wasn't a noose they were adjusting. Hanging where the noose should be, there was instead a neck trainer suspended by the rope. "Megan, what's happening? Gail?" Amy felt completely out to sea. Linda and Laney had never mentioned demos like this. And they had been as befuddled as Amy at the call for an unscheduled meeting.

Megan beckoned Amy over. "We're almost ready here. I was about to come and find you. I want you to be here with me for this."

"Ummmm... for what?" Amy walked to her and stared up at the neck trainer. She couldn't imagine what its intended use here would be. Obviously the neck trainers could be used to support a Hanging Girl's full weight, but it didn't seem to Amy that a demonstration of that was really necessary.

"I'll need some help. And..." Megan looked directly into Amy's eyes. "I just need you here with me. Okay?"

Amy tried to see what was behind Megan's eyes, and saw no sign that she was about to do away with herself. She did see, not just in Megan's eyes but in every muscle of her body, that she was going to do something she found very hard. If Megan was, for one time in her life, asking for support, Amy was willing to give her all she could. "Sure."

The door to the room opened, and three First Year girls came in, looking curious, seeming to notice simultaneously the neck trainer, and stopping to look at it and whisper to each other while finding seats. Gail and Bridget left the central area and hovered near the door, leaving Amy and Megan as the centers of attention. The fact that it was those two girls in particular, the subjects of last night's punishment, standing by the platform was not lost on any of the students as they came trickling into the room, and Amy knew that most of the whispers and probably all of the giggles involved speculations as to whether there was some further punishment not mentioned in the student handbook. Amy moved closer to Megan, not only for purposes of support but also in hopes of picking up some vibration from her that might shed some light on what was happening.

By about 8:25, Gail signaled that everyone was present, and Megan cleared her throat, immediately quieting the by-now loud murmurs that filled the room.

"I asked Gail and Bridget if it was okay if we could all meet together like this. I just have some things I want to say, and then there's something I wanted to show you."

Amy could see Jackie with her jaw set in irritation, her eyes rolling, obviously wondering how Megan could be allowed to summon the whole class for a meeting and wondering what new outrage she might be hatching.

Megan went on, "I want to say that I'm sorry about last night. I know you all had to suffer a little for something I did, and I never meant for that to happen. I promise I'll never let it happen again."

It occurred to Amy that, for last night at least, the class was equally mad at her. She broke in, "I'm sorry too. For the rest of my life, if any of you ever lose any privileges, I promise, on my honor, it won't be because of me."

She looked at Megan and saw Megan giving her the tiniest smile. Amy could read that smile: Megan's acknowledgment that none of the trouble had been Amy's fault this time either.

Around her, Amy could see the students relaxing a little, even Jackie. A mass apology was something they could all live with, even at 8:30 in the morning.

Megan spoke again. "After just a month and a half, you're probably all better at what we're all trying to do than almost anybody in the world outside these walls..."

Amy now caught several pairs of eyes shooting wide open in surprise. Some of them may not have looked at it quite that way before, but beyond that, the last person in the world they would have expected to point it out would be Megan.

"...and I know all of you want to be the best Hanging Girls you can be. We can all get there by sharing with each other..."

Dropping jaws now were joining the bulging eyes. Jackie was looking directly at Amy, as if she suspected Amy was responsible for substituting a fake Megan in place of the real one.

"...and I've got something I can share, and I thought it would work simplest to show all of you together instead of one at a time. I've seen a lot of you trying to do some of the hanging moves I've been doing, and I know you're running into the problem of trying to breathe while you're doing it, like you were trying to recite the alphabet while writing the numbers from one to ten."

Amy saw several stunned nods. The soft background whispers had vanished entirely. The room was in dead silence other than Megan's voice.

"There's some training you can do to help you get past that." She stepped up onto the platform. She was fully dressed, but no one commented on the breach of etiquette -- not even making jokes about why Megan didn't want to show her butt uncovered today.

Megan secured the trainer around her neck. "I'm just going to hold my hands behind my back, but when you practice it, have your partner tie your hands or use the handcuffs or whatever you usually do. And strip naked like for any practice, so it all feels normal. The important thing is to do everything exactly the same way you would if this was a noose. Roll your head, do everything you'd normally have to do to get air and blood circulation. But because it's the trainer and not a noose, you'll be able to breathe easier and stay up longer -- a lot longer, until your neck just gets tired. You need to get used to the feeling of doing those two independent sets of movements, and this will give you the freedom to do that without running out of breath."

Megan put her hands behind her, clasped one wrist with the other hand, and nodded to Amy. As absorbed as any of the other girls in what Megan was saying, it took Amy a moment to realize she was expected to do something. Hurriedly, she reached out and pulled on the lever to make the platform descend, her eyes glued to Megan.

It looked just the way it did in their room during practice, the hip thrusts, the sensuous leg movements. At first that was all she did, and then, continuing those moves, she began taking care of the movements of her head she needed in a noose to prolong her life. She kept it up for several minutes. Even in clothes, Megan was simply the most erotic thing any of the girls had seen, and Amy noticed several of them reaching between their legs to rub.

Amy had adjusted to the display far enough that she noticed Megan's foot-waggle -- sensing the signal was, for Amy, the equivalent of a motorist sensing a red traffic light slightly below the conscious level and automatically applying the brakes -- and she pushed the lever back to raise the platform.

As soon as Megan had her feet planted, she said, "Did you see how I started? I was just doing the hip thrusts for awhile, then I added the head movements. At first you'll need to get into the rhythm of one before you add the other to it. But before long you'll have the feeling for doing both sets of moves together. When you get to that point, stop doing it with the neck trainer and try it with the noose."

One of the girls, Trudy, raised her hand, a surprising acknowledgment that, for now, Megan was the teacher. "Is that just an ordinary neck trainer, like from our rooms?"

Megan nodded. "It's the one from my room, in fact. Just rig it up in place of the noose, and put the noose back later."

Another hand went up. "Should we stop practicing with the noose altogether for now, or mix the trainer and the noose together?"

Megan nodded as if to say, Good question. "Until you get to where you can do this, just use the trainer only. You're trying to teach your body to do all the motions automatically, and you don't want to confuse your muscles with mixed requirements. This may take as many as... well, see how you're doing after a half-dozen sessions. That may work, or it could take more. You can do more practice sessions in a day, though, because using the trainer isn't as tiring."

Each time Megan finished responding to a question, she glanced over at Amy. It didn't appear to Amy that it was the sort of look that requested approval, or any gesture from Amy, and in any case it was only for an instant, before Megan turned her attention back to the other girls.

Another hand. "Are we going to be able to use the trainer in Hanging Class?"

Megan shook her head. "I checked with the teachers, and they don't want to change the structure of the classes right now. If you've got a class today or tomorrow, hold off on starting with the trainer until after that. By the time your class meets again, you should be off the trainer and back onto the noose. Oh! And you don't need to be doing all the things I do right away. This is just to get you started, to give your body a feeling for how it can be making organized motions below the neck while you're doing all you need to with your head. You're all experienced enough with hanging in general that you'll know when it starts feeling right."

From behind the rows of seats, Gail waved to get Megan's attention and pointed to her wristwatch. "It's 8:50, Megan."

Megan sighed with what seemed to be relief. "Okay, that's all I've got."

The students immediately started out of their seats and heading for the door, some going to their rooms, others to class. Jackie, on her way past, opened her mouth as if to say something to Amy but closed it without speaking, shaking in head with an expression of wonder.

As the last of the students passed through the door, Amy turned to Megan. “Megan, that was... uff!”

Megan had turned towards Amy and almost collapsed against her, encircling Amy with her arms and burying her head against Amy’s shoulder the same way she had the night before. Amy hadn’t been able to tell until now that Megan’s whole body was shaking. “Megan, you all right?”

Amy felt Megan’s head on her shoulder nodding. Megan’s muffled voice said, “Amy, I did okay, I think.”

Amy suddenly realized that Megan had been doing something so alien to her instincts that it had taken every ounce of her will to bring it off. What she had done had required that she not only organize what she wanted to do and say, and consider what to say in answer to the student’s questions, but that she also edit her initial speech and her responses on the fly to make sure there was no trace in them of any put-downs or insults, nor even any physical reaction that might suggest she thought the students facing her were enemies to be slapped down and conquered. And the only reason Amy knew this was the insights Amy had gained into Megan’s inner being last night -- during the meeting there had been no sign Amy could see that any such internal struggle had been going on.

Amy put her hand on the back of Megan’s head. “You were fantastic! It all just seemed so natural.”

Amy felt Megan’s head shaking. Voice still muffled, she said, “You know it wasn’t. Is it going to get easier?”

“Megan, everything you’ve ever learned to do has gotten easier with practice. Just like what you told the girls about hanging, today. Right now this is something you’re working on. After awhile it’ll be part of who you are.”

Megan lifted her head finally, brushing away tears and showing a shaky smile. “Thanks.”

Bridget, with a puzzled expression overlaid with a This-is-none-of-my-business look, tapped Amy on the shoulder, and handed her the neck trainer. “You guys better get to class. We’ll finish straightening up in here.”

Amy nodded, took Megan’s hand and pulled her at a dead run out of the room.

As they hurriedly grabbed their books and notes, Amy said, “I thought you told me you didn’t know how you learned the sex moves.”

Finishing gathering her materials, Megan started, “Did you think--” She seemed to cut herself off like a driver stomping on the brakes. She gave the shy little smile again. “I lied.” She rushed out of the room.

Amy followed her, thinking: It’s going to take a conscious effort for her, for a long time, to stop that reflex that spits out a sarcastic response to every question. But she’s working so hard at it!

## CHAPTER 12

In their classes, Amy and Megan were allowed to stand at the sides of the classrooms and put their notebooks on lecterns. Amy was unspeakably grateful that the punishment was considered over, and that the school did not feel it necessary to inflict further pain.

Megan was in two of Amy's three classes that day. Amy found it funny, and fascinating, that several girls approached Megan before and after class -- tentatively, nervously, as if they were approaching a panther of uncertain disposition and feeding history -- to ask her about the new training technique.

Amber, for one, asked, "How long did it take you before those moves felt natural?"

Megan shrugged. "I really don't remember. It was a long time ago. But I know there wasn't just one day where I said, Oh, okay, I don't have to think about it anymore. It's a gradual thing, like any other hanging technique."

Behind Amber, Stacia asked, "Did you learn it on the neck trainer?"

"Not exactly the same equipment, but something similar. Same idea, anyway."

Megan was, again, giving Amy those just-for-an-instant looks, like the ones at the meeting earlier. Amy wondered if she should ask the girls to back off, as Megan might be able to take only so much of this at any one time. She decided to see how things went, on the assumption that Megan probably had enough determination to survive at least one day of it.

Amy was startled to see Jackie standing in front of her, leaning towards her with her elbows casually resting on the front of the lectern. In a low voice that wouldn't carry to where Megan was standing, Jackie asked, "Is this for real?"

Amy shrugged. "I'm pretty sure it is. I can't promise. I've been wrong before."

Jackie watched as another of the girls approached Megan. "What'd you threaten her with?"

Amy shook her head. "It wasn't like that. Exactly. We did have a long talk. Thanks for last night, by the way."

"Welcome. Maybe I should have whaled on your butt, though. What you did for her was nuts."

"So I've heard. But..." Amy stopped watching Megan, turning her head to look at Jackie directly, and covered Jackie's hand with her own. "Give her a chance, okay? I already owe you a lot, but could you do this one more thing for me?"

Jackie looked puzzled. "How would that be something I'm doing for you?"

"I still need to share a room with her."

Jackie sighed. "Even more nuts. But okay. Can't wait to collect on this debt. Maybe I'll have you do something for me you don't like." She twitched her eyebrows playfully and smiled.

Amy grinned. "If you're talking about sex, there's not much I don't like, unless you can turn yourself into my brother. Deal's off if you manage that."

Jackie choked back a laugh. "Okay, something short of that, then. We'll talk later."

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy breathed slowly and deeply as she stood on the platform with her wrists crossed behind her, both to prepare her body and to try to keep her mind calm. She jumped slightly as Megan started wrapping the rope around her wrists. It's okay, she told herself, it's okay. There's no way now she'd do anything like last night.

"You don't want to use the neck trainer? I could rig it up in a few minutes."

Amy shook her head. "I'll start that tomorrow. I want the rope tonight."

Megan dropped the noose down over Amy's head and tightened it around her neck. Amy could see Megan biting her lip. Haltingly, Megan asked, "Do you... want somebody to watch?"

Amy smiled and shook her head. Showing any lack of trust in Megan now would undo everything that Amy had seen happening in Megan today. Megan indeed seemed to have incorporated a spirit of cooperation with others into her quest to be the "best Hanging Girl ever," but Amy didn't doubt that getting through today was the hardest thing Megan had ever done in pursuit of that goal. Amy hoped she'd been right in telling Megan it would grow more natural to her as time went on. It appeared to Amy that even Megan's single-minded determination to do whatever it took was not entirely sufficient. The looks Megan had been shooting at Amy at times of greatest stress gave Amy the strong impression that Megan found herself needing to draw strength from Amy -- the Amy who believed Megan could do it.

Standing there, waiting for Megan to hang her, it was impossible for Amy to banish the nervous feeling completely. She couldn't separate herself at this moment from all of the emotions of last night. She struggled to control her breathing, and at last, as the platform began sinking, her training took over.

She realized, as she lost contact with the platform, that she had been blocking conscious consideration of her greatest worry -- that she would be overcome by a new fear of hanging, making her unable to do what she loved the most. She felt a rush of joy as she wriggled above the floor, suspended by the neck, and felt closer than ever before to Miranda, certain now, as she had not been for the last twenty-four hours, that her life would end with the same triumph that Miranda's had.

She wanted to stay aloft forever, and was frustrated when the first signs of hypoxia told her she had to come down. She felt a momentary tremor of worry that Megan would, again, fail to respond to her down-signal, but knew in her heart that last night would forever remain in the past.

Megan, in fact, lunged almost convulsively at the lever when Amy waggled her foot, looking as though she wished she could hurry the platform's timed rise to a level that supported Amy's feet once more.

Megan was looking at her watch, still seeming nervous for some reason. "Six minutes."

While pleased with a time that represented a new personal best, Amy wished she knew what was up with Megan right now. She decided to let it go -- Megan had been through enough upheaval in the last twenty-four hours to account for any amount of uncharacteristic behavior.

It didn't seem to affect her performance once she was airborne for her own practice session. Amy suspected that Megan, like herself, felt so much at home swinging from a noose that any distractions going on in her personal life were somehow set aside once she was suspended by her neck.

Amy, looking on, felt the same reactions flooding her consciousness that always came as she watched Megan up close. After last night she'd wondered whether that would be the same as well, but the tingling between her legs, the trickle of juices almost spurting from her pussy to dribble down her thigh - it was all back, with its customary force.

Megan was improving on something she'd been trying out lately: raising her legs behind her so she could catch hold of her toes with her fingers, which helped her spread her legs apart a little farther, while rocking her hips back and forth, looking more than ever as if she were having sex in mid-air. She really did it only briefly, for all she seemed to do it forever, before letting go of her toes and letting her legs swing free again. Desperate-seeming leg kicking was an indispensable part of any hanging show.

Amy found she almost couldn't breathe, and nearly started rubbing between her legs, despite her resolve to save that for the privacy of the bathroom afterwards. Amy wondered who would feel the arousal more intensely -- an audience member unfamiliar with Megan's special moves, seeing them for the first time, or Amy herself, watching Megan in privacy, so close she could touch her, having always to restrain herself from doing exactly that. It was, of course, no help at all that Amy felt such a helpless physical attraction to Megan even when she wasn't hanging.

Amy was barely able to think of anything other than her need for sexual release by the time Megan finally waggled her foot. It was lucky for Megan that Amy's reflexes were sufficient to move her arm to the lever to engage the mechanism that brought the platform back up under Megan's feet. Amy had even trained herself, after that first time, to untie, with fumbling fingers, the rope holding Megan's wrists before making her dash to relieve her needs. That done in a few seconds, Amy was halfway to the bathroom when she heard Megan rasp out, "Amy, wait!"

Amy, irritated, turned and said, "It'll only take..." but stopped when she saw Megan's face. Amazingly, considering all the new emotions Amy had seen from Megan in the last day, Megan's face looked as tense as Amy had ever seen it. "Megan, what's wrong? Do you need to see the nurse?"

Amy approached Megan and reached up to loosen the noose, but Megan snorted with nervous amusement and removed it from her neck herself. "I don't think the nurse can fix this. Do you want... I mean, you could..." Megan grimaced and covered her face with her hands. "Shit, shit, shit."

Amy, stunned, saw that Megan was crying -- Amy had seen that last night, but at least then there had been an obvious reason for it. Feeling completely at a loss, she whispered, "Megan, just tell me!"

Megan, her voice now husky from crying, said in a low voice, "I'm not so socially ignorant that I don't understand what I'm feeling right now. I know what it is, and I just don't need it."

Amy reached up, gently prying Megan's hands away from her face. "If it's something you understand, then help me understand it, okay?"

Megan, not making a move to step off the platform, looked down at Amy with teary eyes. "I... I never had a girlfriend, or a boyfriend either. I mean, of course I went to the clubs and learned all about sex, because I knew I needed to, and it felt really nice and was a lot of fun, but I never connected with any of them. You know? I was never even with anybody more than once."

Amy, unable to think of anything except how stupid she'd feel if she was jumping to the wrong conclusion about where Megan was going with this, could only clear her throat and say, "Keep going."

Megan covered her eyes again. "But..." She paused so long Amy wondered whether she needed another prompt, but at last she went on just as Amy was opening her mouth. "...all day today I just kept thinking about how nice it felt holding you last night, and when the other girls were talking to me I just felt like I had to look and make sure you were there. And during History of Hanging..." That was the one class of the day Megan didn't share with Amy -- Amy had it at a different time, "...I c-couldn't stop thinking about wanting to see you there, *needing* to see you..."

She finally threw her hands down to her sides and looked at Amy defiantly. "I can't have this now! Not now, not ever! It's a distraction, it gets in the way. And then there you are, heading for the bathroom to have sex with yourself, and I can't stop thinking about... about..."

The hardest thing Amy had ever done, she thought, was restrain herself from throwing her arms around Megan and pulling her over to the bed. She was suddenly overwhelmed with a vision of herself and Megan holding each other, clutching at each other, kissing, making love, and it took a strident internal voice screaming at her that this wasn't the time, that she couldn't ruin everything by taking advantage of Megan's current barely coherent state. Her teeth almost chattering, Amy suppressed a moan and said, "Megan, I can handle this if you'll let me run in there and do myself first." She pointed to the bathroom. "Okay?"

Megan paused, then shook her head violently. "I don't... I don't want you to have to do that. I want it to be with me..." She covered her face once more.

Another vision of passion swept through Amy's consciousness, and she let go a helpless squeak, her hand diving between her legs. She worked again to force some degree of calm on herself. "Megan, I know you've gone through a lot of new things last night and today. A big emotional meatgrinder. But there's no reason to be afraid of what you're feeling now. Really."

Her voice muffled by her hands, Megan snapped, "I can't fall in love! I'll be wrecked as a Hanging Girl! I can't let anything mess me up!"

Instinctively Amy turned to look at Miranda, her hands making a helpless What-do-I-do? gesture. Memories of the most important day of her life came flooding back.

Amy reached up and pulled Megan's hands down. "Megan, look at Miranda." She held Megan's hands tightly, willing her to comply. Megan finally turned her reddened, teary eyes in that direction.

"Megan, you want to be the best Hanging Girl ever. You're looking at her. You've heard what the upper class girls say about her." The older girls, especially the Third Years who had known Miranda best, still came by periodically to visit Miranda in her new room, sharing warm memories of her with Amy, marveling at things Miranda had done that the Academy's younger students had all tried to imitate. And, Amy noticed, one of the few times Megan seemed to pay respectful attention to anything anybody around her said was when they were detailing Miranda's abilities. If there was anything any Hanging Girl had ever been able to do, Megan wanted to make sure she could do it.

Amy saw that Miranda had Megan's full attention now. She went on, "Remember, I didn't meet just her on the day of her show, I met her roommate Beth, too. I was there when they said goodbye to each other. I saw them share their last kiss. If you'd been there, you would have seen how much they adored each other." Amy paused, and then went on, speaking slowly, emphasizing each word. "And then Miranda went right out and put on the most fantastic show anybody's ever seen.

"Megan, you're such a natural at this that it's unbelievable. It's got to be in your blood. If your mother hadn't met your dad, I'd have to guess she would have been a Hanging Girl like her sister was. And you've got more determination than all of the rest of the girls here put together. But I've had some experiences you haven't had and I've seen some things you've never seen. You're just going to have to trust me sometimes. So listen -- what you're feeling doesn't change who you *are*. Being a Hanging Girl is down so deep inside you that nothing can ever hurt it. Look, when you were hanging a minute ago, you had all this running around inside your head, and I still couldn't tell from looking at you that anything was bothering you. Not while you were up there. Do you understand now that your feelings are nothing you need to be afraid of?"

Megan rubbed her eyes and sniffled. "Maybe. I hope so. I've got them whether I want them or not."

Amy reached up for Megan's hands once more. "Then come down here with me. You're still up on the platform because it's home to you. I can see the way you've been rubbing your shoulder against the noose. But you carry the noose around inside you. You're never going to lose it."

Megan looked in surprise at the loop of rope -- she hadn't been conscious of what she'd been doing with it. She gave Amy a tiny smile and stepped down.

Standing facing Megan now, her eyes locked with Megan's, Amy's knees felt suddenly weak. How did we get here, she wondered, and is this really going to happen? Amy wanted to make the first move, but felt immobilized. She stammered uncertainly, "So h-how do you want... ulffff!" Megan had suddenly thrown her arms around Amy, pulling her whole upper body against her in a tight grip, her wide eyes just inches away.

Amy wriggled her arms loose underneath Megan's and wrapped them around Megan's waist. The next few seconds were forever a blank to her memory -- she didn't know which of them had initiated the kiss. It simply seemed her lips were against Megan's already by the time she noticed, and she felt the need inside her growing as they both pressed their mouths harder against each other.

Megan broke off the kiss and glanced at the bed. Amy giggled suddenly. "How are we going to get there? I can't sit down and I know you can't."

Megan smiled and then broke into a laugh, let go of Amy and knelt the bed, letting herself down carefully onto her side, never letting the tenderest part of her butt touch the sheets. Amy followed her down and lay facing her, and they both let their arms snake around each other again, Amy pushing her leg in between Megan's.

As their movements against each other and their kisses became more urgent, Amy suddenly knew that a missing piece of her life's puzzle had slotted into place, never to be lost.

## CHAPTER 13

THE NEXT DAY

Megan bit her lip as she stood uncomfortably with her lunch tray. "Are you sure it's okay? They're your friends. I'll be in the way."

Amy sighed and rubbed her elbow against Megan's, keeping her grip on her own tray. "Yeah, they're my friends, so they'd better get used to seeing you with me." She gestured come-on with her head, and Megan followed her to Linda's and Laney's table, smiling nervously.

Amy had seen both her friends watching her wide-eyed from the moment she'd entered the caf with Megan. She set her tray on the table when she reached it and cleared her throat. "You guys haven't really had a chance to meet my roommate. I know you know who she is, but anyway, this is Megan." Amy reached behind Megan and stroked the small of her back as a gesture of intimacy. "Megan, this is Linda," she gestured with her free hand at Linda, who gulped and nodded. "And this is Laney." Laney looked at Linda and responded with, "Uhhh, hi."

Amy pulled out a chair opposite Linda and sighed. She'd hoped she'd be able to sit on something today, but decided she was still at least a day away from that. She put her knees on the chair and sat back on her calf muscles, wincing as her heels brushed her butt. Megan took a similar posture on the one remaining chair.

Megan began hesitantly, looking back and forth between Linda and Laney, "Amy talks about you guys all the..."

Linda cut her off. "Don't ever hurt her." Her eyes were fixed on Megan's in an unblinking glare. "I mean it!"

Amy could see the tension in Megan, well-hidden but visible to Amy, go off the scale. Megan's left hand, out of sight in her lap, clenched into a tight fist. Amy reached over quickly and covered Megan's hand with her own, gently massaging it until it relaxed enough for Amy to entwine her fingers with Megan's. Amy's own heart was pounding as she began, "Linda, there's been a lot going on..."

Megan shook her head slightly. "Amy, it's okay. Let me." Megan looked back at Linda, seeming to search for words, finding them at last. "Both of you are really important to Amy. So you're important to me too. I want us to be... friends." Megan blinked at her own words, as if she'd somehow persuaded herself to say something impossibly intimate. She gave Amy's hand a squeeze. "I've... been learning a lot. I just want you to give me a chance." She looked back and forth again. "Please?"

Linda opened her mouth to reply, and closed it again, seeming to be fascinated with the look on Megan's face. She looked at Laney, who looked equally mesmerized. Laney turned to look at her roommate at last, and gave her a slight facial shrug. Turning back to Megan, with an obvious attempt to find some neutral ground for a conversation, Laney said tentatively, "I've seen you from across the gym in your hanging class sometimes. Where did you learn to do that stuff?"

Amy could see the tension in Megan start to swirl away as though a bathtub plug had been pulled. Hanging was something she could talk about. "I had a coach, but those moves I pretty much taught myself."

Linda blinked. "A coach? For how long?"

"I started practicing hanging when I was twelve."

Laney seemed to be getting hooked, forgetting the drama of minutes before. "Does an outside coach... I mean, is it like learning here?"

Megan shook her head. "Not quite at the same level. You don't really get the kind of training anywhere else like they have here, and you can't find a lot of the books. I've been learning a lot."

Megan suddenly realized Tanya, a classmate, was standing just at the edge of her vision, biting her lip nervously. Her roommate Liz was beside her, giving her an encouraging nudge. Tanya cleared her throat. "Megan, I was hoping you could... help me?"

Amy winced as Megan squeezed her hand convulsively. Megan responded cautiously, "Ummm... how?"

Tanya sighed and gave an I-feel-helpless gesture with her arms. "I guess you know I haven't really been keeping up with the hanging class. Most of the girls are doing three minutes at least in class now, and I've never even done two. My hanging grades are just killing my average and... well, of course, that's what we're all here for, anyway, and it's like I'm just not getting it! I'm in the bottom five, and our first party is coming up soon, and I'm... well, scared."

Megan nodded. "I've seen you a few times. You know you don't turn your head enough, right? You've got to free up the carotids on nearly every turn, at least for an instant. In time with your heartbeat, of course."

Tanya sighed forlornly. "The teachers have said that a couple of times. I try to keep that in mind along with everything else, but somehow I'm just not doing it. There's just so much going on when I'm hanging, and I just get... confused."

Megan bit her lip in thought, absorbed in the problem. Her eyes flew open wide suddenly, and she turned to Linda. "Can we get charcoal dust here? Soot, anything like that?"

Linda blinked in astonishment. "Huh? I don't know. I guess the student store could order some. What does...?" She shook her head, mystified.

Megan turned quickly back to Tanya. "You need something visible to give you a goal to shoot for. When you've got some charcoal dust, coat the inside of the noose in your room with it. All the way around, just kind of brush it on. Then do a practice hanging. Don't do anything different while you're hanging, just do it like you normally do." Megan stood up in front of Tanya. "You'll get a black ring around your neck. It's going to be darkest and widest in the parts of your neck that have been bearing your weight and rubbing hardest against the rope..." Megan reached up and around Tanya and touched the back of her neck with her fingers, letting them trace partway around towards the front, "...that'd be the back,

and around to the sides, stopping below your ears. The dark part is probably going to stop about here.” She held her fingers on either side of Tanya’s neck, just behind the carotids. “See, that’s not far enough. You’re not getting the blood flow. You’ve got to work on getting the black smudge to cover up to about here...” Megan brought her fingers a couple of inches farther forward. “You’ll be able to tell at the end of each practice if you’re making progress, because it’s something you can see. Once you get there, you’re going to feel the difference, and it’ll start to feel natural. Your body will learn to tell you when you’re falling short. Okay?”

Tanya’s eyes had grown progressively wider as Megan spoke. Now she clapped her hands once and threw her arms around Megan, hugging her tightly. “I know that’ll work. Thank you!” She whirled to face Liz, grabbing her hand. “Let’s go to the student store!” They ran together out of the caf.

Megan stood frozen, not sure what to make of the departed Tanya’s outburst of affectionate exuberance. She looked down at Amy, wide eyed. Amy grinned and reached up to rub Megan’s arm. “You’ll get used to it.”

Megan gave Amy a short nod and knelt down on the chair again.

Amy turned to look at her friends, and burst out laughing. “I wish I had a camera! Just hold that look on your faces for a minute so I can remember it.” She stopped laughing and sighed. “Okay, maybe we can start over now. Megan, these are my best friends, Linda and Laney. Linda, Laney, this is my roommate, Megan.”

Amy’s two friends exchanged a look, and Laney reached across the table to cover one of Megan’s hands with her own. “Megan, you understand why we’d be concerned. Right?” She lifted one eyebrow, and waited for Megan’s nod that came in a moment, then went on, “But for somebody that Amy looks at the way she’s been looking at you today, I’m sure we can get to be friends.”

Laney looked back at Linda, who reached across and took Megan’s other hand. “Come over tonight, okay? We’ll watch a movie or something.”

Megan started to nod, and stopped. “Can Amy come too?”

Linda choked back a giggle and grinned. “Oh, we *might* let her in. But only if you promise she’ll behave herself. She was really naughty the last time she was over.” All four girls laughed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy, with Megan beside her, was just pushing open the door to their shared room when Megan said, “Amy, wait a minute.”

Amy could hear the tension returning to Megan’s voice. “What’s wrong?”

Megan shook her head. “Nothing’s wrong, but I need to do something. I should do it myself, but I feel better when you’re there.”

Amy understood Megan intended to do another of those things she had newly incorporated into her goal-oriented personal program. I hope I was right, thought Amy, that those things will soon be more natural to Megan. I don't think, Amy told herself, that she needs me to give a boost to her strength and willpower. That seemed like a reasonable explanation, but Megan's got more than enough of those. And it doesn't seem as if she needs me to verify she's doing the right thing. She's not hesitating to do any of this stuff.

As fascinating as it was, the last day or so, to be in Megan's company, Amy was struggling to understand why Megan seemed to need her so much.

They hadn't been holding hands, or even walking particularly close together, but Megan took Amy's hand now in almost a death grip. I don't have a clue what's up, thought Amy, but it must be something big.

Amy had to walk quickly to avoid being yanked down the hallway, and stopped when Megan did in front of Jackie's and Erin's door. Megan closed her eyes briefly and took a deep breath, before giving the door a sharp rap with her free hand.

Erin opened the door, looking, as it happened, in Amy's direction to begin with, and smiled. "Hi, Amy. Jackie's gone to class..." She froze and blinked when she saw Megan was with her. "Oh, hi." She gave the remnants of her smile to Megan, uncertainly.

In a perfectly normal voice, Megan said, "Hi, Erin." Amy had to hold her breath -- Megan was almost crushing her hand. There, that's the reason I need to be along, thought Amy. Megan is phenomenal at hiding whatever tension she might be feeling -- more of that internal determination -- but she needs help draining the tension off. That's me, Amy told herself, I'm the drainpipe. Megan went on, "Is Shawna here?"

From behind Erin, Amy could hear Shawna gasp. The girl appeared behind Erin's shoulder in a moment, though Erin made no move to get out of the way. Shawna was biting her lip, a look of distaste bordering on fear on her face. "What do you want?"

Megan said quietly, "Shawna... I'm really sorry I kept... kind of getting on you all the time. I wasn't very fair to you, and... well, I'm sorry."

Shawna blinked several times, her eyes wide. "Oh, that's..." She stopped, seeming unready to give Megan total absolution quite yet.

Megan went on, "I should have told you, there's something you do better than any of the other girls when you're hanging. The way you arch your back and straighten your legs every few breaths, and point your feet straight down and wriggle your toes, like you're really desperate to try to reach something. All the girls do that, but they should be watching you to get a feeling for how to do it better. I started working that more into my own moves, so I kind of... owe you for that. Anyway, I could help you do some other moves better. If you want."

Shawna looked back and forth between Erin, who looked equally stunned, and Amy, who nodded encouragingly as if to tell her, Yes, this is for real.

Shawna looked back behind her, then back at Megan, and stammered, "Well, I really, right now I'm..."

Megan shook her head again. "Oh, I didn't mean right this minute. I have to get to class. Just whenever you feel like it. Let me know, okay? Or Amy."

Shawna opened her mouth to respond, closed it and simply nodded.

Megan smiled, one that looked nothing like the old, original Megan's. "Okay, see you later."

Megan held Amy's hand tightly all the way back to their room, until, in privacy, she was able to put her arms around Amy and rest her head on Amy's shoulder. Amy could feel Megan's heart pounding against her own chest as she wrapped her arms around Megan. "Megan, I'm getting a feeling that as long as I know you you'll never stop amazing me."

Megan, her voice full of relief, said, "That night, when you said I've been wrecking the other girls, tearing their confidence down... well, I know I did most of it to Shawna. I... that was one of the promises I made. To the heads. That I'd fix things with Shawna."

Amy felt sure the heads in the Hall of Honor had all gotten an earful that night after Amy had left. Amy stroked the back of Megan's head. "You're doing great."

Megan straightened up, smiling and brushing the tears off her cheeks. "Thank you."

It seemed very natural to kiss at that point.

Megan broke it off and looked at her watch. "Let's get to class."

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy sighed in the darkened room, on her side on the rollaway bed, Laney sleeping behind her with her arm draped over Amy, one hand cupping Amy's breast. The evening had gone well. After laughing together at the movie, Amy had persuaded Megan to show Linda and Laney her latest hanging moves. Amy's friends had never had the chance before to watch Megan up close. Amy had stood back, smiling to herself, knowing how horny her friends were going to get.

Amy had expected to fall asleep quickly after making love with Laney, once Megan's and Linda's play had quieted above her. Somehow sleep didn't come.

Megan was in the bed above Amy, on her side facing the edge, Linda behind her, together making spoons. In the dim light from the window, Amy was surprised to see Megan's open eyes, looking down towards her.

At the moment Amy started to reach up to Megan, she could see Megan's hand coming down towards hers. Their hands met halfway, their fingers twining together.

Amy could see Megan's eyes close. In a few minutes she was asleep herself, Megan still holding her hand.

## CHAPTER 14

Amy sat in one of the seats in the demo room -- for the first time, she reminded herself. On both other occasions she'd been in the room, she'd had a special task to perform that had kept her standing throughout the event. She smiled, thinking how lucky she was to be sitting down *this* time. She'd only been able to start sitting again a few days before. The bruises on her butt had faded at last. Megan was beside Amy, holding her hand, her shoulder rubbing Amy's. Amy didn't feel any particular tenseness in Megan's grip -- as recently as a week ago Megan had inevitably displayed internal stress when surrounded by other students, as she concentrated consciously on throttling her previous instincts to belittle and humiliate them, and Amy found it a sign of progress that Megan seemed relaxed in this situation now.

Around them the other members of the First Year class were nearly all assembled, with just a last couple of stragglers now taking seats facing the empty area in which Susan had been hanged a month earlier.

Bridget finished checking off the last name on her list, and nodded to Gail, who stepped through one of the walkways between the two halves of the seating area and cleared her throat. In a few seconds the babble of students died to a murmur and then silence. All were listening as Gail started speaking, referring to and occasionally reading directly from notes so that she wouldn't leave anything out.

"Okay, your first party is coming up on Friday, so you've got three days to prepare for it. As you've been told, due to the size of the First Year class, only half of you will be needed to perform hostess duties. The other half of you will staff the video monitors to observe the activities and behavior of the hostesses. Those of you on monitor duty should keep in mind that you will have a number of different responsibilities. One, you'll be expected to protect the hostess you are observing, though in practice they are rarely in danger. Two, you'll write a short report later, summarizing your impressions of the hostess' performance." Gail smiled slightly. "We expect you to evaluate your hostess objectively, but if you do have some axe to grind and intend to grade your hostess unfairly, keep in mind there will be other people reporting on the same hostess, and the hostess can get even with you when you swap roles for the next party." There were some nervous titters at that.

Gail went on, "Three, and this is most important: you'll be expected to make your observations into a learning experience for yourself, just as the hostess will find herself in a valuable learning experience. As the hostesses learn by doing, those of you on monitor duty will learn by observing.

"The hostesses at this first party will be the students with the best grades, to this point, in your Sexuality class. Of course, in Sex class you have only responded in writing to questions about sexual theories and hypothetical situations. The parties are going to be your opportunity to show that you can perform as well in practice as you do on paper.

"Those of you who are hostesses: You have until Friday evening to get yourself ready for the party. I understand some of you have already scheduled appointments at the hair salon, and as usual there's been a rush on the cosmetics counter at the student store. Once you get your hair done and pick up your party outfits, I want you to stop by my room, in costume, so I can clear you for the party. All of our party costumes are sexy, but of course, not every costume is necessarily appropriate for every hairstyle or body type. Once I, or Bridget, give you clearance, you're good to go.

“Those of you serving as monitors should take the time over the next few days to familiarize yourself with the equipment. We don’t like hearing while the party is in progress that you’re having a hard time following your hostess partner with the camera, or can’t hear what your hostess or any guest with her is saying. The time to be figuring out how to do all that is now.

“As you probably know, Sela Turner will be the student hanged at the party.” Gail paused and looked around, seeing several solemn nods. “Her roommate Monique will be on monitor duty, but will be excused for the last hour to keep Sela company, and one of the Second Year students will fill in for her on the monitor. I know all of you will take some time in the next few days to say goodbye to Sela and give her some encouragement.”

Everyone could see Sela sitting in the second row of seats, with Monique beside her, holding her hand. The girl on the other side of Sela patted her arm, and Sela smiled at her in return.

“Okay, now pay attention while I read out your assignments...”

Amy wasn’t surprised to hear that both she and Megan would be on hostess duty. Wendy, a girl Amy knew vaguely, would be Amy’s monitor, watching and listening electronically as Amy mingled with the guests and eventually took several to bed. Amy felt a thrill of anticipation as she visualized meeting some new people and getting to know them briefly -- and trying to read them, the way Miranda could. In Sex class, sensitivity to a guest’s inner desires was indeed one of the topics, but it was understood that a special knack, such as Miranda had, was needed to become truly proficient at it.

Amy brought her mind back to the present, as Gail was reminding the girls about handing out their private-party chits. “You’ll start out with three of them. As soon as a guest asks you to go private with him or her, give the guest one of your chits so the guest can use it to purchase a ticket, which we call validating the chit. Then lead the guest back to your assigned room, or he or she might meet you there. After your one-hour session with the guest, come back to the main party hall and mingle again. We know from long experience how many guests to expect, and most likely all of you will have at least two private parties. If you give out all three of your chits, tell any other guest who hits on you, very politely, that you’ve finished for the night. Don’t worry about any guest getting mad -- they have to behave or they’ll lose their membership. And they’ve all generally been to enough parties that they understand anyway.”

Tammy asked in a puzzled voice, “Membership?” Amy blinked at the question, and was prepared when she felt Megan’s sudden tight squeeze of her hand. There were a few muted snickers Amy could hear around the room, but no sound from Megan, nor any sign that Megan was incensed at a question no student would ask if she had read the student handbook in the expected degree of detail. Out of the corner of her eye Amy could see Jackie’s head suddenly swivel towards Megan, watching, as she had lately, for any sign of the return of the old Megan.

Gail answered patiently, “Attendance at the parties is restricted to members of the Club, who have paid thousands of dollars for their membership, and that just gets them the right to purchase a ticket to come to the party -- and a ticket costs another thousand or so, so not all the members are going to come to every party. Validating a private party chit costs several hundred dollars as well, so you can feel very proud that one of the guests wants to spend time with you. Some, of course, will only be there to watch Sela hang.”

Lucy said, "I guess membership is still cheaper than buying your own Hanging Girl, right? I was just thinking members kind of have a better deal than people who buy their own girl. They get to watch a lot of hangings, not just one, though the girls they see aren't fully-trained graduates, and they don't get to eat them."

Gail held up her hands. "Oh! I see what you're thinking. They didn't feel a need to make this point in the handbook, but anybody who buys a Hanging Girl also gets an automatic membership in the Club. So it really is a better deal to buy a girl..."

A roaring sound in Amy's ears drowned out the rest of Gail's answer, and she clenched Megan's hand so convulsively that Megan gasped in pain. Amy slowly became aware that Megan was stroking her arm, with a worried look on her face, whispering, "Amy? What's wrong? What happened?"

Feeling out of breath as if she'd just finished a practice hanging, almost shaking with the pounding of her heartbeats, Amy whispered back, "Later. I'll tell you later." Megan nodded and covered their interlocked hands with her free one, the first time Amy had experienced Megan trying to calm her down rather than the reverse. She could see a few more heads turned in her direction now, watching for a moment before turning back to Gail.

\* \* \* \* \*

Safely back in their room, Megan closed the door and looked back at Amy. "Okay, what's going on? You're still whiter than your uniform."

Amy sank down on their bed, the recently acquired larger, shared bed, and wrapped herself with her arms, shivering. "I just... didn't know. My brother is a member. He can come to the parties." Since Miranda had been, technically, bought by Andrew, though with his father's money, his purchase of an Academy Girl would have bought him a membership in the Club.

Megan blinked. "You've got a brother? I didn't know that."

Amy rolled her eyes. "Well, it's not like it's my favorite subject to talk about." She squeezed her eyes shut. "He never mentioned being a member. Well, we didn't used to talk much anyway, and by the time he might have said something..." She held herself more tightly and shuddered. "...he... he knew I was going to come here. I know... I know why he didn't tell me."

Megan came over to the bed and sat beside Amy, putting her arms around Amy. Amy began relaxing a little, and let Megan gently pull her head towards her until Amy's head rested on Megan's shoulder. Usually Amy couldn't be held by Megan without being aroused, but now she let herself sink into soothing warmth with no thoughts of sex. Megan asked softly, "Okay, why didn't he tell you?"

Amy sighed deeply. "How long till class?"

"Couple of hours."

"Okay. Maybe that'll be enough time."

She began talking. About Andrew. About the years of contempt and insults. About the sudden change in Andrews's behavior towards Amy when she'd treated herself to a makeover in preparation for interviewing at the Academy. About the way he'd started looking at her then, as if seeing her as a woman for the first time. About his frustration at having the object of his sudden desire so close to him but so out of reach. About his plans to capture her as his slave, for sex, for breeding, for amusement as he kept her locked away in chains in a secret underground bunker.

She was safe in the Academy, she knew. Andrew couldn't get her out. The only part of the student area he could get into was the party pavilion, which only had two entrances, both guarded -- one from the secured student area into which no guest could pass, the other from the public area, through which no student would be allowed. But if he rented her... she'd have to give him what he asked for. She'd felt so sure she was away from all that. She felt her lunch trying to leave her stomach.

Megan, after listening to it all intently, finally spoke. "Give me a signal, if you see him. I'll try to head him off. I'll put on all my charm." She grinned. "You haven't seen me when I really turn it on. And while I'm talking to him, try to give out all your chits really quick. Even if I can't hook him into a private session, I can delay him long enough. And he won't even suspect anything. We can do it at every party."

Amy sighed and put her arms around Megan. "Thank you so much. I'd rather have something sharp to throw at him, but if you'll throw yourself at him, that will help me out a lot."

"I can be pretty sharp sometimes."

"You've done a lot to smooth off some of the rough edges." She kissed Megan's neck softly. "And thank you again." Amy felt her sense of hopelessness beginning to evaporate. She realized that a major part of the atmosphere of the last months of her home life had been caused not just by Andrew's existence, but the complete absence of any help in dealing with him. Now she had help.

She began stroking Megan's back softly, reaching up to unhook Megan's bra as she kissed her shoulder. She said huskily, "About an hour left?"

Megan, breathing more deeply, her lips parted, nodded, reaching back to unhook Amy's bra. "Never long enough."

Amy kissed Megan's lips at last, reaching down to unzip her shorts, whispering, "It'll do."

## CHAPTER 15

### PARTY NIGHT

Amy leaned over Megan's shoulder to check on her eye shadow in the mirror. "Is it too dark?"

Megan responded absently, concentrating on her own reflected face, "It's perfect, hon. Don't jostle me now, I'm trying to get my mascara just right." She finished, batted her eyes at her reflection, and nodded, straightening up. She looked at Amy. "Wait, one of your straps is twisted." She spent a moment fiddling with Amy's outfit. "Watch for that when you put it back on later."

Amy looked over her roommate and sighed. "You look so sensational! I've got to stop looking. I'll drag you to bed and we'll forget about the party."

Megan grinned. "I'd love to..." She winced. "Stop saying stuff like that. You're getting me wet, and this bottom has to last me all night." Megan had opted for a snow-princess look. Her two piece outfit was comprised of a minimum of fabric covered in snow-white fake fur, held together by white yarn-like strings. Her white eyeliner under ice-blue eye shadow continued the theme, which was intended to take advantage of her light blonde hair. The ensemble also showed off the full length of her legs, as if a guest might otherwise not have noticed them.

Amy looked down at herself. "At least you've got something down there. Don't you think I could wear panties with this? They won't show." Amy's outfit consisted of a tight, very short naturally-brown leather skirt, and a complex webwork of leather straps surrounding her from her shoulders midway to her waist, which held in place the cups of a bra that accentuated her cleavage while leaving the upper parts of her breasts uncovered nearly down to the nipples. The top was nevertheless designed to be easily removed and put back on again, almost like a t-shirt. With the muscular development of her back and tautness of her tummy, it looked incredibly sexy on her.

Megan shook her head, brushing her hair. "They would if you bend over. The guests want to see pussy, not panties."

Amy looked out of the bathroom as a knock sounded on the hallway door. "Who?"

"S'me." Shawna opened the door and looked in. "I just finished..." Her eyes suddenly popped wide open, looking back and forth between Amy and Megan. "Wow!"

Amy and Megan looked at each other and grinned, Amy saying, "Well, that's another vote in favor." She turned back to Shawna. "What's up?"

Shawna shook her head as she tried to recover her chain of thought. "Oh, I was saying I'd just finished with the equipment check." Shawna was going to be Lucy's monitor for the party. "And I've been working with Sela all afternoon. She really wants to impress everybody when she hangs tonight. I feel bad about cancelling out on you, Megan. Would tomorrow at one be okay?"

Shawna had been coming by every few days for a practice hanging session with Megan, and had in turn been working with some of the other girls, including Sela and her roommate Monique. It would be

natural for Sela to turn to Shawna for last-minute advice. Amy, of course, had her own group of girls she was advising, and some were working with Megan herself, the ultimate source of all technical wisdom. A number of the girls still found Megan a little intimidating -- no longer for anything Megan said, verbally or with body language, but just for her sheer virtuosity of technique.

Megan nodded. "I want to keep the focus on your desperation for now, more than the sex moves. That's really your strength. I love how you've added on that quivering with tension when you're stretched out trying to reach down with your toes."

Shawna beamed at the compliment. "Thanks." She saw the clock by the bed and gasped. "Oh, I'd better get going. I asked Lucy if she'd do one more walk-through before the party starts."

Amy nodded. "Sure. Good luck," Megan following with "See you later."

Amy had already done one last walk-through to satisfy Wendy, wandering randomly around the main party hall and her assigned bedroom in the pavilion, unable to think of anything more interesting to say than "Testing one-two-three" for the microphone check.

Megan turned back to Amy after Shawna left. "We've still got an hour to kill before the first guests arrive. Any ideas?"

Amy giggled. "Lots, but we can't do them. Even if we just kiss it'll mess up our lip gloss. Let's just watch some TV."

Megan nodded and clicked the remote. "You still worried about your brother?"

Amy sighed. "A little, but if he can get past you, his whole sex drive must be out of whack. You can recognize him, right?"

Erin had revealed an unknown drawing talent at the level of a professional police sketch artist as Amy had described Andrew to her, and Megan, after studying Erin's work, had said she thought she could spot Andrew no matter how dense the crowd became. "If I see anybody who comes close to looking like the drawing, I'll look at you, and you give me a little nod if it's him. So I won't get sidetracked by the wrong guy. I just hope he's there at the start. I'll try to hang onto at least one chit as long as I can, but I can't be rude if somebody wants one."

"I know. But if he's not there right at the start, he's probably not coming to this one. If he wants to make sure of seeing me, he'd know he has to get there early."

"Yeah." She reached out for Amy's hand and they sat together on their bed, trying to concentrate on the television.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy beamed as she entered the main hall, hearing several quick intakes of breath. She'd waited in line in the hallway as the girls entered one at a time to begin mingling with the guests. Her heart was fluttering, her eyes flicking quickly to both sides, but she concentrated on smiling and making eye

contact with the nearest guests, trying to trust her subconscious to set off alarm bells at the first perception of Andrew.

She felt excited and, in spite of her worries, safe within the confines of the Academy. It occurred to her that this was the first time any outsider had seen her as a Hanging Girl, and she felt buoyed by pride.

The hall looked a little different from her earlier walk-throughs, when Wendy had tested out the equipment that would track and record her movements and conversation. The walls were hung with festive, colorful crepe draperies and balloons. Music, very muted, was coming through hidden speakers.

In the very center of the big room, there now stood a standard hanging platform, with a noose dangling above it. The platform was enclosed in a cage of vertical metal bars, spaced about eight inches apart, with a square base about six feet on a side. When Sela was hanged here later, guests would be able to watch her from any side. The cage would discourage over-excited onlookers from giving in to the impulse to reach out to touch her as she dangled.

Amy tried to push out of her mind the slight self-consciousness at knowing that Wendy was watching her now from her tiny monitoring station near the pavilion.

The reaction that had greeted Amy's arrival was repeated, magnified, a moment later, and her smile broadened. She knew, without looking behind her, that Megan had entered. The gasps were quite audible this time.

Above the general background noise, she could hear Jackie's delighted laugh. Turning in that direction, she managed to catch Jackie's eye, and Jackie flashed a grin in Amy's direction before turning back to the guest she was talking to.

An elegant-looking woman, dressed in a dark blue, expensive-looking and businesslike skirt and matching jacket, in her mid-thirties by Amy's estimation, stepped in front of Amy, somehow without seeming rude, and smiled at her, saying, "How are you tonight, dear?"

Amy quickly riffled through all her memories to try to decide whether she'd ever met the woman. She flashed the lady a friendly smile. "Just got here. I'm trying to get used to the noise. I'm really sorry, have we met before?" Out of the corner of her eye, Amy saw Megan take up the position they'd agreed on, to Amy's left and just slightly ahead of her, facing towards Amy to watch for any signals. Megan raised her eyebrows questioningly. Amy gave her a smile, a small shrug, and a tiny headshake, not having seen Andrew yet. Megan quickly became the center of a small circle of guests. Amy noticed she herself was starting to attract a small crowd, with three men and another woman standing politely within earshot, letting the first woman continue speaking with Amy. There was something about the lady, an aura of authority, which left others reluctant to intrude.

The woman smiled again, and took a sip from the drink she was holding. "My turn to apologize. I should have introduced myself and not left you looking puzzled like that. My name is Grace Millan, and I know your name is Amy, but we've never met. I own a small company that sub-contracts with your father's corporation. Your father has a picture of you on his desk, and the last time I was there he told me you'd been admitted to the Academy. I can tell you he was every bit the proud father." Grace beamed at Amy.

Amy was thrilled at the idea her father might be telling others about her Academy career -- it had never occurred to her somehow. "Thank you for telling me, ma'am. Now, as flattering as it would be, you can't convince me you came tonight just to see me."

To Amy's surprise, the woman colored slightly as she laughed. Amy suspected Grace wasn't made self-conscious very often. "Well, I do come here once or twice a year. Usually I'm doing it to window shop, with the Third Year girls mostly, to see if I might want to buy one. But I did think it would be nice to see the girl in the picture come to life. And I have to tell you," Grace's eyes did a quick up-and-down on Amy's body, giving a slight head-shake in wonder, "The photo doesn't really tell the whole story. I know the Academy encourages physical fitness but..." The up and down look again. "Haven't you only been here a couple of months?"

Amy laughed. "I guess it just seems longer, ma'am. Especially in the gym. But yes, they do like us to get in shape."

Grace gave Amy a smile that looked, to Amy, thoughtful. "I'm picturing what you'd look like in three years."

Amy's eyes flew open. "Do you think you'd like to buy me, ma'am?" It hadn't occurred to Amy that she might work out a purchase so far in advance, but being bought by someone who worked with her father had some attractions.

Grace shook her head, looking wistful. "I'd love to wait for you, but I don't think I'll be able to do it. I've been grooming my executive VP to take over the company, and she'll be ready in about another year. I'm looking forward to being roasted and eaten at a big company picnic -- no date set yet, but I don't think I want to wait more than about another eighteen months. I'm thirty-eight, so I shouldn't really wait much longer than that."

Amy hid her disappointment, and the thought returned to her that she needed to get rid of her chits in a hurry, before Andrew appeared. She smiled again at Grace. "Well, if you did come here hoping to meet me, we probably ought to spend some time together, ma'am." She arched her back just slightly to thrust her breasts forward, and looked directly into Grace's eyes, her lips slightly parted. It was as direct an invitation as she was allowed to give. The hostesses were instructed not to invite a guest to a private room in so many words, but hints and body language were within bounds. Amy suspected that over the next three years, she'd learn how to be a little more subtle about it.

Grace's lips parted. Her voice suddenly breathier, she responded, "I'd like that. Do you have a chit left?"

Amy's eyes lit up. Her first customer! She reached into the shallow pocket of her skirt and pulled out a chit, repeating, "Just got here, ma'am."

Grace accepted the chit, her fingers lingering on Amy's. "See you in about fifteen minutes?"

Amy nodded. "I should be ready then. I'll be in room seventeen."

Grace nodded and lifted her drink. "I'm going to freshen this up. Shall I get you one?"

Amy shook her head. "Oh, no ma'am, I'm fine." Grace no doubt knew that the bar had non-alcoholic drinks for the hostesses, so there was no problem about getting a drink, but Amy wanted to turn her attention to her other patiently-waiting suitors. As Grace gave her another nod and walked away, Amy turned to the man on her right. He was young, close to Andrew's age, tall and good-looking. The man on her right was older, perhaps forty. It surprised her that the younger man could afford a membership, but perhaps he'd come by it the same way Andrew had. She favored him with a smile. "Hi, I'm Amy. Have you been here before, sir?"

The man grinned. "A few times. Nice way to spend an evening. I'm Stan." He held his hand out for Amy to shake, his gaze drifting down to Amy's cleavage.

With polite nods, Amy's other admirers, the other woman and the third man, drifted off to chat with other girls, clearly realizing Amy would be completely booked momentarily. Amy turned to the older man remaining with her. "And you, sir? Are you a regular?"

He was shorter, about Amy's height, with glasses and thinning hair. He looked like an accountant, though presumably, since he was here, he must have a higher-paying job than that. He smiled at her, stiffly but earnestly. "Oh yes, very much so. My name is Benjamin." Amy shook his hand. "I come to familiarize myself with the current students -- window shopping, as the woman here earlier put it," he looked briefly back at Grace, "And I do enjoy watching the hanging -- particularly the First Year girls, though their shows are much shorter than the girls with more training. Their lack of experience in itself is very charming, and there's a poignancy to their performance that I often miss with the older girls." Though he did seem to be looking over Amy's body, he did often fix his attention on her at eye-level, in contrast with the younger man. "You look quite intelligent and responsible, if you're not offended by a snap judgment. I take it I should not expect to see you hang anytime soon?"

Amy laughed, thoroughly charmed. "I don't think so, sir, though I guess you can never be sure. I do expect to graduate."

She glanced back at Stan, who grinned and turned to speak to Benjamin. "She obviously has two chits left. Why don't you go ahead and take the earlier time? I don't mind waiting."

Benjamin looked pleased. "That's very decent of you." He turned back to Amy. "If that's all right with you?"

She beamed at them and reached into her pocket. "Oh, sure. I'm looking forward to getting to know both of you better." She glanced over at Megan and grinned, giving her a thumbs up gesture. Megan grinned back, and turned to the man and the woman remaining with her. As Amy waved at the departing Stan and Benjamin and started threading her way through the crowd towards the entrance to the corridor of hospitality rooms, she heard Megan saying, "Listen, I only have one chit left, but if one of you can be patient, I promise I'll look for you at the start of the next party. Is that okay?" Amy was too far away to hear the response.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grace was already on a sofa in the waiting area as Amy entered the hospitality suite. Amy smiled at her. Grace returned the smile and, unasked, handed Amy the ticket she had received at the cashier's window, where she had turned in the chit Amy had given her and paid for her time with Amy. Amy bent

down and gave Grace a friendly kiss on the cheek, and held out her hand. Grace took it and rose, and followed Amy to her room.

Amy stopped in front of the bed, and started, "What would you like me to..." She stopped suddenly and blinked, as Grace had, without hesitation, walked over to the cabinet in the wall beyond the bed, extracting a leash and the whip. Amy took a quick second look at Grace's ticket. Yes, she saw, Grace had paid extra for unrestricted access to the toys.

Most guests, the students had been assured, simply wanted straight sex. However, the Academy provided, for the small percentage of guests with more exotic tastes, a selection of various types of toys, which any guest was welcome to use for an extra fee.

Amy's stomach fluttered suddenly. She'd had no clue, when talking with Grace at the party, that the woman would be interested in something other than a sex partner. Amy eyed the whip, biting her lip. It wasn't one of the really bad kind, of course, and was intended purely for recreational D&S. It sported, at the end of a stiff but somewhat flexible shaft, an attachment resembling a small fly swatter. Amy had tried it out on herself in preparation for the party. It was stingingly painful, but had little potential for inflicting any serious or long-lasting damage. It was the sort often used by masters and mistresses on their slaves if they preferred them without permanent markings.

Amy had to trust Wendy to be watching her monitor closely. Wendy's job here, in addition to observing and learning, would be to make sure the session didn't get out of hand. Of course, Grace would have her membership revoked if she actually injured one of the girls, and might even be criminally charged if the damage was bad enough, as she was only renting Amy -- in such a case most likely she would be executed, since she was a woman. But, Amy knew, it was often hard to remember things like that during the heat of passion.

Amy had to rely on the knowledge that such injuries were extremely rare. It had been five years since a member had been kicked out for hurting a girl. And fifty years since one had been executed. Also, Grace's familiarity with the room made it obvious she had done this before, and evidently nothing bad had happened. That thought allowed Amy to breathe a bit easier.

Grace faced Amy and executed a complex flourish with the whip. "All right, slave Amy, off with those clothes."

Amy had at least been expecting that much. She wasn't exactly dressed as a normal slave. "Yes, ma'am." She kicked off her shoes, pulled the leather-strap top up over her head, and slid the short skirt down her legs and off, tossing all of the clothing into the corner of the room, straightening to stand again looking at Grace, naked except for her Academy collar. She put her hands behind her, taking pride in the development of her body that the many hours in the gym had produced.

Grace frowned. "While we're here, you're to address me as Mistress. Speak only to say 'Yes, Mistress' or respond to a question, and keep your eyes down."

Amy quickly flicked her eyes down to Grace's feet. "Yes, Mistress." She felt herself flushing slightly. The temporariness of the arrangement made it a game, but the treatment still stung. She had had a few months now to accommodate to the fact of actually being a slave, which muted, somewhat, her ire at

being treated as one. Still, the Academy itself had never treated her that way, other than during that one undeserved punishment.

What upset her the most, she knew, was the absence of respect for her status as a Hanging Girl. Amy admitted to herself that she really wasn't officially one yet, not until she graduated. But she felt her admission alone had earned her something better than this.

Grace made a come-here gesture with the whip. Amy worked to bury her feelings and accept that this session would be one prolonged insult to her status. It suddenly occurred to her why Grace had seemed excited to see her, in particular, tonight. It was easy to imagine that dealing with Amy's father must be a humbling experience for Grace, who was clearly accustomed to dominating a situation -- Amy had perceived that much about Grace in the first seconds after contact with her, in the main party room. The opportunity to treat Preston Cameron's daughter as a pleasure toy was no doubt very sweet to Grace.

As Amy reached Grace, her eyes downcast as required, Grace made another gesture with the whip, which seemed to mean "kneel down." As Amy did so, Grace reached down and lifted up the front of her own skirt. Amy saw that Grace had worn no panties. Grace's pussy, at Amy's eye level, glistened in response to the woman's excitement.

Wendy is watching, Amy remembered, and suddenly Amy looked more deeply into that fact than the mere protection from harm that it offered. Part of the monitor's job was simply to learn from observing one of the other girls performing her duties as a hostess. If Amy did anything noteworthy, either especially well or especially badly, the videos of the session would likely be viewed more widely, possibly by the class as a whole. In any case, Amy was determined to uphold the high standards expected of any Academy Girl.

And, she thought, I'll be damned if I'll give Grace any excuse to use that whip on me. Academy Girls know how to please their owners. That's my goal here. No need for the whip. No need for spoken words. Understanding what Grace wants from the smallest hint. I can do that. I want Miranda to be proud of me.

And at least, she reminded herself, it's not Andrew. Amy nearly giggled, still giddy with relief over having dodged that bullet. Grace has paid the Academy for the privilege of treating me this way, and that's her business. I'll do the best job I know how, and maybe I'll learn something from it, and maybe the other girls can learn something too, from seeing the video. That's the only meaning this has for me.

Amy leaned forward, her hands held behind her back, and pressed her chin between the tops of Grace's thighs. Best angle, she thought, and Grace can see my face, which I'm sure she'll like.

She thrust her tongue up between the folds of Grace's pussy and began licking enthusiastically. Presently Grace closed her eyes and moaned.

## CHAPTER 16

As soon as Grace left, Amy gave a heavy sigh and re-did her makeup nearly from scratch, after washing her face thoroughly -- the room luckily had a sink and mirror for that purpose. It hadn't been as bad as it might have been, she supposed. She had a feeling of accomplishment at having avoided all but very minor nips from the whip, but felt she would just as soon file the whole experience under "Done, no need to repeat." The worst part had been at the end, when Grace had ordered her to lie on her back on the bed, keep her hands at her sides until further notice, and had then knelt over her and sat on her face. Grace had then proceeded to use Amy's nose to stimulate her clit. With her mouth covered and nostrils pinched shut, Amy had been unable to breathe at all. Amy reflected afterwards that this was probably one reason Grace liked Academy Girls, none of whom would panic over a minute or two of asphyxia. Amy fervently hoped Grace had gotten her frustrations over dealing with Amy's father out of her system, and would try another girl in the future.

Amy finished her makeup and dressed once more, checking the straps on her leather top, remembering Megan's warning on that.

She left the room and headed back for the main hall, to see whether... oh no, what was his name?? Benjamin, that was it! Benjamin. To see if Benjamin knew she was available now.

He was so unobtrusive she nearly missed seeing him, sitting on the sofa in the waiting area. Most guests, Amy understood, continued attending the party until their girl was ready, but Benjamin was simply sitting, alone, as he waited. Amy didn't really notice until he leaned forward, his face alight with a charming smile.

She stopped and smiled. "Oh, hi! I'm ready now, if you want to come back to the room with me."

He stood up and returned her smile, presenting his ticket to her. Basic session, she saw with some relief, no toys this time, no whips.

She would have simply turned and let him follow, but instead instinctively took his hand and led him to the room.

Once there, he dropped into a comfortable straight-backed chair facing the side of the bed, saying nothing but continuing to smile at her. She was expecting a little more in the way of direction. "Do you want to lie on the bed? Should I take my clothes off?"

He beamed at her. "I'm happy to talk, if that's all right."

She blinked in surprise, not at the suggestion of talking, but at the idea he would solicit her approval. She smiled and sat on the edge of the bed facing him, crossing her legs at the ankles, resting her hands on the bed on either side of her, pressing them downwards slightly as if to hint *It's really soft*. "What would you like to talk about, sir?"

He shook his head slightly. "Oh, don't call me that. Just Benjamin."

It all struck Amy as very odd. It seemed clear he found her attractive, based on the way his eyes roamed over her body, pausing often at her cleavage, but just as often he looked her in the eye. She grinned. "Okay, then what would you like to talk about... Benjamin?" That felt still more strange, calling him by his first name -- partly because, at least for the moment, she was his slave, and partly because he was near her father's age.

He sighed, maintaining his smile. "Oh, just about yourself. How long have you wanted to be a Hanging Girl?"

She smiled as she thought back over the last few months. "Not very long, really. Just since last spring, in fact. I guess that's a little unusual. It's been my goal since we hanged an Academy graduate at my house. My dad's house. Miranda."

Benjamin's eyes lit up. "Miranda? You saw her hang?"

Amy gasped excitedly. "You knew her?"

Benjamin shrugged. "Well, that's putting it too strongly. I've met a lot of the girls over the years, and I did spend time with Miranda at a party several years ago, just like I'm spending time with you now. She was very sweet."

Amy laughed. "I'm not surprised she made an impression on you. She did that to everybody."

"Oh, I'm sure."

Amy wished there were some way she could satisfy her curiosity about him. She wondered primarily about the source of his wealth -- if Benjamin regularly paid as much as he was paying tonight to do nothing but talk, he couldn't be hard-pressed for funds. Her hesitation to steer the conversation in that direction owed not merely to the fact that it might not be her place to do so, as his temporary property. Even if they had been social equals, it was obviously impolite simply to ask, "So, Benjamin, where's your money come from?"

Before she could frame a question that might start things in that direction, Benjamin spoke again. "Why did you decide to be a Hanging Girl? I'm always curious about that."

Amy bit her lip in thought. It seemed simple enough to attribute it to Miranda's inspiration, but Amy knew there was a much deeper reason. "I guess it's not exactly right to say I *decided* to be one. I've always been one, from the moment I was born. Miranda was like... sunlight making the seed germinate, and grow, and blossom. The seed doesn't decide to do that, you know. It was made for doing that."

Benjamin grinned, delighted. "I've never heard it put quite *that* way before."

Amy laughed. "You would if you talked to Megan, my roommate. Anytime I start to wonder if it's really possible to be born to be a Hanging Girl, I just look at her."

Benjamin cocked his head. "There it is again. There was a light in your eyes when you talked about hanging, and now the same thing when you talk about your roommate."

Amy looked at him appreciatively. "You really pay attention, don't you?"

Benjamin smiled and shrugged, and again avoided talking about himself. "I assume you spend a lot of time picturing your own hanging."

Amy laughed again. "Only when my heart's beating."

"Can you picture it for me now? What do you see and feel?"

She sighed and looked into the distance. "Mostly I see the people. The audience. I'm..." She began losing herself in the daydream, her voice growing softer. "I'm inside my body, so I can't... see myself, watch myself visibly, if you see what I mean. But I can see the people, all staring at me. Their mouths are open. They can hardly breathe. A lot of them are using their hands, rubbing themselves, without even noticing. And somehow it's through their faces that I'm able to watch myself, so I know what I look like, wriggling as I hang by the neck. I can feel their arousal, it washes over me and takes me higher, much higher than I ever thought I could get..."

Her lungs suddenly emptied in a rush, as a tremor shook her body. She looked down and saw, to her surprise, that her hand was between her legs -- she couldn't remember putting it there -- and two of her fingers were inside her, getting soaked.

She felt the blood rush to her face. She felt she had completely botched this session, giving herself an orgasm instead of taking care of her customer's needs. Her mind spun, looking for a way to salvage it. She smiled shakily. "I'm kind of having my own party over here. You're invited, you know."

Benjamin smiled again. "I'm already participating, to the extent that I can. I'm not really able to perform, but I'm glad I was able to provoke a reverie that gave you as much pleasure as it did."

Amy blinked in astonishment, her eyes helplessly drawn to the crotch of his pants. "You can't... at all?"

Benjamin looked down at himself in response to Amy's gaze. "Not have sexual intercourse as such, no."

"Oh, Benjamin, I'm..." She stopped. For someone whom Amy had, to this point, been unable to make talk about himself, he didn't seem at all uncomfortable with this subject, of all things. "I was about to say I'm sorry, but I'm not getting a feeling I need to."

He laughed. "And you said I pay attention to other people. You're very perceptive, Amy. You're the first Hanging Girl who has noticed on her own that I'm quite well accommodated to my disability." He shrugged. "Not that I don't occasionally regret what I'm missing. I'm quite human, and it's natural to miss things you can't have. On the other hand... well, I have quite a sweet tooth, and I don't know whether I'd survive without peanut brittle." He chuckled. "At least the quality of life would seem far less without it. But there are people who are allergic to peanuts, so they're denied that pleasure. We all have things we take pleasure in that are denied to others."

"So I focus on the things I can enjoy rather than worrying about what I can't. I find I do enjoy the company of young women such as yourself -- sex is just one small dimension of human interaction, and I think some people miss some of the other dimensions that can be just as rewarding."

Amy was fascinated. She felt happy with her own life, but understood that that was because she had everything that she could think of wanting. Benjamin was missing something that Amy couldn't imagine doing without, yet seemed quite happy in spite of that. But he must not be looking at it that way, she decided. The list of things he wanted must simply be different from hers. "And you do enjoy watching hangings, right?"

Benjamin nodded emphatically. "Very much so. I think it's partly that it's so impressive to watch a young woman give literally all she has, for the purpose of giving pleasure to others. As well as making herself quite happy, of course. And I hope you understand, I also take pleasure in seeing the feminine form. It has a beauty that goes well beyond sexual attraction."

That explains his roving eye, thought Amy, even though he can't take the next step. She smiled. "Well, I'm not going to be hanging tonight, but I do have a feminine form. I could at least show you more of it, if you want." It occurred to her that the Amy of six months ago would never have dreamed of saying anything like that to a stranger. But now, she did enjoy a chance to show off what she was becoming.

Benjamin looked her over, thoughtfully, and scratched his chin. "That's quite tempting, but I've realized I did quite enjoy your climax a few minutes ago."

Amy giggled and put her hand over her face, feeling herself blush again. "I'm glad you liked it. I didn't exactly mean to. So you want me to... do that again?"

Benjamin smiled. "I understand it's not so easy to do it on demand. It might be easier if I give you something to think about again, like before. I can tell that there are two things that get you very excited: hanging, and your roommate. You said her name is Megan?"

Amy looked at him puzzled, and nodded. "Megan, yes."

Benjamin nodded. "All right. Well, imagine you and Megan are being hanged together. Making love while you hang."

Amy took in her breath sharply as images raced through her mind. "Are we... so we're close together, right?"

"I imagine you'd have to be."

"And... our hands, what about them? Are they tied, or can we use them?"

Benjamin winked. "Up to you. This is your fantasy."

Amy closed her eyes and sought out some of the images that had flashed through her consciousness moments ago. Start with hanging, she told herself. The feeling of the rope, holding her, supporting her, caressing her neck. Taking her breath away...

Watching Megan hang. Megan's hips thrusting, her legs reaching out to enfold a lover...

Both of them hanging. Their mounds bumping together, swinging apart, swinging back to seek new contact. Amy's breasts compressed against Megan's, rubbing briefly, soft and smooth, nipples hard like fingers, probing...

Amy felt herself exploding from within, a sharp cry forced out of her, fiery tingles flooding through her in time with her pounding heart.

It confused her to find she was sitting on the same bed as before, in the room with Benjamin -- when did he come back? Where's Megan? Where's the noose? She was bent over, panting through her wide-open mouth, beads of sweat chilling her overheated skin. Her fingers were, once more, inside her. Again, she couldn't remember just when she had put them there.

She sat up and looked at Benjamin, wide-eyed. "That was..." She couldn't find words.

Benjamin grinned. "It was indeed." He sighed. "Sadly, I suspect our time is up."

Amy looked at the clock by the bed. "Ummm, yeah." She looked longingly at him. "Will you come back? Do you come to all of the parties?"

"Most of them, yes. And I do hope to see you again sometime -- this has been very rewarding. You do understand, though, I'd like to meet some of the other girls too. In fact, in just a few minutes I'm meeting..." He reached into his pocket to look at his ticket. "Jenny. Of course, since I find these sessions less physically exhausting than some of the other members (though no less stimulating and satisfying), I usually do two or three at each party. By the time you graduate, I suspect I'll have met most of your classmates, other than the ones who are hanged before I get a chance."

Impulsively she moved to his chair, bent and threw her arms around him, keeping her gooey fingers away from his suit, and kissed him on the cheek. "Well, at least remember me then. Like I'll always remember you."

He colored slightly, and looked very pleased. "Rest assured."

## CHAPTER 17

Amy washed her hands and sponged most of the dampness from her pussy, and spent under a minute this time briefly touching up her makeup. She sighed. One more to go. She'd enjoyed the session with Benjamin immensely, though it turned out even more physically tiring than the one with Grace. Amy suspected Megan would be at least as worn down, and thought about how nice it would feel to relax in bed with Megan all the next morning.

She sat on the bed, closing her eyes. I can wait a few minutes and get my head cleared, she decided. I'll do a better job if I get a little energy back, and I don't think they'll hang Sela without me. Amy hoped never to miss watching one of her classmates hanged -- they deserved the devoted attention of every member of the class.

She opened her eyes at a noise from the doorway, and she gasped, her hand flying instantly to her mouth. She rasped a furious "What'reyoudoinghere??" between clenched teeth, her hands automatically balling into fists.

Andrew's smirk hadn't changed, more infuriating than Megan's had ever been. "You greet all your customers that way? I should file a complaint." He wandered casually over to the toy drawer Grace had made use of earlier. Her jaw aching with tension, Amy watched as he picked out a set of handcuffs and spent a moment admiring the whip.

"You aren't a customer! I didn't give you a chit."

The whip made a swooping sound as he waved it experimentally. "Oh, I arranged with Stan beforehand to buy his. They're transferable between members, you know. He made a small profit on it."

"Let me see your ticket!" She grabbed it out of his hand shakily, her heart pounding. He had paid, it seemed, for full privileges, including use of the toy drawer.

She realized, suddenly, that the reassurances she had given herself before the start of Grace's session didn't necessarily apply here. Andrew might not care that his membership would be revoked if he hurt her -- he might regard this as a one-time opportunity, to be remembered fondly ever afterward. Even possible civil penalties in case he seriously damaged her might not be a sufficient deterrent. As a male, he wouldn't be executed. He would likely be subject to no more than a fine, which would make the evening more costly than it already was, but perhaps not prohibitively so. She had known, and reveled in the knowledge, of how angry she must have made him when she left home, wrecking his fantasy surrounding her and leaving that taunt behind on his bed. Until this week she had never imagined he might have a way of getting back at her, and until this moment she had believed her worries in the past few days had been unnecessary. But now here he was.

Wendy could stop things before anything too drastic happened, Amy knew. But so much depended on how long that would take. Amy knew Andrew wouldn't cross the line right away. He would humiliate her first. Visions of sexual abuse flashed before her eyes. He would probably use her mouth, holding her head against him, with no more concern for her than if he were masturbating. Then he would use the whip, lightly and stingingly at first, only later hard enough to leave bruises...

Andrew was still playing with the whip, bending it to test its flexibility. “Here’s something I knew you’d think is funny. I used my own money to get in, of course, but to pay for this private session, I used yours. That money you thoughtfully left behind for me when you moved out. I knew you hoped I’d find a good use for it.”

Amy nearly screamed in fury. So typical, so typical! Buying the right to hurt her with *her* money, making her contribute to her own humiliation and pain.

Think, Amy, think now! She imagined herself using the whip on her own brain, trying to force it to work harder. Miranda would take control! I *saw* her control him, Amy reminded herself. Not just any man, but Andrew himself! Her heart sinking, Amy realized she couldn’t copy Miranda’s trick. Miranda’s strategy, tailored perfectly to her reading of Andrew, had been to persuade him that she could put on a much better show, impressing his friends all the more, if he could satisfy her with some kind, gentle sex beforehand. That won’t work here! Amy told herself. I don’t have a show to put on, none of his friends are here, nothing is the same. Come on, Amy! You know Andrew much better than Miranda ever did! Think!

Visualizing Miranda’s head, back in her room, always seemed to help. Amy tried to put Miranda’s smile before her eyes. Okay, Miranda, what do I do, what do I do??

Andrew disrupted her concentration, gesturing at her with the whip. “Okay, Slave Girl,” he said with a nasty grin, obviously reading the engraving on her treasured Academy collar. “You know what I want. Strip down. Now!”

The words “You know what I want” seemed to keep playing in her head on an endless loop. What he wants. What he wants.

A sudden calmness washed over her, like a cooling breeze on a sweltering summer day. Yes, that’s it! She smiled. “Yes, Andrew. I know what you want. What you *really* want. Do you?”

He glared at her. “What are you talking about?” His momentum seemed suddenly blunted by puzzlement.

She leaned back, supporting her weight on her hands as she continued sitting on the bed, making no move to carry out his command of a few moments ago. She waved her hand casually at the whip. “Oh, put that down, Andrew. Any idiot with a weapon can force people do what he’s asking. There’s nothing special about that.”

He looked down at the whip, making no move to discard it for the moment. His eyes narrowed. “What?”

“And money. Give anybody some money, no matter who he is, and he can start throwing it around and make things happen. There’s nothing special about that either.” She leaned forward now, her eyes fixed on his. “You’re Andrew Cameron! Shouldn’t *that* be something special, all by itself?”

Andrew appeared frozen, torn by conflicting impulses. Impatience for action seemed to gain the upper hand in a moment. He took a step closer. “Quit stalling.”

Amy shook her head. "Don't throw this chance away, Andrew. You can have what you want the most, and it's not by being rich, because you never could have bought this. And it's not by tossing out physical threats, because there's no coercion you can come up with that would ever get you this." She made her voice more husky, more breathy, seductive. As if unconsciously, she began letting her fingers play with the leather cup of her bra. "I can give you something you always thought you should have because you're Andrew Cameron. Okay?"

Almost seeming in a trance now, his eyes fixed on her breasts, Andrew nodded.

She stood up, and looked around thoughtfully. "The bed is against the wrong wall. Help me move it."

The trance lingered a few seconds longer, and at last he shook himself out of it. "What?"

As if speaking to a small child, she said patiently, "We're making the room look like yours at home. Come on." She grunted as she shoved one corner of the bed sideways.

Tentative understanding seemed to burst upon him, a theory of what Amy might mean. He fiddled with his pants for a moment to make room for a growing erection, and bent over (which helped with the erection as well) to push the end of the bed counterclockwise. Seconds later the head of the bed was against the side wall of the room.

Amy straightened up, theatrically rubbing her hands. "There! Okay, just wait there a minute." She headed for the door of the room. "You're in your room, by yourself..." she said from the doorway, "...and you hear my footsteps coming up the stairs." She disappeared from his view, out into the hallway.

Yes, she thought to herself, I do know him. Better than Miranda had, better than anyone else in the world. I know what he wanted, from that moment when he first suddenly saw me as a woman. What he wanted and saw that he couldn't have. His frustration that he couldn't impress me with how rich he was, because I had just as much access to wealth as he did. The frustration turning into anger, creating that fantasy of controlling and enslaving me because he saw I'd never come to him willingly.

Alone in the hallway, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, forcing a return of the calm she had felt since the insight had struck her. She silently thanked Miranda, whom Amy felt sure had sent it to her.

Showtime.

Amy moved back to the door and leaned coyly across the doorway, smiling, holding onto the doorframe to keep herself upright. She worked at projecting a hungry look. In her best breathy voice, she murmured, "Hi, Andrew. Been thinking about you all day." She straightened up and walked slowly into the room, rolling her hips sensually. She hoped she wasn't overdoing it, but decided that was probably impossible. She put her faith in her own perception of Andrew's fantasy. She could adjust if it appeared she was losing him at any point.

Andrew stared at her, giving voice to a barely audible grunt. He adjusted his stance again as his erection continued growing, while his face grew flushed.

Just above a whisper, as if overcome with arousal, she breathed, "I couldn't think of anything but what we could do when I got home." She kicked off her high heels, both as a hint of further undressing to come and to give him more full consciousness of his height advantage.

She continued approaching him until she was up against him, her breasts thrust out, her hands reaching out to rest on his hips, looking directly up at him with what she trusted was a yearning expression. She let her palms slide slowly up his sides, then back behind his shoulders as her arms surrounded him, and in her huskiest voice yet, croaked, "I want you!"

She was ready when his arms went around her and his mouth plunged onto hers. She felt she knew everything he was going to do, could judge to the microsecond when it was going to happen. She moved her lips against his, licking his tongue, moaning.

At the moment she judged he was about to get rougher, she broke off the kiss and giggled. "Slow down, Tiger. Slow hands, slow hands." She let her voice get progressively dreamier. "Make it last. We have so much time, so much time. Don't use it all up yet."

She could feel Andrew relax. The kiss resumed.

She had no illusion that she could get out of this without having sex with Andrew. That wasn't the thing that mattered. She had come to this room tonight knowing that it was her assignment to sexually please whomever she shared it with. Her partners might be anyone. She was a Hanging Girl, and it was her life's work to arouse and satisfy. What mattered was whether she was in control. She had learned that from Miranda, her very first lesson in the art of being a Hanging Girl. Miranda had been in control.

And Amy, for the first time tonight, was in control. She hadn't been in charge of the session with Grace, nor even, for all she had enjoyed it, during her time with Benjamin -- even less so with Benjamin than with Grace, in fact. But for her own satisfaction tonight, she had to prove to herself that she could lead Andrew around by his penis, make him do it *her* way.

A feeling of exultation grew in her along with her confidence. I'm doing it! It's working!

Still kissing, moaning from deep in her throat, she reached down to unbuckle his belt, as Andrew began breathing still faster. She unzipped his fly, and reached in to stroke his penis, her groan echoing his. She was careful to pet it with the palm of her hand, not her fingers. She didn't want him to ejaculate early, the way Miranda had made him do. That wasn't part of the plan.

Sensing that he was about to undress her -- that would be a polite word for a procedure that probably would have left her leather top in shreds -- she backed away to do it herself, holding his eyes as she pulled the top off over her head, and loosened her skirt, letting it fall to the floor as she waggled her hips sensuously, then kicking it away as if glad to be rid of it. Naked now, she pressed against him still more ardently, barely giving him room to peel off his own shirt and fumble out of his pants. She saw that his hands were shaking, and felt proud that hers were not.

With a dance of careful footwork, she maneuvered around him so that her back was towards the bed. She let go of him and lay on it on her back, reaching up for him with a yearning expression.

In seconds he was on top of her and inside her, already thrusting almost before she had gotten herself fully settled. She wrapped her arms and legs tightly around him and held on, murmuring his name softly as a counterpoint to his grunts of effort. She echoed his grunts with moans of her own.

As she expected, it didn't take him long to finish, emptying himself into her with a loud grunt and a gasp. She shook herself, gripped him still tighter and made a convincing orgasmic keening sound, quieting as she felt him relax.

Amy almost giggled to herself, thinking how under any other circumstances, she would feel a compulsion to spend an hour in the shower trying to wash every trace of Andrew's seed out of her. Tonight, if everything worked as she envisioned it, she would keep Andrew's fluids inside her as long as she could, as a reminder of what she'd done. She gritted her teeth and got control of herself. It was way too early to laugh. It would spoil everything.

She relaxed her grip on him and let him roll off her to the side, and turned towards him as he did. She stayed near him, not pressed against him since she knew that, for a few minutes at least, his sex drive was exhausted to the point that he wouldn't want any close physical contact. She simply stroked the back of his head with her hand, her eyes on his, occasionally planting light kisses on his chest and shoulders. She knew he was in the right frame of mind for dragging him a little deeper into the fantasy. She murmured, "Should we tell Dad right away we're getting married, or wait till I'm pregnant?" She made a contented-sounding sigh, thinking to herself how grateful she was for the Academy's contraceptives. "I can't wait for the wedding. Dad will want a really big one." She smiled. "He'll probably give us a lot of cash for a wedding gift. You know Dad. Anyway, you can have it. I don't need it." She did giggle now, as it was appropriate. "I don't even need to go shopping. I can just stay naked for you all the time. Would you like that?"

She had to hold back a stronger laugh as she saw his stunned look. He responded vaguely "Ung," and nodded his head, wide-eyed. She'd known he wouldn't be able to manage anything more articulate.

She felt no doubts he would believe her. People generally believe exactly what they want to believe. The fact that the Academy owned her, that they would not sell an undertrained student under any circumstances, and that even if they would, Dad was unlikely to spring for it so soon after buying Miranda, to buy his own daughter so soon after she'd left, as if he were paying a fortune for what amounted to a summer vacation for his flighty child... Andrew's spinning mind probably had no time to stop and dwell on any of those problems. Even the fact that he had helped her set up this role-play a few minutes ago was most likely a remote memory.

But she knew some of those thoughts *would* come crowding in if she took a break from weaving the dream for him. She continued talking. "We can use your room as our bedroom, and make my old room into sort of a nursery for the kids. You *know* how much Dad is going to love having grandchildren."

She reached down now to stroke his side and hip. Still too soon for direct stimulation, but she could come closer and hint at it. She made her voice still more husky, as if desire was coming on her again. "We'll need to get a bigger bed. I want us to spend a lot of time in bed. We can get some books and learn lots of new positions."

There, she saw looking down, it's awake again. That last comment had his erection reappear at half-mast. She reached for it and stroked it with her hand, encouraging it, hearing him gasp at the stimulation.

She pressed up against him now, pushing her left arm underneath him to meet her other arm thrown over the top, squeezing him in a tight hug, lifting her right leg and draping it over his hip so that she could rub her pussy against his now-hard dick. She kissed him, gently licking his tongue, as she wriggled her hips into position to let his erection reach up into her, then reached down to his buttock to pull him against her and keep it there, rocking her hips and tightening her vaginal muscles rhythmically to milk it, while continuing the kiss, harder, more insistently, grunting from her own efforts.

She opened her eyes, and once more nearly laughed, seeing that Andrew's eyes were open during the kiss as well, as if he wanted to be absolutely sure it was really her. She worked to turn the laugh into an mmmmm of passion, as she rubbed her breasts against his chest.

Both of them were breathing hard now, and Amy suspected that without her physical conditioning over the last months, she would have been exhausted by this time. As it was, her body was covered with a sheen of sweat, feeling hot in most places, cool where a draft from the air conditioning was blowing across.

Andrew came again at last, and Amy simulated another quivering orgasm. As he rolled at last onto his back, spent, she snuggled against him and draped her arm over his stomach, her head on his shoulder.

She saw, to her relief, that Andrew was content to lie there. She thought about continuing the earlier conversation, but decided it was unnecessary.

As the clock by the bed finished ticking off the hour Andrew had purchased, Amy sat up at last and said softly, "Our time's up."

Andrew stirred vaguely -- he'd clearly been dozing, or nearly so -- and sat up to verify the disposition of his clothes. He stood, facing away from her, and Amy took advantage of his inattention, looking quickly towards the camera and giving Wendy a hand sign -- the signal for "Send security - non-emergency," used when a girl sensed potential trouble and wanted someone standing by, in case.

Now dressed, Andrew turned back and looked at Amy, opening his mouth and closing it, clearly unsure what to say. It was easy enough to read his thoughts: Would Amy be able to leave with him tonight? Would some sort of arrangements need to be made with the Academy? His eyes shifted to the doorway where he'd detected some movement -- one of the gigantic security men. Amy couldn't see which one from her own vantage point. She knew now, though, that she was covered.

Andrew started to speak again, and froze when he saw the look on Amy's face.

Playacting was over. Amy didn't need it for this. She gave Andrew a nasty grin, her lip curling in disgust, and said slowly, with all the contempt she felt for him, "You *asshole!*"

She was finally able to let go with a whoop of laughter when she saw his reaction. His beet-red face and clenched fists said it all. She could read, in his whole posture, that he understood he had been helplessly

manipulated. That he knew he had been tricked out of giving her any of the abuse he had planned (and indeed paid extra for), denied any of the satisfaction he had, in his fury at her, so desperately craved. That she had effortlessly replaced his own mental image of tonight's confrontation with a fantasy world of her own creation, and then destroyed it for him at the end with a single word, leaving him with nothing at all.

He took one step towards her, and stopped at the sound of a deep throat-clearing. Amy now could see that the security man at the doorway was Karl, known to Amy from Beth's hanging. Karl was leaning forward just slightly into her view, with a forbidding frown on his face, three hundred pounds of muscle that didn't need to be standing between Amy and Andrew to make the point clear.

Andrew stood still for just a moment, his jaw clenched, his breath whistling in and out of his nose like a steam engine. He spun on his heel, walked carefully around Karl at the door and disappeared, the sound of Amy's laughter following him down the hallway.

## CHAPTER 18

Amy weaved through the tangle of guests and students almost in a dance, seizing Megan's hand when she reached her and giving her a warm kiss. She was glad to see the hanging cage was still empty. She had been told they would wait until all of the students were in the hall to watch, but she'd been worried nevertheless.

Amy looked at her roommate closely. "You look tired, hon. Everything okay?"

Megan sighed and gave Amy a smile. "Oh, no problems. I just haven't done three in the same night before. Why the hell aren't *you* tired?"

Amy giggled. "It'll catch up with me later. I'm just too pumped right now. I'll tell you all about it later." Amy beamed at Shawna, who was standing nearby. "How'd it go monitoring Lucy?"

Shawna grinned and sighed. "I am *so* horny right now, watching her for three hours." She was about to go into greater detail, but turned as she saw everyone's attention had been drawn to the entrance to the hall. Amy turned to look, and saw Gail standing in the doorway, her bright red graduate's uniform understood by the guests as a sign that the evening's culminating event was about to begin.

Gail looked over at the entrance to the privacy pavilion, where Karl was standing. She looked at him questioningly. "Everybody out?" She returned his affirmative nod, and looked out among the guests and students. "Does any hostess not see her monitor here?"

Several of the students looked around to confirm that their monitors had indeed arrived. Gwen raised her hand. "Mine was Monique. She's not here yet."

Gail nodded. "She's standing beside me with Sela. Anybody else?"

Amy raised her hand. "I'm not seeing Wendy... Oh, okay." At that moment Wendy had squeezed apologetically past Gail and into the room.

"Is that everybody?" The silence told Amy she must have been the last one out of the pavilion. I could have got done sooner, she thought, if Grace hadn't wrecked my makeup with her juices. Amy spotted Grace at that moment, getting another drink from the bar. Grace noticed Amy at that same time and gave her a friendly wave, but made no move to come over, to Amy's relief. Amy smiled and waved back. Farther to the right, she saw Benjamin. She beamed at him, and held up Megan's hand with her own and pointed to her with the other, rubbing Megan's shoulder with her cheek. Benjamin grinned back and gave Amy a thumbs-up signal. Not at all surprisingly, Andrew seemed to have left.

Megan looked at Amy curiously. "What was that about?"

Amy giggled, "Later. Everything later."

Gail smiled at the assembled crowd. "I know you're all eager to meet our group entertainment for tonight. Academy students and honored guests, please welcome Sela Turner, who will be hanged by her roommate, Monique du Clerq."

From the outer hallway, Sela stepped into the doorway, wearing a long robe -- an ordinary one, in white, not one of the prop robes for the Princess scenario such as Miranda had used. Sela was a cute, rather smallish girl with an angelic, freckled face and red hair combed mostly back behind her ears. She grinned and started to wave to the crowd, then started giggling and put her hands over her face, suddenly self-conscious, as the room burst into applause. Monique, dressed in a form-fitting black leotard representative of the executioner, stepped in from the side to stand beside Sela, her hand on Sela's hip.

In a moment, Monique waved her hands and put one finger to her lips in a shushing gesture. Everyone quieted down.

Sela lowered her hands from her face, took a deep breath and grinned. "I just had a couple of things I wanted to say. I'll really glad all of you could come and watch me die." She suddenly giggled again. "I'm sorry, this is just almost like I always dreamed it. Now please, you've got to promise to remember, I've only been in training for two months, so this won't be anything like a show that a graduate would put on..." She paused as several people offered murmurs of encouragement, one of them close enough to Sela that she grinned and thanked the woman who'd said it.

She continued, "In fact, I'm not going to do any sort of fictional scene to lead into it. They tell me a lot of the girls you've seen here do something like that, to make it more like what a graduate would do, but since I learned just a few days ago I'd be doing this, I've been working on making my technique as good as I could, and there wasn't really time to plan a show or anything like that. Okay?" Sela bit her lip and looked hopefully, as if fearing to see disappointment on the faces turned towards her. She beamed when she detected none.

"Anyway, to make up for it, I promise to make the hanging really good. I really, *really* want to thank Megan and Shawna for helping me with that." Amy looked at Megan, who blinked in surprise. Amy knew Megan had stopped by Sela's room a few times in the last few days, though not as many times as Shawna had. Megan clearly hadn't expected any public recognition for it.

Shawna whispered to Amy, "I told Sela she could be the first one to show off some of those new techniques we've all been working on, kind of hint to everybody on the outside what was coming up in the future from Academy girls. She got really excited."

Amy whispered back, "I see that." Sela seemed almost ready to dance, and Amy had been unable to account for how pumped the girl was. Admittedly all of the girls, on considering the possibility that they might be hanged before graduating, expressed a strong preference for doing it at a party rather than a class demo, for the obvious reason that the atmosphere of a party came much closer to what a graduate would experience. Still, being hanged at a party was flunking out. Amy, expecting to see disappointment in Sela's body language, saw none.

Sela went on, "And we have worked out a couple of things to make this a little different. Monique has something special planned for the end. And for me..." Sela giggled once more. "I guess you can figure out I'm not one of the best at hanging, which is why I ended up here tonight. But I've been getting better. I've never gone six minutes before, but I'm going to go for it tonight. Monique is going to count off the minutes for you while I'm hanging. When she gets to six, I want all of you to clap your hands, so I can hear it. I'll be just *so* happy if that's the last thing I hear. Okay?"

As another round of applause started, and Sela burst out laughing, waving her arms for quiet. “No, no, not *now!* Do it *then!*” The applause quickly turned into laughter.

Amy knew that six minutes would be a challenge for a number of the girls. Amy herself had been improving rapidly recently, and routinely went past nine minutes in practice. She didn’t know what Megan’s upper limit might be. Megan could go twelve minutes without apparent effort, and was satisfied to end a session once she had worked on everything she wanted to.

Sela turned to Monique, her eyes bright, and took a deep breath. “I’m ready.”

Monique gave her a quick kiss, then bent down to pick up something from the floor that had been hidden behind the doorway. As Sela walked into the room, towards the cage, Monique following her, Amy saw that Monique was, as one would expect, holding a small coil of rope in one hand and, unexpectedly, a long, thin box with the other. Amy was puzzled for a moment, and then realized what must be inside the box, and what Monique had planned for the end of the event. She gasped and said, “Oh, cool!” Around her, she could hear similar reactions from other students. None of the guests knew what the small commotion among the students was about, and several asked the nearest students about it, but got only smiles and headshakes in reply.

The back side of the cage was a door, which at present stood open. Sela walked proudly, her eyes glowing, to the cage, Monique trailing behind, working hard to keep up with her while holding the awkward box upright to avoid banging it against anyone. Sela entered the cage, leaping up onto the platform in one smooth motion, brushing aside the noose with her shoulder, and Monique set her box down at the side of the cage and waited.

Sela simply stood on the platform for a minute, slowly sweeping her eyes from side to side, her mouth half-open in a grin of wonder, wanting to drink in every sensation as the center of attention in her life’s greatest moment. All eyes were on her in a room of dead silence.

At last she reached down to loosen the belt on her robe. Shrugging it off her shoulders in a way she had no doubt practiced, it fell onto the platform around her feet.

Amy couldn’t help joining everyone else in a collective gasp, even though she’d known what to expect. The spotlights focused on the cage were more than sufficient to give Sela’s now-naked body, liberally coated with cooking oil, the glow that Amy had first seen on Miranda -- no matter how many times you see that, Amy thought, the first sight of it is always breathtaking.

Monique entered the cage at last, stepping onto the platform behind Sela, and let the rope she was holding uncoil. The rope was short; Sela had chosen not to use a crotch rope. Students were not allowed to start using one until the middle of the second year, as the prevailing wisdom held that students should perfect the basic techniques before they started distracting themselves with mid-air masturbation, but of course girls being hanged at a party were not subject to that rule. Amy was looking forward to practicing tying a crotch rope on Linda and Laney, and watching them make use of it from close up. Amy suspected that Sela, for the same reason she had decided not to put on a pre-hanging show, had nixed the idea of a crotch rope -- she wanted to perform the hanging the very best she knew how, and didn’t have time to work in something totally new.

Amy, always excited to watch a real hanging, felt her heart beating faster as Sela crossed her wrists behind her back, and Monique bound them tightly together.

Everyone in the hall seemed to suspend their breathing as Monique performed her most crucial task: taking hold of the noose, she lifted it and dropped it over Sela's head, tightening it expertly to fit snugly around Sela's neck and positioning it properly -- completely, and forever, taking Sela's control of her life out of her hands.

The onlookers, as it became clear which direction Sela would be facing, redistributed themselves around the cage, each person taking the position he or she favored for watching a hanging. As if to prove that people had a wide variety of tastes, the crowd seemed to arrange itself so that nearly equal numbers stood on all sides of the cage -- some, like Amy and Megan, preferred a frontal view, while a similar number liked watching from the sides, and many enjoyed the view from behind.

Monique squeezed around to stand in front of Sela now, and some in the crowd looked away from this very private moment, which others watched closely, entranced. Since they were not acting out a fictional scenario and had no characters to maintain, they could spend this moment as exactly what they were: two young women, who had shared their lives and bed for two intense months, now saying goodbye. Monique gently rested her hands on either side of Sela's head, careful not to disturb the noose, and put her lips on Sela's for a long, intimate kiss. When they broke it off at last, they said a few words to each other that Amy couldn't hear -- until the very end, when each said, audibly to those standing close enough, "I love you."

As Monique hopped down from the platform, Sela closed her eyes and began breathing slowly and deeply, concentrating on her preparation. Looking closely, Amy could see what most likely only another Hanging Girl would notice: the slight tensing of various groups of muscles, in Sela's legs, shoulders, hips, in sequence, as she mentally rehearsed the moves she wanted to make.

In any case, most of the guests' attention had probably been drawn to Monique at this point. Sela's roommate smoothed out the fallen robe on the surface of the platform, as Sela lifted one foot and then the other to allow the robe to go underneath. They had probably got the idea from watching Amy do the same with Susan's robe during her hanging.

Monique stepped out of the cage, and closed the back side of the cage. For extra dramatic effect, she took the padlock dangling from the latch and thrust it through the latch, clicking it closed to lock Sela in. The key, Amy suspected, was not in the hall at all.

Adding to that same effect, Amy could tell that Sela was standing on a one-way platform. The lever could only lower the surface, not raise it -- once it was lowered, it could only be raised again by partial disassembly that took a good ten or fifteen minutes of work. The guests knew about the platforms, for the most part -- in fact, most probably didn't even realize there was another kind, the two-way platforms that were used for practice.

At last, Monique reached in between the bars and pushed the lever over. The absolute silence of the room was broken only by the faint whirr of the mechanism lowering the surface of the platform.

There were several sighs around the room, and a couple of slight choking sounds in sympathy, as the platform descended below the level Sela's toes could reach and she swung free by the neck, beginning immediately to kick.

After a few seconds, Amy frowned. Sela was kicking more or less randomly with her legs, not using any of the things Shawna must have been showing her. Amy could see that Shawna, standing a few feet in front of Amy and just to the right, had both hands clenched into fists, raised to waist level, and seemed to be mouthing instructions she hoped Sela would hear on a psychic wavelength, looking progressively more frustrated. There was no prohibition against talking to Sela, assuming she could be heard over the growing murmurs that probably accompanied any party hanging, but Amy was sure Shawna wanted Sela to seem to succeed without help.

Sela did, of course, look sensationally sexy even so, with the spotlights picking out the quivering and tensing muscles in her legs, arms, stomach, buttocks, all glowing with the effect of the oil. But the guests must be seeing it as standard fare, the usual semi-panic of any First Year girl being hanged.

Suddenly Sela seemed to relax for an instant, her body swinging to and fro -- and then her body bucked in a long ripple from head to toe that included a sensuous forward thrust with her hips, afterwards swinging her legs out wide and towards the front in that hugging-her-lover move that had so stunned Amy the first time she had seen Megan do it. Around the room, Amy could hear the breath whoosh out of several of the guests, as if they'd each been kicked in the stomach. She saw jaws dropping all around her. In the awed silence, all could clearly hear Monique, down on one knee at the side of the cage, careful not to obstruct anyone's view, say, "One minute."

As Sela continued her performance, Amy could see a number of hands around her moving to crotches, both men and women becoming absorbed and aroused. For the guests, it was like nothing they had ever seen. With all her experience watching Megan hang, it was easy for Amy to judge that Sela was not up to Megan's level, but even she felt a tingling between her legs and a strong need to be alone with Megan. She gripped her roommate's hand more tightly.

At about the three-minute mark, Sela began mixing her sexual thrusts with desperate-seeming attempts to reach a solid surface, holding her body perfectly straight and straining downward, every muscle in her legs taut with effort, her feet pointed straight downward and moving with tiny kicks, her toes wriggling - - relaxing for a moment as if giving up, then resuming the effort even more desperately. This was, of course, Shawna's own contribution to the new hanging choreography. As suddenly as the downward stretches had begun, they then segued into a wriggling and thrusting that commenced a renewed simulation of vertical intercourse.

The undercurrent of conversation was entirely different from its original character. It appeared as if many of the guests were whispering only to themselves, lost in the fascination inspired by Sela's performance.

Just before Monique called out "Five minutes," Sela seemed clearly to tire. Her movements became more random, as they had been for a time in the first minute, and more jerky. She had spent little time, up to this point, trying to free her hands, but she did try now, her forearm muscles straining, her body instinctively fighting for life. Streams of sweat were rolling down her body.

For Amy, it was probably partly a residual thrill from her session with Andrew, partly a sense of the feeling that was running through the watching guests, partly having seen a reflection of Megan in Sela's movements, partly pride that Megan had imparted this much of her ability to another student, partly awareness of the euphoria Sela must be feeling that she was ending her life this way... All of that contributed to a level of excitement Amy couldn't remember reaching during any other hanging. She was pounding her hip with her fist, her lips silently moving in a repetition of "Come on, come on..." Six minutes, Sela wanted. She was getting so close!

The room seemed suddenly to grow silent, and it looked to Amy as if most people were, in fact, holding their breaths, their attention divided between Sela, now kicking weakly and spastically, and Monique beside the cage, her eyes on her stopwatch.

Monique suddenly thrust her fist above her head and shouted, "SIX!" The audience, with no preliminaries, erupted into applause louder than Amy thought that number of people could produce, punctuated by exclamations of "Great!" and "Good girl, Sela."

Amy saw that Sela's eyes, which had been looking glazed and barely functioning, lit up suddenly, her lips twisting into a happy grin. She made several quick short kicks with her right leg, easily understood as an expression of the joy she was feeling.

That was her last burst of energy, and she fainted at last and hung limp. Her body swayed and twisted as the rope swung her lightly back and forth, but no longer moved on its own. As in every hanging Amy had seen, Sela's bladder emptied, the shower of urine falling between and running down her legs to soak into the folds of the robe bunched up on the platform below her.

Monique stood and looked towards the side of the room, and Amy, following her gaze, saw Gail there, intently watching the heart monitor she was holding. The applause was beginning to die down, and Amy, knowing Sela was still alive and might at some level still be conscious, waved her fist in a circle over her head and shouted, "She can still hear you!" Amy wasn't really sure whether Sela actually was aware, but if there was any chance that she was, Amy wanted her to hear that applause for the rest of her life. The sound from the crowd burst forth with renewed energy.

At last, Amy saw Gail nod her head and point at Monique. Monique reached in between the bars of the cage and steadied Sela, arresting the residual swinging motion of her roommate's body to leave Sela hanging as motionless as a sculpture of a hanged woman. Monique then bent down to open the long, thin box she had brought in with her and withdrew its contents.

The guests saw, and knew now what Amy had known at the start. A collective, appreciative gasp spread across the room. As Monique walked outward from the front of the cage, she was clearly anticipating a need to ask guests politely to step aside to give her room, but without a word, the onlookers standing in front of the cage backed to either side to clear an aisle leading straight out from the cage. Monique, looking serious and dignified, walked down the impromptu aisle and turned to face the cage.

Many years before, in the early days of erotic hanging, the art had been plagued with fakery -- hangings that gave the appearance of being authentic, but in which the girl survived to perpetrate further fraudulent performances. The Academy had been instrumental in restoring integrity to the art form, and no hanging of an Academy Girl left any doubt in the end that she was dead. Nevertheless, at every

public hanging staged by the Academy, a tradition remained of offering “proof” of the obvious. Amy had first seen it at Miranda’s hanging, at the end of which Miranda’s father had been given the honor of laying her chest open with a sword, a somewhat romantic alternative to the knife that was more often used.

Still more romantic, though, was the instrument Sela and Monique had chosen.

Every girl in the First Year class knew that Monique had been on her high school archery team. Her bow was one of the few personal possessions she had brought with her to the Academy, and she often relaxed from the tensions of her studies by practicing with it in the courtyard, using targets and arrows she ordered through the student store. Tonight the students had all instantly recognized what must be in the box Monique was carrying, and why she had brought it.

As Monique faced the cage from about twenty feet away, it occurred to the guests behind the cage belatedly to clear a path in line with Monique and the cage, in case Monique was not quite as accurate as she would need to be.

Everyone watched as Monique took her stance, her left hand steadying the bow, the fingers of her right hand holding the arrow firmly, and in an absolute silence more profound than at any time during the night, one could easily hear the faint crackles of tension as the bow bent. Monique seemed to hold the bow cocked forever, aiming for just the right spot.

Monique released the arrow at last, and new sounds followed in rapid succession -- the twang of the bowstring, the faint, brief hiss of the arrow flying through the air, and a solid “Thhhckkk,” like a fist pounding a wet sandbag, the sound of the arrow striking and penetrating Sela’s stomach just below her ribs and slightly to the right of center, after passing between the bars of the cage. The impact knocked Sela’s body back and set it in renewed motion swinging back and forth like a pendulum at the end of the rope, slowly twisting now because of the off-center hit. The twisting motion brought Sela’s back into Amy’s view, before Sela began twisting the other direction, showing Amy her front again. Amy could see that the head of the arrow had emerged from Sela’s back, between her arms still bound at the wrists behind her, while the feathered tail still protruded from her stomach.

A cascade of blood flowed down from both of Sela’s wounds, running down her stomach, back, and legs, splattering onto the robe below -- as always, not as much of it as one might expect, propelled only by gravity without the pressure from a pumping heart.

The crowd let out a delighted “Ahhh,” and began applauding again, this time for Monique, who blushed, smiled, and bit her lip, sighing in what appeared to be utter relief that the arrow had found its mark. As the applause wound down, excited conversations began in all parts of the room.

Amy reached out to tap Shawna on the shoulder, and exclaimed, “Sela was fantastic! You did such a great job with her!”

Shawna’s face almost couldn’t contain her open-mouthed grin. “I got so worried at the start! But it wasn’t me, Sela just worked so hard.”

“Monique was really wonderful too! That was a great shot, only a few inches off target.”

Shawna shook her head. “Not even that much. She hit exactly where she was aiming. That was Sela’s idea. As soon as Monique told her the head of the arrow would probably go completely through her, Sela told her to try to hit a little off-center. She even showed her where on her stomach she wanted Monique to hit, so it wouldn’t be stopped by her ribs or spine or anything. Hitting her there would make her body spin like it did. She thought it’d be really cool if everybody could see the arrowhead sticking out of her back, so she wanted to twist to give everybody a view. It really worked great!”

Amy laughed. “I’ve been telling people those physics classes would pay off! That twisting really added a lot.” She looked at Shawna. “Are you going to move in with Monique?” Shawna was the natural person to room with Monique, so that Jackie and Erin could recover the privacy they’d sacrificed to make room for Shawna.

“We talked about it. I know I’m staying with her tonight, and we’re going to try it for a few days at least, and see how it goes.”

Amy nodded, understanding fully Shawna’s hesitation to commit to a new rooming arrangement until she was sure of being able to get along with her new partner. Amy looked over towards Monique, now surrounded by guests who seemed to be new admirers of both herself and of the late Sela. To Shawna, Amy said, “I was going to try to get to her, but it’s a little busy over there. Tell her later she did a wonderful job, and give her a kiss for me, okay?”

“Sure.”

Aware of someone standing to her right, Amy turned and discovered Benjamin. She smiled in delight. “Hi!” She put her arm around Megan’s waist. “I guess you already could tell, this is Megan. Megan, this is Benjamin, one of my privates tonight.”

Megan smiled and shook hands with him. “Nice to meet you, Benjamin. Amy hasn’t had time to tell me anything, but I can tell she likes you.”

Benjamin beamed at her. “By coincidence, I was going to tell you that Amy obviously loves you very much, in case you weren’t aware. I can see now you feel the same about her.”

Both girls laughed, and Megan said, “Well, now we know,” and kissed Amy.

Amy, grinning, turned to Benjamin to speak, but he spoke first. “Amy, I just have to ask someone who might know...” He shook his head slightly in a wondering way. “The girl tonight, Sela...” For the first time, Amy saw him struggle for words. “WHY would they hang her now, so early in her training? I don’t mean to criticize the Academy, as they must have a reason, but think of the show she could have put on after three more years of practice! I’ve never seen anything like what she was doing tonight! Surely the administration must have recognized her unique talents.”

Amy rubbed Megan’s hip and grinned. She noticed, suddenly, that all around the room, guests could be seen in intense conversations with students, and from their gestures towards the cage and its still gently swinging, arrow-pierced occupant, it was obvious they were talking about Sela. The word, Amy realized, was officially out now. “Benjamin, I’m so glad you felt that way, and Sela would be so proud to hear you

say that. But the truth is, she wasn't the only one doing that kind of thing now. We all are. Or we're learning, that is. From Megan." She gave Megan's waist another squeeze.

Benjamin's eyes widened. "The girl *did* thank Megan, didn't she? I remember that now." He turned to Megan. "Do you mean to say this is something you're passing on to *all* of the other students?"

Megan nodded. "Yes, sir, I'm working on it."

"Benjamin."

Megan smiled. "Benjamin."

Benjamin looked around, as if he were considering the number of students visible in the room and what sort of performances would be coming out of the Academy when they graduated. "Well, well, well..." he breathed softly on a descending scale.

He turned back to Megan. "Well, one reason I came over was to thank Amy once more for the part she played in an enchanting evening. It appears I need to thank you too, Megan." He smiled and offered his hand again. "Thank you very much."

"You're welcome, s... Benjamin."

"And thank you, Amy." He shook her hand as well. "And now I'm afraid I must go. It's getting a little late for me. Megan, I trust you and I will get to know each other better at a later date."

Megan looked at Amy, and laughed when Amy nodded her head forcefully and enthusiastically. "I'm sure I'd enjoy that, Benjamin. Amy says so."

With a final wave, returned by both girls, he turned and headed for the door.

Amy sighed, and said quietly to Megan, "Wish we could leave." They would be free to go once all of the guests with whom they had shared a private party had left. Andrew, of course, was long gone, and a number of other guests had departed by this time, but Grace was nearby, one of several guests around the cage admiring Sela's body, now swinging just barely perceptibly, like a mobile in a very gentle breeze. Amy also saw at least one of the guests to whom she had seen Megan give a chit, talking to Monique. "How's your energy?"

"Getting a second wind."

"No classes tomorrow. Want to make love all night?" Amy gave her a hungry grin.

Megan returned the grin. "Thinking about that is what's keeping me going."

## CHAPTER 19

Amy awoke with her lips brushing against Megan's. She gave Megan's lower lip a soft nibble, and felt, rather than saw, the corners of her roommate's mouth turn upwards in a smile, as Megan came fully awake and tightened her arms around Amy.

Last night they had showered together when they'd made it back to their room, excitedly exchanging summaries of their experiences at the party, continuing as they went to bed, Megan laughing in delight as Amy told about her encounter with Andrew, and then had managed to make love only once before the exhaustion caught up with them and they slept through the breakfast hour. Both awake now, they stretched their muscles without letting go of each other. Amy felt Megan's thighs give her right one a squeeze, a preliminary to another lovemaking session. Amy felt a need for love right now, to clear away the unfocused gloom she had awakened with. She sighed as she felt Megan's hands brushing up and down her back. They suddenly stopped. Amy opened her eyes in surprise. "What's wrong?" She saw Megan frowning at her.

Megan's eyes wouldn't let Amy's go. "Are you thinking he's going to file a complaint about last night?"

Amy's eyes popped wide open. "You reading minds now?"

Megan gave a small shake of her head. "Only works with you."

"How'd you know I was thinking about my brother?"

"That's the only thing that would give you that expression. You think I haven't seen that enough in the last week to recognize it?"

Amy's sigh this time was a symbol of deflation. "Okay, I guess I made it too easy for you. No, I'm pretty sure he won't complain to the dean. I know him well enough to know he'd rather be an alley bum than let anybody know he was gullible enough to be played like that. But the next time I'm on hostess duty for a party he'll be back. Even madder than before. And that trick will only work once." The First Years would host another party in two months, but Amy would be monitoring Wendy for that one. But the party after that... Amy shuddered. "Four months seemed like forever last night. But now it feels like tomorrow."

Megan gave Amy a comforting squeeze with her arms. "Four months is plenty of time to figure out what to do. We can make a plan, like we did for last night." She frowned and rolled her eyes. "Okay, I know that one didn't work..."

Amy smiled at her and reached up to brush a strand of hair back from Megan's eyes. "Well, we've got longer this time. But..." She drew up another sigh from what now seemed an endless supply. "Anybody I talk to at a party might be standing in for him. I don't see any way to know if he's going to suddenly show up for a private session, or what I can do about it if he does. And I've got to be a hostess for a bunch more parties before we graduate. The only way to get out of bedding down guests is to be the entertainment, like Sela."

Megan nodded solemnly, and then suddenly gasped, her eyes flying open, her body twitching with startlement. Amy said quickly, "No, hon, I wasn't thinking of volunteering to die just to get out of seeing Andrew. Kind of defeats the purpose..."

Megan shook her head emphatically. "No, that's not what I was thinking!"

Megan was excited, and Amy looked at her, baffled. "What *are* you thinking, then?"

"You were talking about being the entertainment. I'm wondering if the dean might be willing to approve something new along those lines."

Still at sea, but beginning to absorb Megan's excitement, Amy gave her a hand-twirling, get-on-with-it gesture.

Megan grinned. "I've been thinking since last night about that fantasy you did with Benjamin, about us being hanged together and making love while we did it. Don't you figure all the members would want to see that?"

Amy gaped at her. "What, do it in front of everybody at a party?"

"Yes! They'd *pay* to see that! That's why the dean would be willing to let us do it!"

"Megan, I'd love to go out that way, but I was just saying I'm not ready to be snuffed yet..."

"No, this is something different! Not a snuff show! They'd still hang a girl at the end of the party. We could be sort of an optional extra show. We'd live though it!" Her eyes glowed. "We don't need to die for it. Just being able to do it at all -- that's what people will come to see. *We* can do it! You know that!"

Amy had the idea completely at last. "Yes! We'd..." She paused as her mind spun around the possibilities. "We don't want to take anything away from the girl who's going to die. It's her special night."

Megan nodded emphatically. "Of course! We could be at the beginning, and the snuff would be hours later, the big culmination."

"Wait, wouldn't the dean still expect us to do private parties anyway, afterwards?"

Megan bit her lip, thinking, then her eyes lit up as she flashed another grin. "After our show, the guests who watched us can bid on us. We'd go as a pair, and spend the rest of the evening with whoever offered the most money. Could Andrew afford that? There's a lot of members a lot richer than he is."

Amy gasped and then laughed, then tightened her arms around Megan and pulled her closer for a long, long kiss. They both laughed as they came up for air. Amy beamed at her. "I love you."

"I love you too." The soft expression on Megan's face was not one any of the other students would have recognized.

Amy untangled herself from Megan and bounced out of bed, almost exploding with energy. "Let's figure out how to do this. We're going to need to work out a show and practice..." Her eyes caught sight of the clock. "Oh! We've got get ready for the luncheon!"

Megan scrambled out of bed as well. The whole class would be eating Sela at a noontime banquet in her honor. No student would forgive herself for missing it. "Okay. First Sela, then planning."

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy and Megan stood side by side in their room after the banquet, both looking up at the safety drop built into the ceiling, the mechanism that released the rope in case of emergency during hanging practice. Amy absently fingered her lower lip as she thought. "I can't think of anywhere in the school where there are two of them close enough together."

Megan stood with her arms folded, barely blinking as she concentrated. "The dean could have the staff build us a second one."

Amy shook her head. "We don't want to tell him what we're doing until we have something we can show him. You know how he is about departing from the standard training regimen. We'll need to practice at least a few weeks before we go to him with it."

Biting her lip in frustration, Megan murmured, "We'll have to use one safety drop, somehow. It'll hold two ropes, won't it?"

Amy tapped her foot unconsciously on the floor, lost in thought, frowning deeply. "I think two ropes hanging down from the same point would keep us too close together. I mean, we have to be close, but if we're so smushed against each other we can't maneuver, it won't work."

Megan nodded. Barely audibly, she began, "Have to make the nooses hang about a foot apart..." She gasped suddenly. "Oh! Like this!" She spun around and yanked open the drawer of her desk, pulling out a piece of paper, and drew a quick diagram with a pencil, too excited to take time to sit in her chair. She whipped up the paper and held it up for Amy. "See?"

Amy nodded excitedly. "Right! What do we use for that?" She pointed at a horizontal line separating the ropes in the diagram. "Oh! Spreader bar! They've got them in a bunch of sizes in the toy drawers in the party pavilion."

"Yes!" Megan started for the door, and stopped. "Wait, they'd be suspicious if we started rummaging around in the pavilion now. Student store! They'd have them, and nobody would think anything about it if we got one from there. They'd figure they knew why we wanted it." She giggled.

Amy laughed. "Maybe we can use it for that too." She kissed Megan, and laughed again. "We've still got Sela breath. How did her breast taste?"

Megan shook her head in amazement. "That really meant a lot to me." Sela, it turned out, had asked that one of her breasts be cut into halves, Shawna and Megan each getting one of the halves. Her

roommate Monique, of course, got Sela's other breast. Megan could still hardly believe she'd been held in that kind of regard by another student.

Amy kissed her again. "You earned it. Anyway, let's go to the store."

## CHAPTER 20

ONE MONTH LATER

Amy swung her head from side to side, stretching out her neck muscles, as she and Megan approached the First Year corridor, each of them holding up one end of their hanging platform, carrying it again back to their room after using it in another practice session with Linda and Laney. Two platforms were needed for that.

Megan watched Amy closely. "How's it feel?"

Amy grinned. "Getting better. My neck was killing me the first few days, but I'm getting used to the extra weight. We can add some more tonight." In their own room that evening, she and Megan would each spend part of their hanging practice with extra weights hung from their waists, preparing their neck muscles to hold much more than their own individual body weights while hanging. They did that each evening, while afternoon sessions were spent in Linda's and Laney's room, with their two Second Year friends spotting for them as they worked out some choreography for their "pairs hanging."

Amy stopped suddenly as they entered the First Year hallway, throwing Megan off balance. Megan began, "What..." Then she realized what Amy was seeing, or not seeing. "Huh."

Amy frowned. "Yeah. Where is everybody?"

At this time of day, though classes were over, it wasn't unusual for much of the dorm's population to be missing -- gone to the gym, or the library, or relaxing in the courtyard taking in some sun... But since the start of the year neither Amy nor Megan had ever before seen it as a ghost town, utterly without sound or movement.

Megan looked from side to side wonderingly. "We must have missed an announcement. Or could we both have forgotten a meeting we're supposed to go to?"

Amy shrugged, wide-eyed. "Let's get this put away," she jiggled the platform, "And start looking around."

They looked first in the demo room, which was likewise deserted. Once they got within earshot of the cafeteria, it was obvious that this was where everyone had gone. Amy's eyes lit up. "One of the teachers must have been sold!"

Megan frowned in puzzlement. "Seems like we would have heard about that in the Second Year dorm."

Looking in from the door, Amy could see the caf was nearly wall-to-wall girls: it appeared all of the First Years were there, a few upper class girls, more Third Years than Second, and more red "graduate" uniforms were present than she had ever seen in one place -- as far as Amy could tell, all of the living graduates were there. There were clusters of girls around tables with half-filled pizza boxes and cans of soft drinks, and one large knot of girls near one end of the room. Amy tried in vain to see who the focus of attention was. She walked into the room with Megan and tapped a classmate named Rita on the shoulder. "Who?"

Rita quickly swallowed a mouthful of pizza and laughed. "Where've you been?"

"Second Year dorm. Who's the party for?"

Rita glowed at the chance to impart exciting news to someone in the dark. "Gail!"

Amy and Megan both gasped. Amy stared at Rita, her mouth wide open. "You're kidding!"

Rita shook her head. "For real! She's over there. Go say hi." Rita gestured vaguely with her pizza at the largest knot of girls.

That explained the composition of the crowd in the room. Only a few of the upper-class girls knew Gail, and she or Bridget had probably invited the ones who did individually, but no First Year girl would miss a party for one of their dorm sisters.

Taking Megan's hand as they approached the edge of the crowd, Amy began cautiously shouldering her way in apologetically, hearing Gail's distinctive giggle above the chattering voices occasionally. At last the way parted and Gail was in front of Amy, standing with Bridget beside her and several other graduates nearby. Gail was talking to Jackie, with Erin, quiet as usual, standing next to her. Gail's face lit up on seeing Amy and Megan. "Hi! I was just thinking I hadn't seen you two!"

Jackie gave Amy some room, and Amy grinned and gave Gail a tight hug. After she let go, Megan, after looking uncertain for a moment, put her arms around Gail and gave her a squeeze. Megan would probably never be the hugging type outside of sexual play, but she knew what was expected. Amy saw Jackie giving Megan her usual skeptical look, and noticed Megan, out of the corner of her eye, had seen the look as well -- Amy could see Megan's jaw tighten slightly, and Megan's hand reached out for Amy's again and gave it a crushing squeeze that told Amy that Megan was trying not to react any more visibly. To Amy it was a sign of Megan's progress that it had been weeks since Megan had needed this outlet for her tension.

Amy, for her part, was almost dancing with excitement, imagining herself in Gail's place, the hanging she had trained so long for now so imminent. "So tell me all about it! When are you swinging?"

"This Saturday! I can't believe it's so close now. The carpenters and other crew are already supposed to be over at my owner's house, putting up the gallows and my prep tent and all that in her yard."

"Oh, so a woman bought you..." Amy frowned suddenly. "Ummm, her name's not Grace Millan, is it?"

Gail and Bridget both laughed. Gail sputtered, "Oh, Amy, you got Grace at the party, didn't you? I felt like we should warn all you guys about her, but Bridget said there was no point, if she wants you you have to take her anyway. But no, Grace didn't buy me. I'm hanging for a really sweet lady named Barbara Costman. She owns that chain of clothing boutiques, 'Now Girl,' and she's doing this as a treat for her store managers. And I'm sure she'll invite close friends too -- you know how it is. She says I'll have a pretty big crowd to watch me die."

"Which scene are you going to do?"

“Well, I wound up with the ‘Runaway Slave.’ When I first started looking at scenes I leaned towards the ‘Assassin’s Execution’ thing, but Bridget convinced me I didn’t look mean enough to be an assassin.” She giggled and rubbed her shoulder fondly against her roommate’s, who laughed. “Anyway, Bridge is going to be my executioner, of course, and I’m taking along a couple of Third Years, Terri and... what’s her name, Audra. They’ll be other slaves, and they’ll do all this weeping and wailing when they see me brought back to be punished for escaping. That’s a new thing they’re doing this year. The dean wants upper class girls to participate in a hanging before they graduate. He hinted he got the idea from one of the incoming students, of all things!”

“Uhhh...” Amy wasn’t sure how to respond. “How about that.” She didn’t feel a need to claim credit. Just knowing she had put her mark on the process was enough. To change the subject, she said, “I wish we could eat you, but I know it doesn’t work that way.”

“Oh!!” Gail’s eyes glowed. “It’s funny you’d mention that, I was just going to say. Barbara knows how all of us over here get really close, and she’s going to send a cut of my meat over here! Not very big, probably from my arm, and I imagine you’ll each only get like one bite from it. But it’ll be me!”

Amy impulsively hugged her again. “That’s great! And you know it doesn’t matter how much it is. It’ll just be nice knowing you’re inside all of us. You already are, really, but I mean physically.”

Gail brushed aside a tear. “Thank you, that’s SO sweet. And...” She hesitated, looking now back and forth between Amy and Megan with a serious face. “Listen, I was hoping to get a chance to tell you two. I’m sorry I had to come down so hard on you, that day. I mean, that’s my job, but it’s not easy for me to be like that.”

Amy laughed. “It is when you get as mad as you were.” She unconsciously rubbed her hand against her butt, almost feeling the swats again and pushing aside the memory.

Gail nodded and laughed. “Well, yeah.” She looked at Megan, who hadn’t spoken yet. “So are we okay?”

Megan blinked, seeming surprised at the question. She reached beside her and took Amy’s hand again, rubbing her palm against Amy’s and lacing her fingers through Amy’s. “Gail, that was... the best thing that’s ever happened in my life.” She looked to the side and locked eyes with Amy, while reaching out to give Gail a one-armed hug. Then she looked back at Gail and gave her a sincere smile.

Gail looked at her wide-eyed, momentarily speechless. “Ummm, okay then.”

Amy, also, was looking at Megan in surprise, feeling a sudden strong urge to throw her arms around Megan and kiss her. She fought it down -- it would be rude to take the attention away from Gail. Giving her head a shake to clear it, Amy looked at Gail’s roommate. “Bridget, you’re not going to be dorm sister by yourself, are you?”

“Oh, no! Like I could handle all you guys by myself?” She laughed. “Denise is going to share with me.”

“Great! She’s still going to teach breath control, right?”

“Oh, sure! That’s the thing about being a graduate, we all get busier as there get to be fewer of us.”

Gail elbowed Bridget playfully. "Tell her about those daily room inspections Denise wants to do." She and Bridget both laughed at the expressions on all the First Year faces around them. Gail confessed, "I just made that up."

Gail looked around at the now-thinning crowd, and back at Amy and Megan. "You two better get pizza while there's any left."

Amy and Megan gradually oozed their way out of Gail's vicinity, the crowd closing in behind them. Amy examined the nearest table laden with now nearly-empty boxes. In honor of the occasion, all of the pizzas included girlmeat among their toppings. Amy asked Rebecca, who was picking out a piece, "Is that leftover Gina?" Gina had just been hanged at a demo the previous Friday.

Rebecca shrugged. "Nobody said, but I doubt it. I think we pretty much finished her off Friday night. And they wouldn't have known this was coming, to save any of her. I think it's store-bought."

Amy waved her hand at the boxes and asked Megan, "You in a pizza mood?"

Megan looked distracted, and seemed at that moment to make up her mind about something. She leaned closer and murmured very softly in Amy's ear, "Hon, would it be okay if I invited Jackie and Erin to spend the night with us?"

Amy did a double take, and knew how astonished she must have looked. Megan had never invited *anyone* for an overnight, and Amy had respected her roommate's privacy by never inviting anyone either -- their overnights with Linda and Laney had been spent in their friends' Second Year dorm room. Realizing her delay in answering might be taken by Megan as discouragement, Amy at last said, "Oh, sure! That'd be great!"

Amy watched as Megan walked over to Jackie, who had left the knot of people around Gail and was pouring herself a soft drink in a paper cup. Jackie's startlement as Megan leaned over and whispered something in her ear quickly changed to that same stunned expression Amy imagined she'd had on her own face. Jackie looked around the room quickly and spotted Amy, who smiled, shrugged to indicate Megan was doing this on her own, and nodded that it was okay.

\* \* \* \* \*

The four girls sat on the bed in Amy's and Megan's room, pretending to be absorbed in the movie on television, in which the heroine had infiltrated an outlaw group of antisocial women who had banded together to evade the food draft. Jackie and Erin had sat on the bed together, propping their backs against the wall and stretching their legs across the width of the bed. Megan had taken a place beside Jackie, and looked up at Amy as Amy had started to sit on the other side of Megan. To Amy's surprise, Megan gave her a slight headshake and pointed to her left, indicating she wanted Amy to sit on the far side of Erin. Amy gave Megan a small nod and did so, continuing to wonder what was up. Megan usually wanted Amy nearby when she had to deal with anyone else on a personal level.

As the movie's final credits rolled, Amy leaned forward slightly to look around Erin and Jackie and watch Megan. She could see the signs of tension in Megan -- her hands pressed palms together to keep them from balling into fists, the slight clenching of her jaw muscles as she fought to keep from showing any

signs of nervousness. Amy had to fight with herself to keep from getting up to... do something, whatever was needed to drain off Megan's tension, but it was so clear that Megan wanted to handle this herself.

After a few moments of general uncomfortable silence, Megan turned to Jackie and said, "I know you don't trust me."

Jackie blinked in surprise. Whatever she'd been expecting, it hadn't been anything quite so blunt. "Ummm... What do you mean?"

Megan looked to the ceiling as if the words she wanted might be found there. "You've seen me... acting differently, lately, and you don't think it's for real." The reading of Jackie's thoughts was a statement, not a question. Megan looked back at Jackie. "I've seen those looks you give me."

Jackie reddened, as if she hadn't intended to have been quite so obvious about it. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm just thinking... well, nobody changes *that* much, so fast."

Megan leaned forward, smiling suddenly, as if she'd got the response she wanted. "But that's just it. I *haven't* changed. Everything that's made me what I am, for as long as I can remember, that hasn't changed at all. I'm going to be the best Hanging Girl ever. Everything I've done since long before I got here, and after I got here, and now, is pointed towards that. I'm... going about it differently, lately, because Amy showed me a better way to get there. So what you see on the outside might look different. But it's really me, as much as anything you saw before was really me." She tapped her chest with both hands. "What's on the inside is written in stone. It's always been there, and it'll always be there. I want you to understand that much about me, because then you'll understand everything there is to know about me."

Amy was leaning far enough forward that she could see that Jackie's eyes were wide, and fixed on Megan. In a tiny voice, Jackie asked, "Why do you want me to understand you?"

Megan was looking back just as fixedly. "Because I want us to be friends. I know you've been Amy's friend since we all got here. I know Amy would like it if you and I could be friends too, but this isn't about making Amy happy." She reached down and took Jackie's hand, and Jackie, though obviously startled, didn't jerk it away. "It's just that I trust Amy's judgment, and if you're Amy's friend, that tells me you'd be a good friend to have."

Jackie, sounding almost hypnotized, murmured, "Maybe you'd be a good friend too."

Megan suddenly beamed at her. "Amy! Want to show them what we've been working on?" She looked excitedly at Jackie. "You'd be the first ones in our class to know about this. Keep it to yourselves, for now, okay?"

Amy shook herself out of a trance of her own. Of all the members of the First Year class, Megan had known that Jackie would be the first one Amy would want to share this with. She jumped excitedly off the bed and pulled the hanging platform to the center of the room, under the noose, while Megan got their equipment out of the dresser drawers, and Jackie and Erin looked on, mystified. Reflexively, Amy popped off her bra and pulled her shorts and panties off -- whatever the circumstances, it was hard to imagine hanging any other way than naked.

Megan looked at Amy, and saw she was already undressed. "Okay, you go first." She handed Amy the belt, which Amy fastened around her waist. Megan grunted as she lifted the first weight and hung it on the belt next to Amy's hip. Erin, startled out of her usual silence, blurted, "What in the hell are you guys doing?"

Megan continued hanging weights on Amy's belt. "We're working on strengthening our neck muscles. We're both up to forty pounds now. The goal is to handle a hundred extra pounds in about another month."

Jackie shook her head. "Supposedly that doesn't really help. They've found that just holding your own body weight is enough to condition the muscles."

Amy made her own negative gesture. "Not for what we're going to do." She went on to explain.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sleep released Amy for a moment, and she opened her eyes in the darkened room. She stifled a giggle as she realized her dream of floating on the ocean was probably caused by the slow rise and fall of the sleeping Erin's chest underneath her head. Amy felt the soft rubbing of Megan's hip against her own, as Megan lay beside her on the bed on top of Jackie. Megan's head was turned towards Amy, and presently Amy saw Megan's eyes open to squint at her. Amy smiled at her roommate and mouthed "Thank you."

Megan returned Amy's sleepy smile, and whispered, "Love you."

Amy heard Jackie's breathing change, and knew her friend had awakened. Jackie mumbled, "What's up?"

Moving as little as possible, Amy leaned over and kissed Jackie, Megan moving her head aside to give her room. "Shhh, 's nothing. Sorry. Don't wake Erin."

Erin raised her arm and put her hand behind Amy's head, pulling her more snugly against her breasts. Amy gave a short laugh. "Guess we're all awake now."

She felt Megan's shoulder rub hers. "Want to switch?"

Amy smiled. "Sure." She lifted herself off of Erin to let Megan slide over onto her, then climbed over Megan and onto Jackie, wrapping her arms around her friend and slipping her right leg between Jackie's. She looked down at Jackie, smiling. "Missed you."

Jackie said softly, "Me too," and pulled Amy's head down onto hers for a long, soft kiss.

## CHAPTER 21

THREE MONTHS LATER

Amy shuddered, shifting her footing on the custom-designed platform, her heart fluttering, as she heard the growing murmurs of club members from all directions beyond the curtains that enclosed her and Megan in the party pavilion's hanging cage. She whispered to Megan, "They're starting to let them in. This is really it!"

Megan smiled calmly and kissed Amy's shoulder. "Listen to me. As soon as we're up in the air, we'll be at home. We'll stop being nervous right that instant."

Amy couldn't see any signs that Megan was nervous to begin with. At Megan's words, Amy's fears began to recede. She was right, of course. Home was hanging by the neck. All of her tensions would drain away, as they always did. Everything would flow naturally.

From the time the dean had approved their idea, Amy and Megan had both been counting the days to this first public performance. They had spread the word out beyond their immediate circle of friends after that, and, a few at a time, every Academy student and teacher had come by Linda's and Laney's room to watch the practice sessions in which Amy and Megan gradually developed their routine, occasionally making suggestions for additions. Most of the Third Year girls expressed the wish they had seen something like this earlier in their student days -- by now, they were all so fully absorbed in preparing for their own post-graduation solo performances that they had no time to try anything requiring so many hours of practicing techniques so different from standard hanging. The First Year girls all wished they felt the confidence in their abilities they would need to give it a try, but watching Megan and Amy always seemed to leave them in intimidated awe.

The most satisfying thing, to Amy and Megan, was that it left their fellow students, in any of the classes, horny.

Amy took a deep breath, trying to clear her mind. She whispered, "Half hour, right?"

Megan nodded. "Supposedly. Most guests should be here by then."

Amy put her arms around Megan's waist and rested her head on her roommate's shoulder, as Megan did the same. This fully works both ways now, Amy thought. The physical contact between us that calmed Megan so much in the first weeks after That Night, as Amy thought of it -- we both need that now. She could feel peace washing through her from any part of her body that was touching Megan. She could tell from Megan's soft sigh that she was feeling the same thing.

The murmuring grew louder. A few minutes later, the other First Year girls began their one-at-a-time entrances -- Amy could tell by the reactions. Conversations between guests and students began, and from all around came the sounds of curiosity. None of the members had been told what to expect.

The next time, of course, they would know. Assuming there was a next time. If there was enough positive response to tonight's show, announcements of the show beginning the next First Year party would go out in the mail. The party, starting an hour earlier than usual, would begin with a performance

by Amy and Megan, and members would pay a hundred dollar premium for admission at that earlier time. Those wishing to skip the show and come at the regular time would pay the regular price.

It all depended on how the show went tonight.

For the hundredth time, Amy reminded herself that she shouldn't put so much pressure on herself, since in any case, she wouldn't be the direct beneficiary of the proceeds from future shows, if any. As a slave, she had no legal means of controlling any of the money, all of which would go to the Academy. And the dean understood that this was in the nature of an experiment that he was willing to try. It was clear that Amy and Megan would suffer no penalty if it didn't work out. But this was important to Amy for reasons unrelated to monetary rewards.

Though she was expecting it at any moment, it still startled Amy to hear Denise's voice call for everyone's attention. As a dorm sister, sharing duties with her new roommate Paula following Bridget's sale and hanging, Denise was serving as spokesperson for the First Year class.

Denise began, "On behalf of the Hanging Academy and all of the First Year students who will be your hostesses tonight, I'd like to welcome all of you to tonight's party. Of course, at the end of the party, you'll be able to see a member of the class, April Bondurant, snuffed in a hanging she hopes all of you will enjoy." The background noise of quiet conversations among the guests grew momentarily louder -- Sela's hanging four months ago, followed by Connie's at the most recent First Year party two months later, had led the club members to have high regard for the techniques of the First Year class.

Denise continued, "We have something a little different for you at the start of tonight's party. Two of our students, Amy and Megan, are going to put on a hanging show of a type new to the Academy and, as far as we know, never before done anywhere. The only thing I've been asked to say is that the Academy wants all of our guests to understand that this hanging will *not* be fatal. Our performers will end the show alive and well, though for dramatic purposes they will appear to be dead. Afterwards, each girl's services for tonight will be auctioned to the highest bidder."

Amy and Megan both were a little disappointed with that. They had wanted to be offered for rental as a pair, but the dean strongly felt that it was crucial for every graduate to have consummate skills at satisfying the sexual desires of their owners in a situation that was almost always one-on-one, and the parties were exactly the place where Academy girls honed those skills. He did, at last, promise to study the videos of their private sessions, and to allow them to work together starting in a year or so, once he was satisfied that their solo sexual skills were up to Academy standards.

Denise went on, "Aside from that, please remember that this will be a dramatic performance, and we ask that you have respect for the performers, for the benefit of those around you.

"And now, without delaying any further, I present Amy and Megan, as well as Jackie and Erin, who will play their executioners."

The curtain surrounding the hanging cage began to roll itself upward from the bottom, seemingly of its own accord. There were several appreciative gasps from the audience as the occupants of the cage were revealed.

Amy and Megan were standing on the platform, back to back, so that everyone could have a frontal view of one or the other of them, at least, after the unveiling. They were already naked -- the raising of the curtain, they had decided, would serve in place of the usual dramatic shedding of clothes prior to the hanging. Judging from the reactions of the onlookers, it seemed to have worked very well. With the small part of her mind that was not concentrating on the choreography of the upcoming performance, Amy reflected that Megan, clothed or not, always had the same stunning effect on the occupants of any room she entered -- though to Amy's perception, it seemed that the gasps came in equal numbers from the viewers on her own side of the cage. Maybe, she thought, I'm looking better than I imagined. She struggled to keep the grim, determined look on her face.

With their arms straight down along their sides, each girl was holding the other's right hand with her left in a lover's grip of interlaced fingers.

Amy looked over towards a barred window to the secure area and saw, as promised, that Linda and Laney were looking on from behind the window. Both girls had begged to be allowed to attend the party, but the dean had decided that security for a party involving the whole large First Year class was hard enough to maintain without adding extra students from other classes, and he didn't want to set a precedent that might lead to the security nightmare of keeping track of the entire student body in the semi-secure Party Pavilion. Amy's friends had a limited view from where they were, but Amy could see Linda grin suddenly and give her a thumbs-up signal. Amy closed both eyes briefly in a double wink that wouldn't be perceived as breaking character.

Amy couldn't see Grace, who perhaps was on the other side, facing Megan, but she spotted Benjamin at the far edge of the crowd, and again clamped down on her instinct to smile and wave at him. It was easy to interpret the smile on Benjamin's face. He knew he'd been the inspiration for this.

The dean himself was in the pavilion, the first party he had attended, from what Amy heard, in several years.

Jackie and Erin, dressed in the traditional sexy black outfits their roles required, weaved their way forward from the outskirts of the mixture of guests and students, from opposite sides of the room, each carrying a length of rope and a rolled-up scroll. They stopped in front of the cage, Jackie facing Amy's side of it, Erin facing Megan. As they unfurled their scrolls ceremoniously, the room became as quiet as if everyone in it had suddenly vanished. Speaking loudly without needing to, since a whisper would have been clearly audible at that point, Jackie and Erin began alternately reading lines from their scrolls -- Erin's idea, so that neither Amy nor Megan would spend the entire reading with her back to the speaker:

"Amy Cameron..." began Jackie.

"...and Megan Sadler," continued Erin.

"You have been found guilty of the attempted murder of our beloved emperor..."

"...and have been sentenced to death by hanging, as a penalty for your crime."

"Furthermore, in recognition of the conspiratorial nature of this heinous act..."

“...each of you is condemned to watch the other die.”

“The court has decreed that, if you express your sincere regret and your love for the emperor...”

“...your sentence will be commuted to a lifetime of solitary imprisonment.”

“Have you anything to say?”

Amy straightened, glared defiantly at Jackie and spat -- carefully directing it straight down to the platform, though she doubted she could have reached any of the onlookers from where she was anyway -- and growled, “I say *that* to the emperor.”

Behind her, Megan said to Erin, “We’d rather die together than live apart!”

Erin responded, “Very well! Turn and face each other!”

Amy and Megan complied, renewing their grip on each other’s hands afterwards. Amy lifted Megan’s hand to her lips and kissed the backs of Megan’s fingers. “One last time together, my love.”

Megan responded with her own kiss of Amy’s fingers. “We’ll make the last time the best.”

Erin opened the cage door, entered and sprang up onto the platform behind Megan, followed by Jackie who took her position behind Amy. Jackie said sternly, “Hands behind you!” Amy crossed her wrists behind her back so that Jackie could tie them, while Erin was doing the same to Megan. Amy and Megan had agreed that the inability to use their hands would make the movements of which they were capable seem that much more erotic. In future shows they would vary the format, but this was what they had decided on for the first program.

Then, with solemn formality, Jackie and Erin placed the dangling nooses over Amy’s and Megan’s respective heads and tightened them around their necks. Jackie and Erin stepped down from the platform and backed out of the cage to kneel beside it, leaving Amy and Megan alone, waiting to be hanged.

With the rope caressing her throat, Amy found that her attack of nerves had washed away unnoticed. You can’t be nervous, she told herself, when you’re being yourself. Up to this point in the show, she had played a role. From here on, what remained would be the ultimate expression of herself. She and Megan both took a small step forward, each putting her left foot between the other’s feet and right foot on the outside. Each had her mound rubbing the top of her partner’s left thigh. Amy looked into Megan’s eyes, her lips almost touching Megan’s, and said quietly, knowing it could nevertheless be heard throughout the room, “I love you.”

Megan said equally quietly, “I love you,” and moved her head barely an inch farther forward to kiss Amy.

The kiss was Denise’s cue. The platform on which the girls stood was not only wider than a normal one, to accommodate both of them, but also mechanized to an extent not previously used. Its motion was controlled electronically by a remote in Denise’s hand. At the signal of the kiss, Denise pressed the down

button, and the platform began descending. The girls appeared to hold the kiss, though now with their mouths closed and breathing deeply through their noses in preparation for the hypoxia to come.

As they lost contact with the platform and hung freely, the girls, in long-rehearsed unison, each tightened her feet around the other's left ankle and pulled their bodies forward, in slow, deliberate motion, each pushing her knee between the other's legs. Continuing the motion, their upper bodies joined afterwards, their stomachs rubbing, their breasts compressing together. Each girl then rocked her hips backward, again slowly, almost ritualistically, pulling their upper bodies apart while their legs remained intertwined, then thrusting forward again -- lovemaking as ballet.

The onlookers, staring raptly at the erotic display taking place primarily from the hips upward, was not aware of the work going on below the waist. The flexing, tightening, and relaxing of thigh muscles was visible, but only seemed a minor addition, contributing to the general arousal but not otherwise significant. But it was the most important part. As Megan's left thigh had reached Amy's crotch, Amy had tightened her thighs on it, and pushed herself upward, feeling the pressure of the rope squeezing her neck gradually vanish as it stopped having to support her weight. Now she could breathe, and the blood could flow to her head. After taking several breaths, she gradually relaxed her legs, and felt Megan in turn tightening hers. Within seconds, Megan had used her thigh muscles to lift herself, and Amy felt her neck muscles strain as they began supporting both her own weight and Megan's. After Megan had taken her breaths, she relaxed her legs, and Amy began the cycle again.

Both girls had agreed, almost from the beginning, that the standard method a hanging girl used for breathing would not fit in with their vision of the type of performance they wanted to put on. In a normal hanging, the head-rolling gave the appearance of being just another of the girl's desperate movements to save her life, an attempt to breathe (ironically assumed to be futile), an obvious thing to do, yet not really noticed by onlookers because the legs kicking for support that couldn't be found, the arm muscles straining to try to free the hands, both were more visually arresting and arousing.

In this performance, rather than trying to save their lives, the girls wanted to be seen as making love. Rolling their heads to breathe would ruin the illusion.

So they had evolved, over the last several months, a technique that would be appropriate to the fantasy they were trying to weave. They would breathe in alternation, and each would support the other's weight while her partner lifted herself, to make it possible. It had taken two months of strengthening their neck muscles before they could even begin working that all-important detail into the choreography they had been developing.

Amy was only peripherally aware of the sounds around her, as nearly all of her conscious mind now was absorbed in her dance with Megan. It did register on her that, from various directions, she could hear what sounded almost like moans of passion, not coming from herself or Megan. They had agreed to remain silent, even though they could have moaned and sighed while breathing. Neither had thought it was wise to waste the breath needed for that, and they also didn't want to make it obvious that they *were* breathing. It struck Amy as funny that the crowd around them was taking up the slack and, probably involuntarily, making the sounds that Amy and Megan weren't. Then she pushed the thought aside and concentrated on her next move.

At this point Megan, letting her thighs relax once more, gave Amy's thighs a quick double squeeze. At this prearranged signal, again in slow-motion unison, each girl raised her right leg, bending her knee, and twisted her leg around to wrap it around her partner's waist, as their left legs remained hanging straight downward against each other. In this new configuration, they resumed breathing -- Amy going first, since Megan had breathed last, tightening her leg around Megan's waist to lift herself, all the while continuing the upper-body thrusting-together-and-apart they had been doing throughout. There were much more obvious gasps from the audience at this point, some masculine grunts, and several high-pitched panting moans, most likely from women in the crowd, which suggested impending orgasms.

They had prolonged the show as far as they could -- possibly future shows could be longer, as they refined and improved their breathing technique while adding new elements to the choreography. Each girl was forced to hold her breath for more than half of the show, and it wasn't possible to make up for the accumulating oxygen debt during the brief breathing periods. In their last dress rehearsal (at least Jackie and Erin were dressed for it), they had managed twelve minutes, though it seemed to the First Year students watching that it had been much longer than that -- subjective estimates of the length of the show had run as high as thirty minutes. And a number of roommate pairs had run back to their rooms, flushed and obviously horny, immediately after the end.

Amy gave Megan the signal to go into their closing. Each girl tightened her leg around her partner's waist, tensed all her muscles and clung to the other quivering spasmodically as if in orgasm. Slowly they relaxed, each letting her right leg drop downward, their upper bodies drawing apart, and they let the point of contact of their legs slip down until only their ankles were touching. They went limp at last, each with her ankles hooked behind her partner's, as if in death they were holding hands with their feet.

Denise pushed the button on her remote, and the curtain quickly rolled down along the sides of the cage, after which, unseen by the audience, the platform began rising. Jackie ducked in under the curtain and entered the cage, one of her purposes being to make sure the platform really was ascending -- if there were a mechanical failure, Jackie would have supported both girls while calling for help. Since the mechanism did, in fact, work, Jackie had nothing else she needed to do other than untie both girls' wrists and duck back out again. Moments later the curtain rose once more, revealing Amy and Megan back in their original back-to-back position, holding hands once more, the nooses, now removed, dangling beside them.

The audience erupted in applause that seemed to make the room shake, most of the guests and students taking a break from masturbating to clap their hands, as Amy and Megan grinned and made small bows. Amy saw Linda and Laney at their window, applauding wildly while jumping up and down.

Paula and Denise, themselves still applauding, made their way inward through the crowd and stood in front of the cage. Paula spoke up loudly over the applause, which died down as she began speaking. "We'd like to start the auction now. As you heard earlier, Amy..." Amy raised her hand and waved, grinning, "...and Megan..." Megan echoed Amy's greeting, "...will each be happy to spend the next three hours with the highest bidder. Keep in mind that there will be a ten percent surcharge for the optional use of the toy drawer. In any case, with or without toys, each of the girls, as always, will be glad to perform any of the services listed in the members' handbook, in whatever positions you desire." There was a brief wave of excited conversation and chuckles at that announcement.

Amy spotted a young man at the edge of the crowd fidgeting indecisively during the announcement. At the end, the man suddenly turned and sprinted to the members' entrance to the pavilion, from which he urgently signaled to someone outside.

Amy felt a flutter of nerves, suspecting what was happening. Moments later, to Amy's complete lack of surprise, Andrew appeared at the entrance and presented his ticket, listening and glowering as his friend described the situation.

There was no way to be sure yet, but Amy fervently hoped she had been right about the amount of funds Andrew could possibly have at his disposal. That had been the whole original point of the performance.

As Paula and Denise entered the cage, Amy and Megan turned to face the same direction, side by side, their hands behind them in the traditional pose for slave auctions, with the dorm sisters each stepping up to the platform and taking positions behind them, Denise in back of Amy, Paula behind Megan. The crowd behind them drifted around towards the front. Denise spoke up. "We're going to start the bidding at \$4000."

Megan had persuaded the dean that they should each do a single three-hour session, rather than the usual three one-hour time slots, since an unusual "scarcity value" would add to the members' interest, and hence to the amount of money that would be bid. That had been the best rationalization she and Amy had managed to come up with, to hide the true strategy of simply wanting to make Amy's services as outrageously expensive as possible. Amy herself had then suggested the \$4000 amount. The dean pointed out that that would be more than any student had ever before earned in one night, to which Amy responded that the members had never before had a chance to spend an evening with one of the girls who had just put on the sort of show they were going to do. When the dean at last acknowledged that it was worth a try, Amy could hardly contain her joy.

And now the joy returned, tentatively, when Amy saw Andrew go pale as Denise specified the minimum bid.

Behind Megan, Paula held one hand up and put the other on Megan's shoulder. "Can I get four thousand for Megan?"

Immediately a woman near the front held her hand up. A man farther to the left said, "Forty-one." Another woman said "Forty-two," just ahead of a man near the back shouting, "Four thousand for Amy!"

Amy gasped, and immediately looked at Andrew. She failed to catch his eye: he was already turning away, whipping his arm out in an infuriated gesture and stomping towards the door. He paused there, looked back once, his lips compressed into a tight line, turned away again, slammed his fist against the doorframe, and left.

It had worked! All that work she and Megan had done had put Amy out of his price range!

Amy clapped her hands, bouncing on the balls of her feet, her face alight, knowing she looked as if she were applauding the mere fact of having received a bid, rather than its consequences. Not even realizing

it, she excitedly slapped the flat of her hand against the small of Megan's back, several times, until Megan grabbed her wrist to stop her. Megan was laughing, though, and leaned over and kissed Amy.

All of this was less noticeable to the crowd than it might have been, as there was confusion behind Amy and Megan as well. Denise was laughing and waving her arms in the air. "Slow down, slow down! We haven't done this before, so could you bear with us? We're trying to keep track of all this. Please don't offer an amount until I ask for it, okay?" There was chuckling and good-natured agreement all around.

Denise nodded and breathed a theatrical sigh of relief. "Okay, I heard four thousand for Amy. Anybody going to forty-one? Okay, thanks. Forty-two?..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy smiled and sighed in the glow from her orgasm, and kissed Stephen, tightening her arms around him, as he lay spent on top of her, his erection still buried within her but gradually shrinking. She giggled at the tickle in her pussy lips as it slipped out of her at last, slick with her own fluids and his. "Thank you, sir."

He laughed. "Well, no, thank *you*."

She laughed and patted his buttock. "Well, that just felt really good." It occurred to her that in the six months, actually seven, she'd been at the Academy, Stephen was the first man she'd had inside her other than Andrew. The best part of that, aside from the physical sensation, was the fact that it pushed the memory of Andrew that much farther into the past.

She was still marveling that he had paid so much for her. Megan had gone for a higher price, which Amy regarded as right and proper -- sixty-nine fifty, to a smartly-dressed woman who looked hungrily at Megan and was obviously thrilled to win her -- but it surprised Amy how close she had come to matching that. Five or six people had bid on Amy, including Grace, about which Amy had some misgivings, but it wasn't like worrying about Andrew -- Amy knew she could handle Grace. Grace dropped out early, though, and Stephen had won the bidding war that had come down to himself and a pretty red-haired lady, at sixty-five hundred. (Amy had finally had an opportunity, during the auction, to wave happily at Benjamin, who smiled and waved back, but had not participated in the bidding. Amy understood that Benjamin intended to meet several of her fellow students tonight.)

Amy couldn't stop herself now from satisfying her curiosity. "How come you wanted me and not Megan?"

Stephen blinked at her in surprise. "Why wouldn't I want you?"

"Well, really, she's a lot hotter than me."

He stroked her hair where it lay against her cheek. "You're way too modest. Anyway..." he chuckled, "...you smile more."

Amy leapt to Megan's defense. "She smiles a lot more than she used to. Her face is getting more used to it." She pushed up the corners of her lips into a smile with her fingers, and giggled.

He kissed her chin lightly. "You were really sensational..."

She gave him a mock pout. "Don't talk like it's over already. We've got lots of time left."

He laughed. "Oh, don't worry. It'll take a little time, but I know I'll make a comeback. And I *did* mean you were great in here, but I was also thinking about..." he waved vaguely behind him, in the direction of the main hall, "...out there. You and your friend. I've seen a lot of hangings, but I've never seen one remotely like that. How..." He seemed at a loss for words for a moment, and took a deep breath. "How do you *do* that?"

Amy decided there was no reason to keep it a secret. There would probably be very few imitators willing to put in the required amount of practice. "We lift each other up."

It occurred to her, then, that he had not necessarily been asking for technical details, so much as he was wondering about the source of the inspiration and spirit behind the performance.

And it occurred to her that the answer she had just given still applied.

"In every way possible," she added.

### **End of Book 3**

*Read about Amy's third year at the Hanging Academy in Book 4, "Departures."*