

ACADEMY GIRL

Book 5: The Graduate

By Cardaniel

©copyright 2010 by Cardaniel

All Rights Reserved

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1	3	CHAPTER 21	192
CHAPTER 2	10	CHAPTER 22	202
CHAPTER 3	18	CHAPTER 23	209
CHAPTER 4	28	CHAPTER 24	218
CHAPTER 5	35	CHAPTER 25	229
CHAPTER 6	45	CHAPTER 26	241
CHAPTER 7	54	CHAPTER 27	256
CHAPTER 8	62	CHAPTER 28	271
CHAPTER 9	73	CHAPTER 29	285
CHAPTER 10	83	CHAPTER 30	295
CHAPTER 11	91	CHAPTER 31	310
CHAPTER 12	102	CHAPTER 32	322
CHAPTER 13	112	CHAPTER 33	335
CHAPTER 14	119	CHAPTER 34	349
CHAPTER 15	128	CHAPTER 35	365
CHAPTER 16	140	CHAPTER 36	379
CHAPTER 17	147	CHAPTER 37	392
CHAPTER 18	159	CHAPTER 38	406
CHAPTER 19	170	CHAPTER 39	419
CHAPTER 20	181		

CHAPTER 1

Amy looked around the hallway outside the auditorium, trying to remember the young high school graduate who had been so much in awe of these surroundings three years ago -- the awe persisted, now overlaid with a sense of belonging. This school, the Academy, was her place, destined to be hers from the time she was born. I've done it, she thought, I've cleared all of the hurdles. The only thing left is the finish line.

Around her were the faces of her closest friends, twenty-three of them, the girls with whom she had traveled on all of the journey -- all of them strangers in that dim past, three years previous, now married by the shared experience of becoming the women they wanted to be.

Amy felt herself becoming burdened by ponderous thoughts of this type, and turned to Megan, standing beside her in the whispering and giggling group of Hanging Girls, all dressed in their everyday blue Academy uniforms -- Amy was glad of the absence of cap-and-gown pretentiousness. She kissed Megan and grinned. "Well, we're here!"

Megan grinned back. "Where we were always meant to be." Her beautiful face was aglow.

Amy laughed. The sense of occasion was even affecting Megan.

As the girls milled aimlessly, Amy found she was now near enough to Jackie to put her arms around her in a tight hug, and gave her a kiss. "Took a long time to get here, didn't it?" Amy reached out to include Erin in the hug. Jackie and Erin were one of just three pairs of original roommates who had made it through together -- four, if one counted Shawna and Megan, who had split up but were, at least, both still alive.

Jackie grinned. "Did you do the same thing I did, back at the start? Make a mental list of who was going to make it and who wasn't?"

Amy shrugged. "It's kind of natural, right?" Amy waved her arm around to indicate the rest of the graduating class. "How did you do?"

Jackie laughed. "About as well as I could have if I'd just seen names on the admission list. Or drawn them out of a hat. None of us knew anything about each other."

Erin tightened her hand around Jackie's. "I guess we do now." She leaned in to kiss Amy and Megan.

Jackie laughed again. "Yeah, now we know exactly which girls have moles between their butt cheeks." The girls in the immediate area laughed, and a couple of them got several friendly whaps on the butt.

Vonda Bennett, newly promoted to assistant dean, appeared in the doorway of the auditorium. "All of you get lined up now, so we can go in. You know the order."

Slowly, and with a continuation of low-key conversation and giggling, the girls formed a line in front of the doorway, in order of their dorm-room numbers, so that roommates could march in and sit together -- the two, or in two cases, three, girls in each room lining up alphabetically. Amy took a deep breath as

she fell in line behind Wendy, from the room across the hall, and in front of Megan. In the auditorium, where something resembling a graduation march, unfamiliar to Amy, had been playing very softly, the music was now increased in volume, and the murmur of conversations from inside the aud was suddenly hushed. Ms. Bennett gestured to Rita, the first girl in line, and Rita, with the other girls following her in line, slowly walked down the aud's center aisle, as all of the guests turned to watch, each looking to pick out the one particular girl they had come to see.

Behind the guests sat the newly-promoted Second Year and Third Year classes, all wearing their new uniforms. The Second Years were especially excited -- the auditorium was outside the Academy's secure area, and today was the first time in a year that these girls had been allowed out. Amy grinned and gave a thumbs-up to Melissa, who returned the gesture, and saw Jana give a finger-wave to Megan, with whom she had developed a special rapport.

Amy, nearly alone among the graduates, had not invited anyone. Her father, she knew, was not big on ceremonies of this type, and would not be disappointed to miss it -- and there was always the danger that Andrew would come along, the last person Amy wanted anywhere in her proximity. Amy could visit her father later, for as many hugs and thank yous as that reserved man would stand for. Amy had wanted to invite Scott, the only boyfriend she had ever had, to thank him for being so understanding that their relationship had to be temporary, that her budding love for him could never flower in the face of her need to attend the Academy. But she had failed in her attempts to locate him. He was no longer at the address and phone number she knew from three years ago, and she couldn't find a directory listing for him. She knew he should have graduated from the university a few months earlier, and tried to find him through the university, but they informed her stiffly that they didn't give out that sort of information.

Amy spotted a man who fit the description Megan had given her. She turned enough to see Megan nod at her in confirmation, while giving the man a quick wave. Amy gave the man a smile, despite knowing he wouldn't know who she was. She was a little puzzled that there wasn't a twelve-year-old girl beside the man -- Megan's sister Kathleen. Though Megan hadn't said so, Amy had no trouble reading Megan well enough to understand that Megan was more eager to see Kathleen here than her father -- or, more accurately, that Kathleen should see her. Megan didn't really display any conscious pride in being a Hanging Girl. It was simply the most natural thing in the world to her, and she could never have seen herself as anything else. The extent to which she *did* take pride in it lay in whatever inspiration it could provide for her sister. Amy could see, now, the disappointment in Megan's eyes behind the happiness at seeing her father.

Rita, leading the line, now mounted the steps leading up to the stage on which a single row of twenty-four seats faced the audience, so that no girl would be hidden behind others, and walked, from right to left, across the row of seats to the far end, all of the girls sitting as they reached their seats. Amy followed Wendy, sat, and immediately took Megan's hand, lacing her fingers through Megan's and giving her hand a squeeze. To her left, beyond the row of seats, Amy glanced at the noose she had just passed, that represented everything she had worked for. For the thousandth time, she felt that thrill shoot through her at the sight of a rope tied in that special knot.

Once the graduates were seated, the music faded and the dean stepped up to the lectern on the left side of the stage, Amy's right.

He smiled out at the audience. "I'd like to welcome all of you here to the Hanging Academy on this special day. I am Eric Porter, the dean of the Academy, and it is my pleasure to present to you this year's graduating class." He gestured to his left, indicating the graduates, and the guests applauded, accompanied by a high-pitched cheer from the students behind them.

"As part of our program today, I'd like to present one of our graduates, Amy Cameron, who has a few words to say on behalf of the class. Amy?" He gestured towards her.

Taking a deep breath, her heart fluttering, Amy stood and walked to the lectern. She hadn't exactly wanted this assignment, but had volunteered to save Megan from doing something a little out of her comfort zone. The student speaker was always chosen from the top three students in the class -- in this case, in order, Megan, Amy, and Jackie. Amy checked quickly to make sure the printed list of names was still there on the lectern, though it was not obvious how it could disappear in the time since she had checked earlier this morning. Her hands shaking slightly, Amy held the sides of the lectern and looked out over the audience.

"I..." She swallowed and started again. "I don't have a speech written down. I wanted it to come from the heart. My heart is doing a little bouncing around on its own right now, but I'll try to make this work." She held her hand over her chest. There were appreciative chuckles and encouraging nods with smiles from the audience, and Amy felt her nervousness beginning to subside.

"I'd much rather be over there," she pointed to the noose, "Than standing here. Every one of us feels that way," she gestured to her classmates to her left, "And I think that if you understand that, you'll know the most important thing about us. Those of you who came here to see your daughter, or granddaughter, or sister, or best friend, I just wish there was a way you could really know how much work she has done in the last three years to be sitting where she is today. Please believe me, you can be really, really proud that she is.

"For myself, the one personal comment I want to make is to thank you, those of you out there who either created these girls, or had any part at all in making them who they are today. Because I really needed their friendship and their help, and without them I wouldn't have made it here.

"And now... I want you to stop focusing on us for just a minute, the twenty-four girls you're seeing on the stage. Because in the beginning, there were fifty-eight of us. And if you're wondering what happened to the rest -- they were all hanged at some time during the last three years." Amy could hear a few murmurs of surprise from audience members not familiar with how the Academy worked. She went on, with slow emphasis, "But they *are here*. They are part of us, and I don't just mean in the ordinary way of being food. They helped make us what we have become, teaching us things we couldn't have learned except for their sacrifice. And since they are part of us, they are graduating today, just like the girls you are seeing. You're going to hear all of our names in just a few minutes, so I want to make the list of graduates complete, by introducing the girls who are here but invisible to you, though they are very visible to us."

Amy looked down at the list. "Susan Fennel. Sela Turner..." She gave each name its own emphasis, pausing after each and looking up, as she went through the thirty-four names printed on the page in front of her. She had practiced naming them from memory, but decided to use a list just in case nervousness caused her to blank. She wanted to get this part exactly right, because she knew the

graduation was being filmed -- and she intended, later, to ask the dean to send copies of the video to the families of all of the departed girls.

Amy looked up again as she finished the list, then stole a quick look at the dean, sitting just to her right and behind. She hoped he wouldn't feel she was exceeding her authority, of which she had none. "We, the students you can see, now declare all of the girls whose names you've just heard to be graduates of the Hanging Academy." Her voice broke. "And we thank every one of them, with every beat of our hearts."

Tears running from her eyes, Amy walked back to her seat.

For a moment, there was dead silence throughout the auditorium. Then came the sound of two or three pairs of hands clapping. Instantly the applause spread through the hall. Behind the guests, the Second and Third Year girls leapt to their feet, followed seconds later by the guests themselves. Amy, her lip quivering, saw that her classmates were applauding as well. She wiped her eyes and joined in the applause. It wasn't for her, she knew, or anything she had said. It was for Susan, and Sela, and all of the rest.

As the applause subsided, the dean arose again and stepped to the lectern. To her astonishment, Amy saw him brush the back of his hand across his eyes. He had to clear his throat twice, and spoke his first few words in a slightly more husky than normal voice. "At this time, Ms. Vonda Bennett, our assistant dean, will help me present to each of our graduates a symbol of her accomplishment. Let me say a few words first that will help you appreciate the meaning this symbol has for our girls.

"As you can easily understand, our graduates have little use, themselves, for a diploma, since they all anticipate dying in the next few months, and in the process bringing honor to their school and recognition of their high level of training. We will shortly be mailing diplomas, already mounted and laminated on plaques, to their families. Today, though, each of our girls will be presented with a red slave collar.

"In their wardrobes here at the Academy, the girls have a number of attractive outfits and collars, in which they perform their duties at our periodic Academy parties, in a variety of colors -- with the exception of red. Only our graduates are allowed to dress in red, and I ask you to imagine the degree of pride felt by every one of our graduates which that color then inspires, reminding them of the years of intellectual and physical effort that have earned them the right to wear it."

He looked to his right, where Ms. Bennett was standing beside a table strewn with cloth choker collars, and she gave him a slight nod to indicate she was ready, and said, "Will the graduates please rise."

Amy stood, along with the others, feeling a wave of unreality break over her. She had seen this ceremony three times before, the first time through the grate in the secured area which she was not allowed to leave, the last two in the audience, and had been especially thrilled by the one last year, when she was able to see Linda and Laney graduate. But now, she told herself, it's for *me*. And for Megan, and for Jackie, and for all of the rest of the girls with whom she had shared all of the classes and studying for three years. I did it, she said over and over to herself, I really did it!

Amy was barely conscious of Ms. Bennett calling the names one by one, as the line of girls inched forward and led each girl past the dean for a handshake, then past Ms. Bennett, who went through an elaborate ritual of replacing the girl's Third Year slave collar with that special red, the audience applauding, and each girl afterwards circling around behind the row of chairs to allow the next girl in line to come forward.

And now Amy was at the front of the line, watching Wendy being awarded her collar. Amy felt a helpless, ecstatic smile spread across her lips, and felt as though a shimmering bubble were forming around her. She heard Ms. Bennett say, "Amy Cameron," and the bubble now seemed to float her the few remaining feet to Dean Porter, who smiled and took her right hand with his, covering it with his left, saying something warm and congratulatory that Amy did not quite pick up, as she murmured vague thanks. Then she drifted in the bubble towards Ms. Bennett, whose words succeeded in penetrating the bubble. "You said when you applied you were going to be here someday, Amy."

Amy, her burning eyes suddenly informing her that she hadn't been blinking, whispered, "Yes, ma'am," as Ms. Bennett reached behind Amy's neck to unfasten her collar, lifted the red one from the table beside her, held it up in front of Amy's now-streaming eyes so that she could read the standard words "Amy -- Property of the Hanging Academy" on a red collar, a red one, red, and then looped it around Amy's neck and fastened it.

The bubble floated Amy a few feet farther still, and turned her to watch as Ms. Bennett called out the name "Megan Sadler." Amy's bubble dissolved, allowing her an unimpeded perception of Megan receiving the honor she had been born to achieve. Megan, a huge grin on her own face, stepped towards Amy with her new collar, and Amy reached out for her, her arms sliding around the waist of her roommate for a joyful hug, a minor breach of the protocol of the ceremony for which, Amy knew, no one would fault her.

Holding Megan's hand, still floating on what remained of the bubble, Amy circled behind the chairs and returned to her seat to watch as the remaining girls received their well-earned honor.

As the last girl sat, the dean gestured towards the graduates with his arm. "It's my pleasure to present to you twenty-four..." he hesitated, looked towards Amy and gave her a small nod, a slight smile on his face. "Excuse me, fifty-eight new graduates of the Hanging Academy." His smile broadened, and the audience applauded warmly, standing once more, backed by exuberant shouts from the students behind them.

At this point, Amy knew, the videotaping of the ceremony would end, but not the ceremony itself.

The dean waited for the applause to die down, and spoke again. "At this time, the Academy is pleased to present to you, our guests, a demonstration of the type of show your daughter, grand-daughter, sister, or friend, will put on as an Academy graduate." He looked behind him, and Amy saw Pam emerge from behind the curtain at the back of the stage, a Second Year... no, Amy shook her head to remind herself, now Third Year student, whose career at the Academy would go no farther than today. The dean went on, "I present to you one of our fine students, Pamela Ashton. I would say more, but she has asked me to be allowed to introduce herself to you, prior to her hanging."

Pam, dressed in her everyday uniform, her Third Year uniform on the one day she would wear it, stepped up to the lectern. Behind her, her roommate Christie had also come out from behind the curtain and stood now behind and to the left of Pam. Pam bit her lip and grinned, looking excited, nodding to acknowledge the applause. "Thank you. Really." As the audience quieted, she continued. "I'm Pam Ashton, and I am just so glad to be able to participate in a graduation, even if it's not my own." She paused as the audience briefly applauded again. "And the reason I wanted to talk to you before my hanging is that I sure won't be able to do it *after*." The audience laughed.

Pam gestured towards the graduates. "Now, I know you all know what... okay, just to keep it simple, I'll just say 'your daughter,' though I know a lot of you have a different relationship with the girl who invited you -- you all know what kinds of things your daughter has been learning here, but probably most of you have never actually seen a show before. And you may not necessarily get to see your own daughter do her show, because that's up to her owners to decide. So just imagine I'm her, and then you'll be able to picture her when she does hang. Except..." Pam leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial stage whisper, "...she'll do it better than I can." She giggled, and waited as the audience laughed appreciatively, and applauded once more. Obviously, Amy decided, whether they knew the specifics of how students were chosen for demonstrations and shows, they understood that the Academy would never sacrifice one of their best students at a free show.

The applause went on, and suddenly increased in volume, as the audience members, one by one, rose to their feet again. A little puzzled, wondering what she'd missed, Amy noticed the dean looking at her, his eyebrows raised, giving her a barely perceptible hand-shrug and slight nod. He wasn't expecting it either! she realized, and it came to her suddenly -- they were all thinking about what Amy had said, in her speech! And they understood that Pam was exactly one of the students Amy had been talking about -- giving her life up for the school. Amy, applauding along with everyone, also stood, and around her the rest of the graduates rose as well.

Pam, also taken aback, colored slightly and covered her face for a moment with one hand. As the applause died down at last, she cleared her throat and went on. "Now, I know you all probably know more about Hanging Girls than most people do, since, well, you've got one in the family. But I don't want to take anything for granted, so I want to make sure you know that when you go to a show, there's a little play-acting before the hanging. And there's one more thing that I know you couldn't know if I didn't tell you, and it's something I'm really excited and proud of.

"I'm sure you've seen female criminals or game show contestants hang on TV, and you know their feet are usually free so they do a lot of kicking. But people are all different, and the people who buy Hanging Girls are all different, and sometimes they want the girl to hang with her feet tied together. That's always a special challenge for us, because we can't do all of the things we'd ordinarily do. But in the past year, some of the girls have been working out some new moves for us to do if we find ourselves in that situation -- and today will be the first time we'll -- well, I mean, that would be me -- I'll be showing off that new stuff in public for the first time ever." She beamed at the audience, who applauded once more, with a buzz of murmured conversations behind the applause, continuing for a moment after the clapping subsided.

"I only found out a week ago I'd be hanging for you today, and even though we've all been practicing the new stuff for most of the past year, none of us spend that much time on this kind of hanging, because it's a just-in-case kind of thing. But I decided I wanted to try it this way, and be the first, and I've had so much help getting ready, so I want to thank some girls. I especially want to thank Jana, who invented a

lot of these moves and spent the most time helping me in the last week.” Pam made a stand-up gesture, and the audience, realizing Pam was signaling to someone behind them, turned to see Jana stand up, blushing more brightly than Pam had as a burst of applause came her way. She sat down again quickly and took Melissa’s hand.

Pam continued, “Jana has only been here a year -- she’s in the class *behind* me -- but that’s just telling you what kind of school this is. *All* of us work together to try to help each other get better. And I also got a lot of help from...” Pam gestured in a mock-dismissive way at the graduates, “These older people over here.” She paused as the audience laughed. “So I want to give some recognition to Shawna, and Megan, and Amy.” As Pam gave the get-up gesture, Amy stood, with Megan beside her, and Shawna farther down the row of graduates, and gave the audience a grin and a little wave before sitting again, to yet more applause.

“And I want to thank the dean, so much, for inviting my dad to come today. Daddy, I got to do a show!” She made an exultant fist-pump gesture, and heads in the audience craned to see who she was looking at, satisfied when a man in the middle of the audience blew her a kiss. “My sister Kim just became a puppygirl last year, so she couldn’t make it today. Daddy, if you see her owner, tell him to give Kimmy a little puppy treat from me, okay?” The man responded, “Will do!”

Pam went on, “And especially...” her voice suddenly became husky, “I want to thank my roommate for the last two years, Christie, who is just... the best person there could ever be.” She turned and reached for Christie, as Christie stepped forward, and wrapped her arms tightly around her, patting her back and at last giving her a long kiss. With their foreheads pressed together after the kiss, they both said something inaudible, but Amy was sure what the gist of it must be.

Pam let go of Christie at last, and turned back to the microphone once more. “Now, we do need a little bit of time to get ready. About fifteen minutes, or so. I hope all of you will stay around long enough to sample a little of my meat. My classmates are going to eat me tonight, but while you’re still here for the reception, they’re going to microwave some of my leg and go around...” she giggled, “handing out little cubes of my meat on toothpicks, or on crackers or something.” She looked towards Ms. Bennett, who smiled and nodded. Pam turned to the microphone one more time and said, “Okay, I’ll be right back out as soon as I can.” She turned and took Christie’s hand, and together they disappeared behind the curtain, followed by Rita, from her seat among the graduates, and several students who had come forward from behind the guests, who would be helping Pam with her hanging. The quiet murmuring of the audience rose to a conversational level as the sound system began playing music quietly in the background.

CHAPTER 2

The sounds of the audience, as gentle breezes riffing through leaves, quieted suddenly as the overhead lights grew dimmer, while spotlights brightened the stage. A flurry of angry-sounding shouts came from behind the curtain. Two girls, dressed in desert-sand-colored uniforms that suggested the military through shoulder insignia and berets, though the blouses left their midriffs bare and the trousers ended just above the knee, wearing low-cut boots with two-inch heels, entered the stage from behind the curtain, holding a now-robed Pam between them, supporting her with hands under her cloth-enclosed armpits as her bare feet, now held together by ankle shackles with a single metal link between them rendering her unable to walk, dragged along the floor. Pam's hair was disarranged, her right cheek smudged with dirt. Several other girls, dressed in more civilian fashion with worn, faded short skirts and halter tops, trailed along behind, one of them, Darlene, shouting "Who is she? What's she done?"

The "soldier" on Pam's right, Rita, snarled, "She killed the king, that's what," causing the civilians to gasp in horror. The soldier on the other side, Samantha, said, "Let's get her strung up now and then start looking for accomplices."

One of the civilians, Hayley, dressed a little more nattily, said in an officious, lawyer-like way, "You can't hang her without a trial."

Samantha snapped back, "Don't need a trial. We seen her do it!"

Hayley responded, "Well, you need to say so at a proper trial."

Both soldiers heaved heavy sighs, and dragged Pam across the stage, in front of the bemused graduates, towards the desk from which Ms. Bennett had awarded the red collars. Behind it now sat Molly, wearing a judge's robes. As the soldiers arrived in front of her with Pam, Molly intoned, "Prisoner, you are accused of the foul murder of our beloved king. How do you plead?"

Pam said, in a ringing voice, "I am guilty, your honor."

Rita threw her free hand in the air. "Then what'd we need a trial for?"

Molly held out her hand, palm up. "My fee will be five gold coins."

Samantha groaned. "That's why," and reached into the pocket of her skirt, afterwards dropping several coins to clink into Molly's hand, as the audience, graduates included, chuckled. The graduates all recognized that this was an abbreviated, fast-paced version of the Assassin scenario, with some extra amusing touches thrown in. In a normal show, men would have played most of the roles, generally the Hanging Girl's owner and his friends, but this was entirely a student production.

While the cast members had been in front of the "judge," Christie, dressed in the traditional black of the executioner, had come out from behind the curtain to stand beside the hanging platform, and now stood at parade-rest, awaiting her turn in the play. Rita and Samantha now pulled the unprotesting Pam once more across the stage in front of the graduates. As the attention of the audience shifted to that side, Shawna's roommate Monique, mostly unnoticed, quietly left her seat among the graduates and rounded the far end of the row of seats to disappear crouched down behind them.

The soldiers now hauled Pam onto the platform, a two-way platform that was in its “down” position, so that its surface was only a few inches above the floor of the stage, making it easier to lift the hobbled Pam onto it. Behind her, Christie pushed the lever to raise the platform, and then hopped onto it beside Pam. Once the platform had reached sufficient height, Christie grasped the dangling noose, slipped it over Pam’s head and tightened it around her neck. Amy was close enough to see that both Pam and Christie, their lips barely moving, exchanged some whispered words one last time. Again, Amy could only make a reasonable guess as to what was said. Christie then took a fistful of Pam’s robe and leapt down from the platform, ripping off the loosely-secured robe and taking it with her.

At that moment, two brighter spotlights from different angles suddenly shone directly on Pam, and the audience, nearly all first-timers at such an event, sounded the inevitable gasp of astonished appreciation at the sight of Pam standing alone and naked, her body, as perfect as any Hanging Girl’s always was, coated with cooking oil and glowing, seemingly of its own internal light. Her hands were cuffed behind her to a metal belt circling her waist, the cuffs attached to a chain running between her legs to the front of the belt.

Samantha intoned formally, “Executioner! Perform your duty!”

Pam shouted, “Wait! I’m allowed to speak!”

The civilians all nodded, and the soldiers groaned and shrugged in resignation. Rita said grudgingly, “Make it fast.”

Pam, her posture already perfect, somehow stood even straighter, her breasts thrust forward defiantly. “You don’t have to do this! Don’t you understand? I’ve killed the tyrant! You don’t need to follow his laws anymore. You’re free, all of you! You should be dancing, not killing!”

Samantha said irritably, “In times of trouble, the traditions must be followed.”

Pam, pleadingly, said, “We can make new traditions! We can be a new people, live our own lives, free from oppression!”

One of the civilians said impatiently, “Okay, she’s had her say. Get on with it.” Heads all around nodded to indicate consensus.

Pam sighed. “Okay. It’s too soon for you to understand. You don’t yet know how your lives will change. Someday you’ll know. Just... remember me.”

With only the most subtle change in her posture, it was clear that Pam’s next words were addressed to the audience rather than the cast. “That’s all I want. Just remember me.”

Heads, with mouths slightly open in fascination, were nodding all around the room. Amy knew, as all of the girls around her knew, that Pam’s sentiment expressed every Hanging Girl’s wish. And Amy, and all the girls around her, could tell that Pam was going to get her wish.

At a hand signal from Rita, Christie reached forward. Having, in practice in their dorm room, hanged her roommate hundreds of times in the last two years, Christie did so one last time, pushing the lever forward.

The audience seemed breathless, leaning forward, as the platform slowly sank, and at last went below the reach of Pam's feet leaving her to dangle by the neck, as she had so many times before.

Whatever nerves Pam may have been feeling during the play, Amy felt sure that now, the playacting done, Pam would be feeling comfortable for the first time today. Amy knew well that combination of focus, self-confidence, and peace that only reached their maximum levels at the end of a rope.

Pam wriggled with no particular pattern at first, her movements somewhat hindered by the joining of her feet, but not enough to cause her to lose the instincts for what she needed to do. After a little less than a minute, she made her first hip thrust.

It was a variation on Megan's original motion, but different in character. Jana had developed it, seemingly spontaneously, as she and Megan had worked on coming up with a routine for this type of hanging. Megan had then helped Jana refine it. It started with bent knees, and a sudden downward thrust of bound feet, straightening the lower body and pushing the hips sharply forward. Rather than being sexually receptive, suggestive of a woman on her back on the bed during lovemaking, her legs entwining around her lover, it suggested something much more aggressive, a woman on top, controlling the coitus, grunting in combined effort and ecstasy -- most of the girls watching Jana doing it swore she *had* been grunting, even though it was impossible while hanging. Several times in practice, Megan had been so aroused, watching Jana, that at the end of the session she would push Jana onto the bed as soon as she got the noose off her and make love to her, not stopping to untie her hands or feet. Jana, of course, didn't want to be untied. Amy, when she wasn't otherwise occupied, usually joined Megan in playing with the helpless Jana.

Pam now switched for a time to the "flag in the wind" move, involving her whole body, from neck down to feet, with ripples of back and forth movement flowing from her shoulders downward, each ripple not even complete before the next started. Jana had visualized it, and she and Megan together had practiced, standing on the floor, working to teach their bodies the sequence of muscle movements needed before trying it in mid-air. It wasn't easy to learn, and it was the move on which Megan and Jana had spent the most time with Pam, in the past week, helping Pam improve on it to the point of feeling confident enough to do it in public.

Now Pam alternated the hip-thrust move with Shawna's desperately-seeking-support move -- Shawna and Megan were still the best at that.

Amy was barely able to tear her eyes away and look at the audience, of whose presence she had been nearly unaware for some minutes. They were, as always, enthralled, many of them already at the door of orgasm. Beside her, Amy could hear Megan whispering instructions that Pam couldn't possibly hear, willing Pam to remember everything she'd been working on.

With feet together it was much more difficult to turn and show her back to the audience, but Pam succeeded and gave the audience a chance to watch her arm and back muscles straining with the effort to "free" her hands, before turning back.

Tiring now, some ten minutes in, Pam now began working on her own pleasure, pulling at the chain running through her pussy, her movements becoming more jerky as her arousal mounted. As always, this began taking the audience to a yet higher level of sexual consciousness, and there were gasps of orgasm, from audience members of both sexes and even some of the students, who were a lot more accustomed to what they were seeing but never, ever immune to its effects. (Amy had seen, and together she and Megan had laughed over, the invitation Megan had signed that went out to her father, suggesting that all guests wear some sort of absorbent undergarments.)

Knowing the end was near, the graduates began clapping their hands, joined immediately by the students behind the guests, and then the guests themselves. Amy could tell that the recognition, the approval, the excitement of the assembled witnesses gave Pam an extra burst of energy.

At last Pam stiffened, her entire body wriggling in something like a completely disorganized rippling-flag move, and Amy knew she had reached her climax. Drained of all energy now, she swung back and forth, her muscles making a few random, jerky movements, until at last only the pendulum swinging remained, slowly dying down until Pam hung altogether motionless.

She had kicked for thirteen minutes. Amy knew, since joining the feet usually cost a Hanging Girl three or four minutes, in addition to the two or three minutes for the energy-intensive choreography, that Pam would almost certainly have passed the Fifteen that faced her classmates a few weeks from now. Amy smiled, suspecting that Pam had been, in the end, aware of that.

After another minute, Christie, holding the heart monitor, nodded to someone unseen by the audience - - Monique, who now rose slowly from behind the seats of the graduates and lifted her bow, with its arrow, into position. Sighting along the arrow, waiting a little longer than she probably needed to, adding to the audience's breathless anticipation, she let the arrow fly at last across the stage, the head penetrating Pam's right side below her ribs and emerging from her left, releasing a spray of blood in an arc across the stage, and a brief flow of it down Pam's hip and leg afterward. Pam twisted and swung in renewed motion from the force of the penetration, and gradually subsided again.

The applause began again, punctuated by raucous cheers from the students, everyone standing, some of them stamping feet. Amy, knowing how far Pam had come in just the last week, wished she could somehow hear.

* * * * *

Amy stood, a little nervously, as Megan, her arm around Amy's waist, said, "Daddy, this is Amy, my roommate." Behind Amy, several of her classmates and their families were assembled near the still hanging Pam, discussing her performance, the girls fielding their families' questions.

Megan's father was a pleasant-looking man, only a little taller than Megan herself, beginning to bald, his face creased in a way that suggested the smile he wore now was often there. He held out his hand, and Amy shook it. "Paul Sadler. It's nice to meet you, Amy." He looked around. "Is your family here? We could get together."

Amy shook her head quickly. "No, sir. They couldn't make it." To change the subject, Amy asked, "What did you think of the show?"

He grinned. "Well, I've seen a graduate performance, but this was really something. Second Year, was she? I'm very impressed. I remember the girl mentioned you and Megan had helped her."

Amy smiled. "We really worked hard with her. Oh, and I know about your sister-in-law. Serena."

He was about to reply, but Megan, biting her lip in anxiety, interrupted. "Daddy? Where's...?"

His smile dipped a little. "Kathleen?"

Megan nodded.

He sighed. "Well, you know how kids are. Or, well... I have to remember you haven't seen her since she was nine. She's twelve now, if you can imagine that -- I can't -- and she can't tear herself away from her friends. They're at the mall, planning to take in a movie. I understand boys are involved. One of her friends' mothers is along as a chaperone, so I trust she's on her best behavior. She's really a good kid, Megan. I'm sure you're not surprised by that."

"But..." It required none of Amy's training and years of love for Megan to read her face: Kathleen had skipped this for something she could do any day? "Did... Did you at least try to get her to come?" Megan was near tears.

Paul now gave her a serious, understanding expression. "I did try, honey. But you know I never forced you to do anything. I don't force her either." He smiled again. "Not that it would do much good. She's as stubborn as you, if that tells you anything."

Megan gave him a fleeting smile, and turned to watch as the kitchen staff took Pam's body down and rolled her away on a cart to begin preparing her meat as part of the promised refreshments.

Paul spoke again, to Megan, in a voice of encouragement. "You're still coming to the house next week, right? Both of you? I have a feeling getting to know you again will take as much time as getting to know Amy." He chuckled. "You'll see Kathleen then. I'm sure she's really eager to see you, whether it sounds like it or not."

Megan smiled again, and kissed him on the cheek. "Of course we're coming. Anyway, get me caught up. What's been happening at home?"

* * * * *

THAT NIGHT

Amy, lying on her side, wriggled slightly against Megan in the bed, feeling Megan's stomach and breasts against her own, the skin of Megan's back against her arms, the light pressure of Megan's arms across her own back, the warm feel of Megan's thigh against her pussy, the dampness, from their earlier lovemaking, of Megan's pussy against her own thigh, the light brush of Megan's lips against her own, the soft movement of air moving in and out of Megan's nose beside her own.

She felt sleep beginning to steal towards her, but a thought tickled against her mind. She pressed her lips slightly more firmly against Megan's for a moment, felt Megan's move in automatic response. Amy mumbled, "That was so neat today, the way Pam went. All those parents getting to see what we do. It's like she really represented all of us, even more than when any of us usually does a show."

"Mmm-hmm." Megan was poised just on the border of sleep.

"Do you think you'd want to go like that?" Several times a day now, Amy returned her thoughts to Megan's hanging. It had to be right. It had to be special. And it had to be what Megan wanted. It always seemed to stay teasingly just out of Amy's grasp.

Megan was silent long enough to make Amy think she'd already lost her to dreamland. At last Megan mumbled sleepily, "Don' think so. Was nice, iss jus... people din't know what they were seeing. Nothing to... compare her with. I bet my dad was only one there who... ever saw Hanging Girl b'fore. You know I want to... be the bess..." She stopped, seeming to drift off.

In an instant. A single instant. That idea, that image Amy had spent months groping for. It assembled itself in her mind, fully formed, perfected and complete. Amy sucked in a gasping breath, her whole body spasming. She had it! That was it! She blurted out "Honey!" before she realized she'd said anything.

Megan was instantly awake, alert, alarmed. "What?? What's wrong, Amy??"

In one move Amy disentangled herself from Megan and pushed herself out of the bed to stand upright beside it, crouched over, pumping her fists jubilantly. "Your hanging! Your hanging! Listen! Listen!"

Megan, now sitting upright, still hadn't grasped whether this was something good or bad. "Amy, what's going on?"

Amy went on, in a tense whisper, not wanting to wake up the girls in the other rooms. "You said when you hang, you want people to really know what they're seeing."

"I said that? When?"

"Just now! You do, don't you? You want people who can watch you hang and think, wow, she's the best ever! They'd all have to be familiar with Hanging Girls."

Megan nodded slowly, her eyes wide, as if she was starting to see where this was going. "Uh-huh..."

"The members! The club members! We need to hang you at a party! The members have all seen Hanging Girls before. They wouldn't even be members if they hadn't, and when they come to the parties they've seen lots more of them! Imagine them watching you hang! They are connoisseurs of hanging! They're going to know *exactly* what they're seeing when they watch you!"

"But... Amy, the dean's not going to go for that. He's going to want to sell me, not give me away."

"No!! Not give you away! He can..."

* * * * *

THE NEXT MORNING

“...charge admission?” The dean’s eyes, skeptical up to this point, lit up suddenly.

“Yes, sir!” Amy grinning, knowing she had him now. “They all know who Megan is! They’ve seen her when she and I do our shows at the parties! And they’ve heard girls thanking her for teaching them stuff. They know what she’s capable of... or no, I mean they can *imagine* what she’s capable of. Think how much they’d pay to see her hang! A once-in-a-lifetime thing. You could... I don’t know, you know more about the money end of it than I do. But maybe, what... five thousand each, for a ticket to see Megan hang? Or even... the price could be the standard selling price of a Hanging Girl -- but *each* person pays that much. Announce it about a month ahead. Do it separate from the parties, a standalone event. For members only! Only people who know her would pay that kind of money.” Amy stopped herself from going on. She decided she had given him enough to think about. She really had no clue about the actual amount of money the Academy might charge. She just wanted the dean to start thinking big. He alone knew the finances of the members, could guess at the amount of money they might be willing to pay. Charge too little and he would be passing up greater amounts he could have made. Charge too much and nobody would buy a ticket. But he could work that out.

The dean sat back in his chair, tapping his finger idly against his lips, lost in thought. He looked up at Megan. “This is what you want?”

Megan leaned forward. “Oh, yes sir! Amy thought of it, but the moment she started talking about it, I knew... I just knew. I have to go like this.”

The dean resumed the lip tapping. Eventually he said, “Let me do some figuring, and look at the calendar. We can figure out when we want to do this...”

Amy nearly jumped to the ceiling. “So we’re doing it?!”

The dean smiled. “You know how to sell an idea, Amy. Now, I want to wait a few months on this, at least. The two of you are the best teachers I’ve got, and I’m not ready to let go of either of you just this instant. And in the time that remains, I want both of you to work out a timeline -- decide what there is left for you to do here, what sort of instruction you still need to do. Decide who is the best student or students among the undergraduates who might take over some of your duties when you’re gone. Understood?”

Megan and Amy both nodded eagerly. Megan said, “So, about three months, you think?”

The dean thought for a moment, then nodded. “Let’s say that. Work towards that as your goal. Amy, are you actually speaking for both of you here? Do you want this sort of hanging as well?”

Amy blinked at the suggestion that she was quite in the same league with Megan, but in any case immediately knew the answer. “No, sir. I want to go in the more usual way.” There was no goal higher in Amy’s mind than to have exactly the kind of final show Miranda had had. “But I’ll wait a few months too. That planning you’re talking about, that is something for both of us to be working on, right?”

He nodded. "I've never set an assignment like this for any of our graduates before their hanging, but... well, I've never before had a pair of students do quite as much stirring things up." He smiled. "In a good way, I mean. You've set some things in motion that I think should be brought to some sort of completion, with a guarantee of continuity, before I let you get out of here."

Amy hugged Megan, both of them almost bouncing in their chairs in excitement. Megan let go suddenly. "Oh! Sir, there's just one more thing. This is really important to me. If it's okay."

He raised his eyebrows and waited.

"When you do set a time for my hanging, could you issue two free guest passes? One for my dad, and one for my sister?"

The dean laughed. "I thought you were going to ask something hard. There's no problem with that."

Megan grinned and hugged Amy again.

CHAPTER 3

THE FOLLOWING SATURDAY

Amy, holding Megan's left hand with her right and her travel bag in her own left, grinned at Jana's excitement.

Jana, jumping up and down in place, her fists clenched, her face glowing, bubbled, "This is going to be so cool, Megan!"

Megan smiled back. "I know. I remember my first show."

Amy always felt a little amused at seeing the first-ever underclass girl to have a crush on Megan. Every student in school was in awe of her, but the degree of that awe kept them at a distance. Jana's feelings were much more personal. Amy gave Jana a big-sister look. "Jana, just keep remembering this is Monique's day."

Jana looked slightly hurt. "I know, Amy, I know. I'm trying to get it all out of my system now so I can just be cool when the time comes. I'm not going to take any attention away from her at her own hanging."

Beside Jana, Melissa closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "It's like the air... I don't know, tastes different out here."

Amy laughed. "I remember how it felt, my first time out. There's this whole world out here you've almost forgot about." Graduation, last week, had been a big moment for the Second Years, allowed out of the secured area for the first time, but today was a still bigger step for Jana and Melissa, being allowed off the campus altogether. It wasn't as if they'd been cooped up in the building -- all of the girls had plenty of tanning and jogging time outdoors in the Academy's inner courtyard. But, Amy agreed, it seemed different out here.

Monique, for her part, had that other glow -- the one that always suffused the face of a Hanging Girl on the day of her show. She was the first of Amy's class to be sold for hanging, and she was immensely proud. The arrangements, in fact, had been made the week before graduation -- the girls from Linda and Laney's class were all departed now, and the client had only the near-graduates to choose from, with the understanding that the sale would not be final until after the ceremony.

Amy set down her bag and hugged Monique tightly, barely touching her cheek to Monique's, trying not to spoil her makeup. Amy had said her real goodbyes to Monique earlier, after breakfast. This was more in the nature of a good-luck hug.

Monique was dressed to impress, just as Miranda had been when she had arrived at Amy's house so long ago -- white push-up bra, of a soft material that molded itself to her breasts, a very short matching skirt, white leather boots with high spiked heels, all of it looking gorgeous against her dark skin. Her collar, likewise white, read in flowing blue script, "Monique, Property of David Madison." Amy was tempted to think everyone at the pre-hanging party would stare at nothing but Monique's cleavage, but the outfit did draw the eye to her other attractive features as well. And of course, Monique was highly

trained in making people admire everything about her. Amy whispered, "You're going to do a fantastic job, babe. But I'll miss you a lot."

Monique sighed and let go, and giggled. "Just don't make me cry, okay? I spent so much time on my eye makeup this morning."

Amy laughed. "Okay, I won't say how much I love you."

Monique grinned back, "Deal. I love you too."

Turning to Shawna, Amy gave her a hug as well. Shawna was dressed for her role as executioner in a black leather halter top that left a deep V opening between her breasts, very tight black leather pants that ended just below her knees, black spike-heeled boots similar to Monique's white ones, black Academy collar, and the requisite eyewear, nearly opaque-looking shades. As Amy released her from the hug, she let her hands drop down to take both of Shawna's. "Have you worked out who you're going to stay with after you get back?"

Shawna nodded. "For now I'll go back with Jackie and Erin." Shawna had moved in with them after Amy had volunteered to take her place as Megan's roommate.

Amy smiled. "That'll be nice. Remind you of the old days." Amy thought about asking Shawna to come by some night for a movie, but decided to wait and sound her out when she was alone with her. Shawna appeared to have forgiven Megan completely, and she and Megan had worked together closely as teachers of the essential techniques now used by all of the girls. They had not, though, in all this time, been together in a purely social way.

Jana and Melissa, as befitted their secondary roles, were dressed in slightly less eye-catching outfits, though still perfectly appropriate for parties, each in half-tops and short skirts, in green. Amy looked over Melissa's outfit. "You look really nice, hon. You did get to practice with them, right?" Amy felt a need to make sure Melissa and Jana were prepared for their roles. Monique was doing the Runaway Slave show, which now included one or two extra slaves, and Amy had recommended that she take Jana and Melissa along, for their first experience in a real show. Amy felt a certain degree of responsibility for their performance.

Melissa sighed in exasperation. "We hardly have to do anything, Amy. You know that. We're just a couple of naked slave girls in a cage, and we don't have any lines. Just moan in horror and cry when they drag in Monique to hang her and 'teach us the penalty for trying to escape.' And yes, we know to quiet down when the hanging actually starts."

Jana's eyes glowed. "And we'll be in chains!"

Amy laughed. She'd known Jana would love that part.

The limo pulled up in front. Monique, Shawna, Melissa, and Jana, all in still higher spirits now that their adventure was underway, tossed their bags in the trunk and piled in. Rolling down the window, Jana called out, "You'll be back tomorrow night, Megan?"

Megan grinned and nodded. "Tell me how everything goes."

"Oh, for sure! See you!"

From beyond Jana in the seat, Melissa waved enthusiastically. "See you Sunday night, Amy!"

Amy waved back, grinning. "Take notes!"

Melissa started to say, "I won't have..." and laughed as she realized Amy was joking. "Have a great weekend!"

As the limo pulled away, another rolled to a stop where the first had been. Anthony emerged from the driver's seat and opened the near door for Amy and Megan.

Amy felt suddenly odd to be so casually dressed while getting into an Academy limo. She had been off campus for a variety of reasons in the last two years, but nearly always for formal occasions, for which eye-catching attire was demanded. For her first family visit, admittedly not her own family, she wore denim shorts and a t-shirt with the Academy logo, of the sort some of the girls wore over their uniform bras in the summer when the building's air-conditioning was occasionally overly enthusiastic. Much as she hated parting with her red collar, she decided it didn't quite go with the outfit, and had chosen a dark blue one matching the shorts. Megan was even more casual, in a white tank top and cut offs, though in Megan's case, she was eye-catching regardless of whatever she happened to be wearing.

After fastening her seat belt, Megan closed her eyes for a moment and breathed deeply, her hand over her chest. Amy rubbed Megan's back. "It's your own family, hon! Everything's going to be fine."

Megan muttered, barely loud enough for Amy to hear, "Hope so."

* * * * *

As Anthony opened the limo door, Amy emerged and took in her first sight of Megan's house. She was filled with wonder at the concept that Megan had ever lived anywhere other than the Academy. It was a nice, roomy-looking house, not as large as the one Amy had grown up in, but well over the minimum needed for a family with two daughters.

At the front door, Megan tried the doorknob, but found it locked. She sighed. "Probably forgot I don't have a key."

"Hope they remembered we're coming."

Megan snickered and, with another sigh, rang the doorbell, obviously a little put out at having to do that at her own house.

A girl opened the door, and Amy blinked in surprise. The girl appeared to be about nineteen or twenty, much too old to be Kathleen. She wore a white t-shirt partly covered by an open, sleeveless brown leather vest, with slightly darker pants, and sneakers on her feet. The only clue to her identity was the beautiful silvery chain-link slave collar. This, obviously, was Maya, the servant Megan's father had

mentioned having bought a few months ago when he'd grown tired of getting by on twice-weekly maid service and cooking his own meals. Somehow Amy had visualized a woman closer to thirty or so. Maya's casual attire must be something Megan's father found attractive or cute, as he would be in charge of making the rules for Maya's wardrobe. Or possibly he had left it to her to decide how to dress. Maya was very pretty, her straight, nearly black hair cut shorter than shoulder-length, her bright eyes and full lips now collaborating in a smile, directed at Megan after an initial glance at Amy. She said cheerfully, "Hi, I know you're Miss Megan. Mr. Sadler has pictures of you all over." She gave a small curtsey, and turned to face Amy. "And you're Miss Amy, then." She repeated the curtsey, and backed away. "Please come in. Mr. Sadler is in the back yard, doing some gardening." She looked down at the bags Amy and Megan were carrying. "Please let me take those. May I show you your room first? And then I'll go find him."

As they stepped into the house, Amy heard Anthony, with a brief beep from his horn, put the limo in gear. She turned and gave him a quick wave, then followed Maya, realizing with a slight start that this was the first time in three years that she had been away from the Academy with no staff supervision. As unobtrusive as the bodyguards usually were, often to the point of invisibility in another room, Amy discovered she missed the eyes of the Academy, and felt vaguely as though she were playing hooky.

As they followed Maya into the house and down a short hallway, Amy looked at Megan, who seemed a little bemused. Amy would find out later whether Maya was meeting anything resembling Megan's expectations.

Maya stopped just beyond the first open door on the left, and turned to look back at them. "Mr. Sadler thought you should be in your old room, Miss Megan. He thinks the bed is big enough for Miss Amy too. Is that okay?" Maya stood waiting as Megan looked in through the doorway. The girl obviously hoped the sleeping arrangement was, in fact, okay, and that she wouldn't be called on to move any furniture, which she would, however, no doubt do cheerfully.

It was clear that Maya had been through a servant training school, usually a nine-month program of cooking lessons, cleaning methods, servant etiquette, and instruction in all of the standard sexual techniques. Students usually entered the school at 18. It appeared Megan's father must have bought her immediately after her graduation. Amy assumed Maya must share a bed with Megan's father -- there seemed only to be three bedrooms, two on one side of the hallway, the first of which Amy was standing in, the farther presumably Kathleen's, and one on the other side, likely the master bedroom.

Maya had stepped back to let Megan and Amy enter the room first. At her first sight of the room, Amy's jaw dropped open. A moment later, she nearly burst out laughing, only able to choke it back at the last second. When she trusted her voice, she said, "So, Megan. Is it... the same as when you left?"

Megan took a quick glance around and said absently, "Been dusted, I guess."

Amy's first thought had been, Megan lived *here*?? After a moment of reflection, it had occurred to Amy that nothing in the world could *possibly* better represent Megan.

The room was done primarily in pink, with other pastels in various spots. The bedspread, a darker pink than the walls, was covered in soft pillows and stuffed animals, the latter also occupying the top of a dresser with a pink cloth-bordered mirror. There were posters on the wall of talking animal cartoon

movies, and one of a boy band rock group from more than a decade ago whose primary appeal had been to pre-adolescents -- Amy remembered being nuts about them for a time, along with her classmates.

Overall, three quarters of the room looked like an eight-year-old lived in it.

The fourth wall of the room was of an entirely different character. It consisted, from one end to the other, of wooden bookcases, packed with books and videos. The bookcases were of four-foot height, with each one at floor level surmounted by a second one on top of it, so that the tops of the higher bookcases came within inches of the ceiling. Within the bookcases were texts on physics, chemistry, anatomy, physiology, the cardiovascular and pulmonary systems, and hanging. The videos included movies and game shows with hangings in them -- Amy could tell by the titles -- and instructional hanging films of the sort aimed at amateurs interested in being snuffed by hanging who wanted to prolong the experience to the extent possible. (Amy wondered briefly whether Laney's sister Emily had found any of these.) There was a smaller collection of texts on mathematics, writing and language arts, history... Megan's other studies during her days of home schooling.

It was as if Megan had completely lost all interest in the decor of her room at age eight, making no age-appropriate updates, nor any changes at all other than to add to her collection of books, studying hanging to the exclusion of almost everything else.

Amy couldn't hold back the smile. I really should have expected this, she told herself.

Not having seen Kathleen's room yet, Amy was willing to bet that any visitor to these rooms would assume Kathleen was the older sister. While doing some headscratching over the books.

Behind them, Maya said, "If everything looks okay, Miss Megan, I'll go get Mr. Sadler now." She waited to be dismissed.

Megan had a quizzical smile of her own, unrelated to Amy's. "Maya, ummm... You are Maya, right?"

Maya smiled. "Yes, Miss Megan."

Megan sighed in amused exasperation. "Look, you don't need to call us that." She rubbed her own collar with her finger. "You know I'm a slave, right? Just like you. I'm not your mistress or anything like that."

Maya responded earnestly, "Mr. Sadler told me that while you're here, I'm to treat you as a family member. In this house, you *are* family, no matter what you are anywhere else. And that I should treat Miss Amy as your wife."

Megan opened her mouth again, then gave up -- her father was Maya's owner, and, family or not, there was nothing Megan could say that would supersede an order to Maya from her master. She looked at Amy with a smile and gave her a helpless shrug, then turned back to Maya. "I was about to ask, is Kathleen here?"

Maya shook her head. "Miss Kathleen is at the park, rollerblading with her friends. But Mr. Sadler is expecting her back for dinner." She stood waiting, expectantly.

Megan looked puzzled for a moment, as if she thought Maya might be awaiting a tip, then understood that the girl, having performed a service for her, couldn't leave her presence without her permission. "Ummm... okay, I think we can settle in here. Could you go check for my dad now?"

Maya smiled. "Yes, Miss Megan." She did the little curtsy again, and turned slightly to do it for Amy. "Miss Amy." She turned and went back up the hallway.

Megan shook her head. "That will take some getting used to."

Amy grinned. "Could be worse. He could have married her instead."

Megan shuddered. "Oh yeah. A step-mom younger than me." She shook her head again.

Amy slipped her arms around Megan's waist. "And she promoted me. I'm your wife now."

Megan laughed, and said, "Yeah, that'll be nice," before kissing her.

* * * * *

As she came into the living room, Amy heard running water through an outdoor faucet, and then the door to what must be the back yard opened. Paul Sadler entered, drying his hands on a towel, Maya trailing after him. He managed to toss it onto a hamper in the laundry room just before Megan put her arms around him, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder, saying "It's nice to be home, Daddy." She leaned back immediately and faced him, her eyes bright. "I've got some great news!"

Her father grinned and waited receptively.

Megan went on, excitedly, "My hanging is on, for a few months from now. Three or four months. The date's not set yet, but it's going to be on campus. And you'll be invited! You and Kathleen!" She bit her lip. "Will that be okay? If it's on, say, a Saturday afternoon? They'd want to do it early so they can cook me after, of course. Could both of you come?" Left unsaid was the obvious "please please please" in her eyes.

Her father's face lit up. "That's great, honey! Of course I can come."

"You and Kathleen."

"Sure, if she wants to. On campus, you said? Isn't that a little unusual? I know we just watched that girl, Pam, but she wasn't a graduate."

Megan looked flustered, torn between wanting to answer her father's question and wanting to get a more firm commitment on the subject of Kathleen. Amy jumped into the conversation. "It's kind of a special thing. Megan wants to hang for an audience familiar with Hanging Girls, so it's going to be members of the Academy Club. They already know her and they'll be eager to see what she can do." As am I, thought Amy.

Behind him, Maya said, "Sir, I'm sorry to interrupt. May I start on dinner now?"

“Oh! Sure.” He waved her towards the kitchen. As she departed, he turned back to Megan. “So this is kind of an honor then, right?”

Megan grinned, apparently deciding to wait on the subject of Kathleen. “Oh, yes! It’s like they’re...” She colored slightly. “Well, kind of showing me off.”

He laughed and gave her a squeeze. “That’s my girl. Say, I’m just finishing up outside. Do you want to come and help? I’m just doing a little weeding and replanting. And I want you to tell me all about what this ‘Academy Club’ is.”

Megan smiled uncertainly. “Ummm... you’ll have to show me what to do.” Obviously Megan had never helped her father with gardening before.

“Sure.” He looked at Amy. “You coming too?”

Amy shrugged and grinned. “I’m game.”

* * * * *

Amy yanked at another stem and tossed the weed into a nearby cardboard box. From where she knelt, she could see through the big bay window into Paul Sadler’s comfortable-looking home office -- he would, she saw, have a gorgeous view looking out as he worked. Megan’s father was a fiction editor, who had once worked in the offices of the publisher who employed him but, since the advent of the age of computer communications, had performed his editing duties at home.

Amy knew, from what Megan had told her, that her father, when it became necessary to pay for Megan’s home schooling and hanging lessons, had supplemented his income by engaging in every editor’s dream, writing books of his own. He had one well-received textbook on the art of editing to his credit, and a popular series of books on the bizarre prose he had run across in the books he’d been given to edit. The publisher was now kind enough to forward to Mr. Sadler the books that could never conceivably be published and had no need of an editor, which proved an endless source of wonderfully mangled grammar, syntax, and imagery.

It occurred to Amy that, while Megan had no resemblance to her father physically, there was no surprise at all that any of his offspring might be voracious readers.

As a stay-at-home dad, Paul Sadler had been able to raise his daughters on his own, following the consumption of his wife, their mother. Presumably, Megan’s departure to attend the Hanging Academy, ending the need to pay for her lessons, had made it possible to save enough money to buy Maya.

Amy guessed about an hour had gone by in the garden, and Megan was asking again whether she was attacking the right shoot (“This one, Dad?” “Yeah, any of those with sort of a yellow cap. Pull those out.”) when the back door opened, and Maya called out from the doorway, “Sir, Miss Kathleen is home.”

Megan sucked in a quick breath and jerked her hand away from the weed she’d been about to pull. Amy could see her close her eyes, her jaw set. Amy knew that look. What in most people might have been a sign of anger was, on Megan’s face, just a look of determination, to get something done. Megan stood

and brushed off her hands. Amy, eager to meet the sister of whose existence she had learned years ago, stood as well.

As she followed Megan through the door, Amy stopped and strove mightily to suppress a gasp.

Kathleen was a beautiful girl who was on her way towards becoming a gorgeous woman. She was already over five feet tall, and would probably be at least as tall as Megan, likely taller, by the time she finished high school. At present her hair, as blonde as her sister's, was a little disarranged from exertion, but it framed a face that, like Megan's, would always make people stop and look a second and third time, all through her life. Her legs, as revealed by her shorts, had curves that might belong to a girl several years older. Under her t-shirt she was wearing a bra -- just an A-cup, it appeared, but it didn't look to Amy as if Kathleen was just pretending to need one. She had a pair of rollerblades, connected by their shoelaces, slung over her right shoulder.

If Amy had just seen Kathleen walking down the street as a complete stranger, she would have pointed and said to Megan, "Look, hon! That girl could be your sister!"

Megan's determination broke for just a moment, and she hesitated. Then she walked up to Kathleen and put her arms around her, keeping her hands outward. "Hi, Kathleen. Sorry, my hands are dirty."

Kathleen made a face, not trying to return the hug. "You're all sweaty, too."

Megan backed away. "So are you. You've been out rollerblading."

"Mine's almost dry."

Megan reached back and took Amy's hand. "Kathleen, this is Amy, my roommate at school." She smiled. "Or my wife, as Maya calls her. Amy?" She made a presenting gesture. "Kathleen, my sister."

Amy used her most winning smile. "Nice to finally meet you, Kathleen. Megan talks about you a lot."

Kathleen's face was neutral. "Nice meeting you too." She looked towards the kitchen and shouted, "Maya, is there anything to eat?"

From the kitchen came Maya's voice. "Not so close to dinner, Miss Kathleen."

Kathleen made a face again. "I'm going to take a shower. Can we play Lightning when I get out?"

Maya called out, "After I put dinner in the oven in about fifteen minutes. Girlmeat Special."

"Oh, good." Kathleen turned and sprinted to the hallway with the bedrooms. Moments later, Amy could hear a shower running.

Megan looked stunned. She had wanted to get into the subject of her hanging right away. Amy took her hand. "Megan, there's still lots of time." Amy smiled. "It looks like she kind of lives her life in a hurry."

Megan's jaw was working. At last she was able to say, "I don't know how to talk to her, Amy."

Amy rubbed her roommate's arm. "It's been three years. She'll warm up."

Megan shook her head. "I mean, I never knew how to talk to her."

Amy leaned her head on Megan's shoulder. "Honey, you didn't used to know how to talk to anybody. You'll be okay."

* * * * *

As soon as Kathleen vacated the steamy bathroom, Amy and Megan took it over and showered together. As they dried off and put on some fresh clothes from their bags, Amy could hear a lot of laughing from the kitchen.

In the kitchen, as Amy and Megan arrived there, a card game was in progress. Kathleen and Maya sat giggling, both of them, as Kathleen dealt the cards. Amy shrugged at Megan and addressed Kathleen. "Okay if we watch?"

Kathleen said absently, "Yeah. Kind of sit back from the table, though. We get a little wild."

It took some time for Amy to dope out the rules for a game, apparently "Lightning," she'd never seen before. Each player began with thirteen cards, with the remaining cards face down in a single pile between them. A card from the pile was turned face up and set on the table, and it was up to either player to set, on top of it, the next card higher, or else a card of the same number with the opposite color -- which then reversed the direction of play, that is, the last-played card now needed to be covered by the next lower card rather than higher, until a card with the same number and opposite color was played again. The players did not, strictly speaking, take turns. When Kathleen played a card, Maya might quickly play the next card on top of it -- but not if Kathleen could do it first. If Kathleen played a 5, Maya must look through her hand for a 6, or else a 5 of the opposite color, and play it before Kathleen could do the same, if she could. The player setting down cards must do it one at a time, waiting until she had set a card down before reaching for another.

Occasionally a player made a mistake, in her haste. When she did, the other player would call her on it, and the player making the mistake had to pick up the card she'd played, and take another card from the face-down pile and add it to her hand. Whenever neither player could play an appropriate card, a new card from the pile was turned face up. The player able to shed all her cards first was the winner.

Amy couldn't recall seeing any card game that called for the degree of quick thinking and reflexes that this one did. The reason for the name of the game was obvious.

As play went along, Amy quickly noticed that Maya was allowed to drop her slave-girl etiquette in this situation -- no "Miss Kathleen" or "Yes, ma'am." From both sides of the table came a steady stream of giggles, full-throated laughs, and exclamations. "No no, we're going up!" "Damn, I had a four!" "You rat! I was sitting here with a seven, eight, and nine all set to go!" (The last of those came from Kathleen. Casual familiarities with the mistress can only go so far.)

A beeping sound came from the oven. Maya turned to look at it, and then apologetically at Kathleen. "Sorry, Miss Kathleen. I need to get that out, and then set the table and see to the salads."

Kathleen grinned. "So that's a forfeit. I win, six games to three."

Maya smiled back. "Wait till next time, Miss Kathleen."

"Time to give up hope, Maya."

As Kathleen gathered the cards together, oriented them face down and began restoring the cards to their pack, Megan spoke up. "Can I play?"

Kathleen did a startled double-take. "With me?"

"Of course."

"Ummm... sure." She shuffled the cards, as Megan took Maya's place opposite Kathleen.

It seemed a different game. It proceeded a little more slowly for obvious reasons, with Megan's lack of familiarity, though she had a quicker mind than anyone Amy knew. But the main difference was in the atmosphere. Kathleen was quiet, her face a study in concentration, a slight frown on her face as her eyes flicked from the table to the cards in her hand, her fingers reaching quickly for the card she needed and throwing it down forcibly. No banter, no laughing. Amy marveled at Kathleen's combination of computer-like mind and machine-like reflexes, and suddenly smiled to herself, thinking about where she'd seen that before.

After two games, the first won easily by Kathleen, the second closer, Kathleen gathered up the cards and said, "I've got a new CD I want to listen to." A moment later, she was gone.

Megan fiddled idly with the cards, shaking her head. She sighed, "Amy, why was it so different?" She gestured between herself and Maya.

Amy rubbed Megan's shoulder. "She doesn't relate to you right now. She's got a whole life she's been living without you for three years, and she's used to that. And I know that you... have kind of a hard time with strangers. Maybe there's some of that in her too. She didn't exactly give me a rousing welcome."

"Amy, I'm not a stranger."

"To her, you are. For now. There's still tonight and tomorrow. Give it time."

CHAPTER 4

The dinner was delicious, and probably went far beyond anything Paul Sadler might have whipped up on his own. The girlmeat steaks were cooked in a batter heavy in onions and spices that made Amy's mouth water almost painfully -- but it was a wonderful pain -- the buttered rolls almost dissolved on the tongue, and the salad had a dressing Amy couldn't quite identify, but she knew she had to find out what it was. Maya hovered around the table ready to retrieve anything that was needed.

The conversation in the dining room was less comfortable than the food. Early on, Kathleen grumbled, "Why do we need to sit through a long dinner together?" Amy suspected she was more accustomed to fending for herself in the kitchen, as Amy had often done while growing up, though Amy had to admit that, given her perfect proportions, and skin tone and complexion, Kathleen must be eating a sensible balance of foods somehow.

Her father sighed. "Your sister hasn't been here for three years, Kathleen."

Under her breath, quietly but very audibly, Kathleen muttered, "Don't see why that has to turn everything upside down."

Megan contributed a sigh of her own to the collection. Evidently deciding there would never be an ideal time, she plunged in at last. "Kathleen, I'm going to be hanged in a few months!" Amy could see her trying not to bite her lip, to maintain a breezy tone. She looked as nervous as Amy had ever seen her.

Kathleen shrugged, reaching for her glass of cola, looking only briefly at Megan. "That's kind of the point of being at the Academy, isn't it?"

Megan winced, and her jaw took on that set again. "I hope you can be there. I want you to be there."

Kathleen gave her a skeptical look. "You want me to be there?"

Megan bit back her first irritated response, and said calmly, "Every girl wants her family to see her hang. It's a special time."

Kathleen gave a look that said everything had been clarified. "Ah. Every girl does." Amy realized Megan had picked the wrong thing to say, turning the invitation into pure form-following. Megan, Kathleen had now decided, didn't literally want Kathleen specifically. She was just doing what the other girls do. It all made sense now.

Megan hadn't heard anything to satisfy her yet. "So will you come?"

Kathleen shrugged. "I've seen you hang before." She took another bite of girlmeat.

Amy could see Megan working harder to force calmness on herself, to keep it light. "In practice, not for real. You haven't seen me die before. I only do that once."

"We all do." Before Megan could summon up a response, Kathleen turned to her father. "Dad, Heather wants me to sleep over. She said to come by after dinner. Can I?"

Her father looked hesitant, as if trying to keep score of what was happening between his two daughters. At last he asked, "Is your room cleaned up?"

Kathleen nodded eagerly. When he nodded in return, she grinned and said, "Great!" She looked down at her half-filled plate. "May I be excused?"

He looked exasperated. "Honey, Maya worked hard on this."

She looked, for the first time, chastened. "I'm sorry, Maya." She cut off another forkful of girlmeat.

Megan looked helplessly at Amy. Amy mouthed back, "Patience," and Megan sighed and resumed eating, mechanically, probably more to avoid insulting Maya than from a need to put anything in her stomach.

* * * * *

LATER IN THE EVENING

Amy's eyes grew wide, her heart pounding. This is the room! It should be a shrine, with red velvet rope across the doorway, people paying admission to look in while listening to a tour guide. Whatever awe those people might feel, it couldn't top the awe Amy was feeling right now, in this den off the living room.

A noose, the rope looking new -- Megan said she had changed it fairly often -- hung from the ceiling. There was an exercise machine in the corner, a chinning apparatus, a low wooden box for step aerobics, a stationary bike as well as a normal bicycle, a treadmill for those days when the weather prevented outdoor running. On a shelf sat a device that looked like a posture collar, the one Megan had used to hang by the neck and continue breathing while she worked out those amazing sexual hanging moves that all of the girls at the Academy now learned as standard techniques.

And, in another corner, two platforms for hanging practice. One was non-mechanical, simply a box for Megan to stand on, step carefully off of and then kick away, trusting her coach to put it back under her feet at the appropriate time. This one, Megan had said, she had used in the early years of her training. The other was a rising/falling platform with a lever, modeled after the ones used by Hanging Girls.

In a hushed voice, Amy asked, "How much time did you spend in here?"

Megan answered, "Hours, most days. I'd work on my school lessons in my room in the mornings and meet with my tutor at the kitchen table. Then I'd spend most of the afternoon in here, usually exercising, and then go out jogging, or biking. My coach would come over late in the afternoon, several times a week, and we'd spend about an hour, sometimes ninety minutes, practicing hanging and working out different moves."

"Did Kathleen ever watch you hanging?"

"She'd look in sometimes, but she never seemed that curious. When I'd start a session she was still at school, and when she came home I'd usually still be at it, but she'd be with her playmates in the yard, or

at their houses down the street. She'd usually watch TV in the evenings, here or at a friend's house. I'd come out and watch sometimes, but usually I'd be in my room reading."

"You... well, I guess you didn't play with her, right? She seemed pretty stunned when you asked to play cards with her today."

Megan gave Amy a sheepish smile. "You could tell, huh? I should have, I know that. But I was..."

Amy put her arms around her roommate from behind, rubbing her chin on Megan's shoulder. "You were you. You were the Megan I met when we first got to the Academy."

Megan gave a short laugh and rubbed Amy's head with the back of her own. "That about says it all, I guess."

Amy heard another laugh from the living room. Maya, her duties done for the time being, was on the sofa with Megan's father, watching television, while in the kitchen the dishwasher rumbled, and a load of laundry thumped in circles in the dryer. Maya was sitting with her legs curled up on the seat cushion, her feet bare now, her body turned towards her master, her left arm pinned behind him against the back cushion, her right hand idly rubbing his chest, her head on his shoulder as they both watched the screen, each of them occasionally pointing at some event on the screen and sharing a laugh over it. Even now, each time he spoke to her, she responded with "Yes, sir," along with any other sign of respect that seemed called for.

Amy had seen a variety of master/slave relationships. She had to admit she hadn't seen one exactly like this before.

Her attention returning to Megan's training room, Amy suddenly noticed the room's single non-utilitarian decoration, a framed color photograph on the back wall. She walked over to it, and saw that it showed a young woman and small child, the woman seated in an overstuffed chair, the child curled up in the woman's lap, staring at the pages of the book the woman was holding. The woman was beautiful, her hair reddish brown, smiling as she apparently read from the book. The child was light blonde, adorable, completely enthralled, wide-eyed.

Megan had come up behind Amy. Amy asked quietly, "Is this Kathleen with your mom?" Amy frowned as she said it. The woman looked way too young. When Kathleen was this age, her mother would have been in her thirties.

Amy could hear the smile in Megan's voice. "That's not Kathleen, doofus, it's me. And it's not my mother either. Take another guess."

How am I supposed to know who it is, Amy asked herself, then suddenly gasped. "It's your Aunt Serena??"

Megan, her voice suddenly husky, said, "Yeah. This is the only picture, as far as I know, of me and her together. My mom took it. She thought it looked really cute. I was about... four years old, I think. Serena was still in high school, and she lived really close. She'd come over after school, several times a week, and have dinner here, and after dinner, before I'd go to bed, she'd read to me. It was really hard for me

when she went off to the Academy, and I didn't see her for... probably a couple of years, I guess. Eventually she started being able to come by again, and she was here a few times, up until her hanging. But my life went on without her, I started school, I got interested in other stuff. It's funny, I never had much of a feeling for what the Hanging Academy was, or what she was doing when she was there. I just knew nothing about it. Until that day, that day. The day they hanged her. And everything changed. Everything came in focus. I knew what my life was going to be all about."

Amy turned to look at Megan, and saw the passion flame in her eyes to a degree she'd hardly seen before. "Amy, I want that so badly for Kathleen! I'm never going to say to her, Kathleen, I want you to think about being a Hanging Girl. You can't make somebody decide to do that. It's something you discover inside yourself, not from somebody telling you to do it.

"I want her to be what she wants to be, I want her to do what makes her happy. But if it's anything other than hanging, I get worried that she'll never know the... completion, the pure buoyancy and joy I feel when I'm up in the air. I know you feel it too, you know exactly what I'm talking about." Amy nodded, unnoticed by Megan, who went on, "Nobody else in the world but a Hanging Girl knows that feeling. Serena knew the feeling, and she brought the feeling out of me, she let me find it inside myself. I want, so much, to be able to do that for Kathleen."

Amy wrapped her arms around Megan, and stood silent awhile, breathing in the atmosphere of this special room. Finally she said, "I wish Kathleen had any idea how much you love her."

In a voice even more choked than before, Megan said, "I can't tell her that either."

* * * * *

The bed, besides being narrow, was barely long enough. Megan could just manage to stretch out full length, with her ankles at the very foot. Amy rested atop Megan, the sweat from their just-completed lovemaking gluing their bodies together. Amy's legs were spread apart, her knees resting on the surface of the bed outside Megan's, her stomach pressed against Megan's mound, her head resting just below Megan's chin, her neck cradled between Megan's breasts. She murmured, "I love sleeping like this. We should do it this way more often."

"Mmm-hm." Megan sounded far away.

Amy reached up and stroked Megan's hair gently, then closed her eyes, feeling utterly content.

After about fifteen minutes, Megan whispered, "Amy, you asleep?"

"Not yet," Amy whispered back.

Megan was silent for a moment, then said, "I'm not going to be able to get to sleep."

Amy thought back to her own bouts of sleeplessness. "Does your dad keep any snacks in the house? Cookies, whatever?"

"He kind of likes brownies. There might be some."

Amy rose up and slid her feet to the floor, pulling Megan upward after her. "Come on." They both threw on shirts and shorts without underwear, and walked as quietly as they could to the kitchen.

Megan grunted and nodded when Amy found a foil-wrapped pan of brownies in the refrigerator. Obviously home cooked, not store-bought. Another Maya contribution, no doubt.

Megan sat at the table used earlier for the card game, staring into space and nibbling at a brownie.

Amy jumped slightly at the sound of another bedroom door opening -- the master bedroom, obviously, given Kathleen's absence. It's okay, she reminded herself. We've got a perfect right to be here.

Moments later, Maya appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. She was wearing nothing but her silver chain collar. Two steps into the room, she saw Megan and Amy, stopped with a sudden gasp, and then smiled.

Amy expected the girl to try to cover herself, but she made no such move. The only thing Amy could read in her was startlement at entering a room she'd believed unoccupied and discovering it wasn't. There was no hint of embarrassment that Megan, whom she barely knew, had seen her coming naked out of her father's bedroom. Maya clearly assumed that Megan, whether she'd known beforehand or not, would immediately understand that Maya's bedroom duties were simply part of her job as Paul Sadler's slave.

Maya had recovered her aplomb. "Hi, Miss Megan, Miss Amy. Can I help you find anything, Miss Megan? I know you haven't lived here for awhile."

Megan, taking another bite, said, "No, we're good." She shoved the pan slightly forward. "Brownie?"

Maya shook her head. "No, thank you. Mr. Sadler was having some trouble sleeping. Sometimes a cup of hot chocolate helps." She walked across the kitchen, opened a cupboard for a mug, filled it with water, tore open a packet of instant chocolate and poured it into the mug, stirred it with a spoon, opened the microwave and deposited the mug, closed the door and pressed the buttons to start it -- all of this seeming to be a single, smooth motion resulting from frequent practice.

Amy reflected on the notorious difficulty of finding really perfect slaves, and Megan's father's luck in having found one. Amy had been impressed all day with Maya's cheerfulness, with her competence, with her amazing bonding with Kathleen, who was at such a difficult age... and now with her body, not as trim as a Hanging Girl's but with a flat tummy, firm high breasts, smooth strong legs, ideally rounded butt.

Megan started, "Maya..." and stopped.

The girl turned. "Yes, Miss Megan?"

Megan, her brows knitted, chin resting on her left hand as she held the brownie in her right, asked, "Does Kathleen have... anything she's really especially interested in? I mean, what she wants to be, when she's grown?"

Maya, leaving the microwave to take care of itself, came over to the table. She tore off a paper towel from a dispenser mounted just above the table, spread it on the seat nearest her, and sat. "Well, you know, she's twelve. She gets interested in things, but it's something different every week."

"Has she ever... talked about hanging? I mean, the Academy?"

Maya thought for a moment, and shook her head. "Not that I can remember. I mean, of course she's mentioned *you* being there, Miss Megan. But not for herself, no."

An unrelated insight suddenly struck Amy. The way Maya seemed so comfortable right now with her nudity, the way she'd reached for a conveniently-placed paper towel without even looking and swept it onto the seat in one practiced move, at the table where she presumably took all her meals... she rarely wears clothes! She's only been dressed all day for our benefit! Obviously she was usually nude, as she was now, not just at night in her master's bedroom, but during the day when Kathleen was in school, or any other time Kathleen was out of the house -- which seemed, based on the available evidence, to be most of the time. Amy choked back a giggle of delight -- Maya really *was* the perfect slave for a single, middle-aged, work-at-home man. The image of Maya and Megan's father watching TV earlier, Maya so intimately snuggled up against him, came back to Amy, and she knew it would have looked the same had Megan and Amy not been in the house -- except Maya's clothes would have been absent.

The microwave beeped. Megan, sighing, said, "I guess you need to get that."

Maya smiled. "Do you need to know anything else, Miss Megan? Mr. Sadler said I was to do anything you needed, including answer questions."

Megan shook her head glumly. "Thank you, Maya."

Maya stood up, and did the little curtsy again for both of them -- especially adorable when she was naked -- and retrieved the mug of chocolate from the microwave. Reaching up to open an overhead cupboard, she pulled down a bottle of mint liqueur and poured a few teaspoons worth into the mug, put the bottle away, and took the mug with her out of the room, her buttocks seeming to twinkle in the light from overhead.

Amy smiled. "She's very good."

Megan shrugged, and then laughed. "I guess."

Megan was silent a few minutes, continuing to nibble away at the brownie. At last she sighed. "Amy, I can't leave here without knowing Kathleen is coming to my hanging."

Amy reached out and closed her hand over her roommate's. "I know. Tomorrow."

On the way back to the bedroom with Megan, Amy could just hear, through the closed master bedroom door, a rhythmic creaking of bedsprings and a high pitched "Ahh... ahhh... ahhh!..." from Maya.

* * * * *

THE NEXT DAY

Maya was puttering around the kitchen, dressed today in a short-sleeved V-neck sweater along with her jeans and sneakers, when Kathleen came breezing in, looking eager. “Hi, Dad. You said something on the phone about going to lunch? Where you taking us?”

“Oh!” Her father looked uncomfortable. “I didn’t mean going out. Maya is making sandwiches we can eat here.”

Kathleen gave him a surprised look. “I thought... Couldn’t we still go somewhere, though?”

Megan cleared her throat. “I’m sorry. My fault. We can’t leave the house unless an Academy limo picks us up. And then the driver would have to stay with us while we were out.”

Kathleen gave a theatrical sigh and entered the kitchen. “What kind of sandwiches, Maya? Oh!! Are there still some green olive slices? I love those!”

Maya laughed. “I know, Miss Kathleen. I could put some on yours.”

“Yay!” Kathleen clapped her hands briefly. She went to her room, returning when Maya called out that the sandwiches were ready.

As they sat at the dining room table, and Maya came out to distribute sandwiches and drinks from a tray, Megan started uncertainly, “Kathleen...?”

Kathleen, chewing, looked at her wordlessly, expectantly.

“I was talking yesterday about my hanging...”

“Yeah. Hope that goes well for you.”

“I really do want you to be there.”

Kathleen took a drink from her soda can. “Why?”

Megan leaned forward. “Because that’s really important to me. *You’re* really important to me. And this is something I want to share with the people who are important to me.”

Kathleen blinked. Amy found herself nodding. Better, Megan. Much better.

Megan pressed on. “Okay?”

Kathleen rolled her eyes. “Fine, fine. I’ll be there.”

Under the table, Amy found Megan’s hand and gave it a squeeze. And made a mental note. *I am going to double check, when the time comes. This fish is not hooked at all yet.*

CHAPTER 5

Amy sat straddling the exercise-machine bench in the gym, a towel draped over her neck, running beads of sweat tickling her back and stomach. Beside her, on the adjacent bench, Megan sat in a similar pose, with similar towel, similar sweat. Megan made an almost imperceptible gesture with her head, and spoke with her lips moving only slightly. "That her? The third one in line?"

Amy responded, her voice low, "Yeah, the redhead."

She and Megan both now turned their heads slightly towards each other, so as not to seem to be watching the girls in the hanging class on the other side of the gym, being taught by Lucy. Amy didn't want to make any of the girls self-conscious, least of all the one she wanted Megan to see. The First Year girls had only been doing actual hanging for a few days. Being closely scrutinized from across the room by two red-uniformed graduates, famous ones at that, would likely freak them out.

As the first girl in the class was hanging, doing some frantic kicking as she listened to quiet instructions from Lucy, Amy said, imitating Megan's ventriloquist-like speech strategy, "I saw her the first day they were in here. It was like..." Amy permitted herself a small smile. "Like watching you the first time, all over again."

Megan choked back a laugh and leaned casually on her upraised palm, elbow supported on her thigh, still partly facing Amy. "It's not that unusual that girls come here with some previous hanging experience. You're kind of the weird one."

Amy grinned and gave her a slight headshake. "You'll see what I'm talking about."

The second girl in the class mounted the platform, looking a little shy, still, at being naked at the center of attention of the rest of her class -- she'd soon get over that -- and the girl Amy and Megan were watching, the cute red-haired one, jumped up next to her on the platform, with an excited grin on her face, putting the noose around her classmate's neck and adjusting it, afterwards cuffing the girl's hands behind her, then jumping back down to the floor again. Amy saw Megan nod slightly. The redhead had set the noose very quickly. Lucy had automatically stepped forward to advise her, but nodded and stepped back without comment when she saw the redhead had done it exactly right.

While the girl ahead of the redhead was hanging, Megan asked Amy, "Are you sure we want to start with a First Year girl? Melissa and Jana are both really good already, and it wouldn't take too long to give them some extra training. Jana gets some really great ideas. And they're both Second Years, so they'll still be here a long time. I want to get to my hanging before too long." At present, the dean's order given to Amy and Megan to find worthy replacements as the creative leaders among the underclass girls weighed heavily on them, the only thing, aside from the need for lead time in scheduling Megan's performance, standing in the way of their worked-for and longed-for hangings.

"Honey, there's nothing wrong with Melissa and Jana, and sure, it makes sense to go with them. And we can start that right away, but I just want to see what you think of this girl first."

"Kay. Look, she's up."

Amy started to turn her head directly towards the girl, but remembered not to. Resting her chin on her hand, she threw her shoulders back a couple of times as if working out a slight stiffness, while watching the redhead out of the corner of her eye.

The girl was now on the platform, and it was descending. Amy could sense the intense focus of Megan beside her, at a level only Megan could muster, as they both watched.

As the girl's feet left the platform, she began kicking, and Amy could see clearly the difference between her and the other girls. Her kicking was perfectly synchronized with the movements of her head, in a way Amy rarely saw in girls with less than twelve months' training at the Academy.

After about fifteen seconds, her kicking took on a new dimension. She lifted her right leg and threw it straight down, forcefully, and during the downstroke lifted her left leg and used it for a similar downward thrust, the entire movement resembling a diver climbing a step before leaping off for a plunge into the water. The momentum created by the move threw her hips far forward in a very erotic thrust, while her legs, now both straight, strained downward, similar to Shawna's classic desperate-to-find-support move, their muscles standing taut and quivering. It was not a case of switching, at some point, to Shawna's move. Rather, the entire sequence of movements was a unified whole, a single smooth dance performed in mid-air.

As the girl's hips swung back, she smoothly repeated the cycle of movements, and then a third time, before shifting back into more standard kicking.

Amy had heard, by the time the girl was completing the first cycle, a sharp intake of breath from Megan. When, after Lucy raised the platform as the maximum sixty-second time allowed novices was reached, Amy tore her eyes away from the girl to look at Megan, she saw Megan still staring at the girl, wide-eyed, barely breathing. At last Megan shook her head slightly to clear it, and murmured, "Okay, I've never seen *that* before."

Amy laughed. "So I don't have to explain why I wanted you here?"

Megan laughed as well. "Uhhh, no."

They both sat and stretched for a few minutes, to avoid leaving immediately after the girl's performance, then Megan finally stood and grinned. "We'd better go get Jana. Think she's had enough yet?"

Amy was starting to rise, but dropped back onto the bench, laughing hard. "She'll never get enough, hon."

Minutes later, Megan peeked through the door of the cafeteria, then eased herself in, followed by Amy, who let the door whisper shut behind her.

The cafeteria was nearly deserted at this time, 3:30, though individual girls dropped in throughout the afternoon for snacks. Other than Amy and Megan, the caf's only two other occupants at present were Julia, one of the Third Year girls, and Jana, who was unavoidably exactly where Megan had left her two hours earlier.

Jana was naked, atop one of the tables, her weight on her wide-apart knees and her shins, her shoulders, and the side of her face, with her butt up in the air. Her ankles were tied crossing each other so that she couldn't close her legs, and her arms, on the surface of the table, were pulled through her legs with her wrists tied to her ankles. Another rope tied to her collar made a loop behind her bent knees and returned to her collar, preventing her from raising her upper body off the table. She was blindfolded and gagged.

There was a rope around her waist, and from the rope hung a vibrator, with a note on it that said, "Use Me." Julia, who apparently had been sidetracked in her quest for a snack, was following instructions, understanding immediately, as any intelligent girl would, that she was not meant to use it on herself, but on Jana. Amy could clearly hear, in that nearly-empty room, the humming of the vibrator as Julia used its tip on Jana's puffy pussy lips and clit. Through the gag, Jana was huffing high-pitched moans, her leg and buttock muscles clenching, the sweat pouring down her body and mixing with the juices of her excitement flowing steadily down her inner thighs. At last, with a muffled scream, she came, every muscle in her body defined as in an anatomical chart, though they quivered with tension in a way the charts never did. At last she relaxed, her throat making soft moans in time with her rapid breathing, the sweat springing out anew.

Julia heard a noise behind her and turned, now seeing Amy and Megan in the room for the first time. She grinned at them, turning off the vibrator and dropping it to let it dangle. She came to the door, giggled, and said quietly to both graduates, "I just came in because Sandy told me they had some Purity peaches in here. Turned out they were just regular peaches. She probably doesn't know the difference. But this was a lot more fun anyway."

Amy blinked in surprise. "Purity peaches?" The term brought back a memory she hadn't thought of in years.

"Yeah, we used to get them for snacks at home. My dad never knew why they called them that. But they were really good."

Funny you should mention it, thought Amy. I happen to know where they come from. She was about to start an explanation that would have turned into a longer story than Julia probably wanted, but at that moment Jana, who had probably recognized Amy's voice, began weakly struggling with the ropes again, and mmmphing against her gag. Amy grinned at Julia. "We better get her out of that. Talk to you later."

"Okay." Julia gave her a smile and departed through the door.

Megan walked over to the table supporting a still-squirming, obviously exhausted Jana. In a conversational voice, she said, "Did you have a nice time, sweetie?"

Jana stopped wriggling, and sighed. Very softly, she purred, "Mmm-hmm."

Megan began untying the ropes, while Amy retrieved a spray bottle of cleaner with which, after Megan had freed Jana, she wiped down the table's surface, afterwards drying it with a towel. Replacing the bottle, she came back over to help Megan support Jana, who was too drained to stand on her own.

In the hallway, guiding a staggering, still-naked Jana back towards her room between Amy and herself, Megan asked, "So how many new friends did you make?"

Jana giggled. Her speech was slightly slurred, her brain fuzzy after two hours of continuous sexual stimulation. Even when she'd been alone, Amy knew that the feeling of being helplessly restrained, and available for anyone's use as a sexual toy, had kept Jana constantly buzzed. "Five. With six orgasms. Don't know if they're friends now, 'cause I don't know who any of them were. Kind of wish I did, now. 'Specially the one who made me come twice." She giggled again. " 'S funny, none of them went and brought a bunch of people in. Thought I might end up with a big crowd around me. Scared me a little. But they all decided I was... like their private little game." Another giggle.

Amy shook her head, grinning. "Must be something in the psychology of Hanging Girls. We should do a study."

Megan raised her eyebrows and smiled. "Think we just did, hon."

In the Second Year hallway, Jasmine came out of her room and stopped suddenly, in alarm, when she saw Jana. "Jana, are you all right? Do you need any help?"

Jana gave her a sideways grin, still leaning on Amy and Megan. "No, no, I'm okay, Jas, really. Better than okay." Still another giggle.

Jasmine gave Amy a seriously puzzled look. Though alcohol and any form of recreational drugs were completely unavailable inside the Academy, Jana looked for all the world as if she'd been on an all-night bender. To Amy, Jasmine said, "So she's really okay?"

Amy grinned at her. "Like she said."

They had reached the door to Jana's and Melissa's room. Jana said to Jasmine, "I'll tell you about it later. Maybe. Need a little rest now."

Amy pushed the door open, and saw Melissa at her desk, studying. Melissa looked up, and smiled as always at the sight of Amy. "Hi... oh!" She blinked when she saw Jana. Reading Jana's expression, Melissa said to Amy, "So... I should assume she liked it, whatever it was you did?"

Amy flashed Melissa a special, fond smile. "I think you could say that."

As they were about to ease Jana down to the bed she shared with Melissa, Jana suddenly put her arms around Megan. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." She kissed Megan, hard.

Megan returned the hug, and stroked Jana's hair as she kissed her. "Anytime."

* * * * *

As Amy took one of the chairs in Wendy's and Lucy's room, sitting beside Megan, Megan turned to Amy and said, "So will you do most of the talking? You're better at that than I am."

Amy nodded. "Well, I can start it off, sure. But you need to tell her what you want, and find out how deep her knowledge goes. That's what *you're* better at. Than anybody."

Megan grinned. "Well, maybe." She looked at Wendy. "We're all set, here, if you want to call her now."

Wendy, who, with her roommate Lucy, served as Dorm Sister for the First Year class, thumbed a switch on the dorm intercom. Leaning forward, she spoke into the microphone, quietly. "Holly Maitland, could you come to the dorm sisters' room, please?" She sat back and looked at Amy. "That just went to her room. If she's not there, I'll make the call more general."

Amy nodded. After a wait of no more than sixty seconds, there was a soft tap at the door. Lucy called out, "Come in."

The door opened, and the girl Amy and Megan had watched in the gym now poked her face in tentatively. Amy could see her now close up, and clothed, for the first time. She was tall and slender, perfectly proportioned for a Hanging Girl, already with the slightly longish neck that the girls all had after a year or two. The bright white of her First Year uniform made her fair skin seem a little darker, the single color of the fabric contrasting with the dotting of freckles on the girl's skin. Above her anonymous metal "Slave Girl" collar, her fiery hair reminded Amy of Zoey Hillcrest's -- or rather, of Linda's hair in Zoey mode, since, as Amy had to remind herself, she had never actually met the real Zoey, though she felt as if she had. The hair was longer than Zoey's, hanging down a couple of inches below the girl's shoulders, framing a face a little more narrow than Zoey's, with a straighter nose, but equally freckled, and very cute, though at the moment it held a frown of concern, as if the girl thought she might be in some trouble.

Wendy tried to soothe the girl's worry with a friendly smile. "Come in, Holly. There are a couple of graduates who wanted to meet you."

Wendy began an arm gesture to indicate Amy and Megan, as a prelude to introducing them, but the girl, whose attention had shifted from Wendy to the room's other occupants, suddenly clapped her hands to her mouth, her eyes wide. She stammered, "Are, are... You're Amy and Megan! Right? One of the Second Year girls pointed you out to me. The upper class girls talk about you all the time!"

Neither Amy nor Megan had met most of the First Year girls yet. Megan had suggested doing an early demonstration of the current hanging choreography for them, but Amy had worried that it might intimidate them, so early in their training. Both of them would, within about the next two weeks, start conducting classes for the First Years, but they wanted to wait until the girls had the basic hanging fundamentals down first.

Amy smiled at Holly and stood, moving towards Holly and taking the hand Holly was now absently offering in both of hers. "Yes, I'm Amy, and it's really nice meeting you, Holly. Megan and I watched you in your hanging class today, and we wanted to find out a little about you."

Amy looked behind her and saw that Megan was also rising, smiling, and offered a hand to the girl, who took as she came forward tentatively and blindly slumped into a seat, murmuring as she did so, "I've heard all about the shows you do at the parties. One of the Second Year girls described it, and I was like,

oh, come on, you can't do that, but enough of them were all saying the same thing, I guess it must be true." Her initial shyness fading, babbling was starting to take over.

As the girl ran down, Megan sat again and leaned towards a nearby table, setting her elbow on it, laying her head against her upraised hand. Her eyes were taking on that focused look. "How long have you been hanging, Holly?"

Holly, beginning to relax, as if talking about her own hanging made her feel more at home, bit her lip, looking thoughtful. "I guess it's been about five years. My sister Haley and I wanted to start doing it, and we bugged Daddy about it so much he got us set up with a coach."

Amy grinned at Megan. "Well, that sounds familiar."

Megan smiled back at her, and returned her attention to Holly. "He taught you the basic moves?"

"She. It was a lady, Gloria Taylor. And, well, yeah, she helped us work some stuff out."

Amy broke in, nodding. "Taught you the head moves and all that?" She did a head roll.

"Well, not that so much. Me and Haley kind of figured that out beforehand."

Megan's jaw dropped. "On your own?"

"Yeah. See, I'd been reading some books on physiology, and one night we were watching some hanging videos, you know, from game shows and stuff like that, and I was thinking, you know, the girls who were hanging, when they blacked out, it's not so much that they couldn't breathe, I mean, people can hold their breath longer than these girls were lasting. It must be that the rope was cutting off the blood to their head. You know, through the carotids." She brushed the backs of her fingers along the side of her neck to demonstrate. "And I knew Hanging Girls can go on so much longer than amateurs, so I decided they must be getting around that somehow. When Gloria started working with us, and I saw how hanging felt, I started trying to wriggle my head around to take the pressure off the carotids. Haley asked me what I was doing, and I told her about it. Gloria helped us a lot with using our kicking to help make it all go smoother."

Amy gave Megan a wide-eyed look, and looked back at Holly. "What about the other moves? The..." Amy made a little hip thrust to symbolize the amazing series of moves they had seen Holly doing.

"Oh!" Holly giggled, her hands covering her mouth momentarily. "Haley started doing that, you know, just kind of goofing. I wanted to do it better than her, so, you know, we kind of started pushing each other to try to do it better."

Amy squinted at her. "How old is Haley?"

"She's a year younger than me. She'll be here next year." Holly said this with absolute assurance. In the face of rigorous admission standards that discouraged most high school girls from bothering to apply to the Academy, and that rejected more than eighty percent of those who did apply, to Holly it was obvious beyond question that her sister would join her as a student in another year.

And I can't say I doubt it either, thought Amy.

Holly went on, "We've got another sister, Hayden. She's twelve, now. She wants to be a Hanging Girl when she's old enough, too. We've had her reading some books, and Haley is going to start her out on the hanging basics over the next year, before Haley comes here." Holly frowned, a sad look momentarily taking over her face. "I wish I could be there. I can go home and see her in a couple of years, right?"

Amy nodded. "One year, actually. You can have brief home visits starting in your Second Year. They'd have to be supervised, but you can visit on your own starting in the Third Year."

Holly responded, "That's what I read, but I want to go with Haley, so I'd wait for that." She looked down at the floor. "I really miss her." She palmed a tear away. "We knew this would be the hard part, being apart for a year."

Amy marveled at how different sibling relationships can be. Especially contrasting this girl's with her own. She wondered how different her life might have been if Andrew had been a girl.

Amy shook herself and hauled herself back into the real world. She looked at Megan, held her palms upraised and gave Megan a "so do we want to do this?" look. Megan nodded vigorously, responding to Amy's wordless gesture with a spoken "Oh, definitely."

Amy turned back to face the girl. "Holly, the reason we wanted to meet you is that we'd like to do some special training sessions with you. We want you to still go to all your classes, but this will be something extra. Are you interested in that?"

Holly's eyes grew wide, as she looked back and forth between the two Hanging Girl legends. "You want to work with *me*?"

Amy laughed. "Yes, of course you! Holly, I know you just got here, but... well, haven't you noticed you can do things your classmates can't come close to doing?"

"Well... I mean, I just figured maybe I had a little head start, and they'd catch up..." She paused uncertainly.

"And in class, like the science classes, and the rest... you know the answers, right? Like that." Amy snapped her fingers.

"It's just I've read most of this stuff before..."

Amy smiled and shook her head. "Holly, look. Megan and I have seen six Hanging Girl classes now. Two that were ahead of us, and our own, and now three that have come after us. And I know I've only seen two girls, in all those classes, who had 'Hanging Girl' written so deep inside them that it glowed from them with every move. Megan is one of them, and I've just now met the other one." Amy chuckled. "Me, I just try hard, and I manage to keep up."

Megan rolled her eyes. "Amy..."

Holly's jaw dropped. "Y-you're saying... I'm..."

Megan laughed. "Don't go all big-headed on us. I've still got some things to show you."

Holly, her eyes wide, said in a tiny voice, "I'm sure."

Amy pressed her. "So are you willing? Oh, in case you're worried we'd kind of be ganging up on you, it wouldn't just be you. You'd be in a class with two other girls, Second Years named Melissa and Jana. What we want to do is see if we can help you be the leaders of the growth movement. You wouldn't know this, but for years and years, Hanging Girls all learned one set of techniques, one standard choreography. We've been changing that, and there are a lot of exciting new things going on. The dean has told us he wants us to make sure that can keep happening after we're hanged. We've settled on Melissa for her purity and smoothness of form, Jana for her creativity, and we'd like you to be part of it, also for creativity -- you and Jana can bounce ideas off each other -- and for... well, a special quality, we don't know what to call it. For 'Meganness,' I guess."

Megan covered her face, and from behind her hands groaned a muffled, "Amy."

Amy laughed. "I know, you'll get me back for that later. But you said you wanted me to do the talking." She turned back to Holly. "So would you be interested?"

Holly was breathing rapidly, her mouth open. As if she suddenly realized Amy was waiting on an answer, she finally blurted out quickly, "Oh yes, yes!! I would *love* that. And thank you, so much!"

Amy took both of Holly's hands. "I'm so glad! We'll give you a reading list tomorrow, and figure out times to meet as a group, sometimes for discussions, sometimes for physical training. Listen, could you write down your schedule of classes? We'll need to compare it with Melissa's and Jana's and see if we can work around it. We may need to do it in evenings, but we might find some times during the day when we can get together."

"Oh! Sure." Her hands fluttered, as if she expected a pen and paper to be nearby. There was none. At last Wendy fished the necessities out of a drawer and handed them to Holly, who quickly began writing.

She stopped suddenly. "Oh! I just thought. I know I can't ask you for favors or anything..."

Amy smiled. "Holly, we'll try to do what you need us to do."

"Well, it's not like that, exactly, just something I was thinking. Those party shows you do -- I haven't seen one yet, but I'm *really* looking forward to it -- could you... maybe... show Haley and me how you do it? Teach us to do that?"

Amy frowned. "Well, the problem is, Megan and I will both be dead by the time Haley gets here. If everything goes as planned."

"Oh!!" Holly clapped her hand to her mouth. "I just wasn't thinking."

Megan broke in, "Well, wait. This could work. Holly, if we let you watch our practice sessions, so you can see how we work things out, and if we tell you how we did our original training to get to where we were able to do it... do you think you'd be able to teach Haley when she gets here?"

Holly nodded emphatically. "Definitely! We're always on the same wavelength. We've been teaching each other things for years, and we can always get together on stuff right away."

Amy cleared her throat. "Ummm... Holly, just to make sure you understand. When Megan and I do a show, it gets really very intimate. The premise is always that we're lovers. And to make that really convincing, I've always believed it's essential that we really *are* lovers."

Holly was nodding. "Sure, I understand that. That's what the older students were telling me about it." She sat receptively, waiting for Amy get to her point.

Amy blinked. Yes, sibling relationships certainly could be different from what she herself was accustomed to. "Okay, that's fine. I just wanted to make sure."

Megan wanted to know more. "Is Haley a redhead too? Or would there be a contrast?"

Holly giggled. "She looks *exactly* like me! People always ask if we're twins, ever since she caught up with me in height a couple of years ago. They can't believe I'm a year older. Even Gloria kept getting us mixed up."

Amy raised her eyebrows and grinned at Megan. "The dean is going to love this."

"No kidding."

An idea trickled into Amy's head. She tried to brush it aside, but it remained circling like a pesky fly. She finally managed to banish it by promising she would return to it later to work out its details.

Holly finished writing her schedule and handed the paper to Amy. "When can we start?" She laughed. "I'm sorry, I just can't wait!"

Amy laughed with her. "You've got us kind of excited too. But give us a chance to look at this," she held up the paper, "And we'll try to get back with you tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay! Thank you!" Impulsively, Holly jumped up and hugged Amy, then Megan. "I've got to get back and write this in my diary."

"Diary?" Amy blinked. She couldn't recall any of the girls doing that.

"Oh, since Haley and me can't talk to each other this year, we're both keeping diaries. Then when she gets here, we'll trade them and read them, so it'll be like we were together the whole time." She brushed another tear aside, then broke into what seemed to be a characteristic grin. "Thank you again, so much! I'll talk to you tomorrow." In a second she was gone, to return just for a moment to softly close the door she'd left standing open. Amy heard her feet pounding down the hallway afterward.

Megan broke the bemused silence, saying, "I think we can talk her into it." All four girls started laughing.

CHAPTER 6

THE NEXT EVENING

Amy smiled at the feeling of *deja vu*, as she sat with Megan in Wendy's and Lucy's room, hearing the tapping at the door. Once again, Lucy called, "Come in."

Tasha, Holly's roommate, peeked in through the doorway, the uncertain look on her face identical to Holly's the previous night.

Wendy invited her in with a friendly wave. "Come in, Tasha. Have you met Amy and Megan?"

Tasha's eyes grew wide. "I haven't met them, no. I know who they are, of course." She cautiously came forward to shake Amy's and Megan's offered hands, and took a seat, looking very puzzled.

Lucy took it upon herself to start the discussion. "I want you to know, first thing, that this isn't about you, or anything you've done. But we're in a situation where we want to try shifting some roommate assignments around. This kind of thing is always a little tricky, because even in just two weeks, some roommates have developed a strong bond already, and they'd be upset if they had to change partners. Now, whatever you say won't go beyond this room. What we need to know is whether you'd consider rooming with someone else."

Tasha looked very taken aback. Amy could read in her face that, despite Lucy's assurance, Tasha's immediate thought was that she must have made Holly mad somehow. Amy decided she needed to clarify. "The reason this is coming up is that we want Holly to start working on a special project, with some individualized instruction, and we'd like her to room with a couple of Second Year girls. Those girls and Holly already know we're trying to work this out, and it's fine with them. If you say no, none of them will find out the arrangement fell through because of anything you said. We'll tell them the dean didn't approve it, which is sort of true, because he won't approve any move that isn't okay with everybody. So I just want you to understand, you can decide either way and it won't make Holly mad at you. Okay?" She smiled at Tasha encouragingly.

Tasha sat back with a sigh of relief, and a small smile. "I wouldn't mind rooming with someone else. I really like Holly a lot, and she is so sweet, and fun to talk to, but... to tell you the truth, she scares me a little."

Amy blinked in surprise. "Holly scares you?" Before Tasha said another word, Amy's feeling of surprise dissolved. I know why, she told herself. I know exactly.

Tasha responded, "Well, of course, the last few nights we've started practicing hanging, in our room. And when I watch her, I just think, what's wrong with me? Why can't I do what she's doing? I've tried to imitate it, but as soon as I start, then I can't breathe, and everything gets out of whack, and I try to get the rhythm back, like our teachers have been showing us, but it's just totally gone. Holly's tried to help, and I do feel like I'm getting somewhere, but... Anyway, I do feel better about it in class, in the gym, because I can see everybody else is kind of like me. But then as soon as I watch Holly again up close, and then I have to hang with her watching me..."

Amy smiled at her. "You don't need to explain. I know all about it."

Tasha needed to finish her thought. "I just feel so... inadequate. I've started worrying I don't have what it takes, and I'm having a hard time concentrating on studying..."

Amy waved her arms, again smiling. "Okay, stop, stop." She sat forward. "Tasha, there's no reason to think you're inadequate. You're just... well, you may be looking to the wrong person for a standard."

Tasha smiled, as if Amy had confirmed what she had been hoping. "There is something special about her, isn't there?"

Amy nodded. "We think so, anyway. If there is, we want to draw it out, help her work with it. Oh, I was going to tell you, she said she likes you a lot too. I know you two haven't had sex yet, but it's not anything about you."

Tasha laughed. "Oh, I do know that much. We did kiss once, when we got back to the room after our first hanging class and were really excited, but... well, I get a feeling she's a little too attached to her sister to be ready to sleep with somebody else yet." Tasha shook her head in wonder. "She's already filled up one entire notebook with that diary she's keeping."

Wendy joined in the discussion. "What we need to figure out now is who you might room with. I've been..."

Tasha's eyes shot wide open. "Oh! Could I get in with Samantha and Caryn? I've been eating lunch with them a lot. I think they'd be willing. Or then there's that one room that already has three. I like Emily, and I've been getting a feeling her other roommates are kind of closer to each other than they are to her."

Wendy beamed at her. "Thank you! That saves us a lot of trouble, if one of those matchups works out. Okay, we know Holly is in the library right now. We'll try to get back to you later this evening, but if she gets back to the room before you hear from us, don't say anything to her yet, okay? This still isn't a done deal yet."

"Okay." Tasha stood and gave them all a cheery wave as she left.

* * * * *

THE NEXT AFTERNOON

Amy sat, a little nervously, in one of the chairs in the dean's outer office, holding the yearbook, trying to make sure she had the outline in her head of what she wanted to say. She had earned a lot of concessions from the dean recently, but this, she suspected, would be a lot harder than those.

There was no doubt in Amy's mind about the need for what she would be proposing. Holly and Haley were going to be outstanding Hanging Girls, no matter what. But if their training were handled the right way, Amy was convinced, these two girls were going to be the most important thing ever to happen to the Academy. And Amy loved the Academy with all her heart.

At present, Megan was with Melissa, Jana, and Holly in their room, supervising their practice, and at this moment likely working with Jana on a new idea Jana had mentioned for bound-feet hanging. Amy had been with them for two hours this morning, until the time of her requested appointment with the dean had approached. Holly had done a short practice session in the noose. Melissa's and Jana's eyes had nearly popped out of their heads. Amy could read it all on Melissa's face: Two weeks, this girl has been here two weeks, and I've been here a year, and *I* can't even do what she's doing!

Amy had also seen in Melissa's eyes: *I will* do it. I'll learn to do anything she can do.

Amy jumped slightly as Tina, the dean's secretary, answered the buzz on her intercom, looked at Amy and told her she could go in.

In the dean's office, Amy took a seat as the dean smiled at her across his desk, leaning back in his chair, holding a pen he had probably been using before she came in. She returned the smile. "Thank you for seeing me, Sir. I was just now thinking about my first time in here, more than three years ago."

The dean chuckled, rolling the pen between his fingers. "Little did I know, right?"

Amy felt her face coloring a little. "Well, you knew I had the potential to make it. I'm really grateful you did."

The dean gave her an ironic smile. "But enough about me. I know that look. You have a grand idea you want approval for." He had given the book she was holding a passing glance, but seemed to know she was not simply here to show him something.

Amy tried hard not to react. The dean had an ability to read people that was very much like a Hanging Girl's. Amy wondered where he had come by it, but was determined not to let it fluster her. "Sir, you can probably also tell that I wouldn't be here if I didn't think you'd end up liking it, once you hear it all the way through."

The dean raised an eyebrow. "So my first instinct will be to say no?"

Amy sighed. "Yes, Sir. But I know you'll listen. You always do."

"Ah." He smiled again. "Flattery." He sat up straighter, closing his fingers around the pen. "Okay. Listening."

Amy took a deep breath. "I want to start just by reporting that the roommate switch has gone smoothly. Holly has already moved her things to Melissa's and Jana's room, Emily has moved in with Tasha, and everybody's happy all around."

The dean frowned slightly. "And now I'm getting the feeling that was just the first step in an agenda. I hadn't realized that."

Amy waved the suggestion off. "Oh, no, Sir, it's not like that. Yes, I'm going to ask for some things, but it's not related to switching roommates. I want to talk about some things that hadn't even occurred to me when we started thinking about trying to change room assignments."

The dean raised the eyebrow again, and gestured with the pen. "Proceed."

Amy had tentatively worked out her opening. "Well, to begin with, I'm sure Melissa and Jana will be able to handle the extra work without it disrupting their other studies. We'll never ask for them to be taken out of class or excused from any assignments."

The dean gave her a deeper frown. "But why shouldn't that apply to Holly too?"

Damn him, Amy thought. He's already arguing with a point I haven't even made yet. She decided to try a little humor. With a smile, she said in an I'm-giving-you-a-little-dig voice, "Listening."

He laughed. "Okay. Doing so."

She got back on track. "Sir, what I hope you'll approve is taking Holly altogether out of the First Year class, and letting her start as a new First Year student with the entering class next Fall."

The dean suddenly let his reclining chair come forward with a thump. With an astonished expression, he said, "You were right. Immediately the word 'no' comes to mind."

"Yes, Sir. And remember the part about how I think you'll end up liking this?"

Reluctantly, he leaned back again. "Go on... Oh!!" His eyes shot open. "Does this relate to her sister somehow?"

Amy heaved a tentative sigh of relief. Since he'd now made the connection himself, this might make the rest of it easier. "Very much so, Sir. Of course, I've never met Haley, but I've talked with Holly enough to know that the two of them have sort of a... pipeline into each other's heads. Now, Holly has some amazing abilities, but she is still just an entering student, and she has so much left to learn, and of course her sister will be in that same state when she gets here, just a very talented neophyte. They are both excellent students, and they can succeed anywhere, but in the context of the Academy, they'll learn the most when they're... well, literally on the same page, studying together. It will just be such a huge benefit for both of them to be in the same class." That was an understatement. Amy could tell that Holly and Haley were, in a strong sense, two halves of a single person, united by their love of hanging. Holly was unable, now that she was at the Academy, to let the tiniest detail of her life go by without recording it, in her diary, for delayed transmission to Haley. Ordinary schoolwork, through high school, had been so easy for them that it was only a remote distraction from their concentration on hanging, but once they were both here, at the very center of the art and science of hanging, it was crucial that they become one, in their studies. Yes, Amy knew, each of them could be an outstanding Academy student by herself. But the Academy may never before have seen students of their unique potential, and that potential might never be fully realized if they were forced into unsynchronized studies.

"Amy, we're talking about waiting for a student who hasn't been admitted yet -- who hasn't even *applied* for admission -- for whom we don't have any high school grades because she hasn't sent a transcript, which wouldn't include senior grades anyway because they don't even exist yet. You're asking me to assume she's going to be admitted to an institution whose selectivity you very well know."

“Yes, Sir, but you know Holly. You know she was a straight-A student in high school, and I’m sure she wowed you in the interview. When she left this room, did you seriously have any doubts you were going to admit her?”

The dean was quiet for a moment. He looked at the ceiling, suddenly reminiscent. “You know... well, you wouldn’t know... when I did the choking test in her interview, she said right afterward that she’d noticed I’d only cut off her air, not her arterial flow, and that I was probably really looking for her emotional reaction to asphyxia rather than her physical one. Of course, I know what I’m doing, but I never had an applicant sit there and explain it to me before.”

Amy nodded, as if she’d been there. And she recalled her own interview, in which she’d come to the same conclusion, for a different reason, though she hadn’t said anything about it at the time. “Yes, Sir. And her sister is exactly the same. Straight A’s and all that. You know, I can’t even get Holly to say which one of them is better at hanging. All Holly ever says is that they both feel challenged to keep up with the other.”

The dean still wore a skeptical look. “Okay, accepting, for now, that Haley has a good chance of being admitted... I’m sure you’re right about it benefitting them, to be in the same class. I’m waiting to hear how it would benefit the Academy. All I can see is that I’ll need to house, feed and entertain a student for an entire year without her getting any closer to graduating.”

“Well, Sir, right now one thing Holly is really excited about is that she wants Haley and herself to take over for Megan and me, doing the performances at the parties. I can see Holly has the potential for that, more than any student I’ve ever seen other than Megan, and Holly swears to me she and Haley can do it.” She laughed. “Oh, it would have kind of an extra dimension that Megan and I don’t have. I brought this to show you.”

Amy opened the book she was holding to the page she had marked, turned the book towards the dean and set it on his desk in front of him.

Amy had found it in the library, in a collection of yearbooks from the two dozen local high schools from which most of the Academy’s students had graduated. She had sought it out after her first talk with Holly. “You already know Holly was in the school glee club. Haley was too. Here’s the group picture.”

In the photograph, a dozen girls and a couple of boys beamed at the camera. At the left end of the second row, two redhaired girls sat beside each other, holding hands, their faces wearing sunburst grins. The caption below the picture said, not entirely helpfully, “Second row: H. Maitland, H. Maitland, R. Sellers...”

Amy smiled at the dean. “You know Holly, of course, Sir. Which one is she?”

The dean sat with his chin resting on the knuckles of one closed hand. Amy could see the small movements of his eyes as they looked back and forth between the two girls. “I don’t understand. I know they aren’t twins. They aren’t even the same age.”

“No, Sir, but they managed to get an awful lot of the same genes. It does happen.”

The dean murmured, "So it seems."

Amy knew that the importance of showing the dean this picture went far beyond suggesting that the Academy could have two seemingly identical twins performing Amy/Megan shows at parties. She needed to be able to persuade the dean to assume that any physical ability that Holly possessed relative to hanging was shared with Haley. The picture went a long way towards making the case for that.

"And, Sir..." Amy rushed ahead as the dean opened his mouth to speak, "Before you ask what all this has to do with them needing to be in the same class, think about the fact that, normally, starting from the time Haley gets here, if Holly were starting her Second Year then, she and Holly would have two, maybe two and a half years together before Holly's hanging. They'd have to train for months before they could even start doing the party shows, so let's say *at most* two years of parties, assuming Holly hangs a few months after she graduates. But think about the benefit to the Academy if they could do party performances -- followed, of course, by auctioning off their services, like you do with Megan and me -- for an entire additional year. Three years of shows, and auctions, instead of two."

Amy knew it was obviously time, for the moment, to stop talking. She looked at the dean, who sat looking back at her, silent himself for at least twenty seconds before he finally softly let out a long, drawn out, "Ohhhhhh."

Once she saw he understood exactly what she was saying, she went on, "There's one more part to the idea."

The dean, leaning his head on his upraised hand, choked back a laugh, and twirled the pen in a go-ahead gesture.

Amy launched into Point 2, which she suspected might be just as hard to sell as Point 1, though she did feel she had momentum on her side. "I was wondering if you might consider... well, it's something the big universities do. An early admission, for Haley. Right after she finishes high school -- I don't know the date, but end of May, early June, somewhere in there. As soon as Haley gets her final grades in to you. And does an interview, of course. I'd never ask you to think about skipping that. So she could come here, three months early, before she and Holly both start First Year classes in fall."

The dean was shaking his head slightly, but Amy sensed that it implied only resistance, not a final negation. "What would be the purpose of having her here three months before classes start?"

"Sir, it's unavoidable that Holly is going to be learning a lot of new things that Haley isn't seeing, even outside of the First Year structure, during the next eight or nine months. In fact, of course, that's what Megan and I will be trying for -- to teach her as much as we can while we're here. We'll do a lot to get her started in the right direction, and she's going to be busy, even after Megan and I are gone. We'll be leaving her assignments, and a timeline that tells her what we want her to be able to do at various stages in her development. When Haley gets here, Holly will need some time to get her caught up. I think she can teach Haley faster than she learned it herself -- that's how strong their connection is. But I think it would take Holly at least three months, full time, to pass along to Haley what she's learned, and they'd need to be free from classes because..." Amy smiled. "Well, sir, classes and assignments here do take up a lot of our time."

Frowning, the dean said, "We don't have any precedent for admitting students early..."

Amy was ready for that, in case, as appeared to be the case, a similar situation along those lines had slipped his mind. "Remember, Sir, I was here a whole month before *my* classes got started."

The dean nodded. "Yes, but we admitted you at the normal time."

"Yes, Sir. That's your own rule, though. You could break it if you wanted to."

"And I would want to because...?"

"Earlier start on parties."

The dean, his head still resting on his hand, smiled. "I should have realized you'd given this a little thought."

He was silent for a minute, and Amy knew she needed to let a little mulling go on. She had given him every argument she could think of.

At last the dean sat forward again, but again rested his head against his hand, his elbow planted on his desk. With his other hand he traced aimless circles on the desk with the inkless end of the pen. "Have you discussed any of this with Holly? Her dropping her classes in favor of special training while waiting for her sister, who would then get here early?"

"Oh, no, Sir! I'd never get her hopes up like that. Not before you approved it. I don't even know for sure that she'll go for it, but I really believe she will."

He sat back once more, his eyes focused on the ceiling. Amy wondered if he was seeing dollar signs up there. Amy hoped they added up to the right sum.

He sat forward once more, and Amy searched his eyes for any sign of what he was thinking. Thumbs up or thumbs down. A yes or a no. That was all she needed to see.

Her heart sank as he said, "There's really one flaw in all of this."

Whatever it was, she vowed to find a way around it. "Sir?"

"The advantage to the Academy is all based on Holly and Haley being able to do the sort of performances you and Megan have been doing for the last two years."

Amy nodded as emphatically as she could. "Yes, Sir! Megan and I have watched Holly several times now. We're both positive she can learn to do our kind of hanging show, and she really wants to very much."

The dean tapped the end of the pen on his desk. "But, assuming for the moment I do allow Haley to come here as soon as she finishes high school, then, at that point, we're talking about these two relatively inexperienced girls organizing such a performance on their own, without any direct help from the only two students who have ever done it, and without Haley ever having even seen it, since both

you and Megan anticipate being gone before then. You've said Holly can teach it to Haley, but this still seems to be a very weak point in the proposal. The whole plan hinges on these two girls being able to coordinate, a year from now, without your assistance, a performance of which we can't yet know they are capable."

Somehow the word "year" clicked in Amy's head. It occurred to her that Holly and Haley, both of them, had made a sacrifice almost beyond Amy's imagining in order to realize their own Academy dreams -- they had agreed to separate from each other, each of them apart from the other half of herself, for a full year. A year. Every time Holly mentioned Haley, Amy could read in her face the pain of that separation. But they did it because they loved hanging that much, and wanted so badly what only the Academy could give them.

Nobody, Amy told herself, loves the Academy more than I do. Not even Holly. If they can make such a sacrifice, I can too.

She opened her mouth, and blurted out before second thoughts could stop her, "Sir, I'll stay and help them."

The pen dropped out of the dean's hand to clatter on the desk. His jaw dropped open. "What?"

"Sir, I can... I could stay for a while after Haley gets here, and train them both together." As the offer hung in the air, Amy became more convinced by the second that it was necessary, and that it was right.

In a voice of wonder, the dean asked, "How long are you proposing staying?"

Amy sat up as straight as she could, her hands folded in her lap. Projecting certainty. "Until Holly and Haley can prove to you that they're capable of doing a show. I don't think that requires getting all the way to actually doing one. I think that, at some point in their training, it will be obvious that they are up to the job."

"Amy..." He picked up the pen again, and slipped it into his pocket. "I know what your own hanging means to you. Do you really feel this strongly about this project, that you'd put your hanging off for... well, an entire year?"

Amy nodded vigorously. "Yes, Sir. Sir, you have to understand -- the Academy means everything to me. Everything that has ever been important to me, the Academy has made it available to me, has put it there within my reach. Before I hang, before I do this one last big thing for myself, I want to do one last big thing for the Academy. And I can't leave it half-done."

The dean looked at her for what seemed to Amy a full minute, then nodded. "If Holly agrees, I'll put the appropriate paperwork in her file, changing her status to..." he frowned in thought. "What should I call her? An 'unclassified student.' Will you tell me her decision by the end of the day?"

"Yes, Sir. I'll get right on that." I've got, she reminded herself, a lot to do in the next year.

* * * * *

Holly somehow managed to jump up and down despite having her arms wrapped tightly around Amy, almost bouncing Amy herself on the floor. “Yes!! Yes!! Yes!! Thank you, Amy! Oh! I’ve got to go write this down!” Instantly she was out the door, pounding down the hallway headed towards her new room shared with Melissa and Jana. The prospect, for Holly, of spending an additional year with Haley, and being her study partner in shared classes had, as Amy had expected, far outweighed the downside of delaying her graduation for a year.

Amy looked at the open door Holly had left behind. She closed it, and heard Megan laughing from the bed. “Talk about making somebody’s day.”

Amy turned towards her and smiled. “Want to work on the next set of lesson plans for our girls?”

“Sure.” Megan pulled a notebook down from the shelf and took out a pen.

CHAPTER 7

“You really ready for this, honey?” Amy could see the signs of nervousness in Megan. “I know we’ve been talking about doing it, but we’ve had a lot going on today. We could wait for another night.”

They had spent a large part of the afternoon down at the girls’ room, working mostly with Holly, as Melissa and Jana ducked out periodically for classes. Megan had gently tried, successfully, to sharpen Holly’s memory of what her methods had been to train herself for the moves she had demonstrated at her hanging class. It was crucial that Holly learn the teaching skills that would enable her to pass what she knew along to others. At last they had left the three girls with some reading assignments and returned to their own room.

Megan looked around the room and gave Amy a tiny smile. “What, after all these preparations? Anyway, I’ve just got three months to get done everything I want to do.”

Amy’s quiet “Do you need me to leave?” was followed an instant later by a near panicked “NO!” from Megan. Amy had felt she needed to offer, though she had anticipated that response. After all these years, Megan still felt better in purely social situations if Amy was at least within sight, if not close enough to touch. Megan had some very friendly working relationships, with Shawna, for example, since Megan was always comfortable when hanging was involved. Outside of that context, Megan seemed very close to Jana, and to a lesser extent to Jackie and Erin, but not really to anyone else.

There was a light tap at the door. Megan pressed her hand against her stomach as if settling butterflies, and took a deep breath. Amy waited for Megan to nod, and called out, “Come in.”

Shawna looked in the door, smiling. “Okay, I didn’t eat any dinner. Are we...” She stopped and shook her head slightly in surprise.

Megan had taken care of the ambiance on her own. A table, actually two tray tables pushed together, borrowed from the rooms of two sets of dorm sisters, was covered with a beach towel with a checkerboard design, serving as a tablecloth. There were plates and glasses, the glasses remotely resembling wineglasses, borrowed from the cafeteria -- two of each, not three -- and a large bottle of fruit juice. On the dresser beside the table was a large pizza box, enclosed in a leather pouch to seal in the heat.

The only other things on the table were two candles, providing the room’s only dim, flickering light. The blind on the window was drawn closed.

Megan had known she would have a hard time saying to Shawna what kind of evening she hoped this would be tonight. She knew the decor would allow her to skip over the explanation.

Shawna had crept into the room, her mouth hanging slightly open. She was still shaking her head slightly. She looked briefly at Amy, who inclined her head towards Megan. It did seem clear that Megan was the proprietor of this establishment. “Megan...?”

Megan stepped close enough to take both of Shawna's hands in hers. She took one quick look at Amy for a little further fortification, and then looked back at her guest. "Shawna... I apologized to you a long time ago for the way I was, with you, when we were roommates..."

Shawna said softly, "Yes, Megan. You did, and there's really not anything else you need to say. We're friends now. Everything's okay, really."

Megan shook her head briefly. "No, it's not all taken care of yet. I did apologize to you, but I missed apologizing to myself, and that's been a lot harder. Because I messed up something I could have had all this time, and I've been kicking myself about it. I mean... I wouldn't want to change anything that brought Amy into my life, but I hate that I had to hurt somebody to get there. And it did cost me something. Because, yes, of course we're friends now. But we could have been much more than that."

Shawna gaped at her for a moment, then edged just a little closer, still with Megan's hands holding her own. Very softly, she said, "We still could, you know."

Megan seemed to relax a little as she saw Shawna's reaction. "So... should I accept my apology to me?"

Shawna took another baby step closer. "I think you should."

Their lips met, and fastened together, their mouths slowly opening. Their arms went around each other, their hands roaming up and down each other's back as they continued kissing. Amy could hear Megan making that soft moaning sound at the back of her throat that signaled she was very aroused, echoed now by a similar one from Shawna.

When Megan's hands came together in Shawna's back to unsnap her bra, Amy smiled and backed quietly towards the door, eased it open, and closed it from outside as softly as she could. She could hear the moaning from inside growing louder.

She tapped at Jackie's and Erin's door, and heard Jackie's, "Come in."

Amy entered the room, and stopped. Jackie and Erin were naked, both sitting on the bed facing the television, the sound from which Amy had heard softly through the door. Jackie was leaning back against the wall behind Erin, who was leaning back against the softer support of her roommate. Jackie had her legs wrapped around Erin's waist, and her arms around her as well, her right forearm above Erin's breasts, her left forearm below. Erin had her own arms folded around Jackie's, each of her hands absently stroking one of Jackie's arms, as she and Jackie watched the screen.

Jackie looked up and grinned. "So how's it going over there?" She gestured with her head vaguely in the direction of Amy's and Megan's room.

Amy laughed. "It's going *really* well. Look, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you guys." She started to back out.

Jackie smiled. "Don't be silly. We're just watching a movie. Come on in."

Erin grinned at Amy. "It's that funny one where this guy is going to cook his wife in a backyard barbecue for the neighbors, and everything keeps going more and more wrong."

Amy closed the door and looked at the screen. "Do they snuff the actress for real?"

Jackie shrugged. "I've never seen it. All I know is the premise. It just started."

Amy started towards them, and decided she was overdressed. She pushed her shoes off, stripped out of her uniform and panties, stacking her clothes neatly in the corner. She came over and climbed onto the bed, snuggling up against her friends from the side, snaking her right arm behind Jackie's back against the wall, resting her left arm across Erin's stomach, and cradling her head in the gap between Jackie's and Erin's left shoulders, turned so she could see the screen. "So what's happened so far?"

* * * * *

THE NEXT MORNING

Amy awoke in Jackie's arms. She kissed her, then slid down to the hideaway bed and made love with Erin. Afterwards she dressed in last night's clothes, kissed both her friends, promised to meet them at breakfast, and tiptoed across the hall to her own room.

She opened the door quietly and peeked inside. Megan and Shawna were still asleep, naked, their bodies tangled together, each with a hand cupping the back of the other's head, holding it close.

Megan, facing towards Amy, opened one eye partway, her lips curling up in a sleepy smile. "Hi, honey. Pizza got a little cool, but it was still good."

In front of her Shawna, her back to Amy, began stirring, and gave Megan a squeeze and a kiss. She turned her head to see Amy, and beamed at her. "Hi, Amy. The pizza got a little cool..." She wrinkled her nose. "That's echoing in my head. Did Megan already say that?"

Amy laughed and nodded. "I'm all caught up on the pizza story. You guys want to join Jackie and Erin at breakfast?"

Both of them stretched and groaned, now rolling away from each other and sitting up. Shawna rubbed her eyes and reached for her panties. "My shampoo's across the hall. Let me shower over there and get some fresh clothes, and I'll meet you guys at the caf." She gave Megan a soft kiss, stroking her face, then stood and hugged Amy. She said, "See you in a little bit," and left the room.

Amy took off her newly-donned clothes and went into the bathroom to run the shower. Megan met her in the stall, smiling. As they soaped each other, Megan began, "Honey, would it be okay if we asked Shawna..."

Amy hugged Megan's slippery body. "Absolutely. I'd love having her as a roommate."

* * * * *

TWO WEEKS LATER

Amy, holding Megan's right hand in both of hers in the third row of seats in the Academy limo, hoped Cleo was doing okay. Cleo should be hanging in the class demonstration about now, the first member of the First Year class to go. Last night, Wendy had summoned Amy to help her break the news to Cleo, who was very upset at first, but listened as Amy repeated what she had said to Susan in the same situation, three years earlier. Amy had passed along the suggestion that Cleo and her roommate perform a short skit, such as had become the norm preceding the demonstrations. Cleo had hugged Amy, and was discussing ideas with her roommate as Amy was leaving.

Holly, Amy knew, would be in attendance at the demonstration. The dean had given permission for that, despite Holly no longer being a member of the class -- any learning experience would, of course, be very useful to her. Amy was sure Holly's diary would contain a long entry by this evening.

Amy returned her attention to her fellow graduates in the limo as they burst into another round of laughter. Shawna, sitting on the other side of Megan, holding Megan's other hand, said, "We should see if one of us can get appointed to the board of directors. Whoever gets in can hire the rest of us." The other girls present in the limo, Jackie and Erin in the seat in front of Amy, Megan, and Shawna, laughed again.

Erin laughed harder than the rest, her eyes full of that special brightness Amy always saw in girls on the way to their hanging show. She had been unusually talkative all morning, in her excitement. Now she wondered aloud, "What changes should we make in the company, when we're running it?"

Jackie, her arm around the love of her life, giggled. "More jobs for women!"

Shawna shouted above the laughter, "Not just jobs -- supervisory jobs!"

Erin had been bought by a large corporation, to be hanged at the estate of the board chairman. Beforehand, Erin would entertain this gentleman, as well as the CEO and the Chief Financial Officer -- the last of these was, in fact, a woman -- in the bed of her preparation tent on the grounds of the estate. Following Erin's hanging, while she was being barbecued, the four surviving girls, in the privacy of individual tents, would service the other board members, vice presidents, and department heads -- a total of sixteen men and women, equally divided among the four of them. The client had paid extra for the sexual services of the four girls, in addition to the purchase price of the Hanging Girl.

Megan asked Erin, "What are they going to do with your head?"

Shawna put in, "I've heard this guy has a room full of trophy heads from girlhunts. He won't just put you in with them, will he?" None of the Hanging Girls had anything against women who volunteered for hunts, who usually were just trying to earn a little extra money for the families they were leaving behind, and hoping for a still bigger prize in the unusual case of surviving the hunt, but a Hanging Girl's pride in her own profession automatically made her feel deserving of an individual place of honor in her owner's home.

"Oh!!" Erin nearly bounced on her seat in happiness. "I forgot I hadn't told you! I just told Jackie last night. They've got a niche they're already putting together, in the main entrance foyer of the corporate

headquarters...” She suddenly laughed uproariously, and sputtered, “I didn’t think of it this way -- they’re making quarters for my head at headquarters.” Still giggling, she took a deep breath and got herself back together. “There’s going to be a plaque, that has my name and says I was a Hanging Academy graduate, talking about how the company hanged me, and today’s date, it’s so cool! Anyway, I’ll be there as, like... a recruiting tool. The Human Resources office, where college grads apply for jobs, is right there, and they’ll see my head, and read why it’s there, and they’ll think, ‘Oh, neat, this must be a great place to work.’ So I’ll kind of be working for the company even after I’m dead!” She leaned across her seat to hug Jackie, as the other girls rubbed her shoulder across the back of her seat.

Jackie pointed out the window and shouted, “Oh, here it is!” Ahead of them the barred gates to a large country estate were already swinging open, to admit the five excited girls, four of whom would leave it alive later.

* * * * *

Erin had made a lovely princess, and a truly satisfying Hanging Girl. She had kicked for twenty-three minutes, the audience oohing and ahing with each transition to a new move, whether Megan’s original lover-entwining hip thrusts, or Shawna’s desperation, or a modified version of Jana’s bound-feet shimmying, which could be done just as well without the bondage. Amy struggled to hold back a smile as each moan or gasp from the audience signaled another witness arriving at or near the orgasmic tipping point. Amy wished the audience could know that two of the original artists responsible for Erin’s hanging choreography were present today, but wouldn’t have dreamed of announcing it -- this was Erin’s special day, a time for everyone to focus solely on her final performance.

As the applause died down, and Amy and the other girls left the stage to go to their tents, Amy made sure to pass near enough to Erin’s body to reach out with her hand to give her dangling friend a last fond stroke on the hip. Erin hung limply now from the noose, hands still bound behind her. Her body was already beginning to cool, her skin slick with cooking oil, sweat, and blood still streaming slowly down from the sword wound just below her sternum -- the sword still impaling her, its pointed tip emerging from her back. Amy whispered, “Perfect show, Erin.” She wished she could stay and watch them take Erin down to prepare her body for cooking, but she had work to do. She trotted down the steps from the stage and, moments later, entered her tent.

She changed quickly, stuffing her outfit for the show into the satchel she had brought with her. Amy, Megan, and Shawna had been dressed as the princess’ servant girls, in blouses with puffy sleeves, necklines plunging down nearly to their navels so that plenty of cleavage was shown, with long skirts ripped along the sides, some of the rips all the way up to the waistline, as if from the rough treatment when the revolutionaries had invaded the palace. Their job had been to cry and plead for the princess’ life, to no avail. Jackie, of course, had been the executioner.

From hangers on which she had placed them beforehand, Amy fetched and donned the pieces of her outfit for servicing the guests. All of the girls were going to wear the same thing, agreed upon a week earlier during a brainstorming session interrupted frequently by giggles. Above the waist, Amy now wore a plain white, long-sleeved, businesslike blouse, with a bra sewn to the inside. Below, she wore a knee-length gray tweed skirt, and thigh high nylons, easily rolled down. Her shoes were comfortable flats, suitable for plenty of walking around the office, between desk, file cabinets, and Xerox machine. Erin had, in fact, suggested an actual Xerox machine in each tent as a prop, but there hadn’t been time to arrange it.

The lone garment not suggestive of a secretary was the lacy thong panties, meant as a visual reward and final boost to the client's sexual arousal, once he or she had made it past the outerwear.

Amy quickly combed her hair back and used rubber bands to gather it into a bun. As a final touch, after examining her make-up in the dressing-table mirror and deciding it would serve as it was for the first client, Amy put on the plain-looking pair of glasses -- Shawna's idea. She sat, then, on the tent's chair rather than the mattress, to await the first client, composing her face into an efficient-looking neutral expression.

A few minutes later, a man, about forty, fairly good-looking, entered the tent.

In the milliseconds required for Amy to take in his expression, posture, and overall body language, Amy finished her reading of him and felt she knew him. Though she had not paid particular attention to this man earlier, among the onlookers for Erin's hanging, she could size him up now that she saw him alone, and everything about him screamed in a voice she could almost literally hear in her ear -- Andrew. Physically he looked nothing like Amy's brother, but she knew, immediately, she was about to be the target of arrogant commands and verbal abuse.

Amy hated that. She felt she was as much a professional as anyone at this company, a graduate of a training program more intense than anything this man had ever experienced. She deserved the respect the man had no intention of giving her.

She made an instant decision to depart from the script the girls had worked out.

She quickly rose from the chair, a smile on her face. In a soft, admiring voice, she said, "Oh, I've always loved that look of quiet power." She reached back and, far earlier than originally intended, pulled the rubber bands out and shook her hair free.

The man blinked at the unexpected opening. "What?"

Amy stepped closer, and cast the glasses aside. Her voice even softer, growing slightly more breathy, as she drew nearer, she went on, "I don't get to meet men like you very often. Most men feel they have to tell me what they want, shouting almost, as if it's always been the only way they could get attention. They don't understand that a man who really has power rarely has to say anything. People find out what he wants, and they do it with hardly a word spoken... Well, I don't need to tell you that. You already know." Her voice was still more breathy, nearly a whisper, as she stopped in front of him, her hands reaching out to rest on his hips, stroking them lightly up and down. She could already see the front of his pants starting to rise. She looked upward intently into his eyes, flicking her own eyes down every few seconds to his lips. It took only a few repetitions of that to draw his head down into a kiss.

Minutes later, underneath him now on the mattress, having unbuttoned her blouse earlier and at the same time released the front clasp of the bra inside it, so that her breasts were revealed early in the petting preliminaries, her skirt and panties now pulled down below her knees, his erection now buried deep within her, Amy thought about Miranda. The man atop Amy had hardly spoken a word since entering the tent, though Amy knew he'd been prepared to utter a lot of them -- coarse, hurtful ones. As she moaned in time with the man's thrusts, Amy smiled as she remembered Miranda's first demonstration to her that she could be in complete control, that she could, in Miranda's own words,

wrap anyone around her little finger. It wasn't magic, it was merely something to be learned. Miranda had been right in telling Amy she was capable of learning it. Amy had only needed to believe it could be done.

Amy kicked away the skirt and panties and wrapped her legs tightly around her client, pulling him more deeply inside her. There! That felt very nice. She moaned for real.

* * * * *

Her makeup restored, bun redone, her blouse buttoned, Amy gave her face a last look in the mirror, nodded in satisfaction, put on her glasses and sat primly in the chair once more, waiting for her second client of the day.

A woman, in her early thirties, entered through the tent flap. This one, Amy decided, was much less menacing. Amy rose with a hopeful smile, walked towards the woman, and launched into the script prepared by herself and the girls. "I'm Amy," she said, holding out her hand. "The HR office sent me up here to interview for the office assistant opening."

The woman looked momentarily disoriented, then smiled as she appeared to catch on. "Hi, Amy. I'm Alice Hartley."

Amy held the woman's hand longer than the traditional handshake demanded. "It's really nice meeting you, Miss Hartley. I want you to know..." Amy paused, biting her lip. "I really need this job. I'll do anything you need me to do. Really. Just anything." She looked down at the woman's cleavage. Her lips parted as she stared hungrily, she repeated softly, "Anything."

Miss Hartley licked her lips. "Ummm... Well, Amy, we have a pretty strict dress code here. Let me check to see if you're... dressed appropriately." She reached out tentatively and tugged at the fabric of Amy's blouse, as if straightening it out. As her hand brushed across the underside of Amy's cloth-enclosed breasts, Amy closed her eyes and made a soft moaning sound.

Amy stepped slightly closer. "Please, give me any job. I'll be happy to do it." She was breathing more quickly.

Amy had perceived enough body signals, now, to know what the woman wanted. She tore out the rubber bands again, and once more tossed the glasses. Her hands on Miss Hartley's waist, Amy slowly sank to her knees, giving the woman soft kisses on her blouse along the way. Kneeling now, she unbuckled the belt holding Miss Hartley's skirt and let it slide to the floor, kissed the front of Hartley's panties, then slid them down as well.

She began licking, and knew she'd been right when Miss Hartley moaned, her legs suddenly shaking, and put both her hands behind Amy's head, pulling Amy's face more tightly into her crotch. Miss Hartley then put one of her hands behind herself to help ease herself down to the floor as her legs shakily gave way. Amy followed her down, her tongue never losing contact with Miss Hartley's pussy.

* * * * *

As the fourth and final client departed the tent, drained and smiling, Amy reassembled her outfit one last time and left the tent, relieved that her work was done and only the enjoyment of the barbecue remained.

She spotted Shawna, already finished with her own clients, sitting alone at one of the picnic tables. Amy crossed the grounds to join her, passing the barbecue pit along the way. Erin smelled so wonderful as she cooked, her headless body turning slowly on the spit, her skin browned, cracked, shiny with barbecue sauce. They would take Erin off the fire and start slicing her soon, giving her the honor of becoming part of the body of everyone here. Amy's stomach rumbled. She waved at Shawna.

Megan and Jackie joined them at the table over the next ten minutes. Megan smiled as she sat down beside Amy and kissed her. "So how'd you do?"

Amy grinned. "Oh, it was really fun. Three guys, one woman. I'll have to tell you about the first one. Later. It was so cool. How about yours?"

Megan's face was animated. "Oh, it was great..."

CHAPTER 8

Amy lay facing Megan, letting her body cool down after their lovemaking, moving her head occasionally to kiss her roommate. Shawna was spending the evening with Jackie.

Megan's lips curled into a smile as she stroked Amy's hair. "Can you believe it? Eight weeks from tomorrow." The dean had just informed Megan of the date late that afternoon, and had assured her that he had already invited her father and sister, mailing them guest passes.

Amy kissed her again. "You don't need all that time to get yourself ready, I hope. We still have the one last party show to do in a few weeks."

Megan gave her a tiny headshake. "I can wait until after that to start getting my head in the right space. Have you started checking into your own..." She stopped suddenly, frowning, looking into Amy's eyes.

Amy stopped breathing, knowing why Megan was suddenly silent.

Megan, still frowning, asked, "You were going to tell me, right?"

Amy didn't need to ask what Megan was talking about, or how she had known. Some tiny physical reaction, unnoticed by Amy herself but telling everything to Megan, at that moment when Megan had asked about Amy's hanging. Few of the Hanging Girls were as skilled as Megan at reading body language, especially of the one person she knew better than anyone else in the world. "Of course, honey. I've been trying to work out how to say it."

"Is it because of our girls? They're all really coming along fast. Especially Holly."

Amy nodded, blinking back a tear. "I know. But Haley won't be here for another seven months. I had to offer to stay. The dean wasn't going for this whole thing with Holly and Haley otherwise."

Megan looked at Amy seriously. "So are you okay with this? It feels like you are." Reading again. "You can really wait that long? I don't think I could."

Amy put her arms around her lover, squeezing her tight. "I am okay. It's not like I don't get to hang at all. The noose will be out there waiting for me. It's hard to take something you've chased after for years and push it farther away, but it's still going to be there. The hardest part is..." The tear at last spilled from her eye. "I was worried you might think I'm... insulting you. To say I'm going to stay on so long after you're gone."

Megan's eyes widened. Amy saw that something had finally come out of her own mouth before Megan could read it. "Oh, honey, no! No! Nothing like that! Listen..." Megan looked away for a moment, searching for the right words, finding them at last, returning her eyes to Amy, giving her an intense look as only Megan could. "There are a lot of things I trust. I trust the noose. I trust my skills. And you taught me a long time ago... I have to trust my partner. And I do, I trust you completely. I trust you for a lot of things, but most of all, I trust you always to do the right thing. That's what teaches me what the right thing is. And you believe this is the right thing. I can tell you do. If you think it's right, that's always going to be enough for me."

The single tear became a flood. Amy, her throat suddenly so tight she couldn't believe there wasn't a rope around it, choked out, "I love you, Megan."

The sudden return of Megan's smile made her face more beautiful than ever. "And I love you, Amy." She kissed Amy, hard.

They made love again, with twice the passion of their earlier session.

* * * * *

The dean rolled his eyes, but was smiling. "You want to communicate with Haley? You know we don't allow communication between our First Year girls and their families. That would include girls whose First Year status is... in suspended animation, as it were."

Amy knew he was referring to Holly. She wasn't sure she wanted to bring this up. "Ummm... I did see my brother when I was a First Year." It always irritated her to discuss Andrew for any reason.

"There's a difference. He's a club member."

The one stain on the Academy's reputation, in Amy's view. "Anyway, this wouldn't be a *personal* communication, Sir. And not from Holly herself. I could request to take this information to her myself, on my own, but I'd like to keep it even less personal than that. This would be in the nature of the Academy itself giving some advice to a potential student. Just in an institutional way. In the form of a letter."

"We've never done that before either."

"I know, Sir, but I'm thinking it's pretty well-established now that this is a unique case. And I can give you the usual justification that this will help the two of them get their act together sooner once Haley arrives here."

The dean smiled again. "I suspected as much. What would the letter say?"

"I have a draft here, but let me describe it first, so you can see why everything is in there. For one thing, you'll see there's no proprietary information in it. No giving away any Academy secrets. There are basically just three things we need Haley to work on.

"One is a reading list. About half of what we have Holly reading is publicly available. Some of the things we'd picked out for her, it turned out she'd already read them, and Haley has too, but not all of them. So we've put together a list of books, available on the outside, that Haley hasn't read, and it would save time if she read them before she got here.

"The second thing is a physical exercise program. Just like all of the other students here, we've got Holly doing a lot of conditioning in the gym. Obviously we'd like to avoid her body getting noticeably different from Haley's, and there's no reason why it should, because Haley could be doing the same exercises at home.

“And then finally, there’s something Haley can do in preparation for doing party shows. It’s *our* secret, mine and Megan’s, but it actually only helps specifically for that one purpose. When Megan and I started training to do the shows, we did hanging exercises carrying extra weight -- eventually we got to where we could hang while carrying a hundred extra pounds. And we needed that for the kind of hanging she and I do together, where we alternate holding the other up so she can breathe -- but it’s not something helpful for the standard type of hanging. You know how studies have shown that practicing with extra weight doesn’t really help for normal hanging techniques, beyond what the standard neck-trainer does. So if, for whatever reason, Haley told anybody what she was doing, it would actually be kind of misleading, because people would say, Aha! So that’s the Hanging Girl secret! And it’s really not! It’s just something Haley needs to do, and it wouldn’t help anybody else.” Amy leaned forward. “And the point is, she’d be ready to start working on choreography as soon as she gets here.”

The dean nodded, already having known that was coming, and held out his hand. Amy handed over the letter. She sat patiently as he read it -- some parts several times, it appeared.

At last he nodded. “I’m going to want to reword this, to make it more clear that it doesn’t imply an offer of admission, and perhaps to hint at the need for some discretion on her part. But I’ll leave intact the descriptions of the program she should be following.”

Amy gave him a huge grin. “Yes, Sir! And is there any possibility Holly could sign it at the bottom?”

The dean chuckled. “Of course not. And you’re just giving me a chance to assert authority by saying ‘no’, aren’t you?”

Amy felt herself reddening. “I just wanted to try, Sir.”

* * * * *

Melissa gave Amy a kiss as she pulled the door to their room closed, then held Jana’s hand as they trotted down the hallway towards their class. Amy waved after them, then walked more slowly back towards her own room.

Megan and Holly were there, sitting on the bed, looking at the television, where Megan was running a video of a First Year girls’ hanging class from several years ago. Holly’s concentration on the screen was so intense that Amy wasn’t sure Holly had noticed her coming in.

Holly pointed at the screen. “I think her left leg is unbalancing her. She’s swinging it out too far.”

Megan nodded. “So what would you do?”

Holly fingered her lower lip, considering the question, still watching the girl on the screen. “Maybe tap at her foot every time she swings it out like that, to make her conscious of doing it.”

Amy smiled, remembering Megan administering a very similar cure to Wendy once.

Megan used the remote to move the tape ahead to the next girl. Again, Holly watched the screen with a very Megan-like intensity. At last she looked at Megan and said tentatively, “She’s probably okay?”

Holly breathed an audible sigh of relief when Megan nodded. "For her level of development, anyway." Megan raised the remote again. "Let's skip over the next girl. She's okay too." The girl wriggled on the screen in fast motion, and Megan slowed the tape to normal speed as another girl started.

Holly leaned forward, and quickly leaned back. "That's easy. She's not turning her head enough. You could..."

Megan held up a hand to stop her. "Okay, but remember, always look at the girl's whole body. When there's a problem in one place, it could be caused somewhere else."

Holly nodded and leaned forward to watch the screen again. As the girl finished, Holly looked helplessly at Megan. "Could you run it again?"

Megan nodded and rewound the tape. Holly leaned even farther forward to watch the girl again, almost unblinking. Suddenly she bounced on the bed excitedly. "Oh, yeah! She's got her hands too high up her back! It's making her shoulders hunch and she can't turn her head properly. You could give her a crotch rope to hold them down..." She frowned, and shook her head. "She's too inexperienced, she doesn't need that distraction." She thought a little longer, as Megan rewound the tape and showed the girl again. Holly sat up again. "You could tie a thread between her elbows, so she couldn't separate them more than that distance. Tell her to try not to break the thread. That would keep her hands down." She grinned at Megan. "Okay?"

Megan laughed and patted Holly's back. "Nice job. I've got that class to go teach. Just relax a minute while I talk to Amy."

Megan guided Amy out of the room, closed the door, and said barely audibly, her eyes alight, "Most underclass girls have a hard time picking out flaws in another girl's form. I tried this same exercise with Melissa and Jana. Together. They got over half of them, which was really good. Holly caught *all* of them, and that thing with the thread... that might work better than what I was going to say."

Amy grinned, and whispered, "That's great! We knew she was special. See you in awhile, honey." She kissed Megan, waved goodbye to her, and opened the door. Holly had rewound the tape to the beginning and was restoring it to its case. She looked up and smiled. "Hi, Amy. That was fun."

Amy smiled back. "Megan says you're doing really well. Sit back down a minute. I've got something else to talk to you about."

Holly nodded and sat on the bed again, waiting.

Amy began, "I know you haven't been in classes, but you've probably heard the First Years talking about this. Their first party is coming up in a few weeks. Now, you're not a member of the class, but I asked the dean, and he left it up to me to decide whether an extra year of parties would be helpful to you. So I need to figure that out... You know what I'm talking about, right? What the students do at parties?"

Holly nodded. "Oh! Sure. There's a little about that on the Web site. I was..." Holly suddenly looked slightly uncomfortable. "I'd been figuring, after you got me the extra year to wait for Haley, that that would be one of the things we could do together. Her and me."

Amy frowned. "Together, as in working the same bedroom?"

Holly nodded again. "I mean, I was hoping."

Amy shook her head. "Maybe somewhere along the way, later, but not at the start. I'm not even going to ask the dean about that. Every Hanging Girl has to demonstrate she can provide sexual services by herself. Megan and I have worked together a few times, when it worked out that way at auctions, but at first the dean wouldn't let us. Not until he was sure about our solo skills."

Clouds of concern began billowing in Amy's mind. She had never seen Holly unsure of herself before. Amy had quickly become accustomed to thinking of Holly as another Megan, superior in every facet of a Hanging Girl's life. Megan, along with everything else she did, always drew outstanding reviews from club members she entertained privately at parties. Amy had been assuming Holly would share that skill as well. "Holly... you've gone to the clubs around town, right? To meet sex partners?"

"Oh, for sure! Haley and me knew that was one of the things we'd need to be good at, for the Academy, so we went once or twice a week. We'd hook up with a girl, or with a guy if it was a mixed club, and, you know, learn from experience. We read some books, too, of course. And watched videos."

Amy was about to say she was doubtful about the idea of picking up much practical information on the subject from books, but was suddenly struck by Holly's wording, as she played it back in her head. We'd hook up with a girl. Singular. Her frown deepened. "Holly... Have you ever had one-on-one sex with anyone other than Haley?"

Holly bit her lip and shook her head, saying in a tiny voice, "No."

Amy suddenly realized she was being unfair to Holly. She had to be scaring Holly, making her feel as if she had done something wrong in coming to the Academy with less than the usual amount of experience with sex. It was true that any Hanging Girl needed to be ready to handle clients who had any number of different sexual preferences, in one-on-one situations, and that Holly's one-on-one sexual history was far from sufficiently varied. But the Academy was a place of learning. You didn't have to arrive already knowing everything. That's why they had classes. Including sex classes. Amy reached out and covered one of Holly's hands with her own, and smiled. "Listen, Holly, I'm not mad at you. I just got a little surprised for a minute. We could wait on the parties until next year..."

Holly shook her head, a determined look suddenly on her face. "No, I want to do it."

Amy blinked. "There's no reason we couldn't wait, it's really okay..."

The intense Megan-look was in Holly's eyes again. "Amy, I'll do anything I need to, to be a Hanging Girl. The dean could tell me I need to jump off the roof, and I'd head for the stairs as soon as he said it."

Amy looked at her wide-eyed. "Ahhh... Well, that won't be a requirement, I'm pretty sure. But... so you do want to go to the party?"

Holly nodded her head emphatically.

Amy was silent for a time, considerations swirling around in her head. One of them finally came to the fore. "If I'm going to tell Wendy and Lucy to include you on the list for the party, I'm taking on a lot of responsibility. I'm telling them you're ready to perform and to make the club members happy." Amy continued thinking, her lower lip squeezed between her thumb and forefinger. Okay, she thought, first things first. She gestured at Holly. "Take off your clothes. I want to check on your grooming. I need a closer look than I've been getting when you practice hanging."

Obediently, Holly unsnapped her bra and shrugged out of it, kicked away her shoes, and pulled her shorts down, then her panties, kicking them away as well.

Amy looked her over, lifting her arm. "Underarms okay." She backed away, looking at Holly's tan lines above and below. "I don't think you need the tanning bed. Your skin is pretty sensitive to sunlight, so there's no telling what effect it might have, and I think members will like the contrast anyway, with your breasts freckle-free. Lie back on the bed." As Holly did so, Amy lifted Holly's legs and spread them apart, and bent down close to Holly's crotch.

She considered Holly's wispy thatch of pubic hair. Nearly all of the girls had their bushes permanently removed, and the club members and, later, the buyers, seemed to like it that way. Holly's pubes, a soft reddish orange, a little lighter than the hair on her head, while apparently untrimmed, occupied a relatively small triangle and looked rather becoming and inviting. Amy ran her fingers lightly across it, as Holly jumped slightly and giggled. In a thoughtful voice, Amy said, "Okay, let's keep that for now. We could still get rid of it later if the members don't like it. For the time being..." Amy bent down still closer, gently separating Holly's glutes with her fingers, examining the area in between. "I want you to go to the salon, and ask them to do a laser removal on the hair alongside your labia, and back behind, between your cheeks."

"Okay. I could do that today, if you don't need to have me practice anything."

Amy thought a moment, and nodded. "Okay, but have them give you a time estimate. We need you back here by seven so you can watch Megan and me practice for our show. Tell them just to do part of it now if it's going to take too long."

Holly's eyes lit up. "Okay." She loved watching Amy and Megan practice, wide-eyed throughout, asking endless questions afterward. Primarily, Amy and Megan worked on the choreography for their upcoming show, but they also showed Holly a variety of moves from their earlier shows, demonstrating the many ways each could support the other's weight -- with feet, knees, leg wrapped around waist, thigh supporting crotch, and so on. "I won't miss that."

"Good. Okay, you can sit up now." Amy offered her hand for Holly to pull on as she sat back upright.

As Holly reached for her panties, Amy said, "Wait. I want to do one more thing."

Holly dropped her panties back on the floor and nodded, her eyes looking directly into Amy's. I'm ready, whatever it is, the eyes said. That same drive to be a Hanging Girl, so strong it had allowed her to leave the other half of herself at home while she spent her first year at the Academy, was showing once more.

Amy gave her a serious look. "Like I said, I'm taking on some responsibility, if I send you to a party. You haven't been in sex class, and I have to make sure you can handle yourself on the job. No," Amy waved her hands in a don't-worry gesture, "I don't mean I'm not going to give you any help between now and then. We've got three weeks, and that's enough time to get you ready. But I need to see where you're starting from."

Amy began removing her own uniform, seeing Holly blink in surprise as she watched. That earlier look of uncertainty was back, as she understood what she was about to have to do.

Naked now, Amy moved a little closer to Holly on the bed. "I'm going to be one of the club members now. Female, of course. I can't imitate all of the body parts another gender might present." Amy gave Holly a small smile, which Holly echoed nervously. "I won't give you a hard time. We can talk about that later. But I won't give you much help right now either. When you're in a private session with a club member, it's your job to figure out what would please them, and they won't always tell you." Amy let her voice grow softer as she continued speaking. "They know that Hanging Girls have what seems like a magical ability to sense their turn-ons. We're not born with that. We learn it." Very softly now, Amy said, "Show me what you can do, Holly."

Unlike before, Amy knew that here she was *not* being unfair to Holly. Amy understood that she was several years older than Holly, and obviously far more sexually experienced. Furthermore, she knew that Holly had probably not imagined that an erotic intimacy with Amy could really happen. But this was exactly the sort of situation Holly must be able to handle at a party. She would find herself facing strangers of both genders, and would have to establish an instant sexual connection with them. From watching Holly try to do so now, Amy would know how to help her in the next few weeks.

Holly, breathing and blinking quickly, scooted closer to Amy on the bed, and hesitantly put a shaking left hand on Amy's hip. Amy gave her an encouraging smile, and a soft sigh to let her know the touch was welcome.

The shaking gone, Holly stroked Amy's hip for a moment, then let her hand slide over Amy's thigh into her crotch. Amy opened her legs slightly, and Holly let her hand settle in, spreading her fingers slightly, the outer ones lying lightly on Amy's inner thighs on either side, the middle finger resting along Amy's labia, without entering. That was good, thought Amy. Intimacy without immediate invasion.

At the same time, Holly leaned closer, softly kissing Amy's chin, moving up to her cheek for another soft kiss.

As her lips reached Amy's, Holly suddenly put her right hand behind Amy's head and kissed her hard, pushing her tongue into Amy's mouth, licking Amy's teeth and tongue, holding Amy's head firmly and straining to push in still farther. Amy mmmphed, trying to tell her to slow down, unable to do so with her mouth full of tongue, but just as suddenly as she had invaded Amy's mouth, Holly withdrew, letting her head drop lower, now licking Amy's chest and upper breast. As Amy regained her breath, Holly sucked in Amy's left nipple, licking gently at first, then biting, not too painfully, before returning to sucking again. Through all of this, Holly's left hand remained anchored in Amy's crotch.

Holly moved slightly, kissing the side of Amy's breast, and now the style of kissing changed. It softened, just the barest touch of wet lips, followed by light sucking, during which Holly's tongue just barely flicked

at Amy's skin. As each tiny kiss alternated with a tiny lick, Amy felt a sensation flare through her body, intensifying by the second, an electrical surge beginning from the point where Holly was kissing her breast, flowing from there directly to her pussy. Amy moaned and twitched her hips involuntarily, and the current within her continued to circulate, now vibrating her entire body. Holly's left hand had remained motionless across Amy's crotch until now, but she now slid two fingers inside Amy, almost frictionlessly -- Amy was so wet she knew she was soaking the bedsheet.

And Amy completely lost track of the purpose of the exercise. Forgetting her intent of sitting still and letting Holly try to please her, she pulled Holly upward by her shoulders. Face to face now, Amy's lips met Holly's for the second time, this time by Amy's own doing, and she used her arm across Holly's shoulders to pull Holly harder against her, opening her mouth against Holly's. With her other hand she covered Holly's hand in her crotch, her hips thrusting to do the work of moving Holly's fingers in and out. In just seconds the explosion came, shaking her entire body as she pulled Holly with her to fall onto her side on the bed.

As the tide of orgasm washed away, Amy opened her eyes to see Holly's just inches away, her mouth still pressed, softly now, against Amy's, her fingers withdrawing from Amy's pussy.

Amy tried to speak, and for the moment was unable. She finally succeeded in gasping out, "Where... where did you learn to do that?" Her voice was muffled, with Holly's lips still in contact.

Holly drew back slightly, and grinned. "From books, mainly."

Amy blinked. "That was in a book?"

"Well, not all of it. But all those different things I was trying at the start -- I was just trying to figure out what you liked. That's why my hand was there."

Amy didn't find that the explanation was clearing anything up. "Your hand? What do you mean?" Her breathing was slowly getting back to something like normal.

"Where I was holding it, touching your inner thighs and labia. The book said I could tell whether you liked something sexually by the way your muscles were twitching there."

Amy struggled to sit up, wiping a few beads of sweat off her forehead as she let go of Holly. Beside her, Holly also sat up. "So that was trial and error going on, at the start?"

Holly nodded. "I guess I finally found what worked." She gave Amy a shy-looking smile.

"That, that... kissing thing." Amy failed to find a way to describe it better. "You're saying that was in a book?"

Holly laughed. "Oh, the kiss-licks? Not that, no. That's something me and Haley do for each other. It really gets us going..."

Under her breath, Amy murmured, "I'll bet it does."

“...so I decided to see if you liked it, but I wanted to try some other stuff first.”

Amy shook her head to clear it. “Okay. I think I know where we can go from here. The main thing is, there are ways you can learn to read a new sex client without the trial and error. There are some signs you can see and hear, not just pick up from touch, as soon as the situation starts to get intimate. Usually you’ll be able to tell what kind of contact your client will want within the first few seconds, and take it from there. You can make adjustments after that, but often you won’t need to. And...” Amy shook her head again, heaving a sigh. “That thing you call the kiss-lick -- you’ll be able to use that a lot. But not every time. Anyway, tomorrow we can start talking about the signs, and after a couple of sessions...” Amy grinned suddenly. “...I’m going to want you to try it out on Melissa and Jana. You haven’t had sex with either of them, right?”

Holly shook her head, and suddenly laughed. “I just realized I know what you mean about seeing signs. I wasn’t really thinking about it, but I can usually tell when Melissa and Jana are starting to get... the hots for each other. And I excuse myself then and tell them I’m going down to the library, like I do a lot anyway. Sometimes I miss the signs, but I still leave when they start petting and kissing. They’ve never asked me to go away, but I can tell they like being alone.”

And they’ve seen the signs in Holly that tell them not to press her about sex, Amy thought. And I’ll bet Holly hasn’t caught any of the bondage sex sessions, or she’d probably mention it. Amy smiled. “Well, they’re not a completely ideal place to start, because you’re already kind of familiar with them, but you can still try out some things you’ve learned. You might still get some surprises.” Amy looked at the clock. “There should still be enough time to get something done at the salon. Like I said, just make sure you can come back by seven.”

Holly nodded, and quickly put her uniform back on. She grinned. “Thank you so much, Amy. You’ve just done so much for me, it’s hard to say enough about how much you’ve helped.”

As she turned towards the door, Amy reached for her hand. “Wait a second, Holly.” As Holly turned to face her again, Amy stood, put her arms around Holly and, to Holly’s wide-eyed surprise, kissed her on the lips. “Thank you too, Holly. That felt really nice just now.”

Holly kissed her back, grinning. “For me, too. More than I could imagine.” Seconds later she was out the door, hurrying down towards the salon.

* * * * *

THREE DAYS LATER

Amy kissed Shawna goodbye, wished her a good class, then lay back on the bed, not needing to do anything right this minute. Megan had spent the night in Jackie’s room, and was already in class by now. For Amy it was a rare moment of quiet. She opened one eye at the sound of the knock on her door. “Come in.”

Holly peeked in, the usual grin on her face, quickly turning apologetic. “I didn’t know you were asleep. I’ll come back.”

Amy smiled. She could tell Holly was excited about something. “Not asleep, just resting. Tell me what’s up.” She laced her fingers behind her head, eager to hear.

Holly closed the door, sat in a chair facing the bed, and eagerly blurted, “I did Jana and Melissa last night!”

Amy sat up. “That’s great, Holly. You mean, a threesome?”

Holly shook her head. “Separately.”

Amy said, “Now remember, it’s not just supposed to be sex. You’re supposed to be using what I’ve been telling you.”

Holly’s face was alight. “Oh, I did, I did! It was so cool! We were all on the bed, watching a movie. I was next to Jana, and Melissa was on the other side. There was a part in the movie where we all laughed, and I kind of slapped Jana’s elbow while we were laughing, and then I just kept my hand there and looked at her. Looking like... well, you know what I mean.”

Amy laughed. “Oh, yeah.”

“Anyway, in a minute we were kissing. Melissa just kind of scooted away, to give us room. And, before we went past kissing, I started getting the weirdest feeling about Jana.”

Amy wrinkled her brow. “Feeling like what?” Amy believed she knew what it was.

“Well, you know how you were explaining about the Control dimension, and the signs of whether your client wants to take charge, or wants you to do it? I had a feeling I knew what you meant, and... I thought I might be misreading it, but the signs I was getting said Jana was way, way at the end of the scale. Like it went past her just wanting me in charge, she wanted me to take complete, total control of her body. The feeling just got stronger, and I felt more sure I was right. So I started taking her clothes off first, before I did mine. I pushed her down onto her back -- Melissa was totally off the bed by this time, just watching us -- and I got on top of Jana, and I took hold of her wrists and held them pinned behind her head. Then I used my legs, like scissors, squeezing her knees between mine, and I crossed my ankles over hers, so she couldn’t move her legs at all. Then I saw I could hold her head still by squeezing my forearms against the sides, and when I kissed her again I pushed my tongue way inside her mouth and kept it there, so she couldn’t talk. I knew by that time I was right, because she’s a little bigger than I am, and she could have just pushed me off if she tried hard enough, or at least bit my tongue, but she didn’t. She just sucked on my tongue and made this muffled moaning sound, and wiggled under me.

“Anyway, I was using all my hands and feet already, and I realized I didn’t have any way to rub her pussy, and her clit was totally out of reach. But it didn’t matter! She was getting so excited, wriggling and moaning, and she came in like thirty seconds!

“And -- this was so funny -- Melissa was sitting in a chair now, just shaking her head and gawking at us, and she said, ‘I never thought of that! I just always use ropes!’ And it hit me that that must be how they always do it, with Melissa tying her up! I mean, I always could see the rope marks on Jana’s wrists and

ankles, but I just assumed it was from her hanging practice, where she does it with her feet tied together.”

Amy tried to keep a straight face and nod wisely, not wanting to say what she was thinking. It had taken *Megan* longer than that to figure out what Jana wanted. Amy was stunned.

“Afterwards Jana was so sweet, and after she sat up she kept holding me, and thanking me, and kissing me, and it felt really nice.

“Then Melissa took off *her* clothes, and came up on the bed with us. She started rubbing her hand along my back, and Jana just grinned and backed away. In a minute, I was kissing Melissa.

“And I knew I was getting totally different signs from her -- not just about control, but everything, especially in the Giving/Taking dimension. Like she’s really happiest when she knows she’s making her partner feel good...”

Amy nodded. Having defined the various dimensions for Holly, she knew what Holly was talking about. And Amy and Melissa had made love many times.

“...so it was a lot more of a sharing kind of thing. I showed her some things I liked, and I got myself higher and higher, while I was picking up on what she liked too. I did the kiss-lick on her, and she started doing it to me too. And as soon as I came, she did too. Amy, it was so neat!

“Anyway, I didn’t sleep on the hideaway bed. They wanted me to sleep on the bed with them, so I did.

“Since I woke up I’ve been writing in my diary. I’ve got so much stuff I want to show Haley as soon as she gets here!”

Amy grinned, leaned forward and took Holly’s hands. “Listen, I have a few more things I still want you to try, but I’m pretty sure you’ll be ready for the party. Still want to do that?”

“Oh, for sure!”

“Oh! Before I forget, pull down your shorts and panties. I want to see how the salon did.”

CHAPTER 9

Amy stood with the noose around her neck, holding both of Megan's hands, feeling Megan's buttocks rubbing against her own. Through the curtain surrounding them, as they stood in the hanging cage, they could hear the rising hubbub of conversation as the club members gathered around them. Her heart was fluttering with excitement. She and Megan had done nine shows in the last three years, but this, their tenth, was special.

The noise level dropped suddenly, and Amy took a slow, deep breath, knowing the curtain would rise soon. She rubbed the back of her head against Megan's, and murmured a quick "Love you," to which Megan responded, "Love you."

Outside the curtain, Amy heard Jackie clear her throat, and begin the introduction. "I want to welcome all of the members here tonight, as our First Year students host their first party." During the last year, Amy and Megan had begun appearing at parties for classes other than their own. Now Amy's class, of course, no longer hosted its own parties. "Later, at the end of the evening, the First Year class will proudly present Toni Cermont, who will be hanged for your entertainment. But now, as you are aware, as we occasionally do, we have an addition to the usual program. I believe all of you know, by now, that this feature will not end in death, but I'm sure you won't fault the stars of our show for that. Ladies, gentlemen, performing together for the *final* time..." Jackie gave special emphasis to the word, "...the Hanging Academy, and its graduates, are happy to present Miss Amy Cameron and Miss Megan Sadler!"

Amy buried a smile at the honorific applied to her name, as if she were a free woman, as the curtain was drawn upward. She let go of Megan's hands before they became visible, and crossed her wrists in front of her crotch. Her hands, for this performance, were not tied. Her only restraints were two silvery chains, each running from a metal cuff around one wrist to connect, at her hip, to a similar chain around her waist. As she moved, it would be clear to the audience that the chains were not quite long enough to allow her hands to reach up to the noose. Despite the freedom of movement, Amy felt it was important that she and Megan still be unable to save themselves.

The audience took in a collective breath as Amy and Megan were revealed, their bodies bare and oiled for the spotlights.

Before clearing her mind for the performance, Amy liked to sweep her eyes across the onlookers on her own side of the cage. In addition to the club members in attendance, and the First Year girls who would be hosting them in private sessions following the auction, all of the remaining living graduates were there. Students in the other classes were not allowed in the party pavilion tonight, but Amy knew that Melissa and Jana were watching through the small grill overlooking the party room.

At once Amy saw Holly, standing near the front of the crowd, next to Shawna. Holly's eyes were wide, trying to take in everything at once, and she nodded as Shawna pointed something out to her, after which Holly pointed to something else, leaning towards Shawna with a question. Holly was dressed for the party in a nightie of semi-transparent green that ended at the tops of her thighs. The garment was held up by an elastic band whose front ran across her chest just above her breasts, leaving her arms and shoulders bare. The elastic was very loose, and the top depended more on the jutting of her breasts than on the power of the elastic to anchor it. The uppermost three inches of the nightie had a panel of opaque green cloth sewn inside it, so that Holly's breasts were invisible behind it, though it was still thin

enough to be dimpled slightly by her nipples. Her tummy, already showing taut abs from her workouts in the gym, was visible behind the gauzy fabric, as was the tiny string bikini bottom in darker green. Her legs were bare, and she stood in green felt slippers. The overall effect was that she appeared ready to surprise her lover with a very intimate evening planned for the bedroom. She had picked out the outfit herself, and Amy couldn't imagine improving on it. With her bright red hair mostly swept back behind her ears, except for the bangs in front, with carefully applied makeup that included a soft green eye-shadow matching her eyes, and a glossy lipstick matching her hair, she looked both adorable and magnetically sexual.

Just before withdrawing her attention internally, Amy was surprised to see Steffi Bloom, also near the front. Amy was not aware that Steffi had attended any previous parties, although, due to her purchase of Linda, she'd been a club member for nearly a year. Steffi had an odd look on her face -- "dumbfounded" was as close as Amy could come to describing it. Amy wondered whether it was merely surprise at seeing Amy and Megan, whom Steffi would easily remember from Linda's hanging, though her reaction seemed, to Amy, to go beyond that.

The crowd hushed still further now, as the overhead lights were dimmed, leaving only the spotlights from four directions picking out the featured performers in the center of the room.

In the world of Amy's perceptions, the crowd went away. There was nothing but the touch of Megan behind her, the feel of the platform under her feet, and the soft caress of the rope around her neck.

Amy started the script, growling furiously, "It's your fault we were caught! And now we're going to be hanged for it!"

Megan, behind her, snapped, "MY fault?? You told me the courtyard was clear of guards!"

Amy replied angrily, "It was! You should have had time. Why were you so slow? It's your fault for not running faster!"

Megan snarled, "You got me into this. Did you ever really love me?"

"The assassination was your idea! And I did love you! With all my heart!"

"I loved you too -- Oh no!" This was the final line of dialogue, spoken in reaction to the beginning of the descent of the platform.

Amy, breathing steadily and deeply, felt herself lifted in the air by the noose. The last bit of nervousness faded away as she snuggled into her comfort zone, suspended by the neck. They had rehearsed this performance many times. Her body knew what to do without further thought.

Megan gave her the first bump -- suddenly contracting her stomach muscles to force her buttocks back, to bang hard against Amy's, sending Amy swinging forward. As Amy's pendulum swing brought her back in contact with Megan, she gave Megan a hard butt-bump of her own.

The crowd laughed, understanding that the two angry lovers, unable to continue fighting in words, were now battling physically with their posteriors.

As Megan swung back again towards Amy, she and Amy interlocked their ankles. Amy pushed downward, tensing her leg muscles to lift herself, using the pressure of Megan's ankles to push off against. The tension in the noose eased, and she took several breaths, before relaxing her legs -- the signal to Megan to tense her own leg muscles, pushing upward to take her own turn at breathing. Little of this byplay would be noticed by the audience, whose attention at that point would be caught by each girl slapping the other's hands away.

Each of them now caught the other's hands in her own, interlacing fingers, and here the tone of their interaction would change, as if each of them was remembering how much the other meant to her.

Each of them now took turns lifting the other by arm strength alone, while the focus of the audience was shifting back to their feet. Amy let the inside of her right foot brush upward against the back of Megan's leg, in a very intimate way -- only to stop and straighten her leg quickly, as if remembering that she was still angry at Megan. Megan now mirrored that move, her foot briefly caressing Amy's leg before, again, suddenly stopping, pretending she had meant nothing by it. The audience, again, laughed appreciatively.

Amy now, during her next turn at breathing, turned her head to the right, as if trying to look behind her at Megan, and, as if catching herself, suddenly faced front again, with a tiny headshake -- no, we are not lovers anymore. Megan, when it was her turn to breath, did the same. Amy repeated the headturn, holding it longer this time, and more slowly turning it back to the front, then closing her eyes, and clearly mouthing the words, "I love you." Megan, afterwards, did the same.

And now it was time for their most difficult move. Amy let go of Megan's left hand with her right. She lifted her right foot, pressed the sole of it against Megan's synchronously upraised left, and both of them gave a push, swinging them slowly into grand, opposite circles around their joined hands until, now facing each other, the fronts of their bodies came together gently and they looked into each other's eyes. They had spent more time working on this one move than any they had ever done before. It wasn't enough just to turn to face each other. It had to be as poetic, as graceful, as it was physically possible for it to be.

Amy couldn't resist turning her attention back to the audience for a moment. The loud gasps told her it had gone perfectly.

Slowly, each of them raised her right thigh high up into the other's crotch, feeling it squeezed there. The first part of the program had been very difficult, with several intervals during which neither of them could breathe -- it taken all of their aerobic conditioning to make it through. For the next segment, breathing would be easier, relying only on alternate thigh-squeezing and lifting, and one of them would be breathing at any one time.

Each of them put her hands on the other's hips and pulled her partner closer. Rubbing breasts, they kissed, putting their arms farther around each other, then letting their hands roam to as many parts of each other's body as they could reach, while still kissing, each of them beginning a rhythmic hip-rocking.

In previous performances they had always had their hands bound, either behind their backs or around each other's waist. Now, despite the chains still restricting their movements, they were able to make unfettered love to each other in mid-air.

It wasn't necessary for Amy to maintain that earlier level of concentration for now. All her movements now were perfectly natural, a combination of her years in the noose and her love for Megan. Surrounding sounds were filtering into her conscious mind, and she could hear, now, the mingled moans and gasps of audience members brought to their own height of sexual arousal by the display.

Amy gave Megan's thigh a quick double-squeeze, to signal that they should start, in synchrony, their final new move of the program, the one for which they had needed their hands free. Each of them wrapped her arms as tightly as possible around her partner's waist, and then each of them slowly started raising both knees, each with her outer leg sliding up her partner's thigh and then hip, each raising the leg that was captured between her partner's, rotating hips, to bring, for the first time in any show, their pussies into direct contact. The arm-holds were needed to prevent them falling backward. With a tight grip, they were able to keep their upper bodies together, maintaining the kiss, while also using their arms to lift each other alternately for breathing. As they rocked their hips together, Amy could feel her well-lubricated labia grinding against Megan's, feel the pressure from the contact on her swollen clit.

Amy sought out the sounds, now, the choked gasps of orgasm from around her, because they helped raise her own arousal still higher -- she and Megan could have, in non-hanging circumstances, maintained each other at this level for hours, but the difficulties in breathing forced them to cut their lovemaking short. Amy felt the tingling quickly build into a fire within her, hotter, hotter... and released at last, her entire body quaking, feeling ripples under Megan's hot skin against hers telling her Megan had reached the same explosion.

She let her legs slowly fall, let her body go limp, her hands sliding apart and slipping away from Megan's waist... only to catch both of Megan's hands in her own as their bodies separated, keeping that one contact with her lover after death. Her field of vision darkened, and Amy thought for a moment she was fainting, but it was just the curtain rolling down around them.

Amy did, in fact, nearly faint just as the platform came up underneath her to touch her feet, but she had enough energy left to hold her legs steady to support her weight. She could breathe freely now as the pressure from the noose slackened, and she shook her head from side to side to loosen it still further, as Megan did the same. Jackie was with them on the platform now, removing the nooses after determining that both of them were capable of standing. As Jackie unlocked their handcuffs and waist chains, Amy became aware once more of the sounds from outside, applause louder than she had ever heard before.

She hugged Megan tightly and kissed her, then they each reached for the robes that Jackie was handing them. Amy was tying the robe's belt as the curtain rose again, and she stepped out of the cage, Megan behind her, and waved at the crowd with a grin, turning to face all sides as the applause increased in volume again.

* * * * *

Amy smiled as she walked towards her private room, holding Steffi Bloom's hand -- Steffi had, to Amy's amazement, outbid everyone else at the auction, paying the highest price Amy or Megan had ever fetched. It had gone over eleven thousand by the time the last other bidder dropped out, and it was the first time Amy's sale price had ever topped Megan's.

Steffi looked very distracted, all the way to the room. Amy suspected Steffi was wondering how to act in this situation. Amy kept smiling at her in an attempt to be reassuring.

On reaching the room and closing the door, Steffi seemed even more agitated. Amy, feeling for the first time a little uncertain at the vibes she was getting from Steffi, sat on the bed, still robed, trying to see whether she could read what Steffi wanted. At last she gave up. "Ms. Bloom..."

Steffi turned and looked at her. "Oh, no. Steffi, please." She did manage a tiny smile. "I do feel as if we're old friends, in a way."

Amy smiled again. "There is that. Okay then... Steffi. Would you like..." She frowned. Steffi had resumed pacing. "Steffi, anything you want, we can do that. You own me for the next three hours."

Steffi sat abruptly in a chair, facing Amy. "I just needed to get you alone so I could tell you something. It might be important."

Amy was completely at sea now. "You just paid all that money because you wanted to... tell me something? Steffi... I'm really grateful for whatever it is, but you could have just written to me here, anytime you wanted. For free."

Steffi waved away Amy's concern. "Don't worry about the money. It's nothing. And it's about something I didn't know until a few minutes ago. I mean, I knew it, but I just found out it related to you."

Amy moved close enough to take both of Steffi's hands in her own. "Just tell me, okay?"

Steffi looked up, her lips pressed together, her expression saying how-do-I-start-this. "I never knew your last name until tonight, when that girl said it just before your show started. Are you Andrew Cameron's sister?"

Amy let go of Steffi's hands and sat bolt upright, her eyes wide. "What about Andrew?" She felt a surge of adrenaline rush through her. Did he put Steffi up to buying Amy at the auction? But... Steffi was here. She hadn't handed Amy off to Andrew.

Steffi sighed, seeming relieved. "I can tell I was right about him. And you." She paused, once again seeming to try to organize her thoughts.

Amy tried to get her breathing back to normal. Whatever this was about, there didn't seem to be any danger right at this moment. "How do you know him?"

"Well... this goes back to just after that first meeting here, at the Academy, with Linda. You and Megan were there, of course, and it was you who gave me the name of that contractor for building the dungeon. I don't know, maybe that should have told me something.

"Anyway, I did contact the contractor, and while we were discussing the sale, the agent gave me the names of some previous customers in the area, and suggested I talk to some of them. She was pretty insistent that if I heard the kind of endorsements their 'satisfied customers' gave, I'd know I was working with the right company.

“So, I did talk with three of them. One of them was Andrew. I’m not sure if you... well, do you know about that dungeon he’s got? He showed me around it.”

Amy nodded, remembering, trying to push away the memory. “I’ve seen it.”

Steffi shuddered. “So you know all about what he was planning. Well, he showed me all its features, and told me it was for his sister. I’d been thinking he said the name Annie, but tonight, when I heard your full name, it all came back to me, and I knew he’d said Amy. And I knew his sister was -- you were -- a slave somewhere, but he didn’t say where. That was the problem, he said. You were out of his reach, because he couldn’t just buy you from your current owners, not for this purpose. It just all came together for me tonight: sister -- Amy Cameron -- slave, whose owner wouldn’t sell to him -- Hanging Academy... I mean it’s all so obvious now.

“He said he had a plan he was working on, and eventually he’d have his sister -- you -- down there to... play with. Amy, I am *so* sorry I didn’t put this together earlier. Last year, when I first met you, I hadn’t met *him* yet, and then I had the whole Annie/Amy confusion. If I’d just asked myself later how you’d heard of that contractor, I might have put it together, but...”

Amy took Steffi’s hands again. “That’s not important now. Whatever his plan is, he hasn’t done anything about it yet, so you’re still in time. The important thing now is, did he say anything about what his plan might be? Any details?”

Steffi shook her head. “Nothing at all useful. But even with this little to go on... Amy, something about him really creeped me out.”

Amy choked back a laugh. “Tell me about it.”

“I mean, this was really a serious thing to him. He struck me as a guy who gets what he wants, and would work hard for it if he had to. And as a guy who is very careful, and he’d wait until he had the foolproof plan worked out. I left thinking, that poor sister.”

Amy’s mind was spinning. If Andrew did somehow find a way to snatch her... of course, he wouldn’t do it personally. Someone would be hired to do it for him. But to keep her there afterward in that dungeon, which was the first place the police would look for her, that wouldn’t make sense... But wait -- did anyone even know it was there? Did Dad even actually know Andrew had that dungeon? Amy wasn’t sure. What would prompt the police to consider that there might be such a place on Andrew’s property? Especially if there were no fingers of evidence pointing to Andrew’s guilt to start with?

As far as Andrew knows, Amy realized, his dungeon is still a safe place to put me.

And it’s not! she told herself. Andrew has no idea anyone at the Academy is onto his plan!

Does he? There is at least one person connected to the Academy who did know about the dungeon, and she was sitting right in front of Amy. “Steffi, did you tell him you were buying a Hanging Girl for your dungeon?” If Andrew knew Steffi would be discussing her own dungeon with the Academy, the very place where his sister was a student, a sister who might meet Steffi herself, and hear about Andrew’s

plan from her... If Andrew knew there was a connection between Steffi and the Academy, he'd have to think his secret might be blown.

Steffi shook her head. "Remember, I was trying to keep the whole Zoey scene down to people who really needed to know. And here was this Andrew Cameron fellow, young, good looking..."

Maybe to people who don't know him, thought Amy.

"...obviously with a lot of money. It didn't seem too unlikely he might even know Zoey personally. I had no idea what circles he moved in. So I kept mum about just what my own dungeon was for." Steffi frowned as another thought struck her. "Oh, I meant to ask, is Preston Cameron your father? I was going to ask Andrew, but somehow I never got a chance."

Amy nodded. Steffi must be thinking about where Andrew's money might have come from, she decided. "He's our dad, yes."

"I met him once, at a party. He seemed... I don't know, kind of cold." She suddenly looked horrified with herself. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I just wasn't thinking for a second, about you being his daughter."

She seemed about to apologize further, but Amy cut her off. "It's okay, really, I know how he is." Despite the seriousness of the situation, Amy nearly laughed, as she suddenly remembered her father making an identical characterization of Steffi.

So what now? wondered Amy. Do we tell Andrew we know about his planning? Internally she shook her head. It's better if he doesn't know, she told herself. If he takes me, it's obvious where I'll be, and I'll be found there quickly. But if he finds out we know as much as we do about his plans, he'll change them. It's safer not to tell him. The dean may think otherwise, but I think he'll see it the same way.

Nothing had yet happened, on those occasions when Amy had left the grounds. Maybe the situation hadn't been right. Maybe the snatch was still in the planning stages. Maybe it had been abandoned altogether -- though Amy thought that was the least likely possibility. Knowing Andrew.

For now, all I can do is tell it all to the dean, and he can figure out how to be extra-careful in the future, Amy thought. I have to leave the campus sometime, at least for my own hanging if nothing else. But that's months down the road.

Megan is hanging in five weeks, she reminded herself. I'm absolutely not leaving this building until after that. No point in taking chances. I don't have to worry about this now. I'll tell the dean, and he can take care of safety measures.

Amy gripped Steffi's hands more tightly. "Thank you, so much, for telling me this. It really means a lot to me, that you were thinking about me. And we're going to take this very seriously -- trust me on that. I know Andrew a lot better than you do, and you were totally right to be... creeped out." She moved slightly closer to Steffi, and smiled. "You not only own me for three hours, you've got me really grateful too."

Amy pulled gently on Steffi's hands, and for the first time, felt Steffi's sexual responses come on-line, as if Steffi was suddenly conscious that she was alone with a girl with both the training and the obligation to satisfy her every sexual wish. Amy had no problem, now, reading that Steffi wanted her to initiate the intimacies.

Amy reached up and softly stroked Steffi's neck and cheek, then leaned forward to kiss her, a very soft touch of lips to lips. She could feel Steffi's breath whisper past her ear, suddenly more rapidly than a moment ago.

* * * * *

Steffi lay on her back, her legs off the end of the bed, her feet on the floor, her clothes long since discarded. Her breath was slowly returning to normal.

Amy, kneeling on the floor in front of Steffi, also naked, looked up from between Steffi's thighs, licking her own lips for a few stray drops of Steffi's ejaculate. She smiled. I'm glad I knew that was coming, she thought. That and the scream. "Do you want me to wash off my face a bit, or not? If we kiss right now, you're going to taste yourself."

Steffi laughed, and reached towards her. "That's okay. Just come up here with me."

Amy got up onto the bed and crawled forward on her elbows and knees until she was beside Steffi, and wrapped her arms around her, snuggling up against her, her head cushioned by Steffi's breasts. She giggled. "I had an unfair advantage. I already knew some things you like."

Steffi laughed again, relaxed now, and used a finger to play with Amy's hair. "I won't tell anybody you cheated."

Amy looked up and kissed Steffi's chin. "So tell me how L... Sorry, how Zoey is."

Steffi's eyes lit up. "That's okay. For you, she's Linda. And she's just great. They really did a wonderful job with her. Thanks for telling me about that company." She giggled, a little self-consciously. "I have her in sort of a secret extra bedroom. The maid doesn't get to clean in there. When I get in the mood, once or twice a week, I go in there. She spends her time hanging by her neck -- I had them reinforce that part of her, to make sure the strain is no problem. When I spend the night there, I either leave her up, so I can see her hanging up there when I wake up, or else sometimes I take her down, and untie her hands, so she can sleep with me. I can close her eyes, and when I wake up with her in my arms, she looks so sweet and peaceful. I guess I like that because I feel like I really own Zoey." Steffi blushed. "You don't think that's too weird, do you?"

Amy blinked in surprise at Steffi's worry. "No! Not at all. I know Linda would love that so much. Believe me, I saw how much fun she had playing that role for you, because she knew it would do so much for you. And for her to be able to keep on playing it... Remember, I told her I was going to suggest it to you. She was really happy about it then, and I'm sure she is now."

"Good." Steffi put her arms around Amy and hugged her.

Amy wriggled a little farther up the bed and kissed Steffi, then slid her leg between Steffi's. She let her hands roam up and down Steffi's back. Going to go much slower this time, Amy thought to herself.

* * * * *

Toni had put on a very cute show for her hanging, as a game show contestant giving ludicrously airheaded answers to quiz questions from her roommate Renee as the "host" of the show. After a pouting "You mean you're going to *hang* me?", her silliest response of all considering she'd been standing there the entire time with her hands tied and a noose around her neck, Renee had pushed the lever, and Toni had done a creditable job for a First Year with just two months training, kicking for five minutes, doing some of the special moves all of the girls were working hard to learn. As she hung motionless at last, the blood flow from the knife wound administered by Renee now slowing to a trickle, Amy, holding Steffi's hand while standing next to Megan, turned to look for Holly again. Holly had been the last of the hostesses to return to the pavilion, and had stopped just inside the door as the presentation of Toni began. Amy thought Holly looked as excited as she'd ever seen her, bursting to tell Amy something, but not wanting to interrupt the show. Amy saw Holly now, rushing towards her, beaming, her nightie slightly uneven at the top, probably reflecting the haste in which she had dressed.

Before Amy could even say Hi, Holly burst out, "You guys were so great!! I know I saw it all in practice, but watching you do it for real, in front of everybody..." She stopped, momentarily speechless, shaking her head, her mouth open. She giggled suddenly. "I was trying so hard not to get wet, right before, you know, going back to the bedroom, but I just... Oh Amy, Megan..." she looked back and forth between them, "Now I know how hard Haley and me are going to have to work, to get anywhere near that good! Amy, really, can we do it? I mean, anything like that?"

Amy looked at her seriously. "Holly, you can do it if you believe in yourselves as much as I believe in you."

Holly practically flung herself at Amy, gripping her tightly. "That means so much to me! We won't let you down, Amy! Or you, Megan." She shifted her hug to Megan, who laughed, hugged her back, as kissed her cheek as Holly let her go.

Suddenly Holly looked past Amy's shoulder, and exclaimed, "Oh, he's leaving already! Bye, Benjamin! Thank you!" She waved and blew him a kiss, which he returned with a laugh as he went out the door.

Amy looked at Holly, eyes bright with delight. "You met Benjamin! That's really great!"

Holly turned back to Amy, nodding vigorously. "He was *so* much fun. And he didn't... well, you know him, I guess." Holly was speaking carefully, as there were still guests within earshot, including Steffi. Holly laughed. "I told him about Haley, and how much I miss her..." Holly, still grinning, suddenly wiped a tear away, "And he told me to close my eyes, and imagine she was right there with me. And I did, and it seemed so real!" She put her hand over her mouth, blushing slightly but still laughing. "I came so hard."

Amy laughed too. "I'll tell you later, about the first time I met him. The shows Megan and I do... that was all sort of his idea. In a way."

Holly goggled at her. "Really?? Yeah, I'll have to hear about that."

Amy grinned. "And I've got to hear more about the rest of your night."

Holly laughed again. "Oh, it's all been such a blast! This is all so cool..."

CHAPTER 10

FOUR WEEKS LATER - FRIDAY

The heavily shaded windows had allowed Amy and Shawna to sleep in. At last Amy, in that half-awake morning state, felt Shawna stir slightly in her arms. Amy shifted her head a tiny bit to bring her lips in contact with Shawna's, and felt, rather than saw, them curl into a smile. Sleepily, her eyes still closed, Shawna mumbled, "Thank you, Amy."

Amy laughed, exasperated. For the hundredth time, she said, "I've told you you don't have to keep doing that."

Shawna tightened her arms around Amy and kissed her again. "Yes, I do. I'm never going to stop thanking you. I'm only a graduate because of you."

Amy sighed. "Shawna, everything you needed was inside you."

Shawna scrunched down enough to snuggle her head against Amy's chest. "And it never would have come out. I was going so crazy... Look, you know better than anybody what Megan was like when she first came here. I was just never up to rooming with her. What you did, when you got me out of that situation, it's just... I don't have any words for it, except 'thank you.' So I'll keep using those. And then, getting us back together again..."

"Okay, *that* I'm not going to take credit for at all. That was totally her idea."

"Well, I know. But she's just changed so much from when we started here, and I'm not going to let you tell me you didn't have anything to do with *that*."

"Not as much as you'd think. When she decided she needed to change, she made herself over the way she thought she needed to be. She's like that."

Shawna wrinkled her nose and elbowed Amy playfully in the ribs. "Thank you again. See, you won't stop me."

Amy laughed and kissed her again, then turned to look over her shoulder as the door opened softly behind her. Megan and Jackie were there, Jackie with her arm around Megan's waist. Jackie gave the girls in the bed a small wave and rubbed her head against Megan's shoulder. Amy hadn't seen Jackie this visibly affectionate with Megan outside of bed, but the fact of Jackie having just spent her last night with Megan probably had a lot to do with it. Megan had only a few of the girls to say intimate goodbyes to. She would be spending Saturday night with Jana, and she and Shawna would take advantage of Shawna's class-free day on Tuesday to spend all day and all night together -- the last of Megan's official teaching duties had ended yesterday, to give her a week to prepare for her hanging.

Other than her dates with Jana and Shawna, the rest of Megan's remaining time, before her hanging next Saturday, would be spent with Amy.

Megan grinned and said, "Going to breakfast. Want to come?"

Amy nodded eagerly and pulled Shawna out of bed, towards the shower. "Just give us a few minutes, and we'll meet you down there."

Minutes later, with Amy putting on her uniform as Shawna was still toweling dry, Holly appeared at the door, looking apologetic. Megan and Jackie were still there. "Megan? I didn't mean to interrupt."

Megan smiled at Holly and shook her head. "We're just going to breakfast."

"I just wanted to ask... Not right this minute, but could think about... if you've told me everything?"

Megan looked puzzled. "About what?"

Holly bit her lip, obviously feeling she was being a little pushy, but unable to resist asking a crucial question. "I mean, do I know everything I need to know about hanging, before you go?" The concern that she could miss an opportunity in the last week of an important teacher's life was scaring her a little.

Megan gave her a serious look. "Holly, you don't know how hard it's been lately to find things to tell you that you haven't already figured out." She laughed suddenly. "It's a good thing I'm getting out of here. In another week you'd be telling me stuff I don't know. But listen..." The serious look again. "Anything, anything at all I could be telling you, I know you'd be able to work it out before long."

Holly gave her a small smile. "I'm just..."

Megan stopped her, smiling. "I know what you are. You're as obsessive as I am. That's all you need." Megan gave a quick look around to the rest of her friends, then back to Holly. "Come with us to breakfast?"

Holly's eyes went wide, her mouth in an open-faced grin. Amy knew how much it meant to Holly to be included in a group of her idols as an equal. "Sure!"

* * * * *

TUESDAY MORNING

Shawna had arrived early in the morning for her twenty-four hour goodbye to Megan. She had spent the night with Jackie, then gone to the cafeteria as soon as it opened up, filling a cooler with a full day's food and drinks for two, including the breakfast Shawna, giggling, insisted on sharing with Megan in bed. It had been Megan's idea to spend the entire time alone with Shawna in the room, even eating their meals there, with a sign on the door to turn away visitors, directing them to Amy. Amy had kissed both of them, and gone over to Jackie's room to shower.

From there, she had gone to the dean's office. Tina, the dean's secretary, a little surprised at Amy's request, had nevertheless relayed it to the dean, who gave his approval. Tina had then ushered Amy into the dean's conference room, and had simplified things by lending Amy her own personal cell phone.

Amy, alone in the room now, and equipped with Paul Sadler's phone number, hesitated, her heart suddenly fluttering in a late attack of nerves. She had maintained a constant inner attitude of optimism

that had prevented Megan from discerning her worry, one of the very few times Amy had ever managed to hide anything from Megan. But the optimism was dissolving quickly now that the moment had come. Kathleen was twelve... no, Amy reminded herself, thirteen now. Amy knew how flighty kids that age can be.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Amy punched the number into the phone.

Megan's father himself answered the phone. Probably rings into his office, Amy decided. She cleared her throat. "Mr. Sadler? This is Amy, Megan's roommate. From the Academy."

Paul Sadler made no effort to hide his astonishment. If he'd had a list, thought Amy, of people he might expect to call him, her name was probably near the bottom, if it was present at all. "Amy! Hi!" Suddenly he sounded worried. "Is Megan okay?"

Amy responded quickly, "Oh, yes, sir! She's really excited about her hanging. You're still going to be there, right?"

"Oh, absolutely! I wouldn't miss that for anything." Sounding puzzled now, he said, "She does know I'm coming, right? This isn't... sort of a surprise party, or something like that?"

Amy shook her head, as if he could see that. "No, sir. That is, yes, she knows you're coming. You and..." She hesitated, and plunged in. "Kathleen? Is she coming too?" Amy held her breath.

Her heart began sinking even before he spoke, as she timed the pause. "No, she and some of her friends are planning to go to a concert..."

There was more to the sentence after that, but Amy couldn't hear it over the pounding sound in her ears. She doubled over in her chair suddenly, feeling as if a massive hand were gripping her stomach, trying to rip it apart. She fought back a wave of nausea, knowing it would never do to vomit here. I should have called earlier!! she screamed at herself. But no, she had decided this was the right time. Calling any earlier would have given Kathleen time to change her mind again later.

Amy took several slow, deep breaths, fighting for calm. In a voice only slightly shaky, she managed, "Sir, Megan is really hoping for Kathleen to be there. And you too, of course, but you're already coming. This is really important to her."

In a sympathetic voice, he said, "I'm sure it is, Amy. I'll try to give her enough support for both of us."

No, Amy said to herself, wishing she could scream it at him. That's not it at all! Her right hand gripped the arm of the chair hard enough she thought the wood might splinter, as she tried to keep from crushing the phone in her other hand. Kathleen has to be there. She *has* to be there.

Amy had never seen any emotional concern interfere with Megan's ability to hang. But if Megan's show started and she saw Kathleen wasn't there...

Hopelessly, Amy realized there was nothing she could say. Paul Sadler was a good father, an excellent one by many standards. He cared about his daughters, he listened to them, he set rules and boundaries

for them. No sleepovers on a school night. No going anywhere if he didn't know where they were going, whom they would be with, when they would be home. No going anywhere if it would interfere with schoolwork.

But while he was perfectly capable of telling them what they couldn't do, he was constitutionally unable to do the converse -- ordering them to do something they didn't want to do. It wasn't in his nature. At least, it wasn't now. Amy had wondered if he had tried that, early on, with Megan. Megan would surely break any parent of that habit.

For Amy to try speaking directly to Kathleen, she was sure, was pointless, even if Kathleen were home now rather than in school. Kathleen surely had seen, when Megan had been there a few months ago, how much Megan wanted her to be at the hanging. It hadn't mattered then, and wouldn't matter now. It had been clear that Megan had very little influence on her sister. Megan's absence of several years was no doubt a major factor in that. She couldn't just breeze back into Kathleen's life and start telling her to do things. And Amy was even further removed than that, a total stranger.

If only, Amy wailed inside, Megan's mother were still around. Maybe she could do it. She may have had the kind of relationship with her daughters that...

Amy blinked as a new thought came into her head. There *was* another person in the Sadler household. One whom Kathleen loved and listened to. Hardly believing what she was about to ask any more than Paul Sadler was going to, Amy said, "Mr. Sadler... Is Maya there?"

In his voice in response, Amy heard a higher level of astonishment than the one previously reached when she'd introduced herself at the start of the call. "Ummm... Well, yes, of course."

"Could I... speak to her? You could listen, of course." Amy was feeling her way along in a situation for which there was no standard protocol. A slave didn't just phone up and ask to talk to another man's slave.

"Oh... I... Well, that wouldn't be necessary. She's doing some dusting right now. Let me go get her."

Amy was breathing a little easier now, as hope, completely buried moments earlier, began to sprout anew. She heard a bumping sound as the phone was picked up again, and then Maya's voice, no less amazed than her owner's. "Miss Amy? You wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes, thank you, Maya. It's about Megan..."

Maya interrupted, alarmed. "Is Miss Megan okay?"

The reaction was certainly promising. Though barely knowing Megan, Maya obviously cared very much about her, as a member of the family. "She's fine, Maya. But she needs you to do something... I'm not sure how to explain this." Amy thought a moment. "Maya, if you could do something that would really help Megan, and also would really help Kathleen too, even if Kathleen might not realize it -- you'd try to do that, wouldn't you?"

Maya's answer came quickly. She didn't need to think about it. "Of course, Miss Amy. If it's something I can do."

Amy paused again, seeking a direction to go. Yes, she thought, that's a place to start. "Maya, you've seen that picture on the wall in Megan's workout room, right? The one of Megan with her Aunt Serena?"

"Whenever I dust in there, sure."

"That picture... it's really important to Megan. Well, not the picture itself, I mean, but it... kind of lets her touch Serena. See..." Hesitating again, then taking another direction. "We Hanging Girls... the way we look at it, we're kind of born with something inside us, something that makes us what we are. We need to do this. There's nothing else we can imagine ever wanting to be, other than a Hanging Girl. I think you know something like that yourself. I remember you said... I don't remember exactly how you said it. But that once you decided to be a slave, it was somehow just the right thing for you. Right?"

"Kind of like that, yes."

"Well, we Hanging Girls have that inside, like a voice, but for us it's *really* strong. We're doing something that takes a lot of commitment, but... we're so driven from inside. We often say we were meant to be Hanging Girls from the day we were born. But sometimes it takes a long time to find out. We don't hear the voice, for years. Maybe some women never do hear it calling to them, and they never find out what they were meant to do. For some of us, it takes another person, showing us what a Hanging Girl is, before we can hear that inside voice. For me, it was a girl named Miranda. I met her, and meeting her somehow turned my ear inside and I heard the voice. And my whole life changed." A tear ran down Amy's cheek, as she remembered that day.

She went on, "For Megan, it was Serena. Serena changed Megan's life, she released the inner voice, and the voice could finally tell Megan what direction to go. And it's just... such a fulfillment. Such a... completion, when you can be what you're made to be.

"That's why that picture is special -- why Serena herself is special, to Megan. And Megan does feel... almost complete. Almost, but not quite. Because there's one more thing she wants to do. This... gift that Serena gave her, revealed to her... Megan wants to pass that on, if she can. To Kathleen. If that voice is in Kathleen and Kathleen never hears it, never finds out what her life could be... That would be a loss Megan can't bear thinking about.

"Megan doesn't know whether Kathleen has the voice, buried somewhere inside her. But she does know how to release the voice, if it's there. If Kathleen could just see Megan hang, see firsthand what a Hanging Girl is, what a Hanging Girl does... that's what it would take."

Maya sounded a little doubtful. "Miss Kathleen's seen Miss Megan practice hanging, right here in the house."

"I know, but that's really not the same. In practice, you're not giving your life to thrill people, to amaze people, to excite people, to show them what years of training have taught you to do. If you haven't seen a Hanging Girl show yourself, I'm not sure I can explain it any better than that. But... well, in my case, for

example, I'd seen women hang on TV. They weren't trained for it, and they didn't have any skill at it, and of course, mostly they didn't even want to be doing it. And it really didn't do anything for me. I mean, we've all seen that, and you have to trust me when I tell you it's not the same. Amateur hangings, practice hangings... none of that is like what a Hanging Girl is doing when she's performing in her big show. I didn't hear the voice until I saw Miranda do her show. And I was already eighteen then, Maya! It was almost too late for me! I heard the voice barely in time."

Tears were streaming down Amy's face now, and she struggled to speak as her throat kept trying to close. "Maya, Maya, please. For Megan and for Kathleen. Kathleen will listen to you. If she doesn't have the voice inside, then nothing will happen at the show, but she won't be any worse off. She'll still enjoy the show. She'll remember years later that she sacrificed going to a concert for her sister, but a grown-up Kathleen will know that was the right thing to do. But if she doesn't go, and if this is in her, if she's meant to be a Hanging Girl, and she never finds out... Maya, Megan can't die knowing Kathleen might never hear the voice. Please, whatever it takes, somehow convince Kathleen that she needs to go. That you expect that from her, because Megan is her sister. That she told Megan she would be there, and that that was a promise. And if Kathleen does have the voice, you'll see it in her eyes when she comes home from the hanging. You said she wants to be a different thing every week. But if she has that voice, if she can start hearing it, she'll know what she is. And she'll always, always, always be grateful to you for helping her know."

Amy stopped speaking, because her body would no longer let her. With her hands shaking, her stomach churning, her throat choking the words away, she could only listen. Seconds seemed to turn into hours as she waited.

At last Maya said, "I'll do whatever I can, Miss Amy. I promise. Where can Mr. Sadler reach you, after I talk to Miss Kathleen?"

Amy closed her eyes, taking several deep breaths through a wide-open mouth, her nose clogged from crying. Her stomach began unknitting. Her voice still slightly choked, she gave Maya the phone number to Tina's desk.

* * * * *

TUESDAY AFTERNOON

Amy sat on the bed with Jackie, pretending to watch a movie. She could tell that Jackie knew something was wrong, but most likely Jackie simply attributed it to spending a day away from Megan, who was still alone with Shawna, as she would be until morning.

Amy's body convulsed, nearly sending her flying off the bed in one move, when the speaker in the room crackled, just before Tina's voice came through. Amy had told Tina she should be able to reach her in Jackie's room. "Amy, I just got a message from a woman named Maya, at Paul Sadler's house."

Amy bounded towards the speaker and pushed the button for return-voice. "Yes?"

Tina sounded puzzled. "The message was just, 'Everything is okay.' It sounded like you would know what that means. Do you?"

Amy dropped to her knees, pumping her fists, yes, yes, YES! Sniffing as the tears started again, she said, "I do, Tina. Thank you. Thank you so much."

Amy looked up at Jackie, now standing over her, looking worried. Jackie said, cautiously, " 'Everything is okay.' Does that mean... everything is okay?"

Amy stood, palming the tears out of her eyes, smiling shakily. As an answer, she threw her arms around Jackie.

* * * * *

WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

Amy had had no idea seventeen girls could make this much noise. The seventeen, the remaining members of Amy's graduated class, were talking and laughing in groups in the cafeteria for Megan's party, mostly gathered in small knots around the pizza boxes and soft drink table. Several were still grouped around the table on which Jana was once again tied in the butt-up position, again blindfolded and gagged. That Jana had never before been helplessly exposed to so many girls at once, all of them two years older than she was, had obviously raised her arousal level to new heights. There was no vibrator this time, simply a sign taped to the edge of the table that read "Lick Me Everywhere". At present, Rita was doing so, her tongue running up Jana's left side just west of Jana's breast. Jana was breathing rapidly in grunts, wriggling spastically. Amy had seen Jana come three times so far, and clearly more orgasms were on the horizon.

It was a tribute to Megan that so many girls remained at this point in the year. Jackie, Amy knew, had been lucky enough to find a buyer willing to postpone her hanging a few weeks. A couple of the other girls had managed something similar. It was hard for any Hanging Girl to put off her own show, but as Megan's show had come closer, most of the girls wanted to stay for it. That was a lucky thing for Amy. She would have found it impossible to maintain her resolve to remain on the Academy grounds until after Megan's hanging, if Jackie's show had intervened.

Wendy, now sharing her dorm sister duties with Rita following Lucy's hanging, turned from watching her roommate pleasuring Jana, and faced Megan, grinning. "I just had a mental image of your hanging. About two hours in, the kitchen staff will be standing there with their hands on their hips, waiting for you to finally stop kicking so they can cook you."

Megan and Amy both laughed along with the rest of the girls, though Amy sensed they were all having the same thought Amy was. None of them, not even Amy, had a clue how long Megan was capable of going. Maybe Wendy's joking exaggeration would turn out not to be one after all.

Amy decided, nevertheless, to embellish on the joke. "After they cut her head off and get her over the fire, she'll give another kick, and they'll say, 'Oopsy!' "

Megan laughed harder, and covered her face. "You guys. Promise you won't end up disappointed."

Surprised looks all around, and quick denials. "No way!" Amy laughed again, knowing Megan wasn't really worried. Megan's well of belief in her hanging abilities was bottomless.

Out of the corner of her eye, Amy saw that, in addition to Rita, Jana was now dealing with Tricia as well - Tricia's tongue was slowly licking its way up the back of Jana's thigh, riding Jana's frantic muscular contractions. Amy grinned, knowing she and Megan would probably have to carry an exhausted Jana back to her room this time.

Amy turned back to Wendy. "How about your hanging? Is that set?"

Wendy nodded excitedly. "Well, almost. We're having a final meeting Monday, for them to sign the contract. It's this family of six sisters. They're all really successful -- doctors, lawyers, that kind of thing. They get together once a year for a reunion, and this year they're inviting a lot of friends, and they wanted a Hanging Girl. It's the last time they'll spend a whole reunion together. Next year they're going to eat the oldest sister. Anyway, I'll be really busy with them in bed the day before they hang me -- four of them are married, three with wives and one with a husband, so I'll be doing some threesomes. It's really going to be fun." She beamed happily at everyone, accepting their congratulations.

Amy sighed. She was glad of Wendy's happiness, but couldn't help wishing she could have her own hanging as near in the future as Wendy's was. She had to keep telling herself, it will come, it will get here.

She pushed the thoughts of herself out of her mind. She now saw, unexpectedly, that Wendy had tears in her eyes. Wendy suddenly threw her arms around Megan, digging her chin into Megan's shoulder. In a shaking voice, she said, "I'm here because of you. I passed the Fifteen because of you. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

She backed away far enough to give Megan a kiss, then farther as she felt Sheila tap at her shoulder. Sheila moved around Wendy to give Megan a hug of her own, kissing her neck and murmuring in her ear, "We're all so much better Hanging Girls because of you." She kissed Megan on the lips, and then realized that, somehow, the rest of the girls had started forming a line behind her. Rita and Tricia, seeing what was happening, each gave Jana a pat and came over to join the line to hug Megan.

Amy had been to a lot of goodbye parties over the last three years. She had never before seen the type of spontaneous, heartfelt display of gratitude that the girls, one after another, gave Megan. Megan herself was sniffing, tears running from her eyes. She had just never imagined that her classmates felt this way. Jackie and Shawna gave her especially long hugs, receiving teary kisses in return.

At last the girls stood in a single knot around Megan, looking as though they expected a speech. Megan, as was her habit, her need, when socially pressed, gave Amy a long look, took a deep breath, palmed some of her tears away, and looked around the group in front of her. "I'd tell you I'll never forget you, any of you, but 'never' will only last me three more days..." She paused as the girls all laughed, and she giggled in return. "But for the next three days, I'll keep thinking about you, and how much all of you mean to me. I..." Her improvisational abilities failed her. "Thank you. So much." Her tears started again as the girls applauded.

CHAPTER 11

THURSDAY AFTERNOON

Amy stacked the dishes and drink cans from lunch on the desk, and returned to the bed where Megan waited, relaxing on her back. Megan's eyes tracked Amy, her lips curved in a contented smile.

They were, like Megan and Shawna a few days ago, spending twenty-four hours together in their room. Neither of them had spoken much. It wasn't even necessary to say "I love you," for now. It was time for touching. They had made love twice this morning, and would again tonight, several times.

Lying down beside her, Amy reached out to roll Megan towards her, her left arm underneath Megan, forearm raised behind her, hand pressed flat on Megan's back below her shoulder. Pushing her right leg between Megan's, Amy draped her right arm along Megan's side, spreading her fingers across Megan's buttock. She pressed her lips against Megan's and kept them there, not kissing, just sharing the air Megan breathed.

Amy had a very good sensory memory. It had always helped her as a Hanging Girl, her body always able to reproduce the muscular movements that made her feel right in the noose. She knew she would always, in coming days, be able to remember the way Megan felt against her right now. It was, as always, nice to feel Megan's breasts pressed against her own, feel her heartbeat underneath. But more important at this moment, she would retain the memory of the feel of Megan's stomach pressed flat against hers, remember the slow rhythm of pressure as they both breathed, sharing it through their mouths.

The taste of her breath.

Breath. Nobody thinks about breath as much as a Hanging Girl does, Amy told herself. Most people rarely gave it a thought at all, in fact. Breath is a prime focus of a Hanging Girl's studies. How the respiratory system works in concert with the circulatory system. How to make use of breath as efficiently as possible. Training the body to find breath whenever and wherever it is available. She and Megan had worked out techniques for breathing, for their shows, that Amy didn't think had been tried before.

Breath itself is a lover. A Hanging Girl considers it constantly, responds to the need for it, feels the sweet yearning for it when it is gone, knowing it will return. And willingly gives it up forever when the right time comes, just as any woman joyously parts from her loved ones when it is time move on to her higher calling, to fill their stomachs with herself.

Amy took a long, deep breath, filling her lungs with Megan. Most of the air she breathed in, she would breathe right back out again. But some would stay.

She knew that she would have some of Megan in her stomach in just two days, and a portion of Megan would stay in her body as long as she lived. But so much more meaningful to consume Megan in her breath.

To know, always, that Megan was with her, whenever she breathed.

* * * * *

FRIDAY MORNING

Amy sat upright on the bed facing Megan, their legs around each other's waist, arms holding each other.

After a long kiss, Megan gave Amy a small smile and suddenly said, "I told Shawna I'd thought about sleeping with her every day, way back then. When we were roommates."

Amy's jaw dropped. "For real?"

Megan nodded.

"Honey, why didn't you?"

Megan grinned. "You know why. Tell me why."

"You were afraid getting involved with anybody would take away from your focus on hanging."

Megan nodded again. "I got pretty good at pushing the thoughts away. I'd think instead about Serena's hanging, I'd remember early hanging sessions with my coach, and how exciting that was. I'd fantasize about my own hanging." She frowned. "And I got pretty good at pushing people away too. That's another thing you know."

Amy nodded, then smiled suddenly. "You were sort of half-nice to me. Or at least not insulting. Maybe I should feel insulted about that, now. I guess you didn't feel threatened by any attraction to me."

Unexpectedly, Megan laughed. "Oh, wow. At least you didn't get *everything* about me figured out." She looked into Amy's eyes. "It's true I had you in kind of a different category, but you've got it turned around. Ask me what else I thought about when I was trying to get my mind off sex with Shawna or any of the other girls."

Amy could read it now, in Megan's face. Her eyes went wide. "Oh, come on."

Megan nodded, her eyes bright. "Okay, *now* you can see it. At night, while I'd be lying in bed, trying to fall asleep and not think about Shawna over in *her* bed... like I said, I tried to think about other stuff instead. All that hanging stuff, like I was just telling you, but also, when I wasn't careful, I'd imagine being with you. I tried not to, but I kept coming back to that."

It took effort for Amy to bring her jaw back up to speak. "When did *that* start?"

Megan bit her lip in thought, looking up at the ceiling. "After... about the first week, I guess."

Amy shook her head, stunned. "What about after I moved in? You could see how much I wanted you, right? You knew why I had to run into the bathroom after every time I helped you practice hanging." Amy remembered those post-practice masturbation sessions very well.

Megan looked away with a rueful smile. "I remember that. I felt so superior about that. I felt like I was handling my feelings better than you were, keeping my focus on hanging better than you. I told myself I'd be a better hanging girl, because of that. But I had to really start obsessing about hanging, just to get my mind off you. All that extra reading, and finally..." Megan blushed. "You know."

Amy could barely think. She knew exactly what Megan was referring to. That night, that life-changing night, when Megan had used Amy in an ill-considered hanging experiment.

As the memories rolled through Amy's head, Megan went on, "And you know I was never trying to kill you, right? I was all set to hit the drop button, like I told you. But I just... I wrapped myself up completely in hanging theory, and it led to... that. Just so I wouldn't have to... think about how it would feel to be with you."

Amy looked into Megan's eyes, and saw herself reflected there. Knowing, for the first time, the full extent of how much she and Megan belonged to each other. She pulled Megan closer and kissed her, feeling Megan's arms tighten around her.

She broke off the kiss. She started to speak, and realized Megan was speaking at the same time, both of them saying, "This is the last time."

One more time, Megan occupied all of Amy's senses -- the sight of her body, the sound of her moans, the touch of her skin rubbing against Amy's, the taste of her lips and tongue, the scent of her sweat as the excitement built. And Amy was plunged back in time, to the first time they had made love, the weeks of wanting Megan building up to the thrill of that moment... knowing now, for the first time, that Megan's excitement had been of exactly the same nature, based on the joy of union with the object of her fantasies. And the bridge between that first time and this last time made it seem as though they had been making love constantly for three years. And we really have, Amy thought. There's no first time and last time. Just the one, long time, and the memory of it will be clear enough, pure enough, to last me the rest of my life.

That was her final thought before the sensations of her body overwhelmed all thought.

* * * * *

FRIDAY AFTERNOON

Amy looked around the party hall. Around the sides of the room, some of the underclass girls were draping festive bunting and balloons, readying the hall for tomorrow's unprecedented big show. Vonda Bennett, the assistant dean, was supervising, organizing, offering suggestions on the decorations.

The hanging cage was gone. Members would have an unrestricted view of Megan, with no interference from metal bars. In place of the cage was a circular stage, four feet high and six feet in diameter, in the center of which the hanging platform was mounted. Surrounding the stage, a dozen metal pylons, each now wound with crepe ribbons of various colors, stood at a ten-foot radius. Angie, one of the Second Years, was securing one of a dozen thick red ropes, with hooks at either end, to rings at the top of adjacent pylons, creating a retaining line that the crowd would stay behind, as though Megan were a museum exhibit. Only Amy would be allowed inside the circular clear-zone around Megan.

Amy stood on the floor as Megan leapt onto the stage and up to the surface of the platform, watching as Megan examined the dangling noose, her fingers running softly along its inside surface.

Megan frowned. "It's been used. Can we get a new one?"

Amy turned. "Ms. Bennett? Megan wants a new rope."

Ms. Bennett nodded, and turned to the nearest girl. "Tracy, would you run and get one from the student store?"

Tracy nodded and ran out of the hall. Ms. Bennett directed Angie to go up onto the catwalk from which the rope hung and untie it.

Minutes later Tracy returned, and handed the new rope to Megan. Megan looked it over, again feeling it with her fingers, nodded, and quickly formed a hangman's knot at one end of it. She threw the other end up to Angie, who tied it in place while Megan held the knot at the appropriate height. Megan took hold of the rope above the knot, gave it several hard yanks, and used her arms to raise herself off the platform for several seconds, making sure the rope held her weight. She nodded up to Angie, who scrambled down from the catwalk.

Megan jumped down from the platform and walked out of the clear zone, between two pylons not yet sporting a rope between them. Keeping her eyes towards the platform, she slowly stepped sideways around the circle. She finally stopped at one point. Without looking at Amy, behind her, she said, "Amy, this is where I want Kathleen to be standing..."

She stopped suddenly, and spun around to look at Amy. Amy had no idea what sound she might have made, perhaps a momentary catch in her throat when Megan mentioned Kathleen.

Megan stared at Amy's face for a moment, reading... everything. Every thought that had run through Amy's mind in response to Megan saying Kathleen's name. At last Megan broke into a smile, a tear running down her cheek. She put her arms around Amy and held her close. "Thank you, Amy. Whatever you did, thank you." Without knowing details, she was somehow able to tell that Amy had worked desperately, and successfully, to ensure Kathleen's presence at her hanging.

Amy let loose some tears of her own. She thought about reminding Megan how much she loved her, that she would do anything for her. None of that seemed necessary. Amy just held her.

* * * * *

FRIDAY EVENING

Amy pulled open the door to the Hall of Honor, ignoring the polite "Cleaning - Please Wait" sign that Megan had taped to the door.

Megan had told Amy she would be spending the night there, nodding when Amy asked if she could join her, saying "But give me a couple of hours first."

Amy understood the significance of the Hall of Honor to Megan. Megan, she knew, wanted some time to talk to the heads. To tell them she had kept the promises she had made to them, so long ago.

Amy expected to see Megan stretched out on the mattress she had brought, but saw that Megan was sitting upright at one end of the mattress, motionless, cross-legged, leaning back against the wall facing a row of heads. Her eyes were closed. Her uniform lay folded neatly on the floor beside her.

Avoiding making a sound, Amy stripped off her own uniform. She knew sex was not on the program -- Megan's attention was now fully on planning for her hanging, and would be up to the moment the show started. Amy was simply preparing for a night's sleep. She lay down quietly on the remaining portion of the mattress, trying not to disturb Megan's concentration, if that were possible. Megan clearly wasn't asleep, Amy could see now, not in any type of normal slumber, anyway. Amy wasn't an expert, but some sort of trance was involved, she felt fairly sure. Amy had the sense that Megan was fully conscious, but not of the outside world. All of her attention was turned inward. At this close range, Amy could now see a pattern of muscular contractions, suggestive of the rhythms of hanging. A slight flexing of thigh muscles, a twitch of the muscles that would throw her hips forward, a sequence of slight tightening of muscles in shoulder, upper back, neck, that would be involved in the necessary moves for breathing. Megan, Amy understood, was rehearsing her hanging -- choreographing, in her mind, all of the moves she wanted to do, in the order in which she planned to do them. Amy smiled as she saw Megan give a tiny headshake suddenly, not as a hanging move but a sign of mental negation, as if deciding at that moment to discard one move and replace it with another. Amy felt sure that, while Megan's muscular movements were purely symbolic to Amy as an outside observer, Megan herself was fully experiencing the hanging, from start to finish.

After a few minutes, Amy was surprised to see she was not entirely correct. Megan had, in fact, spared a small space in her consciousness for recognition of the world surrounding her. She was holding her hand in the air, extended partway towards Amy. Megan knew, or a part of her knew, that Amy was there, though she wasn't sure exactly where Amy was.

Amy took Megan's hand, wrapped her fingers around it, and held it between her face and the mattress, palm cupped against her cheek, as though it were a small pillow. Content with that much of Megan, Amy fell asleep.

* * * * *

SATURDAY MORNING

Amy opened her eyes, somehow knowing instinctively not to move.

Directly in front of her, she saw Megan's navel. She could feel Megan's head resting on her inner thigh, using it as a pillow. Sometime during the night, Megan had satisfied herself with the state of her mental preparations to that point, and had stretched out on the mattress in front of Amy for one last sleep.

That was it, thought Amy, that's why I didn't want to move. Amy knew better than to wake Megan from the final recharging of her energy before her hanging. There was plenty of time before the show's scheduled start at 2 pm, and nothing left to do before then, other than eat breakfast.

For now, Amy was content to watch Megan's navel slowly rising and falling with her breathing.

On any other morning, Amy would have kissed Megan there, then moved farther south, to the folds of skin between Megan's legs, to lick her awake. Megan was already in perfect position to return the favor. But today was not for taking pleasure in each other's bodies. Today, Megan's communion with her inner self must be left undisturbed.

After about thirty minutes, Megan began stirring. She rubbed her eyes and stretched.

That shining was there, that Amy always saw in each girl on the day of her hanging. So bright, Megan's eyes, like the sun.

Megan smiled at Amy. "Hi, honey."

Amy grinned back. "Hi, yourself."

Megan sat up, put her arms around Amy and kissed her, then reached for her panties and began pulling them on. "Let's get some breakfast."

* * * * *

There were only a few girls in the caf -- on Saturday, most of the students slept in. Megan picked out a high-energy breakfast, not overly filling. Amy ate a little more than usual, enough to make it through to tonight's banquet.

Amy watched Megan as she ate, memorizing behavior she had never really watched consciously. The way she chewed her food. The way she brushed her hair aside when it fell in the way. Since Amy would never eat with her again, she wanted to complete the "Megan" she could hold in her mind until it was her own time to go.

Taylor, one of the Second Year girls, approached the table shyly. Not sure whether she should interrupt Megan's internal focus, she bit her lip and addressed her words halfway between Megan and Amy. "Okay to wish good luck?"

Amy looked at Megan. It appeared Megan hadn't heard the girl. Amy stroked Megan's hand. Megan blinked, and seemed to play back a recording of Taylor in her head. She smiled warmly at her. "Sure." She reached out, and Taylor bent to give her a hug, whispering, "I'm really excited. I know you'll be great."

Megan gave her a squeeze and patted her back.

One by one, each of the other girls present came by for a few words and a hug. Amy watched. Another Megan memory to hold onto.

* * * * *

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

Amy sat on the bed behind Megan, in the private room in the party pavilion Megan had chosen for her ready room. Amy's legs were wrapped around Megan's waist, as she gave Megan a neck massage. Megan, already having shed her uniform for the last time, was wearing only a choker -- she'd chosen to wear the symbolic red slave collar of the Academy graduate, displaying her pride in reaching her goal. Sewn within its fabric was the heart monitor that would signal her death. Megan's eyes were closed, and she was working various muscle groups -- not a hanging rehearsal this time, just making sure she stayed loose while waiting for her show to begin.

Amy was wearing her graduate's uniform. She had considered wearing something more party-like, but decided she wanted to blend into the background, to the extent that she could, given the high visibility she would have during the show. There would be a number of other identical uniforms around the hall.

Amy could hear the rising murmur of conversation from the main party hall. The hall, she knew, was going to be crowded. Despite the high ticket price -- Amy wasn't sure of the exact figure, but the dean had hinted each ticket cost several thousand dollars -- a little over eighty had been sold. Amy decided she shouldn't feel surprised. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the number of hangings all of the members had seen, the chance to see Megan hang meant that much to them.

All of the students would also be present, along with the graduates, the first time they had ever all been allowed in the party pavilion at once.

Amy leaned forward to kiss Megan's neck, and said, "I should get out there for awhile, and greet your dad. And Kathleen."

Megan twisted around to kiss Amy on the lips, with a slightly absent smile. In the last twenty hours she had spared a minimum of attention to the world outside her body. "See you in a little bit."

As Amy entered the main hall, where two straight rope lines now created a corridor from the doorway leading to the private rooms, where Amy now stood, to the hanging stage in the center of the hall, the buzz of conversation rose momentarily -- every member present knew who she was, and her connection with Megan. Amy smiled and waved away their attention with a negative gesture -- No, not time yet. She ducked under one of the ropes and started weaving through the crowd, looking for Megan's father.

To the vibrant colors of the draperies surrounding the hall was now added the whites, aquas, deep blues, and reds of the students and graduates, some standing together in knots with friends, some mixing with the guests, chatting or answering questions. People were still entering through the main door. Amy couldn't spot Paul Sadler. She bit her lip, hoping everything would still go as it needed to.

She did see the dean, attending his first party since long before Amy had arrived as a student. She walked up to him, and waited for him to finish his conversation with the guest beside him and address her. Smiling, he asked, "Is Megan ready? No cold feet, I assume."

Amy laughed. The idea of an Academy graduate backing out of her own hanging was almost the most ludicrous thing she could imagine. "I believe she'll manage to go through with it, Sir." Her stomach tying in a sudden knot, she asked, "Is Megan's father still coming, Sir? As far as you know?"

The dean smiled again. "Stop worrying, Amy. I'm sure he would have called if his plans had changed. We're going to wait until everyone is here -- including Mr. Sadler. Tina is checking off names at the door. I think..." He looked around. "...about two thirds of the guests have arrived." He turned again to the guests around him. Amy turned the other way, and saw Melissa, Jana, and Holly together.

Melissa hugged Amy when she arrived. "This is probably a little different from my sister's hanging, huh?"

Amy shrugged. "Well, there are more people here. Andrew could never have managed to have *this* many friends." She grinned as the other girls laughed. "And it was outdoors, of course. The general excitement level was pretty similar. Miranda just looked so beautiful." Amy sighed, remembering that day, as she did so often.

Amy suddenly noticed Steffi, about twenty feet away. She kissed Melissa and gave Jana and Holly quick hugs. "I'll talk to you later. I need to go see Steffi."

She greeted Steffi with a very fond hug. "I just wanted to tell you again how grateful I am, for all your help."

"Any time." Steffi looked around. "I see he's not here."

Amy was momentarily puzzled, wondering how Steffi knew Paul Sadler, then realized she would be referring to someone else. "Andrew? No, I wouldn't think he'd be here. Members aren't getting private sex sessions with the students today, and he wouldn't come just to watch a girl hang. And I'm sure he's saving his money for whatever Big Thing he has in mind for me." She flashed Steffi a bitter smile.

"Apparently he hasn't put any plan into action."

Amy shook her head. "He hasn't had a chance. I haven't been off the grounds since you told me. I will eventually, but the dean is working out what steps to take." She looked towards the main door, and gasped, all thoughts of Andrew suddenly leaving her. Paul Sadler had just entered... with Kathleen behind him. Amy reached out vaguely for Steffi and patted her arm. "I gotta go! Sorry, talk to you later." Realizing how abrupt she was being, she gave Steffi a warm kiss, said, "I mean it, I do want to talk to you. And thank you again," then sprinted towards the door.

Almost breathless, and not from the run, Amy grinned as Megan's father heard her coming and turned towards her. He matched her smile with one of his own. "Amy, hi! Big day. I didn't realize there'd be so many people."

Kathleen stood with her arms folded and a slightly bored, sullen expression, of the type only teenagers can manage when they would rather be somewhere else. She grudgingly gave Amy a "Hi," and then gave the crowd an uninterested look.

Amy said eagerly, "Mr. Sadler, if you'll follow me, I'll show you the best place to watch from." She weaved her way through the still-growing crowd, to the rope circle around the hanging platform. She walked about a quarter of the way around and stopped. "It's kind of front-row-center. Megan will be facing this way to start with. As it goes on she'll twist around to face all directions, but this is sort of the... untwisted direction, and she'll always come back to this."

Mr. Sadler nodded his appreciation. Seeing Kathleen take up a position to her father's right, Amy drifted slightly left and gestured for Mr. Sadler to move slightly that way. "There, this is the perfect spot." It was now Kathleen who was centered. Kathleen had turned to look back towards the entrance, as though trying to judge how long it would take to get back to it.

The dean had taken note of Mr. Sadler's arrival and had approached from Amy's left. Amy backed away to let the dean hold his hand out towards Megan's father. "Eric Porter. It's very nice to meet you."

Mr. Sadler gave him a hearty handshake. "Paul Sadler. So you're the head guy here."

The dean smiled. "Indeed. And in some ways one might say your daughter is the head girl. I can't begin to tell you the significance of the contributions she has made to this establishment. It's enough to say..." he gestured around him, "...we've never done anything quite like this, and few students we have ever had would merit it."

The dean leaned a little and smiled at Kathleen. He held out his hand. "And you would be Kathleen. Eric Porter. Good to meet you."

Kathleen gave him a tiny bored smile, shook his hand, said vaguely "Hi," and went back to her inner brooding.

Amy couldn't resist looking at Kathleen, much as it worried her to do so. Now that she was here, it was one burden off Amy's mind, but that weight had been replaced by a new one: is she going to keep wearing that expression throughout?

The dean took his leave of Mr. Sadler, and moments later was in conversation with an unusually wealthy looking couple.

Movement through the entrance had now slowed considerably. Nearly everyone must be here, thought Amy. She turned back to Megan's father. "If you'll excuse me, sir, I need to go see how Megan is doing."

"Sure." He grinned at her.

Amy ducked back under the rope line and went back to the ready room.

Megan was facing away from the door, leaning over the bed onto her hands, her arms straight, one leg supporting her with bent knee, the other leg stretched straight out behind her. As Amy watched, she switched legs, now stretching the other. Amy cleared her throat. "Honey? It's about time to finish getting ready."

Megan stood and turned to Amy. Her gorgeous face seemed almost to vibrate with happiness. She had done all of the preparation she needed to do internally, and was open to the outside world once more. And still reading. "Kathleen is here." She frowned suddenly. "So what's wrong?"

Amy took a deep breath. "Well, she doesn't exactly *want* to be here."

Megan stepped towards Amy and wrapped her arms around her, rubbing the side of her head against Amy's. "She's here. That's all I want. Thank you so much for that. The rest will happen or it won't. I know what I'm hoping for, but I can't control it. I can just do what I do, and see what happens."

Amy held Megan tightly, loving the feel of Megan's arms around her one last time. She kissed Megan on the cheek, then on the lips as Megan turned her head towards her. They held the kiss several minutes, until Megan broke it off at last with an excited grin. "Gotta stop that or I'll never get hanged."

Amy smiled. "One more." She kissed Megan again, just a brief peck. "So I won't keep feeling like I want one more. I'll just tell myself I got one."

"Oil first? Or ropes?"

"It works better to do the ropes first, before my hands get all slippery."

Megan nodded, and turned away from Amy, her hands behind her back.

Picking up a short rope from the bed, Amy quickly tied Megan's hands behind her, wrists crossed, snugly but not enough to cut off circulation -- even though Megan would never need her fingers again, any unusual feelings of numbness would distract her during the hanging. Amy looped a longer rope around Megan's waist, tied it in front, pulled the free ends through between Megan's legs and tied them to the rope between Megan's wrists. "Lower? Higher?"

Megan tugged at the rope briefly, tightening it through her crotch. "It feels fine." She giggled. "I better not do too much of that. I'll get myself off before I even go out there."

She remained facing away from Amy as Amy poured a bottle of cooking oil into a bowl, and fished the now-soaked sponge out of the bowl. Meticulously, she began sponging the back side of Megan's body, starting from her shoulders so she could smooth out any dribbles of oil as she went down. As she reached Megan's heels, Megan turned so Amy could do her front. She sighed as Amy oiled her breasts and cleavage, and jumped slightly as the sponge reached her pussy lips, parted by the rope between them and already very swollen and sensitive with excitement.

Amy stood upright in front of her and took a deep breath. "You tell me. Are we ready? Are *you* ready?"

The shining of Megan's skin still couldn't match the glow of her eyes. "Absolutely, totally ready."

Amy laughed. "Well, we still have to wait. The dean would be pretty pissed if we marched out there before everybody was there."

Megan laughed too. "I just thought, why should I care about that, but then I remembered you still have to live with him."

Amy went to the bed for the white terrycloth robe, hung it on Megan's shoulders, and tied the cloth belt around her waist. With nothing left to do now, she stood beside Megan, her arm around Megan's waist, watching the door, as Megan rested her head on Amy's shoulder.

Amy opened her eyes at the sound of footsteps near the door, her heart suddenly pounding.

Jackie looked around the doorframe. "Dean says it's a go."

Megan closed her eyes and took a deep breath, a smile curling her lips. Amy, who always wondered at the start of a show, what does it feel like, what does it feel like, what is it like to take that last walk, took advantage of her ability to read Megan, more than she could anyone else, and came closer to knowing the feeling than she ever had before.

Megan looked at Amy, and gestured with her head. "You go ahead."

Amy nodded, her legs briefly trembling with excitement until her inner voice insisting *be professional, be professional* took control, walked through the door, down the short corridor, and out into the main party hall.

CHAPTER 12

The entire crowd was already looking in Amy's direction, tipped off moments earlier by Jackie's departure from the hall. It seemed to Amy that they must all be holding their breaths, so absolute was the sudden silence.

Quickly scanning the hall, Amy saw that the crowd had now formed two concentric circles around the rope circle in front of the stage, one consisting of the eighty-odd guests, dressed in a random assortment of colors, the second, outside the first, comprised of the one hundred forty girls, the students and graduates, in the uniforms whose colors distinguished the classes.

There was a sudden gasp from the audience, followed by a burst of applause louder than Amy would have thought possible from that number of people. She knew Megan had just appeared behind her in the doorway.

Trying to walk normally but suspecting she was giving an impression of a royal procession, Amy walked towards the stage, in the line from the door to the stage kept clear by rope lines. As she reached the back edge of the crowd, she could see excited students on either side of her. All were cheering happily, some of them shouting Megan's name. To her right she saw Melissa, Jana, and Holly. Jana was pumping her fist over her head, a huge grin on her face, while Holly was literally bouncing on her feet, her hands clenched by her sides.

Just as Amy reached the rope circle, unhooking one end of it to let Megan pass through, and the shouting grew louder, she caught sight of Kathleen, about a quarter of the way around the circle to the right. The sullen look was gone from Kathleen's face. In its place was complete astonishment, as she whipped her head left and right, in utter disbelief of the crowd's reaction. She had never expected, never imagined, the level of respect, of honor, that everyone in the room, students, graduates, club members, accorded to Megan. Amy recalled Kathleen had been planning to be at a concert right now. Whatever amount of excitement the concert crowd might show at the emergence of the band they had come to see, it couldn't match the adulation being displayed, here and now, for Kathleen's own sister.

Smiling, Amy hooked the rope in place, and watched as Megan, alone, walked up the half-dozen steps onto the stage. Outside the rope circle, two students were already quickly pulling back the pylons and ropes that had formed the line from the waiting room, allowing the crowd to fill in the space the ropes had cleared.

Atop the stage, Megan took a deep breath, and shook her head slightly, amazed. She nuzzled her cheek against the noose beside her, a beatific smile on her face. She started saying, "Thank you, really, thank you..." almost inaudibly over the sounds of the crowd, which gradually quieted in response.

As the room grew still once more, she opened her mouth, and seemed unable to speak. One last time, she looked at Amy for strength. Then she began, in a quiet voice that everyone could hear, turning slowly as she spoke to face all sides, "This room is totally full of people who are very special to me. Everybody here. I mean it. The girls in red are my classmates, and they mean so much to me, but not only them. All of the students you see around you make this Academy what it is. They've learned some things from me, and I've learned so much from them. And all of you members of the club. A lot of you,

I've had a chance to get to know a little better in bed," she grinned, "But all of you, including the ones I haven't met, your support of the Academy is so important! I want to thank all of you.

"I want to especially thank Dean Porter, who does so much to make sure all of us maintain the quality of this school -- you just really can't know how much he does, but it all works because of him."

She waited as everyone applauded the dean.

"There's also my dad, of course, who's standing right here, with my sister Kathleen. Please help me tell them how glad I am to see them here."

Amy helped her out by pointing to Mr. Sadler. Kathleen, suddenly realizing the applause was now partly meant for her, covered her face completely with both hands, but couldn't resist looking from side to side, peeking through her fingers.

"And I want you to know some of the people most responsible for what you'll see me do. There are legends going around that I invented all of this stuff, which is really flattering, but don't believe it, because this place isn't like that. We all work together and learn from each other, and when you watch me today, one person you'll see in me is Shawna. Shawna, raise your arm so they know who you are."

The crowd turned to look and spotted the incredulous Shawna, holding her arm up as she giggled, and gave her a burst of applause.

"Also Melissa, Jana and Holly, you'll be seeing some of them in me." Amy heard a squeak from Jana, who held up her hand as the other covered her mouth below her wide eyes, as beside her Holly waved her arm and grinned open-mouthed. Melissa also grinned, waved her arm, and hugged Jana with the other.

Megan went on, "It's really not possible to name everyone who helped me do what I do, because there are so many. But I need to say one more name.

"When I was a girl, all I could think of, all I wanted to do, was come to the Academy. I thought the only reason was so I could get a chance to be the best Hanging Girl I could possibly be. And I've tried to do that with every breath, in every waking moment. But I didn't know there was another reason I needed to be here. I had to come here to meet Amy."

Tears suddenly welled in Amy's eyes. She had known Megan wanted to talk to the crowd first, but hadn't expected any of this.

"You all know who Amy is, because you've seen us do our shows together. But I wish you could know her the way I do, because... she means everything to me. The others I've named have helped me do what I do, but more than anybody else, Amy has helped me be what I am. And now I'm not going to say anymore after this sentence, because I want the last words out of my mouth to be, I love you, Amy."

Amy crouched suddenly, the heels of her palms pressed hard against her eyes, trying to stop the tears. She forced the word *professional, professional, professional* to echo through her mind, wiped the remaining tears away, and stood. Her excitement returned. *This is Megan's hanging!*

Amy walked to the stage and trotted up the steps to its surface, then jumped up atop the hanging platform. Standing beside Megan, one hand resting on Megan's shoulder across her back, Amy looked out at the audience.

This is it, she thought, we're doing it, we're really doing it. She smiled, and cleared her throat. "I'm just not really sure why you're all here. It's Saturday, and such a pretty day outside. I'm sure there are things you'd rather be doing." She'd planned this opening with Kathleen in mind. She wanted Kathleen to see the value everyone present placed on what they were going to witness.

Laughter spread around the crowd, several people saying, "No!"

Amy made a show of looking at her surroundings. "Well, I've got a girl here, and a handy rope..." More laughter. "What do you suppose I should do?"

Three or four audience members called out, "Hang her!"

Amy turned slowly to look at all sides, her mouth hanging open theatrically. "You think I should hang her??"

A greater number called out, "Yes! Yes!" From behind the guests, some of the girls, Amy couldn't see which ones, started a chant, "Hang her! Hang her!"

Megan, her lips pushed out in a pout, shook her head. Amy, after watching her for a moment, turned back to the crowd. "That's one vote against hanging her. How many in favor?"

A loud "Aye!" from the crowd. The chant "Hang her" resumed, growing louder. Amy, delighted, saw that Kathleen was caught up in the excitement, shouting with everyone else. Her father looked on proudly.

A wave of Amy's arms quieted the crowd, and she shrugged. "Well, all right, then." The crowd cheered once more, then quieted again, intent on watching.

Amy took hold of the noose, looking at Megan. "I'm sorry, dear, the vote is overwhelming." She dropped the noose down over Megan's head and tightened it around her neck, then added a new line to end the script. "But while you're swinging, just keep one thing in mind..." With all of the feeling she could put into her voice, Amy went on, "I... love... you!"

With that, she stepped behind Megan, reached around her waist to untie the slip knot on the robe's belt, and in a quick motion pulled the robe off Megan's shoulders, and jumped backward off the platform, crouching down as she landed to give a clear view to the people behind her.

There was a loud gasp from the crowd, even from the students. Though nearly everyone present had seen Megan naked before, seeing her now, standing proudly alone on the platform, that beautiful face that always drew attention wherever she went, her perfect body oiled and glowing in the spotlights, inspired universal awe beyond any Amy could remember at any hanging. Even Miranda's.

Amy waited until the anticipation led to pin-drop silence. Then, kneeling behind the platform, she pulled the lever.

As the platform slowly sank, it was easy to hear the slight creak and whir from the mechanism, and the slight choking sound from Megan as she raised herself on tiptoes and, for the last time in her life, hung suspended by her neck.

Amy knew Megan rarely took long to orient herself to hanging conditions. As Megan began kicking to establish her rhythm, Amy quickly spread the robe across the top of the platform, staying back from Megan's kicking feet, and then backed further away, slipping off the stage to Megan's right.

Already, as Amy settled herself, sitting cross-legged on the floor looking up at her dangling roommate, Megan was starting her hip-thrusting leg throws. Amy recalled, so clearly, the first time she had seen Megan do that, more than three years ago. It was much more polished now. Nearly all of the onlookers had seen other girls do it, girls who had learned Megan's style, yet it still seemed different watching Megan do it. Amy recalled a time, during that summer before starting at the Academy, she had gone to a club that featured music and dancing. A girl she knew, a casual friend, was there with her date, a woman who danced professionally. The girl had been taking lessons, and it showed in her dancing, but there was still such a clear difference between her and the professional. The girl could do all of the right steps, but it was obvious, in the concentration on her face and the care taken in her movements, that she was consciously working on putting this foot here, that foot there. Watching the professional, however, it seemed to Amy as though the woman's legs were moving on their own, in exuberant, happy steps that their owner had no need to think about.

All of the club members watching, Amy thought to herself -- they all understood what they were seeing here. Amy could hear it in the gasps. They had never before seen Megan in a solo hanging. They were all conscious of seeing something special.

Megan now shifted into a composite dance, combining her own sexual thrusting, Shawna's desperate reaching, Holly's erotic step-climbing, and Jana's shimmying, all blended smoothly together. She slowly turned left, away from Amy, eventually facing the opposite direction, then a full turn right, gradually giving everyone a view from all angles. Moans from the audience were very audible now.

Amy discovered that some of the moans were hers. As usual, without quite noticing when she began it, she found she was rubbing her crotch furiously, the electricity of sexual arousal coursing through her body. It seemed no less intense than it had that first time she had hanged Megan, in their room. Memories of so many hangings, and of the intense lovemaking that followed, came flooding back, taking Amy ever higher.

Even during her orgasm, she forced herself to keep her eyes open, watching Megan for the signal. Amy had a responsibility here.

After about twelve minutes airborne, as Amy's breathing settled back into a normal rhythm following her climax, Megan turned again to face Amy directly, and gave the small foot-signal that told Amy to start her own movement. Megan had needed to work to persuade Amy to take an active role, eventually convincing Amy that this was something she wanted very much. Now, still sitting on the floor, looking up at Megan, Amy began scuttling sideways, crab-like, using hands and feet, around the circular stage, Megan turning to face her at all times while doing the leg wraps. The audience, already aware of Megan's feelings for Amy, would easily perceive that Megan was performing at this point for Amy alone, and that she was, despite their separation, making love to Amy. As Megan reached the limits of her

ability to turn, she signaled with her foot again for Amy to move the other way as the rope holding Megan untwisted, then twisted in the opposite direction.

The gasps and moans of orgasm among the audience members were near-continuous now. Amy, with her internal clock, after years of practice, now rivaling Megan's, knew that about twenty-five minutes had gone by, and Megan at last was showing signs of tiring. She had filled up on fluids before the hanging, but as the sweat ran in streams down her back, sides, and legs, she must, Amy thought, surely be dehydrated by now.

Suddenly Megan began making what seemed to Amy to be another gesture with her foot, shaking her entire leg. Amy bit her lip -- she didn't recognize this one, and she fiercely ripped through the filing cabinets of her brain, searching for a prearrangement that she seemed now to have forgotten. That it was a signal of some sort was obvious -- Megan was looking directly at her, blinking her eyes, continuing the gesture with her leg. She seemed, with her foot, to be pointing at something. Amy turned to look in that direction.

And she saw. Megan had been trying to get Amy to look at Kathleen.

Kathleen was hypnotically immobilized, her eyes, looking up to her sister, wide and unblinking. Her jaw hung slack, her arms were down at her sides.

Amy had never before seen anyone with such a complete, total concentration on a single visual stimulus. The world at large had ceased existing for Kathleen. Her universe contained only Megan.

That is, Amy reminded herself, I haven't seen that level of concentration in anyone *else*. I've only experienced it from inside. While I was watching Miranda hang.

Amy, with a huge grin on her face, spun her head back towards Megan, and pumped her fists -- Yes, I see her, I see her! Megan herself wriggled, nearly bouncing at the end of the rope, her lips curled upward at the corners, her face glowing.

Megan's excitement seemed to serve as a source of new energy. Signaling to Amy to stay where she was, Megan resumed her original combination of moves. The only sign that she was tiring was that she seemed unable to turn completely around, stopping about halfway and letting the rope untwist.

At last she ended the program of specialty moves and began basic kicking, of the sort used during the Fifteen to conserve energy.

Amy couldn't tell who started it -- it seemed to come from at least two different directions in the back of the crowd, among the students -- but it quickly spread among the students and forward to the club members, a sustained applause louder than any heard before, punctuated by shouts of encouragement. Again Amy could see Megan wriggle with excitement, and in a burst of energy that took Amy by surprise, Megan began turning again, throwing her hips and legs forward while facing left, front, and right, as though making love to the crowd.

That seemed to use Megan's last reserve, and finally she began working the crotch rope. Amy was afraid for a moment Megan had waited too long and wouldn't be able to bring herself off, but, as the applause

grew still louder, despite the number of audience members whose hands were otherwise engaged, Megan suddenly stiffened, her body rippling like a flag in a stiff wind, and Amy, her body in tune with Megan through years of shared sensations, felt the ghost of the huge orgasm she knew Megan to be feeling flow through her own body.

Hanging nearly limp now, Megan continued a listless kicking with her feet, no longer able to manage sufficient head movement to breathe. Amy blinked as Megan suddenly made a joyful little double kick. Seconds later, above the applause, one club member shouted in an awestruck voice, "Forty minutes!" Amy understood, now, that Megan had not wanted to say so, unsure that she could make it, but that forty minutes, an unimagined, never-before-approached hanging time, had been Megan's goal, that the timepiece in her head had told her she had reached just before it was audibly verified, and that she had arranged her program with that goal in mind.

Amy jumped to her feet with a victorious fist pump, and shouted, "Best ever!! Best ever!!" Instantly the chant was taken up, first by the students, then by the members. Amy knew, seeing Megan's feet still kicking slightly, that Megan could still hear.

Seconds later, Megan was still. So little fluid remained in her body that her bladder let out the smallest trickle of urine. Amy turned to look at Jackie, holding the heart monitor. Jackie, after a time, looked up and nodded.

Amy stood, picking up the knife that lay on the floor next to the stage. Jumping up to the stage, she took a deep breath, stroked Megan's hip lovingly with her free hand, whispered, "You did it, honey. Everything. Everything," and plunged the knife into her roommate's chest just below her ribs, angled up towards her heart.

* * * * *

Amy had withdrawn to the edge of the rope circle to leave Megan to receive the continuing applause she could no longer hear. Amy felt peace filling her like a soft, warm blanket. The undercurrent of worry that had built up for days, for weeks, the concern that everything should go well and nothing must go wrong, was gone.

As the applause died down, Amy found she had instinctively, without paying attention, stopped in front of Megan's father. She smiled at him, absently rubbing smooth a small stream of Megan's blood slowly dribbling down her stomach into the waistband of her shorts. "I'm not sure what you were expecting, sir. But you can see nobody here thought your daughter was just an average Hanging Girl."

Paul Sadler was shaking his head in amazement. "Yes, I see that. I'd been telling myself that, but a voice inside kept reminding me I was probably biased."

Amy's attention was attracted to Kathleen, not by anything the girl was doing, but by what she wasn't doing -- moving. Her eyes were still glued to Megan's limp form, rarely blinking, her mouth still half-open.

Amy passed her hand slowly in front of Kathleen's eyes. Kathleen didn't seem to notice. Amy moved her hand back in front of the girl's eyes and held it there, blocking her view of Megan.

Kathleen gave her head a brief shake, seeming to come out of her trance. She spun towards her father. "Daddy, I heard somebody say they'd give out some of Sissy's meat later. Can we stay for that? Please?" Amy blinked. She couldn't recall Kathleen calling Megan "Sissy" at their home -- nor anything else, as she thought back. Nor really give more than minimal attention to Megan's presence.

"Of course, honey. Wouldn't miss that."

She grabbed his hand, with an intense look in her eyes that Amy instantly recognized. She had never seen Kathleen look so much like Megan. "Daddy... Sissy's coach. Do you still have his phone number?"

"I... somewhere, yeah. Or I can look it up."

She gripped his hand tighter. "Tonight? Can you call him tonight?"

He looked at her for a long moment, then nodded. And looked at Amy.

Amy felt so buoyant with joy she was sure she would float to the ceiling if she let go of the rope-line pylon. It might have been enough that Megan had realized her dream of being recognized as the greatest of all Hanging Girls, and had accomplished a forty-minute hanging time that no other girl would approach for years, if ever. But beyond that, Amy saw the proof now that Megan had achieved the one goal more important to her than any other. Amy had only to look into Kathleen's eyes to see that.

And I have something too, thought Amy. I'll never have to think Megan is gone from the world. Megan is standing here right in front of me.

She grinned at Paul Sadler. "You know what you're seeing, right, sir? You've seen it before."

He nodded slowly. "Uh-huh."

Behind her, Amy saw that the staff was taking Megan's body down. They needed to start processing her quickly, as the members were here and waiting. As Amy watched, she suddenly realized Kathleen had spoken to her. Amy turned back to look at her. "I'm sorry, what?"

Kathleen looked a little less hypnotized than earlier, but no less intense. "I was just saying, it's like college, right?"

Amy didn't need to ask what she was referring to. "Well, yes and no. Education is more general at a college. At college you spend some time studying a little of everything, language arts, general history, math, science, social sciences... The Academy is at the college level, but it's a lot more specialized. It goes way beyond just practicing hanging, but everything you study has some connection with hanging. It's more like... a professional school. Law school, medical school. That kind of school. There's a science of hanging, and that's what you learn here." Amy somehow wasn't surprised Kathleen had never drawn this information out of Megan. Until she had begun hearing her inner Hanging Girl voice, she'd had no curiosity about it.

Kathleen nodded. "How do you get in?"

“That’s one way it’s just like college...”

* * * * *

After about forty minutes, trays were wheeled out on carts, serving Megan the way she had requested -- she had actually heard about it from Jackie, who had seen this once. Meat from Megan’s thigh had been cut into small cubes and microwaved, each cube soaked in honey and served on a sugar cookie.

The guests found the Megan cookies delightful. Kathleen had started to take two of them, putting one back when her father shook his head.

Kathleen held the cookie at eye level, turning it around, studying it. She looked at Amy. “Is it weird to think having Sissy inside me will help me be a better Hanging Girl?”

Amy blinked back a new flow of tears. “Not even a little weird. I think the same thing myself.”

* * * * *

SATURDAY EVENING

The cafeteria seemed a little subdued for a post-hanging banquet. Partly, thought Amy, because there aren’t many of us left. Only the graduates were present, and three guests invited by Megan -- Melissa, Jana, and Holly. In the student dorms, tables were set up at the ends of the corridors holding a sufficient number of Megan-meat pizzas, but here in the caf, the dining was a little more formal.

But it wasn’t just the small number, Amy knew. Everyone was a little drained from watching Megan’s hanging. All of them, as far as Amy could determine, had had at least one orgasm, and beyond that, there was the awe factor. With their expertise at hanging, they all knew just how amazing Megan’s performance had been.

As platters of roasted Megan were set out on the tables, the girls started passing them around, but stopped when a procession of sorts came out of the kitchen. Several girls from the kitchen staff came out, and set small covered dishes in front of Shawna, Melissa, Jana, and Holly, each containing a quarter of Megan’s right breast.

In front of Amy, they set two larger plates. One contained Megan’s entire left breast. On the other lay Megan’s heart.

Amy looked, wide-eyed, at the feast in front of her. Megan had to know, Amy thought, that I can’t possibly eat all that at one sitting.

The memory of Beth, Miranda’s roommate, sharing Miranda’s heart with Amy, came back to her. Megan did know I wouldn’t eat all of this, Amy realized. This is just her way of saying her heart belongs to me. It’s for me to decide what to do with it.

She cleared her throat. “When you’ve got your plates filled, you can each come by here, and I’ll cut you a slice of her heart.”

There were grins and nods all around the long table. The girls resumed passing platters and serving bowls around.

* * * * *

Amy paused, with a forkful of Megan's breast in front of her eyes. Funny, she thought, to think how many times I've licked and sucked on this, wishing, at the height of sexual passion, to take it completely inside me, to make it part of myself.

Now, Amy told herself, I can.

As she took it in her mouth, she closed her eyes, chewing, savoring the flavor. I assume it must be psychological, she told herself, the way everybody says girlmeat tastes so different, so much better, when it's someone you know. But it's true, somehow it's true.

Except for her mother, whom Amy had eaten when she was too young to fully experience the phenomenon, she had never consumed anyone nearly as close to her before.

It is so good, she thought. This is one more thing I'll always remember.

* * * * *

SATURDAY NIGHT

Melissa, as she always did when she spent the night in Amy's room, kissed Miranda's head. Then she turned to face Amy. "You want to watch a movie or something?"

Amy shook her head. "I'm so tired, I'd sleep through it anyway." She started stripping off her uniform. "Mind if we just hold each other until morning?"

Melissa walked up to Amy, and stroked Amy's cheek softly. "I'd really like that." She started taking her own clothes off.

Amy, naked now, turned down the covers of the bed. "How are Jana and Holly getting along? Sexually, I mean?"

Melissa laughed. "Can't you tell? Jana really adores Holly. Holly keeps coming up with these new positions to tie her up in. It's a good thing there's no classes tomorrow. Jana's going to be all orgasmed out."

Amy smiled sleepily, and lay down on the bed, holding her arms out to Melissa. Melissa climbed into the bed beside her, and wrapped her arms around Amy, pushing her right leg between Amy's. She gave Amy a kiss. "Megan was just fantastic today."

Amy nodded. "In more ways than you even know. I am just... I don't even have words for how happy I am for her. Everything was perfect."

“Like for Miranda?”

Amy, thoughtful, nodded. “A lot like Miranda. I know you’ve heard this before, but let me tell you what Miranda did for me. Like she was passing the torch. Then I’ll tell you what Megan did.”

Melissa snuggled closer, her body pressed full length against Amy’s, as Amy tightened her arms around her. “Listening.”

CHAPTER 13

The dean looked up and smiled as Amy entered. "I'm glad you came by, Amy. I was going to call you here later today anyway."

Amy blinked in surprise as she sat down. "Yes, Sir?"

"I'll get to that in a minute. What have you got there?"

Amy placed the two things in her hand, one of them a handwritten note, on his desk in front of him. "Sir, could these be mailed to Kathleen Sadler? Addressed directly to her, not her father?"

The dean picked up the note and read it, looked at the other item, and nodded. "That's very thoughtful, and I'm sure she'll appreciate it." He set the things down in his in-box to give to Tina later. "Now, I actually had two reasons I was going to summon you. One is that I want you to swallow this capsule." He pushed two paper cups towards her, one containing a small capsule, the other filled with drinking water.

Amy nodded. "Yes, Sir." Amy upended the first of the cups, dumping the capsule into her mouth, and washed it down with the water. "Is this what I think it is?"

"If what you think it is is a slave tracker, yes. You're familiar with them?"

Amy snorted, amused by the irony. "I imagine you want to be able to find me in case my brother Andrew comes up with some way of kidnapping me. What's funny is that the reason I know about them is that Andrew made me swallow one once. Of course, that one's power source is long dead."

The dean frowned. "So he knows about them too."

Amy nodded. "Yes, Sir, but remember he doesn't know we're onto him. Since no Hanging Girl has ever been kidnapped..." She looked at him questioningly, and went on when he nodded. "...he has no reason to think you'd plant tracking devices in any of us. But even if he does, there's nothing he can really do about it. In fact, if the idea does come into his head, he might give up on the whole plan."

The dean shook his head. "Not safe to assume that."

"Oh, of course not, Sir. And I gather we're not going to assume he's taking me to his dungeon? We know where that is, so there'd be no need for the tracker if I ended up there." She was doubtful that the tracker could be detected from within the underground dungeon, but her progress on the way to it could be followed.

He nodded. "Correct. We're not assuming anything."

Amy sighed. She'd be so glad to get to her hanging, after which Andrew could never again screw with her life. "What are the procedures going to be when I leave the grounds? Obviously you must be going to let me do that, or I wouldn't need the tracker." She felt relieved. She badly wanted an off-site hanging, as much like Miranda's as possible -- or in fact, like the hanging of every Academy graduate other than Megan. And if Andrew's threat somehow denied her *that* possibility, she'd request the hiring

of a hit squad to take him out. She thought about asking for that anyway, but felt doubtful the dean would consider going quite that far.

The dean smiled. "Hard to get anything past you. Yes, I'll be letting you leave here. Beyond the precaution of installing the slave tracker, I'll want you to go out with two bodyguards rather than one. For the time being, that will be the standard procedure for all off-site excursions, even when you aren't involved. I don't want it to look as though we are protecting you more than the other girls."

Amy smiled. "I do feel better, anyway. I think we're doing as much as we can. Oh!" A memory from the start of the conversation came back to her. "You said there were two reasons for seeing me?"

He nodded. "I'd considered telling you this earlier, but I didn't want to distract you during your preparations for Megan's hanging. One of our club members has purchased a 'first chance option' on you."

Amy frowned, puzzled. "Does that mean... well, it sounds like this person wants to be contacted if anyone else offers to buy me."

The dean nodded. "He came in all set to buy you, but I told him you were not going to be available until early next summer. He does want to be contacted, yes. Now, you have the right to decline to be purchased by him, as with any other sale. He understands that."

"So I guess he knows me. Do I know him?" The thought suddenly came into her head that this person might be buying her on Andrew's behalf. Of course, that could be the case with *any* buyer. Amy shivered.

"You do, but he wishes not to reveal his identity to you so far in advance of your purchase. As I said, he's a member, and he doesn't wish to be treated any differently for the time being, by yourself or by any of the other girls."

Amy's puzzlement increased. She felt she should be able to figure out who it was. Several names came to mind, but she discarded them all as "unlikely" for various reasons. The first, of course, had been Steffi, but, aside from the buyer already having been identified as male, Amy strongly believed Steffi was satisfied for her lifetime with her one Hanging Girl purchase. Amy bit her lip, giving voice to her foremost worry. "Sir, could you... somehow check on the buyer's background? For any possible association with Andrew?"

The dean, unexpectedly, smiled. "I'd thought about that. For your own peace of mind, I'll do some checking. But I can tell you upfront that I trust him. Does that help?"

Amy blinked. "Yes, Sir. Sir, why are you telling me about this now?"

He sat back, resting his head against his hand. "Amy, you can't tell me you're not a little down right now. Megan had an excellent hanging, and I know you're happy about that, but I'm sure it's hard, after watching someone so close to you reach her goal, to know that you still have a long wait before you can do the same. Knowing, now, that the wheels are in motion towards your hanging, if slowly, does that help you feel better?"

Amy was suddenly conscious is a rising excitement within her, hidden behind her fretting over Andrew. Someone *does* want to buy me, she told herself. And it's someone the dean trusts! She grinned, letting the excitement foam up to the surface. "Yes, Sir. It does." She gasped, seeing the clock on the dean's desk. "Oh! Sir, I have a class to teach in a few minutes. May I go?"

"Certainly." He patted his in-box. "And I'll see to it that Tina gets this into the mail today, to Kathleen."

"Thank you, Sir."

* * * * *

Amy watched, a hundred emotions running through her head, as the students and graduates slowly assembled around her, facing her -- or more accurately, facing the cloth covering on the wall that Amy stood beside.

It was getting crowded. Getting all of the students into the party hall was one thing. In the party pavilion, there was plenty of room for all of them, and the only headache for anyone was maintaining security in that borderland between the Academy and the outside world. Here, in this relatively small, awkwardly-shaped room in the student area, the problem was finding a way to pack everyone in so they could all see.

Ms. Bennett, the assistant dean, had directed traffic as the students began assembling, having the graduates stand in front, with the students taking places behind them within view of the covering cloth, finding space as they were able, shoulders against shoulders. Amy spoke up, as nearly everyone was at last in place. "I think it would work better if everybody kind of kneels down, except way in back where there's nobody behind you." She grinned. "I don't mean like you're bowing down to worship or something," she went on, and several girls laughed, "I'm just trying to make it easier for everyone to see."

With a lot of giggling and wisecracks, the students and grads knelt on the floor, the foremost ones scrunching down a little further, the ones farther back kneeling upright, the students farthest back standing.

Ms. Bennett turned to give the dean a questioning look, and he nodded and spoke. "It seems we've been having several unique ceremonies lately. This one, today, will give all of you a first opportunity to see the permanent home of the person responsible for them." Several girls laughed, and several others applauded briefly.

He gestured to Amy, and Amy spoke again. "There were any number of places we could have put this. The dean's first suggestion was the school's entry foyer, where anyone coming in would see the display right away.

"But Megan wanted, very much, to be in the student area, but not just anywhere. Looking at everybody here now," she smiled as she looked at the students crammed into whatever space was available, "Obviously she could have picked a more convenient place." More laughs.

Amy cleared her throat, finding that her voice was becoming husky. "But this room was very, very special to Megan. She often came here -- sometimes I was with her, and sometimes she was by herself.

"Megan had two life-changing experiences. One of them was the day she saw her Aunt Serena, a graduate of this Academy, hang, and that's the day Megan decided to be a Hanging Girl. And the other one happened here, in this room, the Hall of Honor."

Amy brushed away a tear. "To a lot of us, this room is inspiring but also a little sad. The girls whose heads are in this room... none of them graduated, though they all tried their hardest, and wanted to very much. We honor them, here, for their contributions to the Academy, but actually we hope very much not to end up here.

"Megan didn't feel that way. When the dean told her he wanted to establish a 'Wall of Fame' for Academy graduates whose surpassing ability led the Academy to stage a hanging for them on campus, Megan insisted that it should be here, because she wanted to spend her days looking at the girls, in this room, whose sacrifice meant so much to her."

She palmed some more tears away, and continued, "So the Hall of Honor now includes the Wall of Fame, and here is its first occupant."

She pulled at the cord, and the cloth came away. Megan's head, smiling, was revealed in its niche. Amy had, several times over the last few days, come by periodically to watch as the carpenters and electricians constructed the display case, in the wall facing two different rows of cubbyholes, like library shelves, running perpendicularly from the wall, holding the heads of the girls permanently residing in the Hall of Honor. Megan's case was recessed into the wall, its sides and back made of a light-colored wood, smoothly varnished, softly lit at the top and sides. A plaque beneath her head read,

MEGAN SADLER

Graduate of the Hanging Academy

Hanged for the members of the Academy Club

There were several gasps, and Amy heard a murmured, "Oh, that's pretty!", before the assembled students and graduates burst into prolonged applause.

Tears now streaming, Amy leaned in and kissed Megan on the cheek, whispering, "You're home now, babe."

* * * * *

Amy stroked Jackie's hip fondly, holding her as they lay on the bed. Jackie's skin was still slick with sweat from their earlier lovemaking. Amy sensed, in Jackie's silence, something waiting to be said. "Okay, what is it?"

Jackie giggled, moving her head forward to kiss Amy. "I guess I'm making too big a deal of it. But it's just always hard to say, you were right and I was wrong."

Amy blinked. "About what?"

"Back when you said you wanted to room with Megan. And I tried so hard to talk you out of it. I just didn't know you well enough then. Or her, obviously."

Amy had no need to ask Jackie why she was saying this now. The last days before a hanging often brought a lot of secrets out. "Well, nobody knew her. And remember, she and I did go through, uhh, kind of a tough time."

Jackie waved the point away. "Nothing you couldn't handle. Anyway, I've been waiting for a chance to tell you that, without Shawna being in the room." Shawna was spending the night with Jana. They'd become close while working together with Megan on Jana's bound-feet hanging program, and it gave Melissa and Holly a rare night alone together. Tomorrow night would be Shawna's alone time with Jackie before Jackie's hanging. "I don't think she knows how hard I tried to argue you out of saving her."

Amy shook her head. "You know that's not what you were trying to do. You just cared about me and thought I was being really stupid. And I love you for that." She gave Jackie a long kiss, and felt Jackie's arms tighten around her. They were both ready to make love again.

* * * * *

TWO DAYS LATER

Amy shook her head in amazement, remembering that day when the rest of her entering class had arrived to take up residence in the First Year dorm at the Academy. Amy had a clear memory of meeting Jackie that day, trading introductions, liking her immediately.

Today Jackie had the Glow.

There was a cool, crisp breeze riffing Amy's shorts as she stood awaiting the limo at the front of the Academy building, with Shawna and Jackie -- and with Jackson, the huge bodyguard whose eyes swept up and down the street, no less attentive than if he were in the presidential guard detail.

Jackie, wearing short-shorts and a low-cut bikini top, both in a soft cream color, bringing out her deep tan, turned to Amy, grinning. "It's supposed to be warmer later. This will be perfect! Look at the sky! No clouds anywhere."

Shawna seemed to be imitating Jackson, her eyes flicking from side to side -- not nervously, more in curiosity. "What should we be looking for, Ames?"

Amy laughed. "Well, gee, if only we knew that, it would make everything a lot easier. I'm kind of doubtful of seeing a band of wild-eyed men waving guns. That's not Andrew's style."

Jackie suggested, "We should be watching the manhole covers. He'd travel by sewer, right?"

Amy bent double, laughing so hard she couldn't breathe for a moment. At last she was able to gasp, "So you know why he can't keep a girlfriend!"

The limo pulled up in front, Karl driving. Jackson opened the doors, second and third from the front, and the girls all tossed their bags into the rearmost seat, then piled together into the seat behind Karl -- Shawna first, Amy last, with Jackie in the middle. As Jackson pushed the door closed, opened the one in front and took his place beside Karl, Amy and Shawna each took one of Jackie's hands in both of their own. Amy raised Jackie's hand and kissed the back of it. "You really look great, hon."

Jackie smiled and sighed. "Everything feels really right. I was just thinking that's the most important part of the training. Not learning *how* to hang, but convincing yourself that you're ready to do it. That you have an ability and it won't let you down."

Shawna nodded seriously. "Learning how was, like, the first six months. Everything after that was for the confidence. Well, and style."

Amy nodded. "Style. That helps with the confidence too."

Jackie looked up to the limo ceiling. "Confidence!" she shouted. "That must be what's getting me wet!" The other girls laughed.

* * * * *

Sitting at the picnic table with Shawna, her nostrils flaring as she smelled the aroma of Jackie being barbecued, Amy nodded when Shawna remarked on how well Jackie had done. "Twenty-five minutes," Shawna pointed out. "I'm thinking the average is getting higher lately. But really, anything over twenty is fine."

Amy agreed. She was glad that it didn't appear that Jackie had sacrificed any of the most crowd-pleasing elements to try to increase her time. She had worried a little that graduates might set their sights on Megan's new benchmark, but decided that the pride any graduate took in displaying her stylistic training would always take priority. "I don't think the audience pays that much attention to the time anyway. What gets them off is the moves we do."

Shawna wrinkled her nose. "It's funny, I was just thinking you're the only girl I've ever roomed with at the Academy who's still alive." She blinked suddenly and looked horrified at herself. "I'm so sorry! I know it's hard, having to wait so long to for your own hanging."

Amy smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "I'm okay with it, really. I've got plenty to do, working with the girls," meaning Melissa, Jana, and Holly. "And it's so fun to watch them when they're working out new stuff. They get so serious about it."

Shawna smiled. "I know, I've seen them. Are you going to room with them when I'm gone?"

Amy nodded. "There are some girls in our own class who'll be fun to spend some nights with, but we're all kind of vanishing like soap bubbles now. I want to get back to a stable roommate situation." She grinned suddenly, and kissed Shawna. "No offense, please. I love you, but I've been losing all these roommates lately, and you're about to go too. It'll just feel good to get to say, okay, I'll live with these girls the rest of my life."

“Oh, no offense taken! I understand totally.”

Amy caught some movement out of the corner of her eye. “Oh! They’re taking Jackie off the fire. I am so hungry.”

CHAPTER 14

TWO MONTHS LATER

After laying her panties neatly atop her shorts and bra on the bed, Amy stepped up onto the hanging platform, facing an equally naked, visibly excited Holly. Melissa tied Amy's hands behind her, her fingers moving magically fast, with considerable practice tying Jana. Jana herself was tying Holly's hands, while Holly's eyes were fixed on Amy's. Holly was almost dancing with eagerness to get started, barely able to wait as Jana slipped the noose over her neck and tightened it. "Can I try some moves I was thinking about?"

Amy shook her head firmly. "There's plenty of time for that later. This first time, I just want you to get a feeling for the basics." Holly had remained more or less patient during the weeks of strengthening her neck sufficiently to hold her own weight plus Amy's, but now that Amy had judged her ready for a pairs hanging, Holly wanted to do everything at once. Amy went on, "There are things that are different from hanging by yourself. Balance is a big part of it. When your thighs are squeezing mine, it's not just so you can lift yourself. You also need to use them to keep your upper body leaning towards me. If you start to tip away from me, pushing upward just leans you back farther and doesn't relieve enough pressure on your neck. Concentrate on getting a feel for the balance. And remember not to relax your thighs after you finish breathing. Keep them tight against mine, because I have to push against you so I can breathe. Okay?"

Holly sighed. "It's a lot to remember. It'll get automatic eventually, right? Like regular hanging?"

Amy smiled. "Sure. In a few days we can try some moves, and by that time you'll just be thinking about them, not the process."

Holly closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she opened them, still focused on Amy. "Ready."

Amy nodded, said, "You breathe first," then looked down at Jana, holding the lever. "Let each of us do three breathing segments, then bring the floor back up." Jana nodded, waited a few seconds, and pulled the lever.

Moments later, both Amy and Holly dangled, wriggling at the ends of their respective ropes. Amy automatically turned slightly and pushed her right leg between Holly's. At first Holly seemed to try to use her left leg instead, but quickly sensed Amy's movement and thrust her right leg between Amy's. I should have clarified that beforehand, Amy thought, as she clamped her thighs around Holly's right. It felt odd to be doing it with someone more slender than Megan. But Holly seemed to have a feeling for what she was doing. Amy felt Holly's legs tighten around her right, and felt the increased pressure on her neck as Holly lifted herself. Moments later, Amy gave Holly's thighs a double-squeeze to signal that she needed air. As the pressure from Holly slackened, Amy began lifting herself up, gratefully sucking in a few lungfuls of air before feeling the signal from Holly, letting herself down to start the cycle again.

Midway through her second breathing segment, Amy sensed Holly beginning to tip backward, and felt Holly's hips slap against her own as Holly tried to get her balance back. Amy wriggled her left foot, signaling Jana to raise the platform.

As soon as the platform supported her, Holly stamped her foot on it. “*Damn it!*”

Amy shook her head. “Holly, it’s okay. Megan and I both did that a few times at first.”

Holly’s eyes flashed. “I won’t do it again. I promise. I know where I went wrong. Can we try again?”

Amy nodded. “Take a couple of minutes first, to let your breathing get back to normal. And cool down a little. You can’t do this when you’re mad.”

Holly gave her a tiny smile. “I’ll be okay. I’m just not used to screwing up a hanging.”

Amy smiled and rubbed her cheek against Holly’s, as much affection as she could display with her hands tied. She knew it would help calm the girl. “This is something new, Holly. Give yourself a break.”

Holly sighed, closing her eyes once more, not speaking for about fifteen seconds. She opened them again at last, smiled, and said, “Okay.”

Amy nodded again to Jana, who pulled the lever again.

Holly, this time, seemed more sure of herself. She seemed to start sensing, seconds ahead of Amy’s signal, that Amy needed a breathing turn, as Amy also found herself starting to sense Holly’s needs. The transitions were becoming smoother.

Amy felt the familiar tingling return, different from normal hanging -- more intensely erotic, due to being shared with another person in intimate physical contact, as similar to lovemaking as standard hanging was to masturbation. It was not as intense as it had been with Megan, since Amy’s fondness for Holly couldn’t come close to matching the depth of her love for Megan. But Amy knew, suddenly, she and Holly would make love later. They had only had sex once before, the time Amy had wanted a first read of Holly’s abilities prior to her first party. This, she sensed, would be something different.

On Amy’s third breathing segment, just before Jana pushed the lever back, Holly suddenly turned slightly and planted her lips against Amy’s. Amy, though surprised, had kissed Megan often enough in mid-air to go along with the move, moving her lips against Holly’s soft ones. It gave Amy a second locus of arousal, complementing the one between her legs.

Amy stood as she felt the platform come up under her feet. Holly’s lips clung to hers just a second longer before breaking it off.

Amy smiled at Holly, who now had an ear-to-ear grin. “Remember what I was saying about no moves?”

Holly blinked, still grinning. “I didn’t think *that* counted as a move. I just wanted to see what it would feel like when I kiss Haley while we’re hanging. So I can think about it tonight.”

Amy was suddenly stunned by an insight, perceiving the existence of a potential summit of intimacy that even she and Megan had not quite reached, but that Holly and Haley would. When the two of them, Amy thought, already two halves of a single person, feel the degree of merging that is possible when

hanging together... Amy shivered as her mind imagined an intensity of feeling beyond her own experience.

Holly frowned. "Amy? You okay?"

Amy took a deep breath. "Oh, yeah. I was just... remembering." Yeah, Amy thought, she'll buy that. No need to tell her what I was really thinking about. She'll find out soon enough.

Holly bounced on her feet. "If I reminded you of Megan, I guess I must have been doing it right. Can we do it again? Please?"

Amy laughed, tickled by Holly's inexhaustible enthusiasm. "A little later, but we need to rest. Let's take about twenty minutes..." She shook her head at Melissa, who had started untying her hands. "No, you can leave that. Just get the nooses off so we can sit awhile."

As Jana removed Holly's noose, Holly said, "I'm already getting a feeling for it..."

Amy nodded. "I could tell that."

Holly's grin returned. "So can we try *one* little move next time? I was thinking I could twist a little and rub my breasts against yours."

It was on the tip of Amy's tongue to remind her again that there was plenty of time over the coming weeks, but she laughed instead. Holly's excitement never failed to be infectious. "Okay, but not until the last segment, okay? I still want to focus mainly on the basics for now."

Holly nodded eagerly. "Okay!" She hopped down from the platform, graceful as always despite her tied hands.

* * * * *

THAT NIGHT

Amy lay with her eyes closed, her skin tingling as she felt Holly's kiss-licks between her breasts. She couldn't take much more, she knew, without pouncing on Holly, but she wanted to prolong the buildup as long as she could.

They had Amy's room to themselves for the night. Shawna, her hanging just a week away, was spending the night with Wendy and Rita.

Amy twitched suddenly as the seeming electrical bolt ripped through her body, the accumulation of erotic tension spilling over all at once. There, she thought, that's my limit. She wriggled down the bed to bring her face even with Holly's, covering Holly's mouth with her own for a long, moaning kiss. Holly, in answer, moaned as well, wrapping her arms tightly around Amy, the top of her thigh rubbing Amy's pussy, as they floated together on the river of want to the eventual waterfall of orgasm.

As her breathing returned slowly to normal afterward, Amy smiled and gave Holly a softer kiss. Holly smiled back, and said huskily, "I love you, Amy."

Not needing to think about it, Amy responded, "I love you too, Holly."

Holly looked at her hopefully. "Could you and Haley make love sometime? I don't want her to miss this."

Amy blinked. Holly's thoughts were never, at any time, far from Haley. Amy was amazed, again, at the commitment to hanging so strong in them that they could agree to such a long separation for the sake of it. She grinned. "Of course, Holly. I don't want to miss it either."

* * * * *

ONE WEEK LATER

Amy could easily hear the anticipatory buzz of conversation punctuated by laughter from the other side of the curtain that hid, for the present, the backyard hanging stage. Amy finished tightening the noose around Shawna's neck, as both of them stood on the platform. Shawna's skin shone in the sunlight, reflecting off the cooking oil coating it, and her eyes, as with every other Hanging Girl Amy had known, had that glow of the Big Day. With an open-mouthed grin of excitement, she whispered to Amy, "I just want to say thank you, one more time. Thank you. Thank you. Okay, that was two more." She giggled.

Amy kissed her, and whispered back, "I've always considered us even. I got to room with Megan, and I owe you so much for making that possible. And don't try to tell me again you wouldn't have reached this show without me. You were always going to be one of the best Hanging Girls ever, and nothing could have stopped that."

"Well then, thank you for being such a great roommate yourself the last couple of months." She was about to go on, but her eyes suddenly widened, at the sound of footsteps on the stage in front of the curtain. "I think it's time."

Amy gave her one more kiss, whispered "Have a great show," jumped down from the platform and retreated to the back of the stage. She assumed a parade-rest posture, holding the heart monitor behind her. She was dressed in a silky ensemble that was basically pajamas, with full-length pants and a short-sleeved blouse with a very low neckline to reveal plenty of cleavage. It was all in executioner's black, though Amy would not be pulling the lever to hang Shawna. It was more for the purpose of allowing her to disappear into the background of black curtain at the rear of the stage, so that all attention could be focused, appropriately, on Shawna. Out of the corners of her eyes Amy could see, at either side of the stage, Sid and Bill, their bodyguards for the show, in black suits, standing motionless as they awaited, like Amy and Shawna, the opening of the curtain.

On the other side of the curtain, Amy could hear the host for the party, Gary Blair, clear his throat, as the crowd gradually quieted, and hear his voice saying, "I'm glad all of you could be here today. As you know, I've planned a special event here today prior to the barbecue -- it has to come before the barbecue, not the other way around." The audience laughed heartily.

He went on, "Anyway, most of you have met our guest and dinner, but let me have her introduce herself anyway." With that, he pulled on the curtain cord, drawing it aside to reveal Shawna. The revelation, as always, was accompanied by gasps. No matter that several of them had already seen her naked in bed, in the tent, beforehand. This was different. To suddenly see her, a living, nude, golden statue in the sunlight, atop her platform, as if she were ten feet tall, was inevitably stunning.

Shawna beamed at the crowd of about thirty, as the gasps and whispers died out. "Hi! I'm Shawna, and I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to meet all of you. But at least I'll be meat for all of you."

As the laughter subsided, she went on, "Okay, does everybody have their numbered tickets? Does anybody not have one?" Some members of the crowd reached into their pockets, some nodded. None spoke. Shawna went on, "Okay, we've got three prizes to give out. The first is for first choice of a cut of my meat -- anywhere on my body. While Mr. Blair holds the bowl with numbered slips of paper, my friend Amy will reach in and pick one out. Amy?" Shawna turned to look behind her.

Grinning, choking back a laugh, Amy stepped forward, reflecting on the wide variety of ideas among people who bought Hanging Girls. She'd never seen a party anything like this. As Blair held the bowl towards her, Amy made a show of looking away as she reached blindly into the bowl, fished out one of the slips of paper, and held it up so Shawna could see.

Shawna squinted. "Okay, uh... thirteen. Right?" As Amy nodded in confirmation, there was a squeal of delight from a woman who was either the girlfriend or wife of a man in the crowd holding up his hand with a grin. The man came up to the stage and stepped up onto it, showing his ticket to Blair.

Blair patted him on the back. "Well done, Davey. Oh, here." Blair pulled a black marking pen out of his pocket. "You'll need this. Just pick out a cut and outline it."

The man named Davey blinked in surprise. "What, right on her?"

Blair grinned. "Go on, mark your territory, Davey."

Shawna looked down, smiling. "You can come up here with me if you need to."

Looking slightly embarrassed, Davey stepped up onto the platform beside Shawna. Out of the corner of his eye, he must have seen Bill, the bodyguard, watching him warily. To Shawna, Davey said, "Uhhh, okay to touch?"

Shawna nodded. "Sure, just don't push me off, of course."

Self-consciously, Davey ran his hand over the back of Shawna's thigh, then up over her buttock, as Shawna twitched slightly and giggled. She said to him, "That's fine, if that's what you want, but really, anywhere."

Davey smiled, took a deep breath, reached up and gave her left breast a slight squeeze. Shawna laughed. "Yeah, I thought so. If you want it, go ahead and mark it."

Davey uncapped the pen, and slowly drew a circle around her entire breast. Giving the crowd an uncertain smile, he hopped down from the platform, to laughter and applause from the crowd, and a shout of "Yes, Davey!" from his girlfriend/wife.

As Davey jumped down from the stage and was hugged by his woman, Blair raised the bowl again, and looked up at Shawna.

Burying a case of giggles, Shawna said, "Okay, the next prize winner gets to do the traditional stabbing after I'm dead. Show them where, please, Amy."

Amy stooped to pick up a long knife on the stage floor beside the platform, then stood beside the platform. "This is one of our Hanging Academy traditions. The winner here should wait for a signal from me, then put the knife in right here... could I have that marker?" She accepted it from Blair, and made a small dot just below Shawna's sternum. "Just plunge it all the way in, up to the hilt, and be ready to get a little blood on your clothes." She smiled and reached for the bowl, turning her face away again, and pulled out another slip, holding it up for Shawna.

Shawna could see it more easily, as Amy held it up a little higher. "Okay, five. Who has..."

The answer became obvious as a young woman yelped and covered her face with her hands. Taking her hands down to reveal a grin, she came forward and jumped up on the stage.

Blair nodded happily to her, "Okay, Marcy!"

Marcy turned to Amy, biting her lip. "So what do I need to do?"

Amy smiled at her. "Nothing, yet. But hold this." Amy handed her the knife. "You can stand back there with me during the hanging, and I'll let you know when to stab her." Marcy nodded nervously and retreated to the back of the stage where Amy had been standing.

Amy could see that Shawna was almost bubbling over with excitement. With a grin, Shawna said, "Okay, now we come to the big prize -- at least that's my opinion." More laughs. "Get your tickets ready, because the next winner gets to hang me. Amy?" She waited as Amy reached into the bowl one more time.

Shawna squinted again. "Okay, the winner is..." She paused, letting anticipation build. "Eighty-one!" She frowned. "Wait, there can't be..." Then she laughed. "Amy, you've got it upside down!"

An excited female voice in the crowd said, "Oh, eighteen?" Amy nodded, and the woman pumped both fists exultantly and ran up to the stage.

Blair led the applause. "Way to go, Jeannie!"

The girl grinned happily, and turned immediately to Amy as the expert. "Okay, what do I do?"

Amy rested her palm on the lever. "When you're ready, just pull this back towards you." It occurred to Amy that the girl might find the task a little more difficult when the time came. In a low voice, she asked, "Have you snuffed anybody before?"

Jeannie nodded. "My older sister. We hanged her at home. Of course, it was nothing like this, with so many people and..." She indicated the platform. "...fancy equipment. I just pulled the bucket out from under her."

Amy smiled at her. "That must have been great." In a still lower voice, she said, "Just do it when you're ready. You don't need to ask Shawna. As soon as you pull it, back off out of the way so everybody can concentrate on Shawna."

Jeannie nodded again, her face growing serious as she prepared for her official duties. She grasped the lever firmly, and in seconds, the crowd grew very still. Jeannie, apparently conscious of having become part of the show, stood still for several beats, a smile curling the corners of her lips. Shawna, Amy saw before she backed towards the rear curtain again, had her eyes closed, breathing deeply, slowly, evenly.

In pin-drop silence, or as near as it gets to it outdoors, Jeannie gave the lever a firm pull, and quickly, as requested, backed away, as Shawna began sinking, and the rope grew taut and soon pulled her aloft.

As soon as Shawna established her rhythm in her kicking, she immediately began her performance with her own strength, her desperation stretching/wriggling, drawing oohs from the crowd, which quickly turned to the familiar gasps and aroused moans as she cycled through the now-standard choreography, including Holly's new move. Jeannie, Amy saw, was watching wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Amy smiled to herself. Now, Amy thought, Jeannie can see the difference between an amateur and a trained professional. She immediately apologized to herself for the thought, not wanting even in the privacy of her head to insult the memory of Jeannie's sister, whose snuff had no doubt been exciting in its own way.

From several locations in the crowd, Amy could already, in just these first few minutes, hear indications of approaching sexual climaxes. Shawna must have heard the sounds too, as she seemed now to be concentrating on the moves that brought the greatest reaction.

* * * * *

Twenty minutes later, the audience now enthusiastically applauding, Shawna spasmed in the throes of her last orgasm, gave a few final listless kicks, and was still, no longer contributing to her residual slight twisting and pendulum swinging that was itself gradually dying out. Amy watched her carefully, holding the heart monitor, though only to confirm the judgment of her own experienced eye as to the moment of death. She was aware of the girl Marcy, standing tensely beside her, waiting for her cue. The thought crossed Amy's mind that every young adult seeks out signs of his or her own maturity, having spent nearly their entire lifetimes regarding themselves as kids and wanting to embrace their new promotion to adulthood. That's part of the excitement I feel at these moments, Amy told herself. When I see a friend my own age hanging dead, about to be cooked, carved, and eaten, I know I'm a woman, not a girl. I can have what Shawna has just had, the fulfilling end every woman is entitled to. And I'm ready for it, just as Shawna was ready for it. I'm having to wait for it, but it will be here soon.

As the applause subsided, Amy felt a tap on her arm, and looked into Marcy's eyes. A glance at the monitor verified that Shawna was, indeed, gone. Amy smiled at Marcy and gave her an encouraging go-ahead gesture.

Marcy made no move to emerge from her background position against the curtain. Her face was one concentrated blush. She stammered, "I just... I just...?" She made a brief stabbing motion with the knife, and gave Amy a questioning look.

Amy smiled at her. "Sweetie, she won't feel it, I promise."

"Oh, it's not that. I mean, I know she's dead, but..." She gestured vaguely at the crowd. "They're not."

Amy could see Marcy's girlfriend giving her encouraging hand gestures. But Marcy seemed terminally shy, unwilling to be the center of attention of a crowd of people in a party mood. Amy touched the girl's upper arm gently. "Do you want me to do it? I've done it before." She glanced towards Blair, who was within earshot. He snorted and nodded, smiling.

Marcy grinned happily. "Oh, would you?" Eagerly she handed Amy the knife.

Amy shrugged, walked forward, stopped just in front of Shawna and held the knife up high. Looking over the crowd, she grinned. "You guys ready for some barbecued girl?"

In unison to a surprising degree, everyone shouted, "Yes!"

Amy shouted back, "Well, let me get things started then!" Bringing the knife down to shoulder level, Amy sighted her target just below Shawna's ribs out of the corner of her eye, then in one motion swung around and planted the knife deep into Shawna. An initial stream of blood spurted onto Amy's sleeve and arm, quickly subsiding and flowing down Shawna's stomach, as the fleeting thought passed through Amy that she hoped the Academy cleaners were able to get the bloodstains out of this outfit. The crowd cheered and applauded once more.

* * * * *

Amy breathed a heavy sigh of relief as the door to the student area clicked closed behind her. As far as she knew, she didn't need to leave the grounds again until the day of her own hanging -- which not only made that event feel tantalizingly close, but also meant she could stop thinking about Andrew for an extended period of time.

Early as it was, about nine o'clock, Amy felt like going straight to bed. She was a little tired for sex, and hoped Melissa would understand. Amy's three students would be taking turns spending nights in Amy's room while the other two slept in their own room in the Second Year dorm.

She opened the door to her room, blinked, and choked back a laugh. Melissa wasn't there, but Jana was.

Jana was kneeling beside the bed, along its long side, bent over it, her upper body resting on the bed itself. Ropes around each upper thigh near the knee, tied to the nearer legs of the bed on opposite sides, held her knees wide apart, while behind them her ankles were crossed and tied together. Her arms were

spread wide beyond her head, held at the wrists by ropes running to opposite far corners of the bed. She was blindfolded and gagged. And naked, of course.

Her waist was circled by a wide, multicolored ribbon, tied in a big bow in the small of her back.

Beside her hip, on the edge of the bed, lay a strap-on dildo from one of the party rooms.

At the sound of the door opening, Jana had raised her head, to the extent she was able, facing blindly in Amy's direction, and mmmmped something unintelligible.

Amy felt her tiredness slip away from her in the same way her clothes did as she shrugged out of them. Melissa knew, she thought, exactly what I needed tonight.

Her practiced fingers quickly buckled the straps of the dildo, and she knelt behind Jana, untying the bow and removing the ribbon. She ran her fingers over Jana's back, feeling the girl shiver, hearing her moans of anticipation. She spent a few minutes giving Jana wet kisses along her back, down to her buttocks, and licked her way down Jana's thigh.

At what she judged to be the right moment, she let the tip of the dildo graze Jana's swollen labia. With a high-pitched squeal, Jana's whole body tensed, and she tried to thrust her hips back to bring the dildo inside. Amy teased her with it a moment longer, then pushed it in. It slid into Jana almost frictionlessly, as Jana made a low grunting sound of both satisfaction and need.

Amy leaned forward, her waist bending around Jana's buttocks, her stomach resting on Jana's back, and pushed her hands under Jana's chest to cup one of Jana's breasts in each. Softly kissing Jana's neck, gently squeezing her breasts, Amy began thrusting. As Jana's moans became more rapid, breathy, and higher pitched, Amy's own excitement and anticipation rose as well. I know, thought Amy, I'll be getting a really nice orgasm later in return for this. Jana is so sweet that way.

CHAPTER 15

Amy stood facing Holly, both dressed in their uniforms, their stomachs and chests pressed together, each holding her hands behind her back as requested by Melissa. Melissa squatted down beside them, touching Amy's hip. "See, I'm talking about a rope running from Holly's hands to yours, through your crotches, holding you together. It wouldn't mess up what you need to do to breathe, would it?"

Amy frowned. "That would put such a big limitation on the number of different moves we could make."

Melissa nodded. "I know, but you could use it to bang your mounds together really hard, you know, rough sex. And you could still do a lot of hot stuff with your legs."

The intercom crackled to life, in Tina's voice. "Amy, could you come to the dean's office?" Tina sounded oddly subdued.

Amy blinked in surprise. She looked at Holly and Melissa. "Okay, you guys, help Jana practice her new thing. I'll come straight back after I see the dean." She kissed Holly -- standing so intimately close, it was hard not to -- and gave Jana and Melissa quick kisses as well as she headed out the door.

* * * * *

Tina directed Amy straight into the dean's office without a word. As Amy sat, she saw the dean frown with concern. Amy hadn't felt a need to worry about anything, but she was now getting to that point. "Yes, Sir?"

"Amy... your father has been taken to the hospital with chest pains. The obvious guess is a heart attack."

Amy gasped, and felt the bottom fall out of her stomach. "Is he... do you know anything about how he's doing?"

The dean shook his head. "Nothing more than I've told you. Your father's secretary called. I've contacted the hospital, and... well, you don't just ask whether someone is a patient, since they won't answer that, but I asked them to put me through to Preston Cameron's room, which they did. So he is there. No answer, but I think I take that as a good sign. I would think a doctor or nurse would answer, unless they've left him alone resting."

Or they're too busy with him to answer, Amy thought. Of course, the hospital wouldn't say anything about his condition.

Amy sat in thought a few moments, letting her initial nagging thought blossom in her mind. "Do you know whether Andrew knows about this?"

The dean rested his chin on his hand. "You're wondering about the possibility that this is a trick of his?"

Amy nodded. She was accustomed to the dean's near-telepathic reading of her.

The dean shrugged. "I thought from the first that was possible. The secretary who called me gave her name as Sally Baldwin. Are you familiar with her?" When Amy shook her head, he went on, "Well, she may be relatively new. You haven't been in contact for over three years. At any rate, I checked on the Cameron Industries Web site. It does indeed list Sally Baldwin as his corporate secretary, at the same phone number from which this morning's call came -- she sounded appropriately upset, by the way. I called at that number, and the same woman answered. I asked her if she had any more information, which she did not. At any rate, the original call really did come from your father's secretary. And we do have that indirect confirmation from the hospital that he is a patient there."

Amy saw him seem to hesitate. She looked at him expectantly.

He frowned. "I don't know whether this means anything. I saw, on the Web site, that Andrew is a vice-president. You weren't aware of that, were you?"

Amy blinked. "I knew he was going into management. I never knew where he ended up." She thought about it. "I suppose this means he has more money at his disposal than I'd imagined. Something pretty significantly bigger than any allowance he'd be getting from dad."

The dean nodded. "My thought as well. One wonders why he hasn't been back to one of the parties to rent you for an evening. He couldn't afford it three years ago, but I should think he can now."

Amy gave him a sour smile. "Not that you're actually wondering that, right? Presumably he's saving up for something bigger."

The dean sighed. "That would be my guess."

Amy looked down, and after a long silence, said in a tiny voice, "I have to go see him. He's my dad."

The dean nodded. "I know. Ordinarily, for any girl beyond the First Year, I'd approve without a second thought."

Amy jerked her head up, stricken. "Please, Sir. I really mean it."

He looked at her for a long moment. Then nodded. "Let me make some arrangements. We'll do this under a little heavier-than-ordinary security."

"Thank you, Sir." Amy's gratitude was heartfelt. "Should I wait here while you do that?"

He shook his head. "Go on back to your room, and pick up some things for a possible overnight stay, just in case."

"Yes, Sir. Could... could I bring a friend along?" I'll probably ask Melissa, she thought to herself.

After another long moment of thought, he shook his head. "Given the potential risk, no. There will be other Academy personnel there with you, but I don't want to put another student out there."

Amy nodded. "Yes, Sir." She stood. "I'll be right back."

* * * * *

When Amy returned to the girls' room with a wan smile and an overnight bag, wearing long pants and a buttoned blouse, Melissa's jaw dropped. "Amy?? What's up?"

Amy sighed. "My dad's in the hospital. They think he may have had a heart attack."

All three girls drew closer, as Melissa reached out to stroke Amy's arm. "I'm sure he'll be okay, Amy. These days they really..." She stopped, frowning. Hesitantly, she went on, "Have you thought..."

"Yes!" Amy was instantly contrite for snapping at Melissa, and hugged her. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I'm a little edgy. Thank you for thinking about it. But yes, we're onto the possibility this is some elaborate trick by Andrew. The dean is making some security arrangements."

"Well, that's good then. And I really hope your dad's okay." She smiled. "I was just remembering about how you told me he let my dad make the first cut on Miranda. That was so nice of him."

Amy smiled back, as she always did when remembering Miranda's hanging. "Yeah, that kind of surprised me. But he has it in him." She narrowed her eyes, her face turning serious. "I was going to wait and tell you before my hanging, but it's not like it'll be a surprise to you. You know, if anything happens to me, you get Miranda's head, right? Nobody's going to argue with you. But I just want to be sure you know that's what I want."

Stunned, Melissa nodded briefly. Amy fixed an intense look on each of their faces in turn. "And if anything happens, I want the three of you to be the leaders. Everybody will be looking for that from you."

Holly gave Amy an intense look of her own. "Amy, nothing's going to happen to you! It's fine to be ready and take precautions, in case, but I hate to see it worrying you this way. You've got enough to think about."

Amy stroked Holly's cheek and kissed her. "Thank you. But I want a promise on that from all of you."

Melissa and Jana nodded, and, at last, Holly.

She hugged each of them. "I'll see you guys again in a day or so, okay?"

* * * * *

Amy walked out of the Academy entrance to the steps in front of the circular drive, her eyes sweeping up and down the street. Totally unnecessary vigilance, she told herself. Bill is standing right here, while we wait for Sid to bring the limo around. Nobody can grab me without Bill stating an objection. Karl is already down at the hospital, establishing security arrangements, and Ms. Bennett is there too, arranging for a room for me. She'll stay in it with me, and even come with me to the restroom, while the men guard any room I'm in. Daddy's going to wonder if I got elected president somehow while he wasn't paying attention.

And it's probably all for nothing, she reminded herself. So much time has gone by since I graduated, so many months while Andrew could have executed any plan he might have. I've been off the campus several times, and nothing's happened. Holly's right. It's fine to be careful, but quit worrying about it.

Though this does smell like a setup.

But Daddy really is sick. Was it part of Andrew's plan to wait for Daddy to have a heart attack? That makes as much sense as waiting for the Academy's student area to hold an open house for the general public. Y'all come and wander around the dorms. Kidnap any girl you take a fancy to.

Amy tried to clear her mind, took a deep breath and smelled the fresh breeze of early spring.

There, she thought, the limo's already coming around the corner. That didn't take long. Less time than usual.

Sunlight glinted off the tinted windows. Hard to see in, but easy enough to see out. Bill opened the door for her.

Amy slid in quickly, tossing her bag onto the far end of the seat, hearing the thump as Bill threw her door closed. An unexpected sound followed, and Amy looked up. Her breath suddenly caught in her throat.

There were two women in the front seat, one of them the driver. Neither one, obviously, was Sid.

Alarm swept through Amy's brain. She reached for the door handle and pulled. The door was locked. She looked for the lock release. It was gone. Amy could see Bill, outside, pulling on the front passenger door handle. Equally ineffectively.

At that instant the driver floored the accelerator, and the limo roared away from the curb. Amy shouted, "No!! Shit!!" Still facing the door, she saw Bill, his mouth open in shock, take a few running steps trying to follow the limo, stop, and jerk his cell phone out of his pocket.

Amy's heart pounded. All of the dean's plans had involved making sure she could get safely to the limo, and safely from the limo into the hospital, staying safe while in the hospital. We never thought! We never imagined this! The words ran in a loop through her brain.

As the car skidded to take a right around the corner at the end of the block, Amy had one last view of Bill, now shouting into his cell phone, and the Academy limo, the real one, careening into view a block away. She could see Bill run towards it, but he and the Academy car were lost to sight before he got in.

As the thought "cell phone" ran through her head, Amy lunged to her left, for her bag, containing the cell phone the dean had given her to bring with her. She froze at the sound of the first word either woman in front had spoken: "Don't."

Amy looked up, and saw the muzzle of an odd-looking gun, pointed at her by the woman in the passenger seat, who was turned sideways and watching her intently. Amy and the woman both swayed

as the car swept around another corner to the left. Amy looked quickly out the left-hand window. The Academy limo was not in sight yet. Bill and Sid wouldn't have seen where they'd gone.

Taking a deep breath, trying to calm herself, Amy said, proud of keeping the quaver out of her voice, "You can't shoot me. You need me alive."

The woman smirked. "This isn't a killing gun. It fires tranquilizer darts. Want to spend the rest of the trip awake or asleep?"

The answer seemed pretty obvious to Amy. Her ability to try to resist anything that might happen would be taken away as soon as the woman fired that gun. And it obviously wouldn't take much encouragement for the woman to shoot. She'd probably been told to avoid it if possible, but shoot if needed.

The woman reached towards Amy with her free hand. "Give me the bag."

Aside from the cell phone, which she obviously wouldn't be allowed to touch, there was nothing in the bag but extra clothes and toiletries anyway. Amy shrugged and handed it forward. The phone, it occurred to Amy, was serving as a secondary tracking device, in case anything went wrong with the one inside her. It was better that Amy hadn't managed to get hold of the phone. As soon as the woman saw it, she'd no doubt switch it off.

And yes, Amy thought, I'm being tracked. The dean knows I've been taken by now, and he can find out exactly where I am. So stop worrying.

Amy sat back and folded her arms across her chest, trying not to look as hopeful as she felt. No point giving anything away about the tracker.

The limo slowed now, the driver apparently confident of not being followed. After two more turns, they seemed to be in a warehouse district. The driver reached for a button and pushed it, and the large door of one warehouse began opening as Amy watched. Remote control, Amy decided. The car swung in that direction, entered the warehouse, and stopped beside a van in an otherwise empty, cavernous building.

Both women swung their doors open. The one with the gun used a key to open Amy's. "Out."

Amy weighed the odds on attacking the woman. The driver, Amy now saw, had taken out a dart gun of her own. I can't get to both of them before one shoots, Amy decided.

The first woman opened the rear of the van and waved her gun. "Love to stop and chat, but we're on a tight schedule. Get in the box."

Amy looked into the back of the van, and saw what the woman was referring to. The box was something like the "coffins" men used to be buried in, before cremation became popular. Except larger. As Amy stepped up into the van and got a look inside the box, whose hinged lid was open, she gasped and froze. There was a foam-rubber cushion with a girl-shaped depression, with straps at the extremities. Judging from the thick metal construction of the box, Amy knew what it was for.

Andrew had planned meticulously for anything that might possibly go wrong. He had no way to know Amy was carrying a slave tracker inside her, but was well aware of the possibility. Having once, years ago, made Amy swallow one, it was natural he would think Amy's current owners might do the same. Likely he suspected Hanging Girls were all carrying them, all the time. If not, no harm in being careful.

Trackers weren't foolproof, and were designed mostly with runaways in mind, rather than stolen slaves. The signal was weak, necessarily so, since there was a limit on how much battery power could be packed into such a tiny device. A slave could be tracked within a building, assuming the building had windows or other weak points of enclosure. But it was possible to block the signal.

The box Amy was looking at was designed to hide Amy from detection. Once sealed inside, she would be off the tracking screen, until the box was reopened. If, however, the box were opened in an underground dungeon, with sufficient soil cover and a thick-enough door...

That settles it for sure, thought Amy. I'm definitely going to Andrew's dungeon.

Good, then, she told herself. I don't need the tracker for that. Andrew doesn't realize anyone besides me knows it exists, and it's the first place the police are going to look.

In the distance, Amy thought she heard a siren.

The two women looked at each other in alarm. The one from the passenger seat shouted to the other, "Get in! Drive! We can't let them see the van." As the latter ran for the driver's door and threw it open, the first pointed the sleep gun at Amy. "Lay in the box. Now!"

As the van's engine started up, Amy nearly bolted for the still-open warehouse door, but stopped herself. If the police found her here, that was fine, but these women probably couldn't be connected with Andrew. Andrew had surely been very careful, and these two may have been hired by intermediaries, and might never even have met Andrew. Amy needed to be found in the dungeon. Then, Andrew would be toast.

Amy had to go with them, or Andrew might go free.

But, she realized, it would look suspicious as hell if she didn't resist.

Without further thought, Amy took a single step and leapt out of the van, letting her feet get tangled and falling headlong on the warehouse floor. Nice show, Amy, she told herself. She gasped as she felt a piercing pain in her lower back, where the dart struck her.

Within seconds, her body felt like lead, and resistance was no longer possible as she felt the woman pick her up, dump her into the back of the van, and join her inside, pulling the door closed just as the van started moving. Just before the door closed, the siren had sounded closer.

* * * * *

Amy didn't think she had quite lost consciousness, but it didn't matter. Her body had felt like a vague lump, disconnected from her will, as the woman had dumped her onto the padding in the box and

started fastening straps. The van was moving surprisingly sedately, and Amy decided that the driver considered avoiding attracting attention more important than a quick escape. In any case, they were not stopped by the police, who at this point might perhaps be arriving at the warehouse, not yet told that Amy had started moving again.

The woman, working quickly, finished with the straps and, to Amy's distress, though Amy could express it in only a half-hearted way, pushed something like a large nipple, connected to a long tube, into Amy's mouth, and fastened straps around Amy's head securing the nipple in place. The thing was so large Amy was afraid of not being able to breathe around it, but she discovered in moments that air was, in fact, coming out of it. At that moment, the woman closed the lid of the box, which made a soft hissing sound as it settled into place, plunging Amy into complete blackness.

Amy felt an onset of panic, but pushed it away forcefully, reminding herself that she knew exactly why she was here and where she was going. She had, with the closing of the lid, disappeared from the tracking screen, but that was okay. Within hours, she'd be found at Andrew's dungeon -- police units, in fact, might already be headed there and perhaps would even beat Amy to it. Everything would be okay.

She reflected that she could still be followed by her cell phone signal, in her overnight bag, but a search of her memory told her that the bag had been left behind in the fake Academy limo -- neither woman had been holding it at any point after they'd all left the limo.

Amy found the restraints annoying but tolerable. Her arms were down along her sides, slightly away from her hips, her legs slightly parted. Straps held her by the wrists, the ankles, around her waist, and around her neck -- the last of these giving a certain amount of comfort to a Hanging Girl. She was resting in that body-shaped depression, formed by padding that was actually comfortable, though Amy suspected the cushioning, and the restraints, were more for the purpose of preventing her from making noise by pounding on the inside of the box. The nipple in her mouth was providing air, but also preventing her from making any intelligible sound, and those sounds she could make probably couldn't be heard outside the box anyway. From behind her head, Amy could hear a slight humming that she suspected was the operation of an air recirculation system. She wondered why the box needed to be quite so elaborate. It shouldn't take more than half an hour to get to Andrew's dungeon.

* * * * *

It seemed as though hours had passed. Amy wondered whether the darkness, silence, and enforced immobility had interfered with her time sense.

No engine sounds came through the walls of the box, though by vibration and a feeling of motion, she could tell she was still in the van.

She needed badly to pee, but was hoping to arrive at Andrew's soon, so that she could take care of it then. The woman hadn't removed any of Amy's clothes, even her shoes, perhaps concerned that there might be other types of tracking devices in them -- silenced now, sealed up in the box with Amy.

She passed the time by imagining her hanging, always a favorite fantasy. She replayed Megan's hanging in her mind, and some of her favorite nights making love with Megan. She interrupted one of the latter with the realization that she should be planning what to do when the box was opened. She hoped she could inflict some damage on Andrew before he was arrested, and decided to feign sleep or

unconsciousness, to put him off guard before she sprang at him like a wildcat as soon as she was released from her bonds. She smiled at the image of Andrew on the floor, his cheek bleeding, scrambling to get away from her.

The vibration and sense of motion suddenly ceased, and she tensed, adrenaline flooding her system, as she told herself to get ready.

She felt the box swaying, as if being carried, and wondered how many people it took to lift it. Perhaps, she decided, Andrew's got a machine for that. He's thought of everything else. Moments later the motion stopped with a thump, echoing through the box loudly enough to hurt her ears. She tried to relax, telling herself not to react when the lid opens. She was surprised by an unexpected difficulty -- she wasn't entirely sure whether her eyes were closed. She hoped they were. Asleep, she told herself. Sound asleep. Andrew will start unstrapping you in a minute. Don't make a move.

A vibration began, heavier than that of the van, surprising her. And renewed motion accompanied by a new type of swaying. Dammit, she thought, they've put me in another vehicle! This is ridiculous, Andrew.

She began struggling angrily against the straps, with no noticeable effect, other than to make her aware of how stiff her muscles had become in the hours of immobility.

The thought suddenly came to her -- if it can't possibly take this long to get to Andrew's dungeon, we must be going somewhere else. Maybe, she thought, he's built a new dungeon. One we don't know about. One that can't be traced to him.

The panic she had fought down earlier began to return, and she yanked at the straps randomly, thrashing in the small motions the straps allowed her. Get me out of here! Let me out!!

She froze herself by force of will, breathing hard through her nose. Okay, she told herself, okay. You can't do anything right now. You can when Andrew lets you out. Just wait. See what happens. He'll probably do something stupid, something you can capitalize on. He always does.

And in fact, even in a new, unknown location, the tracker still wasn't needed. They don't have to follow me, Amy told herself. They can get to the same place by following Andrew. He'll lead them to it. And he has no idea.

Her bladder wasn't going to wait any longer. Moaning, she peed in her pants, wrinkling her nose afterward at the smell. And I have to feel those wet panties for the rest of the trip, she thought morosely.

* * * * *

More hours, it seemed. Amy's ability to occupy her mind was waning, and she struggled more often with the straps, always ineffectually.

She suddenly realized her panties felt dry. Okay, it's not that my time sense is screwed up. There really is a lot of time going by. Of course, that fit in with the elaborate air circulation system. That was crucial, if Amy was going to be sealed in here as long as she seemed to have been.

She found herself getting drowsy. Have I been in here all day, into the night? she wondered. Probably. It feels like it. Her body's daily cycle was telling her to sleep now. She fought against it for a time, wanting to stay awake for the opening of the box. On the other hand, she reminded herself, it won't be good for me to be wasted, when the time comes, from lack of sleep. In the scant inches of movement allowed her, she wriggled to try to get comfortable, and relaxed.

She found herself dreaming of Megan's hanging, but Amy's father was there, as was her mother. Amy didn't find that odd, though Amy and the other family members had eaten her mother many years ago. Andrew was there, as well, and the scene shifted to Amy's bedroom, in the house she'd grown up in, Andrew trying to get her into bed, and Amy fought with him, feeling desperate to get back to Megan's hanging. Megan needed her...

That, at least, was as much of the dream as Amy could remember when she woke, disoriented to be plunged back into total darkness and immobility in the box. She fought against her restraints, trying to spit out the breathing tube, until the memory of where she was slowly reassembled itself.

Moaning, she peed in her pants again, unhappily but necessarily. It distressed her even more than before to offload any fluids, as thirsty as she was. Her stomach was knotting with hunger, not having eaten since... when was it then, yesterday morning? But more important, she hadn't had any water either. She tried to get back into her planning for her release from the box, but all she could think of was taking a long, cool drink of water.

After perhaps another hour, more or less, the vibration and swaying, to Amy the only signs of the outside world for what was apparently nearly an entire day, suddenly lessened. Okay, she thought, *finally*, we're here. Got to get ready now.

She wrinkled her nose at a sudden odd taste in her mouth. It was followed immediately by a feeling of dizziness. *Shit!* screamed a part of her mind. Something in the air, the air coming through this tube, can't spit it out, can't stop breathing... She tried to pull her arm free, except she couldn't tell whether she was doing it. Loud buzzing in her ears as her consciousness faded out.

* * * * *

Amy's head was pounding, and she felt nauseated. The sound was a steady roar now. She sat up, and instantly regretted it, as the pounding in her head increased. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut, and reached up quickly with her hand to press it against her aching head, peripherally aware that her hand felt heavier than it should.

Massaging her temple with the fingers of one hand, and holding her other arm across her stomach to guard against heaving, she breathed in air in deep gasps, smelling the salt, feeling the humid heat, wondering what was wrong with the air conditioning.

At last her mind registered what her eyes had been seeing when open -- a vista of rippling water to the horizon, beginning about thirty feet ahead of her at the end of a stretch of smooth gray-white sand. The roaring sound was the pounding surf, and Amy watched as an oncoming wave broke and reached towards her in fingers of foam, stopping about twenty feet away. The uniformly gray sky above stripped the prospect of all color. She felt trapped in a black-and-white photograph.

The disparity between what she was seeing and what she had expected to see was so vast that she couldn't evaluate it for the moment. She could only watch, slack-jawed, as another wave rolled in over the remains of the first.

Memories came back slowly, bringing further confusion. I was bound up in a box, she suddenly remembered. In a van. Imprisoned there by two efficient, rough-looking women. Why can I move? Why can I see? Where's the box? The van? The women? Where's Andrew? Shouldn't he be here? Shouldn't *somebody* be here?

She suddenly realized she was naked. She hadn't been, in the box. Where were her clothes?

She moved her arms to cover herself. She was well-accustomed to standing naked in front of large crowds of admirers, but always by her own choice. It still required a certain mind-set to present herself that way, and she wasn't used to having the condition forced on her.

Again, as she'd moved her arms, she'd felt the heaviness on her hands. At last she became aware of metal cuffs, at least a quarter-inch thick, two inches wide, hinged semicircles closed around her wrists -- no, not quite circles. Ovals, made to fit the natural shape of the wrist, to fit more snugly than circles would. Each was secured by a heavy padlock. Nothing was attached to either cuff, though each cuff sported a D-ring for that purpose.

As she moved, she now felt the slave collar. It had escaped her attention at first, because she'd spent two years wearing metal collars at the Academy, but this was thicker, heavier and, again, she discovered as she felt around it with her fingers, fastened by a padlock.

Her own Academy choker was gone!! That infuriated her more than the loss of her clothes. How could they dare! Her choker symbolized her ownership by the Academy, and someone had tampered with that, had taken the symbol away from her, replacing it a much cruder, much less comfortable, and entirely illegal one. Nobody can collar me but the Academy! she shouted angrily in her mind. Nobody else owns me!

Oddly enough, the collar had a short length of chain connected to it, hanging down from the front, just a few links long, not connected to anything else. It hung down to rest, purposeless, not quite down to her cleavage.

She gasped and bent forward suddenly, when she realized her ankles were cuffed as well. The cuffs, thick and wide in the same style as the wrist cuffs and collar, were also locked by padlocks, but unlike the wrist cuffs, these did have an attachment -- a single thick chain, just over a foot long, connected the left ankle cuff to the right.

Shit!! she thought. Though she'd been a slave for more than three years, she'd never been made to feel like one. She had had some idea all along what Andrew had in mind. But to actually experience it... A block of ice seemed to expand within her stomach, filling it.

And what now? Where *is* he? Amy looked up and down the length of the beach in both directions. Behind her was a rocky natural wall, three feet high, eroded, it appeared, by the pounding of the surf when the tide was high. Beyond that she could see only trees, blocking her view of anything that might be behind them. There was no sign of any human, nor even anything made by humans, anywhere she looked.

The thumping inside her head, and accompanying nausea, had subsided, leaving behind that powerful thirst. She looked bitterly at the seemingly endless ocean. Plenty of water around, but a supply I can drink would be nice.

It didn't help that it was so damned hot, making her body sweat away what little water it had. And so humid that the sweat didn't help cool her.

Wincing, she found she was able to stand -- momentarily dizzy, but it passed. As she brushed sand off her buttocks and side, she suddenly remembered the strange taste of the air, her last memory in the box before waking up here. They knocked me out with some sort of gas, she told herself, and the headache is a hangover from it. And while I was out, they stripped me, put all this metal on me, left me here, and went away.

She was still mystified as to why.

Her hair, she found, was drenched, hanging limp. She hadn't been sweating *that* much. She shook some water out of her right ear. Given the leaden skies, the heavy air, it was pretty clear it had been raining earlier, while she'd been unconscious.

She took a couple of experimental steps. The hobble chain didn't interfere with walking, at a slow pace. Though she couldn't possibly run.

All at once, everything connected together. The ocean. The beach. The wet heat. Her lack of clothing. The style of her restraints. All the puzzle pieces joined.

She knew where she was. She knew exactly.

She had, in high school, once written a research report about this place. And now she was here.

And it couldn't be a coincidence.

The thought, the wish, that this might all be a dream, occurred to her. She *had* dreamed about being here, years ago. Bad dreams. They had gradually become less frequent.

But there is something different about dreaming versus waking. A different quality, a different feeling. It wasn't necessary for her to pinch her arm. She knew this was all very, very real.

She dropped to her knees, her hands flying to her face. No, she moaned to herself, no. No, no, no, no...

CHAPTER 16

Amy Cameron

Social Studies 11

Ms. Kenfield -- 4th Period

PURITY ISLAND

I. THE SETTLING OF PURITY ISLAND

Over a century ago, at the height of the Women's Rights Movement, there was widespread resistance to the movement's goals on the part of a sizeable segment of the male population. There were major protests by men at the time of the repeal of the Gender Identification Law, which had required all job seekers to prove that they were male and were therefore legally entitled to seek gainful employment, and the simultaneous passage of legislation making it legal for women to work for pay. These actions by the government had resulted from pressure by large corporations wishing to hire women for their lowest-paying jobs, once they had determined that this arrangement was cheaper for them than buying the women as slaves. Though the actions of the government were approved by a narrow majority of men, based on the reassurance from the leaders of the Women's Rights Movement that the consumption of women as food was not an issue and would continue as always, a large minority of men were opposed to the new laws, for two reasons:

- (1) Many men were afraid that they no longer could count on job security, and that a woman would replace them.
- (2) A somewhat larger number of men were philosophically opposed to any change in the relationship between the sexes.

Men in the first of these two groups, over a period of years, came to see that women, in that first wave of hiring following the legalization, were being hired for the type of menial tasks that men, in general, didn't want. It took several decades for women in the work force to approach parity with men at higher levels of job-seeking, a period of time sufficiently long that men were able gradually to come to accept women as natural co-workers rather than competitors.

The men in the second category above, however, remained adamant that it was morally and ethically wrong for a woman to be treated as a man. They held that the ancients had always understood that women exist to serve mankind, both as a vessel of new life (reproduction), and in the maintenance of existing life (consumption as food), and that to erase the distinction between men and women was an affront to the ancients and showed callous disregard for many centuries of inherited wisdom. The most vocal members of this category formed a counter-movement of their own, calling it the Purity of Women Movement (PWM), reflecting their conviction that the highest purposes of feminine existence were being tainted by being mixed with masculine values. Though evidence exists that many of the leaders of the PWM had allowed their slaves to wear clothes up until this time, their conservative resistance to a changing world inspired in them a belief that the wearing of clothes by women, enabling

them to hide their feminine characteristics, had led directly to the phenomenon of women pretending to be men, in order to gain access to privileges legally denied them, which had been the reason for the passage of the original Gender Identification Law at the outset of the Women's Rights Movement. The PWM consequently declared that the wearing of clothes by women was an unmitigated evil, a primary reason for the disruption of traditional values, a disruption that they deplored. The act of setting women free of slavery, to pursue goals of their own in life, was an even greater evil, to be fought with all of the energy the PWM possessed.

Members of the PWM staged a number of demonstrations in the decade following the changes in the laws governing women's rights. Generally these remained peaceful, though their leaders were occasionally arrested when the demonstrations went beyond the accepted boundaries of orderly assembly.

At last the highest ranking, and most vocal, members of the PWM saw that the battle to maintain their values in a changing world was being lost, and decided that an exodus was in order. One hundred fifteen years ago, after comparing the advantages and disadvantages of various remote areas, eight hundred PWM members (now calling themselves the "Purists"), and their slaves, embarked to establish a permanent settlement on Parmola Island, renaming it Purity Island.

Bereft of its leadership, the remains of the PWM on the mainland, consisting mainly of the movement's less committed members, gradually withered away, and it ceased to operate as an identifiable organization within a decade of the departure of its leaders.

II. GEOGRAPHY OF PURITY ISLAND

Purity Island, about two hundred miles southwest of the continental coast, was created by earthquake activity many thousands of years ago. It is oval in shape, measuring about fifteen miles west to east, and forty miles north to south. Along its center runs a ridge of rocky hills, north to south, reaching about five hundred feet in altitude, with lower lands on either side sloping gently towards the eastern and western shores.

The climate of the island, due to its location just within the global tropical weather zone, is quite warm and very humid, with measureable rainfall nearly every day, heaviest from early spring through late summer. There is an abundance of fruit trees, particularly those bearing what are now called "Purity peaches" -- similar, though not directly related, to ordinary peaches.

Before being settled by the Purists, Parmola Island was known to be the home of a small native population. Little is known about how they lived, except that they were not far removed from a stone-age society. There was little interaction between the natives of the island and the mainland, because the island was not believed to have anything especially valuable in the way of natural resources, so its inhabitants were left alone by our ancestors.

The coming of the Purists was a disaster for the native population, who at first outnumbered the Purists, but were far inferior in firepower. There are no reliable records documenting the battle for control of the island, but evidence today suggests that very few of the natives are left. It is possible that they have been absorbed by, and interbred with, the Purists.

At the time of the settling of the island by the Purists, there was abundant wildlife on the island, but over the first decades of occupation by the Purists, nearly all animals the size of a rabbit or larger were hunted and eaten, along with most of the female human natives, as the Purists had not been able to bring with them a sufficient number of slaves to form a significant part of their diet. However, the immediate establishment of breeding farms soon led to a burgeoning female population, which then became the main source of meat just as the supply of animals was running out.

III. INTERACTIONS OF PURITY ISLAND WITH THE MAINLAND

Early expeditions to meet with the settlers on Purity Island were turned away, usually with heavy casualties, until the settlers' supply of ammunition ran low. At that point, it became possible to talk to the Purists and reassure them that no one on the mainland had any intention of evicting them from the island, challenging them for its control, nor in any way interfering with their way of life -- the mainlanders simply wanted to see whether trade relations could be established. In time, negotiations succeeded in inaugurating a regular trade.

Interestingly, though the Purists' weapons were no longer useable, they never expressed interest in restocking their supply of ammunition -- in the absence of large animals, remaining natives, or any contact with the mainland for other than peaceful purposes, the Purists no longer perceived a need for guns.

Eventually a cycle of trade was established, in which the flow of material from the mainland to the island consisted mainly of metalware associated with the control of slaves (chains, etc.) as well as some more mundane metal tools, spices for food preparation unobtainable on the island, and alcoholic beverages -- especially wine, as the settlers had a taste for fruity beverages that could be consumed in relatively large quantities before inebriation set in. In return, the Purists could offer two things to the mainland besides Purity peaches: (1) Girlskin leather, as the Purists skin most of their women prior to cooking them, a practice that has gradually declined on the mainland over recent decades, and (2) the herb that serves as a source of the fertility drugs used today in mainland breeding farms.

Purity girlskin leather is regarded as having higher quality than any girlskin processed on the mainland. As a result, it is very expensive on the mainland, particularly those pieces of leather with a circular discoloration recognizable as an areola and nipple. Its use in jackets, sofas, and automobile seat covers is a symbol of its owner's wealth, or at least a pretention to it.

The fertility drugs, far superior to those in use before their discovery, seem only to grow, in the form of an herb, on Purity Island, where the Purists found that the natives had been using the drugs, to a limited extent, for centuries. Attempts to grow the herbs on the mainland have failed. Scientists have speculated that an interaction with some burrowing insect native to the island must be necessary for the growth of the herb, similar to the way honeybees pollinate flowers.

The distinction of the island as the sole source of modern fertility drugs will likely continue into the indefinite future. The Onderman Corporation, ~~using its early huge profits from the sale of the drugs to line the pockets of legislators,~~ was able to successfully solicit a government-licensed monopoly on trade with Purity Island, subcontracting for the wine, spice, leather, peach, and slaveware trade while handling the drug trade itself. Since the monopoly was established, no company unaffiliated with Onderman can legally trade with Purity Island, without prior consent from the government. For its own part, Onderman

has no intention of establishing a factory for production of the drug on the island, since it is much cheaper for them to have the Purists produce the drug in return for items of relatively little market value than it would be to establish a manufacturing operation of their own on the island.

Aside from trade, the island's only other contact with the mainland consists of occasional visits by teams of mainland anthropologists, who are tolerated as long as they come in small numbers, conduct their studies as unobtrusively as possible, and make no attempt to force values of their own on the settlers. While on the island, members of a study team are targets of suspicion and constant vigilance, but not, in recent years, violence.

The very first such expedition, some fifty years ago, funded by three universities, made the serious error of including among its members a female undergraduate, Sherry Patton, the student of one of the anthropology professors leading the expedition. The settlers did not, at the beginning, realize Miss Patton was a woman, as it did not occur to them that a woman might be seen acting as an equal with men, nor that a woman might be clothed. When, at last, Miss Patton was identified as female, perhaps by her voice, or by the settlers' belated recognition of the shape of breasts under her blouse, the settlers became immediately upset, charged that she was "pretending to be a man," separated her from the men of the university team as she cried out for help, and took her away, detailing a rear guard to fight off the rest of the party when they attempted to follow. The men of the team did eventually manage to advance far enough in pursuit to find the shredded remains of Miss Patton's clothes discarded in a clearing nearby, but were soon forced by angry settlers to leave the island. Since that first team had made very little progress, at that point, in its study of Purity Island settlers and their traditions, their original mistake in including Miss Patton as part of the team was compounded by their assumption that any female "criminal" would, as in mainland society, be quickly executed, and that Miss Patton must therefore be dead. No further search was attempted. In light of current knowledge of Purity society, it is almost certain that Miss Patton, 21 at the time of her capture, spent the next fifteen to twenty years on the island, either as a work slave or a breeding slave (see below) before being eaten. It was twenty years before another team of anthropologists was allowed on the island -- all men, this time.

IV. PURITY ISLAND TODAY

The society of modern day Purity Island is very much modeled on the ideals brought to the island by the founding Purist settlers. It is a purely agricultural economy, operating mainly through a barter system, with limited trade with the mainland as detailed above. Most of the settlement has been on the eastern side of the central mountain ridge (the side of the island that faces the mainland), and there are small towns surrounding the handful of trading posts located at intervals along the eastern shore, which are the only parts of the island visited by mainland traders. Further inland there are small farming cooperatives, each forming a nearly self-sufficient enclave, producing food for itself and skins and herbs to trade for its few remaining necessities. The western half of the island, rarely visited by anthropologists once its culture had been determined to be identical to that on the eastern half (but far less trusting of outsiders), is sparsely populated in comparison with the east, with a small number of farming cooperatives and no known town-like settlements.

All women on the island are slaves, some owned by individual farmers, some collectively owned by a farm coop or a trading post. In keeping with the founding tradition and attitudes handed down by the original PWM settlers, women are not allowed to wear clothing of any form, other than the chains and metal fetters needed to keep them secured in service to their owners. Most slaves are (i) work slaves or (ii) breeding slaves. There is a special category of slaves (iii) called doggirls. With no known exceptions,

other than the doggirls, all slaves who are not secured to an immovable object are hobbled by a short chain running between their ankle cuffs, rendering them unable to run, making escape from their masters all but impossible.

(i) Work slaves lead a very strenuous life, most of them involved in farm work, using either bare hands or the most rudimentary of farm implements -- none of them motorized, of course. At night, the work slaves sleep outdoors, usually in groups with chains connecting their collars, the chains circling a tree or similar fixed object. They are not given fertility drugs, but at any moment a number of them may be pregnant. They are expected to continue working in that condition until they give birth. The resulting female babies are raised on breeding farms (see below). The smaller number of male offspring grow up with their fathers.

(ii) The life of a breeding slave, or breeder as they are usually called, involves less work, but is appallingly empty in comparison with modern breeding farm practices on the mainland. On first being selected for breeding duty, a new breeder is secured, stomach down, on a "breeding hill," constructed by burying a five-foot long, foot-thick log under a layer of dirt. The breeder's knees and wrists are held by chains at ground level on either side of the hill, and she is fed, and eliminates her wastes, without being freed from that position, until she is found to be pregnant. The design of the hill holds the breeder's legs spread, with her vagina at a convenient height for a male kneeling behind her. There she is subjected to several attempts at impregnation each day, by breeding farm staff and visiting farmers, until her pregnancy shows, usually within about two months. Following each insemination, a portion of the semen is collected from her vagina and distributed, via swabs, to the vaginas of several non-pregnant breeders who have previously conceived -- the effectiveness of the fertility drugs makes this efficient use of semen practical. Once pregnant, the new breeder is released from the hill and moved to a pen, where she is secured at the collar and ankles by chains sufficiently long to enable her to move to all parts of the pen. Small cradles for the babies occupy most of the space in the pen.

After the breeder has served about fifteen years, giving birth to seventy to a hundred babies, the fertility drugs lose their effectiveness. The breeder is then snuffed, skinned, and cooked. At no time does the breeder leave her pen. Work slaves bring her food to the pen, and clean up her wastes.

Once a breeder throws a litter, she keeps the babies with her in her pen for about the first two years of their lives -- at most two different litters at any one time. The fertility drugs, aided by her own frequent feeding, allow her breasts to keep up with the demands of nursing as many as a dozen babies, while another litter begins growing within her womb. Between eating sufficient food to maintain both milk production and gestation, and nursing the babies, the breeder has no time for anything else, and in any case, there are no other activities available to her.

A number of organizations on the mainland have petitioned the government and the Onderman Corporation to help make the lives of breeders on Purity Island more tolerable. So far these organizations have met with government indifference to a problem outside its jurisdiction, since Purity Island is regarded as an independent state, and with disregard from the corporation, which is resistant to any attempt to alter its profitable relationship with the island. At least one team of anthropologists suggested, to a group of settlers, ways that a breeder's life might be made more comfortable, but their efforts were met with immediate hostility, to the point that the team canceled its research program and left the island immediately.

At age two, the babies are weaned, and are removed to a pen with a near-equal number of ten-year-old girls -- the older girls having reached the age when maternal instincts allow them to act as caregivers for the babies, feeding them until they can feed themselves, teaching them games, nurturing them. None of the girls are chained, but the pen's unclimbable walls, with a single door, locked except when food is brought in or wastes removed, keep them confined. The babies and adolescents remain together in the pen for eight years, at which point the older girls (now 18) are removed from the pen, collared, and chain-hobbled. Some are selected at random to stay on as breeders, and the rest are distributed as work slaves. The group of younger girls in the pen, now ten, are given their own cohort of two-year-olds to care for. What passes for inherited knowledge, whose original source was adult slaves from several generations in the past, is passed down to younger girls by the older ones. Again, anthropological teams have tried suggesting that the offspring of the breeders would benefit from a greater degree of contact with adults, even if it is impractical to approach the level of care given in mainland breeding farms, with their schools staffed by professional teachers and counselors, but any such attempts have been rebuffed.

The newly chained slaves, at 18, have only a rudimentary idea of what will be demanded of them, either physically or sexually, but they quickly learn that unacceptable performance has severe consequences.

The rare males (about one in fifty live births in the breeding farms are male, under the influence of the fertility drugs), at age 2, are taken to a separate facility with adult (slave and male) supervision, given a modest amount of education, and are adopted individually by farmers.

(iii) The remaining class of slaves, doggirls, are the sole example of body modification practiced on the island. The term "doggirl" was coined by anthropologists (the island's inhabitants simply call them "dogs"), to distinguish them from the puppygirls familiar on the mainland. They are selected, at about twelve months in age, from among the babies born at breeding farms (usually the more aggressive babies are chosen), and raised separately from the rest of the slave population, in kennels, where a work slave feeds them for a short time until they can obtain their own food and drink from bowls. Doggirls have none of the sweet-tempered, eager submissiveness of puppygirls -- nor the tail, which is far beyond the surgical capability of the island settlers. They do, like puppygirls, have the standard shortened limbs (arms ending in mid-forearm, legs just above the knee). The original doggirls, raised on the mainland before the Purists left for the island, grew up living with real dogs, believing themselves to be dogs as well. Modern-day doggirls grow up with older doggirls, on whom they model their behavior. Unaware of their humanity, unaware of their potential for communicating by speech, fully-grown doggirls patrol the periphery of the farm or establishment that owns them, growling and barking to warn back slaves who approach too near the boundaries -- usually the warning is enough, but doggirls will attack if necessary. Though they lack some of the abilities of real dogs (including, obviously, dogs' superhuman sense of smell), they are completely loyal to their masters, they can, even on their shortened legs, outrun any full-bodied-but-chain-hobbled slave, and they are superior to real dogs in being able to learn and follow complex commands, despite their underdeveloped language skills. A small farm may have two or three doggirls, a larger one a half-dozen or more. While doggirls have slave collars (in this case, leather) and may occasionally be secured by chains to their collars, or walked by a farmer using a leash, they alone among slavegirls on the island are generally free to move at will. Such is their attachment to, and dependence on, their masters, that no farmer has been known to cite an example of a doggirl running away.

V. THE FUTURE OF PURITY ISLAND

While the inhabitants of Purity Island have clung to their core values for more than a century, it is always possible that the lives of women on the island could someday more closely resemble our own here on the mainland. In our present enlightened society, we often forget that things were not always the way they are now, and that the most long-standing traditions may sometimes give way to new values. We can hope that such a change lies in the future of Purity Island.

CHAPTER 17

Amy didn't know how long she'd been sobbing, sitting in the sand, her arms wrapped around her shins, her face pressed against her knees. A new sound broke through the barrier of sorrow she'd enclosed herself in, demanding attention.

Before she'd identified the sound as the pattering of rain against leaves behind her, the rain began pelting her, immediately establishing streams down her back and arms. It was a rain with a density she rarely saw at home, making the shoreline, just ten yards away, nearly invisible.

She cried harder, still more miserable, unable to conceive of taking shelter, until a more important thought broke through: that's water! Water I can drink!

She looked up and opened her mouth. Quickly she put her hands over her eyes -- so hard was the rain falling that it was hurting her eyelids. Tilting her head forward just enough to stop the water from streaming into her nose, she swallowed as quickly as the water filled her mouth, taking it in in great gulps.

Soon she felt almost euphoric, her most desperate need fulfilled, and she looked around herself. I need to get under those trees, she told herself.

Standing once more, she took a step towards them, and stopped. Able to think critically again, she examined the question that had been buzzing, like a pesky fly, at the back of her mind -- what was Andrew getting out of this? He wasn't in the van, and couldn't have been in the boat that had brought her here... Amy realized now that the swaying she'd felt during the second half of her trip represented the tossing of a boat. It took me an entire day to get here, she told herself. He couldn't have just abandoned both his job and Dad in the hospital for that length of time without raising suspicions. He has to have stayed in town, and spent time with Dad. How can he even be sure I'm here now?

Amy looked both ways, along the beach, for what she knew must be there... there! About twenty feet from her, to her right, propped almost invisibly against a rock. In small steps limited by the hobble chain, made still more awkward by the loose sand over which she was walking, she moved to the object, picked it up. She nodded to herself. Satellite phone. Able to work here where a cell phone wouldn't. Its camera aimed directly at the place she had first awakened.

Amy laughed suddenly. That idiot! He wanted so much to see me wake up here, to see my first reaction when I realized where I was, that he left me a communication device! I can call for help with this!

Not wanting to get the phone any more wet than it already was while she fiddled with it, she turned and took a first running step towards the bluff, behind which the trees towered. In mid-step her stride was cut short by the momentarily-forgotten hobble chain and she sprawled on the sand. Getting up again and walking more carefully, she climbed over the three-foot erosion barrier and scuttled under the nearest trees.

It did not, she discovered, help much. The rain, though slowed by striking against leaves on its way down, still had to reach the ground eventually, and anywhere Amy stood she was showered by several mini-waterfalls, less forceful but no less wet than what she'd experienced in the open.

Sighing, she examined the phone. It had a normal-looking keypad. She wasn't sufficiently familiar with this type of phone to know whether she could reach an ordinary phone with it, but she knew she could reach and talk to someone, somewhere.

She tentatively touched one of the keys, and jerked her finger back. She'd felt a mild shock, more surprising than painful. Seconds later, she smelled a strong stink of burning insulation. No! she thought. NO!!

The power light, illuminated before, was out. The small display screen had gone dead. She could see the smoke curling out of a small hole in the side of the phone. She tried pressing keys again for several minutes, but it was obvious the thing was wrecked. It had been tricked up to self-destruct if anyone attempted to use it.

Furious, she heaved the phone as far as she could, watching it splash into the surf. Andrew, she thought, has what he wanted. He has video of me waking up on Purity Island. He can happily fantasize everything that happens after.

* * * * *

Amy remembered that family dinner well. Dad, in his continuing attempt to establish a homey family life, was hosting the once-a-week ritual in the dining room. Amy, searching for a topic of conversation to interrupt the bonding going on between Dad and Andrew through business talk, had launched into her current subject of fascination, the plight of the slaves on Purity Island, and the school report she'd just finished typing about it.

Andrew, showing a rare amount of interest in anything Amy had to say as she described the naked, chained slavegirls on the island, seemed to be positively glowing when Amy related the story of Sherry Patton, the college girl trapped and abandoned to a lifetime of slavery.

"She probably spent twenty years there, you said?" Andrew's eyes were wide.

Amy nodded. "Of course, the farmers don't keep records about how long they've kept any one slave, but the sociologists have seen the women in the places where they're skinned and cooked, and they look about forty or so. Same age they'd be snuffed here. It's possible all the hard work might make them look prematurely older."

To Amy's irritation, Andrew laughed. "That is so cool! Not exactly what she expected when she signed up for the trip, was it?"

Amy slapped her fork down on the table. "It is *not* cool. She had her whole life in front of her and it got taken away from her!"

Andrew laughed again. "Sounds like she had just as long a life there."

Amy knew her face was red. Her fists were clenching. "She was going to be a teacher! She lost everything she was working for!"

Andrew just grinned. "Did they say if she was really cute?"

Amy stood abruptly, her chair skidding back behind her. "Dad, may I be excused?" Without waiting for a reply, she stalked off to her room.

* * * * *

Andrew must have realized he could never keep me with him in that dungeon, Amy decided. Too dangerous. With everybody out looking for the first-ever stolen Hanging Girl, he had to know they'd figure it out sometime. So he switched to plan B. Another long-time fantasy of his, one that entailed no danger to him but just as much satisfaction. He knows I'm here, Amy said to herself. He got to see me wake up, got to see my reaction when I realized where I was. Permanently recorded on video he'll watch many times, no doubt. From now on he can just imagine my day-to-day life. He'll go to work in the mornings with a smile on his face, go to bed at night with that same smile.

Amy wondered for a moment why Andrew hadn't just arranged to hand her over to the first available farmers on the island. But her own internal feelings answered the question for her. He wants me to go through the terror first. The fretting about how long I can stay free. The fear of what will happen when I finally get caught.

A sudden insight told her why she had those three links of chain hanging down from her collar. She smiled bitterly. An artistic touch, she admitted to herself. It looks like I was secured by the chain and it broke, and that's how I got away. I'm not just an available woman. I've already got the metal cuffs, the collar, the hobble chain. I'm sure they're authentic, from the same company that supplies them to the island. To all appearances, I'm not a newcomer, I'm an escaped slave. I've read, she reminded herself with an audible moan, about the punishment for escaping. Or for major insubordination, or any other "crime." Not execution and consumption. Slavegirls are too valuable to throw away before they're used up. Instead, the punishment would involve a lot of pain.

A chill swept through Amy's body, and she squatted and folded her arms across her chest, shivering. It was still quite warm despite the rain. The chill was purely internal, driven by a sudden intense focus on how alone she was. I can't possibly get home on my own, she told herself. There's two hundred miles of water between here and there. Nobody who wants to find me, or even wishes me well, has any idea where I am, and there's no reason they would ever think to look here. The only people here who have the power to affect my fate are going to force me into a lifetime of misery on sight.

And the slave tracker, she knew, was useless here. Its signal could be picked up by any of the receiving towers around the city -- but only if the slave was within fifty miles of one. Amy was far out of range of any tower in the network.

This is worse than anything I imagined Andrew doing to me. And I don't think he even hates me, she marveled, not really. It's not about that. It's all just a game to him, to play with my future. A game of wrecking my life. And he's won.

No!! she screamed to herself. Damn it, no! He hasn't won yet. I won't let him!

Wait! she thought suddenly. Traders! From the mainland! They come here! Amy had no idea how often, but she knew they came to the small towns along the eastern shore. If she could hide out until she saw a trade ship, could rush out of cover and beg them for help...

Her suddenly lifted spirits fell just as quickly. They'd probably take me as a slave of their own, she wailed to herself. A shipboard slave. Kept in chains belowdecks, for sex, not work.

But they'd know what a Hanging Girl is! I can identify myself, and even if they haven't heard of me, they'll know I'm more valuable to them than any ordinary slave. They'd know there's a big reward involved in returning me, and I can promise to put on a free, non-fatal show for them after they take me back. A private party, including bedroom service. Yes!! That will work! If they can have the sex and the money too, they'll know they're better off turning me in.

I am on the east side, right?

The roller coaster of her emotions hit a downslope again. Despite the fact that taking her to the far side of the island would have required the boat to go dozens of miles out of its way, Amy was sure Andrew had insisted on that. In that case there would be the entire width of the island, including a small mountain range, between Amy and help. With the cloud cover, Amy had no idea where the sun was, had no way to distinguish east from west. But she felt strongly she must be on the west side. The wrong side.

Amy squeezed her eyes shut, trying to take herself off the roller coaster. Worry about that later, she told herself. First, I have to eat.

The ground beneath her feet was partly bare, partly covered with an ivy-like growth, and mostly covered in puddles and tiny running streamlets. Stepping carefully, lifting her feet high to keep the hobble chain from dragging through the ivy and tripping her, avoiding stepping on visible rocks and, when the chain allowed her, stepping across puddles rather than into them, looking up after every few steps for any signs of a trading town or other settlement, pausing to listen frequently for human sounds, Amy began walking slowly through the trees parallel to the shoreline.

As she walked, she felt the constant tickling of rainwater streaming down her bare skin, felt the weight of her cuffs and collar, and heard, between crashing waves and over the steady hiss of the rain, the tinkling of the padlocks at her ankles, wrists, and neck, and the clinking of the hobble chain and the few links hanging down from her collar. That's good, she decided tentatively. It keeps reminding me. I don't want to forget the situation and let my guard down.

* * * * *

Perhaps half an hour into her walk, she heard the sound of rushing water, different from the noise of the waves. Looking ahead through the trees, she saw a river across her path, emptying into the ocean.

Her shoulders slumped. I can't cross that, she told herself. The river was about thirty feet wide. There was no way to tell how deep it was, but probably anything more than knee deep would sweep her out into the ocean, and she wasn't sure how well she could swim with all the hardware she was wearing.

She hated the idea of turning back, and knew she'd probably soon run across another river behind her.

To her right, the sky was lightening over the ocean. At least, she thought with a sigh, maybe I'll be out of this rain before long.

She blinked as a sudden thought struck her. I'm not on the mainland, she reminded herself, I'm on a small island! Continental rivers might be hundreds, even thousands of miles long, carrying the water from all of the many storms constantly dumping water into their drainage valleys. But no river here could possibly be longer than about ten miles. As soon as it stops raining on the island, the river will drain out within hours!

Amy was way too hungry to find it easy to decide to wait out the storm. But she wasn't sure what other choice she had.

She took the opportunity to do something she had been putting off -- pee. At least, she reminded herself, I don't have to lay in it for hours afterward, like in that box. She squatted where she was and relieved herself of at least this one need. I hope, she told herself, I don't get so much into this habit that I just spontaneously pee wherever I'm standing when I get back home.

She moved a few paces ahead, away from her puddle of urine, and sat on the soggy ground, her back against a tree.

She shifted uncomfortably, finding herself sitting on a stone. She idly examined the offending rock, and gasped as she saw she'd misidentified it, and may indeed have been missing a lot of these on the way -- it was a nutshell! About an inch and a half in diameter, with an equatorial ridge, looking a lot like a walnut. There were dozens on the ground around her, and more hanging from the tree above her.

Her stomach rumbling with need, Amy tried cracking the shell with her thumbs, then her teeth. She set in on a stone and smacked it with her wrist cuff, and at last, grabbing a fist-sized rock and pounding the shell with it, succeeded. Inside, she fumbled with the gnarled nut and slapped it into her mouth with her palm, as she reached out for another shell with her other hand.

She lost count of the number she ate, sitting back at last with a sigh in a litter of cracked shells. A feeling of relief covered her like a soft blanket. I can eat here! she crowed to herself. She knew there would also be peaches somewhere, one of the island's main exports, but she suspected those might all be nearer to human habitations. But these nuts, she thought, they're probably everywhere.

To her surprise, she saw the rain had stopped while she was eating, and over the ocean, patches of blue sky showed through puffy, gray-white clouds. The river was still rushing by in front of her, but its lifetime as a roadblock to her was now limited.

The air was quickly warming again, and sweat was beginning to mix with rainwater on her skin. At last the sun shone through a break in the cloud cover. Amy bit her lip, trying to decide what its position was telling her. It was now, she believed, late morning, the sun nearly overhead. She'd have to wait longer to determine which way it was going.

An idea occurred to her, and she reached out and retrieved a nearby stick, thrusting it upright into the dirt. She scraped away the ivy over the stick's abbreviated shadow, and scraped a mark in the mud at the end of the stick's shadow.

Minutes later, the shadow end had moved towards her, away from the ocean. She closed her eyes, sighed, and gritted her teeth. I knew it, she moaned to herself. I'm on the west side of the island. I might as well have just assumed that to start with. Andrew wanted the whole width of the island, and more to the point, the whole dangerous population of the island, between me and any possible safety.

She stood and looked inland. There was nothing to be seen other than trees. No way to tell how far away the island's central ridge was. Her memory told her it should be about eight miles away. Normally she might have walked there in a couple of hours, but the way she was travelling, in small, careful steps, pausing to listen every few paces, it might be, she decided, more like twelve hours. Not something she could finish today. She'd have to spend the night in the middle of this forest.

And all that time was just to get to the halfway point. Under the best of circumstances, she'd need two days, maybe three, to get across to the eastern shore.

And there are a lot more people in the eastern half, she reminded herself. I need to be even more careful when I get there.

She looked back at the ocean, feeling an odd reluctance to leave the shoreline, though there was nothing there that could help her. Maybe I don't want to leave the food, she speculated. Stupid, she told herself. These nuts will be everywhere. And peaches, when I find them.

Slapping her butt to get herself going, she set off into the forest, upstream near the riverbank.

* * * * *

Amy tried to decide, as she walked, whether she'd overlooked anything that might spell early rescue. There is, she said to herself, at least one person to whom the police will talk who *does* know where I am -- Andrew.

Sighing, she admitted to herself that that really wasn't much help. Even in view of his conversation with Steffi, there was no physical evidence that proved he had anything to do with Amy's abduction. They'll search his dungeon and won't find me, her inner voice told her. He'll be cooperative up to a point, then coldly tell them he'd sue if they continued harassing him without cause.

Amy momentarily perked up at the thought that the absence of her tracking signal might, by itself, point to this island as a possible location, so conveniently out of range of the tracking system. As she examined the idea further, her spirits crashed once more. Everybody looking for me, she realized, will have their minds set on dungeons, the perfect signal-blockers. After they find I'm not in Andrew's, they'll still assume I must be in one somewhere. They'll go through records of recently-built dungeons, maybe search some, will check to see if any of them have a connection with Andrew. There are so many places I could be hidden away underground. The idea I could be on Purity Island won't occur to anyone. The only people who would know any reason why I might be abandoned here are myself, Andrew, and maybe Dad. I can't tell anybody. Andrew won't. Dad probably won't remember that school paper or the dinner.

Amy groaned as she suddenly remembered how close she had come to leaving behind a connection between herself and Purity Island. That day in the caf, she reminded herself, when Julia came in

thinking, based on misinformation, that there were Purity peaches available. I almost launched into the whole story of where Purity peaches come from and why they're called that. And about the horrible lives slavegirls live here. I might, she thought, even have told her about Andrew's reaction to the subject. But even without that, there would have been that link. Julia would have an Amy/Purity Island connection in her head. When she heard that Amy had disappeared from electronic tracking, might Julia have thought of Purity Island and asked, "Say, have they checked there?"

Not at all likely, Amy decided. But impossible now. I never had that conversation with Julia. There wasn't time.

When they follow Andrew around and he never leads them to me, they'll have growing doubt that my kidnapping has anything to do with him. They'll start looking for other leads.

After a few weeks of dead ends, she groaned, they'll probably suspend the search. Pending new information.

* * * * *

There!! Amy thought excitedly. I found some!

Amy had to restrain herself from grabbing the nearest peach, the Purity peach for which, in addition to its leather products, the island was mainly known. The color doesn't look quite right, she decided, not like the ones she'd seen in the grocery. But there, that one! She reached for it, barely touching it before it fell into her hand. She bit into it eagerly, closing her eyes and sighing, the peach's sweetness and juiciness making her mouth tingle. A feeling of pleasure nearly orgasmic in intensity washed over her.

She ate three of them, then knelt by the river to chase the fruit down with a long drink of water.

There was no sign of any farm around, so apparently the things did grow wild. Obviously, she thought, I can survive here as long as it takes, if I can just avoid getting caught. I've got the nuts, peaches, water...

She frowned. Eventually, she reminded herself, I'll need girlmeat.

She knew she could stay healthy for a certain amount of time without it, but, like vitamins, the human body did require girlmeat occasionally. The gynemones in girlmeat couldn't be found in any other food.

She shook her head at the irony. The island, she reminded herself, was full of women, in a higher proportion of the total population than even on the mainland. There was plenty of girlmeat around, but Amy wasn't sure how she could get any. It wasn't like she could drop by the local deli here and order a sandwich.

Her train of thought was interrupted by another human need suddenly putting in an appearance. Amy had also known a bowel movement was going to be required eventually, but had avoided dwelling on it. Her body now insisted on it.

Her initial instinct was to drop her feces in the river, but she remembered it was her drinking supply. She left it at the base of a tree instead, using a handful of ivy leaves to wipe herself afterward as well as she

could. Okay, she thought, wrinkling her nose, I've gone through the entire cycle of life now. Let's move on.

* * * * *

LATE AFTERNOON

Amy trembled, her heart pounding, as she breathed rapidly in and out with her mouth wide open, for quiet. She'd nearly walked right into it.

Moments earlier she had frozen, between one step and the next, on hearing the sound. She had dropped quickly to the ground, and now lay on her stomach between two peach trees and behind another, mostly surrounded by a small bush to which she had crawled, from which she was now unable to move without risking exposure. Given sufficient quiet, she would have heard it sooner, but the constant screeching of some type of cricket made the interior parts of the island no less noisy than the pounding surf had been by the beach.

I guess I'm still lucky, she thought, for having all that noise. Without it, they probably could have heard me coming.

She was on the outskirts of a farm, probably one of the outlying parcels forming part of a co-op.

In front of her, in an open field, two slavegirls toiled, preparing the field for planting. To Amy's amazement, each was working with something like a scythe, dragging it along the ground to make a single furrow in the soil. It's going to take them days just to finish this one field, Amy thought.

To Amy's left, two more girls were digging with shovels at the base of a tree. At an adjacent tree, already with a trench dug around it, another girl was cutting through the trunk, below ground level, with a saw. They're expanding the field, Amy realized. All of the farms, Amy guessed, had probably started in small natural clearings, made bigger over the years by removing trees from the periphery.

The settlers, as Amy had read, didn't have much interest in labor-saving devices. There was no hurry to life on the island, no motivation to speed things up, and the farms could be operated with methods so labor-intensive because the farmers had all the labor they needed. And the slavegirls didn't have a say in how things were done.

To Amy's right was a situation causing her the greatest immediate concern: two more slavegirls were picking peaches, in the very same orchard in which Amy lay hidden. Each peach picked was dropped into a wide basket. As Amy watched, one of the girls lifted her now-full basket by its handles, with an effort, and staggered across the field with it.

Amy knew it wasn't long before sundown, luckily enough. Watching the peach-pickers' rate of progress through the orchard, they weren't going to reach Amy's position by the end of the day. Assuming they continued as they were.

As advertised, every one of the girls in view was naked, each adorned the same way Amy was: the same cuffs, same collars, same hobble chains. Their bodies were shiny with sweat, streaming down their

stomachs, backs, legs, dripping from their breasts. There was one girl whose job seemed to be simply pulling a wagon through the fields laden with a water barrel, from which the other slavegirls drank when it came by.

All of the girls, not surprisingly, had fit, strong-looking bodies, their muscles well-defined. Like mine, Amy thought with a shudder. Another reason I'm a convincing escaped slave.

Amy saw one thing she hadn't expected. All of the girls Amy could see had their hair cropped very short, barely an inch long -- and a little haphazardly, shorter in some patches at random, as if it were done very quickly with scissors by someone not especially skilled at it. Okay, thought Amy, my hair won't look right to them. But, she realized, it could easily be explained by the theory that Amy had been running loose, avoiding apprehension, for several months.

The girl pulling the water wagon, Amy could see, was pregnant, her bulging tummy overlaid with large breasts, their areolae dark. About seven months along, Amy judged, possibly more. Maybe, Amy thought, that's why she has a job that doesn't require a lot of bending over.

Near the girls cutting down the trees was the source of the sound Amy had heard -- her best piece of luck of all, since without the noise, she might have continued walking until she'd blundered right into the middle of the field. Within sort of an open-sided shed -- really just an overhead wooden canopy supported by poles at its corners -- was a woodcutting operation, and here Amy saw her first Purity Island male. He looked young, perhaps mid-twenties. Bearded, with shoulder-length hair, he was dressed in skins, in the form of a sleeveless vest and shorts, with a floppy leather hat and leather shoes, in a moccasin design, secured by drawstrings at his ankles. All of it girlskin, Amy knew. The leather shone in a way that suggested it was waterproofed, using girlfat -- another example of Purity Island putting the female body to a greater variety of uses besides food than the mainland did.

The man was expertly cutting logs from felled trees into two-by-fours, with a circular saw making, as it operated, a lot more noise than the girl working at cutting down the tree. Three slavegirls on stationary bicycles, facing almost in Amy's direction, were giving the blade its power, their legs pumping the pedals without a break for as long as Amy had been watching. Two of the three, it appeared, were veterans on the job, judging from their well-muscled legs. They worked with blank expressions, their job something that simply had to be done to get through the day. The third slavegirl looked as though she might be new. Her legs, though strong-looking, weren't developed in the same way as the others. She looked hardly older than eighteen, very likely pressed into slavery after a very recent release from the breeding farm pen in which she'd spent her childhood. She would, Amy thought, have been very pretty at rest, but not now, with her exhausted look, and with her lower lip thrust out and held stiffly to keep from crying.

All of the slaves Amy could see had whip marks on their skin, in most cases old and mostly faded. The new girl's marks were much fresher, redder, and in fact, as Amy watched, when the girl seemed to slow her pedaling, the woodworker, an irritated look on his face, picked up a whip and gave the girl a couple of quick slashes with it. She cried out and began pedaling faster.

Amy choked back a cry as a movement across the clearing startled her. She now saw her first doggirls. She spotted two of them now, trotting vigilantly around the periphery of the field, each on her four shortened limbs. They weren't easily seen at first against the darkness within the forest beyond the

clearing -- the same dimness that had probably protected Amy from being seen. They wore something like leather booties covering the ends of their four legs. Amy suspected the booties had to be replaced fairly often. The doggirls were watching each group of work slaves intently, though not especially belligerently, as no slave at the moment was departing her assigned station.

Watching the doggirls, Amy had to blink to believe what she was seeing. She had seen puppygirls before, remembering one particularly cheerful one, with long blonde curls, who had licked Amy's hand while Amy waited in line at the mall for movie tickets, the girl wagging her surgically implanted tail and grinning up at Amy. The girl's mistress had given her a tug on her leash and a light swat on her behind, as she reminded the girl not to get fresh with strangers. Amy had told the woman she really didn't mind, and received a friendly smile in reply.

But these girls... in the context they were in, with the job they were doing, somehow one expected them to be actual dogs, and it was disconcerting to see their modified bodies, utterly human female, breasts swaying underneath, and see their genuinely girlish faces as they patrolled the field.

Amy looked to her right, suspecting that... yes, there she was, a third doggirl, this one in the peach orchard, near the slavegirls picking peaches, focusing all her attention on them. As close as these slaves were to the boundaries of the farm, they would need to be watched closely. Amy could hear a low growl from the doggirl as one of the slaves stepped away from the tree farther than she needed to. Amy started trembling again, a trickle of urine emerging between her legs. That doggirl might, thought Amy, come this way even if the slavegirls don't. She wasn't more than forty feet away from Amy right now. Or if the other two came to join her, they could easily pass right in front of Amy along the way, too near for Amy's cover to be effective. Petrified, Amy feared that the doggirl might catch her scent if the wind blew that way, as a real dog would.

Amy had stumbled into the farm in late afternoon, and the colors of sunset were now beginning to take over the sky. At the sound of a whistle, all of the girls stopped their work and began converging on another shed, larger than the woodcutting shed, at the end of the field opposite Amy. Trotting behind the last of the slavegirls, the doggirls followed, one of them barking at the youngest slavegirl, from the woodcutting shed, who was staggering on exhausted legs. The girl let out a sob and moved a little faster, tripping over her hobble chain but immediately scrambling back to her feet.

It was too far away for Amy to make out exactly what was going on, but it looked as though a meal was in progress. Amy's mouth watered -- she could smell girlmeat from where she was.

As the slaves completed their meal, Amy could see two men walking among them, rounding the slaves up and securing them around the upright poles supporting the shed. One of the men was the woodcutter. The other appeared older, heavier -- likely the father of the younger one, Amy decided. She wondered which one was the father of the pregnant girl's baby. They were putting the slavegirls away for the night, and Amy realized that the shed, really, was the only home the slaves had. It was, like the woodcutting shed, open at the sides, but at least, thought Amy, they have a roof. They won't be rained on in their sleep. Amy wished she could say that about herself.

As darkness fell, Amy could see lights through the trees, and in the dimness could just make out the outlines of what appeared to be a cabin. Where the men live, she decided.

When the darkness was complete, Amy emerged from the bush, turned away from the farm and crawled away from it, on two knees and one hand, awkwardly reaching back to hold her hobble chain off the ground so it wouldn't make noise. Her progress was slow enough that she could blunder into trees without harm and carefully steer around them afterward. She crawled at least half an hour before stopping.

She looked up at the sky in astonishment. A city girl all her life, she had never seen the stars so clearly, in the absence of city lights that competed with the stars to light the sky and overwhelmed them. She gawked at them for an endless time before she finally patted the ground around her, felt around for a reasonably soft spot, lay down and curled up on her side. Soon, surprisingly considering the tumult of thoughts and images cascading through her head, she fell asleep.

* * * * *

Amy dreamed she was taking a long, warm shower with Megan, soaping the soft lips between Megan's legs, licking Megan's breast. Amy sighed in contentment, feeling the familiar tingling between her legs in anticipation of a long session of lovemaking...

She was suddenly seized in a coughing fit, and sat up, her right hand pressed to her chest, in total darkness. Sat up? In the shower? She croaked out between coughs, "Honey, turn the water off."

Her other hand felt rough ground beneath two inches of water. She could feel the water flowing along her legs, and her wrist, pushing against them. From above, the stream from the shower continued striking her head, her shoulders. She swept her right arm around in front of her. "Megan? The lights went out. Honey? You there?"

Memories reassembled themselves slowly. Shit. Shit. Shit. Megan's not here. Megan is dead. I'm on the island. It's raining again.

The water level around her continued rising, pushing harder against her. I'm in a streambed! she shouted to herself. I've got to get out of here!

The blackness was complete. Rainclouds had banished the stars, the moon if any.

Amy quickly rolled to her hands and knees, her heart pounding. Which way?

The water was flowing from behind her now, her ankles and calf muscles underneath its surface, as it splashed against the backs of her knees. Flipping a mental coin, she shuffled sideways a few feet. Not that way! The water was halfway up her thigh now. Quickly she scrambled the other way, and the water gradually ran more shallow. At last she crawled onto... not dry land, but at least land that wasn't underwater.

Not yet feeling safe, she felt ahead to see whether the ground continued rising. It seemed to, so she continued crawling that direction, one hand held in front of her to feel for trees.

She stopped between trees, suspecting their presence meant that the water rarely rose this high. Leaning back against one, she drew her knees up and hugged them, her shoulders shaking as she

sobbed. She felt a stronger sense of utter aloneness than at any time on the island so far, sitting naked in the blackness, no light switch to flip on, in a shower she couldn't turn off, on an island hundreds of miles from home, where the entire population wanted to enslave her and the elements wanted to kill her.

CHAPTER 18

DAY 2

Amy didn't know how many hours she sat there, in the dark, the rain pounding down on her. She eventually cried herself out, but was unable to get back to sleep, or even persuade herself to lie down again. She had just succeeded in convincing herself she had gone completely blind for some reason, and wondered what that would do to her market value as a work slave, suddenly realizing that would condemn her to the even greater hell of being a breeding slave, and had begun visualizing a lifetime giving birth again and again, with no activity other than eating, sleeping, and breast-feeding in between, when she noticed that she could see the outline of the nearest tree in front of her.

Her waking nightmare of the empty life of the breeder dissolved, and her spirits rose momentarily, only to plunge into despair again when she thought about her friends at the Academy, especially her girls, and thought about the life and death of a Hanging Girl, so long worked for and now lost. She resumed crying.

Somehow, an image of Andrew, beginning his day at this moment, smirking at Amy's fate, drew her out of her funk, replacing her sorrow with a hot flash of anger. He can't beat me! she insisted to herself. I can't *let* him beat me.

The rain had subsided to a light sprinkle, and in the increasing light, Amy now saw that her surroundings were enveloped in a heavy fog, limiting her range of vision to about ten feet. Maybe that's good, she decided. Nobody can see me.

She roused herself enough to crawl to the still-rushing river for a drink. She had no idea whether it was the same one she'd been following yesterday, but if it was, she was at least now on the opposite bank of it, so she shouldn't be in danger of running across that same farm she'd seen before.

Standing, she began walking near the bank, looking for food. After a time she saw one of the nut trees looming in the fog, and sat down to begin gathering nuts.

Piling about a dozen of them beside the trunk, and armed with a heavy rock to smash the shells, she scooted back against the trunk. She moved aside when she felt discomfort under her buttock, and brushed at the offending spot with her hand.

She bent down suddenly for a closer look. It wasn't a rock, as she'd assumed. Astonished, she saw it was an oval of steel. She pulled up on it, and discovered it was one of the links in a chain, half-buried in the mud.

The chain was wrapped around the base of the tree trunk, slightly below ground level and sufficiently covered in dirt that it had been invisible. Carefully, Amy traced the chain in the other direction, away from the tree.

Pulling the chain up further from the ground, Amy gasped as she found the platter-like shape to which it connected. Her first impression was of a bear trap, but as she pulled upward yet more carefully, uncovering more of the device from the mud and ivy concealing it, she became more puzzled. It was

about eighteen inches across, eight-sided like a stop sign, each side having a metal rod enclosed in a spring projecting out from one corner in line with the side. She wasn't entirely sure what the purpose was but, with the image of a bear trap still in mind, she took the fist-sized rock she'd picked up for cracking shells and dropped it on the middle of the platter.

Even though she expected something of the sort, she was still startled when the spring-loaded rods simultaneously shot along the edges of the plate, closing to form an unbroken octagon an inch above the periphery of the platter. She tried to pull one back to its original position, but it was now locked in place.

Suddenly, insight into the function and purpose of the trap flashed through her, and she tossed the trap away from her in alarm. No!! she screamed in her mind. I came so close to stepping on that without ever seeing it!

The trap had been invisible to her as she had walked around the tree gathering nuts, detected only when she'd accidentally sat on the chain securing it to the tree. If she had stepped onto the middle of the trap, one of the rods would have shot across directly over her hobble chain, trapping the chain between the rod and the platter.

No doubt slaves did run away on occasion, despite the hobble chains, despite the vigilant doggirls watching them. Slaves were worth too much to want to injure them so seriously they couldn't work. This trap was designed so that it wouldn't hurt a runaway slave, it would simply catch her hobble chain, and hold her where she was until she could be reclaimed.

More desperately than before, Amy tried to release the rods, any one of the eight. All were locked in place. Amy saw keyholes in the mechanism. Whoever had put this trap here could come and unlock it, she told herself. As Amy sat, her breakfast forgotten for the moment, fiddling with the trap, she gradually convinced herself that, without the necessary key, she simply couldn't open the trap. If it had caught her, she would have been stuck by this tree until somebody came to let her go.

There was food in the tree, which indeed was probably the reason that particular tree had been selected -- the tree had that attraction for a runaway trying to live off the land. But the food would only last so long. A few days, at the most, and Amy would have consumed all of the nuts she could reach.

And if she couldn't get herself loose, then what? Starve?

Shivering, Amy shook her head. There was no question in her mind about priorities. She would call for help, would scream herself hoarse if she had to, knowing she was close enough to the farm she'd seen yesterday to be heard from there. The farmers there had, in fact, most likely been the ones who'd set the trap here. That would become her new home, that farm, for the rest of her life. But even a lifetime of strenuous drudgery as a work slave, or still worse, a lifetime as a Purity Island breeder, was better than dying alone, uneaten by humans. Her whole life had no meaning if she couldn't end it in human stomachs, becoming part of their bodies and sustaining their lives. Even the stomachs of the dreaded and feared men of Purity Island.

Amy had no doubt that any woman would feel the same. To be food is the reason we are here, she reminded herself. The reminder was unnecessary, since it was the central fact of every woman's existence.

Maybe I can be slave meal, she said to herself hopefully. There are more of them than there are men. The idea of being eaten by the local slaves, instead of the men, made her feel slightly better.

I've got to figure out what to do, she told herself, and I'll think better on a full stomach.

She reached for the rock again and began cracking nuts.

* * * * *

Wishing she had a toothpick, a sanitary one, Amy hugged her knees, biting her lip in thought. I'm not going anywhere, she told herself, until I can figure out how to be safe from these traps.

It seemed reasonable to assume she hadn't somehow found the only slave trap on the entire island. They must, she knew, be scattered all around. It had been a complete accident that she had discovered this one before springing it. She might never be so lucky again.

I still have some hopes of getting home, but as soon as I step on one of these things, she thought with a shudder, all that hope is instantly gone.

If I could somehow...

The direction of her thoughts suddenly meshed with the botanical phenomenon that caught her eye at that moment. As the fog had begun clearing, she had a gradually widening view of the world around her, and she found herself looking at the creeping vine spiraling up a nearby tree trunk as if the tree were a barber pole. She'd been seeing the things all along the way, but hadn't given them much attention.

She sprang to her feet and walked awkwardly towards the tree, bent over to hold her hobble chain off the ground. I can't keep walking this way, she thought, but I won't need to. Solution right here. She reached the tree safely, knelt and scraped several square feet in front of the trunk to make sure she hadn't missed one of the mechanisms, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Reaching as high as she could along the trunk, she pulled the vine away from the trunk -- it was clingy, but gave. It proved too thick to cut through it with her fingernails, so she picked up a rock and smashed the vine with it, several times, until the vine broke. She then unwound about ten feet of it, and broke it off at the far end of that length.

She wrapped it around her waist at the center, tied it in a knot in front of her stomach, then, after a moment's thought, slipped it around her waist so that the knot was in back. It had occurred to her that, if it hung down in front of her, it might, if she were found, be interpreted as an attempt, however inadequate, to hide her female genitalia, one of the most serious of all crimes around here. Instead, she let the loose ends hang down behind her buttocks. She bent down then, lifted up the center link in her hobble chain, and tied the loose ends of the vine around the link. The vine, as she walked, would now hold the entire chain off the ground. If she stepped on a trap now, it would miss the chain, and, of

course, there was the added bonus that the chain would now stop getting snagged on rocks. She'd nearly tripped a hundred times, already. No more of that. All of this at the expense of having to take still shorter steps than before, since the chain could no longer be stretched out taut in a line. She was willing to pay that cost.

With a feeling of accomplishment, she resumed her journey along the bank of the river.

* * * * *

The rain had stopped altogether, though the air was still heavy with moisture. Amy had been creeping along for perhaps an hour, with her now-shortened hobble chain and frequent stops to survey her surroundings and listen for sounds of danger -- listening more intently than before, after yesterday's near-disaster. Her carefulness was rewarded when she stopped to evaluate an unexpected sound, and identified it as one that seemed very much out of place. It seemed to be children laughing, shouting -- playing.

Oh, right, she said to herself. Not out of place at all. Amy realized she was close to a breeding farm.

Dropping to her stomach and using her elbows and knees to creep forward, she saw that the river she had been following upstream was emerging, ahead of her, from under a wooden fence, about forty feet long, straddling the river. Where the fence crossed over the river, vertical metal bars projected downward from the bottom of the fence into the water. No kids getting out that way, she decided. Assuming the thought of escaping even occurs to them. The fenced pens holding various age groups were, for the girls inhabiting them, their entire world.

Moving slowly to her left, Amy saw that the fence, after a right turn, went on for at least a hundred, perhaps two hundred yards running away from her. In front of the fence there was a well-trodden walkway of packed dirt. At its far end, Amy saw two slavegirls struggling to pull a heavily-laden wheeled cart. Probably food for the pens, Amy decided. The slavegirls were accompanied by two doggirls. As Amy watched, both slavegirls pushed several buckets of presumed food through a window-like opening in the fence, afterwards receiving an equal number of buckets in return. Full of waste? Amy speculated. And the waste is probably used for fertilizing the fields.

So much for following this particular river, Amy said to herself. There's probably more of the co-op beyond the end of the breeding farm pens. I don't want to check to find out.

She turned to the side and, crawling for some time before she felt safe enough to rise to her feet, started looking for another river to follow.

At her second stop for food, she stepped, for the first time, on a trap. She stifled a shriek as the rods snapped closed, missing her uplifted hobble chain.

* * * * *

DAY 3

The rain had started up near nightfall the previous day, accompanied this time by lightning and thunder. Amy had spent a sleepless night huddled against a tree trunk, the rain, as usual, slowed by its downward

progress through the leaves but undiminished in volume as it poured down on her. The absolute blackness of the night was interrupted by frequent flashes, showing Amy her surroundings in split-second images near-blinding in contrast with their absence, followed by rattling booms echoing through the trees.

At daybreak, in lighter, quieter rain, Amy had spent an hour or so gathering nuts and peaches for her breakfast, reflecting on the increased danger of trying to travel in her sleep-deprived state, while fretting helplessly again about the lack of girlmeat. After eating she sighed, spent some time tearing limbs by hand out of the middle of a nearby bush, crawled into her constructed hiding place within, and immediately fell asleep.

She awakened feeling groggy but better, ate again, and resumed walking -- but, it turned out, just an hour or so before sunset. With all light again hidden by heavy cloud cover, she curled up on the ground within a stand of unusually dense tree growth, and finished catching up on sleep.

* * * * *

DAY 4

Amy awoke crying. She'd been dreaming about a practice session with Jana, and now she was feeling overwhelmed by how much she missed her girls, missed the excitement and commitment to purpose so central to life at the Academy. Above all, she missed hanging.

She sat up and peevishly adjusted the vine tied around her waist, which was chafing. She hated having to wear it to keep her out of the traps that lay potentially under any food-bearing tree. As she pulled at the vine, she suddenly sucked in a breath as an idea came to her.

The one vine isn't strong enough, she decided. But there are plenty more.

Not even waiting until after she could gather breakfast, Amy jumped up and looked around for a tree bearing the vines. There, that one.

Quickly working up a sweat in the warm, humid air, Amy soon had three ten-foot lengths of vine strung out along the ground. She began working at braiding them together, the way her mother had done her pony tail when she was little. She stopped grudgingly when her stomach finally insisted on some attention, ate quickly and returned to work.

She looked around, again, for just the right arrangement of trees... there! There were any number of fallen logs amid the standing trees in all parts of the forest, which had so far served only as obstructions to be walked around or, if not too thick to negotiate with her hobble chain, stepped over. She'd found one, now, beside a tree with a perfectly-placed overhanging branch.

Quickly tying a hangman's knot in one end of her impromptu rope, she flung the other end over the branch and secured it. Her heart pounding in the first excitement she had felt on the island, she stepped onto the log and slipped the noose over her head. She had nothing she could use to tie her hands, nor did she want to do so without a hanging partner, and instead simply clasped them tightly behind her

back. Almost too excited to breathe properly, she closed her eyes and spent a moment calming herself, and carefully stepped off the log.

At once, and for as long as she remained suspended by her neck, all of the tension, all of the fear, all of the worries fled, replaced by a feeling of being... at home. No matter what horrors the future might hold, as long as she could hang, she remained in the present tense. After a few minutes, she organized her kicking into a practice drill including several of the new elements she and Jana had been working on -- she couldn't do full kicks with the hobble chain, but she could easily manage Jana's feet-tied moves.

At last, reluctantly, she stepped back onto the log, and reached up to the branch to steady herself. Her internal clock, more accurate for hanging than for anything else, told her she'd been hanging for thirteen minutes. She could have gone longer, but didn't want to overdo it in her first session in several days.

She untied the rope from the branch, wrapped it around her waist and tied it in place. There was no way she would leave it behind. Feeling it around her warmed the cold, desolate place inside her that the island's heat couldn't reach.

* * * * *

Around midday, patches of blue showed through the clouds for the first time in three days. Amy's lunch of peaches, sitting in the welcome shade beneath the tree that had grown them, had the lighthearted feeling of a picnic. She wished she could share it with Megan, and soon lost herself in a reverie of what she and Megan would talk about on this picnic, the laughs they would share, the love they would make. Regretfully, at length she stood and continued on.

* * * * *

Amy froze suddenly in mid-step, holding her breath. The lightness ahead, which she had been attributing to the sunlight, had resolved itself into a clearing much larger than those she had been skirting around. Creeping slowly closer, she now saw that she had reached her immediate goal -- the island's central mountain ridge. Amy had been walking up a gentle slope for some time. She had suspected she was close.

Amy dropped to her stomach and crawled as close to the forest's edge as she could without breaking cover. Her feeling of success gradually gave way to stunned helplessness. She hadn't been picturing it like this.

Amy wasn't an expert in geology, or botany, or any other field that might explain what she was seeing. She supposed the mountains must be a different type of rock from the part of the island covered with forest growth.

The mountains were devoid of plant life, as far as Amy could see, unless there were some ground-hugging lichens not visible at this distance. The forest ended at a boundary almost surely created by the original earth movements that had formed the island a few millennia in the past. Just past the last trees, a natural wall of rock, about three feet high at this point, served as a step up to the barren surface that led to the sharp upslope at the base of the mountains. Between the step and the mountains was a strip of land about a hundred feet wide, as naked of plant life as the mountains themselves.

The mountains weren't very high, and might more properly be called hills, seeming to agree with Amy's memory that they reached a height of not much more than about five hundred feet. And they were certainly climbable -- they weren't impossibly steep, and there were plenty of rocks of various sizes, useable as handholds and footholds. But to Amy, they may as well have been five hundred miles high.

From the moment I step out onto that strip of land, Amy told herself, I have no cover at all. I can be seen easily by anyone looking in my direction, and they can't possibly imagine any reason for my being there, all alone, other than that I'm a runaway slave.

And there were indeed people around to observe her, she now saw. Backing up a few feet to decrease her visibility among the trees, Amy watched as a wagon approached from her left, along a path that ran along the base of the mountains. Six slavegirls were pushing the wagon, three on each side, driven by a man sitting on a raised seat within the wagon, holding a whip. Behind him, the open cargo hold of the wagon was stacked with what appeared to be girlskins. Two doggirls rode along, at present resting among the girlskins.

Each slavegirl was pushing on a wooden bar projecting out from the side of the wagon, her wrist cuffs chained to the bar. They were the first slaves Amy had seen without hobble chains, other than the doggirls, though they did have the ankle cuffs, and would no doubt be hobbled prior to being released from the wagon. Their legs were obviously very strong, and they pushed the wagon on the level path with little obvious effort. Probably, Amy thought, this is their permanent job.

They must be going to push that thing over the mountains, Amy told herself. Girlskins are one of the main items of trade with the mainland, and they've got to be taking those to one of the trading posts. All of which are on the other side of the mountains.

There has to be a path, a trail through the mountains, she realized. Anybody can climb these mountains, but not pushing a wagon like that.

Directly in front of Amy, the wagon clattered now as it passed over a wooden bridge above the small river Amy had been following. The river was dry now, but would be running again shortly after the rain resumed.

I've got to find that mountain trail, Amy told herself.

She withdrew a little farther into the woods, knowing she didn't need to follow the wagon to find the trail. It would be safer, indeed, to wait until the wagon was well out of sight.

Amy did so. Afterwards, picking her way carefully across the jumbled rocks in the dry river bed, she began walking, parallel to the edge of the forest, a safe distance within the trees.

* * * * *

After about an hour, Amy froze again, hiding behind a tree, as a wagon came towards her, traveling the opposite direction from the earlier one. Amy couldn't make out what this one was carrying, other than some boxes along the edge clearly labeled as wine. She waited until the wagon was out of sight, then continued on her way.

Her progress, as always, was at a snail's pace, with frequent stops to listen for any sounds of human habitation. To her frustration, she came to another co-op, which she had to take a long detour around. By the time she got back to the forest-mountain boundary, night was falling. Sighing, she gathered dinner, and curled up on the ground for another long night.

* * * * *

DAY 5

Heavy clouds were rolling across the sky once again as Amy awoke. She gathered some breakfast, setting off another trap under one of the nut trees. The things always were fairly near a co-op, not surprisingly. Amy hoped one of them sometime would warn her of a co-op she hadn't noticed. Ironic, she thought, if the traps could be useful that way. There was no flowing water, but she was able to drink from a small pond.

She retreated a few hundred yards deeper into the forest for hanging exercise, incorporating Holly's stair stepping move into her practice routine -- the hobble chain allowed it, though she worried the chain might be making too much noise. She let herself down after sixteen minutes, sweaty but refreshed, glowing in the euphoria her practice session created.

Returning to the forest boundary, she was about to continue her journey along its edge, but discovered she had passed her goal while circling the co-op. There, on the mountainside directly opposite the co-op, was the trail over the mountains she'd been seeking.

She sighed heavily. She had tried to stay optimistic, knowing that the mountain trail would at least be something different, and anything different had the potential for being useful.

Amy shook her head at the work that must have gone into creating the trail. She'd been expecting something more natural, but this was obviously the result of years of heavy labor with picks and shovels, by slavegirls probably long since eaten. From its base across from the co-op, the trail rose gently and smoothly along the side of the mountain, about ten feet wide, leveling off about every hundred yards, becoming wider at the level points. Amy at first took those to be resting areas, but it occurred to her they were more likely designed so that wagons traveling opposite directions could pass each other. At present, there was a wagon coming down, flanked by slavegirls, their hands chained to the bars in the same way as the wagons Amy had seen earlier, digging in their heels, their leg and arm muscles straining as they worked to hold the wagon's downhill rolling to a walking pace.

No way I can go that way, Amy told herself. There was, as before, no cover for her whatsoever, and, as she noticed another wagon approaching the base of the trail for the trip upward, it was clear that the amount of traffic guaranteed there would always be someone around who would spot her the instant she emerged from the forest.

Amy spent some time considering whether it would be possible to cross over at night. She bit her lip. She wasn't sure what phase the moon was in -- she hadn't spent time watching the sky during the brief periods any part of it was visible through the cloud cover. If I can get enough moonlight, she thought, to see where I'm going, that may mean I can *be* seen... and if I do start out with enough light, there's no telling when the clouds might roll back in, leaving me totally blind halfway up the mountain. The trail up and down is probably three or four miles, and in complete darkness I'd have to feel my way along it on

hands and knees -- probably in a driving rainstorm -- and I'd probably run out of night before I finished, leaving me out there for the world to see.

And I'd definitely need some light to find the *start* of the trail, she pointed out to herself. I can see where it is now, but to find it at night, I've got to have moonlight, and it's right across from that co-op. I can't even get started before I'm seen.

I have to get over, she told herself again and again. *I have* to get over. I can never get home if I don't.

She felt tears coming on again.

She wondered briefly whether she could circle around the mountains at their northern or southern tip, but then recalled that at either end of the island, the lowlands on either side of the mountain sank below sea level and disappeared into the ocean. The only way around the mountains, she knew, was by swimming -- suicidal, since the pounding surf would smash her into the rocks as soon as she set out.

She moaned quietly. The mountains were seeming, more and more, like a permanent roadblock to any possible rescue.

But I haven't seen their entire length, she reminded herself. There still might be a place I can cross. I'm not giving up until I've seen the whole mountain range. She shuddered. All forty miles of it.

What I can't do, she told herself, is stay here. There's no escape route here. I can't find one unless I move. So let's get started.

Rather than go back around that same co-op again, she in continued the same direction she'd been traveling.

* * * * *

DAY 6

It had been raining all morning, but let up around what Amy suspected was midday -- at least her stomach was telling her it was lunchtime. She detoured to the nearest peach tree she could see.

She'd started a pile with two peaches and was reaching for a third when she froze, alarm bells clamoring in her head at the sound that shouldn't be there, and certainly shouldn't be so close.

She looked down and let out a squeal of terror.

A doggirl was trotting towards her, scowling.

Amy's mind seized up, with just one thought able to trickle through, irrelevantly -- how much the girl looked like Shawna. Except not with that glowering expression.

Amy opened her mouth and closed it, not sure saying anything would help. Not sure anything at all would help. She knew she couldn't outrun a doggirl, not hobbled as she was. Amy considered herself the

world's least violent person, but she wondered whether she could attack the girl, knock her unconscious.

She help up her hands, instead, in a gesture of defenselessness, and began backing away. The girl growled then, in uncanny imitation of a real dog, and bared her teeth. Amy saw, to her astonishment, that the girl's front teeth had been filed to sharp points. She hadn't heard about that.

Amy gasped at the sound of another growl behind her. It came from a second doggirl, this one with her short hair in soft blonde curls, her rounded, dimpled face belonging more to a cute doll than the vicious animal she sounded to be.

Amy felt overwhelmed with sudden nausea. It's over, it's over, she moaned to herself. I'm caught. She was trembling so violently she almost couldn't stand. Every scene of heavy slavegirl labor she had seen, and every one she had merely imagined, flashed through her head in an instant.

The new doggirl approached Amy and barked twice, as the first began circling around Amy to join it, the girls working together to force Amy towards what she knew must be the co-op to which they belonged. Now that she knew to look for it, she could make out a farm cabin at a distance through the trees, and saw a flash of skin of a slavegirl working in a field just beyond the cabin.

After the sound of the bark, Amy heard a stirring within the trees just ahead of her. Looking that direction she saw a man -- no, a boy, judging from the absence of a beard, and the fact of being slight of build and no taller than Amy. The boy was wearing the usual leather outfit of vest, shorts, floppy hat, and moccasins, a bag by his side held by a strap over his shoulder. His shoulder-length, unevenly cut hair was astonishingly black, and his face seemed exotic in other odd ways, his eyes dark and slightly slanted, his nose slightly flat, slightly wide, upturned at the end, his skin a sort of coppery color that didn't match that of the other locals Amy had seen. It really was an extraordinarily attractive face, if Amy hadn't been so frightened by its mere presence. Even beautiful, a word not often applied to males. Native islander blood? she wondered. There was supposedly some of it still around, as far as anyone knew.

The boy patted the first doggirl on the head, and reached into his bag, pulling out several strips of meat, surely girlmeat jerky -- there was no other kind of meat here. Amy's mouth watered involuntarily. The boy offered a strip to each of the doggirls, who snapped it up enthusiastically, chewing it eagerly, swallowing, and looking up for more. The boy began walking in the direction of the farm, gesturing to the doggirls with more meat held out to them. As they approached, he tossed it farther towards the farm, and spoke his first word, in a high voice, "Go," patting the nearer doggirl on the rump as she passed, both girls scampering after the food.

The boy approached Amy and, to her astonishment, walked past her, away from the farm, back in the direction Amy had come from, beckoning to her and saying, "Come on." The words were spoken in an odd accent, but were easily enough understood in context. Eyes wide, Amy followed him. She was perfectly willing to go that direction. It was better than waiting to see if the doggirls wanted to make Amy their dessert.

The boy broke into a run, looked back, and stopped with a giggle when he saw Amy couldn't follow at that pace.

As fragmented as Amy's thought processes were at this moment, the giggle still stunned her. There was something wrong with the sound of it, beyond the inappropriateness of giggling at all in these circumstances. As tall as the boy was, it had been surprising to Amy that his voice hadn't begun changing yet, though not beyond the realm of possibility. But the giggle. There was something way too effeminate about it.

Following as quickly as she could, Amy noticed something else that didn't seem right. The boy's hips seemed just slightly too wide. It was subtle, not easy to pick up in the surrounding clothing, and Amy wouldn't have noticed at all but for the turn her thoughts had taken after the giggle.

The boy ducked suddenly between two bushes, gesturing at Amy to follow him in. Doing so, she thought to herself, okay, this is getting too weird. Nothing is making any sense here.

She began to speak. A brusque "Shhh!" from the boy stopped her. She waited, listening for the sound of the doggirls returning, and with a strong impression that the boy was listening for the same thing.

At last the boy nodded briefly to himself, rose, and gestured again for Amy to follow, this time with more attention to quiet than speed, and Amy was easily able to keep pace. When she judged they had put enough distance between themselves and the farm, and doggirls, Amy asked very quietly, feeling almost sure of the answer, impossible though it was, "Are... are you a girl?"

He -- she -- stopped in mid-stride and spun towards Amy, with a look of shock. "How did you know?" The accent again. But the girl's face said it all.

Amy immediately understood the issue. She held up her hands. "It's okay, it's okay! I was never sure. I just started thinking that. I'm from somewhere else. Nobody from around here would be able to tell." Amy strongly suspected that was indeed true. Men around here probably barely had the concept of questioning anyone's gender. And Amy herself still couldn't fathom how this girl could be where she was, dressed as she was -- dressed at all, for that matter. With no metal cuffs or collar. "And I won't tell anybody. Please believe me, I would *never* tell anybody!"

The girl seemed to relax, slowly. She reached towards her bag. "You hungry?"

Girlmeat! With deep feeling, Amy breathed, "Oh, yes!!"

CHAPTER 19

The jerky was dry and tough, but it didn't matter. Amy felt a warm glow inside, now that the last barrier to her indefinite survival on the island, outside of enforced lifetime servitude, had fallen -- she had a source of girlmeat. She closed her eyes, chewing, running her tongue over each bite of girlmeat to bring out its flavor.

She opened her eyes again, to see the girl watching her closely, seeming as curious about Amy's presence in her current circumstances as Amy was mystified by hers.

As soon as she'd discovered her new friend was a girl, Amy had revised her age estimate upward, with no longer any need to account for the high voice and lack of a beard. While the girl didn't seem to have much in the way of breasts, she looked otherwise physically mature -- but only just. Amy guessed now that the girl was about eighteen, maybe nineteen at the most.

Exhausted, as her adrenaline began draining away, Amy sat on the ground and took another bite of girlmeat. Feeling the wet ivy under her, Amy suddenly realized it was raining again, light but steady. She wasn't sure when it had started. Rain hardly registered on her anymore unless it was especially hard or inconvenient.

The girl, companionably, sat down beside Amy, still watching closely. As she took off the floppy settlers' hat and brushed her fingers through her hair, Amy gasped. This was Amy's first chance to look closely at the girl's face, unhindered by the deep shade beneath the hat brim, and she was stunned by how beautiful the girl was. The eyes, the high cheekbones, the full lips, the coppery-bronze skin had already suggested "native" to Amy, but if all of the native women on the island had looked the way this girl did, there surely would be a lot more of them around today. Her jet-black hair, though of course not perfectly smooth in this land without combs or hairbrushes, still flowed without obvious tangles, reminding Amy of a black satin waterfall. Her eyebrows... if asked to describe them, Amy would simply have pointed out that she had known many girls who had plucked their brows and then penciled in replacements on a new line, just to make them look exactly the way this girl's did naturally.

There must, decided Amy, still be native families living here, somehow not absorbed into the settlers' culture. Amy frowned. That, she thought, doesn't explain why the girl speaks my own language. How did she learn it, if her people have stayed so well-hidden that the settlers haven't found them?

On the other hand, Amy reminded herself, the conversation so far had not exactly been wide-ranging.

Swallowing the meat, Amy finally made a choice among the thousand questions springing through her mind like heated popcorn. "How... How did you make the doggirls go away?" Surely, Amy thought, they couldn't have taken the girl to be one of their masters.

The girl frowned, looking confused. "The what?"

Amy blinked, thrown by the possibility that the girl knew even less about the island than Amy did. She pointed back in the direction from which they had come. "Them. You know, 'rff rff.'" She imitated a doggirl's bark.

The girl grinned in sudden comprehension. "Oh!! Is that what they're called? Say it again."

Amy said, enunciating clearly, "Doggirls."

The girl repeated the word. "So... they're like girls?"

Amy struggled to get a feeling for the girl's accent. Every vowel she used was shaded just a little away from the "ee" end and more towards the "oo" end, the last sentence coming out something like "They're loike garls". Amy told her, "They *are* girls. Men did that to their arms and legs, but they're really girls just like us." Amy paused as the girl worked to process that, and came back to her question. "So why did they do what you said?"

"Oh." The girl smiled. "They like you if you have the leaves."

Amy was completely lost until the girl made a gesture to indicate the leather outfit she was wearing, while Amy, at the same time, was backtracking through her tentative formula for the girl's accent to determine that "leaves" was the word she'd used. It came to her suddenly -- that was the word the girl used for clothes! Amy nearly laughed. It *did* seem to make sense, somehow. Covering the body in that way might well be connected up with trees covering their branches with leaves. And Amy gasped as another part of what the girl had said clicked into place -- she was telling Amy that the doggirls, though Amy suspected they still gave priority to their own master, regarded anyone dressed in leather as a friend, while anyone walking upright and naked was, like Amy, an enemy to be watched closely. Doggirls, like the men, had no expectation that a female might cloud the gender issue by wearing clothes.

Amy recalled how delighted the girl had seemed to learn a new word, moments ago. She touched the girl's leather outfit, glad to note the girl didn't flinch away from contact. "These are called 'clothes.' You're wearing clothes." Again, the girl repeated the word, flashing another happy smile.

Another thought struck Amy. She had no idea what the natives might wear these days, but this girl was wearing settlers' clothes, and Amy was positive no man would have given them to her. "Where did you get the clothes?"

"Oh." The girl nodded, looking pleased with herself as she explained, "I found them in a man's place. I watch the men to see when they leave their place empty, the place where they sleep..."

Amy didn't like interrupting, but the girl seemed so eager to learn. "Cabin. They sleep in their cabins."

"Cabins." Another grin. "I go in their cabins when they aren't there, and I take things I need. Like the clothes, food. I was going to do that again, now. And then I saw you and the doggirls."

Amy's mental translation was growing more smooth each time the girl spoke. She meanwhile noticed that each time the girl used a word Amy had taught her, she pronounced it just the way Amy did, without an accent. Or, well, Amy said to herself, in *my* accent, that is.

The explanation of how the girl had come by the clothes and meat seemed straightforward enough, but it occurred to Amy that if that was how all of the natives got by, the settlers would have put a stop to

the marauding long ago. Something still didn't seem right. "Where do you live? Where are your parents?"

The girl looked blank. "Parents?"

"Your father? Mother? Older people you live with?"

The girl's frown turned to seeming comprehension at the last sentence. She shook her head. "The big girls went to serve men a long time ago."

Amy was puzzled for a moment, then floored as her theory of the girl's personal history took off in a completely new direction. Come on, she told herself, that is *really* impossible. "You grew up with... the big girls?"

The girl nodded. "They took care of us for a long time, when we were littles. Then the men took them away, and we were big girls then, and we got our own littles to take care of."

The girl had grown up in a pen at a breeding farm! It still was obvious she carried native genes in her -- perhaps her mother, a breeder, had been a full-blooded native girl -- but this girl was fully a member of the settlers' culture.

Amy squeezed her eyes shut. How in the hell... Okay, thought Amy, ask *her* that. "When the men came, later, when you were a big girl, and took the other big girls away... Why didn't they take you? How did you get away?"

"I ran." The girl giggled. "They always called me Runner. I guess I was always running around when I was a little. So when the men came, I did that."

Amy shook her head in disbelief. "They just *let* you run away?"

"They didn't mean to. But there was... kind of a thing happened. They opened up the big gate, like they did a long time before when they took the older big girls, and they had all of us start getting together. They were saying it was time to start serving them, and they started putting the shiny on us." She patted Amy's ankle cuffs. Her slave hardware, Amy understood, was "the shiny" to this girl. The girl went on, "They were putting the shiny on Laughher, and then Leaf Eater, the little who always followed Laughher around, came running up crying and tried to stop them from taking Laughher. She didn't want Laughher to go. Laughher was telling Leaf Eater it was okay, we needed to serve the men for awhile and then they'd eat us. But Treefaller, one of the big girls, started crying too. She was like me, she didn't like that we had to serve men before we could be food. She slapped one of the men when he reached for her to put the shiny on her. The other men and some of the other girls tried to hold her and get her to quiet down. There were two... doggirls by the big gate, and they came up making that 'grrrrr' sound, like they were going to bite. And then nobody was watching the gate. So I just stepped back to it, real quiet, and when I got close enough I ran. Men were shouting, but I don't know if it was about me. I guess nobody saw me. Nobody chased me, anyway."

Amy had devoted her entire concentration to following the girl's speech. Anyone from Amy's own world would have been completely at sea, and not just because of the accent, without some pre-existing

knowledge of how things worked on the island. Lucky I wrote that paper, she thought to herself -- then remembered bitterly that the paper was what had got her trapped here on the island to begin with.

"How long ago was that?" Amy felt a strong need for assurance that long term survival outside the system was possible here.

The girl shook her head, looking irritated. "It wasn't long ago. *I* did it."

Amy didn't think they'd be able to connect on the time issue. She suspected the girl might have no way of measuring lengths of time. She decided to move on. One thing the girl had said seemed to hint at her motivation. Amy said, "So you didn't think you should have to serve men?"

"No!" The girl was suddenly vehement. "That never seemed right. When we were little, the big girls told us all about how we are here to be food, and we always liked that. We'd listen to their stories about the long-ago, when girls saved men by being their food, and that really made us feel important." Those stories, it seemed to Amy, had been stretching the truth a little, but she was relieved that the girls on the island all learned what their ultimate purpose was. The girl went on, "Men need us to live! But..." She frowned darkly. "The big girls would tell us how we needed to serve men first, before they'd let us be food. And when I got bigger, I started thinking, that's just not right. If men need us for food, they should treat us nicer! If they take us and make us start serving them, they're making us do things they could do themselves! That's not something we should have to do. We're here to be something they *can't* be!"

Amy sucked in her breath. As limited as the girl's vocabulary was, as limited as her experience with life was, Amy didn't think any of history's classic speeches on women's rights had put the case as eloquently as this girl just had.

Amy realized she had been so fascinated in learning the girl's story she had overlooked the normal protocol of introductions. "So... you're called Runner?" When the girl smiled and nodded, Amy asked, "Do you have another name?"

The girl frowned. "Why would I need another name?"

Amy shook her head quickly. "You don't, I was just wondering. I'm Amy."

Runner, looking puzzled, said slowly, "Amy." After a long pause, she asked, "What does that mean?"

Amy started to say that names didn't mean anything where she came from, but a memory came back that she had forgotten. "Where I come from, it means 'friend.' "

Runner was still puzzled. "Then why don't they call you that?"

Amy said, "There are a lot of things... different, where I come from. And I need to get back there. My..." It occurred to Amy that the word "brother" would be meaningless to Runner. "I was brought here and left here, and I didn't want to be here. I need to get back."

"Can't you go back the same way you came?"

Amy shook her head. "I came on..." She hesitated. "Have you seen the... big water? The water that goes on to the end?" She swept her hand forward to indicate the expanse of the ocean.

Runner nodded eagerly, and said proudly, "I've seen the whole world! One end of it is at the water, and the other is the high ground." She made an upsweeping gesture with her hand, indicating the mountains.

Amy shook her head. "Those aren't really the ends. I live on the other side of the water. I came here on a boat -- that's like a lot of trees all tied together, and it rides on the water." Amy rushed past Runner's disbelieving look. "I can't make a boat myself. I have to go the other way, and find the people on the other side of the... high ground."

Amy saw that, despite the explanations, Runner's forehead was growing more wrinkled with skepticism by the second. Finally Runner shook her head. "There isn't anything past the end of the world."

Amy saw the trouble she might be running into. Aside from the brief unremembered time as an infant being nursed by her mother, Runner's entire life, until recently, had been confined to a small enclosure that served as her world. She had known there was an outside to the enclosure -- food, and occasionally people, came in from outside. But, now on the loose in the larger world, there was a limit to how much larger a world Runner could make her mind encompass. And Amy, knowing how strongly people cling to beliefs that are important to them, could tell she was going to encounter some resistance here. She already was.

Cautiously, Amy said, "Runner, you can see I know some things you didn't know, right?"

Equally cautiously, Runner nodded.

Amy went on, "That's because I've been in some places you haven't been. And I need you to help me get back." Amy's crucial need for Runner had been clarifying itself to her in the last few minutes. There was just no way Amy could cross the mountains by herself. Alone, she was an escaped slave. But accompanied by what appeared to be a boy, seeming to belong to him, to be *his* slave... "I need you to take me to the other side of the high ground..."

Runner shook her head quickly. "No! You're making a story! The high ground is the end! I don't want to go there and fall off!"

Exasperated, Amy said, "Runner, it's not like that! The other side looks just like this side, except there are more people there. And there are... places where the boats come. They don't come to this side, but they come there."

Runner gave her a caught-you look. "If the boats don't come here, how come *you're* here?"

Amy shook her head, foreseeing an explanation that stretched ocean-like to the horizon. "Runner, I *have* to go there." Amy decided she shouldn't show Runner how desperate her need for help was. "If you won't help me, I'll have to try to go myself."

Unexpectedly, Runner lunged towards Amy and threw her arms around her. “Amy, don’t go away! Please don’t go!” Amy was stunned to see that Runner, her face pressed tightly against Amy’s chest, was crying. “Stay with me! We can be together here! You said you were a friend!”

Amy knew she had underestimated how lonely Runner had been. How much Runner missed the companionship, the sharing of lives, the girls by whom she had always been surrounded. Amy patted the girl’s back, stroking her hair. “It’s okay, it’s okay.”

For a moment, Amy considered whether to solicit a simpler type of help. Maybe, she thought, Runner could just steal me some clothes. Then I could pose as a man, instead of as Runner’s slavegirl. She shook her head, then, at her own stupidity. Not a viable plan, Amy, she told herself. Aside from the minor point of Amy not being able to get the shorts on past the hobble chain, the biggest problem was that no clothing used on the island could cover up her slave hardware. Amy could never wear clothes here if she couldn’t get rid of the metal first. Clothes wouldn’t accomplish anything except to make her punishment worse when she was caught.

She sighed and continued stroking Runner’s hair.

* * * * *

Runner grew quiet eventually, still holding Amy. Thinking about how nice it felt to have Runner in her arms, Amy realized that she had underestimated her own loneliness as much as she had Runner’s. After nearly a week lacking in human contact, of constant fear of what any such contact would lead to, Amy now felt a space filling with warmth inside her that she hadn’t realized was empty.

Amy jumped slightly as Runner reached down between Amy’s legs with her hand to touch Amy’s mound. She’s used to being around girls she’s known for years, Amy reminded herself. Intimate physical contact is no big deal.

Back in puzzled mode again, Runner murmured, “Why don’t you have hair down there?”

Amy smiled. I’m foreign to her in more ways than I’d realized, she told herself. I really hadn’t given any thought to pubic hair. “Where I come from, sometimes girls have it taken off. Some like it that way.” Go ahead, Amy, she told herself, laughing internally, try explaining about laser treatments.

Runner ran her palm lightly over Amy’s thigh. “Your legs too?”

“Yes. I like how it feels.”

“Me too.”

Just as Amy was starting to feel a tingle between her legs at the unexpected intimacy, Runner moved on to another, less personal question. “What’s this for?” She was patting the vine running between Amy’s legs.

“That holds up the chain when I walk.” Amy lifted the chain momentarily, and Runner absorbed yet another new word. “The men put traps under some of the trees. Those are things to catch girls who run

away. It catches their chains and holds them so the men can come get them. If I don't let the chain drag on the ground, the traps can't get me."

Runner gasped. "Those things that go 'kkkhhh'..." she imitated the clicking of the rods springing closed, "...when you step on them? I stepped on some of those. I never knew what they were for."

Amy nodded. "They can't catch you either. You don't have a chain."

The earlier talk about things done at home had opened up Amy's mind to a new strategy. It was a mistake, she told herself, to try to impress Runner with how strongly I feel about getting home. It's *my* need, not hers, and I can't make her feel it. But if I can make the mainland sound more desirable to her, make it into a place she'd really want to go... "You were talking about how women shouldn't have to serve men..."

"Women?"

Amy smiled, wishing she'd thought to bring along a magical pill that would instantly teach Runner all the new words she needed to know. "Girls grow up to be women. I'm a woman. You're a woman. We're women. You can still call us girls too, but we grew to be women." She went on, "Anyway, where I live, most people think the way you do. More and more all the time. Women are not here just to serve men, while we wait to be eaten. We can do *so* much more than that. Each woman has her own place to fill in the world, *besides* being food. Each woman has a... thing she can be, and she can choose what it is. Some women... well, have you ever been sick sometimes? You or the other girls?"

Runner nodded, her ear still pressed against Amy's chest.

"Well, where I live, women can be doctors, who try to make sick people feel better. Or they can be teachers, who take a long time to learn a lot of things and then pass them on so other people can know them and understand them."

Runner looked up at her. "You're a teacher, aren't you, Amy?"

Amy smiled. "That's one of the things I am. But there's more things women can be. They can be lawyers, and bring people together who are arguing and help them find a way to stop." Internally, Amy winced, glad nobody from home was present to take exception to that characterization. It's true though, she told herself, as far as it goes. And anybody should get a good word put in for them now and then, even lawyers.

Amy was running out of professions. Most jobs would be incomprehensible to Runner. She wasn't even sure she could explain what she herself did in a way Runner could understand. "And so many more things. Women can be what they want to be, what they feel inside them. And they can even serve men if they want to. Sometimes they do. I know a very good woman who wanted to do exactly that. For her, that's the place where she wanted to be." She had Maya in mind.

Runner sat up, an excited look on her face. "I see what you're saying! Amy, I know what my place is!" Seconds later Amy's hopes crashed and burned. "And I'm in my place! Living here, doing what I do... this is my place, Amy! I never thought about it that way before!"

Amy opened her mouth, grasping fruitlessly for some kind of response. “Ummmm...”

Runner got up on her knees facing Amy. “Stay here with me, Amy! This can be the place for both of us. You can teacher me things, and I can show you how to get things you need.” She reached forward and grasped both of Amy’s hands tightly in her own. “Tell me you won’t leave me, Amy. Say you won’t leave!” She was starting to cry again.

Amy said softly, “I won’t leave you, Runner, I promise I won’t leave you.” It came out as words meant simply to calm the girl, but she suddenly realized that this was a promise she would have to keep, for her own good. She was blocked by the mountains, hobbled by the chain. Runner had already saved her once, and Amy knew she would need her again. The minute she left this girl, the clock would start ticking again towards her own captivity.

* * * * *

Runner’s emotional balance had been restored the moment Amy had promised her loyalty. Amy watched as Runner stood and surveyed the area, hands on hips. “It’s starting to get dark. We need to find something to eat. I still have some meat, but I want to save that until I can get some more.” She was turning slowly. “Do you see any fruit from here?”

Amy looked around, pointed. “I’m not seeing any fruit trees, but there are lots of nuts.”

Runner gave Amy the blank look Amy was growing accustomed to. “Nuts?”

Amy walked over and picked up the nearest. “These.”

Runner snorted and shook her head. “I tried those once. They’re too hard. My teeth hurt after I bit one.”

“No, inside.” If Runner had never seen a nutshell before her escape, it wasn’t surprising that she hadn’t discovered their food value. “Watch.” Amy sought and found a sufficiently large stone, and shattered the shell with a couple of hard hits. Peeling away the remnants, she held out the nut to Runner.

Runner’s eyes went wide. “Those were always in our food!!” She scooped it out of Amy’s hand and palmed it into her mouth, chewing happily and swallowing. She swept her hand to indicate the ground around her. “Are those inside all the rocks?”

Amy picked up another shell. “The ones that look like this. That’s a nut you’re eating, and they come inside shells. These are the shells, all around here.”

Runner laughed. “Okay, let’s stay here tonight. Let me get my...” She searched her memory for the word. “...my *clothes* off, and then we can look for some more.”

Instantly she peeled her moccasins off, setting them beside her hat. On her vest she undid the buttons, which Amy, from her anatomy and physiology classes, had recognized as human finger bones. Amy could hear Runner giving voice to a sentiment she must have thought a thousand times before, judging from the absence of recently-learned vocabulary, as she muttered irritably, “I don’t know why they want to have leaves on them all the time.” Amy smiled as an irony passed through her mind: while Amy had

been struggling to deal with the vulnerability of being naked at all times, Runner was struggling to deal with the discomfort of wearing clothes for the first time in her life. And Amy and Runner had no way to trade places relative to clothing. Runner needed to pass as a boy for her safety, as Amy had already seen. Amy, with no way to hide the obvious metal signs of her gender, would be endangered by putting any clothing on, assuming she could somehow don the shorts.

Underneath the vest, Amy noticed, for the first time, that Runner had wrapped a long, narrow swatch of leather tightly around her body at chest level, tucking it in carefully at the top to secure it. Amy, half watching her and half looking at the ground as she gathered nuts in a pile, suddenly gave her full attention to Runner, and gasped as the leather fabric fell away. Amy stifled a laugh, exclaiming to herself, and I'd been thinking she was flat-chested!

Runner's breasts, now revealed, were round, firm, and as big as Megan's. At present they were crisscrossed with compression lines from the fabric, which were already starting to fade. Amy now fully appreciated how uncomfortable Runner must have been all day, with those breasts squashed that way. No wonder she was so eager to get undressed!

Runner, rubbing her breasts to restore circulation, looked up and noticed Amy watching her wide-eyed. Runner smiled. "I saw the men don't have bumps."

Amy responded vaguely, "Uh-huh." She continued watching as Runner slid the shorts down and added them to the pile. Naked now, she walked towards Amy and bent to help her finish gathering nuts. Runner's body, Amy saw, was trim and athletic, comparable with any Hanging Girl's. Her legs were strong -- obviously she'd spent her life living up to her name -- and her shoulders surprisingly broad, while her narrow waist accentuated the female hips Amy had noticed earlier.

Amy could tell that, despite the lack of access to anything resembling modern female grooming equipment, Runner would attract awed attention from any man or woman in Amy's world. Her black tangle of pubic hair occupied a small triangle with sharp boundaries in spite of never being trimmed. Her legs, never shaved, were covered with a soft, nearly invisible down that invited stroking. Even the small dark wisps of hair under her arms did nothing to take away from her femininity. If I ever get home and she comes with me, thought Amy, I'm not sure I'd want to change anything about her. She is such a perfect example of what a one hundred percent natural woman can be.

Runner had already gathered a dozen shells together. "Do I just smack them with that?" She pointed at the stone.

Speechlessly, Amy nodded.

* * * * *

Amy was developing an eye for relatively comfortable spots to sleep at night. In the fading light she spotted a fairly flat space, free of rocks, within a group of trees on a small rise of ground that should be immune to flooding. She knelt and patted the ground, feeling for traps. Their absence assured, she looked up at Runner. "Is this okay?" Runner smiled and nodded in answer.

Amy sat and untied the vines around her waist, coiling them up on the ground nearby, and stretched out on her left side, curling up and wriggling to find the best spot. Runner dropped down in front of Amy's eyes, also on her left side, her head at Amy's breast level, and Amy thought for a moment Runner wanted them to sleep with their heads between each other's legs, as Amy had often done with Megan and her other roommates. Runner, however, did not move any farther down Amy's body from where she was. She wriggled closer, and pulled Amy's left arm towards her, resting her head on Amy's upper arm, and moving her own arm to support Amy's head. When Runner moved still closer and took Amy's right breast in her mouth, Amy twitched in startlement.

Runner looked at Amy, and drew her head back, away from Amy's breast. "What's wrong?"

"Oh... Nothing. Sorry." Runner seemed so matter-of-fact about it, and Amy understood that this was how Runner was used to sleeping. Always. Until her escape. "Your... lips were a little cool."

Runner smiled once more, said softly, "Sorry," and let her lips surround Amy's nipple once more.

Amy felt Runner's forearm, upraised behind Amy's head, gently nudge her closer. Cautiously, hoping she wasn't misunderstanding, Amy opened her mouth to take in Runner's breast, completing the symmetry.

A feeling of warmth and calm spread through Amy's body. She had often sucked Megan's breasts, and vice versa, but Amy had never used this as a sleep-for-the-night position with any of her friends -- not even Linda, who loved variety above all. Amy saw now what she'd been missing all this time. The softness, the comfort...

She could only try to imagine what Runner must be feeling. How much Runner must have missed this.

Amy pictured the pen Runner had grown up in, girls living according to the common wisdom passed down through the generations, such as that when you are suddenly put in charge of a lot of cranky babies, a warm nipple is the best possible pacifier, even when it doesn't give milk.

The light faded and was gone. In the darkness, with no sounds other than the constant chirping of the crickets, Amy was left with her senses of touch, taste, smell.

Runner's breast smelled pleasantly of leather, the honored remnant of the skin that had covered an unknown woman for a lifetime. Even better, Amy tasted rainwater that reminded her of that first drink she had had on the island, a treasured memory of intolerable thirst quenched.

On her own breast, Amy felt Runner's mouth, a light, constant caress of soft lips. There was an occasional sucking, and sometimes a light brush of tongue on nipple, when Runner swallowed.

Behind the host of pleasant sensations, Amy fretted. A small voice inside her had been telling her to avoid too much intimacy with Runner. There might well come a time, perhaps in the near future, when an opportunity to escape the island would force Amy to leave Runner behind -- Amy had promised Runner she wouldn't do that, but the promise to herself that she would return to the Academy and to her mission in life took priority. And if circumstances turned out to allow Amy to take Runner with her, Amy wasn't sure Runner would even want to leave. As Runner herself had excitedly said, this was her place. Whether a separation from Runner was forced on Amy or resulted from Runner's own choice,

either way Amy knew it would be hard to leave behind a girl to whom she already owed so much -- Amy would right now be the permanent property of a local farmer if Runner hadn't saved her.

As difficult as it was going to be to leave Runner, Amy knew she couldn't afford to make it still harder by developing a close physical connection with the girl. As the much maligned saying went, Can't We Just Be Friends?

Groaning inside, Amy realized it was already too late. The connection was made. Even now Amy couldn't make herself pull away from Runner, break the connection. It felt way, way too good, as starved for human closeness as Amy had been.

She continued sucking softly on Runner's breast as sleep stole over her.

CHAPTER 20

DAY 9

Amy lay on her stomach, her chin on the backs of her hands, watching Runner, about fifty feet in front of her, crawl a little closer to her goal, the cabin just beyond her. The rare blue sky above her did nothing to lighten Amy's mood. She couldn't shake the black cloud hovering over her that owed nothing to local weather phenomena.

She was conscious of the discomfort from resting atop the vines wrapped around her waist. Mostly her hanging vine. She hadn't practiced hanging since meeting Runner. She wasn't sure why she couldn't make herself do it. Why her mind shied away from even thinking about it.

The morning after that first night with Runner, Amy had awakened with a feeling of determination. I have help now, she'd told herself. Yesterday Runner was resisting the idea of crossing the mountains, but I know I can talk her into it.

Amy had tried. But as her coaxing turned into pleading, it had provoked... not their first disagreement, since they'd been over this same subject before, but the first one that rose to the level of a fight. Runner refused to believe in Amy's description of the land across the mountains, pointing out, sensibly enough, that Amy had already admitted she'd never been there, nor so much as seen it. With both of them becoming more upset by the minute, Runner at last had waved her arms, as if symbolically pushing the subject away, and had told Amy that she didn't want to talk about it anymore. That she didn't want to stay with Amy if Amy kept wanting her to fall over the end of the world.

Amy had sucked in a quick breath and shut her mouth tightly, her heart pounding as hard as when she'd met the doggirls. She was terrified at the thought of Runner leaving her.

Amy had intended to practice hanging immediately after breakfast, and for the first time encountered that internal resistance to the idea. Meanwhile, Runner had immediately proposed a raid on the nearest cabin. Eager to seem agreeable and restore their relationship to a friendly level, Amy had gone along, accompanying Runner to a point as near yesterday's farm as she dared to come, waiting then until Runner returned with several strips of girlmeat jerky and a vest for Amy. Amy had thanked her very much but explained why she couldn't wear it. Runner, looking disappointed, had suggested Amy could use it for cover when the hard rain returned. Amy, who somehow hadn't thought of that, thanked her again and hugged her.

All through the next two days, Amy had awaited an opening that would allow for a resumption of the discussion of a mountain crossing. She knew she couldn't open up the subject herself, but thought it was possible that circumstances might arise that would lead a conversation in the appropriate direction. As time had passed, though, it became clear that the days would have a certain monotonous regularity that frustrated Amy's hopes, consisting of raids, during which Runner left Amy behind waiting for hours, followed by escapes, walking on towards another farm, resting, eating, and little else. Amy and Runner were clearly friends again, but conversation of any sort seemed to lag, due to Runner's limited knowledge of any wider world, her lack of curiosity about Amy's life if it meant discussing anything beyond the island, and Amy's fruitless waiting for just the right time to suggest a foray beyond the mountains without making Runner mad again. Runner seemed patient with Amy's slow progress as they

traveled, but underneath the surface, Amy could read an irritation in Runner at having to move slowly enough for Amy to keep up.

Amy's mood went steadily downhill. By the end of each day, she needed badly the comfort of their nighttime sleeping position. There was a softness and warmth to it that allowed Amy to blank out her thoughts and simply feel.

But then day would return, and with it, a growing certainty within Amy that she would never leave the island. The Academy was gone from her life. Her friends, all of the people she loved, were gone from her life. And her dream of a wonderful hanging, one just like Miranda's hanging. It was gone.

Lying on the ground now, her third full day with Runner, her -- she had to stop and think... her ninth on the island -- the feeling of being trapped rolled over Amy. She *was* trapped, she knew it. She couldn't get home by herself. She needed Runner's help. Runner wouldn't help.

Amy suspected Runner would not carry out her threat to leave, but she couldn't be sure. They both needed each other, but in different ways and in different degrees. Runner's need for Amy was purely emotional. She had been so terribly lonely, trying to survive by herself without the girls she had grown up with and loved. Amy, of course, knew exactly how Runner felt, but her own need had an extra ingredient. Without Runner to provide the protection of appearing to own Amy, Amy would inevitably be caught, as she nearly had before. Amy would eventually stumble into a farm and be spotted by doggirls again, and it would be all over.

Amy couldn't dare leave Runner, and that was the nature of the trap. Runner was tied to the wrong side of the island, and held Amy there in exactly the same way one of the mechanical traps would.

Tears began streaming from Amy's eyes. Her shoulders heaved, and she had to struggle to keep from giving voice to her anguish, so close to the farmers' cabin.

* * * * *

Amy had cried herself out by the time Runner returned. Runner, with a delighted grin, signaled for Amy to follow her, in a moderate rain, as she continued away from the farm. Amy followed listlessly.

At a sufficiently safe distance, Runner turned to reveal her treasure: a large slab of cooked girlmeat -- not jerky, a real steak. Amy's spirits rose at the sight of it. Looking nervously behind her, Amy suggested continuing on for the time being, to put a greater distance between themselves and the farm.

After another twenty or so minutes, they stopped within a small grove of nut trees, beside a flowing stream. Amy, as was her habit, swept her hands along the muddy ground, feeling for traps, then sat with a sigh.

She spread her leather vest, which she had been carrying with her -- not bothering to use it to shield herself from the rain, which wasn't really coming down hard enough to concern her -- and Runner set the meat down on the vest, reaching into her bag to retrieve a knife, an implement Amy hadn't seen before, obviously the booty from an earlier raid. Amy watched as Runner cut the meat, carefully making sure the pieces were of equal size, handing one to Amy.

Amy bit into the meat while Runner was shrugging out of her clothes -- Runner usually stripped at the first opportunity.

The meat tasted wonderful to Amy, if a bit salty. Obviously the farmers made use of nature's original preservative, readily available from the ocean.

Runner sat down to start her own meal. "I don't get very many big pieces like this. Mostly just that little tough stuff."

"It was just sitting out there?"

"It was in... I don't know a word for it." She looked at Amy hopefully, no doubt eager for some more "teachinging."

Amy put the meat down. This can't last, she told herself. Runner's going to get tired of doing everything for me, without me doing anything in return -- I can't go on a raid, I can't even get close enough to a farm to serve as a lookout -- and she's going to get tired of waiting for me while I plod along behind her.

Suddenly the tears came back. Amy felt the loss of her world more strongly than ever. She buried her face against her knees, sobbing.

She was aware of Runner suddenly in front of her, cooing softly, wordlessly, gently rubbing her knees, then pulling them apart, kneeling now between her legs, pulling Amy's head gently towards her breasts.

Amy opened her mouth and sucked on Runner's left breast. She's treating me like one of the babies, Amy told herself. I guess I *am* like a baby. I'm that helpless, and that useless. And it does feel nice, just letting her comfort me with warmth and softness.

Amy pushed herself away, suddenly. It was as though a dam had just broken in her mind, long-withheld thoughts flooding through. Sternly, an inner voice told her, Amy, you are *not* a baby. You are a Hanging Girl. You are one of the *best* Hanging Girls. You are the Hanging Girl the rest of the Hanging Girls look to for advice. For encouragement. For help. Amy, it's time to be who you *are*!

Runner was trying to draw Amy back to her breast. Amy pushed her away, shaking her head. "I don't need that. Runner... I want to show you something."

Amy palmed the tears out of her eyes and stood up. Without another word, she began untying the braided coil of vines around her waist.

Runner looked up at her, worried. "Amy, you need that to stay out of traps."

"I'll leave that part on. I need this part, I really need it, but not for that."

Amy looked around for a fallen log in the right place... there, there's one. She walked as quickly as she could in her tiny steps over to it.

"Amy? What are you doing?"

The rain had diminished to a heavy mist. Amy was glad there would be no rain distracting her for this, her first performance for an audience in -- it seemed to be forever. She quickly tied the hangman's knot, throwing the other end of the vine over an overhead branch. She stepped up onto the log and tied the vine to the branch. "Runner, you were right about me being a teacher, but that's only part of it. I want to show you what I do."

"What you do when?"

"I mean, this is my place. I'm going to show you what my place is. This is something I spent a long time learning to do. To make people happy. To make them excited. To make them horny." Amy wasn't sure Runner understood the last adjective, and maybe the one before it, but she surely knew what the first one meant. And, Amy told herself, she's about to figure the others out. Amy pulled the noose down over her head, around her neck, adjusting it.

"Amy, I don't get it."

Runner started to walk towards her, but Amy held up her hand, and smiled. "Just watch. Don't do anything else. Don't come here and try to help me or anything like that. Only watch."

Beneath her excitement, Amy was angry with herself. She knew, now, why she hadn't hanged herself in front of Runner. Everything about Amy's world was so alien to Runner, and Amy had been afraid Runner wouldn't understand, wouldn't see the performance as being sexual, as being arousing, wouldn't see any sense in it at all, and that would hurt Amy at the very core of her being -- it would be a rejection of Amy as a Hanging Girl. The fear of that rejection, though barely conscious, had been controlling Amy for days. She berated herself furiously -- Amy, you were so worried about that rejection, you rejected *yourself* as a Hanging Girl.

I am what I am, Amy told herself. If Runner doesn't understand it, fine. But I'm going to show her what I am.

Closing her eyes, taking a moment to settle her breathing, Amy clasped her right hand firmly around her left wrist and stepped off the log.

A glorious feeling of release bubbled to the surface within her, stronger than she had ever felt it. She barely even had a sense of the vine around her neck supporting her. It felt more as if she was flying, gliding on air currents above the clouds. Automatically she began cycling through the practice regimen she had established in the past week.

Consciousness of her audience returned suddenly. Runner, she reminded herself, is very focused on the breasts. Probably all of the girls from the pens are. That may be a primary area of sex play, or at least a very common one.

Amy concentrated more than the usual amount of attention on her breasts, timing the flexing of her shoulder muscles to make them bounce, adjusting her kicking so they would sway and jiggle more. She performed her hip thrusts automatically but downplayed them slightly, knowing Runner might not be that familiar with male sexual techniques, though she might have seen farmers and their slavegirls

together since her escape. Instead, she worked more on hip rotation, presenting her pussy to view, as if to be fingered or licked, as a female partner might do for her.

She had not been watching Runner at first, but now kept an eye on the girl when movements allowed. Runner was standing and staring, one hand in her crotch, the other cupping and kneading her breast. Amy began using Runner's reactions as a gauge to tell her which of her motions should have greater emphasis.

After about fifteen minutes, Amy was beginning to tire. She could, she judged, perhaps have gone on another ten, but there was no reason. She reached above herself, taking hold of the branch to steady herself, and stepped back up onto the log.

She looked at Runner, giving her a smile. It took her a moment, after Runner did not smile back, to notice that, in addition to her facial muscles, no other part of Runner's body was moving either. The girl stood as still as a statue, an unlikely one sculpted in a slight crouch, one hand between her legs and the other on her breast.

Amy loosened the noose, pulled it off and hopped down from the log. As she approached Runner, Amy was relieved to see Runner's eyes and head were tracking her as she moved. Good, thought Amy, she hasn't gone completely catatonic, at least.

Runner suddenly unfroze, her hands dropping to her sides, and though her eyes remained wide, they were now fully focused on Amy's. As Amy reached her side, the girl said in a tight, breathy voice, "Amy, I have to do that, I have to do that!" Amy had just one more second to look into Runner's fully dilated eyes, before Runner burst into motion, dashing past Amy towards the log and overhanging noose.

Amy spun. "Runner, wait! It's dangerous..."

Runner was already up on the log. "I have to!"

"I was just trying to tell you you need to wait for me!" Oh, wow, thought Amy, I never thought about *this* happening. I've created another Kathleen! Or, well, another me.

Amy shuffled as quickly as her chain allowed over to the log and Runner. "You can do it, but I have to help you, Runner. I don't want you to get hurt."

Runner, holding the noose but not yet putting it over her head, nodded vigorously. "Teacher me this, Amy."

Amy couldn't help smiling. "It's 'teach,' Runner. I'm a teacher, and I teach things. And what I was doing is called 'hanging.' "

Runner was still nodding. "Teach me hanging. Please?"

"Okay, okay. Just give me a little time." Keeping one eye on Runner, Amy looked past her to the nearby trees. Okay, there's one. She held up her hand. "We're going to do this, Runner. Just wait a little bit. Stay right there. I need to get something first."

Amy shuffled to the tree, picked up a rock, and used it to cut off about three feet of vine running up the trunk, remembering belatedly that there was a knife lying just ten yards away that would have made the job easier. She came back to Runner. "Put your hands behind your back, like I had mine. I just had to hold my hands there, because I didn't have anybody to do this for me. But you can be hanging the right way."

Amy quickly tied Runner's wrists together with the vine, then hopped up beside her on the log. She put the noose over Runner's head, adjusting it carefully. "Don't step off. Don't do anything. I'll help you. If you just jumped off it would be really dangerous. Wait for me."

Even lost in this hinterland, where it was unlikely that she or Runner would ever contact anyone from the mainland, Amy firmly reminded herself not to give away anything the Academy considered secret. But, Amy decided, there's no problem with Runner getting a feel for hanging. People do it all the time, with no training at all. Amy put her hands firmly on Runner's hips to steady her. "Okay, just really slow... bend your knees a little... like that, now a little more. Lift your feet up..." As Runner's feet left the surface, Amy gave her a gentle push away from the log, to hang just in front of it.

Runner immediately started kicking -- random, purely novice kicks -- twisting slightly to the right. For the first few seconds she struggled wildly to get her hands loose, but then, to Amy's amazement, calmed down, mainly kicking. Amy had intended to let her swing for thirty seconds, but, sensing no significant panic in Runner's movements, let her go another fifteen before clasping her hips again, saying softly, "Okay, stop kicking, stop, stretch your legs down..." She pulled her back. "There's the log. Stand on it now."

Standing, as Amy loosened the noose, Runner's face was flushed and glowing with excitement, and words came tumbling out of her. "I could do it longer, Amy. But I couldn't breathe! How did you do it so long? And I couldn't do those things you were doing. Can you teach me to do that?"

Amy frowned, as a debate began raging inside her about how much she could tell this girl who was so desperate to learn. Then she gasped as her thoughts suddenly changed direction entirely. This is what I needed! This is it! This is it!

She looked into Runner's eyes. "Runner, I can teach you some things, but I can't do it all by myself. It takes more than one person. We need to go to the Academy. That's where I learned to do this. There are a lot of girls who do it like me, and we all work together, we help each other, and that's how we get so good at this." She reached down to untie Runner's hands. I am, Amy reminded herself, telling her the absolute truth. They say the truth shall set you free.

Runner now used the vine as a handhold to steady herself -- Amy could see her knees were shaking -- and gave Amy a still more intense look. "Take me there! Take me to the Academy! Please, Amy? Take me where those other girls are." Again, Runner said the new word in Amy's accent, not her own.

Amy took both of Runner's hands in hers, and looked into her eyes. "I will try, Runner. But remember, I need you to help me." Amy took a deep breath. She has to be reminded of this sometime, Amy told herself, and it might as well be now. "We have to get over the mountains. The high ground. And after that, we still have to find a way to get back to the Academy. That won't be easy."

Runner was already nodding -- to Amy's amazement, Runner was acting as if Amy was stating the obvious.

Amy felt herself floating again, this time without the benefit of the noose. Home, the Academy, was within reach again! She threw her arms around Runner and kissed her.

Runner's lips, Amy noticed, didn't move against hers. Amy backed away slightly, enough to see that Runner had her puzzled face on again. Runner asked, "Why did you do that?"

Nothing could dampen Amy's mood, but she didn't want to seem to be laughing at Runner. She took a deep breath to hold back the giggles, grinned, and said, "That's a kiss, Runner. Friends kiss to show they're happy to be with each other." Reasonably accurate, Amy decided as she played back her explanation in her head. Amy felt as surprised as Runner seemed. She'd just seen Runner masturbating, and felt positive Runner must have had some sexual experiences, growing up in the breeding pen. Somehow, it appeared, face to face contact had dropped out of the erotic playbook over the generations of isolation. Amy had read that there are cultures in which kissing is unknown. Anything, in fact, not directly related to reproduction might be discarded. Sexual preferences are very flexible.

Runner grinned and returned Amy's hug. She pressed her lips against Amy's briefly, and said, "I like to be with you, Amy." She suddenly turned, grabbed one of Amy's hands, said, "We need to go to the Academy!" and leapt down from the log. She took two sprinting steps before Amy, unable to keep up, went sprawling headlong, tripped once more by her chain. Amy barely felt it. Laughing, she looked up at Runner and waved her arm at the hanging vine, Runner's bag, Runner's clothes scattered on the ground. "Let's at least gather our things together. And finish eating. Okay? We're going, but we need some stuff."

* * * * *

The light was fading when Amy and Runner, following the river upstream, arrived at the geological discontinuity where the forest ended and the mountains began. Light rain was falling. Amy wasn't sure whether the darkening meant the sun was going down behind the impenetrable cloud cover, or another storm was coming in, but she believed it was late afternoon. Going entire days without seeing the sun, Amy found, forced one to rely more heavily on internal time sense. Her body was suggesting a stop for dinner, followed by a night's sleep.

The natural rock wall serving as the forest/mountain boundary was about five feet high here. Runner immediately began hoisting herself up to the higher level, until Amy stopped her. Amy sat down, gesturing to Runner to sit with her.

"Okay, here's what we have to do," Amy began. "We're going to see other people soon, and they're going to see us. We have to make sure we don't look... strange. You look like a boy -- that's a little man, a boy grows up and later he's a man -- and I look like I'm your slave."

"What's a slave?"

"That's what they call the girls who are serving men. So I was saying, maybe it's okay for a boy and a slave to be walking together, with nobody else around. But maybe it's not. If somebody thinks we don't

look right, they will talk to us, and we might not answer them right. I don't think I'm supposed to talk at all, and you might say the wrong things, because you don't know very much about them yet."

Runner was nodding, visibly concentrating on Amy's explanation. "So we need to watch them for awhile. Like right after I ran away."

Amy nodded. "Yes! First we need to find the trail over the mountains -- the place where people walk up the mountain and down. Have you seen that?"

Runner nodded. "I thought they just lived close to the edge."

"Do you know which way that is from here?" With all their wanderings in the last few days, Amy had lost track of where she had been before. Runner shook her head blankly, and Amy said, "That's okay, we'll find it. For now, let's eat something."

Runner nodded and pulled the remnants of the girlmeat out of her bag, handing a piece to Amy. Amy smiled. "It's really nice being able to eat girlmeat again."

Runner asked, "Why is it called..." then stopped suddenly, her eyes widening. "Are we eating girls? But this was always in our food! You mean we get to eat girls too? Not just the men?"

Amy took another bite. "Runner, women are for *everybody* to eat."

Runner bounced excitedly on the ground. "Then girls could eat me! I want girls to eat me." She looked at Amy. "Amy, I want *you* to eat me."

Amy felt very touched. "If it works out that way, I'd love to eat you. Or you could eat me."

Runner nodded eagerly, and took another bite, chewing with a new satisfaction.

They finished off their meal with peaches, and a drink from the stream, where it fell down the wall in a tiny waterfall. It seemed still darker now. "Runner, I think we'd better stay here for the night."

Runner nodded, instantly peeling off her clothes. Amy, after her usual check for traps, unwound the vines from around her waist and coiled them neatly on the ground. She treated the vines with respect, knowing they had not only saved her from traps, but had provided the reason Runner was now helping her get home. But the irritation of having them constantly rubbing her skin made her eagerness to be as naked as possible nearly equal to Runner's.

Runner knelt and brushed her hand lightly, almost worshipfully, on the vines. "We can find the... trail, in the morning?"

Amy nodded. "First thing."

Runner's eyes lit up. "Can I do hanging again?" Her hand closed around the braided vine that served that purpose.

Amy had spent considerable time during the afternoon thinking about this. While she was not allowed to give an outsider Academy instruction, there was no reason she couldn't get Runner caught up on necessary everyday facts that everyone knew in Amy's world. "You want to learn to do it better than you did before, right?"

Runner nodded emphatically.

"I can help you do that. We can do a lot more, me and the other girls, when we get back to the Academy, but there are things I can teach you right now. We won't have time to hang you tonight..." Amy saw Runner's instant frown, "...but I can teach you things about it, and we won't even need light. Do you want to start?"

Runner nodded again.

"Okay, take a deep breath, really slow." Amy demonstrated. Runner blinked, and followed her example. Amy went on, "You're taking air into your body. Air is all around us. You can't see it, but you can feel it when the wind blows. That's air pushing on you. It shakes the leaves on the trees. You need air, just like you need food. Even more than food.

"When you breathe the air in, it comes in through your mouth or your nose, and it goes down into you through a space that's right in front of your neck." She put her finger lightly on Runner's throat. "Can you still breathe when I do this?" She braced the sides of her hands on Runner's shoulders, put her fingers on the back of Runner's neck, and pressed hard.

Runner said, "I can breathe."

Amy shifted her hands, the heels of her palms now at the front of Runner's neck, her fingers along the sides. She pressed hard against the front.

Runner's eyes grew wide, her face red. When Amy released the pressure, Runner gasped, and said, "That's just like when I was hanging!" She raised her hand up to the front of her throat. "So it's just here, that one place?"

Amy nodded. "For the air, yes."

Runner sat back, silent for a moment. To Amy, it looked as though Runner was visualizing something. Runner suddenly looked at Amy, her eyes wide. "So maybe if I tried hard to look up while I'm hanging, I could make that one place loose and I could breathe!"

Amy suppressed a gasp. She hadn't imagined Runner would jump to the basic idea *that* quickly. She nodded. "Yes, but there's more."

She explained about the blood going up to the head -- Runner knew what blood was, but not its purpose -- the blood carrying the "food" that the air had brought in. She had Runner hold her hand over her heart, explaining that her heart was pushing blood around inside her with each beat. She pressed her hands against Runner's carotids, and kept them there. Runner, though still able to breathe, grew faint quickly.

After Amy released her grip, Runner bounced on the ground excitedly. "So I need both! I have to get air through here..." she brushed her fingers downward on her throat, "...and the air goes into the blood, and the blood comes up through here..." brushing upward on both sides of her neck, "...and feeds my head! And the... what did you call it, that I hang on?" She touched the vines on ground.

"It's a vine. We use ropes at the Academy, but this was all I could find here."

Runner nodded. "When I'm hanging, the vine squeezes everything and stops it. But..." She frowned, thoughtfully. "I could tip my head back, and get the front of the vine loose, but I can't get all those parts loose at the same time." She looked eagerly at Amy. "Amy, can I watch you hang again?" She looked around and frowned again. "It's getting too dark to see you. I want to watch you when I can see you."

Amy looked around herself in surprise. She'd been concentrating so hard on her "lesson" that she had barely noted her surroundings. Now she could barely see them. She nodded. "Tomorrow."

Completely unexpectedly, Runner slipped her arms around Amy's waist, leaned forward and pressed her lips against Amy's. Noting Amy's wide-eyed surprise, Runner asked, "Is that okay? You said I should kiss you when I feel this way."

Amy began tingling in a way she hadn't in all her time on the island. Breathing more deeply, she answered in a soft voice, "It's more than okay, Runner."

She kissed Runner, and Runner, after a moment, began moving her lips in imitation of Amy's, following each move Amy made -- turning her head more to the side, opening her mouth, nibbling softly on Amy's lips with hers. After a time, a soft whimper at the back of Runner's throat told Amy that Runner now understood another purpose of kissing besides demonstrating friendship.

In complete darkness now, Amy felt, rather than saw, Runner shift her body, turning her head to the side and down, to lick Amy's shoulder, and felt Runner's hands begin roaming up and down her sides, her back, cupping her breasts momentarily, as she moved her head down further, her tongue running down Amy's side. Runner's licking was nothing like Holly's feathery kiss-licks. She used her tongue more the way an animal would -- different animals at different moments, sometimes using just the tip, more often the full, wet surface, lapping at Amy's skin. Her hands and, Amy realized now, even her feet were participating, the soles of her feet rubbing Amy's lower legs. Amy could hear Runner making a breathy, voiced sound, halfway between a grunt and a sigh.

Those observations were her last continuous rational thoughts for some time. All of the need within her that had been bottled up, without outlet, for more than a week, all of the longing for the touch of her friends, all of it burst forth at once, and now it was Amy imitating Runner, following Runner's lead, touching, licking, rubbing. And Amy realized, in one of her brief instants of conscious awareness, that half of the animal grunts were her own.

Licking farther down Runner's stomach now, past her navel, finding spots along the way whose stimulation made Runner gasp and shiver, crying out as Runner's tongue found similar spots on her. Both of them shifting to the ground to lay side by side, hands and feet still roaming over each other. Amy's mouth finding its way between Runner's legs now, tasting the slight uriny tang on the hair guarding the soft folds of skin there, and the familiar taste of female arousal. Amy's own thighs clamping

against Runner's ears, quivering and moaning over what Runner's tongue was doing down there, feeling Runner's hands kneading her buttocks, Runner using her grip there to force her tongue deeper into Amy.

Amy hadn't noticed the rain was falling harder, and barely reacted to the lightning, each flash engraving in her memory a visual image, too brief for motion, of Runner's buttocks on either side, the skin wet and shiny in its coating of rainwater, and thousands of suspended raindrops, each frozen in place and glowing in rainbow colors in that instant.

...a sudden explosion inside her, silent yet somehow louder than the thunder outside, every fiber of her body quivering, waves of heat and cold pounding through her -- still coming -- still coming -- going now, subsiding, waving goodbye, leaving her drained in their wake.

Feeling as if she'd run a mile at top speed. Feeling the hot breath on her inner thighs expelled by Runner's laboring lungs. Both girls exhausted, limp.

Okay, Amy said to herself, too drained to giggle. I know how they have sex in the pens now.

CHAPTER 21

DAY 10

Amy awoke feeling, for the first time on the island, almost as if she were back at the Academy, with another girl's head between her legs, and her own head between the girl's, the way she had awakened so many times at school. The momentary flash of joy quickly subsided, as she recalled where she was. Some of the feeling hung on, though, and she realized how close to Runner she was beginning to feel.

Runner began stirring, stretched, and separated from Amy, but quickly gave Amy a warm hug as they sat up. "I'll go get some nuts."

She stopped to do something Amy was working hard to get used to: she squatted and began peeing on the ground. Amy had decided to try not to seem uncomfortable with it. She, after all, had found herself needing to do the same in front of Runner over the last few days, as an easier alternative to explaining the tradition of privacy to Runner, knowing it wouldn't make much sense to her. And maybe, thought Amy, it is more a matter of boundaries than privacy. Through their years together, Megan had often come into the bathroom for one reason or another while Amy was using the toilet, and vice versa, and neither of them had given it a thought after the first few times. But with Megan and Amy, or any other roommates at school, that kind of thing was a matter of each accepting the other inside the boundaries that strangers had to stay outside. With Runner, it seemed a matter of never having had the boundaries to begin with, and that concept would be even harder to explain to Runner than the privacy she had never experienced. Amy shuddered at the vision of Runner piddling in the middle of an Academy hallway. There are so many things, Amy thought, that Runner is going to need to learn when we get home.

It occurred to Amy that her thoughts of the Academy, now, always included bringing Runner along when she returned there. It was increasingly hard to imagine leaving her behind.

Minutes later, dropping the last shattered shell on a pile of similar fragments, Runner asked eagerly, "Amy, can I watch you hang now?"

Amy smiled, swallowing the last of her breakfast of nuts. Now that she felt free to hang again, she'd been looking forward to giving another demonstration. She stood and put on the single vine that she had come to think of as her "trap protector," not wanting to walk any distance without it, picked up the braided vines she used for hanging, and began looking for an appropriate fallen-log-and-branch configuration. Finding one, she tied the noose onto the branch.

Standing on the log, adjusting the vine with the noose hanging down at head level, she shook her head when Runner asked if she wanted the short vine tying her hands, as Amy had tied Runner's yesterday. "Not this time, but maybe later. With my hands tied, I'd want you standing next to me to help me when I finish. This time I just want you to stand back so you can see how I do it." Amy still had, would always have, that resistance to directly describing the techniques of hanging to a non-student, but there was no problem involved with anything Runner might pick up simply from watching Amy hang.

As Amy stepped off the log and started her kicking, she could see she'd been right. Runner's concentration was intense, and she was looking exactly where hanging audiences so rarely did. For the

most part, people watching a hanging were enthralled by the sexually charged wriggling and kicking of the girl hanging -- even more so since Megan had introduced her special brand of choreography, and Shawna, Jana, Melissa, and Holly had begun adding to it. It was like the way a magician performed tricks, directing the attention of the audience away from the clever sleight-of-hand that left them stumped and amazed afterward. Obviously nothing was really preventing anyone seeing a hanging from watching the girl's head closely. It was just that there were so many other interesting places to be looking.

But here was Runner, her eyes unblinkingly fastened on the movements Amy was making with her head. Not masturbating this time. Runner must have known, after last night's talk, that Amy must have a way of freeing up the windpipe and carotids, and was determined to see what it was. And she had known where she needed to be looking.

About halfway through Amy's performance, Runner's hands suddenly clenched, and a big grin spread across her face. For the rest of Amy's time aloft, she could see Runner, still watching raptly, making tiny, probably unconscious movements of her own head in time with Amy's.

As soon as Amy stepped back onto the log and began taking off the noose, Runner came to her quickly, saying almost breathlessly, "I get it, I get it, Amy! Can I do it now? Let me do it again!"

Minutes later, watching Runner squirming in midair as the vines held her up by the neck, Amy shook her head in amazement. Runner, of course, had a long way to go, but she was doing things that many of the beginning First Years could only do after Amy or another teacher had given them a week of classroom instruction first. Runner had needed a visual demonstration such as Amy gave the students, but she hadn't needed the verbal explanations, other than those about how the body works. Amy, now, for the first time, thought Runner could bring something very special to the Academy. Like Megan. Like Holly.

Amy let Runner go a full minute. Afterwards, Runner seemed ready to float away with happiness. As soon as Amy untied her hands, Runner threw her arms around Amy and kissed her, a much better, more practiced kiss than her first one yesterday. "I breathed a little, Amy! And I don't feel dizzy like I did last time! Can I try it again?"

Amy couldn't suppress a grin at the girl's excitement. "Runner, we really need to get going. I want to find that trail today. We need to find a way back to the Academy..."

"Yes!! The Academy! Let's go, Amy."

At least Runner didn't try to drag Amy along this time. She immediately began gathering her clothes. As Runner began dressing, Amy noticed, for the first time, the bloodstain on the inside crotch of Runner's shorts. Of course! Amy somehow hadn't thought of periods, not having had one of her own in years, nor knowing any other girl among the Academy students who did -- all of them were using the Academy's contraceptives. Amy stopped Runner before she pulled the shorts on, and indicated the stain. "You bleed sometimes, right?"

Runner looked at her in surprise. "Don't you? Everybody does that when they get old enough."

“Oh, sure.” Amy decided the time for explaining the effects of the contraceptives, or why men didn’t have periods, would come later, like so many other things. “But I was just going to ask, how many times have you done it, after you ran away?”

Runner bit her lip, thinking back. “Since then? Three times, I think.”

Okay, Amy thought. Useful info in a lot of ways. Runner has been out here on her own two to three months, she told herself. To Amy it was encouraging that Runner could survive and keep from getting caught for that long -- Amy had been picturing Runner’s time on the loose as being more like a few weeks. And it did pretty much pin down Runner’s age as eighteen, to satisfy Amy’s curiosity. She realized the girls in the pens weren’t taken into servitude exactly on their eighteenth birthdays, if anyone even kept track of when that was. Each age cohort in one of the pens would include girls with several different mothers, born at different times within a period of, probably, a few months. Most likely Runner had escaped within a few months after her eighteenth birthday.

On the other hand, Amy thought, knowing Runner had been out here for years would be nicer still. But three months is very good.

* * * * *

Around late morning, as Amy and Runner were pushing through an especially dense patch of undergrowth, Amy suddenly stopped, squeezed her eyes shut and sighed in exasperation. I’ve been, she told herself, such a complete idiot!

Just ahead of her, Runner stopped and looked back, then turned to look in all directions, instantly alert, whispering, “What is it?”

Amy shook her head. “No, I didn’t see anything. I just thought of how we could make this so much easier. Maybe. We need to get a key.”

“What’s a key?” The word was a little beyond the range of Runner’s vowels, and she pronounced it closer to “kay.”

Amy thrust her wrist forward. “These things are called ‘padlocks.’ The men can take them off, and they use a key to do that.” Amy had no idea whether all padlocks on the island were identically keyed, but it seemed a strong possibility. If a farmer found a runaway slavegirl, it would be easier to unlock her hobble chain, which Amy knew they did on occasion, if the farmer already had a key to it. An even better reason -- surely keys were lost sometimes, and it would be so much easier for the farmer who lost one if he could just drop by a central supply and pick up another. Amy had believed from the first that Andrew had obtained authentic Island slaveware for her, which was manufactured on the mainland, and that would include whatever padlocks the farmers used. So it seemed as though there was a very good chance that, if there was a common key, Amy’s locks could be opened using the same key as for all of the slavegirls.

If I can get a key for these, Amy told herself, I’m as good as home. I can get out of these cuffs and the collar, Runner can get me some clothes, and then we can just be two teenaged boys off on an

adventure, hiking over the mountains and through the countryside to the boat docks on the far side of the island.

Until she'd met Runner, Amy had never given a thought to obtaining a key. She couldn't have imagined a way to do so. Now that she had Runner to steal things for her, it had taken this long for her thoughts to shift in that direction.

"I don't know where they would keep their keys. They might carry them around with them, but they don't really need them very often during the day, so they might just leave them in their cabin." Amy knelt on the ground and carefully drew an outline of a generic key in the mud. Drawing it oversized so she could show detail, she said, "It's really a lot smaller than this, probably about this big." She drew a smaller version about two inches long. "It's made of metal, like the padlock," she went on, teaching Runner a new word to replace "the shiny."

* * * * *

Mid-afternoon, Amy spotted Runner returning from raiding the nearest farmhouse. The huge grin on Runner's face needed none of Amy's reading abilities to interpret. Amy jumped up and hugged Runner. "You got one!"

Runner was ecstatic. "I didn't find one in the first cabin, so I went in another. I looked all over. I found this too." She retrieved a girlmeat steak from her bag. Now that Runner had discovered the kinds of places where farmers stored meat in their cabins, Amy suspected there would be a lot more meat in their diet. Runner's grin widened as she reached into the bag again. She had to fumble around for a moment, as the sought-after treasure had apparently settled down below some of the bag's other contents, but at last she found it. "Here's the kay."

Amy took the key and hugged Runner again. The key, she found, was coated in grease and salt from the girlmeat, so she popped it in her mouth to clean it, and rubbed it between her hands to dry it. She raised her left wrist to try the key in the lock, but found her hand was shaking too badly. She sat on the ground, tried to relax, and attempted it again.

Her heart pounded harder as she saw that it *did* seem to be the right kind of key. Its tip fit perfectly into the keyhole on the padlock. Amy frowned as it slid partway in and stopped.

She pushed harder, and realized something felt wrong. If it was the wrong key, it might go all the way in and fail to turn the tumblers, or it might be blocked by some internal impediment. In the latter case, it should be blocked firmly, not in the mushy way Amy was sensing. Amy continued trying, pushing harder, still meeting with some soft sort of resistance.

Amy withdrew the key and looked at it. Seeing something she couldn't quite account for on its tip, she held it up close to her eye.

There was a tiny glint at the tip that didn't match the rest of the key. It seemed to be a small flake of a different type of metal.

Amy's jaw dropped, her eyes closed, as the puzzle of the key resolved itself in her mind.

The resistance she was encountering was metal shavings jammed well down into the keyhole.

Glumly, she tried the rest of her locks, discovering without surprise that they were all fouled up in the same way. Andrew's last little prank. These locks couldn't be opened.

Amy wondered why she wasn't crying, then told herself, because I knew all along. Among all of Andrew's preparations, this one was kind of a no-brainer.

She heaved a long sigh. Holding the key out to Runner, she said, "It's not going to work. Could you take this back and put it exactly where you found it?" Just in case the locks of the slavegirls were *not* identically keyed, Amy didn't want any slavegirl to face the same problem of unremovable locks that Amy did.

* * * * *

DAY 12

Amy could read, on Runner's face on her return from her latest cabin raid, a smile that said she had met with partial success.

As they walked back to their small encampment beside the rocky step of the forest/mountain break, Runner showed Amy the latest girlmeat steak, and then held out an implement that glistened in the rare sunlight. "I still didn't find the... boltcutter, but is this the right other thing?"

The idea of finding boltcutters in a cabin seemed an extreme long-shot. Amy strongly suspected that a farmer faced with padlocks he couldn't open on a slave just shrugged and said, well then, I'll leave them as is. It was really just a matter of whether the girl's hobble chain could be removed -- Amy didn't think any of the other hardware ever was taken off anyway. Nevertheless she had had Runner look for boltcutters on each raid in the last couple of days, and would continue to do so. But she wasn't going to delay the mountain crossing for it.

But Runner had found scissors, on her first attempt. Amy reached for them carefully, avoiding jabbing herself with the sharp point. She smiled. "This is it." She decided not to try to explain to Runner why scissors were somehow plural.

The need for scissors had just occurred to Amy as she watched the slavegirls laboring to push a wagon up the mountain trail, the first she and Runner had seen together. Amy had known there was a good chance of finding scissors, imported from the mainland, in a farmhouse. All of the slavegirls Amy had seen had their hair trimmed very short, and there surely would be tools around to do the trimming much more easily than the stolen knife Runner had used to cut her own hair down to farmer-length. (It had originally hung down a little below her waist, she'd told Amy.) As with the key and boltcutters, Amy had not been able to find a way to describe scissors to Runner in a purely verbal way, and she had drawn outlines of their shape in the mud, both open and closed, again pointing out they were made of metal.

Amy had not given her hair much thought since realizing early on that it neither helped nor hurt her. She was going to look like a runaway slave on sight in any case, and while her hair's length stood out in contrast to local slavegirl styles, it would only mark her as a long-term fugitive rather than an outsider.

But with Runner to provide cover as her “owner” as they set out to cross the mountains, Amy had suddenly realized that she needed to look *exactly* like a slavegirl, in every way, or risk drawing that close attention that traveling with Runner was supposed to avoid.

Amy sat on the ground, holding the scissors, and tried to force herself to start. I have to do this, she told herself, I really have to, and however bad it ends up looking, the salon can fix it when I get home. There were several girls at the Academy, Amy reminded herself, who kept their hair very short, and the salon helped them style it so it looked really cute. Well, Amy thought, maybe not *quite* as short as mine’s about to be. But it’ll grow out.

With a sigh, Amy lifted up a handful of hair behind her head and began cutting through it.

Runner was watching intently, and after a few minutes, asked, “Can I do it, Amy?”

Maybe that would actually be better, Amy thought. At least she can see what she’s doing, to make it look right. As she handed over the scissors, Amy had Runner touch the point carefully. “Watch out for that, you can really hurt yourself, like the knife. And don’t get your fingers in here while you’re cutting,” she finished, putting one finger between the blades. “I need it to look like the slavegirls we’ve seen.” Runner, frowning in concentration and using both hands to arrange the fingers of her right hand through the handles the way Amy had done, took a large handful of Amy’s hair and tried cutting it, unsuccessfully. Amy told her, “Don’t try to cut so much at once. Try about this much.” She took a strand of her hair between her fingers and held it out towards Runner.

After a few attempts, Runner managed to cut through the strand of hair, and gasped excitedly, “I get it!”

About thirty minutes later, Amy felt her hair with her hand, suppressing a groan. Anybody who knew her, she was sure, was going to say “What the hell?!” when they saw this. She walked to a small nearby pond and knelt to take a look. Wincing, she said to herself, yes, this looks really awful. Her hair varied randomly in length, nowhere as long as two inches. And, Amy saw, it was absolutely perfect for her current needs. She looked, in every way, like a Purity Island slavegirl now.

Amy looked, thoughtfully, at the scissors Runner was still holding. She stood and reached for them. “I want to try something.”

She inserted one of the blades of the scissors within the shackle of the padlock on her left wrist. Gritting her teeth, she pulled up on the handle, the blade’s point aligned along the metal wristcuff for safety. Straining, she tried to lever the padlock open.

With a sudden loud snap, the scissors came free. For just a second, the words Yes! Yes! floated through Amy’s mind, until she saw what had broken. The blade itself had snapped, across its width, the last two inches of it missing... there it was, on the ground, about five feet away. The padlock was intact, barely scratched. A burning sensation on her wrist caught her attention. The sharp remaining stub of the scissors blade had scratched the skin on her inner wrist just above the artery, not quite breaking the skin. Just a little deeper and she could be bleeding out from a slit wrist now, leaving Runner to her own devices once more.

Her heart sinking, Amy told herself she was *not* trying anything like that again. Especially on the lock on her collar. She wasn't about to take a chance on cutting her throat.

Breathing a sigh of relief that at least she hadn't managed to kill herself, Amy sighed, kissed Runner, and said, "Thank you for finding that. Now let's eat some of that meat."

* * * * *

DAY 14

Runner rose up on her knees briefly to see over the rock wall, through the light rainfall, then sat down and shook her head. She and Amy took turns occasionally watching for approaching wagons.

Amy continued surveying the game board, frowning. She couldn't seem to make a move without Runner winning some rocks, either on this turn or the next.

Amy thought of the playing surface, mud with a light coating of standing rainwater, as a "board" out of habit, remembering the board games of her childhood, though in this case she was simply looking at a half-dozen finger-drawn rings in the mud, arranged in a circle, some of them containing marble-sized pebbles and some pebble-free. Yesterday Runner had eagerly introduced the game to Amy, to fill the time between watching the occasional small groups of men and slavegirls traveling up or down the mountain trail.

Runner had loved the game, growing up in the pen, though in recent years she couldn't often find another girl willing to play it with her. She always won. Other than saying she'd learned the game when she was "a little," Runner was unable to tell Amy how old she'd been when she had first persuaded one of the bigger girls to let her play. Knowing how children are, Amy guessed that by the time Runner was five or six and the bigger girls thirteen or fourteen, the older girls might have trusted her to be serious about the game and not simply throw the rocks playfully at other girls. In any case, Runner said that after a time, she had regularly been beating the Big Girls. And she'd never lost to any girl her own age.

Amy sat hunched over, the fingers of both hands pressed against the sides of her head as if she could goose her brain into working harder. I'm a professional school graduate, she told herself. I was number two in my class. I got all A's in high school. I should be able to beat her, at least once anyway. Okay, okay, Runner has had years of practice at this. But it's such a simple game.

It was indeed simple, in the sense that Runner had explained the rules yesterday in five minutes. But strategically it was deceptively complex, like checkers. Amy couldn't see how to set the kinds of traps that Runner kept making her fall into.

A sound made Amy look up, and she rose to her knees. She gestured for Runner to join her. Side by side, they watched from behind the tangle of shrubbery they had set up atop the three-foot step. From the trail, Amy believed, it looked like a normal bush grown up from below, and it gave them sufficient cover to watch the trail without being observed.

Approaching them from beyond the farm co-op that sat directly across from the beginning of the trail, a teenaged boy, judging from his lack of facial hair, was walking, followed by a slavegirl and, trotting

behind her, a doggirl on all fours, presumably on guard for any false move by the slave. The boy was using a long, straight tree branch as a walking stick, and carrying what might be a whip wrapped around his other arm. The slavegirl was the beast of burden for the trip, not surprisingly. She had a bag slung over her shoulder by its strap, of the same type Runner used to carry the various items stolen in raids -- Runner's bag, of course, itself being one of the earliest such stolen items, along with her clothes -- and she was pulling a wheeled cart behind her at the end of a long handle. The cart could better be described as an open basket, and was filled with peaches.

As they drew closer, Amy could see that the girl's wrist cuffs were fastened by chains to the handles of the cart. Unlike the teams of slavegirls pushing the larger wagons, this girl sported a hobble chain.

In nearly four days of watching, this was the second such group Amy had seen, the other having come down the trail from the other side of the mountains. Amy could tell this was a different group, not the same boy and slave as before.

All of the other expeditions had consisted of an older man driving a six-girl wagon, with one or two doggirls riding along or trotting alongside.

Possibly, Amy thought, the larger groups were meeting periodic supply needs for an entire co-op, traveling to one of the trading posts and back to exchange farm products for the supplies. The boy-and-slave groups might be from a single farm, perhaps in quest of a needed farm implement that the co-op lacked and wasn't planning to obtain soon enough. It seemed to make sense that the farmer would send a boy out on the trip rather than leaving his farm leaderless.

The boys' fathers might have insisted on the accompanying doggirl. The slavegirls were hobbled, so escape wouldn't be easy, but in both cases the slavegirl had been bigger than the boy. They might not be afraid of the boys, and like nearly all of the slavegirls Amy had seen, these looked to have the strength that came from years of hard work. But Amy's observations had suggested all of the slaves were afraid of doggirls.

As an alternative explanation, maybe every boy here had a pet doggirl, and wouldn't think of going on a trip without her.

Runner, her forearms crossed atop the step and her chin resting on them, whispered, "We could be like them. I can get one of those... what do you call it? What that girl is pulling?" She pointed at the trio now making progress up the trail.

"A cart."

"Cart. I can get one. Men leave them next to the cabins. We can take one and fill it with peaches, and then we can go up the trail."

Amy hadn't been ready to suggest that when she'd watched the first such group yesterday, but seeing a second one confirmed that it wasn't unusual for a boy and slave to travel together. She bit her lip and whispered back, "Except it looks like we'd need a doggirl too. Every group we've seen always has doggirls, even little groups like this." Amy knew she and Runner couldn't afford to attract *any* undue attention. If the lack of a doggirl in a traveling party raised eyebrows...

“Doggirls like me.”

“Because you’re wearing clothes. But even if they like you, I don’t think you could get one to leave the farm for you.”

Runner was silent for a time, then shifted gears. “That one wagon yesterday had an empty space.”

Amy nodded. She knew Runner meant that she could approach another such wagon and volunteer Amy’s services to help push.

One of the previous day’s wagons had indeed had just five girls pushing instead of the full complement of six. It seemed to be a temporary condition. There was a sixth slavegirl trailing behind the wagon -- very unhappily. Her wristcuffs were joined behind her, and a chain was attached to them that ran through her legs and was secured to the back of the wagon. Any failure on her part to keep up with the wagon would result in the chain pulling painfully taut through her crotch. She was managing to keep pace, despite wearing a hobble chain the other girls didn’t have, which forced her to take quick, short steps, lifting her feet high on each step so the chain wouldn’t snag on any uneven portion of ground. She was winded, and crying. It was obvious she was being punished for something, most likely not trying hard enough. The other slavegirls looked back to glare at her periodically -- her absence from her post was making all of them work harder.

Amy shook her head slightly. “They might let me push for awhile. Maybe until we could get to the other side of the mountains. But the man would ask you a lot of questions you don’t know the answers to. Things *I* don’t know the answers to. Like, you can say we want to get to the trading post, but I’m not sure if *they* call it that. Oh, and he’d want to get my chain off if I’m going to push.” She reached down and jingled it.

“We can say we lost the key.”

“It’s probably pretty easy to get another. He’d know that. And he’d probably still wonder where our doggirl was.”

“So let’s go get one.”

Amy closed her eyes. “Runner, it’s not like taking a piece of meat. You can’t just stuff a doggirl in your bag, or expect her to stay quiet while you’re leading her away.”

Runner turned her head slowly to look at Amy. “Amy, do you want to get back to the Academy?”

Amy gasped, stung. She wanted to return to the Academy so badly that the thought of it occupied every waking second, no matter what else she was doing. But here was Runner questioning her will, questioning her desire to return, as if Runner wanted it more than Amy did.

Amy saw, then, how scared she was. Terrified of making a false move that would lead to her permanent captivity on the island. I’m so afraid of being caught, Amy told herself, that I’m freezing up, just when I need to start taking action.

I may have to take some big chances, she informed herself. The time is getting closer when I have to make some dangerous moves. Either that or get used to spending the rest of my life here.

Taking a deep breath, Amy said, "I want to get home. More than anything I've ever wanted in my life."

Runner simply nodded, and waited expectantly.

Amy closed her eyes and breathed deeply again. As self-sufficient as Runner was, Amy knew the girl was still looking to Amy for leadership.

Amy put her arm across Runner's shoulder, pulled her closer and rubbed her cheek against Runner's. "Okay." She turned and sank down to sit with her back leaning against the rocky wall. "Let's start talking about doggirls. How we can get one."

CHAPTER 22

DAY 16

Amy crouched behind the bush, peering through its branches towards the tiny figure of Runner, far ahead of her on the outskirts of the chosen farm.

They had spent yesterday backtracking to farms more distant from the mountains. It was not clear whether any farmer to date had been alarmed at the loss of any stolen articles -- things were always being misplaced, and "there's a runaway girl from the breeding pens breaking into our homes" would not be the first idea to spring to local minds -- but Amy was uncomfortable with the possibility that she and Runner might set out in plain sight on the approach to the mountain trail carrying stolen articles right in front of the farmers they'd stolen them from.

In any case, Runner had finished, after visits to two farmhouses, gathering the needed items from the short checklist she and Amy had decided on, preparatory to stealing a doggirl and attempting the mountain crossing. After that, they had picked a sufficient number of peaches to fill the basket of their newly-acquired cart. At the end of the busy day, Runner had prevailed on Amy, as she usually did, to "show me another sex way." Amy was starting to run out of favorite positions, but she showed Runner one she and Megan had often enjoyed. With Amy and Runner both sitting upright on the ground, their arms and legs around each other, Amy's right leg over Runner's left and her left under Runner's right, so that they could grind their pussies hard against each other, they kissed with growing passion, grinding with rising fervor... Amy had found, in the past, that the pressure on her pussy, with the movement of both Megan's and her own hips, put just the right pressure on her clit that she could come to orgasm without needing to touch it directly. More than any other position, Amy found it worked best with a partner to whom she felt both very close and very attracted -- mainly with Megan and Linda. And now with Runner.

Afterwards, as they traded kisses more languidly, Runner, flushed from her orgasm, had asked Amy to promise they could do it that way again soon. Amy had smiled and said with mock reluctance, "Oh, okay," as they settled to the ground for a night's sleep in the mutual breast-sucking position, of which Amy was growing very fond. Amy had experienced a few nightmares since being stranded on the island, but so far none when she slept with Runner's breast in her mouth.

Now, watching Runner, Amy took in a quick breath, her heart pounding. Runner was backing towards Amy's position, bent over. Amy couldn't see around Runner, but she assumed... yes, there she was. A doggirl was following Runner's slow retreat, obviously interested in the bite sized chunks of girlmeat and peaches Runner was holding out for her.

It was Amy's hunch, based on the behavior of the doggirls who had earlier menaced Amy until Runner had rescued her, that doggirls were always kept a little hungry during their working hours, the better to keep them in the cranky mood necessary for keeping slavegirls in line. It seemed possible the doggirls might even be more motivated, in that case, to bite a recalcitrant slavegirl's leg, and that the slavegirls were fully aware of the danger of this happening. In any case, this doggirl did seem to want the food Runner was offering her.

As the doggirl came closer, Amy could see she had light brown hair, slightly curly, in the very short style enforced on all females on the island. Rather than a metal collar of the sort Amy wore, the doggirl had a buckle-on leather dog collar, with no lock -- a doggirl had neither the physical ability nor the inclination to remove her collar anyway. She had the leather doggirl booties on her feet -- all four of them -- that Amy had seen before. The girl had a pretty face, and seemed to be fully of mainlander blood, with no hint Amy could see of the islander genes so dominant in Runner -- she looked like any teenager Amy might pass at the mall, laughing with friends, walking fully dressed on two legs rather than trotting naked on all fours. She looked not much older than Runner, if at all, and had probably been working at the farm a very short time. Amy had suggested Runner try to attract the youngest doggirl who came anywhere near her. It seemed to Amy that the most recent additions to the farm's "staff" might not have had time to develop the bonds with other doggirls that would prevent their wanting to leave, and that the newer a girl was on the job, the more likely Amy was to succeed in the behavior-modification experiment she was about to try.

Amy took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. So much depended on what happened in the next few minutes. And it wasn't without its own danger.

When Runner and the doggirl were within about twenty feet of Amy's position, Amy squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to move. She rose to her feet from behind the bush that had hidden her.

The doggirl, seeing past Runner to the unexpected movement ahead of her, froze and glared at Amy, baring her teeth, filed to points like the ones Amy had seen before. A low growl came from the back of her throat. Obviously Amy had no business being here, so far beyond the farm's outer boundaries, and the doggirl was determined to correct the situation.

The girl barked twice, and Amy was amazed again at how authentic the sound was. Of course, as high-pitched as it was, it was really the bark of a dog much smaller than the girl, but slavegirls here had no basis for making that comparison, and to any slavegirl, and now to Amy, it was a sound indicating danger to whomever it was directed.

They were far enough from the farm that no normal conversation would be audible from there, over the background noise of the ever-present crickets, but prolonged barking would be heard and investigated. Amy and Runner had planned for this. Runner knelt quickly beside the girl and said sharply, "Stop!" As Amy had hoped, it worked. Amy assumed that doggirls, trained as they were to obey males, would understand a variety of simple verbal commands, and the word Runner had just used could hardly fail to be one of them. The girl quieted, though she continued growling softly, and made no move to advance on Amy.

Runner offered the girl some more bits of sliced peaches. While the girl was licking the treats out of Runner's hand, Amy reached down quickly, picked up the vest from the pile of clothes beside her and began dressing. The vest was the one Runner had given Amy last week, and it was now supplemented by the standard floppy hat and a bolt of leather fabric Amy could use as a wraparound skirt.

As Amy finished, she saw that the girl was looking at her with the first completely human expression Amy had seen on any doggirl, one of pure puzzlement.

Beside the girl, Runner began undressing -- dropping the hat, kicking away her moccasins, dropping her pants and shrugging out of the vest, and finally unwinding the leather wrap she used to compress her breasts.

The girl looked helplessly back and forth between Amy and Runner. Runner in particular seemed to befuddle her -- the bearer of delicious snacks, previously accepted as a boy, now standing next to her as naked as any slavegirl. The girl made an uncertain "rff" sound, trying to process a situation for which no previous training suggested a response. Any upright-walking person with whom she had contact was either a master or a target. She had had no idea that anyone could change teams.

Runner reached into her bag for more food. As she knelt again beside the girl and held out some meat slices in her hand, Amy came closer, knelt on the other side and began petting the girl. The girl gave Amy that same puzzled look, but let Amy continue stroking her hair and rubbing her back, as she licked food again from Runner's hand.

Amy, encouraged by the girl's reaction to this point, decided it was time to put the second phase of the plan into action. Reaching underneath the girl, she slid her hand slowly down the girl's stomach, to her crotch.

The girl seemed to want to pull away at first, and Amy stopped for a moment. The girl bent her head down and looked between her breasts to see what Amy was doing with her hand. Amy waited, holding her breath, to see whether the girl would run.

She did not. Amy's hand was already close enough to the girl's crotch that she had to be feeling some tingles. She looked up now, straight into Amy's eyes, and made a new sound, something between a puppy-whimper and a sigh of desire.

Amy slid her hand farther down now, gave the girl a moment to get used to the feeling of Amy's hand between her legs, and gently slipped a finger inside her.

Slowly, Amy searched with her finger, feeling the increasing wetness. Where is it, where is it... there!

Amy didn't have to guess whether her finger had correctly located the right spot. The girl's whole body spasmed, and the air went out of her in a single whoosh. She began breathing in rapid, shallow sips, accompanied by that same whimpering sound.

Leaving her hand, and finger, where it was, Amy leaned in closer and softly kissed and licked the girl's neck, just behind her ear. On the opposite side of her, Runner now did the same, and reached under the girl with one hand to begin stroking the girl's breasts in alternation, and playing with the nipples. Amy had decided that, in the absence of knowing exactly what kind of stimulation the girl would find most arousing, a full sensory overload was called for.

It was another of Amy's hunches that no doggirl had ever experienced this level of intense sexual attention. It was apparent that she wasn't a virgin -- no doubt one or more of the farmers had been at her -- and she had probably had oral-genital sexual encounters with other doggirls. But no doggirl was physically capable of doing what Amy was doing, no slavegirl would think of touching her this way, and men probably wouldn't know how even if they were so inclined.

The girl was moaning now, her eyes closed, her mouth open, her hips twitching in a rhythm that matched Amy's finger ministrations, her head bent down to expose more of her neck to Amy's and Runner's tongues.

She cried out suddenly, another fully human sound, and her entire body quivered as a jet of fluids from her crotch soaked Amy's hand. Her stubby forearms could no longer support her and she dropped shakily onto her elbows, breathing in gasps.

When Amy was sure the girl's orgasm was over, she withdrew her finger, knowing that for many girls continued stimulation at this point could be painful, but she continued, with Runner, kissing the girl's neck. The girl, her face red, turned to Amy and licked her cheek, then turned the other way and did the same to Runner, who giggled.

Amy looked at Runner and nodded. The licking was an excellent sign -- the girl had almost certainly never before offered any affection to anyone other than another doggirl.

They both stood, Amy undressing now and restoring her clothes to Runner's bag, while Runner dressed. Runner picked up the bag, and together she and Amy began walking away. It was time to see whether the plan had worked.

Trying not to appear to be looking at the girl, Amy gave a couple of quick looks to the side as she walked. Out of the corner of her eye, Amy could see the stunned expression on the girl's face. Seconds later, with an anxious-sounding bark, the girl came galloping after Amy and Runner.

They both knelt as the girl reached them, offering warm hugs and back rubs as she licked their faces again, wriggling and whimpering with excitement.

It worked, Amy told herself. We've made a new friend.

Runner, laughing again as the girl's tongue lapped against her chin, asked, "Why doesn't she talk, Amy? I never heard any doggirl talk."

Amy, giving the girl a one-handed shoulder massage, said, "You have to learn when you're a baby, Runner. When they took the Big Girls away and you got your littles to take care of, they couldn't talk at first, right?"

Runner nodded. "They mostly just cried. But after awhile they could talk."

"Right. They had to learn, and they really needed to do it when they were babies. It's something special about babies, the way they can learn to do things they see and hear older people doing around them. This girl just grew up around other doggirls like her. She does what they did, but just like her, they didn't talk." Amy had read about cases of people who had grown from infancy to adulthood, or adolescence, in non-verbal environments. Despite efforts of experts, most of them never learned to speak.

It suddenly occurred to Amy that the girl was not, however, truly without language. She actually did have one, though it wasn't as rich as the one Amy and Runner spoke. It was a language of pure emotion, consisting of barks, growls, whines, and any other sounds a dog might make, and she used it to say how

she felt about things happening around her and to her. It was, indeed, the language she had learned as a baby -- no wonder she could do it so well -- and it had been passed down through generations of doggirls, learned from the real dogs with whom the first baby doggirls had lived.

As a Hanging Girl, with her training in reading people, Amy realized she could probably do much better than most people at learning to understand this girl's language.

We need to give her a name, Amy told herself. After a moment's thought, she said, "Let's call her 'Puppy.'" "

"What's that mean?"

"In my part of the world, we have girls that are called puppies. Puppygirls. They walk on four legs just like her..." Amy gave the girl another affectionate squeeze, and decided to leave out explaining to Runner about the surgically implanted tails, "...but they wanted to become what they are. They're really friendly, and they just try to make people happy. I want her to be like that."

"They can't talk either?"

"Well, they can, but they don't. That's part of being a puppygirl. So that's another way they're like her."

Amy sat back a little, and when the girl looked at her, she put her hand to her own chest. "Amy." She reached and touched Runner's shoulder. "Runner." Then she touched the girl's shoulder. "Puppy." She repeated the cycle in a different order, and then a third time, and then said, "Runner?"

Amy smiled as Puppy turned immediately to Runner and licked her face once more. She said, "Amy?" and laughed as Puppy lunged for her to give her a few more licks. Finally she said, "Puppy?" and clapped her hands when Puppy barked, as if calling attention to herself.

She did catch on to that a lot faster than a real dog could, Amy told herself. She's not an animal. She's human. Maybe she'll never speak our language, because she's past that age when she would try to imitate anything we do. But that doesn't mean she can't learn anything.

Amy stood again, and grinned at Runner, who was also rising. "I think we're ready."

With Runner beside her, and Puppy trotting behind, they headed back towards their camp by the mountain trail.

* * * * *

When they arrived back at the camp, where they had left the cart, Amy judged, more from a feeling of the time that had passed than from any useful environmental cues, such as the position of the as-usual-hidden sun, that it must be late afternoon. She was sure it had taken hours for Runner to creep up on the farm, wait for a doggirl to come sufficiently close to entice her away, more time to establish rapport with Puppy, and hours more to return to their base camp at the slow pace always enforced on Amy's movements. Runner was no more interested than Amy in the idea of having to stop partway up the mountain trail to spend the hours of total darkness with a doggirl of uncertain temperament who might

panic at her blindness in such a novel and dangerous environment, where a step in the wrong direction might send her tumbling down the rocky slope. They agreed it would be best to wait for morning.

Amy saw that Puppy was watching closely as Runner, as always when their travels for the day were done, took off her farmer's outfit. Amy stroked Puppy's back in case any calming was needed when Puppy saw Runner as a naked woman again instead of a farm boy, but it appeared that Amy and Runner had been permanently successful in short-circuiting Puppy's training that had told her who was a friend and who was a foe. Maybe, Amy thought, despite Puppy's upbringing having been so alien from anything experienced in Amy's world, the tendency to question, suddenly, everything one has ever known or been taught was just something hard-wired into human teenagers. Lucky for us, Amy told herself.

Amy and Runner ate dinner from Runner's bag, taking turns letting Puppy eat from their hands, after which they played a few more repetitions of Runner's pebbles-in-the-circles game, with the usual result.

As Amy looked over the smoothed-out area on which she and Runner had been sleeping for several nights, she absently back-handed away a twig that had fallen from the overhanging tree into the midst of their bed, then looked up in surprise as Puppy, with a brief bark, sprang after it, picked it up in her mouth, and trotted back to stand in front of Amy with a hopeful expression.

Amy gave the girl an astonished look. She wasn't sure whether games of fetch were instinctive to dogs or a matter of training, but she felt pretty sure they weren't instinctive to humans. Maybe, she thought, a century or so back when doggirls were raised alongside real dogs, men had played the game with the dogs, the doggirls had learned to play along, and then men kept doing it, as the generations went by.

It is going to be really disconcerting, Amy thought, to keep seeing signs of Puppy's humanity in one instant, and then in the next instant see her behave, once more, more like a dog than all but the most dedicated puppygirls. In the case of playing Fetch, Amy wasn't sure she wanted to demean the girl by treating her like a mindless animal. On one level Amy understood the appeal of puppygirls, but personally she had never felt that appeal herself.

But as Puppy stood in front of her, whining hopefully, Amy was less sure it was really demeaning. It certainly didn't seem to be so to Puppy. Puppy was giving the impression that it was an enjoyable game, occupying a place in her heart identical to the pebble game in Runner's.

Amy reached for the stick, and Puppy happily relinquished it. Amy threw it about twenty feet, and with an excited yelp, Puppy turned and raced after it again.

Runner took turns with Amy throwing the stick. Before long, whichever of them had thrown it, Puppy would return it to the other. She's being human again, Amy thought, in the midst of acting like a dog. Puppy had quickly understood that Runner and Amy *wanted* to take turns, and was accommodating them. Amy didn't think any real dog would have caught on that quickly.

At last Puppy dropped the stick at Amy's feet and ran to the nearby stream for a drink. When she returned, Amy had the impression she had something in mind other than continuing the game. She stood before Amy and whined in a different, more breathy way, a small smile curling her lips. She dropped her head and looked under herself towards her crotch, then looked up and whined again.

Amy choked back a laugh. One way or another, thought Amy, she does manage to communicate. "You want sex again, Puppy?"

Puppy had no particular reaction to the never-before-heard word, but whined and looked back between her breasts to her crotch again.

Amy smiled at Runner. "We'd better do her again. We need to stay friends with her." Looking at Puppy again, she said, "Puppy likes sex." Let's see how long it takes to teach her the word, Amy decided. As before, she reached under Puppy's stomach to her crotch, her index finger curling.

CHAPTER 23

DAY 17

Amy stirred in the growing light and was instantly awake. We're crossing the mountains today, she told herself, with a mixture of excitement and dread. By nightfall we could be past the biggest barrier keeping us from the Academy. Or we could make a big mistake within sight of a farmer and be caught and enslaved for life.

For the moment, she didn't want to move. It felt too comfortable. It had taken some time, last night, with darkness falling, to find a position soothing enough for Puppy so that she stayed there quietly. At last Runner and Puppy had settled in, facing each other on their sides, with Puppy's head down at Runner's breast level so she could suck on one. Amy was curled up against Runner's back, her right thigh comfortably squeezed between Runner's, both of them having their right arms draped over Puppy's shoulder, holding hands, their fingers intertwined. Amy wasn't sure exactly what memory from Puppy's past allowed her to lie contentedly with Runner's breast in her mouth. It was possible there were some lactating doggirls, though she hadn't read about that. Runner hadn't been eager to have those teeth anywhere near her breast, until Amy discovered they were less sharp than they looked. The filing had rounded the tips, so that they weren't actually that much sharper than a normal incisor. They were designed to look dangerous, while leaving the girl able to eat without slicing up her own lips.

At last Runner moved and stretched. Amy kissed the back of her neck and sat up, stretching as well. Puppy made a quiet yipping sound, gave Runner's breast a last lick and rolled up to her feet, leaning across Runner to lick Amy's face. Amy laughed and stroked her. That's the only way she's shown us of displaying affection, Amy told herself. Maybe the only one she has. Runner, at first, had used mainly her tongue, but also used caresses, not just with her arms and hands but with her legs and feet as well, something Amy was now doing more of. Each of us has taught the other some things, Amy thought. Wonder if we could teach Puppy some new responses. She's physically a little limited, though.

After breakfast and elimination of wastes -- Puppy, Amy noticed, peed against the base of a tree with one leg upraised, dog-like behavior again, though Amy doubted Puppy was "marking" the tree in the canine sense -- it was time to get ready.

Runner dressed in her usual clothes. Amy reminded her, "The whip, remember."

Runner said, "Oh, right!" and retrieved the whip from her bag, wrapping it around her arm the way they had seen the boy a few days ago carrying his. "What else?"

Amy bit her lip, thinking. "We need to lift the cart up over the step here before we get me tied to it." Amy had seen, in the distance, that there was a ramp cut into the step across from the start of the trail, so that wagons could roll up the three-foot elevation difference between the forest and the road at the foot of the mountains. The ramp, however, was located in the middle of the farm co-op across from the trail, and Amy was leery of passing through farms, too close to too many people.

They watched the road for several minutes, but could see nobody yet on the road in either direction, and nobody on the trail. The road was never crowded at any time, and it was a little early in the morning

to expect much activity. Both of them grunting with the effort, they lifted up the cart, Amy deciding belatedly it would have been easier to empty it of peaches first and then refill it.

Amy lifted Puppy up next, who walked around afterwards, looking puzzled but staying nearby. Taking a deep breath, trying to calm herself, knowing she was, for the first time, exposing herself to easy observation should anyone happen to be looking, Amy climbed up herself, with Runner beside her. Runner draped the strap of the bag over Amy's shoulder, then worked on securing Amy to the cart.

There were short chains attached to the handles of the cart. Amy didn't want to mess with padlocks for which the keys might be lost, so they used vines running through the links of the chains to secure her hands to the handles. From any but the closest distance it looked as though the chains themselves were attached to Amy's wrist cuffs.

Runner gave Amy a questioning look. Amy took another deep breath and nodded. Runner started walking, angling her path towards the road. Amy followed her, as Puppy, full of early-morning energy, pranced around them. Amy hoped it looked like something a doggirl would be doing, and reminded herself that, in fact, if any situation called for Puppy to act like a doggirl, she was certainly qualified.

Minutes later they were at the foot of the trail, starting up its not-quite-gentle slope. Amy, as they began climbing to positions progressively more exposed to view from below, became proportionately more aware of her nudity, revealing as it did her female body in a culture where being female was the most dangerous possible thing to be. Any number of men in the farm co-op directly below could at this instant be giving her at least a passing glance -- the first time, as far as she knew, that any male had seen her in more than two weeks on the island. She couldn't stop herself from hunching her shoulders in a fruitless attempt to hide herself somehow. Since she was not wearing her trap-evading vine tied around her waist, as it was neither needed nor advisable here, she felt all the more uncovered. It had come to feel something like a garment in the time she had been wearing it. It, and the more elaborate vine she and Runner used for hanging practice, were coiled at the bottom of the bag Amy was carrying.

Within minutes, her leg and arm muscles were starting to complain about the amount of work she was doing, climbing the trail, pulling the cart. Her hobble chain was also dragging, for the first time in weeks. Though the trail was impressively smooth, with only slight ruts from who knew how many passing wagons, her chain occasionally was held back by minor projections, and she lifted her feet as she walked, making the climb still more laborious. Amy suspected she was much better off pulling a relatively small cart, peach-laden though it was, rather than pushing one of those heavy wagons. As it was, she could tell she was going to be very tired at the top.

Puppy had settled into following behind Amy. Perfect, thought Amy. That's the way we've been seeing it. There was another chain in the bag that could be used as a leash if necessary. Amy had no idea how Puppy would take to being led by a leash, or how unusual it might appear if they had to use one. Amy hoped it wouldn't come to that.

A moderate rain began when they were about a quarter of the way up. Amy noted it only as an ingredient of the environment, realizing that a few weeks ago she probably would have thought, "Oh, maybe we should wait for a nicer day for this." There were no nicer days, and Amy was thoroughly used to being rained on. It was a relief, actually, as it did a much better job of cooling her than her sweat was

doing. She was actually glad of her extreme haircut, under the circumstances. Two weeks of constantly wet hair, frequently whipped around by the wind in front of her eyes, hadn't been pleasant.

When they reached the level passing area at the halfway point, Runner stopped and reached into the bag, withdrawing several pre-sliced peaches. Puppy had been whining for several minutes, and was most likely thirsty, if not hungry. Runner knelt and fed her several peaches, which appeared welcome. With another handful of peaches she fed Amy, and ate a few herself.

Amy saw, at the base of the trail, a full wagonload pushed by a six-girl team, just beginning the ascent. It shouldn't matter, she decided. They're not going to catch up with us.

She winced as Puppy began whining in a different way, one Amy recognized. She whispered to Runner, "She wants sex. We can't do that here. We've got people watching." She gestured with her head to the wagon down below.

Runner gave Amy a worried look. "What should I do?"

Amy looked at Puppy, and whispered back, "Give her a few hugs and talk to her. Tell her we'll do it later. I don't know if she'll understand, but I think she'll get a feeling we understand *her*."

Runner knelt beside Puppy and gave her a squeeze, stroking her hair, rubbing her cheek against Puppy's, saying softly, "You'll just have to wait awhile, Puppy. Follow us now and we'll be really, really nice to you later." She gave Puppy one last kiss on the cheek, stroked her hair again and stood up. Immediately she resumed climbing the trail, and Amy followed behind her. Looking back, Amy could see Puppy watching them briefly, her lower lip pushed out in a very human sad girlish pout, before she sighed and followed.

* * * * *

The view was breathtaking.

The trail, at its summit, flattened out to form a plateau about thirty feet wide. Ahead, Amy looked down on a rolling sea of green tree-tops, with occasional islands of cleared ground, a few buildings visible surrounding the farmland of the clearings -- more such clearings than Amy could see behind her in an otherwise similar prospect. Beyond that was the deep gray of the ocean, whitecaps of waves near the shore gradually thinning to monochrome sea in the distance. Amy, for the first time, was able to perceive visually her placement on a small, isolated island in a world otherwise containing nothing but unbroken water. As high as she was, Amy could still see no indication of land at the end of the sea. Looking east, Amy's homeland lay two hundred miles in that direction, and its invisibility, beyond water stretching on seemingly forever, brought home to Amy how very far she was from the world she knew. A flash of anger passed through her, at Andrew leaving her here so helpless, endangered, and alone, followed by near despair at how much difficulty still remained in getting to safety.

I'm not alone anymore, though, she reminded herself. I have friends. Andrew never imagined that.

Barely audibly, in an awestruck voice, Runner said, "It's like you said, Amy. The other side of the mountains looks just like where we came from." She pointed. "Is that the water? It looks so different

from up here. I couldn't see so much of it before. It's so... so *big!*" She looked at Amy, gesturing out to sea. "If you go far enough, there's trees and ground again? Where the Academy is?"

Amy nodded. "We'll go there. In a boat."

Runner squinted. "What does a boat look like? Is there one out there?"

Amy squinted as well. "Not right now. Not close enough to see, anyway."

Behind them, Puppy was whining more insistently now. Amy bit her lip. She wasn't sure Puppy would keep following them if she wasn't getting what she needed.

Amy could see the team of slavegirls following them, trudging up the slope. Amy and Runner had easily outdistanced them, and the wagon hadn't reached the halfway point yet. Ahead, the trail down the other side was clear. "Runner, untie my hands. We need to take care of Puppy."

To the right was a jumble of rocks that would hide them from view. As soon as Amy was free, she started backing towards it, facing Puppy. "Do you want sex, Puppy?"

Puppy barked, suddenly excited. Another new word she now understood.

All this vocabulary she's picking up, Amy said to herself, and it would just never occur to her to try to shape the same words with her own throat. She doesn't even know about nodding or shaking her head, Amy realized. She barks in place of nodding. She barks in place of any number of things. Amy wondered if, failing at teaching her to speak, they might, over time, at least teach Puppy some normal human body language. Or is it too late for that too?

Runner joined her, crouched down among the rocks, giving Puppy some much needed attention.

* * * * *

Minutes after starting down the trail, Amy sucked in her breath as she spotted a wagon on the road below. She swore to herself, wishing they could retreat to the effective cover of the rocks at the crest of the trail. But at this point the driver below would see her and the others turning, and there was also the wagon coming up behind them, the driver of which would wonder what had become of them. She whispered, "There's..."

"I see them. What do we do?" Runner was slowing.

"We have to keep going. Are you ready, on those things I told you?"

Runner gulped. "I think so."

By the time they reached the broad level passing area halfway down the mountain, the wagon below had turned onto the trail and started up. Amy said, more softly than before, "We need to stop here and wait."

"I know." Runner was already on the flattened area, walking towards the side to give the wagon room to pass.

Amy stopped several feet ahead of her, and waited as Runner carefully adjusted her position. It was raining slightly harder, Amy noted.

She tried to still her trembling. Did I make this too complex? she fretted. Maybe nothing will happen, she thought hopefully. He might just nod and pass on.

Amy suddenly remembered the mental trick she had used for her Academy interview, in what seemed two lifetimes ago. She said in a low voice, knowing the spattering of the rain would prevent the sound from carrying any farther than Runner, "Runner, tell yourself this. Imagine it's my voice in your head telling you. I'll be saying this has already happened. All you're doing is remembering it happening. Waiting here, meeting the farmer, talking to him... imagine it's all over, it happened yesterday, and all you're doing now is remembering it. It went very well. Nothing bad happened. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Runner gulped and nodded briefly. "I get it." Over the next few minutes she seemed to grow more calm. As she reached into the bag, her fingers, Amy saw, weren't trembling now. Runner ate one sliced peach, fed one to Amy, and knelt to feed Puppy, stroking Puppy and receiving face licks in return.

As they waited, it must have occurred to Runner, Amy saw, that Puppy should be kept occupied, as the one member of the party who had no idea what was going on. Runner picked up a small, rounded pebble, rubbed some dirt off it with her vest, and knelt again, holding it up in front of Puppy. As soon as she had Puppy's full attention, Runner tossed the rock a short distance, and said, "Go get it, Puppy!"

Puppy, with an excited yelp, scrambled to follow the rock, and returned with it in her mouth. She started towards Amy with it, and Runner quickly said, "No, over here." As Puppy dropped it into Runner's hand, Runner tossed it again.

I'm sure this is okay, thought Amy. We didn't teach her this game. She came already knowing it, so it must be familiar behavior in doggirls. It's going to look perfectly normal to that farmer.

As the wagon approached, Amy looked straight ahead, leaving her unable to watch Runner. She repeated over and over to herself, keep it together, Runner.

Two nights ago, after finishing their plans for capturing a doggirl, Amy and Runner had planned farther ahead, for the eventuality that they might meet a farmer on the trail. Now they would see whether their preparations were sufficient.

As Amy had feared, the farmer slowed his slaves to a halt as he came abreast of the "boy and his slave" waiting for them to pass. He hopped down from the wagon's driver's seat, stretching his leg muscles as if he'd been sitting too long. At least he's smiling, Amy observed. Rain was dripping from the brim of his hat. Obviously he thought nothing of it.

One issue that had worried Amy was the possibility that any farmer they met might conceivably be the one to whom Puppy had belonged. The likelihood was small, and in any case Amy didn't know what

could be done about it. It appeared, however, that there was no problem on that score -- he showed no sign of recognizing her.

The man also gave Amy herself barely a passing glance, leaving her with mixed feelings of relief and affront. *I do* look just like a slave, she told herself, glad again of her industrial-strength haircut. And this guy is surrounded by naked women every day. Amy was proud of the body she'd worked hard to sculpt. But, she reminded herself, *all* the women work hard here.

The six slavegirls pushing the wagon stood at attention. Amy tried to make her expression match their blank ones.

The farmer nodded to Runner, standing behind Amy. "Awt hair boy yosalf, sawnny?"

Amy nearly fainted as she suddenly realized they had dodged an overlooked potential disaster. It wasn't anything about the way she and Runner looked. Amy, from years of sunbathing in the Academy courtyard and occasional use of the tanning bed, had a uniform skin tone, without tan lines that would instantly have given her away. Her skin was indeed a shade darker than most of the slavegirls Amy had seen here, in this land with relatively little sunshine, but she was within acceptable limits. Runner's significantly darker skin was less striking than her islander facial features, but given that there were any original island genes floating around at all, there had to be some males who looked like her.

But with all the thought Amy had put into what a farmer would see when he looked at them, she had just not thought about accents! Amy had grown accustomed to Runner's speech patterns, as she was the only person Amy had to converse with, day after day, and the accent had receded from Amy's conscious observation. Until this moment, Amy had somehow never focused on the possibility that the men of the island wouldn't sound like that, and that Runner's accent would mark her as a product of the breeding pens, somehow running free. But now Amy heard a farmer speak, for the first time, and his speech had that same vowel shift. Maybe that's how everybody spoke over a century ago, when the Purists left the mainland, she thought now. In any case, there's no reason this man will think Runner isn't the boy she appears. But this could have gone so horribly wrong.

Amy's familiarity with the accent enabled her to translate easily the man's friendly "Out here by yourself, sonny?"

All of this passed through Amy's mind in an instant, and she remembered herself quickly enough to give Runner the signal, though the question here was easy enough that Runner probably didn't need it. Indeed, Runner was already saying, "Yes, sir," before Amy started the beckoning curl of her index finger that would signal "Yes" to Runner.

Amy's hope had been that polite conversation between an older man and a boy he'd never met would consist mainly of yes-no questions and friendly observations. In case Runner didn't know how to respond, Amy would give her hand signals, which Runner could catch out of the corner of her eye while looking at the man rather than directly at Amy.

The man smiled. "Your daddy taught you old-fashioned. I like that." Amy could only guess he was reacting to Runner's "sir," perhaps a rarely-used honorific on the island today. Another bullet dodged, thought Amy. Runner was just within the bounds of normal speech.

Before Runner could reply -- she may have been waiting for another sign from Amy -- the man went on, "You headed for one of the towns?"

Amy quickly gave the finger curl again, and heard Runner say again, "Yes, sir."

"Which one?"

Amy held her hand with all fingers splayed apart. Behind her, Runner said, "I don't know, sir."

The man smiled again. "Ain't been to any before?"

Amy waved her index finger from side to side. Runner responded, "No, sir."

The man nodded. "You try to get yourself to Purity Town, then. Biggest one. Lots for a boy to see on his first big adventure."

"Yes, sir. How do I get there?"

Amy blinked. No prearrangement had suggested the latter sentence. Runner had done it on her own.

"No trouble. You just follow the signs when the trail branches."

Amy signaled, and Runner said "Yes, sir" once more.

Amy tensed as one of the wagon's two doggirls jumped down from the open tailgate and approached. This one was a redhead, significantly older than Puppy, perhaps thirty, probably a much-traveled veteran. Amy now saw that Puppy, who had been directly behind her, now approached the oncoming doggirl.

As Amy watched the interaction out of the side of her eye, trying not to react, Puppy and the other doggirl met and licked each other's faces briefly, Puppy making a soft whimpering sound that Amy took to be a sign of submissiveness. The farmer's second doggirl remained in the wagon, looking on. This one was younger, probably early twenties. Possibly, Amy decided, the older one was taking advantage of seniority.

The redhead now turned and faced directly away from Puppy, spreading her legs apart and arching her back downward for a purpose that soon became obvious: she was bringing her pussy into position for Puppy to lick. She barked once. Puppy quickly approached her from behind.

The farmer looked irritated. "No, no, we ain't got time for that." He bent and gave his redheaded doggirl a light swat on the butt. "Get back in the wagon, Princess. We're headed off."

The girl, looking disappointed, obediently trotted back to the wagon and hopped up onto the tailgate. The second doggirl, probably recognizing her elder was going to be irritable for a time, licked the redhead's face, whining softly.

The man looked at Runner and put the side of his index finger against his forehead in what Amy suspected was a friendly salute of departure, like waving goodbye. Amy couldn't see whether Runner returned it, but the man seemed satisfied. Resuming his seat on the wagon, he picked up his whip and flicked it against the backside of the front right slavegirl. "Let's go." The girl had no visible reaction other than to begin pushing the wagon forward, along with the other girls.

As Amy turned to watch their departure, she could see Runner, standing with her eyes closed, one finger hooked under Puppy's collar to keep her from following. She was breathing deeply, her mouth open, looking as if she were trying not to faint.

Amy said softly, "Runner? Runner? Let's go."

Runner opened her eyes. They were bright, and her mouth curled in a huge grin. Apparently not trusting her voice, she mouthed to Amy, "We did it, Amy!!" She dropped down to give Puppy a hug, laughing as Puppy licked her face as usual. Then, beaming at Amy, and brushing her hand on Amy's hip as she passed, she walked on ahead down the trail.

* * * * *

As the trail leveled off at the foot of the mountain, Amy saw the signpost to which the farmer had referred -- a wooden two-by-four standing vertically, embedded in the ground, with boards at its top facing in several directions naming the towns they were pointing to. As on the west side, there was a road along the foot of the mountains. According to the sign, following the road north would take one to the towns of Purity and Freedom, presumably with future signs to tell a traveler which fork to take. Going south one would arrive at Liberty or Fairhold. Going east, a path directly into the forest would take one to Tradition.

Amy, seeing no way to stop and confer with Runner while they could still easily be seen, continued relying on Runner to lead the way. She saw Runner look at the signpost in passing, after which Runner took the eastbound road into the forest.

After a hundred yards, with no oncoming wagons or other travelers visible, Runner beckoned to Amy and ducked into the forest, far enough that they were soon invisible from the road. Amy followed, pulling the cart with difficulty over the rough ground and around trees.

Runner turned to Amy then, with that same big grin as before, and wrapped her arms tightly around her, jumping up and down in excitement. "We made it Amy, we're here, we're here!" She broke off the hug and untied Amy's hands from the cart handles.

Amy's arms automatically folded around Runner, and her lips met Runner's for a long kiss.

Puppy, catching the mood, barked several times, bouncing from side to side on her forearms. Both laughing, Amy and Runner dropped down beside Puppy and gave some well-earned attention to her sensual needs. Once Puppy was exhausted, Runner slipped off her clothes, and she and Amy turned back to each other for some serious lovemaking.

Amy loved the feeling of her rain-slick skin sliding against Runner's.

* * * * *

As they lay in each other's arms after sex, their energies spent, Amy asked Runner, "What made you decide to go to Tradition?" The farmer had recommended Purity, though for reasons that didn't really apply to them.

Runner gave her a stumped look. "What?"

"To the town named Tradition. We're headed there."

"How do you know that?"

"That's what the sign said. I saw you look at it."

Runner's brows wrinkled. "Was that that thing stuck in the ground?"

Amy nodded. "It said this road led to Tradition."

Runner's puzzled expression deepened. "It did? I didn't hear it say anything."

Amy choked back a laugh, covering it with a cough. She didn't want to seem to be laughing at Runner, especially as her chagrin was really directed at herself. Until now, in the absence of anything that needed reading, Amy had never stopped to think about whether Runner could read. Now, at last, Amy was able to tell herself, of course she can't! Where would she have learned? And it went well beyond that. Runner, in fact, did not even imagine the concept of reading, had no idea that people could communicate information silently by drawing lines and curves that didn't look like any physical object.

But she loved learning things. Amy had seen that from the start.

Amy kissed her again. "When we get back to the Academy, there's going to be a lot of new stuff you can learn. Besides hanging."

Runner's eyes lit up. "We're closer, aren't we? Where do we go now?"

CHAPTER 24

DAY 19

Amy crawled on her stomach to the protection of a bush sufficiently large that it would shield Runner and Puppy as well. Ahead of her was a large clearing that appeared to serve as a town square, presumably that of Tradition.

They had continued following the path leading to the town of Tradition, Amy pulling the peach cart and following Runner, with Puppy usually following Amy, seeming to enjoy traveling but occasionally whining for either food or attention -- Amy could easily tell which, by now. Though they departed the path at intervals, to rest, eat, or seek what small shelter there was during heavier downpours, Amy and Runner had agreed that it was safer staying on the packed-dirt trail, barely ten feet wide, public though it was. While they were on the path, the appearance of a boy, his slave, and his dog, were accepted as belonging there, at least by the two farmers they had encountered driving transport wagons. Runner and Amy had waited on the edge of the trail to give the wagons room to pass, and their presence had merited barely a glance and a nod from the farmers. The farms on this side of the island were much closer together, and Amy felt that sneaking through the woods, rather than using the path, was likely to be noticed and might generate suspicion.

Late on the second morning since their mountain crossing, Runner, leading the way, had stopped suddenly, as the clearing of the town had revealed itself ahead of her. Amy was glad they had been sufficiently mentally alert to the possibility of its proximity that they hadn't walked out into plain view of the inhabitants. Amy didn't feel ready for that yet. She and Runner had retreated into the safety of the trees, while examining the layout of the town.

The town was oval in shape, about a hundred yards long, forty wide, bisected in its long dimension by a line of wooden buildings, with what appeared to be two more lines of the same behind them, and an open area in front of them. Amy, crouched now behind the bush, was about midway along the periphery of the open area.

The open area, though devoid of buildings, was not entirely empty. In the middle of it, barely thirty feet from Amy, ahead and to her right, there was a stage that reminded Amy of the ones used for hanging Academy graduates, but which had a different purpose here.

In the center of the stage, a single, forlorn slavegirl was semi-suspended, not by her neck but by her wrist cuffs -- chains attached to an overhead beam held her arms widely separated above her head, with her toes just touching the floor of the stage -- she couldn't put her heels down. From where she was, Amy could see that the girl's back and left side were striped with fresh whip marks, as were the backs of her thighs. Even the side of her left breast, just visible from where Amy watched, showed an angry welt from the whip. She was alone now, though probably, as Amy knew, not for long. As Amy watched, the girl groaned as she raised herself high on her toes to take the tension out of her arms, the muscles in her legs standing out and quivering. Within seconds her legs were quaking -- Amy suspected the girl had made this move many times before, and her legs were at the end of their strength. They gave out quickly and left her arms and wrists to bear most of her weight again. Amy could hear the girl's exhausted whimpering. Amy had no way to know how long the girl had been there, but suspected it had been a long time.

It was impossible to guess what the girl had done. Escape attempts were relatively rare, and Amy thought it unlikely she would stumble on the punishment for one the moment she hit town. More likely the girl had refused to work. Inevitably a few of the younger ones were rebellious. At first.

There were people walking to and fro on the boardwalk in front of the buildings, usually men each accompanied by a single slave, sometimes with a doggirl. The slavegirls averted their gaze from the suffering girl on the stage. Amy, from her reading, believed she knew why. They had all seen more than they wanted already.

Amy buried her face against her arms on the ground. In Amy's world, slavegirls were rarely disciplined publicly -- control of slaves was generally considered a private matter. But that wasn't the source of Amy's internal discomfort. It was her realization that she was at high risk of the same treatment. She had known it, up to this point, as an intellectual fact. Seeing it made it much more real. Watching the girl, Amy could feel every muscle in her own arms and legs aching in sympathy. And dread.

Runner whispered, "She did something bad, didn't she?"

Not looking up, Amy nodded.

"Would they do that to us?"

"If they catch us."

"Well, then they won't catch us. They haven't yet."

Puppy had been whining softly earlier, but had been silent once Amy and Runner had begun whispering. She usually caught on quickly to the need for quiet.

Amy reached for Runner's hand and gave it a squeeze. She looked up at last, making an effort to look beyond the girl on the stage to the rest of the town. "We need to watch for awhile. See what people do there. Maybe I can figure out what some of the buildings are for. If there are any boltcutters here, they might be in one of those buildings. A store -- that's where people get things they need. You can't just take what you want. You'd have to trade... like, the man in the store might want you to give him some of the peaches and then he'd let you have the boltcutters."

Runner nodded. Amy suspected she might know about exchanging favors from her years growing up in the pen. Runner looked back at Amy. "Shouldn't we be trying to find boats?"

Amy thought about it. With their goal so near, Amy had been putting more thought into the job of finding transportation to the mainland. Her best strategy, she suspected, would be to disguise herself the same way Runner was, in clothes and without the slave gear, allowing her to walk more freely anywhere. So she was hoping to find a way to cut the locks off, before anything else. But it couldn't hurt, she decided, to check out the docks and see what the situation was.

The ocean couldn't be far, she told herself -- and suddenly realized she could hear a whisper of breakers on the beach, almost covered by the insect sounds of the forest. The sound was coming from her left.

From Amy's right, a wagon emerged from the woods into the square, pushed by the usual six-girl team, all of them clearly tired as they arrived at the end of their trip. The farmer driving the wagon, seeing the girl on the stage, ordered the slaves to stop. Moments later he made them divert towards the stage. Out of the corner of her eye, Amy saw a man, who had been lounging in a wicker chair on the boardwalk, stand and begin walking towards the stage, carrying a whip. An involuntary whimper escaped Amy's throat. She didn't want to watch what she knew was coming next.

She nodded to Runner. "Let's see where the boats are." She crawled backward, away from the edge of town, with Runner and Puppy following.

As she stood and began walking, she heard Runner's whisper behind her. "What about the cart?"

Amy blinked. She was surprised she had forgotten about it, but knew that her eagerness to make an exit owed to a desire to get away from the sight of that slavegirl on the stage. "We're going to cut through the forest to get to the docks. It'll be easier without the cart. We can come back for it if we decide to go into town later."

"Do you know where the boats are?"

"I can hear the ocean. Listen."

After a moment of quiet, Runner nodded, and smiled. "I didn't know we were that close."

Are we really that close to getting away from the island? Amy wondered. The tiny seed of hope inside her began to sprout.

* * * * *

Amy led her friends back well away from the edge of the town clearing before starting to circle the town's outskirts, so that their lateral movement would less likely be spotted from within the town.

She wished she could close her ears to the sound she knew was coming. Minutes later, she heard it -- the sudden cry of the girl on the stage following the smacking sound of the whip against her skin. At intervals of about half a minute, the smack and the cry were repeated five more times.

Amy didn't need to be there to know what was happening. She had read all about it. The six slavegirls from the wagon had been led up onto the stage, had been told what the girl had done, and each of them in turn would be required to stand, by herself, within just a few feet of the punished girl to watch her receive a stroke from the whip. During the time the girl was on stage, every slavegirl in town, and every girl just passing through, would see, close up and individually, what would happen to herself if she violated any of the many behavioral requirements slavegirls were expected to meet. Very few of them would ever need to be punished themselves. Seeing it was enough.

The slavegirls Amy had seen on the boardwalk earlier had already had their turns watching. But each new contingent arriving in town would serve as witnesses before continuing on their way.

Amy kept her hand over her stomach for a time, working to keep her most recent meal down. After the six strokes, she knew the worst of the girl's suffering was over. For the time being.

Amy walked as quickly as she could, to put more distance between herself and the punishment stage. I can't help her, she told herself over and over. I can't make them stop.

Runner looked back frequently, seeming distressed. Though she knew less than Amy about what was happening behind her, she could make a good guess.

As they approached a peach tree, Amy felt sudden alarm bells going off in her head. Something didn't feel right. Something left undone.

Runner suddenly said urgently, "Amy, you forgot..."

Amy flinched violently at the familiar snapping sound from underfoot, the vague alarms belatedly resolving into a mental voice shouting Trap! Trap!

Amy dropped to her knees, desperately scraping away the undergrowth from around her feet. One of the heavy spring-loaded bars of the trap had shot home across the edge of the trap, catching her hobble chain underneath it against the trap's surface. As intended.

Muttering a tense repetition of "Shit! Shit! Shit!" until she noticed and stopped herself, Amy wrapped her fingers around the bar and strained to pull it free, loosen it, bend it, do something with it, but it was far beyond her strength. She was shaking with fear and fury with herself. Since crossing the mountains, they had mostly followed established trails, where her trap-evading vine, tied around her waist, was unneeded and would have looked suspicious as a non-standard slave accoutrement, so she had been removing it for travel, restoring it when they left the trail for rest or refreshment. She had stepped on two traps, and Runner one, since the crossing, but neither of them had been in danger of being caught before.

Now Amy, her thoughts on the punished slavegirl, had forgotten the vine. Her own mind, and Runner, had both tried to tell her. Too late.

Amy pulled the trap free of its semi-burial near the tree, revealing the chain securing it to the tree. She and Runner both tried to find a way to free Amy from it, discussing it in low voices, as Puppy padded around them, yipping softly, uncertainly.

Still frowning at the trap, Runner asked, "When will they come and get you?"

Amy, still trembling slightly but feeling more under control now, shrugged. "They might check the traps every day, or it could be a few days." She looked around, then pointed. "Could you get me that stick, over there?"

Runner went quickly to retrieve the indicated stick and brought it to Amy, who looked it over. Fallen from a tree, it was more or less straight, about three feet long, a bit over an inch thick. Kneeling beside the trap, Amy inserted the stick between the metal bar trapping her chain and the plate underneath it, stood on the plate to anchor it and pulled the stick upward, straining, trying to bend the bar.

With a loud snap, the stick broke, the piece in Amy's hand flying away from her, almost hitting Runner. Amy gritted her teeth, pounding the ground with her fist. Any stronger stick would be too thick to fit in the space under the bar.

Runner took Amy's arm, biting her lip fretfully. "Amy, they're going to hurt you, like that girl. We have to get you out of here."

"I know, I know. I'll try to think of something."

Runner looked at the trap for a time. "Amy, what's 'shit'?"

Amy blinked. "What?"

"You were talking about it, right after you stepped on the trap. Is it something that would help?"

Amy gave her a wan smile. "Uhhh, no. It's... just something to say when you're really mad. What it is... well, it's the stuff that comes out behind you." She brushed her hand past her backside.

"Oh." Runner giggled briefly. "We call it poop."

Amy smiled again. "Yeah, we call it that too sometimes." She picked up the remains of the stick. "We need something like this, only metal. Something they call a crowbar. I don't know if they have those."

Runner stood and surveyed the area. "I don't see one."

"I didn't mean just laying around. There could be something like it in a farmer's cabin. Or in one of those buildings, in town." She gestured in the direction of the town. "Try a farm first."

Runner gave her a serious look. "Amy, I'm not leaving you."

"Runner, I need..."

"You need me to be here with you! If a man finds you here, I need to be with you so he can see you're my slave."

Amy blinked. She wanted to argue, but she knew Runner was right. Even caught in a trap, Amy wasn't a runaway if her owner was with her.

It seemed they would just have to wait. It occurred to Amy they might hurry the process along -- Runner might go into town and tell someone in authority that her slave had been trapped. But it was too worrisome to send Runner off by herself to deal with strange men, barely knowing what to say and what not to. And as long as there was time to consider other ways out, Amy wanted to use it.

Amy sighed, picked up the stick, managed a smile at Puppy, and threw the stick. She and Runner played Fetch with Puppy for a time, then played the rocks-and-circles game, with Puppy going back and forth between them soliciting affection.

At last, as the sun set and it was clearly too late in the day for anyone to come checking on traps, Runner finally shed her disliked clothing. The three girls snuggled together for the night, Amy feeling the warmth and closeness of Runner and Puppy that enabled her to forget the new level of danger she'd stumbled into.

* * * * *

DAY 20

Amy and Runner made love in the morning, Amy with a feeling of desperation, willing her senses to record the soft, warm feel of Runner's skin, the look of her face with eyes closed and mouth open, the taste of her lips, the sounds of passion rising in both of them, knowing this could be the last time. Puppy had learned to give them space, understanding she could have a turn very soon.

Amy wished she could feel the peace of hanging one more time. She and Runner had been starting each morning with a practice session. But though she could see a log to stand on some fifty feet away, she had no way to get there. Runner saw her looking in that direction. "It's okay, Amy. We can hang after you get out of the trap." She kissed Amy again.

After breakfast, and repaying Puppy for her patience, Amy sat back with a sigh as Runner dressed. "Runner... we can't just stay here all day waiting for somebody to come. It could be days. And it could even be never. Whoever set this trap might even not remember he did it."

Runner frowned deeply. "I can't just leave you here. A man could come any time." She bit her lip. "We could just call for help now. Make the man come faster."

Amy shivered. She had thought of that herself yesterday, but she just couldn't bring herself to put herself in the hands of the locals. At that point, any number of things could happen, nearly all of them bad. But... "If he sees you here, you can say I'm your slave. But he might not believe you. He could think you just found me here, and wanted him to come set me loose so you could have a new slave. You can't show him anything that tells him you came here with me."

Runner started to speak, and stopped. She looked helplessly into Amy's eyes.

Amy stroked Runner's shoulder. "You don't need to be away very long. Just find us a long piece of metal, that looks like that stick we used. Don't take anything else. I don't want a lot of men to start noticing things are missing."

Runner looked at her a minute longer, and at last nodded.

Amy kissed her. Puppy, who had been standing beside them, looking back and forth as each spoke, took the kiss as a sign to lick Amy's face, making her laugh. Amy said, "Take Puppy with you. I know it will make it harder, but if she starts barking and making noises, it's okay if she's with you, you'll just be a boy and his doggirl out walking. And if somebody does follow you, you can get away. If she's with me, and somebody comes to check out what the barking is about, they'll find me. Okay? Can you do it with her along?"

Runner, stroking Puppy, who had turned to lick her face, nodded. "We'll be okay. I'll be right back as soon as I can, okay?"

* * * * *

It was a rare rainless day, with breaks in the cloud cover allowing Amy to judge time from the sun. Amy could not believe time could possibly move so slowly. Every crackling sound in the branches around her made her heart skip and pound -- it could be Runner returning, or it could be disaster unfolding. It always turned out neither.

At last, after about three hours, Runner did return. Puppy, as soon as she saw Amy, came sprinting towards her, knocking her over with exuberance and happily licking her face. Amy, laughing as always when Puppy did that, looked up at Runner. She could tell the answer from Runner's face, but asked anyway. "Find anything?"

Runner sighed. "Not what I was looking for. I know you said not to take anything else, but this looked really good." She pulled a thick cooked girlmeat steak from her bag.

They hadn't had any girlmeat since crossing the mountains, and Amy's mouth started watering instantly. She smiled. "Yeah, okay."

Runner cut it into three pieces, saying, "There are lots of farms and cabins around here. I tried three different ones. Puppy was really good in between and waited for me. I can try some more places later."

Amy nodded. She didn't want to go through another long wait like the one she'd just been through, but didn't see any other choice. "Okay."

* * * * *

Heavier clouds were rolling in. Amy had lost sight of the sun a few minutes ago, just past noon -- about an hour, she judged, into Runner's second foray in search of a metal bar. Amy tried to maintain hope, but was growing increasingly skeptical of farmers keeping such an implement in their homes. What would they need it for?

A moving shape in the trees to her right caught her attention. Runner, she thought, shouldn't be returning so soon. Unless this meant she'd found something!

Amy's hand flew to her mouth. The movement was in the wrong direction. Runner hadn't gone that way...

A man, dark-haired, bearded, frowning, emerged from the trees, a doggirl trotting beside him. He was tall and muscular, about thirty years old. His eyes went wide as he saw Amy. Amy could hear him say to himself, "Got one!"

Amy felt as though the ground under her was vibrating, rather than herself quaking on top of it. Barely noticed, her bladder let go. Though she was now thoroughly accustomed to being naked, even out in the open on the mountain trail, her arms automatically folded across her breasts. She stared at the man,

willing him to be an illusion, to disappear. This isn't happening, this isn't happening, please don't let it be happening, she repeated to herself again and again. After all this time, it can't happen now!

The doggirl ran ahead of the man, towards Amy, her sharp teeth bared, a growl in the back of her throat. Amy scrambled away, her hands walking on the ground behind her, to the limit of freedom the trap allowed her. The doggirl followed her, barking between growls.

The man came up even with the doggirl, and stroked her back. "Easy, Pepper. She ain't goin' nowhere."

The words tumbled out of Amy, unbidden. "Please, I'm not from here, I'm not from the island, I'm from the mainland. My brother..."

"Hush!" he said sharply, and the doggirl crowded in closer, near enough to bite. The man looked exasperated. "Those dang sci-en-tists. I knew they'd start givin' girls ideas. You listen to 'em good, girl? Yoor even tryin' to talk like 'em."

Amy pounded at her brain, desperately seeking some way she could convince him. Anything she could tell him about the mainland that a slavegirl wouldn't know, he likely wouldn't know it either, and in any case would attribute it to overheard conversations of a sociology team. He wouldn't even have any idea what a Hanging Girl was. Amy felt more helpless than she had ever imagined possible.

The man squatted in front of her, a nasty grin on his face. "Yoor a runaway. You know what happens to runaways, don't yah?"

Amy's throat tightened. She couldn't push any words out of it. She nodded helplessly.

"Yah, you musta seen it sometime. Seen the strokes. You gonna be gettin' strokes all today and half tomorrah, till enough girls seen you."

No, she thought, oh no, oh no... In her mind, she could already feel the lashes against her skin. And to be standing on the stage, in pain and misery, all through a dark night, waiting for it to start again in the morning...

Amy cringed as the man came still closer, but it was only to unlock the trap, with a key fished out of his vest pocket. With a twist of the key and a click, she was... free wasn't the word for it, she knew. Able to move away from the tree under which she had been caught yesterday, but definitely not free. Not free to run, any more than she'd been for three weeks. Never again free.

Runner, when she came back, would be able to figure out where Amy was. But there was nothing she could do about it. She would only be able to watch Amy's suffering on the stage. Please, Runner, Amy thought, just get away from here. Don't take any chance on them catching you too.

The man gestured. "Stand up."

Amy couldn't manage to get up farther than her knees. Her legs were trembling too badly.

He grinned, probably having seen that before. "Or don't. Up to you. You'll get help standin' soon enough."

Yes, thought Amy. The chains holding her wrists over her head. Standing in pain for twenty-four hours. Wishing desperately for time to pass more quickly, even as it brought the next round of whipping closer.

"Hold your hands behind you." The man knelt and connected the rings of Amy's right and left wrist cuffs with a padlock. Coming around in front of her, he removed a leather leash, curled up, from his pocket and clipped it to the front of Amy's collar.

He looked her full in the face for a moment, his grin broadening. Amy looked down, avoiding his eyes.

"Yoor a pretty one. I think it's time to have some fun."

Noooo, Amy screamed within herself. Please, no!

"Pepper." He made a twirling hand gesture to the doggirl, who barked excitedly. To Amy's astonishment and still-mounting horror, the girl dropped onto her side and rolled onto her back in front of Amy, her stubby legs held up and spread.

The man spoke to Amy, more harshly than ever. "Now, don't you make me tell the magistrate you wasn't co-woperative. You do what I tell you, and I'll say you came along peaceful. If I tell 'em you fought me, they'll give you two strokes for every girl who sees you, 'stead of one. Understand?" He waited for Amy, unable to breathe, to give him a tiny nod. "Now why don't you do Pepper here while I do you. Go ahead, bend down there. And stick your butt up in the air. You start lickin' while I start stickin'." He chuckled at his own witticism.

Amy, somehow, hadn't cried until now. But now she couldn't stop the streaming tears, the choking sobs.

Amy realized that the sudden pounding sound that she first thought was her own heart was coming instead from her left. Looking that way, Amy gasped as she saw Puppy burst out from behind the trees at full gallop, barking furiously, more angry than Amy had ever seen her. Puppy rounded in front of the man, alternating growls and barks.

The man gave ground involuntarily, then stood, his hands held out in front of him. "Whoa, girl, you hush. I got everything under control here. You... stop! Dang it!" Puppy had lunged closer, making him back off again.

In front of Amy, the doggirl Pepper rolled and scrambled to her feet, and looked on in perplexity. Amy assumed she would defend the man, but doing so against another doggirl was outside the range of her training. Why a strange doggirl would be threatening a man to begin with just seemed to mystify her.

Still growling, Puppy lunged again, her sharp teeth aimed towards the man's shin. He jumped back away again. "What in the *hell*...?"

Amy turned her head to watch his retreat, in time to see, out of the corner of her eye, Runner standing behind him, swinging a thick fallen tree branch like a club. There was a loud thump as it connected with

the back of his head. The man dropped instantly to his knees, then toppled slowly forward, landing on his face with a thud.

Amy, wide-eyed, watched as Runner bent over him, her free hand clenched in a tight fist, and screamed, “You *shit!!!!*”

Puppy, her teeth still bared, turned towards Pepper. Pepper saw that Runner was looking at her as well, raising the branch again, Runner’s own growl nearly doggirl-like. “You get out of here!”

Squealing in fright, Pepper turned and galloped away through the trees, back towards town.

As the man lay unmoving, Runner dropped the branch, and lifted Amy to her feet with a hand under her shoulder. “Amy, let’s go!”

Amy shook herself, her brain beginning to function. “Wait! A key! He’d have a key!” She twisted awkwardly to show Runner the cuffs locked together behind her.

“Where?” She knelt beside the inert form sprawled on the ground.

Amy used her foot to turn the man partly over, touching his pocket with her toes. “In there!”

Runner reached into the pocket and found two keys. Amy recognized the one used for the trap, and indicated the second. “That smaller one. Remember how I used that other one, before?”

Runner nodded, saying, “But that didn’t work!”

“It’ll work on this lock.” She twisted her arm around to brush her fingers against the new padlock. “His lock. His key.”

Runner knelt behind Amy. “Just put it in that hole?”

“Yes. Hurry. He could wake up. I don’t want him to see you.”

After some fumbling, Amy heard a click. She shook the lock free as soon as it came open. The first thing she did with her arms was to throw them around Runner. She wanted to hold her and never let go.

Runner kissed her, then said, “We need to go!”

Amy nodded, broke off the hug, unclipped the leash from her collar and threw it down, started away, then stopped. “Wait just a second.” She knelt beside the man, her hand on his neck. His pulse seemed strong. Good, she thought. I don’t want to kill anybody. Not even him. “Okay.” With Runner and Puppy, Amy shuffled as quickly as she could towards the trees.

* * * * *

They waited, crouched down in the trees, about fifty feet from the man's prone body, talking in whispers. Runner had wanted to go farther, but Amy, sensing the man would wake up soon, didn't want to make noises he could follow.

Amy, in the middle, had one arm across Runner's shoulders and the other over Puppy's, nuzzling her face against Puppy's as Puppy licked her. As usual, Puppy understood the need for quiet in the other girls' whispers, suppressing the happy whimpering she would usually be doing. Amy looked at Runner. "How did you get Puppy to do that?"

Runner whispered back, "I told her 'Go help Amy.' She seemed like she understood that. I think it helped that you were crying, so she knew you were in trouble. I just wanted her to make him watch her so I could come up behind him."

"You weren't gone very long. Why did you come back so soon?"

Runner looked uncertain. "I don't know. I felt like you needed me."

Amy shook her head in wonder. "I did. I *really* did." She kissed Runner's shoulder. "I want to make love to both of you all night."

Runner grinned and, in imitation of Amy a few days back, said, "Oh, okay," as if Amy had worn down her resistance. Amy choked back a giggle and kissed her.

Runner pointed suddenly. In the distance, Amy could now see the man stirring. He sat up slowly, his hand rubbing the back of his head. Amy could hear him weakly calling, "Pepper?" He seemed to listen for a time. At last he stood, and, seeming dizzy, stumbled off through the trees towards town.

After a few minutes, Amy took Runner's hand. "Okay, let's get far away from here."

CHAPTER 25

DAY 22

Amy watched in amazement as Runner wriggled in the noose. She felt herself quickly getting wet as Runner jerked and rotated her hips. Amy was letting her go three minutes now, and it appeared she could go longer. The development of her form, in imitation of Amy but without any formal instruction, was equivalent to that of a First Year after about three months, Amy judged.

Amy grasped her gently at the hips and let Runner's feet find the log, ending the practice session. As Amy untied her wrists, Runner twisted around to kiss Amy, her glowing face projecting an emotion that Amy understood very well. Amy herself had felt it just minutes earlier, after her own hanging practice. Having taught Runner to tie a knot, Amy was able to hang with her hands bound, and she now could practice without having to spare part of her concentration to keep her fingers wrapped tight around her wrist. It made her feel that much more free as she danced in the air. Runner was sufficiently aware of Amy's whole body while Amy was hanging, that she could easily spot Amy's foot waggle signaling Runner to help swing her back to the tree stump on which she stood before and after hanging.

Two days ago they had turned south, following the coast, headed for either Liberty or Fairhold -- Amy didn't know which town was the nearer -- after Amy's capture and escape. With Tradition alerted to the presence of two escaped slaves, one of whom could be described accurately by a man with a killer headache, Amy didn't want to remain anywhere in the vicinity. Knowing Purity, the largest of the coastal trading communities, lay to the north, Amy had decided to head the other direction.

They should have arrived yesterday, despite Amy's always-labored progress with her hobble chain, but they had to detour around a large farm co-op occupying land much too close to the beach to sneak past on the sands, and then a deluge of rain had caused hours of delay as they waited near the bank of a swollen, hard-rushing river that even Runner, with no chain such as Amy's interfering with her movements, had been reluctant to try crossing by herself, let alone carrying Puppy. Nightfall had come with the river still uncrossed, the rain not slackening until sometime after sunset.

By morning the rain had receded to a heavy mist, and the river, far from menacing, was a slow, shallow trickle. They crossed it, feet (and booties, for Puppy) squelching in the mud, before looking for breakfast and a place to work on hanging.

As Runner hopped down from the stump, Amy shaded her eyes from an unexpected burst of morning sunlight from over the water and peered off in the distance, out to sea and along the shoreline. She nudged Runner, who was just finishing dressing, and pointed. "There! See that... it's like a bridge, but it just goes a little way out into the water and stops?" Runner had learned about bridges as they followed the trail from the mountains. "When a boat comes, it will stop next to that, and they'll take things off the boat and put things on it."

Runner gaped. "Do you see any boats?" She scanned the ocean eagerly. "When will one get here?"

Amy said, with a heavy sigh, "I don't know."

* * * * *

DAY 25

On the morning of the fourth day of waiting, Amy began to wish they had gone to Purity after all. The town in front of her had a boat dock, about two hundred feet from where Amy and Runner sat on the ground, hidden by the deep shade of the trees, while Puppy wandered nearby, returning occasionally for some petting. So clearly the town did some direct trading with the mainland, but probably not as much as Purity, the largest of the towns. But Amy reminded herself that she didn't want to be anyplace where there were large crowds of men. On the other hand, she thought, maybe big crowds would serve as better cover. And...

Amy cut off the line of thought. We're here and we're not there, she told herself. We're safe where we are, and traveling always presents its own dangers. We'll wait it out here.

Across from her, Runner looked up from studying the game board and jumped to her feet. "Amy, what's that?" She was pointing out towards the ocean.

Amy turned and gasped. She could hear the distant growl of the engines, now. It was hard to see the boat, let alone determine what direction it was heading, the dim daylight under the usual heavy cloud cover not much help.

Looking at the dock, Amy suddenly saw increased activity. Yes! she decided, her heart pounding. It's coming here!

About fifteen minutes later, the boat had reached the dock and was tied to it. It was, Amy guessed, about a forty-footer. As the crew and townsmen cooperated in tying it to the dock, Amy looked at the still-naked Runner and gestured with her head towards Runner's clothes. "Get ready. We might need to go soon."

Runner seemed to shake herself out of a trance. She'd been staring at the boat, barely speaking, for the entire time since they'd spotted it. She nodded and began dressing.

Puppy chose this inconvenient time to begin whining. Amy held her arms out and Puppy nuzzled up against her, giving Amy's face a few licks. Amy gave her some absent caresses with her arms that seemed to satisfy Puppy for the time being.

At present, there was not much visible interaction between the boat and the locals. One of the townsmen did board the boat, talking briefly with a crewman. Probably inevitably, some local boys were attracted to the activity, starting up a game with a ball that appeared to be keep-away. Amy could hear the laughter of the kids. They were generally younger than Runner looked, none of them accompanied by slaves. Amy had no intention of trying to join the crowd until she and Runner would fit in, unnoticed. The time, if there would be one, had not come yet.

Amy's attention was caught by one man walking from one adult to another. It looked as though he was handing out flyers, or at least something that looked very much like sheets of paper. Amy wondered what news he could possibly be distributing that the men of the town didn't already know. As the man arrived at the boat and handed a copy to a crewman, then went to a nearby post and hammered a copy of the flyer to the post, an unwelcome thought passed through Amy's mind. She had a very bad feeling

about this. Her eyes still glued to the scene at the dock, she reached over and touched Runner's forearm. "Runner, could you go bring me one of those things he's giving out? Just walk up to him and say, 'Could I get one of those?'" Amy looked at Puppy. "I think I'll keep Puppy with me this time. Get back here fast if you hear barking."

Runner nodded and dashed into the woods, taking a roundabout route towards the dock.

Minutes later, Amy held her breath as Runner appeared by the dock, trying to look like she belonged, worked up her courage and spoke to the man. He handed her one of the sheets and immediately turned his attention elsewhere, as she made her exit.

Soon after, Amy tensed at the sound of footsteps coming towards her, breathing easier when she saw it was Runner returning.

It was indeed a stiff sheet of paper Runner was holding, a poster. "I did what you said. He just said, 'Sure, sonny,' and gave me one." With a puzzled look, she held it towards Amy. Amy could see a drawing at the top, and her heart sank. I was right, she told herself gloomily.

Runner was brushing her fingertips across the drawing. "Amy, this is like you! Your face. Except it's flat..." She seemed about to go on, but couldn't find words. She handed the sheet to Amy.

The islanders, it appeared, had some rudimentary printing equipment. Probably no more elaborate than that of a small-town newspaper a century ago.

The drawing was indeed of Amy, a fairly decent bit of police-sketch artwork, accurate in the basic lines of her face, and including the detail of those few links of chain hanging down from the front of her collar. The men at the dock would be looking out for her now -- her specifically, not just a vaguely-suspected escaped slavegirl.

Below the drawing was the printed text:

RUNAWAY!

WANTED FOR ATTACKING A SLAVE-HUNTER
CAUSING GREAT BODILY HARM
AND ESCAPING HIS CUSTODY

The slave here pictured should be brought immediately to the magistrate. It may be traveling with another slave, and a stolen dog. Use extreme care in capturing it, as the other slave may attack. This slave may pretend to be from the Old Country, and may try to sound like a trader. Both slaves should be returned to Tradition for public whipping. Standard reward for each slave is hereby doubled.

Amy looked up from reading the poster aloud to Runner, to see Runner looking at her fearfully, her coppery skin slightly paled. Runner asked softly, "How is it making you say that?"

Amy looked helplessly back towards the dock, and said hoarsely, "They know about me, Runner. They know what I look like. I can't go down there. They'll see me and know I'm the girl this is talking about."

Runner was shaking her head. "Talking? It's not talking, Amy. You're talking." She was drawing away, her fear building.

Her mind on the message of the poster, it took Amy this long to understand the problem. Perhaps, she thought, I should have explained this the first time it came up. She forced a smile, holding the poster towards Runner, who backed farther away. "Runner, it's not..." She realized Runner might not know the word "magic," and failed to think of another she might use. "Runner, this is okay. It's nothing that can hurt you. See these marks?" She traced some of the letters with her fingertip. "These are called letters, and the letters together make words, like the words we use. That's a word..." she held her fingers spaced apart at the beginning and ending of one of the words of the text, "...and that's a word, and that's a word..."

Runner had stopped retreating. "You... just look at it? And it says words to you?"

"Sort of like that, but not out loud. When you've seen letters like this before, you just remember what word they make."

Runner reached out and took the poster, looking it over in fascination. "Do they teach you that at the Academy?"

Amy gave her a small smile. "We learn it before we get to the Academy. Every girl..." She stopped suddenly. How could she have been thinking Runner could just jump right into Academy classes in September, when the new First Years arrived? Reading was such a major part of their studies, and Runner was more profoundly illiterate than even a three-year-old. The smallest child at least knew what reading was, long before she could do it herself.

Not time to worry about that now, Amy told herself. First we have to get home.

And how? Amy's plan had involved identifying herself to the crew of the boat and begging for their help in returning to the mainland. Now she couldn't get near the boat without passing through a knot of island men who would recognize her from this poster. It wouldn't even help if Runner was with her.

Amy wondered again at her decision to let her captor go after Runner had knocked him out cold. If she hadn't, the men down there wouldn't be looking at this poster now.

On the other hand, the discovery of a dead slave-hunter, the unlocked trap nearby, would paint an obvious picture of something that might never have happened here before -- the murder of a man by a slavegirl. The sensation caused by *that* would have set off an even larger, more determined girlhunt. And Amy didn't want to imagine the sort of punishment she'd be in for if she was caught.

And she really, really didn't want to kill any man. It was nothing like snuffing a willing woman, as she had done several times. Men didn't have the satisfaction of being eaten to look forward to. Being a man had always seemed empty to Amy. But then, she'd never been one. Maybe it was different from their point

of view. But a man dead was simply dead, not food. Amy couldn't bear thinking about bringing that about.

What's done is done, Amy reminded herself. I did what I did. I let him go, he set off a hunt for me, and here we are. I can't change that.

Runner was running her fingers over the text as she had earlier with the drawing. "Amy, can you teach me to hear the words?"

Amy managed another smile, in the face of her newest worry. "It takes a long time, Runner. First we need to get home." Amy wondered what meaning the word "home" had taken on in Runner's mind. Probably accurate enough, she decided, considering how I've been using it. And the Academy *was* going to be Runner's home. There was a staff of non-students there. Amy would make sure Runner had a place there somewhere.

Amy stretched out on the ground, on her stomach, her eyes on the dock. "We need to watch. See what they do. See if there's some time we could get to the boat without the men from the town seeing us."

Runner set the poster aside and lay down beside Amy, also watching. Puppy, catching their mood, lay quietly on the other side of Amy, rubbing up against her but not insisting on any fondling. They waited.

* * * * *

Over the next hour, under a slowly brightening sky, a team of slavegirls had assembled on the dock. In pairs, they had gone below decks, to what clearly must be the cargo hold, coming out with crates, two girls holding each crate by handles on either side, straining to lift them and staggering beyond Amy's view, towards town.

Amy forced herself to stop biting her lip, when the pain alerted her to the fact her teeth had scraped it raw almost to the point of bleeding. Beside her, Runner murmured, "Can you just go down with one of those girls? And then stay?"

Amy shook her head tensely. "Somebody down there knows who all those girls are. Even the girl I went with would know I don't belong there. And we have to get you and Puppy on the boat somehow too."

Runner was looking at the poster. "Does it say..." She paused, and closed her eyes, trying to remember the words. "'This slave may pretend to be from the Old Country.'?" She looked at Amy. "Is that what you call it where you live? 'The Old Country'?"

Amy sighed. "That's what that means, yes. If I could get close to the men on the boat, if I could talk to them, they'd know where I'm from. I know too many things no girl from here knows. But the men from the town... They're all around, down there. Even if they look at me and didn't think about me being the slave on the poster, as soon as they hear me talk, they'd remember what it says. They'd know I'm the girl they're looking for. They'd drag me away and... you know."

"The men on the boat -- would they know what a Hanging Girl is?"

Amy shrugged. "They should. They probably haven't seen one, but I think everybody knows about us. But..." She gestured helplessly towards the boat. "I just can't get close enough to tell them!" Tears started streaming down her face. To be so close and not be able to get any closer! That damned trap! If only she'd remembered to wear the vine that day! If she'd worn it, no trap, no hunter, no description of her, no poster...

"Amy, you don't have to tell them! They can see you from here!"

Amy's mouth dropped open. She spun her head towards Runner so fast her neck hurt. She stared at her for a few seconds, then with a single arm-thrust she shot up onto her feet, alarming Puppy who yelped and backed away.

Her eyes wide, Amy examined the area around them. They were well-enough hidden where they were. Suddenly, Amy didn't want to be hidden. Ahead of her, the trees gave way to a bluff that led down to the beach. Cautiously, Amy shuffled to her left just behind the front line of trees. Here, she thought, this will work. Standing where she was now, she had a clear view of the boat itself, while the trees immediately to her right shielded her from observation from the dock.

She growled in frustration. She was still in heavy shade from the foliage overhead. Nobody on the boat would be able to pick her out from the dark background of the dense forest behind her. But if she stepped forward much farther, out of the deep shadows, the townsmen would spot her as soon as the boat crew did.

Looking up, she was startled to see a patch of blue sky directly overhead. There had been none for days. As Runner said, "Amy, what..." Amy held up her hand, palm outward, and Runner stopped. Amy stood still, staring upward, trying to judge where the edge of the break in the clouds was headed...

Yes! Yes! Amy looked around now, almost frantic, and pointed to a nearby log. "Runner, help me with that! We need to get it over here. I'm going to stand on it right here and we're going to hang me."

Together, both gasping with effort, they half lifted, half dragged the log into position. Amy stood on it a moment, nodded, then leapt towards the bag holding their noose. She tied it quickly to the overhanging branch, and handed Runner the short vine for securing her wrist cuffs. Amy pulled the noose down over her head and tightened it around her neck -- she had avoided showing Runner the proper placement of the noose, judging that to be an element of instruction she was not allowed to give -- then put her hands behind her back so Runner could slip the vine through the rings on her cuffs and knot it.

She stood then, as motionless as she could, maintaining her balance on the log's uneven surface.

"Amy, aren't you going to..."

Amy shook her head. "I need to wait for the sunlight. It's still too dark here for anybody to see me."

Amy had been through some long waits before, but this seemed the longest ever. Above her, she could see the ragged edge of the cloud cover creeping out ahead of her, like a paintbrush leaving a trail of electric blue behind it.

The mid-morning sun was going to be creeping steadily higher behind those clouds. If it got too high before the departing clouds uncovered it, the overhead leaves would keep it from illuminating her. Come on, she thought, come on!

On the boat, activity was beginning again, the reverse of the earlier process, as pairs of slavegirls carried crates onto the deck of the boat and took them below. Amy didn't know how long that would take, but suspected the boat would be leaving before long, its exchange of trade items completed. Two crewmen were supervising on deck, and Amy could see a third occasionally appear from below.

Amy's heart was thundering as she saw the edge of the clouds take on a silvery glow. In less than a minute it was too bright to look at.

She closed her eyes. She was trembling, much too pumped to get enough breath while hanging. Calm down, Amy, calm down. In a minute you'll be dangling. Everything will be okay. The bliss of the noose, in just a minute. Be cool, stay cool.

As the first direct sunlight burst out from behind the cloud, exposing her bare skin to its glow, she stepped off.

She hadn't taken off the hobble-chain vine -- she hardly ever did anymore -- so her kicking was even more restricted than usual. But she could shimmy and wriggle her body, she could thrust her hips, and she concentrated on doing that more erotically than ever before.

As she'd expected, the calmness washed over her, the feeling of being at home, no matter where she was, as long as she could hang.

As she wriggled, she watched the boat.

She focused on one crewman in particular, facing in her direction as he watched the slavegirls go by lugging crates, his arms folded, his shoulder leaned casually against a bulkhead. Come on, Amy thought. Come on. Look at me! Look at me!

She couldn't see his eyes, under the shade of his hat, but she saw his head jerk up suddenly, his jaw dropping. Yes!!!

Two slavegirls walked by in front of him, neither of them looking towards Amy as they left the boat.

The crewman took quick looks left and right, then turned and leaned down towards the cargo hold. Then, looking rather casual, his hands in his pockets, he stepped off the boat and sauntered out of Amy's sight along the dock.

Amy, her excitement suddenly overwhelming the calm of the noose, waggled her foot and felt Runner grabbing her hips, pulling her back over the log. As Runner reached behind her to untie the vine, Amy said, "Did you...?"

Runner cut her off, her own voice equally excited. "I saw him! What now, what now?"

Amy, her hands now free, pulled off the noose and hopped down from the stump. She put both hands on Runner's shoulders, holding Runner's eyes with her own. "Do exactly what we talked about. What's your name again?"

Instantly, Runner said, "Caleb." Amy had chosen a name in common use a century before. She had no idea whether it was used by the islanders today, but probably the seaman wouldn't know either.

Amy nodded. She kissed her, and quickly said, "We can't do that anymore, until we get to the Academy. A boy wouldn't kiss a slavegirl." Amy looked around almost frantically, struggling to determine whether anything more needed to be said or done. She pointed to Puppy. "Puppy might get upset when she sees him. Try to keep her quiet. When we get on the boat, it's okay if she licks your face, but don't touch her breasts or between her legs while anybody's watching. And remember, except for your hat, don't take off your clothes no matter what..."

Runner held up her hand as she knelt beside Puppy. "I know, Amy."

"Oh!" A thought bubbled up from the depths of Amy's mind. She lowered her voice, suspecting the seaman might be close enough to overhear by now. "On the boat, don't pee or poop until I show you where to do that. They'll have a place for that. You can lower your shorts to do it, but not where they can see you."

Runner nodded. She was about to speak again, but now they both heard footsteps approaching, a whispery sound in the undergrowth.

Amy's heart fluttered. If that's not him, she reminded herself, we are *so* screwed. And even if it *is* him, there's no telling how this will come out.

She had momentary glimpses of him now, between trees, and at last a full view when he rounded the nearest. He stopped short, looking surprised, perhaps not realizing he'd gotten that close.

Relief washed over Amy as she saw he was indeed the man from the boat, not a local. Having seen him only from a distance, she wouldn't have recognized his face, but his clothes were a giveaway. He wore denim shorts and a greasy short-sleeved pullover cotton shirt that had once been white. His hat was not one of the islanders' floppy leather ones, instead having a bill in front to shade the eyes. He appeared about thirty, with unruly black hair much shorter than the island men wore theirs, and a beard growth of about three days. His eyes widened at the closer view of Amy, though Amy knew he couldn't very well be amazed at her nudity -- he'd been watching a parade of naked slavegirls all morning. Nonetheless, he was unable to think of a more clever conversational opening than "Uhhhh..."

Amy went down on her knees, facing him. Her eyes brimming with tears, her face expressing emotion that was only partly feigned, she said in a choked voice, "*Please*, get me out of here!"

"You're... you're her, right? The one they're looking for down there?"

Puppy's low growl, continuous since the man had appeared, boiled over into barking. Runner arrested Puppy's lunge in his direction, wrapping an arm gently across both shoulders underneath her neck while

whispering, “Shhhh, it’s okay, it’s okay,” stroking her back soothingly, petting her hair. Puppy quieted, but continued to glare at the newcomer.

Amy rose to her feet, bringing his attention back to herself. Her initial reading of him confirmed her judgment beforehand on the most likely successful strategy. Most women, she knew, would instinctively try to seduce him, but Amy did her best, all through the conversation, to keep any seductive note out of her voice. Amy was aware that most men fantasize that a beautiful (naked!) woman will suddenly come on to them -- but when it actually happens to them, their first instinct is to suspect a trick. Amy could more easily control him by conveying complete helplessness. “I’m the one. But you can tell I’m not from here, right? Listen to me talk. Do you think I could really talk like this if I was from here? They think I’m a runaway slave, but I’m from the mainland! You saw me hang, right? Nobody from here knows how to do that! Please, please, take me home!”

Of course, Runner was an exception to that last statement, but Runner’s hanging ability would be kept under wraps, along with any other sign of her actual gender. Amy had considered having Runner pretend to be another Academy student, but she had quickly realized Runner couldn’t do the accent in any prolonged conversation -- and then Amy had remembered, more importantly, that nobody on the mainland looked like Runner did. Indeed, not many on the island did either, as far as Amy could tell. Amy had seen traces of native genes in a few of the men and a handful of slavegirls, but not to the extent Runner showed them. Amy was starting to wonder if perhaps both Runner’s mother *and* father, strangers to each other except for a brief mating in the breeding farm, had both carried some native blood, and had somehow both managed to contribute disproportionate amounts of their native genetic heritage to the resulting embryo, creating a baby more purely native than either of them individually. She supposed it could happen.

Amy had also considered having Runner be a slavegirl, but, assuming the men on the boat would take the risk of stealing a work slave from the island, Amy couldn’t think of a way to ensure that they wouldn’t keep her as their own sex slave afterward. As far as Amy could work out, the only plan with a chance of success was for Runner to be a local boy, estranged from his father, who wanted to see the amazing land where Amy lived, and insisted on bringing his pet doggirl along. That might make sense in a you-know-how-kids-are kind of way. As for Puppy, Amy would have to rely on the knowledge that rough men of the sea were not ordinarily drawn to puppygirls. Though puppygirls were often used for sex, that was not usually the main satisfaction in owning them.

The idea of leaving either Runner or Puppy behind, with Amy so much in debt to both of them for the fact of having this opportunity at all, was never under consideration.

In Runner’s case, Amy felt a love for her to a degree she hadn’t experienced since Megan. If she couldn’t take Runner along with her, she wasn’t leaving.

The expression on the man’s face told Amy he wanted to believe what she’d said, which certainly counted as a plus. He probably did suspect, without knowing for sure, that no girl on the island could do what he had seen Amy doing. But he needed more. “How long have you been here?”

“About a month.”

“Then you’d know who was the only woman who won on ‘Girlhunt’ last year?”

Amy's mind went blank for a moment, but came back to life an instant before panic set in. "Gail Hudson! CTV network, Thursdays at eight! She won a million dollars, they made a big deal of it, she went on all the morning shows the next week."

The man blinked, clearly convinced now, but his puzzled look grew deeper. "So what are you doing here? With all the..." he indicated her slaveware, "...stuff?"

Amy had decided that, in the case of her own personal story, the truth was going to be her best friend here. "I was kidnapped and left here. As a really, really cruel joke. A hate joke, only funny to the man who did it. I'm a graduate of the Hanging Academy. You saw what I can do. That's why you came up here, right?"

"Uhhh, yeah." His eyes widened at the memory. "That was pretty amazing."

"Please tell me you've heard of the Hanging Academy."

He nodded. "Oh, sure."

"You've seen a Hanging Girl show?"

He snorted. "I'm not that rich."

Perfect, thought Amy. He already knows the Academy means money. By this time, she decided, if there was any news out about a stolen Academy girl, he'd remember it and mention it. Apparently they had kept a lid on the story. Amy didn't want to bring it up herself. If she put it in the form of a question and he knew nothing about it, it might cast doubt on the rest of her story. It was crucial that he be absolutely convinced she was associated with the Academy. She would put on a more elaborate show for him, and the others, if necessary. "Want to be richer?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a missing Academy graduate. There'd be a reward for bringing me back."

"What kind of reward?"

She had no idea what sort of specifics to give him. Too small an amount would not seem worth his while, against her value to him as a sex slave. Too large an amount would not seem believable. In between, she felt sure, was an ideal amount that would be both convincing and motivating, but she needed to know more about him to know what it was. She put all the sincerity she could into her voice as she said, "Big."

The man folded his arms, looking at Amy silently for a time, as though weighing options. Then he twisted around to look back towards his boat. "How am I supposed to get you on board? I can't trash my reputation on this island by looking like I'm stealing one of their girls. And they'd stop me anyway. I know about these people. They're pretty easy-going until you piss them off."

Amy let out a huge, real sigh. She was past the first hump -- he had made the decision to try to help her and was considering ways and means. Still, she knew he needed more time to let the decision firm up

before she added on the complication of Runner and Puppy. “What’s your name?” It was time to make the issue more personal.

He turned back to her. “Huh? Oh, Justin. Justin Greene.”

She stepped up to him with her hand held out. “I am so, so lucky you came along, Justin. My name is Amy.” They shook hands, as Amy reflected that, without being openly seductive, it was still easy to suggest the idea that she would be very grateful if he could help her.

She now opened up on the latest version of her plan, making it look as though it had just occurred to her. “Oh! Do you think you could persuade another crew member to let me borrow his clothes? I mean, you could go get them and bring them here?”

He arched an eyebrow. “I’m the captain. So I guess I could get them to do just about anything.”

She held her arms up, palms outward. “And do you have anything that can cut through these padlocks?”

He nodded. “No problem on that.”

Amy smiled in relief. “That’s how to get me on board, then. I can just walk on as a member of your crew. Maybe there could be a few comings and goings before that, so people watching lose track of how many men are on shore. They won’t be paying that much attention anyway. In fact, most of the men watching probably drift off after you’ve exchanged cargo. Don’t they? The kids too?”

He scratched his chin. “Yeah, mostly.”

Amy looked back at Runner at last, still crouched beside Puppy, watching the proceedings intently and silently. “And Caleb and the puppy can wait by the boat. He can ask your crew questions, and one of you can invite him on board to look around, when the other boys are gone.”

Greene looked back and forth between Amy and Runner. “Huh? What?”

Amy banged the heel of her palm against her head. “I’m sorry, I forgot to introduce Caleb! He’s coming with me.”

Runner looked at Greene, and gave him a smile and a small wave. “Hi.”

Greene frowned deeply. “So I’m supposed to kidnap a kid too?”

Amy looked at him seriously. “Justin, I wouldn’t be here without him. And he’s kind of burned his bridges. He helped me get away, and he’d be in so much trouble if he went home! And he wants to see where I live. He’s imagining it’s kind of a magical place. And it will be, to him! Anyway, I owe him so much for what he’s done for me. I can’t just abandon him here! He doesn’t have a place here anymore.” Using the male pronoun gradually seemed more natural as Amy went deeper into her story. She took a deep breath. “If you’ll do this one more thing for me, I’ll make sure you and your crew are invited as guests to an Academy party. Do you know about the parties? You’d get to see a girl snuffed by hanging, and you can spend some private bedroom time with me, or any student you want. Please, do this for

me.” She bit her lip in a show of anxiety that was entirely genuine. This was the last barrier, for herself and for Runner.

He folded his arms again, in what seemed to be his thinking posture. After a minute, he nodded. She’d offered him more than enough to justify the risk.

CHAPTER 26

Inevitably, Runner's questions addressed to the crewman ("Why doesn't it go under the water like a rock does?" "What makes it go?"), products of her natural curiosity that Amy knew would emerge as soon as Runner reached a sufficient comfort level mingling with the dockside boys, had attracted a knot of those same boys, eagerly tossing out their own questions. Greene was ashore, lurking in the bushes with Amy, who was rubbing her newly unshackled wrists and trying to stretch her leg muscles sufficiently to do splits, as she had been unable in nearly a month of bondage in the hobble chain. The other member of the crew was belowdecks in the crew quarters, presumably in his underwear, his outer clothes now covering Amy. Amy had discovered she needed to copy Runner by wrapping a swatch of leather around herself below the shoulders to suppress the bulge of her breasts, otherwise obvious under the crewman's shirt. Luckily the portion of her nearly brush-cut hair not hidden under the crewman's hat was appropriate to her disguise.

There was a burst of excitement from the three boys with Runner as the visible crewman invited them all to take a look around on the deck -- Runner, of course, bringing Puppy with her. Amy had been adamant that Runner and Puppy had to be aboard before her -- she was well aware the crew had no real reason to let either of them come along with Amy, the only member of the trio worth anything to them.

The crewman let the boys have a close look at the engine, exposed under the opened trap door that usually covered it, on which he had been hammering before Runner arrived dockside, pretending to be fixing a problem with it. They followed him on a tour, which excluded the crew quarters, firing off a barrage of questions of their own. Eventually one of them left on his own, another departing at the command of his irritated father. The last of them left reluctantly as the crewman closed the engine cover and declared the trouble fixed. Watching the boy's departing back, the crewman gestured to Runner indicating the steps down to the cargo hold, down which she carried Puppy and disappeared from view.

The next twenty minutes had an air of comic opera, as the crewman left the boat and entered the woods, Greene then returned to the boat, left again, the crewman returned... and at last Amy, her heart doing cartwheels in her chest, barely able to breathe, walked out of the woods. Two townsmen were still on the dock, likely detailed to keep an eye on the boat in case the now-famous runaway slave should appear and attempt to board. They barely gave Amy a glance, not interrupting their conversation, as she walked along the dock, the crewman's ill-fitting boots covering the bruises on her ankles, her hands thrust into the pockets of her shorts, partly to hide her wrists and partly to hold the pants up, her shoulders hunched against the convenient rain that gave her an excuse to hide the scrapes made by her slave collar. Barely able to persuade herself it was really happening, she walked up the plank onto the deck of the boat and down into the cargo hold, where she threw her arms around Runner to give her as brief a hug as she could, then stripped off her borrowed clothes, replacing them with the leather islander outfit Runner had stolen for her weeks earlier. She left off the leather breast-wrap, not only in the interest of comfort but also to create a contrast in shape between herself and Runner -- the more obviously female she was, the less Runner appeared so, with her own breasts squashed down.

A minute later Greene came down into the cargo hold. Amy lunged at him and gave him a hug, murmuring "Thank you thank you thank you..." She had no idea how long she might have gone on, but her flow of gratitude was cut short by the abrupt ignition of the engine. Above the thundering noise,

Amy could hear two terrified yelps, one from Puppy and one from Runner. Runner grabbed Amy and pressed up against her, her face buried against Amy's shoulder. Amy let go of Greene and started rubbing and patting Runner's back, saying "It's okay, it's okay," slowly pulling her down so she could wrap an arm around Puppy as well, who was crying like a small child.

Amy looked up at Greene, who gave her a bemused look in return. He said loudly enough to be heard, "We'll have some lunch a little later. For any of you who haven't sworn off food forever by that time." Picking up the clothing Amy had discarded, he turned and bounded up the steps, no doubt glad to be able to leave Amy the job of calming her two charges, who were too freaked out by their first encounter with modern technology even to begin thinking about getting seasick.

* * * * *

Greene led Amy, Runner, and Puppy into the galley, where one crewman was already eating at a small table, seated in one of the three chairs. Nearby sat a small fridge and a microwave. Amy felt uncomfortable without some sort of collar marking her status as a slave -- she certainly didn't want back the one she'd worn on the island, but she knew that she was technically violating the law by not wearing one. Under the circumstances, she knew nobody would object, and she suspected the men would treat her a little nicer if she looked like a free woman, despite their knowledge that she was, in fact, a slave.

Amy had, on the other hand, unbuckled Puppy's leather collar and pocketed it, before heading for the galley. Puppy's collar had been a disquieting reminder to Amy that, while Runner didn't belong to anyone, Amy had technically stolen a slave in bringing Puppy onto the boat. Amy insisted to herself that she shouldn't feel guilty about it, since Puppy's entire potential life as a human had been stolen from her at birth, which put her servitude beyond all boundaries of fairness observed on the mainland -- there were legal circumstances in which women could be made slaves involuntarily, but none of them sanctioned what had happened to Puppy.

The man eating lunch, whom Amy judged to be in his mid-twenties, was large and muscular, with dirty blond hair with ragged ends indicating he might be cutting it himself. He was the one who had pretended to service the engine, stalling for time to facilitate Amy's escape. He appeared uncertain whether to stand as Amy and the others entered. Amy smiled at the crewman, who was sipping a beer as he finished a sandwich.

Greene gestured towards the man. "Dave Bailor."

Amy smiled at Bailor, who nodded in return. "I'm really grateful for all your help."

Bailor smiled back nervously. "You really a Hanging Girl?"

Amy always felt pride at the designation, even when, or especially when, it was just reminding herself in her own head. She grinned. "I really am."

"Could you... maybe show us later? I mean, I know Justin said he seen you, but I ain't never seen one."

Amy bit her lip. The vibration from the engine and uncertain rocking motion would cause trouble. "I've never done it on a boat. I wouldn't be at my best." She brightened. "Justin told you about you being invited to one of the Academy parties, right?"

Bailor looked at her cautiously. "Yes, ma'am."

Amy shook her head while trying to read his expression. "Oh, please don't call me that. Just Amy. Academy girls are slaves." There, his reaction when she'd said "Academy" again. Despite Greene's assurances of her hanging prowess, Amy could read in Bailor's face that he wasn't entirely convinced she had any association with the Academy, nor, in consequence, that the promised reward and party would really be forthcoming. She tried to think how she could convince him. Even hanging might not do it, considering the difficulties here. She might just be a talented amateur. Reluctantly, she put the problem on hold.

Bailor wiped his hands together, his meal finished. "I'll go relieve Jimmy." He rose, nodded at Greene and left the galley, not looking at Amy again.

Greene gave him a puzzled look as he passed, not as good at reading him as Amy was. Greene turned back to Amy and shrugged. "One of them's got to steer." He gestured to the table, where he had piled cold cuts on a platter beside a stack of sliced bread, open bottles of mustard and mayonnaise with a spreading knife sticking up from the latter, and several unopened beer bottles. His gesture swept wide enough to include Runner.

Amy took one of the seats, looked at Runner and gestured with her head towards another seat. Runner had probably never used a chair before, but Amy had seen her watching closely as Amy pulled one out, sat and scooted back in. Runner copied the move exactly.

Amy looked at the beer. She'd never acquired a taste for the stuff, and was sure Runner hadn't. And she could imagine Puppy's reaction to it. "Ummm... have you got bottled water, or something like that?"

"Oh!" Greene snorted. "I just put those out automatically. If I'd been on an island without beer for a month, it'd be the first thing I thought about." He went to the fridge and pulled out several clear bottles.

Amy regarded the cold cuts. The meat appeared to be bologna and salami -- no girlmeat, which would be more expensive. These men probably had girlmeat just once or twice a week.

She twisted off the caps on two bottles, handing one to Runner. Runner took it, looking at it uncertainly, then imitating Amy's first sip from hers.

Amy looked at Puppy, and pointed to her for Greene's benefit. "Maybe a bowl? She's used to drinking out of rivers."

A minute later Amy set the cereal bowl Greene had located down in front of Puppy, and poured the contents of the last of the water bottles into it. Puppy gave it an experimental taste, then began lapping eagerly.

Amy put a sandwich together for Runner, deciding that it was probably believable that sandwiches were not a standard item of island cuisine. Amy stayed constantly on the lookout for any possible situation to which Runner might react differently from the way an adolescent island boy would. So far, there had been none. Amy spread mayo on the bread but decided to skip the mustard. Plenty of time later for Runner to discover intense spices. Runner looked at her questioningly as Amy handed her the sandwich, and watched as Amy took a bite of her own. Runner nodded, took a bite from her own sandwich, and grinned at Amy.

Amy picked up a few bologna slices, rolled them up in a tube and held them down for Puppy, who sniffed the meat, bit into it experimentally, then snatched it out of Amy's hand with her teeth and wolfed it down quickly.

The other crewman, whom Amy had never yet seen close-up, came down into the galley. Greene gestured towards him. "Jimmy Pellis."

Amy would almost have described Pellis as a boy. Smaller than Bailor, with curly brown hair, he was clearly younger than Amy, and in fact, hardly looked older than Runner, if indeed he was. Amy gave him a friendly wave. "It must have been your clothes I was wearing. I wanted to tell you how much I appreciate your help."

Pellis gave her a tight smile. "No problem."

Oh, shit, thought Amy, a different problem here, just as bad, maybe worse. She didn't need to look at his crotch. His face alone said how horny he was.

Amy had considered the possibility that she might need to have sex with her rescuers. She didn't have a strong objection, except for two problems. One was that, after a month, she wasn't sure her Academy contraceptives were effective anymore. She had, in fact, had a feeling she might be ovulating, though with all the emotional stress she'd been through lately for various reasons unrelated to reproduction, it was hard to be sure. The other problem was that she had serious reservations about engaging in sex in such an uncontrolled situation. Doing it with a monitor on duty in the party pavilion was one thing, but doing it on a boat in the middle of the ocean attended only by horny males who could overpower any resistance she, Runner, and Puppy could muster together was entirely different. Greene had been nice so far, but men were men. There was also Runner to think about. Amy had detected Runner's gender soon after meeting her, despite her disguise. The hornier the men here became, the greater the chance Runner's femininity might sneak into their perceptions. Amy had decided she had to steer events away from that scenario.

Cautiously, she ventured, speaking to Pellis, "I'm looking forward to showing how much I appreciate it when you come to the next party at the Academy."

Pellis wheezed out a sharp breath. Amy had known she was ratcheting up his internal tension considerably. But she had to get him to bring what he really wanted out into the open.

His face reddening, he said, "What about showing your appreciation here? Now?" He gave her a shaky smile.

Perfect, Amy thought. She paused in her eating, sandwich held negligently in one hand, and gave him a wistful look. "That could be a lot of fun, Jimmy. But I want to make sure you get the most you can out of it. At the party, I'd give you a real girlfriend experience, or act however else you want me to act. Something you'd never forget. And if there's a girl there you like better, you could have her instead. Or me *and* her. And you'd see another girl snuffed by hanging, and that's exactly what all of us are trained for. She'll put on a show like you can't imagine. You can't find video of it anywhere. We don't allow that. The only way you can ever see a Hanging Girl snuffed is by being there." She leaned forward slightly, holding his eyes with hers. "I don't want you to miss out on that."

She could see the wheels turning -- no training in reading faces or body language necessary. While not quite putting it as a threat, she had made it clear that sex now versus the party later was an either/or thing. He couldn't do both. And Amy was in control of who was invited to a party. She saw a second wave of realization hit him -- that she was also in control of whether he got a financial reward out of this.

In a choked voice, he asked, "You promise? On the party?"

As sincerely as she knew how, Amy said, "I promise."

He looked at her a moment longer, then nodded. He took a final bite of his sandwich, picked up the beer bottle, and left the galley. Just as he was leaving, Amy read that same doubt in his face that Bailor had shown. This is all fine, his face said, as long as she's from the Academy. How do I know she really is?

Greene snorted as he watched Pellis's retreat, and turned to Amy. "He doesn't get out much."

"I gathered."

Greene shrugged. "I already ate. Come on up to the bridge later, if you want."

Amy nodded. "Thanks for everything, again."

As he nodded and left, Runner finished chewing the last bite of her sandwich. She looked at Amy. "Is anything wrong? I don't get what's happening."

Amy rubbed Runner's thigh and briefly leaned her head on Runner's shoulder. "Everything's okay. For now."

Puppy barked, leaned in between them and licked Amy's hand.

Amy laughed. "I'm sorry, Puppy! You're still hungry, aren't you?" She rolled up another tube of bologna.

* * * * *

Arms crossed over the railing and chin resting on it, Runner stared out at the rushing water alongside the boat. She seemed to be holding her own against motion sickness. Puppy, on the other hand, had been looking slightly queasy, and was now napping in the cargo hold.

Runner craned her neck, looking around as much of the periphery of the boat as she could see, and shook her head. "I saw the engine, when the man showed it to us. How is that engine pushing us, Amy?"

Amy considered how to answer. "It's like there's... arms, not real arms, metal arms, under the boat, going like this, swimming." She made a paddling motion. "The engine is making the arms do that. An engine is one kind of machine. That's something that can do work, like people can. You'll see a lot more of those later, to do different things."

Runner nodded. Moments later she straightened, began taking her pants down, and suddenly remembered. "Amy, I need to pee."

Amy called out loudly, over the engine noise, "Justin? Where's the head?"

His voice came back, "Go back in the galley. Far side."

Amy led Runner back to the galley, and discovered a door she hadn't paid attention to earlier. Inside the small room behind it stood a toilet and sink, both relatively clean. The seat, of course, was up. Amy pulled it down. "Just sit on that, and pee through the hole, into the water."

Runner nodded, pulled her shorts down, and sat -- it was not, after all, that complicated an idea -- and Amy said, "We usually leave people alone to do it. I'll be right outside."

When she heard the tinkling stop, Amy reentered, and decided it was a good time for some personal hygiene instruction. She pulled a wad of toilet paper from a roll. "You can pat yourself dry with this, then drop it in the water. Oh, and watch." She turned the tap to start running water into the sink, as Runner used the toilet paper. "Rub your hands together under the water. Where I'm from it doesn't rain nearly as much, so people rub water over themselves. They like to feel clean." As Runner washed her hands, looking up at Amy questioningly to make sure she was doing it right, Amy reached down to lift the toilet seat back up. She froze and gasped.

Runner straightened up quickly. "What? Did I do something wrong?"

Amy squatted down for a closer look. There was a tiny red circle on the seat. Obviously fresh. In the toilet, she now saw that the discarded paper also had a reddish streak.

Oh, shit, she thought. Shit, shit, shit. She'd met Runner... when was it? About three weeks ago? She might have realized the time was getting close. She whispered, glad the sound of running water made it impossible to be overheard, "Runner, you're bleeding!"

Runner, not sure why she was whispering but doing so, said, "I just started. Amy, we talked about this before. Everybody does it."

Amy stood upright and held Runner by the shoulders, leaning close, whispering even more softly. "Men don't, Runner! Only women!"

Runner gaped at her. "Why don't men do it?"

Amy shook her head. "I'll explain all that later. Right now we just need to get you plugged up somehow."

Once a month, moaned Amy, and of all times it has to be now! Two of the three men on the boat already suspected Amy might be lying about her own value to them. Amy had known all along the potential danger to Runner if the men found out she was a girl, but now Amy realized it would also destroy her own credibility as well. She and Runner both would probably end up chained in the crew quarters as permanent sex slaves.

There's got to be... yes, there they are. Amy grabbed a few paper towels from the nearby pile and, as she had done with the bologna earlier, but now for an entirely different purpose, she rolled them up into a thin tube. She wasn't sure how absorbent this particular paper would be -- it wasn't exactly an expensive brand, clearly -- but Amy thought it should do until they reached land. Luckily, so far Runner was only very lightly spotting, not flowing, but it wasn't clear how long that would last. "Take down your pants again. And bend over. I need to put this inside you."

* * * * *

Back on deck again, leaning over the rail once more, Amy tried to decide whether she'd covered up all traces. The offending toilet paper had been flushed, the seat cleaned. Was that it?

Runner was intently scanning the horizon ahead. Nothing but water was currently visible. "What does the Academy look like, Amy?"

Amy puzzled over how to answer, and then realized Runner intended to try to see it from mid-ocean. "We won't see it from the boat. After the boat we'll have to go there another way." Amy wondered what that might be. Would Greene drive them?

Runner looked disappointed, and turned her attention elsewhere. "What's that?" She pointed.

Amy smiled. Really, she thought, it's *so* much like being with a three-year-old sometimes. She saw where Runner was pointing. She'd seen this structure on the boat before, without paying much attention. She was about to describe it as the mast, and briefly wondered why a boat without sails needed one. Then she saw the thin strip of metal running up the side of the tall wooden pole. Her jaw fell open. Why didn't I think of that before?? She said excitedly, "It's... I think it's a radio antenna, R... Caleb." Ignoring Runner's puzzled "A what?" she took Runner's hand and half ran, half leapt up the steps to the bridge.

Pellis was at the wheel at present. Greene was writing in some sort of ledger. The log, Amy guessed. Breathlessly, Amy burst out, "Justin, you've got a radio, right?" Stupid, stupid, Amy, you've been such an idiot!

Greene looked up in surprise. "Well, yeah." His expression added "Duh!"

"Can you reach a telephone land line with it? Talk to somebody on the mainland, by phone?"

"Ummm... yeah, I guess. I haven't tried that before, but I suppose I can get patched through."

She nodded almost spastically, and went on, "Well, look, I can make things a lot easier for you. I need to talk to the Hanging Academy. Tell them where I am, where I'll be... I mean, you'd have to tell them that, where you're going to dock. But you won't have to take me to the city. They can pick me up and do all that."

She waited, shivering with excitement, as Runner looked at her with an expression that said, Okay, Amy, you *really* have to explain this to me. Greene put on a headset, flipped switches, adjusted dials, and began speaking into a microphone. Minutes later, when he turned to Amy and said, "I need the phone number," Amy almost told him, but her eye caught Pellis's, watching the by-play intently. Two birds about to be snuffed at once, thought Amy. Not only can I call home, but I can also provide proof to the skeptical. "I don't know the number. It's not like I call there myself. You'll need to get that from the operator."

She saw Pellis press his lips together and give a barely perceptible headshake. He thinks I've just proved I'm *not* from the Academy, she told herself. He thinks I should know the number. Just wait, Jimmy. If I gave a number to call, Pellis and Greene would have no way of knowing who I'm really talking to. But if Justin finds the number from the operator, there's no question it's the Academy.

She waited with Greene as Directory Assistance sought the number. As Greene responded at length, "Could you put me through to that number?" Amy spotted, on the radio console, a toggle switch labelled "Speaker." She reached forward and flipped the toggle, and a voice emerged from a grilled circle in the console, "...ging Academy, this is Bonnie. How can I help you?"

Through a wavery curtain of tears, Amy could make out Runner's incredulous expression, as she looked under the console to see where Bonnie might have been hiding all this time. Greene looked at Amy questioningly, and Amy waved frantically for the microphone. Greene handed it to her, and Amy said, her throat knotted, her voice shaking, "C-could you connect me with the dean's office?"

"Certainly, ma'am." There was a sharp clicking sound, and a new voice. "Dean's office. This is Tina."

Amy tried to speak, but couldn't hold back the sobs. She'd felt sure she could keep it together better than this. She took a deep breath, as Tina's voice, full of concern, asked, "Ma'am, can I help you?" and finally managed to choke out, "Tina, it's Amy."

There was a long silence. Amy looked at the console, and up at Greene. "Are we still connected?"

At last a choked whisper emerged from the speaker. "Amy! Where *are* you?? *How* are you??"

"I'm okay! I'm okay!" She sniffled desperately to clear her nose so she could keep speaking. "I'm on a boat. We're headed for land. I'm with some men who rescued me. I'm going to need somebody to come get me. I'm going to let you talk to Justin Greene. He'll tell you where to come." She handed the microphone back to Greene, and fell forward onto her crossed arms on the table in front of her, all ability to hold back the sobs now gone.

She felt Runner beside her, squatting, Runner's hand on the back of her neck. "Amy? Amy? Does it hurt to talk to that thing?"

Amy looked up and did her best to smile. Her latest sob suddenly morphed into a laugh. "It doesn't hurt. Caleb. It feels... better than anything. Ever. Oh!" She looked up at Greene, and said softly, indicating the microphone, "I need it back. When you're done."

Greene nodded, saying into the microphone, "About 10 pm, I think. Somewhere in there. Depends how choppy the water is."

Tina's voice, businesslike now, said, "Okay. Is there anything else we need to know?"

Amy made a beckoning gesture for the microphone. Greene handed it back, and Amy said, "Tina, we need transportation to the Academy for three people. There's me, and someone from the island who's going to come back with me, and a puppygirl."

"Puppygirl?" Stunned Tina replaced efficient Tina again. "What island?"

Amy giggled. "Tina, if I explained everything right now, that 10 pm target would just drift right by. Oh, one more thing. Whatever reward there is for finding me, if that could be taken care of up front, I'd appreciate that. Split three ways."

"I'll check on how that works, Amy. Is there anything else?"

Amy sighed. "I just... I don't want to stop hearing your voice, Tina, but I know you've got things to do and people to talk to."

"No kidding."

"Anyway... I'll see you soon. I'll see everybody soon."

"I know. Amy... I missed you. We all missed you."

The tears started again. "Not as much as I missed all of you. Okay, go now. Bye."

"Bye, Amy."

As the click was followed by a dial tone, Amy looked up to see Pellis staring at her, wide-eyed. She grinned and gave him a thumbs-up signal. He nodded, a smile breaking out on his face. Amy wondered how much of his reward money was already spent. Then her mind snapped back to the Academy, and she laughed, visualizing the activity she'd just inspired.

"Amy, what....?" Runner seemed unable to find words for all the questions flying around her mind.

Amy smiled, closed her eyes and sat back. I'll try to explain radio first, she decided. Somehow.

* * * * *

THAT NIGHT

Runner had been marveling at the electric lights. First the ones on the boat (“Amy, isn’t it nighttime? I can see *everything!*”), for which Amy had told Runner the word, and at which Amy had cautioned her against looking directly, then at the string of lights now stretched along the horizon, slowly growing in definition as well as brightness as Amy and Runner watched from the railing. Amy could see outlines of individual buildings now, and what appeared to be a shoreline highway, judging from the moving ribbons of white and red.

The mainland!! Everything felt so unreal. She had wanted so desperately, impossibly, to find a way back. Had feared so much she would never see any land but the island, the rest of her life.

Amy noticed it seemed cool now, though she knew she’d be comfortable normally. The temperature was several degrees down from the heat she’d become accustomed to on the island. She has glad to have clothes to wear.

Runner was leaning far forward, nearly in danger of falling over the railing. “But we can’t see the Academy from here?”

I can see it, Amy thought. Feel it. Taste it. But she shook her head. “No. But soon.”

Runner pointed. “Look, those lights. They’re...” Runner wriggled her fingers in front of her, her best description of the unsynchronized red blinking of at least a dozen lights. Police cars! Amy hadn’t expected that, but realized she should have.

As the boat chugged up beside the wharf, and Pellis jumped over the railing, heading for the rope Bailor tossed overboard to secure it, a searchlight suddenly illuminated the boat and its surroundings, and a tinny voice magnified by megaphone said firmly, “Stop! Drop all weapons. Stand still with your hands up.”

Squinting against the light, Amy could now see a half-dozen uniformed officers lined up just beyond the wharf, guns drawn. She muttered to herself “What in the *hell...*?” This, she told herself, was not the sort of reception Greene and the others needed or deserved. Against the judgment of an inner voice telling her how crazy she was being, she threw her hat into the water, to make herself more recognizable despite her hair, stood with her hands on her hips rather than in the air, balancing with difficulty against the rocking of the boat, and shouted furiously, “Did you guys not get the memo? These aren’t the men who took me, they’re the ones who *rescued* me! Do you understand the difference?”

She was hoping her attitude would convince them that she was not under any form of compulsion or restraint. Evidently it worked. A woman emerging from what appeared to be an Academy limo, not one of the police cars, shouted, “Stand down.” She gestured to Pellis, who was standing frozen. “Do whatever you need to do there.”

The surface of the dock was sufficiently high relative to the boat that Amy could easily hop over the railing and onto the boards. She did so, and turned back to Runner. “Hand Puppy over to me.”

Runner did so, and then imitated Amy in jumping over the railing as Amy was awkwardly setting Puppy down. The woman, who appeared to be in charge, walked over to them, and faced Amy, holding out her hand. “Amy. I’m Lieutenant Sims.”

Nothing so far, not all of the familiar sights and sounds of civilization, struck Amy with a sense of being home quite so much as the realization that, after a month in a land where women were nothing more than pack animals, she was back now in a world where a woman might be giving orders to the men who worked for her. Amy shook hands with Sims. "How did you know I was me?"

Sims smiled. "Admittedly you don't quite look like your picture. But I was told."

"By whom?" She then saw that a man had emerged from the same car that Sims had come from. Even against the glare of the searchlight, the dean was instantly recognizable.

Amy whooped, ran to him and threw her arms around him, something she had never, in her years at the Academy, imagined doing. With the side of her face pressed to his chest, she felt his hands patting her back. Equally hard to imagine. She murmured, "I am so glad to see you."

"I can easily say the same."

Amy laughed in delight. That statement, at least, seemed to fit him. She opened her eyes and gasped. "Steffi!! What are you doing here??"

Steffi Bloom was standing just behind the dean. "I've been doing a lot of work with the police on this. And the dean." She grinned and held out her arms, and Amy shifted her hug from the dean to Steffi.

Steffi let go first, and looked at Amy, holding her at arms' length. "What did you do to your hair, dear?"

Amy laughed. "I thought I'd try something different. If I said it's a long story, would you believe me?"

Steffi laughed with her. "I'm sure it is."

Puppy, who with Runner had followed Amy to meet the dean, had been growling at the strangers, and now let loose with several menacing barks. Steffi gave Puppy an astonished look as Runner knelt, stroking Puppy to calm her. Amy was fully accustomed to the sounds Puppy made, but she knew how much more authentically dog-like they were than anything a mainland puppygirl could manage.

She turned back to the dean. "There's a reward, right? For finding me?" She gestured back at the boat. "The three men on that boat should get it. Get all of it, whatever it is."

It was Steffi who responded. "Yes. Those three? Not this one?" She gestured at Runner, still petting Puppy.

Amy laughed and nodded. "The guys over there, yes." She looked at the dean again. "Did Tina pass on the part about me bringing along some extra people?"

"We're to give a ride to one of the men, and the puppygirl, I understand?"

"Well, more than just a ride, I hope."

The dean turned to Steffi. "You want to settle up on the reward now?"

Steffi nodded, and looked back at Amy. "Let me just make totally sure. Him, and him, and him, right?"

Amy nodded again, and Steffi headed in that direction. Amy took Runner's hand, pulling her up to a standing position, and told her, "This is the dean of the Academy. He's going to take us there."

Runner gasped. "There's a man at the Academy? I thought..."

Amy shook her head, grinning. "It's not like you're thinking. He's a good man. Very good."

Amy could see Steffi was now in conference with Greene, Bailor, and Pellis. Amy reached out and took off Runner's island hat. "Here, I want him to get a good look at you." She smoothed down Runner's hair and turned back to the dean. "Sir, this is Runner. That's the only name she has. I want her to stay at the Academy. And the puppy."

The dean was uncharacteristically flustered. Amy, following his eye movements, could tell that it was at least partly due to his sudden perception of a very beautiful woman standing in front of him, despite all his experience with same. Runner was in a class only a few of the girls reached. "You want... I don't know... how are you proposing...?"

"Sir, she's a free woman, not owned by anyone. She doesn't have any family. She's ready and willing to commit herself to the Academy as a slave. She could do whatever staff job you can give her."

He frowned, his thoughts more collected now. "Birth certificate? Any sort of identification?"

Amy looked at him intently. "Sir, do you trust me?"

He nodded hesitantly. "More than most, I'd say."

"Okay. She's past her eighteenth birthday, or she wouldn't be here. Nobody has any claim on her. In fact, aside from the people standing around here right now, nobody really knows she exists, except as a face they've seen. I can't prove any of that, but it's true. That's what I hope you'll trust me on."

He looked at Amy thoughtfully, and finally nodded. He turned to Runner. "Where are you from?"

Runner looked helplessly at Amy.

Amy spoke for her. "She's from the only place she's ever known, and she doesn't have a name for it. It's Purity Island."

"Purity Island!" He looked at Runner again. "But that was settled by people of our own stock."

Amy nodded. "Yes, but there was a native population there before that. Genetically, she's mostly an original islander. They're almost gone from interbreeding, but I think she got an unusually pure mix."

The dean looked at Runner a moment longer, then shifted his attention to Puppy. "Ummm... what staff position do you propose for the puppy?"

Amy grinned. "Dorm pet?"

He frowned. "We've never allowed..."

"Sir." She discarded the light-hearted approach, and looked at him intently. "The fact that I'm standing here is because of them. *Both* of them." She gestured toward Runner and Puppy. "Everything I'm going to be able to do now, everything I can accomplish with my life from now on, I owe that all to them." She felt tears stinging her eyes once more.

The dean looked at her, and Amy could read that she didn't need to state the obvious -- he already understood. To the extent that any of Amy's future activities would result in financial rewards and other advantages to the Academy, the dean himself owed Runner and Puppy a great deal as well. He nodded.

Amy heaved a great sigh. That was settled.

Steffi returned, and told the dean, "They seemed pretty pleased with that. I bumped the reward up to fifty-one. That made it easier to split into thirds." She laughed. "After all our effort publicizing it, they hadn't heard about a missing Hanging Girl before they ran into Amy, and only knew about the reward from her. They're a little outside our media coverage area."

Amy grinned. "That's great! Seventeen hundred each! No wonder they're happy."

Steffi smiled back at her. "No, Amy. Seventeen thousand."

"What!?" A fifty-one thousand dollar reward! Amy wasn't sure she would even be sold for that much! Megan, of course, had brought in far more than that. But that was Megan. "How..."

The dean smiled. "You have admirers, Amy. The Academy put up ten thousand, and then Miss Bloom and your father added twenty thousand each."

Steffi held up a finger. "Twenty-one now."

"My dad!! How is he?? Please don't tell him I waited this long to ask about him! There's just so much going on... Is he okay?"

The dean answered, "It seems to have been a false alarm. He'd given all the indications of a heart attack, but tests were negative. They kept him at the hospital a couple of days, and released him."

"But he didn't come here tonight?"

Steffi shook her head. "We haven't told him. We don't want Andrew to know you're back yet."

"Andrew! So he's still on the loose?"

Steffi sighed. "We haven't been able to find any provable connection yet. He lawyered up pretty quickly when we started asking him questions that suggested he was under suspicion. We haven't been able to talk to him much since then."

“He *had* to have given Dad the fake heart attack somehow. You know it’s too much coincidence that he took me right when that happened. Some kind of drug?”

“None was found. There are drugs that can do it undetectably. But, well, they’re undetectable. We do assume Andrew was responsible, but again, no connection found.”

“When you say ‘we’... Steffi, you haven’t joined the police department, have you?”

Steffi laughed. “Not in an official capacity. But I’ve hired some detectives. They’ve been working with the police. And they report back to me.”

Amy gave Steffi another hug. “I don’t know what to say. You’ve been doing so much for me!”

Steffi shrugged. “You talked about owing people. I felt I owed you and the Academy a lot.”

Amy tightened her grip. “Well, we’re way past even now.”

Steffi grinned. “Let me be the judge.”

Lieutenant Sims came over, accompanied by a woman Amy hadn’t met. The lieutenant said, “I’m done here for now. The men agreed to be interviewed in a couple of days.”

Amy frowned. “You’re not, like, arresting them or anything, right?”

The lieutenant shook her head. “I’m convinced they’re what they say they are. But they might know something useful.”

The dean opened the limo door. “Shall we go, then?”

Sims nodded. “Go ahead. I won’t come with you, but Detective Reed will.” She indicated the woman accompanying her. “She wants to ask Amy some questions.”

Amy turned to the dean and breathed out a heartfelt, “Let’s go *home*.”

* * * * *

Detective Reed took the front seat, beside Bill, who was driving. In the second seat were Amy and Runner, with Puppy draped across their laps. The dean and Steffi took the rearmost seat.

Amy and Runner sat pressed together at shoulders, hips, and thighs, despite plenty of room on the seat. Amy held Runner’s left hand in both of hers, resting them on Puppy’s back. Runner needed one hand free for pointing.

Runner seemed permanently wide-eyed, not even wanting to blink in case she missed something. She pointed again. “What’s that?”

“That’s a billboard. It’s for...” She struggled to find a way to explain advertising. “It’s to tell people about something they might want to have.”

“But people can’t hear it. There’s too much noise...” She gasped suddenly, her face alight. “Oh! Is that those letters, that make words? You hear it that way?”

Amy smiled and nodded. “It’s called reading. People read those words when they go by.”

In front of her, turned in her seat to face Amy, Detective Reed said, “Amy, if I could just ask you a few...”

Amy shook her head quickly. “It can wait.”

“But while it’s still fresh...”

Amy glared at her. “I promise I will help you all I can. I *want* to help. But it’s always going to be fresh for me. I’ll remember what you need me to remember. It can wait. This is more important.”

“But...”

“Look. You’ll get your job done, and I’ll help you do it. But this is Runner’s first night in the civilized world. It’s never going to be her first night again. It’s very special to her, so it’s very special to me. It’s my priority. I’m going to answer her questions now and yours later. Okay?”

The detective looked past Amy to the dean, for help. Out of the corner of her eye, Amy saw the dean shake his head. Detective Reed sighed and turned to face the front.

Runner pointed again. “What’s that?”

CHAPTER 27

Amy asked softly, "Sir, what time is it?" Puppy was asleep, her head nestled in Runner's lap. In the front seat, Detective Reed appeared to be sleeping as well.

Runner, of course, was still wide-eyed, the more so since the car had reached the city. Her neck seemed spring-loaded, whipping her head from one side to the other as each new wonder came into view. There were few cars on the streets, and almost no pedestrians. But to Runner, it was a hive of activity such as she had never imagined. Mostly it was a blaze of lights that banished the night entirely.

"About 1 a.m. I'd like the three of you to spend the night in the infirmary, so the nurse can check you out in the morning. Before that, we'll all go to my office."

"Yes, Sir." Amy had to shake her head to clear it as an odd feeling washed over it. The world of the mundane seemed to be opening up and surrounding her, caressing her, beginning to banish the adventure she had never wanted and which she had feared would never end. Somehow even the infirmary seemed exciting.

"Am I correct in understanding that neither Runner nor Puppy can read?"

Amy choked back a laugh. Runner's illiteracy could easily have been inferred from her conversations with Amy, but Puppy, of course, hadn't said a word. The dean didn't yet understand that Puppy's lack of speech wasn't simply a lifestyle choice, in the manner of puppygirls here. "Umm, that's right, Sir. Runner's going to start learning right away, though." Beside her, Runner smiled and nodded at Amy eagerly.

"I'm concerned with the present rather than the future. We have some paperwork to do. I'd like to get that done before they take up residence as slaves."

Amy bit her lip. She hadn't actually told Runner she was going to be a slave, unsure of the effect of the word on her. Runner knew what it meant on the island. It was unavoidable, though. No one but slaves lived in the Academy's secure area.

Runner looked quickly at Amy. "Am I going to be a slave?"

Amy held Runner's hand more tightly. "Runner, it's a different thing here. It's not all about serving men because you have to, the way you've seen girls doing. You'll understand it better later, but it's okay. I'm a slave. All of the Hanging Girls are slaves. It's a good thing. It's what I wanted to be, so I could be a Hanging Girl." Amy wanted to explain to her that it simply meant the Academy would own her, but realized Runner wouldn't have a clear idea what "ownership" meant -- Amy hadn't exactly wanted to introduce the subject while Runner had been out stealing things for both of them.

Runner relaxed, her smile coming back. "Okay."

Amy suddenly felt her lips curl themselves upward in a grin as if by outside agency. She pointed. "Runner, see that big building right there?"

Runner looked at the approaching structure. "What..." She gasped suddenly. "Is that it??" She seemed almost ready to hyperventilate.

Tears streamed from Amy's eyes. She could only nod her head.

* * * * *

The hallways were deserted at this time of night -- probably just as well, thought Amy. She wanted desperately to see all her friends, but suspected the reception they would give her would be overwhelming not only to Runner but to Amy herself, exhausted as she was. Runner, she suspected, was equally tired, though it was hard to tell. Runner was breathlessly looking at every passing feature, her mouth open in wonder. She said to Amy, automatically whispering in the quiet of the empty halls, "I thought it would just be like a bigger cabin."

The dean ushered the three girls into his outer office -- Detective Reed was being driven home by Bill, and Steffi was making her way home on her own. Amy, looking into the office, blinked at the sight of Tina, raising her head from her desk where she had apparently been napping. Tina came around the desk and gave Amy a warm hug. "So glad you're back."

Amy laughed. "Me too." She let go of Tina. "Tina, what are you doing here?"

"I work here."

"At one o'clock in the morning?"

"I wanted to be here in case you needed anything."

The dean said, "Tina, could you print out two slave service contracts, one in the name of 'Runner,' and the other..." He looked at Amy. "What is the puppy's name?"

Amy laughed. "'Puppy,' actually."

The dean smiled. "Simple enough."

Tina looked puzzled. "'Runner'? Spelled like it sounds?" When Amy nodded, Tina went on, "What's the full name?"

Amy shook her head. "Just 'Runner,' nothing else. And just 'Puppy.'"

A thought occurred to Amy as Tina sat in front of her computer. "Oh, Tina, could I have a pen? And a blank sheet of paper?"

Tina handed Amy the necessities, and Amy set the paper down on a low file cabinet. "Runner, do you want to learn a letter?"

Runner's eyes lit up. She nodded vigorously.

“Okay. Watch me, and then do what I do.” Amy took the pen, and slowly made a large capital R on the page. “This letter is ‘arr.’ ‘Rrrunner’ starts with arr.” She emphasized the R sounds.

Runner stared at the letter, frowning in concentration. Amy could see the tiny movements of Runner eyes as she visually traced the shape of the letter.

Suddenly she gasped, and pointed at the letter. “Say that again! What you just said.”

Amy repeated it, again stretching out the R sounds.

Comprehension flooded Runner’s features. “Arrr. Runner. Rrrrunner.”

She gets it! thought Amy. Already! Each letter makes a sound like its name.

Runner whirled towards Amy, pointing insistently at the paper. “Make the whole word, Amy! Runner!” Runner already knew, from Amy’s earlier explanation, that it took several letters to make a word.

Amy started to comply, then said, “Wait. You do this one first. Make an R, just like that one.” She gave the pen to Runner and spent a moment coaching her how to hold it, then watched as Runner, with total concentration on the job, slowly made the strokes on the page forming a shaky R, identical to Amy’s. Beside it she made another, and scattered several more R’s on the page before demanding, “Now the whole word!”

In block capitals, Amy printed “RUNNER” on the page, then pointed to each letter in turn. “R. U. N. N. E. R.” She repeated it, and said slowly, “Rrruhnnnerrr,” sweeping her finger slowly across the letters as she said them.

Runner hopped up and down in place, her hands clasped together as if in applause, her whole face glowing. “Now let me do it! Let me do it!”

Amy gave her back the pen, and watched, suddenly understanding how a proud parent must feel, as Runner wrote her name for the first time.

Runner made five copies of Amy’s example, then turned to hug Amy ecstatically.

The dean cleared his throat. “Likes learning things, does she?”

* * * * *

After Amy had explained the slavery form as well as she could, and Runner had signed it triumphantly, with Tina signing as witness, the dean turned and spoke to Puppy. “I’ll need you to sign one, somehow. Could you write with the pen in your mouth?”

Amy choked. Shit, she thought, I hope this doesn’t screw up anything. “Uhhh, Sir...” As he turned to look at her, she went on, “She doesn’t understand you.”

The dean frowned. “Excuse me? I wasn’t aware there were other languages on Purity Island.”

“She... doesn’t understand any language, Sir. Except a few words she gets used to and responds to. She was trained from infancy to behave like a dog. That’s how they do it there.”

The dean retained his frown, and stood stroking his chin. “I’m not sure what I can do about taking her in as a slave. Personally I don’t care to have unwilling slaves in my establishment, and obviously she can’t give anything like informed consent to the arrangement. I’m convinced that Runner understands what she just agreed to, but...” He gestured towards Puppy uncertainly. “You’re telling me she can’t.”

Amy’s heart sank. She had anticipated the awkwardness, but had hoped the hurdle had been crossed when the dean agreed to take Puppy in.

“Sir...” she began. “Puppy is willing to stay with us, if that means anything. She doesn’t want to be anywhere else. Yes, I know she can’t understand the concept of being a slave, but...” She suddenly redirected her pleading as a thought struck her, “She could stay here as a free woman, couldn’t she? If she can be anywhere she wants to be, couldn’t she just want to be here?” It was lucky, she decided, she’d removed Puppy’s collar.

He continued stroking his chin. “There are no free women living full-time on the premises.”

“I know, Sir. But... well, slavery is subject to all the laws that cover it, and you can’t do anything about them, but now we’re getting into *your own* rules. You can decide to let a free woman live here if you want to.”

“You know the reasons...”

Amy’s concentration on the battle to keep Puppy was too intense for her to worry about the etiquette involved in interrupting the dean. “Yes, Sir, but the reasons don’t apply to her. It’s not like she could learn some secret you don’t want her to learn, then decide to leave and pass it on to someone outside. She’s not going to want to leave, and can’t communicate any complex thoughts to anybody if she *did* leave.”

“The point is, how can I *know* she doesn’t want to leave? She can’t tell me. I can’t keep a free woman here if she doesn’t want to be here. That’s another law beyond my control.”

Amy stood helplessly, her mind racing. If Puppy can’t tell us...

She laughed suddenly. Amy, you idiot, she told herself, start thinking like a Hanging Girl! Since when did you need people to speak to you to know what they were thinking? You can come closer to reading minds than anybody outside these walls. And the dean can do it too.

Amy turned to Runner and took her hand. “Runner, I need you to come with me for a minute.”

Runner nodded, and Amy led her to the door of the room, opened it, and stepped out into the hallway.

From inside the office, Amy could hear Puppy’s bark of distress, full of the fear of abandonment, followed by a thumping sound as Puppy scrambled to the door.

As Puppy came out the door, Amy knelt and held her arms out, and was almost knocked over as Puppy ran into her, whining and licking Amy's face, then turning to lick Runner as well, as she knelt beside Amy. Every quiver of her muscles, every whimper of her voice said how much she needed to be with Runner and Amy. Amy knew the dean would have no trouble reading her.

Amy looked up to see the dean watching from the doorway. "Sir, as long as Runner and I are here, this is where Puppy's going to want to be."

The dean, his arms crossed, sighed. Amy could hear him mutter, "I don't know why I thought I'd win an argument with you." He turned his head and said into the room, "Tina, could you get a slave collar... just the one, for Runner. And a uniform suitable for a staff slave. Also a graduate uniform and collar for Amy. I'm not sure what sizes to tell you. Bring them to the infirmary, please."

Tina came out past him into the hallway. "I can tell the sizes."

Amy looked up from hugging Puppy, grinning. "Oh, and could you see if they have a pack of alphabet flash cards in the student store? Oh!! Also a box of tampons." She indicated Runner.

Tina flashed her a smile. "Tampons I can probably come up with. Flash cards I'm a little doubtful about, but I can order some in the morning."

As Tina walked down the hall, the dean said to Amy, "I think we've already established Puppy's job here. In the morning we can talk about what Runner can do for us."

Amy gave Puppy one last stroke and stood. "Sir, if you're not too tired yet, while everything's quiet could we go down to the Demo Room? As long as we're thinking about what Runner's job might be, I want to show you what she can do."

The dean responded with a puzzled frown. "In the Demo Room?"

"Yes, Sir."

* * * * *

As Amy followed the dean through the door to the Demo Room, holding Runner's hand, with Puppy trotting happily behind, Amy asked herself why she felt so insistent on showing the dean now. They were all tired, though Runner was so amped on the wonder of her new world that no fatigue showed through.

The dean started to speak, but stopped at the sound of Runner's loud gasp.

Runner almost crushed Amy's hand. "Amy, it's a noose! Can I hang? Can I hang? Please?"

Amy saw the dean's stunned look. Before he could speak, she held up her free hand, the one not caught in the vise of Runner's grip. "I know what you're thinking..." She laughed. "Of course, you know I know what you're thinking. But I did *not* give her any instruction in hanging. I told her some basics about

breathing and blood flow that everybody knows, but she'd never learned them. That's all. Everything you're about to see her do is from her just watching me practice."

The dean frowned and waited as Amy led Runner to the hanging platform. Amy debated about whether to show Runner how the platform worked, and decided to postpone that, instead using the platform as simply a flat-surfaced log. She pushed the platform back slightly so that it was no longer quite directly under the rope. She wanted, for now, to stay with what Runner was familiar with. As she lowered the noose over Runner's head and tightened it around her neck, she said, "I haven't even talked to her about the proper placement of the rope. I've just been doing it for her."

Runner's jaw dropped, and she rubbed her neck against the rope. "It's so soft! Smooth. Is this what you always use here?"

As Amy nodded, the dean asked, "What have you been using?"

Amy answered, "Local vines. They're a little rough, but I've kind of got used to them."

Amy now fought against a smile, anticipating the dean's reaction to what she was about to do and not wanting to give away any of the surprise. She said casually to Runner, "Here, let's get you out of these clothes. You never wear them when you hang." She unbuttoned the vest, and as Runner shrugged out of it, Amy unwound the breast wrap.

She almost laughed aloud at the dean's gasp. He had indeed, as Amy knew, not been expecting the size of Runner's breasts. Nor their perfect shape. Amy pulled Runner's shorts down, revealing the rest of her. The slightly baggy leather outfit had not given much idea of the body underneath. Amy stayed out of the dean's line of sight to Runner, wanting him to get the full first impression of what he'd just acquired.

As Amy went to the cabinet at the side of the room and picked out a short rope for wrist-tying, she saw the dean staring at Runner, his wide eyes running up and down her body.

After tying Runner's hands, Amy edged back on the platform, away from Runner, and let her choose her own moment. Runner took a last, slow breath and stepped off.

As Runner kicked and twisted, turning and thrusting her hips, Amy alternated watching her and watching the dean. He was rubbing his chin on his hand, his eyes not focused on any one part of Runner's body but taking in her performance as a whole. He was, probably unconsciously, slowly nodding.

Amy let Runner kick for three minutes, during the last of which the dean appeared steadily more surprised, no doubt at the sheer duration of the session. At last she gently gripped Runner's waist and guided her back to the platform.

Runner, as always at the end of her practice, had a blissful glow to her face. She kissed Amy as Amy loosened the rope.

The dean opened his mouth to say something, and closed it without finding the words he wanted.

Amy hugged Runner, then kept her arm around Runner's waist as she looked out at the dean. "As I said, I never told her..."

The dean nodded, interrupting. "I know, I believe you. I could see a few counterproductive moves you would have corrected by now if you'd been giving her any coaching." He slowly shook his head in amazement. "How long has she been doing this?"

"I guess it'd be... a little less than three weeks."

"She'd never done it before that?"

"She'd never even *seen* it before. They don't do it on the island."

The dean rarely took very long to make a decision. He looked at Amy. "You know what I want you to do, I assume? You and the rest of the girls. I'm not assigning you to do it by yourself. You don't have to worry about delaying your own hanging any further."

Amy gave him a happy, wide-mouthed grin. "Yes, Sir! I'm already on it. You heard me ask Tina for the alphabet cards."

The dean gave her a small smile. "Now will you go to the infirmary?"

Amy giggled. "Yes, Sir."

* * * * *

Amy was having a hard time keeping her eyes open as she led Runner and Puppy into the infirmary. There it was, Amy saw, smiling despite her exhaustion. A bed. A real bed. What I need more than anything in the world, she thought.

She could see, on the small dresser adjacent to the bed, two small piles of clothing, one for herself, and one for Runner. The latter pile included panties, to which she hoped Runner would react favorably. There were also shorts and a bra, in khaki, the shorts a little longer than the brief ones the students wore, the bra a bit more modest than the lower-cut, cleavage-revealing student model. In the morning, Amy decided, she would ask the Student Store to make or order an outfit in the same color, cut identically to those of the students. She wanted Runner to have a sense of belonging, to the greatest extent possible. There were also two sets of socks and sneakers, and, as requested, a box of tampons, as well as a box of sanitary napkins.

Tina had apparently, unsurprisingly, been unable to find a set of alphabet flash cards on the premises. It's probably just as well, thought Amy. Plenty of time for that later. She suppressed a giggle at her knowledge that, if Runner had seen such cards here, she would likely have recognized the similarity of the letters to those she had just learned, and she would have insisted on a lesson right this minute. Amy just wanted to sleep.

The one remaining item was a collar.

It was a metal one, of the type worn by all staff slaves, and students in their first two years. Like those of the First Year students, it was simply engraved, "Slave Girl -- Property of the Hanging Academy."

Amy picked it up, and turned to Runner. "Runner, this is yours."

Runner blinked in surprise. "It is?"

Amy nodded, smiling. "When you wear it, it means you're a slave. The good kind. Like me."

Runner looked puzzled. "You don't have one."

"I've been here a long time, so I wear a different kind, but it means the same thing." Amy picked the bright red choker from the pile of her own clothes, and closed her eyes, savoring the feeling as she fastened it around her neck. More than anything else in her surroundings, it made her feel fully returned.

She opened her eyes. "Now let me put yours on." Runner stood patiently as Amy closed the hinged collar around Runner's neck and secured the catch.

Amy stood back and looked at her, and that proud parent feeling swept through her again. She kissed Runner's cheek. "Now you're part of the Academy. The Academy is my home, and now it's your home too."

Runner's face glowed. "My home."

Yes, thought Amy, Runner had picked up very accurately what the word meant.

Amy shrugged out of her leather Island outfit for the last time, and Runner, who had redressed after her hanging, though without the breast wrap, did the same. Amy sighed. "Now let's get some sleep."

She lay on the bed, and held out her arms to Runner. As Runner sat on the surface of the bed, she exclaimed, "It's so soft!"

Together they curled into the position they had evolved in the last week or so of their Island sojourn. As on their first night, they lay facing each other, in opposite directions, each sucking one of the other's breasts, to which they had added the refinement of each bringing up her knees behind the other's head, gently nudging the back of it to help keep it in place, while Puppy climbed up to lay atop both of them, sucking the free breast of one or the other of them -- tonight, Amy's.

Amy, feeling the intimate contact with both of her dearest new friends, reflected on how well she and the dean could read each other. Neither needed to spell out his or her thoughts to the other. Amy knew that the dean saw the natural instinct for hanging in Runner, and, without Amy needing to tell him, how much of an asset to the Academy Runner could become. Amy also knew that the dean, without needing to say so to Amy, had no intention of relaxing the Academy's admissions standards. Runner could not be a student if she couldn't keep up with the courses in history, in the sciences, in the theories of hanging.

And Amy knew, without the dean needing to say it, what Runner's job would be at the Academy. She wouldn't be joining the kitchen staff, or the cleaning staff.

All of the students had had twelve years of public schooling before arriving at the Academy. Runner had a lot of catching up to do. Her job now was to learn.

* * * * *

THE NEXT MORNING

Amy was startled as the light came on in the room. Puppy was up off her and growling, facing the door.

Amy let Runner's breast slip out of her mouth and looked in that direction. The nurse, Carol, was standing there, looking startled, warily regarding Puppy.

Amy sat up, and felt Runner come quickly alert as well, twisting around to see what Puppy was growling at.

Carol stammered, "Uhhh, I'm sorry. I think I snuck up on you a little."

Amy reached out to stroke Puppy and calm her. "It's okay. She doesn't like strangers much." Amy gave Puppy a soft kiss on the neck. Puppy stopped growling, but continued to watch the nurse's every move. The latter made no move to come closer.

Amy rubbed her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock. Do you want breakfast?"

Amy suddenly noticed how grimy she was, something to which she had paid no attention on the island. "I think we'll take a shower first. Oh..." She bent down and picked up the leather outfits she and Runner had been wearing. "Could you have all this cleaned? It's real girlskin, so do whatever you need to do with it. We probably won't wear it, but I want to keep it." Several slavegirls had given their lives to be these clothes.

Carol nodded, cautiously stepped forward and took the outfits. "After you clean up and eat, I want to check you over."

"Sure." As the nurse left, Amy stood and stretched.

She watched as Puppy hopped down to the floor. Amy barely reacted in time as Puppy lifted one leg. "Whoa!"

Puppy's startlement cut off the flow that was just starting. Amy looked around, and spotted the bedpan she needed. She set it on the floor and pushed it towards Puppy, and watched in frustration as Puppy sniffed it as if she thought it might contain food, then backed away, dismissing it.

Amy sighed. She hadn't really given much thought to this.

Sighing still more heavily, Amy dropped down onto all fours, straddled the bedpan and peed into it. Runner, in a surprised voice, asked, "So am I supposed to do it that way now?"

Amy worked desperately to hold back her laughter. This is like herding cats sometimes, she told herself. She shook her head, and pointed to an adjacent room, its door ajar. "There's a toilet in there. Go ahead and use that if you need to. But Puppy can't use that. This is just for her."

As her bladder finished emptying, Amy looked at Puppy encouragingly. She backed away from the bedpan and beckoned towards Puppy.

Puppy at last got the idea, padded forward to straddle the bedpan and directed her own stream down into it.

Amy led Puppy into the bathroom, where Runner was just finishing with the toilet, and led both of them into the shower. Runner's face lit up after Amy turned on the tap. "You can make it rain in here!"

Amy bent to begin soaping Puppy, who seemed to tolerate the novel experience well enough as long as Amy seemed to be sanctioning it. Runner pulled the soap out of Amy's hand and held it to her nose. She gave Amy an astonished look. "I like that!"

Amy grinned. "Let me rub it all over you then."

Runner loved the shampoo as well.

* * * * *

They made love standing up in the shower, Amy loving the feel of Runner's slick, soapy skin sliding against her own. Afterwards they knelt, the water still streaming over them, and gave Puppy similar attention.

* * * * *

Amy had just finished helping Runner dress, explaining the bra at great length, ("No, that's okay, it's not meant to squash them down. It just holds them so they don't bounce around quite as much.") and had given her some protection against her menstrual flow, when Carol looked in again. "Do you want breakfast now?"

Amy stood with her hands on her hips. "Can we just go eat in the caf? I want to see my friends."

Carol shook her head. "The dean wants us to do some tests."

Amy rolled her eyes. "I feel fine. We all do. And if we've got any diseases, the dean is already exposed. So is Tina."

"I know, but he said his priority is to protect the students. Even if something starts going around now, it helps to have some advance warning about what it is."

Amy sighed. "How long will it take? When can we leave?"

"We should have results around dinnertime."

"Can some students come over?"

"I'm sorry. That would kind of defeat the purpose, you know?"

Amy ground her teeth. Standing in familiar surroundings -- she had spent a lot of time with Linda in this same room after her operation -- and wearing familiar clothes, she just wanted to get back to the normal routine of her life, and see the friends she had missed so much. With an almost Puppy-like growl, she sat on the bed. "Okay. What do you need to do? Blood test? Can we do it now?"

* * * * *

Amy had Puppy and Runner both watch closely as Carol jabbed the needle into Amy's arm near the elbow. Runner followed Amy in giving blood, her free hand gripping Amy's, her eyes squeezed shut, making a small squeak as she felt the prick of the needle, then helped Amy keep Puppy calm as Puppy's sample was taken. Afterward, following their delayed breakfast, Amy looked around for something to occupy their time. Her eyes stopped at the obvious solution. Of course, she thought. They'll both be amazed.

After tuning the television to a children's channel, currently showing cartoons, Amy summoned Carol once more. "There was a Detective Reed I was talking to last night. Could you contact her and tell her I can answer her questions now? Tina should have a number for her. If I'm sick, she's exposed already." Carol nodded and left.

* * * * *

Amy wasn't sure why Detective Reed was so fascinated with the satellite phone Amy had found on the beach. "So you didn't bring it back with you?"

Amy smiled at the sight of Runner sitting cross-legged on the bed, Puppy stretched out beside her, their faces full of childlike wonder, both of them with their whole being focused on the colorful moving images. It had taken ten minutes for Runner to stop looking behind the flat-screen set to see where the pictures were coming from. Now she sat still, her eyes wide and barely blinking, her mouth slightly open. Amy turned back to Reed. "No, I told you I threw it away. I couldn't think of any reason I needed to keep it. Well, I mean no, that wasn't really it. I was just pissed off. But I still don't know why you'd want it. I'm sure Andrew would make sure it couldn't be traced to him."

"Do you think you'd recognize the brand and model? Be able to pick it out from a selection of various phones?"

Amy shrugged, puzzled. "I guess so. What for?"

Reed gave her a small smile. "I've got some ideas I'm working on."

* * * * *

Detective Reed left around lunchtime, and Carol, along with lunch, brought a small box. "Tina said you wanted these."

Amy practically leapt off the bed. "Yes! Thank you."

Waiting until after lunch, during which Runner spared just enough attention to the food without withdrawing her gaze from the television, Amy finally waved the box at Runner. When Runner at last looked over, Amy asked, "Do you want to start learning some letters?"

Runner shot off the bed in the same way Amy had earlier, the television instantly forgotten. "Yes!! Teach me letters, Amy! Do you have a... what was that called?" She pantomimed writing her name, as she had last night.

"Oh, right, we do need that. Let me get one from Carol."

* * * * *

At about five o'clock, Amy's heart leapt at the sound of footsteps just beyond the door. The test results must be back.

Her jaw dropped as a face looked in past the door. "Carol told me to tell you you're all okay..."

Amy sprang off the bed and threw her arms around Melissa in a single move, holding her tight, tight, tight, tears streaming down her face, murmuring "I missed you so much I missed you so much..."

Holly and Jana came up behind Melissa, grinning, Holly explaining, "We drew straws to see who got to tell you."

Amy tried to shift her grip to encompass Holly and Jana, without losing hold of Melissa, as all of them laughed and cried at the same time. Amy wondered who would be the first... Jana, it turned out, was the one who rubbed Amy's head and demanded, "Amy, what'd you do to your hair??"

Amy started responding, "It's a long story," but stopped as she discovered Runner had come up behind her, leaving behind her writing pad on which she had just left a page covered with lower-case a's. For hours she had been testing Amy's powers of explanation ("Why do they make every letter two ways?"), but now a new source of excitement had caught her attention. "Amy... Are these the Hanging Girls?" She appeared to want to touch them but hesitated, pending the answer.

All three visitors seemed really to notice Runner for the first time, and Amy saw the reaction she knew was going to be repeated often as Runner met more Academy students -- she could hear Jana say under her breath, "Wow," while Holly whispered, "She's so beautiful, Amy."

Amy let go of her friends with one hand to wipe her eyes, and said to Runner, "There are a lot more Hanging Girls, but these are also my really good, good friends."

Confirmation left Runner frozen in awe. Finally she managed to say, in a soft voice, "Can I watch you hang?" Having seen Amy, she clearly had set a high priority on obtaining more data on the techniques.

Amy laughed. "We'll get to that soon. First I want you to get to know them, because we'll all be spending a lot of time together." She put her hand on Melissa's shoulder. "This is Melissa." She continued with the introductions of Jana and Holly, then said, "Guys, I want you to meet Runner."

Melissa blinked. "'Runner,' did you say?"

Amy nodded, grinning. "One who runs. Runner."

Melissa held out her hand. "Very nice to meet you, Runner."

Runner stared at Melissa's hand, with no idea what to do with it. Amy gave her a demonstration, and Runner shook hands all around, still seeming to puzzle over the significance, looking at her hand as if she expected to see some change in it.

Jana looked past her to the bed, where Puppy was still entranced by the television. "That's the puppygirl Tina was talking about."

Amy nodded. "She told you where I've been?"

Holly said, in a voice of amazement. "Purity Island. She didn't exactly say how you ended up there."

Amy waved the point off. "Later. Part of the long story. But anyway, Runner and Puppy are both from the island."

Melissa looked at Runner, puzzled. "I thought people on Purity Island were originally from here."

Amy laughed, knowing this would be another of the many things she was going to need to explain again and again. "There were natives before they got there."

Jana looked back and forth between Runner and Puppy. "It sounds like you're saying they're going to live with us. How did you manage that, with the dean?"

"Another long story, but later I'll have Runner show you what she can do. You'll understand."

Melissa said, "We can all talk later tonight, but by now Tina should have got all the students together in the caf." She grinned. "They don't know why."

Amy laughed. "Now *that* should be fun. Pizza?"

"Of course."

Amy reached for the remote and turned off the television. Puppy made an uncertain sound and pawed at the screen, trying to urge the pictures back into existence. Amy called to her. "Puppy! Come." She clapped her hands together.

* * * * *

As Amy heard the buzz of conversation on her approach to the caf, she said quietly to Runner, "There are going to be a lot of girls here. Probably more than you've seen in one place before. They're going to be really loud, but they're all Hanging Girls, so they're very nice. Stay close to me. Puppy is going to be really scared, so give her some hugs if she needs it."

Nervously, Runner nodded.

Melissa entered first, and knocked on one of the propped-open double doors to get everyone's attention. As the room quieted, Amy, her heart fluttering, trying to maintain a smile despite the quivering of her lips, walked into the entrance and stopped.

In the first few seconds, Amy could hear a few puzzled comments, from among the hundred or so girls present -- "What's..." "Who...?" "I thought all the graduates were gone..." until Christy, one of the Third Years, her hands flying to her mouth, shouted, "It's Amy!!!"

After that it was a long while before Amy heard any more individual voices over the general shouting.

The nearest girls began to close in, forming a tightening semicircle around her. Amy held up her hands and shouted, "Wait, wait! I'll try to talk to everybody when I get a chance..." It had the effect of slowing the onslaught, though the girls from farther away continued closing up against the back of the crowd. Amy looked down and saw Runner kneeling with her arms around Puppy, who had tried to bolt in the first seconds and now stood on all fours shivering, pressing up against Runner as if trying to shrink away to invisibility. Beside Amy, Melissa and Jana were both making quiet-down gestures with upraised arms, and making shushing sounds. Holly was helping Runner settle Puppy down.

As the room grew more-or-less still, Amy spoke up again. "I know this would be my one chance to tell everybody what's been happening with me so I don't have to repeat it all a hundred times, but I'm not up for that right now. I just want to have a party..."

Another exuberant shout went up from all the girls, and Amy, with Melissa and Jana, had to work for some degree of quiet again.

Amy went on, "I just want to tell you a couple of things first, and then I'll come in and start saying hi to everybody. I want everybody to be patient, because I can't see all of you all at once, and I'll try to stay until I see everybody. The main thing is, I've been on Purity Island..."

The sound level rose again, and Amy resumed when it fell once more. "I'll tell my roommates a lot more details, and they can pass it along to all of you when they get the chance. One last thing, and then we can all start mingling. I want you to meet two very special new friends. Without them I could never have got back here, and they'll be an important part of my life for the rest of my life." Amy looked down and saw that Puppy was under control, though still looking scared. She reached out to urge Runner back to a standing position. Putting her arm around Runner's waist, she announced, "This is Runner. She's from the island, and..." Amy grinned and rolled her eyes, and went on, "To keep everybody who knows anything about Purity Island from asking, yes, Purity Island was settled by our own people, but there were natives there before that, and she is one of them."

Amy half-crouched now and stroked Puppy's side. "And this is Puppy, also from the island. I want all of you to welcome Runner and Puppy here, because the Academy is their home now. And all of you are their sisters."

Rather than shouts, this time there was sustained applause. Runner shot Amy a puzzled look, and Amy assured her, "That's a good sound. They're all happy you're here." Runner responded with a grin.

As the applause subsided, Amy shouted, "Okay, I'll talk to the girls standing closest to me first. Everybody else -- please, patience, I'll get to you. Now let's do some partying!"

For the next three hours, Amy held forth, returning hugs, answering a few questions and begging off answering others in the interests of time. She wished she had remembered to preempt the inevitable "What did you do to your hair?" question by explaining it the whole room beforehand. Runner was asked a number of questions, a few of which she could answer, looking to Amy for help with the others, and she received her own share of hugs. Puppy had decided by now that the crowd was well-intentioned, and several girls knelt to pet her and giggled when they got face licks in return.

Runner enjoyed the pizza very much.

CHAPTER 28

TWO DAYS LATER

Gwen, the hair stylist, held up the mirror. "How does that look?"

Amy frowned, trying to be objective. It wasn't a style she would have chosen for herself. She tried to take herself out of the image and imagine meeting a girl with hair like this. Some of the girls here favored pixyish cuts of this type, though not usually quite *this* short.

She suddenly realized the frown was exactly the problem. Amy had always been attracted to girls who looked as though they were satisfied with themselves as they were.

She looked across at Runner, whose own stylist, Patty, was just finishing combing out her hair, while exclaiming again how beautiful it looked. "And I don't think I've ever seen hair *this* black. And the way it shines, I thought it would be greasy or oily, but it's not. It just does that on its own." Patty hadn't wanted to make any changes other than to even out the ends, just beyond shoulder length.

Amy smiled to see Runner's continued wide-eyed wonder at everything around her.

There, thought Amy, looking at her own reflection again. I was right. The smile helps a lot.

She had to admit that Gwen had succeeded, in some subtle way, in making her hair look feminine, despite being barely an inch long anywhere -- some had been longer than that, but Gwen had needed to even it up. A man would usually have it shorter on the sides than on top. And Amy's came to a wispy point in front of her ears, where a man would have squared-off sideburns. She grinned at Gwen, who was biting her lip. "Thanks, Gwen. You did a great job with what there was to work with."

Gwen smiled back. "Thanks. You should come back in a couple of weeks, after it grows a little. I can do a bit more with it then." She removed the cloth surrounding Amy's neck.

"I'll do that." She looked across. "Are we ready to go?"

Runner gave her a blank look. "I don't know." She looked up at Patty.

Patty smiled. "All done here."

Runner grinned at Amy. "It didn't hurt! When I saw all that stuff," she gestured at Patty's instrument tray, "I thought it might be like..." She pantomimed Carol drawing blood from her arm with the needle.

Amy smiled and shook her head. "I promise I'll let you know when something might hurt. That doesn't happen very much." She looked up at Gwen again. "You heard we've got a puppygirl, right?" Puppy was with Melissa and Jana, experiencing some new variations on the sexual play she liked, as the two girls cemented their friendship with her.

Gwen laughed. "Yeah, I heard that. Not something I would have expected."

“Could I bring her here in a day or two? She won’t exactly understand what’s happening, but I can keep her calmed down. Her hair will start out like mine just was. I want you to do this same thing to it.” She indicated her new style. “Oh, and I think I can get her to just sit in this chair. She doesn’t have a tail.”

Gwen grinned. “I’ll give it a try.”

* * * * *

LATE AFTERNOON

Amy returned from the dean’s office, where she had been on the phone to both Detective Reed and Steffi, and found that Jana had moved on from letters for now and was doing numerals with Runner. This was a little different for Runner, as she already knew the names for the numbers from one to nine, and now only had to learn the symbols. Runner expressed puzzlement that none of the shapes of the numerical symbols seemed to have any connection with the amounts they stood for, but accepted the explanation that once she learned them, that would never bother her again.

Runner had discarded her clothes, of course. Earlier Amy had done her best to explain the difference between public and private places, with Runner, as usual, asking endless questions. Runner liked the softness of the cotton, but her strong preference was to be naked, as she had been her entire life until a few months ago. Amy had assured her it was okay in a room with friends -- that counted as a private place.

Runner looked up and grinned at Amy as she entered. “Jana just tried me with some of the flash cards. I knew some of the numbers.”

Amy returned her smile. “I think you’ll know all of those in a few days.” Amy had tried to word that carefully, avoiding implying that Runner would then know everything about all numbers. Wait until she gets to putting the digits together to make bigger numbers, Amy reminded herself. That might take awhile.

Reluctantly, Amy went on, “Are you going to be okay tonight? With me not here?” While Amy hated to leave Runner so soon, her concern was outweighed by the need to get tonight’s program out of the way quickly.

Runner nodded. “Melissa and Jana are going to take me to the caf to eat. I can work more on learning to use the...” She hesitated, frowning. “...upencils?”

Amy smiled. “Utensils. The fork and spoon and knife are called that.” She had worked on those with Runner at breakfast and lunch.

Runner flashed the grin she always gave for new words. She would probably not forget that one again. “Then after that, Holly is going to work with me on hanging. And I want to show her the Game...” Amy knew Runner was referring to the one with rocks and circles, “...and then I’ll sleep with her, and she’s going to show me new ways to sex.”

Amy was so glad she had three such close friends to help with Runner's education. Runner's thirst for knowledge was more than any one person could possibly quench. Gradually, as Runner came to know more of the girls, the job would be split more ways.

There was more to it than that, of course. Amy was anxious about making sure that *all* of Runner's needs could be taken care of when Amy was gone for good. Amy had not yet told Runner that she was planning to die within the next couple of months. She wasn't sure yet how to bring that up. Any woman in Amy's world was happy to see a friend or lover achieve a satisfying snuff, but Amy was uncertain how Runner would see it. Luckily Runner had learned in childhood of a woman's need to be eaten, but Amy suspected Runner might picture that happening in an indistinct far future time. Amy knew she needed to feel out Runner's understanding of the subject soon.

Through the window to the courtyard, Amy could see Melissa with a frisbee, playing Fetch with Puppy. Puppy showed no interest trying to catch it in her mouth, as real dogs seem to do instinctively. It was just as well, as the human jaw wasn't ideal for that. But Puppy seemed to be learning to anticipate where the frisbee would land, galloping each time to that spot to snatch the frisbee off the grass in her teeth and running back to Melissa with it. Once Melissa took it, Puppy would bark at her until she threw it again. Puppy sounded happy.

Like Runner, Puppy's needs had to be addressed. Unlike Runner, Puppy would not be able to anticipate or understand Amy's permanent departure. Amy felt optimistic, though, about Puppy's future. Puppy still showed a strong preference for the company of Amy or Runner if they were around, but Amy was already seeing signs that Puppy was becoming attached to Melissa. And Runner, of course, would be here a long time.

Amy held out her arms. "I'll be back tomorrow."

Runner sprang off the bed to give Amy a tight hug. As they kissed, Amy reflected on how well Runner had learned to do that -- and suddenly realized it was reminding her just a little of Jana's kiss. Of course, thought Amy. Given how excited Runner gets when she's learning something, obviously she's kissed Jana several times today.

Amy rubbed her cheek against Runner's, brushed her hand down Runner's back and broke off the hug. "When I come back, tell me all about your night with Holly."

Runner nodded vigorously. "I will."

As Amy closed the door, she was startled to find her lip quivering. I was worried about separation being hard for Runner, she thought. I didn't even think about me.

She headed for the dean's office. Detective Reed should be there by now.

* * * * *

Amy sat beside Detective Reed in the second seat of the limo, behind Karl, the driver. She squirmed to straighten her slightly bunched skirt underneath her. She was completely out of the habit of dressing this way -- the dark blue knee-length skirt, the somewhat frilly white blouse. She'd chosen a dark blue

slave choker to go with the skirt. To Reed, she said, "I know this restaurant, but I've never been there as a slave. Slaves are okay there, right?"

Reed nodded. "They don't mind, as long as you sort of recede into the background. Until your big moment, of course. I'll order for you. Just remember to speak only to me."

"The hard part will be not saying anything to Andrew. We'd have lots to talk about." She frowned at Reed. "I don't understand why you don't have enough to arrest him already."

Reed sighed. "He had a long time to plan, and he's been careful. We keep running into all these dead ends. We thought we'd got lucky when we traced those two women who took you -- sisters, by the way. They used a stolen credit card and matching fake identification at the limo rental agency, but the clerk was able to describe one of them well enough that we got a good sketch, and we got a call identifying her after her picture was put out on TV. But right away we found that she and her sister were both dead. They'd apparently used the money they got for pulling the job to stage a huge catered barbecue, with themselves as the main course, something they'd always dreamed of -- their dad hanging them together with the whole neighborhood watching. Kind of surprising they didn't ask you for some tips on hanging while they had you." Reed gave Amy a small smile, then sighed again. "Nobody in their family knew anything about where the money was from. They suspected it was something illegal, but couldn't give us anything useful even when we dangled a reward in front of them. And of course, the information that they'd taken you to Purity Island died with the girls too."

Amy shook her head. "But still, knowing it had to be Andrew..."

"Well, you can't say we exactly *knew* that for sure. But we checked all we could on him. His whereabouts during the kidnapping were easy to determine, and he wasn't anywhere near the action -- he was actually in the hospital waiting room at the time. We checked his phone records, but whatever arrangements he made don't seem to have been done on his personal phone. Nothing actually pointed to him at all, other than what Ms. Bloom passed on to you and your dean. That got us a warrant to search his house and dungeon, which he's now equipped as an exercise room, of all things. We wanted to get at his personal computer, but the warrant didn't cover that -- invasion of privacy and all that. We were only allowed to try to look for your physical presence on his property. We got one interview with him with his lawyer present, and since then they've managed to shut us down."

"I understand Steffi hired detectives on her own. Couldn't they find anything?"

"Oh!" Reed laughed. "I thought you knew. That would be me. And my staff."

"What?" Amy stared at her. "But you're with the police."

"I'm not *employed* by the police, no. But I've done a lot of work with them in the past, and they trust me. We share ideas and information. When I've been saying 'we' all along, I mean the team of people trying to find you, including police."

"But at the dock... Lieutenant Sims introduced you as 'Detective Reed.' Aren't you... I'm sorry. Isn't that like impersonating an officer, or something?"

Reed smiled. “Not at all. I *am* a detective. Sims has taken to introducing me that way because it adds an aura of authority. As long as she and I don’t actually say I’m with the police department, it’s all legal.”

“I... please, don’t take offense, I’m just wondering... why not have an actual, official police detective doing the work you’re doing?”

“No offense taken. But when the trail got cold, I assumed a more active role. The police have other things to do. I don’t. They moved on to those other things, and I stayed with this. One thing I’ve done is have an associate hack into Andrew’s e-mail account. Nothing there worth noting. Aside from that, I’ve been working on learning his habits. That’s how I know where he’ll be eating dinner tonight. I know who his friends are, who he sees on a daily basis... I’ve been hoping to catch him with some shady characters, but I suspect that since the snatch, he’s severed all contact with his point man, whoever it was.”

Amy shuddered. If she hadn’t managed to get herself to a boat, with Runner’s and Puppy’s help, then Steffi, it turned out, had been her only other hope. Nobody else had continued searching. A tear ran from her eye. “Thank you. I really appreciate everything you’ve been doing. I’ll thank Steffi later too.”

On arriving at their destination, Karl declined the offer of valet parking and drove into a nearby lot, from which the three of them walked to the restaurant. It was one at which Amy’s family had occasionally eaten in years past, including, she recalled, once or twice with her mother. It was one of the best in the city, and Amy suspected Reed couldn’t have afforded to eat there without Steffi’s expense account. And Reed surely could not, without Steffi’s help, have obtained a reservation on such short notice.

On the way to their table, as Amy carried the oversized purse that reminded her of Runner’s carry-all bag -- Amy knew she appeared to be carrying the necessities for her “mistress” -- Amy noticed Reed give a brief head-nod to a man seated nearby. Amy looked questioningly at Reed, who nodded back. As they arrived at their table, Reed indicated a particular chair to Amy. Amy, following slave protocol, stood behind the indicated chair and waited for Reed and Karl to take their seats before she did. As she sat, she placed the purse on the floor beside her in easy reach, its top yawning open.

While Reed was studying the menu, she murmured to Amy, inaudibly to anyone else underneath the buzz of conversation around the room, “Andrew’s reservation is for a half-hour from now. His table is the one directly behind you.” Amy had noticed the “reserved” sign on it. “I’ll tap your thigh when he comes in. Absolutely don’t turn around to watch at that point.” Amy nodded, and Reed went on, “You’re sure he won’t recognize you from behind?”

Amy smiled and brushed her hand along the side of her head. “I can’t imagine how. He’s never seen my hair like this.”

Reed nodded. “It helps that he’d never expect to see you here. But I just want to make sure we won’t tip him off too soon.”

The waiter came, and Karl ordered a huge girlmeat steak. Reed opted for a chicken dish, and an artichoke salad for Amy. She explained to Amy after the waiter left, “Hard to be sure we’ll get to finish.”

Amy nodded that she understood. She wasn’t sure about Karl, but she knew no woman would leave a girlmeat meal unconsumed. It was too great an insult to the woman who had died to be their food.

Reed engaged Amy in small-talk while waiting for their meal, but Amy responded absently, and couldn't thereafter recall what they had talked about, except for one question about what she'd eaten on the island. She picked at her salad once it arrived, her heart beating gradually faster.

Luckily she saw Reed's hand moving towards her thigh to make the Andrew-is-here signal before it got there -- she was sure she would have jumped out of her chair if it had caught her unaware. Behind her she could hear the movement, the chairs scraping the floor. She could hear a woman's voice murmur, and clenched her fist when she heard Andrew's laugh in response. It's him! she told herself. He's five feet away from me now!

With a pen on her napkin, Reed completed the diagram she had begun earlier, now showing Andrew's location in relation to Amy.

Amy's heart was thumping hard now, so that she felt sure Andrew must be able to hear it. She tried to still the shaking of her hands. She looked down at the napkin, then up at Reed, who gave her a quick double-blink with both eyes.

Amy forced into her mind an image of Runner, how eager Runner would be to show Amy what she'd learned in bed with Holly tonight. The smile, nearly a laugh, it brought to her face was just what she needed. She swung that expression around to her right, twisting in her chair to face Andrew. Andrew, his eyes drawn to the sudden movement, looked up.

The expression on his face made everything easier. The surprise, sliding down through astonishment into shock as his mind registered the impossibility of what he was seeing. The body frozen, not even breathing. The hand half-lifted off the table and then held immobile.

Across from Andrew, his date, a giggly blonde in a tight red dress showing deep cleavage, looked back and forth between Amy and Andrew. She seemed to grow suddenly irritated, in apparent misunderstanding of the situation.

Amy's nervousness gave way to excitement, the grin spreading more widely across her face, her hands no longer shaking. Andrew hadn't said anything yet, so Amy moved on to the next step in the script. She reached down and scooped her prop for the evening out of the oversized purse -- a satellite phone, slightly battered and grimy, the one Reed had purchased and banged up for the occasion. Amy held it up, shaking it playfully, her eyes still on Andrew, mindful of Reed's warning not to say anything whatsoever at this point, not "Look familiar?", not "Lose something?" -- just show it.

Abruptly Andrew stood up, his chair skidding across the floor behind him, and pointed at the phone. "No!! That's not the same one! You're just..." He choked off further words, his face contorted in an expression that said how much he wanted to call back the ones he'd already spoken, torn out of him by shock before his rational mind had a chance to censor them.

In the now utterly silent and still restaurant, the man to whom Reed had nodded earlier stood and walked over to Andrew. "Andrew Cameron, you're under arrest for grand theft and abuse of property. You have the right..."

As the cop continued speaking, Amy looked at Andrew's stunned blonde companion and whispered, "Is this his first arrest with you, or have you known him awhile?" The girl glared at Amy, transferred the glare to Andrew, threw down her napkin and stormed out.

Amy suddenly realized how hungry she was. The artichoke salad looked very good.

* * * * *

As Karl stopped the limo in the circular drive in front of Steffi's house, the wide double doors at the top of the steps flew open, and Steffi, with a huge grin, walked out and trotted down the steps. As soon as Amy emerged from the car she found Steffi's arms wrapped around her.

Amy hugged her in return. "Thank you so much, for *everything*."

Steffi released her grip and smiled at Amy. "I heard it went well. Janet called and told me all about it."

Amy gave her a puzzled look. "Janet?"

Steffi laughed. "I guess you didn't get that far into personal details. Janet Reed."

"Oh!" Amy laughed as well. "She was kind of busy telling me what to do and what not to do. She's really good, Steffi. I don't think Andrew ever would have been caught without her. It didn't sound like the police were that interested."

"They are now. Based on his reaction in the restaurant to a phone that shouldn't have meant anything to him, in front of a couple dozen witnesses, they got an unlimited search warrant for his house. They can hold him while they're executing the search, but they'll probably have to let him go in the morning. There isn't enough to put him out of action for any length of time yet, but Janet is pretty sure they'll find something. Let's go inside." She put her arm around Amy's waist and led her up the steps, Karl trailing discreetly behind.

They entered a huge living room, with one of the longest sofas Amy had ever seen, and walls supporting tastefully distributed artworks. Amy turned to Steffi. "Does my dad know I'm back yet?"

"He should by now, I think. Your dean was going to try to reach him before he got the word from Andrew. He knew all along, by the way, that we had suspicions about Andrew. He wasn't happy about it, but he wanted whatever was necessary done to find you." She looked at Amy thoughtfully. "You know, he's not really as cold as I thought when I met him before. He really seems to care about you a lot."

Amy smiled. "He's not real demonstrative about things like that, but you're probably right. Thank you. Again."

Amy found herself drawn to a watercolor painting on a huge canvas, at least six feet by three, done apparently with very fine brushes, that appeared to be of a house party on a country estate, on a well-manicured lawn against a lovely forested mountain background. Based on the clothing styles of the men -- the formal coats, the trousers, the odd neckwear -- it seemed to be set in a time two centuries past. Each of the men was attended by one or more devoted, happy naked slavegirls with gleaming collars,

their hair in the styles of the day, either upswept and piled atop the head, or else short in tight ringlet curls. All of the girls, though nude, were decorated with gaily colored ribbons around their upper arms and ankles as well as in their hair.

On the left side of the painting, a game of croquet was in progress, with slavegirls, each kneeling with her thighs parted in an inverted V, serving as wickets, their hands either resting atop their heads or held behind their backs. One of the players, holding a mallet, awaiting his turn, had his pants down, with a slavegirl kneeling in front of him, smiling and ready to service his erection. Near the players another man, apparently not a participant in the game, was sitting on the ground, a slavegirl kneeling on either side of him, one of them kissing his cheek as she cradled his chin gently in her hand, while the other helped him shrug out of his coat. On the right side, a newly-arrived guest was dismounting from a one-man open carriage. The ponygirl who had pulled it, glowing sweat coating her breasts, muscular legs, and taut stomach, was elaborately outfitted in a leather harness that circled her waist, with straps crossing between her breasts, above which they circled her neck to form her collar. She was clearly a show-pony -- her hair, flowing in back and shaved at the sides to form a mane, was dyed bright green, matching the color of her long, hanging tail, probably of genuine girlhair, anchored in her anus. A head-harness, with a wooden bit and leather headband, held a gorgeous headdress of upright feathers above her forehead, again in that same bright green, and the high-heeled boots designed to resemble a horse's hooves were green as well. Looking more closely, Amy saw that the pony's pubic hair and even her eyebrows were of that same green hue, as were her painted nipples. Her posture radiated the pride she took in her service to her master.

In the foreground, two slavegirls tended a cheery fire, their skin reddened by their proximity to it, over which a headless woman was being roasted on a spit. One of the slavegirls was turning the spit while the other ladled honeyed juices over the roasting woman's browned skin. It all looked so real that Amy could almost smell the aroma of girlmeat. Her mouth watered. "I'm thinking I've seen this before." The artist's name, Sarah Cray, done in elaborate script at the painting's bottom right, sounded slightly familiar.

Steffi came up behind her. "It's semi-famous. You've probably run across pics of it, one place or another. I got it for eighty thousand at an auction. Drink? I have some white wine here, or brandy if you want something stronger."

"Oh, just some fruit juice, please. I've got so little experience with alcohol it'd probably knock me loopy in five minutes."

Karl also politely requested juice, no doubt concerned about his duties. Steffi left the room to fetch the refreshments and returned moments later.

While Karl lounged on the sofa at Steffi's invitation, Steffi continued showing Amy around the room. They stopped for a time in front of a built-in bookcase, with hardcover editions showing Steffi's strong attraction to science fiction. A few of the books Amy had read in high school, and she mentioned a few others not present, Steffi making mental notes of their titles for future purchase.

Steffi, at last, looked at the clock on the wall. "It's pretty late already. Karl, let me show you your room, and then I'll get Amy settled."

* * * * *

Amy stopped suddenly in the doorway of a huge bedroom, its walls a very pale blue and its furnishings either of polished, dark wood or of fabric in a darker shade of blue. Her eyes had been caught by the enormous canopied bed to her left that faced window draperies to her right. She whispered, "Steffi, somebody's already sleeping in the bed."

Steffi smiled and said in a normal voice, "Not sleeping, exactly. Go ahead and... well, I was going to say 'meet her,' but you've already met."

Amy gave Steffi a deeply puzzled look, then gasped as she realized what Steffi might mean. She ran to the bed and quickly yanked the cover down.

Linda, of course, still looked exactly like Zoey Hillcrest. A sleeping Zoey, her eyes closed, one hand under her pillow, the other near her hip. But Amy was used to seeing Linda as Zoey. She'd had weeks to adapt to her new look. She'd spent many nights in bed with Linda after her surgery, made love with her as Zoey many times.

Amy reached towards Linda, stopped. "May I touch her?"

Steffi responded with a delighted laugh. "Amy, I'm assuming you'd want to spend the night with her. That's really the reason I invited you here. If you do, I'll sleep in one of the guest rooms." She beamed at Amy. "You've been through too much shit lately. More than anybody deserves, especially you. And I feel terrible I couldn't do more to prevent that..."

Amy shook her head. "Stop feeling that way. You couldn't possibly have done more for me than you did."

Steffi held up her hands. "Just let me offer you this, and I'll feel better." Steffi walked to the bed. Linda's bare shoulder was uncovered by the bedsheets, and Steffi stroked it fondly. "I sleep with her sometimes, when I don't have a partner for the night. The rest of the time I leave her hanging by the neck in the next room. I know she'd like that. They did make her neck extra-strong so I could do that." She straightened up and smiled again. "Well, I'll leave the two of you alone."

Amy, her eyes tearing up, threw her arms around Steffi and held her tightly. "This is just one more thing to add to the list to thank you for. I can never repay you for any of it."

Steffi gave Amy a hug in return, rubbing her back. "Just be happy. And have the hanging you've earned. I want to see that, and we'll be even." She kissed Amy and let go. Seconds later her footsteps clicked down the hallway beyond the door, and Amy was alone with her dearest friend, for the first time in over a year.

She marveled at the wonderful job Full Body Associates had done with Linda. It occurred to Amy she didn't see a seam on Linda's skin anywhere, and then she remembered that it was new skin, grown from Linda's original cells. Underneath the skin, Amy knew all of Linda's meat and organs were gone, replaced with a synthetic substitute. But Linda felt exactly right. Her original bones, now connected with clever hinges, moved easily with just the right amount of resistance. Her skin was a little cool to the touch, but warmed quickly.

Linda had a typical subtle smile on her lips, familiar from long before she was Zoey. Amy gently eased Linda's eyes open with her fingertips. Linda looked as though she were lost in some pleasant daydream.

Amy shed her own clothes and climbed into bed with Linda, and pulled her close, entangling her arms and legs with Linda's.

She had so much she wanted to tell her.

"You're not going to believe where I've been..." Amy gave Linda a nearly minute-by-minute account of her ordeal and rescue from the island, her meeting with Runner, how special Runner was, how close she and Amy had become.

She moved on to her return. "And Runner is going to be a Hanging Girl! The dean wants her to get her education so she can meet the entrance requirements. She's learned so much already! You should see..." Amy described Runner's skills with awe, and how incredibly intelligent and determined she was.

"Oh!!! And you didn't get to see Megan's hanging! It was so great! She..." Amy described every detail.

The hours of the night passed, Amy snuggling with Linda and getting her caught up on everything she had missed. At last Amy drifted to sleep, her breasts and lips pressed against Linda's. They, too, felt just right.

* * * * *

THE NEXT MORNING

Steffi beamed as the freshly-showered and dressed Amy came into the breakfast room. "How was your night?"

Amy leaned down to hug Steffi in her chair. "Thank you so much, again. That was *exactly* what I needed! And I can see you're taking really good care of her."

Steffi smiled. "Well, she's a very special girl. If you want to see her hanging, I can put her back up before you leave."

"I'd like that. Thanks."

* * * * *

After eating, they returned to the living room, leaving Karl working on a much bigger breakfast than both of theirs combined.

Amy looked at the Sarah Cray painting once more, Steffi's eighty-thousand-dollar work of art. She frowned, looking at the happy slavegirls waiting on their owners. Or perhaps they all belonged to the party's host, and were serving the guests. It was an age when all women were slaves. Like Purity Island, but somehow not at all like it. Amy knew that somewhere outside the frame of the painting, there were work slaves, girls laboring just as hard as the ones on Purity... yet even then in those difficult times,

women had other things they could aspire to. Amy was sure the life of a personal serving girl was a little romanticized in the painting, but knew that it really had been considered by women a plum position, one with rewards as well as duties. Women did have the opportunity to rise in the world of slaves to the levels to which their talents and abilities could take them. And to the extent that life *was* hard for the work slaves, it had to be remembered that this was all two hundred years ago. In Amy's world, that was all in the past. On Purity Island, life was much harder for women, more unfair, and opportunities non-existent, *today*.

"Steffi..." Amy kept her eyes on the painting for a moment longer, then turned to face her hostess. "You're rich, you live alone, you don't have kids. I know you look for ways to spend your money..." She paused as she saw Steffi stiffen and blink in surprise, and went on hurriedly, "...and I don't mean you're throwing it away, or wasting it, or just spending it on yourself. I'm so, so, so grateful for what you've done to help me, and not just lately. And all the girls at school love the theater you gave us. But... would you be willing to hear an idea about how you could use what you have to change the world, or at least part of the world?"

Steffi seemed to relax, and gave Amy a smile. "Okay, I'm hooked. Listening."

Her eyes lit up as Amy explained.

* * * * *

TWO DAYS LATER

The dean smiled as Amy entered his office, and immediately said, "I thought you'd like to know..."

Amy's eyes widened. "Sir?" She hadn't needed to hear his introduction. Amy could easily read that he was bursting to pass along news. "Something about Andrew?"

The dean nodded. "His home computer had some... useful information," he said, with an air of dry understatement. "He'd had an e-mail account nobody knew about. He'd deleted all traces of it, but of course, deleting something doesn't just make it vanish from the hard drive. Much of the correspondence had been overwritten, but fragments of a few e-mails survived, including the address itself. The City Attorney subpoenaed the entire record of correspondence from that address, and learned quite a lot about how Andrew had set up the kidnapping. There were also records in the computer's Web browser history of searches for information on drugs that can induce heart-attack symptoms, including several pages on Zerlinol, which police believe may have been used on your father. It breaks down into harmless sugars within thirty minutes, so they can't say for sure, but the mere fact of Andrew looking for information about it is incriminating, given the circumstances."

Amy was growing increasingly excited, but automatically continued reading the dean. "There's more."

He nodded. "One thing he apparently couldn't bring himself to delete was a video, hidden in an obscure folder, probably unfindable by anyone not looking for that specific type of file. The one of you waking up on the island."

Amy laughed joyously. "The idiot! He just had to keep that, of course. They can use all of that at his trial, right?"

"No trial. Andrew huddled with his lawyer all last evening, and this morning they reached a plea deal. Abuse of property." That was the term usually used when someone mistreated and/or damaged a slave not belonging to him. "Grand theft charge dropped, but that would have been a tricky one to convict him of anyway, since he never took delivery of you. Six months jail time. Three years probation after that."

Amy jumped to her feet and pumped her arms. "Yes!!! Six months! That's perfect! I'll be dead by the time he gets out! He's in jail for the rest of my life!" She knew the sentence would have been much longer if she'd been a free woman rather than property, but it didn't matter. "Sir -- may I call Detective Reed... Janet Reed, and thank her? This would never have happened without her. If he'd found out I was back, any other way than the way he did, the way she set it up, he would have just junked his hard drive and would have been home free. She didn't give him a chance to cover his tracks."

The dean nodded, and said, "There's someone else who wants to see you first. Down in the conference room."

Amy gaped at him, and stood. "My dad? He's here now?"

He nodded again. "Go ahead."

Amy hurried quickly to the conference room.

* * * * *

As she entered the room, Amy could read little more in her father than that he was in an emotional state she hadn't seen in him before. He didn't rise as she entered, merely looked at her with a shaky smile.

It wasn't really significant, at this point, that she hadn't seen him for nearly four years. The Preston Cameron in front of her was one she'd never met at all.

She bent down to give him a hug, to which he responded vaguely with an arm pat. In a husky voice, he asked, "How are you feeling?"

Amy sat in another of the chairs, on the same side of the room's big table as her father. "Me? I'm doing great. How about... you?" She was shocked to notice a tear creeping down his cheek.

He sighed in answer, not looking at her.

She leaned closer. "Daddy... I'm okay. I'm doing fine."

She realized, suddenly, feeling stupid for having missed it, that this wasn't about her. Not directly, anyway. It was about his only son being in jail, for a crime Preston Cameron had never seen coming,

directed against his only daughter. And Preston himself had been used, his health endangered, during the commission of the crime.

He heaved another sigh, looking at the floor, and in that same choked voice, said, "I've never failed at anything before." He absently wiped a tear away. "At least I didn't fail at something I thought I'd be good at."

"What did you fail at, Daddy?"

"Being a father."

Taking on a role she'd never in her life imagined herself in, she moved her chair closer and took both of his hands. "Daddy, look at me."

As if his entire being was stuck in a mud pit, he raised his head with effort and focused his eyes on her. More or less.

"Daddy... I came here to the most selective school in the city. I got in... you know eighty percent of their applicants don't? And I didn't just graduate from the most intellectually and physically demanding academic program around, I'm one of their top students. I was second in my class!" Amy smiled. "And if you'd met the girl who was number one, you'd know what an honor it is to follow her. And now I'm going to put it all to use, as the most valuable kind of slave there is. I'm going to make a lot of people happy and excited, and this school is going to be very proud of me. And you..." she poked her index finger into his chest, "...are my father! Does that sound like you're a failure?"

He sighed once more and shook his head. "Whatever talent, sweetness, and light there is in you, it's all from your mother. I could always see so much of her in you, and I can still see it now."

Amy continued holding his hands, patiently. "Keep looking at me. Do you know how I got to be so good at what I do? It's because when I decide I want something, I never give up, I keep working for it, as hard as I need to, until I get it. Does *that* sound like somebody else in this room?"

He chuckled at last. "Okay, maybe a little."

She wrapped her arms around him again for a more complete hug. This time he returned it.

As he sat back, she saw that his lips were pressed together. "It's a little irritating that you were back in town a full day before I found out about it."

She frowned. "I know. I'm sorry that happened. But you do know why, right?"

He rolled his eyes. "I guess so. I've been told, anyway. But it's upsetting that Steffi Bloom knew long before I did."

"Everybody was following the request of the detective who was investigating the case. She thought it was better if you didn't know until..."

“Until Andrew was arrested. I know. It’s still upsetting. I understand you’ve even been to Ms. Bloom’s house already.”

Amy nodded. “Daddy, have you talked to her? I hope you’ll call her and thank her for everything she did to help me.”

He sat back. “I’m just a bit uncomfortable with that. She and her detective are the ones who got Andrew put in jail.” As disappointed and angry as he was with Andrew, Andrew was still Preston’s son.

“No!” She took his hand again. “Daddy, before you leave today I want you to tell me you understand one thing. What’s happened to Andrew, he did it all to himself. Nobody made him do any of that. Not Steffi Bloom, not me. Not you either. None of us made him the way he is. He decided himself to be that way. Do you see?”

He hesitated, and nodded at last.

She squeezed his hand. “Okay. I just don’t want you thinking Andrew being in jail is somehow Steffi’s fault, any more than it’s yours. It’s Andrew’s.”

He let go still another sigh. “I’ve talked to Ms. Bloom a couple of times along the way. You know she put up a big chunk of the reward money... well of course, you know that,” he said, as Amy nodded. “She really seems to care about you a lot.”

She giggled at the *deja vu* feeling his words inspired. “Some people do.” She grinned at him. “Daddy, promise you’ll come to see my hanging? I’ll make sure you get an invitation.”

He smiled back at her. “I’ll be there.” His eyes narrowed. “What did you do to your hair?”

CHAPTER 29

ONE MONTH LATER

Amy lay on her stomach on the bed, absently petting Puppy, reading through hanging scripts, half-conscious of Jana and Melissa at their desks, marking up their textbooks with highlighters, when she heard footsteps pounding down the hall. She smiled, knowing it was Runner, and felt a little surprised -- Runner was usually watching television at this time, sometimes by herself, sometimes with any of a number of students who took turns sitting with her and fielding her questions. The students seemed to enjoy being with Runner, both as informal teachers and sexual partners. Amy believed that watching television would acculturate Runner more quickly than anything any of the students could tell her, and at present she was watching two hours of news, talk shows and soaps each morning and a movie every evening -- whoever among Amy, Melissa, Jana, and Holly were free usually joined her for the latter. Her afternoons were usually spent in the library -- she was reading simple children's books now, sharing and giggling over her favorites with Amy. The library had acquired a number of books for kids over the last month. The context of many of the books had given Amy the opportunity to explain family relationships to Runner, and they had decided that her mother was most likely a work slave impregnated by her owner, rather than a breeding slave, as none of the other girls in her pen seemed to have been her sisters. At least, according to Runner, none had looked much like her, though Amy was sure, from her own observations of the island population, that several of them would have shared some of Runner's native genetic background to a more limited extent.

Runner's library routine was interrupted twice weekly for sessions in the dean's conference room with a sociologist from the university, who was excited by the opportunity to publish the first research describing day to day life in a Purity Island breeding pen. Amy had met the woman once after a session. The professor, laughing, had told Amy that in the session just completed, she wasn't sure whether she or Runner had asked more questions.

The footsteps now stopped, followed by a hurried tap at the door, another of Runner's recent acquisitions in social etiquette. Amy's smile spread to a grin. "Come in."

The door opened and Runner burst in, an excited look on her face. She was fully dressed -- she did that more often now, and Amy suspected the khaki outfit, cut like a student uniform, added to Runner's feeling of belonging, as she'd hoped. "Amy, I figured out about money!"

"Ummm..." Amy wasn't quite sure what the issue was. "What did you figure out about it?"

"What it's for! Why people have it! It's so cool!" A recent addition to Runner's vocabulary.

Amy sat up and patted the bed beside her. "Tell me about it."

Runner crossed to the bed and sat down, crossing her legs and leaning back against the wall, giggling as Puppy, as usual, licked her face in greeting. Amy glanced at Runner's legs, remembering the fine hair that had covered them when she'd met her. The skin was perfectly smooth now, the result of laser treatment in the salon, making their curves that much more attractive.

Runner was wearing make-up now as well. She didn't need very much -- most women wore it to accentuate features of their faces which in Runner were naturally dramatic to begin with -- but Runner had learned to use it in subtle ways. She had overdone it at first, but she remembered every tip the salon girls gave her.

Melissa and Jana had turned to listen as Runner spoke, each with a smile on her face.

Runner started, "I've been watching on TV, and I'd keep seeing people trade pieces of paper for things they wanted, and I couldn't figure out why the pieces of paper were such a big deal. The girls would tell me it was money, that this person was using money to *buy* that thing she wanted, and I get it about trading except I didn't see why the second person wanted those pieces of paper. But I get it now!

"Everybody has a *job* they do, like maybe they work in a..." Runner hesitated, "... a factory..."

Amy tried to follow the context. "A factory?"

Runner laughed and pointed at Amy. "Right!! I was mixing it up with fiction, I think. Anyway, suppose you work in a *factory*, where you make..." She looked around the room. "...chairs. So you have these chairs you made. And you want food, but all you have is these chairs. And you see a woman who has food, but she doesn't want chairs. You find some man who *wants* chairs, but he doesn't have food, he has..." She looked around again. "...shoes that he made. And maybe he *does* want a chair, and maybe the woman with food wants shoes, so you could trade your chair for shoes and take the shoes to the woman who has food... But the man with shoes, maybe he *doesn't* want a chair, so you have to keep looking for somebody who wants a chair and has something the woman with food wants..."

"But money is so you don't have to do all that! In the factory where you make chairs, you have a boss, and he gives you money, the pieces of paper, because you made the chairs for him. And you can take the money to the lady with the food, and you can trade it to her for the food, and she takes the pieces of paper because *she knows she can use them the same way!* She knows she can trade the money for something *she* wants. And your boss at the factory... He gets money because people *buy* the chairs you made -- maybe more money than he paid you to make the chairs, so he has extra money left and he can buy things *he* wants!" She beamed at Amy. "It's so simple! When you want to have something, you trade money for it, and people take it because they know *they* can get things they want with it!"

Amy knew to expect Runner to lean forward for a hug -- she always distributed hugs freely, and usually kisses, when she was this excited. As Amy held Runner, she reflected on how many complex ideas seemed "simple" to Runner. She is, thought Amy, very special in so many ways.

Suddenly, Runner broke off the hug and frowned. "Why don't *we* use money, Amy? On TV they do, but we don't."

Amy wasn't sure how to start. She looked at Melissa, who tentatively offered the same thing that had first come to Amy's mind, but had seemed so far from a complete explanation that she had hesitated. "We're slaves, Runner." She looked at Runner hopefully, with a does-that-help-at-all? expression.

Runner's frown deepened, and she seemed to go into some internal zone. Amy could almost visibly see the mental processing going on, the collation of all available information.

Runner suddenly took on an astonished expression, her eyes wide, and whispered, "People don't give money to us, they pay money to *have* us." Her excitement flooding back, she bounced slightly on her seat on the bed. "We're not the woman who makes the chairs. We're the chairs!! People want us! Because we can hang!! I don't see anybody hang on TV like we can! There was a girl on a game show, but she couldn't do it anything like us!" Runner had increased her hanging time to five minutes, and was making a number of advanced moves -- her ability now indeed went far beyond that of any girl outside the building. "People buy us because we can do something they want to see!"

Amy looked at Runner in amazement, relieved that she could now check off several items on her mental to-do list. She hadn't felt ready yet to explain why there was such a place as the Academy, and what a "slave" really was, knowing the explanations would involve so many ideas which Runner had not yet grasped. Now Runner seemed to have worked it out entirely on her own.

What remained, Amy thought as she hugged Runner yet again, was to get across to Runner that a Hanging Girl was bought for a single performance, ending in her death. In this case, it wasn't that Amy didn't think Runner would understand that yet. It was the way the subject related to Amy's own future that made her hesitant.

We have to talk about that very soon, Amy reminded herself again.

Puppy, reacting to the flow of affection, rubbed against Runner with a yearning whine. Runner began stroking her.

* * * * *

THAT AFTERNOON

Tina smiled as Amy arrived at the dean's office. Amy could tell, from her face, that something was up. Tina was struggling to avoid giggling.

Amy entered the office, and saw Holly sitting in one of the chairs. Holly, as far as Amy knew, had been working out in the gym. Amy smiled and nodded to her. "Hi, Holly." She turned then to the dean, with Holly's sudden giggle adding further to the mystery. "Sir?"

The dean simply turned to Holly, smiled, and shook his head in wonder.

Amy loved jokes as much as anyone, but preferred to be in on them. She turned back to Holly. "Okay, come on, what..."

She was stopped by the expression on Holly's face. The amusement, the air of something mischievous going on, that all seemed normal. Behind that, though, were clear indications of non-recognition. This was a girl who had never seen Amy before.

Amy gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. She had rarely felt so stupid. She had known this was coming, that by now it could only be days away, and she, Holly, Melissa and Jana all had been growing tense with anticipation. Especially Holly. Yet on seeing the girl in the flesh at last, there was just no visual cue to tip Amy off that this was anyone other than Holly.

Through her fingers covering her mouth, Amy breathed, "You're Haley, aren't you?" She looked to the dean for confirmation.

The dean nodded, smiling again. "I did have a sense that they look quite a lot alike. But I haven't spent nearly as much time with Holly as you have. I thought your reaction might be different."

Amy could only stand staring at Haley, who colored a little at the intense examination. Yes, thought Amy, I've spent a lot of time with Holly, sharing meals with her in the caf, helping her with hanging practice, and Amy wasn't sure how many nights in bed with her. "Haley..." Even calling her by her correct name wasn't easy. Haley was the distant unseen sister, Holly the one present in Amy's life. "I'm Amy. I'm... sort of your sister's mentor, I guess you'd say." She could see Haley had already been processed in as a permanent resident -- she was wearing the standard white First Year uniform and "Slave Girl" collar, another factor confounding Amy's ability to distinguish her from Holly. "Do you want to go see her?"

Haley looked ready to leap out of her chair. "Oh yes, please!..." She turned immediately to the dean. "May I go, Sir?" Her voice was Holly's as well.

The dean nodded, and said to Amy, "She's all signed in. I'd like to see both of them in a few days, with you, to talk about their joint presentations at parties. I'm sure you and Holly will fill her in on the details by then."

"Yes, Sir. Ummm... Sir?"

"Yes?"

"It really would be helpful to have some way of telling them apart." She rubbed her chin in thought. "What if... You know those letters girls sometimes wear on necklaces? Their initials? I think if we got a letter 'O' for Holly, and an 'A' for Haley, that's all we really need. The letters could attach right to the ring on the front of their collars, maybe."

The dean nodded. "I'll have Tina order something like that."

Amy grinned at Haley and took her hand. She could feel it trembling with excitement. "Let's go see if Holly's back from the gym."

Almost breathlessly, Haley said, "Okay," and picked up a bookbag from the floor beside her seat. Amy blinked -- students were allowed to bring a few personal possessions from home, but it wasn't often a load of books.

The top of the bag was slightly open, and Amy saw a three-ring binder on top. Oh, of course, Amy told herself. Amy suspected the rest of the bag was full of more of the same. She pointed. "Diary?"

Haley looked a little startled. "For Holly, yeah."

Amy smiled. "I know all about it."

* * * * *

Amy couldn't stop shaking her head in amazement. They had passed a half dozen girls in the hallways, each of whom had smiled at Amy and Haley with barely a glance, one of them saying, "Hi Amy, Holly." Not one perceived Haley as a stranger. Amy was eager to see the reactions of the girls who knew Holly much better.

Amy pushed open the door to her girls' room. Only Melissa was present, industriously scribbling at her desk for a class assignment. She looked up and smiled at Amy. "So what'd the dean want? Oh, hi Holly. You done already?"

Amy burst out laughing. She knew that, for each girl, their first meeting with Haley was a one-time-only thing. She wanted to savor the moments. "Where's Jana?"

Melissa gestured with her head towards the window. "Out jogging with Puppy. I imagine Runner's still in the library."

"Could you signal Jana to get back in here? Then I'll go find Runner. I want everybody here when Holly gets here."

Melissa looked back and forth between Amy and Haley, puzzled. "Amy, she's standing right..." Then she must have seen the same meeting-a-stranger look on Haley's face that had given it away to Amy. Her eyes flew open wide, and she squeaked in a near-whisper, "Haley?"

Haley and Amy both laughed. Melissa stood and crept closer for a better look. "Wow!" She threw her arms around Haley. "It is so nice to meet you. Holly's tried to be patient, but she's been biting her nails for the last couple of weeks. I imagine you've been the same."

Haley brushed a sudden tear away. "Oh yeah."

Amy said to Haley, "You are used the mix-ups, right?"

Haley shrugged. "Not exactly. We've spent a long time around people who know both of us, and they're kind of used to us. Every once in awhile in the last year I'd run into somebody and they'd say, 'I thought you went to the Hanging Academy,' but mostly they know about us. People we're really close to can tell us apart. Some of the time, anyway."

Amy gestured to Melissa again to go to the window, and said, "Everybody gets pretty close around here."

Melissa opened the window, waited for Jana to come around and whistled, then gave her a come-here gesture. Amy could see Jana come straight towards the window, Puppy trotting beside her, and Melissa gestured towards the building entrance.

A minute later Jana appeared in the doorway, wiping away some sweat with a towel she'd been carrying. Puppy came straight in and licked the back of Amy's leg, looking for some fondling. Amy knelt and began petting her, her eyes on Jana.

Jana glanced at Haley. "Done already?" Then she turned to Melissa. "What's up?"

Melissa grinned at her. "Notice anything different about Holly?"

Jana turned to regard Haley, frowning. After a moment she shook her head, and turned back to Melissa. "What's the joke...?" She gasped suddenly and whipped back around, staring at Haley. "Are you...?"

Amy laughed. "Jana, meet Haley. You two start getting acquainted while I go find Runner."

Haley was looking down at Puppy, astonished. "You've got a puppygirl?"

Amy heard Melissa start explaining, "It's a long story..."

* * * * *

Runner walked beside Amy down the hall towards the room, eager to discuss the book she'd found. "It's for second graders. 'Molly and Donna Roast Mom.' It's about two sisters and the stuff they do to get ready to cook their mother. They don't really do it all by themselves, but it's all about how good it is to help with family things..."

She was still talking as she and Amy passed through the door into the room. Runner suddenly stopped short and stared at Haley, who was looking back at the new arrival. In an astonished voice, Runner asked, "Who are you? You look just like Holly does!"

Amy spun towards Runner, her jaw dropping open, unable to speak for a moment. At last she stammered out, "What... H-how do you know it's not Holly?"

Runner shook her head. "She's just like Holly, but..." She stopped, looking as if she was searching for words. "She's not looking at me right."

Amy felt her knees get weak. She was constantly amazed by Runner, but this was a new dimension of abilities Amy hadn't encountered before. The rest of the girls, Amy included, had done the same thing within a few seconds -- reading the lack of recognition on Haley's face when she met them. It was an easy enough task, with the training Hanging Girls go through. But Runner had done it much more quickly than Amy or the others, so fast that it seemed instantaneous -- and without any formal training at all. And without knowing Holly nearly as long.

Amy squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. Okay, she told herself, she's just the world's most natural Hanging Girl. Get used to it. She cleared her throat. "Runner, this is Holly's sister, Haley. Remember?" They had discussed Haley on a few occasions.

"Oh, yeah." Runner grinned. "Hi." She stepped forward and hugged Haley. "We could sleep together tonight so I can get to know you better."

Amy almost strangled herself holding back a laugh, and again when she saw Haley's wide-eyed reaction. Runner was still working on social conventions. She said gently, "Not tonight, I think, Runner. I think she and Holly are going to want to spend some time together."

“Oh!” Runner nodded her head. “Okay, I get it.” She gave Haley a quick kiss and let go, then knelt on the floor to greet Puppy, who had been bouncing on her front legs, whining for attention. Puppy licked Runner’s face as Runner began petting her.

Jana suddenly raised her arms. “Hssshht!” And now Amy could hear footsteps approaching the door. They waited in silence, easily able to hear Haley’s increasingly fast breathing.

Holly appeared in the doorway, and blinked at the unexpected number of people in the room. “What’s...” Then, it appeared, she finished a more complete census of who was present.

They took off at a run for each other, grunting at the chest-to-chest impact, and Amy decided it was a good thing they hadn’t spotted each other from any greater distance -- they hadn’t had enough space here to work up to a dangerous collision speed. They both were sobbing immediately, each with the side of her head pressed against the other’s, four arms seeming to try to touch everything at once. They turned their heads to kiss, mouths wide open, still crying, and simultaneously reached around each other to fumble with bra clasps.

Melissa and Jana, their own eyes streaming with tears, had each grabbed books and a pile of papers and were already backing into the hallway. Amy tapped Runner’s shoulder, and whispered, “We need to go.”

Runner, her mouth hanging open, shook her head vaguely. “I want to watch.” In front of her, the two girls finished shrugging off their bras without breaking the kiss, and reached down to unzip each other’s shorts. Their crying had turned into breathy moans.

Amy smiled and pulled Runner up to a standing position. “Runner, they need some time alone. We can spend a lot of time with both of them later.”

Reluctantly, Runner stood and followed Amy, with Puppy following behind her. Amy closed the door to the room, muffling the sounds of still-vertical lovemaking within.

* * * * *

Amy hesitated at the door of their second room. Amy’s “family,” the term she had begun applying to herself, Melissa, Jana, and Holly, had swollen to six members with the addition of Runner and Puppy, and they had taken to distributing themselves in varying groupings between two different rooms in the Second Year dorm. This late in the school year, there were several vacant rooms, so the arrangement caused no trouble. I think we’ll need three rooms now, thought Amy. Holly and Haley should have their own space. And I think we need to start now. Melissa and Jana both have work to do, she pointed out to herself. I want to talk to Runner, and it’d be better if we don’t bother the others.

Telling Melissa and Jana “We’ll see you guys in awhile,” and leaving Puppy in their care, Amy took Runner’s hand and led her down the hall... Okay, she remembered, room 12 is empty. Ginger had moved out of it after her roommate Celia was hanged at a demo.

Inside the room, as soon as Amy closed the door, Runner began shedding her clothes, as she still invariably did when alone with Amy. Amy shrugged out of her own uniform as well. She wanted to work

on clarifying some nuances of pair relationships such as Holly's and Haley's, and thought that emphasizing some of the features of their own pairing would help.

As Amy sat on the bed and Runner joined her, Runner spoke first, with a slight frown. "That book I was reading..."

Amy remembered. "The girls helping cook their mom?"

Runner nodded. "Molly and Donna. I was just thinking... Free women get to decide when they want to be eaten, right? And who eats them?"

"And some slaves, too. Hanging Girls get to choose."

Runner, who had been visibly tense, suddenly broke into an excited smile. "That's what I was going to ask! We can decide too? After somebody buys us, and we do some hanging for them, we can say when we want them to eat us? On the island, I don't think slaves get to decide *anything*. It's different here. Women can do things, they can make things and build things, just because they want to, they can build *themselves* to be who they want, and when they've finished being what they want to be, then they get to say it's time to be food. But Amy, how do you *know* when it's time? Is there like a feeling inside, where you know it's right?..."

Somehow Runner, off to the conversational races as she often was, had got this far before it occurred to Amy that Runner was handing her the key to the subject she had so long worried about bringing up. She grinned and took both of Runner's hands. "Wait, wait, slow down. It's not quite like you're thinking..."

Runner frowned again, and Amy could read the fleeting thought in Runner that her hopes were going to be dashed, but Runner could see Amy's smile. "Okay..." She waited for Amy to go on.

"Runner... When somebody buys us, it's just to hang one time. We do all our kicking, all the things you're learning, for as long as we can, until we're dead." Amy hesitated. "You understand what it means to be dead, right?"

Runner nodded vigorously. "Oh, sure. It's like you go to sleep and you never wake up, and that's when you're eaten. Oh!!" Runner had that expression, that Amy had so often seen, saying that the lightbulb had gone on. "Everything we learn about hanging is for that one time, and then we hang and we don't stop, and after awhile we're dead. And they eat us right then! And we get to decide when all of that happens?"

Amy nodded, her eyes glowing. "This is why we're here, Runner. When somebody buys one of us, they have a big party..." Runner knew about parties. "...and they have all of their family and friends come to watch the Hanging Girl, and she does what we call a 'show.' She does everything she learned to do here, and the people at the party get very excited, watching, because they can't see a show, like we can do, anywhere else. Only girls from the Academy can do what we do. They watch the Hanging Girl until she dies, and then they eat her."

Runner suddenly realized her original question wasn't quite answered. "So... how do you know when it's time to do that?"

“Well, when you’re a student at the Academy, there are things you have to do. You know how Melissa and Jana are always going to ‘classes’?” Runner nodded, and Amy went on, “In the classes, that’s where they teach you new things that you need to know to be a good Hanging Girl. The classes go on for three years...” Amy knew that Runner had picked up the idea of a “year” being a length of time, though she might not know exactly how long it was, “...and when you finish, you know you’re ready to hang and be eaten. So it’s really easier for Hanging Girls to know when it’s time.”

Runner clenched her fists excitedly. “Hanging Girls who finish are graduates! Right? *You’re* a graduate, aren’t you, Amy? I heard other girls say that about you. You don’t go to classes! You finished. And Holly, she’s a graduate too. She doesn’t go to classes either.”

Amy shook her head. “No, Holly hasn’t really even started yet. She’s been waiting until Haley could get here, and they’re going to take classes together. But I’m finished, yes. Right now I’m the only graduate left, until some more girls finish. All of the girls who graduated at the same time I did have had their shows, and they’re dead and eaten. I would have done it by now, but...” She smiled. “My brother kind of got in the way, and I ended up on the island. But I’m glad that happened now, because I met you.”

Runner smiled and kissed Amy. Amy somehow knew it wasn’t because of what she’d just said, but because Runner had learned something she considered important. At the end of the kiss, Runner gasped suddenly. She looked at Amy wide-eyed. “So when *are* you going to do your show?”

Amy bit her lip. The conversation seemed to be going well, but she was still uncertain of the reaction she was about to get. “Soon, I think. I haven’t set it up to happen yet, but I’m going to try to do that in a few days.” Amy had been doing something unheard of for a Hanging Girl -- procrastinating on her own hanging, until she found a way to clear this up with Runner. She felt a rush of warmth and excitement rush into her. If I can get to the end of this talk with Runner and everything is still okay, that’s the last hurdle! She thought about how to specify a time to Runner, and the obvious occurred to her. “Do you know how long you’ve been here now, at the Academy?” Runner shook her head uncertainly, and Amy went on. “Well, it’s about one month. I’m going to try to do my show in about one more month.”

Amy’s heart sank when she saw the sudden cloud take over Runner’s face. Had Amy misread her somehow?

“Amy...” Runner’s lip was quivering. “Won’t I get to eat you? Your owner will eat you. On the island, you said I could eat you.” A tear started down her cheek.

Is that all the assurance she needs?? thought Amy. She smiled and kissed Runner. “You can eat me! Not all of me, but you don’t want to keep me all to yourself, do you? Other people will share, but I *promise* you can be at the party and eat my meat with them. I’ll make sure whoever buys me knows you have to be there. You can have me inside you always. Okay?”

The sudden light of Runner’s face, emerging from behind the clouds, was almost blinding. Amy couldn’t remember seeing her this happy about anything before. “Yes!!” Runner threw her arms around Amy and almost squeezed the breath out of her, before fastening her lips to Amy’s for her most passionate kiss ever. She looked at Amy, tears of joy washing away the earlier ones of sorrow. “Amy, I love you!”

Everything Amy felt about Runner came to the surface of Amy's mind. Runner had never said those words before -- likely she had only recently learned, from movies, that it was something you said when you felt this way. Amy returned the kiss with interest. "And I love you, Runner."

Runner sank onto her back on the bed and pulled Amy down on top of her. Lips locked together, arms and legs entangled, moving against each other, they didn't say any more words for a long time.

CHAPTER 30

TWO DAYS LATER

Amy looked up at Haley on the platform, and nodded. "Okay, you ready?"

Haley nodded excitedly. "I think so. Holly and I talked about it awhile after you showed it yesterday." Automatically she reached out to brush her hand against her sister's. Amy and Holly had demonstrated the technique of assisting each other's breathing during a pair-hanging yesterday, as Haley looked on in absorbed concentration, asking several questions. "And I think I can handle the weight. I did all those exercises, hanging with the extra weights, like the dean talked about in that letter he sent." She blushed. "I'm sorry, I think of it as him sending it, but Holly tells me you wrote it."

Amy nodded. She laughed suddenly. "I assume the dean found a way to word it so it didn't imply you were admitted already."

Haley laughed. "Well, as far as the wording, yeah. I didn't know how else to take it, though. I knew it had to be connected with Holly being here, and something he wanted me to get ready for. Especially the hanging with the extra weights. Holly never got anything telling her to do that while she was waiting."

Amy smiled. "I figured you wouldn't be fooled, but he was just covering himself. He didn't want to get some sort of general early admission policy started."

Both girls were naked, of course, which, for the time being, gave Amy an additional way of telling them apart, besides the newly-arrived glittery monograms attached to their collars. Both had identical reddish-orange bushes, but Haley's went further down between her legs, lightly covering her labia. There hadn't been time for laser removal of the extra unwanted hair. Aside from that, Haley's exercise program over the past year had kept her body looking essentially identical to Holly's. Amy remained on the lookout for subtle differences in habitual gestures or expressions that would help her distinguish them. There was still a touch of the familiar-friend-and-occasional-lover look on Holly's face when she looked at Amy that was absent from Haley's, but Amy knew that difference would fade away before long.

Each dropped a noose over the other's head, adjusted it and tightened it, and waited for Amy to tie their hands behind them. As close as they were standing, it was automatic that they kissed each other, but they clearly both were setting aside any more extensive intimacies to concentrate on the business at hand. It was obvious that Haley took hanging as seriously as Holly, and Holly set a standard for that which was hard to match.

Amy nodded. "Okay, Haley, I just want you to get a feeling for the breathing itself. Like I said yesterday, Holly and I have worked out some moves, part of a routine, in fact, but we were just showing you the basics to start with. We can work on some choreography in a few days, once you've got breathing mastered." She gestured downward. "Haley, move both of your feet just a few inches left. You'll be able to put your right leg between Holly's with less fumbling from there. While the platform is sinking, think where your knees are in relation to hers."

Haley nodded briefly, and Amy pulled the lever, starting the platform downward.

As she lost contact with the floor, Haley quickly reached out with her feet, banging them against both of Holly's ankles. After knocking her right knee against Holly's left, she managed to push her right leg between Holly's thighs and lock both her thighs around Holly's right.

On Haley's first push upward, Amy saw a familiar problem arise. She quickly pushed the lever, raising the platform.

As soon as Haley could breathe, she voiced an exasperated growl and stamped her foot on the platform. She looked at Holly with a pleading expression. "I'm so sorry, I can't believe I..."

Holly covered Haley's mouth with her own, stifling the apology, and quickly said, "I did the same thing, the exact same thing, the first time. You have to get the balance just right. Push straight upward, and try not to lean back."

"It's just that I never screw up a..."

Amy reached up and stroked Haley's hip. "Shhh, it's okay. Haley, I know you can hang. But this is different. As you practice you're going to work out a new set of reflexes you haven't needed before. It just takes time. You saw Holly do it yesterday. You'll get there."

Haley took a deep breath. "Okay. Can we try again?"

"Sure." Amy spoke softly, going for a calming note. "Close your eyes and stand there a minute. I'm not in a hurry. Just breathe for a minute. Tell me when you're ready."

Haley breathed in and out a few times, then nodded. "Let's go."

Amy pulled on the lever.

Almost smoothly this time, Haley pushed her right leg between Holly's again. Lifting herself, she took a few slow breaths, then responded to Holly's double thigh-squeeze by relaxing her upper body, and tightening her thighs still further to allow Holly to lift herself.

On Haley's third lift, she twisted her upper body slightly to rub her breasts back and forth across Holly's. Holly duplicated the move on her own third lift.

Amy pushed the lever. As soon as she could stand, Haley hopped excitedly in place. "Okay, okay, I've got it now! Can we do it again?"

Amy laughed. The girl was just way too much like Holly. "After you rest about ten minutes. Your body's more fatigued than you know, right now."

"Okay." She grinned at Holly. After a quick kiss, they leaned into each other, their chins each resting on the other's left shoulder, rubbing their heads softly together.

Amy shook her head slightly. I've never seen lovers more in tune with each other, thought Amy, always making complementary moves, always knowing what the other is about to do and what the other wants. Not me and Megan, not anybody.

I had a feeling they'd be like that, Amy reminded herself. But expectations aren't much of a preparation for seeing it happen, it turns out.

* * * * *

Amy paused at the door of Melissa's and Jana's room, where Runner had spent the night with Jana -- Melissa having slept with Amy -- and listened before knocking, not wanting to interrupt if there was sexual activity that sounded as though it were beyond a certain threshold. It seemed fairly quiet, so Amy tapped at the door, and heard Runner's "C'min."

Runner looked up from her reading -- Amy could see the title "Sherry's Day With Mom," recalling that it involved a young girl spending the day with her mother at work so she could see what Mom did for a living -- and grinned at Amy. She was sitting up on the bed behind Jana, her knees pulled up with the book propped on them. Against her left shin a squeeze bottle of chocolate syrup was leaning, and Puppy was nosing at it while looking up at Runner hopefully, her soft whimper clearly a request to Runner to do something with the bottle.

Runner had awakened Amy, asleep in Melissa's arms, early this morning, to take Puppy down to this room for some unstated reason, and Amy thought she could see now what the reason was.

Jana was on her knees and face on the bed, blindfolded and gagged as she preferred to be, her wrists tied to her ankles, her elbows to the sides of her knees, her ass high in the air. She was sweaty from recent exertion, and her buttocks and the backs of her thighs seemed slightly darker than normal. Amy pressed her knuckles against her mouth to keep from laughing, not completely successfully. She could tell what had been happening, partly because she knew how much Puppy loved chocolate.

Runner closed the book, using her thumb to mark her place, petted Puppy and said, "Oh, okay." Picking up the squeeze bottle, she held it over Jana's upraised rear end and dribbled chocolate sauce over Jana's buttocks, concentrating mainly on her butt crack, where the sauce ran slowly down over her pussy lips.

With a grateful yip, Puppy rose onto her four legs on the bed and began licking up all available chocolate.

Jana, with a high-pitched squeal, began squirming spastically, her muscles uselessly straining, the squeal quickly turning into rapid, breathy grunts. As Puppy finished with the more easily-reached sauce and began lapping earnestly at Jana's pussy, Jana's grunts became sharper and briefer, timed with the rhythmic tensing of the muscles of her arms and legs as her arousal quickly ascended towards a peak.

Puppy was nearly finished when Jana's leg and buttock muscles tensed one more time and stood taut, quivering, as her grunts rose in pitch and then held a sustained note until she was out of breath. Amy, from long experience, knew one of Jana's orgasms when she saw one.

As Jana slowly slid down the far end of her climax, she inevitably found Puppy's attention less welcome, and squirmed now with the goal of pushing Puppy away, but Puppy continued licking undeterred. At last the final bit of sauce disappeared, while Jana, giggling despite her irritation, was left alone to catch her breath, her whole body now bathed in sweat.

To Amy it was just another facet of the gem that was Runner, her quick understanding of Jana's offbeat wants and needs. She shook her head, grinning. "Runner, could you take her gag out just for a minute? I need to ask her something."

Runner put her book down and laughed. "I think she's had enough anyway. That's her third time." Runner reached forward and began untying Jana.

As soon as she was free to move, Jana pulled out the gag and slipped off the blindfold. She immediately turned to Runner and threw her arms around her. "Thank you *so* much, Runner, that was great!" She gave Runner an affectionate kiss, then, still holding Runner, looked up at Amy. "What's up?"

"You're on monitor duty for the party Saturday, right?" The Second Years were hosting the upcoming party.

Jana nodded. "Melissa and I both did bedrooms last time."

"I was going to ask the dean if it'd be okay for you to be assigned to monitor my room. I just wanted to check with you first."

"Oh! Sure. Have you got any extra signals?" There were standard hand signals the hostesses used to alert their monitors to special needs. Occasionally hostess/monitor pairs worked out some additional ones.

Amy shook her head. "Just the usual. I'm not expecting anything weird. If anything I'm sure they'll be on their best behavior."

Justin Greene and his crew, the men who had rescued Amy from the island, were going to collect, at last, the remainder of the reward Amy had promised them.

Runner gasped. "Is that *this* Saturday? That's..." She frowned in thought, pulling out of memory what she had learned about the days of the week. "Is that three more days?"

Amy smiled and nodded. "Today is Wednesday."

"The men from the boat are coming to this one?"

Amy nodded again. "I need to get that done. There aren't too many more parties before I do my own show."

Runner gasped again. "Do you know when your show is? I thought you were going to find out later today."

“Oh, no, not yet. Not exactly, anyway. But I know it’s going to be soon.”

“Can I come to the party?”

Amy frowned. “Well, there’s a place where you can watch from outside the room...”

Runner shook her head vehemently. “I want to be *in* the party. Amy, I’ve never had sex with a man before. Isn’t that something I need to learn, if I’m going to be a Hanging Girl?”

Amy bit her lip. “Well, remember, you aren’t really a student yet. That’s still going to be awhile.”

Runner had a determined look on her face. “You said you were with men *before* you came here.” She looked at Jana. “Jana, you did it too, right? Before you were in the Academy?” Jana nodded, and Runner looked back at Amy. “You said I need to learn as much as I can about what all girls do, because Hanging Girls know so many things before they come here. Isn’t this one of those things? I’ve watched women have sex with men on TV, so I know what to do. But watching it isn’t the same. I need to *do* it.”

Amy was about to dispute how much Runner really knew about sex with the other gender just from watching television, but realized that wouldn’t be at all helpful towards putting Runner off. The more Runner saw that she didn’t know about a subject, the stronger her need to learn it became.

Amy knew the futility of trying to satisfy Runner’s hunger for knowledge with anything other than real food. Not able to promise anything, she said cautiously, “I’ll ask the dean if it’s okay...”

Runner bounced off the bed with a huge grin, enveloping Amy in her usual tight hug. “Thank you, Amy!”

Jana cleared her throat. “We can’t really just turn her loose in a bedroom, right? She needs to know some things first.”

Amy smiled at her. “You offering to help?”

Jana laughed. “Sure. It’s the least I owe her after this...” She gestured vaguely at the chocolate bottle.

Amy grinned. “Okay. Start making a list of what we need to do.”

Jana looked at the chocolate-stained bedsheet. “First thing is clean up a little.”

* * * * *

THAT AFTERNOON

Sitting at the conference room table, Amy could feel excitement billowing inside her. I’ve been to several of these meetings, she reminded herself, probably more of them than most girls who come through here. Starting with the one for Laney. But this is the first time it’s been for *me*.

Amy had thought about asking Melissa and Jana to accompany her, but had decided against it. We’ll probably have another meeting for contract signing, she told herself, and they can come to that. The

main reason she had left them behind was that inviting them would have made it impossible to tell Runner why *she* couldn't come. For various reasons, Amy needed Runner to be absent today.

It piqued Amy's interest especially to be meeting, at long last, the Club member who had bought an option on her services. It would be someone she had met, but she didn't yet know who, except that he was male. Someone who had decided far in advance that Amy was the Hanging Girl he wanted to buy, and had paid money to ensure that he would have that opportunity.

Amy saw the dean look at his watch. "What time, Sir?"

"He should be here in the next ten minutes." The dean always insisted that Hanging Girls be in the conference room, waiting, when a prospective client arrived. It assured the client that the girl was there to serve his or her needs.

That, Amy decided, gave enough time to get an extra issue out of the way. May as well do it now, Amy thought, since it was one of the things she didn't want Runner present for. "Sir, could Runner participate in the party Saturday?"

The dean looked startled. "I think for the present it's sufficient that she watch from outside the room."

"Sir, it really would fit in with what you want us to do with her. Aside from hanging, our most important duty is serving the Club members at parties. Runner herself pointed out that all of us knew something about inter-gender sex when we came, and that helps all of us share a starting point. She'd be handicapped if she started as a student with zero experience with men."

He rested his chin on his hand, his standard thinking-posture. "It's going to be a couple of years, I think, at least, before she reaches the point of being ready for admission. There's plenty of time."

"Yes, Sir, but two things. One is that I won't be participating in any more parties myself, after this one. I know the job of teaching Runner doesn't fall exclusively on me, but I think it's my duty to do as much as I can before I go. The second thing is, this party is special. The crew from the boat who rescued us are going to be there. They're here because I made a promise to them, and because I owe them so much for bringing me back here. But I'm not the only one they rescued from years of an empty, exhausting, painful life. They rescued Runner from that too, and she owes them the same way I do. She doesn't need to try to entertain members. I know she's not ready for that. But we can get her ready to give a guest a freebie. The guests will enjoy it, and she'll learn more from that than from anything we could tell her ourselves. She *has* to get some hands-on experience..." Amy grinned. "...so to speak." She went on, "This is the *only* way she can get that experience before she's admitted, without sticking a member with an inexperienced girl, and probably the only time the opportunity will come up."

The dean was looking down at the doodling he was doing on a notepad. "So the understanding is that she'll service only men from the boat crew?"

"Yes, Sir."

"What happens if they don't want her?"

Amy laughed. "Are you kidding, Sir? You've seen her. And wait till you see her in make-up and a party outfit."

The dean smiled, still doodling, and sighed. "You win again. How many is that?"

Amy laughed again, just as the door opened and Tina said, "Your two o'clock is here."

"Thank you, Tina. Show him in."

Amy stood respectfully, trying to keep a lid on her excitement as another this-is-it moment arrived, then gasped, both hands flying to her face. "Benjamin!! It's *you*!?"

Benjamin stopped in the doorway, blinked at the intensity of his reception, then smiled. "So you'd be willing to let me stage your hanging?"

"Absolutely! When do..." She worked to get a grip on herself. "I'm sorry. You should come in and have a seat." She gestured towards a chair at the table opposite her, then winced, looking at the dean, suddenly remembering her status as a slave. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be the one who says..." She covered her face, knowing she was blushing furiously. "I'll shut up now." She sat abruptly. Benjamin sat down across from her.

She peeked through her fingers to verify that she was hearing the dean laughing. Cautiously she uncovered her face.

The dean was smiling at her. "I can't recall seeing quite that reaction before. Should I assume you're willing to consider being owned and hanged by Mr. Smith?"

"Consider? Of course I'd..." She shook herself, trying to force herself into a more appropriate businesslike attitude. "I guess we need to find out more details, right?" She was a little startled to learn Benjamin's last name after all this time. She couldn't recall the subject having come up before.

Benjamin smiled. "What would you like to know?"

Amy remembered, at last, the question that had been her top priority coming in. "How many girls can I bring with me?" It was always required that at least one other Academy girl accompany the one being hanged, to set the noose in place, but Amy was hoping for more than that. "In recent years we've been sending, ummm... two or three."

Benjamin nodded. "Three would be fine. There's enough room in the guest house, if they don't mind sleeping in the same bed."

Guest house, thought Amy. Cool. "Is that... do you mean three counting or not counting me?"

"Three in addition to yourself. More than that would get a little crowded."

Perfect! thought Amy. She turned to the dean, her heart fluttering slightly. This would be the hard part, but she was prepared to argue for it until she got her way. "Sir, I'd like to take Melissa, Jana, and

Runner.” She knew not to try asking if Holly or Haley could be there. The dean had made it clear, at the time of sending Haley the letter, that he considered Holly to be subject to the rule for First Years forbidding any outside contact, and presumably now Haley was as well. He had not, to date, said anything about Runner. Runner, Amy was going to argue, was at a cultural disadvantage compared with any other girl at the school, in having almost zero experience with the mainland world outside the walls of the Academy. It was something she needed badly, to be an Academy student and a Hanging Girl.

Amy had, from the beginning, dreamed of a hanging exactly like Miranda’s. Her vision of her hanging included a road trip to the beautiful estate of whoever bought her. If, after every argument Amy could think of to support her request to take Runner along, the dean still said No, Amy was prepared to give up that part of her dream and ask for her hanging to be staged on the grounds of the Academy. She didn’t want one like Megan’s, if only because she wanted to preserve the uniqueness of Megan’s very special send-off. But she would wait for a buyer willing to have the hanging here. Amy had made a promise to Runner, and keeping that promise took priority.

The dean frowned at her. “You want to take Runner?”

“She’s not a First Year, Sir.”

“Well, of course she’s not a student at all, but you know...” He trailed off, looking at her silently for a moment. Then he heaved a heavy sigh and sat back. “Let’s assume I’ve finished saying why I don’t want Runner leaving the grounds, and you’ve finished explaining why I really do. I think I know what you’re going to say. We’ll assume you’ve convinced me as usual. Let’s move on.” He made a resume-your-conversation gesture towards Amy and Benjamin.

Amy could barely think, now, for all the Yes! Yes! Yes! clamor inside her head. She turned to Benjamin with a huge grin. “Ummm... where were we? Oh!! I know! What kind of show do you want me to put on? You know about our various standard scripts, right? Do you want one of those, or will you have one of your own?”

“Ah. Well, I’m leaving that part to my son, Calvin, on whose behalf your hanging is actually going to be staged. At present I don’t believe the plan really calls for much rehearsal in advance, or anything of that nature. If that changes we can let you know.”

The parallel with Amy’s father buying Miranda for Andrew didn’t escape her, but she could tell instantly that Benjamin’s son was nothing like Andrew. Benjamin himself was such a sweet person, and when he mentioned his son he radiated nothing but pride... wait a minute. His son?

Amy’s brow wrinkled. She could always recall every moment of that first meeting with Benjamin three years earlier, including how well he had accommodated to his own sexual disability. “Benjamin, how could you have...” She stopped herself, just that much too late, and slapped her hands against her face. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me today.”

Benjamin actually laughed. “Amy, you know better than to worry about offending me on that score. True, I’m not at present physically capable of fathering children. But that wasn’t always the case. Calvin recently graduated from college, and I wanted to give him a graduation present. You are the nicest one I could think of.”

Amy finally laughed, finding herself unable to be uncomfortable in Benjamin's presence. "I think that is about the sweetest thing anybody's ever said to me." She decided to shift the subject away from her insensitive gaffe, and turned to the dean. "Sir, did you know the whole concept of Megan and me doing a pairs hanging for the members was originally Benjamin's idea?"

The dean's eyes widened. "No, I did not." He looked at Benjamin. "I can't even begin to tell you how much I appreciate that."

Benjamin waved his hands self-deprecatingly. "I can't really take credit. As I recall, I merely asked Amy to engage in a fantasy. Turning it into reality was all her doing. With Megan."

The dean smiled. "Well, in any case, thank you for setting that idea in motion. Now, when would you want to stage the hanging?"

Benjamin scratched his chin. "I can be fluid on that, but I should think I'll need about a month to get together a guest list, send out invitations, that sort of thing." He turned to Amy. "Does that give you enough time to finish whatever *you* need to do beforehand?"

Amy nodded. "Should we say four weeks from this Saturday? Hangings are most often on Saturdays, that's all I'm thinking. I'm hoping we can set a date now, so I can tell Runner."

Benjamin looked at her curiously. "Who's Runner? Oh, you were talking about bringing her along. That's an interesting name."

Amy grinned. "She's an interesting girl."

Benjamin smiled back. "Well, four weeks from Saturday it is."

As Benjamin and the dean discussed payment and contracts, Amy barely heard them. She felt a fire begin burning inside her that she knew would not be extinguished until she herself was. I've got a date for my hanging!! The words ran in a loop inside her head, over and over.

* * * * *

On her way to Melissa's and Jana's room, Amy saw that the door to Holly's and Haley's room was standing open. Amy was bursting to tell the news to someone. She would have passed by the sisters' room if a closed door had signaled their need for privacy, but the open door invited her in.

She stopped in the doorway, her mouth open to speak, but stayed silent instead to watch.

One of the First Year girls, Richelle, was hanging, her naked body squirming at the end of the rope. As the school year drew towards a close, the First Years by now had been introduced to all of the standard moves and were becoming fairly proficient, though a discerning eye would see the lack of polish in comparison with the more advanced students. And of course, they could not yet hang nearly as long.

Holly was watching Richelle intently, her chin resting on the palm of one hand, her elbow supported by the other forearm across her stomach just below her breasts. Her eyes were intensely focused and

barely blinking, and Amy, who had seen the look in Holly's eyes before, was nevertheless stunned again by the resemblance to Megan, who alone had been capable of the depth of concentration on another girl's hanging that Holly was now showing. Haley, standing beside her sister, was similarly absorbed, though her eyes seemed to move more, taking in different parts of the performance that Holly seemed to be seeing all at once.

Without looking, Holly reached for the lever to bring the platform back up. As soon as Richelle could stand, she asked Holly, just slightly out of breath, "So did you see anything?"

Frowning, her eyes now unfocused as if she were replaying a video of the hanging in her head, Holly said quietly, "Well, I think you hold your elbows a little too far behind you, but that's just your own style. You've always done that, and I don't think it's really messing you up. But there's kind of an overall extra tension in you that I didn't used to see. When did that start?"

Richelle shook her head. "I didn't even know I had it. If it's there, it's not something conscious."

"So when did your hanging times start going down?"

"I guess... about a month ago."

Holly's frown deepened. "About when the classes on the Shawna Move started?"

Amy smiled. That was how the students now generally referred to the desperate-looking downward stretching which, though Hanging Girls had always done it to some extent, Shawna had turned into an art form -- just as they called the hip-thrusting leg wraps the "Megan Move." It was one of the ways Shawna and Megan would live forever at the Academy.

Richelle nodded slowly. "I guess so. I thought I was doing it right. Mona said I looked really good doing it." Mona was a Third Year, one of the teachers for beginning hanging classes.

Holly said, "Oh, you are. You do. Except... I'm wondering if you're getting too much into the mind-set of the move. When we do the Shawna Move, we're pretending we're in a panic, struggling to reach something to stand on. I'm thinking... it's like you really believe that's what's happening. The tension I'm seeing has a taste of panic in it. Do you..."

Richelle suddenly nodded excitedly. "Yes! I've always... Well, I've always kind of fantasized about hanging, even before I started doing it. I've been talking to the other girls, and they do it too, but it seems like mine are more vivid, I guess. They're more focused on the excitement of it, I think, and I kind of get deeper into the story going on in my head. When we started learning the Shawna, I started getting that really desperate feeling washing over me." She suddenly looked worried. "Holly, the fantasy, the story, that's part of what makes this work for me. I *have* to have the fantasies. If I stop doing it..."

Holly waved her hand to stop Richelle. "No, I know. You've always been one of the most convincing girls in the First Year, and the fantasies you go through must be the reason. But now they're getting in the way of something you need to do. Let me think a minute."

While Holly's wheels were turning, Haley suddenly spoke up. "If you can't drop the fantasy, what if you just tweak it a little?"

Richelle gave Haley a blank look, and asked, "What do you mean?" But Holly suddenly spun towards her sister. "Yeah!" She looked up at Richelle again. "Look, what if, while you're hanging, about to go into the Shawna, you see your lover riding in on horseback, in the distance..."

Haley continued Holly's thought from mid-sentence, "Coming to save you. Just a few minutes away. You'll be rescued, if you can just hold out a tiny bit longer..."

Holly resumed, "You need to reach the platform so you can breathe, you can survive, until your lover gets there..."

Haley continued again. "So that's the desperation, but it's hopeful, it's excited, you're going to be okay if you can just make it through. You wouldn't have that panic tension making everything stiff..."

Holly again. "Then when you go on to a different move, go back to whatever fantasies go with that. But always come back to the rescue image when you're doing Shawna."

Richelle's eyes were wide with excitement, and she bounced in tiny hops on the platform. "Yes!! I can see the whole thing now! Let me try it."

Holly grinned at her. "Okay, but take a few minutes, okay? You were just up there. I want you to calm down and get all your breath back first."

Amy backed into the hallway, shaking her head. There it was again. For as long as she'd known Holly, Amy had been aware, just from what Holly had told her, that Holly and Haley were so close as to be a single person in two bodies. But now Amy was getting to see it -- earlier, in their physical intimacy, and now in their interaction with another person. Amy was going to need to let her mind boggle for awhile before exposing herself to any more of it.

Amy knew, also, that the task the dean had set for her and Megan, prior to their hangings, was done. The leadership qualities the dean had seen in herself and Megan, so that so many of the other girls had looked to them for guidance -- especially the technical help that nobody but Megan could give -- had now been transferred to Amy's girls. Amy had already witnessed students, even a couple of Third Years, seeking out Melissa for her stylistic advice. And just now had been Amy's first chance to see Holly's ability as a troubleshooter, a talent Megan had strengthened within Holly during the first months she'd been here. Amy could see in Holly, now, another way Megan was living on.

Haley did not yet have the purely technical expertise that Holly did, to the point that errors in hanging form would jump out at her and identify themselves as she watched. But Haley had the same insight as her sister into the frame of mind a Hanging Girl needed, to perform at her best.

Still shaking her head, Amy knocked on Melissa's and Jana's door, heard Jana invite her in.

Amy opened the door, took one step forward, and gasped as a wave of desire, a pure sexual need, swept through her. Set off by Runner.

Runner was dressed in a pale green nightie, without shoulder straps, barely held up by her breasts just above the nipples, that came barely below her hip, sheer enough that the absence of a bra underneath was obvious, and through which could be seen thong panties in the same color, a tiny strip of fabric in front barely covering her mound. She was walking between the bed and the desks towards the door, her hips slightly swaying, in spike heels, held by a strap circling her ankle. She was watching Melissa, who was directly in front of her, and Amy could read the question on her face, "Am I doing it right?"

With Runner dressed in such an unfamiliar way, Amy could almost see her as a stranger, and Amy worked to preserve that impression, letting the full effect wash over her. The impact was stunning. Amy thought that if what she was seeing now were a scene in a movie, the film would be remembered for decades afterward for this one scene of a beautiful woman walking slowly towards the camera without speaking. Fans would argue about whether special effects had been used to augment her sensuality.

Runner stopped just in front of Melissa, and seemed to see for the first time that Amy was there. A sudden smile lit her face. "Amy! I get to come to your hanging, don't I?"

Amy smiled back. "I told you that already."

"I know, but you weren't really sure when you said it. You are now."

Amy felt dizzy. Runner was reading her as if she had a direct connection to Amy's brainwaves. Amy had recently seen her do the same with Haley, at the instant they first met. Amy had been in Hanging Girl training for three years, and she thought she might be able to read faces and body language as effectively as Runner was doing it now, but Runner shouldn't be doing it at all. Amy wasn't sure when she'd started. She couldn't recall Runner doing it on the island, though she might have missed it. Maybe, Amy thought, it was the exposure Runner was now getting to so many people, so many girls she was getting to know, so many faces on television and the movies she'd been watching. Reading people, Amy reflected, was very much a matter of focusing your senses on them and paying close attention. Runner certainly did that. But it was also a cultural thing, a result of shared knowledge and beliefs. Runner was learning more about the culture of Amy's world every day. Maybe that was the key.

Amy forced herself back to alertness, in time to hear Runner say, "I don't understand why people wear these." She was looking down at the heels she was wearing. "Why do they want to make it harder to walk?"

Amy smiled. "You're really doing it for other people, instead of yourself. It changes the shape of your legs, and when people look at you they get really... well, horny." Runner knew the word very well by now. "That's why we wear them at parties. We're *supposed* to be making people horny."

"When I get them in bed, can I take the shoes off?"

Amy grinned. "Oh, sure. By the time you get the person in bed, you can take *everything* off. Or a little before that, probably." She looked at Melissa. "Did you show her any videos of girls with guests in the bedroom?"

Melissa shook her head. "Was planning to do that later. Jana thought we should work on her entrance first. What do you think so far?"

“You showed her that walk?” Melissa nodded. “She’s really picked that up well. Just a little wobbly with the heels, but we’ve got a couple more days. The outfit...” Amy frowned at Runner’s nightie. “The style is perfect, but I think the color is more for Holly or Haley. Have they got the exact same thing in white? Not snow white. Cream, I think. I want something that really brings out her skin color.”

Jana answered. “They have it in a bunch of colors. We were going to try several different styles until one of them really popped.”

Amy laughed. “This one pops just fine. I want to stay with it, but in the cream.”

Jana looked at the clock on her desk and gasped. “Oh, Lissa, we need to get going.”

Melissa said, “Oh! Right.” She turned back to Amy. “We need to get to class. Sorry, Amy.”

“No, of course, you go.” She made a get-moving gesture, then said, “Wait. Have you had a chance to practice male sex with her yet?”

Jana had gathered up two books and a notebook, and Melissa scrambled to do the same. She shook her head. “Another thing for later.”

Amy nodded. “I’ll do that then... Strap-on?”

Jana pointed towards the near dresser. “Second drawer. It’s clean. Some oil next to it.” It was a toy she enjoyed Melissa using on her when she was tied up, usually spread-eagle on her back. “See you, Amy.” She blew Amy a kiss on her way out.

To Melissa, following close behind Jana, Amy asked, “Where’s Puppy?”

Melissa, backing out the door, said, “Jeri and Taylor. I think they’re going to keep her for the night. And yes, they’ve got a litter box in their bathroom for her.” Amy insisted that anyone overnighting with Puppy take care of her physical needs. Melissa gave Amy a quick hug and ran out into the hall, closing the door.

Amy retrieved the strap-on, pushed her shorts and panties down and donned the sex toy. After spreading some baby oil over the shaft, she pulled her panties and shorts back up.

She turned to face Runner, who had been watching her with absorbed attention, and was now staring at her crotch. Amy smiled. “I don’t know if you know, a man wouldn’t look like this all the time. Well, of course, you’ve *seen* they’re not always like this. It only starts to get big and hard when they’re about to have sex. Or thinking about sex.”

Runner’s eyes went wide. “Oh! That’s what they’ve been talking about in the movies! I didn’t quite understand what they were getting at, but I get it now!” Runner was happy that another educational loose end had been secured.

“I’ll be the man. Whatever I say about me, I’m saying it about the man you’re with. Okay?” She waited for Runner to nod, and went on, speaking more softly. “Once you’re in the bedroom with me, stay close

to me. Ask me about myself -- with the men from the ship, you might want to know what they've been doing since we saw them."

Runner nodded.

"Keep your eyes on mine. While we're talking, you could stroke my hip..." She waited as Runner reached out to touch her. "We're going to undress each other. You can look away sometimes to see what you're doing, but remember to look back in my eyes. You should always look like you want to be with me more than anything."

"I do, Amy." She was speaking softly, in imitation of the sensual tone Amy was using.

Amy smiled. "I'm not Amy right now, I'm the man. You want to be with me." Runner nodded. "Keep your lips just a little apart when you're not talking." Runner nodded, her mouth slightly open.

Amy took hold of Runner's nightie at the bottom. "Lift your arms up, so I can take this off you. Then unbutton my shorts."

Looking at Runner, Amy's arousal grew quickly. If I had a penis, she thought, it'd look like the strap-on by now.

With both of them naked, Amy tried to decide whether Runner needed any more grooming in preparation. The hair through her crotch was gone, but Amy had decided to leave the bush mostly alone, just trimmed slightly at the edges -- the fabric of the party panties she had just discarded had covered it, though only just. Most of the girls, like Amy, had their pubic hair removed altogether, but some kept it, for various reasons. Amy, for example, had had Holly keep hers, with its startling fiery color. In Runner's case, Amy felt that maintaining Runner's bush added to her native-island-girl look -- though she'd had the salon eliminate the tufts of hair under Runner's arms, since there was such a thing as taking the earthy native look too far. There was also, as with Holly, the issue of unusual color -- in Runner's case, her bush was so intensely black, and somehow glittery with highlights. Looking one more time, with the party now unexpectedly looming, Amy decided to stay with her original decision. The bush should remain.

She looked up at Runner's face. "Okay, I'm me for a minute, not the man. Men like sex a lot of different ways, like you and I do, and mostly they involve different ways of using this." She stroked her artificial erection. "I'll show you one of the ways now, and some more later. And we, all the Hanging Girls, have learned how to tell which way a man wants it without asking. We almost always get it right. In the next couple of days I'll try teaching you to do that, to know what he wants." Amy had a feeling that part would go easily.

Runner nodded eagerly. Another thing to learn!

"I'm the man again. We're going to do man-on-top. Keep looking at my eyes, remember. Lips open." Runner had momentarily forgotten the latter. "Sit down on the bed..." She watched as Runner did so. "Scoot to the middle, and lay on your back." Amy followed her down as she was doing so, positioning her dildo in front of Runner's crotch. Lowering herself smoothly down atop Runner, speaking more softly still, she continued with the instructions. "Lift your legs up. Wrap them around my waist. Dig your

heels into my butt, but not very hard, and wrap your arms around me. Do it all kind of slowly, and all at the same time.”

Amy pushed forward now, and Runner squeaked slightly as the dildo entered her. “Try not to make that first sound. But this one, the one you’re doing now, that’s good.” Runner was softly moaning, in an excited, not pained, way. Amy suspected Runner had never had anything this big inside her before, though all the evidence pointed to girls in the pen having used their fingers in Runner, before Amy had met her. Runner obviously liked the feeling of being filled by the dildo. Amy felt relieved. That would have been the hardest thing to teach her to fake, but as with nearly all of the girls here, it was clear Runner didn’t need to fake it.

Amy lowered her head and kissed Runner, as she began thrusting the dildo in and out. Runner broke off the kiss for a moment, smiling. “I’m glad men like to kiss too. I knew that from TV.”

Amy grinned and whispered, “Everybody likes that.” She gave little more in the way of instruction for awhile. Runner didn’t need it, as the fire and excitement took over. Amy kept her mouth on Runner’s, her tongue licking Runner’s, as she began thrusting harder.

CHAPTER 31

PARTY NIGHT

Amy frowned in concentration, staring at Runner's face. The rules for using facial makeup didn't seem to apply to Runner in the normal way. Even for a party, it seemed necessary to back off from standard practice, to avoid messing with perfection. With help from the salon girls, Amy had picked out a copper-toned eye shadow that differed only very slightly from Runner's own skin tone, and a slightly darker lip gloss. With face powder, it almost seemed as though one needed simply to hold the powder in front of Runner and let a few particles of it drift onto her face on the room's air currents.

Melissa was working on Runner's hair, brushing it straight back and slightly up at the sides, then fiddling for at least ten minutes with the location of a barrette to secure it. Jana was holding Runner's right hand, running her fingertip across the tip of each nail, colored earlier in the day, as a last minute check for any rough edges.

Amy knelt now and lifted the hem of Runner's cream-colored nightie. The matching panties had turned out to have a slightly smaller swatch of fabric to cover her mound than the earlier green outfit, and Amy was fretting now about pubic hairs that might be visible beyond the edge. There seemed to be just one. Amy reached for the tweezers, patted Runner's forearm and said, "This is going to sting for just a second. I'll count to three, and be ready for the sting when I get to three. One, two, three." Runner squeaked slightly as the unwanted hair was pulled free, and seemed relieved that the pain hadn't been as much as anticipated.

Satisfied, Amy stood again and looked at Runner, her mind spinning, trying to identify, at this late hour, any detail of instruction she and the other girls might have forgotten. She reminded herself, for the hundredth time, that it was perfectly okay if Runner seemed inexperienced, it was okay if Runner, at some point, seemed not to know what to do. As usual, the reminder did no good. Amy felt responsible for Runner. She had brought Runner here to be a Hanging Girl, and felt a strong need to see that Runner could excel in every aspect of the profession. "What do you do if you can't tell what he wants? If you see he wants to be in control, but you don't know what he wants you to do? If you can't read one of the positions we showed you?"

Runner nodded slightly before speaking, responding to the drill. "I can tell him I want to be his slave for the night, and ask him to put me in the position he wants. I move any part of me in the direction he pushes it, until I'm sure I know what he wants me to do. Oh! And I do the little moan, to say I like him doing it."

"And if something hurts?"

"I don't say anything. If it gets too bad, and if I can't make the hand signal, I hum like this..." She hummed three notes on a descending scale, "...so Melissa can hear it on her TV. Then she'll send somebody to help. But if it's not too much, then I don't give any sign, but I make the other sound," she did the short squeak of distress, "And if he didn't mean to do it he'll stop. If he doesn't stop, I'll know it's what he wants, and I do the moan. Amy, I'll be okay! If I do something wrong, then I'll remember it for next time."

As always, Runner seemed fully in charge of her own learning process. Amy wanted to go on testing her, but knew she was going to have to trust her on her own.

Jana looked at the clock. "Just a couple of minutes. Do you need anything else, Amy?"

Amy shook her head. "You two go ahead." Jana nodded, and she and Melissa took off for the monitor room. The rest of the dorm was nearly empty, most of the other girls already assembled for their party entrance.

Amy took a deep breath, smiled, and took Runner's hand. "You ready?" She found she could barely look at Runner -- as sexually hot as Runner now looked, it took all of Amy's self-control to keep from pulling her to the nearby bed to spend hours making love with her while the party went on without them.

Runner, looking excited, simply nodded.

* * * * *

Amy waited with Runner in the corridor as the Second Year girls entered the party pavilion, each girl receiving her share of applause, along with appreciative sighs and gasps. Amy held Runner's hand, and with her other adjusted her own outfit, genuine girlskin, chosen from the Wardrobe room to suggest an Island Girl, despite the fact no woman wore clothes on Purity Island. The top was little more than a bra, or the top half of one to cover her upper breasts down to the nipples, ending in a short leather fringe that did little to hide the underside of her breasts. The shorts were more in the nature of leather panties, covering her between her buttocks and over her mound, the front and back coverings connected by leather straps, again fringed, leaving her legs bare to the hips, as well as most of the skin of her buttocks. For shoes, she wore moccasins somewhat in the island style, but better fitting.

As the last of the girls entered, Amy turned to Runner and grinned. "I'd give you a kiss, but I don't want to..." She waved her hand over her own face, "You know, mess us up."

Runner smiled and nodded. "I know."

When the last girl had received her applause, Amy took a deep breath. "Time to go in." She gave Runner's hand a last squeeze, and left her to wait with Melissa, who would go back to the monitor room as soon as Runner had made her entrance -- she would be monitoring Runner. Jana was already in place at the monitor for Amy's room.

As Amy entered, after a time interval a little longer than between the entrances of the other girls, it was a few seconds before she attracted any attention, most of the guests believing the processional of the hostesses was over. After a few gasps from guests who were looking in her direction, gradually more heads turned her way. Applause started and quickly grew. After years of performances with Megan, the members all knew exactly who Amy was, and more to the point, where she had spent the month before last.

Amy colored a little at the enthusiasm of the reception, and made a quieting gesture with her arms. When the room grew more or less silent, she said, "I'm really glad to be back..." The applause broke out again, mixed with cheers. She grinned, gestured for silence again, and gradually got it.

"I'm not here tonight to put on any sort of show, but just to thank the men who are responsible for me being back here at the Academy." She looked around briefly, and spotted them, near the hanging platform. She pointed towards them. "They're right there. The captain of boat that brought me back to the island is Justin Greene... Raise up an arm, Justin." The applause that had greeted her was transferred now, at still higher volume, to Justin, who turned red as a beet. "And standing with him are Dave Baylor... Give them a sign, please, Dave." An equally embarrassed Baylor raised a hand. "And Jimmy Pellis." Pellis nodded shyly. "Everybody please join me in telling them how much we appreciate what they did for me." Amy herself led a renewed burst of applause.

The three of them looked about the way Amy had expected. All were clean-shaven, Greene with his hair carefully combed, Baylor with his slicked back, and Pellis with his cut short, all of them looking uncomfortable in suits. Amy had made sure the word was passed along to them to "dress to look nice," which covered a lot of possible variations in clothing. The men had taken the safe approach. Probably fewer than half of the male guests were wearing suits, but there were enough of them that Greene and his crew didn't look out of place, beyond radiating an impression that they *felt* out of place.

Amy looked around the room with a grin and said, "Okay, I'll have another announcement in a few minutes, but for now, everybody just *party!*"

A gleeful shout went up around the room, and the guests resumed picking out girls with whom to chat and arrange some private time together.

Amy made her way across the room. She meant to greet the men coolly, but within about ten feet she broke into a run and threw her arms around Greene, who was surprised but returned the hug. She broke away from him and gave hugs to Baylor and Pellis. With all three men, she could feel the hardness at the front of their trousers. Pellis, in particular, was looking around wide-eyed, turning his head rapidly to look at one girl, then another, like a small child suddenly finding himself in a huge, colorfully-lit candy store.

Amy broke off her last hug and flashed a grin meant for the men as a group. "Before we figure out any plans for the evening, I have a confession to make. Obviously, I meant everything I promised you, and I've worked on making sure you get it, but I wasn't totally upfront about one of my traveling companions from the island. My friend's name isn't really Caleb."

Greene, who had apparently been steeling himself against disillusionment, gave her a puzzled look. "Why would we care what his name is?"

Amy giggled briefly. "You'll see. It was just a matter of being really careful. I didn't know what your reaction might be if you knew. I'm sorry about not trusting you, but you understand I didn't really know anything about you." She turned around and held her arm up, still able to see Greene's befuddlement out of the corner of her eye. "Can I have everybody's attention again for a minute?"

As conversations quieted around the room, she went on, "I want to introduce another person who's very special to me, who came with me from Purity Island." She made a beckoning gesture with her arm held high again. "This is my very, very good friend and roommate, Runner."

In the dim light of the corridor beyond the girls' entrance, Amy could see Melissa give Runner a one-armed hug and pat on the shoulder. Runner, with the grin of excitement she reserved for any opportunity for a new experience, entered the room, using the walk Melissa had been teaching her, her bare arms, shoulders, and long legs glowing coppery gold in the room's bright lights.

The collective gasp around the room reminded Amy strongly of the reaction, several years ago, when a breathtaking blonde named Megan had entered this room for her first party.

Beside Amy, Greene was seized with a coughing fit, holding the back of his hand over his mouth so he could remain standing upright, staring at Runner. Pellis whispered hoarsely, "You made her a girl?" followed by a grunt as Bailor elbowed him in the ribs, Bailor saying in another whisper, "Don't you get it, you nitwit? She was a girl the whole time!"

Greene sighed with what sounded to Amy like relief, and murmured to Amy, "You don't know how glad I am she's a girl. On the boat, I... ummm... I was getting these weird feelings looking at him. Her, I mean, at her. I was starting to worry about myself. I've never been... attracted... you know."

Amy smiled at him. "I know."

In the seconds following the first shock, a general movement towards Runner began as Runner crossed the room, and Amy called out, "Runner is not a student yet, and she's here tonight only for my friends from the boat. If those of you who want to spend time with her privately can have some patience, she *will* be a student eventually." The convergence on Runner stopped, with several disappointed groans, and Runner was able to reach Amy and take her outstretched hand without mishap.

Greene said uncertainly, "The puppygirl was really a puppygirl, right?"

It took Amy some time to recover her breath from laughing. Still holding Runner's hand, she turned back to the men. "So how should we do this? Usually each girl at a party has three one-hour sessions from seven to ten. Does everybody want an hour with me and an hour with Runner? And an hour with another girl?"

Neither Pellis nor Bailor could manage much more than an inarticulate "Umm," unable to take their eyes off Runner. Pellis, in particular, had his gaze fixed on Runner's breasts, shadowed by the gauzy nightie but not otherwise covered.

Greene was looking at Amy. "Meaning no disrespect to your very beautiful friend, I was hoping for a little more time than that with you."

Amy smiled, genuinely happy. She felt gratitude to all three collectively, but it was Greene whose decision to take a chance on the girl in distress had guaranteed her rescue. She wanted to show him, in particular, just how grateful she was. "We can probably arrange that." She turned to the others. "How does this sound? Would the two of you like ninety minutes each with Runner, and spend an hour of the rest of your time with another girl? I can't guarantee you could have absolutely any one you want, because you've got a whole room full of members competing for their attention, but really, you can't go wrong with any of us."

Bailor and Pellis had both torn their eyes from Runner and were looking hungrily around the room. As Amy saw Bailor's attention fasten on Jill, standing about ten feet away talking with two women, Amy asked, "Do you want her? The blonde girl in blue?" Jill was in a half tank-top and very short shorts with strategic rips.

Bailor gulped and nodded.

Amy signaled Jill to come over. "Jill, do you have any chits left?"

Jill gave Amy an apologetic look, and a smile to Bailor. "I'm sorry, Amy, I just gave out the last one."

One of the women with her, Beverly, who had won an auction last year for Amy's evening-long services after a performance with Megan, smiled at Amy. "Amy, are you trying to arrange something for one of your friends here?"

Amy returned her smile. "Hi, Beverly. Hoping to, yeah."

She held up the stub of paper she was holding. "Jill, if you'll promise to look for me at your next party, I'm willing to give this up to help Amy out."

Jill nodded. "Sure. By that time I'll be at a Third Year party, not Second Year."

Amy tried to read the chit, jiggling in Beverly's hand. "What time is it for, Beverly?"

Beverly looked at the chit to make sure. "First hour, I think... yes."

Amy looked at Bailor. "That okay?"

Bailor cleared his throat. "Does that mean, like... an hour with this girl, then wait thirty minutes, then you were saying ninety with... ummm, Runner?" Amy nodded, and a smile lit Bailor's face. "Cool."

Jill gave Beverly a friendly kiss. Beverly smiled and gave Amy a wave, and departed to look for another girl.

Within five minutes, Amy had located a date, Christa, for Pellis's last hour. It remained, in the short time left before all of the girls retired to private rooms, for Amy, Jill, Christa, and the mostly silent and observant Runner to chat with three men with uncomfortable erections.

* * * * *

Arriving at her assigned room for the night, holding Greene's hand, Amy turned to him. A quick read of his face confirmed what she'd been seeing in the main party room -- Amy should be his girlfriend, with an intimate, long-standing relationship. She stroked his arm, smiling, speaking softly. "Take off that coat, Justin, loosen that tie. Wait, let me do that." She reached up and wriggled the knot loose on his tie, freed the top button of his shirt, and caught his coat as he shrugged out of it, hanging it on the hook on the door.

He seemed suddenly shy. Hesitantly, he said, "Your hair looks good. They did a nice job on it. Fixing it..." He trailed off.

She grinned at him. "Thank you. Would you like coffee? Something stronger?"

He blinked. "Coffee's fine, thanks."

Amy made a gesture with her hand to no one Greene could see -- to Jana, who would relay the order to the staff. "Now watch the magic happen. Shoulder rub while you wait?" She pulled him gently from behind to sit on the bed, and knelt on the bed behind him, her fingers moving immediately to begin kneading his shoulders. She could feel him begin to relax.

Within about three minutes, a kitchen slave arrived with a coffee service on a silver tray -- steaming carafe, a cup already poured, bowl of packets of sugar and cream -- and set it down on an upholstered stool beside the bed. Greene, already relaxing under Amy's ministrations, picked up the cup, declining to add anything to it.

Still working his shoulders as he sipped, Amy leaned forward and lightly kissed his neck. "So how was your day? Same old same old?"

It took Greene a moment to formulate an answer. "Pretty much."

Amy smiled and softly licked the spot she had kissed. "Well, let me add some sugar to it then."

Greene blinked, staring at his cup, and then seemed to realize she wasn't talking about coffee.

She reached around him and slowly, giving him time to finish his coffee, unbuttoned his shirt.

* * * * *

Amy and Justin lay naked on the bed, facing each other, each lying atop one of the other's arms, Amy's other hand lightly stroking his hair, their bodies cooling after the intense heat of sex.

Amy touched her lips to his. "So why did you want to take a chance on rescuing me? I could have been a really clever island girl, fooling you. You could have got in so much trouble."

Greene smiled, returning her kiss. "I knew you weren't. And... well, I don't want to say it was just that you were worth a lot of money. I like to tell myself it was more than that. You didn't belong there. That did mean something to me. Really."

Amy giggled and ran her hand down his back to stroke his hip. "That's kind of a self-proving argument, you know. The fact that you want to think of yourself as a good person, wanting to do the right thing because it's right, means you *are* a good person."

He smiled. "If you say so." He cupped his palm on her buttock. "This, tonight -- this means more than the money, too. I'll run through that so fast I probably won't even remember where most of it went. But this right here... I'll remember it."

She kissed him again. "I'm glad. Speaking of that, maybe I should add to the memories now. You ready for another ride?" She gave him her best seductive look.

He was silent a moment, checking his own body's responses. "I could probably be talked into it."

She favored him with her most naughty smile. "Talk? I use my mouth for that." She scooted down slightly and kissed his chest, then slowly licked her way down his stomach, arriving at length at his limp manhood. Sucking it deep into her mouth, flicking it with her tongue, she tasted the mixture of semen and her own juices on it, and felt it begin coming back to life.

* * * * *

Holding Greene's hand, Amy returned to the main room, now about half-filled, with more girls and their final partners for the night entering from the private wing. She spotted Jimmy Pellis, getting a final warm kiss from Christa, as Christa took leave of him to cross the room to her roommate. Pellis looked flushed, a little disheveled, and happy. His tie was missing, likely coiled in his coat pocket.

Amy looked at the entrance again, and smiled. There she was, Runner, holding Bailor's hand. Bailor looked at least as exhausted as Pellis, but had his tie on, though crooked.

Runner looked ecstatic. Her hair, damp at the roots, flowed freely down to her shoulders now, minus the barrette, and her nightie clung to the sweat on her breasts, outlining them more clearly than before and attracting attention from anyone she passed. As she arrived she grinned at Jimmy and kissed him, still holding Bailor's hand, then broke contact with both and hugged Amy.

Amy grinned at the group as a whole. "Everybody have a nice time?" She received stunned vague nods from Bailor and Pellis, and an excited one from Runner.

Amy now saw Melissa, just now returning from monitoring Runner. She grinned across the room, gave Amy a two-thumbs-up signal, shaking her head slightly in wonderment, and went to stand with Jana.

I've got to see the video of Runner's sessions tomorrow, Amy reminded herself. She'd been planning to anyway, so she could tell Runner about any errors she had made, as gently as possible, but now she found herself unexpectedly eager to see exactly what had happened.

To her right, about thirty feet away, Amy suddenly spotted Benjamin. I should have realized he'd be here, she told herself. She'd been planning to get a message to him this week anyway, but decided this was an ideal opportunity.

Giving Greene a quick kiss, she said, "I'll be right back. Got to talk to someone."

She walked over to Benjamin, and hugged him. She grinned. "Still getting to know the Second Year girls?"

He smiled back. "Indeed. I was able to see Sarah, Emma, and Taylor tonight. I hadn't been with Sarah before. Delightful, all of them."

"I'm sure they'd all say the same about you. I was meaning to ask you something." She bit her lip, hopefully.

"Yes?"

"Could I invite a couple of people to my hanging? I mean, besides the girls from here we've already talked about? I would have asked when you were here before, but..." She smiled ruefully. "My mind was a little blown."

"Oh, certainly. I was expecting you would invite your father, at the very least. I assume your mother is no longer with us?"

Amy nodded. "Right. We ate her years ago. And yes, if my father can be there, I'd really appreciate it. And there's one other person, non-family." She gave him another hopeful look.

"Ah, another V.I.P. in your life?"

She was pleased he had understood immediately. "Oh, very! I don't know whether you know her. She's a member here. Steffi Bloom?"

"I know the name, though I don't believe we've met. She is the one you are hoping to invite?" Amy nodded eagerly, and Benjamin smiled. "Consider it done. I have nothing to write with at the moment, but I will... well, they probably have unpublished addresses and phone numbers. Why don't you have your dean pass along the information tomorrow?"

"I will! And thank you!" She hugged him again.

Benjamin looked beyond her. "I heard you say earlier that those are the men who brought you home?"

Amy turned and looked. "The ones standing with Runner. Oh, that's Runner, my roommate. The one I mentioned before."

"I caught that earlier tonight, when she came in. Quite a stunningly pretty girl."

Amy smiled. "Very."

"Would you have any objection to my also inviting the three men to your hanging?"

Amy gaped at him. "Would you? I feel I owe them so much, and I was trying to do what I could to pay them back tonight, but if they could see what they saved me for... Benjamin, you're one in a million." She kissed him on the cheek, making him blush.

* * * * *

The monitors had been streaming in for some time, and now Lori, the Third Year now serving as a Dorm Sister for the Second Years, appeared in the doorway, with a girl beside her dressed as a prisoner. The room quieted as Lori called out, "I see all of the girls are back now. I would like to introduce, for the

entertainment of our honored members, Mandy, who will hang for your pleasure. She will be assisted by her roommate Jaime. Let me hear a big round of applause for Mandy!"

The girl in prison garb grinned and blushed. Obviously she would have liked to cover her face, but her hands were already bound behind her.

Runner turned quickly to Amy. "Where should I stand? Where's the best place to see it?" She had been almost beside herself with excitement two days earlier, when Amy had told her a student would do a terminal hanging at the end of the party.

Amy whispered quickly, not wanting to miss anything, "Wait until she stands on the platform. She's going to be turning to face everybody while she's hanging, but go stand in front of her before she hangs, just a little to this side." She gestured to the right. "I've seen her practice, and when she turns she'll go this way." She gestured again, a counterclockwise flip of her wrist.

Runner nodded, just as Mandy spoke up, in a whiny stage voice. "I thought there'd be more people here to see my execution. Did they put an announcement in the paper?"

Jaime, standing next to her, responded loudly, "There's a bigger hanging going on tomorrow. They're probably waiting for that. We're expecting a huge crowd for that one."

The crowd seemed puzzled at first, but Amy could tell they gradually caught on that the exchange between Mandy and Jaime was part of the show. She whispered to the shocked looking Runner, "They're just doing make-believe, for fun, like on TV."

Runner spun towards Amy and gaped, with her I've-got-it look, and whispered, "That's what you meant when you said girls do a show when they hang! Like a TV show!"

Amy grinned and put her finger across her lips. "Quiet now. Just watch."

Mandy was continuing with the script, exclaiming irritably, "Lot of good that does *me*! And where are the television cameras? I told all my friends I'd be on TV!"

"Best Friends' is on right now," Jaime explained, naming one of the most popular shows on television. "The network doesn't want to interrupt that." There were several chuckles as Mandy made an exasperated sound and rolled her eyes.

Mandy went on, "And what kind of a last meal was that? I thought I was supposed to get girlmeat steak and champagne. Not a tuna sandwich and some awful soda pop! There weren't even chips! How can you eat a sandwich without chips?" Both Mandy and Jaime began walking towards the hanging cage at the center of the room.

"Sorry about that. Budget cuts."

"I robbed a bank! Couldn't they use the money from that?" More laughter.

"Ummm... they can't find it."

“Can’t find it!! I had it all in a bag when they caught me. What happened to that?”

“The chief of police said the investigative team will make every effort to find the money, just as soon as they all get back from Star Mountain.” Another outbreak of chuckling at the mention of the ultra-expensive ski resort. Mandy and Jaime entered the hanging cage and stepped up onto the platform.

Runner gave Amy’s hand a squeeze and now walked up closer, stopping just behind the knot of people in front of the cage, at the position Amy had suggested. None of the nearby members, Amy observed, seemed to have any objection to a skimpily-dressed treasure of beauty and sexual magnetism standing among them.

As Jaime dropped the noose over Mandy’s head and tightened it around her neck, Mandy whined, “And you keep it too hot in here. I *hate* hot weather. It makes my hair frizz up at the ends!”

“Didn’t you use the special shampoo they brought you? It was in a blue bottle.”

“That?? I thought that was the soda pop!” She squeezed her eyes shut, stuck out her tongue, and shuddered, as everyone laughed.

Jaime reached up to the neckline of the prison outfit and tore it away from Mandy’s body with one motion, hopping down from the platform, and at that moment three soft but bright spotlights focused on Mandy from different directions. The sudden sight of her naked body, glowing with oil as if from an inner light, evoked the usual response of gasps, both appreciative and sexually aroused.

Jaime exited the cage and closed Mandy inside, and said, “Mandy Larkin, do you have any last words?”

Mandy curled her lip and said, “Yeah, just two, for your hangings in this useless waste of a town: boring! Next time I die, I’ll do it where I’m appreciated!”

There was laughter once more, and then, spontaneously from several directions, applause began and spread throughout the audience, as if to make sure Mandy knew that, contrary to her script, she was very much appreciated here. Mandy tried to maintain her sour face but couldn’t. She grinned and mouthed, “Thank you.”

She closed her eyes then, and evened out her breathing, taking in the air more deeply. After about ten seconds, Jaime pulled the lever.

Amy could never resist watching a hanging, but found that her eyes kept being drawn back to Runner. Amy smiled. Runner was as focused as Amy had ever seen her, her eyes wide and only rarely blinking. As Mandy kicked and wriggled, going through all of the standard choreography, Amy could see Runner tensing different groups of muscles, in echo of Mandy’s movements. Runner, Amy suspected, was not conscious of doing it, nor indeed aware of her own body at all. Runner was, to the extent possible, inside Mandy’s body, experiencing a hanging more fully than she ever had before.

All around were the usual groans and gasps of highly aroused men and women, the inevitable reaction to watching a Hanging Girl show off her best. Amy, as susceptible to it as any of the guests, found she was rubbing her mound as she continued watching Mandy and Runner.

At about the fifteen minute mark, with Mandy visibly tiring, Amy saw Mandy smile suddenly. Mandy was, Amy realized, as aware of the time as Amy was, and Mandy knew that, in a sense, she had just made a passing grade on her Fifteen, the test that the rest of her classmates would go through a couple of months from now. She gave a triumphant little kick, and now began working the crotch rope for her terminal orgasm. The audience began applauding again, using hands that had to this point been otherwise employed.

Just a minute later, Mandy's whole body shivered in the throes of that climax, and then, all energy expended, she hung limp, her body twisting slowly from side to side in gradually diminishing turns. The applause continued until, one by one, audience members and students alike let their hands return to their earlier occupation.

It occurred to Amy, at last, to see how her guests were taking the show. All three men, she saw, were staring at Mandy, each with his hand rubbing his crotch. Amy grinned. No doubt Mandy's performance had gone beyond what they could have imagined.

There was one more round of applause as Jaime stabbed Mandy. Then, slowly, conversations began again around the room.

Looking entranced, Runner came back to where Amy was standing. In a dreamy voice, Runner said, "You said we could get to eat her later?"

Amy said cautiously, "I said maybe. The Second Year girls will eat her. Melissa is going to find out if she can invite you to come. I think it will be okay. There aren't as many Second Years as there were at the start of the year."

Runner nodded and, in that same voice of wonder, said, "I never saw a girl hang that long."

Amy smiled. "We don't go so long in practice. We're trying *not* to die."

Runner looked back at Mandy, whose swinging had subsided again following her stabbing. "When I hang to die, I'm going to do it that long."

Amy stroked Runner's arm. "Runner, I'm sure you're going to go a lot longer than that."

Runner turned back to Amy and grinned, then looked back at Mandy once more.

Amy tapped her on the shoulder. "We need to say goodbye to our friends."

Runner saw that Amy was hugging Greene, took the cue and gave Bailor and Pellis each a hug and a warm kiss, and echoed Amy's sentiments about being glad they could come, et cetera. Together Runner and Amy walked them towards the exit.

Watching Runner, Greene said to Amy, "That accent she had, on the island. That was faked too?"

Amy gasped and replayed, in her head, the sound of the last thing Runner had said to her. Amy had, from the beginning, mostly been able to understand Runner, and gradually her mind had filtered out any

consciousness of Runner's island accent. Any changes in Runner's speech pattern, since her arrival at the Academy, had been so gradual that Amy, talking with her many times every day, had been unaware of them, but now that Justin had called Amy's attention to it...

She blinked in amazement. "No. No. That was all her. She's just... she learns things fast." She shook her head to clear it, and grinned. "See you at my own hanging?"

Greene grinned back. "Wouldn't miss it."

Once the men were gone, Runner turned to Amy, with a look Amy, through long experience, could interpret as sexual hunger. "Amy, could we go back to our room? I feel... jumpy all over."

Amy laughed. She knew the feeling exactly, and knew that a long session of lovemaking was coming up. "Let me take just a minute to say goodbye to Benjamin. Then we'll go right there."

CHAPTER 32

THE NEXT MORNING

Amy sat at one of the computer hutches in the library, and rested her cheek on her left hand, supported by her elbow, as the video on the campus intranet began playing.

For the first few seconds, the screen showed an empty private room in the party pavilion. Runner then appeared in the doorway, holding the hand of Jimmy Pellis.

Amy bit her lip anxiously. She wished she'd been able to tell Runner what she was reading in Bailor's and Pellis's faces while they were still in the main room, but the opportunity had never come up. On the screen, Amy could see much more clearly than before, now that he was in a one-on-one session for sex, what Pellis would want from Runner, and suspected it was not behavior that would come naturally to her.

Seeing Pellis now, as Runner turned to face him, watching his eyes run up and down her body, his mouth open, his eyes wide, Amy knew what he was looking for, and helplessly wished she could tell Runner, the image of Runner on the screen from fifteen hours ago...

"Take off your clothes, Jimmy." Runner's voice coming from the screen startled Amy, coming so close to what Amy's own voice was saying automatically inside her head.

While Pellis scrambled to comply, ripping off his tie and thrusting it into his coat pocket (there, thought so, Amy told herself), peeling off his coat and the rest of his clothes and dropping them on the floor, Runner stood with her arms folded in front of her, a small smile on her face. Amy was slammed by an intense *deja vu* feeling, and struggled to identify the source of it. Considering that Amy had never seen Runner alone with a man before, for the good reason that it had never happened in Runner's life, Amy's sensation was that much more mysterious to her.

Moments later, Pellis stood before Runner naked, with a huge fleshy rod projecting slightly upward in front of his crotch. He looked pale, swaying as if he might faint. Runner's smile grew. She lifted her hands to her breasts, still covered but visible in a ghostly way, and cupped a hand underneath each of them. "Do you want these, Jimmy?"

That's it!! thought Amy. That movie!! The one she and Runner, along with Jana, had watched a couple of weeks ago. Runner is acting out a scene from the movie!

Amy watched as Jimmy spastically nodded, whimpering softly. Amy mouthed Runner's next line. "What are you going to do for me first, Jimmy?" Runner's voice wrapped itself sensuously around his name.

Amy, whose wonderment at Runner's behavior had abated somewhat once she knew where it came from, was struck by a thought that brought the amazement back full force. Yes, right, Amy told herself, Runner is copying what she's seen on TV. But it's exactly the right thing! This was the need Amy had read in Pellis, the interaction he wanted with perhaps the hottest woman he had ever been alone with. Whether something about Pellis had reminded Runner of the movie, or whether she had read Pellis's desires and searched her memory for something that fit, either way she had reacted to Pellis perfectly,

as very few First Year students would. And with far less instruction than a First Year would have had by the time of her first party.

Pellis stammered, "I - I don't know." He didn't seem to have seen the same movie. Amy wondered whether that was good or bad. At least it would make the scene seem more spontaneous to him. And probably not any less memorable.

Runner, still with that smile, snapped her fingers and pointed to the floor. Pellis looked at the floor and, uncertainly, dropped to his knees in front of her, which turned out to be the right thing.

Amy smiled, knowing what was coming next. As Pellis stared up at Runner, nearly drooling, Runner started to sway her hips sensuously, her fingers playing with the cord serving as a waistband for her panties, directly in front of Pellis's face. "These are *so* uncomfortable," she purred. "Would you take them off for me? -- No, not with your hands," she went on, stopping him as he began to reach up. "You want to touch me with your hands, don't you? If you make me happy first, you can touch me." It appeared as though Runner did not recall some of the unfamiliar words in the script of the movie ("You have to *earn* it"), but had understood the essential idea from following the action.

Pellis, breathing raggedly, looked at her helplessly. "But how...?" He pantomimed pulling down her panties, as if to say, I *need* my hands.

Looking down at him, not at a loss despite Pellis being considerably more dense than the actor in the movie, Runner bared her teeth and clicked her upper and lower teeth together, a pantomime of her own apparently inspired by Pellis's.

Pellis gasped as he caught on. Nervously -- his shaking visible to Amy on-screen -- he leaned closer to her hip, pressed his face against it and closed his teeth around the waistband cord. Able only to pull it down a few inches, he knee-walked to her other side and, again with his teeth, pulled down the cord from there. At last he worked it down far enough that the panties fell to the floor. Runner casually kicked them away with one foot.

She reached down to the hem of the nightie then, her arms crossed in front of her, and slowly lifted up upward, while her upper body slowly gyrated in an almost hypnotic dance. Lifting the garment past her head, she threw it beyond Pellis, her arms still upraised, continuing the dance.

Pellis, watching her swaying naked just inches away, could barely breathe.

She lowered her arms now, still swaying, and ran her hands down her torso to her hips, with her eyes closed. "I feel so grimy, Jimmy." Amy recalled Runner having to ask what "grimy" meant, and marveled that, as closely as Runner was following the script, she kept remembering to replace the movie character's name with "Jimmy."

She looked directly into Pellis's eyes now. "I want you to lick me clean, all over. *Then* you can touch me." She pointed to her feet to indicate a starting place.

Perhaps it was the camera angle, but Pellis's erection looked still larger than it had been at first. That's probably getting pretty uncomfortable, thought Amy. And Amy was sure Pellis didn't care. He followed

orders, licking the top of Runner's left foot, and running his tongue gradually up her leg, moaning with arousal elevated beyond anything in his previous experience.

She made him detour around her crotch and mound ("That's for later"), but did allow him to suck on her breasts, as he rose to his feet, and he moaned more loudly there, Runner caressing the back of his head, holding him against her. He raised his hands to cup her breasts while he sucked, but Runner pushed them gently away with the backs of her own.

Reluctantly, it seemed, he continued upward. As soon as he reached her chin, she took hold of his head, tilted his face up towards her and kissed him, hard, her tongue pushing deep into his mouth.

Amy thought it looked as though Pellis nearly fainted at that point.

Runner broke off the kiss. Locking eyes with him, she pointed downward. "Now finish the job."

Quickly he dropped back onto his knees, tonguing her crotch eagerly, moaning continually. Runner grasped his head more firmly than before, squashing his nose into her bush, so that he had to pause in licking frequently to catch his breath. Once again Runner pushed his hands away as he rested them on her thighs. At last she stiffened, quivering, and threw her head back, letting go a squealing sound from the back of her throat. Amy was familiar enough with Runner's orgasms to know she wasn't faking this one.

Recovering her breath after a time, she murmured, "You've been a good boy, Jimmy." She took hold of his shoulders to urge him up to his feet again, turned him as she walked around him and gently pushed him back towards the bed. "Lay down." As he lay on his back, his erection pointing straight up, hard and long enough to make a more than adequate tentpole, Runner knelt on the bed, her knees straddling him, and positioned her crotch directly above the pole. As Pellis gasped, his eyes wide, she lowered herself onto it and took it inside her.

It was, of course, one of the positions she had practiced with Amy and the dildo. There was a squeeze bottle of baby oil on a nearby table, but Amy could see that Runner, about to couple with a genuine male organ for the first time, didn't need any additional lubrication.

While she shifted her hips slowly, his manhood sliding up and down inside her, she said in a hoarse whisper, "Hands, Jimmy, use your hands now. Use everything."

Quickly he reached out, seeming to want to touch everything at once, stroking her thighs, steadying her hips as she rocked up and down harder, cupping her breasts, gasping each time she hit bottom with his manhood fully inside her, moaning in between. Runner reached behind her to lift his legs up, adjusting the angle of his erection so that she could lower her upper body onto his, her breasts against his chest, her palms against the sides of his head, her mouth and tongue finding his.

Amy, watching almost unblinkingly now, her mouth open, breathing hard, rubbed the crotch of her shorts. She saw Pellis spasm, his sudden cry muffled by Runner's mouth against his, as he erupted into Runner, Runner knowing from verbal description what she was now experiencing for the first time, the warm gush of semen within her. They both held each other tightly as his spurting went on, both slowly relaxed as it waned.

Afterwards Runner raised herself slightly, gave Pellis one more light kiss, and crept forward along his body so she could rest atop him with his face between her breasts. They both lay quietly, Pellis with his hands cupping Runner's buttocks, until a pinging tone, set off by Melissa, served as the signal that their time was nearly up. Rising up to give Pellis one more kiss, she began getting dressed. Pellis, as if in a deep trance, did the same.

Looking at the clock, Amy saw she needed to get to Holly's and Haley's room for a hanging practice session. She would have to stop by her own room first for a change of panties.

* * * * *

"Amy!" Haley greeted Amy at the door of the room she shared with Holly. Haley and her sister were both out of their clothes already, and Haley eagerly handed Amy two lengths of rope.

Holly said with a grin, "We want to show you what we've worked out."

Amy waited as they set the nooses around each other's neck -- they liked to do that themselves -- and then she tied their hands behind them with the ropes Haley had handed her. Amy pulled the lever and stepped back, watching the two sisters hang.

Holly bore Haley's weight first. Their lips touched for a light kiss, and then Holly, raising the thigh between Haley's legs with obvious effort, lifted Haley by the crotch several inches, enough so that she could kiss Haley's breast. Letting Haley sink down again, and kissing her on the lips again, Holly relaxed her legs to let Haley take over supporting her weight. Haley then lifted Holly in the same way, enough to briefly kiss Holly's breast, then lowering her again. They went through a second cycle, then Haley signaled for Amy to raise the platform.

Holly, breathing deeply, looked down at Amy, her face aglow. "Did you ever do that with Megan? Tell us you didn't! We wanted to see if we could come up with something new!"

Amy, her eyes wide, shook her head slowly. "No, we never tried that. I don't think it really occurred to either of us. I'm not sure we would have done it. You've got an advantage in being lighter than either of us, so as long as your legs are strong enough, you can manage it. The only thing is, you look like you're really straining. The audience likes it better very smooth and natural."

Haley nodded eagerly. "Oh, we know! We want to keep working on it to get a lot smoother, and we're doing some new exercises to build up our thigh muscles."

Holly added, "And the butt. You can really feel it there."

Amy laughed. "I'm sure. You tire more quickly too, don't you? Is this going to take away from the total time of the program?"

Haley responded, "It would if we had to do a show right now..."

Holly continued for her, "...but we're going work on that too. If we can make the transition smoother, that will also help with the breathing..."

Haley finished the thought, "It'll be that and the muscle strength together. We just need to keep practicing it."

Amy nodded. "Okay. Now take another couple of minutes, and then I want to see your other moves. Without the new one, for now."

Both nodded, and Haley spoke. "Amy, I wanted to ask you..." She stopped, and bit her lip, her smile suddenly a little shy.

Amy was about to prompt her to go on, but then was able to read it on her face. Amy smiled, deciding to make it easier for her. "You want to sleep with me tonight?"

Haley blinked in surprise. "How did...? Oh yeah." She grinned. "I have to get used to that." She knew about the expertise of Hanging Girls in reading body language, but knew little as yet about how it was done. "So it's okay?"

Holly broke in, "Runner can stay with me, unless she already made plans with somebody else."

Amy reached up to put her hand in one of Haley's bound ones. "Of course. I was hoping I could get a chance to get to know you better."

Haley beamed at her. "Great!"

Amy backed away. "Okay, get yourselves ready. I want you to start with the breast bumps, and go from there."

The girls both nodded, and closed their eyes, evening out their breathing.

* * * * *

Amy was just opening her door when she heard a bark to her left. She turned with a smile to welcome Puppy, and her jaw dropped. She could only stare as Puppy came bounding towards her. Puppy's hair was now bright pink.

Puppy began licking Amy's leg, and Amy squatted down to put her face in range. Stroking Puppy, Amy looked up to see Jill peeking around the corner, grinning. "So how do you like it?"

Amy stammered, "What... how...?" She blinked hard. "How did you get her to sit still for it?"

"She *wanted* it that way."

Amy stroked Puppy's hair, looking like so much cotton candy. "She told you that?"

Jill nodded. "Well, pretty much. We were going by the salon, and Mona was coming out. She'd just finished getting her hair turned blonde -- you know how she changes it a couple of times a year. Puppy saw her and kind of started dancing around her, barking. Not mad, you know, the happy bark. She knew who Mona was, but she was giving Mona this really puzzled look, and she really seemed fascinated with

the new hair color. Then she ran up to the salon's full-length mirror and started looking at herself really intently, like she thought her own hair might be a different color now too."

Puppy was very familiar with her own image in a mirror by now. It had been Emma's idea that if Puppy could see that she looked like all of the girls around her, she might realize she was human as well, and perhaps would think that she should be able to do what the others could do -- including speaking. It was clear that Puppy quickly learned that the image in the mirror was herself, and she enjoyed looking at it. But so far there had been no sign that she'd been inspired to try to imitate the girls' vocal sounds.

Jill continued, "I was thinking she might *like* it to be another color, so Mona and I took her to the library and brought up a girl's face on the computer screen, and started changing the hair color. I wasn't sure at first if Puppy caught on to what the idea was, but at least she kept watching. Then Mona started getting silly and tried some really goofy hair colors, like lime green, sky blue. When she got to pink, Puppy started barking and making these really excited whimpering sounds, seeing this girl with pink hair. So we took her back to the salon. She was really sweet through the whole thing, so I knew she knew what they were doing. And you should have seen her looking at the mirror when they got finished. If she had a tail she would have been wagging it like mad." Jill laughed.

Amy, squatting in front of Puppy, put her hands on either side of Puppy's face and looked into her eyes. "You like that, Puppy?" She ruffled Puppy's hair, very short but nicely trimmed like Amy's own, but bright, glowing, almost fluorescent pink.

Puppy barked excitedly.

Amy grinned up at Jill. "Wonder if she'll drag one of us back to the salon to do it again when she starts seeing dark roots."

Jill laughed again. "Probably."

Amy thought back to the painting at Steffi's house, including the ponygirl with every hair on her body dyed green. She looked between Puppy's legs. "Wonder if she'd want her bush pink too."

Jill looked at her in surprise. "We never thought of that. I should get to studying, though. Test in physiology tomorrow."

Amy shook her head. "Oh, I didn't mean right now. There's no hurry." She waved to the departing Jill, opened her door and let Puppy precede her inside. Puppy ran quickly to the mirror Amy had set down at floor level for her a week ago. Puppy often examined herself, but never so happily as now.

Amy grinned. As rarely as Puppy demonstrated human behavior, it was funny to see her showing as much vanity as any five other girls combined. "Lunch, Puppy?"

Puppy turned and barked at the familiar word.

Amy grabbed her food card, and a leash for Puppy. Amy had made a rule that any girl taking Puppy to the caf should keep her on a leash there, so that Puppy wouldn't help herself to interesting-looking food on another girl's plate. Despite not officially being a slave, Puppy wore a new leather collar for attaching

the leash. Puppy, very accustomed to the arrangement -- in fact, she sometimes picked up the leash in her mouth as a sign she was hungry -- padded alongside Amy towards the caf. She seemed more eager than usual, no doubt wanting to show off her hair.

* * * * *

Amy returned cautiously to the library after lunch, suspecting... yes, Runner was there, at a table near the new section of children's books. Runner was sufficiently absorbed that she didn't notice Amy coming in. Amy would ordinarily have walked over to see what Runner was reading, starting a discussion full of questions from Runner, but Amy didn't want Runner looking over her shoulder while Amy reviewed Runner's second bedroom session at last night's party.

Luckily, the computer was equipped with headphones. Having made it to the computer undetected, Amy could watch the video unnoticed.

The video resumed from the point Amy had left off viewing earlier that morning. She would have fast-forwarded through the interval of Runner dressing in her nightie and retouching her makeup, but Amy watched the normally uninteresting process with fascination. It was impressive that Runner seemed so comfortable with applying makeup, a skill so recently learned, but... well, Amy thought, that's just her.

When Amy saw Runner's final step of preparation for Bailor's visit, she gasped, then looked across the library to see if Runner had heard her. Amy gaped at the screen. She had been concerned that Runner's skillful handling of Pellis's needs might have been a coincidence, that Runner might have decided beforehand to treat every male bed-partner based on that one movie. Instantly that concern evaporated. Runner had pulled the toy drawer, which Amy had shown her just yesterday, completely out of its cabinet, and set it on the edge of the bed in plain sight.

Amy had known Bailor would want the toys but, as with Pellis, Amy hadn't managed to say anything about Bailor's desires to Runner. But Runner, somehow, had known. And Runner had realized Bailor, unlike a member, wouldn't have known the toy drawer was there unless it was made visible to him. So she had put it out there to be seen. She'd done it for Bailor in particular. She'd known Pellis didn't need the toys.

Are all Island girls, Amy wondered, like Runner? Her intelligence, her eagerness to learn, her sensitivity to the thoughts of others... the last of these really stood out to Amy as she watched the video. Amy didn't harbor any suspicions that Runner was literally reading minds, in the commonly understood sense of somehow sensing brainwaves, especially since Amy herself, like any other fully-trained Hanging Girl, had that same skill. Many outsiders *did* perceive what Hanging Girls did as mind-reading, but it was nothing more than watching for the outward, physical signs that internal thoughts painted on the face, the body. Amy had learned it along with all her classmates. But with Runner, the skill seemed innate. Amy and the other girls had given Runner some quick lessons in the last few days, in preparation for the party, but Runner had demonstrated the ability long before that, with no training at all. Could all of the girls Runner grew up with do the same thing?

Amy remembered, then, that there was evidence that Runner had stood out, apart, in that environment as well as this one. At the age of five, or thereabouts, Runner had already been beating teenaged girls in a game of thoughtful strategy, that game with stones in circles that she loved so much. (And no girl at the Academy so far had beaten her at it either.) Somehow Runner's mind ran at full speed, at peak

efficiency, at all times, her mental focus going beyond anything Amy had ever seen -- even in Megan, who had set the previous standard Amy judged from -- and none of the girls Runner had grown up with had matched it. Runner, after all, had understood the need to escape from the control of the Island men and had found a way to accomplish that. If all of the Island girls were like her, they would have broken free and taken over the island long ago.

Runner's sensitivity to body language, which had, Amy admitted to herself, grown more accurate and powerful since she'd arrived at the Academy, was just part of a larger phenomenon.

Amy's attention was drawn back to the video screen by Bailor's arrival.

Runner turned to face him, with her head down, her eyes looking at the floor, her hands clasped behind her back. Amy recognized that Runner's posture was, again, in imitation of a scene from a movie they had watched recently.

Bailor looked her up and down, a small smile on his face. "Man, if only I'd known on the boat."

Amy shuddered. Runner's future, she knew, would have taken a very different turn if she hadn't maintained her cover on the trip from the island. Amy had known that all along, but had pushed it to the back of her mind until Bailor had forced it back to the surface.

He looked to his right, suddenly. "Where's...?" He saw the empty space where the toy drawer had been, then saw the drawer itself on the bed. His smile widened. "Okay."

Amy blinked, then remembered Bailor had just spent an hour with Jill. Presumably Jill had acquainted him with that feature of each room's contents.

Bailor fished around in the drawer and withdrew a pair of linked leather wrist cuffs. He started to order Runner, "Turn..." then decided something else should come first. "Take that off." He gestured at her nightie.

Without looking up, Runner responded in a small, almost whispery voice, "Yes, sir," and slowly, accompanied by that same sensuous swaying of her hips as before, drew the nightie up over her head, dropping it on the floor beside the bed.

Bailor made a sound halfway between a grunt and a groan. The discomfort in front of his crotch, where his trousers struggled to contain his erection, was obvious. In a slightly strangled voice, he said, "Panties too."

"Yes, sir." Runner hooked her fingers under the waistband on either side, and writhed sinuously as she pushed the tiny panties down her leg, looking almost as if she were a snake rising up out of them. Amy groaned and shifted in her seat, reflecting irritably on the fact she was going to need to change her own panties yet again. She could usually watch videos from party sessions clinically, but this was different. This was Runner.

Bailor, unable to wait any longer, quickly stripped out of his own clothes, obviously relieved when the stiff rod at the top of his legs was freed of the encumbrance of pants. With an easily interpreted gesture,

he had Runner turn around so he could buckle the cuffs on her wrists. To complete his control of her, he chose a leather leash from the box and clipped it to the back of her "Slave Girl" collar.

The fleeting thought ran through Amy's head, I hope Melissa is watching really closely, before she remembered that this entire session had taken place the previous night, and Runner, obviously unharmed, was now sitting across the library from her reading a book.

Turning to face Bailor again, with her head still down, Runner said, "Please do what you want with me, sir. I belong to you." A line from the movie.

Bailor's response was not from the movie, but easy enough to follow. "Get on your knees. Lay on your stomach on the bed."

Runner, exuding gratitude for being issued a command, said eagerly, "Yes, sir," spun around, dropped to her knees, and sprawled across the bed as ordered, her hands in the small of her back. Bailor sank down to one knee behind her, steadied her with a hand on her right buttock, wrapping the leash around his other hand, and quickly penetrated her -- vagina, not anus. Runner had practiced with anal sex, afterward saying it was "kind of fun" but that she much preferred the pussy. The position itself was familiar to Runner, even before seeing it in movies, from having watched farmers use it on slavegirls, though she hadn't really understood its purpose back then. She did now.

Runner, emitting an airy sigh each time Bailor pounded into her, gave every indication of enjoying the experience -- for real, as Amy could tell, not just for show. Bailor came at last, with a loud grunt, slowed gradually to a stop and shrank out of her, draping himself over her backside briefly before straightening with a satisfied sigh as his shrinking penis slipped out of her.

Runner straightened as well, half turned and directed a yearning look at Bailor's penis, and used another line from the movie -- "May I clean that for you, sir?", making her method of cleaning clear by sliding her tongue in a circle around her open mouth.

Bailor's eyes opened wide. "Uhhh... uh-huh."

Runner's licking and sucking, following tips given by both Amy and Melissa, had Bailor hard again within minutes.

* * * * *

Jill, Amy discovered later, had needed nearly ten minutes to figure out that Bailor would be interested in the toy drawer. There was no possibility she had somehow passed the word on to Runner, who had been occupied with Pellis during Jill's entire session with Bailor.

* * * * *

THAT NIGHT

Amy snuggled against Haley in bed, feeling the warmth emanating from both of them following their lovemaking. Haley, Amy had discovered to no surprise at all, was as adept at kiss-licks as her sister. The practice had spread quickly around the school following Holly's arrival, but no one did it quite as well as

Holly. Except Haley. Amy, thinking back, now felt another tingle between her legs, just from remembering.

Amy thought Haley might have drifted off to sleep, until she felt Haley wriggle slightly against her to get more comfortable. Taking the opportunity to satisfy her curiosity, Amy whispered, "You doing okay, spending a night without Holly?"

Haley whispered sleepily, "I'm good," before coming awake more fully. "I miss her, of course. Being without her for a night is almost like when I spent a year away from her. There's... such a big part of me missing. But I know I need to do stuff like this." She suddenly sucked in a breath. "I'm sorry, that came out so wrong! I don't mean I'm with you now because I feel like I have to be. You've done so much for both of us. Fixing it so we can be in the same class, and teaching us to do shows together. That's going to be so great. I love you, Amy! I was just... well, I meant something more general. There are parts of being a Hanging Girl that we have to do individually. We both want to be the best Hanging Girls we can be, more than anything."

Amy gave her a squeeze. "You don't need to apologize. I know what you mean. As soon as I got to know Holly, I knew how... central you are to each other. The way you can't be whole without each other. I know what it feels like to love someone with your whole heart, and to be loved back the same way -- I've had that, more than once -- but it still falls short of what you and Holly have."

The subject seemed to cue something in Haley's mind, something that, Amy could tell, she'd been reluctant to ask, fearing the answer. "Amy, the dean wants us to put on hanging shows together at alternate Second Year and Third Year parties, and he'll auction us as a pair at the end, because he's thinking we'd bring in more money that way, but when the First Year parties come along, he wants us to do what all the other girls do. Hosting members one-on-one, by ourselves. He said he needs to make sure we can handle bedroom duties individually. We understand that, and we're okay with it, but..."

Amy realized where this was going. "You're afraid when you graduate you'll be sold separately? That he's getting you ready for that?"

Haley gulped and nodded, her head brushing Amy's chest. "He says he wants us to be able to do anything any Hanging Girl can do, and satisfying our owners and their guests in bed is part of it. But is that for just-in-case, or could he really want to sell me without Holly? If I'm sold by myself, I'll do the best show I know how to do, but..."

Amy knew that Haley couldn't bring herself to put it in words -- the emptiness of what should be a Hanging Girl's final triumph, if she had to do it without her sister.

Amy said tentatively, "I think he knows he has something special in the two of you. I'm sure he'd want to... make sure of using you the best way he can."

"Like we could do a terminal pair hanging? Wouldn't he need to be able to get more money for that one hanging than for two separate ones? Would somebody pay that much?"

Amy thought it over. "Anybody who knows beforehand what you're capable of. Like a member who's already seen you. They'd know."

“Oh, like with Megan...” Haley interrupted herself with a gasp and suddenly sat upright. “Could it be just like Megan’s show? Holly told me all about that. Megan did her show here, and made way more money than any Hanging Girl ever, because all the members knew what they’d see! We could do that, couldn’t we?”

Amy sat up beside her and grinned. “Oh, sure, that’d be perfect. We could talk to...” She frowned. “It’s too early to ask the dean, I think. He hasn’t even seen you do one show yet. You’ll have to talk to him later, after you do that. I’ll be gone.”

Haley bit her lip. “But you’re so good, getting him to do things! Holly’s told me about all the things you’ve made him do.”

Amy laughed. “I never *made* him do anything. I make him *want* to do things. You just have to know him... Look. I can tell you what you need to know. It’s not really all about money. It may look like that sometimes, but that’s not it. He will do anything -- *anything* -- to make the Academy a better place. Taking in more money is part of that, but just part. If something will make the shows better, if something will teach the girls more, he wants that. Anything like that. The Academy is his life. I’ve understood him, because I’ve always felt that same way. And you and Holly do too. If you want anything from him, you need to show him what it will do to help the Academy. Think about it in those terms -- *only* in those terms. Then talk to him.”

Haley’s eyes were aglow. “This *is* that kind of thing, isn’t it? Something unique, something the members have never seen before. Something they’d want to be part of, that they’d remember for years. They’d pay to see that, like they paid to see Megan hang, so there’s money in it, but it also builds the Academy’s reputation! Right?”

Amy grinned. “Exactly.”

Haley threw her arms around Amy and squeezed her tightly, her lips finding Amy’s for a long, hard kiss. In seconds they were both moaning, their hands roaming each other’s back.

* * * * *

NEXT MORNING

The caf was beginning to clear out by the time Amy and Haley arrived. At a table in the corner, Melissa and Jana were just finishing, and Puppy was licking up the last of a bowl of fruit salad, her favorite breakfast. Puppy, seeing Amy, sprang upward and jerked at the leash, looking reproachfully at Melissa for holding her back. Amy came over and hugged Melissa and Jana, then knelt down to hug Puppy and receive the usual excited face licks.

Jana grinned. “Everybody loves her hair like this.”

Amy laughed. “I’m sure. Have Holly and Runner been in yet?”

Melissa shook her head. “Haven’t... oh, there.” She pointed, as the two girls just entered.

Haley got there first, running across the room from the serving line to throw her arms around her sister, giving her a long kiss. Amy hugged Runner, and had barely touched lips with Runner when the speaker in the room crackled to life. "Amy Cameron, please come to the dean's office."

Amy blinked, and completed the kiss with Runner. "I'd better go see what he wants."

Holly, holding Haley's hand, said, "We'll wait for you."

Amy bit her lip. "I don't know how long I'll be. I'll try to get Tina to let you know if it's a long meeting. I don't know what it's about."

* * * * *

Tina directed Amy into the office, and Amy entered, slightly nervously. Usually she had some idea what might be up.

At least the dean was smiling as he directed her to a seat. As she was settling, the dean, without preamble, went directly to the subject. "I watched the videos of Runner's sessions at the party. Very impressive."

Amy nodded. "Yes, Sir. I was pretty amazed myself."

"I can see you prepared her well..."

"Several of us worked on it, Sir, not just me."

He nodded. "How did you let her know what approach to take with each of the men? I've also reviewed video from the main room, and I didn't see you take her aside and speak to her in the middle of the party. Some sort of prearranged hand signals I missed?"

Amy shook her head and opened her mouth to speak, and was suddenly overcome with laughter. Aware of the dean's puzzled look, she worked to get hold of herself. "Sir... I know you can read whether I'm telling you the truth or not, but you're going to have a hard time with this. I didn't tell her anything about them, in particular. We did give her a lot of examples beforehand of different positions and things different men liked, to supplement what she's already learned from movies, so she had different formats to choose from, and we did give her some tips on reading sexual interests. But nothing specific about Mr. Bailor or Mr. Pellis. There wasn't really any time to do that, with everything going on."

The dean stared at her for a prolonged interval, and finally said, "What?"

"She figured it out on her own. She's been doing stuff like this more and more lately. Reading us, I mean. It seems to come naturally to her."

He was silent again for a time, and at last managed, "Indeed." He leaned forward. "The generic lessons you gave her... Were they really as detailed as it appears they must have been? Spoken scripts, and so on?"

Amy's earlier laughter bubbled up again as a brief giggle. "She didn't get that from us. I could show you clips of the movies they came from."

The dean sat back, doing the characteristic tapping with the pen he was holding. "I'll need to think this over. I believe I'll watch the videos again, with this new information in mind."

"Yes, Sir. I was just thinking, to give the whole thing some sort of context... Runner is just very..." She searched for a word. "Unusual. Special. You're probably thinking this is all very odd, because so many things suggest Runner was born to be a Hanging Girl, in a place where they don't have any. And somehow, here she is now, at the Academy. That seems to stretch the laws of probability, but I don't think that's quite what's going on. She wasn't born to be a Hanging Girl in particular. She was born with so many special abilities -- and I'm sure we haven't even seen all of them yet -- that she could become anything she wanted to be, and really excelled at it, whatever it was. It just turns out what she *wants* to be is a Hanging Girl. And so she's here."

He nodded slowly. "Okay, I'll accept that. At least I can't argue with it. I don't know enough yet."

Amy smiled. "You'll have years ahead of you to get to know her, Sir. I think that time will be very valuable, to both of you. You'll be able to give her what she wants most of all, making her a Hanging Girl, and she'll give back to you everything she can, which is a lot."

The dean leaned forward, with an air of ending the interview. "Thank you, Amy. For the information." He smiled. "And for bringing a jewel back with you from the island."

Amy grinned. "Always happy to help, Sir."

CHAPTER 33

THREE WEEKS LATER -- SUNDAY

Runner gave Amy's hand a squeeze as they approached the door to the party room. "Why is your party here, if they usually have it in the caf?"

Amy grinned. "Melissa asked the dean if they could use the party room, because it's bigger. Usually it's just friends of the girl who's being hanged -- like the other graduates, or if she's a dorm sister for one of the classes, it's the girls in that class, and maybe a few others. But so many girls in all the classes kept asking Melissa if they could come, and Melissa decided it was just too many people for the caf."

Amy could hear the noise in the party room from well down the hallway. It was a different sort of sound from what she normally heard emanating from that room. Usually the conversations were more muted, with members chatting with hostesses and decorum prevailing, though salted with giggles. Today the room was filled exclusively with students, in noisy high spirits, awaiting the arrival of the guest of honor.

Amy paused in the doorway, taking in the atmosphere. She had been to so many going-away parties over the years, for acquaintances, classmates, and beloved friends. Now, she thought, it's for me! After waiting for so long, after going through so much, she couldn't believe her own time had finally come.

Stacy, one of the First Year girls, spotted Amy first, and shouted above the background hubbub, "She's here!" All around the room girls looked towards the doorway, and burst into applause.

Amy felt herself reddening, and covered her face, giggling. The nearest girls came toward her to begin the endless parade of hugs.

Melissa came over, handing Amy a paper plate with a pizza slice and a soft drink in a paper cup. She grinned. "Be careful with it. The place has to be spotless when we leave, and you're the only one who doesn't have to participate in the clean-up."

Amy laughed and took a bite, discovering to her surprise how much better everything tasted at her own party. "I promise not to leave a trail of crumbs behind me."

Taylor, after hugging Amy, turned to Runner with a grin, and gave her a hug as well. Though all of the students knew who Runner was, she was closest to the girls in the Second Year class, a result of living in their dorm. "So how was the party last night?"

Just eighteen hours earlier, Runner had participated in a party, hosted by the First Year girls (the hall was still festively decorated from that), and had private sessions with members for the first time. The dean, having reviewed the videos of Runner's sessions with Pellis and Bailor once more, had, to Amy's surprise, assigned Runner to party duty. Amy, Melissa, and Jana had spent the previous two weeks coaching Runner, this time mostly in how to have conversations with members in the main room, the tutoring conducted at a less frantic pace than for the previous party. Amy had asked the dean why he didn't want to wait until Runner was actually a student before having her work parties, then read the answer on his face before he spoke. "You want members to get to know her and know what she can do,

so eventually you can start charging extra for her services!” The dean had simply smiled, seeing no reason to confirm Amy’s insight verbally.

After the party, Runner had excitedly spent hours in bed with Amy, reconstructing her evening for Amy, until at last they made love and fell asleep. Amy was still feeling the aftereffects of a night with too little sleep. Runner didn’t seem to be, as she launched into a slightly less detailed description of her party experience for Taylor’s benefit.

Amy heard a bark to her right, and automatically dropped to her knees while turning -- nobody could imitate Puppy. She held out her arms to give Puppy a tight squeeze while Puppy licked her face happily. Puppy looked adorable in the harness designed and sewn for her by Kylie, one of the Second Year girls. The harness consisted of soft felt straps about an inch wide, in bright pink matching Puppy’s hair and bush -- a band around her waist, with a pair of straps attached to either side coming up her back, crossing each other and attaching to the sides of another band around her neck, while a second pair of straps, also attached at the sides of the waistband, came up her stomach, crossed between her breasts and again attached to the sides of the neckband. The neckband was actually felt-lined leather, with a ring at the back for attaching a leash -- one was attached now, at present held by Rianna, from the Third Year class. The waistband featured one further inspiration -- a pink puffball, about four inches in diameter, was attached to it in the small of Puppy’s back, serving as a symbolic tail.

Puppy loved the harness. It seemed she would have adored anything that made her more pink.

Rianna offered the leash to Amy, who smiled and declined it. “She has to get used to spending her time without me.”

Rianna crouched down and stroked Puppy’s back, as Puppy continued to give Amy attention. Puppy could now give something resembling a normal lips-only kiss, though she still had a tendency to use her tongue as the default mode of affection.

Jana arrived and set a paper plate of pizza, sliced into bite-sized pieces, in front of Puppy, with a paper cup and straw beside it -- Puppy had recently learned to use a straw, making feeding a little less messy. As Puppy began attacking the pizza, Jana stood and gave Amy a hug. “We still on for tonight?” She would be spending the night with Amy, her last time alone with her.

Amy laughed. “It’s not like we could put it off for a week or so.”

Jana grinned, her arms still around Amy’s shoulders. “I know. In a week maybe I could sleep with your leg.”

Amy laughed. “You’d better be eating it, not sleeping with it.”

“I’m sure you’ll taste great.” Jana gave Amy a kiss, then made way for the next girl in line -- Jenny, a Third Year.

Jenny hugged Amy, and asked, “What show are you doing?”

Amy wrinkled her nose. "Well, I don't exactly know what I'm going to do. Benjamin says it will be straightforward and doesn't really take any advance planning. I keep trying to figure out what it might be. Maybe something like what Shawna did."

"Oh! I heard about that. That did sound fun."

Amy shrugged. "That's just a guess. The main thing is, I trust Benjamin. I know it'll be a nice hanging and everybody will be entertained. I'll make sure on that last part."

Jenny nodded. "I've been with Benjamin. He's so sweet. I was thinking he hasn't bought a girl of his own before. Has he?"

Amy shook her head. "The dean says no, this is his first time. I guess he just... I don't know. It feels like a real honor."

"Oh, for sure! But listen, thank you so much for all of the help over the years. And I'm not talking about the same thing as the way Megan helped. You just always... kept us all in the right frame of mind. You reminded us how special what we're doing is."

Amy felt her eyes stinging, and gave Jenny a still tighter hug. "Pass that on to the younger girls, okay? Tell everybody to do that."

"I will. We will. I promise."

Amy kissed Jenny. Jenny smiled and backed away, to give the next girl in line some time with Amy.

Nearby, Amy could hear Janet asking Holly and Haley, "Are you guys really going to do hangings together? Like Megan and Amy did?" Amy wasn't able to make out Holly's reply, other than the giggle. Farther away, a small knot of girls stood talking to Runner.

The party outlasted the refreshments. As the room slowly emptied out, Melissa and Jana persuaded several other girls to tidy up the room, while a gradually shortening line waited for Amy.

Runner stood by Amy as the last half-dozen girls got in words and hugs with Amy. Amy slipped her arm around Runner's waist as the last of them departed for some weekend studying. Smiling at Runner, Amy asked, "So what were you talking with Molly about?" She'd spotted a very animated Runner in conversation with Molly just before both Molly and Runner came over to Amy.

"Oh! She was telling me about this book she read in high school, about this girl named Sadie who figures out things the police can't. She was asking if I'd read it yet."

"Oh, that's actually a bunch of books about the same girl. They're really popular with teenagers. I don't think the library has them, but you could check. I'm pretty sure they'd order them if you asked."

Runner nodded. "I'll check later." She frowned. "Maybe I should wait, though. I don't want to get away from the schoolbooks too much." Runner was concentrating now more on educational texts than recreational reading, not wanting to miss any standard knowledge. She was particularly interested in

arithmetic, currently adding long columns of multi-digit figures and staying on the lookout for girls willing to sit with her for a time, to drill her on multiplication flashcards.

Amy grinned. "In the Sadie books you'd probably learn more about what high school girls do every day. That's not really in schoolbooks."

Runner's eyes lit up. "Okay." She took Amy's hand. "Have we got time for some snuggling before dinner?"

Amy laughed and kissed her. "I do if you do."

* * * * *

AFTER DINNER

The knock on the door proved to be Jana. She was carrying a small bag and, to Amy's surprise, looked first at Runner, seated on the bed beside Amy. "The caf is empty. The staff is just finishing cleaning up."

Runner nodded, and began, "Did you bring... Okay." She'd spotted the bag.

Amy looked back and forth between them, puzzled. She could, at least, tell one thing. "You guys have something planned!" She grinned. "So what is it?"

Jana laughed. "Not telling just yet. We're going, in case you couldn't tell, down to the caf."

Runner sprang off the bed, grinning, and offered Amy her hand.

Amy, shrugging, let Runner pull her up standing. "I'm up for whatever. I guess." She felt slightly disappointed. The evidence pointed to another of the occasional sessions of Jana tied up in the caf, available to be played with. Amy had been hoping for a little more alone time with her.

Melissa was standing behind Jana. The four of them walked down to the caf together, Amy trying to read any information she could find in the looks of the other three. Whatever was happening was too complex for anything specific to show on their faces.

Arriving at the caf, now empty of staff as well as students, Melissa put up the "Private Party" sign at the door, to prevent anyone entering for the moment, and led the others inside, closing the door behind them. Amy wondered whether any student was misled by the sign anymore -- in the interests of candor, they probably should have made a sign saying "Getting Jana Set Up." Everyone would have understood.

In the caf, Amy saw that one of the tables was already draped in plastic wrap. Jana now walked eagerly towards that one, stood beside it and began stripping out of her uniform, while Melissa began rooting around in the bag Jana had dropped, with a thump, on the floor.

Naked now, Jana climbed onto the table and lay, a little surprisingly, on her side, apparently in preparation for being tied in a position Amy couldn't recall seeing before.

Runner turned to Amy, grinning. "Now you. Take off your clothes."

Amy's jaw dropped. "What? What's going on?"

Jana began laughing, and propped herself on her elbow, looking up at Amy. Then her face became earnest. "Amy, this is my last time being with you. I'll always remember you, and all of the really special things you've done for me and Melissa. Tonight I want to try to get closer to you than I've ever been, and I don't mean in the physical sense. I mean, physical is going to be part of it, but the plan is, I want you to spend part of the night in my world with me, and I'll spend the other part of the night in your world with you."

"Ummm..." Amy looked at Runner, who gave her a go-ahead gesture, and Amy reached behind herself to unhook her bra. Bending over to take off her shoes and socks, she tried again to read Jana's face. She gave up. "I'm not sure exactly what you mean."

Jana beamed at her. "You'll see."

While Amy was pushing down her shorts and panties, Melissa withdrew, from the bag, a piece of odd equipment from the party pavilion toy supply, used sometimes when entertaining a female guest. It was a head harness, with leather straps, some of which connected to a hard rubber double-ended dildo, others forming a headband, still others connecting these. One end of the dildo, the short end, fit into the mouth of the wearer of the harness, and the straps held it there. The long end of the dildo then projected directly outward from the wearer's mouth.

Melissa began securing it in the standard way around Jana's head. Amy saw Jana's lips curl upward around the gag, her eyes, looking at Amy, growing steadily brighter as they always did at the start of one of her bondage games. Amy remained puzzled. She was familiar with a number of uses to which the harness *could* be put, but didn't feel clear on which one of them might be featured now.

After Melissa finished with Jana's harness, Runner bent over the bag and pulled out a second, identical harness. "This one's for you."

Amy's eyes went wide. "What?"

Jana, having returned to her original position, curled up on her side on the table, grunted insistently around the gag, her eyes again on Amy.

Amy suddenly saw what Jana must have meant about Amy joining her in "Jana's world." Clearly Amy would be spending the evening tied up the same way Jana was. And not in private, but in the very public caf. Obviously Amy, like Jana had many times before, would be used as a public sexual plaything.

Amy never minded being tied, hands and occasionally feet, when hanging was involved. It was all part of the process, and the joy, of hanging. She had occasionally been tied up by club members in private sessions at parties. It wasn't her favorite thing, and her chief enjoyment of it came from the knowledge that she was giving a member what he/she wanted.

Now all of Amy's friends would be using her for their amusement, and there would be a bit of an embarrassment factor involved. She knew how much Jana adored it. But that was Jana.

Amy began shivering. She could see Runner looking at her, holding the harness, waiting for a physical signal from Amy that Amy was okay with what was happening. Amy was frozen, unable to give such a signal.

And just as suddenly as the paralysis had come over her, it washed away. Jana had just stated the obvious herself: this was her way of feeling close to Amy, and Amy wanted that closeness, this week, not just with Jana but with everyone she loved the most. And as for feeling embarrassed... Amy giggled. I'll be dead in less than a week, she reminded herself. Embarrassment is just enhanced self-consciousness. I *want* to be conscious of myself, my being. It makes giving it up that much more special.

She smiled at Runner. Runner grinned back and began securing the harness around Amy's head. She did it quickly -- either she had practiced it beforehand, or... well, Amy realized, she'd just watched Melissa do it. With Runner, seeing something once was all it usually took.

The gag, Amy found, filled her mouth so completely that she wasn't able to make any remotely intelligible sound. And she realized she was already starting to drool.

Melissa, grinning, said, "Okay, get up on the table, facing Jana -- no, other way. Yeah, like that..."

* * * * *

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER

Amy wriggled to the limited extent possible, trying to get comfortable, causing the inevitable reaction in Jana. Amy had a perfect view of Jana's buttocks clenching, vaginal lips quivering -- that was almost the only thing she *could* see.

Runner had just finished with the last tie, and Melissa patted Amy on the hip. "You doing okay?"

"Hm hm hm." Even Amy's giggles were muffled.

Runner looked up from the bag. "Where's the tape?"

"Oh!" Melissa pulled the tape dispenser out of her pocket. "One time it unwound a little in the bag and got tangled up with the ropes. So I keep it separate."

Runner took the tape, while holding a printed sheet of paper -- Amy could see that much, though not what it said. But she knew basically what it would contain. Instructions and/or suggestions for how Amy and Jana should be treated. "Just put it along the side of the table?"

"On this side, yeah, so people can see it as soon as they come in."

Runner taped the page to the table, while Melissa bent and kissed Jana on the hip, whispering, "I love you, honey." Jana hummed a pair of musical tones that Amy assumed were a "love you" response, and wriggled, a movement Amy felt very deeply, causing a shiver of her own.

Runner gave Amy a hip kiss of her own, saying, "I love you, Amy," while Melissa gathered up Amy's and Jana's clothes and stuffed them into the bag.

Melissa said casually, a laugh in her voice, "Okay, Runner and I are going back to my room to watch a couple of movies. The second one is pretty sexy, so we might get a little involved with each other after. Anyway, see you later."

She's serious! thought Amy. We'll be in here three, maybe four hours! She had visualized more like one hour. Amy called "Hmmm!" after them as they walked away, hand in hand, to the door that was just within Amy's field of vision, partly obscured by Jana's buttock. Melissa gave a cheery wave at the door, then she and Runner walked out into the hallway, the door closing softly behind them.

I thought they'd stay and watch! Amy moaned to herself. She felt very alone, and clung tightly to Jana. Jana was already reacting to Amy's movements, again causing a reciprocal feeling within Amy.

They were tied lying on their sides, facing each other, in opposite directions, their positions and ties perfectly symmetrical. Amy's head was between Jana's legs, her arms wrapped tightly around Jana's waist. Behind Jana's back, Amy's left wrist was tied to her own right upper arm just above the elbow, her right wrist similarly tied to her left upper arm. There was a short rope running between her knees, not quite holding them together, but sufficiently close that her thighs were tight around Jana's head, and she knew how Jana felt, with the pressure of Jana's thighs squeezing her own ears. Another rope ran from her knees to her bound arms, preventing her from straightening her legs at the hip. Her ankles were crossed and tied, not that she could have used them for much.

The dildo projecting outward from her head harness was being used as intended, buried full length inside Jana's pussy. One more rope completed the tie, running from a ring at the top of the head harness, in the middle of a strap running across the top of Amy's head, to her arms. That rope was sufficient to the task of holding Amy's head inescapably in Jana's crotch. She could pull back just a few inches, not enough to pull the dildo out of Jana's vagina.

Any movement Amy made, however slight, caused her head to shift position, sliding the dildo in and out of Jana -- perhaps only a few millimeters, but as Amy was well aware, all the more frustrating to Jana because of that. With each of Amy's movements, Jana twitched in response, giving Amy that same tickling, teasing feeling between her own legs, and Amy would wriggle again, continuing the cycle.

Amy's senses seemed scrambled. Sight and sound, usually the busiest senses, were taking a rest. Amy could see almost nothing other than an extreme close-up of the skin of Jana's buttocks and, looking down her nose, the soft folds of Jana's labia, parted by the dildo. There was almost no sound to be heard, other than Jana's soft squeaks and gasps, which Amy herself was echoing. On the other hand, Amy's other senses were responding to a volume knob turned to maximum gain. Amy could feel heat and tingling on every inch of her skin, and not only where Jana was rubbing against her. She could taste the milky foam of self-lubrication leaking from Jana's pussy, and Amy knew the same foam was present

between her own legs -- both dildoes slid in and out almost frictionlessly. Above all else was the smell of sex, arousing Amy to a higher level of sensual need than she could remember experiencing before.

Amy suddenly felt Jana's face press hard against her crotch, and withdraw slightly -- then push again, and again, forcing the dildo deep inside Amy. All awareness of the rest of the world faded, as Amy's entire existence was suddenly located between her legs. She tightened her arms automatically around Jana's waist, and felt Jana's hips twitching violently, begging for Amy to give her the same treatment. Amy pushed her face against Jana, flattening her nose against her, over and over, hearing Jana's cries overlap her own.

The sudden flow of tingling, like an electric current, passing through her body gave Amy just a few seconds of warning before the orgasm hit. The world seemed to explode in a blinding flash as she squeezed her eyes tight.

After a moment of disorientation, Amy felt herself float to the surface. I fainted, she told herself, marveling at that. She'd never done that during sex before. Her throat felt raw, and she realized she'd been screaming as well. She hardly ever did that either.

She felt drained of all energy, and sensed herself floating on a cushion of sexual release. It was like all of the best times with Megan and Runner. She had never experienced it at such a level with Jana before.

She moved to get up and stretch, and the disorientation returned. It took her a few seconds to realize that the ropes keeping her arms and legs tightly clamped around Jana had not suddenly disappeared. And there was no one here to set her free.

She began giggling. I need to thank Jana, at least, she told herself. She gave Jana's head a quick double-squeeze between her thighs, heard Jana giggle and felt her return the gesture.

Breathing deeply, Amy rested, trying to remain totally motionless, not yet ready to get caught in the arousal cycle again.

* * * * *

It seemed to Amy that half an hour must have gone by. She was getting stiff from maintaining one position, but tried to shift as little as possible, with each movement eliciting a squeak and a twitch from Jana, and Amy reacting similarly to each of Jana's movements. Amy held her breath each time she heard voices outside the door, willing them to go away -- her mental vibes apparently successful, in each case.

At last a set of voices grew louder until the door to the caf swung open. Amy froze, her stomach in knots, and broke into a sudden cold sweat, and felt Jana tighten her arms around her. Past Jana's buttocks, Amy could see four girls, all First Years, stopped in the doorway, their mouths open in varying degrees of astonishment. It wasn't unusual for any student to discover Jana here during a nighttime run, but Jana had never had a partner before.

Amy felt her face growing hotter, and knew it was bright red. Maybe, she told herself, with the harness, they can't tell...

Cynthia, the nearest of the four, suddenly gasped, "Oh, it's Amy! You can tell by her hair!"

Amy's heart sank. She was completely busted now. Ironic, she thought, that on the island, she had cut her hair exactly for the purpose of escaping undue attention. Here, it had the opposite effect.

Giggling, the four girls approached the table. Ginnie, always the quiet one, said wonderingly, "I always felt like I wanted to ask her if she'd spend the night with me -- has she been with any First Years? I guess Holly and Haley don't count. Anyway, I could never get myself to do it."

Her roommate, Ronnie, giggled. "Well, you can do whatever you want with her now... What's the note say?" All four bent to read the printed page taped to the table.

Amy couldn't watch anymore. She squeezed her eyes shut tight. Maybe, she thought, Runner and Melissa were kidding about the movies. They'll come back in just a few minutes.

Paula asked, "What's it mean about 'contest'?"

Cynthia nudged her. "Just keep reading. I get it." She laughed. "This sounds like fun."

Fun for whom? thought Amy.

The girls quickly chose up sides, which involved picking either Jana or Amy, for purposes Amy couldn't yet guess, though she had some suspicion. Cynthia asked Paula, "What do I get if I win?"

Paula laughed. "Winner gets to be the boss in bed tonight, of course."

"How should we do it? The note just says 'stimulate them.' "

"Well, that's easy enough."

Cynthia giggled. "Almost too easy."

The girls surrounded the table, and began touching Amy's and Jana's skin -- Cynthia and Ginnie taking Amy, Ronnie and Paula with Jana. Amy could feel light fingertips running across her buttocks, crawling over her side into the crease between her stomach and thighs... a Hanging Girl knew all of the most sensitive points on the skin relative to sexual arousal, and Amy felt their soft touch on every one of them. Amy was involuntarily moaning with every breath, her hips twitching, her arms tightening around Jana's waist, her thighs squeezing Jana's head, feeling all of the same from Jana...

Now one of the girls behind Jana, she couldn't tell which, began pushing the back of Amy's head, in a steady rhythm, making the dildo slide in and out of Jana. Amy blinked at the sudden perception of her own head as being simply the handle of a sex toy. At the other end, one of the girls behind Amy started pushing against Jana's head.

To say the combination of sensations affected Amy would be a gross understatement. Every square inch of her skin seemed to tingle with electricity, and she wriggled helplessly against Jana as Jana twitched

and writhed against her. In just minutes she could feel the tension building inside her, begging for release...

Jana suddenly spasmed and emitted a high-pitched shriek, which brought Amy still closer, so close, so close...

The exploring fingers were gone, the hand behind Amy's head stopped pushing. Ronnie stood upright and clapped her hands, as Paula threw her arms in the air. "We win!"

Cynthia and Ginnie rounded the table, each hugging her roommate. Ronnie suggested, "Let's go back to our rooms and have a little fun." She took Ginnie's hand and said, "Come on, slave-for-the-night."

Ginnie giggled and said, "Yes, mistress."

Amy groaned in frustration. *That's* what the contest is about, she thought. They're trying to get either me or Jana be the first one to come!

The girls appeared to be leaving. Suddenly Cynthia turned back, bent, and kissed Amy on the hip, and said softly, "Goodbye, Amy." Each of the other three girls did the same. Amy felt a tear sting her eye. It was a surprisingly tender, intimate gesture from the same girls who had just used her for their own sexual amusement.

A minute later, all four girls were gone.

While being touched by their heartfelt goodbye, Amy was irritated that they had left her sexually unsatisfied. Though possibly, it occurred to her, that might be another of the "rules" stated on the note.

I could probably get Jana to help me out again, thought Amy. But wait -- maybe it's better if I'm on edge. It should help me come more quickly the next time...

She knew there would be more contests.

* * * * *

Just minutes after the four girls left, the cafeteria door opened again, and Holly and Haley entered, holding hands, in animated conversation with each other.

They froze at the sight of Amy and Jana -- obviously nobody had given them a heads-up, not even Melissa. Amy heard the one on the left -- they were too far away for Amy to tell which she was -- whisper, "Oh, that's Amy!" They approached slowly.

Wide-eyed, without another word, they began walking around the bound pair, looking at every detail of the bindings, breathing a little faster as they went. After a full circuit of the table, they came into Amy's view again, and looked at each other. Holly -- Amy could now discern the "O" hanging from her collar -- nodded to Haley. Both of them looked very excited. Grasping hands again, they ran out of the room.

Amy giggled to herself. I know what *that* must be about, she told herself.

* * * * *

Another pair of roommates, Neely and Cassie, Third Years, came in about a half-hour later. After goggling at Amy and Jana, and reading the note, they had an extended discussion of how to proceed. Amy could feel the tingling returning as the girls talked about how to play with her. Suddenly Cassie gasped, "Oh, I know!" and pulled her roommate to the exit. Amy could hear them running down the hall. I don't know if I like this, she told herself. They have to be getting some kind of equipment.

Minutes later they returned, giggling, each holding a spray bottle. Many of the students kept small plants in their rooms, and used sprayers periodically to keep them watered. Cassie and Neely went quickly beyond Amy's limited field of view, and Amy heard a loud crunching sound. She gasped, identifying it as the ice machine. They were filling their spray bottles with crushed ice!

Amy heard Cassie say, "I'll take Amy!" and could see Neely pass around in front of her to take a position behind Jana. Amy was shivering already, her body tensing, knowing what was coming. She still jerked and gasped when she felt a stream of ice-cold water splash across her back. Jana smacked against her after getting the same treatment, and Amy felt the quick movement of the dildo inside her. The next stream of water hit Amy on her side and dribbled down her stomach between herself and Jana.

Amy could barely think, outside a desperate desire to get away from the cold. Thinking back on it later, she realized how brilliant the strategy was, as a way of bringing herself and Jana to a sexual peak quickly. To start, both of them moved reflexively to try, impossible though it was, to escape the spray of icy water. Soon, shivering, they were moving against each other frantically, grasping, skin rubbing sensually, to try to warm up, even between spritzes. Finally, they were purposely stimulating each other desperately with the dildoes to try to get the ordeal over with as soon as possible.

In what was probably just a few minutes, though it seemed much longer, Amy felt a sudden jolt rip through her, spreading out from her crotch to all points of her body, and she erupted with a cry forced out of her by the power of her climax. Cassie had barely had time to shout "Yes!" when Jana followed Amy over the edge of orgasm, and she and Amy nearly squeezed the breath out of each other as they rocked together in shared climaxes.

Coming down from the peak, recovering her breath, Amy giggled. That took care of the cold, she noted to herself. Damp with sweat, she felt she actually wouldn't mind being cooled off with a little ice water.

Again, the spontaneous kisses from the girls as they were leaving. On the forehead this time.

* * * * *

Two other small groups of girls had come and gone. Amy had come both times, once preceding Jana, once following her.

Amy would never have imagined she could climax so strongly so many times in rapid succession. She was very accustomed to the sixty-nine position, one of her favorites, but the addition of the dildoes and the bondage took it to a new level. She was intensely aware of her own body and Jana's, everywhere they touched each other -- and filled each other. It felt as though they completely surrounded each other's body. The inability to speak to each other added still more, requiring that they communicate

their needs on a much more intimate level, with squeezes and rubbing skin. And tied together, unable to take a rest from the intensity of the interaction, their arousal remained, between orgasms, on a plateau Amy couldn't recall reaching before.

Amy heard voices in the corridor again -- a lot of voices now. She tensed once more, knowing the secret was now completely out.

It occurred to Amy that Melissa had not necessarily planned for this. All students were used to Jana's cafeteria predicaments, and some came and made use of her if the mood struck them -- probably at most a dozen different girls on any one night, all girls knowing that if they skipped the entertainment this time, there would be other occasions later. But not a single student had ever thought to find Amy here, and they all knew it would be the only time, given her impending hanging.

The door opened, and girls began streaming in, from all classes, talking, laughing. The first ones in rounded the table and the others filled in behind them, conversations uninterrupted. All surrounding and looking at Amy, naked and tied down like a lab specimen in front of them. Amy recalled her own description of embarrassment as "enhanced self-consciousness." Well, she thought, it's enhanced out the wazoo now. I'm the center of attention of a roomful of high-spirited girls, all under instruction to make me have a public orgasm.

Amy could feel Jana once more wriggling excitedly against her, and could feel her own excitement rising.

Amy squeaked as she heard a sudden bark from near the door. Of course, she thought. If everybody was here, somebody would be bringing Puppy.

There were at least thirty different conversations around Amy and Jana, discussing what they should do. Suddenly the voice of Sheree, one of the Third Years serving as the First Years' dorm sister, cut through the room. She was accustomed to the role of authority figure. "Okay, we can't have fifty or seventy different contests. Everybody choose different sides, but we should just have two, at most four girls stimulating them..."

From near the door, Tricia called out, "What about having Puppy do it?"

There were shouts of affirmation, one voice saying, "Yeah, she'd be neutral." Another asked, "How will she know what she's supposed to be doing?"

Several girls, it turned out, knew how much Puppy loved chocolate.

* * * * *

Four girls had lifted Amy and Jana, very carefully, along with the plastic sheet underneath them, and set them gently on the floor. Now Puppy was eagerly licking both of them, as Sheree, taking charge, was dribbling chocolate impartially on each.

Amy had been curious to know Jana's sensation when Runner had done this to her a few weeks ago. Not sufficiently curious to try to find out, but now she was learning anyway.

Each touch of Puppy's tongue, dragged wetly along Amy's skin, was like a pebble dropped in a pond -- ripples of tingling spread outward from each spot to every point in her body, waves of sensation overlapping, reinforcing. Amy was breathing hard, with continual sighs, and could feel the hot breath from Jana's nose billowing against her own buttocks. Amy wasn't actively trying, this time, to use the dildo to stimulate Jana -- she simply rode the waves of Jana's frantic hip movements in self-defense, and knew Jana was doing the same at her end.

Amy was barely conscious of the sound of a room filled with girls shouting encouragement and exhortations, all of whose evenings would turn on the outcome of a competition in which Amy was a helpless, sexually frantic game piece. All of Amy's attention was occupied with pure sensation.

In a sudden explosion, the orgasm took her. Amy had a mental image of a dog violently shaking a squeeze toy in its mouth, with herself as the toy -- no doubt Puppy's presence had inspired the image, though Puppy was still doing nothing more than licking.

As the shaking slowly subsided, Amy was aware of cheers throughout half of the room -- the half standing behind her.

Jana's buttocks were still pounding Amy's face, and the thought slowly filtered through the muddle of Amy's mind that Jana hadn't reached her own peak yet. Amy tightened her arms and pushed her dildo as deep into Jana as she could again and again, until Jana's sudden rigidity and muffled scream told Amy that Jana was now, to put it very mildly, satisfied.

Sheree at last pulled Puppy away with a promise of more chocolate elsewhere, and Amy felt herself drifting on a cloud, lightly tickled by droplets of sweat running downward everywhere on her body. She was half-aware that the girls, one after another, were filing past her on their way out of the room, each of them kissing her hip and quietly saying goodbye.

* * * * *

Amy swam out of a dream to find that her hands were already free, the dildo removed from her mouth. Resting on her back, her thoughts sluggish, she saw that Runner was untying the ropes around her knees and ankles.

Still naked, Amy leaned heavily against Runner as they navigated the corridors back to their room, followed by Melissa and the likewise nude, likewise groggy Jana.

Amy reached for a doorknob, and pushed open the door despite Melissa's sharp whisper of "Amy, wait!"

Amy headed towards the bed, only to pull up short on seeing it occupied.

Holly and Haley were tied together in the same position, with the same equipment, as Amy and Jana had been in the caf. Amy couldn't tell which sister's head was visible from where she stood, squeezed between the other's thighs, thrusting the dildo in and out. They were rocking on the bed, their breath whistling in and out of their noses like steam engines, obviously nearing a sexual peak, seemingly oblivious to the presence of their four friends.

Melissa gently pulled Amy out of the room, whispering, "They wanted to try it."

Amy frowned, and muttered, "Wha' they doing in my room?"

Melissa closed the door, and whispered patiently, "It's their room, Amy. You're two doors further down."

"Kay." Amy allowed herself to be led to the proper door and into her own room.

Amy heard Melissa ask Jana if she wanted a shower, to which Jana vaguely responded, "Morning." Amy realized Runner was asking her the same thing. She smiled tiredly and shook her head. Amy was dimly aware she was smeared with sticky, drying chocolate, but she couldn't focus enough to attach much importance to it. Not with a bed visible in the foreground.

After Jana had dropped onto the bed, Amy somehow found the strength to crawl in beside her, putting her arms around Jana as she felt Jana's go around her. Amy felt Runner's light kiss on her cheek, and heard the door close as Runner followed Melissa to Melissa's room.

Amy wriggled against Jana, and felt Jana's soft kiss on her lips, heard Jana ask, "Did you like it?"

Amy tightened her arms around Jana to the extent her debilitation allowed, and giggled. "Loved it. Thank you."

Jana smiled, with her eyes closed, too weak to open them. Her voice barely making a sound, she said, "So you understand?"

Amy kissed her. "Mmm-hm." She said, carefully enunciating so Jana would know she was sincere, "Totally."

As near sleep as she was, Jana's face still lit up. "I'm glad."

Sleep took both of them together, while their lips were still pressed together.

CHAPTER 34

MONDAY AFTERNOON

The library was, as always, quiet. Amy sat with her arm across Runner's back, resting her head on Runner's shoulder. She looked up as Runner leaned back from her reading, frowning. "So... the world goes around the sun..." Runner began uncertainly.

"Uh-huh."

"So why does it look like the sun is going around the world?"

"It's because the world is spinning around..." Amy thought about how to explain it. "Here, stand up."

Runner blinked, but rose out of her chair.

"Okay, say the table here is the sun, and you're the world. I want you go slowly around the table, and keep turning around and around while you're doing it."

Runner smiled. "Like this?" Runner began turning in place, sidling gradually around the table.

At the other end of the library, Amy could see Taylor look up at them curiously. Amy smiled back at Taylor, and said to Runner, "Okay, stop here a minute. You're facing the table. That's like the sun being right up overhead. Now turn, and watch where the table is... no, keep looking straight ahead. Now you're seeing the table off to your side. It's getting close to the edge of your vision. Keep turning... See, now you can't see the table. It's behind you. And now... here it comes again, from your other side. Now it's right in front of you again. It's like the table moved in a big circle all around you, but it wasn't really moving at all. *You* were moving."

Runner looked at Amy wide eyed, dropping her jaw. "So tonight when we're in bed, the sun will be..." She pointed to the floor. "There? And we can't see it because the world is in the way?"

Amy grinned and nodded vigorously. "Right!"

Runner shook her head, looking amazed. "I always wondered where it went at night. I got afraid sometimes it wouldn't come back." She suddenly gave Amy a serious look. "Amy... You help me learn so many new things. After this weekend you won't be here..."

Amy cut Runner off gently, putting both hands on Runner's shoulders, saying softly, "You can learn all this without me. I don't have to be here. You've been learning *how* to learn, so you can do it on your own. Just remember -- there's always a reason for everything, even the things that really confuse you at first. There's a reason. There's a reason. *You* can find out what it is. Don't let it scare you while you're trying to find out." She grinned. "And if you *do* need me, you'll be carrying me around in your head." She tapped the side of Runner's head. "In your thinking. You'll remember this talk today, right here. You'll remember me telling you not to feel scared, or feel bad because you're confused. Remember me telling you to think about all those times when your confusion went away because you understood, and tell yourself that will always happen again. You'll learn and you'll understand. I know you will."

Runner's face seemed aglow. She threw her arms around Amy. "I *will* remember."

They held each other for a time. Amy was startled to hear a throat clearing nearby. She looked up to see Melissa.

"I figured I'd find you here," Melissa began apologetically. "I was thinking... since tomorrow night is our last time, do you want me to be... ummm... Miranda? You know, the dress, the hair?"

Amy turned to face Melissa, her hand still rubbing Runner's back. She shook her head. "No, honey. I've always got Miranda with me. The person I want to say goodbye to is Melissa. I love you for *you*, not because you remind me of someone else."

Melissa beamed at Amy, and leaned forward and kissed her.

* * * * *

MONDAY NIGHT

Amy sat on the bed in Holly's and Haley's room, looking up at the sisters. "Okay, I won't say anything while you're doing it." She reached out with her foot and kicked the lever on the platform, starting its descent, then sat back and wrapped her arms around her shins, trying to imagine herself as a mere spectator of their pair hanging.

As soon as they were airborne, Haley smoothly thrust her right thigh between Holly's, who gripped it tightly. They began moving against each other, briefly touching hips, breasts, lips together. They were working on shorter breathing cycles, constantly shifting their grips on each other with their legs to allow for a single, deep breath for each of them during each cycle. Amy, comparing their performance with her memory of a month previous, could see they were much more sensual, less mechanical now than when they had first been learning. The leg lifts for breast kisses still required effort, but flowed much more smoothly now.

The best sign of how far they had advanced was the tingling that began between Amy's legs, almost at the start of the performance. She began rubbing herself, involuntary sighs escaping her throat.

When Haley waggled her foot, it took a moment for Amy to remember that she was not, in fact, a mere spectator, and that she needed to move the lever to raise the platform again.

Once both girls stood on the solid surface, Amy grinned and clapped her hands. "That looked great! And..." She paused, and giggled. "There ought to be a drum roll for this, but I'll just say it -- you don't need me anymore. Of course you need to make the program a little longer than that, and you should start working on a script for the girls assisting you to follow. If you want some ideas on that, Melissa would be really good. But you know what you need to know about the techniques and training."

Haley beamed at her. "Thank you!" She kissed Holly.

Holly giggled. "So are you going to untie our hands?"

Amy smiled. "Thought you liked to be tied. You seemed happy enough with it last night."

Both girls laughed. Holly said, "That was SO cool. We ran straight back to Melissa's room after we saw you and Jana like that. Melissa made us sit through the end of that movie she and Runner were watching..."

Haley continued, "...and then they tried to tell us they wanted to wait for another night, and not have to run around gathering the harnesses and ropes and all that..."

Holly went on, "...But we did a little tag team begging, and they knew we wouldn't let them alone..."

Haley -- "And after they got us all set up like that, Melissa said they might leave us like that all night..."

Holly -- "...but they came back about one a.m. Some night we *want* them to leave us tied all night..."

Haley -- "...but only if we don't need to do much the next day, because we were *so* wiped out. We had so many orgasms!"

Holly -- "It just feels so amazing! It's like..."

Amy laughed. "Hey, I *know* what it feels like, remember?" She stood and untied Haley's hands, and Haley herself untied Holly and they each removed the nooses.

The girls jumped down from the platform, and unexpectedly pressed up against Amy from either side. Haley, on Amy's right, leaned in and began giving Amy kiss-licks on the side of her neck. Holly, at nearly the same time, did the same on Amy's left.

The breath ran out of Amy in a rush, and she squeezed her eyes shut. Her entire body seemed to be pulsating, vibrating. She had often been with two girls at once, but it seemed far more intense, more sensual, for her perceptions to tell her that she was being petted and fondled by the same girl in two places at the same time.

Her eyes still closed, Amy wasn't sure which of them unsnapped her bra, and which was unzipping her shorts, pulling them down with her panties. Now they had moved around, one in front and one behind her. The sister in front pressed her breasts, stomach, and mound against Amy's, bare skin to bare skin, her hands on either side of Amy's face, holding her head as she kissed Amy, her tongue deep in Amy's mouth. The one behind rubbed her stomach on Amy's back, mound brushing back and forth against Amy's buttocks, running her hands up and down Amy's sides from her breasts to her hips, while continuing kiss-licks on the back of her neck.

Amy moaned helplessly, then gasped in a sharp breath as both sisters let their fingers slide down between her legs, each of them slipping one finger inside her. Amy managed to stammer, in a hoarse whisper, "I thought.. thought we weRRRRRe! g-going to watch a movie."

The sister in front snickered, and asked softly, "Are you kidding?"

* * * * *

Amy lay on her back on the sisters' bed, her eyes half-closed, floating on post-orgasmic bliss. Holly lay facing her on her left, Haley on her right, each with one leg draped over the nearer of Amy's, each with one arm under Amy's back, each with one hand cupping one of Amy's breasts, playing with it idly. Each had her head on one of Amy's shoulders, occasionally kissing the nearer of Amy's cheeks.

Holly said softly, "We wish we could see your hanging..."

Haley continued the thought with, "But we were talking before you came, and if missing your hanging is the price we have to pay for everything you've done for us, we're really glad to pay it..."

Holly -- "We just never imagined, when I was leaving home to come here and Haley had to stay behind for a year, that we could end up being in classes together, and graduate together..."

Haley -- "And these pair-hangings we're going to be doing! To be able to put on shows where everybody can see the special love we have..."

Holly -- "And it's never been stronger than now! Nothing has ever made me feel so close to Haley before..."

Haley -- "Whenever we feel that closeness, we'll think about you."

Tears were streaming from Amy's eyes now. "Really, you know I didn't make any of that happen by myself..."

Holly giggled. "Oh, shut up, Amy. Just let us think of you the way we want to."

Haley leaned in and kissed Amy under the chin. "And then we'll shut up too, if that makes you feel better."

Amy grinned through her tears. "What'll we do then, if nobody's going to talk?"

In answer, both sisters rolled onto Amy's body, covering her between them, and began another round of kiss-licks. Amy shivered, and found she was ready for another session of lovemaking.

* * * * *

TUESDAY MORNING

Amy felt a quiver inside as Tina smiled and directed her into the dean's office. This may be my last time in here, Amy told herself in amazement. She looked around, taking in details she hadn't focused on before. A photo of the dean shaking hands with the mayor. A framed award from the Chamber of Commerce.

The dean, apparently feeling a sense of occasion, stood and offered his hand to Amy. Stunned, she couldn't think what to do for a moment, but at last recovered her senses sufficiently to shake hands with him.

Sitting, Amy began, "Sir, I just want to thank you for... for everything. Everything in my life in the last four years." She wanted to go on, but couldn't think how to expand on that.

He smiled. "I'd like to offer you my thanks as well. I'd make a list, but I'm sure you know what would be on it."

Amy blushed. "I was just trying to... be a Hanging Girl. I think all of us have our own version of what that means. Everything I've done comes out of what being a Hanging Girl means to me."

"You've added quite a lot to what it means."

Her eyes stung with tears. She tried to palm them away. "Shit. I told myself I wasn't going to do this."

He smiled and pushed a box of tissues towards her. She blinked in surprise, and took several, dabbing her eyes with them. She looked questioningly at him, and he smiled and shrugged. "I've done a lot of exit interviews."

She giggled despite her tears, then sobered as a thought struck her. "I'm sure every one of those girls has added to your pride and the school's reputation. I hope I can do that."

He smiled again. "Not something I'm really worried about." He sat back now, tapping his pen idly. The smile widened. "For old times' sake, is there anything more you want to persuade me to do?"

Amy burst out laughing. It felt odd doing it while still crying. She sniffled and tried to recover. "N-No, Sir. I think I'm about done with that." An idea suddenly came into her head. "Oh! Wait! There is one thing."

He folded his arms. "Thought there would be."

Amy thought over how to put her wish into words. "This is kind of vague. You'll just have to figure out what it means when the situation arises. I think you'll be okay with it, though." She looked at the floor, seeking the words there. "Sometime... You'll get another applicant like Megan. Technically perfect, unlimited potential. You'll feel positive you want her as a student. But... ummm, she's sort of deficient in social skills, maybe. When that happens... get her together with someone like me. I don't mean I'm especially brilliant and can fix everybody's problem. But she and I... we were just right for each other. For hanging, she was the best teacher I could ever have had. And I found I could... open her up. Make her more approachable. We... I guess the best word is, we elevated each other. You can make that happen again, if you find the right fit."

He raised his eyebrows. "I should bring these two hypothetical girls together? I take it you mean pair them up from the beginning. How would I identify them that early?"

Amy leaned forward. She gave him a small smile. "I know how you are at reading people, Sir. I think you'll know as soon as you interview them."

He sat back thoughtfully. At last he nodded. "I will promise to keep that in mind."

Amy grinned. "Thank you, Sir."

“Anything else?”

She waited a moment to see whether further inspiration would strike. At last she shook her head. “No, Sir.”

To signal the end of the interview he rose and, to Amy’s surprise, came around the desk. She stood up to meet him, and as he held out his arms, she leaned against him and felt his arms go around her.

She couldn’t help it -- she was sobbing openly now. With no idea the words were about to come out of her, she blurted, “I love you, Sir.”

She felt his arms tighten slightly around her. It was enough. He and I both know, she told herself, a Hanging Girl doesn’t need to hear words.

* * * * *

TUESDAY AFTERNOON

Amy hadn’t been sure she wanted to say goodbye to Puppy, but she felt a need she couldn’t shake off. She believed she owed her life, or at least her escape from the island, to Puppy, and the fact that she had no way to make Puppy understand she would see Amy no more after this week didn’t really matter.

Puppy had so many new friends, lavishing on her so much of the physical intimacy she loved, that Amy wasn’t entirely sure Puppy even attached any special significance to Amy as a person anymore. At least, Amy hoped that was the case. She didn’t want Puppy to mope around unhappily from missing Amy.

In Amy’s room, after an initial round of face-licking, Puppy was content to lie quietly, facing Amy, her stubby limbs entangled with Amy’s, their faces close enough that no effort was required to kiss occasionally.

Amy sighed, feeling the wish again that they could have given Puppy a more completely human life. But Amy, looking into Puppy’s eyes, saw contentment there, and decided that was enough. How many people, Amy asked herself, have that much?

Or have pink hair? she added.

Amy startled Puppy slightly by raising herself up to reverse her position beside Puppy. She started licking Puppy between her legs, and felt Puppy immediately reciprocate. Soon they were both moaning, and Amy had time to reflect, before losing herself in the world of pure sensations, that Puppy never sounded so much like a normal girl as she did when she was nearing orgasm. And that, thought Amy, seemed just right.

* * * * *

Amy, leading Puppy by her leash, knocked at the door to Melissa’s and Jana’s room, and heard Jana’s voice saying, “In.”

Opening the door, she smiled at the sight of Runner on the platform, noose around her neck. Runner grinned. "Amy! Watch!" She nodded down to Jana, who pulled the lever to lower the platform.

Amy was glad, though not surprised, that Puppy no longer barked at the sight of girls practicing hanging. She'd become accustomed to the constant sight, and understood now that no one was in danger.

Swinging freely, Runner took a short time to get into a breathing rhythm. Suddenly, with her legs together, she made a complex move with her hips, followed by a swing of her legs. Amy blinked as she saw Runner's whole body almost immediately make a quarter turn to the side, and remain facing that direction as she swung her legs separately to dampen the motion.

Runner waggled her foot to signal Jana to bring up the platform. Moments later, standing in its surface, she beamed at Amy. "I tried that last night, with Jana, when we were practicing with feet tied. Having my feet together gave me more..." She frowned and looked at Jana. "What was... Oh! Control. That was the word." She looked at Amy again. "I had more control that way."

Amy gaped at her. "You made that up yourself?" Turning the body while hanging was always a gradual, laborious process involving certain standard leg moves. No girl, as far as Amy was aware, had ever turned as far as Runner just had in a single move.

Runner grinned and nodded.

Amy tried to decide whether to try to learn the move in the time she had remaining, and decided against it. She might, she thought, become proficient with it in a week or two of practice, but she didn't have that long. A hurried attempt to work it into her own routine would just throw everything off. "Where's Melissa? I was thinking we could all go to dinner."

Jana answered, "She got called down to the dean's office. It didn't sound like a big deal. It was just a few minutes ago..."

She stopped at the sound of running feet down the hallway. Puppy quickly turned to face the door, a low growl at the back of her throat, prepared to protect her friends from any danger.

Melissa appeared in the doorway, using a hand on the door frame to stop her momentum, and stood there, grinning and out of breath. Amy tried to imagine what the dean could have told her that would make her as happy as she seemed to be.

Melissa finally put her hand over her chest to finish steadying herself, and said, still slightly breathless, "Tina just told me... the dean said it was okay to tell me..." She stopped again to make another payment on her oxygen debt.

Amy made a come-on gesture. "Melissa, what the hell is it?"

Melissa stood upright at last without help from the door frame. "They just mailed out letters of acceptance for next year's class. My sister Maria got accepted!" Melissa, her fists clenched, was bouncing up and down in place.

Amy's jaw dropped. Standing closest to Melissa, she was the first to jump forward to give her a hug. "That's great, honey!"

Jana quickly untied Runner's hands, then lunged at Melissa to join in the hug.

Amy shook her head. "I didn't even know she'd applied."

Melissa's eyes glowed. "I didn't either! Didn't know she'd interviewed, or anything. I think the dean didn't want to get my hopes up, in case."

"Did you know she was *going* to apply?"

Melissa shook her head. "I haven't seen her for two years. When I left home, I didn't even think she was interested in hanging! She was talking about going to medical school. That was her latest phase, anyway."

Runner, free of the noose at last, jumped down from the platform to add her hug to the others. Puppy barked, and Melissa laughed and knelt to offer a hug at floor level.

Runner asked, "So will you be like Holly and Haley?"

Melissa, giggling as her face was licked, said, "We're not quite like them, Runner. I think she'd almost be like a stranger. She went from sixteen years old to eighteen since I left home. Girls really change a lot between those ages."

Runner frowned. "Isn't that just two years?"

Amy rubbed Runner's shoulder fondly. "Growing up here is a little different from what you had, Runner. That age is, well, it's the time when a girl realizes she's growing up and has all these choices to make."

Runner nodded, seeming to understand. She looked back at Melissa. "Will she live with us?" Runner would be rooming with Melissa and Jana once Amy was gone.

Melissa didn't answer immediately. She looked thoughtful. "It depends on what she wants. She's probably going to want to spend most of her time with the girls she's in classes with. The First Year girls. She'd learn more that way, and I'm sure that would be important to her."

Runner blinked as a thought suddenly occurred to her. "She'd be in classes with Holly and Haley. Could she room with them?"

"Ummm... Runner?" Amy took her hand. "Don't say anything about that idea to Holly or Haley, okay? They have a really special bond, and nobody should mess with that." Amy wasn't sure Runner understood what the word "bond" meant, but Runner was uncanny about picking up new words based on context. She certainly knew the word "bondage," which was related. "It's possible they might want to share a room with Maria. But if they do, it should be their idea. Okay?"

Runner nodded. She was always willing to yield to Amy's superior understanding of social situations, a subject in which Runner was just cracking the surface.

Jana grinned, looking at Amy. "Somebody suggested a minute ago we should all go to dinner." She looked at Melissa. "How's that sound?"

"Great!" Melissa beamed at her. "We can tell more people!"

Amy, with Puppy, began following Melissa and Jana out the door, but she stopped and choked back a laugh when she looked at Runner, who was nearly to the door. "Runner." She gave Runner a significant look.

Runner caught on, and threw her arms up in exasperation. "I still forget about that!" The rest of the girls waited as Runner, still naked from hanging practice, rounded up her clothes.

* * * * *

TUESDAY NIGHT

Amy and Melissa lay facing each other, arms wrapped around each other, lips close enough together that they could kiss without effort.

Amy smiled. "I was just thinking. Now there'll be three Warren sisters who've been to the Academy. I wonder what the record is for one family."

Melissa shrugged, causing another kiss. "I could ask Tina. I suppose they've kept track somewhere."

Out of the corner of her eye, Amy could see Miranda's head, soon to belong to Melissa, in her place of honor on the shelf. Amy, her lips now brushing Melissa's as she spoke, said, "You look so much like Miranda. Does Marie?"

Melissa shrugged again. "I don't think so, but maybe I'm not the best judge. Maybe somebody outside the family would think so. She has dark brown hair. So that's different. I don't know if anybody would get us confused if she colored it."

Amy leaned ahead for a moment to give Melissa a more serious kiss. "Maybe it'll be good for Runner to see a sister relationship different from Holly and Haley..." She stopped as she felt, more than saw, Melissa's lips curl into a sudden smile.

"Amy, stop worrying."

"Worrying?"

"About Runner. I know you think it's your job to get her acculturated, and you feel like you're leaving that unfinished. I promise... promise, promise, *promise*, that we'll keep working on that. Me, Jana, Holly and Haley, the other girls. Everybody who's close to her. We all love seeing her grow. We can all see

how much potential she has, and now we feel like it's *our* job to make sure she reaches that potential. So stop worrying."

Amy smiled, and tightened her arms around Melissa. "Okay."

A thought struck Amy. "Growing up, *were* you girls different from Holly and Haley? I mean, in the sense of physical relationships?" Amy, with her own background of dysfunctional sibling dynamics, constantly felt amazed at how different other families could be from her own.

Melissa nodded, her lips and nose brushing Amy's. "None of us in the family ever had anything sexual going on -- well, obviously not with Miranda, since she was so much older than the rest of us, but I never had anything with Marie either. But seeing how Holly and Haley are..." She shrugged and laughed. "I guess it's inevitable that's made me a little curious. We might try it, but only if it's really obvious Marie wants to."

Amy chuckled. "She's going to see Holly and Haley too. I guarantee she'll get curious."

Melissa made a slight giggling sound. "Yeah, probably."

Amy's arousal, so gradually rising with the series of intimate brushes of lip against lip, reached a tipping point. She rolled atop Melissa, using her legs to spread Melissa's apart, and opened her mouth over Melissa's, as they began rubbing mounds slowly.

* * * * *

WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

Amy, holding Runner's hand, pulled open the door and led her inside.

"This is the Hall of Honor," Amy said, speaking barely above a whisper, though no one else was present. "You know what 'honor' means? When somebody is honored?"

Runner wrinkled her forehead in thought. "It's for somebody who does something most people wouldn't do? Something very good?"

Amy smiled. "Wouldn't, or can't. Yes." As the first row of heads came into view, Amy went on, "We honor these girls because they died to help *us*, not themselves. These are the girls who have been hanged here, at the Academy. They were all students here. Except for one of them, these girls didn't graduate. They weren't doing well enough in their classes, so instead of selling them, the Academy let them use their abilities in a different way. Some of them were hanged in classes, in what we call 'demonstrations.' In a demonstration, a girl is hanged so other students can learn from watching. In each demonstration, there's something the students are supposed to pay close attention to, so they know that much more about hanging and they can do a better job themselves."

Runner was frowning. "These girls flunked out?"

Amy looked at her curiously. "Where did you pick up those words?"

“On a TV show. It was about college students, and they were talking about one girl who ‘flunked out.’ It sounded like she did bad on her tests and the college wouldn’t let her stay.”

Amy nodded. “It’s kind of like that, but here we don’t make them go away. That’s very sad, when someone has to go away. At the Academy, all of the girls, even when they flunk out, are very special. They know more about hanging than anybody outside. So they either do demonstrations for us, or else we hang them at parties. You’ve seen that. In fact, you’ll remember some of these girls.” Amy led Runner into the last currently occupied row, in which the heads were displayed to a point about three-quarters down the row, with empty spaces after that. She pointed to the last head, and smiled. “You know this one.”

Runner gasped, “Oh, it’s Amelia! I watched her hang at the last party!” She looked at another recent head. “And this is Mandy! From the time before that!”

Amy grinned. “The longer you’re here, the more special this room will be to you, because you’ll know so many girls here. And here, look.” Amy pulled out the small drawer at the bottom of Mandy’s niche. “Girls come by and leave notes here. Mandy can’t read them now, of course, but before she died, she knew her head would be here, and that her friends would come by and leave messages for her. That they would all remember her. Here’s one. Can you read that?”

Luckily, the note happened to be printed, rather than cursively written, but Runner did need to concentrate on the shapes of the letters, none quite identical to the mechanically or electronically printed ones she was used to. With many hesitations, sounding out words silently in her head until she felt sure she had them right, she read, “Dear... Mandy... Do you... remember... the time you... hugged... me... after I ... messed up our... first... test? I... always... will. You were so... sweet... Thank you... so much... I love you. Sandy.”

Amy smiled. “See, this is a room full of love. We love all of the girls who are here. And some are extra-special.” Amy moved back up the row, and reached out to stroke the hair of one of the heads. “This is Susan. She was my first roommate, for the first month I was here. She was the first in our class to... well, flunk out. But the demonstration she did...” Amy tapped her own head. “She’s in my memories. I’m the only one left from our class, but we all remembered her. By dying, she helped us all be Hanging Girls.” Amy leaned forward and kissed Susan on the lips.

Amy looked up to see Runner frowning again. “Amy, will I flunk out? I don’t want to. I want to graduate! I want to put on a show like you’re going to.”

Amy turned to face Runner fully, and took both of Runner’s hands in her own. “Runner, I know you won’t flunk out. You’ll have to work hard, but I know you can do it. Always work hard. Promise me that?”

Runner nodded.

Amy gave Runner’s hands a squeeze. “Good. Because if you keep working the way you do now, I know you’re going to be one of the best Hanging Girls ever. Runner, you learn faster than anybody I ever saw, and in hanging you’re already figuring out new things none of us knew how to do before!”

Runner's eyes lit up. "I *do* want to be one of the best. I want to be *the* best."

Amy grinned. "Well, you'll have to work *really* hard then. I'll show you who's the best."

Amy led her back to the front of the row, and to the wall opposite the rows of heads, to the one special niche by itself, facing the rest. They had walked by it on the way in, Amy not wanting to call attention to it until the last.

Runner blinked as she saw the specially-honored head. "Oh, she's pretty!"

Amy smiled. "Very."

Runner bent slightly to read the inscription on the plaque. "Megan..." She gasped and stood upright suddenly. "This is Megan! The one you talk about... *all* the girls talk about, all the time!" Runner looked confused. "Why is she here? She didn't flunk out, did she?"

Amy shook her head. "No, she's the one graduate in here. All other graduates end up with their owners. Their heads are usually... Well, you've seen Miranda, but you've seen others like her too, right? Mounted on a stand, or on the wall? In TV shows?"

"Oh!" Runner nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Girlhunting trophies."

"Right. Well, it's like that for Hanging Girls. Like we might be over the fireplace, or... well, somewhere our owner can show us off to his friends, or visitors. Having a Hanging Girl head is special."

"But Megan is here?"

Amy nodded. "So many people -- members -- knew about her, and how good she was, that the dean put on a show, just for her, so the members could come and watch her hang. They paid a *lot* of money, way more than for any other Hanging Girl ever, because they thought they would never see another like her." Amy took Runner's hand, and waited for Runner to look back at her, so she could hold Runner's eyes with her own. "I know what you can do. I know you can be like her."

Runner's eyes grew wide. "Really?"

Amy pulled Runner in for a hug, and whispered in her ear, "Really."

Breaking off the hug, Amy turned to Megan. All of the time spent with Megan, all of the practicing together, all of the talking for hours, all of the closeness, all of the times making love with her, washed in a flood through her mind. She stroked Megan's cheek with her hand, then leaned forward to give her a lingering kiss on the lips, for the last time. Tears stinging her eyes, Amy smiled and sighed. "Goodbye, honey."

It remained, now, to give the bulk of her remaining time in the Academy to her current roommate. She took Runner's hand once more. "Let's go back to our room."

* * * * *

WEDNESDAY NIGHT

Amy couldn't remember the dorm, outside her room, being so quiet, other than occasions when it was emptied out for one reason or another. She knew Melissa, Jana, Holly, and Haley were taking shifts sitting in the hallway, reminding the girls to keep conversations and television volume down low. Amy loved them for that, and for so many other reasons. They wanted Amy and Runner to share a world of their own, without undue intrusions. Melissa had brought them sandwiches and drinks for dinner on trays, had picked the trays up later and replaced them with a late snack -- three bowls, one containing fresh strawberries, one with sour cream, and one brimming with brown sugar.

Amy sat on the bed with Runner, both of them automatically adopting the position more intimate than any other they knew -- sitting upright facing each other, legs around each other's waist (each with her right leg under the other's left), arms around each other, their pussies, stomachs, and breasts pressed together. Occasionally one of them would reach for a strawberry, dip it first in the sour cream and then the brown sugar, and feed it to the other -- Amy had shown Runner how it was done.

Runner, smiling, licked some excess brown sugar off Amy's lips. She frowned then in thought. "Amy, will I feel you inside me after I eat you? When we ate Mandy, I thought I was going to feel different, like I was partly her and partly me, but I was still just me."

Amy smiled and sat for a moment, thinking. At last she said, "It can be like that, but you have to do some other things first. When you want to feel someone you've eaten, first you need to think about her, and remember her. You didn't really know Mandy, but you remember one thing about her -- you watched her hang. At the party, do you remember what you were feeling inside while you watched her?"

"I felt..." Runner hesitated, searching helplessly for the right words.

Amy shook her head. "You don't need to tell me. Just go back to that night. Close your eyes, and put yourself there, right now."

As Amy watched, Runner's face began showing an inner excitement. She swayed slightly, her muscles making tiny twitches as though she were imagining herself hanging -- exactly as she had that night while Mandy had been hanging.

Amy said softly, reaching out to cup her hands lightly against the sides of Runner's head. "You're thinking back to it now. You're remembering Mandy. You know that everything you think, any time, is inside here, right? In your head, in your brain. That's where thinking happens."

Runner, coming back to the present gradually as Amy spoke, nodded.

"You ate Mandy later, and now Mandy isn't just in your head anymore. She's everywhere inside you. Your body, your skin, everything inside you, is made of things you eat. That's where it all came from. You're partly made of Mandy now. Now, when you think about Mandy, what you remember about her, start from the memory in your head, and then let it spread out to all of the rest of your body. Mandy was only here at first..." She tapped a finger lightly against Runner's head, "...but now she's spread out

all around inside you.” Amy let her hands slip down from Runner’s head to her shoulders, slide down her arms, move to her waist, to give tactile meaning to the spreading.

Runner, her eyes still closed, suddenly shook and gasped in a sharp breath. To all appearances, knowing Runner and her body as well as she did, it seemed to Amy that Runner had had a small orgasm. Runner’s eyes popped open wide. “I feel her! I *do* feel her inside!”

Amy laughed delightedly and hugged her tight. “Yes! And you can always do that, with me or anybody you eat.”

Runner kissed her hard. The kiss became a tightening of arms, a rocking of hips, rolling pussies against each other. Presently they moaned.

* * * * *

After the lovemaking, Amy set the now-empty bowls of their snack on the floor, knowing one of the girls would pick them up when they brought breakfast.

Amy knew how she wanted to sleep with Runner on her last night with her, and saw that Runner, already curling into the appropriate position, had the same idea. They lay, and fell asleep, each gently sucking on a breast of the other, exactly as they had on their first night together, on the island. Amy knew how content it made Runner feel, reminding her of how she had always slept in the pen. It made Amy feel the same.

* * * * *

THURSDAY

They made love in the sixty-nine position.

They fed each other breakfast, brought by Haley.

They made love sitting up again.

Runner put on the strap-on, because she wanted to make love to Amy in the male style. Afterward, they switched.

After feeding each other the lunch Jana had brought, they made slow love, barely moving for hours, mouth covering mouth, tongues lightly touching, until the fire built up and set them into frantic motion.

After feeding dinner to each other, they made love once more.

And then it was time to part.

* * * * *

THURSDAY NIGHT

They walked silently to Melissa's and Jana's door, holding hands.

Runner knocked on the door, and Melissa opened it. Melissa saw Runner's wavery smile, on quivering lips, and put her arms around Runner.

Looking over Runner's shoulder to Amy, Melissa asked, "So we should be ready to go about eleven, tomorrow morning?"

Amy nodded, and gave Melissa a distant smile. "I want to make sure to be on time. Benjamin says I should try to be there by noon."

"He's never said why he wants you a day early?"

Amy shrugged. "No, but it's not a big surprise. Whatever kind of show he wants me to put on, I assume it requires *some* rehearsal. Laney had to be at the sorority a couple of days early, for exactly that. And then there was Linda, of course."

Jana asked, "Are you sure you really want to be by yourself tonight? You could stay here, and we wouldn't have to do anything, if you're kind of sexed out."

Amy gave her that same distant smile. "I won't be by myself. You know that." She turned to Runner, who was losing a battle to keep her eyes free of tears. "I'll see you in the morning, sweetie."

Runner gave her a spastic nod. "I... it's hard, letting you go." She was trying to smile again, though not well. "But I can see... well, it started about when we were leaving the room. You're somewhere else already. You're seeing your noose."

Amy's smile widened. She was not surprised Runner had no trouble reading her. Amy hadn't told Runner about her own perception of the "light" she could see in a Hanging Girl's eyes when her day came. Runner didn't call it by the same name, but she could see it now in Amy, and understood it for what it was. "Yes. You'll see your noose someday too."

Runner smiled back. "I know." She took a deep breath and appeared to gather herself. She seemed about to turn away, but Amy caught her by the shoulder and gave her one more soft, long kiss. She backed away then, and Runner entered the room. Melissa gave Amy a small wave, biting her lip, and closed the door.

Amy took a deep breath, and looked both directions down the hallway. Her last night in these halls, she reminded herself.

She went back to her room, and closed her door. Quickly, she shed her clothes, which she had put on for the first time that day just minutes earlier.

In the bathroom, she took a shower, and peed, and brushed her teeth. Then she returned to the bedroom.

She took another deep breath, her eyes closed. At last she opened them, and reached onto her shelf for Miranda's head.

Holding Miranda, Amy sat on her bed, then lay on her side, drew up her legs and curled herself into a ball, wrapping herself around Miranda, cuddling Miranda against her, Miranda's face against her breasts.

In a voice made husky by the tightness in her throat, but gradually softening and relaxing, Amy began, "Miranda... Thank you, thank you, thank you. For the last four years, and everything in them. I... I can see my noose now."

She began talking about her favorite memories of the last four years, though she knew Miranda knew them all already.

CHAPTER 35

FRIDAY

Amy awoke, just gradually aware of the transition from sleeping to wakefulness, because she had been dreaming she was in her bed in the Cameron house, her home growing up, lying curled around Miranda's head. She realized, suddenly, she was now in her own bed in the Academy dorm, in that same fetal curl with Miranda cradled against her, and that quality of here-and-now that tells us when we are truly awake was operating now. It was an odd feeling, leaving a dream so near the reality of her existence, and the dream proved harder to shake off than one more outrageously unrealistic.

She felt an excitement tinged with sadness. Excitement, that she was beginning the last full day of her life, standing on the edge of fulfilling the goal that had driven her these last four years. Sadness in leaving the Academy, the scene of the happiest times of her life, the home of all of her dearest friends

She brought Miranda's head up to her face and kissed her lips. You're one of the loved ones I'll have to leave here, Amy thought to Miranda. But you'll be in the room of someone who treasures you as much as I do.

She showered, and examined her hair as she blow-dried it. She'd had the salon trim it last week -- it had reached an awkward length, a little shaggy to be a pixie-cut but still not long enough to style the way she would have liked, and time had run out to let it grow any longer. She'd thought about having it all in tight curls, but after looking at pictures she decided it just wasn't her. Still not quite long enough to part it effectively, she'd had them cut the front shorter, where it had crept a little too far down her forehead, and over her ears, where it had hung awkwardly, not long enough to cover them fully. She had left the back alone. It still came nowhere near her shoulders, but she had just recently begun feeling it brush the back of her neck when she turned her head. It's a lot less boyish now, she told herself. She nodded to herself, deciding against stopping in at the salon once more for an emergency adjustment.

She dressed in the outfit she'd picked out for her arrival at Benjamin's house. She had debated with herself whether to dress up at all, as opposed to simply wearing her Academy uniform. Miranda had arrived for Andrew's party in that incredibly hot golden outfit, though that was because she was arriving on the day of the party. In Amy's case her party was scheduled for tomorrow, so it wasn't necessary to be dressed for it yet. The consideration that decided her choice was that, like Miranda, Amy had been sold to someone she had not yet seen -- in Amy's case, Benjamin's son, Calvin. Amy wanted to make the best possible first impression on her new owner.

Now dressed, Amy examined herself critically in the mirror -- she had already done so the day she'd chosen this outfit, but was aware that it might look different to her in closer proximity to its public display.

The top was white cotton, with very short sleeves, ending just below her breasts so that her midriff was bare, formed of a see-through mesh that left her bare skin visible on the shoulders and upper chest, the mesh closing in to a solid white gradually as it approached her breasts, so that her areolae were invisible, though the shape of her nipples could be seen. Its back narrowed down between her shoulders to a band of fabric crossing her back about where a bra would be. She wore no bra with it, since it looked much better without one -- she was satisfied that, after years of body shaping, her breasts were

sufficiently firm that she didn't need a bra. She liked the way it showed off her abs and her back. She'd spent several sessions in the tanning bed after choosing the top, so that her skin contrasted more with the white fabric.

Her skirt, medium brown, was very short, its lower seam uneven, coming up higher at the sides to show more of her legs. She wore lace panties of the same color, knowing they would be visible from certain vantage points when she bent over.

Toeless brown high heels, fastened by a strap around her ankle, completed the ensemble. She had considered calf-length high-heeled boots, but decided these shoes gave her a more mature look.

Looking more closely at her eyes, she decided to touch up her makeup. She was using slightly more black eyeliner than usual, and a slightly darker eye shadow. She smiled as it occurred to her that, without thinking about it, she was trying to make her eyes more dramatic in the way Runner's were. Finishing, she took in her whole face, trying to see herself as a stranger. An intelligent, sensual, desirable woman, she decided. As she had wanted.

Biting her lip, she picked up the new slave choker. The medium-brown fabric -- she had chosen the skirt to match it -- displayed the words, stitched in flowing white script, "AMY -- Property of Calvin S. Smith." Amy stared at it for a full minute. Quivering slightly, she fastened it around her neck, symbolically letting go of the Academy. The Academy no longer owned her. Her sale having gone through a few weeks ago, her master was now a young man, very close to her own age, a recent university graduate, about whom she knew nothing else other than his relationship to Benjamin. She closed her eyes and let out a breath, calming her shivers. He's Benjamin's son, she reminded herself again. What more do I need to know?

Her thoughts turned to a less visible feature of the choker. Embedded within the fabric was the electronic monitor that would signal when Amy's heart ceased functioning. Donning the choker was the first real step of Amy's final journey. She reached up and touched it, stroking it for a time. Then it was time, she knew, to go on with her preparations for departure.

Amy was able to pack her overnight bag quickly through years of experience -- including an outfit identical to the one she was wearing now. Little else was left in the room. She had already given away her favorite party outfits to some other girls her size, given most of her other clothes, except for those too worn to bother with, back to the student store, returned her books to the bookstore, collected huge piles of class notebooks and left them with Melissa for Runner's use. Melissa had insisted Amy should not disrupt her mental focus on her upcoming hanging with efforts to make sure the room was completely emptied and clean -- Melissa would do that herself on her return from Amy's hanging.

Amy nevertheless looked around and found a few discardable odds and ends and dropped them in the trash can, and left some clothes she decided against packing stacked neatly on the bed.

As her final act of packing, she withdrew the only remaining item in a dresser drawer, an envelope she needed to fulfill a promise made long ago. She had saved it for last because, even more than the choker, it signified that she was on her way to her final show. She placed the envelope carefully in a side pocket of her bag and zipped the pocket closed.

She stood now in the middle of the room, not to decide whether anything more needed to be done but simply to take a last look around. She hadn't lived in this particular room very long, but it represented all of the dorm rooms she had lived in during her time here, rooms shared with Susan, with Megan, with Shawna, with Melissa and Jana, with Runner.

Nodding to herself at last, and feeling an eagerness to start on her one last adventure that conquered her reluctance to leave a place of comfort behind, she picked up her bag, cradled Miranda in the crook of the same arm, opened the door, and closed it behind her in the hallway.

* * * * *

As soon as Amy knocked, Melissa opened the door and grinned at her. "I heard footsteps coming, and I figured it was you."

Behind Melissa stood Runner, her face alight. Amy was relieved that Runner was in much better spirits than when she'd left her. "Amy! I was just thinking about riding in a car. We'll go in one, right? I've only been in a car that one time, and then I just didn't know what was going on."

Amy laughed. "Hold on just a minute, Runner. I need to do something first." She set her bag down and carefully shifted her grip on Miranda, holding her out to Melissa, face first. "Melissa, I kind of gave Miranda to you once before, when my life here got so rudely interrupted. But obviously, you should have her." She hesitated, then giggled. "I was about to say something really stupid about taking good care of her. But anyway, your sister belongs to you now."

Melissa bit her lip, smiling as she fought off tears. She reached for Miranda and pulled her sister's head against her chest, her eyes closed, rubbing her cheek against the top of Miranda's head. "Thank you so much, Amy. I'm *so* glad we got to be such close friends that you didn't have to think twice about this." She wiped the side of her hand against her eye and turned, taking Miranda to the space she'd cleared on the shelf over the bed.

Amy saw three more overnight bags, similar to her own, lined up next to the bed. Melissa had told Amy she'd help Runner with her packing.

Amy turned to Runner, smiling. "So how was your night?"

"Oh, it was nice. They knew I was really sad, so they hugged me between them in bed all night. I felt better when I woke up."

Melissa rejoined the group after having a few words with Miranda. Amy looked at her curiously. "You do know it's not today, right?" While Jana and Runner were dressed casually, in white Academy t-shirts and colored shorts, with standard sneakers on their feet, Melissa was in the executioner's outfit she had picked out -- tight black t-shirt with a plunging neckline that showed plenty of cleavage, full-length black leather pants, and black high-heeled boots. A black choker would have been an ideal addition, but as a Second Year, Melissa hadn't yet earned the right to wear a choker, so her metal collar would have to do.

Melissa laughed and nodded. "Of course I know. But I remember you said Miranda's roommate Beth was in character the whole time at Miranda's hanging. I'm going to wear these too." She pulled dark eyeshades, with black frames, out of her pocket and put them on. "How do I look?"

Amy smiled. "Totally professional. It's a good thing you're going to kill me tomorrow, because otherwise you'd be looking for somebody else to kill." Actually, Amy suspected Melissa's role would be limited to setting the noose in place, then giving the signal at the end of the hanging that Amy was dead. It all depended on what sort of script Calvin wanted to follow, but Amy suspected he most likely would want to pull the lever himself.

Amy turned back to Runner. "You under..."

Runner interrupted her. "Yes, I know why you didn't want me to be your executioner. This is my first off-campus hanging show, and you don't want me to get..." Amy could tell she was searching her ever-expanding vocabulary for the right word. "...distracted. You want me to be watching everything that happens."

Amy nodded slowly. "Right." I should, Amy told herself, be used to this by now. It's not like I can't read minds myself. I understand how it's done, and I've been learning how for four years. But I still can't do it like Runner does.

If the occasion ever arose when Amy had to hide something from Runner, she was daily less confident that she ever could. Of the many reasons Amy was glad her hanging was coming tomorrow, that was one of them -- it made it unlikely she'd ever be in that situation.

The speaker in the room crackled, and said in the voice of Angie, one of the dorm sisters for the Second Years, "Can I have everybody's attention..." Amy had time to wonder why so many of the world's announcements began that way, as if people would otherwise fail to notice an amplified, disembodied voice suddenly springing up in their environment. Angie went on, "All ten o'clock and eleven o'clock classes are cancelled, for today only. All students please assemble now in the party pavilion."

Amy blinked. "I don't know if we have time for whatever that's about..." She stopped when she saw Melissa's face.

"Uhhh... Amy?" Melissa was grinning. "That doesn't really apply to us. They can't exactly... start without us."

Amy stared at her for several seconds, and at last said, "Ah. Okay."

Jana looked at the clock. "We have time for breakfast. I'm starved!"

Runner nodded. "Me too."

* * * * *

It seemed very odd in the cafeteria. The serving lines were open, the food was hot or cold as appropriate, but no other students were there. Normally there would be several girls having late

breakfasts at this time. Amy felt as though the world had been suddenly depopulated in the last few minutes, except for herself and her friends.

As they ate, Runner suddenly asked, “Amy, are there princesses in real life? I just read another story with a princess in it, but I never hear about them for real.”

Amy blinked, smiling, wondering where the question had come from. Probably, she decided, with Amy’s hanging so close, Runner’s thoughts turned to the standard hanging scripts that Amy had described to her, including the Princess scene used for Miranda’s hanging. The current question hadn’t come up then, probably because Runner hadn’t yet been aware of the absence of princesses in the day-to-day world. “There were princesses for real, and kings and queens, a long time ago, but we do things different now. Now we have elections, where everybody writes down who the leaders should be, and whoever the most people want becomes the leader. And we have different words for what we call them. Like the leader of the city is called the mayor...”

Runner frowned. “I knew about elections from TV. If they didn’t choose kings that way, then how did they get to be king?”

As they all continued eating, Amy tried to explain the system of power, back as far as tribal days. As she spoke, she watched Runner, noticing that Runner’s table manners no longer distinguished her in any way from any other girl in... well, thought Amy, I’ve been calling it “my world,” but it’s very much Runner’s world now too. Nothing about Runner at this moment suggested she’d lived her entire life, until just months ago, in a culture where girls just grabbed food and ate it with their hands.

By the time Amy was finished with an explanation that seemed to satisfy Runner, they had all finished eating. My very last meal in the Academy cafeteria, Amy told herself. How many does that make, she wondered. Not quite four years... about fourteen hundred days... four thousand meals here?? Can it possibly be that many? Amy shook her head to clear it. No thought about her leaving the Academy had staggered her quite as much as that one.

* * * * *

When they returned to Melissa’s and Jana’s room to pick up their bags, Melissa, trying unsuccessfully to stifle a smile, said, “What do you say we leave by way of the party pavilion?”

Amy picked up her own bag, laughing. “Just a passing thought, was it?”

Melissa nodded. “No special reason.”

Amy, holding her bag, turned in a slow circle, looking around the room she had spent more nights in than the one she and Runner had shared. I’ve got to stop my mind taking this sentimental farewell tour, she told herself. It’s slowing everything down, and I want to get to my hanging. But somehow it was hard to make herself leave the room. At last she took a deep breath, and grinned. “Okay, party pavilion it is.”

* * * * *

Amy could, to no surprise, hear the commotion before even entering the corridor that led to the party pavilion entrance. It gave her a *deja vu* feeling, her goodbye party having been here just last weekend.

Melissa, Jana and Runner entered first, and the room instantly grew hushed. Amy grinned and shook her head. Here I go again, she told herself.

She entered the doorway and stopped, expecting a sudden outburst from the gathered students. Instead, the silence continued for several seconds, interrupted by a single female voice -- Amy couldn't tell whose -- calling out clearly, "One, two, three." An instant after "three," every girl in the room shouted in synchrony, "GOOD LUCK, AMY!!!" The organized chant was followed by laughter from various places around the room, and, at last, the applause.

Amy saw that there were two rope lines forming a corridor from the student area door, through which she had just entered, to the public door on the other side of the room. Students were lined up in ranks outside the rope lines. Obviously there was no intent of repeating the endless hugging session of her party, or making her stop to give a speech. The girls were only there to watch her and deliver a group expression of their feelings for her as she passed through.

Melissa and the others had stopped during Amy's entrance, but Melissa now turned and beckoned Amy on. Amy followed, both embarrassed and very touched to be the focus of the scene. She'd only seen this once before, for Linda's exit, and then it was only because all of the students were pretending to be watching a movie star leaving. Amy wasn't convinced her Academy career was really that distinguished, certainly not in the way Megan's was. Most likely, Amy decided, it was because she'd only so recently returned, and been given a second chance to achieve the goal of her existence, after she'd thought it was out of reach forever. All of the students, she knew, understood how much that meant to her.

Amy didn't believe the girls expected her to greet them individually, but she did make an effort to smile and wave at the ones she felt closest to, especially any she had spent the night with. With her other hand she brushed tears away.

Her smile broadened when she heard Puppy's bark, and spotted her near the rope, her leash held firmly by Taylor, who was kneeling next to her and applauding, then giggling as Puppy licked her face.

Holly and Haley, holding hands, were up next to the rope about halfway along. Amy had resolved not to stop, but found she couldn't pass by the red-headed sisters without one more hug. As she squeezed each one, Amy whispered in the ear of one, and then the other, "You guys are going to do shows they'll always remember." As Amy broke off the second hug, wiped another tear away and picked up her bag again, she heard both girls shout, to be heard over the applause around them, "Thank you, Amy." It was as synchronized as the group shout-out had been moments earlier, but Amy hadn't seen any signs of them coordinating it.

Vonda Bennett, the assistant dean, unlocked the exit door and opened it. She smiled at Amy. "With some girls, when I first interview them, I feel for certain I'll see this day come for them. You're one of those girls, Amy, and I'm so proud of you."

Amy hugged her tightly, her tears flowing non-stop now. "Thank you. You just don't know how proud I am to represent the Academy."

Ms. Bennett, releasing Amy, held her at arms' length for a moment. "I can tell, Amy. The very best of luck to you."

Amy thanked her, and followed Runner out the door as Melissa and Jana held it for her, hopelessly brushing tears away, trying to collect herself as she took in a great lungful of fresh outdoor air. At the curb, Bill was standing by the open doors of the Academy limo -- definitely one of ours, Amy thought to herself, able from where she stood to see Karl in the driver's seat. Getting the girls from building to car was something the bodyguards took a great deal more care with these days.

All four girls tossed their bags in the open trunk -- Runner last, following the example of the others in a brief interruption of her wide-eyed survey of their surroundings -- and Amy entered the first open door, leading Runner by the hand to follow her in, while Melissa and Jana took the seat behind.

Amy pulled a tissue from her bag and dabbed at her face, then reached for her make-up kit to do a quick restoration. As she finished, the limo pulled away from the curb. Amy turned in her seat to watch the Academy grow smaller in her field of vision. Melissa and Jana remained silent while Amy watched, and even Runner was quiet. For now.

* * * * *

Runner's questions were of a different nature from those of her previous car ride, though flowing just as fast and with an equal level of excitement. In that first ride, she'd been confronted with a whirl of impressions all completely alien to her. Today, she was trying to coordinate visual stimuli within the framework of the world she'd been mentally constructing. "Is that a park, where people go to relax and play? Oh, there's a food... grocery store. 'Benson's,' I heard that name in commercials... That's a school, right? I think it must be an elementary school. They wouldn't have swings for older kids. Amy, what's that building?" Pointing at a high-rise.

Amy looked for a sign at the entrance, but saw nothing identifying it. "I think it's offices where people work. Probably a lot of different companies use parts of the building. Like one company might use all of the offices on the fifth floor."

"You're not sure, though?"

Amy smiled. "No one person knows *all* of the buildings in the city, Runner. Not even the mayor. It's just way too big, with too many different things in it."

"Can we see the university from here? Where Doctor Chase works? In the Sociology Department?" Runner was still seeing the professor twice weekly, describing life in the Island pens to her, while barraging the woman with her own questions.

Amy shook her head, and pointed past Runner through the right-hand window. "It's over that way, about five miles."

Runner swung around in her seat. "Melissa, when you hang, could you do it closer to the university? Maybe we could go by it on the way."

Melissa laughed. "I'll try, Runner."

Runner suddenly pointed past Amy. "Oh! I heard of that. It's a girlmeat steakhouse...."

* * * * *

After about thirty minutes, the limo had entered an upscale residential neighborhood, its winding streets heavily shaded with overhanging trees. Runner goggled at the current sights as she had all of the previous ones. "Rich people must live here. Right?"

Amy smiled. "Pretty rich, yeah." The residences here seemed, if anything, larger than the Cameron house, which was in a different part of town.

Amy felt a rush of adrenaline as the limo turned into a driveway interrupted by a heavy gate. I'm here! she told herself. I'm seeing the place where I'll do my show! Karl stopped the limo beside a speaker and identified their party as being "from the Hanging Academy," upon which the gate swung open, and Karl proceeded down a long, landscaped drive.

The car stopped at last at the head of a circular drive, and Bill got out to open the second door, then the third, on the passenger side. Runner looked at Amy uncertainly, and Amy gestured back to go ahead and exit the car. Jana and Melissa were already slipping out of the other door. As Amy slid across the seat towards the door, she was overcome by a vivid memory of her first sight of Miranda, in all her golden glory, emerging into the sunlight in front of the Cameron house. I think, said Amy to herself, that may have been the first moment when I told myself, unconsciously, that I was going to do the same thing someday.

Melissa took the lead, going up the steps, as she and Jana looked around nearly as wide-eyed as Runner at the beauty and elegance of the grounds in front of the house, and the house itself, its porch covered by an overhang supported by white columns. It was Melissa who rang the doorbell. Bill and Karl were gathering bags from the trunk of the limo.

A pretty slavegirl, about thirty, with short dark hair, dressed in a businesslike way in a white buttoned shirt with sleeves rolled up, and black feminine-cut pants, her collar a gleaming silvery band of metal, opened the door. Looking at Melissa, she smiled and asked uncertainly, "Amy?"

Behind Melissa, Amy raised her hand and smiled. "I'm Amy."

The girl directed her smile at Amy and stepped back. "I'm Matty. If you'll come in, Mr. Smith will greet you in just a minute." She looked down the steps and called to Karl and Bill, "Do you need me to get anything?" Karl shook his head.

Benjamin now emerged from an adjoining room. "Amy! Very nice to see you."

Amy held out her arms and gave him a warm hug, then backed away to do the introductions. "I believe you know Jana. You met her once last year."

Benjamin grinned and took Jana's offered hand in both of his. "I did indeed. Very nice seeing you again."

Jana smiled back. "You have a really nice house, Benjamin."

Benjamin thanked her, and Amy gestured to Melissa. "This is Melissa. You haven't been with her yet, but you I think you remember her sister Miranda."

Benjamin gaped in delight. "Miranda! Yes, I remember Miranda quite well. Really delightful girl. I'm sure you're the same."

Melissa shook hands with him. "I try, sir."

"Benjamin, please."

"Benjamin."

Benjamin turned to Runner. "And you would be Runner. Amy pointed you out to me at a party some time back."

Runner gave Amy an uncertain look, and held out her hand to be shaken as the others had, able to muster a generic greeting, "It's nice to meet you... Benjamin."

Benjamin stood back and rubbed his hands. Looking at Amy's friends, he said, "Now, if the three of you will follow Matty, she can take you out to the guesthouse, where there's some lunch waiting. And..." He suddenly struck the heel of his palm against his forehead. "I *knew* I'd forget something. I don't suppose any of you brought swimsuits? For the pool?"

Melissa looked amused. "Uhhh... no."

Amy interpreted Melissa's look. "If it's okay with you, Benjamin, they don't really need the suits." Even without Melissa's vote, Amy knew Runner would be fine without a suit.

Benjamin raised his eyebrows, and murmured, "Just so, just so. Well, it's certainly okay with me. The pool area is entirely private."

Near a door leading farther into the house, Matty said, "If you'd follow me, please." She backed through the door, with Melissa and Jana trailing her, and, after receiving Amy's nod, Runner followed them.

Benjamin looked at the men. "Oh, you two gentlemen as well. The bags will be fine in the guesthouse."

Amy pointed at her own bag. "Just leave that one." Bill nodded, and he and Karl followed the others with the remaining bags.

Benjamin smiled at Amy. "And now, if you'll follow me, I'd like you to meet Calvin. Matty can get your bag later."

Amy felt a tremor rush through her, and swallowed hard. I'm sure he'll be nice, she told herself. She followed Benjamin into an enormous open area, with a skylight above and a fireplace along one wall, that Amy decided, based on the arrangement of couches, was the living room. At the opposite end, two

curving stairways ran up to what were most likely bedrooms, and between them a door led into what seemed, based on visible shelves of books, to be a library. A young man emerged from that door, and stopped suddenly.

Amy froze, her jaw hanging open, her eyes wide. The young man seemed equally stunned.

The young man spoke first, in an awestruck voice. "Wow!"

Amy understood his astonishment. She was aware her body had changed considerably in the four years since he had seen her, and she was, in her choice of clothes, showing it to best advantage. She could easily read the appreciation in his stare.

He shook his head and smiled at last. "Hi, Amy. Your hair looks really cute like that."

After looking back at him for what seemed an eternity, Amy finally managed to croak, "Scott? What... what are you doing here?"

He grinned. "I live here."

"Where's... where's...where's Calvin?"

Scott brought his hands up to his chest, cupped, fingers towards himself. "Calvin Scott Smith. I never really liked Calvin, so I stopped using it in junior high. Dad's the only person in the world who calls me Calvin now. Well, and Matty and Sharon, they call me Mister Calvin. Look, let's go into the library. We can talk."

Amy looked behind her. Benjamin had withdrawn, leaving her with... Calvin. She followed Scott into the library, looking around the room as he closed the door. Scott, she thought, it's Scott. Of all people in the world to end up hanging me.

As he started turning back towards her, she reached for his hand, moving towards him. Pressing against him, she slid her arms around him and kissed him.

* * * * *

FOUR YEARS AGO

She waited in line at the food court, to order a soft drink, and when she reached the front and gave her order, the boy in line behind her, about Amy's age or perhaps a little older, stepped up alongside her and said, "And I'll have a large Sip Fizz."

Amy spun her head quickly to look at him, wondering how anyone could be so rude, as the clerk asked, "Is this together?" His memory seemed to be telling him they had arrived separately.

The boy smiled. "Yeah. I'm paying."

Amy suddenly realized what was going on, though nothing remotely like it had ever happened to her before. She examined him more closely. "I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

As the clerk handed them their drinks, the boy passed some money across and said to Amy, "I've been trying to decide that. I think I've seen you around. You go to the university, right?"

She smiled. "Mistaken identity. I'm at the high school. I graduate next month, though."

He blinked, but smiled. "I guess I don't know you, then. But we could fix that."

Her heart was fluttering. The sudden attention was wonderful, and he was kind of cute, but there was one thought foremost in her mind. "Look, before we start anything, I should tell you I'm not available for anything long-term. I'm going to go to the Hanging Academy in the fall. So you know what that means, right?"

He sighed, and smiled. "Okay, that's useful to know. But you'd be free this Friday, right? We could go to a movie, and maybe go get a girlburger afterwards?"

She almost said yes, then hesitated. "I'd like that, except I've got this big thing coming this weekend. I'll have to... take a raincheck, if that's okay." She looked at him apologetically.

He smiled. "It is if the raincheck could be used the following week."

She grinned open-mouthed. It was so stunning, not just being asked for a date for the first time in her life, but him being so persistent about it.

What made up her mind was the thought that it would be really useful to have some sexual experience, if it came to that, before she started at the Academy. Miranda had said they would teach her a lot about it there, but she was willing to bet any amount that none of her classmates would be virgins. "Sure." She looked in her new purse, but found only the items she had come to the mall with, which didn't include a notepad. She turned to the clerk at the soft-drink counter. "Could you tear me a sheet off your order pad? And let me use your pencil a second?" She wrote down her phone number and signed it "Amy" underneath, and smiled as she handed it to the boy. "I'd usually be home after six."

The boy grinned and tucked it into his wallet. "Great. I'll call you soon, Amy. I'm Scott." He gave her a little wave as he turned away.

"Oh, thank you for the drink!" He looked back and held up both hands in a think-nothing-of-it gesture, and soon was lost in the crowd.

* * * * *

ONE MONTH LATER

They lay together in Scott's bed in his off-campus apartment, naked, stroking, kissing. Amy felt relaxed. No worries about Scott's purposely absent roommate barging in. Scott brushed back a strand of Amy's

hair. "You know I'm just really glad we could have some times together. Nobody hopes you get in the Academy more than I do."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Silent now, except for sighs and grunts, she worked a little faster, the combination of movements getting easier as she fell into a rhythm. She squeaked as he reached up for her breasts, cupping his hands around them and gently squeezing them in time with her motion. Faster now... everything smooth, flowing, slick with her fluids, gripping, sliding... there now, there, there... THERE!!!!

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

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

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

She laughed and kissed him again.

* * * * *

TWO MONTHS LATER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

AT THE ACADEMY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 36

PRESENT DAY

Amy broke off the kiss, keeping her arms resting on Scott's shoulders, maintaining her lips within range of his for whenever the urge struck again. "So what do you want me to do? And wouldn't your bedroom be a better place to do it in?" She tried, as best she could, to keep the seductive Hanging Girl purr out of her voice. She could be as real as she wanted with him. This was Scott.

She sensed the nervous tightness in his voice at his next words, and frowned. Something big was happening, aside from the obvious. "You could take off that slave collar."

She blinked, and backed away slightly. "Well, yeah, I *could*. But why? It's just saying I belong to you. Don't you want that?"

"Of course I do, but in a different way." He slipped out of her arms and moved to a nearby desk, picking up a paper from it. "I released you from slavery. You're a free woman."

She backed off a full step. Her voice a choked rasp, she said, "WHAT??"

"I would have taken you downtown today to do it, but it can't all be done in one day. They have to verify ownership in city records, see if there are any other claims on you -- stuff like that. They did find a slavery agreement between you and your brother on file, but it never went into effect." He handed her the paper. "But you're free now... What's wrong?" The tightness in his voice increased.

Amy was staring at the document, shaking her head. "You did this without asking me?" She couldn't believe it. The Scott she had known would never have done this.

"Well, technically, you know, as long as you were a slave, you didn't have any legal standing to give permission for..."

"The hell with the legal niceties! The hell with whether the city cares what I want! Don't *you* care what I want??" Outside an open window, through which a warm breeze floated, fluttering the curtain, she could dimly hear splashing and high-pitched giggles. The girls must have decided on a swim before lunch, oblivious to the drama unfolding inside the house. "Scott, I'm a slave for a *reason!*" She was shaking, and didn't care whether he saw. She wanted him to *know* how angry she was. Four years of striving towards a single goal, and he thought she would be happy to throw it all away for a life she'd never wanted?

He started to approach her and then backed away, in obvious distress. Clearly this wasn't going as he'd anticipated at all. "But you have to be free, to be able to..." He stopped.

"To what? To do what?" She took a step towards him, her fists clenched.

"To... Well, I was hoping... Amy, will you marry me?" He wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "I was picturing that coming out a lot smoother."

She froze, her jaw dropping. It all makes sense now, she thought. At least from his point of view. Why can't he see mine? Why doesn't he know what he's asking me to give up? She realized she was slowly shaking her head, and decided to continue doing so.

"Amy... say something. Please?" He was biting his lip, nearly to the point of puncture.

Suddenly Amy's hands flew to her face, and she began crying, her shoulders shaking in great heaves. The one person outside the Academy I trusted, she wailed within herself, and now look what he's done. Sniffing, she stammered out between sobs, "You... you... you always understood me before. When you, when we... In the first two minutes after we first met, didn't I tell you we couldn't have a long-term relationship? Didn't I tell you I was going to be a Hanging Girl? You understood, you always understood!" She took a deep breath to calm herself, and said with as much dignity as she could muster. "Scott, take me home. Now."

His own voice as choked as Amy's now, he said, "I... okay. I think I know where your dad lives..."

"No!" She thrust out her jaw, trying to stop the quivering of her lips. "The Academy is my home! And I'll never leave it again!" She started crying again. After all those goodbyes, she told herself, it's going to be so humiliating to return. And the dean will be so mad! He'll have to give Benjamin his money back. But I'll never trust anyone outside the Academy again. I'll ask the dean to hang me at a party. He can at least charge extra and get something out of it. Not nearly as much as Megan.

Her legs felt weak, as she realized she was choosing to give up her dream of ever having a hanging like Miranda's.

Scott was crying as well, now. "Amy, all those people coming tomorrow... what do I tell them?"

Her hands flew down to her sides, fists clenched again. "I don't care! Inviting people to a wedding reception before you even asked the bride -- just tell them you did that!"

He blinked. "Amy, none of them were invited to a wedding reception. They have no idea about that."

Amy paused in her sobs as her mind processed the incongruity. "They have no... What is it they think they're coming for?"

He stared at her for several seconds, then let out a long, "Ohhhhh." To Amy's amazement, the corners of his lips turned up in the ghost of a smile. "I see what the problem is. I've been planning this so long, I somehow figured you'd automatically know... Okay, I needed to make everything more clear."

He walked over to the window, and pulled aside the curtain. "I want you to see something."

Grudgingly, but curious despite herself, Amy came to look.

In the distance, she could see the pool, and a building near it she assumed was the guesthouse. Melissa, Jana, and Runner, naked as expected, were in the pool, playing some sort of game with a large inflated ball.

Amy could only spare a small part of her attention for her friends, though. In the foreground stood a stage, of standard Academy construction, with a hanging platform, and a noose above it, swaying gently in the breeze.

Amy couldn't help being calmed by the sight. Quietly, wiping her eyes, still sniffing, she asked, "So what's that there for?"

Scott laughed briefly. "What do you think it's for? *Who* do you think it's for?"

Amy continued staring at it. "But... so what's all this stuff about getting married?"

"That's for today. Then tomorrow, when everybody comes for the hanging, we can start it with the wedding party, and then hang you, and barbecue you for the big meal at the end."

She turned towards him, frowning, but excitement beginning to bubble within her. She had to make sure she was understanding this. "You want to hang me as your wife?"

"Sure. Lots of men hang their wives."

"But not at the wedding party! I've never heard of that!"

He grinned. "Isn't it cool?"

"Scott..." Her mind was spinning. "This is... Is this really what you want?"

"What I hope is that it's what *you* want. Amy, look at me a minute." He took both her hands in his, and he took a breath. "Amy, I'm sorry I made such a mess of explaining this. Let me try to do it better.

"When you left for the Academy, I was so happy for you, it didn't leave much room for thinking about myself. It was all true, what I'd been saying about being happy with the memories. But it all seemed... incomplete. There was something really missing.

"Then one day, after maybe a year, I was thinking about you again, like I did a lot, and thinking about that last phone call, where you said you loved me. And as I thought about it, the idea went through me, man, if I could just be married to you for one day, that would last me a lifetime. It was... Just sort of a throwaway thought, a fairy tale kind of thing. But then I started thinking more about it, and I realized how well it fit with you being a Hanging Girl, so that it could be exactly what you wanted too. And the... completeness. I knew we'd have it then.

"Of course, I wasn't sure how I could manage it. But Dad goes to those Academy parties all the time, and I finally talked it over with him. In case you're wondering, when he first met you, he had no idea you had any connection with me. It wasn't until about a year ago, around the time I graduated from the university, that I explained it all to him. He found out you weren't available yet, and told me he'd probably need to purchase an option on you right then, so somebody else wouldn't buy you first. And I said, fine, I'll pay for that too."

Amy blinked. "Too? What are you... Scott, you're paying for all this? Not your dad?"

“Oh! I guess I did skip over that part. Amy, I couldn’t have my dad buy a wife for me! So I worked it out with him. I’ve been working at his company since I graduated, and all of my salary goes back to him. For this. I get to eat and sleep here, and I get a little allowance if I want to go to a movie or something, but the rest of it is for this. After the option, and buying you, and getting an estimate for the cost of the party, it all works out to me owing him about two more years after this.”

She looked at him wide-eyed, her jaw hanging unrecoverable below her. “Scott... you... You’re giving up everything you earn for three years of your life, just to be married to me for one day? And then to host an Academy Hanging Girl party to hang me?”

He bit his lip again, bruised though it was from the last time, but looked less nervous now. “So... What do you think?”

She stared at him for what must have been a full thirty seconds. Just as his nervousness appeared to be returning, she said, barely above a whisper, “I think that is the... most... romantic... thing I’ve ever heard of.”

“So will you...” He stopped as Amy reached behind her neck, unfastened her choker, and set it gently on the table. She smiled at him.

He cleared his throat. “So is that a yes... uff!” He was cut off as she threw herself at him, her arms squeezing him tight, tighter, her lips on his once more.

When she broke off the kiss at last, he tried again. “Will you marry me?”

She laughed with the greatest pure joy she’d ever felt. “Yes! Yes, yes, yes. Now shut up.” She kissed him for a long time.

* * * * *

Amy had heard that the city marriage office was nice, but she didn’t quite expect such beauty in the middle of the utilitarian drabness of City Hall. One minute she was walking, holding Scott’s hand, trailed by Karl, through a dim, featureless corridor with doors sporting pebbled frosted-glass windows with division names and room numbers stenciled in paint, and in the next she found herself, on passing through one of these doors, marked “Marriages,” in something resembling an island paradise -- reminding her of Purity Island, only much prettier, and without the menacing farmers ready to force her into captivity as a work slave.

The room was lit pleasantly by fixtures hidden in what might otherwise have been wooden planter boxes along the wall near the ceiling. The walls themselves were cream-colored, with darker swirls in a wood-grain pattern. The floor was richly carpeted and interrupted by randomly-distributed flower boxes, the flowers themselves in a riot of colors. One of the side walls was glass, behind which was a miniature forest with stunted but lovely trees, within whose branches birds were chirping happily. The sound system piped in music quietly, almost subliminally, in a tune Amy would find herself still humming hours later.

Incongruously, though inevitably, there was a counter near the back of the room opposite the entry door, with a cheerful girl sitting behind it, about twenty-five, slightly pudgy, who greeted them. "Here to be married?... Yeah, I can tell you meant to be here." An engraved nameplate in front of her read, "Cynthia Bowen."

Amy stopped alongside Scott at the counter, and smiled at the girl. "That obvious, huh?"

Cynthia laughed, and then looked at Amy admiringly. "That is *such* a cute top. I wish I could wear something like that." She sighed, and went on, "Anyway, have you got your blood test forms?"

Amy gasped, and looked at Scott. Blood tests! In the whirl of emotion, she had totally forgotten.

Without hesitating, Scott pulled a folded form from his pocket and handed it to Cynthia. Amy started to speak, and decided to ask later.

After looking over the form, the girl smiled and pulled out a form of her own from below the counter. "Just fill this out, and I need you both to sign here, and date it. You need to sign in front of me. I'm legally authorized to witness."

Scott took the form, and thanked Cynthia, leading Amy afterwards to a small circular table, unnecessarily covered by a brightly-colored umbrella, in the corner of the office next to the "forest." Karl took a seat nearby.

As Scott began filling in the form, Amy leaned close and whispered, "When did I do a blood test?"

He smiled and whispered back, "You had one on file from four years ago. They wouldn't tell me what was in it, but they could clear it in coordination with my own test."

The one she did for Andrew! That explained it. "Ummm... what would you have done if it hadn't been there?"

He shrugged, while writing. "I'd been figuring to ask your dean to test you at the Academy on some pretext. He knew what I was planning. Where were you born?"

Yes, Amy said to herself, the dean would have had to know. It was no easier keeping secrets from the dean than from Runner. She looked at the line Scott had arrived at on the form. "City Hospital."

"What's your date of birth?"

She told him, and he continued filling in the rest of the form.

They returned, with the form, to the counter. The girl spent a moment typing on a keyboard that was flush with the surface of the counter, and looking at a monitor set at an angle in front of her which, from Amy's side of it, appeared to be clear glass. After maneuvering the computer mouse and clicking it a few times, the girl said, "It looks like Miss Cameron was a slave until being freed just last week." She gasped and looked up at Scott, her mouth agape, the edges curled up in a smile. "Did you buy her so you could get married?"

Scott smiled back. "Basically, yeah." Clearly he'd decided there was no reason to go into greater detail.

She grinned at him, then at Amy. "That is so neat!"

She turned the form back around and pushed it towards Scott. First he, then Amy, signed the form, both with hands slightly shaking. The girl produced an official stamp, used it, and then signed the form herself. Afterward she looked up. "It's kind of traditional to say this -- Anyway, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Amy turned to Scott, her heart pounding, and kissed him. He broke it off, grinning. "I've got something here."

Amy laughed. "I'm sure you do." Still shaking slightly, she watched as he pulled a small, felt-covered box from his pocket, and opened it. She gasped. "Oh, it's beautiful!"

The ring must have added its own significant expense toward the debt Scott was slowly working off. As he slipped it onto her finger, it occurred to Amy that at least he could get some of the money back by reselling it -- except, she knew, he would never do that. She started to ask, "What are..."

With Hanging Girl-like perception, he interrupted her. "Necklace." Her head, wherever he decided to display it, would wear the ring from a necklace around her neck.

He continued holding her newly be-ringed hand, took a deep breath, and grinned. "Hey, Mrs. Smith."

She thought about responding, "Hey, Mr. Smith," but he'd always been that, and it didn't seem terribly original anyway. She gave him a long kiss instead.

To her left, Amy heard Cynthia murmur, "*I love this job.*"

* * * * *

Riding in the limo, with Karl driving, Amy sat with her hand curled around Scott's, her head on his shoulder. She reached up with her free hand to scratch a momentary itch on her throat, and reflected on how odd it felt not to be wearing anything around her neck.

A sudden thought made her sit upright, with a gasp.

Scott was immediately concerned. "Honey? Everything okay?"

She frowned for a moment, ignoring him, and then smiled and squeezed his hand as the solution occurred to her. "Yeah, it's okay, or at least easy to fix. You must have got a bridal dress for me for tomorrow, right?"

"Oh, sure. Is that what you were worried about?"

Amy shook her head. "I just need a... fashion accessory, to go with it. I don't suppose it came with a choker."

“Ummm... you brought a choker...”

“No, I don’t want that one. That one said you’re my owner, and...” She giggled suddenly. “...and I’ll bet the color doesn’t go with the dress. I haven’t seen a lot of brown bridal dresses. Could we go by wherever the shop is where you bought the dress and see if we can get a choker that will go with it?”

Scott looked lost. “What for?”

Amy explained. After that, Scott looked at her in wonder. “So this is to keep a promise to a girl you knew for a month, who died three years ago?”

Amy nodded vigorously.

Scott grinned. “No wonder I married you.” He kissed her. Amy let her lips melt against his, holding the kiss a long time.

* * * * *

They entered the Smith house holding hands -- No, Amy corrected herself, *my* house.

Amy let Scott guide her to a small den, down a short hallway from the huge living room, from which the sounds seemed to be coming. In the room, Amy’s three friends, now fully, if casually, dressed, were engrossed in a movie showing on a big-screen television. Melissa and Jana were squeezed intimately together in an overstuffed chair, while Runner sat on the floor in front of them, leaning back against the front of the chair, Melissa’s legs draped over her shoulders, her hand resting on Melissa’s shin, stroking it absently. All three looked to the doorway as Amy and Scott entered it.

Runner gave Amy an open-mouthed grin. “Hi, Amy! Look at this TV! It’s huge!”

Amy grinned back. “I see that.” To Melissa, now dressed like the others in t-shirt and shorts, she said, “Thought you said you wanted to stay in character.”

“Oh! It turns out I won’t be wearing that tomorrow. Didn’t Calvin tell you this already? They’re doing some kind of wedding scenario. Matty had us try on bridesmaid dresses in the guesthouse. They already had our sizes. Matty wasn’t sure, she said she thought Benjamin or Calvin called ahead of time and got the info from the Academy. Anyway, they’ve got a rip-away bridal dress for you. You’ll need to try that on later.”

Amy giggled and stepped farther into the room, holding her left hand out. “I’ve already got part of the... costume.”

Jana and Melissa both gasped as they saw the ring. Jana said in awe, “Now that’s a pretty high-priced prop.”

Amy reached back to take Scott’s hand again, as he came up behind her. “I wouldn’t exactly call it a prop. A prop is when you’re faking something.”

Melissa frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it's not a fake wedding, or fake reception. We were just down at City Hall, where we got married."

Melissa hurriedly threw her right leg over Runner and stood upright out of the chair in one motion. "WHAT??" Jana quickly stood beside Melissa, gaping at Amy.

Runner scrambled to her feet to join the others, with an astonished look on her face. "Amy? Did you say you're *married*?"

Jana managed to squeak, "For real??"

Putting all her concentration toward burying the laugh that wanted to bubble out of her that would have suggested the whole thing was a joke, Amy stepped back and rested her hand against Scott's back. "You guys didn't get a chance to meet earlier. Melissa... Jana... and Runner..." She went slowly, pointing, so Scott could catch their names. "I want you to meet my husband, Scott Smith."

Scott held out his hand to Melissa, standing nearest. "Hi... Melissa?" He looked back at Amy to make sure he'd attached the name to the right girl. Amy nodded.

Melissa automatically shook hands with him, saying vaguely, "Nice to..." She looked at Amy again, "Amy, you can't... you just can't!"

Amy could easily read Melissa's concern, which wasn't based on her belief Amy was still a slave. She said reassuringly, "Melissa, I'm still going to hang tomorrow. Nothing's changed." She giggled suddenly. "Except my name. My next of kin. Stuff like that."

Jana, looking very confused, asked, "Where's Calvin?"

Amy rubbed Scott's arm. "Calvin Scott Smith. But I've always known him as Scott."

Melissa said, "Always... Didn't you just meet him like four hours ago?"

Amy laughed. "Uhhh, no. It's closer to four years ago. We..."

Melissa interrupted, her eyes wide. "Scott! Amy, is this the guy you were trying to reach when you graduated?"

Scott gave Amy an astonished look. "You tried to call me?"

Amy smiled and turned more fully towards him. "Uh-huh. I wanted you to come and see my graduation. But I couldn't figure out how to find you! You weren't living at that apartment anymore, the university won't give out any personal information, and... ummm, do you have *any* idea how many Smiths... well, of course you do." Her hand flew to her mouth suddenly. "Oh!! I remember I saw 'Benjamin Smith' when I was looking for you in the phone book! I was looking right at your phone number and had no idea!"

He laughed. "It's okay. It's really nice knowing you hadn't forgotten me."

Amy squeezed his hand. "Of *course* I didn't forget you." She leaned forward and kissed him.

Jana waved her hands. "Okay, wait a minute. Amy, if you lost track of him... so this wasn't all planned in advance somehow?"

Amy smiled and shook her head. "Not by me, anyway."

Melissa, in an awestruck voice, said, "Scott... You waited all this time then, to buy Amy, and marry her, and then hang her the next day?"

Scott kissed Amy again, and responded "Uh-huh" to Melissa.

Runner said uncertainly, "Amy, is this what they call..." She frowned and looked down, muttering, "What's that word?" then looked up again. "...romantic?"

Amy, still looking up at Scott, said softly, "You've got it exactly right, Runner."

* * * * *

Dinner was served in the formal dining room by Matty and Sharon, Benjamin's slavegirl cook. Amy could tell, the moment the two slavegirls were present in the same room, that they were lovers. It seemed, to Amy, typical of Benjamin that he would take the trouble to make sure his slaves could work well together. She wondered whether he had bought them as a set, or whether their relationship had blossomed after their purchase.

Benjamin sat at the head of the table, with Scott and Amy to his right, Jana, Melissa, and Runner on his left.

Benjamin, unsurprisingly, found Runner fascinating. "Have you always been called 'Runner'?"

"Mostly, sir... Benjamin." It amused Amy a little to see that Runner had so fully absorbed her training in how to address club members that she found it as hard as the others to bend the rules for Benjamin. "It's not really like here. Here people name babies as soon as they're born..." She hesitated a moment, seeking a confirming nod from Melissa, before going on. "When we got our littles... babies, to take care of, we didn't call them anything for a long time. When they started getting bigger, there would be things about them we would use for names, and after awhile we'd stay with one thing, and everybody knew them by that one thing."

Amy noticed Runner watching closely as Melissa broke a roll and buttered it, doing the same thing herself afterward. I think, thought Amy, she's intentionally using Melissa as a model, and not me. She's consciously trying to break her dependence on me for behavioral cues, knowing I won't be here after tomorrow.

Amy breathed a relieved sigh as she cut another bite of girlmeat. Runner's perceived need for Amy had been one last thing that nagged at Amy's mind, one final loose end before letting go. Of course, Amy

reminded herself, it won't be too much longer before Runner stops being actively dependent on anyone at all.

Runner looked at Amy. "Will you come out to the pool with us later?"

Amy looked at Scott, keeping her eyes on his as she said, "I think Scott and I need to spend some time together. This is our one day."

Runner looked irritated with herself, and banged the heel of her palm against her forehead, a gesture she'd picked up somewhere. "Oh, and it's your wedding night! I know about that."

Jana leaned ahead to see Runner past Melissa. "I meant to ask if you'd been swimming somewhere before, Runner. It looked like you already knew how."

Amy suspected that whatever Runner had been doing had been picked up instantly by watching the others, but Runner nodded and answered, "There was a river running through the pen. Most of the time, anyway." She looked at Benjamin, her eyes shining. "But your pool is so cool, Benjamin! It's all blue, and smooth, and it doesn't try to push you over when you're in it."

Benjamin laughed. "I'm glad you like it. The three of you certainly made it more beautiful by being in it."

Melissa and Jana laughed, and Jana made the rest laugh by looking at Amy and asking, "So why was it again you like him, Amy?"

Scott said to Runner, "Amy mentioned you're not a student, Runner?"

"Not yet, but I will be. I have to pass the high school equivalence exam first."

Amy told Scott, "She's studying hard. She's getting started on fifth grade workbooks now. You've got to keep in mind, she couldn't read when she came here." Amy realized she was getting that proud-parent feeling again.

Scott shook his head in wonder, and looked back at Runner. "So what are you studying?"

That got Runner started. She was always eager to describe her latest reading.

* * * * *

Amy looked around Scott's room as he closed the door behind her. It was amusingly bare, looking more like the inside of a bachelor's refrigerator than one's bedroom. "Kind of... utilitarian."

He laughed. "Well, I had a different room growing up, downstairs, next to Dad's. Mom and Dad's, before we ate her. This was actually a slavegirl bedroom, and the one next to it, but Matty and Sharon share my old room now, so this was empty when I moved home after college. I keep planning to put stuff in it, but I never get around to it." He grinned. "I'll have something now, though."

“Oh!!” She laughed. “Right.” She looked around. “You should...” She shook her head -- the very head being referred to. “I shouldn’t tell you. You should decide where you want it.”

“Oh, I already know. I moved the furniture around last week, to make just the right place for it. See if you can figure it out.”

She blinked, realizing he meant that there must be some visual clue in the room. After a moment of looking around mystified, she noticed a long rectangular depression in the carpet adjacent to the right-hand wall. Exactly in the shape of the base of...

She pointed. “That dresser wasn’t there before, was it? You moved that.”

He smiled and nodded. The dresser, about six feet long and three high, was against the far wall beyond the foot of the bed. “It’ll be easy to look at you every morning when I wake up. And most of the year, the sun shines through that window in the morning...” he pointed, “...right across the dresser. So you’ll be sunlit.”

Amy crossed the room to the dresser, and squatted down in front of it, with her neck at the level of the dresser’s top. “Here’s what you’ll see.” She giggled.

“Yeah, at least until I replace you with a lamp.”

She laughed, and ran across the room to give his chest several playful punches with both fists. He caught them, laughing, and used them to pull her closer for a kiss. Her arms went around him for a time as they kissed, then dropped down so she could loosen his belt, still kissing.

Minutes later, both naked now, they managed to navigate to the bed and lay down on it without breaking the embrace or the kiss.

He broke it off at last, and looked into her face, stroking her hair. “Can you still do the pussy-suck thing?”

She laughed, and looked directly at him, holding his eyes with her own. “Sweetie, it’s been four years...” She paused just long enough to see his frown of disappointment, then went on, “...so I’ve had *lots* of time to get better at it. Get on your back.”

He laughed and complied, his erection pointing to the ceiling. Moments later she was over him, taking it inside her, slipping up and down on it briefly to lubricate it. Then she began rippling her vaginal muscles, from front to back -- milking his manhood. As he squeezed his eyes shut, his mouth in a wide O of astonishment, letting go of a loud groan, she could feel it growing still longer inside her.

* * * * *

They rested awhile, holding each other, on their sides, each stroking the other’s hair idly.

Amy gave Scott the next in a succession of hundreds of small kisses. “You are going to get married again, right?”

“Sure. I think I’ve got a free day next week.”

She grinned and punched him on the shoulder. “Be serious. I don’t want you to go through the whole rest of your life without anybody to share it with.”

“I know. I don’t think of it as something you plan ahead for. It just kind of happens.”

“You planned ahead for me.”

He shook his head, and returned her latest kiss at last. “I planned ahead for the *day*. You’d already happened to me, long before today.”

She tightened her arms around him and gave him a more serious kiss. “I just don’t like to think about you just going to work, coming home, watching TV, going to work, coming home, reading a book.”

Scott shook his head. “It’s not like that. I *do* go out, and I do have friends.”

“Okay. But no real close female ones, I guess, or you would have been married before now. Tell me you’ve had some sex in the last four years. Do you at least use Matty or Sharon sometimes? They’re right here.”

“Well, they’re... you could probably tell, their thing with each other. They can’t legally marry, as slaves, but I think of them that way. I don’t want to get in between them.”

Amy sighed, and smiled. “You’re just literally too sweet for your own good.”

“I *do* go to parties at the Breeding Farm. Dad’s thing is the Academy, mine is the Breeding Farm.”

Amy nodded. “Okay, but as far as something deeper, richer, and more permanent than playing with a breeder, just promise me you’ll be open to love happening. It will.”

He smiled. “Promise. She’ll just need to be open to sharing a bedroom with the head of my first wife. That’s non-negotiable. You’re not going in the livingroom, or...” he made a face, “...a closet shelf. You’re staying here.”

She laughed. “I better. I’ll be inside you too...” she patted his stomach, “...and I can give you indigestion anytime I want.”

He covered her hand on his stomach with his. “Hey, I think I can feel you moving around in there already. Oh, no, wait.” He slid her hand down lower, between his legs, where his manhood was growing and hardening again. “That’s not my stomach, it’s a different organ altogether. And it’s meant to go inside *you*.”

She laughed again. “Well, let’s not disappoint it.” She rolled onto her back this time, as he rolled on top of her, his mouth finding hers.

* * * * *

They fell asleep at last, hours later, still holding each other. As much as Amy begrudged losing any time that could be spent making love with Scott, she knew she had to be rested for tomorrow. And she had always found sleep pleasurable in its own right. She wanted to do it one last time.

CHAPTER 37

SATURDAY

Amy awoke suddenly, yet without making any moves of startlement. It seemed right to be awake. There was none of the momentary confusion that always accompanied the transition to wakefulness, no groping for alertness. Today, her inner voice told her, is my hanging day.

She felt an energy coursing through her she had never experienced before, and an intense awareness of everything around her. The warmth of still-sleeping Scott's body against her, his arms holding her. The crispness of the bedsheets. The brightness of the sunlight streaming in from the window, illuminating the currently bare top of the dresser, as promised. The almost subliminal hum of sixty-cycle electric current that she realized was coming from the alarm clock on the bedside table, its digital display red. Redder than red. Six forty-five.

She hadn't moved, but perhaps Scott's sleeping mind had sensed the change in her breathing pattern. His eyes came open partway, the corners of his mouth twitching into a smile. A whispered, "Morning, Mrs. Smith."

She tightened her arms around him and kissed him, rubbing her body against him. Not in invitation to something more intense. Just wanting to feel him.

Scott broke off the kiss, his smile now quizzical. "There's something about your eyes."

She smiled back. "What about my eyes?"

He thought a moment, then gave her a small shrug. "Just somehow, I don't know... brighter."

She gave him a squeeze. What Runner had seen two days ago was now visible to anyone who looked. "Well, you know. Big day today."

He was startled by a sudden tap at the door. Amy was not. With her heightened awareness, she had heard the soft steps approaching on the hallway carpet.

Matty's voice, very soft. "Mister Calvin? Mistress Amy? Do you want your breakfast now?"

Scott's eyebrows went up. "Ummm... You mean in here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Uhhh... sure." He looked at Amy and shrugged. Obviously this wasn't the usual thing.

The door opened, and Matty and Sharon entered, each with a tray. Scott and Amy, looking at each other with a simultaneous giggle, pushed themselves up to a sitting position and put their pillows behind their backs, upright against the headboard. Amy, as she let the bedsheet settle across her lap, considered for a moment the propriety of showing her bare breasts to near-strangers, uninvited, as a guest in the house, but remembered suddenly she was a member of the family now. Matty and Sharon were, in a

sense, her own slaves, odd as the notion seemed to her, having just discarded her own slavery of four years' standing less than twenty-four hours ago.

The two slavegirls waited patiently as their master and mistress rearranged themselves, then set the trays, each supported on short legs at the corners, over their laps.

Scott said to Sharon, "This my dad's idea?"

She shook her head briefly, and gave him a small smile. "No, sir. We thought you might like it. Mister Benjamin did tell us the caterers were coming at eight, and we thought you'd probably want to eat before that."

"Oh! Right. And thank you, this is really nice."

Matty and Sharon both said, not quite together, "Thank you, sir." Amy choked back a giggle as the thought crossed her mind that Holly and Haley would have been perfectly synchronized.

Amy was amused by her breakfast -- a sugary kids' cereal, blueberries, some sweet rolls, and chocolate milk, in contrast with Scott's more normal scrambled eggs, girlmeat bacon, buttered toast, and orange juice. Women frequently stoked up on sugar in the last weeks before being snuffed and cooked, in hopes of making their meat sweeter, but Amy couldn't imagine a single last meal making a noticeable difference. She ended up trading parts of her breakfast with Scott, so that their meals ended up nearly identical.

As she ate, she asked, "So what's the schedule? All I know about now is the caterers."

"Well, there's also a wedding coach, who's going to show your friends, and mine, the ones participating, what they're supposed to do." He laughed. "The guys, my friends -- on their invitations it said get here by ten. I didn't say why, though. Oh! And a photographer is coming, at about nine. I wanted some pics of you, and of us together. Could you put on that same outfit as yesterday? I really like that."

"I've got one like it in my bag, that's fresher. The girls were talking about a wedding dress. Don't you want me in that?"

"Of course, but you can change into that later."

"This guy knows he can't photograph my hanging, right?"

"Girl. Yeah, in fact, she'll be leaving before that."

"When do the guests get here?"

"The invitations said noon. I was thinking we'd try to hang you around three -- does that give you enough time to get ready, after we spend some time with the guests?"

She nodded. "I won't be cooked until kind of late, then. Is that okay?"

“Yeah, the invitations say dinner will be at about eight. So everybody knows.”

She grinned suddenly. “This is so great! I just still can’t believe... well, I’m just really happy to have something unique. I don’t think any Hanging Girl ever went out this way. Thank you.” She kissed him, and went on for a time, alternating thank-yous and kisses.

She saw the time on his watch. “We’d better shower and get dressed. Come on.” She set her tray aside, jumped out of bed and extended her hand, to pull him along with her. She could read a slight disappointment that they hadn’t made love once more, though he hid it well. We’ve done it in bed enough, sweetie, she thought. I’ve got something else planned.

The shower was easily big enough for the two of them. Amy used her hands to spread soap over his body, while he did the same for her. She smiled as she saw his erection growing. I’d better get to that now, she told herself.

Kneeling, she stroked it with wet hands for a time, then opened her mouth and took it in, alternately sucking deeply and licking. After an initial gasp, he grinned down at her. “What do you think you’re doing, Mrs. Smith?”

She let him slip out of her mouth long enough to say, using the seductive purr she’d avoided earlier, “Making memories.” She began sucking again, hearing his moan as the warm water cascaded over both of them.

* * * * *

The grounds behind the Smith house bustled with activity, mainly involving the caterers, whose truck was parked now beside the hanging stage. Scott, holding Amy’s hand as she closed her eyes and slowly took in a deep lungful of fresh air, dry, cool but soon to be warming, sweetly floral-scented, said to her, “Remind... No, sorry, honey. You’ve got enough to think about. I need to remember to tell them to move that truck out of the area before the guests start showing up.”

Amy rubbed up against him and brushed her cheek on his shoulder. “I’m imagine they’ve done this before, sweetie.” She smiled at the sight of her three friends, splashing in the pool again some distance away.

Amy turned to look at the hanging stage, her eyes fixing on the heavy rope hanging from the horizontal beam above the stage. She had only meant to glance at it and then return her attention to Scott, but it held her attention magnetically. It’s for me, she repeated to herself, it’s for me! Ever since the day she had stood, entranced, watching Miranda hang, Amy’s life had been pointed towards this one special day. She felt a quivering energy pour through her body.

With an almost audible grunt, she turned away. I can get caught up in that excitement later, she promised herself. There’s something else happening now, something I never imagined I’d participate in, she reminded herself -- my own wedding party! And that’s something to be shared with Scott. I want him always to remember every second of today.

She felt a renewed gush of love for him, remembering how much he was sacrificing for this. My dream comes first in his mind, she told herself. He's giving so much of himself to make this perfect for me. I want it to be perfect for him.

Her arms seemed to enfold themselves around him automatically, and she rested her head on his shoulder. Her voice husky, near tears, she said, "I love you."

His arm circled her waist, his cheek rubbing the top of her head. "I love you, Amy. I'll say it first, next time."

She giggled. "Nope, I'll beat you to it every time."

A slightly sleepy-but-friendly looking woman with an expensive camera approached. She smiled. "I'm Jessica. Your girl... ummmm, Matty, let me in. Do you want me to get some pics now?"

Over the next several minutes, Jessica took photos in various poses -- one with Scott and Amy standing beside each other looking at the camera, one with them facing each other looking lovingly into each other's eyes, one of Amy and Benjamin, one of Amy, Scott, and Benjamin, one of Amy alone, holding a bouquet of flowers in front of her waist, her head in a slight playful tilt to the side. Jessica suggested Amy get up onto the stage, and took a shot of Amy, her right arm upraised with her fingers wrapped around the noose as she beamed at the camera.

After hopping down from the stage, Amy suddenly heard a distant shout, "Amy!" and moments later the pounding of feet as Melissa, Jana, and Runner sprinted over, all un-self-consciously naked -- Runner least self-conscious of all -- Melissa stopping suddenly about ten feet away, her arms out to signal the others to hold back, and saying, "I'm sorry, you're in the middle of something. We can..."

"Oh!" Amy turned Jessica. "Can we get one of the four of us?" She looked at Scott. "Is that okay, sweetie?"

He grinned. "Sure. Ummm... You mean like they are?"

Amy laughed. "You wouldn't mind, would you?"

Scott choked back a laugh. "Uhhh, no, that's fine."

It took a few minutes for Amy to direct them where she wanted them, all of them next to her, with no one hidden behind anyone else. She ended up with Melissa on her left and Jana on her right, her arms around their waists, while Runner sat cross-legged on the ground in front of her, her head resting against Amy's inner thigh, her arm wrapped around Amy's leg, hand resting on Amy's outer thigh.

Runner looked up at her uncertainly. "What do I do, Amy?"

Amy suddenly realized that, though Runner had seen any number of photographs, she'd never had her own picture taken before. Amy pointed. "That's the camera she's holding right there. That's what makes the picture. Just look right at it, and smile like it's a really close friend."

Runner grinned back. "I'll pretend it's you." She beamed at the camera.

Amy asked Jessica, "Is the lighting a problem? They're all kind of... reflective." The girls were all still wet from the pool.

Jessica shook her head. "Not a problem. On three..." Melissa tilted her head against Amy, and Jana put her arm across Amy's back and pressed her hip against Amy's. Jessica counted, and pressed the button.

As Jessica lowered the camera, Runner looked up at Amy again. "Did she do it?"

Amy smiled at her. "Yeah, it's done." She looked at Jessica. "Is there any way we can see that now?"

Jessica nodded. "Sure." The camera, storing all of the images digitally, had a small printer on the side. She pressed a few buttons, and a wide, flat tongue of stiff paper issued from the slot. Jessica took it and handed it to Amy, as Runner scrambled to her feet.

As Amy held it, Runner stood transfixed, staring at it, her lips pressed together, her eyes unblinking.

Amy, though conscious of Runner's superiority in reading body language, had no trouble reading Runner's. She looked at Jessica. "Is there any way she could keep that..." She looked at Scott, biting her lip. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't ask. I know this is costing you more money."

Scott started, "It's not a big..." but was interrupted by Jessica saying, "It's on me," smiling.

Amy looked at her, wide-eyed. "Really??" Impulsively, she reached out and hugged Jessica. "Thank you."

Jessica, a little startled, said, "No problem."

Amy turned and held the photo towards Runner. "This is for..." She stopped and looked back and forth between Melissa and Jana. "You guys understand, right?"

Melissa said, "Absolutely," while Jana nodded vigorously.

Amy smiled at both of them, and turned back to Runner. "This is yours."

Runner's jaw dropped as she took the photo from Amy. "Mine?" Amy nodded.

Holding the picture by her fingertips in both hands, Runner said breathlessly, "I'm going to go put this in my bag," turned, and made a dash for the guesthouse.

Amy watched her go, sighed, and turned back to Scott, hugging him and kissing his cheek.

He grinned. "What's that for?"

"Just general principles. And because you said yes too."

Sharon had approached and stopped a few paces away. She cleared her throat now. "Mister Calvin? The wedding coach is here."

Scott gave Amy a quick kiss on the lips and turned to the slavegirl. "Show her to the guesthouse, please, Sharon." He looked back at Amy. "You guys should all go there too. I'll hang around out here and bring my buddies back there when they show up."

Amy nodded, kissed him again, and started to walk with Melissa and Jana back to the guesthouse, but stopped. "Sharon, my bag is up in Scott's room... ummm, Mister Calvin's room..." She laughed briefly. "My room. Could you or Matty bring it out to the guesthouse? I need something that's in it."

Sharon nodded, "Yes, ma'am," and did a small curtsy.

Amy blinked. That was the first time either of Benjamin's slaves had called her that. Well, she told herself, life's full of changes.

* * * * *

Melissa finished buttoning the back of Amy's dress. "You do look fine without a bra, Amy. I'm just thinking about whether the dress is going to chafe your boobs, rubbing back and forth when you walk around."

Though disdaining support for her breasts, Amy had decided to wear panties, for now. She would discard them later, but she'd been feeling the lubrication oozing out between her legs all morning, in anticipation of her hanging, and felt more comfortable with something soaking it up -- she had added, in fact, a heavy-duty sanitary napkin. She'd come prepared.

The dress was a pretty cream color, and she liked the style -- long sleeves, shoulders slightly puffy, not excessively so, snug across her tummy, with a somewhat more sheer material across her breasts that showed the shape of them separately, the neckline running straight across the top of them, showing just a hint of cleavage. The bottom hem was near her ankles, and she thought about having the girls oil her legs beforehand, since they wouldn't show under the dress anyway, but decided to wait. She shook her head. "No, it feels fine. I don't think I'll need to move that much anyway. Now help me with this." She picked up the strip of material that matched the color of the dress, bought yesterday at the bridal shop on the way home from the city marriage office.

Melissa blinked. "What kind of help do you need with a choker?"

Amy shook her head. "Not with the choker itself. Hold on." She bent down to her bag and unzipped the pocket containing the envelope. Carefully, trying not to lose any strands, she extracted the five inch cutting of brown hair. Her tongue lodged against the edge of her lips as she concentrated, she wrapped the lock of hair around the choker and tied it in a knot, on the outer side of the choker, to hold it in place. She nodded, and muttered to herself, "That should stay."

Runner, Amy noticed, didn't look especially puzzled until she saw that Melissa and Jana did. Apparently she assumed Amy was doing something normal until the evidence came in that it wasn't. "What's that for, Amy?"

Amy smiled at Runner. "Remember what I told you about my first roommate, Susan?"

Runner nodded. "We saw her in the Hall of Honor. They hanged her at your first demo."

"Well, this is some of her hair. You saw how short it was, right?" Runner nodded. "It was cut so she could play a prisoner in the little show we put on beforehand. She was the first girl to do any kind of show at a demo, instead of them just hanging her so we could all watch. Anyway, I promised her I'd wear her hair around my choker when I did *my* show. Right up next to the rope. I just wanted her to know I'd remember her always."

Runner looked wide-eyed at the bit of hair now tied around the choker, then up at Amy. "I'll remember *you* always, Amy." She suddenly knelt beside her own bag, and stroked the side of it, looking up at Amy as she did it. "When I do *my* show, I'm going to have the picture of us. I'll put it somewhere on me."

Amy blinked quickly to keep the tears from flowing. This wasn't a good time to have to restore her makeup. As Runner stood again, Amy kissed her. "Thank you, honey." She picked up the choker, brushing her finger against the right side of her neck, and looked at Melissa. "I need you to help me put this right over my carotid." She put on the choker and fastened it, and stood still while Melissa, her own tongue sticking out the way Amy's had earlier, gently tugged it around so Susan's hair was in the proper place.

As Melissa stepped back, nodding with satisfaction, Amy said, "Oh! I hadn't thought of this somehow. The pulse monitor is in my slave choker, and I'm not going to be wearing that."

Melissa looked startled. "Oh, right! Well, it's okay, Amy. I can just do it the old-fashioned way. I'll check your pulse myself."

Amy nodded. "Okay. But... okay, just leave me hanging about an extra five minutes after you think I'm dead. I'll tell Scott, so he knows what's going on. I just don't want you checking over and over."

Melissa smiled. "Amy, I can tell..." She waved her hand. "Never mind, though, I'll do it that way."

Amy let out a sigh. I'm ready now, she told herself.

Melissa, Jana, and Runner were all in their bridesmaids dresses -- of a cut similar to Amy's, but in a soft yellow color. They had all arranged their hair in semi-formal styles, held by clips. Runner had done her own, based on the practice she'd had with it prior to the last party, though she did seek out advice from Melissa, who relocated one of the clips by about an inch. Amy's hair was too short to be rearranged in any significant way, but Jana had smoothed it out with a hairbrush.

Amy looked up as the door opened, and three young men entered. She recognized one of them immediately -- Scott's apartment roommate from his days at the university. She moved towards him, giving him a hug. "Alan! It's nice to see you."

He grinned and returned the hug. "Hey, Amy! Scott says this is all for real? You guys really are married?" Alan, like the other two men, looked half-stunned. All three had anticipated a hanging, but had had no idea a wedding party was included -- much less that they'd actually be participants in it.

Alan's degree of surprise ran even deeper. "I had absolutely no hint you were the girl Scott was going to be hanging! So... I guess you got through the Hanging Academy okay, then?"

Amy laughed. "So it seems."

"This is *so* weird. You know, I thought all along you and Scott could end up married, if it wasn't for the Academy thing. And you did anyway!" He frowned. "I never heard of a Hanging Girl being married. I thought you were all slaves."

"I was. Scott freed me for this."

He shook his head in wonder. "And you're still going to hang anyway?"

She laughed. "Alan, it's what we *do*! Anyway, are you going to introduce me to your friends?"

"Oh!" Alan turned to look at the others. "I don't exactly actually know them. You guys are from Scott's work, right?"

The nearer one, with short dark hair, nodded. "I'm Doug." He shook hands with Amy. "And this is Rob." The other man, shorter, his hair curly and blonde, stepped forward to greet Amy. Amy, in turn, introduced her friends, and then Annie, the wedding coach.

Annie said, "Why don't you guys get into your coats, and we'll get you paired up with the girls, and I'll tell you what you need to do. Have you been to any wedding parties before?" She'd asked the girls the same question earlier. Runner, of course, had not, though she'd seen a few on TV -- or bits and pieces of a few, anyway.

As the men put on coats -- all sky blue, all of them more or less fitting the wearers, whose sizes Scott had estimated beforehand -- Amy said to Alan, "I never really got a chance to thank you for..." She giggled. "Well, this sounds rude, but thank you for not being around much, when I was seeing Scott. I don't mean you aren't wonderful company or anything like that, but it was nice being able to get some time alone with Scott."

Alan laughed. "You're welcome. And I understand. It was kind of a favor we traded. Like he'd clear out when I brought girls over."

"Well, anyway, thanks." She kissed him on the cheek.

Annie said, "All of you stand still for a sec. I usually arrange the pairings by heights..."

* * * * *

About ten minutes after the men left the guesthouse, Annie, standing outside the door watching them take their places, signaled to Melissa to begin the formal portion of the party.

Melissa, in her yellow bridesmaids' dress, emerged from the guesthouse and began walking slowly towards the assembled guests in front of the hanging stage, carrying a basket, its handle hooked over

her left arm, into which she reached periodically for a handful of red rose petals, scattering them around her as she walked. Amy, watching unseen from the dim interior of the guesthouse, heard the waiting crowd quiet suddenly, and saw them turn to watch Melissa.

About thirty feet behind her, Jana followed, distributing yellow petals, her face bearing a wide smile that threatened to turn into a giggle. Neither she nor Melissa had ever participated in a wedding party before, and neither had expected that they ever would -- neither happened to have had any close friends get married in the short months following high school graduation before they entered the Academy, and between the two of them they had only one older sister, Melissa's sister Miranda, who had, of course, never married. Both, however, had attended such parties for more distant acquaintances or cousins, so they had listened to Annie's instructions with some idea beforehand of what was expected of them.

Melissa had suggested that Runner should go last, being the least familiar with wedding traditions, though she'd actually seen this part before on television. Runner followed Jana, her petals blue.

At about the same time that Alan, standing to Scott's right between him and Benjamin, reached out for Melissa's hand and she took her position beside him, Amy, her heart fluttering, her mouth helplessly smiling, saw Annie's signal. Holding a floral bouquet in front of her, the same one she had held for pictures earlier, she stepped out of the guesthouse, and began walking at the same slow pace the others had used, following the gaily-colored path of petals they had made for her. At the near edge of the crowd, Jessica, the photographer, her camera held up to her eyes and aimed at Amy, went down on one knee and took several pictures as Amy approached. Several members of the crowd began applauding, and it quickly spread to the rest.

Amy was accustomed to being applauded, but the context was so different here that Amy was more self-conscious as the object of attention than she had been in a long time. She could feel herself blushing, and quickly looked above the waiting faces to the hanging noose. She took a deep breath, as the sight of it both calmed her and excited her.

She could pick out individual faces now, as she came closer. She spotted Steffi Bloom, grinned at her and gave her a small finger-wave. Justin, Jimmy, and Paul from the boat that had rescued her were standing together, dressed neatly but more casually than for the Academy party, in buttoned shirts and slacks. She waved to them as well. Her father was standing near Scott, beaming with a show of pride she hadn't seen directed at her before, and she blew him a kiss.

She suddenly sucked in a quick gasp and nearly stopped walking in her astonishment -- Dean Porter was here, smiling and applauding with everyone else.

The faces of the rest of the crowd were unfamiliar, probably a mixture of friends and colleagues of Scott and Benjamin -- she assumed she could tell whom they were connected with by their ages.

She gave Melissa, Jana, and Runner each a smile -- Jana standing with Rob, to Scott's left, and Runner with Doug next to them -- and then fixed her eyes on Scott. As she stopped in front of him, the guests quieted again, their applause dying down. In the utter quiet, Scott smiled, reached out to slide his arms around her. Holding each other, they kissed, a long, soft touch of lips.

They broke the kiss at last, and Amy stepped to the side and turned to face the guests, Scott's arm around her waist. Scott, a little nervously but speaking clearly, said, "I want to thank you, all of you, for honoring us with your presence. I present to you..." He paused, almost unable to form words around a huge smile, then went on, "...Mrs. Calvin Scott Smith -- my wife, Amy Cameron Smith."

The applause broke out again, louder than before, accompanied by exuberant shouts. The sounds then slowly quieted as the guests began forming a line to file past the newlyweds.

Some soft music began to play over the sound system. Amy understood there would be some dancing later, between her hanging and the barbecue.

Before any other guests could approach, Amy turned and hugged Benjamin. "Thank you so much, for everything."

Benjamin looked a little sheepish. "I suppose I should have told you, when we met in your dean's office..."

Amy grinned and shook her head. "I love surprises. This was the best ever, Benjamin. Oh, I just thought. I should probably call you Dad..." She looked to her left, and shook her head. "Maybe not, though. My own dad is right there."

Benjamin smiled. "'Benjamin' is still fine."

Amy let go of Benjamin and lunged at her father who, standing nearest the groomsmen, had managed to be first in line. She squeezed him in a bear hug, her head against his chest. "I am *so* glad you're here, Daddy."

Preston rumbled, "Wouldn't miss it... Though I didn't have any idea a wedding party was included." He sounded slightly miffed.

She looked up at him. "Daddy, I didn't even know until yesterday. It was all meant to be a surprise, and Scott... Oh! Daddy, this is Scott." She released her father and gestured towards Scott. She giggled. "I know this seems weird, introducing you to a man I'm already married to. Please, don't be mad, Daddy! I wish now you'd met him four years ago... do you remember? I told you a little about him then. But I was so set on going to the Academy, we were both trying not to get too serious. But I love him, Daddy." She held her father's eyes with her own. "Very much."

Preston looked at her a moment longer, then seemed to relax a bit, and held out his hand towards Scott. "Preston Cameron."

Scott let out a visible sigh of relief. "Scott Smith. This is my dad, Benjamin Smith." As handshakes were exchanged, Preston went so far as to smile at Scott. "I'd ask what sort of long-term plans you and my girl have, but I understand I don't need to worry about that."

Scott laughed. "Not at all, sir. But I do want you to know I will do everything I can to make your daughter happy..."

Amy leaned against him and kissed his cheek. "You already have, honey."

She looked around, wanting to introduce her father to her friends from school, but couldn't spot them anywhere. Shrugging, she decided she could do it later.

Benjamin shook hands with Preston once more, and said, "Well, help yourself at the snack table. The bar is at the far end..."

Amy, her eyes finding Steffi, about halfway down the line, interrupted. "Daddy! Have you talked to Steffi Bloom yet, like I said to? You promised you would."

Preston looked uncomfortable. "Well..."

Amy gave him a stern look. "Daddy, she did so much for me, and she didn't have to do any of it. I've told her how grateful I am, but I want you to do it too. I know you must still be thinking she's responsible for what happened to Andrew. Andrew's an adult, he made his own decisions, and the consequences to him were his own doing. The only thing Steffi was ever thinking of was protecting me." She flashed a sly smile. "My dying wish, okay? Now you can't say no."

He sighed. "Okay. After she gets through the line."

She hugged him once more, and giggled. "Now get some food. It's going to be awhile before the big feast."

As he walked in the direction of the bar, Benjamin introduced Amy to the next guests in line, one of his employees and her husband.

* * * * *

Amy hugged Dean Porter unself-consciously. "It's so great you came! I never imagined!"

He smiled. "Well, I may be the only guest here who knew he was coming to a wedding party."

"About that. Ummm... I was remembering something awhile ago about your sale contracts. You always attach conditions to them, about having to hang the girl within a certain time. Letting Benjamin or Scott free me doesn't seem to fit -- I mean, as a free woman I can decide on my own future. Did you... well, what I mean is..."

The dean relieved her of having to find a tactful way to inquire into his business arrangements. Smiling again, he said, "No, this wasn't a normal Academy contract. Just a straight-up sale. And yes, I did understand Mr. Smith's intentions."

"But why would you..." She smiled suddenly, understanding. "You knew I'd insist on hanging. You didn't need any of the guarantees you normally get."

He nodded. "That's part of it. I trusted you, but it's actually never been a matter of trusting my own girls. I knew you'd do the right thing, as I know any graduate would. It went beyond that in this case. I trusted Mr. Smith. Benjamin. I've known him for years."

She thrust out her lower lip in a mock pout. "What, so it wasn't because I was special?"

He laughed. "You're misunderstanding, for once. What really charmed me about the idea was that it would give you a unique ending. As unique as you've been as a student, I thought you'd earned that."

Tears stinging her eyes for the hundredth time today, she hugged him again. "Thank you for making all this..." she gestured to indicate the grounds and the activity all around, "...possible. I'm happier than I ever imagined I could be."

"I can see that."

* * * * *

Melissa suddenly appeared, holding Alan's hand as they emerged between some tall shrubbery, both brushing what seemed to be loose blades of grass from their clothes. Alan's face wore a half-stunned grin. Amy, between guest greetings for the moment, waved Melissa over. "Where have you been? Like I can't tell." She giggled.

Melissa laughed. "Ummm, well, busy."

"Jana and Runner still 'busy'?"

"I guess. I kind of lost track of them." She laughed again. "This was Runner's idea. Or, well, I don't know if 'idea' is the right word." Amy's puzzled look set her off laughing again. When she caught her breath, she explained. "Last night, Runner was asking all these questions about what we were supposed to do. Matty had said there'd be a wedding coach, and we told Runner the coach would explain all that, but you know how she gets when she wants to know something. So we described it as well as we could, and then she asked, 'How do I know when to take my partner into the woods and have sex with him?' She'd seen that in a movie! And she thought it was just one of the things a bridesmaid does at a wedding party! We told her they don't, uhhh, usually do that, but then it occurred to us it sounded kind of fun. So we figured out when we could work that in."

Scott looked at Alan, who was now at one of the snack tables, and choked back laughter. "What, you mean that's where Doug and Rob are?"

Melissa nodded, and burst out laughing again.

Scott shook his head. "Well, I guess they'll remember *my* wedding." He and Amy both needed some time to recover from laughing before greeting the next guests.

* * * * *

Steffi hugged Amy warmly. "I am so glad to see you so happy."

“Oh, Steffi, you just can’t even imagine.”

“I wanted to make sure and tell you, I’ve been consulting with some sociologists, experts on primitive societies in general. We’ve formed sort of a working group, and a lot of good ideas are coming out of it.”

Amy gasped excitedly. “That’s great, Steffi!” Amy had felt sure Steffi would get interested in the ideas Amy had expressed when she’d visited Steffi’s house shortly after her rescue.

Steffi sighed. “I just wish I had something more concrete to tell you before you go...”

Amy shook her head vigorously. “No, please don’t worry about that. I’m so happy just knowing you’re putting your energy into it. So many women’s lives are going to be better, because of you.”

Steffi smiled and shook her head. “Because of you, Amy.”

They hugged again, and Amy said, “Oh, Steffi... Would you go over and say hi to my dad? He’s been looking to talk to you, but he...” she hesitated only an instant, deciding how to phrase it, “...gets kind of sidetracked.”

Steffi gave her a puzzled look, but nodded. “Sure.”

* * * * *

“Honey, these are the sailors who rescued me from the Island! This is Justin Greene, the captain... Jimmy Pellis... Paul Bailor. I want all of you to meet my husband, Scott Smith.” Wow! thought Amy, how odd it sounds to say that, but somehow just right.

After all had shaken hands with Scott, and Amy had hugged Bailor and Pellis, she gave Greene an especially warm, tight hug. Her arms still around his shoulders, she backed away enough to look in his face. “I think every day about how you helped me when nobody else could. I’m so happy you get a chance to see what you saved me for! Listen, while I’m hanging, at one point I’ll be facing in your direction. When I do a little double kick with my feet, that’s me saying goodbye to you, and ‘thank you’ one last time. Okay?”

He grinned and nodded, then blinked in surprise as Amy kissed him. He shot a quick look at Scott, but Scott simply smiled, held out his hand for another shake and said, “Thanks again.”

* * * * *

Amy had missed seeing Jana and Runner return, but spotted them over at the snack table, both with paper plates, Jana apparently making suggestions to Runner as to which treats would be good. Amy waved, trying to get their attention, but suddenly her own attention was drawn to the portable barbecue pit, beyond the hanging stage, where two women from the catering crew were preparing to light the fire. One of them sprayed lighter fluid over the top of the coal bed, while the other turned on the gas jets beneath the coal. The fire sprang quickly to life when touched by flame guns, and Amy closed her eyes, inhaling deeply the always-exciting smell of mixed lighter fluid and charcoal. It’s for me it’s for me it’s for me! a voice inside her chanted. All her life, long before devoting herself to hanging, Amy had been conscious of every woman’s goal of being food, and her hopes that she could provide for

the people she loved most. That fire, she thought, that fire I'm seeing right there in front of me, that's my completion as a woman.

Near the barbecue pit stood the carving table, and beside it the large jar full of preserving fluid. In just a few hours, she marveled, my head is going to be in that! She brushed her fingers across her cheek. This head right here, she told herself.

She looked up again at the noose. And I get to hang!! said another voice inside her. My completion as a Hanging Girl.

* * * * *

As Amy and Scott finished greeting the last guests in line, Scott held his arm up. "Everybody! I know this is a little out of the usual order, but we can't wait and share the wedding cake *after* dinner, and I assume you all know why." There was laughter all around, and Scott, taking Amy's hand, led her to the table on which the cake towered.

Amy, as soon as she was close enough to see the cake, threw her hands to her face and started laughing. The cake was topped by five-inch-high bride and groom figures -- the groom dressed formally in a tux and bow tie, looking up at the bride, who was naked, hands bound behind her with string, hanging by the neck from a tiny noose.

Amy spun towards Scott and threw her arms around him again. "I love it!" She kissed him once more, while the guests applauded.

CHAPTER 38

As the guests accepted slices of cake on paper plates from Matty and Sharon in the serving line, Amy aimed another plastic forkful of cake at Scott's mouth, holding it there for a moment while Jessica snapped another picture. Scott reached out with a finger to wipe a bit of excess frosting from Amy's lip, and she caught his hand and sucked on his finger for a moment, giggling.

Amy caught herself turning her eyes towards the stage again. It was getting harder to tear her attention away, and harder to ignore the tingling between her legs -- she'd never been a squirter, but felt almost as though she was doing it now. The napkin in her panties was soaked completely through, and it felt slick and soapy rubbing against her. No, she told herself, not yet, not yet. This is Scott's time.

As Scott gave her her last bite of cake, and she started to look at the stage again, her eyes were caught by his, as if he had reached out for them and grabbed them. He was smiling. "You want to get ready, don't you?"

She couldn't speak. How rude, she thought, to tell him she wanted to leave him.

He leaned forward and kissed her -- a long, soft, tender kiss. Not a goodbye kiss, she knew. That would come later. He broke the kiss and took her hand, squeezing it. His eyes just inches from hers, he whispered, "Go. It's your time now."

She looked at him, wondering how he could come so close to reading her concern and addressing it. She opened her mouth, and he beat her to it, for once. "I love you."

She giggled, feeling bubbles of release bursting inside her. "And I love you." She put her hand behind his head and kissed him again. She turned quickly, and got the attention, in turn, of Jana, Melissa, and Runner, pointing towards the guesthouse as she caught each one's eye.

As she moved to follow them, Amy stopped suddenly, blinking at the sight of her father walking by, holding a drink cup in each hand. She turned as he went past, and saw him stop by Steffi and hand her one of the drinks. It appeared Steffi must have been expecting it, so evidently they had already been talking. Amy hadn't noticed. Steffi said something to him, and Amy blinked again when her father laughed in response. It was not something Amy had seen very often.

And on that positive note, thought Amy to herself, I am out of here.

Trying not to attract undue attention but smiling and giving a finger wave to a few people who did notice her, Amy walked to the guesthouse.

* * * * *

As Amy arrived at the guesthouse and Melissa immediately began unbuttoning the back of Amy's dress, Amy heard Runner saying to Jana, apparently in continuation of an ongoing conversation, "You should pick out where you want to go, and we could put some ropes there beforehand so he can tie you up if he wants to..."

Melissa spoke up. "Just make sure there's some bushes close by so I can watch from there."

Amy, having a hard time concentrating on the outside world as she rehearsed her hanging moves in her head, at last registered the conversation and slowly concluded she did not know what the hell they were talking about. She looked at Jana, around whom the talk seemed to be centering. "What?"

Jana giggled. "Oh! Well, we had a really fun time with Scott's friends, and Runner said maybe we should do your boat friends too. While the dancing and all that is going on, after your hanging."

Runner nodded. "I never got to be with Justin. He just would want straight sex, wouldn't he, Amy?"

Amy smiled at her. "Yeah, do a lot of stroking and kissing. He'd like that. What was this about the ropes?"

Jana answered, "She said I should be with Bailor, because he'd want to really take control. Melissa's going to do Jimmy first, and then -- you heard this part -- she'll watch from the bushes while I'm with Bailor. I'm not reading anything dangerous in him, just that he's kind of aggressive. But it never hurts to be safe."

Amy nodded. Her first instinct was to encourage caution in a situation less controlled than an Academy party, but if Melissa was going to keep an eye out, with Scott and an entire wedding party within earshot, she didn't see cause for worry. She shrugged out of her dress, handing it to Melissa, and pointed to her bag. "Jana, could you get the oil? And the sponges are in there. Melissa, let me look closer at that dress."

She took the dress back from Melissa, and examined it on the inside, more closely than she had before. It was designed to be ripped away easily, its front and back halves slightly overlapping, held together on the inside by small loops of thread sewn into the fabric, every few inches from top to bottom, as well as down the sleeves. She had found that, as long as she didn't need to bend over, none of the spaces between the threads spread apart far enough to show any skin. She bit her lip, and said to Melissa, "We need to test this somehow."

Melissa pointed. "Let's rip open that stitch at the bottom, on the right side. That's expendable."

Amy nodded and handed her that part of the dress. "You do it, since you and Scott are going to be doing it for real later. See how much effort it takes."

Melissa, her lips pressed together, pulled at the fabric on either side of the stitch. In a moment it gave way. She nodded and draped the dress over a chair. "It wasn't as hard as it probably looked. I was trying to make sure I didn't rip any more of them than that. We'll have to give it a pretty good yank, but it's no big deal." She looked behind her. "Do you have... Oh, good." She took one of the sponges from Jana.

Amy pulled down her panties, relieved to get the slimy material away from her crotch. She giggled. "Kind of think I needed a heavier napkin. These are really a mess, hon. I don't know if you even want to bother taking them back with you."

Melissa laughed. "I'll give them to Scott. He'll probably want them as is."

Amy smiled at her. "Oh, would you? Thank you."

Runner stood holding her sponge. "What do we do, Amy?"

Amy looked at all three of them. "Okay, none of you has done this before, but there's nothing tricky. Just soak your sponges in the oil and rub it all over my body, from the neck down. Check each other's work to make sure you don't miss any spots -- underarms, between legs, everything."

Runner's eyes went wide. "Oh! This is how they make the girls shiny before they hang!"

Amy nodded. "Right." She stood with her legs apart, her arms away from her sides. Jana knelt first and began oiling Amy's feet, as Melissa started on her upper legs. Runner, after watching the others briefly, started oiling Amy's shoulders.

Amy closed her eyes and sighed, blanking her thoughts of hanging for the moment and giving in to the pure sensation.

She had never felt closer to Miranda. Amy had known Miranda for such a very brief time, and almost her only physical contact with her had been oiling her body, while Beth had busied herself with Miranda's crotch rope. Amy felt the circle of a Hanging Girl's life completing itself, from her birth on the day she'd met Miranda, to the day she had aimed herself towards ever since.

She gasped and giggled as Melissa passed the sponge between her buttocks, at the same moment Runner was approaching her crotch from the front and above.

The girls finished and spent some time looking closely, and Amy smiled as she wondered whether her naked body had ever had quite *this* much visual attention. At last they looked at each other, and Melissa turned to Amy. "All done."

Amy pointed to her dress. "See if you can get that back on me so it does as little sliding across my skin as possible."

After some discussion, Jana helped Melissa turn the dress nearly inside out, rolling up the sleeves, then together they held it over Amy's head, bringing it down over her head and hands and then unrolling it down her body and arms.

While Melissa was buttoning it in back, Amy held out her arms to Jana. Holding Jana, she kissed her and said, "Have a great life and a great hanging. With your feet tied." Jana giggled and promised she would.

Amy hugged Melissa next. "Make the Warren family proud. Again. And tell Maria about me when she gets here." She kissed her, and Melissa brushed a tear away as she said, "I will."

She turned finally to Runner, and held both her hands. "You've come such a long way since I met you. And I don't just mean from the island. I couldn't be here without you today, and I thank you so, so, so much." She drew Runner closer for a hug, and whispered, "Always love everybody. Always be happy. And always be the best Hanging Girl you can be." She kissed her.

Runner's eyes were glowing, and Amy wondered whether it was a reflection of her own eyes or something contained in Runner's. "I will, Amy. I love you."

Amy, in a choked voice, said, "I love you, Runner."

Amy let her go, stood back, and closed her eyes a moment, breathing deeply. She let the joy, the excitement, the eager anticipation, burst forth into her conscious mind again. "Okay, here's how I want us to go out..."

* * * * *

For the second time, Melissa, Jana, and Runner emerged from the guesthouse, together this time -- Melissa in the middle, holding Jana's left hand with her right, Runner's right hand with her left. In their free hands, Jana and Runner each held a small coil of rope.

They paused, about ten feet out from the door, until they were noticed -- first by one of Benjamin's friends, and then by all as the word spread through the crowd, which immediately was hushed. At that time, Amy emerged, and closed the guesthouse door behind her. She giggled briefly at the thought of closing the door being symbolic of leaving her life behind. At this point, she told herself, I can probably find some symbolism in pretty much anything.

She took a deep breath of the day's fresh air, and fixed her eyes on the stage, giving only minimal attention to her friends walking ten feet ahead of her. As before, applause spread through the crowd, in pockets at first and then general.

Bill and Karl, as soon as they observed Amy's approach, took up positions on the stage on either side of the hanging platform, several paces behind it. Bill flipped a switch on the device that generated interference with any local electronic devices, the usual precaution against any images of the hanging being recorded. Both men then stood with their hands folded in front of them, as still as statues except for the movements of their eyes, scanning the crowd.

Scott now mounted the steps to the stage and stood beside the platform, beaming with pride.

The girls broke their formation as they reached the steps, Melissa stepping up to the stage first, then Jana, then Runner. They took up a position on the side of the platform opposite Scott, with Melissa nearest.

As before, Amy, as she approached, picked out the people she knew in the crowd, her own invitees. The men from the boat, of course, were standing together. Amy smiled, thinking how none of them knew what the girls had planned for them during the post-hanging partying.

More surprisingly, Amy's father was still standing with Steffi. Good, thought Amy, that cuts down on the number of different directions I'll have to face.

Matty and Sharon, their duties done for the moment, stood together, each with her arm around the other's waist, Sharon whispering something in Matty's ear, Matty nodding, her eyes going from Amy to

the stage. Amy suspected they were considering asking Benjamin to hang them together when their time came.

Amy beamed at Dean Porter, giving him a thumbs-up signal. He smiled and nodded in return.

She fixed her eyes on the noose once more. Sparing barely enough attention to the steps leading up to the stage, she found that the level of her excitement, which she had thought was already at its maximum, reached a new higher plateau with her rise to each step.

On the stage now, she approached Scott's open arms, and felt them enfold her. She sought out his lips for another kiss.

He let go of her, and she walked around him to stop behind the platform. Between Scott and the platform, lying on the stage, she saw the huge carving knife. She smiled. Her father didn't yet know that Scott was going to ask him to make the first cut, the same privilege Preston had given to Kevin Warren, Miranda's father, so long ago.

The circle, she thought, keeps closing in so many ways.

Beyond the stage, she saw the air shimmer with waves of heat rising from the coal bed of the barbecue. She closed her eyes briefly, breathing in the aroma of heated charcoal again. In just another hour or so, she reminded herself, a woman will be cooking there -- me!

Facing the crowd, she felt her connection with them grow stronger. It's exactly the way I always pictured it! she told herself. These are the people who will see my show! They're very excited already, she observed easily. In their own way. They can't know how I'm feeling, but they have feelings of their own. Already aroused, some of them, already uncomfortable with growing erections or moistening panties, the ones who have some idea what to expect.

Miranda! her inner voice shouted silently, triumphantly. I'm here!

She stood still, her eyes sweeping across the gathered audience. Scott had told her he wanted to speak first.

To her right, Scott held up his hand, and the applause quieted, conversations were hushed.

"And now..." Scott said, and for the moment the quiet seemed to extend even to the birds chirping in the trees. He paused and went on. "My wife tells me she has a little show she'd like to put on for you."

The silence was shattered by whoops of laughter and renewed applause.

Amy stepped up onto the platform, her face almost hurting from the breadth of her smile. Burying a moan as she felt the noose brush her shoulder, she clasped her hands together in front of her, to keep them from visibly shaking in her excitement. Just let me get nooseborne, she told herself, and I'll be perfectly calm.

She swept her gaze over the crowd. "Most of you probably know the usual thing is to perform a little skit before the hanging. We're not going to do that today, for a lot of reasons. One is, we couldn't work in any rehearsal time, because Scott and I have been, ummm, kind of busy for the last twenty-four hours or so." She giggled, and her audience laughed appreciatively.

She went on, "The biggest reason, though, is I don't want a piece of fiction to take away from the... realness, of today, my wedding day. I never thought I'd love any man the way I love Scott, right now." She looked down at Scott, and saw him mouth "I love you." She mouthed the same back to him, and returned her attention to the crowd.

"I never knew, when I was going through the Academy, exactly what the circumstances would be, for my hanging. I knew I'd be excited, no matter what. But I never imagined being so happy. So many people I love are here right now. Scott -- Daddy -- Steffi -- Dean Porter -- Justin -- Paul -- Jimmy -- Melissa -- Jana -- Runner -- Benjamin... I love you so much I want to give you *everything*, and what makes me happy is that I can do that. Those of you I just met today, I love you too. Either Scott or Benjamin invited you, so you're special to them, and that makes you special to me too. I'll give you everything I've learned in the last four years, and then I'll give you my body, so I can always be part of you." She grinned. "So let's start on that right now."

She looked down and gave a little hand gesture to Scott and to Melissa, who both jumped up beside her on the platform, and the crowd grew very quiet once more. Amy put her hand behind Scott's head and gave him a long kiss, during which he let his hand drift casually up to the low neckline in front of her dress. She whispered, "Goodbye, honey. Thank you so much. I love you."

He whispered back, "I love you too. Always."

Behind her, Amy felt Melissa's fingers curl around the top of her dress, against her back. Amy could see Scott locking eyes with Melissa, and nod. Melissa whispered, "One, two, three..." and together they both pulled. As the uppermost stitches gave way, both of them jumped away, off the platform, keeping hold of the dress, its front and back halves separating down its length and along its sleeves.

The last of the dress tore away, and Amy stood, alone atop the platform, naked and glowing in the sunlight. A single collective gasp emerged from the wide-eyed crowd. At every hanging, this moment was always so dramatic in its suddenness, giving the witnesses just a small hint of the powerfully erotic vision to come. Amy put her hands behind her, arching her back, standing proudly with her feet apart.

Runner and Jana jumped onto the stage with their ropes. Jana quickly looped her rope around Amy's waist, while Runner was tying Amy's hands. Runner had wanted an active participation role so badly that Amy had relented from her earlier determination that Runner should only watch. Jana, finishing her own knot, passed the remaining loose length of rope from one end of the knot through Amy's legs to Runner, who tied it around the rope between Amy's wrists. Runner had done Amy's crotch rope many times for practice sessions over recent weeks, and Amy trusted her by now to do it exactly right.

Amy kissed Jana, giving her an "I love you" and hearing it in return, then turned to Runner. Runner's eyes were blazing now, and Amy had the odd thought that she wished she could tell an astronomer that she understood what caused a star to go nova -- some inhabitant of a planet circling the star, Amy's

theory went, radiated so much excitement, in the way Runner was now, that it made the star explode. Amy kissed her and said, "Thank you for saving me. I love you."

Runner put her arms around Amy, and rubbed her cheek against Amy's. At last she said, "I love you, Amy. Thank you for bringing me here." She turned and followed Jana in jumping down from the platform, and sat on the stage with Jana, a few feet away.

Melissa stepped up once more, took hold of the noose, and lowered it over Amy's head. tightening it around her neck. Any of the three girls could have done this, but Amy had wanted Miranda's sister to have the privilege. With the knot placed and adjusted, Amy kissed her, and said, "I love you. Tell Miranda all about it tonight." Melissa told her she would, and jumped down from the platform, leaving Amy to stand alone once more.

She evened out her breathing, trusting Melissa to signal Scott when it was time. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Scott, standing beside the platform, pull the lever. The platform began sinking.

Amy worked to clear all thoughts from her head, and chanted in her mind, Hanging Girl, Hanging Girl, Hanging Girl...

The rope around her neck tightened and lifted her. Her feet came free of the world, never to return to it in her lifetime.

A sensation of power, of being in control of the emotions of all of the people around her, came over her more intensely than at any time since she had last performed with Megan. Now it's just me, she told herself. They all came to see me.

Along with the power was the feeling of floating, a familiar friend she had known since her first time hanging.

As she oriented herself, kicking, preparing for her first moves, she smiled to herself, reminding herself that, as familiar as her routine was to her friends, few of the others watching in the crowd had ever seen anything like what she was about to do. Not even Scott.

She felt, suddenly, the mental equivalent of listening to a dozen songs on a dozen radios, while somehow keeping all of the tunes separate in her head. Images were flooding her mind, all simultaneous. Of Megan, showing to Amy and her classmates those special moves of hers for the first time, in that first hanging class. Of Susan, trying her best with little formal training, a lock of her cropped hair now pressed against Amy's neck, feeling the last beats of Amy's heart. Of Linda, looking like Zoey Hillcrest, kicking and squirming in the noose and helping Steffi conquer the anger that had clung to her for so many years. Of Runner, hanging for the first time, entering a world she had never imagined. Of Holly and Haley, hanging together, expressing a connection to each other that went far beyond mere love. And behind all of the images, surrounding them and unifying them, the image of Miranda, her dying performance as seen by a directionless high school girl whose life was changed forever.

Amy heard the gasps as she began her hip thrusts and Megan-style leg wraps, and saw several hands drifting towards their owners' crotches. She saw the open mouths, the widened eyes, as she

transitioned to Shawna's downward-straining wriggling, and the high-diver move Holly that had first attracted Amy's attention to her. She heard the soft moans and sighs from all directions in front of her.

I'm all Hanging Girls who have ever died for their art, ran the thought through Amy's head. All of their blood flows through me, and mine through them.

She turned to face Scott, projecting her love for him through her body movements, seeing his wide eyes following her. I can't thank you with my voice anymore, my dearest, her motions said, but I can thank you this way.

She swung herself around the other way, to face Runner, Melissa, and Jana, all sitting together on the stage looking up at her, unblinking. Of the three, only Runner was moving, her body swaying slightly, her hips, arms, and legs twitching, the muscles contracting in synchrony with Amy's. Her body is echoing every move I make, Amy observed. She's imagining herself here, in my place, the crowd watching her performance. For a time, Amy concentrated on Runner alone, dedicating the dance to her. At the back of Amy's mind ran a small trickle of regret that she wouldn't see Runner grow any more, see her evolve into the greatest Hanging Girl ever seen -- if anyone ever takes that title from Megan, Amy told herself, I'd be glad for it to be Runner -- but the trickle was overwhelmed by a flood of satisfaction, of joy in just having known Runner at all.

Turning now to face her father, and Steffi. Thank you, Dad, for giving me my first chance to be an Academy girl. And thank you, Steffi, for working so hard to try to get me a second chance.

Facing the dean, now, projecting her gratitude for giving her the home she needed, the direction she craved, and surrounding her with the friends who showed her what a real family could be.

Justin, Paul, Jimmy. Especially you, Justin, she thought. Deciding to help me when you didn't have to, and giving me my life back. Giving me this, giving me today. Amy did the double-kick she had promised Justin, and saw the smile curl his lips, the nod of his head.

Her mental hanging clock, developed to perfection over the years, told her twenty-two minutes had gone by.

Turning to face directly away from the crowd now, to give them a view from behind. So much harder to make the effort to breathe now, falling badly into oxygen debt.

She let the rope itself slowly turn her back to face the front, too tired to do it herself. Twenty-five minutes. There, she thought, though her thoughts were cottony, puffy things that were hard to grab onto. Wanted twenty-five. Might make thirty, but okay if I don't. Everybody satisfied. Can hear orgasms in front of me. Got to work on myself now.

She began working her hands, pulling the rope taut through her crotch. The tingling, there from the beginning, growing more intense now at the stimulation. A small burst of new energy. Feeling as though she was physically lifting her own body to float higher, higher, into the sky. The tingling spreading, pulsating.

Visually, the world seemed to be fogging like a windshield on a cold, moist morning. Sounds fading, heard through soft cotton earmuffs. The fog, the whiteness, the silence growing. Wait, she thought. I didn't finish yet...

* * * * *

The whiteness was all. Amy could see nothing else.

She felt entirely weightless. So many times she had experienced the sensation of floating while hanging, but it never before engulfed her perceptions to this extent. The rope around her neck was a comforting caress, and she found she could breathe easily in spite of it.

She wasn't aware of turning, but another naked hanging figure, hands tied behind like Amy's, swung into view from her left. She saw that it was herself, as if she were watching herself in a mirror. She had done that one time, but had found that the sight of herself hanging distracted her to such an extent that she couldn't do the proper breathing movements. Since breathing was, at the moment, not a problem, she watched, the tingling between her legs growing, as the dangling figure kicked and wriggled in echo of her own movements.

I never thought of myself as beautiful, thought Amy. Not like Megan, not like Runner. But when I'm hanging... A fish is lovely and graceful in water. A bird is clumsy and awkward hopping around on land, but when you see him riding a current of air, wings outstretched, his beauty can take your breath away. When I hang, when I'm in my element, I am beautiful.

The image of herself drifted closer somehow, the ropes holding herself and her reflected image aloft slowly converging. Amy was not aware of the figure in front of her changing until the transition was already complete. The figure's hair was blonde now, not brown. Long, not short. She gasped in recognition. "Megan!"

Megan smiled, and drifted still closer. Her body seemed to emit a glow that went beyond mere reflection of the ambient light on her oiled skin. Her face, while so familiar, somehow carried the quality of being new, unknown. Amy was conscious of feeling that instant physical attraction she had known at the first sight of Megan, at the Academy's orientation for new students.

Her hanging seemed not to interfere with Megan's ability to speak, any more than it had Amy's. "I'm so glad you're here, Amy."

Amy looked around, but there was nothing else to see in the whiteness. "Megan... where *is* here? There were people all around, watching my hanging. I was doing my show!"

Megan giggled. Somehow, though Megan's hands were tied, Amy felt one of them tap the side of her head. "We're in here."

"In... you mean in my mind? Like I'm dreaming?"

Megan nodded. "Remember that article we read once? I showed it to you. When I started looking up stuff about the 'brain flood,' at the moment of death?"

Amy looked at her, startled. The memory returned to her. She and Megan had both become interested in a phenomenon seen by neuroscientists -- that there was, in Hanging Girls, an intense burst of electrical activity in the brain in the last few instants before death. Several Hanging Girls, during demos at schools of hanging throughout the world, including the most esteemed of them all, Amy's own Hanging Academy, had worn wireless sensors on their heads during their final hanging, aiding research into general brain activity, during which the existence of what scientists dubbed the "brain flood" became known. A much less dramatic version had been recorded in non-Hanging Girl deaths, but not at the level of intensity seen in Hanging Girls.

The exact cause and purpose of the burst of activity was widely debated. Further research to pinpoint the part of the brain involved was needed, but no one was quite sure how that could be done -- a Hanging Girl's final performance could not be done in an fMRI machine, nor any other electro-mechanical diagnostic tool that could determine the location of brain activity. The consensus among scientists held that the girl could not possibly be conscious during the time the brain flood took place, occurring as it did so near the time of death. It was most likely a final panic reaction within the brain, the girl herself already gone at that point.

One published article, however, proposed a different thesis: that the burst of activity signaled the occurrence of a dream, experienced by the girl like any other dream. In the absence of more accurate brain scans of the phenomenon, or any interviews with girls who had experienced it (proposals to attempt reviving girls after the brain flood had never been approved, not by the schools, nor by the girls involved), the idea that some sort of dream was involved would have to remain pure speculation for now.

Megan grinned. "Looks like the guy was right. I always did think it made sense."

Amy nodded. "Yeah, I know. Because of the way we're always talking about our own hangings as 'the dream,' the ending we want more than anything, the day we're always imagining and visualizing. You said you thought we were emotionally conditioning ourselves to have a real dream, in the end."

"Right. And you're living through the proof right now."

Amy laughed. "So you came back from the dead just to say 'I told you so'?"

Megan shook her head and, again without using her bound hands, somehow tapped Amy's head once more. "I'm in here, Amy. You're thinking all this yourself. You're just picturing me as the person who would remind you about it."

Amy looked at Megan and grinned. "You had such a great show! And Kathleen... She went straight home and started reading your books. Honey, you did everything you were hoping for! You found the Hanging Girl in your sister!"

Megan smiled beatifically. "I know. And you found one too, sweetie."

Amy sighed, letting the feeling of satisfaction wash over her. "You know about Runner?"

Megan laughed. "Amy!"

Amy shook her head, amused by her denseness. "Yes, okay, okay, you're in my head."

Amy looked to her right, aware of sudden movement where there had been nothing before. At some distance, seen more clearly than Amy's normal visual acuity could account for, she now saw a barred gate. Only the gate, with white blankness on either side of it. Behind the gate, Andrew was pounding for entrance. The gate was clearly too strong to yield to his efforts. Amy smiled. "He can't get in here."

Megan grinned. "Real subtle symbolism, Amy."

Amy laughed. "Don't make fun of my subconscious. You're in the middle of it. As you keep reminding me." She looked to her right again. The gate was gone. Andrew was gone. Amy knew, with certainty, she wouldn't see him again.

She frowned suddenly. "Megan, this has already lasted way too long. The whole brain flood only goes on for a few seconds."

"It's a *dream*, Amy. Your time sense is on vacation."

"So what happens now?"

"You're asking me? It's all up to you."

"I..." A wave of feeling washed over Amy. That same physical attraction she had felt moments ago was back, stronger than before. She tried willing herself to move closer to Megan, and found that she could. Their bodies came together softly, their breasts touching, and then their lips. Though she still retained a perception of her hands being tied behind her, she nevertheless felt her arms go around Megan, and Megan's tighten around her.

Amy held Megan's lips with her own, for a long, long kiss. She closed her eyes. When she opened them, she found the eyes looking at hers were no longer Megan's. "Linda!"

Linda, her skin giving off an internal glow in the same way Megan's had, gave Amy a typical smile, from her original face. Not Zoey Hillcrest's face. It was the Linda Amy had known and loved for years before she spent her last months as another person. "Hi, Ames."

"Linda, I'm so glad to see you here!"

Linda grinned. "Where else would I be, Amy?"

"Linda... I wish you could see Steffi! She's changed so much! *You* changed her. Exactly what you said you wanted for your hanging, to change somebody's life. You *did* that."

Linda responded with a happy sigh. "I know. I saw her, honey. I've seen everything you've seen."

Amy groaned, exasperated with herself again. "You're in my head. This is just really hard to get used to."

Linda laughed, and then looked at Amy pointedly. "Amy, you changed a life too. A lot more than I did."

Amy smiled. "I guess I did." Imagine, she told herself, what Runner's life would be like right now, without my intervention.

The wave of sexual need returned once more. As she had with Megan, Amy moved herself closer to Linda, feeling the front of her body press against her, Linda's arms encircling her. The contact seemed more complete than before, as if the dream was solidifying. She was intensely aware, at a superconscious level, of touching Linda bare skin to bare skin, stomach to stomach, breast to breast, mound to mound, and at last lip to lip. An energy of a type Amy had never known seemed to flow in both directions between them.

Amy had closed her eyes for the kiss. When she opened them, she gasped once more and instantly backed away, while sinking downward a few feet. It seemed only right to view this face from below. "Miranda!"

Miranda's body was whole, and exactly the way Amy remembered it from her hanging at Amy's house -- except for the glow. Her skin shone with a sunlike intensity, though Amy could look at it without squinting.

Miranda looked down at Amy. "Amy, come up here with me."

"I -- I shouldn't. Really."

Miranda smiled. "No, you really should."

Seemingly against her will, though she knew that couldn't be the case, Amy drifted higher, until her eyes were on the same level as Miranda's. She couldn't think what to say.

Miranda spoke. "You're one of us, now. Completely. And you're my equal. You can look at me as your mentor if you want, but you have to know there are girls, so many girls, who see you that same way. Including Runner, of course. And my sister Melissa. Thank you so much for that."

Amy shook her head. "Melissa was already at the Academy when I met her."

Miranda, in turn, shook her head. "I'm not talking about bringing out the Hanging Girl from within. I did do that with you. Megan did it with Kathleen, you did it with Runner. But a Hanging Girl can also be an inspiration to others who are already at the Academy, who need someone to show them what they're capable of. You heard the older girls talk about me. The girls at the Academy now talk about you that way."

"I don't... well, deserve that. Girls like Megan, Shawna, Holly and Haley. They're the creative ones. They made hanging into something beyond what it ever was before. Even Runner is already inventing new things, new moves."

Miranda shook her head again. "Still not what I'm talking about. Being a Hanging Girl is committing your life to one single thing. Did you ever doubt you were meant to do that, once you started towards that goal?"

“No. Never. How could I?”

Miranda smiled. “Girls do, sometimes. But then, Amy, they look at you. You *are* a very special Hanging Girl, Amy. In the same way you think I am.”

Amy laughed suddenly. “I’m having this argument with myself. Why am I losing it?”

Miranda laughed with her. “If you want to look at it that way, you can. But these are things you’ve buried underneath your conscious mind, and wouldn’t let yourself think them. You’ll let me tell them to you. And you can believe me when I tell you.”

And Amy saw. Suddenly, completely. As if through the eyes of all of the girls who looked up to her, she saw herself, and what she had done for them.

The love she had always felt for Miranda suddenly became a physical need. Wave after wave of desire suddenly washed over Amy as a rising tide.

The most intense orgasm Amy could remember in her life was the first one with Melissa, when Melissa had dyed her hair and worn Miranda’s hanging costume, so that Amy could make love to her as Miranda. That earthquake barely registered on the scale of tremors Amy was feeling now.

Amy’s body rushed forward to meet Miranda’s, and she moaned as her open mouth met Miranda’s. That intensity of awareness for every point of contact of their bodies, the sense of energy passing between them, was much stronger than before, double, triple. Just as with Megan and Linda, Amy could feel Miranda’s arms around her, holding her, loving her, even though they were still tied behind her.

As Amy moved against Miranda, she saw, though her eyes were closed, that Megan and Linda were at her side, now moving in closer, touching, and again Amy felt the touching deep within her. All of the Hanging Girls Amy had known and loved were behind them, now with them, surrounding Miranda and Amy, enfolding them like a warm, soft blanket. Laney was there. Jackie was there. Shawna. Erin...

Amy was aware of all of them, felt all of them. As the energy intensified still more, Amy’s own sense of self, the separation between her and the others, began to dissolve, her entire being uniting with all of the others who had gone before, the goal of lovers to become one body achieved at last, propelled far beyond orgasm to a state for which there is no word.

She/they faded together into the whiteness.

* * * * *

Lucas Benson, attending the hanging at the invitation of his friend Benjamin, watched Amy’s body cease moving on its own, and swing slowly back and forth. In a tight voice, his ability to hold back his ejaculation nearing an end, he said to his wife Sara, “I think she just came!”

Sara, her own hands very busy in her crotch, gasped out, “No kidding!”

CHAPTER 39

FIVE YEARS LATER

Gretchen, Dean Porter's secretary, pressed the intercom button on her phone. "Kathleen Sadler is here for her interview, sir."

Kathleen took a deep breath as she heard the dean's voice say, "Thank you, Gretchen. Send her in, please." All these years preparing, ran the thought through Kathleen's mind. It all comes down to this. No!, another voice insisted. This is just a stepping stone. It's all aimed at my hanging. She directed a smile she hoped looked confident at Gretchen, who smiled back and said, "You can go in."

Kathleen pushed the door open, and saw the dean rise behind his desk, smiling, offering his hand. As she shook hands with him, she vaguely felt she had met him before. She knew where and when it would have been, but couldn't recall for certain. She sat in the chair in front of the desk, and said, as the dean resumed his seat, "Did we meet before, Sir?"

He smiled again. "Indeed we did, at your sister's hanging."

She had long since decided that honesty was her only option. "I really don't remember much about that day, Sir, other than Megan's hanging. I relive that every night before I go to sleep, but everything else from that day is kind of a blur."

He chuckled. "I've run into that phenomenon before. A lot of our students are here because of a particular hanging serving as their inspiration. Including Megan herself."

Kathleen nodded. "Yes, Sir. That would be my Aunt Serena. She died before I was born, except she lived on in Megan. My dad told me more about her after Megan's hanging."

The dean nodded. "Now, I often start an interview by asking the prospective student why she wants to be at the Academy. I think we've covered that ground already..."

* * * * *

THIRTY MINUTES LATER

The dean sat once more. "Thank you, Kathleen. You can put your clothes back on now."

"Yes, Sir." She stood again and reached for her panties, still feeling the tingles, and the wetness, from the choking test the dean had just given her. Another facet of her excitement was the feeling of certainty that the dean had liked her body. She had always been self-confident about it, but there was still a certain tension in knowing she had to pass muster with this one particular man. She had spent years in an exercise program to make her body look like Megan's, to the extent she could remember it. That, she decided, has paid off.

Fully dressed once more, she resumed her seat, as the dean asked, "Now, do you have any questions you wanted to ask me?"

She nodded. "I did have one, Sir. At a lot of colleges, they have a policy that students can test out of certain courses, and get credit for them, by proving they already know the material. Is it possible to do anything like that here?"

The dean began his automatic answer, but stopped suddenly, almost made dizzy by an intense *deja vu*. An instant later the memory returned, of Kathleen's sister, looking *so* much like her, asking essentially the same question -- not in the interview, but during the orientation session for new students. They really are *very* much alike, he thought, and not just visually.

He looked at her thoughtfully. Years of practice behind her, and obviously ready to be a Hanging Girl in so many ways -- he'd rarely read quite the level of arousal he'd seen in her during the choking test -- but also a little aloof. Again, so much like her sister. At present, not yet ready to connect with a hanging audience. Of course, she didn't have to be ready *now*.

He quickly matched up the observation with another recollection, one that was never far from his mind during any interview. A memory of the very last thing Amy had requested of him, years ago.

Sometime, Amy had said, you'll get another applicant like Megan. Technically perfect, unlimited potential. You'll feel positive you want her as a student. But she's sort of deficient in social skills, maybe. When that happens... get her together with someone like me.

He pulled open a desk drawer, then realized he still hadn't answered her. "Oh... No, we don't do anything like that. In any class where you've mastered the material, your contributions to classroom discussions can be of invaluable aid in the learning process of other students." He located the file he'd been looking for and opened it. He tore a blank sheet off a small notepad and began copying some information from the file.

Disappointed, Kathleen responded, "Yes, Sir," and watched him curiously. He seemed distracted. "Sir?"

He finished writing and, to her surprise, handed her the note. "This is another one of our applicants for the next entering class. I'd like you to contact her in the near future, meet with her, and get to know her." He smiled, seeing a need to reassure her. "I think a mutual acquaintance would be valuable to both of you." He chuckled again. "And don't read into this an offer of admission. We still won't decide on that for some time yet."

She frowned as she looked over the note. A name, an address, a phone number. Maybe, she decided, they always do this -- match up girls in pairs before admission. Maybe they do roommate choices this way? But what if one of us gets in and the other doesn't? Is my admission contingent on contacting this girl? But how is he even going to know whether I have or not? It's probably not a big deal. He must see us as the two major incoming powers. He wants us to be friendly. That makes sense. "Yes, Sir." She politely put the note in her pocket. I don't need anybody else, she told herself. If he wants me to meet her, I'll do that, and see what I have to work against.

The dean leaned forward and pushed a button on his phone. "Gretchen, send Runner in, please." He stood and, once more, offered his hand to Kathleen. "Thank you, Kathleen. As you probably know, we'll be sending out admission letters in mid-August."

She stood and shook hands with him again, and nodded. "Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

The door opened, and a student entered, wearing what Kathleen, from her research, recognized as a Second Year uniform.

Kathleen looked, and her eyes shot open wide. Not that she'd ever met this girl before. She was positive she would remember that, even if it had been at Megan's hanging. Kathleen herself was accustomed to instantly attracting every eye in any room she entered. I'd have some pretty stiff competition, she told herself, if this girl was there too. The glowing, coppery skin, the perfect face framed by blacker-than-black hair flowing like an ebony waterfall. So exotic, so obviously from Somewhere Else. Kathleen hadn't realized the scope of the Academy's outreach program.

And that body...!

Kathleen caught herself wondering what it would be like to be in bed with this girl. Does she know sex tricks we don't know about here? Has she been teaching them to the other girls? Not yet recovered from her choking test, she felt the residual tingles intensify.

Kathleen took a breath. She demanded internally that she get hold of herself. Fine, she told herself, she's a stunning, sexually magnetic girl. I've been able to hold my own in that department. And there's no way she arrived here better than I am at hanging. Nobody is. I'll beat anything she can do.

Her eyes fell on the girl's metal collar. "Runner -- Property of the Hanging Academy." Okay, she thought, I *did* hear the name correctly.

The girl smiled and held out her hand. "I'm Runner. The dean asked me to show you around, if you want."

Kathleen shook hands with her, and gave her a small smile. Don't act impressed, she reminded herself. "Sure. I'm Kathleen Sadler."

Runner's grin spread wider. "I would have known that, even if the dean hadn't told me. You look so much like your sister."

Kathleen blinked. "You couldn't... Oh, her head is here, isn't it? You would have seen that."

"Well, yes. But I feel like I know her better than from just seeing her head, and I can see a lot of her in you. Amy told me all about her. Even a little about you, too. I just couldn't wait to meet you..."

It took Runner's words a moment to register, before Kathleen sucked in a deep gasp. "*You knew Amy??* Wait, there's no way! She must have been hanged five years ago!"

Runner laughed. "I've been here awhile. It's a long story. Do you want to see your sister?"

Kathleen blurted, "Sure!" before quickly ordering herself to calm down. She worked to slow her breathing. Never let anybody think they have power over you, she reminded herself. She cleared her throat, and said more softly, "I'd like that."

Kathleen jumped slightly when the dean spoke. She'd almost forgotten he was there. "Runner, here's her file, if you want to take a look at it." He handed Runner the folder he'd had in front of him through the interview, the one Kathleen knew to be hers -- not the other one he'd drawn from a drawer near the end.

"Thank you, Sir." Runner opened the folder, and her fingers flipped through the three pages in a few seconds. As she handed it back to him, Kathleen frowned at the girl's rudeness. If the dean was going to let her see a file, the least she could do was actually read it. Especially if the subject of the file was standing in front of her.

Runner looked at the dean. "Is that all, Sir?"

He nodded, and chuckled. "Don't let her break anything."

Runner gave him a mock-serious look. "I'll cover the cost of any damage." As the dean laughed and waved in dismissal, she said to Kathleen, "He's just kidding, really. You can break stuff if you want."

Kathleen blinked and shook her head slightly as she followed Runner through the outer office. Walking down the hallway, Runner said conversationally, "I see you've read Tannin's book on breath control. That's a good one. We've got more comprehensive studies here in our library, but that's a good beginning."

Kathleen frowned. "How did..." Then she remembered the bibliography she'd included in her application. "So you already read my file earlier?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. Just now. Anyway, most girls don't have the kind of reading background you've got when they first come here, so you have a head start."

Kathleen looked back towards the door of the dean's office and replayed, in her head, Runner's quick glance at the file. How the hell, Kathleen thought, did she do that? Did she read *all* of it? To get back to the question foremost in her mind, she said, "You said you knew Amy? We're talking about Megan's roommate?"

Runner gave her a softer smile than she'd seen so far. "Right. We were... wait, let me show you this." She stopped walking and, from a pocket in her uniform shorts, she extracted a photograph, encased in tough protective plastic. She handed it to Kathleen.

Kathleen stared at the picture. Yes, that was Amy, all right, just the way Kathleen remembered her, except for having much shorter hair. And there was Runner herself, looking several years younger than she did now, sitting on the ground at Amy's feet, looking up at the camera while holding one of Amy's legs lovingly. Runner and the two girls flanking Amy were all inexplicably naked, while Amy was clothed.

Runner was looking over Kathleen's shoulder, and pointed. "That's Jana, who developed most of the bound-foot hanging choreography we use now. And this is Melissa, and you've got something in common with her -- her older sister graduated from here too. That was Miranda. Miranda was Amy's inspiration to be a Hanging Girl. Like Amy was mine. And Megan was yours."

Kathleen coughed, trying to collect her thoughts, stunned at how much Runner knew about her. Looking again at the picture, she said, "You guys were all really close."

Runner nodded, and appeared to brush a tear aside. "Very." She took the picture back, and began walking again. "Another advantage you have is that you've spent a lot of time getting sexual experience. Some of the girls' background in that is a little iffy, when they first get here. We do teach them a lot here, of course, so pretty soon they get caught up. But you've already spent a lot of time at the local hook-up clubs."

Kathleen coughed again. Another item of information Runner had apparently taken in during her glance at Kathleen's file. "Uhhh, yeah. That, and my Dad recently started letting me sleep a couple of nights a week with our slavegirl, Maya. She taught me a lot about sex with women, and gave me some good pointers about men."

Runner looked at Kathleen. "That does sound helpful. Still, there's nothing like really meeting men at the clubs..." She stopped suddenly, and looked more closely at Kathleen's face. "You did go to the mixed clubs a couple of times, but mostly you went to the all-girls. You like sex with girls a lot better."

Kathleen stopped walking and stared at Runner. There was nothing about *that* in her file. "How did you..." Further words failed her.

Runner patted her shoulder. "You'll learn to read body language here too. And don't worry about what I said about men. You do have some experience, and you'll get more here. We don't assume any of the girls is an expert."

Kathleen looked at her, puzzled. Runner kept saying "we" in reference to teaching. "Aren't you one of the students, not a teacher?"

"Well, both. I'm taking Second Year classes, but I'm also one of the First Year teachers. You'll probably be in one of my classes."

Kathleen felt herself being enveloped by a cloud of awe. This girl can't be just an average student, she told herself. No way are they all like this. She hoped her next question wouldn't cause offense. "Why are you... well, just a Second Year? If you've been here five years?"

Runner laughed, to Kathleen's relief, and started walking again. "Now we're back to that long story. I'll tell you all about it sometime, if I get the chance. The short version starts with the fact I grew up on Purity Island. You know where that is?"

"Ummm... yes. But I thought..."

Runner smiled, with an air of explaining something for the thousandth time. "Yes, yes. But there were natives there when it was discovered. I sucked up all their genes when I was born, somehow."

How many surprises, she wondered, is this girl going to come up with? "I believe you when you say it's a long story."

Runner laughed again. “Really. Anyway, I couldn’t even read when I came here. I spent two years studying for my high school equivalence test, and then the dean let me spend a year taking classes at the university. Internet, I mean, not in person. I got my two-year degree, and then finally started as a student here.”

“Didn’t you say you did the university stuff for *one* year?”

Runner nodded. “They *call* it a two-year degree, but they don’t literally make you spend two years. It’s all a matter of finishing a certain number of courses. Oh, there was a bonus, too. The university sent some people here to make sure I really was doing the work I claimed to be doing, and one thing led to another, and I ended up in contact with Dr. Devor at the university, who was interested in doing research on Hanging Girls. So we’re working together on a project to see if we can figure out which is more important to making a woman a Hanging Girl, genetics or environment. I mean, is there a gene for it, or is there something about the atmosphere of the home? My roommate is Mindy Warren, who’s the youngest of five sisters who’ve all been Hanging Girls -- including Melissa, who you just saw in that picture, and her older sister Miranda. After Melissa came Maria and Melanie, and now there’s Mindy. Melanie was just hanged a few months ago, so there’s just Mindy left. Now, the question is, why did they all become Hanging Girls? Is it because they all shared some kind of Hanging Girl gene, or is it because they all grew up together? I’ll want to talk to you, too, because I know your sister and your aunt were both Hanging Girls.”

Kathleen nodded. “I never knew my Aunt Serena, though. She was hanged before I was born. So it’s not like being around her affected me. And the truth is I never paid much attention to what Megan was doing either.”

Runner’s eyes lit up. “See, that’s useful. Anyway, I’ll want to talk to you more about it. And so will Dr. Devor, if that’s okay. We’re leaning towards it being genetic, because I had absolutely no Hanging Girls to emulate growing up.”

There was a quickly-approaching pounding sound from around a corner up ahead, and an excited bark. Kathleen, startled, had time to reflect that she wouldn’t have guessed there were dogs here, before two puppygirls burst into view from the adjoining hallway and galloped towards Runner and Kathleen on four stubby limbs each.

The one in the lead had short hair in an eye-catching pink, matching an elaborate harness seemingly made of pink felt, and also matching her upraised, wagging tail. The girl trailing her had a similar harness, but with a color scheme (including hair) a more normal-looking brown.

Kathleen shook her head in amazement. A *puppygirl* had made that sound? As the pink-haired one skidded to a stop in front of Runner and began licking her leg, with another bark and a very dog-like whimper of excitement, Kathleen said, “I’ve never heard a puppygirl who could bark like that.”

Beside the pink one, the brown-haired one looked up at Kathleen and gave her a very shy-looking smile, then rubbed up closer to the pink one and kissed her shoulder. Kathleen wondered whether they’d been in the middle of something when the pink one heard Runner’s voice. It was clear there was some special relationship between the pink puppy and Runner. Runner had dropped to a crouch and put her hands on either side of the pink one’s head, and rubbed noses with the girl affectionately.

To Kathleen, Runner explained, "She's had lots of practice. This is Puppy. She trained her entire life to be a dog. She came with me from Purity Island. That's how they do it there." Runner gave Puppy a kiss on the lips. "The dean let us get Daisy as her mate a year ago. Daisy's a more standard puppygirl, from a local petgirl store." Runner giggled. "As soon as Puppy saw Daisy's tail, we could tell she wanted one just like it. Right after the surgery it looked like she might not be so sure about it, but she loves it now, and she can wag it like any puppygirl." Puppy was indeed wagging her tail enthusiastically. Runner pointed back the way the puppygirls had come. "Puppy, go find Mindy. Okay? Find Mindy."

Puppy quickly turned, with another bark, and pounded back around the corner, Daisy following in her wake. Runner stood. "She can't talk, but she can understand most of what we say."

Kathleen blinked. "Literally *can't* talk?"

Runner nodded. "Never learned. She doesn't even imagine she'd be capable of it. I assume Daisy can talk, but I've never heard her. She just follows Puppy everywhere." She giggled. "Puppy love. I think Daisy sees Puppy as the perfect model for the puppygirl Daisy wants to be." She resumed walking.

They arrived at a door, which Runner opened. Kathleen followed her in. "This is the Hall of Honor," Runner explained. "All girls who've been hanged on-campus are here. Mostly they were hanged at demos or at parties. You know about those?" Runner quirked an eyebrow at Kathleen.

Kathleen nodded. "Megan didn't talk about it, but I've read all the Web site info about the Academy."

"Good. Now, along all the stacks here are the demo and party girls. Your..."

Kathleen suddenly stopped short and pointed, her jaw hanging slack in astonishment. "Why have you got a Zoey Hillcrest mannequin? I can't remember her having anything to do with hanging." What appeared to be Zoey, looking especially out of place with a full body in a room occupied otherwise only by heads, was reclining in a lounge chair, her arms resting on the chair's arms, one knee upraised, wearing a tiny green string bikini and dark glasses, looking for all the world as though she were sunning herself poolside.

Runner started laughing, and eventually sputtered, "I didn't even stop to think, you don't know about Linda. We're all used to her here." She gave Kathleen a more serious look. "Linda was a Hanging Girl. She really gives us a lot of inspiration, because she shows us how dedicated to our craft we can all be. She went through major facial reconstruction to look like Zoey Hillcrest, because we had a client who wanted that -- to hang Zoey. And afterwards Linda was processed by Full Body Associates, if you know who they are. Her meat has been eaten, and replaced with a synthetic substitute, but everything else is Linda. The client kept her for several years, and when she found she didn't need Linda any longer, she returned her to us, because she knew this was Linda's home. We *all* think of the Academy as our home - - me more than most, I guess, but we all do."

Kathleen was still staring at "Zoey." "So... now she just sits on display in this room?"

Runner giggled. "Ummm, well, no. Any of the students can sign her out for a night. Just so long as they clean her at the end and put her back the way she is now. Linda was Amy's closest friend, other than

Megan, and I know, from Amy, that Linda would really *adore* the idea of her body being used and loved. We *do* love her. She's one of us. One of the *best* of us."

Kathleen's attention was drawn from Linda to something seen from the corner of her eye, and she turned that direction. There was a head standing alone in its own niche in the wall across from the general shelves. Kathleen's hands dropped to her sides, her heart fluttering. Softly she breathed, "Megan," and stepped closer. For the moment she was oblivious to Runner's presence.

Slowly, she reached out and stroked Megan's cheek. My sister, she thought. My inspiration. My model for everything I want to be, everything I *will* be.

She was startled when Runner stepped closer, suddenly reminding Kathleen of her being here. Kathleen asked, "Has she been here ever since... that day?" The day, Kathleen thought, when her life ended and mine began.

Runner nodded, and said quietly, "Amy knew Megan would want to be in here. This room really was special to Megan."

Kathleen looked at Runner. "Why?"

Runner looked at Megan's face now, so similar to that of the one living girl in the room beside her. Almost whispering now, she said, "In this room, Megan learned what being a Hanging Girl *really* is. That it's not something you can do alone. We're not really a school full of separate girls. We're *one* Hanging Girl. We all learn by sharing with each other, because we all have the same goal. We can't elbow each other out of the way to get to that goal. We get there by pulling each other along, lifting each other when we fall." She turned once more to look at Kathleen, and Kathleen's eyes were drawn away from Megan to look into Runner's. Runner went on, "Megan would want you to learn that too."

Kathleen was about to respond that she knew what a Hanging Girl was, but as she looked at Runner, then at Megan again, she was no longer so sure. She swallowed. "I... I'll try. If you'll help me."

Runner gave her a soft smile. "We all will." She startled Kathleen then by putting her arms around her for a gentle hug. Kathleen had little experience with hugs outside of sexual play, yet she was immediately aware that this hug had nothing of a sexual nature in it. It was, she suddenly realized, her first lesson in being a Hanging Girl.

Kathleen's attention was caught by two nearby heads, sharing a niche just beyond Megan. Two redheads, looking happy, bubbly -- and identical. Each wore a choker with a glittery letter dangling from it, one an "A", one an "O". Rather than strictly upright, their heads were leaning against each other, in a way that conveyed love for each other. Kathleen, surprised, said, "You've had twin Hanging Girls?"

Runner let go of Kathleen and stepped towards the redheads, kissing each on the cheek. "Sisters, but not twins. They were actually born a year apart. Just another one of those tricks genes play."

"Were they hanged together, though?"

“Uh-huh. After years of performing shows together at parties. Erotic pair hangings. Like Megan and Amy did.”

Kathleen, startled, looked at Runner. “Megan and Amy?”

“Oh, you didn’t know? That’s right, I guess you never would have seen that. But yes. Holly and Haley learned how to do it from Megan and Amy.”

At the mention of their names, Kathleen looked at the plaque below the heads, identifying the girls as Haley Maitland and Holly Maitland. Her mind spun in neutral for a moment, trying to think why those names were somehow familiar.

At last it came back to her. She pulled from her pocket the note the dean had given her, and saw the name on it, at which she had glanced very briefly before -- Hayden Maitland. She showed the note to Runner. “This must be their sister.”

Runner looked at the note, startled. “Where did you get that?”

“The dean gave it to me. Just now. He said she’s another applicant this year, and he wants me to contact her.”

Runner eyes glowed. “Really? You should, you really should. I know some stuff about her. She’s been practicing hanging for as long as you have -- even just a little longer, in fact. Hey!” She looked back at Hayden’s sisters. “I just thought. That pairs hanging thing I was telling you about -- only two pairs have ever done it. It started with Megan and Amy, and they taught it to Holly and Haley. It’s really very different from regular hanging, and it takes a lot of work to learn it. But it just occurred to me, you and Hayden are so experienced already -- and you’re sisters of three of the four girls who have ever done it! Do you think you’d want to try it?”

Kathleen felt her heart beating faster. “So it’s doing shows? In front of people? Like the way Megan did her own hanging here?”

Runner nodded eagerly. “Yeah! You want to?”

Kathleen remembered it all, the way she remembered it every day. The way Megan had absorbed every molecule of attention of an entire room full of people, the way she had controlled them, aroused them - - as only a Hanging Girl could do. Kathleen had assumed she would only be able to do that once, and had dedicated all of her training to that single event. But to do it again and again, to savor the memories afterward... “Yes!”

“Great! I watched Holly and Haley perform and practice for years, and I know how they trained to do it at the beginning. So I could teach you... Wait, first things first. When you get home... Her phone number was on that, right?”

Kathleen looked at the note again. “Yes.”

Runner nodded. "Okay, when you get home, give her a call. Get together, see if you get along together. Okay?"

Kathleen nodded quickly. "Okay!"

"And remember what I said. Hayden is not your competition. You need her, she needs you, and all of the girls here need you and you need them. That's what Megan learned, right here in this room where you're standing."

Kathleen looked back at Megan once more. Thinking how obviously close Megan had been to Amy, when they'd come to the house together. How Megan had tried to connect with Kathleen. She wasn't the same Megan who'd left three years earlier. I was being an idiot, Kathleen admitted to herself for the first time. Megan was trying so hard to tell me something. To tell me what Runner is telling me now.

Kathleen stepped towards Megan and kissed her softly on the lips. Okay, sis, she thought. Now I think I know what you were trying to say. We're all one Hanging Girl. I'll try to learn that. And believe it.

Kathleen frowned suddenly, as the nagging thought that something was missing finally surfaced in her consciousness. She looked at Megan again, then at Holly and Haley Maitland. She turned and looked behind her at the heads of the other girls. "Runner, why doesn't Megan have a collar? All the rest of the girls do."

Runner shrugged, and began, "Amy told me..." She stopped, looking more closely at Kathleen -- her hand in particular, which had just twitched, seeming unconsciously, towards the pocket in her skirt. A smile spread slowly across Runner's face. "I didn't quite understand what Amy meant when she said 'Megan's choker will come home sometime.' I understand now. You know something about it, don't you?"

Kathleen stared at her for a long moment, and finally nodded. Her hand went towards her pocket again, intentionally this time, and brought out a bright red strip of fabric, bearing a white script that read "Megan - Property of the Hanging Academy." Looking at it, running her fingers along it, Kathleen said in a choked voice, "I... always have this with me. I look at it every night, before I go to sleep, to remind me where I'm going. Amy sent it to me after Megan's hanging, with a note that said she wanted me to have it, because of how happy I'd made Megan by being at her hanging." Tears were flowing freely now. "I never wear it. I haven't earned it. I know it's a graduate's choker. I just... always like to know it's with me."

She looked at Runner, trying to blink the tears away. "Amy didn't say to bring it back here, or anything like that. But... she knew I would, didn't she?"

Runner, her own eyes shimmering and ready to spill, said, "Amy knew a lot."

Kathleen lifted the choker to her lips and kissed it, then stretched it out to its full length and, without hesitation, fastened it around Megan's neck. Barely able to push the words through her closed-off throat, Kathleen said, "It's home now, Megan."

Runner rested her hand on Kathleen's shoulder, and said, "So are you, Kathleen. Want to see more of it? Tour's not over."

"Sure!" With a habitual gesture, Kathleen patted her pocket. Not, this time, to feel Megan's choker. She wanted to make sure the paper with Hayden's phone number was still there.

* * * * *

Preston Cameron sighed and ended the phone call, folding up his cell phone and returning it to his pocket. He had once again invited Andrew, now living eight hundred miles away and serving as a vice-president of sales for a Cameron Industries subsidiary, to spend a few days at home when he had the chance, and Andrew, once again, had irritably declined to enter the house as long as That Woman was living there.

Preston's mood brightened considerably as Linnie bounded into the room. She had learned to walk at eleven months, and the walking phase had lasted about a month, succeeded by an apparently permanent phase in which all locomotion was done at a dead run.

Preston held out his arms, and Linnie bounced into his lap. Recently turned four years old, she was getting a little big to curl up in Preston's lap, but with plenty of practice behind her, curl she did anyway.

Preston gave her a hug. "What've you got there, Peanut?" He recognized what Linnie had in her hand as a framed photo from his dresser. She'd been exploring again. Tammy, the family's slavegirl-nanny, was allowed a well-earned nap in the late afternoon after Preston returned home, on days when Linnie's mother was working, during which Linnie was to entertain herself within Preston's earshot if she was home rather than visiting a friend's house.

Linnie held up the photo. "Who's this, Daddy?"

Preston smiled. He was sure Linnie had seen the photo, without comment, any number of times, to the point where it barely registered, but recently the "What's this?" phase had come to encompass everything in the environment. "That's your sister..." It was one of the pictures of Amy from the morning of her wedding party -- standing alone, holding flowers, beaming at the camera.

Linnie interrupted, frowning in deep puzzlement. "Megan is in Mommy's tummy!"

Preston chuckled. "Megan will be your new *little* sister when she comes out of Mommy. This is your *big* sister. Amy."

Linnie's face lit up in startlement. "That's *my* name! Linda Amy Cameron! L-I-N-D-A-A-M-Y-C-A-M-E-R-O-N." Linnie was spelling everything these days.

Preston's phone rang. Fishing it back out of his pocket, he looked at the Caller ID, and smiled as he pressed the talk button. "Hi, Steff."

Steffi's voice sounded weary but happy. "I've just got back to the mainland, and I should be home in a few hours. Everything's going smoothly. I can tell you all about it later."

“That’s great! Did you...”

He stopped as the phone left his ear, the result of a violent yank on his arm. Linnie was bouncing excitedly in his lap. “Is it Mommy? Is it Mommy? Can I talk to her?”

Preston held the phone up again, smiling. “Uhhh, somebody’s claiming priority over the phone, hon. Hold on.” He handed the phone to Linnie.

Linnie’s face glowed as she shouted into the phone, “Hi, Mommy!” She said, “Yes” twice, with pauses in between, then, “Tammy took me to the petty zoo today.” After another pause, she responded, “*Petting* zoo, yeah. And I got to pet the baby goat, and it said ‘Aaa-aaa-aaa’ to me.” She giggled, then listened for a moment. “I will! When are you coming home, Mommy?” After another pause, she said, “I will. I love you, Mommy!” Apparently under orders, she handed the phone back to her father.

Preston said, “She’s been really good. She got a little weepy last night when you weren’t here, but I let her sleep with Tammy.”

“She’s okay now, though?” Steffi had stayed away overnight once before, a few months earlier when work started on the restaurant. She hated being away from Linnie that long.

“Well, let me check...” Preston wriggled a finger in Linnie’s armpit, and was rewarded with a squeal and giggle. “Does she sound happy enough?”

Steffi laughed. “That’ll do. Anyway, no more trips after this for a long while.” Steffi was expecting the birth of Megan in about two months.

At about the same time she had married Preston, Steffi had found, as Amy had requested of her in her living room five years ago, a way to put her personal fortune to positive use, working to find ways to improve the lives of the slavegirls of Purity Island. She had sought advice from sociologists and cultural anthropologists as to how that could be done, eventually assembling a number of interested ones into a committee. All were agreed on the principle that it would be self-defeating to insist to the farmers of the island that they should do things differently, recalling the resistance to change that had led them to settle the island in the first place.

At length one committee member, during a discussion of the many features of mainland culture absent from the island, brought up the fact that there were no restaurants anywhere on the island. He himself didn’t attach any particular significance to the lack of such establishments, and it wasn’t until another member made a joke about the consequent unfamiliarity with the concept of waitresses that the germ of an idea began to take root.

So Steffi, after personally seeking and obtaining permission from the Onderman Corporation, who decided the operation of such a business posed no threat to their own interests, had funded the construction and hiring of the kitchen staff for a restaurant that had now opened for business in Purity, the largest town on the island. The restaurant took payment in trade, the results of which were then sold to the Onderman Corporation, and it provided the farmers with a pleasant place to eat food prepared and spiced in unfamiliar ways while chatting with neighbors in a relaxed atmosphere. It also introduced the farmers to beer, along with making the familiar wines available.

And significantly, it also introduced the farmers to waitresses. The girls, all of them recruited from the mainland, most of them college students obtaining credits in sociology for a semester, all of them paid for their work on returning home, took orders from the patrons and served the food and drinks -- naked, of course, but festooned in brightly colored cloth bands on their upper arms, wrists, and ankles, and colored ceramic slave collars. Steffi herself had suggested the "uniforms," based on the painting in her home that had so absorbed Amy's attention, which now hung in the bedroom she shared with Preston.

The idea behind the presence of the waitresses was that they would gently tweak the farmers' perceptions of women in a number of ways. Island men generally had little or no experience in dealing with females who didn't belong to them personally, but their tradition of respecting the property rights of neighbors gave them a tendency to treat the waitresses politely, an early step on the road to personal respect. The rare cases of waitresses being treated rudely were handled by temporarily banning the offending customer from the premises. The farmers retained their generations-old abhorrence of clothing on women, but the waitresses' cloth bands, since they were very minimal and not used in covering any part of their bodies that identified them as female, that is, the breasts or vagina, met with no objection -- but planted the seed of the notion that the beauty of the female body could be enhanced by decoration. Eventually the waitresses' covering would include a waistband that would, over a period of months, expand ever so slowly towards their female parts -- it would be discarded, to be tried again much later, if it caused any negative comment. (At present, for their safety, the girls remained naked at all times, even in their off-duty hours in their private quarters in the building. Neither Steffi nor any of the committee members wanted there to be any chance of an "incident.") Finally, and most importantly, the customers in the restaurant could see women performing in a role that required intelligence far beyond anything they had ever given any female an opportunity to display -- the girls memorized the menu and described the dishes on it, relayed orders to the kitchen, and eventually returned with exactly the meal they had been asked to bring, rarely having to ask who got which dish. All of the service was performed with friendly smiles. None of the girls wrote down the orders, since the reaction of the farmers to women displaying actual literacy was not yet known, but plans were being made to experiment carefully later with hints that the girls could read and write.

Construction had now begun on a restaurant in Fairhold, another of the coastal towns, with plans to establish a foothold not only in all five towns, but also, someday, in the more remote areas of the island. The committee had now moved on to a search for further ideas for changing the ways women were perceived on Purity Island.

The restaurant was called "Amy's Place." The locals understood it to be a mainland name. Since they didn't give names to their slavegirls, none of them recognized it as a female name.

On the phone, Steffi now sighed to Preston, "Anyway, it's good to be wearing clothes again. And I don't plan to go back in the near future, so I can grow my hair out again." All of the women working for the restaurant were required to wear their hair cropped very short, in the island style for women, though cut much more neatly than was usual for the local slavegirls.

"Did they have you pull a cart again?" Steffi, if she wanted to be on the island, had no choice other than to appear to be a slave. Impersonating a man was much too dangerous.

"To get from the boat to the restaurant? Yeah. Nothing big, though. I mean, come on, I'm at seven months. Even the locals know that means no heavy work. Oh!" She laughed. "Bart, the manager, actually suggested I ought to wait tables for an hour or two, just to get a feel for it. I just showed him my

tummy and begged off. My back was already killing me. I did watch from the kitchen, though. It's all really running smoothly." He could easily hear the pride in her voice, and knew it wasn't for her own accomplishment, as such. It was for what she had been able to do for Amy. "Anyway, I'll see you in a few hours."

"Okay. Oh, and that thing you just said about clothes," he said cautiously, with Linnie still in his lap. "Don't get too used to it."

Steffi laughed delightedly. "I'm sure you've got something naughty planned. See you in a bit. Love you."

"Love you too." He clicked off and folded up the phone.

Linnie was looking at the picture again. "Daddy, did you and Mommy eat Amy?"

He smiled. "We ate part of her. So you got part of her inside you too, from Mommy's tummy." He tickled her again, and was rewarded with another squeal. "We shared her with a lot of other people. She was a Hanging Girl."

Linnie nodded wisely. "Tammy says sharing is good. I share my toys with my friends. What's a Hanging Girl?"

Preston paused and thought how to put it. At last he said, "A Hanging Girl learns how to die in a really special way, so she can make a lot of people excited and happy."

Linnie's face lit up in a way that suggested she heartily approved of that idea. "Can I be a Hanging Girl, Daddy?"

He pulled her closer in a hug. "Peanut, you can be anything you want to be."

END