

FAIR

By Cardaniel

©copyright 2018 by Cardaniel

All Rights Reserved

Contents

CHAPTER 1	3
CHAPTER 2	9
CHAPTER 3	15
CHAPTER 4	23
CHAPTER 5	33
CHAPTER 6	39
CHAPTER 7	47

CHAPTER 1

Cammy sucked in a quick breath and sat upright in her desk chair at the sound of the tap on her dorm room door, her eyes alight. She quickly set down her highlighting marker and closed her textbook, fumbling to straighten her notes and close up the notebook.

Behind her, her roommate Taylor giggled from her bed. She'd watched Cammy change clothes four times in the last hour, and had only asked, "Boy or girl?" Now she said, "Think your girlfriend's here, Cam."

Cammy could feel her face flush. "She's not exactly..."

Cammy could sense that Taylor was smiling ironically without having to look. "What is she exactly, then?"

Cammy sat frozen, her heart pounding. It wasn't that she was afraid of opening the door. She wanted today to get started more than anything in the world. But she was weighed down by a feeling of the significance of the moment. Her first date with Alisa. Admittedly it was her first date with anyone, ever. But if there had been previous ones, none of them would have been Alisa.

She finally jumped out of her chair when the knock was repeated. She stopped herself from jerking the door open, wanting to preserve some sense of decorum in front of Taylor.

She took a deep, slow breath and opened the door calmly, with shaking fingers.

When she saw Alisa's face light up, Cammy thought: it's for real! This is all really happening!

Cammy couldn't think what to say, other than "You look nice," and immediately wanted to unsay it. Alisa did, in fact, look nice, but was dressed very casually, in a white t-shirt featuring a sunburst design and fairly worn denim pants. Cammy was dressed only slightly more formally, the outfit she had finally settled on being old brown corduroy pants and a yellow buttoned shirt tucked in at the waist. She was worried Alisa might take the remark as sarcasm, and was relieved when Alisa gave her a sincere smile and said, "So do you."

Cammy's urge to kiss Alisa, to pick up where they had left off in the library last night, was arrested by her perception that several girls were in the hallway, not all looking this direction but nevertheless there. Not to mention Taylor sitting upright in the bed behind her, watching. Cammy didn't quite feel ready for Public Displays of Affection yet. She wasn't completely sure her relationship with Alisa was at that point yet. She wasn't sure how to tell whether it was or not. She had no experience to guide her.

She could see the tiniest move by Alisa, leaning towards her then back, her eyes flicking up and down between Cammy's eyes and her lips. She's feeling the same thing, thought Cammy, both the urge and the restraint. Of course she is, Cammy pointed out to herself, her lips curling up in a tentative smile. I already know how much we think alike.

Alisa's lips maintained her smile. "You ready?"

Cammy nodded eagerly. She looked back at Taylor. "You're coming, right?"

Taylor blinked and suppressed a laugh. "Umm, not right this minute." Of course, thought Cammy, feeling like an idiot. Obviously Taylor wasn't coming with them still dressed in her bedtime undies. Taylor went on, "Waiting for Jim." Jim was her boyfriend.

Cammy nodded and turned back to Alisa. She nearly repeated Alisa's "You ready?", but instead came out past Alisa into the hallway, remembering at the last second to close the door.

Alisa fell into step beside her as Cammy walked past her into the hallway. Cammy, uncertain once more, demanded of her internal self whether she should take Alisa's hand. That's not as big of a deal as kissing, right? she asked herself. It's not... possessive, right? But what if she doesn't think we're ready for it?

Then she thought back again to last night. She felt the tingling start up once more between her legs. That was real, she told herself. That really happened.

She made her right hand reach for Alisa's left, and saw that, in a movement that had to have started before hers, Alisa's hand was reaching for hers. Again, Cammy thought, a thrill running through her, we had the same thought at the same time.

Their hands clasped together, their fingers interlaced, they walked through the dorm's front room and out into the sunlight.

* * * * *

It seemed very strange to Cammy, now, that she hadn't really noticed Alisa through the first three weeks of first-year calculus class. She'd seen her and been conscious of her presence, but Alisa in no way had stood out, in Cammy's perceptions. Alisa usually took a seat three rows to the right of Cammy. Cammy thought Alisa was cute -- high cheekbones, small nose, clear skin, full lips, the kind of face Cammy liked. Her hair was short, parted in the middle and swept to the sides and back, a style that also appealed to Cammy. Cammy felt some attraction, but there were several other girls Cammy felt more physically drawn to. She had no interest in the handful of boys in her classes. She'd never understood how girls could be attracted to them. But among the girls, Cammy had a number of heartthrobs.

Not that she ever felt moved to do anything about her attractions. She'd always felt a distance from other girls, distance established by those other girls. Cammy was in no way mean, or unpleasant, or insulting to anyone. It was just the kind of thing that happened among kids when faced with a peer who was intellectually far beyond them. In high school, Cammy was aware of being called "supernerd" behind her back. That was one of the nicer nicknames.

Cammy had established a shell around herself, to protect herself from the hurt, from the disdain, resulting from being so different from anyone she met. She had learned to blank out the nasty looks she got when test papers with red-circled "100%" were returned to her.

She understood those looks, really she did. She knew many of the students were putting a lot of work into the attempt to get good grades, and the resentment they felt at anyone seeming to breeze through successfully without obvious effort was, to Cammy, very natural.

Understanding didn't make it hurt less. But the shell did.

So far in college Cammy had kept a low profile, avoiding volunteering answers to her professors' questions. Supposedly the general intelligence of college students ought to be higher than in high school, Cammy thought, but she continued seeing blank stares when the professors made remarks Cammy considered obvious, hardly worth saying.

Cammy remained largely invisible in the classroom. She was good at it. She never considered the possibility that another student might have the same knack of invisibility, for the same reasons.

* * * * *

Last night, Friday, Cammy had been sitting at her favorite study carrel on the fifth floor of the library, intent on her biology homework. Friday nights were a good time for studying in the library -- it wasn't deserted, but it was a lot less populated than at other times. It suddenly occurred to Cammy that she was thirsty, and she suspected she had been for some time -- she knew she tended to lose contact with her physical body when reading absorbed her attention, as it so often did.

On her way to the water fountain, she passed by Alisa at another carrel, hunched over a book opened on the table. Despite Alisa having registered on Cammy's conscious mind as nothing more than a seatholder in her calc class, Cammy did know her full name, Alisa Atwater, since Professor Simpson kept track of attendance in class, and for the first week or so she had called out names until she knew the students on sight.

Cammy was struck again by a feeling of attraction to Alisa. Standing this close, Cammy saw now that Alisa's hair, which she'd thought was brown, actually had more red in it, a sort of dark copper color. Her eyebrows were the same, so Cammy gathered that the color was genuine.

Alisa didn't look up, or make any other sign that she was aware of Cammy walking past her, her attention fully focused on the page she was reading. Cammy didn't intentionally try to identify the book, but it was automatic for her eyes to read a sentence or two of any text that passed in front of them, and she stopped suddenly, with a short intake of breath. She recognized the text: it was from book 1 of "The Mantanor Chronicles," a series by little known fantasy writer Selena Norrell. Cammy's mother had given her the first book for her tenth birthday. Because of its length, Mom had assumed it would take Cammy a year to get through it so that she could deliver the second book on Cammy's next birthday. Cammy had finished it in a week, and begged Mom to get her the next volume immediately.

Cammy had read the series from beginning to end four times in the years since. And she had never met anyone else at school who had ever read it. Until this moment.

Reaching out to Alisa through the shell seemed risk-free. Alisa wouldn't ridicule Cammy's taste in literature over a book she herself was reading. Heart pounding for a reason she couldn't identify, Cammy asked, "Who's your favorite character, so far?" Cammy suspected that at this point in the story, it would probably be Wendy.

Alisa gasped and convulsed in startlement and looked up, wide-eyed. Cammy immediately said, "I'm sorry, I should have made sure you knew I was here..."

Alisa laughed. "No, it's no problem. I get kind of... zoned out. Anyway, it's Sandra, of course. She's kind of like me, except really daring in a way I wish I was."

Cammy blinked in puzzlement, and looked again at the page Alisa was reading to make sure... yes, it was the first volume. Sandra didn't appear until the second book, but became one of the main characters from that point on. The solution to the puzzle became clear. "So you've read the whole thing before?"

Alisa blushed slightly. "Well, yeah. A few times. I re-read books I like. It never matters that I know what's going to happen. Each time I still... well, it's like I'm fully in that world and not this one anymore. Like I know all the people, the characters, and I'm part of what's happening." She smiled, still looking a little embarrassed. "It's weird, I know."

Cammy stared at her for a moment, and finally managed to whisper, "No. No, Not weird. Not weird at all." She reached blindly behind herself and managed to locate a chair at a nearby table. She pulled it over and sat in it beside Alisa. Alisa seemed not to mind her reading being interrupted.

They talked.

They started with the Mantanor series, then branched out into other fictional works -- their reading histories seemed nearly identical. They started finishing most of each other's sentences. Cammy knew, before she asked, that Alisa, like Cammy herself, used to read at the dinner table, a habit her parents had tried to break until they realized that if she were given an ultimatum to choose between reading and eating, eating would lose.

They went on to other subjects -- family life, childhood memories and special events, goals, dreams. An undercurrent in Cammy's thoughts grew, not quite rising to the conscious level: the sense that something profoundly special was happening. Cammy's sense of separation from the world had to give way when faced with Alisa's existence. It was as if an emptiness inside Cammy was finally being filled.

They were both startled by an announcement over the loudspeaker, "The library will be closing in fifteen minutes."

Cammy looked at her watch, astonished. She and Alisa had been talking for four hours. She didn't see how that was possible. She looked around. The fifth floor was deserted. She couldn't recall everybody leaving, though she was sitting less than thirty feet from the elevator and she thought surely she should have been hearing it.

She looked back at Alisa, and was suddenly overwhelmed by Alisa's presence, fully conscious of Alisa being right here, right now, right in front of Cammy's eyes. That sense of how special Alisa was in her life, now bubbling up to the surface of Cammy's consciousness, released a need long denied, long suppressed, long unfelt. A need that had been intellectual and emotional. And physical. There was a sudden tingling feeling between her legs.

Drawn by something like a gravitational pull from Alisa, Cammy leaned forward, and saw that Alisa was doing the same. Their lips met, and fastened together, moving. Cammy had never kissed anyone before, and had always assumed she would worry whether she was doing it right -- would her nose bump the other's, was she supposed to suck or just touch lips... Unexpectedly, she found it all instinctive.

She felt Alisa's arm go around her and draw her closer. Her hand came up to stroke Alisa's hair as the kiss continued, intensifying. She heard a tiny sigh from Alisa, and another closer one, which Cammy decided must have come from herself.

Cammy let go Alisa's lips with her own at last, with a soft liquid sucking sound, and immediately Alisa's lips sought hers out to renew the contact.

They both jumped, their foreheads banging together, momentarily painful, when the voice on the speaker said "The library will close in five minutes."

Cammy looked at Alisa's face, so close to her own, eyes wide in seeming astonishment, cheeks heavily flushed. She saw Alisa's lips -- so full, and now Cammy knew, so soft -- curl upward in a smile copying the one Cammy knew she wore.

Cammy's resistance to getting in trouble struggled, and finally won, against her urge to explore the new world of physical intimacy with Alisa, the boundaries of which she had barely had time to cross so far. She said in a near whisper, "We better go." Alisa giggled and nodded, and quickly gathered her notes and books together, while Cammy went back to her own carrel to pick up her own.

Cammy, holding the straps of her satchel in her right hand, took Alisa's hand without thinking about it as they walked to the elevator. Once the doors of the elevator, carrying only the two of them, closed, Alisa turned to her and threw her arms around Cammy. Cammy dropped her satchel and her lips quickly sought out Alisa's again, her own arms going around Alisa, both of them tightening their hold, Cammy feeling the softness of Alisa's breasts under her clothes flattening against hers. The tingling between Cammy's legs intensified, punctuated by a damp coolness. Alisa's moan was louder than before.

They broke the kiss when the elevator stopped, and separated by unspoken agreement before the doors opened. Together, Cammy barely stifling a giggle, they walked together without touching past the front desk, the two student workers behind it paying minimal attention to them as they gathered their own things prior to heading back to their dorms.

Outside in the cool night air, Cammy didn't want her time with Alisa to end, but she did feel a need for some alone time to process what had happened. The two urges, to stay with Alisa or go back to her dorm,

fought within her. The one feeling she had that was not in dispute was that her life had permanently changed.

Alisa seemed to be facing the same struggle, opening her mouth several times to speak and then stopping herself. At last her eyes lit up -- clearly the right way forward had just come to her. "Do you want to come to the fair with me tomorrow?" Tomorrow, Saturday, the annual Fall Fair was scheduled on campus, an event meant to welcome first-year students but open to all, and to the public. Throughout the day preparations had been visible, booths and tents being set up.

Cammy gasped at how perfect the idea was: a way to spend the entire day on a first date, with fun experiences to be shared, along with being a solution to Cammy's do-I-want-to-stay-now-or-go problem. "Sure! Where should we meet? When?"

Alisa considered. "You said you're in Trent, right?", identifying Cammy's dorm. "That's closer to the football field than I am." The fair would occupy the practice field and some open spaces around it. "What if I meet you at your room at... ten o'clock?"

"Okay." Cammy gave her the room number, and hesitated once more, wanting to kiss Alisa again but not quite ready to do it in the open. She saw Alisa lean briefly towards her, then away. Is she always going to feel the exact same thing I do? wondered Cammy, a smile curling her lips. She finally decided that her urge for some processing time was the winner. "I'll..."

In the same second, Alisa said "I'll..."

They both giggled, and Cammy said as rapidly as she could, "I'll see you then," spun around and began trotting towards her dorm.

In her room, she found that Taylor wasn't back from her date with Jim yet. She quickly made her preparations for bed, wearing, as usual, only her panties. Underneath the covers, she thought back to the library again. And Alisa. She slipped her fingers in under the waistband of her panties and began rubbing. Presently she moaned.

CHAPTER 2

Still clutching hands tightly, Cammy and Alisa approached the entrance to the fair.

For Cammy, feeling Alisa's hand clasped in her own made her feel connected with the world in a way she had never been before. The copper glow of Alisa's hair in the sunlight made Cammy aware that all of the colors around her seemed brighter, more vibrant, from the green of the grass to the blue of the sky. The light, warm breeze ruffling that hair felt like an intimate caress. The gentle rustling of leaves in the trees sounded like whispers of secrets only lovers would tell.

Cammy was already feeling wet between her legs. She'd known she would, so she'd taken the precaution of putting an extra-absorbent pad in her panties, despite being a week past the end of her last period.

There was a line at the entrance to the roped-off area within which the fair was in progress. There was no admission charge, but all of the females were issued numbered tickets on entering, for a possible drawing later. As Cammy waited in the line, she leaned against Alisa, so that their arms were in contact from hand up to shoulder.

Once through the line, they entered the grounds, each putting her ticket stub in her back pocket. Cammy looked at Alisa. "Where should we go first?"

Alisa looked around, and pointed. Cammy saw where she was pointing and grinned. "Arts and crafts." There was a tent with that label. "I love that kind of thing!"

Alisa turned to look at Cammy with an open-mouthed grin, her whole face saying, of course you do! Giving each other's hand a squeeze, they walked to the tent and entered.

Within the tent was an array of booths, each displaying the work of a local (or widely traveled) artisan. Some were painters, some had designed ingeniously lovely wind chimes (with electric fans directed at them to make them sound in the windless tent), some specialized in macrame. Cammy's attention was caught by a hand-crafted guillotine that must surely be very expensive. Alisa had already started in that direction before Cammy could take a step.

Guillotines were readily available in hardware stores, of course, at prices of a few hundred dollars. This one, though, wasn't designed for the average consumer. It appeared, except for the shiny steel blade, to be made exclusively from wood, in at least two types: a pale yellow for the main structure, with trim in a dark brown. The sides down which the blade would fall were intricately carved, in scenes depicting barbecues (there were even wiggly lines arising from the cooking woman's body suggesting the irresistible aroma of roasting girlmeat), with dancing onlookers surrounded by bowers of flowers. There was a small card tacked to the side saying the price was twelve thousand.

The artisan sat near the guillotine, fielding questions from several people around her. Cammy said to Alisa, quietly and standing far enough from the artist to avoid being overheard, "Who'd buy one? I mean, it's gorgeous, but it's something you'd only use once."

Alisa bit her lip thoughtfully. "Maybe not. A family with several daughters might splurge on it."

Cammy nodded. "And I guess some people have enough money that they wouldn't even think about it. If my dad could afford it, I'd love to be snuffed in that. I know everybody at my barbecue would remember it."

Alisa nodded. "Exactly." She looked at Cammy. "Is that how you want to go? Guillotine?" It was one of the few personal subjects that hadn't come up last night in the library.

Cammy shook her head. "I haven't decided yet. There's a lot to think about, besides just the method. We did snuff my mom that way. I might want something different." She grinned. "Maybe a roleplay, where an executioner cuts off my head with a sword." She didn't need to mention that such an executioner was usually a professional, hired for the occasion, adept at cutting off the head with a single stroke. They both knew that.

Alisa nodded again. "What about hanging?"

Cammy paused, thoughtfully, then shook her head again. "I don't think so. One way or another, decap is kind of a turn-on. I just need to think it over." She looked at Alisa and grinned. "I'll want to bounce some thoughts off you. I'll get a better feeling for what I want if I say it out loud."

Alisa gave her hand a tight squeeze. "I'd love that." Cammy's breath caught. It was the first time Alisa had used the word "love" for anything personal between them. Cammy hadn't either, but she knew what she was feeling.

As they came out of the tent, a girl walked past Cammy from behind and brushed her shoulder. The girl then turned, about ten feet in front of Cammy and Alisa, smiling.

Cammy, who didn't know the girl, frowned at her in a puzzled way, then suddenly caught on and giggled, and felt at her back pocket. The girl then held Cammy's wallet out towards her, and a piece of candy.

Cammy laughed as she retrieved her wallet, which held her student i.d. and the small amount of money she had judged would be needed for the day. She knew the tradition. The girl was a professional pickpocket, one of (probably) several hired by the fair committee. If she was able to take your possessions without your awareness, she'd give you a piece of candy. If you caught her in the act, you'd get two.

Cammy returned the girl's wave and watched her resume her rounds. She put her wallet back in her pocket and considered the small foil-wrapped bit of hard candy. It suddenly occurred to her that she hadn't given her new -- okay, yes, it did seem fair to call Alisa her girlfriend -- any gifts yet. She held out the candy to Alisa, with a small smile.

Alisa beamed at her, took the candy and unwrapped it.

Cammy had a sudden mental image of sharing the candy back and forth with Alisa, transferring it directly from mouth to mouth. The tingling between her legs returned, at a new level of intensity.

Alisa, her voice a little unclear as she sucked on the candy, asked, "Where next?"

Cammy pointed at a tent, with a sign in front that featured the university logo, and the words, "Department of Women's Research." Underneath was the slogan: "Using Science to Benefit Womankind." Cammy smiled. "We probably can learn some new stuff in there." Alisa smiled back.

There were few visitors inside the tent. It seemed that Cammy and Alisa were rare in having been attracted by the sign. As they entered, Cammy's attention was immediately captured by a large video screen showing two women swimming submerged in a brilliant blue pool, nude, their hair flowing behind them, amid tall, seaweedy vegetation growing upward from a sandy bottom. There was a sand bar rising above the water line in the far corner of the pool. The most visually arresting thing about the scene was the bodies of the women: they were mermaids.

The arms of each woman had been amputated, and skillful plastic surgery had rounded off the ends of the shoulders without a noticeable scar. And their legs, below a normal pair of buttocks, appeared to have been joined together somehow into a single leg, ending in a fin. They must have had considerable practice swimming in that body-modified format: the movements of their single leg propelled each of them seemingly effortlessly around the pool, one chasing the other playfully around the seaweed stalks. As Cammy watched, the pursuing mermaid caught the other and kissed her, then darted away to be chased. They were beautifully graceful: as they swam, their bodies looked like flags rippling in the wind, though they didn't bend in any place a human body shouldn't bend. After a short time one, and then the other, beached herself on the sandbar, each breathing deeply, with beatific expressions on their faces. They kissed, then, more deeply than the playful one before, before diving back into the pool for another chase.

A woman, wearing a nametag on her blouse reading "Dr. Helena Smythe, Department of Women's Research," stood beside the screen. Alisa, gaping at the screen, asked her, "Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?"

Before Dr. Smythe could respond, Cammy elaborated on what she was sure Alisa was referring to: "Do they each have just the one leg? It doesn't look like one was cut off. It's perfectly symmetrical. Like it's natural." She looked at Alisa, who nodded in confirmation that that had indeed been what she was wondering about.

Dr. Smythe nodded. "We're trying to make it natural. Our goal is to open this niche fully for women. There are so many who have grown up fantasizing about being mermaids. So far we're able to adapt the body morphology of our volunteers in a superficial way..."

Alisa interrupted, "How did you do the leg thing?"

Dr. Smythe looked back at the screen. "We start by making a full-length incision along the inside of both legs. After surgery to relocate the vagina -- see there, at the top front, where the mons pubis would normally be..."

Cammy looked closely at one of the women in the video, and blinked, saying under her breath, "So *that's* what that is."

"...we then fused the bones of both legs together. Muscles are left in place, or relocated in minor ways, and then the high-tech step is to form a scaffolding that encloses both legs, and we've developed a method to induce the woman's natural skin to grow along the scaffolding. Eventually the new skin growing from both sides meets in the center, in both front and back. We'd like to be able to make the skin below the waist express itself in the form of iridescent scales, but that's a long way off. Part of the ongoing research."

Alisa, entranced, asked softly, "The fins, are they real?"

Dr. Smythe smiled. "In a sense. The scaffolding extends to the end of the leg, and ends in that fin shape. Again, it's natural skin covering it, once the growth process is completed. The mermaid can't move her fin independently, as if it were a foot, because the existing muscle structure doesn't allow for that. We may solve that problem in the future. But the movement of the leg is enough to enable the fin to serve its purpose of helping propel her while swimming."

Cammy asked, "So, is the idea that people would own mermaids as pets -- like puppygirls except they're fish? Well, swimming mammals, I mean." The women in the video visibly remained very much mammals.

"That would be one way to go -- they might be pets in a home aquarium. They might also live freely. In pairs, of course, in either case, like you see here. Companionship is a must in a situation like this. We're a long way from being finished, by the way. We're having them breathe air with higher oxygen content, so they can stay underwater longer, but eventually we want to develop gills that can be implanted."

Cammy and Alisa spun towards her in synch, their mouths agape. Cammy said, "You're kidding!" while Alisa asked "You mean they could stay underwater indefinitely?" Her voice squeaked with astonishment.

Dr. Smythe nodded. "That's the goal, yes. We also want to change their body chemistry and digestive systems so that their wastes are biologically benign -- no harmful bacteria in them, I mean -- which would considerably simplify their lives. Right now safe waste elimination is a pretty elaborate process. Ideally we'd like to reach a point where they can feed from the water itself, something like a fish eating plankton."

Cammy and Alisa both stood staring for a time. Cammy said, "I can imagine thousands of women wanting to live like this."

Alisa nodded. "Especially after the development is finished. It would be such a beautiful way to live."

Dr. Smythe said with a cautious smile, "I don't suppose the two of you would like to volunteer? We have about a dozen pairs on a waiting list right now for surgery, but we're always looking for more."

Both girls shook their heads. Alisa said, "I wasn't thinking that, but what would I need to do to get in on the research?" She looked at Cammy, who nodded.

Cammy said, "We're both first-years, so we don't have majors yet. Where would we go from here?"

Dr. Smythe nodded, her smile expanding. "We need staff with a lot of knowledge in human physiology, and also bioengineers. If you major in pre-medicine, and take a few introductory engineering classes as electives, that would keep your options open to go either way in graduate school."

At this point another student came by, asking questions that Cammy and Alisa had already heard the answers to. Cammy saw another display to her left, proclaiming "Sperm-Free Reproduction!" The sign included a diagram. She said "Thank you" to Dr. Smythe, then got Alisa's attention and pointed. "Check that out?"

"Sure." They walked towards it.

As Cammy came closer, she was able to make out the details of the diagram on the sign: Two women, with arrows leading from them to two circles labeled "eggs," a bundle of wavy lines labeled "chromosomes" coming out of one egg and an arrow pointing from them to the other egg. An arrow led from this second egg to a baby. Another woman was in charge of this exhibit, with a nametag reading Dr. Ramona Colton.

Cammy studied the diagram, and said to Dr. Colton, "So you can fertilize one woman's egg with the chromosomes from another woman's egg? You can make a baby that way, with genetic inheritance from both women?"

Dr. Colton smiled and nodded. "We've finally been successful with the process. We've got three women who've just given birth in the last two months, and several more pregnant."

Alisa was fingering her lower lip absently as she considered the diagram. "The babies are all girls, right?"

Dr. Colton beamed at her. "Exactly. Since the genetic donors have only X's among their sex chromosomes, no Y's."

Cammy was once more impressed at the way her mind and Alisa's always seemed so closely synchronized. She'd just been opening her mouth to make the same observation. She said, "One of the women carries the baby, I'm assuming. The other is -- like -- kind of the father?"

Dr. Colton chuckled. "In a sense. We're avoiding that terminology, of course, but you could look at it that way. We've petitioned the City Council to change the official birth certificate form so that it has a space for 'Mother's genetic partner' in place of 'father.' "

Alisa frowned. "It seems like there'd be some opposition to this. Like men will feel they're not needed for anything anymore."

Dr. Colton shrugged. "A few men aware of the project have mentioned that. But there are always going to be women who have a sexual preference for male partners. Baby boys will continue to be born the old-fashioned way." She smiled. "The men may even get more female attention than usual. And a higher proportion of women in the population means more girlmeat, of course. Many people still can't afford to eat girlmeat every day, certainly not at every meal. All of us have to supplement our diets with other sources of protein. So everybody comes out ahead when there are more women. The men I've talked to have come around, if they've objected at first."

Cammy said, "It sounds like the research is over with, since the process works. I was thinking all of the projects here..." she gestured to indicate the entire tent, "...were looking for help."

"Oh, no, we're not at all finished. It took a lot of experimentation to make the process work to begin with -- we've been at this for years -- and we're still experiencing failures. It's tricky convincing an egg that it's been invaded by sperm. There turns out to be more to it than just inserting chromosomes. It took a long time to find the right chemical environment to make successful fertilization happen. We want to make the process smoother, more often successful, and also affordable. That's where both of you come in." Smiled at both Cammy and Alisa. "You've both been showing some insight we don't usually see from undergraduates -- you are, right?"

Alisa nodded. "First year."

Dr. Colton raised her eyebrows. "So you don't even have a major yet. Thought you might be pre-med. Anyway, you're smart, you're interested. Either of you might end up in my job."

Cammy asked, "So we should start out in pre-med?"

"If you *are* thinking about this, then yes, that would get you going in the right direction."

A few students now came by, and Dr. Colton started addressing their questions. Cammy looked at Alisa. "Lots to think about. Anything else here we should see?"

Alisa looked around. "Let's go outside. We can think about this anywhere, so let's get some fresh air."

Cammy grinned. "Great idea." Taking Alisa's hand again, they left the tent.

CHAPTER 3

Outside, Cammy's attention was caught by another sign. She pointed to it. "Ponygirl races? I've seen the ones on TV, but I've never been to one. It costs a little money."

Cammy had never seen a real ponygirl, in the flesh. They were woman, of course, not horses, women who had undergone a highly stylized body modification. They ran upright, rather than on all fours like a puppygirl. Though they were slaves, like puppygirls, they were at the opposite end of a spectrum from puppygirls in one sense: where puppygirls were the ultimate submissives, ponygirls carried themselves with pride and self-assurance, to the point that they were never referred to as "pets."

That there were women who chose the permanent surgical body alterations required to serve as a racing pony surprised Cammy, though she could imagine it attracting girls with certain personalities, self-images, and personal fantasies. And she'd just seen mermaids, which seemed even a little more extreme.

Alisa nodded eagerly. "Sure! I've never seen one in person either. I don't really know enough about it to do any betting, though."

Cammy shook her head. "I wouldn't want to. It's kind of nuts to put any money on it unless you really follow the sport closely."

Alisa looked at her and grinned. "That's us, right? We always want to study the reading material first."

Cammy laughed and squeezed her hand, and held it as they walked to the stadium.

The races were inside the football stadium, the only one of the fair's attractions to take place there. Admission was three dollars -- much less than it would ordinarily be for such races, and though the races, according to various visible signs, were an official Ponygirl Racing Association event, Cammy strongly suspected that none of the ponygirls here would be ones you would see in the televised races. Most likely they would be novices, at an early stage of their training.

Inside, there were several hundred onlookers, not nearly as many as would attend a football game, so there was no requirement to sit in the grandstand, though some did. Most were on the field, ringing the outside of the running track. A lot of them had taken places near what was obviously the finish line, with sparser crowds at other points along the track.

Alisa pointed. "It's not too crowded there, behind the starting line. Is that okay? They won't be running right in front of us, but we can still get a good look from there, without too many people in the way."

Just as they arrived at their chosen location, a voice over the stadium's sound system announced the next race, the last of four one-hundred-meter heats. Eight ponies, walking with their grooms, approached the starting line.

These ponygirls, who had been assembled on the infield with the others who were still awaiting their turn to race, approached the starting line from behind it, most of them walking in front of Cammy and Alisa to get there.

The races were organized in a way similar to track and field competitions. There were too many ponygirls for them all to run in a single race, so they ran in separate preliminary heats, with up to eight ponies in each, the top two finishers qualifying to be among the eight ponies in the final. You could bet on each preliminary heat, as well as on the final. The odds for the final changed according to when you placed the bet -- before or after the preliminaries.

One of the ponygirls, assigned to an outside starting position, walked by within just six or seven feet from Cammy and Alisa, giving them a much better look than they had imagined they would get. Cammy sucked in her breath -- the girl was really eye-catching. That was intentional, of course -- each girl's owner received a cut of the betting pool in proportion to the amount bet on the girl, with bonuses added depending on her finish in the race, so each of them was decorated in such a way as to encourage such bets.

Like all racing ponygirls, by long-standing tradition, she had no arms. As with the mermaids Cammy and Alisa had seen on video earlier, they had been amputated at her shoulders, and given attractive rounded knobs at the ends of her shoulders that looked as though she had been born this way. No doubt the plastic surgeons responsible for the mermaids' arm removal had been experienced with ponygirl body modification. For ponygirls, there wasn't really a practical reason for removing the arms. As Cammy understood it, it symbolized the lifelong commitment, as a slave, to a life that demanded full concentration on the abilities and training of her legs. The girl had known, when offering herself as a ponygirl, that once she had undergone the surgery, she could never be anything other than a pony. It was her declaration that she was certain of never wanting to be anything else.

Each pony had her own color, and the girl Cammy was looking at up close presented a bright yellow-green color theme. Her hair, or mane (each girl had long hair combed smoothly back along the top of her head and down her back, the sides of her head shaved, a mane that flowed dramatically behind her as she raced) was dyed that yellow-green color, as were her eyebrows and pubic hair -- the centuries-old tradition of decorating a ponygirl's bush was too ingrained in the culture to allow for any trimming. Her makeup included eye shadow, eye-liner, lashes, and lipstick again in that same color; her nipples and areolae were also yellow-green, likely using the eye shadow; and her leather harness was, again, that same color. All of it had a fluorescent glow that suggested it would be visible in the dark, though it really owed everything to sunlight. Of course, her slave collar matched as well. The collar appeared, to Cammy, to be covered in a fuzzy material, like felt. Aside from her collar, harness, and ponyboots (again yellow-green), the girl was nude, her skin a deep tan from long days of training outdoors.

The harness was mainly a decorative accessory, as she wasn't expected to pull a cart -- there was cart racing, of course, but in this race the girls would be running free. It consisted of straps that ran over her shoulders, crossed between her breasts and the middle of her back to attach, from both front and back, to a belt around her waist. It included cleverly-designed cups attached where the straps passed underneath the breasts, which gave the breasts some support while running.

The “ponyboots” were so called because centuries ago, they had been actual boots. Now they replaced her feet at the ankles -- a surgical-amputation-and-graft treatment. In their design, they resembled hooves. The springiness of the soles of the boots made it possible, after training, for her to run faster in them than any woman with feet.

There were enough different colors to choose from that there usually weren't two ponies with the same color theme in the same race, but just in case, each girl had a number, painted in large digits on the skin of her back, the two digits on either side of the place where the harness straps crossed. This particular girl was number twenty-six.

Aside from a bit of plastic surgery that reshaped her ears to come to a point at the top -- clearly visible with the hair shaved away around them -- the girl's one other significant body modification, completing the transformation of her human body to her chosen animal avatar, was her luxuriant tail, made from genuine horse hair, grafted surgically to her tailbone, two feet long and, of course for this girl, dyed to match her yellow-green color theme. It emerged from just above her buttocks like a brightly hued fountain, suggesting that her body had more beauty than it was able to contain within itself.

Of course, the ponygirl's lack of arms made her utterly dependent on her groom, and there was no other relationship in all the world of slavegirls that was like the one shared by pony and groom. In nearly all cases, or so Cammy had read, a pony racer and her groom had a pre-existing romantic relationship before committing themselves together as slavegirls. The pony loved the idea of being dependent on her groom, and the groom loved, with equal fervor, all of the duties of taking care of her pony: they were never apart, and never wanted to be, from waking until bedtime, and then slept together in the pony's stall -- a stall that included a television and offered Internet access, as well as a bathroom, with a shower and a toilet that was specially designed to accommodate a ponygirl and her tail. So life within it wasn't as bare as the word “stall” suggested. Keeping the ponygirl and her groom happy was a key to running a successful stable.

It was impossible to mistake which groom went with which pony. The grooms were each in a uniform of sorts, each wearing a t-shirt, shorts, running shoes, and slave collar, all in the exact same color as the pony's theme, as if to emphasize that they were a team together. Even the laces of the shoes matched the color theme. The groom Cammy was focused on, the one in yellow-green, had the legend “Banner Stables” on her t-shirt, announcing the ownership of herself and her pony.

Cammy knew that the pony and her groom, together, had eaten the pony's arms, the groom holding the meat for the pony who could no longer feed herself. It seemed to Cammy that it had to be an incredible bonding experience, the two sharing the meat of one's body, the groom making the pony's body part of her own.

Watching the ponygirl move past her, Cammy marveled at the girl's muscles -- not just her stunning legs and perfect butt, but also the taut abdominals, with a well-defined six-pack, and back muscles rippling as she walked. Everything about her said that this was a woman who devoted her life to being as powerful as she could be. The way she walked gave off waves of pride in herself that radiated from her almost visibly in the air.

The girl and her groom had been walking side by side, but as she approached the starting gate her groom came around in front of her, put a hand on each of her shoulders and began talking to her, softly but intently. Cammy couldn't hear any of it, but assumed the groom was reminding the pony about racing strategy and helping her establish her psychological racing mind-set.

The groom's eyes bored into the pony's, and the pony nodded a few times. Ponygirls, like puppygirls, were never heard to speak, though unlike puppies, whose avoidance of language was complete and permanent, using only barking for attention as part of their lifestyle as pure pets, a ponygirl did talk on occasion, but only to her groom in private. It was a necessary break in her animal persona, since some communication was required -- at a minimum, the ponygirl must tell her groom whether her body felt ready to race, whether a particular training exercise seemed to help or not, what muscles hurt and needed attention, and so on. According to interviews with grooms, the question of whether verbal interaction between pony and groom went beyond that minimum varied from pony to pony. In most cases, the pony held it as a point of professional pride and petgirl sensibility never to speak other than for those bare necessities. Not even during sex.

The pony Cammy was watching gave one final nod to her groom, and the groom pulled what looked like a candy bar -- likely some kind of energy bar -- from the satchel she was carrying, unwrapped it and held it up for the ponygirl to take a couple of bites, then picked up a plastic bottle and squirted a liquid into her pony's mouth. The pony swirled it around her mouth and spat it out. Her groom then gave her a quick peck on the lips, then rubbed the side of her head against her pony's -- clearly a minimal intimacy meant to express her love without distracting the girl from her upcoming run. The pony nodded again, and as a buzzer sounded, she entered her stall in the starting gate.

Moments later, a bell rang, the gates sprang open in front of the ponies, and the ponies emerged to sprint down the track, the crowd cheering them on. Cammy found it stunning to watch from this vantage point, different from any she had had on television, with the ponies running directly away from her, their long powerful legs flashing, their manes flowing, tails twitching side to side as if cheerleaders were waving pompons of all different colors. As far as Cammy and Alisa were from the finish line, neither of them could quite tell what the order of finish was. It appeared to Cammy that the girl she'd been watching, number twenty-six, had finished in about the middle of the pack, which would fail to qualify her for the final. Cammy was disappointed on her behalf.

Alisa pointed. "Let's get a view from that end. About thirty or forty feet past the finish there's not too many people."

Cammy nodded. As they walked that way, once again holding hands, Cammy asked Alisa if she'd ever considered being any kind of slavegirl. She found nothing surprising in Alisa's answer -- it was exactly what she'd expected.

"Not really. I don't have a problem with it, except... well, I want to keep learning new things, not settle into a life where you just do one thing. I did think about maybe the Hanging Academy for a while, because you do go to school and learn a lot there, but it's so specialized. I would have liked all the science study, and anatomy and physiology, but it's all aimed at one specific thing, and there's nothing else. It's like being

in grad school and skipping the whole general undergrad curriculum. I don't want to concentrate on one thing yet." She smiled and shrugged. "And I'm not that attracted to hanging anyway."

Cammy grinned. "That's what I thought about it too! There's just so much out there I don't know yet. I want to keep digging at it. If we... If you... well, do you think you'd want to be pre-med? Like to get ready to do research for the mermaid program, or Dr. Colton's project?"

"Oh, sure! That'd be fascinating. And I know pre-med is heavy in science and math, but it's still general, until you really start focusing after you get in med school."

Cammy squeezed Alisa's hand still more tightly. Alisa seemed never to say anything that couldn't just as easily have come out of Cammy's mouth. Alisa reacted to the squeeze by smiling back.

As they walked, the speaker system carried the announcement that the preliminary runs at the hundred meter distance were over, and there would be several four hundred meter runs before the final hundred meter run. The trackside crowd began drifting back towards Cammy and Alisa, and Cammy realized that at the four hundred meter distance, a complete circuit of the oval track, the finish line would be at the same place as the starting gate. She and Alisa were now about fifty feet past that point, the bulk of the crowd had moved behind them, and they decided to stay and watch from there.

Once again a group of ponies and their grooms walked out of the infield onto the track. Among these women with muscular, powerful bodies, Cammy's eyes were drawn to one especially magnificent specimen, and not just because she was taller than the rest, obviously over six feet. The girl was walking with *such* assured authority and pride. She was the archetype of the perfect ponygirl. An odd sudden flash of recognition shot through Cammy, startling her. She didn't know why a racing pony here would look familiar, since she'd already decided none of these today could be at the top level of competition, so none would have been on television. Then she looked at the pony's groom, and made the connection. She raised her hands to her mouth and gasped.

Alisa spun towards her. "What is it? Are you okay?"

Wide eyed, Cammy pointed. "The pony there, the one in violet." Actually the pony's theme was pale version of violet which, like the other colors, seemed to glow of its own light.

Alisa looked in that direction, "I see her. You know her?"

Cammy nodded. "Jenna Selmon. She was the star basketball player at my high school. A year ahead of me, so she graduated last year. The girls' team won the league championship, and it was mostly because of Jenna." Cammy laughed. "They even beat the boys' team that year, and that was a really big deal. Jenna scored thirty points. I used to go to the games." Cammy did love sitting in the stands at a game, where she could feel she was an accepted part of the crowd, with no teachers asking questions that only she knew the answers to, no students seeing her test scores and accusing her of wrecking the grading curve, no one mocking her nerdy choice of reading materials. "And her groom is Tracy Akins. She was on the team too. They were girlfriends, of course. They'd walk around campus and everybody knew who they were."

“Did you know she wanted to be a ponygirl?”

Cammy shook her head. “No idea. Well, I guess it’s not that big a surprise, though. She was on the track team, too, in spring. And she was so... intense. Like competition was everything.” Cammy giggled. “And she liked the attention, and seemed to like showing off her body. So I guess I could see her going this way.”

Cammy had never before seen a slave she had known before her slavery, let alone one who’d been through surgical body modification. That was the main reason she hadn’t recognized Jenna immediately, despite her face being so familiar. There was the ponygirl hairstyle and its violet color, so different from Jenna’s short brown hair of her high school days. The pointed ears, the lack of arms. And Cammy had never seen Jenna naked before. And of course, there was that tail.

Tracy’s violet t-shirt read “Pennock Stables.” Cammy had heard the name, which was a sign that they must be one of the elite ponygirl farms.

Cammy wondered how long Jenna would have been in training by this time. She had graduated... when was it, sixteen months ago. But Cammy was sure that a number of those months had been spent recovering from her surgeries, learning to deal with the discomfort of the tail until it no longer interfered with her movements and felt like a normal and accepted part of her body, learning how to walk in the ponyboots with no arms for balance, exercising to recover the pre-surgery strength in her legs after the long layoff -- and her buff body suggested she’d gone well beyond that. It seemed likely that Jenna had only been in full-fledged training for racing for at most six months, maybe less. Probably longer than that for strength training and conditioning.

Jenna was standing now, just short of the starting gate -- though she wasn’t really standing, she was bouncing up and down in a way Cammy hadn’t seen any of the other girls do. It occurred to Cammy that that sort of bouncing in ponyboots couldn’t be easy, with no ankles to help, and required both extra leg strength and a finely-tuned sense of balance.

Jenna suddenly started a set of deep knee-bends, and though Cammy hadn’t seen a sign she’d been about to do that, obviously Tracy had anticipated it -- she’d gone behind Jenna to hold her tail up off the ground during each squat. Cammy assumed it was to avoid having the brightly colored tail pick up any dust from brushing the track.

Once again a buzzer signaled that it was time for the girls to enter the gate. Seconds later they burst out of the gate as it opened to the sound of a bell.

The race, at this longer distance, wasn’t a full-out sprint this time. The ponies, coming out of the gate, were spread out in a line across the track, but soon bunched together as they approached the turn. Jenna had started from a middle position in the gate, and was in the middle of the pack going into the turn, but soon began moving up.

By the middle of the back straightaway, Jenna was in the lead. Her mane and tail were two violet streams flowing behind her, as if taunting the other ponies. Cammy didn't realize she was jumping up and down and clapping until she saw that Alisa was doing it too -- Alisa was even shouting, "Go, Jenna!"

By the time the ponies came out of the last turn, Jenna was several body-lengths ahead of the rest. The starting gate having been pulled out of the way, the ponies all sprinted to the finish line, Jenna continuing to stretch her lead. She won easily, by a wider margin than Cammy could ever recall seeing in any race at that distance on television. The crowd, perhaps energized by Cammy and Alisa, cheered more loudly than for any of the sprints.

Beyond the finish line, the grooms all ran out onto the track to tend to their ponies. Jenna, barely seeming winded and clearly elated, her whole body glowing now with sweat, jumped up and down excitedly. Tracy ran to her and threw her arms around her, seemingly as much for the purpose of keeping Jenna from hurting herself as in celebration. She managed to settle Jenna down, and they shared a long kiss.

Cammy's attention was caught by a pony in orange, the one who had finished last, lagging badly behind the rest. She was bent over, struggling to catch her breath, and as her groom ran up to her she straightened and collapsed sobbing into her groom's arms.

The groom rubbed her pony's back, letting her cry for a moment, then held her at arms' length, saying softly but insistently, "Cindy, look at me. Look at me. Look at me..."

At last the pony, her eyes red and still streaming, her makeup running, her lips quivering, her shoulders heaving as she tried to repress the sobs, gave her attention to her groom. The groom, still speaking softly, said, "Cindy, halfway through, right there..." the groom pointed towards the opposite side of the track, "You lost your stride. Remember what Coach Penny has been saying about gliding? How you've been using too much energy going up and down while you run? You were doing really well up until there, gliding like Coach says, but then you went back to your old stride and you were coming too high off the ground. And you're way too out of breath now. Did you remember what Coach said about breathing tempo?" The groom pressed her palm against Cindy's chest above her breasts, as if to remind her of the proper technique. "How to breathe at the start so you have more at the end?" Cindy shook her head and burst into sobs again, her face buried against her groom's shoulder.

The groom worked to calm her again. "Hey, shhhh, shhhh, it's okay, it's okay. This isn't a bad thing, honey, it's a *good* thing. It means you have a way to get better. We know things you can work on and improve on. I know you. I know what you're capable of. I know these other ponies too, they've just been doing it longer than you. You'll have all the experience they've had soon." Cindy, eventually, began nodding, her tears under control, even managing a small, shaky smile. Her groom kissed her on each cheek, as if to kiss away the tears, and then on the lips. "I love you, babe."

Cammy was relieved, and again fascinated by the pony/groom relationship. She'd been worried that Cindy's poor finish might doom her to be sold away from the racing circuit, to spend her life in much heavier ponygirl labor, but obviously her groom anticipated no such problem. Clearly Cindy must be at a sufficiently early point in her training that lapses were to be anticipated and forgiven. And if the loving support of her groom was an advantage, Cindy was going to win someday. Or at least not finish last.

Jenna, on the other hand, was clearly a rising star. She would almost surely be in the televised races in front of crowds of thousands in the near future. Cammy laughed.

Alisa grinned and squeezed her hand once more. "What?"

"I was just thinking someday I could tell people that I knew Jenna before she was a pony... well, okay, maybe 'knew her' is stretching it just a little -- and also that I saw her race before she was famous."

Alisa's eyes lit up. "Yeah, I can say that last part too. Of course, all these people here today saw her, but they don't know who she is, so when she's on TV they won't remember they saw her here. We can remind them."

A thrill ran through Cammy at the way Alisa used "we," as if it was obvious they would be together. She nodded. "Lunch?"

Alisa nodded emphatically. "Sure."

CHAPTER 4

There were benches and tables set up for eating, the food being sold at stalls lined up in one area, and there were also blankets spread on the ground -- the fair committee had thought of everything. Holding cups filled with soft drinks and each with a bag of girlmeat popcorn -- small cubes of girlmeat coated in a crunchy batter, fried and then buttered and salted, its taste reminding one of actual popcorn, hence the name -- Cammy and Alisa, without needing to discuss the choice, headed for one of the available blankets. Most of the blankets were occupied, split evenly between people eating in groups of two or more and couples making out.

A loudspeaker crackled ahead of the announcement, "Volunteers for Hanging Roulette should now report to the west goal of the practice field. We will start at two o'clock."

Hanging Roulette, thought Cammy. That should be fun to watch. Another thing I've never seen in person.

On sitting down on the blanket, Alisa immediately resumed their conversation from last night about the Mantanor series, the interest they shared that had first brought them together, this time going deeper into the motivations of the characters. They wandered gradually into other topics, occasionally reaching into their bags for mouthfuls of their popcorn but sometimes forgetting it for several minutes at a time.

Alisa suddenly grinned and held one of the girlmeat bits towards Cammy's mouth. Cammy, giggling in understanding, bit onto the popcorn, carefully so as not to catch Alisa's fingers, and then returned the favor, letting Alisa snap up a bit of the food from between her fingers.

Cammy's heart started pounding. She wasn't completely sure what to do next. She knew something important was happening, had started happening last night and was still happening now. A development was proceeding... to what, exactly? Is all of this what I think it is? she wondered.

She knew that she had not only never felt so in tune with another person, she had never even imagined it was possible.

She felt sure that she had had an Alisa-shaped hole in her existence. The most amazing thing was that she felt no doubt, none whatsoever: Alisa was the person meant for that hole. She filled it so exactly.

A thought came to Cammy, about a type of relationship she had just seen, one she had never witnessed in person before: the connection between ponygirl and groom. She suddenly visualized the part of the relationship that no one saw, the one in the privacy of their shared stall. It occurred to Cammy that, in a way, it was a mistress/slave relationship taking place between two slaves. The ponygirl had permanently given up part of her humanity in her pursuit of a goal that consumed her in its importance to her: to compete, to win, and to be beautiful and admired while doing it. In doing so, she had given up a considerable amount of freedom and nearly all of her ability to do normal things for herself -- and yet, in spite of that loss, or even because of it, in this pairing between herself and her groom, the ponygirl was the mistress, the groom her slave. Cammy saw, in images passing rapidly one after another through her mind, the groom feeding her ponygirl. Bathing her pony, soaping her body in the shower. Shaving her pony's

legs. Styling her pony's mane -- shaving the sides, shampooing the mane and tail and combing the tangles out them. Dyeing every bit of hair anywhere on her pony's body, including her bush. Doing her pony's makeup. Even wiping her pony's butt. It was a constant, demanding service of one person for another, though done out of love rather than force.

This relationship between me and Alisa could never be like that, Cammy observed, because its entire nature lies in its symmetry, in our equality within the relationship, in our loving the same things, speaking the same words, thinking the same thoughts. We haven't come together to be mistress and slave. We have come together to be equals.

That thought brought Cammy up short. *Are we equals?* Does everything about us seem to her the same way it seems to me? Is she really seeing "us" the way I am?

Cammy's heart pounded still harder. I have to find out, she told herself. I can't go on without knowing.

There was one way to be sure, she realized. I will know, Cammy told herself, if she reacts when I say it the same way I would if she said it.

It didn't really sink in to Cammy that during all this time that these thoughts had been passing through her head, Alisa hadn't said a word. She was just staring fixedly at Cammy, in the same way Cammy was staring at her.

They opened their mouths as if at an invisible signal, and both said, in voices breathy and shaky, "I love you."

The smile that took possession of Alisa's face was like a blinding burst of sunlight. She lunged towards Cammy, wrapped her arms around her and kissed her.

We're kissing, thought the one tiny part of Cammy's brain still able to function rationally, kissing here, in the open, in public -- *very* public. Kissing because none of the onlookers around us matter. None of them are in our world. In our world, in our universe, there is only me and Alisa.

That was her last thought before giving herself over to the pure sensation, the feel of Alisa in her arms, her hands moving up and down Alisa's back, Alisa's hands moving on her own back, her lips against Alisa's, her tongue softly rubbing Alisa's, tasting buttery and salty from the popcorn. Hearing Alisa's soft moans echoing her own, feeling the internal explosion of want and need, every sensation stoking still greater need.

Cammy broke the kiss, not because the wanting ended, but because she knew she couldn't satisfy it, not here, not now. They could only go so far, out here in a public place. There were limitations everyone had to deal with, not just Cammy's own internally imposed ones.

We should really go back to my room, she thought. It's closer than hers, and I know Taylor won't be there.

But Cammy realized she also didn't want this first date to end. She wanted to keep living it, burning every second of it into her memory.

And there was time for lovemaking. So much time.

She smiled and kissed Alisa once more. She said, "Later?" Knowing Alisa would know what she meant.

Alisa gave her a quick kiss in return, grinning. "Yes. Later. So much to happen later." She opened her mouth to say more, and closed it. Then opened it again. "You know..." She hesitated again. "Ummm..." She stopped once more, then plunged ahead. "If we got married, we could live together in married student housing."

Cammy gasped, then laughed. "That has to be the most practical proposal ever."

Alisa bit her lip, her face bright red. "So you... I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

Cammy stopped her with a kiss. "You should at least wait for an answer. It's yes, of course."

Alisa's eyes went wide. "You mean it's... yes?"

Cammy laughed again, as happy as she'd ever been. "Yes, yes, yes..."

This time it was Alisa's kiss stopping her. They kissed for a long time again.

And this time it was Alisa who broke it off. She looked steadily into Cammy's eyes, and said in a husky voice, "I never thought there was someone like you. You are the person I never realized I was looking for. So forget about that practical proposal. Let's do it because I can't think of not doing it. Let's do it because I want to be with you every day, always. Camilla Felton..."

Cammy grinned. "It's Cammy."

It was Alisa's turn to laugh, seemingly helpless to stop for a minute. "Okay, I guess it was time I actually learned your name."

Cammy laughed as well. "So do you go by Alisa? It's such a pretty name."

Alisa nodded, still laughing. "So Cammy Felton... Will you marry me?"

Cammy beamed at her. "Still yes. I will marry you, Alisa Atwater."

They kissed once more. Cammy heard a patter of applause from a nearby blanket.

* * * * *

“Okay, I see it.” Alisa pointed. They’d finished their girlmeat popcorn (no woman ever threw girlmeat away), and walked, holding hands again, to the west end of the football practice field where the “Hanging Roulette” contest would take place.

Cammy, interrupting their long post-engagement kiss, had suggested attending the Hanging Roulette contest when the loudspeaker announced its commencement in fifteen minutes. She felt that a little time to consider what had just happened was needed, though she felt no need to do the considering alone, as she had last night outside the library. Cammy thought that, in a sense, this might be an appropriate and convenient way to celebrate their engagement -- attending an event as a committed couple. Alisa had agreed immediately and enthusiastically; as always, Alisa was thinking the same thing Cammy was. Alisa had never seen a Hanging Roulette contest in person either.

By this time a crowd of several hundred, perhaps even more than a thousand, had gathered on the practice field, and it wasn’t easy for Cammy or Alisa, neither of them very tall, to see over them. But the elaborate stage for the Hanging Roulette event was very visible once they got close enough.

Cammy was glad the weather had been good. She supposed they would have moved the hanging inside one of the tents if rain had threatened, but there was no way to squeeze this many people into any of the available structures.

Cammy’s heart was singing. She had met the love of her life, and they were going to be married! They had already discussed tentative plans on the way to the football practice field. Alisa said her father’s house had a nice big yard, so they could do it there. They might wait for the end of the semester, or even the end of the school year. They were sensitive of the fact that doing it right away would leave two girls, Taylor and Alisa’s roommate Renee, by themselves, and they felt they should check with them as to how they felt about that, and whether they wanted to make other living arrangements.

Cammy had clear view of the stage now. There were four platforms, each offering a surface to stand on that was about six or seven feet above ground level, the platforms painted four different colors: yellow, blue, red, and brown. Above each platform a noose dangled, hanging from a thick horizontal structure that Cammy knew contained a complex computer-driven mechanism. To the left of these was a larger stage, on which were mounted two oversized circular spinners, of the type used in children’s board games except for being six feet across, each divided into quadrants. On one of them, the quadrants were colored yellow, blue, red, and brown. On the other, the quadrants displayed the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Soon there would be a woman standing on each of the four colored platforms, each with her hands cuffed behind her and the noose over the platform fitted snugly around her neck. These would be women who had answered the call for volunteers broadcast earlier across the grounds, each taking a chance on ending her life in a very public way.

There was a hand crank in the base of each platform, on the side facing the crowd. Each crank would be attended by the partner of the girl on the platform. Turning the crank would raise the noose over the platform slightly. The spinners would determine which noose was to be raised, and how far it should be raised, in inches. The game would proceed until one of the four women was raised completely off the platform, hanged.

It was a familiar element of television game shows. Usually in those shows, the women would be required to answer trivia questions to remain alive, but here, in Hanging Roulette, the loser would be determined purely by chance.

To Cammy it seemed the perfect way to end a perfect day. To watch a woman reach the culminating event of her life, thought Cammy, to watch her achieve the ending she was made for, to see her validate her existence as a woman -- and to see that on the same day that I meet the person I was made for, the person I will share the rest of my life with -- it's almost too much to imagine.

After their long kissing session on the blanket, Cammy was *very* glad for her foresight in putting the absorbent pad in her panties. Her crotch was no less squishy than it would have been without the pad, but at least it saved her from the embarrassment of walking around with a visible dark patch between the legs of her corduroys.

Now Cammy's head was buzzing with exactly the sort of thoughts that had made the pad squishy, now more intensely than ever. She had wanted very much to watch the contest, especially out of respect for the woman who would die today, but now she was finding that she could barely concentrate on any thought other than her physical need for Alisa, a need to touch every part of her, to see all of her, to hear her sighs, to smell and taste her, to immerse herself in the pleasure they could each give to and receive from the other.

The crowd stirred, interrupting Cammy's fantasies, as a woman came to the front of the main stage, holding a cordless microphone. She beamed at the crowd, and said, "Hi everybody, I'm Susan Andress, from Raider Radio 107!" She paused as her fans cheered, and then called out enthusiastically, "Is everybody here to see a hanging???"

The crowd responded in near-unison, "Yes!"

Cammy had considered the question rhetorical, so rather than answering she turned to Alisa, who was looking at her yearningly, and kissed her, no longer giving a thought to the fact that the two of them were surrounded by a huge crowd. They continued the kiss as Susan went on, "Well, we're going to need another volunteer. Come on, girls!" There were, of course, a number of boyfriends and husbands in the crowd, but they were naturally not part of the solicitation. "This whole day only three of you ladies have come forward to test your luck! Can we get a fourth?"

She waited as the crowd buzzed. There was a lot of discussion in hushed voices and giggles, but no clear answer.

After a reasonable time, Susan sighed into the microphone. "Well, you know what that means. Our three volunteers came forward under the understanding they each had only a one-in-four chance of being snuffed. The law says we can't change that now to one-in-three. So..." Her voice rose in pitch, "It's time for a drawing! Get out your ticket stubs!" From behind Susan, two female assistants rolled out a drum containing the other half of everyone's ticket stubs that had been handed out at the main entry gate.

Another girl came running up from behind. She shouted audibly “Late arrivals!”, opened the drum and dropped a few more stubs in.

The crowd cheered in excitement. All of the women present knew that any one of them might be chosen to participate. There was a little fear in the heart of each one, none of whom felt ready or they would have volunteered, but the fear was muted by the obvious fact that each one’s chance of being chosen in the drawing was very small. Only one woman was needed, out of this whole crowd.

Cammy didn’t need to pull the stub out of her pocket. She’d looked at it when she’d entered the grounds. She was number four thirty-seven. Alisa was four thirty-eight.

Susan gave the drum several turns, opened it and reached in.

Alisa broke the kiss, but remained close, her eyes barely an inch from Cammy’s. Her lips curled in a smile. She said, softly so that only Cammy could hear, “I want to learn everything that makes you feel good. I want to try every kind of sex there is.”

Cammy literally felt a squirt from between her legs. She was distracted for just a moment, her breath catching, when Susan called out, “Two seventy-eight! Who has number two seventy-eight?”

Cammy turned to face Alisa again, and pulled her head close to whisper directly into her ear, “I want to lick every square inch of your body to see what it tastes like.”

Alisa turned quickly to her with an open-mouthed grin and a gasp. She kissed Cammy again, her tongue pushing deep into Cammy’s mouth.

From the stage: “No two seventy-eight? Not here?”

No one was under obligation to attend the hanging, or even to stay at the fair until it happened.

Susan spun the drum again, and reached in. “Number seventeen!” She laughed. “Must be a really early arrival. Any chance she stayed late?”

Cammy could only spare the tiniest bit of her attention to what was happening on the stage. All of the rest was filled with Alisa.

Alisa backed away again. Her whole body shaking, almost unable to speak from the effects of adrenaline and an unmanageable mixed cocktail of other hormones flooding her body, she managed to rasp, “I want you! Right now! Cammy, let’s go.”

Cammy nodded spastically. “I just saw my roommate a minute ago.” She gestured vaguely behind her with her head to where Taylor stood with her boyfriend Jim. “We can go to my room.” She reached shakily for Alisa’s hand, threaded her fingers through Alisa’s, and took a step towards the rear of the crowd.

Susan called out cheerily from the stage, "Four thirty-seven!"

Cammy spun back towards the stage, her mouth gaping. Every molecule of air in her lungs was pushed out in a rush.

Any thought of leaving now was dismissed. A lifetime of cultural indoctrination and inborn feminine instinct prevented any consideration of evading a woman's deepest obligation to humanity from entering Cammy's conscious mind.

In any case, people around her had seen her reaction, and several were calling out excitedly, "Here! Over here!" with their arms in the air, pointing towards Cammy.

The next 0.8 seconds were a very busy time inside Cammy's head.

* * * * *

FOUR YEARS AGO

"Hey Mom?" Cammy sat down at the kitchen table where her mother had disassembled a table lamp, in hopes of finding the loose connection. Cammy had a paperback book with her, her finger holding her place in it. She was never without a book. "How do you... How does a woman, I mean -- know when it's 'time'?"

Her mother didn't need to ask "Time for what?" The party where she would be snuffed and barbecued was set for next Saturday.

Mom set down the screwdriver she was holding and chewed on her lip, thoughtfully. She smiled. "That's the question every teenaged girl asks. That one and 'How will I know who's the right person to marry?' The funny thing is you don't really need anyone to tell you. Either question. When the time comes, you'll know."

Cammy wrinkled her nose. "That's just an easy out. I need something more concrete."

Mom laughed. "There isn't anything more concrete, honey, trust me." She saw the exasperated look on her daughter's face and went on, "Let me try, though." She thought some more.

She nodded to herself at last. "Okay, you know there are the two big things that women can do and men can't: Have babies and be people food."

"We could eat men."

Mom snorted in disgust. "Well, yeah, but who'd want to? And there'd be no point. Women's flesh has gynemones. Men don't. You know that." Gynemones, more essential than any vitamin. Humanity was omnivorous -- all manner of fruits, vegetables, and the meat of many animals could be consumed with

varying effects on health. But a diet without girlmeat left humans with a gynemone deficiency that led to ill health and, eventually, death. And gynemones resisted all efforts to concentrate them in useful form in a pill -- they immediately degraded when separated from flesh. Not that any scientist had really felt motivated to try very hard, with girlmeat always readily available. "I mean, you could eat dirt too, and it'd fill your stomach, but you'd die if that was all you ate. You have to have girlmeat."

Cammy said impatiently, "We're still on that question."

Mom rolled her eyes. "I'm trying, honey. The best answer I can come up with is, you'll know it's time to be eaten when you feel inside yourself that it's more important than anything else in your life." She reached across the table and took Cammy's hand. Cammy, who would ordinarily have resisted, let her take it, knowing Mom was trying her best to be serious with her, and Cammy knew she had brought it on herself by asking the question. "When your father and I were married, what was important to me was making a family. Making you. It was my time to do that." Mom smiled.

Cammy succeeded in the effort to avoid rolling her eyes. She waited, knowing that Mom hadn't completed her thought yet.

Mom went on, "But for every woman, it's like there's a clock ticking away inside. The importance of maintaining the chain grows, and grows." That was the most often-used metaphor: the chain. Every woman lived because of the flesh other women had provided, and she in turn must give back to humanity one day, an unending chain of women sustaining their families, friends and neighbors with their bodies. "You'll feel it inside, more and more as you get older. Rising all the time on the list of things that are important to you. And you'll feel when it reaches the top, and you'll know it's your time to be food."

Cammy felt her face turning red. Having serious talks with a parent is never at the top of *any* fourteen-year-old's list. But she did think she understood now. A little. "Thanks, Mom." She started to rise out of her chair.

Mom startled her by gripping her hand more tightly. "I need a promise."

Cammy sat again, sorry now that she'd ever opened this can of worms. She gave Mom a cautious okay-go-ahead look.

Mom looked straight into her eyes. "When your time comes, when you get the Call, it could come from inside, like I've been talking about, or it could come from outside. No matter where it comes from, listen to it. Don't resist it."

"Mom!" She backed her chair away in utter shock, pulling her hand away. "Are you thinking I'd dodge the draft? I would *never* do that." The draft of women, requiring them to report to a processing center to be snuffed and rendered into cans and packets of frozen meat, was an ever-present fact of life, though the success of the growing program of breeding farms, a way of life for women who chose to live in one, each giving birth to as many as seventy to eighty babies, nearly all female, with the help of fertility drugs, made

the draft less active now than it had been in the past. It was maintained purely out of a sense of tradition. No one proposed ending it. It was an essential part of how life in a fair society should be.

Mom smiled. "You know me. I just wanted to make sure. There are always a few women who try to get out of it. We used to call them 'chain breakers.' I don't know what kids call it these days."

Cammy wrinkled her nose. "Pigging. Women who try to run from the draft are like greedy little pigs, not thinking about anyone else. It's disgusting."

Mom nodded and smiled again. "So that'll be an easy promise to keep. I want to hear it, though."

Cammy rolled her eyes and sighed. "I absolutely promise not to pig. And I promise not to murder any teachers or rob any banks."

Mom laughed. "You'll be a mother someday. You'll understand."

"Anyway, thanks, Mom." Cammy rose, eager to end a conversation that had taken a lot of unexpected turns. "I think I get what you're saying about knowing when it's time." She turned to leave.

"And honey?"

Cammy reluctantly faced her mother again.

"I want you and your father to share my heart. I love you very much."

Cammy blinked in astonishment. Any married woman usually gave all of her heart to her husband or wife. And she blinked again, this time to hold back the tear she felt starting to escape her eye. With an effort of will she stopped herself from wiping it away with her hand. "Thanks, Mom." She turned and ran back to her room. She knew she wasn't supposed to cry. But she knew she wasn't doing it over Mom being snuffed. And she knew Mom knew that.

* * * * *

In that 0.8 second, Cammy's thoughts were mostly of No.

No, it can't be me! No, they can't take me away from Alisa, not now! No, I can't move. Not a single muscle of my body.

The last was certainly correct. She couldn't move, couldn't breathe.

No, I can't say no. I can't pig. Mom must have known this day would come, the Call coming, the choice of where and when taken away.

It didn't matter that she had a three-in-four chance of surviving. It was still The Call. It was something that every moral law of humanity demanded that a woman willingly answer.

Everything could be taken away. Alisa taken away!

I can't pig! I promised!

She tried to raise her arm, to say Here, I'm here. She still couldn't move.

She heard a strangled squeak behind her. She didn't want to see Alisa's face, but she turned automatically. Alisa was standing as frozen as Cammy had been, her mouth half open, in her eyes the look of someone watching a car crash with everyone she loved in it, helpless to stop it.

The spell had to be broken. Now. But Cammy knew she was powerless to break it. She would stand here as people around her began realizing she was pigging. Any second now.

She watched as Alisa's mouth moved. There was no voice to accompany the effort at speech, not because Alisa was trying to speak quietly, but because she could not force a sound through her throat. Cammy had no experience with lip-reading, but she could hear it as if Alisa had screamed it:

"I want to have your baby!"

The words washed through Cammy like a cleansing wave. A baby! She wants my baby!

This isn't my time to be food! I'm not going to lose, because it isn't my time! We're going to have a family, Alisa and me! It's my time for THAT!

She spun around to face the stage, and threw her arm in the air. "Here! Four thirty-seven! I'm coming!" She turned back to face Alisa. "It's okay, babe! We'll be okay! It's not time for me to lose! I won't!" Around them applause began, and spread through the crowd. Cammy put her arms around Alisa, and said directly into Alisa's ear, so she could hear through the sudden din, "I want to have your baby too! We can do it together! I'm Sandra, honey! I'll get through this!" Sandra, for both of them their favorite character in the Mantamor books. Sandra, the daring one, unhesitatingly taking chances. "I'll get through this," she repeated, "Because it's not my time to be food. It's our time to have a family!"

Alisa blinked hard, stared at Cammy, and slowly the corners of her lips turned up.

Cammy took a step back, and held out her hand to Alisa. Alisa, her smile spreading, took it and followed Cammy, as the crowd in front of them began parting to let them come to the stage.

CHAPTER 5

Reaching the front, the applauding crowd now behind them, Cammy led Alisa around behind the main stage, where a woman sat behind a table. As Cammy started up the steps to the stage, the woman stopped her. "Wait, hold on, I've got some forms for you to fill out."

Cammy laughed a little at her own impatience. Of course there would be forms.

One of the forms was brief, having her simply sign to acknowledge her acceptance of the draft, and her willingness to participate in the contest, with the understanding that she had one chance in four of dying. The second form was longer, with spaces for her to fill out the name and address of her next-of-kin, and specify the disposal of her meat. She put her father down as her nearest relative -- she wished she could put Alisa, but they weren't married yet. Then she filled in her desires: That her father should receive her lower legs, everything from the knees down, and that all of the rest -- that would include meat, organs, and in particular her heart -- should go to Alisa Atwater. Alisa gasped at that, leaned down next to Cammy where she sat at the table and kissed her passionately.

Now, together, she and Alisa mounted the steps to the stage. By this time, the three volunteers had emerged from backstage, along with their partners. Cammy and Alisa both shook hands with Susan, and Susan turned to face the crowd. "Let's meet our contestants. First, our volunteers." She turned to the blonde woman standing nearest her. "What do you want to tell us about yourself, sweetie?"

The woman smiled as Susan held the microphone towards her, and spoke confidently. "I'm Karen Peters. I'm thirty-five... Oh, and this is my sister, Darla." She patted the shoulder of the woman standing beside her. "I just always wanted to go out in front of a huge crowd, and I thought, well, today could be the day!" Her choice didn't seem too surprising to Cammy. It was clear that the crowd energized Karen.

Next was Beth Short, thirty-six, who was here with her husband David. Beth spoke more shyly than Karen, and managed to stammer out that she had recently been thinking it was time, and that she and David couldn't afford a big party, and that this was a good opportunity. "And it's free!" she giggled. The crowd laughed with her.

The last of the volunteers introduced herself as Kat Gibson, thirty-three, who was here with her wife Hayley. She explained that she and Hayley couldn't agree on who would be snuffed first, so that the other could eat her, so they had been taking turns at Hanging Roulette, to leave it all to chance.

Susan was intrigued. "And how many tries is this now?"

Kat beamed at the crowd. "This is our third one. We've each survived one. I hope I get through this, because I *really* want to eat Hayley." She and Hayley laughed, and the crowd did as well.

Hayley leaned to the microphone and said, "Not going to happen. I've got to get a taste of this after all these years," as she patted Kat's butt. More laughter.

Susan turned, at last, to Cammy and Alisa, looking uncertainly between the two. “And our draftee is...?”

Cammy made a gesture with her hand. “It’s me. I’m Cammy Felton. I’m a student here...” She looked adoringly at Alisa. “...and this is my fiancée, Alisa Atwater.” Alisa blinked and grinned happily. She knew the word applied, but she hadn’t heard it out loud before.

It occurred to Cammy to wonder what Taylor, standing out there in the crowd, was thinking, remembering that a few hours ago Cammy wouldn’t even acknowledge that Alisa was her girlfriend.

Thinking she should say something more, Cammy said, “Assuming I get through this, Alisa and I are going to have each other’s baby.” She took a quick look at Alisa, who gave her a happy grin and mouthed “I love you,” and then at the crowd, which had immediately started buzzing. Most would not have heard of Dr. Colton’s program, and were probably trying to work out exactly what Cammy meant. Some *had* heard of it, in the same way Cammy and Alisa had, and it was likely that some of the buzz was explanations. Cammy leaned to the microphone again and said, “That’s really a thing, trust me.” The crowd laughed, many of them applauding. Cammy smiled. If getting the crowd on her side and interested in her well-being had any power to affect the spinners, then this probably helped.

Susan said, addressing the crowd, “All right, that makes it interesting! Okay, we’ve met our contestants, let’s see which one of them doesn’t leave the fair alive!”

Cammy’s breath caught. She ran the words again and again through her mind: This isn’t my time to be food. This is our time to make a family. This isn’t my time to be food...

As she ran through the internal chant, she gave Alisa a reassuring abridged version: “We’re going to make a family.” Alisa gave her a hopeful smile.

Susan continued, “Contestants, it’s time to take your places! Partners: get them set up for us!”

Kat was nearest the steps down from the main stage, so she moved first and led the rest down to ground level. Cammy, holding Alisa’s hand, went last, and saw, to her horror, that an assistant had set out four plastic tubs, and Kat was already standing in front of one, peeling off her t-shirt and dropping it into the tub, then reaching behind her back to unclip her bra.

Of course, thought Cammy, biting her lip hard, where is my head? How could I have forgotten? She simply hadn’t focused on the hanging, as she worked so hard at mentally projecting herself past it.

There were a number of different ways to snuff women, some of them very popular, others with niche appeal. But the various options shared one thing in common: by unbreakable tradition, women were always snuffed nude, giving full display of the meat being offered.

Cammy, since the not-really-remembered days of her mother bathing her (Cammy had ejected her mother from the bathroom at a very early age), had never shown her body unclothed to anyone. And she now very

much wanted Alisa to be the first to see her naked. Instead, she would be seen in the altogether by a thousand people all at once.

And that wasn't the worst of it. In the rush to get herself ready this morning, trying on one outfit after another for her first date with Alisa, it had occurred to her that she ought to shave, but she had rejected the idea: there wasn't time, and she had told herself rationally that it wasn't realistic to think she and Alisa really were going to have sex, so soon in their relationship. It was Cammy's impression, judging from all of the available evidence, that these days only ponygirls and virgins had untrimmed bushes. Now she'd be standing up there showing her dark, tangled thatch of pubic hair to all of the same people who'd just heard her declare Alisa to be her fiancée. People were going to wonder.

Hesitation would be perceived as pigging, Cammy told herself. Just focus on Alisa. Imagine that only she is here.

Cammy turned to face Alisa, stared straight into her eyes, took off her shoes and socks, and started unbuttoning her blouse.

She was startled when Alisa, not taking her eyes from Cammy's, kicked her own shoes off, peeled off her socks, then pulled the hem of her t-shirt up and over her head, discarding them all in the same tub into which Cammy was putting her clothes.

Cammy could read in Alisa's eyes what she was doing. She was telling Cammy that she knew Cammy was imagining herself stripping for Alisa alone. Alisa's response: I'm stripping for you too. Just for you.

The assistant, watching Alisa in surprise, said, "You don't have to..."

Alisa cut her off. "I know." She continued removing her clothes in synchrony with Cammy. Her bra was off now.

Cammy *loved* the type of breasts Alisa had. Not large, but firm. Nipples uptilted, of the type like pencil erasers. Cammy wanted so much to touch them. To kiss them. Not the time now. Later, Cammy told herself. There will be a chance later. It's not my time to be food...

The danger Alisa was putting herself in suddenly occurred to Cammy. We're pretending we're all alone here, she thought, but the fact is that we aren't. She wasn't sure Alisa was thinking about consequences. She started, "You can't..."

Alisa interrupted, "I won't," as she pulled her jeans down and off, her eyes still fixed on Cammy's, and dropped them into the tub.

By tradition, eventually made official law, any free woman who appeared naked in public was offering herself as a slave to the first person to claim her; in a case, such as the one at present, in which there were too many people present to be reliably sure who had claimed her, she became the property of the city, to be sold at auction. Cammy was protected, in this situation, by the Competition Exception. Alisa was not.

They were each wearing only panties now. Cammy, with so many threads of thought running through her head now as chants: Only Alisa is here; it's not my time to be food... took a deep breath, added a new chant (Alisa, don't do this, don't do this...), pushed her thumbs in under the waistband of her panties, and slid them down her legs, carefully trying to avoid visibly coating her inner thighs with the gook of secretions of sexual arousal that had so thoroughly drenched the pad she'd inserted into them.

To her relief, Alisa only stood and watched, making no move to pull down her own panties.

Cammy looked down and blinked, smiling. She could see that Alisa had also put a pad in her panties. And the odds were that it wasn't for blood either. Alisa, like Cammy, had anticipated spending the day very aroused. Cammy looked into Alisa's eyes again. "I love you."

Alisa responded, with as much feeling as anyone can put into such a short sentence, "I love you."

Cammy held out her hand for Alisa to take, and together they walked up the steps onto the only remaining available platform. Reaching the top, she held her mouth in a tense line as she faced the crowd, conscious of everyone looking at her entire uncovered body.

The other women were already atop the other three platforms. Cammy had the yellow, the one nearest the main stage. The other platforms were to her left. Kat was on the nearest one, the blue; Karen beyond Kat on the red platform; Beth on the farthest one, the brown.

The buzz among the onlookers increased in volume as they saw that Alisa was unexpectedly nearly naked. At least Cammy believed that most of the buzz was for that. Not at all surprisingly, Cammy could see now she was the only one of the contestants unshaved, so some of the conversations were surely about that. She felt her face, already hot, growing hotter.

On the other platforms, the partners were already putting the nooses around the contestants' necks. There was a set of handcuffs on the floor of each platform, and Darla had cuffed Karen's hands behind her back first, then set the noose.

Alisa, not making a move towards the noose or the cuffs, stepped up beside Cammy. Cammy gave her a puzzled look, which Alisa ignored. Facing the crowd, Alisa hooked her thumbs under the waistband of her panties and, just for a brief instant, pulled the front down far enough to make clearly visible the tangled triangle of reddish-brown hair between her legs, the same dark copper color as the hair on her head. Immediately she then readjusted her panties to hide it away once more. Cammy blinked in surprise, but immediately understood that Alisa's gesture declared to the crowd: See, I don't trim mine either. We both like it that way. If she's weird, we both are.

The crowd's buzzing rose in volume, and there was some applause, especially in front where people could more easily see what Alisa had done.

Cammy stared at Alisa. Her move with her panties had stayed just within safety limits, but it was so...

Cammy's breath caught in her throat as she realized the word that came to her mind was "daring." That quality in their favorite character in the Mantanor books, Sandra, the "daring" that Alisa had expressed a wish she could emulate, but apparently had felt was beyond her. I'm not Sandra, Cammy realized, but Alisa is. I'm not standing up here because I'm daring. There's a chance I will die here, but I didn't choose to put myself in this danger. And I didn't choose to stand naked in front of a big crowd. The luck of the draw and tradition made those choices for me.

But Alisa doesn't need to be (nearly) naked, Cammy told herself, and she certainly didn't need to show a thousand strangers an embarrassing detail of her personal grooming. She is doing it all only for me. To calm me, to make a scary situation more bearable, to mute my feelings of embarrassment about what the crowd is thinking about me so I can concentrate on surviving. And to do all of that, by stripping down to nothing but her panties, and then taking it even farther and partially uncovering herself from behind them, Alisa has dared to go to the very borderline of something I know she doesn't want: being taken as a slave.

All for me.

The only thought Cammy could process, driving all others out of her head for the moment, was: Alisa, whether it's only another half-hour or many years to come, I will love you all of the rest of my life.

Alisa took the noose, loosened it slightly so that it would go down over Cammy's head (everyone knew how to deal with nooses from seeing hangings, both professional and amateur, on television), and tightened it around Cammy's neck. Then she bent to pick up the cuffs, and used them to fasten Cammy's hands together behind her back.

She came around in front of Cammy then, and said softly, "Listen to me. They're going to do equalizing in a minute. Remember to keep your heels on the floor."

Cammy nodded. "I know." Unsurprisingly they had read the same articles about Hanging Roulette, the same reminiscences of survivors. Cammy understood exactly what Alisa was referring to.

Alisa put her hands gently on Cammy's face, on either side of her mouth, and leaned closer. "I mean it. It's hard. You have to concentrate on it. Don't lift your heels! Remember it!" She said "I love you" one more time, reached around Cammy to take Cammy's hands in hers against Cammy's buttocks and kissed her, softly rather than out-of-control-passionately, her bare breasts pressed against Cammy's for the first time. She broke the kiss, and simply said with a smile, "Later."

Cammy, breathing hard from both mounting tension and from the kiss, nodded. "Later." She felt, again as before, what seemed literally to be a squirt of lubrication from between her legs, this time with no panties to absorb it. She could feel the juices trickling slowly down the inside of her thigh.

Alisa gave her one last very brief kiss and walked around her and down the steps.

Susan said cheerfully, "All right, we're ready! Partners: take your places next to the hand cranks in front of the platforms! Contestants: we're going to equalize the ropes so you each have twelve inches of slack."

Cammy took a deep breath and closed her eyes, working to slow the suddenly runaway pounding of her heart. It's starting, she told herself, and she resumed her internal chant: It's not my time to be food. It's our time to start a family... She felt, rather than hearing it over the buzz from the crowd, a slight humming as the computer-controlled mechanism overhead began slowly reeling in the rope hanging down to her noose. In moments she felt an upward tug on her neck.

She knew what was happening. At this moment, arrangements were being made to ensure that all contestants had an equal chance. This was the process Alisa had been talking about: "equalizing the ropes," so that all participants had exactly the same amount of slack in the rope.

The rope was raised until sensors in the mechanism measured seventy pounds of tension in the rope -- not enough to raise the contestant off the floor of the platform, but enough so that cheating by slouching was impossible: anyone pulled up by the neck with that much force could not avoid standing ramrod straight. The rope would then be lowered by exactly twelve inches -- in some games it was more, or less, depending on how long the people in charge wanted the contest to last. Once the contest began, Cammy and the others could each afford to have twelve inches taken away while standing flatfooted on the floor.

As the rope now gently, and then more insistently, pulled upward on her neck, Cammy's heart began to pound hard again. She couldn't breathe, the pull continued, and the entire experience, which had until now been only theoretical, was suddenly very, very real. The sticky film of sexual fluids coating her inner thighs was joined by a warmer, more runny stream of urine.

She struggled automatically to free her hands from the cuffs, desperate to reach up to loosen the rope choking her. Within her mind, alongside her "It's not my time to be food" chant, an equally insistent voice drummed into her consciousness, the memory of Alisa telling her: Don't lift your heels! Don't lift your heels! Cammy knew that going up onto her toes would be the worst mistake she could possibly make -- it was, in fact, the only action it was within her power to take, to relieve the pressure on her neck, and that made it that much harder to avoid doing it.

Going up on her toes would make *that* posture, heels off the floor, the standard from which the twelve inches would be measured: instead of having twelve inches to give away during the contest while standing flatfooted, letting her heels leave the floor during the equalization would mean that by the time her rope had been pulled twelve inches upward later, she would already be on tiptoes.

Don't lift your heels! Don't lift your heels! Alisa's words filled her mind completely. She cleared everything else out of her head except the imperative to keep her feet flat on the floor.

Finally, just as Cammy was about to panic over the possibility that the mechanism had somehow become stuck, choking her, with her unable to make a sound to call attention to something being wrong unless she did go up on her toes, the rope began unwinding. Cammy, able to breathe again, took advantage of it in great heaves, using her lungs to their fullest possible advantage.

She resumed the chant: It's not my time to be food...

CHAPTER 6

Beyond the edge of her platform, Cammy could see Alisa looking up at her from below. Alisa was wide-eyed, looking excited for some reason. She puzzled Cammy by raising her hand in an odd gesture: her hand bent at the wrist and held horizontal, fingers together and extended straight, thumb tucked underneath. Then she raised her fingers together, like a rising drawbridge, separating them from her thumb which she held unmoving in its horizontal position. She repeated the same gesture, and then pointed to the platform to Cammy's immediate left, the one on which Kat stood.

Cammy stared at Alisa with a frown. Alisa repeated the gesture one more time, and pointed again.

From the main stage to Cammy's right, Susan interrupted Cammy's thoughts, shouting happily into her microphone, "The technicians tell me everything is ready. Control of the ropes has now been switched over to the hand cranks, so partners of the participants, it's all in your hands now! There's only one more thing to I need to know from all of you watching out there: ARE... YOU... READY... TO... SEE... A... HANGING??"

The crowd let out its loudest cheer so far. A few YESes could be heard, but they were far from unison.

"I'll take that as a yes! My assistants, Sheri and Becky, will spin for color and number." Two attractive women, fetchingly dressed in miniskirts and tight tank tops, waved from beside the two spinners. "Partners, when you hear your color, wait for the number and then turn your crank that many full circles. Each turn of the crank will raise the rope one inch!"

The shafts overhead reeling in the ropes now really were controlled by the cranks below, though the control was electronic rather than mechanical. Having the partners operate the cranks allowed them the honor of participating in their loved one's snuff.

Cammy's mind was spinning. She knew Alisa had to be telling her something important, something she didn't want anyone else to know. But Cammy couldn't fathom what it might be.

We've each always known what the other was thinking! she reminded herself. What is she thinking now?

Susan now swept her arm towards her assistants. "Take it away, Sheri and Becky!"

If I'm Alisa, thought Cammy, what do I want to tell Cammy right now? What would be really important? I've already finished the equalization, so there's nothing I can do...

That was it! Alisa's hand gesture was like a heel coming up off the floor! Her thumb was the floor. And she'd pointed at Kat! Alisa is telling me Kat went up on her toes! Kat gave away two, maybe three inches! There's nothing I can do about it -- I've got no control anymore over my life or death, now that the equalization is over. But Alisa wants me to be less scared. If I only have twenty or thirty minutes left to live, she doesn't want me to spend it afraid. And I *do* feel less scared. Telling me that at least one of the other girls is at a disadvantage really does help.

And Alisa didn't want the others to know what had happened. Especially the people in charge. It was possible that if they knew Kat had messed up, they might do the equalizing all over again. They might not -- different Hanging Roulette contests had different rules for that situation. Susan had never said. Alisa, Cammy told herself, doesn't want me to lose the advantage I have, the handicap Kat is facing, by telling everybody. She only wanted *me* to know.

To acknowledge Alisa, Cammy didn't have to catch Alisa's eyes. They were already locked on hers. Cammy tilted her head briefly towards Kat, and nodded to Alisa. Alisa nodded back and gave her a thumbs-up gesture.

It's weird, thought Cammy, that it's Kat who'd made the mistake. The other two might have considered doing it intentionally, and in fact maybe they did, but Kat is the only one other than me who's hoping not to die today! And she's the only one with previous experience! She should know better. But maybe she screwed up the same way before and just lucked out.

Behind her, Cammy heard the sound of the spinners. A moment later Susan called out, "Yellow! Three!"

Cammy let out her breath in a rush. Shit!

Below her, Alisa gritted her teeth. Having agreed to be Cammy's partner in an authorized snuff, she couldn't now refuse to participate to save Cammy, as if she regarded Cammy's life as more important than her meat, any more than Cammy could have refused to be standing here. Alisa grasped the handle of the crank and gave it three full clockwise turns. Cammy felt, again, the vibration of the mechanism reeling in the rope. Exactly three inches.

Cammy closed her eyes. That advantage I had is gone already! she moaned to herself.

She opened her eyes again. If I'm about to die, she told herself, I want to see Alisa for as much time as I can. Toward that end, she decided not to watch the other women at all. She didn't have an unobstructed view of Karen and Beth anyway. And she could keep track of Kat's situation by counting.

Okay, Cammy told herself, I've lost three inches. I can only lose nine more before I get pulled up off my heels. Then three more and I'll be up on tiptoes. That's fifteen altogether. I think I'm dead if I get to sixteen.

Cammy felt tentative relief when Susan called out "Red!", but it mostly evaporated when she followed it with "One!" Out of the corner of her eye, Cammy could see Karen's sister Darla turn the crank. Once. Big deal.

"Blue! Two!"

Okay! thought Cammy. Cammy guessed the number of inches Kat had given away during the equalizing was most likely three. So she was at five now.

* * * * *

By the time Kat was at eight inches -- three given away and five during the contest proper, Cammy was already at ten. Cammy hadn't been keeping track of Karen and Beth -- there were only so many numbers she could juggle in her head at once, under this amount of stress, while also maintaining her "It's not my time to be food" chant. She continued staring steadily at Alisa, who was breathing hard, her jaw set.

The sound of the crowd was steadily growing. Even microphone-assisted, Susan was having to shout louder as she called out the colors and numbers: "Brown! Two!" came next, followed by "Blue! Three!" So Kat was up to eleven now.

Then on the next spin: "Yellow! Two!"

Cammy's heart pounded. I'm at 12, she thought, I'm at 12, I'm at 12, shit, shit, shit! She started feeling a little faint, and concentrated on steadying her breathing. Below her, Alisa stared at her, her mouth open and her head shaking, as she turned the crank twice more in a circle.

Cammy could feel the now-taut rope pulling at her throat. All slack was gone. She could still stand flatfooted, but it was hard to breathe that way. She found she needed to rise up on her toes periodically to be able to breathe freely.

Judging from the sudden boost in noise level from the crowd, Cammy was the first to reach this point. At least she assumed she would have already heard such a spike if any of the other women had got this close to being hanged.

"Red! Two!" was followed by "Blue! Three!"

Yes! thought Cammy. Kat is at fourteen! She has to be up on her toes now. She shouldn't be, but it's her own fault.

The again-increased shouting from the crowd confirmed that Kat was in trouble.

"Yellow! Four!"

No no no no no no, thought Cammy, her stomach clenching. She watched helplessly as Alisa, shaking her head violently and almost hyperventilating, dutifully turned the crank four times. It's not my time it's not my time it's not my time...

Okay, Cammy thought when the rope stopped pulling her any higher, maybe fifteen inches wasn't my maximum after all. I can still touch the floor. I'm still okay.

But she realized within seconds that she might be wrong about that. On tiptoes now, the balls of her feet barely in contact with the floor of the platform, her ankles and calf muscles already aching with the strain of keeping her feet extended downward, Cammy found she couldn't keep her balance for any length of

time. When she was perfectly vertical, the grip of the rope around her throat eased just enough that she could breathe, but she couldn't stay that way for more than a few seconds at a time, and she would start to fall over like a pencil stood on its point. The direction in which she fell would be random -- she might tip over to the right, quickly shuffle her toes in that direction to get them back underneath her to support her again, only to fall forward immediately, and each time she leaned in any direction her breath was cut off. Then she would shuffle her toes once more, and manage to take in a few gasps again.

She was helplessly turning as well, which seemed very unfair to her, because she wasn't sure how long she would be able to keep Alisa in sight. If this was the end, she desperately wanted Alisa to be the last thing she saw.

Over the roars from the crowd, Cammy could barely hear Susan shouting, "Cammy, you still with us?"

Cammy realized that her movements were so limited that no one could quite tell whether they were intentional or just random swaying of a lifeless body. She knew she had to signal, in some way, that she was still conscious and that the contest couldn't end yet, but she was unable to croak out any sound that could be heard over the constant commotion of the crowd. She nearly made a thumbs-up gesture with her right hand, before she realized it might be taken as a "take me up" request. Instead she made a circle with her thumb and forefinger, as an "Okay" sign, and wriggled her hand to call attention to it to make sure it was seen. She couldn't hold it long, because her struggle to breathe regained her full attention.

Besides gravity and the rope, Cammy also fought with her female instincts. Maybe it *is* my time to be food, the voice of her womanhood said within her. This is what you were born to do, Cammy. It's the most *important* thing you can do: offer the flesh of your body to sustain others. No one but a woman can do this for her people. Stop fighting against your own birthright! This is your highest calling! Relax, stop fighting it, and be the woman you were born to be. It can all be over in less than a minute, and you'll be inside Alisa for all of her life!

No! she shouted back within herself. I am a woman, and I'm food for all, but not yet! It isn't my time yet!

Cammy grabbed a tight mental hold on the one fact that helped swing the battle in the fight-to-stay-alive direction: that Kat, who should still be standing flatfooted, was not; that Kat was just three inches, a single spin, from losing.

Cammy struggled on, breathing when she could, fighting to reestablish an upright posture when she couldn't.

She had rotated a quarter turn by now, clockwise, and could barely make out Alisa from the corner of her eye. Susan, on the main stage, was directly in front of her field of vision now, looking out at the crowd while gesturing to Sheri and Becky to spin again, shouting "Do it again, ladies!" into the microphone.

Cammy, for the first time, could see the spinners. Sheri had given hers an extra-vigorous push, and it was still spinning when Becky's stopped on 3.

The color-spinner settled at last. Susan leaned forward. "Is that... I can't tell if it's yellow or blue. Call it for me, Sheri."

The girl leaned in to look closely at the pointer, which had stopped almost exactly on the borderline. "It's... blue!"

Over the roar of the crowd, Cammy heard a delighted whoop from Hayley, who would at last be able to eat her wife's meat.

Cammy's heart was singing. See?? she thought, I told you it wasn't my time!

Yet still she struggled, as Susan kept looking past her at Kat, not raising her microphone. Apparently Susan wanted the crowd to get full closure, everyone watching Kat until she stopped kicking.

After a time that seemed an eternity to Cammy, she began to wonder whether Kat, somehow, had been able to keep going the way she herself was, despite being five inches past the end of her slack, an inch more than Cammy. Cammy was starting to feel faint, heard a buzzing that was internal rather than from the crowd, and there was a pinkness starting to come into her vision. She was sure she couldn't hold out through another round of the spinners, especially as Susan didn't appear to be about to set a new round in motion.

Then Susan, at last, lifted up her microphone and shouted, "And there we have it! Congratulations, Hayley, and I'm sure you'll have all of us here over to dinner!" The crowd laughed, and Susan went on, "Partners of the surviving contestants..." apparently not recalling all of their names, "Turn your cranks in whichever direction you want. And everybody turn your radio dials to my drive-time show tonight at 5 on Raider Radio!"

Cammy was able to see, off to her left, Alisa frantically spinning her crank counterclockwise, and found she was settling to the floor. She tried to stand, but was too weak to make her legs work. Her knees bending, she sagged as the rope, still choking her, let her down.

Alisa raised one foot up onto the shaft of the crank, used it as a step to vault herself onto the platform in a single leap, rushed to Cammy and wrapped her arms tightly around her, holding her up so she could breathe. Alisa was both crying and laughing with relief, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Once it was clear Cammy getting air into her lungs, Alisa loosened the noose and pulled it up and over Cammy's head.

Cammy, still breathing in heaves, barely able to keep her eyes open in exhaustion, grinned at Alisa and tried to speak. She found she couldn't make a sound. She put her mouth against Alisa's ear and started whispering. "I just want..."

Alisa, wiping away tears on her other cheek, shook her head. "Shhh, don't talk. We can do that later."

Cammy whispered more insistently. "No, just one thing, then I'll stop. I made it because I want to spend a lifetime with you, but it took more than that. If you hadn't told me about Kat going up on her heels, I wouldn't be alive now. The only thing that kept me going was knowing how close Kat was to being done." She looked behind her at Kat's platform, where Kat now hung limp above the floor, and Hayley, one hand lovingly stroking her late wife's hip, stood talking with someone from the event staff, probably about arrangements for butchering.

Beyond Kat, Karen's platform was now vacant, Karen having apparently departed already with her sister. At the most distant platform, Beth was kicking, suspended several inches off the floor. Her husband, after Susan had called the contest over, had obviously turned his crank clockwise, hoisting her instead of bringing her down, probably by prearrangement -- there had been a box to check on the acceptance-of-risk form to request being hanged regardless of contest outcome. Beth had apparently wanted to use this event for her snuff, as she had hinted in her interview with Susan. Karen, on the other hand, might be going to alternate volunteering for Hanging Roulette contests with her sister, for the same reason Kat and Hayley had been doing it.

Alisa grinned, wiped away more tears and, seeing that Cammy was breathing more steadily, kissed her, a long deep kiss. "Okay, no more talking now. And I just want you to know, after you heard your number, when you waved your arm and said it was you, I was like one second away from raising my own arm to volunteer. I just couldn't bear thinking about living without you." Her lip quivered and the tears started again. "But when you told me it wasn't your time to be food, and we'd make a family, I just... somehow I knew you'd get through. Now let's get you out of here. I'm sure your throat hurts, but we've got to get something into you. Do you think you could eat some ice cream? The cold will help slow down any swelling, and the sugar should give you some energy. And a soft drink, with caffeine in it. Can you handle that? Just nod."

Cammy nodded. Together, with Cammy leaning heavily on Alisa, Alisa's arms still around her, they headed to the steps down from the platform, to get the key to Cammy's handcuffs and retrieve their clothes.

* * * * *

Hand in hand, having dressed and shared an ice cream cone, they left the fair venue. It was about four o'clock. Walking in the direction of Cammy's dorm, Alisa suddenly stopped. She looked at Cammy, biting her lip. "How's your energy level?" She immediately waved off her own question. "I'm sorry, you still shouldn't be talking. Rest your throat till tomorrow."

Cammy whispered, "It hurts to make a sound, but this doesn't." She gave Alisa a broad smile. "So... what were you thinking?"

Alisa's smile looked a little shy. "Before your number got called, we were about to... I mean, we still haven't yet." She laughed. "It's so strange. I know we haven't even really known each other twenty-four hours yet. But in another way, you've always been part of my life, even before I met you, before I knew you existed. Before I knew *anyone* like you existed."

Cammy looked at her wide-eyed, and nodded vigorously. Alisa had given words to the exact feeling that had filled Cammy with such wonder all day.

Alisa went on, "And yet... with all that, we haven't made love yet."

Cammy bit her lip, and whispered, "I think Taylor is probably back in my room by now. Yours? Renee?"

Alisa's face fell. "Yeah, that's a problem, then. Would Taylor understand if we asked her to leave?"

Cammy's eyes lit up. She pointed. "We need privacy, but we don't need a room. Trees over there. Crowded. Can't see very far in." Cammy was starting to ration words. Even whispering was beginning to tire her throat.

Alisa began breathing harder, sensing how near she was to what she felt such a desperate need for. Together they left the paved path and ran over to the trees.

By the time they were fifty feet into the stand of trees, they could no longer see out of it in any direction. Cammy felt a tug on her hand as Alisa stopped running. She turned to face Alisa, once more feeling the tingling and the dampness between her legs, quickly intensifying. Her heart pounding, her breath quickening, she knew there was no longer anything they needed to wait for.

Alisa said softly, "I can tell even the whispering takes some effort for you. No more talking. We don't need it."

Cammy reached for the top button of her blouse, but Alisa's hand stopped her. Cammy felt puzzled only for a moment, until Alisa took over. Cammy understood immediately: they had already undressed for each other once, each in charge of her own clothes, so this time they should do it differently.

Alisa took her time, pausing in undressing Cammy to let Cammy lift up the hem of her t-shirt, raising her arms to let Cammy remove it, and waiting again while Cammy unbuttoned, unzipped and pulled her jeans down and off, all of it done very slowly, as if part of a long-established ritual.

The ground was soft, covered in moss and crackling leaves. They made love for a long time.

* * * * *

Cammy awoke, pressed up against Alisa, their arms and legs entangled. She'd been awakened by Alisa stroking her hair.

A little groggy, she whispered. "How long you been awake?" She could whisper a little more comfortably, but still not make a sound with her voice.

Alisa smiled. "A few minutes. Let's plan some things."

Cammy smiled, understanding. "Let's get married Saturday. We don't need to plan a big party way ahead with a lot of people. Just our dads, your sister and her wife." Alisa had an older sister, Anna. "Anybody else who should come?"

Alisa beamed at her. "No, that's it for my side. I wish it could be sooner, but they need a *little* warning. And that gives us time to talk to the Housing office. If they have any vacancies in married student housing, maybe we could have a place right after the wedding party."

Cammy nodded. "We can do something else sooner, though. You got anything after third period Monday?"

Alisa shook her head, looking as if a smile was about to burst into being. Cammy started to go on, but Alisa spoke first. "You mean we go see Dr. Colton?"

Cammy barely had time to grin and nod before Alisa kissed her. They made love again. Oral this time. They wanted to try all the possibilities as soon they could.

CHAPTER 7

TEN MONTHS LATER

Cammy screamed.

Alisa leaned over her. She'd shifted her grip on Cammy's hand after the last one to avoid having her hand crushed. "Okay, honey, breathe, remember, breathe. Think about breathing. Be your breath."

Cammy's pinched face was covered in sweat. "That was a bad one."

Alisa held Cammy's right hand in her right, and used a folded towel in her left to wipe away sweat from Cammy's forehead that was dripping into her eyes. "No, honey, it was a good one. They're all good ones."

Alisa grimly maintained a smile, though Cammy could read what was behind it. Cammy herself smiled behind gritted teeth. "See what you're going to be going through?"

Alisa raised Cammy's hand and kissed the back of it. "I won't want to miss a minute of it." She absently rubbed her own tummy, which looked as if she'd swallowed a beach ball. The two of them had attracted a lot of attention and questions lately, walking around campus holding hands, wearing tent-like shirts that did nothing to hide the shape of their huge baby bumps. Even with ordinary insemination, female couples very rarely chose to be pregnant together.

Looking out from between Cammy's spread legs, Dr. Shelton said, "Okay, head is out. Stop trying to push, Cammy. Just let the baby come."

"And breathe, honey." Alisa held tightly to Cammy's hand, ready for a renewal of Cammy's crushing grip.

Cammy grimaced and screamed again.

Dr. Shelton said through the scream, "Coming, coming... Here we are!"

Moments later the sound of a baby's cry filled the room. The population of the room had increased by one. Dr. Shelton looked at the clock on the wall and said to the nurse, "Put the time of birth as 11:15 a.m."

Cammy asked, crying, "Is she okay? Okay? Okay?"

Dr. Shelton said, with a beaming smile, "She's perfect." She held the squalling baby up so Cammy could see.

Cammy giggled. "Where'd that hair color come from?" The baby had a full head of dark red-brown hair.

Alisa, also crying and laughing, leaned down and pressed the side of her head against Cammy's. "Must be in her genes somewhere."

Cammy held her arms out to Dr. Shelton. Alisa rearranged the pillows behind her so she could sit up.

The doctor motioned towards Cammy. "Alisa, why don't you get that shirt off her?" They'd been in bed early this morning when Cammy's labor started. She'd only taken time to throw on one of her baggy pregnancy shirts and a pair of shorts before the rush to the university hospital.

A moment later, Dr. Shelton carefully put the baby in Cammy's arms.

Cammy started crying again. "She's so beautiful! So beautiful!"

Dr. Shelton said, "Let her lie against your stomach, Cammy. She should manage to find your nipple on her own if you get her close enough."

A few minutes later, the doctor clamped and cut the umbilical cord.

Alisa asked the doctor, "Can I get in the bed with her?"

Dr. Shelton laughed. "Go for it. But no funny business."

Alisa laughed and wiped away tears. "Promise." Cammy scooted slightly to the far side of the bed, as Alisa awkwardly, maneuvering her beach ball, climbed in next to her, careful not to disturb the baby as she sought out Cammy's breast.

As Alisa stroked Cammy's hair, which was disheveled from exertion and drenched in sweat, Cammy said "She's latching! I can do this!"

Dr. Shelton beamed at her, and said, "Congratulations, Cammy. Your placenta should come out in a little while. I'm going to make arrangements to get the baby to the neonatal unit. Not the intensive care one, just the one for one hundred percent healthy, perfect, totally normal-in-every-way babies." She knew new mothers loved hearing that. "Nurse Morris will stay to help you finish up." She left the room.

The nurse, picking up a clipboard, said, "Can I get the baby's name for the birth certificate?" She smiled. "Is this going to be another Jenna?" Jenna was by far the most popular female baby name at the moment. Jenna the Ponygirl was a huge star, her races on television followed by record audiences. All around the university, the high schools, even elementary schools, one could see girls wearing white t-shirts with symbolic ponygirl-harness patterns in light violet, with the name "Jenna" spelled out across the top in back.

Cammy smiled first at Alisa, and then looked at the nurse. "First name Sandra. Middle is Alisa, A-L-I-S-A. Last name is Atwater-Felton. With a hyphen. Oh, and for partner's name, put Alisa Atwater-Felton." The City Council had recently given official approval to the new form of birth certificate, listing the "mother's genetic partner."

Some female married couples each kept their own names, sometimes one took the other's name. Some hyphenated. Cammy and Alisa were both using Atwater-Felton as their last names now. They'd talked

about it. Both agreed that joining their names reflected the joining of their lives, and that Felton-Atwater sounded too much like a law firm, while Atwater-Felton, somehow, did not. And it would give their daughters an alphabetical advantage.

That was one in a long series of decisions. They loved deciding things together. Life is full of decisions, and they talked about all of them, even the not-really-consequential ones: they had decided, for example, never to trim their pubic hair, because it always reminded them of that bonding moment together up on the Hanging Roulette platform.

They had decided to have the babies together, rather than one after the other. They were the first married couple to both go through Dr. Colton's procedure simultaneously.

Continuing their studies while caring for the babies would be challenging, but the accommodations by the university for new parents were generous. The timing was ideal: the babies were coming with a month still remaining in summer break. Once classes started for fall semester, Cammy and Alisa would be able to take all of their classes without leaving their tiny apartment provided through the Housing Office, streaming class lectures onto their laptops -- even able to pause the professors whenever motherly duties arose -- and taking exams online. When they had courses that required labs, there would be no substitute for attending physically, but they had none of those in the upcoming semester. By the time they did need to include labs in their schedule, they would schedule them separately, much as they hated being apart, so that one of them could always be home with the babies. In case of emergencies, there were two women who lived on the same floor who'd said they'd be happy to watch the girls for an hour or two.

They had decided to raise the girls as sisters, as in fact they literally were genetically, despite having different birth-mothers. They wouldn't hide from the girls which of them had given birth to which, but would always tell the girls that when playmates or classmates were sisters, or talked about sisters, or when the two of them read about sisters, that term applied to them, and that when teachers asked if they were sisters, the answer was yes. As often as possible, when talking to either of the girls, Cammy and Alisa would describe the other girl as "your sister."

They had decided that, to both girls, Cammy would be "Mama," and Alisa would be "Mommy," and that neither Cammy nor Alisa would take priority as either girl's mother. For all of these decisions, in the unprecedented situation Cammy and Alisa were in, there were no standards to go by. They were on their own.

The choice of a major at the university would be coming up during their sophomore year. They had decided long ago to declare for pre-med. They were excited by the chance to make a contribution to the lives of women. For example, the Mermaid Program was still in progress, still working on full surgical conversion of women to mermaids. They hoped to be part of the program, though leaving themselves open if still more exciting opportunities arose.

The only thing each had decided alone, without input from the other, was the babies' names, and somehow they had done it without clashing, and had achieved a sort of symmetry. Cammy chose the name Sandra, explaining that Alisa was her Sandra, from that moment on the hanging platform when she had taken such a daring chance for Cammy. Cammy said Sandra should never become Sandy, at least not in their house.

Sandra was never Sandy in the books. Alisa would name her baby Selena, after the author of those books that had brought the two of them together -- in full, Selena Camilla Atwater-Felton.

Alisa lay on her left side facing Cammy, her left hand steadying her own bulging tummy while her right patted to still-gooey bottom of Sandra, who was industriously sucking on Cammy's farther breast. For now it was the first version of milk, colostrum, which Cammy and Alisa had each found was dribbling from their nipples in the last few days. A few days from now Cammy's regular milk would start coming in. Cammy and Alisa had decided to share nursing duties, each of them breastfeeding both Sandra and Selena -- and each other, whenever one of them felt full of milk when neither girl seemed hungry. "Honey, I was thinking we need to decide something."

Cammy looked at her, smiling. "What's that, sweetie?"

"I know you'll probably think this is nuts to talk about so far in advance -- I mean, obviously it's years down the road -- but we should talk about what we want to do when it's time to go."

Cammy nodded, not thinking it strange at all to talk about anything and everything with Alisa. "I told you what my mom said."

Alisa nodded in return. "I know, and that was really smart. She had a good way to say it. But we've got an extra concern she didn't have. When you ate her, there was still your dad to take care of you. But when both of us go, the girls won't have any parents. Unless we go... separately." Clearly Alisa wasn't sure how Cammy felt about that.

"Well..." Cammy paused, thinking it over. "One thing is, we're both only nineteen, so we could wait until the girls will be fine on their own. When they're eighteen, we'll still only be thirty-seven. Some women wait until they're forty."

Alisa nodded again. "We can do that. But there's still the question of which of us goes first. We could be snuffed together, but then neither one of us gets to eat any of the other. So there's always that question. We saw that some women leave it up to chance. We could do that."

Cammy winced. "But not in Hanging Roulette."

Alisa shuddered. "Noooo. Not that."

Cammy suddenly gasped and looked wide-eyed at Alisa. "Oh, sweetie, I just remembered something I was thinking that day!"

"What, honey?" Alisa never had to ask what day Cammy meant.

"When we were watching the ponygirls, I was remembering how the groom and her pony both eat the pony's arms, and how I thought that would be *such* a wonderful sharing experience..."

Alisa blinked. “We kind of need our arms, honey.”

Cammy shook her head excitedly. “Not arms, I’m thinking legs! We’d get them amputated, both of us! We could manage to get around in wheelchairs for a while. And they’d last us a long time...”

Alisa caught Cammy’s excitement. “Oh, and mix them together in that girlmeat casserole you make, for you and me and the girls, and maybe some friends. We wouldn’t know which chunk of meat came from which one of us, and it wouldn’t matter! I don’t want to know! It would be the two of us becoming one in food!” She reached up to stroke Cammy’s hair. “Because we’ve *always* been one, not two.”

Cammy nodded vigorously. “So then we can get snuffed together, because we’ve already eaten each other so we don’t have that to worry about. Should we decide now how we want to do it?”

Alisa thought a moment, and shook her head. “The who-goes-first thing was what I was really worried about. As far as the method goes, in eighteen years there might be something new we can’t even imagine now, so it’s too early to decide on that.”

Cammy grinned. “That almost makes me want to fast forward eighteen years to see how we’ll do it, but I don’t want to skip past our girls growing up.”

Alisa beamed at her. “Neither do I.” She scooted towards Cammy on the bed and kissed her, with all the love she felt.

* * * * *

Dr. Colton appeared at the door. “Knock knock.”

Cammy, nearly asleep, opened her eyes and smiled tiredly. “Hey!” Alisa sat upright beside her. “You missed all the fun!”

Colton bit her lip. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t here. I was teaching a class, and I found out right after.” She looked around the room. “Everything okay?”

Alisa beamed at her. “Sandra’s in the nursery.”

Cammy added, “She’s perfect! And so beautiful!” Her tears started flowing again.

Alisa, with careful and awkward effort, got out of the bed, came over and gave Colton a warm, tight hug, a little bent forward because her bump didn’t let her hug upright. “Thank you so much, Mona.”

Suddenly Alisa winced, then doubled over and cried out.

Cammy's eyes lit up. "They're going to have the same birthday! Genuine twins!" She pointed to the side. "Mona, you've done so much for us, but could you do one more thing and push that bed over this way? I don't feel like I can get out of bed yet, but I've got to be holding her hand." She laughed. "Busy, busy day."

Alisa walked gingerly through the space between the now-relocated bed and Cammy's, as the nurse rushed into the room. Alisa, steadying her bump, bent and kissed Cammy before climbing into her own bed, and said, "You said it that day, honey, and it got us both through."

Cammy gave her a smile. "What was that, sweetie?" She knew what Alisa meant, but wanted to hear the words again.

Alisa took Cammy's offered hand. "It's our time to make a family." She settled back to wait for her labor to start in earnest.

END