

ISLAND

By Cardaniel

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CHAPTER 1

Dr. Fuller pushed the box of tissues across her desk, closer to Sara Bollinger. Sara snatched a tissue from the box, blew her nose, and dropped the tissue into the nearby wastebasket. Still sniffing, she reached for another tissue and dabbed hopelessly at her leaking, reddening eyes. She focused absently on the engraved “Dr. Michelle Fuller” plaque at the front of her therapist’s desk.

“I’m ss... ss... ss... sorry, doctor.” Sara took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. “You know I’m t... t... t... trying.”

Dr. Fuller nodded, maintaining a patient smile. “I do know, Sara.” She paused in making notes and rested her chin on her folded hands, her elbows propped on her desk. “Sara...” She paused, obviously searching for words. “I’m not completely sure that... I’m the right kind of doctor for you. The kind who could really help.”

Sara’s head jerked up to look at Dr. Fuller, a shocked look on her face. “But you’re a ss... ss... speech therapist! What other kind of d... d... d... doctor could help me?” She gave Dr. Fuller a pleading look, as if the doctor was her last hope.

Dr. Fuller leaned back, letting her chair recline, looking to the ceiling for inspiration for speaking the right carefully chosen words to a sensitive and fragile patient. In a quiet voice, she said, “We know that stammering is often caused by a specific psychological distress. Not always, but sometimes. In your case, I think it’s become clear that the distress has a name: Cherise.”

Sara blinked hard at the mention of the name. As always, on hearing it or even thinking of it, a wave of warmth shot through her body, striking the shore with explosive force between her legs, leaving its wetness there. The direction the doctor’s words were taking filtered in behind the wave. “Do you m... m... mean I should talk to a psy- k... k... k... chologist??” She was suddenly angry. “Dr. Fuller, I’m not k... k... k... crazy!”

Dr. Fuller straightened up quickly and leaned forward, shaking her head. “Sara, it’s not like that.” She paused for further inspiration, looking to the diplomas on the wall for it this time. “Life often puts up roadblocks to our happiness. Sometimes we find these roadblocks pretty formidable. We may need help getting over them. A psychologist can be good at helping with that.” With a gentle gesture, she cut off a reply Sara was starting. Stopping Sara from speaking was never the problem. “Let’s think about what we’ve learned. You didn’t have any problem speaking until the beginning of the tenth grade. And it turns out that’s the same time you first had a class with Cherise Marteau. You developed a considerable... attraction to her.” The doctor avoided using the word “obsession.” “That was four, nearly five years ago. You finished high school, working hard to get into the university, winning a scholarship even, so that you could go to college with her. Yet in all this time you haven’t spoken a word to her.”

Sara made a gesture of helplessness. “I k... k... k... can’t! When I t... t... try to make myself t... t... t... talk to her, I get this feeling inside that I know my m... m... mouth won’t work. And when I try to m... m... m... make myself talk anyway, I just k... k... k... k...”

Dr. Fuller saw the look of complete panic come over Sara’s face, and knew she’d reached a major blockage. Very quietly, she said, “You can’t say any words at all.”

Sara nodded miserably. Crying again, she moaned. "She just looks at me like I'm k... k... k..." She shifted to a different word, as Dr. Fuller had taught her. "Nuts." She paused, and gave Dr. Fuller a rare look straight into her eyes. "I love her, Dr. Fuller! I n... n... need her to know that!" Sara never seemed to get stuck on saying "I love her." It rolled easily off her tongue. Her feelings for Cherise were the one thing she knew for sure.

Dr. Fuller gave Sara a slight headshake. "Sara, you don't really even know her, and that's the first requirement for love. For example, you think she's attracted only to boys -- men -- unusual though that would be, and so you upset yourself about how you can never be her lover, but you don't even know that for a fact. That's my point -- that you don't know that about her. If you knew for certain she was strictly heterosexual, you might accept her being that way because you love her, you might reject it and still go on loving her, but you just don't *know*. To love someone, you need to know them first."

Sara shook her head violently, her anger building, then suddenly felt calm wash over her. It's not important if Dr. Fuller doesn't understand my love for Cherise, Sara told herself. It doesn't threaten my love. Nothing can.

She still resisted the idea of seeing a psychologist, because she knew there was nothing wrong with her. But something about the way Dr. Fuller had put it suddenly spoke to her. What if, she thought, a psychologist could help me over that roadblock? What if I learned how to stop freezing up when I try to talk to Cherise? What if I could finally tell her how I feel about her?

She nodded, at last, to Dr. Fuller. "I think I'll m... m... m... make an appointment with a psy- k... k..." She paused. "...with a doctor like that. But k... k... k... could I keep seeing you?"

Dr. Fuller smiled. "As long as you need to, Sara. It doesn't have to be an either-or kind of thing."

Sara stood, picking up her purse and grabbing one last tissue. "Th... th... th... thank you, Dr. Fuller. I'll ss... ss... see you next week."

* * * * *

Sara stepped out of the shower and towed off, starting with her hair. She kept her light brown hair very short, just over her ears, parted in the middle and brushed back at the sides. It still looked feminine, and people had sometimes told her they thought it looked cute the way she had it. Sara assumed that, since Cherise preferred men, she might like Sara better if her hair was short.

Sara closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath, letting the endorphins from her afternoon workout do their work. Free weights this time, for her arm muscles, followed by two laps around the quarter-mile track, the first at a jog, the second a sprint. Sara always felt happy and energized after a workout, not least because she believed building up her muscles would make her more attractive to Cherise.

Sara refused to deny her femininity -- being a woman was important to her, with the promise that she, like all of her gender, would be eaten eventually. But if her body took on a few male characteristics, her theory ran -- the short hair, the firm muscles -- it couldn't hurt her chances with Cherise. It would also make her meat more savory, she always reminded herself. She had never liked girlmeat with a lot of fat. At five-foot-nine, her own 130 pounds included very little fat.

Sara had actually been approached once in the gym by a man who gave her his business card and offered to coach her for body-building competitions. She'd thanked him politely, and promised to think about it, but she never really considered it. Assuming that a strong body did appeal to Cherise, Sara wanted the effect to be subtle, almost subliminal. Competitive body-building would be taking it too far.

Sara had to admit to herself that she was, indeed, not sure Cherise didn't have any attraction to women, but she did constantly see Cherise flirting with male students, and she strongly suspected something was going on with one of the male professors as well. Cherise had run through numerous boyfriends, the relationships lasting a few months at the most. Sara took medications for the tightness and grinding she experienced in her stomach whenever she saw Cherise holding hands with one of the boys, and she could only imagine, in despair, what Cherise and her current significant other would be doing that night.

If only, Sara told herself, as she did many times daily, there was some way to make sure she could end up in Cherise's stomach. Part of her, at least. She wanted desperately to have a life with Cherise, as she knew she was meant to: to wake up beside her every morning, to eat breakfast with her and laugh over the comics in the morning paper, to be coworkers and share lunch in a company cafeteria, to go home together for dinner, with wine, and afterward watch a movie, holding hands and exchanging comments about the film, and then go to bed and make passionate love until they both fell asleep from exhaustion. Then start over with breakfast the next morning.

And in the end, after their shared lives, perhaps fifteen years following graduation, Sara wanted so, so, so badly for Cherise to eat her, so Sara could always after be inside the woman she loved.

Reality began to intrude on Sara's reverie. Final exams were in three weeks. College was so much harder than high school. Last year, freshman year, Sara had barely kept her grades up, just high enough to keep her scholarship at the end of the year. As her exercise high wore off, Sara began once more to fret about the upcoming tests. So far, her grades in her classes were not nearly high enough -- she was failing one class, and just squeaking by in another.

If she lost her scholarship, her life was ended. Her father certainly couldn't afford to keep her in school. Out of school would mean out of Cherise's life. Sara couldn't just wander around the campus, trying to stay in proximity to Cherise, if she wasn't a student. Campus security would think she was a stalker, and probably bar her from campus completely.

Loss of her student status would also mean the end of the free use of the student health services, for speech therapy and, if she went ahead with it, psychological counseling. But that, Sara reminded herself, wouldn't matter. It was important now, but pointless if the goal of speaking to Cherise was made impossible.

Without Cherise in her life, she had no life.

Sara's stomach clenched again.

Wrapping the towel around herself, she stepped out of the bathroom, and pulled up short with a small gasp of surprise. Melissa, her roommate, was back from the library already.

Melissa gave Sara a cheery smile, and something Sara thought might be a yearning look, on seeing her roommate dressed in a towel and nothing else. "Hi, sweetie!" Melissa called everyone with whom she was on friendly terms "sweetie." "How was the session at the gym?"

Sara shrugged. "It was g...g... good. I benched w... w... w... one-twenty."

Melissa's eyebrows shot up. "Bench -- is that the thing where you're on your back and..." She pantomimed lifting weights overhead with her arms.

Sara nodded. She never tried using words when a gesture was sufficient.

Melissa shook her own head. "Jeez, sweetie, you can lift *me* over your head! You know that?"

Sara snorted, gave Melissa a small smile and nodded. She hadn't exactly thought of it that way before. She crossed the room to the dresser beside her bed, quickly grabbed panties, a bra, t-shirt and shorts in her right hand while awkwardly holding the towel closed around her with her left, and turned back towards the bathroom. She heard Melissa sigh.

"Sweetie, you don't really need to go in there. I'm just going to sit here at the desk, and get going on homework. I won't look, I absolutely swear."

Sara had never let Melissa, or anyone else without a medical degree, see her undressed. That was something only Cherise was allowed to see, though she never had so far. Sex, of course, was even further out of the question. A few weeks into freshman year, Melissa, feeling lonely and a little overwhelmed, had started to crawl into Sara's bed one night. Sara, awakened instantly, had shaken her head violently, and then, to soften the rejection, had conversed quietly with Melissa for a solid hour, across the gap between their beds. Talking that much was very hard for Sara, but she'd felt the effort was important, so that she could stay on good terms with her roommate. Melissa had thanked her profusely in the end for helping her feel better. Since then, they had kept their relationship on a good-friends level. Sara could see signs that Melissa would jump into Sara's bed again at the first sign that such a move was welcome, so Sara was careful not to give any.

Sara had never been with a man, nor wanted to, but in adolescence she had experimented with sexual play, with a couple of female classmates separately. She'd enjoyed it, and had planned to continue. She didn't feel ashamed about it now. It wasn't a betrayal of Cherise, because Sara hadn't met her yet. Sara divided her life cleanly into BC and AC -- Before Cherise and After Cherise.

Sara shook her head. "Really, Mel, the b... b... bathroom is only a f... f... f... few feet away. Not a big d... d... deal."

Melissa threw her hands up in exasperation, but smiled. None of her roommate's quirks surprised her anymore. Melissa herself always hung her towel on the rack in the bathroom as soon as she was dry, opened the door to let the steam out while she blow-dried her hair, and walked across the room to her dresser, still naked, in front of Sara, with no sign of self-consciousness. She gave Sara a resigned look now. "Suit yourself." She suddenly burst out laughing. "I guess you could interpret that a couple of ways. Both appropriate."

Sara laughed as well, and headed for the bathroom.

* * * * *

Sara usually studied in her room, but wanted the quiet of the library now to improve her concentration, hoping for Statistics to click. Stats was the class she was failing. She knew it was an important class for her Sociology major, with so much of the research in sociology depending on statistical analysis. The professor was good, as far as she could tell, speaking clearly, sometimes entertainingly, with lots of examples. At least that seemed to be the case during the limited time Sara could devote her attention to what the man was saying. With Cherise sitting in the same classroom, it was hard.

Sara remembered, so clearly, the first time she had seen Cherise, on that first day of sophomore year in high school. Sara had come into the classroom after checking the door to make sure she was in the right place for History class, had picked out a row with several empty seats, and passed by the first student in the row without really noticing her. The second student was Cherise.

It wasn't just that Cherise was the most beautiful girl Sara had seen, or even imagined, in her life: the black-as-night hair, the high cheekbones, the gently incurved nose, the dramatic upswept eyebrows above it, the mouth with full lips that curved naturally upward at their edges, all formed by utterly perfect skin; below all that, a body with gentle curves, accentuated by already-large breasts. A body that screamed for you to touch it, stroke it, hold it, lips that called out for another pair to meet them.

It was so much more than all that. Sara had been struck, almost dropped to the floor, by a sense that her own life was permanently, inextricably tied together with that of this girl whose name Sara didn't yet know. Sara had stumbled, there, in the aisle between rows of seats, had somehow managed to keep her feet under her, and had seen that wonderful face turn upward to look at her, heard the voice for the first time, asking softly, musically, wonderfully, "You okay?"

Sara had opened her mouth to give a standard reply -- sure, no problem, I'm just a klutz -- but had been unable to force out a word. It was partly that she had stopped breathing, but she couldn't really blame it on that. She could sense, without testing it, a complete disconnection between her brain and her mouth, so that it went beyond being simply unable to speak. It was as if she had forgotten how.

Sara had taken a seat a few places behind the unknown girl, and absently shoved her backpack under the seat without taking a notebook and pen out of it. The important thing was to breathe, which she was finally able to do by the time she'd started feeling faint from lack of oxygen.

Later, when the teacher had called on her to answer a question, Sara had stammered for the first time. Yes, she told the now-absent Dr. Fuller in her mind, you were right, without me telling you. It did start with Cherise.

* * * * *

Sara walked past the Sociology Department message board, as she did several times daily recently, biting her lip, hoping the list was posted now but not sure if she was prepared for what it might say. Or not say.

The feeling of hopelessness about her final exams was growing. She had to pull her grades up in three different courses, and no matter how much she studied, all the ideas in Statistics seemed just to whirl around in her head out of reach -- there was just too much to fit it all together! -- and her chemistry class, taken to fit the university's general studies requirement, just seemed to make no sense.

She had to get that summer internship. She *had* to. The fact she was about to lose her scholarship wasn't a problem for that purpose. For those chosen, the Amy Cameron Foundation would pay all travel costs and provide room and board all summer. Even if Sara lost her scholarship she would still, through the summer, be a student, and eligible for the internship. That would give her three months to be close to Cherise. Surely something good would happen in those three months. Sara had learned a lot from Dr. Fuller. She knew that, given time, she could make her mouth say *something* to Cherise. If they could get to be friends, just friends to start with, then Cherise would stay in contact with Sara even when Sara wasn't in school.

For the internships, ten female students would be chosen, from the departments of Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, History, and Education, those most relevant to the opportunities for learning that the internship provided. In addition to the Amy Cameron Foundation paying their expenses, they would also be getting ten upper division elective credit hours applicable towards their majors, as well as an important experience to record on their resumes when they went job hunting after graduation. Well, thought Sara, the ones who do graduate, that is. Not me.

Sara knew Cherise had applied for the internship, and was sure she would be one of the ten. Cherise had the grades, the right personality, everything they were looking for -- including being physically attractive, a requirement vaguely hinted at, a criterion for which Cherise went well beyond the bare minimum.

Sara thought she herself stood a reasonable chance. Her grades, through the end of the previous semester, had barely cleared the minimum for the internship, but she understood that grades were not the most heavily-weighted factor. There had been a written test, covering the relevant history and basic social principles, on which Sara thought she had done well. There had been a questionnaire, and no one had come right out and said exactly what sort of responses were needed, but it seemed to Sara to be exploring her attitudes towards other cultures, and Sara thought she had demonstrated the orientation they wanted. Sara couldn't judge objectively how attractive she was, but she did try to look nice for Cherise, beyond the body-building program, and Melissa wasn't the only girl Sara had seen giving her that what-would-she-be-like-in-bed look.

Most nerve-wracking of all for Sara in the application process, there had been an interview with that woman, Steffi Bloom Cameron ("You can call me Steffi if you want"). Any speech impediment would be a significant problem for this particular internship, but Sara had spoken slowly and carefully, using several of the tricks Dr. Fuller had taught her, and she thought perhaps her stammering had been put down to perfectly understandable nervousness.

Sara *had* to get this internship. If she didn't, Cherise would be two hundred miles away across the water for the entire summer, on Purity Island, a place that was otherwise impossible for Sara to reach. And by the time Cherise returned, Sara would in all probability no longer be a student at the university, unable to pay tuition for fall semester. If Sara failed to get the internship, her remaining time with Cherise in her life was very likely down to its last few weeks now. That was unacceptable. It was terrifying.

And there was the list, now, on the bulletin board in front of Sara. In large letters at the top, Sara could see from where she was standing, "Students accepted for summer internship on Purity Island."

Her heart pounding, Sara stepped closer to the announcement on the board. She could now see the words underneath the heading: "The following students should report to an orientation session in room 109, Becker Hall, on Monday at 8 a.m."

Sara's eyes went directly to the middle of the list, and she immediately saw the name "Cherise Marteau." Not at all surprising. Sara asked herself why she had even bothered to look, but she knew she did get a rush between her legs just from seeing Cherise's name in print.

Only then did she look up to the top of the list for "Sara Lynn Bollinger." There was no name between Andrews and Chase.

Breathing faster, Sara looked down to see whether her name might have accidentally been put under S. At last she started from the top, saying each name slowly under her breath as she read it, to make sure she didn't miss any, unconsciously shaking her head. At the end she began repeating softly, "No, no, no, no," with a rising inflection as if asking the world how it could be so cruel. Her body was shaking. She thought she might be about to lose control of her bladder. She closed her eyes, and drew a deep, shaky breath.

She was half aware of footsteps coming up behind her. And then, almost subliminally, she smelled a familiar perfume. Her first real conscious knowledge of who was standing beside her came from sensing that her lips, tongue, palate, throat, everything she used to voice sounds, seemed no longer to be part of her body. It was a very familiar sensation.

Cherise, on Sara's left, leaned in towards the list, saw her name, and broke into a smile. On the other side of her from Sara, her current boyfriend, Toby -- how Sara hated the sound of that name in her head! -- said, "Hey, you made it! That's great!"

Cherise giggled, turned, threw her arms around him and kissed him. Breaking off the kiss, she said, mock-reproachfully, "You trying to get rid of me? You know this means I'll be gone for three months."

Sara felt an electrical surge all along her left side, the side nearer Cherise, in addition to the usual buzzing in her crotch. She rarely stood this close to Cherise. Signals went to her muscles, trying automatically to initiate a movement across Cherise to Toby to peel him away from Cherise, to throw him to the floor. She struggled to remain motionless.

She jumped when Cherise suddenly spoke to her. She hadn't even realized Cherise was done kissing Toby. That sweet voice said, "Did you make it, Sara? Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." As always on those rare occasions when she spoke to Sara, Cherise's voice sounded tentative, as if not quite sure she *should* be speaking to Sara, knowing from experience Sara was unlikely to answer back.

Sara turned her head to look at Cherise. Seeing that amazing face this close was almost more than her body circuitry could bear. She realized she had tears streaming down her face, and momentarily worried that it made Cherise see her in a non-masculine light. Sara suddenly understood that it probably didn't matter anymore. Cherise was on her way out of Sara's life, forever out of reach. Yet Sara still, standing

this near Cherise for perhaps the last time, couldn't get a word out. She simply shook her head, as if Cherise couldn't see the answer already by looking at her face.

Cherise's face grew softer, if that was possible, and reaching up -- she was three inches shorter than Sara -- she put her hand on Sara's shoulder and gave it a consoling squeeze. Sara nearly collapsed. It was the first time Cherise had ever touched her, an event that would have made Sara explode with excitement if it hadn't been overbalanced by a sense of loss so profound it went deeper than her soul. Giving Sara's shoulder a slight rub, Cherise said, "Listen, remember you can apply again next year. And you'll be a year farther along in the program, and that's probably going to help. You'll get it the next time."

Sara tried her best to smile, drawing on the happiness she always felt within when Cherise was near. She nodded. She saw Cherise wrinkle her nose slightly, a reaction Sara had seen before that she read as "What a strange girl, I've seen her so many times but she never talks to me." Sara knew Cherise had heard her speak, in her halting way, both in the classroom and in conversations with friends. She always supposed Cherise assumed Sara was just very shy with people she didn't know, but there was always a "how odd she is!" feeling that Sara perceived running just under the surface.

Sara wanted to walk away, but that was purely impossible as long as Cherise was still there. It was much, much more important to feel the warmth of Cherise standing beside her one last time.

Cherise turned back to Toby and kissed him again. He wrapped his arms around her and let his hands drop down to cup her buttocks. "How should we..."

Sara suspected the next word was "celebrate," but Cherise softly made a "shhh" sound, making a head gesture back towards Sara, obviously concerned with the feelings of the girl behind her who had no internship to celebrate. That's Cherise, thought Sara miserably. Never wrapped up in herself the way so many gorgeous girls are, still thinking about others even in the midst of her happiness.

That characteristic sweetness, along with so many wonderful things about her, is about to leave my life forever, Sara thought.

Cherise turned back to Sara and said, "I really hope you get it next year." Sara thought that surely it ought to be simple enough to say "Thank you," but only managed a tiny smile and a nod of her head.

Cherise walked away with her arm around the hated Toby's waist, leaning her head against him. Sara thought she saw Cherise make a slight move that might have been intended to initiate a turn to look again at Sara, but she never completed it.

Sara, at last, walked back to her room, alone. She assumed she must have, anyway, because she found herself there, not remembering going there. She threw herself on her bed, her body wracked with sobs. She wished it was possible that her heart could break literally, not metaphorically, and save her from all this misery.

CHAPTER 2

It's time, Sara thought miserably, lying on her back on the bed, her arm draped over her eyes. It's time to be eaten.

Sara had had dreams, even before meeting Cherise, of the kind of fairy tale ending her life should have: being roasted for friends and family, of course, but in particular for the one true love of her life, her partner, the other half of herself. Every woman, she felt, should be able to have that. When she was very young she had assumed that partner would be a man, but as she grew older it became clear to her that her true love would be a woman. Then she had met Cherise, and known in the first nanosecond that Cherise was the one.

Her eyes stung yet again, with a renewed flow of tears, when she told herself that she knew now that it could never happen.

But Sara could still have a good, respectable ending. She would go home this weekend -- never mind the final exams, there was no point in putting herself through that when she knew how they would come out -- and ask Daddy if he would plan a barbecue for her.

Even though I won't get it the way I want, she told herself, being consumed still means something. Sara didn't simply want to be snuffed by decapitation. It should, she thought, be something more memorable to the people who are there to eat me. She thought about hanging, perhaps. Dangling naked and kicking while a rope around her neck choked the life out of her... Maybe. Sara decided to give it more thought later. Sara's sister Penny, now fifteen, would be there, of course, and that would be nice, having her sister eat her. Daddy could invite some of his coworkers, some neighbors, and Sara herself could come up a list of some friends from high school whom she'd like to see there. And Melissa, of course, it would be good to have her there too.

Sara considered the possibility she could get some physical comfort from sex with Melissa in these last few days before leaving the university forever. Melissa would be eager, she knew. Of course, it wasn't as though Melissa hadn't hooked up with several of the other girls, and at least a couple of guys, but Sara knew how much Melissa wanted into Sara's bed. Maybe I should let her, Sara told herself, and it would be nice for both of us...

No! An intense resistance built up suddenly, from the deepest part of Sara's heart. Nobody but Cherise! I can't give myself to anyone else, even knowing that Cherise and I can never be together. I will always carry Cherise in a special place inside me where no one else belongs.

Sara sighed, and the tears started again. By the time I'm getting barbecued, she thought, Cherise will be two hundred miles away, doing that internship, working in that restaurant...

With a sudden gasp, Sara sat bolt upright on the bed. Restaurant!

She ran to her desk, yanked open a drawer, fumbled inside it and found the brochure from the Amy Cameron Foundation. She had read it closely several times already, but never with the concentration with which she read it now. I have to know all the details backward and forward, she told herself breathlessly. When I talk to Ms. Cameron again, I need to be on top of all this.

She felt behind her blindly for her chair, sat down, and continued reading.

* * * * *

PURITY ISLAND [the brochure read]

I. THE SETTLING OF PURITY ISLAND

Until a little over a century ago, all women were slaves, born to be owned and traded by men until they were eaten, but at that time the dynamic began changing, due to an increasingly bold resistance on the part of many women, with the support of a number of forward-looking men. At the height of the Women's Rights Movement, there was widespread resistance to the movement's goals on the part of a sizeable segment of the male population. There were major protests by men at the time of the repeal of the Gender Identification Law, which had required all job seekers to prove that they were male and were therefore legally entitled to seek gainful employment, and the simultaneous passage of legislation making it legal for women to work for pay. These actions by the government had resulted from pressure by large corporations wishing to hire women for their lowest-paying jobs, once they had determined that this arrangement was cheaper for them than buying the women as slaves. Though the actions of the government were approved by a narrow majority of men, based on the reassurance from the leaders of the Women's Rights Movement that the consumption of women as food was not an issue and would continue as always, a large minority of men were opposed to the new laws, for two reasons:

- (1) Many men were afraid that they no longer could count on job security, and that a woman would replace them.
- (2) A somewhat larger number of men were philosophically opposed to any change in the relationship between the sexes.

Men in the first of these two groups, over a period of years, came to see that women, in that first wave of hiring following the legalization, were being hired for the type of menial tasks that men, in general, didn't want. It took several decades for women in the work force to approach parity with men at higher levels of job-seeking, a period of time sufficiently long that men were able gradually to come to accept women as natural co-workers rather than competitors.

The men in the second category above, however, remained adamant that it was morally and ethically wrong for a woman to be treated as a man. They held that the ancients had always understood that women exist to serve mankind, both as a vessel of new life (reproduction), and in the maintenance of existing life (consumption as food), and that to erase the distinction between men and women was an affront to the ancients and showed callous disregard for many centuries of inherited wisdom. The most vocal members of this category formed a counter-movement of their own, calling it the Purity of Women Movement (PWM), reflecting their conviction that the highest purposes of feminine existence were being tainted by being mixed with masculine values. Though evidence exists that many of the leaders of the PWM had allowed their slaves to wear clothes up until this time, their conservative resistance to a changing world inspired in them a belief that the wearing of clothes by women, enabling them to hide their feminine characteristics, had led directly to the phenomenon of women pretending to be men, in order to gain access to privileges legally denied them, which had been the reason for the passage of the original Gender Identification Law at the outset of the Women's Rights Movement. The PWM consequently declared that the wearing of clothes by women was an unmitigated evil, a primary

reason for the disruption of traditional values, a disruption that they deplored. The act of setting women free of slavery, to pursue goals of their own in life, was an even greater evil, to be fought with all of the energy the PWM possessed.

Members of the PWM staged a number of demonstrations in the decade following the changes in the laws governing women's rights. Generally these remained peaceful, though their leaders were occasionally arrested when the demonstrations went beyond the accepted boundaries of orderly assembly.

At last the highest ranking, and most vocal, members of the PWM saw that the battle to maintain their values in a changing world was being lost, and decided that an exodus was in order. One hundred twenty years ago, after comparing the advantages and disadvantages of various remote areas, eight hundred PWM members (now calling themselves the "Purists"), and their slaves, embarked to establish a permanent settlement on Parmola Island, renaming it Purity Island.

Bereft of its leadership, the remains of the PWM on the mainland, consisting mainly of the movement's less committed members, gradually withered away, and it ceased to operate as an identifiable organization within a decade of the departure of its leaders.

II. GEOGRAPHY OF PURITY ISLAND

Purity Island, about two hundred miles southwest of the continental coast, was created by earthquake activity many thousands of years ago. It is oval in shape, measuring about fifteen miles west to east at its widest point, and forty miles north to south. Along its center runs a ridge of rocky hills, north to south, reaching about five hundred feet in altitude, with lower lands on either side sloping gently towards the eastern and western shores.

The climate of the island, due to its location just within the global tropical weather zone, is quite warm and very humid, with measureable rainfall nearly every day, heaviest from early spring through late summer. There is an abundance of fruit trees, particularly those bearing what are now called "Purity peaches" -- similar, though not directly related, to ordinary peaches.

Before being settled by the Purists, Parmola Island was known to be the home of a small native population. Little is known about how they lived, except that they were not far removed from a stone-age society. There was little interaction between the natives of the island and the mainland, because the island was not believed to have anything especially valuable in the way of natural resources, so its inhabitants were left alone by our ancestors.

The coming of the Purists was a disaster for the native population, who at first outnumbered the Purists, but were far inferior in firepower. There are no reliable records documenting the battle for control of the island, but evidence today suggests that very few of the natives are left. It is possible that they have been absorbed by, and interbred with, the Purists.

At the time of the settling of the island by the Purists, there was abundant wildlife on the island, but over the first decades of occupation by the Purists, nearly all animals the size of a rabbit or larger were hunted and eaten, along with most of the female human natives, as the Purists had not been able to bring with them a sufficient number of slaves to form a significant part of their diet. However, the

immediate establishment of breeding farms soon led to a burgeoning female population, which then became the main source of meat just as the supply of animals was running out.

III. INTERACTIONS OF PURITY ISLAND WITH THE MAINLAND

Early expeditions to meet with the settlers on Purity Island were turned away, usually with heavy casualties, until the settlers' supply of ammunition ran low. At that point, it became possible to talk to the Purists and reassure them that no one on the mainland had any intention of evicting them from the island, challenging them for its control, nor in any way interfering with their way of life -- the mainlanders simply wanted to see whether trade relations could be established. In time, negotiations succeeded in inaugurating a regular trade.

Interestingly, though the Purists' weapons were no longer useable, they never expressed interest in restocking their supply of ammunition -- in the absence of large animals, remaining natives, or any contact with the mainland for other than peaceful purposes, the Purists no longer perceived a need for guns.

Eventually a cycle of trade was established, in which the flow of material from the mainland to the island consisted mainly of metalware associated with the control of slaves (chains, etc.) as well as some more mundane metal tools, spices for food preparation unobtainable on the island, and alcoholic beverages -- especially wine, as the settlers had a taste for fruity beverages that could be consumed in relatively large quantities before inebriation set in. In return, the Purists could offer two things to the mainland besides Purity peaches: (1) Girlskin leather, as the Purists skin most of their women prior to cooking them, a practice that has gradually declined on the mainland over recent decades, and (2) the herb that serves as a source of the fertility drugs used today in mainland breeding farms.

Purity girlskin leather is regarded as having higher quality than any girlskin processed on the mainland. As a result, it is very expensive on the mainland, particularly those pieces of leather with a circular discoloration recognizable as an areola and nipple. Its use in jackets, sofas, and automobile seat covers is a symbol of its owner's wealth, or at least a pretention to it.

The fertility drugs, far superior to those in use before their discovery, seem only to grow, in the form of an herb, on Purity Island, where the Purists found that the natives had been using the drugs, to a limited extent, for centuries. Attempts to grow the herbs on the mainland have failed. Scientists have speculated that an interaction with some burrowing insect native to the island must be necessary for the growth of the herb, similar to the way honeybees pollinate flowers.

The distinction of the island as the sole source of modern fertility drugs will likely continue into the indefinite future. The Onderman Corporation was able to successfully solicit a government-licensed monopoly on trade with Purity Island, subcontracting for the wine, spice, leather, peach, and slaveware trade while handling the drug trade itself. From the time the monopoly was established, no company unaffiliated with Onderman could legally trade with Purity Island, without prior consent from the government. For its own part, Onderman has no intention of establishing a factory for production of the drug on the island, since it is much cheaper for them to have the Purists produce the drug in return for items of relatively little market value than it would be to establish a manufacturing operation of their own on the island.

Until now, aside from trade, the island's only other contact with the mainland has consisted of occasional visits by teams of mainland anthropologists, who are tolerated as long as they come in small numbers, conduct their studies as unobtrusively as possible, and make no attempt to force values of their own on the settlers. While on the island, members of a study team are targets of suspicion and constant vigilance, but not, in recent years, violence.

The very first such expedition, some fifty years ago, funded by three universities, made the serious error of including among its members a female undergraduate, Sherry Patton, the student of one of the anthropology professors leading the expedition. The settlers did not, at the beginning, realize Miss Patton was a woman, as it did not occur to them that a woman might be seen acting as an equal with men, nor that a woman might be clothed. When, at last, Miss Patton was identified as female, perhaps by her voice, or by the settlers' belated recognition of the shape of breasts under her blouse, the settlers became immediately upset, charged that she was "pretending to be a man," separated her from the men of the university team as she cried out for help, and took her away, detailing a rear guard to fight off the rest of the party when they attempted to follow. The men of the team did eventually manage to advance far enough in pursuit to find the shredded remains of Miss Patton's clothes discarded in a clearing nearby, but were soon forced by angry settlers to leave the island. Since that first team had made very little progress, at that point, in its study of Purity Island settlers and their traditions, their original mistake in including Miss Patton as part of the team was compounded by their assumption that any female "criminal" would, as in mainland society, be quickly executed, and that Miss Patton must therefore be dead. No further search was attempted. In light of current knowledge of Purity society, it is almost certain that Miss Patton, 21 at the time of her capture, spent the next fifteen to twenty years on the island, either as a work slave or a breeding slave (see below) before being eaten. It was twenty years before another team of anthropologists was allowed on the island -- all men, this time.

IV. PURITY ISLAND TODAY

The society of modern day Purity Island is very much modeled on the ideals brought to the island by the founding Purist settlers. It is a purely agricultural economy, operating mainly through a barter system, with limited trade with the mainland as detailed above. Most of the settlement has been on the eastern side of the central mountain ridge (the side of the island that faces the mainland), and there are small towns surrounding the handful of trading posts located at intervals along the eastern shore, which are the only parts of the island visited by mainland traders. Further inland there are small farming cooperatives, each forming a nearly self-sufficient enclave, producing food for itself and skins and herbs to trade for its few remaining necessities. The western half of the island, rarely visited by anthropologists once its culture had been determined to be identical to that on the eastern half (but far less trusting of outsiders), is sparsely populated in comparison with the east, with a small number of farming cooperatives and no known town-like settlements.

All women on the island are slaves, some owned by individual farmers, some collectively owned by a farm coop or a trading post. In keeping with the founding tradition and attitudes handed down by the original PWM settlers, women are not allowed to wear clothing of any form, other than the chains and metal fetters needed to keep them secured in service to their owners. Most slaves are (i) work slaves or (ii) breeding slaves. There is a special category of slaves (iii) called doggirls. With no known exceptions, other than the doggirls, all slaves who are not secured to an immovable object are hobbled by a short chain running between their ankle cuffs, rendering them unable to run, making escape from their masters all but impossible.

(i) Work slaves lead a very strenuous life, most of them involved in farm work, using either bare hands or the most rudimentary of farm implements -- none of them motorized, of course. At night, the work slaves sleep outdoors, usually in groups with chains connecting their collars, the chains circling a tree or similar fixed object. They are not given fertility drugs, but at any moment a number of them may be pregnant. They are expected to continue working in that condition until they give birth. The resulting female babies are raised on breeding farms (see below). The smaller number of male offspring grow up with their fathers.

(ii) The life of a breeding slave, or breeder as they are usually called, involves less work, but is appallingly empty in comparison with modern breeding farm practices on the mainland. On first being selected for breeding duty, a new breeder is secured, stomach down, on a "breeding hill," constructed by burying a five-foot long, foot-thick log under a layer of dirt. The breeder's knees and wrists are held by chains at ground level on either side of the hill, and she is fed, and eliminates her wastes, without being freed from that position, until she is found to be pregnant. The design of the hill holds the breeder's legs spread, with her vagina at a convenient height for a male kneeling behind her. There she is subjected to several attempts at impregnation each day, by breeding farm staff and visiting farmers, until her pregnancy shows, usually within about two months. Following each insemination, a portion of the semen is collected from her vagina and distributed, via swabs, to the vaginas of several non-pregnant breeders who have previously conceived -- the effectiveness of the fertility drugs makes this efficient use of semen practical. Once pregnant, the new breeder is released from the hill and moved to a pen, where she is secured at the collar and ankles by chains sufficiently long to enable her to move to all parts of the pen. Small cradles for the babies occupy most of the space in the pen.

After the breeder has served about fifteen years, giving birth to seventy to a hundred babies, the fertility drugs lose their effectiveness. The breeder is then snuffed, skinned, and cooked. At no time does the breeder leave her pen. Work slaves bring her food to the pen, and clean up her wastes.

Once a breeder throws a litter, she keeps the babies with her in her pen for about the first two years of their lives -- at most two different litters at any one time. The fertility drugs, aided by her own frequent feeding, allow her breasts to keep up with the demands of nursing as many as a dozen babies, while another litter begins growing within her womb. Between eating sufficient food to maintain both milk production and gestation, and nursing the babies, the breeder has no time for anything else, and in any case, there are no other activities available to her.

A number of organizations on the mainland have petitioned the government and the Onderman Corporation to help make the lives of breeders on Purity Island more tolerable. So far these organizations have met with government indifference to a problem outside its jurisdiction, since Purity Island is regarded as an independent state, and with disregard from the corporation, which is resistant to any attempt to alter its relationship with the island. At least one team of anthropologists suggested, to a group of settlers, ways that a breeder's life might be made more comfortable, but their efforts were met with immediate hostility, to the point that the team canceled its research program and left the island immediately.

At age two, the babies are weaned, and are removed to a pen with a near-equal number of ten-year-old girls -- the older girls having reached the age when maternal instincts allow them to act as caregivers for the babies, feeding them until they can feed themselves, teaching them games, nurturing them. None of the girls are chained, but the pen's unclimbable walls, with a single door, locked except when food is brought in or wastes removed, keep them confined. The babies and adolescents remain together in the

pen for eight years, at which point the older girls (now 18) are removed from the pen, collared, and chain-hobbled. Some are selected at random to stay on as breeders, and the rest are distributed as work slaves. The group of younger girls in the pen, now ten, are given their own cohort of two-year-olds to care for. What passes for inherited knowledge, whose original source was adult slaves from several generations in the past, is passed down to younger girls by the older ones. Again, anthropological teams have tried suggesting that the offspring of the breeders would benefit from a greater degree of contact with adults, even if it is impractical to approach the level of care given in mainland breeding farms, with their schools staffed by professional teachers and counselors, but any such attempts have been rebuffed.

The newly chained slaves, at 18, have only a rudimentary idea of what will be demanded of them, either physically or sexually, but they quickly learn that unacceptable performance has severe consequences.

The rare males (about one in fifty live births in the breeding farms are male, under the influence of the fertility drugs), at age 2, are taken to a separate facility with adult (slave and male) supervision, given a modest amount of education, and are adopted individually by farmers.

(iii) The remaining class of slaves, doggirls, are the sole example of body modification practiced on the island. The term “doggirl” was coined by anthropologists (the island’s inhabitants simply call them “dogs”), to distinguish them from the puppygirls familiar on the mainland. They are selected, at about twelve months in age, from among the babies born at breeding farms (usually the more aggressive babies are chosen), and raised separately from the rest of the slave population, in kennels, where a work slave feeds them for a short time until they can obtain their own food and drink from bowls. Doggirls have none of the sweet-tempered, eager submissiveness of puppygirls -- nor the tail, which is far beyond the surgical capability of the island settlers. They do, like puppygirls, have the standard shortened limbs (arms ending in mid-forearm, legs just above the knee). The original doggirls, raised on the mainland before the Purists left for the island, grew up living with real dogs, believing themselves to be dogs as well. Modern-day doggirls grow up with older doggirls, on whom they model their behavior. Unaware of their humanity, unaware of their potential for communicating by speech, fully-grown doggirls patrol the periphery of the farm or establishment that owns them, growling and barking to warn back slaves who approach too near the boundaries -- usually the warning is enough, but doggirls will attack if necessary. Though they lack some of the abilities of real dogs (including, obviously, dogs’ superhuman sense of smell), they are completely loyal to their masters, they can, even on their four shortened legs, outrun any full-bodied-but-chain-hobbled slave, and they are superior to real dogs in being able to learn and follow complex commands, despite their underdeveloped language skills. A small farm may have two or three doggirls, a larger one a half-dozen or more. While doggirls have slave collars (in this case, leather) and may occasionally be secured by chains to their collars, or walked by a farmer using a leash, they alone among slavegirls on the island are generally free to move at will. Such is their attachment to, and dependence on, their masters, that no farmer has been known to cite an example of a doggirl running away.

V. THE AMY CAMERON FOUNDATION

The Amy Cameron Foundation has the goal of improving the quality of life of women on Purity Island. This goal would necessarily be the culmination of a long-range plan whose execution is expected to take years to accomplish. The male inhabitants of Purity Island have clung to their core values for more than a century, and are extremely resistant to any attempt to impose the values of another culture, or even to suggest them -- their tolerance of outsiders is limited, and vanishes when their beliefs and traditions

are questioned. This attitude has presumably been passed down from the original founders of the Purity Island society, who left the mainland precisely because of their resistance to a changing culture relative to the treatment of women.

Towards the goal stated above, the Amy Cameron Foundation offers ten annual summer internships for female students in the disciplines of Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, History, and Education. Interns will work as waitresses in a restaurant, "Amy's Place," established by the foundation in the trading post town of Purity.

Interns will remain nude at all times, both on-duty and off, in observance of the most important of all laws governing slaves on the island. During working hours, however, interns will wear festive ribbons on their wrists, ankles, and upper arms, with a matching ceramic collar, in various bright colors, as symbolic replacements of the metal bondage bands and slave collars worn by the island's women. Very light face makeup may be worn; hair will be kept extremely short in keeping with island tradition for slaves, but should be groomed attractively to the extent possible; legs and underarms may be shaved, but not pubes, which applicants for the internships should allow to grow freely for at least three months prior to the beginning of the term of the internship. [Sara absently slid her fingers inside her panties and felt the kinked, tangled hair there, still an odd sensation, as she had begun shaving it years ago almost as soon as it had appeared. The itching from its initial return as stubble a few months ago had almost driven her nuts.] Interns will be expected to know all details of the menu of the restaurant from memory, without giving any evidence of being literate.

All of the above points of performance and presentation are intended to show women in a light acceptably but subtly different from that to which island men are accustomed. Every island woman wears something around wrists, ankles, and neck, yet waitresses in the restaurant will suggest, by their grooming and multicolored accessories, that women can be very attractive when allowed to express themselves in a decorative way, as a very small initial step nudging island men towards the perception of women as persons in their own right, rather than simply property, a perception also enhanced by allowing the waitresses to perform their required tasks without supervision, implying that women can be self-motivated, trustworthy and responsible. For the time being, any difference too extreme, such as ribbons on any part of the body not listed above, longer hair, or shaved pubes, will be avoided.

Waitresses should treat customers with politeness, deference, and subservience beyond that customary in a modern mainland restaurant, but also with a moderate cheerfulness that would rarely be seen in island slaves but will, as in the case of body decoration, present to island men a new image of what a woman can be, while not exceeding the bounds of acceptable behavior. However, absolutely no flirtation with customers is allowed.

In future years, the program envisions very gradual changes and additions to the picture of femininity that waitresses at the restaurant will project: waitresses will test the acceptability of a narrow ribbon circling the waist, with a short fringe on its underside which, once island men become accustomed to it, will be slowly lengthened to the point of covering the pubes and vagina. Similarly, ribbons may be worn in the future that circle the breasts, gradually widening to the point that the nipples are covered. All of these changes will be executed with great care, observing the reactions of customers of the restaurant to judge their acceptability. Similarly, the behavior of waitresses towards customers, while remaining very respectful at all times, may in future years be broadened in minimally perceptible ways to include interactions more commonly found in mainland restaurants.

APPLICANTS SHOULD READ THE FOLLOWING CLOSELY AND GIVE IT DUE CONSIDERATION. The restaurant is able to function only on the strength of promises given to the town council of Purity that all personnel associated with it, and the restaurant as a whole, will strictly observe all laws of Purity Island. All interns are regarded as slaves of the Amy Cameron Foundation while on the Island, and will not be allowed to leave the premises of the restaurant except under approved circumstances. Any intern leaving the restaurant without approval may be regarded by local authorities as a runaway, and it should be noted that any master allowing a slave to escape his control loses ownership of that slave, in consequence of carelessness. Such a slave *may* be returned to the owner after payment of a fine (essentially buying back the slave); otherwise the slave may be claimed by the man capturing her, or sold at auction by local authorities. *If any intern on unapproved leave from the premises is claimed by a new owner with her whereabouts unknown, the Foundation will conduct only a minimal search, which may not be sufficient to lead to her recovery.* Any such search would certainly not go beyond the boundaries of the town of Purity. This is not due solely to the limited resources on-site available to the restaurant for conducting such a search, but also to the higher priority given to avoiding operations beyond the premises of the restaurant that disrupt normally observed traditions on the island: swarming the island with search parties of mainlanders may result in a cultural backlash leading to the closure of the restaurant and the end of the Foundation's efforts on the island. However, the Foundation will guarantee the safety and security of any intern while she is on the premises of the restaurant.

[The brochure then gives the qualifications for the internship, details the application process, and describes classes interns will take during their off-duty hours at the restaurant.]

* * * * *

Sara took a deep breath. She believed her plan would work. She got out her laptop and sent an e-mail to Ms. Steffi Bloom Cameron, requesting an appointment.

She hoped she'd be able to talk.

CHAPTER 3

Sara drove to the address Ms. Cameron had given her in her return e-mail. To her surprise, Sara found that it was a private home, not an office building. An extremely nice house, by Sara's standards. That part wasn't surprising.

A little more disconcerting was being admitted to the house by a male butler. Don't see *that* very often, she told herself.

James, the butler, led Sara to a room that was, indeed, an office, where Steffi Bloom Cameron invited her in with a smile. Ms. Cameron lifted a thermos. "Coffee?"

Sara shook her head. "No thank you." She generally found that responses not requiring thinking never gave her trouble.

A small girl suddenly ran into the room. "We're going to the park, Mommy!"

A young woman in t-shirt and jeans, with a pretty silvery chain-link slave collar, trailed behind the girl, looking out of breath. "Sorry, ma'am. She gets harder to keep up with every day."

Ms. Cameron gave a short laugh. "Tell me about it. Just please have her back by dinnertime, Tammy." She gave the little girl a quick kiss and shooed her away to follow Tammy. She grinned at Sara. "My daughter Linda. Linnie."

Sara noticed a framed photograph on the desk, showing Linda in a chair -- Sara already sensed that it was probably rare to see Linda sitting still anywhere -- with a huge grin, carefully holding a baby in her lap. "You have another d... d... daughter?"

Ms. Cameron saw what Sara was looking at, and nodded, smiling. "My baby. Megan Runner Cameron." Sara blinked at the odd middle name. Probably a family name, she decided, as Ms. Cameron went on, "She's ten months now. She'll be walking in another couple of months, and then Tammy will *really* have her work cut out. We're thinking we might need to buy a second nanny."

Sara's gaze wandered to a larger framed photograph of a young woman, about twenty years old, hung on the wall. She was going to ask if this was yet another daughter, but Ms. Cameron didn't look nearly old enough.

Ms. Cameron saw Sara studying the picture, and turned to look. "My stepdaughter. Amy. She was a Hanging Girl."

Sara smiled and nodded, then her eyebrows shot upward. "*The* Amy k... k... Cameron?"

Ms. Cameron's smile widened. "The Foundation is named for her, yes. And we've kept the name in the family. Linnie's full name is Linda Amy Cameron."

Sara nodded and sat back. Even though Amy hadn't been Ms. Cameron's natural daughter, it was obvious that Ms. Cameron had loved her very dearly. Sara could hear it in her voice when she talked about her.

Sara saw Ms. Cameron's expression turn cautious. "Now, you said you had something you wanted to propose. This isn't about somehow getting back into the internship program, is it? I'm really sorry that we can't give the experience to everyone who applied, but there is only so much space. We have to establish a cutoff."

Sara shook her head vigorously. "It's not th... th... that. But it is about P... P... P... Purity Island." She could sense her mouth starting to get vague, and closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and reminded herself to slow down.

Ms. Cameron looked puzzled. "Go ahead."

"I w... w... want to ask if I k... k..." She decided to switch from Could to Would. "...would be able to go on the t... t... trip, but n... n... n... not as an intern. I w... w... want to go as food. For the r... r... restaurant. I want to be r... r... roasted there."

Ms. Cameron blinked. "Not a request I was expecting. You understand, we get all our girlmeat on the island itself, by barter. There's no shortage."

"Yes, ma'am..."

"Steffi." A smile.

Sara nodded. "Ss... Ss... Steffi. B... B... B... But I think I can add something."

Steffi looked at her for a moment. "I'm intrigued, at least. Go ahead."

"Steffi... The island m... m... m... men need to know we are j... j... just like their women. Our meat t... t... tastes the same. This could r... r... r... reduce their d... d... distrust of outsiders a little. Also it k... k... could expose the ss... ss... services of the restaurant to m... m... m... more people, because they w... w... would all be curious, and you can advertise my roast as an end of ss... ss... ss... summer celebration, just before you k... k... close the restaurant for the year. Your b... b... brochure says the islanders sh... sh... sh... should see things in us th... th... th... they are used to, so we don't offend them, b... b... b... but just a little different, so their thoughts start g... g... getting tugged in just a l... l... l... little different direction. My body is p... p... probably a lot like their slaves h... h... h... who have done heavy labor for years..." Sara had worn a sleeveless blouse and short skirt, and without shifting position she flexed her arm and leg muscles at this point to demonstrate her point. "... but my sk... sk... skin is lighter, b... b... because their slaves have spent all their l... l... lives outdoors. So they would be k... k... curious about that too, w... w... w... wondering if that makes it t... t... t... taste different." She knew the roasting of women for the restaurant was done in plain sight, and that customers would see her body before they ate her. She paused now for breath, and reminded herself again: slow, slow. "I think if they eat me it w... w... will establish a k... k... connection between our cultures."

Steffi broke into a grin. "You did think up some reasons, didn't you?"

Sara grinned back, feeling positive vibes coming from Steffi. "Yes m... m... Steffi."

Steffi sat back, obviously thinking, tapping a finger on the desk, looking at Sara. Sara knew it was time to let the idea simmer.

"End of summer, did you say? That makes sense, but you know you'd need to spend the entire three months there. We wouldn't make a special trip just for you."

Sara nodded eagerly. Exactly what she was hoping for.

Steffi gave Sara a small nod, and Sara's heart leapt. "I'm going to want to discuss this with our advisory board, in case they think of some dangers to the program that aren't obvious right off. But I'm going to propose to them that we do it. Let me write down those points you made." Steffi pulled a notepad towards her and picked up a pen.

Sara leaned forward, excited that she was so close now. "I just have w... w... one request. I g... g... guess really it's two."

Steffi looked at her expectantly.

"I'd want my f... f... father and my sister to have a p... p... piece of my meat. It doesn't have to be big."

Steffi smiled. "I think it goes without saying we'd save some of you for your family."

"And the other thing is the..." She got completely blocked for a moment on the word "interns," and decided to get to it in more roundabout fashion. The fact that she had arrived at the whole point of the plan didn't help with the tension. Her mouth was getting badly confused. "...other girls. The interns. I already know some of them, and after th... th... three months together we'll all probably get k... k... close. Can they..." Stuck on "have." Switch to "eat." "...eat some of me too?"

"This is sort of in the nature of a dying request?"

Sara felt the blood pounding in her veins. She was there, she was there! She simply nodded, unable even to attempt speech for the moment.

Steffi smiled again. "I can't see how we can turn that down. Normally there is plenty of meat leftover from any one girl that it feeds the staff as well, though I think you're right about the larger crowd for you. But I can make sure it's known that you're also to be shared with the interns."

A tear escaped Sara's eye. Part of her would end up in Cherise! Aside from the pleasure of having three more months to spend near Cherise, this was it, this was the ultimate goal: Sara, as she wanted more desperately than ever, would end up inside the woman she loved! She tried to say thank you, but was unable for an unusual reason -- her throat had tightened up too much to attempt speech, which wasn't the normal problem. She simply nodded again, tears now streaming down her cheeks. She supposed Steffi thought her happiness was for the acceptance of the plan as a whole. In a sense it was, but the last bit was a culmination of everything she could ever have wanted.

Steffi stood up behind her desk and offered Sara her hand. "I do like the idea, Sara, and I'm glad you came by. I'm going to e-mail the board now to get a discussion started. I think I can let you know our decision in two days."

Sara stood, her knees shaking, and took the offered hand. She found her throat had loosened to the point of being able to get a word or two out. "Th... Th... Thank you so much, Steffi. If you need me on a ss... ss... ss... special diet, I'll do it. Anything you n... n... need me to do is okay."

Steffi nodded. "I'll leave that up to the chef."

CHAPTER 4

Sara's sister Penny had been grumpy since the middle of the fifty-mile drive south, when she'd lost her cell reception in the middle of texting her friends. She cheered up as the car neared the tiny port, and her bars returned.

Sara sat in the front passenger seat, her eyes trying to take in every sight along the road. They weren't familiar sights -- she had never been this far down the highway -- but this was her last time seeing the mainland, and every part of it seemed to be her home, the only one she had known. There was no room for sadness, though, against the excitement coursing through her veins.

She reached up absently and brushed her fingers through her hair again. It was such a weird feeling. She had kept her hair short for years, but not *this* short. It was no longer than an inch anywhere, and was stiff enough at that length that it resisted lying flat. It met the requirements for female grooming on the Island. Sara was sure she would get used to it, but it would take some time.

She frantically tried to think if there was anything she had forgotten to say. "Daddy, you have Ms. k... k... Cameron's number, right?"

He smiled patiently, as he exited the highway onto the road into the port. "At home. Drawer in bedside table."

"Don't call her a lot and b... b... bug her, because she probably won't know d... d... d... day-to-day things about what's happening to me, but call her in ss... ss... September to see what the plans are for g... g... getting my meat sent to you."

Her father sighed. "Yes, hon."

"Oh! Daddy, do you th... th... think you'll get m... married again?" They had eaten Sara's mother four years ago, not long after Sara had met Cherise. Sara had served as something of a mother to Penny since then.

He looked at her in surprise. "What brought that on, out of the blue?"

"I guess..." She giggled. "W... W... When you said 'bedside.' And anyway, th... th... this is my last chance t... t... to ask you."

He rolled his eyes. "I honestly haven't thought about it." He looked at Penny in the rear view mirror. "You'll be the lady of the house now, Pen. Should I ask your permission before I go on dates?"

Penny looked up from her phone. "Can I veto anybody I don't like?"

Dad looked uncomfortable. "I suppose. In a way."

"Cool." Penny returned to texting.

He turned the car into the parking lot entrance. "I think this is it."

Sara could see a boat at the pier. It looked big enough. She rose slightly in her seat. "Can't see the n... n... name... Oh! There's Ms. k... k... Cameron."

As she started to open the door, she saw Penny suddenly look directly at her, for what seemed the first time during the drive. Penny looked somehow lost. "This is really for real, huh? I'll never see you again?"

"Well, n... n... not alive. Listen..." She focused on Penny, made sure to hold her eyes. "Daddy's not g... g... going to see me roast. You m... m... m... make sure he sees you w... w... when your time comes."

Penny's eyes suddenly puddled and overflowed. "I will." She reached over the back of the seat to hug her big sister.

Sara hugged her back, and said, "Come on, l... l... let's get out of the k... k... car and do this right." Standing beside the car, she gave her sister a much longer hug.

* * * * *

Sara stood alone on the deck for now, watching the coastline recede. The others had all been standing with her twenty minutes ago as the boat pulled away from the dock, waving at family members. Cherise had been there, which gave Sara the usual flushed, tingly feeling, though there had been a couple of other girls between her and Sara. Like Sara's, Cherise's once long, flowing hair was cut to a one-inch length, yet it looked indisputably feminine, coming down to gently curled points at the sides of her head in front of her ears -- still black as night, and so soft and feathery-looking that Sara longed to stroke it with her fingertips. Sara was sure that Cherise could walk down the street past any number of men and look back to discover they were all following her, hypnotized.

All of the other girls, of course, had cut their hair as well, and Derek, the assistant manager of the restaurant on Purity Island, had some training in hair grooming and would cut all the girls' hair regularly through the summer to keep it an acceptable length. But on the girls other than Cherise, it just looked like an unusual and whimsical fashion choice. Only Cherise looked as though the style was undeniably hers, an integral part of who she was, regardless of the fact Sara had never seen her that way before.

Sara was surprised none of the others had stayed on deck longer after the boat pulled away. Of course, there was the attraction of refreshments down below, but Sara thought the last view of the mainland would...

Oh, right. Sara almost slapped her head at her denseness. All of the others would be coming back in three months. Sara was the only one who would never see the mainland again.

Sara was also a little disappointed Ms. Cameron -- Steffi, as Sara kept reminding herself to call her -- wasn't coming along with them. Sara found her very likeable, and was also very grateful to her for approving Sara's request -- in part because Sara had been able to skip final exams and spend the last couple of weeks with her family. Steffi would be returning to Purity Island next year, when the new restaurant opened in Fairhold, another of the trading-post towns on the coast. Sara felt lucky that construction on that site had taken longer than expected. When the two restaurants were both running next summer, the foundation would choose twice as many interns, so that Sara might have had an

opportunity to be chosen -- but she would only have had a fifty-fifty chance of ending up at the same restaurant as Cherise.

Sara had asked Steffi why the restaurants, the present one and the upcoming one, were only open three months out of the year. Steffi explained that during the following nine months, everything that had happened, every interaction between restaurant staff and islanders, every comment made by restaurant customers -- there were cameras and microphones all around -- would be analyzed by the foundation's panel of experts to help them determine where the project stood and what might be tried next.

Sara heard, above the rumbling of the engines, footsteps coming up the steps from below. She turned and saw Trish, a psych major, rising up from the boat's depths, carrying a soft drink of some kind in a paper cup, covered with a plastic lid with a straw stuck through it -- carrying an open beverage container on the rocking deck was asking for trouble. Behind her -- Sara sucked in a breath and felt her vocal apparatus close down as always -- was Cherise, holding a couple of crackers with slices of cheese. Ashley came up behind her, though Sara barely noticed.

Cherise looked out at the choppy water and then, making Sara's breath freeze altogether for a moment, looked directly at Sara and smiled, with a puzzled expression. "I thought you didn't get the internship, Sara." Cherise hadn't spoken to her when the entire group was on the deck, but presumably she had been curious all along.

Sara almost fainted. She loved, loved, *loved* hearing Cherise say her name. It sounded so incredibly sweet, almost like a new, prettier name, coming out of Cherise's mouth. Only seconds later did Sara start to focus on the fact that some sort of response was expected from her. Sara tried to send a stern message to her mouth, but it was hopeless. Cherise gave her that usual look that said, I know you can talk, Sara, what is the deal?

Cherise went on, "Oh! Maybe you got in from the waiting list later? But I haven't seen you at the orientation sessions." Sara hadn't been required to attend orientation. She wouldn't be waiting tables, so she didn't need to learn the menu and the detailed rules of conduct; she could attend classes at the restaurant if she wanted but wasn't required to and hadn't been assigned to any.

Sara's mind spun, wondering how she could answer a question that wasn't yes-or-no. She was relieved when Ashley, who was another sociology major with whom Sara had shared some classes, said to Sara, "Oh, I heard you're coming along as food, right? Not as an intern. You'll be the featured meat at the end?"

Very gratefully, Sara nodded eagerly, happy to have her role understood. If the others still didn't know yet, Ashley could tell them -- or Sara herself could, at any time Cherise wasn't around.

Trish looked at Sara wide-eyed. "Oh, so you're not coming home? You're going to be eaten there? As a restaurant meal?"

Ashley put in, "By the natives, yeah."

Sara wanted to add that the girls would have part of her as well. Impossible to explain that right at this moment, of course.

Jill, an anthro major whom Sara knew vaguely, came up from below and joined them. Trish explained, with some degree of excitement, what Sara was doing on the boat.

Jill looked even more excited than the others. "I wish I'd known you could do that!" She bit her lip in thought for a moment. "I still want to finish the internship and get back, though. I'm graduating next spring." She looked at Sara. "But I'm going to see if I can come back the next year and do what you're doing!"

Trish gawked at her. "You want to finish your degree and then not do anything with it?"

Jill said defiantly, "This *is* doing something. You know they study everything that happens at the restaurant, and everything helps them understand better how to deal with the islanders. I'd be contributing to that! If I'm going to be eaten eventually anyway, why not do it so it helps people learn something?"

Trish nodded. "Okay, yeah, that's a good point."

Cherise smiled again at Sara, and for the second time ever, touched her, this time a friendly pat on the upper arm. Sara had to lean against the railing, feeling faint, as Cherise said, "Well, I'm really glad you got to come."

Sara nodded again, now completely unable to tear her eyes away from the beloved face. The thought raced through her head: What if I touched her too? But I'll probably end up totally throwing my arms around her and holding her as tight as I can. This isn't the place for that. She wouldn't be ready. I really need to talk to her first.

Bart, the restaurant manager and de facto uppermost honcho of the operation in the absence of Steffi, came up from below. "Okay, I need all of you down below now. You can strip off down there and we'll get you fitted for the decorations you'll be wearing."

Sara's heart seemed to stop pumping altogether. They want all of the girls to discard their clothes -- now! This minute! Sara had known it would happen eventually, and had hoped to talk her way out of it, but now there might not be time.

She had hoped *so* much that only Cherise would ever see her naked. That was looking like another dream she would have to discard, but not without a fight.

Bart remained at the top of the steps, sweeping his arm to gesture the girls onward as they descended. As soon as Cherise was out of sight, Sara felt the invisible hand of silence release her. Quickly she said, "Mr. W... W... Winchell, k... k... k... can we talk a minute?"

Bart turned to her with an affable smile. "Bart."

Sara nodded. "Bart -- k... k... can I be excused from... that? From ss... ss... stripping? I'm n... n... not really in the same k... category..."

He interrupted her gently. "I know you're not an intern, but the point right now is, you're female. You're not going to walk around on the island wearing clothes. You know what the islanders think about that."

She gestured at the clothes he was wearing, standard island attire for males -- the shorts and sleeveless vest of girlskin leather, the floppy wide-brimmed hat of the same material that was good for deflecting the near-constant rain, the leather moccasins for shoes, and said, "I k... k... could wear something like that. Maybe with a cloth or something r... r... wrapped around my chest to squash my b... b...b... breasts down. N... N... Nobody would know."

"And you know what would happen to you if they did figure it out? I'm told you've studied as much about the island culture as the rest of the girls, so you know impersonating a man is about the worst offense there is. You really, really, really wouldn't want the punishment you'd get for that. Not to mention they'd seize you and rush you off so we'd never see you again. You know the old story about Sherry Patton, right? Fifty years ago? As far as anyone knows she spent the rest of her life on the island in hard labor as a work slave."

Sara wasn't ready to let it go. She would take risks to keep this part of her dream alive. Also, she had never imagined showing her body to strangers and near strangers, most of whom weren't Cherise, and the immediate terror of that seemed to outweigh the theoretical terror Bart was describing. "Isn't it a sh... sh... short walk from the d... d... d... dock to the restaurant? I'm w... w... willing to take a chance."

Bart shook his head. "I'm not. This isn't just about you and your own safety. An offense like that would wreck the whole operation. They'd never trust us again. And no, before you suggest it, you can't just chicken out and go home on the boat. It's staying tied up at Purity for a few days, and you wouldn't be any safer trying to hide out on it than you would be walking around town." His voice grew softer, the usual friendly note coming back to it. "Look, Sara, I can see this is scary for you and you didn't see it coming. But just tell yourself it's something you have to do. It'll be uncomfortable but it won't hurt you." He started down the steps, and beckoned back to her. "Come on."

In the big room belowdecks, the rest of the girls were either naked now or peeling off the last of their underwear. Each was depositing her clothes, folded, in a small cardboard box with her name on it. Derek was saying, "We'll return these to you in September, on the trip home. Laundered, in case you're wondering." There were a few nervous titters.

Sara saw Cherise, standing naked like the rest, and nearly came unglued. Cherise was the loveliest image that had ever been processed by the optical centers of Sara's brain. Her breasts stood out proudly on her chest, with slightly upturned nipples, just the type Sara loved. Her tummy was perfectly flat, with a hint of taut abdominal muscles -- not as defined as Sara's own, but perfectly shaped, curving inward to her navel. Her mound was covered with a perfectly triangular patch of kinked hair, as black as that on her head, likely allowed only recently to grow out as required, yet seeming as if there was no possible universe in which it would not be there. Her perfectly curved legs, her rounded buttocks... Sara was nearly squirting between her legs, and realized, to her further enhanced embarrassment, that she was just minutes from having to discard her panties with a damp coating of sexual juices.

Derek handed Sara a box of her own. "I know you won't need to get your clothes back, but we can hang onto them if you want something done with them."

Sara stared at him, playing back what he'd said to her while she'd been staring at Cherise, and nodded vaguely. She was glad he didn't ask her to specify where she wanted her clothes delivered right this minute -- she had lost the power of speech again. She would tell him later to send them on to Penny. Sara had already left Penny all her other clothes -- Penny was thoroughly used to getting her clothes handed down from her big sister.

A sudden cloud of concern flashed through Sara's mind. She was so accustomed to her vocal trouble that it hadn't immediately occurred to her that it was expanding its grip on her. She had stammered for years, but the only time she shut down completely was when she tried to address Cherise directly. She was otherwise able to speak, even when Cherise was in the same room. But Sara knew it was hopeless to speak to Derek right now, as much as if he had been Cherise himself. Cherise's presence radiated through Sara's consciousness like the heat from a furnace. If it was because Cherise was naked, that wasn't a good sign, because she would remain so all through the summer -- for the rest of Sara's life, in fact.

It doesn't matter, she told herself. Sara knew she would bear any burden if it meant she could be near Cherise. It would obviously, though, be inconvenient.

She brought her mind back to her surroundings and reminded herself that right at this minute, there was something she was required to do.

Sara used each foot to push the shoe off the other foot and put them in the box. Then she closed her eyes, gritted her teeth, and reached down to the hem of her t-shirt, to raise it up and peel it off. Her shorts came off next and, feeling her face nearly explode from the flush, she unhooked her bra and worked her panties down her legs.

Naked now, Sara resisted the almost overwhelming compulsion to cover her sex with one hand while shielding her breasts with her arm. None of the other girls was doing that, though a few looked nearly as uncomfortable as Sara. They were, presumably, all promising themselves they would get used to it.

Derek called out, "Line up in front of this table. I'll take some measurements and get you fitted."

Jill, first in line, was the first to be adorned with soft cloth wristbands, about two inches wide, which sealed closed with Velcro patches; similar ankle bands; and armbands that rested just above her biceps. The last of these required a measurement, as they came in three different sizes. All of them were of a bright yellow-green, almost neon shade. Finally, he measured Jill's neck with the tape measure, searched through a box and extracted a collar, ceramic with a flat glaze of that same yellow-green color. It came in the form of two semicircles, about an inch across, hinged so as to swing closed to complete the circle around Jill's neck. As Derek closed the collar with a click, Jill reached up to feel it, and to feel the latch mechanism in particular. From where Sara stood, it looked like the latch had joined the two semicircles so flush that the circle was unbroken. "How do I get it off?"

Derek showed her another of the collars. "See these studs next to the latch? Feel for those. Press inward on them simultaneously."

Jill spent a moment finding the studs by feel, then squeezed them. The collar opened with a slight popping sound.

From behind them all, Bart said, "The collars are designed so you can get them off in case of emergency, a choking hazard, for example. But aside from that, we want you wearing them at all times, even in the shower, even in bed. We don't want to take the smallest chance of you being seen without a collar. Take yours off and you'll find yourself with floor-scrubbing and toilet duty for a week." That was a chore otherwise performed by two genuine mainland slavegirls brought along for that purpose.

A girl Sara didn't know looked very uncomfortable, biting her lip at the sight of Jill's collar and knowing she was about to be made to wear one too. "There's something I didn't get clear on. Are we *really* slaves, or just pretending to be slaves?"

Bart responded, "While we are on the island, we respect, observe, and are bound by all of the laws of the island. That means it's not just pretending. As long as you're there you are, like any other woman on the island, really a slave."

The girl gulped. "Okay, I was just wondering. I didn't... well, I mean, I don't have anything against any slave personally. I just... never pictured myself as one. Wanting to be one."

Trish suddenly laughed. "Katie, Katie... You're a college student. You do whatever your teachers tell you and they don't pay you anything for it. You don't want to be a slave? What did you think you already are?"

All of the girls laughed, and Derek and Bart as well. Finally Katie laughed too. "Well, yeah, okay."

Sara was beginning to accommodate to her nudity. It definitely helped that she was surrounded by a roomful of women equally naked. It wasn't as if anyone was staring at her. As far as she could tell.

One by one the rest of the girls were fitted for their decorations. Cherise's were a beautiful gold color, the collar looking like a pure twenty-four carat treasure. Sara stared at her in awe even beyond the usual.

Sara's own color turned out to be sky blue. She liked it, and hoped she could find a mirror soon to see what the collar looked like on her. It was very smooth with no attachment rings, thin though rounded at the edges, thicker in the middle. Sara had never imagined wanting to be a slave any more than Katie had, but her first reaction to the neckware was that these were the coolest slave collars she had ever seen.

It had taken her a little longer than the others to get her armbands fitted. Derek had blinked at her arms. "Let me see how big those biceps get."

When she tightened up her arm for maximum flex, Derek blinked again and gave an unconscious tiny headshake. "Okay, relax and let me put this on here as loose as I can get it. Just enough so it doesn't start sliding down your arm." He adjusted the armband in place, then said, "Okay, flex that muscle again, see if it pops the band off." Under his breath he muttered, "Should have got some elastic ones."

She made a bulge of the muscle, and felt the armband tighten, like a blood pressure cuff, but it stayed in place. She nodded to him, the best way she could think to say, Okay, that should work. She turned away to look at Cherise again. She told herself she shouldn't, because now there was the danger of a stream

of fluids dripping down her inner thighs, unhindered by panties. But she couldn't turn away from that vision.

Derek now lifted a heavy box onto the table, where it landed with a clinking sound. The girls all turned to look. Derek said, "Let's go in the same order as before. I've got two sizes of these..." He extracted an example of the contents of the box, "...but I should be able to find the right one for you without measuring."

All around her, Sara could see the other girls giving the same uncertain look at the apparatus that she knew she herself was. Ashley said quietly, "Uhhhh... Nobody mentioned hobble chains."

Clearly that was what Derek was holding: a heavy chain about twelve inches in length, with metal bands, again in the form of hinged semicircles, of a size that would fit around the ankles.

Another girl Sara didn't know said, "We have to wear those??"

Bart said in an apologetic tone, "Oh, thought somebody would have told you about this. But not once you get inside the restaurant, no. These are *only* for the walk from the dock to the restaurant, and again in three months when you're going home."

Ashley said, "Look, I mean I'll do it, but I thought we were going to spend the whole time in symbolic bonds." She held up her wrist bands. "Not real ones."

Bart explained, "You're all familiar with the requirement of keeping our presentation on ground that's familiar to the islanders. They are perfectly willing to accept that we let you walk around our own establishment unfettered. That's our prerogative as your owners, and they respect that. But for any slave to walk around out in public without any restraint -- they just can't imagine that. Someday in the future perhaps they'll accept it, but right now they won't. And you can consider yourself lucky that it's down to just the hobble chains. Last year, when the islanders saw our waitresses arrive for the first time, we had the girls also wear handcuffs joined in front, and heavy metal collars. None of the colored decoration, just ordinary slave hardware. Only later did the islanders become familiar with how we were going to dress our slaves inside the restaurant. They're used to it now, so when they see you arrive, that stuff you're wearing..." he gestured at the gaily colored cloth bands, "...won't surprise them. But just for this one short walk today, and the walk back to the boat in September, you'll need the hobbles."

Several girls nodded, mostly accompanied by sighs. Jill asked, "What about the cloth ankle bands?" She raised one foot and tapped her ankle. "Will the cuffs mess them up?"

Derek responded, "I was going to say, slide them up about three inches higher on your leg for now, and back down the way they are now when we get inside. We want the islanders to see them."

All of the girls nodded now, and knelt to adjust their ankle bands. Derek pointed to Jill. "You're up."

Sara wasn't sure if anyone noticed her staring at Cherise. They generally seemed more absorbed in watching the process of hobbling their classmates. But in any case, she couldn't stop. She only wished time would stop so she could see Cherise like this forever.

CHAPTER 5

The interns lined up in the big room belowdecks, behind the four real slavegirls they had just now met, who had been in another part of the boat during the ten-hour trip. They waited for Derek to tell them it was time to go up to the deck and cross to the dock. The girls had not been allowed on the deck as the boat approached the shore -- island men wouldn't know what to make of slavegirls behaving as idle sightseers.

None of the interns had the slightest idea what to expect, other than mental images formed in their heads that might be entirely inaccurate. Foremost in Sara's mind, and she was sure it was the same for the others, was that she was about to be paraded naked, as property, in front of a crowd of men from a culture far different from the one she was used to. And that she couldn't possibly hurry through it: taking the small shuffling steps that the hobble chain allowed, Sara was sure her exposure and self-conscious discomfort would last longer than forever.

She calmed herself by looking at Cherise, the third girl ahead of her. Cherise's bare back, like everything else about her, was perfectly shaped as if by a sculptor expert in bringing out the beauty of the female form. Sara herself, who had spent several years doing some sculpting of her own body, stood looking on in her customary awe.

Bart had already left the boat, along with the remaining members of the permanent staff -- Jeffrey, the chef; his assistant chef, Joe; Greg, the technical expert who kept the equipment running; the four male professors from the university, who would be teaching the interns in their classes; and Sid, the huge, muscular "bouncer" for the restaurant, who had previously worked at the Hanging Academy as a bodyguard. Patrons of the restaurant were occasionally, for various reasons including treating the waitresses disrespectfully, asked to leave, and Sid was clearly capable of making sure that they exited gracefully and without undue protest. Bart would open up the restaurant and make sure it was ready for occupancy, while Greg got the electrical generating devices running. Derek remained behind, waiting for Bart's signal that everything was ready.

The Foundation's four slavegirls assigned to the restaurant had joined the interns after the boat had docked, and Derek had made the introductions. Wendy and Karen were the general work-duty slaves, who would be keeping everything spotless in the building, and Mindy and Cindy, at whom all the interns had goggled at least briefly because they were not just sisters but identical twins, were the kitchen slaves, who would be helping the chefs prepare the meals. All four of the slaves had hair trimmed even shorter than the interns -- different shades of brown for Wendy and Karen, light blonde for the twins -- and waited by the door secured in the full set of slave hardware that the interns had been spared: besides the hobble chains, each had thick wristcuffs fastened together in front, and prosaic thick metal slave collars sporting the standard attachment rings, each with a padlock holding it closed. None of the interns had been exactly sure how to interact with the slavegirls. Normally they would have barely noted their presence, but it was sinking in to all the interns that, as of their landing at the Purity Town dock, they were all now slaves themselves. All the interns ended up smiling and saying "Hi" to the slavegirls, who returned the greeting cheerily.

Derek, at the door, made a sudden movement that startled Sara, held his arm outward with a thumbs-up gesture, and turned to the girls with a smile. "Okay, just follow the Foundation's girls," he gestured at

the four slavegirls, "They've been here before." And the swarm of butterflies in Sara's stomach awoke and began wildly cavorting.

The most physically challenging part of the short walk to the restaurant was getting up the steps to the boat deck. It wasn't that the hobble chain was too short, but it did require careful planning of each step unneeded when the feet are unfettered. Sara kept her eyes on her feet and lifted each foot just enough to reach the next higher step. She could sense that letting the chain jerk her raised foot to a stop would put her in danger of falling, and falling on the sharply-cornered steps would be an experience she didn't want any closer acquaintance with.

Once she reached the deck, the heat and humidity struck Sara like a physical blow. The rooms belowdecks had been kept cool, and none of the girls had been acclimated to a local weather substantially different from what they were used to. It wasn't quite raining, but a light mist was floating down from leaden skies, and based purely on visual evidence Sara would have expected it to be chilly, which was absolutely not the case. Sara felt as though a huge, heated wet blanket had been tossed over her, and it was hard to breathe through it. Beads of sweat immediately popped out on all parts of her skin and began sliding downwards, announcing their presence.

Her first sight from beyond the boat brought her heart up into her throat: several dozen men, scruffy and unsmiling, had formed a semicircle around the head of the dock. Most of them sported thick beards, though a few were clean-shaven -- trade with the mainland included old-fashioned straight razors. The men didn't appear at all threatening, merely curious, but collectively they scared Sara as much as if they had been shouting angrily with raised pitchforks.

She looked ahead at Cherise's back, and felt calm wash over her. She remembered that she was here for a reason: to be with Cherise. She would face any danger, real or (in this case probably) imagined, to be with Cherise.

A wooden board about three feet wide bridged the gap between the deck of the boat and the dock, and Sara, following the others and with only Ashley trailing behind, walked across it in tiny steps as the chain between her ankles clinked. Looking out over the faces of the men, she was suddenly overwhelmed by an unwelcome fantasy: the hobble chain restraining her steps, the unfamiliar climate and the sight of clothing styles different from those seen on the mainland suggested that she was captured booty of war, arriving in an alien culture that was claiming her as a sex slave. The sense of that scenario almost cost her bladder control. She could only restore calm by looking at Cherise again. Cherise chose to be here, she reminded herself. We all chose to be here. We have a job to do, and these people will welcome us doing it.

When Derek arrived at the far end of the semicircle it parted, the onlooking men forming it moving back and to the side to create an opening wide enough -- just -- for Derek and the girls to walk through.

Sara actually almost smiled suddenly: she could see three faces, at least, in the crowd with eyes directed towards Cherise, and the expressions on those faces was different from the rest: a look of appreciation mixed with awe. Okay, Sara decided, as far as standards of feminine beauty go, they're not really different from us. They know what they're seeing when they look at Cherise.

A few steps later, Sara saw several men looking directly at her, and the expressions were again different. Through a surge in self-consciousness at the never-before-experienced uncovered display of her body that went beyond the level she'd had a hard enough time dealing with earlier, she saw that the eyes in these faces were darting back and forth between Sara and a half-dozen local slavegirls who were standing nearby, and she knew they were making comparisons. Sara did the comparing on her own. The slavegirls were immediately seen as more muscular than the average mainland girl, but not quite as much as she'd expected -- and not quite as much as Sara herself either. These men had more than a dozen mainland women to look at at this moment, and likely remembered the ones from last year as well, so they had a lot of samples from her own part of the world to compare Sara with, and they could only be wondering what sort of work Sara did to make her look the way she did -- and what sort of work she might be capable of doing for them.

The thought actually turned into a second source of calm for Sara, besides looking at Cherise's lovely back. Sara had a sudden sense that the men attached some value to her, not just as a sexual object but as something that held more importance to them: someone who could do useful work.

Her heart went out to the slavegirls of the island. Born to a lifetime of submission against any will they might have possessed, a lifetime of tedious and exhausting work, without hope of release or relief, a lifetime with no hope of escape even in their dreams, because they couldn't imagine life's rich possibilities and alternatives. A life without even the one thing to which all women were entitled: the right to end their lives at the time and in the manner they chose, and to offer their meat as a gift to the people of the world. Instead their meat was taken from them as if it had never belonged to them to begin with. Sara was conscious of being part of the process of trying to better the lives of the women of Purity Island, but none of these women she was seeing now would benefit from it. Any changes would take so many years that these women's grandchildren might be the first to see any difference.

But we're trying, Sara thought at them. We're making the effort.

As she was thinking that, she was taken aback by her first sight of a doggirl, looking directly at her with a frown.

Doggirls, though fully human, didn't know it. Surgically altered at a very young age so that they walked on arms ending in mid-forearm and legs stopping just above where the knees had been, they communicate only by barking like the older doggirls who raised them, unable to speak a language because they are not exposed to one until well beyond the age window of language acquisition, and they are conditioned to trust any upright-walking person wearing clothes and to hate any who is not -- that is, the workslaves. They are able to learn to obey more complex commands than real dogs can, and, under further conditioning, are tolerant of workslaves only when the slaves are busily performing tasks that the doggirls expect to see them doing. If any workslave slacks off from her task or tries to quit doing it altogether, the doggirl on duty will growl, bark, and under sufficient provocation attack -- an attack that the chain-hobbled workslave is unable to run from.

The doggirl Sara saw now had short brown hair, and she reminded Sara of a girl named Deedee she had known in high school. Seeing a face so similar to a familiar one made it that much more disconcerting to hear a low growl coming from behind the scowl. The growl suddenly turned into a sharp bark, and it astonished Sara how much like a real dog the bark sounded. Adrenaline shot through Sara as the doggirl started to take a step towards her, only to be restrained by a leash held by her owner. Sara had no idea

why the doggirl had focused on her, though she decided it was possible that with the body she had, Sara might have reminded the doggirl of a particular slave that she worked with.

Looking up at the doggirl's owner, Sara was very surprised to see an expression that actually appeared apologetic. She wouldn't have expected him to direct that look at any woman, and she speculated that he might have been a regular customer of the restaurant last summer, and didn't want to offend anyone associated with it, even a slave. She decided to pass the observation on to Bart later, just as a small bit of anecdotal data. The experts at the Foundation could decide whether it meant anything.

Sara was approaching the opening in the crowd now, and grew tense again. Men were standing near enough on either side to reach out and touch her, and she had to hope that enough respect for the restaurant had been generated last year to keep her safe -- there is nothing so vulnerable as being naked, and added to it was her inability to run away from any attack. Her heart pounded as she passed through the small opening.

She was breathing easier moments later, now past the worst barrier between herself and the safety of the restaurant. Looking behind her, she saw that a local whom she learned later was a town official, accompanied by the slavegirls she'd seen, went down into the boat. The man and his girls knew what to do from having done the same last year, and soon the slavegirls, who had learned to use mainland hand trucks, were transporting boxes from the hold of the ship to the side door of the restaurant, which opened into the supply room.

To Sara's profound relief, she finally passed through the open front door of the restaurant, and found that Bart was standing just beyond it. She had arrived at the place that would be her home for the remaining three months of her life.

* * * * *

"The restaurant will open for business four nights from now. These first three days Wendy and Karen will clean the place from top to bottom, especially including the dining area, Greg will make sure the machinery is working smoothly, and Jeffrey and Joe are going to get the kitchen ready."

They were in the dining room, and the girls, who had pulled chairs around to face Bart, all nodded.

"Our first delivery of local women as our food source should be either tomorrow or the next day. We snuff one to use as the main course each day, start her roasting late in the morning, and the chefs start carving her in mid-afternoon. Other women are snuffed and frozen, to be cooked as needed for side dishes and incidentals. Greg has told me that the freezer is working, so we should be fine there.

"You'll be doing mainly two things in the next few days: getting organized in your classes, and getting in some practice as waitresses. Derek and I will take the role of customers, and we'll see how you do and give you some pointers. You're going to learn from observing each other as well as doing it yourselves." The girls all nodded again, including Sara, who hadn't yet found out exactly how she would fit into all this.

Bart gave them all a quick tour of the facilities. The cooking would mostly be done in the kitchen, aside from the roasting of the evening's meat course, which would be done in view of any townspeople or

visitors wishing to watch -- islanders skinned their women and dismembered them before cooking, so cooking an entire woman on a turning spit over a fire was a novelty in itself. It wasn't done that way because the Foundation wanted islanders to start cooking their women that way, but simply because they wanted islanders to consider the restaurant an interesting place. So for that purpose, there was a roasting bay at the front of the building, facing the street, with a window looking in. All windows in the building, including that one, were designed in the island fashion. No glass was made on the island, and the Foundation's experts decided not to introduce glass windows. Islanders used windows protected by a cleverly designed wooden louver whose slats could be cranked fully open when possible, or closed against the rain, though closing only needed to be done in a storm that was driving the rain almost sideways -- an overhang of the roof several feet beyond the outside wall protected the window from rain in most cases.

The restaurant was designed so as to require relatively little in the way of electricity. Oil lanterns would be used in the dining room, with small electric bulbs elsewhere. Cooking was done almost exclusively over wood fires. The only significant user of electric power was the walk-in freezer. The sources of the electricity were all on the roof. The planners for the restaurant had decided against using any type of generator that made a significant amount of noise, which would be a major annoyance, probably to the point of creating local anger beyond the boiling point in a culture with little experience with background noise. Nearly the entire roof was given over to producing electricity quietly: a large array of solar cells, only occasionally useful in a place without much direct sunlight; several efficient but unobtrusive wind generators; and, most productive of all, several turbines powered by the weight of falling rain. There was a large storage battery to carry the restaurant through the times when all three types of devices failed temporarily to keep up with the demand.

After Bart dismissed the girls, by now exhausted by the long day, to check out their rooms and get some sleep, he took Sara aside, and smiled at her. "I suppose you're wondering."

She nodded and waited expectantly. At the moment she felt entirely capable of speaking, but rarely did so when it didn't appear necessary.

He led her back to the supply room, now mostly occupied with piles of newly-delivered boxes, and explained, "I have to apologize for this, because this really is a good service you're doing for us, but this was the best we could do for accommodations. The four slavegirls are paired up in two rooms, and we've got five rooms for five pairs of interns, and we weren't really anticipating an odd-girl-out. So this can be your room, and we've set up a cot in here." He pointed. "Your stuff is over there." She saw the handbag she had brought along as "luggage." None of the girls was allowed to bring any clothes, which would have been pointless, but they could bring toiletries and makeup supplies.

Sara rolled her eyes but gave him a small smile of acceptance. It would have been fantastic if she could have slept in Cherise's room, but she'd never thought that was likely. "So, w... w... what do I do?"

"Well, I understand you've been told you can attend any classes you want to..." He cocked a questioning eye at her. She nodded.

"Aside from that, in the dining room you'll essentially be our busboy. Busgirl. You know, collect plates and utensils after a customer leaves, wipe down the table, put out some silverware to get it ready for the next customer." He smiled. "It was kind of funny. At first they didn't really know what forks and

spoons were for -- they knew all they needed to know about knives -- but the girls were good at explaining, and pretty soon every new customer picked up on it from the other diners. If somebody looked befuddled, one of the other guys would help him out. They're good people, if you don't count their attitude towards women."

She smiled, and nodded. "I k... k... can handle that."

She couldn't account for the odd smile he gave her now, as if he'd been waiting to say something. "Don't you want to know why we're giving you a job in the dining room that one of the work slaves could be doing?"

She blinked. "Well, I'm going to be l.. l... living here for three months. I k... k... k... can't just eat and sleep and not d... d... d... do anything."

He straightened up and put his hands in his pockets. "We want you to be a very visible part of the restaurant service. We want the regular customers to be very familiar with you."

She was once more suddenly conscious of her nudity. Customers who saw her even once were going to be a lot more familiar with her than anyone had ever been before. She felt the urge to cover up again and fought against it. "Why?" She never stammered when the words came out of her automatically.

"We're going to make a little bigger deal of the Sara Bollinger feast than we'd originally envisioned. We're going to construct a tent in front so we can do it outdoors. The construction will include a barbecue pit, so we'll do the cooking out there too. And the snuff -- we'll move the guillotine out there for that. Obviously we'll need to start the festival in the morning, so the snuff, roasting, and carving can all be done in time for dinner. And to start it all off, we'll introduce you at the beginning, alive and smiling. You might even..." He stopped, looking slightly embarrassed. Since the obvious continuation of the sentence, in context, was "...say a few words," she understood his discomfort perfectly. Unable to back himself out of the sentence gracefully, he skipped past it. "Anyway, they see you alive and cheerful, then watch you snuffed and barbecued, and then they eat you. The point is, this will be a big party, that was your original idea, but it will be a party centered around a woman. A party celebrating a woman. Exactly the way we do it on the mainland. The islanders eat their women, but there's no ceremony at all to it. On the island, a woman is a worker bee, or a dog, or a baby-making machine, and she's food, but at no time is she ever a person. To these men, you will be a person, because you'll be someone they recognize from the restaurant. We think this will do more to emphasize the... personhood of women, the humanity of women, than anything we've done so far. And the island men won't object, or be offended, because to them it will just be a party. From our point of view it's a party with a message, but we're slipping the message in under the table." He stopped and gave her a "What do you think?" smile.

Sara's excitement was growing all through Bart's speech. She threw her arms around him now, and gave him a squeeze. "I think any woman would d... d... die for a ch... ch... chance to die this way. Thank you!" She gave him a kiss on the cheek, her eyes bright.

He patted her back and let her go. "See you in the morning."

After he'd gone, Sara looked around the chaotic supply room -- chaotic in the context of being a living space, though she was sure the guys on the staff knew where all the boxes were and how to find what

they needed -- and turned down the room's electric light at the switch. The light operated at several different wattages, and she left it as a minimal night-light. She stretched out on her cot. It was funny to just go to bed without undressing or washing up -- she'd be able to wash in the morning. Fresh water was never in short supply here. It literally fell from the sky.

Sara knew she wouldn't be falling asleep anytime soon. She was too excited about the plans Bart had just given her for her future demise.

All through the description he'd made, she'd felt her self-confidence expanding. I'm an important part of what they're trying to do here! she told herself. I was thinking of myself as just a tag-along, but they're glad I'm here, glad of what they can do because I'm here!

Along with her self-confidence, one thought had grown to fill her mind, to the exclusion of anything else: This is what I need, feeling good, feeling needed, feeling worth! It's going to help me talk to Cherise, I just know it is! I'll be able to tell her everything I need to tell her! AND she still gets to eat me, we still have that!

Sara was suddenly struck, almost as a physical blow, with an acute awareness of how near Cherise was. I'm in bed, she thought, and Cherise is in bed, but we're not fifty feet apart!

Sara sent her mind outward, erasing the distance, erasing the walls between. She saw Cherise, felt her, held her, skin to skin, arms and legs entangled, lips tingling with their nearness to lips. Her body moved her hand to her crotch, her fingers knowing what to do, while her mind explored Cherise, caressed her, enfolded her. Sara held her mouth open, trying to be as silent as she could, missing the irony of *not* wanting to make a sound for once. Soon waves of joy spread out from between her legs to fill her body.

CHAPTER 6

FOUR NIGHTS LATER

Sara thought she might be able to settle into a routine, given enough time, but it was going to take awhile. She had known getting through this first night would be hard, and she hadn't even specifically foreseen some of the worst parts. She had prepared herself, as well as she could, for working in a roomful of unknown men, catching occasional stares at her body (except for Cherise's, Sara suspected they were finding hers the most stareworthy, for reasons different from Cherise's), and knowing she wasn't aware of all of them, with so many of them directed, she was sure, at her backside. But she somehow hadn't stopped to think how much more intensely self-conscious she would be whenever she bent over a table to wipe it down. At such times, she was sure her butt was attracting even more attention, as well as her breasts, which hung down over the table and swayed as she wiped.

And there were so many times that her whole perception of the scene around her took on an intense and unpleasant dreamlike feel, which she was sure was because it reminded her, again and again, of those dreams in which she was performing some mundane, very public task, such as shopping in a crowded grocery store, only to realize suddenly that she had forgotten to put any clothes on. Tonight Sara was feeling those same flashes of shame and embarrassment she felt in the dreams. The feeling was intensified by the fact that the place was just the same, in a number of ways, as any other restaurant she had ever been in, so that this really could have been one of those dreams -- Bart and the staff had worked hard at reproducing the basic experience.

There were differences, of course, and not just that the clientele consisted entirely of men. The customers were boisterous, though generally in a good-spirited kind of way, so it was more like a sports bar than a normal restaurant, increasingly so as the night wore on and more beer and wine was consumed. All around her Sara could hear the interns taking orders and watch them deliver them, occasionally explaining the nature of various dishes to the customers, either because the customer was new or the dish was (the menu included two new combinations not offered last year, in place of two that had proved unpopular). The waitresses were all doing an excellent job, while retaining a respectful attitude and calling everyone "Sir" in every response. Bart and Derek had trained them very well. There had been only one incident, so far, of a customer pinching or fondling (Sara wasn't sure which) a waitress' butt (it was Ashley's), and Sid the bouncer, not visibly present but watching for obvious events or waitress' signals through a small viewhole, had come in and told the man his evening at the restaurant was over (reminding him "Don't touch our slaves"). Sara had felt very tense for a time after that, but nothing else remarkable had followed.

Three things made it easier for Sara to get through the night. One was that her job didn't require her to speak to anyone. That in itself was always a relief, but was especially fortunate given the second thing on the "list of things that made it easier": that Cherise was on duty (five waitresses would alternate nights with the other five). Cherise's presence would always buoy Sara up through any amount of distress, even though it also resulted in Sara being unable to get a word out at all. The third thing was the knowledge that as local men saw Sara and became familiar with her, that helped make her upcoming roast that much more special.

Sara watched now as Katie delivered an appetizer plate of breaded fried fingers and toes, while Cheryl brought out the orders for a table of two: one order consisted of girlmeat steak garnished with diced

green onions and gravy, a baked potato, open and covered with same, and a salad with ranch dressing, a side order that had proven unexpectedly popular the year before; the other order was a bowl of girlmeat stew with a side of garlic bread. Every dish on the menu was built around girlmeat -- to the island men simply "meat," as they didn't know any other kind.

It was uncomfortably warm inside the dining room -- the entire building actually. Air conditioning had been judged not only to use too much electricity, but also to be too noisy, so there was none, though there were wind-powered ceiling fans. But Sara found that the heat, though unpleasant, was actually a good thing. With Cherise spending so much time in Sara's sight, Sara had no control over the powerful sexual arousal that set her crotch buzzing -- and leaking. But her job kept her so active that she was drenched in sweat, her skin shining in reflected light that made the cuts of her muscles more noticeable and surely brought her still more attention than otherwise -- yet the sweat did her the useful service of making invisible the other fluids dribbling down her inner thighs. Since she wasn't needed every second, there were plenty of opportunities to take breaks to drink water that included added electrolytes, so she, along with the other waitresses, was able to hold off heat exhaustion.

Sara, now finishing a mug of water, saw two men from one of the tables leave the room. Sighing, knowing she was about to have to bend over again, she went over to wipe down the table.

* * * * *

Sara could barely keep her eyes open when the dining room finally closed for the night, but she absolutely had to shower before going to bed. The girls' shower room had four shower heads, two pairs on opposite sides, but it managed to accommodate all six of the girls who'd worked tonight, as they took turns standing under the streams, soaping up while waiting.

Sara wasn't sure she'd ever be able to turn off the faucet between her legs, as she watched Cherise tiredly soaping her breasts and tummy. She wished so hard that Cherise would look at her and say, "I'm so exhausted, Sara, would you wash me?"

Katie looked around as she toweled off and said, in an irritated voice, "No blow dryers." Cheryl responded, "Uhhh, what was it you thought you needed one for, Katie?", making them all laugh -- it just seemed so automatic to think of blow-drying following a shower that it was difficult to remember that there was no reason to use one on their brush-cut hair.

Sara felt a little gloomy looking ahead to tomorrow night, when there would be no Cherise in the dining room, for her to watch and make the time go faster. Luckily Sara's own job required essentially no thought, so she'd be free to lose herself in reveries about Cherise.

Sara finally stumbled her way back to the storeroom, only to find that Wendy was still there, organizing the "receipts." Customers paid for their meals by barter, some bringing lengths of girlskin leather, some bringing a box or two of peaches, some with other farm products. There was no set price for a meal, but each man brought what he thought was fair to the storeroom door and handed it over to Wendy or Karen, receiving in return a chit from Derek, which the man would then take to the front door for entrance to the dining room. Wendy was finishing up stacking and labeling boxes of non-food items, while Karen was delivering edibles to the kitchen for refrigeration, freezing, or just storage.

Wendy looked up at Sara and smiled. "Almost done. I'll just be another minute."

Sara gave her a don't-worry-about-it wave. "I'm just going to flop down on the bed. When you're done, could you turn down the light to the lowest level? Not off, just down."

"Sure. Night."

After Wendy had gone, Sara's hand sleepwalked on its own down to her crotch and began rubbing eagerly. Soon Sara was wide awake, feeling the thrill coursing through her, and silently mouthing the name "Cherise!"

* * * * *

THREE DAYS LATER

Sara had been attending the classes Cherise was taking, two sociology and one psychology, and they really turned out to be pretty interesting. The one this morning was about Purity Island society and why it had developed in the directions it had. Sara didn't bother taking notes, but she still managed to listen when not playing with fantasies about Cherise in her head.

But class was over now, Cherise was in her own room doing homework, and Sara was bored. She'd finished her daily workout -- the situps, pushups (she was trying out a new form to work out new muscles, doing the pushups with knees down and arms spread wide apart), chinups using the molding at the top of the doorframe for fingerholds, bench presses using a box full of girlskins, making up for its low weight by increasing repetitions, and running in place for twenty minutes -- she was still working on finding a way to make less noise doing it. She had gone to the library -- really just a closet with books in it -- to see if there was anything interesting. She found one she thought she might like: a period novel, set two centuries in the past, in which a young planter and one of his slaves fall passionately in love, defying the standards of the time. Sara had seen the movie, and wondered whether the book did a better job of explaining the chemistry between the two main characters. As she reached for it, Trish came up behind her, startling her.

Trish apologized immediately, and then gave Sara a suspiciously nervous smile. "Jill is off studying with Ashley and Cherise, for that sosh class she's in." Jill and Trish were sharing a room. "I'm not in the same class, so I was deciding what to do, and I thought... I might get to know you a little better." She reached forward and put her hand on Sara's forearm, then slid it downward, in what seemed to Sara a very sensual way, until her index finger was hooked playfully around Sara's.

Only a complete idiot would have failed to understand what "getting to know Sara better" was meant to consist of. Sara had known this would happen occasionally, with a group of college girls sharing a small space together for months. She had thought ahead about what to do about it, and hoped the result would work without offending anyone. She smiled. "I'm f... f... flattered, honest. But I j... just... It's n... n... not you, it's absolutely not you! It's me. Y... Y... You understand?" It was true that, in any universe not including Cherise -- and what a miserable, empty place such a universe would be! -- Sara would have been eager to try out a little sexual play with Trish.

That Sara hadn't hooked up with any of the other girls probably made her gentle rejection more believable. Trish, Sara hoped, was concluding that Sara was exclusively hetero. To Sara's relief, Trish turned her disappointed expression into a playful pout. "Well, okay."

Sara looked into her eyes intently. "Still f... f... friends?" She held her arms out.

Trish gave her a genuine-looking smile and completed the hug. "Of course." She let go, smiled again, and said, "See you tonight, then." Trish was on waitress duty tonight.

Sara nodded and smiled. "Sure." Trish left, and Sara retrieved the book. She decided the encounter may actually have been helpful. Word would probably go around about Sara's supposed sexual preferences, and the number of future occasions of the other girls hitting on her might be reduced, perhaps even to zero. On the downside, Cherise would likely hear about it too. Sara hated the idea of Cherise getting the wrong idea about her, but she realized that, as the summer went on and Sara failed to pair off with anyone, Cherise along with the others would inevitably have reached that mistaken conclusion anyway. It doesn't really matter, Sara told herself. As soon as I can talk to Cherise, I can straighten all this out. Sara wondered, for the thousandth time, when that would be. Probably, she decided, when I get close enough to the day of my roasting, and I get more excited, that will conquer whatever this thing is that happens to me with Cherise.

Thinking of her roast reminded her. She dropped her book off by her bed in the storeroom, and went forward to the now-empty dining room, to the cooking bay extending out from the front wall of it, where Mindy and Cindy were attending to the roasting of tonight's main course.

Sara hadn't seen the enclosure, at the edge of town, where the slavegirls destined to be roasted for the restaurant were kept. Rather than keep them in a room inside the building -- none of them had ever lived in such a tiny, enclosed place, and it would have frightened them very much -- the live slavegirls were quartered until their cooking day, usually six or seven of them together at any one time, inside a much larger area, with trees and even a small brook flowing through, designed to resemble the enclosures where they had spent their childhoods. Sara understood that the Foundation, somehow, had received some expert advice on its design from a woman who had actually grown up in one. She wasn't clear on how they had managed that. She did know, from Derek, that giggles and sounds of sexual play could often be heard from within. Each morning, one or if necessary two of the girls were walked, in chains, from the enclosure, before a small crowd of onlookers, to the restaurant. The men were eager for a look at what they would be eating tonight; the girls were always excited to know that they were about achieve what even they knew was the culmination of any woman's life.

Tonight's meat had had a very nice body. Of course, Sara had no way to tell what kind of face had gone with it, with the head missing. That body was now stretched out horizontally, with a spit running through it from vagina to neck, with its wrists tied to its upper thighs with string, and ankles tied to the spit with the same type of string. A low but steady fire was burning in the pit underneath. The girl's skin was lightly browned, beyond the usual tanned skin tone island girls always had. Sara supposed she was about halfway cooked. She smelled wonderful.

Mindy -- Sara could tell which twin she was because she had a small medallion with the letter M attached to the front of her slave collar -- was just now giving the spit crank a quarter turn, putting the body in a buttocks-down position, while Cindy -- medallion with a C on it -- was brushing cooking sauce on the meat's stomach. Mindy looked up and smiled at Sara. "Hi." Cindy turned and offered an identical smile and greeting. It really was disconcerting how much alike they were.

It was, of course, still hotter in the cooking bay than in the rest of the restaurant, though not as bad as it could have been. The bay was a rectangular area projecting beyond the restaurant's front wall, with a big window at the front, and also windows on either side providing cross ventilation. Like all windows in the restaurant, these sported the louvered openings, which at present were cranked fully open.

Sara spoke to Mindy, only because the girl had been the first of the two to greet Sara. "You n... n... know who I am, right?"

Mindy locked the crank in place, and said, "If you mean do I know you're the girl we're going to barbecue at the end, yeah."

Sara snorted at the characterization, because it went to the heart of why she'd come to see the twins. She held out her hand. "Sara."

Mindy quickly wiped sauce off her hand and shook hands with her. "Mindy." Cindy wiped as well, and introduced herself.

Sara went on, "I j... j... just wanted to watch what you're d... d... d... doing here..." She gestured to indicate the roasting girl, the spit, the fire, "Is that the s... s... same thing you'll do to me?"

Mindy nodded. "As far as I know."

Cindy offered, "I think it won't be right here, though. They said something about building a barbecue pit outside."

Sara nodded. "Yeah, that's the way B... B... Bart told it." She pointed at the bowl Cindy was holding. "Can I t... t... taste it?" She wanted to get some idea what her own meat might taste like.

"Sure. You know, it's not quite the same as what it would be like after it's been cooked on the meat, but... anyway..." She dipped a finger in the sauce and held it in front of Sara's mouth.

Sara, not expecting to be offered it in quite that manner, opened her mouth and sucked the sauce off Cindy's finger. She smiled. "Hey, that's really g... g... good!"

Cindy grinned. "Jeffrey's a wizard with this stuff."

Sara smiled. "Thanks. I just wanted... you know, s... s... some idea."

Another smile. "Sure."

Mindy suddenly brightened. "Say, would you be willing to give us a little help?"

Sara was taken aback. "Well, I d... d... don't know anything about k... k... cooking."

Mindy shook her head. "I just need a couple of strong arms." She looked to take in Sara's muscles more completely, and seemed to think her wish had definitely been granted. "Cin and me could both leave the

meat alone for a few minutes, but we don't really like to do that. If you can help me move a popsicle into the kitchen, then Cin can stay here."

Sara was sure she must look lost. It took two girls to move a popsicle? "Uhhh, sure."

Mindy wiped her hands more thoroughly, put the cloth down, and, to Sara's surprise, leaned into Cindy and gave her a kiss on the lips. Cindy smiled and said, "See you in a few minutes."

Mindy turned back to Sara and said, "Okay, this way." She led Sara out through the dining room, to the other side where a door opened into the kitchen.

Along the way, to satisfy her curiosity, Sara asked, "What do you do the r... r... rest of the year?"

Mindy responded, "Whatever temp work comes up."

"T... T...Temp?"

Mindy looked at her, realizing the misunderstanding. "Oh, the Foundation doesn't own us. We're from a slave-temp agency, specializing in food preparation. The Foundation rented us for the summer last year, and again this year. I think they've got reservations for us for the next five summers, which is as far ahead as they can go." She smiled. "I guess they thought we did good work last year." She opened the kitchen door. "In between, we do whatever job come up -- you know, big company banquets, private parties, wherever they need to bring in somebody who can cook girlmeat." She looked back in the direction of her sister. "The agency has been really nice about renting us out together. Well, of course, there's not many clients who just want *one* cook, so it's no trouble. The agency just includes us as two out of however many. It's really fun work, and there's always good food to eat." She grinned.

Entering the kitchen, Sara could see Jeffrey chopping onions next to a big pot suspended over a hearth, which she strongly suspected would be hold tonight's stew. Joe was dicing potatoes. They both looked up briefly, nodded at Sara, and continued working.

Mindy went on explaining, "We always wanted to be slaves, because everything is taken care of for you, but we were just worried about, you know, who knows what an owner might do later, like sell the two of us to different places. But we figured out that if we submitted to the agency, we'd be safe, because slave-temp agencies hardly ever sell their slaves. You know, it's worth a lot more to them to keep renting us out. So it's worked out really well."

Mindy stopped in front of a large metal door, pulled on the handle and grunted with the effort of pulling the door open.

A cloud of condensation billowed into the room, along with a blast of frigid air that made Sara immediately shiver.

Beyond the door, the first thing Sara saw was three headless female bodies, hanging by their tied ankles from hooks at the end of chains, their arms hanging down.

Sara suddenly got it. These were the popsicles.

The main courses for any night at the restaurant were always fresh meat, snuffed and cooked that same day, but for incidentals, such as appetizers and the stew, they used frozen meat.

Mindy walked over to a hand crank on the wall, and started turning it. The body nearest Sara began descending slowly. She said to Sara, “Just kind of catch her as she falls so her arms don’t break off. That gets little shards of bone in the meat.”

Sara heard her, but had to force herself to move. When she’d agreed to help Mindy, she hadn’t realized it would entail standing naked in a sub-freezing icebox. She had hunched her shoulders and hugged her arms against her chest the second she’d entered, and didn’t see how she could do anything but stand there, crouched and shivering.

She was astonished that it didn’t seem to be bothering Mindy, who was no less naked than Sara. “Aren’t you k... k... cold?” She stammered for a different reason from usual.

“Oh! Sorry. I’ve spent the whole morning next to the fire, so this feels really nice right now. We’ll be out in a couple of minutes, I promise.”

I told her I’d help, Sara reminded herself, so I need to just grit my teeth and do it. She gripped the frozen woman’s far shoulder and began pulling her to the left as she came down, anchored her left arm under the woman’s shoulderblades, and reached over to put her other hand on the woman’s buttocks. All of the woman’s body parts, Sara decided she shouldn’t have been surprised to find, were ice-cold and hard as rocks. Eventually Sara was holding the woman horizontally.

Mindy came over and looked at Sara wide-eyed. “Uhhh, we usually just try to keep the weight off her hands as she comes down and get her laid out on the floor, then both of us pick her up. Do you... want any help?”

Sara shook her head. She was fine holding up the woman by herself, and just wanted out of that damned freezer as soon as possible. “This all you n... n... need?” It was all she could do to keep her teeth from chattering.

Mindy choked back a laugh. “What, do you want to hold two of them? Actually I think maybe you *could* manage that. But this is it, they just needed the one body out.” Mindy backed out of the freezer, Sara following, turning the body sideways to get it out of the door. She followed Mindy, relieved beyond words to be back in the temperate comfort of the kitchen, and laid the woman on the slab Mindy indicated.

She followed Mindy back out into the dining room, where Mindy said, “Thank you so much.” She laughed. “You’d better avoid us the rest of the time here, because I can think of a *lot* of heavy lifting for you to do if I can grab you. Anyway, thanks again.” To her surprise, Mindy gave her a warm hug, then ran across the dining room to the cooking bay. Sara blinked again when Mindy stopped in front of Cindy, put her hand on Cindy’s waist and they shared an even warmer kiss than before, lasting several seconds. When Sara heard Cindy murmur something like “Missed you,” she began to feel so much like a voyeur that she decided it was time to get to her reading and give the twins some space.

* * * * *

TWO WEEKS LATER

Sara opened up the library closet, replaced the book she'd finished reading and picked out another. She did enjoy reading, but that wasn't the only reason she stopped by the library so often.

The library was in the same hallway as the girls' rooms -- those of the interns and also the slaves. All of the girls, that is, other than Sara herself, lived here. Cherise's room was two doors down from where Sara was standing, on her right. Classes were over for the afternoon, and the dinner crowd would start coming in about two hours.

Sara contrived to be near Cherise's room as often as she could manage it, usually unobserved. She didn't stop and listen at the door, but she listened carefully for any sounds from inside as she passed by. Right now Cherise and Ashley, with whom she shared her room, were both inside, most likely studying, but Sara was always in fear, when she passed by, that she would hear them doing something else. She didn't know what she would do if she heard sounds of sex in progress, which she did occasionally hear from the other rooms. Die on the spot, possibly. To her relief, there was only silence.

No, wait. There was...

Sara's stomach spasmed in agony, as she thought, this is it! But she realized the noises were from farther down the hall. As she walked in that direction, she realized they were from Mindy and Cindy's room: Heavy breathing with sighs, a voice, recognizably that of one of the twins but there was no way to know which, softly but urgently saying "Lick there, right there, yeah!", followed by a sharp gasp and another sigh, and liquid sounds of kisses.

Sara smiled and shook her head. She had a sister of her own, but a five-year age difference made it a way different situation. She wondered what it would be like to share her entire life with a sister who looked and thought exactly like her. She understood that siblings like that could sometimes be *very* close.

She guessed they must have finished cooking tonight's woman and been given a little time off before the demands of dinnertime began. They probably made the most of whatever time they could spend alone together.

Sara took her book into the dining room, now empty, and took a seat near one of the lanterns. The dining room was brighter than the storage room, one of several reasons she preferred reading there. She put her feet up on another chair and opened the book.

She could hear the rain coming down outside. It had been coming down fairly steadily for two days. Sara was glad, as always, that she never needed to be out in the local weather.

Above the sound of the rain, Sara heard another noise, looked up and saw Jill come into the room. Jill saw she'd been noticed, smiled, and continued heading in Sara's direction. "Is it okay if I sit a minute? I wanted to ask you something."

I hope she's not looking for a hookup, Sara thought. Sara hadn't run into that problem since Trish, a couple of weeks ago, so she imagined Trish had been talking -- especially to Jill, her own roommate. Sara smiled tentatively and gestured to the remaining empty seat at the table.

Jill sat, folded her hands on the table, and seemed to be looking for a way to start. Finally she said, "Is it true, what I heard? When they roast you it'll be a huge party, out in front? They're going to snuff you and barbecue you in front of everybody, before they all eat you later?" Jill's eyes were bright, almost unnaturally so, and she seemed to be having a hard time breathing.

Sara remembered how excited Jill had been when she'd heard the first version of the plan, before it got bigger. She'd already said she wanted to be the one in Sara's place next year. It looked to Sara as though the new, more elaborate program took Jill to a whole new level of arousal.

Sara nodded and said, "That's what they t... t... tell me."

Jill's mouth opened, and she breathed still more unevenly through it. She withdrew her right hand from the table and dropped it into her lap. It was hard for Sara to tell, with the table hiding the view, but it looked as though Jill's hips twitched, once, twice.

Jill suddenly leapt to her feet, and panted vaguely, "I'll... I've gotta go!" and ran out of the room.

Sara stared after her in wonderment, then grinned. Jill almost had an orgasm just sitting here, she told herself. Now she's finishing up in a little more privacy. She *really* wants to be next year's party girl now. It was funny: the whole idea of the party was essentially the same as what most women had as a normal sendoff back home. But for Jill, the thought of doing it here, doing it in front of men from an alien culture, somehow added just that extra something she couldn't get anywhere else. At least it seemed to Sara that that must be what the deal was. Sara herself found it very exciting as well, but obviously not to the degree Jill did.

Sara leaned across the table, looked down where Jill had been sitting, and almost laughed. I'd better wipe that up, she told herself. That's my job.

She went to get a towel.

Paula entered the dining room, said "Hey" to Sara with a grin, and walked over to the front window. She shook her head. "Doesn't stop very often, does it?"

The question seemed to Sara purely rhetorical, and Sara answered it with a shrug.

Paula continued scanning the vista available from the window, and suddenly froze, with a sharp gasp. "What are they doing to her?"

Sara, curious to see what seemed to have shocked Paula, came up behind her and looked in the direction Paula was facing. She frowned and said, "Shit!"

Across the square from the restaurant, a young slavegirl was standing on a platform that Sara had seen, empty, during the walk to the restaurant. The girl was standing there because she had no choice. Her

arms were stretched up overhead, spread apart in a V, held up by chains attached to the cuffs on her wrists that ran up to an overhead beam -- chains sufficiently taut that the girl could just manage to stand on her toes. Sara could just hear her moaning in misery, the rain obviously adding to her suffering.

As Sara and Paula looked on helplessly, a trader with two slaves who were pushing a small wagon -- obviously a small-time trader, as a more successful one might have had a half-dozen slaves and a larger wagon -- passed by. On seeing the girl, he spoke to his slavegirls. Sara could see one of the girls bite her lip as she flashed a scared look at her owner. Apparently on his orders, both girls went up the wooden steps leading up onto the platform and stopped standing near the suffering girl, waiting there for further instructions.

Sara now saw a man, who'd been sitting sheltered under an overhang across from the platform, walk across the square to the platform, holding, it appeared to Sara, a whip. Sara moaned in the back of her throat. It seemed clear what was about to happen, though the "why" of it was mysterious.

Behind her, Sara heard someone enter the dining room. She looked back and saw it was Derek. She waved him forward frantically.

As Derek joined Sara and Paula at the window, the man with the whip mounted the platform, and spoke to the trader's slavegirls. Sara could see the look of fear on both faces increase. One of them, at the man's direction, stepped forward, to within just a few feet of the chained girl.

The man swung the whip at the chained girl now. The slapping sound against her skin, and her scream, were nearly simultaneous. He motioned the nearby slavegirl back, and had the other step forward. Another slap and scream.

Tears running down her cheeks, Paula said, "Derek, what's going on? Why are they doing that to her?"

Derek sighed. "No telling exactly what she did, but they're punishing her for it. Most likely refusing to follow an order, or some other sort of defiance. When they punish a slave here, at least in town -- they might do it different ways in different parts of the island -- they're using it as a teaching tool at the same time. Any slavegirl that passes by is made by her master to watch, up close, one stroke of the whip, so she gets a very clear idea what happens to recalcitrant slaves. She might be made to learn that same lesson over and over during her life, to keep it fresh. How many strokes the punished girl gets altogether depends on how many slavegirls happen by."

Paula was shaking her head, for the moment unable to speak, so it was left to Sara, ironically the only one of the pair of girls still able to get a word out, to ask the next obvious question: "H... H... How long will she b... b... be there?"

In a low voice, obviously one wishing it didn't have to impart the information, said, "Usually it's twenty-four hours. For something really bad it could be forty-eight."

Paula whirled and stared at Derek. "She'll be there overnight??"

Derek nodded unhappily.

Paula said fiercely, "Derek, we're right here -- *you're* right here, you and a bunch of other strong men in here. We have to do something!"

Derek shook his head and said, "Paula, listen to me. It's important that you understand this. We *can't* interfere. The authorities here would be so angry at us that they'd make us leave, and the whole program would be ruined." He looked directly at her, but made sure Sara was listening as well. "We have a choice between helping that one single slavegirl now, or else helping *all* of the slaves on this island, starting maybe a generation from now, maybe two, and forever after that. We can't do both."

Paula stared at him silently for several seconds, and then dropped her eyes. "Okay." She looked back out the window. "I've never been as glad as I am right now that we're here doing this. I know we *are* doing something, and someday something like that..." she nodded towards the suffering girl, "...will never happen again. I'll always remember I was part of this."

Derek patted her shoulder silently, turned and left the room. Not before Sara, to her surprise, saw a tear running from his eye.

Sara decided that for the present, the storeroom was a better place for reading after all.

CHAPTER 7

EIGHT WEEKS LATER

Sara could hear the carpenters working outside. The front windows were open -- rain was threatening, but holding off. Construction was going on on the other side of those windows.

From either side of the front wall of the restaurant, a line of poles, about eight feet apart, came straight outward into what would normally have been an open town square. By next week, the carpenters would begin stacking leafy tree branches, tied together and piled high, between each pair of poles. The parallel lines of poles and tree branches would serve as windbreaks on the left and right. The fourth side of the rectangle, across from the front of the restaurant, would remain open. As a final step in construction, a huge tarp, brought along on the original trip from the mainland for just this purpose, would be tied to the tops of the poles to serve as a roof and complete the shelter in which the end-of-summer party would take place, where Sara would be ceremoniously barbecued.

Sara wiped down another table, trying to tamp down the worry that was gnawing at her.

The worry wasn't about her upcoming public snuff and barbecue, now just twelve days away. She was growing more excited day by day about that, as any woman would. Bart had asked her a week ago whether she wanted some other method than the guillotine, in use daily in the kitchen. It should be something within reason, he'd said, but alternatives were possible. After some thought, Sara had told him that she thought perhaps staying with the same method used by the islanders themselves would be better -- they did dispatch their slavegirls by beheading, but using something more along the lines of a machete. Sara suspected Sid could do a job at least as quick and painless, wielding a machete, as a guillotine could do, and her point was that she didn't want the method of snuff, by being unusual, to draw attention away from the subject of the snuff, herself. Bart smiled and said he understood.

No, her approaching death wasn't the problem.

It didn't help her mood at all that she missed Cherise terribly. Nothing was wrong with Cherise, other than that she was having her period. She'd been bleeding the last couple of days, and it had been determined long ago, in the initial planning of the program, that the girls should not wait tables while menstruating. Obviously, to begin with, waitresses dripping sweat was one thing, but dribbling menstrual fluids in a public eating area was out of the question. On first thought, it seemed as though stuffing a sufficient number of tampons inside would block the problem, but the experts were wary of the possibility that the tampons might be visible, and objectionable, to the island men, who might, by a stretch aided by unfamiliarity with the whole idea of devices to stop the flow, regard the tampons in some sense as clothing. There was disagreement on that point, but caution had won out. In practice it was simple enough for the girls to trade off shifts, and Trish had taken Cherise's place in the dining room last night. Since the night before, and the night following were off-nights for Cherise anyway, this was Sara's third consecutive night without Cherise (and Trish's third consecutive night working, but all the girls were accustomed by now to piling up shifts to help out a coworker who was out of commission). The bleeding was pretty much over with now, from what Sara had heard, and Cherise would be back working tomorrow. But it felt to Sara as if she'd gone forever without that indispensable part of herself.

But Cherise's absence wasn't really the problem either.

Sara's gnawing worry was that, since yesterday, she hadn't been able to speak at all. That feeling of disconnection from her vocal machinery persisted at all times now, even when Cherise wasn't anywhere in sight. Even when Sara was *alone*.

Sara had written and handed Bart a note to explain the trouble, to the extent it was explainable. She had fudged the truth a little: in her note she said her trouble speaking was a periodic problem that came and went unpredictably, and she should be fine soon. Bart had nodded and looked very understanding, patted her arm and made a small joke about the amount of speaking Sara's job required, which was none. Sara had smiled at the joke, and knew that the fact that everyone here knew that Sara always had *some* trouble with speech would make her present malady much less puzzling to everyone than it would otherwise be.

Other than Sara. It puzzled the hell out of her. Puzzled, worried, tormented...

She only had twelve days left to talk to Cherise. And she had felt so sure that, when the right moment came, her increased confidence from being at the center of the most important event of the whole summer, an event that excited her and that validated every effort she had made to be part of the program, would loosen her tongue and she'd be able to tell Cherise everything she wanted her to know.

Instead, the one thing she had needed to complete her life happily, the knowledge that Cherise knew at last how important and special and unique she was to Sara, that thing seemed to have been taken from her.

Sara only considered for a brief moment writing down everything she wanted to say and giving it to Cherise to read. The idea reeked of junior high school, of adolescents leaving anonymous notes for their crushes. The deep, profound love for Cherise that Sara wanted to, *had* to express, had to be expressed face to face, eyes looking into eyes. To write it all down and hand it to Cherise was only marginally less ridiculous than the idea of sending it as a text message on the phone.

Sara picked up the plates and silverware from another table, returned them to the kitchen, and came back to wipe the table.

She gasped as a hand brushed her arm on her way past a table. Somehow, without actually gripping and holding, the fingers curved in front of her arm just sufficiently to impede her progress and make her look at the arm and the body they were attached to.

Sara smiled involuntarily. The face of the man who'd stopped her was the handsomest she'd seen on the island. Clean-shaven, strong face shaped on classical lines, long hair wavy and somehow rakish... It occurred to Sara that if someone on the mainland decided to produce a weekly television drama series taking place on Purity Island, this man would have to get the starring role. Female viewers would swoon over him.

Sara decided not to signal Sid that a diner had groped her. It wasn't like that, really. The man had been as polite as it was possible to be in intercepting someone striding past him.

The man returned her smile and spoke just loud enough to be heard over the background hubbub, "You are pleasing far beyond your race. I would be happy if you would meet me after darkfall. Look to the

building straight across from here..." He made a small pointing gesture, indicating the front of the restaurant, "Go then to the next building that way..." a flick of his hand to the left, "...and the next. I will be waiting there for you."

It took Sara a moment of audio playback in her head to assemble that speech in understandable form. Island men had a strong accent, consisting mostly of a shift of the vowels, all of them closer to the "oo" end of the spectrum and away from the "ee" end. Sara had sat in with all of the waitresses as they were instructed how to understand the accent, since the waitresses were all going to have to be taking meal orders. Luckily, island men, while sounding odd, at least enunciated what they were saying fairly clearly.

A second level of interpretation was required after getting the individual words figured out. Island men tended to refer to the collective population of all women as a "race," which fit with their attitude that women constituted a separate, inferior breed, a "race" not quite human. He was, she realized, simply saying that he found her a very attractive woman. The absurdly awkward set of directions he'd given were his accommodation to his belief that Sara would not be able to count to three, and that she didn't know left from right.

It took her just a few seconds to put it all together and realize she'd just been hit on by an islander. And he'd done it in rather a romantic way that she hadn't been aware they were capable of.

She gave him a little bigger smile than before -- it really was flattering -- and then a tiny headshake. Somehow she didn't want to make a big deal of rejecting him. He'd been rather sweet and didn't deserve to be slapped down in a very public way, and deserved even less drawing Sid's attention and getting tossed out on his ear. This was nothing like the occasional rude hands that reached out for a feel of buttock, or mound, or sometimes breast, which had happened about a dozen times in the eleven weeks the restaurant had been in operation, including twice to Sara herself.

She simply took another step in the direction she'd been going, avoiding yanking her arm away from him. As she moved, his fingers slid off her arm naturally.

She decided to store it away in her "nice memory" file. At some point she would write it up for consideration by the Foundation's panel of experts. Was it a good sign? She supposed they would debate that for awhile. She'd also mention it to the other girls, assuming her voice returned so that mentioning became possible.

At least it proved Sara was making an impression on the men of the island -- a positive one, it seemed -- which was exactly what the planners of the End of Summer Party had been hoping for.

The man -- in her mind she gave him a name, "Cute Guy" -- caught her eye twice more during the evening, flashing his smile at her, perhaps hoping she was thinking it over. She wasn't, of course. In the years since meeting Cherise she'd always turned down every invitation, clear or hinted, from women, many of whom she found physically attractive. She wasn't about to break that pattern in response to a *male* come-on.

She was relieved when Cute Guy finished his meal and left. As she cleared his table, she half-expected to find a tip, though islanders didn't use money, or a note, though she knew he would never have imagined she could read. There was nothing. Good, she thought. That's over with.

As the last of the diners left, and the waitresses mostly departed, Sara wiped down the last of the tables. She looked up and saw that Katie had stayed behind. On Katie's face was a quizzical grin. "I saw that guy talking to you. What'd he say?" Immediately she remembered, and waved her hands in apology. "I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. Okay, let's see. The nearest thing I could think of was it was like he was asking for your phone number." She laughed at the absurdity of the idea. "Was it kind of like that, though? Like he was asking you for a date?"

Sara gave her a you-got-it smile and nodded her head.

Katie laughed again. "Okay, that's a first. You going to go out with him?"

Sara held up her hands, with an are-you-crazy? look on her face. To make sure the point was absolutely clear, she shook her head emphatically.

Katie nodded, with a smile. "Yeah, I know. But really, he was cute! I might even be tempted, if I didn't think he was going to slap me in chains and set me to work digging up carrots. You done here? Let's get to the shower while there's hot water."

Sara gave her a small smile and nodded. She was used to the sweat creeping down all sides of her, but she still didn't want to go to bed that way. A shower was going to be welcome. But a shower without Cherise in the room was only a shower.

* * * * *

THE FOLLOWING NIGHT

Sara was so glad to have Cherise back in the dining room with her. Seeing Cherise's perfect legs flashing as she walked quickly between the kitchen and the tables, watching her light-up-the-room smile as she politely took orders, seeing the lantern light glint off her wonderful gold slave collar. Sara somehow took pride in the way the men looked at Cherise. They ogled all of the girls, of course, Sara included, but there was always something special about the way they looked at Cherise, a higher degree of yearning.

Cute Guy was back tonight. He had to be visiting from out of town, Sara judged, since a townsman couldn't possibly have waited eleven weeks to check the place out. Obviously he'd enjoyed the experience, despite whatever disappointment he might be feeling over Sara's rejection. Assuming that was disappointing. She wondered if he'd actually stayed up waiting for her last night.

Sara felt uncomfortable whenever she had to approach the far end of the room, by the front window. There was another slavegirl outside on the platform being whipped throughout the day, anytime a slaveowner came by and wanted his slaves to see what happened to bad girls. She was the third girl punished this summer, the first in five weeks. Sara was glad it didn't happen any more often, in Purity Town anyway. At least it wasn't raining, so the girl was spared that added element of misery. If every-four-weeks-or-so was the norm, then there was a good chance this was the last one Sara would have to see.

Sara was reluctantly starting to consider the possibility of writing a letter to Cherise. She hated that she couldn't declare her love to Cherise face to face, but this was her third day of complete aphasia, and Sara felt she needed to face the fact that she might never speak again.

She looked up from wiping a table and saw Cute Guy talking to Cherise. Cherise listened politely, with her usual smile. Sara was too far away to hear, but could watch the man speak with the same earnestness he had last night. Just like Sara the previous night, Cherise seemed to put his stopping her in a different category from the unwelcome groping that got a customer thrown out.

Sara supposed Cute Guy never would have chosen her to hit on last night if Cherise had been in the room. She nearly laughed out loud, thinking: You asshole, I *knew* you were just giving me a line. And now you're trying it out on Cherise. Not a big surprise you'd pick her out as soon as you saw her, but good luck with that.

* * * * *

THAT NIGHT

It was such a pleasant dream. Sara was lying in a warm, soft bed with Cherise, snug under the covers. Cherise and Sara were facing each other, each propping her head up on an upraised hand, the arm resting on its elbow, as they talked. Cherise was fondly stroking Sara's hip with one hand, and Sara paused during a description of her day -- she was speaking easily, unhindered by any stammering -- pausing occasionally to lean just slightly forward and kiss Cherise, rewarded with a return kiss from Cherise's sleepy smile.

Yet somehow, there was an alarm going off in Sara's head, screaming wordlessly that it was a dream, and she needed to wake up, it was important to wake up. Sara resisted leaving the dream, but the alarm grew louder. You must wake up, Sara! Wake up now!

Leave me alone! she shouted back at the alarm. I'm with Cherise! Let me be!

The alarm at last overrode her resistance. The dream broke into pieces, defying Sara's desperate grasp at it, as she tried helplessly to keep it together.

Disoriented for a moment, she remembered at last where she was. I'm in my bed in the storeroom, she told herself despondently. It was only a dream. Cherise isn't here.

She blinked her eyes, finally sufficiently aware enough to realize the room, though dim, was brighter than it should be.

A sound drew her attention to the door that led outside, the one where restaurant customers came first, to pay for their meals. It was the pattering of rain, and that was louder than it should have been. There was a vertical strip of dim light at the edge of the door. It was standing ajar, just enough to let in a tiny bit of light and sound from outside.

It appeared it must be very near dawn, on one side or the other.

Sara got up and went to the door. Across the door at about waist level ran the handle, one of those auditorium-type handles that you push on to unlatch the door. The door was always locked from the outside, but easily opened from inside, in recognition of the need to escape quickly in emergency.

Sara looked down along the gap between the door and the frame, to the floor. There was a small wedge of cardboard preventing the door from closing.

Sara was absolutely sure the door had been fully closed when she went to bed. She could not have failed to notice it being open like this. Someone had gone out in the night. Someone who, unlike Bart or Derek, didn't have a key and wanted to make sure they could get back in.

Sara sucked in a sudden sharp gasp. Leaving in the middle of the night? Sara herself had been asked to do that the night before. Asked by Cute Guy. The same man who had hit on another girl last night, no doubt making the same request.

That girl was Cherise. Cute Guy had been talking to Cherise.

It must have been Cherise who'd snuck quietly through the storeroom, without waking Sara, and left the restaurant. It made sense that anyone trying to sneak out would exit by the storeroom door, though Sara was sleeping right there. Jeffrey and Joe both slept near the kitchen door, doubling the chance of awakening someone, and opening the front door rang a small bell in Bart's and Derek's room. And it had worked -- Sara hadn't heard the storeroom door open, at least not consciously.

And now it was near dawn, a new day was starting, and Cherise wasn't back yet. Sara had no idea how long she'd been gone. Surely it must have been Cherise who had set off Sara's mental alarm, but Sara didn't know how long it had taken to wake her. She'd certainly tried to ignore it as long as she could.

Sara stood at the door, shaking her head, her breathing coming in ragged gasps as her heart exploded into pounding activity in her chest. No, she said to herself, no, no, no, no, please no!

She eased the door further open, and looked desperately in both directions.

The light was still very dim, though it was possible the sun was already up. The cloud cover made it impossible to tell. If dawn was past, though, it couldn't have been for long. There was no activity whatsoever in the town square. Nobody was there, at least in the part of it Sara could see from the door.

She understood that while out in the farming areas work would already be getting started, the people who lived in town, the tradesmen, the shopkeepers, the carpenters, the artisans, all began their day a little later. They would all be up very soon and the square would be bustling with activity. But not yet.

With her legs trembling and bladder threatening to give up control, in fear of what she knew she was about to do, Sara pulled a cardboard box marked "girlskin" over to the door. She opened the door fully, went outside, and left the box in the doorway, propping the door open wider than before.

Slowly, her whole body trembling now, she began taking small steps towards the front of the building, trying to look every direction at once for anyone who might see her. The weather was warm, as always,

with early-morning fog that was helpful in keeping Sara herself less visible, but frustrating in making everything she wanted to see less visible.

She knew anyone seeing her would instantly know she was a slavegirl: she was naked, and that was all they needed to see. Even in the fog, she suspected her sky-blue slave collar stood out, making identification of her status still easier. A slavegirl out on her own, unaccompanied by her owner. That made her a runaway.

It began raining, lightly at first, then more steadily within a minute.

Sara reached the corner at the front of the building, and was horrified to see that the slavegirl she'd seen being punished last night was still there. Right, she remembered. Derek said the punishment usually lasted a full day and night. Sara could hear the girl moan in misery. As Sara watched, the girl pushed herself still higher on tiptoes to relieve the strain in her arms, but could only manage it for a few seconds, losing strength in her legs and sagging back down to hang from her arms. She moaned again. She looked up and opened her mouth, letting the rain run in. She wouldn't be given food or drink during her punishment. She had to rely on the rain for water.

Derek is right, Sara reminded herself, I can't help her. And right now there's someone maybe I *can* help. If I can find her.

Sara knew where to look. She remembered the directions Cute Guy had given her the night before: across from the restaurant, then two buildings left.

Her heart pounding even harder, Sara swept her gaze once more across the square. Still no movement. She left the safety of the restaurant, going between two of the posts that would eventually frame windbreaks for her own party, her own roast. She crept as quickly as she dared across the space separating the restaurant from the buildings across from it.

Purity Town had no hotels, as such. There were none anywhere on the island. In place of the concept of establishments to house travelers in large numbers, anyone staying overnight in town simply took up residence in an empty house, of which there were more than enough: exactly for this purpose, local carpenters had constructed more log shacks than the permanent population needed. Cute Guy had no doubt made one of those shacks his temporary address while in town.

Sara told herself she was only going to listen briefly at the door of the shack, for any sound that would tell her that Cherise was within. She hadn't wanted to raise the alarm in the restaurant, get Bart and Derek out of bed, and then discover Cherise was snug in her own room. No, she told herself, that's not really it. I'm just rationalizing. This is really stupid, but I *have* to be here. If anything is happening to Cherise, I have to be there for her!

Sara discarded the "listen at the door" idea as soon as she saw the door standing open. That was how visitors could tell that a shack was available: its door was open.

If this is where Cute Guy was staying, she told herself, he's not there now. He's left town.

The sight of the open door brought something of a sense of relief to Sara. Cherise isn't here, she said to herself. It's all just my own panic over an open storeroom door. Maybe it was like that when I went to bed and I only *thought* it was closed. Cherise isn't with Cute Guy. He left last night. Cherise is fine.

Sara started to turn to go back to the restaurant, to see if she could somehow get a little more sleep, and perhaps get back into that dream, before she had to get up. Just as she did, something bright on the muddy ground in front of the door of the shack caught her eye. She bent to retrieve it.

It was a scrap of cloth, with Velcro patches at both ends. The bright color was golden.

Not able to breathe at all now, Sara shot forward into the open doorway. Among the many bits of various things discarded on the floor, to be cleaned up by the next occupant, Sara saw several more scraps of gold-colored cloth. And a beautiful golden collar, raggedly sliced through on one side, probably by something like tin snips.

Sara grabbed the collar, shot out the door, and sprinted across to the restaurant, turning sideways to jump through the storeroom door without bothering to open it wider. She stopped then and stood crying.

She threw open the door to the hallway and pounded down towards Bart's and Derek's room. Ashley, Cherise's roommate, was in the hallway, knocking at the door to Katie's and Cheryl's room. As Ashley looked at the sprinting Sara in surprise, Sara suddenly remembered she wouldn't be able to tell Bart anything, not verbally. She could only project severe emotional distress, which would get his attention but not be especially helpful. She ran back past Ashley to the storeroom. The marker Wendy and Karen used to label the boxes was there. Sara slammed into the storeroom, tore the side off an empty box, and started writing on it.

Ashley looked in at the door, very worried. "Sara, is Cherise in here?"

Sara thrust the cardboard at her. In all caps, it read **CHERISE IS GONE SHE'S OUTSIDE FIND HER PLEASE PLEASE!!!!**

Ashley went pale and ran back the way she had come. Seconds later Sara heard her pound on another door. Bart's sleepy voice emerged in response. Sara heard the door open, and Ashley saying frantically, "Bart, Cherise isn't in our room, and I can't find her anywhere, dining room, kitchen, I asked everybody if she was in their room, and now I got this from Sara."

Sara had already started out into the hallway, ready to go down to Bart's room so he could tell her what to do, when she heard Bart shout, "Derek! Sid! I think Cherise is outside! I'll go watch the front door, and you two get the storeroom and kitchen doors. We have to be there to let her back in."

Sara had no idea, later, how she had managed to have the presence of mind to think: Get out, now, Sara, you have to get out before they get here!

She whirled towards a shelf on which a pile of local men's clothes lay, for use by the faculty members if they needed to go out (they wore regular clothes while in the building), and grabbed shorts, a vest, a hat, and shoes. As quickly as she could she pulled the pants up, slipped into the vest, pulled on the shoes

and slapped the hat on her head, while hearing Sid and Derek in the hallway deciding which one would take the storeroom. She leapt towards the door, kicked the box back into the room, and at the last second remembered to rip off her wristbands and ankle bands, unhook the collar, and toss the entire set of slave accessories into the corner, before jumping outside and pushing the door closed behind her. She ran to the rear of the restaurant, to a corner where none of Bart, Derek, or Sid would be able to see her if they stood by their respective doors and glanced outside, and finished buttoning up the vest, tying the drawstring on the shorts, and adjusting the hat. The hat came equipped with a phony fringe of long brown hair, so the professors, all of whom had short hair, wouldn't look out of place as long as they wore the hat. Sara shakily straightened the fringe so it hung evenly to her shoulders. She waited a few minutes until she felt safe from any of the men inside spotting her, then began her search.

CHAPTER 8

Sara knew that earlier, when she had run across the square, naked and unattended, it was the most dangerous thing she'd ever done in her life.

Until now.

Now she was a woman wearing clothes on Purity Island. Perhaps the first woman since Sherry Patton, fifty years ago, to do so. And Sherry had had no idea how much offense she would cause.

Anyone seeing Sara from far enough away would never give her a second glance. She would simply be an island male intent on his business, of no concern to anyone else. She needed that anonymity that clothes would provide. Without them, every male on the island would instantly see her as a runaway slave, to be taken into custody, to be sold at auction, if not simply claimed outright. She *might* be sold back to the Foundation, but only if she stayed in town. The Foundation would never find her beyond the borders of Purity Town. They wouldn't even look for her. And outside of town was where she must go. Cherise had been taken away. Sara had to find her.

But being acceptable as seen from a distance was one thing. Being seen close up was another entirely. Seen by anyone up close, Sara would never pass inspection. She hadn't had time to do anything about hiding her breasts. The vest did nothing to cover her cleavage, and wasn't tight enough to disguise the shape of her chest. She also believed she was probably too tall to be convincing as the adolescent her stubble-free face suggested she must be. And she was pretty sure no man on this island shaved his legs. If she was caught, she would be in bigger trouble than any woman on the island in fifty years. The end would be the same as if she had gone out naked: sold to spend the rest of her life as a Purity Island slave. But because of the clothing, she would be punished first. Sara looked again at the girl up on the platform, covered in whip marks, struggling to find a way to lessen the pain. In her, Sara saw a perfect example of what she herself would go through, and probably for at least two days, not just one. If caught here in town, she would stand on that same platform, in plain sight of Bart, Derek, all of her friends. And none of them would be able to help her.

It didn't matter to Sara. Cherise needed her.

Sara knew she'd been right to grab the clothes and get out of the door before Derek or Sid could get there. The men would watch all of the doors, waiting for Cherise if she should return, needing to be there to let her in. And they would never have let Sara out to look for her. They knew exactly how dangerous it was, how unacceptable it was to let any girl out by herself. Sara knew they were never going to find Cherise, because Cherise must already be beyond the boundaries of their protection. Only Sara could find her. Sara didn't have any boundaries, any limit to how far she would go for Cherise. And if she had waited any longer, she would have lost her chance.

The rain pattered down around her, running off her hat, her vest, her shorts, all made water-repellent by girlfat. The sky was getting lighter now, definitely past dawn. Around her, the town was coming to life. She saw a trade wagon rattling along at the end of the street, pushed by two slavegirls as their owner rode inside. A shopkeeper was sweeping out the entryway of his store, getting ready to open for business. They weren't close enough to endanger her.

Where to look?

Her first thought was simply to run down every street -- it wouldn't take long -- hoping to see Cherise in plain sight. Sara couldn't imagine she would find Cherise here, though. Cute Guy had to be the one who had taken her, and he was obviously from out of town. He would be taking Cherise back where he came from.

Consideration of the sheer number of places to look started turning Sara's bowels to water. She had an entire four hundred square mile island to search.

She shook her head. Cute Guy couldn't possibly have taken Cherise far yet. He would have wanted to be away as soon as possible with his stolen slavegirl, and had probably left at the very first hint of pre-dawn light. But that wasn't very long ago, and Sara had left the restaurant very soon after. Cute Guy would have made his start no more than fifteen minutes before Sara had arrived at the shack he'd been using for his stay in town. He should still be near. But which way? He would now be getting farther away by the minute, and could have gone in any direction.

Okay, she thought, wait. It was true there were countless small paths leading out to nearby farms, but for the same reason she knew Cute Guy was from out of town, she strongly suspected he was from *far* out of town. After eleven weeks of restaurant operation, he suddenly appeared one night, and then again the next night. Farmers from nearby were surely in Purity Town more often than that, and they had no reason to stay in town overnight. Sara had studied the geography of the island and the town, as had all of the girls. Cute Guy would be on one of the major roads. Either he was on the coastal road joining Purity with the other trading towns, to the north and south, or he was on the main road that headed west, deeper into the island towards the mountains.

Sara wasn't even a hundred yards from the coast road. She began trotting towards it.

Men were starting to assemble at the dock now. Possibly a mainland trader was expected to arrive this morning. Sara kept buildings between her and the growing crowd, reached the coast road some distance down, and began jogging along it, going south.

It felt *so* strange to be wearing clothes, after doing without for months. And very nice to run freely. She could feel her leg muscles loosen up, the blood flowing, her heart and breathing settling into a running rhythm.

Underneath the physical well-being, she was growing increasingly frantic. She knew it was possible she might never find Cherise. But Sara considered it an unalterable law of nature, an absolute, that she would not return to the restaurant without Cherise. Sara would either find Cherise or else be captured herself. There weren't any other choices.

She stopped after about a quarter mile on the south coastal road. She could see ahead perhaps another quarter mile, and decided Cute Guy couldn't have gone any farther than that in the time since first light.

She reversed course and began jogging back. Detouring around the dock area, she started up the north road. She went a little farther, but again came to a point where it didn't seem possible Cute Guy could have taken Cherise beyond the farthest point she could see.

She jogged back to town, seriously worried now. She slowed to a walk, needing to rest before starting out on the road to the mountains.

The town was getting busier now, and she skirted the area around the main square in favor of back streets.

There was some traffic at the terminus of the road to the mountains, and Sara detoured into the woods, successfully out of sight but unable to break into a run amid the dense random placement of trees. She told herself walking would be okay. Cute Guy would not be moving faster than a walking pace either, so she wouldn't be losing any ground.

A few minutes later there was no one in sight. Sara moved into the road itself, and began jogging.

She thought she must have gone about a mile, and was biting her lip, almost whimpering with worry, trying to convince herself that, with all the time taken for her earlier searches, Cute Guy might have had time to get this far, when she caught sight, through the lessening rain, of a modest-sized wagon up ahead. That would be about the right place, she thought, if Cute Guy started out right at first light. There appeared to be a slavegirl on either side pushing the wagon by its side handles, and three women following behind the wagon. In the dim light, the distance and intervening rainfall made it impossible to tell if any of the women was Cherise. Sara caught a momentary glimpse of a man seated on a rear-facing bench at the back of the wagon. Too indistinct to tell whether it was Cute Guy.

With a tentative target in sight, Sara was able to still her anxiety to some extent, and suddenly realized how hungry and thirsty she was. She hadn't been able to take care of either need since awakening. She ducked back into the forest, and soon found what she was looking for: a peach tree. She picked several fruits, choosing ones that more or less matched the color of the ones on the ground under the assumption that those would be ripe, sat under the tree and ate them. They tasted wonderfully sweet, but the juice in them did not completely take care of her thirst, so she followed the sound of running water she'd been hearing, and drank several doubled-palmfuls of flowing rainwater from the creek.

As she finished drinking, she decided that her next step should be to try to get ahead of the wagon she had seen. She wanted to have as complete an idea as she could of what she was dealing with before she tried to devise a plan of attack.

She had been hearing the creek for awhile, and decided it probably paralleled the road for some distance. She began jogging upstream beside its bank, checking periodically to make sure she was still near the road.

As she jogged, she wondered what was happening now at the restaurant. They must have discovered her absence soon after she left, and her discarded decorations soon after that. Since they knew she'd still been inside when Cherise was found to be missing, they probably had correctly guessed she'd gone to look for her. None of the other girls would have that opportunity, Sara knew, not with the doors watched, not with the whole staff alert to the problem.

Among all the other things that scared Sara right this minute, one fear flashed to the forefront before she pushed it aside, determined not to think about it: That no one was looking for her, and that no one

ever would. The restaurant project was far too important to risk its existence for a single girl, or even two. Sara understood that. She knew it was right. But it was still frightening.

Cherise, she reminded herself. Think about Cherise only. Nothing else.

Sara slowed to a walk as she heard the sound she'd been listening for, off to her right: the slow grind of wagon wheels along the gritty road. There were too many trees in the way to see it except for momentary, unrevealing glimpses, and she didn't want to get any closer, at the risk of being seen.

Walking briskly, she slowly outdistanced it. When she decided she was far enough ahead, she broke into a run again.

She slowed again, and edged closer to the road. If she could find just the right tree...

There! That one was perfect.

She trotted to the tree, adjacent to the road, and needed to jump only a few inches upward to wrap her hands around the lowest branch. Years of daily chinning-bar exercises made it effortless to pull herself up with her arms until the branch was at chest level, and then she swung her right leg up over it. Fully mounted on the branch now, she scrambled higher until she reached the place she wanted. The road was just in front of her, down below. The wagon would be coming from her right side. She couldn't see it coming because a heavily-leafed bough was in the way, which was the point: as the wagon approached her vantage, no one in it could see her either. She also wouldn't be able to see the wagon after it had passed. Only when the wagon reached the point directly below and in front of her would she see it. At that point she did risk being seen herself, but that danger was minimal. She would be very marginally visible through intervening leaves, and only if someone in the wagon just happened to look up in her direction at just the right moment.

She heard the wagon approaching. She prepared to make her mind a camera, to take in every detail she could in the short time she would have.

The very first thing she saw was Cute Guy. He was sitting on a front-facing bench-type seat at the front of the wagon. Behind him, there were actually four slavegirls, not two, pushing the wagon along, their hands chained to outward-projecting handles, two on each side of the wagon. At the rear of the wagon were the people Sara had seen before: a second man in that rear-facing seat -- Sara dubbed him Crushed Hat -- and the three women following the wagon. They were following because they had no choice: each had her standard slavegirl handcuffs locked together in front of her and attached by chain to the rear of the wagon. None of the seven slavegirls, the four pushing and three following, was wearing a hobble chain, though of course they had the ankle cuffs. None of them could get away from the wagon anyway, and Cute Guy had probably wanted to make better time traveling than hobble chains would allow.

By the time Sara had taken all of this in, her breathing had stopped completely. Because among all these things, she was paying the most attention to what was being carried inside the wagon.

It was Cherise.

Her waitress decorations, all left behind in and near the room Cute Guy had used as his in-town hotel room, had been replaced with standard island slavewear. And Cute Guy had used it to hogtie her, dumping her in the wagon like a bag of cement. Her wristcuffs were locked together behind her, her legs bent with her feet pulled towards her hands, the hobble chain pulled around the lock between the wrist cuffs, back to the ankle cuffs and locked there.

Her eyes were closed, and tears ran freely from them. There was a puffy bruise on her left cheek, just below her eye.

The other occupant of the wagon was a doggirl, standing over Cherise in a belligerent pose as if daring her to move. Cherise didn't seem disposed to move now anyway. She was inert, exhausted.

Sara felt the hottest flame of fury she had ever experienced. The rational part of her had to struggle to the limits of its strength to hold her back from leaping out of the tree to attack the two men on the wagon. She had thought perhaps Cute Guy would be traveling alone with Cherise, and Sara thought she could take him if it was only him, that he wouldn't stand a chance against her, mad as she was. But seeing two men changed the equation. She was still angry enough to try, but couldn't guarantee she could fight two men at once. She had to be sure. She had to know she could win. Cherise could not afford Sara letting her fury trump her common sense. Sara would need a better plan than a frontal assault.

The wagon was out of Sara's sight now, but not out of her mind's eye. She kept seeing Cherise, helpless, abused, threatened, and on her way to begin a lifetime of hopeless, empty drudgery at the mercy of evil men. Men who would no doubt rape her frequently, as if everything else wasn't bad enough.

That can't happen, Sara told herself forcefully. That MUST NOT happen!

Cute Guy had probably been in town on a slave-buying trip, Sara decided. There were no trade goods in the wagon now, and he had probably exchanged them for the three slavegirls behind the wagon. And while he'd been in town, he'd discovered the restaurant, and had realized it offered him a way to get a slavegirl at no cost, requiring only his charm. He'd had nothing to lose by trying. And it had yielded him, in Sara's estimation, a treasure beyond price. Sara had to make sure he couldn't keep it.

Obviously Cherise must have fought them. Sara was sure Cute Guy would have been happy for Cherise simply to walk peacefully behind the wagon like the other slavegirls. Cherise wouldn't go peacefully. Sara felt a surge of pride on Cherise's behalf, and a renewed burst of hot fury at the men who had treated her this way.

Sara sucked in a sudden breath, as she realized that could be herself lying hogtied in chains in the wagon. Sara had been Cute Guy's first choice, for now-obvious reasons. He'd preferred a strong girl, one who could handle whatever heavy labor Cute Guy needed her for. And if it had been me, Sara reminded herself, there'd be no one at all to save me. Cherise has me. She'll always have me.

Sara's head whirled at a sudden unexpected sound behind and below her.

A man was standing there, a man with unusually hairy arms. He was looking directly up at her. Sara saw now what she had been too hurried to see before: that when she'd picked out her tree, she had been

skirting the edge of a farm. The fields began just on the other side of the creek. There were perhaps a dozen slavegirls in sight, and it appeared that a harvest was in progress. Among the slavegirls, another man stood watching, holding a whip. The man looked very much like a younger version of Hairy Arms, likely his son, and Sara dubbed him Hairy Junior. Junior strode up to a slavegirl who had stopped pulling a cart, filled with what looked like onions, through the field in the direction of what was probably a small storage barn. The girl appeared pregnant, maybe four months along. It looked to Sara as though the girl was simply exhausted. Hairy Junior spoke to her angrily and gave her a hard, surely painful slap with the whip. Sara clearly heard the smack against the girl's skin, heard her sharp squeal, and watched as she took off at a near run, pulling the cart.

Below Sara, Hairy Arms stood with his hands on his hips. "You come down outa there, Sonny."

Sara's heart was pounding so hard she thought her ribs would give way and let it out. At least, she told herself, he doesn't see I'm a woman yet. But that's probably only a matter of seconds away.

Her mind spun through alternatives. I might fight him, she thought, but while I'm doing it, Hairy Junior has plenty of time to join him. I can't handle both at once. I can probably outrun both of them, though. And I can for sure keep running a longer time than they can.

She started creeping downward through the branches, to get low enough to jump. At least, she decided, this will pacify Hairy for the moment. He thinks I'm just going to come down like he said and take my scolding.

She saw Hairy Arms suddenly do a double take, his eyes widening now as he stared at her. Oh shit, shit, shit, she thought. Now he knows.

Hairy Arms shouted out, "Ruben!" and waved his arm, gesturing for Hairy Junior to join him. Junior started trotting over.

No time left, thought Sara. Have to do it now. Jump outward and land just ahead of him. Take the shock of the fall with bent legs, stay on your feet, start running.

She pushed off and jumped.

Hairy, unexpectedly, moved towards her as she fell. Her foot struck his outstretched arm and she spun to fall horizontally. She crashed heavily on her left side. Her head hit the ground, and she remembered later an explosion of light before everything went black.

CHAPTER 9

The mental clouds cleared away. Sara kept her eyes closed. The left side of her head throbbed almost blindingly. Her left hip ached, obviously at least badly bruised. Her legs felt trapped under something.

She breathed carefully. It didn't feel as though anything was broken. That was the only good news. Other than that, her inventory of her body told her how much trouble she was in.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been out, but it had to be several minutes, at least. Long enough to do this to her.

She was on the ground, sitting upright with her back against a tree. Her hands had been pulled back behind the tree and tied there, wrists crossed. Checking the binding with her fingers, it seemed to be cords of leather... obviously Junior's whip, she decided, pressed into service as an impromptu rope.

She opened her eyes a crack. It was Hairy who was kneeling straddling her legs, sitting back on her ankles, his hands clamped tight to her thighs just above her knees. She tried to jerk her legs free, but it was obviously hopeless. She hadn't nearly enough leverage in that position.

She tested the cords around her wrists. They were tied expertly.

"What was you doin' here, girl? What was you doin' in clothes? Har?"

She wasn't so much in clothes anymore. Her shorts were lying on the ground a few feet away, leaving her exposed completely from waist down, showing all the evidence needed to prove her gender. Her vest had been torn open, popping off the bone buttons, and pushed back on her shoulders -- it couldn't be removed yet with her hands tied behind the tree, but her breasts were there for anyone to see. Her left breast was throbbing, as if it had just been squeezed moments ago. Her hat was on the ground a few feet to the right of the shorts, leaving her slave-length brush haircut visible. Hairy hadn't bothered with her shoes yet.

She hadn't been raped yet, but she already felt more violated than she had ever imagined being in her life.

The tree under which she sat seemed to create thousands of little funnels for the rain. It didn't block the downward flow, but the leaves gathered the water into fewer and larger drops, plopping down on her head, her shoulders, her outstretched legs. She tried again, harder, jerking both legs to try to wrench at least one free, but Hairy didn't even have to move to maintain complete control.

Hairy glared at her. "You answer me, girl."

She glared back. There was no point in saying anything, even if she could -- her vocal paralysis was still in force.

Her hands writhed in the leather cords. They were tight, too tight to slip her hands out of. But the leather was slightly stretchy, more so than rope. It wasn't intended for a job like this. If she twisted her hands back and forth enough, creating tension to make it stretch enough...

Seeing movement in the background, she looked up to see Junior trotting towards her, now about fifty feet away. Her heart caught in her throat. Junior was returning with the set of ankle cuffs, hobble chain already attached, that he had gone to fetch. As soon as they got those on her, it was all over. And there was nothing she could do to prevent it. Junior had only to close and lock the cuffs on her ankles just behind Hairy's butt. She would be a lifetime slave of these two men, with no escape possible. She'd already seen how they treated their slaves. But first they would punish her for the clothes. They were close enough to Purity Town that they'd probably take her there, perhaps hogtied in a wagon like Cherise, to make the punishment very public. A teachable moment for all of the slavegirls who came passing through. And Sara would get to see if her voice came back enough to scream. After that she would work for them for years, and bear their babies, perhaps a son for Junior to carry on with the farm.

She twisted her hands more desperately, trying to make the cords pull against the knot, tightening the knot itself to create some slack in the loops around her wrists.

Thirty feet away now. Not enough time! she moaned within, I can't get my hands out in the time I've got left! Keep twisting, but try something else. Something that will work.

Sara took a deep breath. Now, Sara, she shouted at herself, it has to be now!

She closed her eyes, and relaxed her entire body as much as she could. She couldn't afford to give any warning, give Hairy any chance to prepare and adjust.

She suddenly jerked her right thigh towards her, using all her strength to lift the knee against Hairy's weight holding it down. Hairy, taken by surprise, was pushed to the left, his hold on her thigh weakening. Continuing the motion, now under less restraint, Sara pulled her lower leg free, out from underneath Hairy. As quickly as she could, while Hairy reached to try to recapture it, she swung her foot sideways, the heel connecting with the side of his head. Hairy gasped in pain and fell over to the side, off of Sara completely.

Now imagine what they'll do to me, ran the fleeting thought through her head.

Junior arrived with a bellow of anger. As he reached for her he made the mistake of putting his two feet on either side of Sara's right. She kicked upward with all the force she could muster, and felt her instep slam up into the apex of Junior's crotch.

He staggered back with a scream of agony, and fell on his butt, his eyes screwed shut, his mouth wide open but now as incapable of producing sound as Sara was.

She felt some slack in the cords at last. Straining every muscle in her arm, she pulled against the leather steadily, feeling her hand begin slipping through, a tiny, painful scraping millimeter at a time.

Hairy was up now, and no longer looked like a man with a new slave. He looked like a man intent on creating some dead meat.

Sara's right hand slipped free so suddenly she scraped it hard against the tree trunk on the way towards her. She brought her left hand around, still tangled in the whip cord, and put it on the ground to support

her as she leaned left, swung her right hand around and struck Hairy full force with the heel of her palm on the side of his head where she'd kicked him before. Hairy went down in a heap without a sound.

Sara leapt to her feet, the soles tingling but there, unwound the whip cord and threw it down, grabbed her shorts, pulled them on and up her legs, held the waistband with her left hand, grabbed her hat with her right, and ran.

* * * * *

She ran straight across the road and into the woods on the other side, hoping she wasn't running into a neighbor's farm or a continuation of the same one.

She slowed after a few minutes, wanting to make less noise. At last she stopped and crouched behind a bush. She couldn't hear sounds of pursuit, but knew they would come eventually. Hairy and Junior, as soon as they could stand upright (probably much a much longer time for Junior), would likely work on gathering nearby farmers for a more thorough search. That would take some time, but it would come. Sara hoped she could manage to stay out of the expanding circle of search so it never closed in on her. While locating Cute Guy and his wagon again.

Gradually catching her breath, she tied the drawstring on her shorts, and adjusted her hat to its proper long-hair display. She groaned silently over the state of her vest. The buttons were all gone. She would have to walk around Purity Island holding her vest closed, which would look suspicious enough to attract attention she couldn't afford. The only alternative would be to leave herself exposed from neck to breasts to navel to waist. Obviously going topless was out of the question.

She fretted about the length of time Cute Guy had been out of her sight. As time went on, he would inevitably turn off the road somewhere. If he turned off just minutes after Sara lost track of him, then at least she would know the general area to search once she found he was no longer on the road. But the longer the time delay, the more uncertainty about his location.

Holding her vest closed awkwardly with her left hand, she began jogging again, paralleling the road, on the side opposite the one she had been on before.

She had to take a chance on going onto the road itself. There was no other choice. She had to see where Cute Guy was.

She angled towards the road, cautiously keeping an eye out for anyone who might be chasing after her. Holding her breath, she stepped out into the road.

She felt the greatest sense of relief she could recall experiencing in her life. The wagon was up ahead, still trundling along, not more than a hundred yards ahead.

She retreated a small distance into the forest and continued shadowing Cute Guy, this time keeping a closer eye on her surroundings. She detoured around farms twice. No one saw her.

CHAPTER 10

Sara grew more concerned as Cute Guy and his wagon continued farther from Purity Town. The farther away Sara was from the restaurant when she recovered Cherise, the harder it would be to get back to safety. It was bad enough that she and Cherise would need to take a wide detour around the area where the residents, presumably, were even now being alerted to the presence of a runaway slavegirl disguised in clothes, who had physically attacked and injured two farmers. As long as they could stay away from that problem, it may not matter that Sara had no clothes to give Cherise -- Cherise could play the role of Sara's slave, though, again, the pretense would only work when they were seen from a distance.

Walking through the woods near the edge of the road, still holding her vest closed with her left hand, keeping the wagon in sight, Sara almost stumbled over a discarded wooden box, lying on its side with a pile of rotten-looking peaches spilled out of it. She supposed it had been there a long time, but decided it was more likely it had been pushed off a wagon recently, by a disgusted trader who had discovered the condition of the peaches belatedly and realized they were worthless to him.

The peaches reminded Sara that she was getting hungry again, though these particular peaches weren't an attractive solution to the problem.

She located a peach tree quickly, and as she ate she tried to not to think about the mountains looming ahead. Not really mountains, exactly -- the terminology seemed a little grandiose for a land feature that barely rose above the five hundred foot level, but the rocky, jagged, barren ridge that ran along the island's center line in the long direction didn't fit what "hills" normally looked like. It hadn't occurred to Sara, when she set out after Cute Guy, that he might be from the west side of the island, beyond the central mountain ridge, and might be going to take Cherise there. But he'd now traveled most of the distance to those mountains, and most of the east side's farms lay behind him. The odds were steadily growing that his destination was beyond the central ridge. If Cherise did end up beyond the ridge, it added still another layer of difficulty to getting her back home safely.

About ten minutes later, Sara seemed to have her answer. She groaned internally.

Why no vegetation grows along the central ridge of Purity Island is a question geologists haven't answered, handicapped as they are by not being allowed to go there. The common wisdom in the university's geology department, as to why they couldn't get permission to send a team to the island, holds that the Onderman Corporation, protecting their exclusive trade rights with the island, knew something about the island's soil that they didn't wish generally known. The corporation went so far as to make quiet checks of the background of people wishing to visit the island, and it was believed that the reason was that they didn't want trained geological experts poking around there. In any case, scientists had to be satisfied to make judgments of the island's makeup and history based on satellite views and educated guesswork.

The island itself had been formed, current theories ran, by an earthquake occurring at least several millennia ago -- it had to have been strong enough that it would have been recorded in written records or legends if it had occurred during human history -- which had pushed the forty-mile-long land mass above the surface of the ocean, with the high ridge along a line in the center, the rest of the land gently sloping downward from there on either side. The latest theory on the ridge held that the ridge had risen

higher than the surrounding land surface because it was made of a different, perhaps lighter type of rock, one that perhaps, among its chemical constituents, contained something that discouraged plant growth. The earthquake theory was supported by the fact that the ridge was skirted, along both sides, by a flat horizontal shelf of similar barren rock, varying in width from thirty to a hundred feet, edged by a vertical dropoff of several feet in height down to the surrounding forest, the discontinuity obviously the result of separate land masses displaced along an earthquake fault line.

What Sara saw rising before her was a forbidding barrier that did fit the common image of “mountain range” very well, other than the fact of going up only hundreds of feet rather than thousands. Just ahead of her, the road she had been traveling ended where the flat shelf along the base of the mountains began, with a man-made earthen ramp allowing wagons and carts to roll up from the end of the road to the shelf. And Cute Guy’s slavegirls had just pushed his wagon up that ramp and turned right along the shelf.

As she reached the end of the road herself, Sara saw that a short distance away along the shelf lay the beginning of an artificial trail that zigzagged from the foot of the ridge to the top. Sara had read about the trail in her studies of the island. It was no doubt the result of many decades of backbreaking labor by slavegirls, and was the only realistic means of crossing the mountains. The trail’s first zig took it, at a walkable slope, to a point about halfway up, where there was a level place to rest before continuing on the zag to the summit. Near the top, Sara could see a wagon larger than Cute Guy’s coming down, full of trade goods, pulled, or at the moment held back from rolling down the trail on its own at breakneck speed, by six slavegirls, attended by two doggirls circling the wagon like buzzing gnats, on the lookout for any slavegirl misbehavior. Sara moaned, silently, and shook her head as Cute Guy steered the wagon carrying Cherise to the foot of the trail and began the ascent.

Sara stood staring out from among the trees hiding her from view. What, she asked herself, do I do now?

As worried as she had already been about following the wagon over the ridge, she hadn’t really had a clear enough picture of what her pursuit would entail.

The mountain ridge was, indeed, impossible to climb other than by walking the trail. The ridge itself was a jumble of huge, randomly placed rocks, with nothing obvious in the way of handholds or footholds that would make the ascent possible. The trail would be an easy climb, as intended, but it was impossibly exposed. Sara had no way to avoid coming unacceptably close to travelers navigating the trail in the opposite direction. If she were to start climbing it now, for example, she’d eventually run into that wagon coming down, and the men piloting it would easily see the female hiding behind her male disguise, even if her vest had been whole.

Sara gasped suddenly and sank to her knees, her face in her hands. She had just been overwhelmed by a sense of how very alone Cherise must feel. Cherise would know the wagon had begun climbing a steep slope, and would figure out what it was. She would know that she was being taken to the western side of the island. Though she must have felt sure for hours that she was beyond any chance of rescue, the mountains would serve as a symbolic exclamation point on Cherise’s permanent separation from the life she had known, a gateway to a terrifying future.

Sara stood still, her jaw clenched, looking at the trail, trying to think of a way over. Cherise is on that wagon, she thought. I'm going to follow her. I don't know how yet, but it's going to be done, she told herself forcefully. In a few minutes, I'll know how. I just need to think.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and pushed away the tumult in her mind, reaching for calm.

On the blank slate of her mind, she saw an image of the discarded box of rotten peaches she had passed fifteen minutes earlier.

She turned and began weaving her way through the trees, back to the point where she had seen the box.

* * * * *

It worked perfectly. Holding the box, with its cargo of rotten peaches restored to give her something to carry in it, against her chest, Sara found that it both held her vest closed and also hid the bulge of her breasts, flattening them against her chest. She carried the box that way towards the end of the Purity Town road, staying just off the road in the woods.

Taking the next step was perhaps, she thought, the most dangerous thing she'd done so far. Since she'd dressed herself back in Purity Town, she hadn't intentionally exposed herself to potential close-up scrutiny. She would have to do that now: she needed to emerge, here at the end of the Purity Town road, onto the shelf along the foot of the mountains and walk towards the mountain trail out in the open, plainly visible to anyone watching. It would be a mistake to emerge suddenly from the woods opposite the foot of the trail. She knew it would look suspicious to the two groups currently on the trail, both Cute Guy's wagon and the larger wagon coming down. She had to approach the trail the way anyone else would -- openly.

Closing her eyes and breathing deeply for several seconds, she worked yet again to calm herself, and to steel herself. Cherise needs me, she told herself, and the longer I put this off, the farther away she is getting.

Sara exhaled one more deep breath in a sigh, walked up the dirt ramp and stepped out onto the shelf.

She concentrated on simply putting one foot ahead of the other. Almost entirely on autopilot, she angled towards the foot of the trail when she came to it, and began trudging upward.

* * * * *

About halfway up the first segment of the trail, Sara approached the wagon traveling downward -- this wagon and Cute Guy's wagon had been able to pass each other at the flat halfway point of the trail. Her heart, as it had so many times today, pounded out a wild, uncontrollable rhythm, her lungs bringing in rapid, shallow breaths that left her feeling faint. She reminded herself that if any of the men on the wagon saw through her disguise, she could run and outdistance them easily, but she knew the horrible, unacceptable downside to that -- that in blowing her cover, she might be throwing away her opportunity to make any use of the trail at all, leaving her with no way to keep up with Cute Guy and see where, on the entire western half of the island, he had ended up taking Cherise. Sara told herself firmly that if it came to that, she would give herself a crash course in rock climbing, and that once she had scaled the

mountains, she would search all of the western half, for as long as required. She would recognize Cute Guy, Crushed Hat, and any of the slavegirls with them if she ran across any of them. Eventually she would find where Cherise was.

Sara bit her lip at the thought of what would happen to Cherise in the time required to find her, if Sara failed to get up the trail and over the mountains in time to keep up with Cute Guy. This better work, she thought helplessly.

The man driving the wagon was holding a whip, for use on any of the slavegirls who made the mistake of holding up the others. Sara dubbed him Pinched Face, for the features below his scraggly blond hair. As she made to march past him, Sara kept a neutral expression on her face, having no idea what the appropriate behavior would be.

Pinched Face broke into a sudden grin, gesturing at her with the whip. “Yor pa mad at yo, Sonny?”

Yes! thought Sara. That works! Pinched Face obviously assumed that this boy’s father was punishing him, sending him off on a tedious errand with no slavegirl to help.

She couldn’t possibly respond vocally, even if she’d had the ability. She knew her smooth face, to anyone assuming she was male, suggested adolescence, but her height would make anyone think that her voice should have changed by now. And even if she could somehow have sounded male, she knew she could never have imitated the accent. So she simply did her best to smile ruefully at Pinched Face, to support his own theory of what was going on.

Pinched Face broke into a laugh, and saluted her with the whip. “Wal, yo won’t make that mistake again, har?”

Sara smiled again and shrugged. The two doggirls gave her a curious look, then went back to minding the slavegirls, ignoring Sara. She wasn’t of concern to them, since she was wearing clothes.

And she was past! Everything had worked in her favor, including the tendency of all people to see things in a way that meets their expectations.

Breathing deeply in relief, Sara moved on, up the trail, watching Cute Guy approach the summit up ahead.

* * * * *

Sara met another wagon, smaller than the first, on the way down. She was still recovering from the view from the top of the ridge, which had given her a daunting sense of how large the island was, and how very far she was from the mainland, invisibly distant across miles and miles of ocean. She had taken a look behind her, towards Purity Town, where the only people were who could take Cherise off the island once Sara had rescued her. Sara still intended that she would be barbecued on the island... when was it? Ten days from now. That shouldn’t be a problem. Time wouldn’t really be an issue.

Sara cleared the future barbecue from her mind, along with all thoughts of the staff and the interns back at the restaurant. Getting Cherise back was the only important thing. That had to happen first, before anything else.

At the base of the trail, Cute Guy made a sharp turn, in the direction opposite the last leg of his descent down the trail. He was traveling, now, on the shelf along the foot of the mountains, a mirror image of the one on the east side.

Sara walked across the shelf towards the woods, and hopped down the three foot drop into the forest. No one, she decided, would be on this side of the island if it wasn't their home, and she would simply appear to be taking a shortcut to her own farm. She followed Cute Guy's wagon from behind the cover of the edge of the woods.

She didn't have to follow him for long. She saw, within a few minutes, what his destination had been, and blinked in surprise. She hadn't expected to see something like this. She had doubts that anyone on the mainland knew about it.

CHAPTER 11

To the left of Sara as she approached near the edge of the shelf, Cute Guy appeared to have entered a natural cave in the side of the mountain ridge. Sara walked carefully, and as quietly as she could while she watched, because there was a farm just behind her -- the earthen ramp down from the shelf in front of the trail, a copy of the one on the other side, led into the clearing for the farm. Sara had veered off towards a fringe of woods beyond the ramp to avoid it. There hadn't been anyone from the farm near the shelf, fortunately. In the distance, Sara could see a few slavegirls working in the field, and once they were out of sight, hidden by the trees, Sara still periodically heard the barks of what she first took to be real dogs, before remembering there were none on the island. The sound, she reminded herself, hard as it still was to believe, came from human women, the doggirls attending the working girls.

Sara now saw that the cave into which Cute Guy had turned his wagon was anything but natural. It went about thirty feet deep into the base of the mountain, its entrance about ten feet across and ten feet high. When she saw what the slavegirls were doing in it, she realized they were working at creating the cavern as she watched. It was the early stage of a tunnel being dug through the mountain.

Sara's eyes adjusted to the dim light within, and she determined that there were eight slavegirls, attacking the rear wall with sledge hammers. Two more returned with a wheelbarrow, apparently from dumping loose rock at some distance, who then took up hammers of their own and resumed pounding. Each slave sported not only the standard hobble chain, but also had her wrist cuffs locked together. The bondage didn't interfere with swinging the hammer, though two girls were needed to roll one wheelbarrow. Sara suspected that a wheelbarrow full of that rock might well be too heavy for one girl to move it even with her hands free to hold both handles.

The slaves were being supervised by two men who stood at some distance back from the slaves working at the rear wall. While it was doubtful that any of the slaves was stupid enough to attack an overseer with her hammer, the latter were also not stupid enough to tempt them by standing nearby. Having their hands fastened together, Sara judged, probably would make it more difficult to throw such a hammer with any accuracy. Of course, there were two doggirls watching the working girls intently, ready to bark and perhaps bite if any worker should leave her post and approach one of the overseers.

Cute Guy's arrival with his wagon brought the total number of slavegirls present to eighteen, including the four pushing the wagon, now being unlocked, the three that Sara believed had been newly purchased in Purity Town -- and Cherise.

It was hard to tell how long the project had been in operation. It must be early on, Sara decided, started perhaps a few months ago. There were years, maybe even decades, of work ahead, to be performed by more than one generation of slavegirls. No doubt in the future there would be torches illuminating the gradually longer tunnel, and possibly fans, powered by slavegirls, for air circulation. The tunnel wasn't yet deep enough to require such things.

Sara's stomach tied itself in a knot. This, then, is what Cherise was expected to do for the rest of her life: swing a sledge hammer against a wall, for many hours a day, and carry the resulting loose rocks away. Day after day, year after year.

And it is obvious, Sara thought, why Cute Guy would have wanted me for this.

Sara stood astonished, still holding the wooden box of rotten peaches, peering through a tall bush that hid her effectively from anyone not specifically looking for her. The shelf alongside the base of the mountain was perhaps twenty-five feet wide here, and Sara was just behind the three-foot drop-off at the edge of the path, where the barren rock of the mountains gave way to the lush vegetation of the forest. She was standing around fifteen feet north of the line straight out from the tunnel.

She finally realized she had no reason to keep holding the box. She set it down gently, off to the side.

Once Cute Guy's wagon arrived, it appeared the two overseers decided it was time for a lunch break. It occurred to Sara to wonder just what time it was. There was no way to determine where the sun was behind the still-unbroken cloud cover. Recalling what she knew of the geography of the island, she believed it would have been about eight miles from Purity Town to the mountain trail. The wagon, she decided, probably made it in four hours or so, maybe a little more. Another hour, perhaps, climbing up the mountain and going down the other side. They had started out... around 7 in the morning? That seemed about right. So it should be early afternoon.

The two overseers -- Wild Hair and Gimp Leg, Sara named them -- had the slavegirls put down their hammers and assemble in front of a set of crates and what seemed to be a water trough. The girls eagerly ladled water out of the trough and gulped it down, and each was handed a bowl of what must have been food, though Sara couldn't tell specifically what it was. They ate it hungrily, using their fingers. There were water bowls and food bowls for the doggirls as well.

Cute Guy and Crushed Hat detached the four slaves from the handles of the wagon, and the three new ones who had followed behind -- after first connecting their ankle cuffs by hobble chains. They fastened the girls' handcuffs together in front of them, in the same way as the other workers. And then -- Sara held her breath and clenched her fists as she watched -- Cute Guy lifted Cherise out of the wagon, like the same bag of cement she'd been when he had dumped her there in the first place. He bent slightly as he lowered her towards the ground, but rather than set her down gently, he let her roll off the end of his arms and land heavily from about a foot up. When she heard Cherise cry out in pain from the impact, Sara nearly rushed into the cavern to take on all four men. Not now, she ordered herself, not now. I can't get myself into a fight I'll probably lose.

All Sara could do watch look on and grind her teeth. Don't you men know what you have? she thought at them. Don't you know who she is? You aren't fit even to touch her -- to *look* at her!

Cute guy bent to open the padlock that had secured Cherise's hobble chain wrapped around the lock of her wrist cuffs, then yanked her upright to stand unsteadily on legs that had been bent in that cramped position for hours.

Sara couldn't make out anything being said, but she did see the look of hurt and anger Cherise directed at the man.

Cute Guy, ignoring the facial reproach, unlocked the wrist cuffs from behind her and relocked them in front. With a contemptuous gesture he directed her to where the other girls were eating.

Sara was intensely relieved to see Cherise at least getting food and water. As far as Sara knew, Cherise hadn't had either since last night.

Sara began turning over ideas in her mind for effecting the rescue. As much as she hated the idea of Cherise being forced to work here for any length of time, Sara committed herself to spending days in the planning. She wanted to know everything about what went on here, what their working schedule was, what they did at night. She would wait until she had a plan she knew would work.

She hadn't been seen yet, but she became concerned about her light skin being picked out from behind the bush hiding her. Her dark leather clothes matched the tone of the bush well enough, but her skin offered too much contrast. She dropped to the ground, started grabbing handfuls of mud and began smearing it on her face, arms, and legs.

By the time she was satisfied with her camouflage, the lunch break was over. The veteran slaves went to pick up their hammers once more, while Cute Guy, who seemed to be the leader among the four overseers, seemed to be explaining to the new slaves, including Cherise, what was expected of them. Again, with echoes added to the accent, Sara couldn't quite make out what was being said.

The three newly purchased slaves, looking resigned, picked up hammers and joined the others taking whacks at the rear wall. Cherise did not.

As Sara looked on in growing concern, Cherise stood upright, glared at Cute Guy, and shook her head. With her wristcuffs fastened together she couldn't fold her arms across her chest as a symbol of stubborn resolve, yet her whole posture somehow suggested that she had.

Cute Guy gave her an amazed look, then gestured forcefully towards the other slaves, and said, in a shout this time clearly audible to Sara, "Do it! Now!"

Please, Cherise, thought Sara, please just do what they want! The memory of the girl up on the platform being whipped, trying desperately to relieve at least some of her pain despite her utter exhaustion after standing in her stretched and nearly suspended position all night, was still very vivid in Sara's memory, and it seemed likely that the girl's crime had been the exact same thing Cherise was doing now.

Two of the doggirls had turned towards Cherise, snarling and barking -- again, that amazingly authentic dog-like sound -- and were creeping towards her, their lips pulled back to show teeth. They stopped at a word from Wild Hair, but continued growling menacingly.

Sara could see Gimpy Leg raising his whip, preparing to restore order, ratcheting Sara's tension up yet another notch. Do it, Cherise! she thought desperately, though appalled to realize she was echoing Cute Guy. Just go pound some rocks! Please!

Cute Guy looked at the two nearest overseers, and gestured out beyond the cave. Getting nods in return, he signaled to Wild Hair to go behind Cherise. Wild Hair did so, grabbing her by the upper arms while Cute Guy, surprising Sara, unlocked Cherise's wrist cuffs. Moments later Sara watched, with less surprise, as Wild Hair wrenched Cherise's arms behind her and relocked the cuffs behind her, then forced her down to the ground. Cherise barely resisted, and gave no voice at all to the usual protests -- Stop, let go, you're hurting me, etc. -- that women usually shout in such situations. Cherise's jaw was set stubbornly, her entire posture suggesting "Bring it on!", yet her face looked as scared as any Sara had ever seen. From as far away as she was, Sara could easily see Cherise trembling. Sara didn't know what to make of the combination of body language signals.

Wild Hair now restored Cherise to the same bondage in which she had arrived, pulling her feet towards her butt, looping the hobble chain around the lock between her wrists and locking it to her ankles to complete the hogtie. Cute Guy picked Cherise up, and Sara blinked as he carried her out of the cavern. Sara then froze, trying for utter immobility, as Cute Guy headed almost directly for her position.

Crushed Hat followed Cute Guy out, carrying a coil of rope. Cute Guy, Sara now saw, was walking towards something to Sara's right to which she had paid no attention previously: a rock pile, oval in shape, about six feet long and three across, at the edge of the shelf of barren rock just before it dropped off into the forest, and barely fifteen feet from where Sara was hidden. The pile was so close to the forest that a jutting tree branch hung directly over it. The rocks in the pile were uniform in size, each about as big as a doubled fist, the outermost edges of the oval being a single layer of such rocks, while piled a little higher in the middle. Sara had not focused on the pile consciously because there were so many loose, randomly-placed rocks all around the area in and out of the cavern, probably overflow from wheelbarrows that had not yet been cleaned up. She realized now that this particular pile was more organized than the rest of the rubble.

Cute Guy stopped at the pile, dangling Cherise face down two feet above the jagged rocks, obviously to let Cherise anticipate what was about to happen. Cherise was facing away from Sara, so Sara couldn't see her face, but Sara marveled again that Cherise didn't struggle, didn't voice any protest, apology, nor plea, made no sounds at all other than a soft whimper of fear. Sara couldn't understand why Cherise, as scared as she obviously was about what was about to happen, wasn't doing anything to try to stop it.

Sara's hand closed on a rock near her feet. She tensed all her muscles, preparing to spring out of her hiding place, tackle Cute Guy first and brain him with the rock, as soon as he dropped Cherise on the pile. She would worry about the other men later.

Cute Guy lowered Cherise gently onto the pile, an act Sara found so unexpected that it failed to trigger her attack. It occurred to her that it was probably not an act of mercy, so much as avoidance of puncturing or breaking bones of a slave who needed to be physically fit to work. He simply wanted to cause pain, not excessive damage to a valuable piece of equipment.

It definitely was painful -- Cherise wailed as her full weight settled on the rocks, their sharp edges pressing into her stomach, breasts, mound, and thighs in dozens of places.

Wild Hair completed her misery, tying the rope around the joining of her wrists and ankles, then throwing the other end over the tree branch that hung horizontally about six feet above. He pulled on the rope, lifting Cherise's hands and feet behind her just a few inches, then tied the rope to the branch. The rope was obviously meant to prevent Cherise from rolling off the pile. Sara could see that the branch, at the point where the rope was tied to it, was worn, evidence that the branch, and rock pile, had been used in exactly this way before.

Cherise moaned, and wriggled to try to adjust her position to minimize the pain. It didn't seem to work. Wild Hair took one more length of rope and wrapped it around Cherise's head, through her mouth, to make a gag. He made it tight enough to pull back the edges of her lips, and tied several knots in her mouth, rather than behind her head, making a big wad of rope in her mouth that made speaking impossible. Sara supposed that was another standard part of the treatment, preventing the punished

girl from having any hope of pleading her case to be released, presumably by swearing she would obey commands faithfully from now on.

Cute Guy looked back into the cavern and gestured with his arm. Crushed Hat and Gimp Leg, in response, gave orders to the other slavegirls, who all dropped their sledge hammers and followed the two men out of the cavern. They were made to assemble in a semicircle about six feet away from Cherise and then... simply watch. Watch as Cherise wriggled, moaned, and occasionally squealed in pain. Of course, thought Sara grimly. Any punishment always has to be used as a lesson to all of the other girls. Sara could see most of the slavegirls wincing, biting their lips, and at least three of them crying. None would be likely, at any time in the future, to do what Cherise had done.

After about ten minutes, Cute Guy ordered the girls back into the cavern to resume work. He remained nearby with Crushed Hat. Sara judged that her opportunity to attack them had passed, now that they weren't physically occupied with dealing with Cherise. They were just a little too far away for her to have surprise on her side -- they would see her as soon as she moved, seconds before she could get to them. She could only look on in misery, tears streaming down her face.

Focused completely on Cherise, it took Sara several seconds to realize a quiet conversation was going on between Cute Guy and Crushed Hat. Crushed Hat said, "I figger she work tomorrah, har?"

Cute Guy looked at Cherise a few moments, and shook his head. "We can't keep her. Bad influence on the others." He sighed. "Least I didn't give up trade for her." Yes, thought Sara angrily, you got her for free. Not such a loss then, right?

What had first struck Sara about Cute Guy, in the first moment he talked to her in the restaurant, was that, while he had the accent, he didn't have the bumpkin speech patterns and vocabulary of the other men of the island. She wondered if there were schools on the island, which Cute Guy had been one of a small percentage of boys to attend. Or perhaps his manner of speaking had just been passed through his family, father to son, for several generations. Either way, Sara realized that had been exactly what had made him dangerous in the restaurant. He had immediately struck Sara as being apart from the men of the island, more like a mainlander, which somehow made it possible to relate to him, to be drawn to him. It hadn't quite worked on Sara. But it had on Cherise.

Crushed Hat shook his head, not in disagreement with Cute Guy but simply disappointment. "Bad we don't get a worker. Them other three new uns is a little scrawny, but this un look stronger. Why you get *them* three?"

Cute Guy sighed. "I got what there was. Didn't have enough trade for better ones." He looked irritated. "If our people here would give us more real workers 'stead of trade stuff, we could show 'em all better progress. But they won't part with more trained girls."

Sara suddenly put it together. The tunnel dig was, in a sense, a tax-supported public works project. Or no, not exactly tax-supported. Contributions were voluntary. It sounded as though a consortium of farmers had commissioned the tunnel, chosen these four men to be in charge, with Cute Guy as the manager, and had grudgingly given them some slaves for the labor. But like so many such projects, the tunnel dig was woefully underfunded, and its sponsors were reluctant to give up further valuable slaves for a project they weren't sure could even be done. They wanted some sign it was going to work. And

so, in an irony frustrating for Cute Guy, he was expected to demonstrate the feasibility of digging a tunnel without enough slaves to do the work. So he had taken his limited resources to the other side of the island to purchase a few more slaves.

Crushed Hat grunted. "What we do with this un then, har?"

Cute Guy thought about it. "Trade her to the breed'n farm. Maybe for a new girl that ain't filled yet, or for enough trade to get us a new girl."

As soon as he finished that thought, Sara heard Cherise squeak, and try for the first time to speak. Sara had never seen that trick for making a gag before, but it worked very effectively -- Cherise couldn't make an intelligible sound. Cute Guy and Crushed Hat ignored her.

Sara herself was at least as horrified as Cherise. If they did turn Cherise over to a breeding farm, Sara would never be able to rescue her from it. She'd read enough about the breeding farms to know they were too closed off, that Cherise would be too inaccessible for Sara to succeed in a rescue.

Crushed Hat now looked towards Cherise with a nasty grin that Sara could easily read, and it raised her horror level another notch. "Girl got a nice shape. Like to get me inside un o' them holes. Let's we all do her 'fore the breedies get at her, har?"

Sara caught herself starting to shake her head, freezing her body motionless once more, though she couldn't do anything to stop the sudden surge of adrenaline shooting through her. They were going to rape Cherise! Right now! Or try. Sara would make sure the first man to make a move toward Cherise with his pants down would lose an important part of his body. Once more she readied herself to spring out of concealment.

She saw Cute Guy give Crushed Hat an exasperated "You idiot!" look. "You know what the breedies do to us if they find out we trade her to them already preg?"

Crushed Hat looked defiant, still eager for a chance at Cherise. "How they know it's us give her babies? And why they give a shit who done it?"

Cute Guy responded, "They know 'cause she'd just have the one baby!" Under the influence of the fertility drug, breeding farm girls usually had litters of five to seven babies. Sara could imagine the outrage at the breeding farm after taking a girl in trade and then finding that her entire first pregnancy had been wasted on producing just a single baby, and that they had wasted the valuable drug on a girl who'd already been pregnant when she'd arrived.

Crushed Hat looked as though he still wanted to press the point, but gave up at last. Cute Guy patted his back and said, "We can do her after she gets there," and turned to walk back to the cavern. Crushed Hat followed, looking disappointed, and walking awkwardly with an erection visible in his shorts.

As frantic as Sara was to do something, anything, she wasn't blind to the irony. The fear of making Cherise pregnant had saved her from immediate rape, and the men had no way to know Cherise had just had her period. They'd actually had nothing to worry about.

But in the near future, there was more to worry about than Sara thought she could handle. Cherise would certainly be raped at the breeding farm, perhaps a dozen times a day, maybe even more -- men would line up for a chance at the unusually pretty, intensely arousing girl. And it would go on for weeks. Cherise wouldn't even be able to be impregnated for a couple of weeks, and it might be as long as a month after that before they found out the task was accomplished. An endless string of rapes, for weeks on end, hundreds of them, was coming up.

And then, after that: fifteen, perhaps twenty years, all of the rest of Cherise's life, would consist of nothing but feeding babies at her breasts, and eating to make more milk, all day, every day, while feeling her tummy filling yet again with still more babies. And knowing she was just making more slavegirls for the island men to use and abuse.

Unless Sara could get Cherise away from here *tonight*. Sara discarded any notion of waiting for several days. She didn't have that kind of time. Cherise must *not* still be here in the morning, when Cute Guy, in all likelihood, would set out with his wagon for the nearest breeding farm, and Sara's last chance to save her would be gone. Sara had feared that they were going to take Cherise away now, this minute, but it seemed clear Cute Guy didn't intend to do that. Perhaps it was too late in the day. Perhaps he wanted to make sure the lesson continued -- that the other slavegirls should have plenty of opportunity to see Cherise's struggles with the pain, to hear the anguish of her crying and moaning. Probably both reasons applied, Sara decided.

But tonight, Sara told herself. It *has* to be tonight.

She sat back, miserably, to wait.

* * * * *

Through the waning afternoon, Sara occupied her hands with clothing repair, though her mind couldn't draw itself away from Cherise. Each of Cherise's moans was an icpick stabbing through Sara's ear. She found some twigs of the right size, and made use of the leather strings that had tied the lost bone buttons in their place -- the bones had been ripped away, but the strings were still there. Sara managed to tie the strings around the twigs, and use the twigs as her new buttons. They seemed to succeed in holding her vest closed, but wouldn't stand up to too much stress.

She found she needed to pee, which carried its own problems. She wanted to withdraw from the safety of the bush to avoid having to stand in a urine puddle afterward, but if anyone should catch sight of her, either from inside the cavern or somewhere on the farm whose edge she was on... No, she decided, it was way too dangerous. She absolutely could not let herself be seen out in the open with her shorts down, squatting rather than standing to relieve herself. Gritting her teeth, she remained within the bush, trying to ignore the scratching on her bare hips and butt as she squatted and peed on the ground. At least the continued pattering of the rain effectively covered any sounds she was making.

She remembered that the girl on the platform in Purity Town had been left there overnight. As much as Sara hated thinking about Cherise suffering in pain through the hours of darkness, Sara realized that would be her best hope. If they took Cherise back into the cavern, it would be much, much harder to get her out of there without waking everyone up. Yet the darkness, of course, presented problems of its own. It was still raining -- adding yet more to Cherise's misery -- and the sun hadn't been in sight all day. Sara had no idea what phase the moon might be in, and how much light it would offer during which

parts of the wee hours, but the bigger problem was whether the moon would be visible at all, behind the continued cloud cover. Sara might have to contend with absolute darkness, stumbling around with Cherise through a forest she couldn't see. She had no idea how far away she could get under such circumstances. Very likely not far enough to avoid being heard and easily found at daybreak.

At least, she thought, I can find Cherise herself. She's right here, and I'll know where she is even in the dark. As long as they leave her here.

It occurred to Sara that the fact of Cherise being so close to where Sara was hiding wasn't that much of a coincidence. For the men to use a rock pile as a punishment wasn't a surprise. It was just making a natural use of the materials at hand. And putting the pile where it was had obvious reasons behind it. It needed to be in a place under constant observation, so the men could keep an eye on Cherise, and so the slavegirls could absorb the intended lesson, so it needed to be up on the shelf, not out in the forest whose floor was out of the line of sight of the cavern for some distance out. But there needed to be that overhanging branch to secure her in place. There were plenty of trees around and a lot of branches, but only one branch was in just the right place overhanging the shelf. The only place that fit all requirements was right there, where Cherise was now. And Sara had also chosen a place as near the forest/shelf boundary as she could get, directly out from the cavern so she could see what was happening within. So I have to be where I am, Sara told herself, and Cherise has to be where she is.

Cherise's moans were frequently punctuated by sharp gasps and squeaks of pain. Sara sat back, put her palms against her eyes and cried as quietly as she could.

CHAPTER 12

As the light of day faded, the men in the cavern made preparations for putting the slavegirls to bed. They were fed again -- it angered Sara that Cherise was missing that meal -- and the girls then stood in line, the new ones imitating the veterans, as the men unlocked their wrist cuffs, then relocked them behind their backs. The girls all sat, and the men connected their ankle cuffs together with padlocks -- they would have to hop if they wanted to get away now -- and finally connected the collars of each pair of adjacent girls with chains. The girls lay awkwardly on the floor of the cavern, wriggling to find a comfortable posture. None were attached to anything immovable, but any escape would have to be a group effort that couldn't fail to wake the men no matter how deep their sleep.

As Sara had anticipated, Cherise was left out on the rock pile. The slavegirls would be hearing her distress all through the night. Sara had doubts that any of them would get much sleep. What worried Sara more was having no idea whether any of the men was a light sleeper. She would have to make every effort to be very... very... very... quiet.

The men kept one lantern burning as the natural light vanished. Sara hoped the tiny amount of slightly unsteady light from it would remain through the night. She could hear soft conversations, with occasional laughter, going on inside the cavern, and fervently hoped that *wasn't* going to go on all night. At least hearing the voices was a helpful sign telling her in no uncertain terms that it was *not* time to try a rescue yet.

She wished, so much, she could somehow signal to Cherise that she was there. Sara couldn't speak, and Cherise was facing away, so she wouldn't be able to see Sara. Any method Sara considered for making Cherise aware of her presence carried the danger of alerting the men in the cave, not just from any noise Sara herself might make, but from any unpredictable sounds Cherise might make in response. Sara had to let Cherise go on feeling lost, alone, hopeless.

The rain had, at last, slowed to a drizzled and finally stopped. That's good, thought Sara. At least Cherise doesn't have to contend with *that* anymore.

After an hour, or perhaps a bit more, the voices seemed to quiet. Sara decided to count to a thousand, about fifteen minutes, and then ease up onto the shelf and creep towards Cherise. Halfway through the count, she cursed silently as the light from the lantern vanished. Now she was completely blind.

She looked up to the sky. Nothing there offered any help. There was nothing to do but wait to see if that would change.

She waited. To the point when she couldn't bear waiting longer. And then a little longer past that. She suspected several hours had gone by.

I'll have to just do it by feel, she finally told herself. Except when I get to Cherise, first I'll have to untie a knot that I can't see. Then pick her up and walk with her without being able to see where I'm going -- I'm not about to drag her along the ground. All while trying somehow to keep her quiet, because she won't be able to tell that it's me, she won't know what's about to happen to her, and she'll be scared out of her wits. And because of that, she'll probably be making a lot of noise. And then there's a good chance I'll fall off the edge of the shelf -- even if I feel for it carefully with my foot, the edge might crumble with

my weight when I reach it -- and we'll both fall over and crash down to the forest floor, waking up everybody inside the cavern.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Sara closed her eyes, without really being able to detect a difference, and told herself, I have to do it now, there's no other choice, no matter what goes wrong it can't be worse than waiting until morning.

She opened her eyes, and was about to feel her way up onto the shelf, when she suddenly realized something had changed. There was light. Dim, almost unnoticeable, nearly useless, but enough to pick out the outlines of the crest of the mountain ridge above her. Something was shining behind those mountains.

Over the next few minutes, as Sara's heart pounded with excitement, the light grew stronger. Above her, she saw that the edge of a cloud bank was starting to grow silvery. As she continued watching, the clouds slowly moved west, a curtain slowly but steadily withdrawing to reveal the moon behind them, a three-quarter moon, a few days past full, hovering over the ridge.

Sara could make out Cherise now, as Cherise let out her latest gasp of pain. I can't assume I have much time, Sara warned herself. There could be another bank of clouds coming up behind.

She eased out from behind the bush, felt for the edge of the shelf -- it still wasn't that easy to see -- crawled onto the shelf, and crept towards Cherise. Halfway there, she suddenly realized that one of her earlier thoughts was still important: she couldn't afford any sounds of surprise Cherise might make when Cherise figured out someone was right next to her. Someone in clothes.

I have to do it this way, Sara told herself. She'll forgive me later.

Crawling just inches at a time, alert to any movement within the cavern, Sara guessed it must have taken at least five minutes to move across the fifteen feet towards Cherise. Cherise's head was facing straight ahead. Sara came up from behind her on the forest side, so that the moon would shine on her face. If anyone in the cavern was awake, they would see her too, but that couldn't be helped. Holding her breath, Sara let her hands inch forward until her right was below Cherise's face, her left behind Cherise's head. Then she quickly moved to catch Cherise's head between her hands, her right clamping tight over Cherise's mouth and nose, so she couldn't breathe.

Cherise spasmed in panic, still able to make soft sounds at the back of her throat. Sara kept hold, walked farther forward on her knees, and turned Cherise's head towards her own face.

Sara could easily pick out the instant when Cherise recognized her. Cherise went completely still, her eyes widening so suddenly and so far that Sara thought they might fall out of her head. In any other circumstances, Sara might actually have laughed at the degree of Cherise's surprise. Sara put the index finger of her left hand over her own lips. When Cherise nodded that she understood, Sara let go of Cherise's mouth and nose so she could breathe again.

Sara suddenly realized it was the first time, in all the time she'd known Cherise, that Sara had reached out to touch her.

Sara discarded the thought. There was no time for it now. She began picking at the knot of the rope around the chain holding Cherise's hands and feet together.

There was absolutely nothing Sara could do about Cherise's bondage holding her in a hogtie. That was all a matter of chains and padlocks, and Sara had no way to undo it short of going into the cavern and asking Cute Guy politely if she might borrow the key. She'd be able to untie the gag, but that could be saved for later.

It took at least five frustrating minutes, Sara shifting constantly to get the moonlight to reflect off just the right place, before the end of the rope finally slid through the knot. Sara finished untangling it from around the chain. Taking a steadying breath, deciding just how she wanted to do it, she picked Cherise up.

She shifted Cherise two or three different ways, and finally settled on holding Cherise upright against her, keeping her right hand clasped around the chain wrapped around the lock between Cherise's wrists -- it was easy to keep a good grip on it -- using her left arm across Cherise's back to steady her, and letting Cherise's head rest on her shoulder. She could feel Cherise's breasts against her own, with a layer of leather vest in between, and pushed away any thoughts of how arousing that would be if she allowed it.

There was no time, way, or need to explain to Cherise what was going on. Cherise would know Sara was taking her somewhere. That would be enough for now.

* * * * *

Sara walked along the shelf for what she judged to be a mile or so -- it allowed her to move farther, faster, than trying to weave between trees in the forest, and made much better use of the fading light that was left. Then she carefully set Cherise down at the edge of the shelf, hopped down into the forest, and picked her up again. She walked, making sure her surroundings remained heavily treed -- she didn't want to wake in the morning and discover she was in the middle of a farm field -- and finally stopped when the overhead foliage cut off too much light to see.

She set Cherise gently on the ground and sat next to her. Cherise still couldn't talk -- her gag would have to wait until morning. She was beginning to make little choking sounds at the back of her throat, and Sara, almost in a panic, decided she would have to rethink the gag problem, but she realized that it wasn't that Cherise couldn't breathe. It sounded much more as if she was trying not to cry. The dam burst suddenly, and Cherise was crying -- not the way a grown woman cries, but in the full-on way that a small child cries, muffled hardly at all by the gag. Sara lifted Cherise's head into her lap, curled her left arm around it to cradle it, and stroked Cherise's hair, tears running down her own cheeks.

At last Cherise quieted, and seemed to be asleep. Sara lay back on the ground, Cherise's head still in her lap, and drifted off as well.

CHAPTER 13

Sara squeezed her eyes tightly shut before she'd even tried opening them. The sunlight...

Her eyes suddenly sprang open in surprise. Oh, yes, she thought, that *is* sunlight. She had seen it occasionally through the restaurant windows, but had not been out in it in months.

Cherise was still asleep, still using Sara's lap as a pillow. Sara sat up carefully, not disturbing her, and just watched. After all the terror Cherise had been through yesterday, it was so nice to see her sleeping peacefully today.

It wasn't nice to see the whole front of Cherise's body covered with bruises, a few of them crusted in caked blood. Sara's fury flared anew at the idea that anyone could dare to treat Cherise the way those assholes had.

Cherise's eyelids flickered at last. She looked up at Sara first, then twisted her head to look at her surroundings. They seemed not to be what she had expected. "Mmmmmgh?"

Got to get that gag out, thought Sara, but first I'd better get us some food. She has to be starving. And parched. She has to see as soon as possible that I'm going to take care of that.

Sara got up carefully, laying Cherise's head on the ground. As she stood, Cherise gave her a panicked look. "Mmmmmgh! Mmmmmgh!", and shook her head violently.

It just seems like it should be natural to be able to explain things, thought Sara. But I haven't been able to talk to anyone for four days, and now I want to say something to Cherise herself? There's no point in even trying.

Sara held up her finger in a gesture usually meant as "Hold on, stay right there." Cherise, of course, had no choice but to stay there, but Sara also meant the gesture as "Don't worry, I'll be right back, I promise."

Cherise seemed to take it that way. At least she stopped panicking.

As quickly as she could, Sara located a peach tree -- she could spot them quickly by now, even before she saw the peaches -- and also ran across a tree full of those nuts she'd read about. She gathered up as many of both as she could, holding them against her stomach with both arms, and hurried back to Cherise. Showing them to Cherise, who nodded eagerly, she knelt and pried Cherise's mouth open a little wider to get a look at the knots.

It seemed it should have been easy to untie them, but they were so soaked in saliva that the entire wad of rope seemed welded into one piece. Sara wondered how Wild Hair had been planning to untie it, then thought, Oh, probably a knife. Wish I had one.

For ten minutes, Sara tried to tease the outermost knot loose, growing almost frantic with worry. If I can't get this out, she told herself, I can't feed her. She'll starve. She probably can't even drink -- I don't think she can swallow very well with all that in there.

At last, she got one knot undone, then reached a little farther into Cherise's mouth to try for the next. Luckily, the ones farther in hadn't been tied quite so tightly. In another few minutes she had the rope out altogether.

Cherise spat out some excess saliva, and worked her jaw back and forth. After making a raspberry sound with her lips, she finally looked up and said, "Thank you, Sara. Thank you so much for everything. Everything!" She started to cry again.

Sara helplessly stroked Cherise's hair again, wishing nothing in the world would ever make her cry again. She finally caught Cherise's eye with a peach, and gave her a questioning look.

Cherise said, "Thank you, I know they're moist, but is there any way I could get some water first?"

Sara shot to her feet. She listened for running water, and realized that since it hadn't been raining for hours, all of the streams may have drained into the sea. She looked for ten minutes, and finally found a pool that looked fresh, in a sandy bed. She scooped up a double handful and walked carefully back to Cherise, and held it next to her mouth. Cherise opened her mouth, and Sara tipped the water in.

Cherise nodded, and said, "Maybe I could try a peach now."

Sara fed her six of them, turning them as Cherise bit off pieces. Sara tried to open up one of the nuts next, but it resisted any pressure her fingers could muster. I'll try later, she decided.

Somewhere within her, a part of Sara awakened, flushed, tingling, wet between her legs and growing more so, wanting, needing. Cherise was right in front of her, the focus of her fantasies every day and night for years, now lying there naked, helpless, completely real. Cherise was right here, right now. Sara was conscious of wanting nothing more than to kiss Cherise, to wrap her arms around her and hold her, rub against her -- especially to rub her mound against her, rub her sex against her. It would be so much more powerful than any fantasy she had ever had.

She pushed the aroused Sara, the Sara who wanted Cherise so much, into a windowless stone cell and locked her in behind a steel door. She could never let herself take advantage of Cherise that way. Raping Cherise, using her body for pleasure, was what the men had wanted to do yesterday. Sara couldn't let any such thing be done to Cherise, ever. Not even, she thought, by me. *Especially* not by me.

She saw Cherise looking up at her, seeming to want to say something, and she realized Cherise was blushing. "Sara, ummm... I really need to pee, real bad. I got so tired of having to lie in it afterward, yesterday. Is there some way...?"

Sara, somehow, didn't find it embarrassing at all. Cherise had a need. It was Sara's job, her one and only job, to take care of Cherise's needs.

She lifted Cherise up by her arms near her shoulders, to stand on her knees. There was no way Cherise could balance that way, so Sara continued holding her steady. She reached down and pulled one of Cherise's knees to the side, opening her legs so the pee wouldn't run down her thighs.

Cherise, her face reddening still more, finally let go a stream that Sara, her head turned away and eyes closed to give Cherise as much privacy as she could, heard pattering on the ground. When Cherise was finished, Sara lifted her and set her back on the ground a few feet away.

“Thank you, thank you again, that feels so much better.” She made a half-giggle sound, which to Sara was a wonderful thing to hear. “You probably never thought that was going to be part of the deal.” She looked up at Sara again. “You don’t... I guess you must not have anything you could use to get all this... stuff off me?” She thumped her hands against the ground behind her, making the chain jingle.

Sara, feeling totally helpless -- here was Cherise with another need, and now Sara was failing her -- shook her head, blinking away tears.

“Hey, no, I understand, really. I... maybe you could help me, though. My legs are so achy from being like this. All day yesterday on that wagon I kept trying to push my hands down past my butt so I could straighten my legs out, and I never could do it. Maybe you could help...?”

Sara nodded eagerly, glad to see the goal moved closer so that it was in her reach. She went behind Cherise, pulled Cherise’s hands and feet outward, away from her butt, and pushed gently against Cherise’s shins, trying to make her bend at the waist. She wanted to say “Now push!” as if Cherise was delivering a baby. Cherise seemed to get the idea anyway, pushing her hands downward, getting them to slip slowly, slowly down along her buttocks. At last they cleared her butt and reached the back of her thigh.

Sara helped Cherise sit up, leaning her back against a tree. Cherise bent double, making it possible to straighten her legs all the way, despite her hands still being inseparable from her feet. “Oh, Sara, that just feels wonderful!”

Sara beamed at her, joy washing through her.

Cherise sat back upright against the tree, pulling her legs back once more, but no longer forced to have them bent completely double. “Thank you, thank you. I’ll never stop saying that.”

And suddenly she began crying again. As before, like a small, heartbroken child. “Sara, I was so stupid, stupid, stupid...”

Sara quickly sat beside her, holding her face, turning it towards her own face so Cherise could see Sara shaking her head, No, no, not stupid, no, never stupid. Sara put her arm across Cherise’s shoulder, pulled Cherise’s head closer to rest on Sara’s own shoulder, stroking Cherise’s hair as she had before. It wasn’t in any sense the horny Sara escaped from the cell. Sara felt no sexual arousal, only a desperate need to comfort Cherise in any way she could.

Cherise, her head still resting against Sara’s shoulder, began talking in a low monotone between sobs and sniffles. “I just... I don’t know, I don’t know how I was so stupid. I think I was going stir crazy in the restaurant. It seemed like it would be fun to get out, I’d feel better. And he seemed so sweet, so sincere. And... Sara, I hadn’t had a man inside me for months, and I just thought it would feel so nice, so welcome. And then I’d come back to the restaurant after, and nobody would know I’d been gone. Stupid, stupid...”

She took a deep breath, fighting against the tears. "I fought them, of course. Maybe that was stupid too. I never had a chance to beat them. But I wasn't going to give them what they wanted." She raised her head and looked at Sara. "That was the important thing. I knew I couldn't get away. I knew my real life was over, and they owned me and would never let me go." Her voice shook, and a fresh set of tears welled out of her eyes.

"I did grab one of my wristbands, after they tore it off, and I wadded it up in my hand. They didn't see it. I dropped it outside, in the street, so maybe Bart could find it. I don't know what I was thinking, though. Just finding a wristband wouldn't tell them anything."

Sara wanted to tell her that the wristband had told her everything, that she was here because of it. But she only continued stroking Cherise's hair. It seemed to calm her a little.

Cherise's voice became strong. "But I swore to myself they'd never get what they wanted from me. Never! I wouldn't work, I wouldn't do anything they wanted me to do. And I thought... well, it seemed to make sense. Of course, I'd had so many plans." The tears came again. "I had things I wanted to do with my life before I was eaten. I was going to get my degree, and stay on at the university to teach. Get married, have kids, you know, all that. I knew..."

Crying overcame her for a moment, then she went on. "I knew all that was over. I'd thrown it all away. But I could keep one thing. A woman should always be able to decide when she's snuffed, decide when she's eaten. I had that, and these guys couldn't take that away from me. That's what I told myself. I'd show them I wasn't going to work, so that there was nothing they could do but snuff me and eat me. I still had that power, I could make them snuff me."

She shuddered violently. "Sara, I always hated pain. I'd cry when mom took me to see the doctor, because I knew he'd stick needles in me. But yesterday, when they tried to get me to work and I wouldn't do it, I knew they'd hurt me, and I knew I had to go through it if I wanted to be snuffed. I knew it'd be bad. I thought it'd be like that girl in the square, in front of the restaurant. I guess it sort of was, it was different but just as bad. I knew I was letting myself in for that. But I just told myself, it will hurt, but then they'll snuff you and the pain will be gone and you won't even remember it."

That, Sara understood now, was what she'd seen in Cherise yesterday. That determination to resist their commands, despite being scared enough to piss. She nodded.

Cherise began crying aloud once more. "Sara, I was so wrong! They weren't going to snuff me! They were going to sell me to a breeding farm! That one thing I thought I still had, that I could decide when I was snuffed, that was gone too! Because I couldn't just tell them in the breeding farm I wasn't going to work! I could never hurt a baby! I could never neglect a baby! I'd be their mother! I'd have to feed them, keep them clean, hold them when they cried, do everything they needed their mother to do, and I could never stop! The breeding farm people, they'd decide when I stop. And I'd just spend twenty years like that, crying every day remembering everything I'd thrown away." She began crying harder. Sara could do nothing but hold her, hoping she was doing everything for Cherise that she could.

Cherise closed her eyes and buried her head deeper into Sara's shoulder. After several minutes she seemed to pull herself back together. She looked around again. "Where are we, Sara? Are we almost back to the restaurant?"

The dangers of lying about that were obvious. Sara bit her lip, gave Cherise an “I’m sorry” look and shook her head.

Cherise was on the edge of another crying jag. “I want to go home.” Sara nodded, and stroked her head once more.

Cherise took a deep breath. Looking back up at Sara again, she said, “Bart sent you to find me though, right?”

Sara had to steel herself to tell the truth again. She wished Cherise didn’t have to know, so soon, that there was no one else out there to help them, that the two of them were on their own. She shook her head again.

Cherise obviously found the implication of Sara’s answer astonishing. Wide eyed, she asked, “You just grabbed some clothes and came out to find me on your own??”

Sara nodded emphatically.

Cherise stared up at her. “Sara, I am so, so, so grateful, but why would you take that kind of risk?” She started shaking her head immediately, remembering Sara needed to be asked yes-or-no questions. “I’m sorry, I know you can’t...”

During the few seconds it took Cherise to start that sentence, Sara felt something inside that she could never quite describe later. She called it a loosening-up, a lifting within, as if a door rusted shut had suddenly sprung open, as if a bird without wings had suddenly taken flight... none of her descriptions ever did justice to the experience, or ever could. There were no words for suddenly having the words back.

But it seemed so right. Because it allowed her to say the one thing she had always wanted so much to say. Maybe it happened because it was the right time to finally say it.

Cherise stopped cold, mid-word, seeing something happen behind Sara’s eyes.

Sara’s eyes held Cherise’s, not wanting ever to let them go. And, in a voice husky from both disuse and emotion, she said slowly, “Because I love you.”

Sara knew it was a beginning, not an end. Nothing would ever stop her speech again. She knew, positively knew, before she said another word, that she would never stammer again.

Cherise looked back at her, mouth hanging open, staring unblinking. “What?”

Sara leaned closer. “I love you, Cherise. I always have. I always will.”

Cherise still wasn’t blinking. “Always... But I thought...”

Sara went on, “Always. From that first instant that I saw you, I knew...”

Cherise surprised her by smiling. "In Mr. Malloran's history class?"

It was Sara's turn to stare. "You remember??"

"Of course I remember! I..." Cherise looked down at last. "I mean, I *really* remember. The last detail. I was looking up at you, and you tripped, nearly fell. Right next to me. Something told me... It was weird, I'd never seen you before, but it was like I knew you'd be really important in my life. I thought I should get to know you, but... Well, you'd never talk to me. I thought it meant you didn't like me, so I didn't press." She suddenly looked up at Sara. "Oh, but it wasn't that, right? You just had your... problem?"

Sara shook her head. "No. I mean, I'd never had it before that. It started that day. I got the same thing you did, that feeling you were really, really important, and it came on too intense for me to handle, I think. Something like that. I'd just completely *forget* how to talk when I'd try to say something to you. And it was just this summer that it started getting worse, I couldn't talk when you were even in the room. And a few days ago I just seized up totally. I kind of lied about that to Bart. It hadn't really happened that way before. I couldn't understand it. It was like some force had hold of me, like it took years for it to get that much control of me, but it was somehow important to stop me from talking..."

A thought flashed through Sara's mind, so astonishing she nearly fainted.

If I had been able to talk yesterday, the thought told her forcefully, then I couldn't have saved Cherise. If I had been able to talk when I found out Cherise was missing, if I'd been able to talk when I ran towards Bart's room to tell him, he would have had Derek and Sid man the doors before I could have got to one. I only got out because I'd run back to the storage room to write a note, so it was Ashley who told him instead of me. Whatever it was that fouled up my speech as soon as I met Cherise, it's the one thing that made it possible to rescue her.

"Sara? What's wrong? Is it back? Can you not talk anymore?"

Sara struggled to clear her mind, and shook her head quickly. "No, no, I'm okay. I was just thinking something. It's a long story, so I'll save it for later." Much later, she thought. When I can get some sort of handle on it.

Still off balance within, Sara was suddenly aware once more of holding the object of her unbridled love so close. She didn't realize she had leaned in to kiss Cherise until she'd done it.

She was instantly appalled at herself. No, no, she shouted to her horny self, I told you no! I can't do that!

Sara saw Cherise looking at her, seeming shocked. Sara opened her mouth to apologize.

It was Cherise who moved next. It was Cherise who leaned forward, her lips parted, pressing them against Sara's lips, fastening on them, nibbling them, staying locked with them.

Sara moved her lips against Cherise's, pressing harder, feeling the pressure in return, moving her right hand behind Cherise's head, resting it there, gently holding her near, hearing Cherise echo the soft sighs she herself was making.

Sara thought: I'm *kissing* Cherise I'm kissing Cherise I'm kissing *Cherise!* And it was like... her birthdays as a child. The cookies. Those birthday cookies Sara's mother had made, that Sara always ate slowly, savoring them, because they fell apart on her tongue and covered it with sweetness, with butteriness, with cinnamonness, and life stood still while the cookie coated her tongue. Cherise's kiss was exactly that way.

But no more than this, Sara promised herself. A kiss is a kiss, but more would be wrong.

They broke apart at last. Sara breathed in air that hadn't come straight from inside Cherise, and that was a loss, but she could deal with it.

Cherise was smiling. "Well... wow."

Sara laughed. "Yeah." Time had stopped standing still, with the parting of their lips. But Sara knew her life now was not the same one it had been before the kiss.

Cherise frowned suddenly and looked around. "So if you came to find me on your own... then..." She looked back at Sara. "There's... nobody out looking for us. Right? I know Bart said if any of us went missing they'd never look for us outside the town." The look she gave Sara said she fervently hoped that somehow this would be an exception to that policy.

Sara suddenly had a sense of how scared Cherise must be right now. Sara knew very well the constant sense of danger generated by being a woman deep within Purity Island, far, far from any help. How much more terrifying that would be, she told herself, if I were manacled and helpless, unable to move on my own.

Sara reached behind Cherise's ankles and took one of Cherise's hands. Cherise's fingers immediately curled around Sara's. Sara said softly, "I know it's scary. But I saw you yesterday, in the cavern. I saw you stand up to them, even knowing how much it would hurt. You're the bravest person I've ever seen."

Cherise looked up sharply, and Sara was glad to see a smile spread across her face. "I'm the bravest you've ever seen? Try looking in a mirror."

Sara felt herself blushing. She smiled back. "Let's not start arguing about who's braver. What we need to do is figure out a way back."

Cherise looked as though she was at the edge of crying again. Instead, she nodded. "Okay. Tell me how you got here, to start with. You followed me across more than half the island without getting caught. So how?"

Sara started recounting events and strategies. She wanted to skip the part about being trapped up in the tree, but told herself that if they were really going to collaborate on a plan, Cherise had to know what the dangers were. She started talking.

As if talking were the most natural thing in the world.

CHAPTER 14

THE NEXT DAY

Sara was glad there were plenty of thick bushes growing right up to the edge of the shelf. She and Cherise were sufficiently hidden that Sara had a tentative feeling of safety as she watched traffic in either direction on the mountain trail. "Traffic" might be stretching it, the word inspiring mental images of dozens of cars crossing and turning on intersecting roads, their movements controlled by electric signal lights. For as long as an hour at a time there was no one in sight on the trail or its approaches at all. Each time anyone made use of the trail, usually one or two men driving a wagon pushed by slavegirls, with a doggirl or two attending them, Sara lifted Cherise up so she could see. Between viewings of the passages of wagons of various sizes, they'd been discussing, in near whispers, ideas for making the crossing themselves.

To the right, through a stand of trees, lay the farm that was directly across from the beginning of the mountain trail. Sara could dimly make out, as she had two days ago, the sounds of work in progress -- the creaking of wheels of wagons, carts, or wheelbarrows, the occasional barking of doggirls, sounds her mind was beginning to accept as the background of her life, along with the more familiar twittering of birds and buzzing of insects. Some of these new environmental sounds were coming from the cave, a bit farther to the right, to which were added the muffled smacks from within of hammers striking rock.

Sara had spent at least an hour yesterday examining the iron bands, padlocks, and chains holding Cherise's hands and feet together in their seemingly permanent grasp. Sara was glad there had at least been a way to relieve the strain of the entire assembly being trapped against the small of Cherise's back. But any greater degree of freedom for Cherise seemed to be out of the question. There were plenty of loose rocks around that could have been used to pound any of the padlocks to the breaking point, but there was no way to attack the locks with the required abandon. All of the bands on Cherise's wrists and ankles were turned so that the padlocks were on the inside, so striking them with rocks using any great force carried an unacceptable risk of breaking bones instead of the locks. Cherise couldn't even get her hands underneath her feet to bring them around in front of her ankles -- the hobble chain wrapped around the joining of her hands held them too close to the backs of her ankles, so she couldn't get them past the barrier of her heels. The chain itself, like the locks, was too close to any number of skin surfaces to allow Sara even to think about trying to smash it. Rubbing rocks against the surface of the metal bands might gradually wear them down, but certainly not in the time remaining.

Sara had given up at last, frustrated to the point of crying. Cherise had told her it was okay, really, it was all right, that she could stand staying bound up this way. She reminded Sara that the alternative had been a life of many years of bearing one litter of babies after another. Then she'd leaned forward with her lips parted. Sara understood the signal. They'd kissed until Sara felt better, which had taken about three seconds, and a little longer past that.

Sara, when Cherise smiled at her, talked to her, listened to her, felt herself on a high plateau, towering over the world. And when she and Cherise kissed, in Sara's world there were no slaves, no breeding farms, no men who would strip away her freedom if they caught her, no mountains in her way, no past, no worrisome future. Only the present, the wonder of lips meeting soft lips.

The kiss ended, and Sara considered the future again. Time. That was the big issue. A deadline loomed over Sara and Cherise. Sara's roast was scheduled in eight days, but more importantly, the boat returning the restaurant staff and interns to the mainland would leave three days after that. Eleven days from now, there would no longer be a reason for Sara and Cherise to get past the mountains. There would be no one anywhere on the island who could rescue them from the natives.

Sara didn't feel time pressing unbearably yet. She had followed Cherise to this point from the restaurant in a matter of hours, during a single day. Once they crossed back over the mountains, getting back to the restaurant would take longer than that, with all of the stops and detours made necessary by whatever dangers intervened. One detour was already obvious: they couldn't take the road that went straight to Purity Town, along which Hairy and son no doubt were still looking for her. But Sara felt sure that they could get to the restaurant no later than the day after crossing the mountains.

Crossing, though, was a serious problem. Sara could still impersonate an island male, but she would have to carry Cherise the entire way, which was not at all comparable to carrying a crate of peaches. Sara couldn't imagine any interpretation of an island man physically carrying a slavegirl over the mountain trail that wouldn't set off alarm bells in the mind of anyone seeing them.

Sara was starting to think she might need to consider a night crossing. They wouldn't run into anyone on the trail at night. If the sky would stay clear, there would be a slightly-more-than-half moon in the sky that should clear the mountains a little after midnight, which would give Sara sufficient light to see where she was going, but it also exposed them both to greater danger of being seen from below -- if it was light enough for Sara to see, it was light enough for anyone else to see too. And there was no way to know how temporary the current clear skies might be. With a return of the thick cloud cover, there might not be a visible moon at all tonight, leaving the trail in pitch blackness. Sara was going to have to make the crossing walking upright -- she'd be carrying Cherise, so she didn't have the option of crawling and feeling her way ahead with her hands on the ground. Trying to walk the trail blind was much too dangerous to attempt.

Sara had spent the last couple of hours discussing all this with Cherise. A shroud of gloom was starting to settle over Sara's mind.

As if to punctuate Sara's mood, the prospect in front of her suddenly fell into shadow. Sara whirled around, instinctively ready to defend against attack, and saw that a thick bank of clouds was approaching from the west, stretching unbroken to the horizon, the sun now vanished behind it. She sighed deeply. New rains coming. At least, she told herself, the streams will be flowing again.

She saw that Cherise was frowning at the western skies as well. Cherise echoed Sara's sigh and looked away. She was sitting upright, her legs necessarily drawn back, her back pressed flat against the surprisingly smooth natural rock wall separating the shelf from the woods. She had told Sara she could manage to feel relatively comfortable that way. It didn't put any strain on her back, and she needed only to bend forward periodically to stretch her legs straight out when they began to ache.

Cherise gasped and looked up suddenly at Sara, wide-eyed. Sara could almost see the lightbulb that seemed to have just turned on above her head.

Sara listened carefully to make out Cherise's whisper. "Sara, I came here in a wagon. All these guys crossing over have wagons. Would it work if you put me in a wagon and pushed it across? Nobody would even have to know I was in it. You could cover me with skins, maybe. Or peaches. Then you'd just be a guy with a load to trade in town. You already got across carrying a load of peaches. Pushing a wagon full of stuff isn't really any different. Could you get a wagon somehow? Steal one?"

Sara was cautious about the idea. "Just walk up to a guy and take his wagon away from him?"

Cherise shook her head. "Not here. I mean from a farm. They have to put them *somewhere* when they aren't using them."

That could work, thought Sara, that could really work, assuming I can get hold of a wagon small enough to push by myself. Anyone seeing me would attach the same story to it that made my carrying peaches seem natural.

Sara's excitement began growing, but she saw one drawback immediately. In anything she said or did, her uppermost priority, her first thought, was how it would affect Cherise.

She knelt in front of Cherise, reached behind her feet to take hold of both hands, and kissed her briefly. "I need to know if this is okay. If I do start looking for a wagon, I'd have to leave you alone. I mean *really* alone." So far, Sara had only had to go short distances from where Cherise was to gather peaches and nuts to eat. "You wouldn't be able to see me, or hear me, or know how long I was going to be gone. Please don't just say 'Sure, that'll be fine.' Really think about how scary that will be." Sara could imagine herself in Cherise's place, and to Sara, the thought of being so completely alone in a place of constant danger, unable to move, unable to evade capture that would lead to a lifetime of slavery, was terrifying.

Cherise nodded solemnly, with no hesitation. "I don't want you ever to let worrying about me stop you from doing things you have to do."

"Cherise, I don't have it in me to stop thinking about you. But I can do it if you swear to me that this is what you want."

Cherise nodded forcefully. "This will work, the thing with using a wagon. We've spent all day thinking and this is what we came up with. Nothing else has sounded feasible."

Sara watched Cherise's face intently, looking for any sign of uncertainty. Finally she nodded. "Okay, but not today. There's not that much of a hurry, and we can spend the rest of today trying to think of something different that would work. Instead of this."

Cherise quickly agreed. "Okay."

Sara smiled. "You hungry?" Sara had worked out the problem of opening up the nuts, and mealtime was less monotonous than it had threatened to be at first, featuring only peaches. They would need girlmeat eventually to stay healthy, but Sara didn't think that would be a problem. In two or three days, tops, they should be back at the restaurant.

Cherise grinned. "Yeah."

Sara kissed her once more. "Back in a minute."

* * * * *

THREE DAYS LATER

Sara woke up and felt the excitement surge through her, tinged with fear. She was going to try for the wagon today. She'd spent two days watching, learning the schedule of the farm, the habits of the farmers. It would be better to study the routine a little longer, but as always, Sara felt time ticking away. If anything looked wrong, if anything didn't fit her expectations, she could wait for another day, but there weren't that many days left. The worst case would be having to start over at a different farm. She really hoped that wouldn't happen, but she wanted to have enough time if it did happen.

Sara uncovered Cherise's upper half -- she'd draped her vest over Cherise from her waist up past her ears, to give her some shelter from the rain overnight. As she had daily, Sara gave Cherise a drink of rainwater that had fallen into Sara's upturned hat overnight, then fed her peaches and nuts, turning each peach as Cherise bit off the fruit surrounding the pit. Then she held Cherise up, butt down, supporting her with arms under Cherise's knees and shoulders, so Cherise could empty her bladder and get rid of digestive wastes, afterward wiping Cherise's butt with a wad of leaves, then washing her own hands in the nearby stream afterward. Cherise had been terribly embarrassed by the toilet process the first day, but seeing how serious Sara was about taking care of any need she had, and knowing that it was something that had to be done, had made it easier to accept it as the days went by.

Cherise smiled as Sara ate her own breakfast and buttoned her vest. She knew why Sara was looking eager to get going this morning. Sara had described everything to her, and together they had agreed that it was time to give it a try. The countdown was approaching its end. They should be over the mountains and on their way to safety later today.

Sara helped Cherise sit upright against the wall, as she preferred, and set several peaches and some shelled nuts beside her, so that if Sara was gone too long and Cherise got hungry, she could fall onto her side and have lunch. Sara knew Cherise could manage on her own to wriggle back to a sitting position afterward -- she'd returned each of the last two days to find Cherise sitting up, with the nuts gone and only pits remaining of the peaches. It was really lucky, Sara told herself, that this place is full of food you can eat without using your hands.

Sara knelt in front of Cherise, put her hand behind Cherise's head and kissed her deeply. Her throat tight -- leaving Cherise always brought her close to crying -- she said, "I'll be back as soon as I can. Probably sooner than the last couple of days. I think this should do it."

Cherise grinned at her. "I know. Go ahead, I'll be fine. I'm getting used to this." She leaned forward for one more kiss, and Sara found herself, again, in that timeless world that her lips shared with Cherise's.

Sara let go of Cherise and backed away. As she'd expected, tears were running down her cheeks.

Cherise's eyelids were shining, about to spill over. "Now go. Get us out of here." She managed to maintain a smile.

Sara turned and began weaving her way through the trees, ordering herself sternly not to look back. If she did, she knew she'd come back for one more kiss, and have to start the whole departure process over again.

* * * * *

Sara lay on her stomach, supporting her chin on her hands, remaining as motionless as she could for as long as she could, moving only her eyes as she followed the activities in front of her. She was about ten feet from the edge of the field, within a dense stand of trees. Even on a sunny day she would have been deep in shadow. Her hiding place was still darker under the heavy clouds. Nevertheless she'd smeared her face and arms with mud again, to be that much harder to spot. She'd found a relatively dry place to wait -- the arrangement of leaves and branches above her seemed to divert most of the lightly falling rain elsewhere.

In the field, several slavegirls were harvesting some sort of herb Sara hadn't recognized, when she'd first spent nearly all of a day watching the work in progress two days ago. She'd puzzled over it long enough to decide it was likely the raw form of the fertility drug, the island's most valuable export, which had proven impossible to grow on the mainland.

The girls, as they worked, piled the harvested herb into one of several small wagons, perhaps more properly called carts, whichever one was nearest. Periodically one of the girls pulled the cart to a distant structure that Sara suspected was a drying shed, the cart replaced with an empty one returning from the shed.

Sara needed one of those carts. Any one of them was big enough for Cherise to curl up inside, but small enough that Sara was sure she could pull it up the mountain trail by herself. She had planned to cover Cherise with peaches, though she suspected that would add too much weight. She'd wished there had been a supply of girlskin leather she could appropriate, since that would more easily hide Cherise with less of a weight penalty. She decided that the herbs available here would be a good compromise, much lighter than peaches.

Sara hadn't had nearly as much trouble finding carts she might steal as she had expected. This was the first farm she had checked, the one directly across from the mountain trail, the one on whose periphery Sara and Cherise had set up camp after Cherise's rescue.

On Sara's first day of watching the farm, the slavegirls had worked steadily all morning, then were given a break, no doubt for lunch, at about midday, though time was hard to judge in the absence of a visible sun. At that time, the field had completely emptied, as the slavegirls, doggirls, and their overseers had all headed for the building adjacent to the supposed drying shed, really just a roof supported at the corners by upright logs, in which lunch was served. Lunch had taken about a half-hour, Sara judged, during which time the carts in the field had been left completely unattended.

Sara would have preferred to take one of the carts at the end of the day, but as darkness approached that first day, signaling the end of the workday, all of the carts had been wheeled back to the shed. Lunchtime was the only time Sara would be able to make off with one without being seen. The farmers would, of course, be left with the mystery of a missing cart, but with no idea where to start looking for it.

Sara did acknowledge the possibility that she might be seen. It worried her. The danger wasn't immediate -- as far away as any of the overseers were going to be, Sara could easily abandon the cart and run, at the first sign that anyone was chasing her. But she would then have to give up on this particular farm and scout out another. There were still five days now until Sara's roast, eight until the boat left for the mainland. If everything went well today, Sara might be able to pull the cart, and Cherise, over the mountain trail this afternoon, and perhaps arrive at the restaurant late tomorrow. Losing a few days finding a new farm and planning a theft could cause a major problem with her own roast, but returning Cherise to the restaurant was the important thing. There would still be time.

Yesterday Sara had repeated her surveillance of the farm. The same thing happened again at noon: field abandoned for half an hour, carts left behind. Sara didn't bother to stay to watch the rest of the day -- it seemed doubtful, based on the previous day's events, that the afternoon and approaching sunset would offer any better opportunities than lunchtime did. Sara had returned to Cherise, to report on what had happened and to talk over plans and exit strategies. It had been Cherise's idea to pause just out of sight in the woods, after stealing the wagon, to watch for any signs of pursuit before continuing. Sara thought that was a very good idea -- once she started lugging the cart through the woods, she didn't want to be run down from behind and surrounded while she was distracted by her efforts.

Sara loved so much being able to talk to Cherise! All those years wasted when she could have been getting to know Cherise and growing closer to her, but they were making up for it now. Sharing the planning of the Great Cart Heist was just a small, but rewarding, part of it. They talked about their families, about experiences they'd had in college, in high school, and in those years before they'd known each other.

Cherise was moved to happy tears when Sara had told her that her whole reason for volunteering to be roasted for a restaurant-sponsored feast here, on the island, was so that Cherise could eat part of her. She'd leaned forward with her lips parted, in the now standard kiss-me signal. They'd kissed for a long time then.

Sara tensed now, feeling her heart pounding against the hard ground. Lunchtime had come, and once again the girls stopped what they were doing and headed for the meal shelter.

Sara had picked out her target cart: one that was to her left, very near the edge of the woods. Sara judged she would probably need less than thirty seconds out in the open to reach it, pull it past the front line of trees, and wait there for a time, to see whether the theft had been witnessed.

In a few minutes, the slavegirls and overseers were all in the meal shelter. Sara watched carefully as she counted to a hundred, then rose slowly to her feet and sidled through the woods closer to the cart.

She took several deep breaths, trying to calm the thumping of her heart, then walked out of the woods, trying to appear as if she belonged where she was, having decided that running would catch attention and any sign of furtiveness would generate suspicion.

She was starting to bend to reach for the handles at the front of the cart when alarm bells went off in her head, just a fraction of a second too late to prevent her taking another step. Why, she suddenly asked herself, is this cart in a cleared area, at least a dozen paces from the nearest herb patch? Why

would anyone choose to leave it there instead of in the middle of the work being done? And why is the dirt in front of it unnaturally smooth?

Her brain sent frantic signals to her feet to freeze in place, but she was too far along in her stride to stop.

As she set her foot down, it began sinking into the ground, and continued sinking. She threw her arms out to the side to try to catch any firm surface she could find as she plunged downward. She saw the dirt puff up from the ground surrounding her, dirt that had covered the strands of the net covering the hole she was sliding into. The net followed her in, surrounding her now, beginning to close in at the top.

Her fall was brought to a soft, springy stop, arrested as the net reached the maximum depth its anchors would allow, and her feet splashed into a shallow puddle of collected rainwater at the bottom of the hole.

She tried desperately for a handhold along the sides of the hole, and looked above her to see that the edge of the net had closed just above her head, as the drawstring forming the edge shrank to a circle barely three inches across. From the circle, strands of twine radiated outward. Anchored to unseen stakes, those strands had been buried under soft dirt like the rest of the net.

Her brain still rang with the words of her mental alarm, repeated over and over, uselessly and woefully late: It's a trap! Cart right by the edge of the woods! Perfect one to steal! Away from where they'd been working, away from everything!

There seemed to be a swatch of girlskin between her feet and the bottom of the net. Yes, of course, she thought, that was covering the hole. Damn it damn it DAMN IT!!! SHIT!!!! So stupid, so stupid! I should have figured it out sooner! How did they know?? How did they know?? If they saw me yesterday, why didn't they just take me then? SHIT!!!!

Above the clamor of recriminations almost overwhelming rational thought, another voice broke through: Stop it! Stop panicking! Nobody was out here to watch! You still have time to get out of this!

The hole itself was about three feet across at the top, narrowing at the bottom so that there was barely room for her feet side-by-side. She could easily have climbed out, if she hadn't been enclosed in the damned net!

She reached up to try to widen the opening of the net at the top, but her own weight holding down the net made it impossible. It's anchored outside, she reminded herself. I need to get my weight off the bottom of it.

She climbed up a few inches and dug her heels into the side of the hole, so that her weight wasn't on the bottom. It didn't help. She was just anchoring the net to the sides of the hole now, which did nothing to relieve the tension in the drawstring. Short of floating weightlessly within the hole, she wasn't going to be able to open that drawstring any wider.

Wait, she told herself, I can be weightless for a second.

She jumped upward, her hands above her trying to spread the opening during the brief moment when she wasn't holding the net down, hoping she could afterward dig her heels into the sides of the hole to prevent her falling back, which would pull the drawstring closed again. She tried it five times, each time briefly making the opening wider, but never succeeded in anchoring her heels against the hole's sides. Maybe, she thought, if I jump, spread the opening, and catch the edge of the hole with my hands after...

She heard voices approaching. Shit, shit, shit, shit...

She thought: I must never tell them about Cherise. I have to protect her...

She almost screamed when she realized that keeping Cherise's existence and whereabouts secret wasn't an option. Cherise couldn't survive on her own. She might wriggle her way to a few fallen peaches, but not enough of them near enough to keep her going. And she couldn't do anything with the nuts, which could only be opened by smashing the shell with a rock. Left on her own, she would starve, but that wasn't the worst part. That wasn't the completely, totally unthinkable part.

Cherise would die alone and her meat would spoil, uneaten by her kind. Everything a woman lived for, existed for, would be lost.

I have to tell them, Sara told herself. They have to find her. The alternative, Sara knew, was so unacceptable to any woman that Sara must not let it happen.

The voices outside the hole were near enough now that Sara could make out what they were saying.

"Gotta be a kid. I bin sayin' that all along."

"Reckon his daddy better whip him good. Damn kid, out stealin' from our hard work!"

"'Nless his daddy put him up to it. What he gonna do with our herbs all by hisself?"

Sara's jaw dropped. It was so unfair! The trap wasn't for me! she told herself. They never knew I was here! I was going to steal from them, but somebody's already been doing it! I've been caught in a trap they set for some local juvenile delinquent!

She couldn't help a whimper escaping her throat as she realized the mistaken identity made things still worse for her. They'll assume I've been doing it! she thought. Not only am I a woman in clothes, but on top of that, they'll think I'm a woman who's been stealing their stuff! They were talking about whipping a *boy* for this! What will they do to a *woman*?

Several shapes towered above the edge of the hole over Sara's head. Her bladder let go.

Two of the men bent down and pulled the net, and Sara with it, roughly out of the hole. How long before they can tell what they've got? she wondered helplessly.

Not at all long, it turned out. Her hat, with its shoulder-length wig, had come off, revealing her slave-length hair and her full face. The eyes of the man she happened to be watching went wide in

astonishment. Sara had seen that exact look before. The man said slowly, as if searching for words he never imagined saying, "It's... a... girl!"

Another voice, standing by Sara's feet where she lay stretched on the ground still entangled in the net, said in wonderment, "And she ain' got no metal on her!"

The first man, holding the net near her head, said sharply, "Clement, run get us some slave gear."

The one named Clement sprinted off, leaving three men surrounding Sara.

It would, she reflected later, have made a lot more sense for them to leave her netted until Clement came back, so the four of them could let her loose carefully and hold her down while locking her into the wristbands, hobble chain, and collar, which would keep her their inescapable property for the rest of her life.

But their hatred of the idea of any women wearing clothes like a man was so intense, so deeply held, that the first order of business was to do something about it.

With an angry yank, the man who'd identified Sara's gender, standing by her head, pulled open the drawstring and dragged her out of the netting. The man was a generation older than the other two. Sara dubbed him Dad.

With two hands around her arms, Dad pulled Sara up to her feet, and the younger two, Skinny and Slack Jaw, began tearing at her clothes. It took just seconds for them to strip away the vest and shorts -- she'd already lost the shoes at the bottom of the net -- leaving her naked in less time than it took to think the word "naked."

Sara tried to resist, to the extent she could, but Dad maintained his grip on her arms, almost cutting off the circulation.

In the distance, Sara could see Clement returning, a full set of slavewear jingling in his hands.

Anger suddenly replaced fear within Sara. I don't care what they'll do to me if I don't get loose, she told herself, but Cherise will *not* belong to these men.

Sara began struggling wildly, challenging Dad to keep his hold. She could feel his hands tighten still further. Fine, she thought. You hold on, Dad. Don't even think of letting go. Just hold me up and don't let me drop.

Dad grunted, "A little help here."

Skinny and Slack Jaw had turned away to toss Sara's clothes off to the side. They turned back to face her directly now.

Now, thought Sara.

She bent at the waist to kick her legs into the air, repeating her thought: Hold me up Dad, hold me up. Dad obliged.

Planting her left foot against Skinny's chest and her right against Slack's, she thrust outward with her legs as hard as she could, thinking of all the leg presses she'd done in her workouts.

Skinny and Slack went staggering backwards, and the recoil of her butt slamming unexpectedly into Dad's stomach sent him reeling back. Unable to move his feet quickly enough to keep his balance, he went over backward, falling on his back with Sara face up on top of him. He cried out when his elbows struck the ground painfully, and his hands shot open, freeing Sara.

She bounced to her feet, turned sharply to her right as Skinny recovered and reached for her, slipped out of the grasp of his outstretched hand on her forearm, and ran. No possible way to stop to recover her clothes this time, which were in shreds anyway. Skinny was just a few feet behind her, Slack just behind him.

She ran directly across the field, seeing several astonished slavegirls gaping at her, hearing two doggirls bark at her, not near enough to pose any danger. Into the woods then, on the opposite side from where she had hidden. Instinct had told her not to run in the direction of their encampment where Cherise was waiting.

It took several minutes of weaving through trees, with the two men just behind her, before first Skinny, then Slack, each staggered to a stop, bent over, panting, their hands on their knees. Sara ran straight ahead for another minute, and knew she must be out of sight by then. Turning directly to her right, she dropped to the ground and crawled for several minutes in that direction. She stopped when she saw the right type of bush, one she could crawl into that would hide her from all directions, and stopped there at last, trying to catch her breath with her mouth wide open, making less noise that way.

She heard sounds of pursuit resume, but soon they receded into the distance.

CHAPTER 15

Sara ruthlessly suppressed all self-oriented thoughts, such as the fact of being an un-collared woman, no longer able to hide within clothes, under pursuit on Purity Island, separated by miles of forest and a mountain ridge from anyone who could help -- a mountain ridge she couldn't possibly cross in daylight, in her present state of undress. Only Cherise was important. Sara was a mechanism whose one task was to get Cherise to safety. All mental processes had to be aimed towards that goal.

Having smeared her entire body with mud now, she moved slowly, and she hoped invisibly, in a wide circle around the farm, back to the north side of it where Cherise waited at their camp. Not taking a chance on being spotted from within the farm itself, she put as much distance as she could between herself and the clearing, crossing two streams, staying on the far side of the second so that she wouldn't blunder back into the fields of the farm.

Fortunately, it was impossible to get lost on Purity Island, as long as it was raining or had recently rained -- a condition that rarely failed to be met for any length of time. On the west side of the island, all of the streams ran to the west, down from the mountains and into the ocean. It was easy to remain oriented.

Sara stopped as the way in front of her grew marginally lighter. Creeping forward, she saw that she had reached the clearing for another farm. She gave it a wide berth, resuming her progress back towards the mountains once she had passed it.

She wondered about the safety of herself and Cherise remaining camped where they had been. Right now, she told herself, they should be searching for me in the area south of the farm, because I ran in that direction. Eventually the hunt will spread north. They can't look everywhere at once, but won't stop looking for a woman on the loose who they think has been stealing from them. We can't stay by the trail. It's way too close, one of the first places the hunt will cover once it moves north.

They may recruit other farmers to help, she thought. A female thief is a menace to all of them. But there are no phones or other communication devices for them to use, no cars, not even horses to ride. News on the island can only spread as fast as a man can walk. When he gets around to it. The area north of the farm should be safe temporarily. At least until morning, with only a few hours of daylight remaining today. We could try to cross over the mountains tonight. If the moon breaks through the clouds just right, not too dark, not too light.

Sara wondered about the person who'd been stealing herbs from the farm -- they had likely been correct to begin with in thinking it was a boy, presumably a teenager. What was *he* gaining from it? Sara reminded herself that no product of any of the farms exceeded the fertility herb in value. She thought it might make sense that the boy was on his own, after a falling out with his father, or mistreatment. He'd struck off alone to try to start his own farm. He'd need slaves. Stealing slaves was hard. Stealing a supply of the herb was easier, and would make it possible to buy some slaves at auction.

Sara pushed the thoughts away. Stop thinking about unimportant stuff! she ordered herself once more.

She bent occasionally to scoop up a few peaches from the ground, and ate them on the move.

Without clothes, Sara reminded herself, I can only get us across the mountains at night. Of course, we'll need a moon, but I'll worry about that when the time comes. If we can't cross over the mountains tonight, we can't stay at our camp. We'll have to camp out some distance away, and come back at night for another try.

She took in a sudden sharp breath as she realized the topography of the island might present an alternative.

The central ridge runs the entire length of the island, north to south, she told herself, but surely it doesn't stay at that height and then suddenly drop off when it reaches the sea. It more likely gradually gets lower and lower in altitude until it finally dips underwater and the island ends. At the very end, it might just be a rocky rise a few feet high. We wouldn't need a trail to cross it. I can just carry Cherise over. And then head down the eastern coast back to Purity Town.

In that case, she reminded herself, time finally became a serious issue. The island was forty miles long. At present, their camp should be about twenty miles from either end. Sara knew she would have to travel slowly, carrying Cherise and pausing frequently to listen and watch for any signs of being near another farm. She would have to go around several farms, most likely. I might, she thought, be able to make it to the north end in two days. But let's say three, considering the obstacles. And then another three days down the coast to Purity.

Too long, she decided. I'd miss my roast. It's in five days. Well, she reminded herself, the six days of travel is a conservative guess. But this whole idea doesn't look nearly as good as it did a minute ago. We'd better stick with the original plan of going over the mountain trail at night. Tonight, if at all possible.

* * * * *

Sara dropped down to hands and knees as she approached the camp where Cherise would be waiting for her -- where she *hoped* Cherise was waiting for her. Sara hadn't been this near the edge of the farm, the center of the hunt, for hours, and felt uncomfortable, as well, being this close to the shelf.

She felt intense relief at the sight of Cherise, lying on her side, awkwardly turning a peach on the ground with her mouth for access to its uneaten half.

Sara was moving so carefully that she was within ten feet of Cherise before Cherise suddenly spun her head around at the sound of Sara's approach, her face showing an instant of panic before breaking into a relieved grin. Cherise said in a trembling whisper, "Sara! I was getting so worried..." Then she sucked in a sharp gasp, as she took in Sara's lack of clothes. Barely audibly, she whispered a shocked, "Sara..."

Sara held up her hand in a gesture for quiet. She wanted to assess the situation up on the shelf before either of them made any more noise.

Beyond the foot of the trail, Sara could see the entrance to the cavern. Cute Guy and Crushed Hat were standing in front of it, in intense conversation with Dad and Skinny from the farm.

Sara shook her head slowly, unconsciously, repeating “No, no, no, no...” under her breath. The intensity of the hunt was now ratcheting another notch higher. The cavern men and the farmers were putting their two stories together, and both sides now knew there was a woman on the loose who had stolen both a slave from the tunnel project and herbs, and likely one or more wagons carrying them, from the farm. Sara was sure a still greater number of surrounding farmers would soon be enlisted in the search. Nothing would infuriate Purity Island farmers as much as the crime wave Sara was believed to be engaged in.

Sara wondered briefly what they thought she was going to do with the herbs, but rationality about women had never been the island’s strong suit. She pushed the thought away, as she had all others that didn’t directly relate to her own and Cherise’s safety.

Cute Guy knew exactly where Cherise had come from, and once Dad had described the “thief” to him, Cute Guy would know who the thief was as well: that restaurant clean-up girl. He’d know why Sara had “stolen” Cherise, and where she would try to take her. The mountain crossing would be watched closely now, very likely by night as well as by day. At least, Sara had to assume that was the case. Crossing the mountains over the trail at any time of day or night was off the list of options.

Sara would have to take Cherise over the mountains at the end of the island, where they reached sea level. And there was no time to lose in getting there.

She rushed over to Cherise, whispered “We have to go,” and picked her up, arms under knees and shoulders as usual. She could feel Cherise trembling.

“Sara, tell me what happened. Why...”

Sara caught Cherise’s eyes and shook her head, chancing a whisper. “Cherise, I love you more than you can imagine. Now hush, please. I need to focus.” She couldn’t carry on a conversation while keeping all her senses alert for all of the things she needed to watch for.

Cherise blinked, then looked at Sara steadily. Briefly, she nodded.

Barely noticing Cherise’s weight, but always, always conscious of holding the most important person in her world, Sara began walking. Feeling unsafe near the shelf, she angled away from the shelf deeper into the woods, heading north.

* * * * *

Slightly more light ahead. Clearing? Go left, keep it in view. Yes. Open area. Move around it.

Sound of barking doggirl. Not for us, but there must be slavegirls ahead. Stop, determine direction. Slightly ahead and left. Move slowly ahead to right, keep listening.

Rain stopped, but skies still gray. Creek. Stop for drink for self and Cherise. Cross, move on.

Sharp yips. Doggirl puppies? Mixed with giggles. Playing.

Move slowly. Fence ahead, enclosure. Move around it, keeping it in sight through trees.

* * * * *

Sara stumbled, nearly dropping Cherise. Cherise said softly, "Sara, let's stop here. You can barely stand up. I think we're as safe here as anywhere. And there can't be much more daylight left anyway."

Sara stood still, looking around. There was a small creek just in front of her, thick trees ahead and behind, no human sounds she could detect other than her own and Cherise's breathing. The creek, besides providing ready access to water, was gurgling sufficiently to mute any sounds she and Cherise might make.

Sara closed her eyes, swayed, and opened them to set Cherise gently on the ground, on her side.

And the glass jar in which Sara had bottled up her emotional reactions to the day's events suddenly shattered. She dropped to her knees and bent double, her face buried against her hands on her thighs, shaking with sobs.

Dimly she heard a voice saying, "Sara... Sara... Sara..." She thought it might be her mother, but she remembered her mother was dead, and this voice was here, in the present, alive.

She looked up and blinked hard. Through the still streaming tears, she saw that Cherise had rolled onto her back, and was holding the inseparable knot of her hands and feet above her, her elbows and knees apart to make circles of her arms and legs. Her eyes looking steadily at Sara, Cherise said, "Come inside." She jiggled her arms and legs to make it clear what "inside" meant. "I want to hold you, like you held me when I was crying."

Pressing her lips together, sniffing mightily, Sara crawled forward, between Cherise's legs, between her arms, and lay full length atop Cherise, resting her chin on Cherise's shoulder, feeling Cherise's arms and legs tighten around her as she cried.

* * * * *

Eventually, Sara told Cherise everything, through the sniffles, hiccupping, gasping and catching of breath that accompanied her tears. The light was dimming significantly, from the setting of the sun rather than increasing clouds, when she finished, ending with saying over and over, "I'm sorry, Cherise, I'm so sorry, so sorry..."

Her chin still on Cherise's shoulder, Sara let the litany of apology wind down when Cherise kissed her ear. "Sara, you don't have anything you have to apologize for."

"I should have seen the trap. I should have been able to stay out of it..."

Sara could feel Cherise's headshake. "You can't blame yourself, really you can't. There was no way you could have expected they were already protecting themselves against somebody who was stealing from them before you ever got there. I didn't even know that kind of thing happened here!"

“But I still should have...”

“Shhhh. Stop dwelling on things you think you should have done. Think about what you *have* done. Nobody but you could ever have done what you’ve done for me. Nobody! I can’t possibly put in words how much that means to me. Lift up your head, Sara. I want to kiss you.”

Sara, more out of a feeling of duty to do anything Cherise asked than any notion of deserving a kiss, looked at Cherise and met her lips with her own.

As the kiss continued, Cherise began, slowly at first and gradually more urgently, rocking her hips under Sara’s, tightening her arms and legs to pull her more firmly against her, moaning softly at the back of her throat.

Sara broke the kiss suddenly. “Cherise, I... don’t think I should...”

Unexpectedly, Cherise smiled. “You’re thinking you’d be taking advantage because I’m helpless, and that I just feel I have to give you something because I think I owe it to you.” Sara blinked, knowing no one in her life had ever read her mind as exactly as Cherise just had. Cherise went on, “Okay, my fault you were thinking that, because of what I just said a few minutes ago.” She shook her head. “It’s not that. There’s...” She grinned, a little sheepishly. “There’s something I left out telling you, about that day we met, in history class.

“Okay, let me back up a little. A long time ago, just before we ate my mom, so I would have been thirteen, she sat down with me, and, I guess, passed along to me what she thought I needed to know. One thing that really stuck with me was when she told me that there would always be a lot of people who liked me, and that I couldn’t worry myself about a few who didn’t. She said it was important to always be me, and if I saw that someone didn’t like me, that I just needed to let it go, that I should always be myself, the person I really was inside, and not try to change myself to get the approval of that one more person.”

Sara nodded, puzzled. The advice sounded wise, but she wasn’t seeing how it related to what was happening now.

Cherise continued, “What I didn’t mention about the day you and I met was... well, I said I knew you were important somehow, not just another person in my life. But I... kind of left out the part about how right away, right that minute, I felt really, really attracted to you. I mean, physically.”

Sara gaped at her. “But...”

Cherise smiled again and nodded. “I know, I know. But see, when you wouldn’t talk to me, I thought it meant you didn’t like me. So I tried really hard to do what my mom told me. I kept telling myself I just had to let it go. But it was so hard! I couldn’t, really. I could act the way I thought my mom would want me to act with you, and not push anything, not try to get to know you and be friends with you. Because it was true what mom said, I really did have a lot of friends. And I’d tell myself, if there’s something about me Sara doesn’t like, I can’t help that. I have to be me and not change it. But... It never stopped me thinking about you. About being with you.”

Sara tried hard to gather any single complete thought from the swirl of fragments flying around her head. "... always thought you only liked boys. For sex, I mean." She winced. That didn't seem at all the thing to say at this moment.

Cherise laughed. "I suppose it did *seem* like that. And I like men, very much. But for women... I always kind of pushed away women for physical attention, and kept them out of my mind, because... well, I just knew none of them were like you."

Sara opened her mouth, perhaps to respond, though she realized she had no idea what to say. Cherise said, "So, do you really think *talking* is what you want to do right now?"

Ummmm... No, thought Sara. She plunged her mouth onto Cherise's, open wide, all of the wanting, the wishing, the needing, from five years flowing out of her all at once. Rubbing her tongue against Cherise's, sharing her breath and her moans, moving her hips in rhythm with Cherise's, spreading her legs apart so the lips between their legs could kiss as well as the ones on their mouths, thinking: I'm so glad, so glad, I haven't been having sex with any of the other girls -- and not because it would somehow have been a betrayal of Cherise, but because it would have given me such an inferior idea of what sex can be. The feel of skin touching skin, mind touching mind, love touching love and being multiplied beyond all measure...

Orgasm rippling, stiffening her body, her head thrown back, eyes closed tight, feeling the earthquake inside.

The quake subsiding, the feather floating downward, her body draining of energy like a tub with the plug pulled.

She opened her eyes, thought for a moment she was blind, and thought that her eyesight was such a tiny price to pay for what she had just experienced, then realized it was simply that night had fallen while she hadn't been paying attention to anything other than the union of two bodies loving.

She sucked in a quick breath, as the thought that had been knocking at the door of her mind suddenly burst in. "You didn't come!" She had never felt so selfish in her life. How could she have put her own orgasm ahead of Cherise's? Shame washed over her.

From below her, unseen but felt, Cherise said, breathlessly, as her hips continued rocking, though more gently than before. "It's okay, it's okay! It's our first time! We'll get our bodies in perfect synch before long."

Sara grinned in spite of herself. "First time? There'll be more?"

Cherise laughed, and tightened her arms to pull her head up to kiss Sara. "Of course there'll be more!" She was breathing unevenly, with sighs. "Have you been with other girls?"

Sara shook her head violently, enough so she knew Cherise could feel it without seeing it. "Not in all the time since I met you, I swear..."

“No, I didn’t mean that. I don’t care about that. I just want to know if you know how to use your fingers.” Her hips thrust hard against Sara’s suddenly, and her grip with both arms and legs tightened convulsively around Sara.

Sara laughed. “And you don’t think I’ve used them on myself?” She reached down, letting her fingers creep gently between Cherise’s legs.

Cherise began breathing harder and harder.

CHAPTER 16

They made love again at first light -- more slowly, more deliberately, each sensing what the other liked from reactions. Sara kept her eyes closed, wanting to experience Cherise more fully by touch, by scent. By sound. By taste.

Cherise came first, setting off Sara immediately after. They lay still for a time after, kissing lightly, Sara still atop Cherise. At last Sara disentangled herself from Cherise and scooped up a few handfuls of water from the creek -- the water was no longer flowing, but there were plenty of small pools. Afterward she went for some food. As she fed it to Cherise, Sara said, "We need to decide what to do. I don't know how far north we got yesterday. Probably only a couple of miles, with all the stopping and starting and going around things. The mountain crossing is going to be watched, so we can't go back there. I was thinking we should go to the northern end of the island, cross over where the mountains are low, and then come back down. I'm guessing it will take about six days -- three up, three back down."

"Are you sure they'd still be looking for us?"

Sara sighed. "After the cave guys and the farm guys compared notes? Yeah, I'm sure they'll still be looking. I'm Public Enemy Number One. And they must know who I am, now. The guy who took you, he'd remember me from the restaurant, as soon as the farm guy described me, and he'd know I came for you. And that we have to get back across the mountains. They'll be on the lookout for a pair exactly like us -- one carrying the other, because it'll seem pretty unlikely I got you loose from the chains and cuffs. So *anybody* would be able to recognize us, even ones who didn't see us."

Cherise frowned. "How many days till your roast?"

Sara looked down and said softly, "Four."

A tear ran down from Cherise's eye. "I want to tell you we need to try the trail, but I was just thinking -- they can't have any idea where you got clothes from to begin with. They might think you got some more, so they'll be extra-vigilant."

Sara sighed again, extra deeply. "I didn't really think of it that way. I figured we were in enough trouble as it is, but that makes it even worse. They'll be looking closely at *anyone* who comes near the trail. The trail is just totally out, for the time being. We already know the guys on that farm set traps for people who are messing with them. Now that they know it's a woman they'll work that much harder, and the mountain trail is almost at their front door."

"But if we go north, we can't get to the restaurant in time for your roast!"

"We still might. When I figured six days, I was assuming the worst. Everything could go smoothly and we could get back sooner than that. But I'm not thinking about the roast anymore. That was..." She looked at Cherise. "That was so you could eat me. If we get caught trying the trail, which we probably would, then we've lost everything -- not just me getting cooked and you eating me, but also you getting home. The last one is the important part: you getting home and safe. That's the only thing I care about right now." She kissed Cherise softly, long, lingering. She broke the kiss. "You ready?"

"I still need to pee." She no longer seemed so embarrassed by that.

"Of course." She waited as Cherise rolled onto her back, then picked out a place to leave pee and poop, her own and Cherise's.

* * * * *

Sara carried Cherise differently today: Cherise upright, facing her, arms and legs around her -- like last night, only standing. Sara kept her left hand cupped around Cherise's buttock to support her from below, and her arm wrapped behind her shoulders to keep her from tipping backward. Sara found that carrying Cherise that way was easier on her back, along with being very pleasant. Cherise kept her chin mostly on Sara's shoulder, and remained silent like yesterday, so that Sara could concentrate.

When they stopped around noon to eat, Cherise frowned suddenly, looking to her left. "That tree over there, that's split down the middle, like by lightning or something. I think I saw that same tree a couple of hours ago." She bit her lip.

Sara stared at her. "The *same* tree? Are you sure?" She looked where Cherise was facing, saw the tree. "I don't remember it."

"You've been mostly looking straight ahead. It was farther away. You passed it on the left."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Not a hundred percent, but I have a pretty good memory for shapes."

Sara suddenly realized it was very possible. Yesterday Sara had angled away from the mountains, afraid of the possibility of search activity in progress on the wide-open shelf, and now they'd been traveling all day out of sight of both the mountain ridge and the shore -- the trees cut visibility in all directions to at most a hundred yards, usually less, and there was no way to see in what direction the mountains and the ocean lay. They'd had to make a detour around a farm sometime back. Sara thought she'd walked halfway around it and then struck off in the direction she'd been going before. But now she wasn't sure of that. And that wasn't the only problem with direction. There was no water flowing today, nearly twenty-four hours after the rain had stopped. They had passed any number of damp creeks, some of which might have been the same ones crossed in opposite directions. The slope of the land from mountains down to the sea was so gentle that it was almost impossible to perceive it. There hadn't been any break in the cloud cover in days, so Sara had no idea where the sun was.

Sara had a sudden swirling feeling of vertigo. All sense of direction, on which she had been depending all day, abruptly left her.

Cherise saw the look in Sara's eyes, and said quickly, "It's okay! The island isn't really that big. We can't be more than a few miles from the mountains one way and the ocean the other way. Don't!" She gave Sara a little smile. "Don't say you're sorry! You've been doing more than anyone I know ever could, and this is just a little setback. Okay?"

Sara smiled back. "How did you know what I was going to say?"

“I guess I’m getting to know you. I always wanted to.”

“I’m glad.” Sara leaned forward and kissed her. She sat back again and closed her eyes. Then she opened them and pointed. “If we follow that creek there, it has to go either to the mountains or the beach. One way or the other it will take us to a place where we can get oriented.”

Cherise nodded. “I’m ready.”

Sara crawled again into the circle of Cherise’s arms and legs, picked her up, mentally flipped a coin and started following the creek to the left.

* * * * *

An hour later, Sara heard the barking of a doggirl just before seeing a clearing up ahead. The creek ran directly into it. She muttered “Shit” under her breath.

Cherise twisted around to look. “What is it?”

Sara sighed. “We need to go around this. I can go left or right, but one of them will be taking us closer to where we want to go, the other farther away. And I don’t know which is which.” She made a frustrated growling sound in the back of her throat. “Another coin flip.” She set off to the left.

After about fifteen minutes, she stopped suddenly. She could just distinguish the sound of breakers on the beach from the rustling of leaves in the trees. It was ocean ahead of her, not the mountains. “Shit, shit, shit,” she intoned softly. “Hear that?” Cherise nodded. “I picked the wrong way. Turning left took us south instead of north. And now the farm is in between us and our goal.”

As if to mock her efforts, a sprinkle of rain began falling from the leaden skies, turning to steady rainfall within minutes. Soon all the streams would have water running towards the beach. If it had been raining the whole time, they would never have gotten lost. Sara growled again.

Cherise said, “If you keep going ahead, that should be shorter than turning around. We want to get to the beach, so we can follow it the rest of the way to the north end.”

Sara nodded, and set off again.

In another fifteen minutes she sank to her knees, moaning. Cherise quickly asked a worried, “What?”

“The clearing goes all the way to the beach. If we walk in front of it, we’ll be in plain sight. We have to back up and go all the way around.”

Cherise kissed her cheek. “Do you need to stop and rest awhile?”

Sara shook her head. “Can’t. We’re losing too much time.” By the time she walked completely around the farm and hit the beach on the other side, they’d be starting to lose daylight. With the time lost earlier going in a circle, then later taking the wrong direction around the farm, they had lost an entire

day, ending no closer to the north end of the island than they'd been at daybreak. If it took six days to get back to Purity Town from here, they'd arrive after the boat had sailed that morning.

She sighed heavily and turned to start walking the other way.

She thought of one thing that would lift her spirits. She jiggled Cherise and said, "Hey."

Cherise looked up from Sara's shoulder and responded, "What?"

"I love you."

Cherise's smile lit up Sara's path the way she wished the absent sun would. "I love you too."

It was the first time Cherise had said it! Sara shared a long kiss with her, then resumed walking.

* * * * *

TWO DAYS LATER

Lovemaking at dawn again. As it had each time before, the world outside their bodies receded, unimportant, unperceived. Only Cherise's touch, her lips, whimpers of passion, made their way into Sara's world. They knew each other's needs much better already, and managed to come together for the first time.

It was only afterward, as Sara still lay on Cherise, stroking her hair, planting soft kisses on her lips, that the thought of time intruded.

As she seemed to do with little effort, Cherise read her mind again. "We really can't make it to your roast, can we? It's day after tomorrow. I mean, they'd wait if they knew you were still out here, but..." They both knew that, though the day of the roast hadn't come yet, it was a physical impossibility for them to reach Purity Town in the amount of time left.

Sara gave her a tiny smile. "Don't. You know the rule." They had agreed on a permanent ban on apologies, Sara's for being trapped and losing a chance at crossing the mountains, Cherise's for both of them being out here in the first place.

Cherise maintained her serious look. "Can I do a no-fault apology? Like if your friend's dad died in a car wreck, and you say 'I'm so sorry,' even though you didn't have anything to do with it? I'm so sorry about your roast, Sara. I know it's hard for any woman to make plans for her consumption and see them fall through."

Sara shrugged, then smiled again. "Maybe you could still eat me someday."

Cherise smiled. "I'd love that. Having some of you inside me." Then she frowned. "What do you suppose they're doing about it?"

"I'm pretty sure Jill must have volunteered." She laughed, and told Cherise about how excited Jill had been, to the point of having to run off and masturbate, from picturing herself being the subject of the end-of-summer roast *next* year.

Sara withdrew from Cherise's bound embrace and scooped some water from the adjacent creek for Cherise to drink. "We have to be pretty close to the north end now. We might even reach it this morning. We can get across and start heading south to Purity. Of course, on the east side of the island there'll be more detours. More farms, more people. But getting there before the boat leaves still looks okay." They still had five days. Though Sara thought she probably should count it as four. The boat would be leaving the dock early in the morning, to make the ten-hour return trip in daylight.

Cherise gulped down the water and nodded. "We'll make it."

"Back in a minute. Grabbing some food."

The nearest peach tree overhung the creek. Sara had gathered three peaches, and was reaching for a fourth, as many as her hand could hold at once. She looked down to make sure of her footing. It looked safe, with her left foot on the soil, her right on a smooth-topped rock at the edge of the creek.

As she reached out for the peach, closed her hand around it, and put more weight on her right foot, her foot slid along the slanted, rain-slicked surface and over the edge into the creek. It slammed down onto the bed of the creek, in shallow water about nine inches below where the rock had been. She hadn't had time to straighten her ankle, and she came down hard on the side of her foot.

Cherise looked up in sudden horror at the sound of Sara's loud cry of pain. She saw Sara pitch over into the water. In a harsh stage whisper, not wanting to add any more attention-getting noise so soon after Sara's, she rasped, "Sara! What happened? Are you okay?" She turned onto her side and began to wriggle along the ground in Sara's direction.

She stopped as she saw Sara sit up in the middle of the creek, her face scrunched up in a soundless howl of agony.

Sara's ankle hurt so much she couldn't breathe. The initial shock gradually wore away, but the pain didn't show any sign of leaving.

She saw Cherise trying to reach her, and held up her hands to tell her to stop. Gasping as waves of pain continued radiating from her ankle, she used her hands and other foot to lever herself out of the creek.

Cherise, ignoring the "stop" gesture, continued wriggle to the edge of the creek, stopping beside Sara as she sat up on dry land. "Is it broken? Can you tell?" Cherise bit her lip so hard it started bleeding.

Between gasps, Sara managed to say, "I don't think... it's broken, I just... I got it twisted... really bad when... I fell. I... landed wrong."

"Let me see. Please?"

Sara turned on her butt to present the ankle to Cherise. Sara could see it was already swelling.

Sara could tell Cherise was trying not to say anything really stupid, like “Does it still hurt?” when obviously it did. Cherise finally said, “At the least, it’s a bad sprain. You can’t walk on it, can you?”

Sara pushed herself up to a standing position with her hands and stood balancing on her left foot. When she started to put weight on her right, she bit back another cry of pain and sank back down to the ground. Miserably she shook her head.

Cherise said, “You need to keep it elevated.” As Sara nodded that she knew that, Cherise looked around, and gestured with her feet. “That log over there.” The forest had no shortage of fallen trees. “Put it up on that.”

Sara looked back at the peach tree. “I need to get you...”

Cherise said firmly, “I’m not hungry. Go put your leg up. Please?”

Sara looked in Cherise’s eyes and saw a degree of worry far beyond what being lost yesterday had inspired. And she had a strong sense that it was all empathy for Sara’s pain, and nothing about the loss of her only means of transportation.

Sara nodded, leaned over to kiss Cherise, and crawled over to the log. She stretched out on her back, her calf muscle resting on the log, and threw her arm over her eyes, suppressing a moan. She shifted the arm slightly, so that it shielded her nose from the rain so it wouldn’t run in.

A few minutes later she heard Cherise coming up behind her, inchworming along the ground. Sara twisted her head around to watch Cherise’s awkward progress, made more difficult by clutching a peach in each hand.

“I ate a couple, and I brought you some.”

Sara reached gratefully and took the peaches out of Cherise’s hands. She hoped neither of them was the peach she had grabbed just as she fell. She wasn’t feeling especially friendly towards that particular peach, but it was impossible to tell. She bit into one, and said, “I think I’ll be okay in a few minutes.”

Cherise shook her head. “Sara, I can see what your ankle looks like from here.”

“I’ve had broken bones. This doesn’t feel like that.”

“Sara, please, you need to at least take the day off.”

“We don’t have time...”

“Yes we do. But not if you try to walk on it too soon and do more damage to the tissues. Even if there’s no break. Sara, we can still make it. If we get over the ridge at the north end early tomorrow and get partway back south along the coast, we could get to Purity in two more days. But you have to rest it now to do that. Please? You know I’m making sense.”

To Sara, that was exactly the trouble. She felt a desperate need to keep going without any delay, but she couldn't argue with what Cherise was saying.

She sighed deeply. "Okay." She tried to smile. "Kiss?"

Cherise smiled back, and wriggled close enough to put her face up against Sara's for the kiss. Then she moved a little farther down and rested her head on Sara's stomach. Like she's pinning me down to make sure I don't move, thought Sara. But it does feel nice. She stroked Cherise's hair and, following orders, lay there quietly.

* * * * *

It was very lucky, Sara decided later, that Cherise had turned so that her head on Sara's stomach was facing away. Cherise could see, with one eye, just over the log Sara had her legs propped on, which Sara, in her reclining position, could not.

After only a few minutes of rest, Sara barely made out, over the sound of waves dashing against the beach, the softest possible whisper: "Sara... don't... move... stay... very... still... doggirl."

Sara, who had been about to move her left leg to get more comfortable, froze. For a tense time, that seemed like an hour but she decided later was more likely five minutes, Sara remained still, though an itch on her thigh was starting to drive her crazy. Shit, she thought, double shit! It must be a doggirl alone, Sara told herself, or Cherise would have given the still more disturbing news that there was a man out there. But there was nothing that could be done if a doggirl saw them -- the girl would start barking, and no doubt her owner would show up soon after. Neither Sara nor, obviously, Cherise was capable of running away or, alternatively, catching the doggirl and silencing her. The doggirl couldn't have seen them yet, or there'd be a lot of noise right now.

Sara could just hear the soft padding of the doggirl's stubby limbs crinkling fallen leaves underneath. Adrenaline shot through her body, uselessly. It wasn't going to help, but the body reacts automatically regardless.

At last Cherise sighed and said, in a whisper only barely more audible than before, "She's gone now. Turned and wandered off."

Sara whispered back, "She must have heard me yell when I turned my ankle. Decided to check it out." The sound of a female voice in an unexpected place, or anything else a female did that didn't seem right, was exactly what a doggirl was trained to watch out for.

Cherise snorted. "I imagine so. They probably heard that back in Purity."

Sara dismissed the thought that the doggirl had pretended not to see them so they'd stay put while she went to get reinforcements. Doggirls are smarter than they seem, she told herself, but they aren't that subtle. And her owner couldn't have made her understand an instruction that complicated. "How close did she get?"

"Not very. Maybe fifty feet."

Sara nodded. It wasn't too surprising the doggirl hadn't seen them. The light under the forest canopy and cloud cover was dim, and the human animal, like almost any other animal, sensed movement in its visual field much more easily than anything standing still. But she would definitely have caught them without Cherise's warning. Sara was glad that a doggirl's sense of smell was merely human, nothing like a real dog.

In the absence of further untoward noises Sara or Cherise might make, they were probably safe for now. In a very relative sense of the word "safe."

Sara said, "We need to get out of here in the morning. We must be closer to a farm than I thought." In the stillness, Sara now heard the distant bark of a doggirl -- a single bark, no doubt directed at a balky slavegirl, not an insistent repeated sound that would mean "Hey, follow me and check out what I found in the woods."

Cherise responded only, "See how it feels in the morning." She didn't need to clarify what "it" was.

* * * * *

As the day wore on, Sara managed to crawl back to the peach tree, keeping her right foot off the ground but still feeling pain in her ankle with each movement, at a just-tolerable level. She got herself and Cherise fed, which was as much as she felt capable of doing.

Sara didn't feel up to sex that night, but was content to lie behind Cherise, the two of them nestling as spoons, Sara with her arm draped over Cherise protectively, kissing the back of her neck occasionally. She heard Cherise whisper, "I love you," and whispered the same in return, smiling as she drifted to sleep, the exchange clearing her mind of worries, replacing them with the thought that that was the first time Cherise had said it spontaneously rather than in response.

CHAPTER 17

Sara awoke at the first hint of daylight, with a sense of urgency whose cause she couldn't immediately remember. Then it came back to her. They *had* to get moving today, as soon as possible. Get over the ridge, start back down the eastern coast, travel at least a couple of miles before nightfall. Cherise was right, Sara thought, we should be able to make Purity in two more days after that.

Her right ankle looked huge, darkened with a bruise. It felt as though her entire right foot had been replaced with an oversized cement imitation.

Sara backed away from Cherise, and pushed herself up with her arms, using her left leg to stand, balancing on it. Tentatively, she put her right foot on the ground.

Immediately she winced, as pain signals exploded from her ankle.

She found, after painful experimentation, that she could put her weight on the foot, as long as she kept the ankle joint still, not bending it in any direction.

Cherise began stirring, and twisted her head around to look up at Sara. "Morning. How does it feel?"

Sara described the situation. "If I had some plaster to make a cast, we'd be in business."

"You'd be okay with a walking stick, do you think? Something to take most of the weight?"

"Yeah, I think that would work." She looked around. There was no shortage of fallen limbs. She tried to step towards a useful length of wood, gasped in pain, and hopped the rest of the way on her left leg. She picked the limb up, and tore away a few offshoots, to leave a single straight stick, about five feet long.

She took about ten steps, gripping the stick hard and leaning on it for each step with her right foot. She nodded. "This would work." She looked suddenly at Cherise. "Except..."

She wasn't seeing how she could carry Cherise and hold the stick at the same time. The position she'd been using yesterday -- Cherise upright against her stomach -- required Sara to use both hands to keep her there.

Cherise frowned, chewing on her lip. After a moment, she said, "What if you carry me wrapped around your waist? I could curl up tight and hold onto you. I don't think you'd need more than one hand to keep me from slipping down past your hip."

"You'd have to do a lot of work to keep yourself up."

"I don't mind! I *should* be doing a lot of work. You've been doing everything."

Cherise's excitement flowed into Sara. That should work! she thought. As long as I can use the walking stick, I think we can do this!

This was going to be pretty strenuous for both of them. Cherise was going to have to keep her elbows and thighs pressed hard against Sara's waist on either side. With that, and Sara's left hand curled under her to help stabilize her, Sara could use the walking stick, though walking would be exhausting. But it has to be done, Sara told herself. I have to get Cherise home.

Sara wanted to start out right away, but they both needed to gas up the engines first. Crawling once more, Sara moved to the nearest peach tree and stood on one leg under it, picking out peaches and dropping them, afterwards dropping to the ground again, scooping them up in both hands and knee-walking back, feeding Cherise and herself. On her knees, she picked up Cherise for toileting, the combined warmth of her own smile and Cherise's making her feel as though the sun had burst out from behind the clouds.

Finally it was time to try it. And to realize it wasn't that easy to see how to get Cherise into position.

After trying out a few other ideas, Sara had Cherise lie on her back, and then she crawled in between Cherise's arms and legs from the side, going between Cherise's left arm and left leg, then her right arm and right leg. As Cherise tightened her thighs and upper arms against Sara's side, Sara picked up the walking stick and jammed its end into the ground, using it to push herself upward and slowly rise to a standing position, the muscles in her arm writhing with the effort of lifting her own weight and Cherise's. Hooking her left hand under Cherise's hip seemed to secure her in place adequately. Standing at last, on her left foot, her right hand clenched tight around the stick, Sara nearly fell backward and had to use her right foot to stop herself, holding it as stiff as she could so the ankle wouldn't bend, biting back a scream of pain.

As she tried to walk, Sara found that she couldn't use only her left foot and the stick. The best she could manage to do, with the stick, was use it to hold about ninety percent of the weight while her right foot was on the ground. She did find that the pain was tolerable, and that was able to make the most minimal possible use of her ankle. After a dozen steps she was getting short of breath -- the pain was making it hard to breathe -- and she rested before going on. She continued that way, stopping every ten or twelve steps to breathe.

In every workout session, Sara had always tried to push herself beyond the point where she thought she could go no farther. I'm not done yet, she would say to herself at the point of complete exhaustion. Just one more. One more pushup. Lift this weight one more time.

I can do this, she told herself now. I can keep doing this for as long as it takes. Never mind what hurts. It's your body's way of trying to hold you back. Don't let it hold you back. You can go on.

It wasn't helpful that the ground was so uneven. Sara kept careful watch on exactly where she was putting her right foot, but frequently her ankle had to adjust to an unexpected tilt. Each time it exploded in pain, and Cherise could easily tell when it happened, with Sara sucking in a huge gasp through clenched teeth, trying not to cry out.

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After about twenty minutes, the ocean breakers seemed to grow much louder. Ahead, it grew lighter, and Sara moaned, thinking at first she'd come to another farm clearing she would have to walk around. But it was the brightness of beach sand. The coastline had curved, and open ocean lay directly ahead.

We were that close to the end of the island! Sara thought in surprise. And it's still morning! Maybe I can make a few miles down the coast today after we cross over!

Sara stopped behind the first line of trees, and examined the prospect.

Still hugging Sara's waist, Cherise whispered with feeling, "Oh, shit!"

Sara looked to the right, and finally saw what the mountain ridge looked like at its northern end.

In her shock, her right hand slipped and lost hold of the stick. She reached instinctively to grab it, and staggered forward, her right foot landing on a slight incline, the ankle turning. The worst pain of the day exploded in her ankle. Sara gasped, felt a wave of nausea at the pain, and thought she was going to throw up.

She fainted instead.

* * * * *

Sara heard a very worried voice behind her ear repeating, "Sara, Sara, talk to me! Talk to me!" Cherise was digging her chin into Sara's upper buttock.

Sara opened her eyes, and immediately closed them again, groaning at the throbbing in her ankle.

"Sara, say something, okay?"

Sara finally managed to find a shaky voice. "Are you okay?"

"Tell me about you. What's happening?"

Sara twisted her head around and gasped. "You're bleeding!" There was a smear of blood around Cherise's mouth and chin, and another on her shoulder where she'd tried to wipe it away.

"It's just my nose. I think it stopped already. But I'm pinned under you."

"Oh." Sara crawled out of the embrace of Cherise's arms and legs. She helped Cherise sit upright with her back to a tree, looked closely at Cherise's face. She swiped away some of the blood with her finger, looking closely to see if any more was coming out.

Cherise kept her eyes on Sara's, biting her lip. "You went down so suddenly, I couldn't tell if you... uhhh, saw it."

Sara looked behind her to take in the details, and said under her breath, "Yeah, I saw." She turned and walked back on her hands, her right leg stuck out straight in front of her, to sit beside Cherise, putting her arm across Cherise's shoulder. And tried to assemble the consequences in her mind.

All along, she had carried with her a mental image of what the north end of the island would look like -- the mountain ridge declining to a mere gentle rise and at last sinking out of sight under the water. She would carry Cherise over the rise and start walking down the island's eastern shore.

She wasn't sure, now, why she had visualized it that way. Probably, she decided, because she so much needed for it to be that way.

What she saw, instead, was an obviously impassable barrier.

There was a greater discontinuity, at this end, between the ridge and the surrounding forest. The vertical wall between the forest and the shelf along the base of the ridge, which had been just three feet high in the middle of the island, now was about ten feet. The forest ended right where Sara and Cherise sat now, but the wall of rock ran out farther, beyond the point where the beach curved in to meet it and form a bay. The gradually increasing noise Sara had been hearing was waves crashing against the wall. Above that wall, the shelf still ran, for perhaps a hundred yards before reaching sea level and vanishing. The mountains themselves, though perhaps only about a hundred feet high at this point, were formed of the same chaotic jumble of rock that they had been in the area of the trail, and ran, gradually lower, about another half mile out to sea before they, too, went under water.

Assuming she could find a way to get herself and Cherise up onto the shelf, Sara thought she might, possibly, pick out her own way, slowly, carefully, among the boulders, up and over the ridge, at considerable risk of slipping and breaking her neck. But not with an ankle she couldn't use, and absolutely, definitely not carrying Cherise.

The trail they had abandoned twenty miles back, the one that had surely been guarded days ago and likely still was, was the only possible way of taking Cherise over the mountains.

Sara had to consider going back to the trail now. She was completely out of other choices.

Their whole hope of returning to Purity Town on time had been based on being able to walk down the eastern coast from here. Starting with what remained of today, at Sara's current rate of movement as she struggled with her ankle, she thought it would require tomorrow, the day of her roast, and perhaps two more days after that to travel the twenty-mile distance plus whatever additional distance was added to it by the need to detour around various problems, such as farms and a couple of port towns smaller than Purity. They could then enter Purity at night, while the town slept, bang on the door of the restaurant and rejoin the restaurant party, on the night before the boat left.

Instead, they would need to travel that same distance down the western side of the island to the trail, arriving there still on the wrong side of the mountains. Then, even if they got there early in the day, they would still have to wait for nightfall to cross over the mountains unseen. If the entrance to the trail wasn't guarded.

Sara recalled her earlier thoughts on a night crossing. There would have to be clear skies, so that moonlight would show Sara the way -- if there were no light at all, Sara would be walking upright, as she must when carrying Cherise, completely blind, on a narrow trail where falling over the edge probably meant death.

Even if the clouds did clear, offering moonlight for the crossing attempt, Sara and Cherise would not only have to get over the mountains, but then also walk the remaining seven miles or so to Purity, all during the hours of night. They couldn't walk into Purity after daybreak, when the streets began filling with people.

And then Sara groaned, as she remembered one more thing.

Their crossing of the mountains would be taking place ten days after Sara had rescued Cherise -- on a night when the moon had been a few days past full. For the crossing, there would be no moon in the sky at all, all through the night. Even if the clouds did clear, there would be nothing helpful behind them. There would not be a moon bright enough, in the sky long enough, to make the mountain crossing possible, for at least three or four days after the new moon.

Sara squeezed her eyes tightly shut. Never mind that, she told herself insistently. We still have to try. There's no other choice. We have to start now. There should still be six hours or so of daylight today. I'll have to walk faster than I've been doing, and save a day somehow, but I can do it. The pain in my ankle is just pain. I've fought through pain before. We'll get over the mountains somehow. I'll figure out how when we get there. I'll fight anyone who stops us. I'll kill anyone who stops us.

She kissed Cherise, and said softly, "We have to go."

Cherise started to respond, but must have seen the look in Sara's eyes. She stopped and nodded, and went over onto her back so Sara could wriggle back into the embrace of her arms and legs.

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Sara didn't think she had gone as much as a hundred paces back into the forest -- the crashing of waves against the seawall was still loud -- before the pain in her ankle overwhelmed her. Her arm, holding the walking stick and bearing most of her weight on every stride, was exhausted, shaking, starting to cramp, and her ankle was being forced into greater use. She leaned against a tree, her right foot upraised but throbbing nonetheless.

She started crying.

The achingly beautiful voice she had so long ago fallen in love with was saying softly "Sara... Sara... Sara..." behind her ear.

Sara calmed a little at the sound, and heard Cherise say, "We can't make it in time, can we?"

Sara couldn't make herself respond. It wasn't a return of her vocal paralysis. She was capable of speech. But she couldn't make herself admit to failing Cherise so completely.

Cherise rubbed up against her. "Sara, Sara, look at me."

Sara, her eyes streaming tears, turned. Cherise's eyes were doing the same.

"Sara, we're together. We're still free. That's more important to me than being back home."

Sara blinked, and a feeling of calming warmth flooded her body. Cherise was relieving her of the unstated imperative that Sara must find a way, no matter what, to get Cherise home.

I need to accept it, Sara told herself. For the next nine months, until the restaurant resumes operation next summer, nobody on the island can help us. We're on our own. But together. She actually found herself smiling. "It is to me too." She went carefully down to the ground, crawled out of Cherise's embrace, and held her silently, for a long time.

After several minutes, Sara could see Cherise's attention suddenly focus elsewhere. "Sara, what's that? See, behind that waterfall?"

Rainwater was gushing over the ten-foot wall separating shelf from forest, which Sara had kept in sight during the short-lived retreat. She felt safer near the wall, seeing it as protection from their enemies, at least enemies in that direction. "I see the waterfall."

"So behind it, why is it so dark?"

That did seem odd. Sara managed to stand, laboriously, her ankle still throbbing, and went to investigate, using the walking stick. "Back in a minute." Without carrying Cherise, the pain was only intolerable, not incapacitating.

There was, Sara found, a pool of water, a few feet deep, into which the flow from the shelf was dropping. Behind the falling water, there was an opening into a cave. Sara entertained for a moment a bit of pure wishful thinking that the cave might go all the way through the mountains to the eastern side, but it proved to be only about ten feet deep. Sara wondered how the cave had come to be there. She supposed the empty space might once have been filled with a softer type of rock that had been dislodged or dissolved by the steadily falling water. Whatever the cause, it seemed to be completely natural, not a product of human efforts.

Sara gave it some thought, and nodded to herself. We're going to be on the island awhile, she thought. And here's some shelter.

She went back for Cherise. "I want you to see this. See what you think." Sara didn't want to go through the whole process of getting Cherise mounted around her waist for such a short trip, so she carried her the original way, arms under her shoulders and knees, with her right hand holding the walking stick awkwardly ahead of her, distributing what weight she could manage onto it. It was hell on her back, and Sara's progress so slow that she would never have considered it for an all-day walk, but for moving Cherise only a short distance it was workable. Sara had to discard the stick when she reached the pool, and eased herself down into it, hopping toward the waterfall, just squeezing past it at its edge to set Cherise down on the floor of the cave behind it. She turned and boosted herself out of the pool with her hands and sat beside Cherise, examining the cave.

Cherise said, loudly enough to be heard over the sound of the waterfall, "It's really hard to see the entrance from any distance away. And it's got the darkness of the forest going for it. Even when it stops raining and the water curtain dries up, it's going to be really hard for anyone outside to see into it." She turned to look at Sara with a smile. "And hey, no rain in here."

Sara smiled back. "So what do you say?"

Cherise smile broadened. "I think we're home." She leaned forward for a kiss.

CHAPTER 18

FOUR DAYS LATER

Sara sat on the beach sand just in front of the treeline, her arms wrapped around her shins, looking out at the waves, as the constant rain fell on her head and shoulders. She was growing accustomed to the endlessly repetitive noise of the water along the seawall. It was just part of the environment, a reminder of where she was, in a place so far from home. It was useful, in a way. Combined with the constant sound of the water falling into the pool in front of the cave, it allowed her and Cherise to make as much noise as they wanted to during lovemaking, releasing them from the inhibitions caused by the fear of being heard. They'd had sex two or three times daily, and Sara made a point of focusing on a single thing about Cherise during each session -- the scents Sara could detect from various parts of Cherise's body, to the point where she thought she might identify exactly the square inch of skin her nose was hovering over; the feel of Cherise's soft skin on her palms and fingertips, the smooth strands of her hair, the feel of her nipples hardening, of her sex made slick with fluids of excitement; the sounds, to the extent Sara could hear them, that Cherise made in response to each thing Sara did, each place Sara touched, or licked, or sucked. Sara wanted to know everything that could be known about Cherise's body. And about her life -- between sessions of lovemaking, they spent hours talking about things they had seen or done, people they had known, memories they cherished. Other times they just sat silently, Cherise sitting upright against the wall of the cave, with her head on Sara's shoulders or the other way around, Sara with her arms around Cherise.

They did have to spend part of the day apart, as Sara met the needs of both herself and Cherise. Rather than use the walking stick, Sara found it worked better just to hop from one tree to another, because she could carry more peaches or nuts at a time that way. Her ankle was growing gradually less tender. She thought in a day or two she might be able to stand on it.

She took Cherise out of the cave as Cherise's needs required, for getting rid of her wastes at some distance from the cave, not wanting, for obvious reasons, to do that inside. Meanwhile, inside the cave, Sara had begun spending some time each day trying, with stones with sharp enough edges, to saw through the metal bands, or the hooks of the padlocks, to free Cherise. So far she wasn't making any significant progress on that front.

Sara felt this life, though certainly not her first choice, might be tolerable. The background fear of being caught had diminished considerably -- it wasn't just the natural noises covering any they might make themselves, or the darkness of the cave and curtain of water in front of it keeping them invisible. Beyond that, as far as Sara could determine there were no human habitations nearby, and no reason for any man of the island to venture here.

The one worry that gnawed at her was the complete absence of any girlmeat in their diet. A deficiency of gynemones from the meat of women affected different people in different ways. Some were more tolerant of the lack than others. But there wasn't any doubt there would be some adverse health effects, and Sara tried hard to think of a way they might find some girlmeat. Approaching a farm near nightfall, then sneaking onto it in the first minutes of daylight the next morning, seemed the best plan, though once she was prowling a farm, Sara would have no idea exactly where to look for unattended meat. And there was the danger to Cherise to consider. Sara would risk capture if it was only a matter of her own safety, but she wouldn't consider any activity that might end up leaving Cherise on her own.

Cherise couldn't even get out of the cave by herself -- the pool of water protected the entire entrance, and with all the slave hardware Cherise was wearing, she would sink like a stone and drown, despite the depth being barely three feet. And Sara certainly wouldn't consider leaving Cherise alone *outside* the cave overnight.

Sara sat, now, looking out at the ocean. She was allowing herself fifteen minutes for this solitary reverie, adding it onto the time she would be spending gathering food for the day. Today of all days, she needed to do this.

The boat was leaving now, perhaps this very minute. Sara, of course, wouldn't be able to see it -- she was on the wrong side of the island for that. But the consciousness of herself and Cherise being left behind, to be so completely alone, on an island hundreds of miles from any friend, surrounded by men who hated and mistreated all women and who might catch them on any day... Sara needed a little time of meditation to deal with it.

The water in front of Sara went on forever, with no land visible anywhere, no boats, no sign that any world other than the island existed. She wished she could at least see the mainland, though she was on the wrong side of the island for that too. But even on the east side, she knew it wouldn't have been visible. The island was too far, far, far away from home.

Sara sighed and started to gather the food she'd picked up on this trip out -- the rest was back at the edge of the pool, waiting for her to take it inside the cave. Her left foot scraped heavily through the sand as she awkwardly worked at standing up. Sara noticed the track left by her heel was darker than the surface sand. Presumably, she thought, the underlayer was the original ground surface, the upper layer deposited above it by incoming waves over the years.

Sara frowned as she considered the dark streak under the sand.

It's worth a try, she thought. Pretty much anything is worth a try if the danger involved is minimal.

She finished gathering the food beside her and hopped back to the cave.

"I think I could leave a message," she said as she set a first handful of peaches on the floor in the area they had ironically dubbed "the kitchen," as if the cave had separate rooms, and leaned down to kiss Cherise.

Cherise gave her a puzzled look. "What message? For who?"

"On the beach. When I scrape the sand, it's dark underneath. I can write something on it, in really big letters."

"Who's going to read it?"

"It could be seen from a plane." Sara realized how unlikely it sounded as soon as she said it. No planes, as far as she knew, other than jets bound for some other part of the world, ever had occasion to fly over the island, and fewer still on the very, very rare occasions when the cloud cover parted sufficiently for anything on the ground to be visible. And a jet would be seven miles up, far too high for anyone to make

out any message Sara could create. "I'd like to try it, anyway. There's really nothing to lose. Take me a couple of hours, I think."

"What if some farmer comes by and sees it? I know we haven't seen any around here, but what if?"

Sara shook her head. "They'd think it was pretty mysterious, but it wouldn't occur to them a woman might have written it. They can't imagine a woman reading. I'll make it vague, so they can't figure it out."

"Two hours?" Sara nodded. Cherise smiled then. "Sixty-nine after?" They had tried that position for the first time last night, and then afterwards spent the night sleeping with their heads between each other's thighs.

Sara grinned back. She had really enjoyed that, and now felt an instant wetness between her legs. "Absolutely."

* * * * *

Sara found a sufficiently large rock with a nearly flat edge, the perfect tool. She painstakingly scraped out the words:

CHERISE HERE

in the sand, in strokes eight inches wide, the letters ten feet high, making the edges as sharp and clean as she could, afterwards smoothing sand to cover extraneous marks left by her knees. It looked to her as though the sand was above the normal tide line. Probably, she decided, the water only comes up this far during big storms. That would explain the sand layer being so thin. The letters should stay visible for awhile. And, she pointed out to herself, I can redo it if it gets washed out.

Towards the end the tingling between her legs grew. She forced herself to finish the job, while imagining the feeling of Cherise's tongue licking her right *there*. She got back to the cave as soon as she could.

* * * * *

THREE DAYS LATER

Yesterday had been a rare clear day, the skies a brilliant blue -- Sara couldn't remember the last time she'd seen that. She had begun walking the previous day, though not far before the ache in her ankle grew to the point that she stopped, not wanting to push her recovery too hard. She added walking, in circles near the cave, to the regimen, intending to build up the distance gradually. During that sunny day she had done as many of her exercises out in the sunshine as she could: the situps, pushups, and chinups using a handy overhead branch. She tried squats, though couldn't do more than a few before her ankle, again, made her stop. She picked out two rocks of nearly matching weight and used them as dumbbells. She wished she could find something to serve as heavier free weights, but it was far too dangerous without a spotter.

That evening the weather went all to hell, with a new wave of black clouds dumping the heaviest downpour Sara had ever seen. Inside the cave, the cascading waterfall was nearly deafening, and

around its edges Sara could see that the waterfall could hardly be distinguished from the near-solid wall of water falling down from the skies all around. Sara had found she never even noticed the rain anymore unless she specifically paid attention to it, but in this storm she was profoundly glad she and Cherise had found shelter, though even the cave was getting a steady light spray of water rebounding from the pool. Sara, in the safety of the cave, found it somehow extra-arousing -- the entire universe seemed to have shrunk to the size of the confines of the tiny cave, with herself and Cherise the only two living things in existence. They made love several times, and each time, the universe shrank still farther, to include only their bodies and nothing else -- no cave, no pounding of rain, no ground beneath them, only Sara and Cherise, moving against each other, lips against soft lips, skin against warm skin, fingers enfolded by wet caressing internal muscles, cries, sighs, whimpers unheard but felt as vibrations.

Sometime in the mid-afternoon (Sara judged) the rainfall lessened to the point of being a more normal shower, with the lightening of the sky suggesting that the worst of the storm had passed.

It was finally possible to bring up the subject she'd been thinking about last night, during one of the lulls in sexual play. "Cherise, we've got nine months to think about this, but we might as well start now." She took a breath and plunged in. "You feel... safe here, right?"

Cherise nodded agreement. "If you mean in the cave. Or near the cave. There hasn't been any hint of anyone coming near here, and if they did, I think this is as good a hiding place as we could have." She frowned. "Are you thinking..."

"Probably the same thing you're thinking, yeah. When the boat comes back with next summer's people, and the restaurant opens up again, we could try to get to them. But there are really a lot of miles between us and that, and on the way here I got caught, twice. It's just pure luck that I got away both times. So we've seen how dangerous it can be here. And we still don't know how to get over the mountains. It'll have to be at night, and a crossing like that carries dangers all its own. When you put it all together, the chances we'll get through safely are really small." She paused and took another breath, hesitating. "There's something else."

Cherise stopped as she'd been about to reply, and waited.

Sara went on, "I just was thinking last night... what if I've messed up the whole restaurant deal, too? The guy who took you knows you're from the restaurant. And with what he learned from the farm guys, he must have figured out who took you back from him." She sighed. "So the thing is, the guys who think I've been stealing from them -- well, I *did* steal you, as they see it -- and running around wearing clothes and beating guys up, they know, by now, I worked in the restaurant. So they'll be mad at the restaurant. They might not let the restaurant come back."

Cherise's face looked more and more horrified as Sara went on. Sara could tell she really hadn't thought of this. Cherise finally offered, "Other people come to the island too. We could try to reach them..." She bit her lip.

Sara shook her head. "We can't get to anybody but the restaurant people. They're the only ones we would ever know how to find in the middle of the night. And it has to be night. Whether I'm carrying you or not, I can't go anywhere in daylight where people might see me, walking around without an owner." Sara held up her hands. "I know the restaurant could still be there. But I'm just saying, it might not be. If

we leave this cave and try to get to the restaurant, it's not only dangerous to begin with, but there might not be any restaurant out there anyway."

"So... you think we should just stay here?"

Sara shook her head. "I'm not saying that. I came out here for you, and the only thing I ever want to do is keep you safe. The safest place you can be is home, and as long as you want to get there, I will do anything, anything, anything, to try to get you there."

Cherise was silent for a time. Then she rattled her hardware. "We might not ever get me out of this stuff. You've been trying, but it's not getting anywhere." She kept her eyes on Sara's. "If I don't get out of these things, and if we decide to stay here, you'll have to do everything for me, for the rest of my life. You thought of that, right?"

Sara nodded emphatically. "I know. I'm not going to stop trying to cut through that stuff, somehow. But if you have to stay the way you are, then I will always do anything you need me to do. Always."

Cherise looked down at last. Then she said, softly, "You were asking if I feel safe here. I do, I really do. I've been so scared, the whole time. From the moment the guy took me, I've just been constantly... terrified. And then, when you came and got me, then I started being scared for you too. About what could happen to you." She looked at her surroundings. "Until here. I do feel safe, here. And I feel like you're safe here." She looked back at Sara. "If we stay here until we're too old to be any good as slaves, or breeders -- like, say, twenty years or so -- could you turn us in then? So they'd just cook us?"

Sara moved forward to wrap her hands around Cherise's. "Of course. I'd love to be snuffed and eaten with you!"

In a voice barely audible over the splashing of the waterfall, Cherise said, "Let's just stay, then. Just live here, and not try to get to the restaurant next year. You're right, it's so unlikely we'd make it through. And it's *such* a big penalty if we don't. And it may not even be there." She closed her eyes. "Would you hold me for awhile?"

Sara grinned, feeling within her the buildup of the sexual desire that never really went away. "I can do more than that."

Cherise gave out a familiar sigh of arousal, and twisted around onto her back so that Sara could crawl into the circles of her arms and legs. "I love you!"

Sara never tired of hearing that. Or saying it back. Or saying it first.

* * * * *

Sara went to the beach to check on her message in the sand, and stopped dead with a groan when she was close enough to see what had happened.

It must all depend on the wind direction, she thought.

Instead of incoming waves pushing the sand up and smoothing it over the letters she'd scraped, the deluge of rain had washed the white sand back down into the sea, revealing the uniformly darker soil beneath. Not only was the message gone, but the loss of the light-colored sand had made it impossible to restore it.

Sara dropped to the ground and buried her face in her hands. Nothing ever seemed to work. It had been a harmless longshot. No reason not to try it. But there was a different perspective to it, now that they had both agreed not to expose themselves to the overwhelming dangers of trying to cross the island to a rescue that might not even exist. The message in the sand had been the very last chance for herself and Cherise to escape spending the rest of their lives on Purity Island, cut off permanently from the entire world they had known.

Sara couldn't make herself give up hope immediately. She watched from just off the beach, for an hour each day for a week, to see whether any rescue was on the way. There had, after all, been one day of cloudless skies during which the message might have been seen.

After a week, she knew that if anyone had seen and understood the significance of the message, they would have been here by now. And, she forced herself to remember, the restaurant had made it so clear: girls lost on the island would not be rescued.

Sara stood staring out at the empty waves one last time. To maintain a vigil for a rescue that wasn't coming, she told herself, would get in the way of accepting her life as she now knew it would be. She promised herself she wouldn't come to the beach again.

It was done, now. She and Cherise would have to make the best life they could for themselves here, on Purity Island.

She took a deep breath and returned to the cave. She saw Cherise look up at her and smile at her return, and knew it was time to start thinking long-term.

"I'm worried about you spending all your time bent at the hip. You need to keep a full range of motion." Sara helped Cherise lay on her side. "See if you can get your hands up past your butt, like they were to start with."

Cherise nodded and pushed her knees away, her hands sliding up the backs of her thighs. They got stuck just below her buttocks. "I can't make it," she finally said after a time.

"Yes you can. Keep trying." Sara pulled Cherise's hands outward from her legs. As Cherise's hands finally began sliding upward along her butt, Sara could tell Cherise was in pain, her back protesting against an alignment it hadn't experienced in weeks. Cherise kept trying, though, uncomplaining, though her breath was hissing in and out between clenched teeth, as she occasionally whimpered. Finally her hands cleared her butt, and she was back in the original hogtie position, her hips fully straightened. Her eyes were shut tight, and she bit back a cry of pain.

Sara stroked Cherise's hip, whispering, "The pain will pass in just a minute. I promise." Cherise, still hissing, nodded spastically.

Finally Cherise took a deep breath, and smiled up at Sara. "Feels better now. I mean, a *lot* better. Thank you."

Sara bent over and kissed her. "Love you. You should be in this position a few hours every day. Want to try a few exercises?"

Cherise nodded eagerly. "I feel like I've kind of been wasting away."

Sara grinned. "You look perfect to me, but you do need to keep all your muscles working. Here." Sara put both hands over Cherise's upper knee. "Try to raise your knee up off the other. I'll be holding it down, but just try as hard as you can to lift it, when I say 'go.' I'll count to five, and you stop pushing and relax when I get to five. Then we'll do it again. Five times today, and then I'll turn you over and you can do the other leg, five times. Then we'll exercise some other muscles."

Cherise returned Sara's grin, and nodded.

"Go."

* * * * *

ONE WEEK LATER

"Oh, let me do your nails. I don't want you to slash your palm if you make a fist."

Cherise gave her a quizzical smile. "What? How?"

Sara searched briefly and found a flat-sided rock. "Here, I can get at them if I turn you on your side. I'll do you toenails after." She gently tipped Cherise over to lie down, reached under her feet and pulled her right pinky out straight. She began sanding the nail, very carefully, with the side of the rock.

"Sara, you are so sweet to do this, but you know it's going to take you forever."

Sara grinned. "What, you've got a class to go to?" Cherise giggled. Sara leaned down and kissed her, and brushed Cherise's hair back behind her ears -- it had grown a couple of inches since they'd left the restaurant. She resumed sanding.

CHAPTER 19

EIGHT WEEKS LATER

Sara had found her joints were a little achy this morning, and wondered whether she had overdone her workout the day before. Though she hadn't added anything new to the workout in awhile. The pain was mostly gone in her ankle, though it was still stiff. She'd picked out a circular path through the woods that didn't require dodging too many trees, and ran fifty laps around it as part of her daily regimen. She'd been doing the fifty for a week now, so she thought she should be used to it. She was thinking of upping it to sixty starting tomorrow.

She smiled when she looked at the wreath hanging from a projecting knob of rock. It was Sara's first contribution to the decoration of the permanent home she and Cherise would be sharing for life. Sara had devoted about a half-hour a day for two weeks to constructing the wreath, picking out twigs of a certain length, doing her best to braid them together, experimenting because she wasn't sure how braiding was done, using long stalks of grass wrapped and tied around it to make the twigs stay together as she gradually formed them into a circle, and then finally picking several dozen yellow and purple flowers, sticking their stems into the spaces between the twigs so they stayed in place. She'd finally showed it to Cherise yesterday, and hung it over the knob. Cherise had loved it, and she and Sara had made love with Cherise facing towards the wreath so she could admire it. Sara knew she'd need to replace the flowers every few days, but she was already considering other ways she could make the cave into a home.

* * * * *

When Sara's thoughts turned, as they often did, to trying for ideas on how to obtain some girlmeat, the truth about her aching joints suddenly hit her: she was starting to show early symptoms of girlmeat deficiency.

She came into the cave and sat in front of Cherise, who was sitting up against the wall of the cave, her preferred position for as long as her butt could stand it. "Cherise? Are your joints kind of achy lately?"

Cherise managed a wan smile. "They always are, at least a little. I'm glad I've got you to bend me different ways and help me do my exercises, but I spend so much time in any one position, everything's always a little painful."

Sara frowned. That made it harder to decide whether lack of girlmeat was affecting Cherise. It would eventually, inevitably, but she might be one of those who could get by longer. "We really have to get some girlmeat."

Cherise was startled. "Oh! You mean you... that's why you were asking about being achy?"

Sara nodded.

Cherise looked stricken. "But... we can't get any! We've been out here a couple of months, and if there was a way..." She looked helplessly at Sara, and then a determined, don't-argue-with-me expression came over her face. "Sara, I want you to snuff me and eat me."

Sara's jaw dropped. For Cherise to want Sara to eat her was beyond the wildest fantasies Sara had ever had before coming here, but she immediately saw the difficulties. She put her hand over her heart. "Cherise, I am so, so honored..."

Cherise smiled. "Stop that. You know how much I love you!"

"...and I'd be happy to eat you raw, but the problem is, I could only eat a little of you before your meat spoiled..."

"I don't care! Just so some of me is inside you."

"But it would only help me temporarily. Eventually I'd still have to get girlmeat somewhere else. I'd still be left with either dying alone..." She saw Cherise shudder at the idea, "...or trying to find some, like I want to try to do now."

Cherise's eyes suddenly glowed, as if she thought she had the perfect idea. "Eat me a little bit at a time! I mean, cut off parts of me, without snuffing me. You know you could get by a long time, we both could, on the meat from my arms and legs." She laughed. "I'm not using them. We could stretch it out maybe a couple of years, because we don't have to eat *only* my meat. Just the amount our bodies need. And that way you could get my arms and legs out of these cuffs, after you cut off my hands and feet. You know those vines that grow around a lot of the trees? You could use those for a tourniquet. Just cut off a few inches of an arm or leg each time."

"Cut with what?"

Cherise opened her mouth, and suddenly tears started rolling down her cheeks. "Shit."

Sara scooted over on the ground to sit beside Cherise, and wrapped her arms around her. "Listen, I think I can find us some girlmeat. I haven't exactly really been trying, you know. But there's a good chance I could find some leftovers on a farm, from what they feed the slavegirls..."

Cherise shook her head violently. "We agreed we weren't going away from here. We're safe here!"

"That was about getting back to the restaurant. We assumed we could just live right here safely as long as we wanted, and I really, really want to do that. But this is about survival. Living here as long as we want is exactly what we *can't* do, if there's no girlmeat. Listen, I really think I can do it." She told Cherise the plan that had been germinating in her mind.

Cherise looked at Sara steadily, her tears still flowing. At last she nodded. "Keep holding me awhile, okay?"

Sara grinned. "You know that's not all I'm going to do."

* * * * *

THE NEXT MORNING

Sara woke before Cherise, just as the waterfall in front of the cave was becoming visible in the light of dawn. She and Cherise had slept in spoons position, Sara behind Cherise, her stomach and legs pressed up against Cherise, her arm draped over Cherise with hand lightly cupping breast. She backed away carefully without waking Cherise. She windmilled her arms and did a few squats. Her knees and shoulders felt about the same as yesterday -- tolerably but annoyingly achy. Exercises had caused many aches in the last several years. They weren't the cause this time. Luckily, she told herself, we should have some girlmeat soon.

Sara had decided that she needed to try exploring a nearby farm in the very early morning hours, before anyone was awake, in the hope they had left some girlmeat out. She would need to get there around sunset the night before, so that she would be ready, on-site, at the first hint of light the next morning. Cherise insisted she would be all right if Sara left her alone for all of one night and part of the next morning, and Sara had reluctantly decided that, in the absence of a better plan, she would need to try to put this one into motion over the next few days.

Today Sara wasn't headed for a farm. She wasn't ready for that yet. First she wanted to scout, from the safety of home, the layout of the closest farms so that she would know exactly where to go when the time came.

She padded softly to the pool, squeezing out around the edge of the waterfall into the open air.

The usual light rain fell on her unnoticed as she jumped to grab a branch over her special tree and hoisted herself up into it.

The tree was sufficiently taller than average, so that from its upper reaches, Sara could see a significant tract of the northern part of the island's west side, mostly a blanket of densely-packed trees looking like a giant-sized broccoli salad, with occasional oval gaps that represented the clearings for farms. Sara, on discovering the height of the tree a couple of weeks ago and climbing it, had determined, from her view above the surrounding treetops, that all farms were sufficiently distant that none of them threatened the safety of herself and Cherise. Today, Sara wanted to refine her observations: for each of the nearest farms, she wanted to construct a mental map of its exact whereabouts, matching its location with visible landmarks in the mountains and on the shoreline, and also map the locations of any buildings she could see, preferably including the covered area where the slavegirls were fed. She wanted to know beforehand where to go so that she could hide herself safely within the shortest possible distance from potential caches of food. She was doing her survey in the morning because she thought she might also be able to determine how soon any activities began on each farm. If any farm delayed the start of its workday longer than the others, she would try that one first.

Sara had climbed many trees in her life, but this was the only one she'd ever climbed naked. Twigs that would normally have brushed against her clothing were scratching at her bare skin, sometimes in very sensitive places. She tried to ignore it, while staying carefully out the way of anything that might cut too badly, especially her unprotected crotch. The barely sufficient light made it harder.

At last, well above the height of the average island tree, she stopped to start her survey.

She managed to pick out the local farms she'd seen in better light before. With the usual heavy cloud cover delaying significant daylight, it would still be awhile before she could start making her mental map

and making judgments about points of attack. So the first order of business was observing when each farm's working day began.

An odd phenomenon of lighting about a mile to the south attracted her attention. At first she thought it might be caused by shafts of sunlight breaking through the clouds, but it didn't seem the sun should be high enough to shine beyond the intervening mountains yet, no matter what the clouds were doing. It seemed as though the light was coming from *underneath* the trees, presumably at or near ground level. As Sara focused on the light, it seemed still harder to account for. It appeared that there were two somewhat raggedly parallel lines of light, separated by perhaps a hundred yards or so. The lines ran directly across the island east to west, more or less the entire distance from the mountains to the shoreline.

Of the farms Sara could see, most of them were beyond the lines of light. Only two, in fact, were on the near side of the nearer line.

Sara had only observed from the treetop once before, and that had been in mid-afternoon, when the daylight was much brighter than now. These lines of light might very well have been there at the time, but as dim as they were she wouldn't have been able to see them then. But she and Cherise had passed that part of the island weeks ago. The lights couldn't possibly have been there then, or they would have been easily noticed.

Sara gave up trying to puzzle it out, and turned her attention to the two nearest farms. On the closer of them, near the mountains, she could see slavegirls, like tiny ants at this distance, beginning to populate the fields. On the farther farm, nothing was happening yet. If Sara had been at the edge of this farm at first light, she would probably have had thirty minutes to explore it by now. She tried to see... there it was. A flat roof, probably the eating area she'd been hoping for. There was a slight inward bulge in the line of trees not far from it. That should be a perfect hiding place, she thought.

She carefully noted the surroundings of the farm, in particular where it was in relation to the shoreline. There, that little promontory where the shoreline went out to a sharp point, like a thorn on a rosebush. She could go to that, then turn inland at an angle and arrive at the point she wanted on the periphery of the farm.

She wouldn't do it tonight. She wanted at least a couple more days of observing to make sure the farm's morning routine was consistent.

She hoped no one had been stealing from the farm already. She thought it was unlikely, but she would look out for traps. As for the stealing that she herself would be doing, she thought there was a good chance it would never be noticed. A portion of meat, leftover and forgotten, would disappear. Big deal.

She began the climb down to the ground, eager to tell Cherise what she'd seen.

* * * * *

THE NEXT MORNING

Sara, as she neared the upper reaches of the tree, weighed the possibility of going out to the farm tonight, rather than waiting through one more day of observation tomorrow. No, she told herself. I've made a plan, and it's based on preparing as much as possible. If I get impatient, that's when disaster happens.

As she cleared the surrounding trees, she focused immediately on the farm she'd picked out yesterday. She glanced over to the other periodically, but spent most of the time with her eyes locked on that farm near the beach.

She sucked in a sudden breath. That light phenomenon from yesterday was present again, only closer. It was so dim she had almost missed it, and caught sight of it only because the memory of yesterday reminded her she should look for it. The two parallel lines of light, still separated by about a hundred yards, were now on Sara's side of the farther of the two farms she had observed. Only the nearer farm now lay on this side of the lines.

She'd matched the lines up with landmarks yesterday, and tried to determine how far they had moved. Looking toward the place where they had been, it appeared they had covered about a quarter of the distance to Sara's location.

Without having formulated any theories about what was causing the bands, she had nevertheless assumed they were something fixed in position. The idea they would move made her very uncomfortable.

Then she gasped, her left hand flying to her mouth, her right instinctively but barely managing to hang onto the branch she had hold of. No, she thought, oh no, no, no!

She knew immediately she was right. There was no other explanation that made any sense.

She climbed down the tree as quickly as she could, almost falling twice, then ran to the cave, and plopped down cross-legged in front of Cherise, who roused herself sleepily at the sound of her entrance.

"Cherise! The lights I told you about. It's... they're from people looking for us! They're doing a search of the whole island! This half of it, anyway, the half we can't get off of. And you know it can't be anybody friendly."

Cherise's eyes went wide with shock at the idea. "There's not enough men on this island to search all of it."

"There are if they section off the island, and do it really methodically. That's what the lights are about. They probably started from the south end, that's what took them so long to get here. Or maybe started from the trail and went out in both directions. They set up a line of torches across the island, and set men watching the line, so we can't sneak past them, day or night, and another line a hundred yards or so ahead, with men to watch that line too, and then a team of men sweeps through that corridor between the lines, trying to find us. Once they see we're not in that corridor, they pull up the rear line of torches, and carry them past the forward line and plant them again, and sweep the next corridor. That's what happened since yesterday. Several times. The lights moved. They're about a quarter mile ahead of where they were."

Cherise was shaking her head. "Why all this for us? They can't possibly go to this much trouble every time a slave runs away."

Sara bent forward, her head in her hands, rocking back and forth and speaking through her hands. "I don't think they've ever had anything like me before. They're really mad. They can't let me get away with what I was doing. I was wearing clothes to pretend to be a man, and they think I used that disguise to steal stuff from that one farm, and I *did* steal a slave, you. I fought with some men and probably hurt them. Worst of all, there are bunches of slavegirls who *know* I did all that. The cave's slavegirls didn't see me steal you, but they know it happened. The ones on the farm didn't see me stealing herbs, because I didn't do it, but they would have seen me fighting the farm guys, and saw me *get away* with it, and afterwards would have heard the men blaming me for the thefts. The men are going to be afraid of what their slavegirls are thinking. That the girls might start resisting, trying to fight the men like they saw me do." She sat up and threw her arm outward in a gesture towards the mountains. "And if you think the men from *this* side of the island are mad at me, and worried, they might even have run into the guys I told you about from the other side. I really did hurt those two pretty badly. So it could be the *entire* island over here trying to find me. They know I'm on this side because they've been watching the trail ever since the farm fight. Shit, shit, shit..." She buried her face against her hands once more, her whole body shaking.

"Sara, look at me."

Sara looked at Cherise immediately.

Cherise went on, "You said you think they're a mile away? And it looks like they're moving about a quarter mile a day?"

"I'm not that great at judging distances. It might be less than a mile. And more than a quarter mile of movement. And they'll go faster as the island gets narrower. Less time searching each corridor. I think they'll be here before nightfall today."

The top priority of Sara's existence remained as it had been the entire time -- protecting Cherise. She would do whatever she had to do. She said in a low voice meant only for herself, "We have to get out of here, we have to get out of here..."

"Could there be a way to scale the rock wall up to the shelf? It's, what, ten feet?"

"Well, that was never really the big problem. There are trees adjacent to it. I can climb one and get up to the shelf. The problem is getting you up to it." Sara continued rocking back and forth, her body insisting on action but not sure what it should be.

"You could make a rope out of those vines on the trees, tie one end around your waist and the other around me, and pull me up after you get up there. And once you're there, you might see a way to scale the rocks and get over the ridge."

Sara shot to her feet, and dove out past the waterfall and into the pool, vaulting out of it and running to the nearest vine. It unwound easily, though stickily, from the tree, but proved impossible to tear apart with her bare hands. She found a sharp rock, and tried to decide how much of the vine she wanted.

About twenty feet should do it, she decided. She wanted it all one piece, thinking it might be weaker if she tied separate pieces together. She managed to get about twenty-four feet of it, using her armspan to measure it, and sawed it free of the rest of the vine with the rock.

Leaving the vine by the pool, she went into the cave again, noting irrelevantly that the rain had stopped for the present, so that the waterfall was reduced to an almost negligible dribble. Without a word, she picked up Cherise, and splashed out through the pool once more.

Cherise, blowing water away from her lips as Sara set her on the ground, asked, "Are they coming?"

Sara, standing over her trying to decide the best way to tie the vine, shrugged. "Not right this minute. But I'm sure they're getting closer." She finally decided to run the end of the vine around Cherise's chest just below her armpits. She did so, and tied a knot in the end as secure as she could make it. She raised the vine to lift Cherise a few inches off the ground, to make sure it would hold her weight.

Satisfied, she carried Cherise over to the rock wall, and picked out a tree that offered an easy climb. Tying the free end of the vine around her waist, she reached up for a branch and pulled herself up into the tree.

As she reached the level of the shelf, she paused, caution now ingrained into her. With just her eyes above the edge of the shelf, she looked down the trail to the south.

Her caution was rewarded. In a sense.

Perhaps a half mile down the shelf there were three burly, bearded men, dressed in standard island garb, standing in various attitudes of attentive boredom as they looked out over the shelf into the forest -- one with his arms folded, another with hands on hips, the third merely standing upright, leaning forward slightly. Sara withheld an automatic groan when she recognized one of them: Dad, the man from the farm where she had been trapped and gotten away. Whether because of being the party most offended, the farmer from whom valuable herbs had been stolen by the thieving woman, or else perhaps because he was a local leader already, he seemed to have been given a portion of the supervisory responsibility for the search. Likely he was the organizing force for the search to begin with.

None of the men were looking towards Sara, or had much chance of spotting her amid the foliage in any case. But all chance of escape in this direction was gone. Sara would be spotted immediately if she emerged onto the shelf carrying Cherise.

To the extent Sara had retained any shred of optimism at all, it owed to two hopes -- that she had been wrong to interpret the mystery lights in the forest as a search in progress, and that the search might, against everything she had been told, have been initiated by friendlies from the mainland. Both hopes were gone now.

Slowly -- she was in no hurry because she had nowhere to go -- Sara descended through the branches. Cherise was watching her, puzzled and worried. "What's wrong? What's happening?"

Dropping the last few feet to the ground, Sara fumbled with the knot on the vine and untied it. She gestured vaguely, and said in a dead voice, "They're up there. Watching from there. We can't go that

way." She felt her eyes stinging. She worked to hold the tears back. She felt she shouldn't cry right now. She had tried everything she could, all this time, to save Cherise. It hadn't been enough. She told herself she shouldn't feel ashamed, but she did anyway.

Cherise was staring up at her, her mouth moving but no words coming out.

Sara dropped to her knees beside Cherise. The tears started now. "I love you, Cherise. Love you, love you, love you. Do you..." She stopped, and made herself go on. "Do you want me to snuff you? So they can only have your meat, not your lifetime of service as a slave?" This was the one last thing she could do for the love of her life. Cherise *must* be allowed to choose the time and place to be snuffed. Every woman had that right. Sara could not imagine letting it be taken away from Cherise. If she did, *then* she would know she had failed Cherise.

Cherise pressed her lips together, her own tears starting, and nodded her head. "Would you wait until they're here, though? I want to spend any minutes and seconds I can with you. And then kill yourself, okay? They can't have either of us."

Sara bent down and wrapped her arms around Cherise's head, cradling it against her breasts. "Of course, of course." She stroked Cherise's hair, as she loved so much to do.

Cherise seemed to relax a little. "I love you. After all these years, we did finally get to spend a couple of good months together. I love you!" She managed a tiny smile.

Sara gave her a shaky one in return.

Sara picked up a stick, and hurriedly began sharpening one end of it against the flat side of a rock. She knew she would never consider denying Cherise's request to wait until the men came. It was what Cherise wanted. To Sara, that settled it. She was glad Cherise had simply assumed Sara would have time to kill herself afterward, rather than ask her if she would. Sara had never lied to Cherise and never would, and it felt bad enough that she was, for the first time, not telling Cherise what she was thinking -- that in waiting until the oncoming men were in sight, Sara wouldn't have time to use the stake on herself after impaling Cherise, because she would have to make absolutely sure Cherise was dead. Sara was going to be captured, but that couldn't be helped. The next few days were going to hurt, physically, more than anything Sara had ever imagined. She was sure it would be much more painful, and much more prolonged, than what she had seen Cute Guy do to Cherise at the cavern, and what she'd seen done to that girl in the square. Sara's crimes were that far beyond anything any other girl on the island had ever done. And it would all be very public. They would make sure every single slavegirl on the west side, at least, would witness Sara's suffering up close, one by one, as was the custom here. And then for the next twenty years after that, Sara would belong to someone else, someone to assign her to dreary, backbreaking tasks, someone to whip her if she failed.

Sara pushed all thoughts of the future out of her head. They were interfering with her attention to Cherise. Cherise would soon be gone, eaten, but Sara would have memories. She would be able to transport herself back to this time spent in love, relive any event of it. That would keep her going.

She had come to know Cherise so well, she told herself. She knew how much Cherise loved having her breasts sucked, and how much she loved sucking Sara's tongue deep into her mouth. She knew about

the collection of dolls Cherise had loved as a young girl, and how much Cherise had hated those trips with her family to visit her Aunt Renee, because it was so boring there. She knew how much Cherise loved pizza and hated seafood. She knew how much Cherise had loved algebra class but hated chemistry. Sara would carry all of those things with her, and never forget. It would be an inadequate substitute for carrying part of Cherise's meat within her own body, but all treasured nonetheless.

The best way, she decided, to carry out Cherise's wishes most completely would be to take her to the point farthest north on the island that she could get to, presumably the very last place the searchers would reach. With the sharpened stake in one hand, she picked up Cherise, arms under her shoulders and knees, and began walking ahead, through the trees, to the point on the bay where the beach met the seawall. With the shelf denied her, it was the best she could do.

She set Cherise down gently on the sand just in front of the trees, and knelt beside her, her eyes closed, wiping tears away with her shoulder. Behind her, between the explosions of wave hitting seawall, she could hear the barking of a doggirl. Still distant, but Sara knew that the doggirl, and all the men with her, would be here before long.

Sara took a deep breath, and blew it out shakily. How long? she wondered. Probably a couple of hours. No more.

She needed to open her eyes to look at Cherise, to decide exactly where to stab her with the stake. Just below the ribs, she decided, angled upward so it would penetrate her heart.

Sara's attention, once she could see, in wavery vision through the tears, was caught by something that her mind told her didn't belong there. She blinked, not quite sure what she was seeing, or whether she really was seeing it.

There was a boat about fifty yards out, rolling gently with the waves. It was a pretty damned big boat, about the size of the one that had brought Sara to the island, but of a different type, powered by sails, judging from the furled canvas around various uprights. It seemed to be anchored there, as the best explanation of why it wasn't going anywhere.

Sara's first thought was that the boat had joined in the search, though it wasn't clear to Sara that the islanders had boats like that. For a people who lived on an island, they weren't much given to seafaring.

The boat had its stern facing Sara. Across the flat surface, in large letters, Sara could make out the name: "AMY."

For at least a minute, Sara could only kneel there, staring, barely conscious of muttering over and over, "Holy shit holy shit holy shit..."

The spell was broken when Cherise said, "Sara? What's that doing there?"

If it's a hallucination, thought Sara, it's contagious.

She sprang to her feet and ran forward across the sand to the edge of the water, jumping up and down, waving her arms. There was a flurry activity on the deck. Within minutes, a small rowboat was lowered to the surface.

Sara kissed Cherise, said "I'll be right back," and ran back to the cave.

CHAPTER 20

Once the rowboat had been raised up to deck level, Sara declined any help with Cherise, as she had on stepping into the rowboat earlier, insisting on carrying Cherise herself. All the way to the sailboat Sara had sat with Cherise on her lap, bent over her, arms wrapped around her, holding her tight, both of them with tears flowing down their cheeks, Cherise asking again and again if this was really happening and Sara assuring her that she was pretty sure it was. Wendy and Karen, dressed in cloth shorts and t-shirts -- probably the first women ever to dress like *that* anywhere near the island -- were doing the rowing, both grinning at Sara and Cherise between strokes.

On the deck at last, Sara set Cherise down gently on her side, and said to two men she didn't recognize, "We need some bolt cutters. And clothes. And girlmeat, we could really use some girlmeat!" Then she'd turned and leapt at Bart, throwing her arms around him, saying breathlessly "Thank you thank you thank you I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry thank you thank you..." Bart only smiled and kept his arms around her until she let go, after which Sara threw herself at Steffi and repeated the process.

* * * * *

Sara, newly attired in standard island apparel, dressed the newly freed Cherise, who had tried it herself and then asked for help. Cherise flailed her arms uncertainly. "Sara, I feel strong enough, all those exercises really helped, but it's like I'm not sure how to get standing up. I've forgotten how! Am I going to remember how?" She was biting her lip, looking scared.

Sara kissed her. "I know you'll remember. It won't take very long." Without quite lifting her, she'd kept her hands on Cherise's waist to keep her moving the right direction, until Cherise was on her feet, grinning with accomplishment. Then, her arm around Cherise's waist, Sara had guided her as Cherise took clumsy steps towards the stairs the led down below.

At the top of the steps, Sara looked back towards the island, in time to see a swarm of men and several doggirls reach the sand. The men stopped abruptly, staring across the water at the boat.

* * * * *

They sat together on a bench pulled up to a table, Sara with her hip and shoulder rubbing against Cherise's, not wanting to be even an inch away from her. As Wendy brought out plates stacked with girlmeat sandwiches, and glasses of orange juice ("Anything but peach," Sara had told her and Karen), Sara grinned at Cherise. "See, I told you I'd find us some girlmeat!" Cherise laughed, and tentatively, still moving uncertainly, worked at picking her sandwich up. Sara started to reach for it, but Cherise shook her head quickly. "I need to do this. You've been doing everything for me, and I..." she looked at Sara with a gradually widening smile. "I want to feed you, because it's *my turn!*" She picked up her sandwich, fumbling just slightly, and held it up to Sara's mouth. Sara, laughing but with tears starting up again, leaned towards it and took a huge bite. Cherise continued holding the sandwich, alternately taking bites of her own and holding it up for Sara to do same, and shared the juice in the same way with Sara. The sandwich consumed, Cherise reached for another.

Steffi and Bart came in then. Sara looked wonderingly up at Steffi. "How..." she gestured around her, back towards the beach, "How did you know to come find us?"

Steffi laughed. "It wasn't *that* hard. You left a message. Obviously it must have been you, not Cherise. We'd assumed it was her."

"But that was only visible for like one day! And it was..." She stopped herself from saying "...months ago." She didn't want to sound as though she was complaining about the length of time the rescue had taken.

Steffi started to respond, and then her eyes suddenly narrowed, looking at Sara. Sara wasn't sure what she'd done, but understood when she noticed Bart looking at her in even greater puzzlement. Oh, I get it! she thought. Steffi's not used to me talking like this! And last time I saw Bart, I couldn't talk at all! It's finally sunk into them.

Steffi shook her head briefly and went on, "Well, we all owe a debt to the Onderman Corporation for that. It seems they'd assigned one of their staff sociologists -- they have a few, for giving advice on dealing with the native population -- to determine, by whatever means available, what the population of the west side of the island was, so they could decide whether it would be worth the expense to construct a trading port on the west side. This staff member, Mike Keller, decided that a satellite view of the island should be sufficient, so he'd recommended the company make arrangements with the government for high-resolution images of Purity Island from a low-orbit satellite to be taken on the next available clear-weather day. They finally had a day like that a couple of months ago, and got pictures from several orbital passes, before the clouds came back.

"So this Keller gets the pictures and starts examining them, counting all of the farms and measuring their size -- he figured that any farm's population could be estimated based on its size and... well, while doing that, he sees this mysterious message on the beach up at the north end. He studied it kind of idly, asked his colleagues if they knew what a "cherise" was, and when none of them did he looked it up in the relevant books from the company library -- if he'd done an online search on the word "cherise" this might have all gone faster, but the corporation has a lot of proprietary information on the island that isn't available online, so he thought the books would be a better bet. He assumed it was some sort of Purity slang term. Couldn't find it, of course. And whatever it meant, he couldn't come up with a theory on why they would have written it in huge letters on the beach. Facing the sea.

"So Keller gives up and pushes it to the back of his mind. And a couple of months later, he's attending a sociology conference, and gets in a conversation with a group of other attendees, a couple of whom were from the university. And just as a curiosity to toss out there, when it came back to mind while he was discussing his research, he mentions this message, "cherise here" on the sand, and starts to ask if they have any idea...

"And of course, the guys from the Sociology department at the university knew exactly what a "cherise" was. Word got back to the Foundation in the time it took one of them to get his cell phone out of his pocket.

"And then we spent a solid week, myself and the advisory board, going around and around about whether to try a rescue. About two-thirds of them were against it, on the grounds... well, you probably know why they'd say that. And I understood them, really I did. But I thought of what Amy would want. The whole Foundation was her idea, and I knew she wouldn't want it endangered, but I also was sure she would never have wanted any of our girls to be abandoned on the island, because she herself was

once.” She obviously caught Sara’s surprised look. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you sometime. The fact that we could see Cherise was still free to leave messages, or at least had been two months ago, and that the message told us exactly where she was, was enough to make it worth a try. I decided to bring my own boat out here and just wait, off the beach, to see what happened. We weren’t going to put a search party ashore. We got there towards nightfall last night, and I figured we’d wait offshore all through the next day -- today -- to see if you responded.”

Sara’s jaw dropped as she considered how unlikely it had been that today, the one day Steffi was going to spend out on the bay looking for them, would be the one single day in the last two months Sara had looked out on the bay, after having sworn to herself she wouldn’t look again.

Sara’s eyes caught Bart’s, and her greatest worry returned to mind. “Is the restaurant okay? Did I...” She swallowed convulsively. “Did I screw everything up?” She gave him a look that pleaded for reassurance.

She was intensely relieved when Bart smiled at her. “What, your little experiment with grand theft?” Sara blinked in astonishment, and heard Cherise gasp. Bart went on, “We know about that, yeah. A couple of days before the big party, I got a summons to the mayor’s office. There was a delegation there from the west side, mad enough to fry eggs on their foreheads, swearing some girl from the restaurant had been on a crime spree, wearing an island outfit, stealing farm products and at least one slavegirl. One of them described the culprit, and I knew it was you, Sara. When I probed a little to see exactly what they knew, it turned out only one of them had ever eaten at the restaurant, and he said it was the girl who’d cleaned tables there who’d done all this, but it turned out he’d never actually got a look at her when his slave disappeared -- he never hinted his missing slave was *also* from the restaurant, because that would have required some uncomfortable admissions on his part as to how he’d come into possession of her, but we figured it had to be you, Cherise, because we couldn’t imagine a reason for Sara taking anyone else. He said he’d only concluded it was the “cleaning girl” at the restaurant after he heard the other guy describe the thief, and said he wasn’t surprised because, I quote, ‘You people don’t keep your slaves under control.’ Of course, I suspected right off he was the one who’d taken Cherise, so he was more disposed to think in terms of the restaurant than he wanted to admit. I told him we didn’t have any missing girls. This guy tried to get the mayor to order me to show him all our girls to prove that the clean-up girl was missing, but one of the rules we established to begin with is that nobody’s allowed in our building without our permission, not even the mayor himself.”

Cherise interrupted with a puzzled frown. “But if it’s your word against an islander, how is the mayor going to side with you? Everything they told us about the island says that would never happen. None of them trust any outsider. He could have just ordered you to bring all the girls out.”

Bart laughed. “Well, part of the initial planning of the project covered eventualities of that type. Did you ever wonder what we do with all the trade goods we get in return for restaurant meals?”

“Ummm... I assumed you sell them on the mainland to help cover expenses.”

He shook his head, grinning. “Well, partly. When we get the fertility herbs, we can’t legally sell those, so we turn them over to the Onderman Corporation -- that was a big factor in our getting permission to operate to begin with. Of the rest, we sell about half, and turn half over to the mayor’s office.”

Sara and Cherise both stared at him for a moment, and then Cherise slowly said, “Ohhhhhhh.”

Bart laughed. "So you get it, right? I knew we'd be okay as soon as the mayor saw that nobody who'd seen the thief on the west side had ever actually personally seen Sara at the restaurant. I didn't even have to point that out to the mayor. He jumped on it himself, and told them they had a pretty flimsy case, and they ought to keep better track of their own slaves, because it must have been one of them. But anyway, yeah, the mayor's personally invested in making sure the restaurant stays in operation. It's a source of income for him beyond anything he's ever had before. He ended up tossing them out of his office. And then apologized to me for the trouble."

Sara said, "All those guys were from the west side? You didn't get any other.... ahhh, complaints?"

"Why, what else did you do?"

Sara told him about Hairy and Hairy Junior. Bart laughed and shook his head. "The kind of shape it sounds like you left them in, I don't think they'd want to admit to anyone that a woman did it. Just like the westsiders won't come back and say they saw you carried off on a boat. In their case, they know their credibility is already shot anyway."

Sara laughed. "Well, so what about the party? Did Jill end up doing it?"

Bart nodded. "Yes, and it was a smash. She wanted to do a speech beforehand and tell them how honored she was to have them all eat her, but we weren't completely sure how that would play. But anyway, she was so wiggly when she got her neck on the guillotine that I think she had an orgasm just as the blade was coming down."

Sara and Cherise both laughed, and Sara said, "Yeah, that does sound like her."

Steffi, smiling, broke in, "So Sara, do you think you'd want to be the party girl *next* year? We haven't had a volunteer yet. Though I admit we haven't started looking for one yet. I was just thinking we should give you the first shot at it."

Sara blinked in surprise, and was about to thank Steffi for the offer but wanted to think it over, but before she could open her mouth, Cherise gasped and said, her words coming out so quickly they ran together, "Sara before you say anything..." She stopped, and Sara saw she was out of breath for some reason.

Sara looked at Cherise in surprise, her arm automatically going around Cherise's waist. As Sara looked at her expectantly, Cherise went on, "I was thinking... I mean hoping... well, wanting..."

Sara had to kiss her just to calm her down. "I'm listening. Just breathe a minute."

Cherise sat with her hand over her heart. Sara could hear it pounding from where she sat. Cherise finally said, her voice shaking, "Could we... I mean... What would you think about getting married?"

Sara stared at her for just a second. But it was a very long second. As it passed, every minute, every hour, every day of all of the years since she'd met Cherise, all of her fantasies, all of her dreams, everything she'd ever wished for and despaired of ever having with the only woman she would ever love, went through her mind in an orderly progression, ending with now, this moment of present time,

in which she understood why Cherise had spoken so quickly: If Sara had said yes to Steffi's offer, then Cherise could never have been so rude as to try to change the mind of a woman who had decided when, where, and how she wanted to be eaten -- certainly not a woman she loved. So she'd had to stop Sara before she said anything.

The second ended, and Sara threw her arms around Cherise and squeezed her as tight as she could, the side of her head rubbing against Cherise's, the tears flowing once more, her lips moving for several seconds before she remembered to make sound come out of them. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Sara saw Steffi nudge Bart with her elbow, heard her say, "I think we need to go help out with something topside. The sails, that must be it."

* * * * *

SIXTEEN MONTHS LATER

Sara shifted the grocery bags into her left arm and maneuvered from her pocket the key to the apartment she shared with her wife, Cherise. Today was Sara's turn to pick up groceries on the way home, while Cherise had stayed on a little longer at the gym.

She just had time to unlock the door and push it open with her foot before having to secure the teetering bags with her right arm to stop them from spilling all over the floor. Breathing a little easier with that disaster averted, Sara set the bags on the kitchen counter.

She smiled, as she always did, at the sight of the wedding photograph in its frame on the wall -- Sara and Cherise in matching off-the-shoulder dresses in complementary colors, yellow for Cherise, violet for Sara, sharing a bouquet in both colors, their heads tipped together, both beaming at the camera. Steffi and her husband Preston had been so nice to hold the marriage party in their own spacious back yard.

Sara felt almost overwhelmed by the things Steffi had done for both of them: paying for the four weeks of physical therapy for Cherise, with Sara allowed to assist the professional therapist; the Foundation scholarship for Sara, while Cherise continued on her earlier scholarship; finding the perfect off-campus apartment for them and paying the rent on it. According to Steffi, it was all a "consulting fee," in return for the two weeks of debriefing by the Foundation's advisory committee, during which Sara and Cherise had described, it seemed, almost every minute of their stay on Purity Island, especially all interactions with and observations of islanders, and answered endless questions from committee members. The committee, Steffi had told them, had found their input "invaluable," including as it did any number of things no mainlander had known before about the island, especially the west side.

The Sociology Department at the university had been equally generous, awarding both Sara and Cherise fifteen credit hours of sociology elective credit for their experiences, and allowing Sara to take the final exams she had skipped at the end of Spring Semester -- she passed all but the statistics, which she then retook as an overload when she and Cherise returned to classes for the next Spring Semester. With the fifteen hours compensating for their missed Fall Semester, they ended up caught up on credit hours for starting their senior year the following fall. They'd taken all their classes together (except statistics, which Cherise had already passed) since returning, but sat on opposite sides of the classroom in each one. Sara found she could concentrate in class as she never had before -- she never got lost in fantasizing sexual encounters with Cherise, able to put such things out of her mind until she and Cherise

got home. At home, she and Cherise spent marathon sessions studying together, which had helped both of them manage straight A's since returning. Even at home, Sara was able to push her sexual desires aside while studying with Cherise, because she knew there would be plenty of time for lovemaking after.

And in bed, somehow Sara found that her heart still pounded, her body trembled with excitement, whenever she sensed that Cherise wanted to play. When they did sleep, it was with their arms locked tightly around each other, their legs in a complex conjoined tangle, and lips pressed together on their shared pillow.

Entering the bedroom after putting the groceries away, Sara quickly took off her clothes, putting them back in the closet or the laundry hamper as appropriate. She and Cherise never wore clothes at home unless guests were present, and sometimes not even then, depending on the guest. It was one of the ways they used for reminding themselves of the first time they had made love. They had maintained the brush-cut hairstyles they'd acquired on the island -- the other interns had let theirs grow out immediately on returning, but Sara and Cherise both loved keeping theirs that way, feeling that it connected them to those intense months of loving in the cave on the island. Neither trimmed her pubic hair either, each of them giggling over how much they loved feeling the prickling against their chins when they sixty-nined.

Naked and comfortable now, Sara went back to the living room to retrieve the mail, in its tray below the slot in the front door. Among the usual pile of advertising circulars, she found that there were two identically thick envelopes, each obviously containing multiple pages, with the return address of the Department of Sociology, one addressed to Sara Lynn Marteau-Bollinger, the other to Cherise Marteau-Bollinger. Barely able to breath for the sudden pounding of her heart, Sara ripped open the envelope addressed to her with shaking fingers, unfolded the contents and read the first paragraph of the top sheet:

"The Department of Sociology is pleased to welcome you to the doctoral program in..."

Behind that were a copy of the program requirements, a list of department faculty, and a brochure with information about graduate student housing.

Sara threw her arms in the air with a loud whoop, and drew her cell phone out of her pocket to call Cherise. Obviously Cherise had been accepted as well -- a rejection letter would consist of a single thin sheet. She brought up Cherise's number on the phone's contact list, and stopped herself just before punching Call. Her smile widened. Got a better idea, she told herself.

She dropped Cherise's letter on the kitchen counter, by itself, then sent a text to Ashley. She then sent a text to Cherise: "Box. Pizza. Check kitch counter first."

Cherise would probably figure it out before she got home, Sara knew. Pizza was their celebration food, and Cherise would likely realize that there would be a letter waiting for her on the counter. That was okay. She and Cherise always found it hard to surprise each other anyway.

Retreating to the bedroom, Sara finally took the shower she'd intended to have as soon as she got home, with the scented soap they both liked. Then she opened the toy drawer and pulled out the

padded cuffs -- two for wrists and two for ankles, all joined together by a few links of chain. Dropping the key into the cup on the dresser they used for exactly that purpose, she climbed into the pillow box.

The pillow box was exactly that -- a large, almost bed-sized box filled with soft pillows. They often used it instead of their regular bed. It gave the sensation of floating on air when they made love in it.

The cuffs were self-locking. Smiling and already wet between her legs -- Sara knew how much more wet she would be soon -- she clicked the larger cuffs closed on her ankles, with the wrist cuffs hanging down just below them. Bending sharply at the waist, she slipped her hands into the wristcuffs and clicked them closed as well.

She nearly had her first orgasm right then, but held it off, relaxing and blanking her mind. She didn't want to use up any significant sexual energy before Cherise even got home.

She had rendered herself completely helpless, but the text message she had sent to Ashley would see to her safety: "8 p.m. Sara." Ashley would be expecting a text from Cherise before 8:00 to let her know everything was okay and that she was home with Sara. Sara expected Cherise home well before then, but knew that life has no guarantees. If for any reason Cherise didn't message Ashley by 8, Ashley would come to the apartment, let herself in with her own key, release Sara from her restraints and together they would try to figure out what was wrong with Cherise. But assuming all went well, the first word "Box" in Sara's text to Cherise told Cherise that she would be waiting at home in the pillow box, and that Cherise should come home alone. And it hinted at many other things that didn't need to be explained.

As it was Friday, Sara looked forward to spending the entire weekend being cared for by Cherise.

Sara knew that Cherise understood fully, now, why Sara had never tired of taking care of all of her needs while they were on the island. Love never got tired.

Sara wriggled deeper into the pillows and relaxed, letting the time pass in anticipation of the beginning of a lovely weekend. She smiled at the sight of the wreath on the bedroom wall -- the one she had made on the island, that she had run back to retrieve as the rowboat neared the shore, the symbol of sharing a home with Cherise. They took turns putting fresh flowers in it.

Sara was half-dozing, but came instantly alert at the sound of the key in the front door. She heard the door open, and Cherise's musical greeting "It's meee!"

Sounds of backpack set down, zipper going down, soft plops of clothes being discarded. Cherise always dropped her clothes as soon as she came in. Sound of footsteps toward kitchen. The smell of hot pizza. The sound of a ripping envelope, a loud squeal of joy.

Cherise appeared in the bedroom door, carrying a large pizza box, with a huge smile. She enjoyed so much being able to feed the helpless Sara. "I texted Ashley."

Sara, as always, momentarily lost her ability to breathe at the first sight of naked Cherise, because her body was, literally, breathtaking. "You worked on your abs after I left. I can tell."

Cherise's smile turned almost shy. "They're still not like yours."

“They’re getting there.”

“Eat now, or later?”

Sara grinned. “It’ll warm up in the microwave. I want to do something else first.”

Cherise tried and failed to look innocently mystified. The smile broke out again, wider. “What would that be?”

“Guess.”

Cherise put down the pizza box, climbed into the pillow box, and wormed her way into the circles of Sara’s legs and arms. Putting her arms around Sara, she kissed her.

Sara, as always, thought in amazement, I’m kissing Cherise I’m kissing Cherise I’m kissing Cherise!

It never got old.

END