**Mailgirl Number Thirteen: Day 01**

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Her ears popped as she stepped from the revolving doors and into the lobby of US Financial Plaza. Though it was probably just the adjustment of leaving behind the vacuum-sealed pocket of air in the doors themselves, Sarah Jane Scott could be forgiven for believing it to be something more symbolic and profound.  
  
The din of the world outside faded away. It was still early. The city was still waking up. But there had been a crowd in front of the building -- the International Women's Action Committee, United American Women, and a host of other Whitestocking groups had erected an encampment just beyond the doors, protesting USF's treatment of their female employees. These sorts of demonstrations had popped up all over the Bay Area and the Pacific Northwest, but few still matched the furor or the numbers of what Sarah had been forced to navigate that morning. USF was the first company to launch a program here in New York, and so USF Plaza felt like a beachhead to Grace Burgmeier and her Actioneers, the spread of an infection they were passionately fighting to stop.  
  
But though there was still an audible roar from outside, the Plaza's lobby was a world away. A single, self-contained bubble in the middle of a frothing sea. Inside, the fight had been fought. Inside, the Whitestockings couldn't touch USF. Inside, it was like a parallel dimension, a fantasy world made real by perverts, creeps, and misogynists. A century of women's rights and equal treatment, from Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton down to Grace Burgmeier herself, was buckling under the pressures of the day, with USF joining the ranks of dozens of other American companies in establishing business practices that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier. Inside, separated from the world, mailgirls were the new reality.  
  
Her escort that morning, Professor Gillian Schang, was a step or two ahead of her, Gillian's pace one with purpose and destination. Sarah trailed behind, hesitant and unsure of herself. Wide-eyed, she took the lobby in in its entirety, all the while fighting the gravity pulling her backwards and out the door. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting. There were no naked mailgirls scurrying this way or that. No girls dancing nude, with a chain around their necks, to greet them. No stocks, no pillories, no cages.  
  
The lobby was spacious, and still mostly empty at this hour of the morning. It was decked out in black onyx and gold leaf in a way that was somehow subtle and tasteful, yet hinted at immense wealth and power. She knew, from her research, that there were a handful of shops here on the Ground Floor -- a bakery, a bookstore, and a women's boutique, among them. The Whitestockings weren't allowed to protest inside, but the lobby was open to the public, and the rumors were that the Plaza had seen a dramatic uptick in foot traffic since April, as voyeurs and lookie-loos tried to catch a glimpse of USF's infamous mailgirls. Access was restricted beyond the security desk, with only USF employees and their invited guests allowed up the central escalators to the elevator lobby on the 2nd Floor, and up into USF proper from there.  
  
Walking behind Gillian, Sarah couldn't help but feel like a trophy her professor was parading into Human Capital, a sacrifice to the mailgirl gods. As much as this was Sarah's research and Sarah's field study, it had been Gillian who'd suggested going this particular route, and it was Gillian who had made most of the arrangements with USF. Sarah was here under her own volition. She was here by choice. She was a volunteer. But Gillian had midwifed this morning into existence, and Sarah wouldn't have been here now had Gillian not pressured her into reluctantly pursuing this avenue for her studies.  
  
Sarah would be a mailgirl, at least in name. She'd be among them, work beside them, and suffer embarrassment and humiliation -- the likes of which she couldn't begin to imagine -- right there with them. For the next three months, she'd explore firsthand what made these girls tick, what had led them to volunteer, and what the relationships they forged with one another were like. She was a PhD candidate, working under one of the foremost academics in the fields of Anthropology and Women's Studies. Only that academic, that foremost in the fields of Anthropology and Women's Studies, had sold Sarah and Sarah's body to US Financial.  
  
"S-c-h..." Gillian told the security guard. "'Schang.' And, 'Gillian,' with a 'G.'"  
  
Sarah had spaced. They'd somehow arrived at the security desk without her noticing, and were checking in.  
  
"And you, Miss?" the guard asked. He wore a name-tag that read simply, "Popowski."  
  
"Uh...Sarah," the girl replied. "Sarah Scott. We're here for Will Barrow. He's expecting us for seven."  
  
She half-expected a lecherous grin or a knowing smile, but Popowski maintained his composure. If he knew who Will Barrow was, or if put together what Sarah Scott was here for, he didn't let it show. Instead, the model of professionalism, he simply nodded and asked them for identification.  
  
Sarah fumbled through her purse, found her wallet, and produced her student ID. There'd be no need for this tomorrow, as she'd been informed that she'd be issued an official USF security badge later that afternoon. If she were to have been a normal USF employee, it was probably the sort of thing she'd clip to her waist or to her blazer, or wear on a lanyard around her neck. As a mailgirl, though, Sarah imagined that her "uniform" alone would be enough to readily identify her as belonging to USF.  
  
As Popowski double-checked that they were who they said they were, Sarah's eyes followed the escalator up to the elevator lobby on the 2nd Floor. Though there was no direct line-of-sight, she knew what waited for her up there, beyond. Those "normal" USF employees would be treated to a view of USF's mailgirl locker room, on the far side of a one-way mirror. As they waited for their cars to arrive, to carry them off to wherever they spent their days here in the Plaza, they'd be treated to a view of the mailgirls readying themselves for inspection. Undressing. Showering. Sarah stifled a shudder. Shaving.  
  
Though she'd moved into her apartment for the summer already, Sarah had met Gillian at the Imperial Hotel that morning for breakfast. It had been early, and the hotel's restaurant hadn't been open. But Sarah hadn't slept more than an hour or two the night before, and she hadn't been hungry anyways; the meager offerings of the hotel's continental breakfast had been enough for her advisor, while Sarah worried about being able to keep anything down due to her nerves. She'd confessed that she wished there was another way into the building, one that didn't necessitate her being subjected to the goings-on inside the mailgirls' locker room. Gillian had countered that it might be good for her, that whatever fears Sarah had going into the day might be helped by seeing that she wouldn't be alone. There was a tortured logic to Gillian's argument, but Sarah still dreaded the ascent up the escalators to the 2nd Floor.  
  
Popowski handed the girl's ID back to her, and then did the same for her professor. He picked up the phone at the desk, dialed the appropriate extension, and had a short back-and-forth with whomever was on the other end.  
  
As he did so, a woman who looked to be in her mid-thirties breezed past them, flashed her badge at the security guard, and then ran it over the card reader to one side of the desk. As Sarah watched her head up the escalator, she couldn't help but feel out of place.  
  
The woman - a brunette with long, flowing hair -- was a Wall Street stereotype. Good-looking, well-dressed, and confident. She was wearing a dark, tight-fitting pencil skirt with rich, floral lace and a scalloped hemline that fell just below the knees. She had on a suit-jacket with a single button fastened in the front. Heels, of course. And hose. Pantyhose? Stockings, perhaps. Though USF now had a roster of young women flitting about Plaza in nothing more than a lycra armband to hold their smartphones, the company still had the reputation for being old-school and conservative when it came to the regular dress code. Women wore skirts and dresses, significantly more so than pants and pantsuits. And, though it was now June, they apparently continued the practice of wearing hosiery along with those skirts and dresses right through the summer.  
  
Sarah, in contrast, wore a loose-fitting, light-weight A-line skirt in navy blue, speckled with small white polka dots that gave it a sort of retro-chic look. She had on a sleeveless white satin tank-top, with a conservative little keyhole cutout at the neckline, and a navy blazer she'd borrowed from her roommate in New Haven on top of it. No stockings for her, but a pair of pair of white, open-toed flat-heeled sandals. For a graduate student still living in university-provided housing, this was dressy for Sarah. Even with all her clothes on, she didn't feel like she fit in here at the Plaza.  
  
"18th Floor," Popowski announced, turning his attention back to Gillian and Sarah. "Up the escalators. Take the elevators to the right to the 18th Floor. You'll be met by Mr. Barrow's assistant at reception, and she'll escort you from there."  
  
"Thank you," Gillian responded as he buzzed her through.  
  
"Thank you," Sarah repeated, though she was already at the top of the escalator in her mind's eye; it just took another moment or two for her body to catch up. Gillian took her by the arm, and they rode up together.  
  
As they ascended, the elevator lobby on the 2nd Floor came into view. Four massive columns stood guard at the top, marked and labeled to indicate which floors were serviced by which sets of elevators -- the lower floors off the right, the higher floors to the left. But Sarah's eyes were drawn to the far side, where a set of glass doors led into a well-lit, white-tiled room. The doors were flanked on either side by big, picture-glass windows that went from floor to ceiling, and ran the entire length of the back wall in both directions.  
  
At one time, this had been USF's employee fitness center, Sarah knew. But the facility had been underutilized, as employees -- female employees especially -- had complained that they'd felt on display while working out, ogled in their gym clothes while riding the exercise bikes or climbing the Stairmasters. Earlier that year, the company had relocated the fitness center down to the 1st Floor, and repurposed the space in April to take advantage of those very aspects USF's employees had previously bemoaned. The windows had been removed, but had been replaced with new ones that -- from the outside looking in -- would have seemed no different. However, USF had installed one-way mirrors; from the inside looking out, anyone on the far side would see on their own reflections.  
  
The scene that greeted Sarah and Gillian was jarring, and would have been utterly unthinkable in a world before mailgirls. Twelve girls, naked almost entirely from head-to-toe, were lined up shoulder-to-shoulder in the locker room. Most were on their knees, with their backs to a bank of open lockers behind them, and facing out towards the elevator lobby. A single girl -- a blonde with a prominent nose who looked vaguely familiar to Sarah -- was on her feet. No, rather, she was on her toes, with her elbows out at ninety degrees from her body and her hands behind her head. A tall, immaculately dressed dark-haired woman was running a fingertip down the girl's naked hip.  
  
Sarah had known what to expect. She'd read accounts of mailgirl programs on the West Coast and abroad, and was well versed in the function here at the Plaza. She'd seen pictures online, and had even watched a handful of videos -- both official and unofficial -- that had allowed her a peek at mailgirls in practice. But, even still, she wasn't prepared for the scene before her. There was nothing to compare with seeing it firsthand, being there in the elevator lobby and witnessing it in person.  
  
Sarah knew the mailgirls, themselves. As people. USF's Human Capital department had thoughtfully provided her with their files for her research, and she'd pored over them all. She knew their names. She knew their backgrounds. She knew their measurements, as well as any number of other formerly private details of their lives -- anything and everything from when they'd lost their virginity to whether they'd ever slept with another girl or engaged in anal sex. She knew them intimately, and knew things about them she didn't about her own closest friends, or even her own sister.  
  
Mailgirl Number One -- so identified by the black magic marker on her right hip - was a lawyer named Laurie Rice. Mailgirl Number Two was Meredith Ferris from Middle Market. Three was a Princeton grad and a Tuck MBA named Amanda Dobson, formerly of USF's Asset Management group. Four, from Trading, was a twenty-nine-year-old girl named Chelsea Hurst who -- up until her transfer to the mailroom -- had been on some sort of corrective action for not meeting the minimum performance standards of her old job. And so on.  
  
But these weren't people. The girls before her? They were objects. Sex objects. Whatever and whoever they'd been before, they'd been reduced to nothing more than tits and ass. They were animals. They were pets. They belonged, through and through, to US Financial. The numbers. The collars. The "uniforms," such as they were. Laurie Rice was no longer Laurie Rice; she was just a mailgirl. Meredith Ferris? Amanda Dobson? Chelsea Hurst? Mailgirls, all. Diminished. Lessened. Owned. Stripped of everything -- not just clothes, but of dignity, self-worth, and even value as a human being.  
  
And Sarah Scott would be right there with them, later that very day.  
  
Mailgirl shifts at the Plaza ran from seven in the morning to seven at night, six days a week, with a handful of rotating early morning and later evening shifts mixed in for good measure. The girls, though, were expected to ready themselves for an "inspection" each morning before their shifts began. It was still a quarter to seven when Sarah and Gillian arrived on the 2nd Floor, and it was this exact exercise that greeted them on the other side of the floor-to-ceiling windows beyond the elevator banks.  
  
Yes, Sarah had information on each of the naked girls on their knees in the locker room. The fully-dressed brunette, on the other hand? Sarah had been forced to go digging. Human Capital hadn't released her information to Gillian or her graduate student beforehand, citing the "special" role she'd play in Sarah's day-to-day life here at USF. Known only as "Mistress Zero," it was this woman's responsibility to provide authority and instill discipline in the girls, to oversee the program on the ground, and to carry out the will of the higher-ups on the 18th Floor. Even on this side of the glass, Sarah found her intimidating.  
  
Gillian pushed Sarah gently at the small of her back. "We've got a minute or two," she offered reassuringly, encouraging her student to get closer.  
  
She's trying to be helpful, Sarah told herself. She's not rubbing your face in it. She's trying to expose you to this world before you immerse yourself in it.  
  
Sarah didn't want to go any closer, but she did as her professor wished all the same.  
  
The floor-to-ceiling windows that separated the elevators from the mailgirl locker room weren't sound-proof, but they did muffle the exchange taking place inside. Sarah could make out the tone, at least: contemptuous and condescending, superior and sneering. Though Mistress Zero's tone was short, Mistress Zero herself was tall and commanding; she towered over the one standing naked blonde, even with the blonde on her toes. She wore a pair of stiletto heels and a form-hugging bodycon dress, in raspberry red, with a knee-length hem and a slit that ran up one side to a dangerous degree. Her hair was up, pulled back into a precise and severe-looking bun. Even amid a scene that included twelve naked women and all the exposed tits and flesh and sex associated with them, Mistress Zero stole focus and owned the room.  
  
She'd been "Mailgirl Funf," once upon a time, at an investment bank in Frankfurt. Her real name was Mila Bluhm. She was thirty-eight years old, and a former client services rep, who'd been one of the very first to ink a mailgirl contract with Rhine-Main Bankengruppe when the concept reached Central Europe from the Far East. Though Sarah knew plenty about Mailgirl Funf's sordid history with RMB, what had brought her here to New York was still a blank spot in Sarah's research. Sarah hoped she could build enough of a relationship with her soon-to-be new boss that Mistress Zero might one day open up to her about her experiences in Germany, and why she'd chosen to become a mailgirl supervisor at USF.  
  
"Down in front!" a man's voice called out in a joking tone.  
  
Surprised, Sarah took a step back from the window and looked over her shoulder. Even at this early hour, there was a smattering of USF employees watching the show on the other side of the mirror glass. There was a coffee cart in one corner, manned by a single cashier only half paying attention to her duties. There was an older man, alone, seated at one of the tables USF had thoughtfully provided here on the 2nd Floor. A short woman with horn-rimmed glasses sipped a coffee quietly by herself. A trio of young men in their early twenties were chatting and laughing, joking at the mailgirls' expense. A shoeshine waited by his chair, and passed the time between customers by nervously surveying the goings-on of the locker room. There were others, too, including the middle-aged man who'd told Sarah she was blocking his view, though his interest in the naked girls seemed to be competing with interest in the smartphone in his hand.  
  
Sarah took another step back, and to her right. She hadn't realized she'd gotten as close as she had; she'd wanted to see if she could hear what Mistress Zero was saying to the mailgirl on her toes. The blonde appeared to pass her mistress's morning survey, and was marked with a thick, black number "7" on her right hip. After Mistress Zero had unlocked the leash that secured her collar to her locker, the girl returned to her knees, and the fully-clothed brunette moved to the next girl down the line.  
  
As Mailgirl Eight was tugged to her feet, and up onto her toes, Sarah reflected on the collars the girls all wore. These were not jewelry. Nor were they playful, flirty nods at bondage and discipline. These were the real deal. They were thick, black, and looked almost like they were made of cast iron, three inches wide and studded with D-rings around the circumference. The mailgirls to Number Seven's left -- Sarah's right -- had leashes still hooked to them, leashes with thick, heavy links that ran from each girl's neck to floor of their assigned lockers. There was no slack; each mailgirl still wearing the chains was at the furthest-most point her leash would allow her.  
  
To the uninitiated, these trappings of BDSM were at odds with the stories USF and other companies with mailgirl programs spun about the nature of their girls. These were volunteers, after all, and not slavegirls in a sex dungeon. But such elements of bondage had been around since the very first mailgirl programs began in Tokyo some years earlier. Maybe not every program had collars and leashes, spreader bars and armbinders, muzzles and hoods and gags - but many did, and some of the earliest had incorporated them from the outset. Similarly, not every company enacted corporal punishment upon their girls, but spankings, paddlings, and even the occasional light whipping were utilized by mailgirl supervisors the world over to instill proper discipline in their teams. These sorts of restraints and punishments had Grace Burgmeier and her Actioneers frothing at the mouth, but those who defended the practice again pointed to the fact that the mailgirls had volunteered for this treatment, and could walk out at any time.

Sarah, as she took in the spanking bench before her, wanted to walk out right then and there.  
  
Gillian took the girl by the arm, and led her down the length of the plate glass. Everything transpiring within the locker room was transpiring on the left-hand side of the room; the right was empty. The lockers were bare.  
  
"Yours, you think?" Gillian asked, rapping gently on the glass after they'd crossed to the other side of the double-doors leading into the locker room. She nodded in the direction of an empty locker to one side of a large metal desk that split the room in two, the first locker just to this side.  
  
"Probably," Sarah replied, unnerved. USF had recruited Mailgirls Number One through Six in April, and Seven through Twelve in May. She'd be a member of June class, numbers Thirteen through Eighteen. She hadn't been told she'd be Number Thirteen, exactly. But she was -- through the circumstances of her arrangement with Human Capital -- technically the first volunteer for the class. Will Barrow would be tapping additional candidates throughout the morning.  
  
The locker -- her locker -- wasn't so much a locker as it was an open cubby. There was a shelf towards the bottom, below which the girls were expected to store their shoes without interfering with the other end of their leashes, which attached to an eye-hook on the floor. Purses, bags, and any clothing that couldn't be hung were to be placed on top of the shelf. The locker itself was only about shoulder-width, and there was a single dowel that ran from the left-hand side of the first locker, through the partition on the right, all the way down to the last locker in the row. Below this were coat hooks -- one on the left, two in the back, one on the right. Up top, another shelf, this one already occupied by a smartphone standing vertically in a charging dock, as well as tin cup with the number thirteen printed on one side.  
  
"Right in the middle of things," Gillian observed.  
  
It was true. Eleven lockers on the right, and nothing but a corridor disappearing deeper into the building on the left. A corridor lined with toilets, about which Sarah did her best to ignore. Her locker -- or, at least, the locker she assumed would be assigned to her -- was maybe ten to twelve feet from the unadorned metal desk that sat at the center of the room. There'd be no hiding from Mistress Zero there.  
  
"Okay," Sarah said finally, gathering her faculties. "I think I've seen enough for now."  
  
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Sarah remembered the first time she'd read of mailgirls. She'd been a Senior at Pepperdine, and it was relatively early in the Fall term; she'd only just recently broken up with Mark Agnew. She was in the library with her laptop, taking a break from this paper or that project, and absentmindedly surfing the Web. Sarah couldn't recall what page she'd been on or what she'd been looking at up that point, but she remembered clearly the link.  
  
"You won't believe the sexy new business practice sweeping Japan!!" the banner read, plastered in big bold letters over a picture of a woman's silhouette. "Jaw-dropping!!"  
  
It was the definition of click-bait, and Sarah generally knew better than to be suckered in. Something about that silhouette grabbed her, though -- a slender woman, posed in such a way to suggest she was running top speed, with an envelope in one hand. Whether it was boredom, or curiosity, or some combination of the two, she clicked through -- half-expecting to be assaulted by pop-ups, or encouraged to refinance her nonexistent mortgage, or to send away for penis-enlarging pills. Or, for that matter, to accidentally stumble upon porn.  
  
What she got, instead, was an over-the-top report about mailgirls -- no, they were simply "mailroom girls" in that first account -- delivering interoffice communications in the nude. The practice, at that point, had been picked up by a handful of Marunouchi-based firms, and involved female employees volunteering to take of their clothes and take on the lowliest of duties to help "employee morale." The sensational nature of the reporting, combined with the fact that Sarah didn't recognize the name of the news outlet she was reading all this on, led her to believe that it was some sort of prank. It all sounded too fantastical to be real, and was undoubtedly nothing more than the elaborate imaginings of an undersexed pervert.  
  
Still, Sarah conducted a cursory search of the Internet, to see if there was any corroboration. She got a few hits, mostly in Japanese, before managing to find one that purported to detail the abuses these "mailroom girls" had suffered in their new jobs. It talked of girls being forced to drink out of doggie bowls on the floor, of carrying messages in tubes they were required to hold between their teeth, of being spanked in front of their colleagues for racking up too many demerits. One girl recounted the time she'd had an executive practice his putting; she'd been instructed to get on the floor, open her mouth, and let him tap his balls in. Another had had her vagina used to "polish" someone's shoes. It went on.  
  
Again, Sarah hadn't believed any of it. She wasn't sure what she'd stumbled into, but not once did she believe that any of this was for real. Maybe this was just a weird fetish she hadn't heard of; you could have filled a book with the things Sarah didn't know about the predilections and proclivities of men, the weird sexual subcultures that existed out there on the Internet. Maybe this was just that? Maybe this wasn't any different than people who got excited about feet, or just an odd, specific subset of the larger world of bondage and discipline or submission and domination.  
  
She'd masturbated that night, back in her dorm room -- the first time she'd done so in almost a month.  
  
It was a few weeks later that one of her classmates brought the subject up, during a discussion group as part of a Women's Studies course she was taking. Sarah's initial reaction was to feel sorry for the poor girl, for being suckered into believing that naked mailroom girls were a real thing. But then someone else had added her own two cents on the topic, and Sarah began to doubt herself. It couldn't be real, could it? What woman would subjugate and humiliate herself like that? What reputable business was capable of inflicting that level of cruelty on their female employees? How could any of this not run afoul of sexual harassment protections?  
  
There was a single girl -- Valerie Plympton -- who chose to defend the concept. It was an unpopular stand, and Sarah took it as an attempt to play devil's advocate and spur debate among the discussion group. Valerie pointed out that these girls were all volunteers, and were able to opt out any time they wanted to. They weren't slaves. They weren't being forced into this weirdness against their will. They suffered a good amount of abuse, yes, but they well compensated for their suffering. These were all private companies, operating on private property, behind closed doors, away from the eyes of children and away from the public at-large. Valerie even went so far as to point out that there were accounts of the girls "touching" themselves during breaks and other lulls in their daily routines; the mailroom girls seemed to be getting off on their part in the exercise. Who were they to judge the decisions these girls made?  
  
From Tokyo, the practice began to seep out into businesses throughout the rest of Japan. Yokohama. Osaka. Nagoya. Sapporo. Kyoto. Then into the regional offices Japanese companies maintained in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Seoul, before expanding to Chinese, Singaporean, and Korean companies, as well. Berlin and Frankfurt came next, followed by Moscow, Zurich and Geneva, and eventually even Paris and Rome. In its early stages, it had been tempting to write off the idea of naked mailgirls as an Asia-specific oddity, a cultural thing that the West simply didn't understand. But as mailgirl programs began popping up in Europe, it was clear that there was something more going on.  
  
Sarah graduated from Pepperdine with dual degrees in Sociology and Anthropology, and a minor in Women's Studies to boot. She came East to study under Doctor Gillian Schang, an Anthropology professor at Yale who'd made a name for herself with her work on Third- and Fourth-Wave Feminism. Sarah's own interests were in the Socio-Cultural Anthropology space, and -- like Gillian's -- were intertwined with Women's Studies. She'd spent the better part of four years examining women's place in society - "women's culture," more specifically. The roles women played, the jobs they took on, the decisions they made. Some of her early work had been with groups like the Daughters of the American Revolution, the League of Women Voters, the Women's National Republican Club, and even the International Women's Action Committee. She'd done a ton of research around Greek organizations, too, spending an inordinate amount of time getting to know every detail about sorority life at Yale.  
  
...all while the mailgirl "revolution" spread like wildfire overseas.  
  
That there were perverts and creeps among Boards of Directors and Executive Leadership teams the world over was perhaps not unsurprising, men in power and men of means capable of realizing the twisted fantasy of stripping their employees down and sexualizing them in the workplace. One could obsess about the difference between right and wrong, or pine for chivalry. One could hope that the better angels would prevail, that attacks of conscience or pangs of guilt would nip the thing in the bud. But without government intervention, without a strong and powerful opposition pushing back and putting an end to the practice from the outside, these executives had nothing to keep them in check. They could get away with it, and so they did.  
  
For that matter, it wasn't completely shocking that there were girls out there who were willing to comply. There was no shortage of strippers or porn stars on the market. Prostitution, it was said, was the world's oldest profession. And men didn't have a monopoly on kink. In its way, the Sexual Revolution had empowered women to go after their own interests and fetishes; modern-day feminism may not have liked the fact that this freed women to explore submission and exhibition and humiliation as turn-ons, but nor could they stand in the way of that exploration without coming across as hypocritical.  
  
But it wasn't degenerates at the top of the house or deviants on the ground that propelled the model ever forward. Instead, it was the impact that mailgirls were having on those early adopters' bottom line. If a company were able to weather heavy attrition among their female employees at the outset, if they could survive the exodus of their more righteous and upstanding clients, and if they had the fortitude to stand tall against the public outrage that accompanied their decision, they were rewarded -- eventually - with gains in almost every conceivable performance metric. Rewarded to such a degree that even the most conservative of companies were forced to at least consider the idea.  
  
Turnover always spiked up when a program was introduced, and no one would have been surprised to learn that women comprised the bulk of that increase. But those spikes were never as high as they probably should have been, given what was happening. And the employees who remained behind tended to stick around longer than they had previously, before the program was launched. Time and time again, attrition rates would plummet to new lows; counterintuitively, turnover among women who remained behind declined even more significantly than among their male counterparts. Attendance issues all but disappeared, and the number of employees on leave dropped to never-before-seen lows. Employee engagement went up. Job satisfaction went up. Workforce performance, overall, went through the roof. And, with those gains, companies saw meaningful increases in sales, in profits, and in market share. Mailgirls turned out to be every bit as exciting to the accountants tasked with managing a company's earnings as they were to everyone else.  
  
It was perhaps inevitable that Sarah would turn her attention back to mailgirls. She came at it sideways at first, due to her work with Grace Burgmeier's Actioneers. A video game company in Seattle, well-known for pushing boundaries when it came to both content and business practices, launched the first widely-publicized mailgirl program in the United States. There'd been others, on a smaller scale and more under-the-radar, but it was DumpsterDawg Enterprises upon which the Actioneers, the UAW, and a host of other protest groups descended. Finder-Spyder and eVendr.com came next in Silicon Valley, and the Actioneers went there, too.  
  
But rather than continuing to study the Whitestocking groups who were fighting against the arrival of mailgirls in America, Sarah recognized the mailgirls themselves were fertile ground for a sociological and anthropological study. There'd been a paper published in the British Journal of Industrial Psychology, and a handful of pieces in various business journals, but no one had yet explored the cultural aspects of such programs. She pitched the idea to Gillian, and Gillian was enthusiastically supportive; with mailgirls now popping up all along the West Coast, there was an opportunity for Sarah to be at the forefront in capturing the Zeitgeist of the day. In fact, Gillian was so enthusiastic that she began to run away with Sarah's proposal, and Sarah increasingly felt caught up in the undertow.  
  
Sarah's approach was to have been done with surveys and interviews. She would visit Seattle, and take in the scene there. She would go to LA, and conduct her research there, too. She would go home to the Bay Area - maybe visit with her mom and her step-dad -- and talk the girls of Finder-Spyder, of eVendr, of Hooli. She'd immerse herself in the culture of mailgirls.  
  
Gillian proposed a more radical path: Sarah would become a mailgirl herself. It was Gillian who observed that, while the Whitestocking groups had plenty of former mailgirls they held up as victims and as the aggrieved, it was the Blackstocking groups that included a greater proportion of the girls who'd successfully lasted the full duration of their contracts. As awful as the treatment these girls had suffered had been, they'd come out the other side championing the concept of "individual life, individual choice," a libertarian worldview that held they could make up their own minds about what they were or weren't willing to do with their own bodies. The only way that Sarah would ever truly understood the mailgirl experience would be to experience it firsthand.  
  
Sarah, naturally, had balked. Though she should have been more concerned with the nudity and the humiliation of it all, her first reaction had been centered upon how she'd explain it to Christopher Reardon. The pair had been dating for the better part of six months, getting together shortly after Christopher had arrived on campus for a junior faculty position in the Sociology Department. Though not unheard of, a graduate student dating an Assistant Professor -- even if he wasn't her professor - was still frowned upon. Sarah had initially been excited by the forbidden and hush-hush nature of their relationship. They were serious. Or, Sarah was serious, at least, and unwilling to do anything that might jeopardize what she and Christopher shared. And, of course, the nudity and the humiliation, yadda yadda yadda...  
  
Gillian had been insistent. She'd gone so far as to meet with Deepa Chaudhri, a second-year grad student, and Liz Smith, a first-year. Liz, like Sarah, had issued Gillian a flat-out "no." Deepa, meanwhile, had given it some amount of consideration, and had even sought out Sarah's advice, on the basis that no one in the department knew more about mailgirls than Sarah Scott. The implications were clear: though the proposal had been Sarah's, Gillian was going to move forward with it, herself, in her own way -- with or without Sarah on board.  
  
In the end, Sarah caved. It had been a combination of factors -- not least of which had been Christopher breaking things off to pursue a relationship with another student. Gillian continued to work her, and brought to her attention that US Financial would be launching a program of its own that Spring in New York. Sarah could get in relatively early in the roll-out, and the fact that it was on the East Coast meant that there'd be an entire continent between her and her mother in Santa Clara. Moreover, Gillian knew USF's program director personally, and was therefore in the unique position that she could guarantee certain guardrails would be in place for Sarah specifically, as well as for the program overall. As difficult as the study would be, and as much as Sarah would be forced to put herself through, Gillian had promised that the work they'd do together would make Sarah a star in the field. It wasn't an empty promise, either; a paper co-authored with the venerable Gillian Schang all but guaranteed Sarah would get consideration for a tenure-track faculty position at any number of top tier national universities.  
  
Sarah, like so many girls before her and so many more after, had been lured into becoming a mailgirl by the rewards that awaited her on the other side.  
  
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Sarah and Gillian stepped out of the elevator and onto the 18th Floor, and were met by an attractive woman with dark, chin-length hair. Though Sarah guessed her to be in her mid- to late-forties, she easily could have been among the goddesses kneeling naked back on the 2nd Floor. Thin lips, long eyelashes, and a flawless complexion. She had a slender, athletic frame that suggested the gym was an important part of her daily routine, that she wasn't entering middle age without a fight. She wore a tight-fitting mini-skirt that might have been looked upon as inappropriate somewhere where there weren't bare-skinned girls flitting about the building. This was accompanied by a blouse with a few too many buttons undone, dark stockings, and a set of heels. If she were younger, she might well have been a prime mailgirl candidate.  
  
But Sarah knew that USF had a preference towards girls in their late twenties and early thirties, girls that came from management-track positions and executive development programs, girls with law degrees, business degrees, and even -- in the case of Mailgirl Five - PhDs. At twenty-six, Sarah would be the youngest girl on the roster by almost a year, and one of just two girls recruited thus far without a successfully completed terminal degree. Though they might have been overlooking girls both young and attractive, and overspending in going after the profiles they had been, USF wasn't approaching administrative assistants and receptionists. Even if his assistant had been Sarah's age, and still in the prime of her beauty, Will Barrow likely would have passed her over in favor of more qualified, better-educated candidates.  
  
"You must be Gillian," Barrow's assistant smiled with questionable sincerity, coming forward to meet them both.  
  
"Good morning," Gillian replied, taking the woman's hand.  
  
"Melanie," the girl said, introducing herself. Turning to Sarah, she sized her up and down, nodded, and said, "Mrs. Lowrie."  
  
Melanie Lowrie. Why was that name so familiar?  
  
The distinction between Gillian and Sarah -- "Melanie" to the former and "Mrs. Lowrie" to the latter -- Sarah didn't take as a cruelty, even if it was accompanied by a sneer. Mrs. Lowrie didn't think much of Sarah, which meant she knew what Sarah was here for, and she did little to hide her judgment. But Sarah knew full well that she'd be expected to be deferential and proper in how she interacted with USF employees outside of the mail room. "Yes, sir," and "No, sir." "Yes, ma'am," and "No, ma'am." "Mr. Such-and-such." "Miss So-and-so." "Mrs. Lowrie." In introducing herself to Sarah the way she had, Mrs. Lowrie was only just stating the facts; though Sarah wasn't yet a mailgirl, officially, there was no need to pretend that they'd ever be anything more to one another than "Mrs. Lowrie" and "Mailgirl Number X."

"Mrs. Lowrie," Sarah repeated, doing her best to fake a smile. Sarah extended her hand. "Sarah Scott."  
  
"Hm," was all Mrs. Lowrie allowed in response, declining to shake her hand. Instead, she shifted her attention back to Gillian; Sarah might as well have been luggage. "I'll show you down to Mr. Barrow's office. Please forgive the décor -- it takes some getting used to."  
  
They rounded the reception desk, crossed an open pathway flanked on either side by rows of cubicles, took a left, and arrived at a glass door with a card reader on the wall nearby. Mrs. Lowrie ran her USF badge over the black square and the indicator light went red to green. The three of them stepped through the door and into a long, mostly barren corridor. At first, Sarah wondered if the bare walls were what Mrs. Lowrie had felt the need to apologize for, that the décor she'd asked to be forgiven was simply a lack thereof. But, as they got closer to the end of the hall, Sarah gasped; she was face-to-face with a pair of women's underwear, framed, and hanging on the wall.  
  
A red lace tanga was mounted in the center of the frame. Below, a prominent "#7" announced to whom this particular set of panties belonged. Or to whom they had once belonged, apparently. And, if that weren't enough, there was a small, inset photograph of Mailgirl Number Seven herself, naked and on her knees, in the bottom right-hand corner. The blonde girl, the very one whom Sarah had witnessed undergoing her morning "inspection" just a few minutes prior, wore a smile that stretched from ear to ear. Her eyes smiled, too -- bright blue and full of life. This girl wanted you to see her underwear. This girl wanted you to see her naked body. This girl was happy with her new role here at USF.  
  
This display was repeated again and again down the corridor. Number Twelve's contained a coral pair of seamless, French-cut briefs. Number Eleven's contribution was an off-white string bikini. Number Ten's was pink and lace. And on and on. Were it not for presence of the stark naked girls in the bottom, right-hand corners, this might have been an advertisement for a line of high-end lingerie.  
  
Despite herself, and as horrified as she might have been, Sarah found the exhibit fascinating from a sociological standpoint. She knew these girls, on paper at least. She'd read their profiles. She'd read their contracts. She knew their names. But the scene down in the locker room had homogenized them, in a way. Hair-color and facial features might have distinguished them. But, aside from maybe Mailgirl Number Six's cartoonishly-large chest size, they were all mostly cut from the same cloth, all roughly the same build. Naked tits and exposed twats were, after all, just naked tits and exposed twats -- that they'd been stripped even of their names demonstrated that USF viewed them as nothing more than the aforementioned naked tits and exposed twats.  
  
Here, though, in the hallway leading to Human Capital, they were individuals. Individuals with individual tastes, individuals who'd made different individual choices. What did the red lace say about Mailgirl Number Seven? What did the seamless briefs suggest about Mailgirl Number Twelve? What did the black g-string reveal about Mailgirl Number One? And, was this a representative sample of the women of Wall Street, overall? It was like peeking beneath the skirts of the young and hungry women who worked downtown, and getting a glimpse of who they were beneath their power suits and designer apparel.  
  
Sarah didn't know the story of how these girls' underwear had wound up here on the wall -- whether the girls had chosen these particular panties to bequeath to Human Capital, or if Mistress Zero had simply lifted them from the girls' lockers one morning while they were out in the building and on duty. She suspected it was probably the latter; the high-waisted cotton briefs exhibited in (confusingly) one of the two frames marked as Mailgirl Number Four had to have been embarrassing to the baby blonde who'd once worn them. But even the panties of Mailgirl Number Eight, skin-tone and otherwise nondescript, shimmered in the overhead light, suggesting silk or satin or some similar synthetic blend.  
  
Sarah was thankful she'd gone out a bought a pair of underwear specifically for today. She didn't know if the pearl-white thong she had on that morning would be the pair Human Capital chose to mount, and she certainly hadn't chosen to wear it thinking it might be taken from her. Rather, she knew she'd likely be undressing in front of an audience, and didn't want to be wearing something cheap or old or embarrassing. She shuddered to herself, imagining a pair of her worn-out old cotton briefs -- the girly ones with the strawberries printed on them, maybe - hanging over her picture here on the 18th Floor in perpetuity.  
  
"Our trophies," Mrs. Lowrie announced with a heavy-hearted sigh.  
  
Sarah passed a second "Mailgirl Number Seven," with a different girl's photograph set inside, one that she hadn't seen in that morning's line-up. As she did, it dawned on her now why there were two Fours, two Sevens, and two Twos. The original numbers Two, Four, and Seven were longer with the company, and had been replaced. But, though these girls may not have been mailgirls here at USF any longer, they'd left something behind. No matter how long they'd actually been naked couriers at the Plaza, their time had been memorialized here in this corridor on the 18th Floor.  
  
Mrs. Lowrie ran her badge over the card reader at the far end of the hall, opened the door, and the three of them stepped into Human Capital proper. Though the term "Human Capital" was often used interchangeably with "Human Resources" out in the larger world, here at USF it referred very specifically to the department charged with setting up and recruiting for the mailgirl program. This particular function within HR hadn't existed a year ago, when Senior Management first decided to explore the concept. Whether Will Barrow had been whispering in one of the Managing Directors' ears, or if he'd simply been roped after they'd made the decision -- that much wasn't clear to Sarah. But it was here on the 18th Floor that the company housed Barrow himself, along with Mrs. Lowrie and a small team of technicians and analysts, who made the mailgirl program a reality. Mistress Zero may have been charged with overseeing the girls on a day-to-day basis, but it was from these offices that she took her orders.  
  
Sleek and modern in layout and design, Human Capital featured a handful of offices along one of the Plaza's exterior walls, with windows that looked out into the city beyond. Looking inwards, they had glass walls that allowed a view both in and out, and Sarah was greeted by smiles and polite chin nods as she followed Mrs. Lowrie past them. It was still this side of seven o'clock, so Sarah was a little surprised to find so many staff members already here at work. Perhaps it was because today they'd be onboarding a new class of six mailgirls. Or, perhaps, these were men -- and they were all men, of course -- who simply loved their jobs.  
  
She wondered who they were and what they did; unlike with the mailgirls, Sarah hadn't been given background information on the men who made USF's mailgirl program run. Some of them were likely charged with the technology -- the smartphones that the girls wore on their arms, the sensors that had been installed throughout the building to pinpoint a mailgirl's exact location at all times. The term "Mailgirl Monitoring Unit" was used at a handful of West Coast companies, and only underlined the idea the mailgirls themselves were on some sort of "electronic leash" throughout the day.  
  
There were data analysts, too. These were men tasked with making sense of the digital information the smartphones and sensors collected. They were responsible for establishing the deadlines to which the mailgirls were to adhere when getting from Point A to Point B, for flagging any irregularities in time required or routes taken to accomplish a task, for managing the "chit" system used to summon a mailgirl for delivery or to "hold" her for a more specialized assignment. Every moment of Sarah's day at the Plaza would be tracked and recorded, and she'd be issued automated "demerits" each time she took a little too long in making a delivery, or violated any other of a myriad of tightly-defined parameters.  
  
Lording over them all -- the techs, the analysts, the mailgirls, and the mailgirls' mistress -- was Will Barrow. Despite everything that Sarah Scott would be subjecting herself to, she hadn't actually met the Director of Human Capital face-to-face. She hadn't even spoken to him over the phone; Gillian had served as a go-between. She'd seen pictures of him posted on the various mailgirl sites online, and even watched a panel discussion he'd participated in with the leaders of a handful of more established programs, as well as representatives from the Actioneers. She knew his bio: he had an MBA from Yale, and had done his undergraduate work in New Haven, too. In fact, it was at Yale that he'd first crossed paths with Gillian Schang, and it was that relationship -- among other reasons -- that had steered Sarah in the direction of US Financial in the first place.  
  
It was Barrow's office at the far corner of Human Capital to which Gillian and Sarah were led. They passed by what Sarah assumed was Mrs. Lowrie's desk, and after a gentle rapping at his door, were summoned in.  
  
The first time she'd seen Barrow's picture online, she'd been surprised. Among the mailgirl programs she'd looked into as part of her research, there hadn't been much consistency around how those programs were governed. In some cases, the girls were truly just mailroom employees, overseen by whatever sad-sack happened to be running the mailroom at the time. In others, the roles played by Barrow and Mistress Zero at USF were done by a single individual -- sometimes by women, but more often by men. One of her first interactions within the world of mailgirls was an interview she'd conducted with a slovenly, middle-aged man, balding and bespectacled, who seemed to working out his failings with the opposite sex by abusing the mailgirls under his charge. It had colored Sarah's expectations, and she'd falsely anticipated that she'd be running into more of the same, the deeper she went.  
  
Will Barrow was not that man. He was still young, still on the right side of forty. He'd reportedly been a "whiz kid" when it had come to operations and logistics early in his career, and he'd made a name for himself overseeing large-scale projects, herding cats, and getting executives decades older than him to fall into line. At some point after his MBA he'd transitioned into Human Resources, touching upon talent management and employee engagement as levers to be pulled in driving USF's corporate vision and performance goals. He was smart and driven, an up-and-comer, and even looked the part; he was the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome. Though there might have been a danger of putting a charmer like him out there amid all the controversy and bad publicity that surrounded USF's decision to launch a mailgirl program - a danger in the public seeing him as some sort of predator - Barrow carried himself with an air of professionalism and "put-togetheredness." He'd owned the panel Sarah had watched the moment he'd opened his mouth, presenting USF's adoption of the concept as modern, respectful, and interested only in performance gains that the entire company benefited from.  
  
He stood as they entered, stepped away from his desk, and greeted Gillian with a warm embrace. "The big day!"  
  
Gillian chuckled. "Here we are!"  
  
"I'm happy this all worked out," he told his former professor. "I'm looking forward to working with you again. You look good!"  
  
"Please," Gillian chuckled. "And you! You're all grown up."  
  
"A few greys starting to creep in," Barrow responded. "This job is not without its headaches. I've got a day in front me, I'll tell you that..."  
  
"Yes," Gillian answered sarcastically. "I'm sure you're dreading it."  
  
Barrow laughed. "At least this one will be straightforward enough. I can't tell you how nice it is to go into this meeting with the i's all dotted and the contract signed."  
  
"Well, I'm sorry for all the back and forth to get us to this point. I know that this is not how you've been doing this here, so thank you for that. We both appreciate the accommodations you've made for us and our study."  
  
Sarah had signed a contract, yes. But hers had only been for three months, in contrast to the two years required in the more standard mailgirl contract. She'd be a mailgirl, sure, but she'd be returning to New Haven in the Fall to wrap up her PhD; the light at the end of her particular tunnel was only thirteen weeks away.  
  
The sticking point, though, had been the Power of Attorney. Sarah had done enough homework to know that mailgirl contracts were infamously one-sided, and that companies regularly altered the terms and played with the dates, with the mailgirls themselves always on the losing end. There were performance kickers and special clauses hidden throughout; even the contract Sarah had eventually signed had dozens of little loopholes that had kept her up at night. She'd drawn the line at Power of Attorney; by signing that away, she might as well have not even signed a contract in the first place, as it would have allowed USF to alter the terms at any time. After a tense, two-week standoff (during which time Sarah increasingly hoped the whole thing would fall apart), Gillian found a solution everyone could live with. Instead of signing away her Power of Attorney to US Financial, Sarah gave it over to the Department of Anthropology at Yale; Will Barrow and his lawyers wouldn't be able to tack on any amendments or make changes unilaterally on Sarah's behalf.  
  
Barrow shrugged. "We're here now. Again, I'm glad we got it done. I think this is going to be a good opportunity for everyone involved."  
  
"Me, too," Gillian agreed.  
  
Barrow clapped his hands together, and turned his attention to Sarah. "Well done," he said, still addressing Sarah's professor. He didn't bother to pretend he wasn't checking her out. He showed no shame in the way his eyes raked her up and down. He lingered upon her hips, and again upon her chest, before finally coming up to meet her gaze. He didn't bother to shake her hand or introduce himself. He didn't even really say hello, or treat her as if she had any agency of her own -- beyond that of the unnamed graduate student Gillian had brought along with her. Without any further hesitation, and in just as casual a manner as it might have asked her to take a seat, he told her to undress.  
  
"Let's see what we've got," he added.  
  
Sarah had known this moment was coming, but she hadn't expected to it come so soon. She'd played this scene out in her own head going back months now, when Gillian had first proposed a more experiential dip in the mailgirl pool. Sarah hadn't been sure where it would happen or how it would happen or who would be there when it did, but the first and most important step in becoming a naked mailgirl was (of course) getting naked. Before Barrow had set the time and location of their meeting, Sarah had imagined any number of possibilities -- from undressing in the locker room to undressing in the mail room, from undressing in the lobby before being allowed past Security to undressing in the parking garage beneath the building. Once she'd been instructed to meet him in his office, first thing on Monday morning, she'd been reasonably sure she'd be walking out of that meeting in nothing but her birthday suit.  
  
She hadn't, however, expected to strip the moment she walked through the door. Barrow's secretary hadn't even yet returned to her desk, let alone shut the door. Gillian hadn't even been offered a seat. Maybe Sarah had been naïve, but she'd presumed they'd sit and chat first, talk about how the day was going to play out, discuss some out-standing aspect of Sarah's arrangement with USF. To Barrow's point, however, the i's had all been dotted some weeks earlier; there simply wasn't anything left for them to deliberate over. It was time to get down to business.  
  
Barrow's office, unlike the others in Human Capital that Sarah had passed on the way, had real, honest-to-goodness walls - not the floor-to-ceiling windows that had allowed the rest of his staff to watch her being paraded in a few moments earlier. Once Mrs. Lowrie had excused herself, and shut the door behind her, Sarah was standing in front of an audience of only two -- both of whom had already seen her naked.  
  
Gillian, in an effort to get Sarah comfortable with being naked in front of other people, had begun having Sarah take off her clothes during their weekly one-on-ones. The first time, Gillian had even undressed with her. She had assured Sarah that she wasn't asking her to do anything that she herself wasn't willing to do. If there had been a mailgirl program out there looking for a woman in her late fifties, she promised, she'd have been the one doing this in Sarah's place. Sarah's wasn't convinced; the following week, it was Sarah and Sarah alone in the nude, as it would be for the next couple of weeks before the semester had come to an end.  
  
Barrow, meanwhile, had been given a series of naked photos. Gillian explained to Sarah that he wasn't willing to accept her into his program sight unseen. Gillian's assurances of her grad student's exceptional beauty notwithstanding, Barrow needed to make sure that Sarah was USF material. Sarah submitted a single naked selfie at first, but was asked for more. She'd been forced to ask her roommate Audrey to play photographer in an awkward and deeply embarrassing photo shoot.  
  
Still, it wasn't as if Sarah was fully prepared for this moment, and none of it made what she had to do next any easier. She glanced back over her shoulder, double-checking that Mrs. Lowrie had, in fact, closed the door, and began by kicking off her shoes.  
  
Sarah was on the precipice of major, character-defining moment in her life, compromising her dignity and modesty to get ahead in her chosen field; neither Barrow nor Gillian paid her much mind. Instead, the Director of Human Capital was inviting his former college professor to sit down in one of the two open chairs across from his desk. He asked her if he could send Mrs. Lowrie to fetch her a coffee, and she declined. He asked her if she was going to spend the rest of the morning in Manhattan, or if she'd be on a train back to New Haven. Small talk. Chit-chat. Passing the time.  
  
Shoes now off, and gently kicked aside, Sarah shed the blazer she'd borrowed from Audrey at some point in the preceding weeks. She wasn't sure why she'd borrowed it initially, or how it had wound up with the things she'd brought with her from New Haven for the summer. She wasn't sure that Audrey would have pleased to know she'd worn here today; though supportive and understanding -- eventually - Audrey had done her damnedest to talk Sarah out of going through with all this. But Sarah had needed something to wear over her sleeveless blouse, and Audrey's jacket happened to be the same shade of navy as the skirt Sarah had picked out. Or, at least close enough that someone could be forgiven in believing they actually went together.  
  
"I try to have Mistress Zero here with me, at this stage, as much as possible," Barrow was explaining to Gillian. "But she's likely still wrapping up downstairs, and I figured she could sit this one out."  
  
"Less contentious than most?" Gillian asked.  
  
"Most of our candidates aren't usually this eager."  
  
Sarah's stomach turned. Apparently, she was more "eager" than other girls to take off her clothes and join the mailgirl ranks.

"It doesn't always work out," Barrow went on. "Mistress Zero really needs to be in two places at once on day like today. I'd like to have her in all of these meetings, ideally. Not only does it give us another woman in the room, but it saves me from having to get directly involved."  
  
From getting your hands dirty, Sarah said to herself.  
  
She folded the blazer vertically, and then over her forearm, before looking to Barrow for instructions on what to do with it. As he was otherwise engaged with Gillian, Sarah took the path of least resistance and just draped it over the open chair next to her professor, where she'd already set her purse.  
  
Blouse or skirt? Skirt or blouse? Sarah had had this debate internally for weeks now, whenever she had imagined this moment. Not that it mattered, given that they were both coming off. This wasn't a strip show -- at least, not in the sense that Sarah was on stage and swinging around a stripper's pole. She wasn't here to perform. This was a Point A to Point B trip. It didn't matter how she got naked, only that she did. Despite that, Sarah had strategized her next step. She tugged the skirt down to around her knees, stepped out of it with her right leg, and then did the same with her left.  
  
Sarah's blouse wasn't long, but it was long enough that it fell past her waist, and obscured the top of her panties. For a beat or two, at least. She knew she was being ridiculous. She knew that it was pointless. But modesty was difficult to overcome. Grimacing, she took the shirt's hem in her hands, pulled it up over her head, and stood before Barrow in just her bra and underwear.  
  
Barrow had been concerned that whomever Gillian was sending his way wouldn't belong among his mailgirls. His concerns were unfounded. Whereas Deepa Chaudhri was noticeably flat-chested, and Liz Smith was carrying a little too much weight around the mid-section, Sarah was a vision. Long blonde hair spilled down upon her shoulders, and Sarah smoothed it down even as she folded her blouse. She'd never been one much for the gym, the occasional yoga class or get-in-shape-just-in-time-for-swimsuit-season panic notwithstanding. But, though she was carrying a little more weight than she might have wanted -- especially at the hips and on her behind -- this was more her own neuroses and body image issues than reality. Without the rest of her clothes to hide behind, Sarah proved she that was mailgirls material, with big, bouncy breasts that were still being held back by her bra, and a God-given physique that belonged more to a model in a men's magazine than it did to a mousey academic. Sarah wasn't vain, but she knew she was pretty. She may not have had much experience with men when it came to actual relationships, but she'd been on the receiving end of more than enough pick-up attempts and come-ons to know she was desirable to the opposite sex.  
  
"It can be...I don't know...what's the word? Unseemly, maybe?" Barrow was saying to Gillian. "We looked at other programs. What worked, what didn't. Ultimately, we thought it better to hire a woman to oversee the mailgirls, a woman with some experience in this sort of thing."  
  
"With mailgirl experience?" Gillian asked.  
  
"Experience," Barrow said, nipping that line of questioning in the bud. Sarah didn't know if Barrow was trying to shield Mistress Zero's past from her, as Sarah would soon be one of her charges.  
  
Gillian seemed to take the hint.  
  
"Honestly, training begins right away, which is why it's helpful when Mistress Zero is here. She'll be with me this morning, at least, but I might be on my own as we get into the afternoon. Depending on how the meetings go, we may only be able to get through the first three or four volunteers before Mistress Zero is needed back in the locker room."  
  
Sarah reached behind her back, bending forward ever so slightly as she did so, and fumbled with her bra hooks. She was nervous. At home, in the privacy of her bedroom, she might have done this differently; she might have slipped her arms out of the shoulder straps, released her breasts from their cups, and twisted the bra itself around so that she could see what she was doing. Instead, she opted to unfasten it like an adult. That she was struggling with it like a teenaged boy, however, made her regret the choice, and spoke to nerves. Gillian and Barrow were still engaged in their chit-chat, however, and neither seemed to notice. The extra second or two it took Sarah to finally free herself from her bra was likely only perceptible to Sarah herself, and they both looked over to take her in when her breasts popped into view.  
  
As she took a breath, calmed herself down, and prepared for the final reveal, Barrow stopped her. Thumbs already beneath the elastic waist of her thong, Sarah looked across the desk.  
  
"Hold up just a minute," he ordered. His eyes went from her underwear to her breasts, and only then to her face, meeting her gaze. "It's still early, and it's going to be a little while before we get you down to the locker room. Do you want a quick bathroom break?"  
  
He was fucking with her. He was fucking with her, right? She was almost there. She was almost through with this ordeal. He could have done this before she'd begun, before she'd taken everything else off. Now, if she were to be granted a reprieve and allowed a trip to the bathroom, she'd have to put everything back on and do it all again.  
  
Only then did it dawn on her that, yes, Barrow was fucking with her. But that also, no, he had no intention of making her undress a second time. She was supposed run to the restroom dressed just like this, wearing just her underwear.  
  
"I'm okay," she answered meekly. Had it been a kindness? A twisted, perverted kindness, but a kindness all the same? Sarah was cursed with tiny bladder, one that only seemed to shrink with anxiety. If she were expected to wait here for an hour or two, while Barrow and Mistress Zero held meetings elsewhere in the building, she probably shouldn't have turned the opportunity down. Sarah wasn't sure she really had the option, though; Barrow had put the suggestion out there politely and phrased it in such a way that it seemed up to her, but it was possible that this was a test.  
  
As if to underline how little Sarah had to say in the matter, Barrow shook his head. "No, go ahead and go now. We can finish this when you get back. There's a men's room here in Human Capital. Mrs. Lowrie can direct you."  
  
Turning to Gillian, Barrow explained. "If she's in uniform, she really should have a chaperone. And then Melanie's got to take her out the ladies' room, out of Human Capital, back by reception. The door's got to be left open. Melanie's got to watch. No privacy for our mailgirls - it's a whole thing."  
  
Barrow sounded annoyed by rules and regulations he himself had no doubt put into play.  
  
Gillian nodded, shrugged, and directed her attention back to Sarah. "I'd go now. Take the opportunity while you've got it."  
  
Traitor. Sarah seethed internally, but didn't let it show. She wasn't even a mailgirl yet -- not officially, at least -- and she was already under USF's thumb. Barrow was fucking with her, but it was her job to do as she was told. It was her job to let him fuck with her, just as it would be her job to let anyone else here at Plaza fuck with her, too, if they so chose. Being a mailgirl wasn't just about delivering the mail in the nude -- it was to serve at the pleasure of any USF employee, to follow any instruction issued to her, to degrade and humiliate herself in any way she was directed.  
  
Here and now, that meant running to the men's room in just her panties.  
  
She hesitated, and both the Director of Human Capital and Sarah's academic advisor saw the hesitation.  
  
"Trial run," Gillian reasoned. "Just here in Will's offices. While you're still wearing...something."  
  
"Okay," she replied, finally, fighting the urge to offer a sarcastic "Yes, ma'am" or a "Yes, Dr. Schang."  
  
As Sarah closed the distance to the door, Barrow cleared his throat and her head swiveled back in his direction.  
  
"Before you go, though, let's just get a quick peek at what we're working with downstairs." He jutted a chin towards her crotch.  
  
He wanted her to flash him. He wanted her to show him her pussy.  
  
This caught even Gillian off-guard, and Sarah watched her professor sit up a bit in her seat. Barrow seemed to notice the reaction, as well, and smiled wolfishly in Gillian's direction. No words passed between them. But it was clear that Barrow was flexing, that he was demonstrating the power he already had over Sarah.  
  
Sarah resisted a gag. Instead, she stiffened up her back, summoned her resolve, and exposed her sex, tugging her panties down just enough for Will Barrow to get a good look.  
  
"That's disappointing," he said in response.  
  
Sarah was taken aback by the reaction. What had he been expecting?  
  
"Waxed?" he asked.  
  
"Last weekend," she answered, confused. "I'm sorry. I thought we were supposed to? I thought we weren't allowed to keep our...to have any...pubic hair?"  
  
"It's alright," Barrow offered graciously, taking her apology at face value. "You're not the first mailgirl we've had who came in already shaved. You're still going to have to make a show it, though."  
  
Make a show of what, exactly? Sarah shifted her attention to Gillian, as Barrow did the same.  
  
"It's become something of a crowd favorite," Barrow explained to the older woman. "A popular part of a girl's first day, to have to shave or get waxed. We got a crowd in the lobby in May. That...that, and the anal bleaching."  
  
Sarah shuddered.  
  
Gillian, though, didn't miss a beat. Apologetically, she began, "If we'd known..."  
  
Barrow shrugged good-naturedly. Back to Sarah, he said, "Like I said, Mistress Zero will have you make a show of it anyways." And, with that, he made clear that she'd been dismissed.  
  
Sarah pulled her panties back into place, covering her "disappointing" pussy, and exited the room. As she stepped back out to where Mrs. Lowrie was sitting, she fought the instinct to cover her chest with her arm, to shield her bare breasts and exposed nipples from view. There'd be a lot of that today; every instinct she had told her to storm back in Barrow's office, collect her things, and run screaming out of Plaza without looking back. She was here by choice, however, no matter how much Gillian might have pushed that choice upon her. She was here to become a mailgirl, to learn about being a mailgirl, to live the life of a mailgirl.  
  
Mrs. Lowrie gave her the once over with a look of disgust on her face. "New uniforms?"  
  
"Bathroom break," Sarah answered. "The men's room? I'm supposed to use the men's room."  
  
Mrs. Lowrie sighed. "You'll need a chaperone."  
  
"He told me I didn't," Sarah mewed. She didn't want to get into a back-and-forth with Barrow's secretary. "Not yet."  
  
The woman sized her up, glanced at the door to Barrow's office, and shook her head. She seemed annoyed by the curve ball, and searched Sarah's face for a sign that the topless twenty-six-year-old was lying. "Sure," she sighed again, resigning herself to the situation. It wasn't worth a fight. "Down the hall, on the left. On the other side of the break room."  
  
Sarah tried to measure the distance in her mind's eye before setting off, but failed. As she'd been led down to Barrow's office on the way in, she'd been so focused on the men in their offices on one side of the hallway that she hadn't taken stock of what had been on the other. She saw a number of different doorways that, from this vantage point, could have been the break room to which Mrs. Lowrie was referring, or could have just been conference rooms, supply rooms, or closets. Though she couldn't tell just how far she needed to go, she prepared herself for the reality that she'd have to march past every single one of those offices -- almost all of which had been occupied even at this early hour in the day -- until she reached her destination.  
  
These men have all seen naked breasts before, she tried to tell herself. Who was she to them? Who was she to them but just another mailgirl? This was Human Capital, the very department responsible for overseeing the mailgirls. This was Human Capital, who recruited and tracked naked young women day-in and day-out. This was Human Capital, where Will Barrow held court. It would have been worse, then, had Mrs. Lowrie been forced to accompany her back through the "Hall of Panties" and to the ladies' room out amidst the rest of Human Resources. In that light, Barrow's instruction to use the men's room here in Human Capital was -- as it turned out -- a kindness, after all.  
  
Sarah struck out from Mrs. Lowrie's desk at a pace that was neither too fast nor too slow, moving deliberately down the hall. She avoided even the quickest of glances into the first office on her right, and moved past each subsequent office with the same restraint. Maybe Barrow's underlings would see her breeze past, and maybe they wouldn't. Sarah, for her part, pretended they weren't there, and she focused all of her attention on the wall to her left. Mailgirls -- real mailgirls -- were generally forbidden from making eye contact with their "superiors," an all-encompassing classification that usually meant anyone but their fellow mailgirls. In that moment, Sarah took the restriction as a blessing, because it meant never having to meet someone eye-to-eye, and it meant being able to pretend they weren't there.  
  
Still, Sarah measured her progress down the hall by how many offices she passed on her right, counting them out of the corner of her eye. Someone in the third office apparently saw her, and yelled out a teasing, "Yeah, baby!" Sarah didn't break stride. Someone in the fifth let loose a "Wow!" Sarah didn't turn around. She remained fixed on her destination, and wasn't going to be distracted in getting there. When she did, finally and thankfully, see the door marked "Men," she pushed it open and sought refuge inside.  
  
Refuge, as it turned out, was not to be found in the men's room. As Sarah entered, she came face-to-face with a man -- a boy, really -- washing his hands at the sink. If Sarah was surprised and embarrassed by his presence, he was even more so by hers; the moment he laid eyes upon her, his whole face turned a deep shade of crimson. It was almost as if Sarah had caught him in his underwear, and not vice versa.  
  
"I'm sorry!" Sarah yelped. "I should have knocked! I was just-"  
  
...just trying to get out of the hall. Just trying to get somewhere relatively more private. Just trying to get away from the eyes on naked breasts.  
  
"No, no," the man-boy said back. His eyes went to the floor. To the sink. To the door. Sarah had somehow stumbled upon the one man in Human Capital whose eyes weren't on her naked breasts, whose eyes were now searching for something -- anything -- to look at other than those naked breasts. "I'm...I'm...I'm all done. Just washing my hands." He held up his hands, still dripping wet, as if Sarah required proof.  
  
Tech support, Sarah surmised. He couldn't have been any older than twenty-four. He was short, and nothing more than skin and bones. Even in her bare feet, Sarah had a few inches on him. Even devoid of nearly all her clothes, Sarah probably had a good ten pounds on him. His face was pockmarked with acne scarring, and if he'd been wearing glasses or braces he couldn't have been more of a "nerd" in any sense of the word. Her naked body -- or, nearly naked, as it was -- clearly made him uncomfortable, and his discomfort only served to heighten Sarah's own.  
  
"I'm sorry," she apologized again. "I was told to use the men's room. I didn't know..."  
  
"No, no," he repeated. "You're not the first mailgirl in the men's room. I'm done, really." He shut off the sink, stood from his hunch, and looked, distressed, past her to paper towel dispenser. He was strategizing how to get around her without being forced to ask her to move.  
  
Sarah took it upon herself to slide out of his way. She went around him to the large, handicapped stall on the end, entered, and shut the door behind her. And, as she slid her panties down her thighs and turned to sit, the man-boy finally found his voice.  
  
"You're the girl from Yale. Right?"  
  
She just wanted to pee. But she responded, all the same. "Yup."  
  
"I thought so. I recognized you from the pictures."  
  
Sarah scowled. He was referring, of course, to the pictures Gillian had submitted to Barrow. Pictures. Not just in the singular. Not just the naked selfie she'd taken in the mirror at first, but the "pictures" -- plural -- that she'd pressed Audrey into taking. From the front. From the back. From the sides. Close-ups of her breasts, her vagina, her naked behind. It had been a full six days after Gillian had sent them over that she and Sarah had finally heard back from Barrow, and that response time had nearly given Sarah a complex. Did she not measure up? Did they not see her as "mailgirl material"? Were her hips too wide? Was her butt too big? Was there something wrong with her breasts?  
  
Apparently, these pictures had been circulated among the Human Capital staff.  
  
Sarah didn't know how to respond. She wanted to say something witty, to make a joke out of it, to ask him what he thought. But nothing was coming, and so the man-boy spoke again.  
  
"I'm Chad. Chad Ostermueller. Mr. Ostermueller, I guess," he introduced himself. "I'm the one that wrote the app."  
  
"Mr." Ostermueller. The formality of the title seemed awkward even to Mr. Ostermueller. But she'd been right -- Mr. Ostermueller was indeed one of Barrow's tech support guys.  
  
"Oh, wow," Sarah said. She wasn't sure what he was looking for. She continued to sit, but waited to pee. Though ridiculous in the face of everything else she'd be expected to go through today, she felt embarrassed to let him hear her take a piss. "Anything I should know?"  
  
"Well, no," Mr. Ostermueller answered, sounding as if he was giving it some serious thought. "The app's not really for you. I mean, it's for you and it's about you and it's how people summon you. But you're not really supposed to touch it or play with it."  
  
"Oh. Okay."  
  
"Well, maybe that's not true. You've got do your daily affirmation on it. But, after that, it's just directions and a countdown."  
  
"Good to know."  
  
A pause. And then...  
  
"You're doing research. You're doing research, right?"  
  
"I'm doing research," Sarah confirmed.  
  
"If I can help at all, let me know. I can run you through it. I can show you how it works. It might have to be after hours, when you're not on-duty. Though I guess if we were to do it here in the building, you'd probably still have be in uniform..."  
  
From seven to seven, Sarah would be a mailgirl. At the end of the day, she'd be allowed to get dressed and go home. Not "home" home -- not back to New Haven, of course. Not back to the graduate apartment Sarah and Audrey shared. But to the one-bedroom she'd sublet for the summer on the Upper West Side. And then she'd get up the following morning, and repeat her day. But, even after seven, even if she were officially off the clock, Sarah wouldn't be allowed up into the building if she weren't stark naked.  
  
"Thank you," Sarah replied. Mr. Ostermueller had seemed uncomfortable around her in her current state. She wasn't sure he'd be able to sit and talk to her if she were in his office, fully nude. But his offer was sincere, and seemingly without a more lurid objective. And Sarah did, in fact, want to learn about USF's mailgirl app, an app that she'd be forbidden from using during the day. "I'd love to take you up on that. Maybe next week, once I get a better handle on everything?"  
  
"Cool," he said. "I'm here, in 1861. That's my office number."  
  
"Got it."  
  
"Okay, good." He didn't seem to have anything further to say, but nor did he seem to be walking away.

Sarah grimaced. She'd been through the instructional handbook USF assigned its mailgirls, a thick, dense tome filled with do's and don'ts, rules and regulations, and even petty instructions on how she was supposed to arrange her clothes and undergarments in her locker. She and Gillian had also been supplied with documents -- emails, memorandums, meeting notes -- that had circulated prior to and after the program's launch. And so not only did Sarah know how the "bathroom issue" finally netted out, and what would be required of her just to go to the bathroom, but she was also aware that the matter had been debated internally, with Barrow trying to find the appropriate solution for USF.  
  
She'd read of programs that denied their mailgirls of actual toilets, forcing them to use litter boxes or repurposed mop sinks or men's urinals. There was a company in suburban Berlin that sent them out into the woods behind their office park. And one of earliest accounts she'd come across involved a mailgirl peeing on the floor, and being forced to lap it all back up with her mouth -- a story so vile it had nearly turned Sarah off on mailgirls, on the whole.  
  
USF, thankfully, had installed toilets -- actual toilets -- in the locker room. There were no partitions, and anyone standing in the elevator lobby on the 2nd Floor could watch from the far side of the mirror glass. But toilets, all the same. One of Barrow's analysts had floated the suggestion of Japanese-style "washikis" or squat-toilets, but the idea had been nixed...for now.  
  
Outside of the locker room, USF's solution was to require that bathroom breaks would be supervised. A mailgirl was supposed to ask for permission, and then be escorted -- be it a man or a woman playing the role of chaperone -- into the nearest restroom, where she'd be required to leave the stall door open and the chaperone would be required to watch. Sarah couldn't imagine that anyone but the perviest of degenerates might enjoy their part in this particular arrangement, but mailgirls weren't to be allowed even the briefest moments of privacy or solitude while on the clock. The whole thing was then to be logged and reported into the app, another bit of metadata for Mr. Ostermueller and his peers to do god-knows-what with.  
  
Sarah wasn't a mailgirl yet. Not technically speaking. The point of Barrow instructing her to use the facilities now was -- among other things -- to avoid this exercise, and she supposed that she should have been grateful for it. Her stall door was closed. She still had her underwear, even if it was down around her ankles. And Mr. Ostermueller wasn't watching. But he was listening. Maybe not intentionally. But he was still out there, engaged in a conversation with her that she did not want to have here and now, and he didn't seem to be taking the hint.  
  
And so she peed. As it turned out, the sound in the bowl was enough for Mr. Ostermueller to finally bid her adieu; she heard the men's room door creak closed behind him.  
  
She was alone now as she emerged from her stall, snapping her panties back into place. Alone, save for the miserable-looking wretch staring back at her from the mirror above the sink, a topless blonde wearing nothing but a lacy white thong. She didn't look bad, per se. If anything, there was something undeniably sexy about how she was dressed, standing in the sanctum sanctorum of her male "coworkers" with the urinals all lined up behind her.  
  
But her reflection's face spoke volumes. She didn't want to be here. She didn't want to be doing this. She didn't want to be seen.  
  
"Confidence," Sarah told the girl, a message the girl repeated back to her. "Confidence."  
  
However she'd arrived at this moment, she was here now. She'd volunteered. Whatever her reasons, this was what she'd wanted. It didn't serve her purposes to show Barrow and his lackeys how much she hated it, how miserable she was, how much this embarrassed her. She wasn't going to go skipping back to Barrow's office with a big smile on her face, or start twirling her panties around over her head, or shake her tits at any of the Human Capital employees she happened to pass by -- but she could put on a brave face, and pretend that none of this was affecting her as much as it truly was.  
  
"Confidence," she said aloud again.  
  
That confidence was tested the moment she poked her head back into the hall. In addition to Mrs. Lowrie, whom she'd be able to see at her desk all the way back down to Barrow's office, there were now two men engaged in conversation about three-quarters of way towards her destination. As Sarah stepped into the hall, both of them turned their heads and drank her in. Whatever topic they'd been discussing was back-burnered the moment the underwear-clad blonde came into sight, and neither made any effort to pretend they weren't staring at her chest.  
  
Sarah was self-conscious of the way her breasts bounced as she approached them. Mailgirls spent most of their days dashing this way or that, running at top speed to hit their impossible deadlines and desperately avoid racking up demerits. She wished she'd be allowed to wear a sports bra, not for the coverage -- though, that too -- but for the support; she knew her C's would be moving almost independently and with their own agenda.  
  
Sarah put on her brave face, smiled at them, and padded in their direction.  
  
"Yowza!" the taller of the two exclaimed, and chuckled out loud.  
  
Sarah decided to take the comment for what was -- a compliment, in its way, on her body. She gritted her teeth, willed them to let her pass without further conversation, and stayed focused on the door to Barrow's office.  
  
After she was by them, she heard one say to the other, "She's the PhD, right? She's not one of ours?"  
  
There was a laugh. And then, "She's ours now."  
  
Though Mrs. Lowrie told her to go right back into Barrow's office, Sarah still knocked politely as she opened the door. Barrow and Gillian were still talking, but both looked up at her as she entered. Gillian, apparently, had made herself useful, and had taken it upon herself to fold Sarah's clothes neatly and place them on the corner of Barrow's desk. Blazer, skirt, and blouse, with the white lace bra stacked on top, and her sandals off to one side.  
  
Barrow interrupted Gillian with the "one minute" finger, and directed his attention to Sarah. "I'm going to have keep your underwear on for a little while longer, so that you can have a seat and chat with us."  
  
He meant it as a reprieve. Or, at least, he meant for Sarah to take it as a reprieve. Once her panties were off, she wouldn't be allowed to sit back down -- the company claimed "sanitary" reasons in preventing mailgirls such basic comforts as chairs, even. Sarah, honestly, just wanted to get on with it, to take off her panties and become a mailgirl in earnest. But she did as she was told, and settled into the chair beside Gillian where her clothes had been before.  
  
"Jewelry needs to come off, though," Barrow add.  
  
Now seated, Sarah took out her earrings. She deposited them, along with her rings and her necklace, in a pile next to her clothes.  
  
As she did so, Barrow slid a stack of papers across to her, a stack of papers Sarah recognized as her contract. She'd already signed it once, but Barrow was asking her to initial it once more, and to affix an inky thumbprint upon the last page.  
  
"No changes, no edits," Barrow promised, holding up his right hand. "Scout's honor."  
  
Sarah knew better than to trust him. As much as Gillian might have vouched for him, Barrow was still USF's representative on the mailgirls initiative, and her research had taught her to be suspect of anything a company asked her to sign. She'd been though the contract dozens of times by that point. There were bits that were concerning, but none of the possible dirty tricks and legal loopholes could have been as bad as the things that were spelled out explicitly. She scanned the document quickly - quicker than she probably should have, if she were being honest with herself -- speed-reading through each page to make sure that the contract before her now was the same one she'd handed over to Gillian during their office hours a few weeks back. She scribbled "SJS" in each corner as she progressed through, but wondered if she should have perhaps been scrawling a number "13" instead, to signify her surrender to what she'd become.  
  
As Sarah was re-checking her contract, Barrow and Gillian continued to talk. Only now, Barrow began to include Sarah herself in the conversation.  
  
"Just so that we're all on the same page, are we telling the other mailgirls what you're doing here?"  
  
Sarah looked up from the contract, shared a look with Gillian, and nodded. "Yes," she said aloud. The matter had been of some debate between the student and the professor. Gillian had wanted a cover story -- Sarah was a new hire. Sarah was a transfer from another office. Sarah was coming on board as a "loaner" from another company currently in the exploratory stages of launching a similar program.  
  
Sarah hadn't felt comfortable with any of it. She didn't want to lie to the other girls. Yes, they were the subjects of her research. And, yes, she'd tell them that they were subjects of her research. She hoped that joining them in the nude would soften that revelation, and demonstrate that she herself was willing to experience their experiences first-hand.  
  
"Good," Barrow replied. "There's no reason to hold back from our girls. If I were to embed a reporter, or a reality TV star, or an academic, well...that's my decision. They don't get a say. I'll make clear that they are to cooperate with your research."  
  
Sarah winced. "If it's alright, can I be the one to tell them? I'd rather be upfront and honest, myself, and work to gain their trust. If talking to me is going to be compulsory, or if they see it as a dictate from the company, it may affect what they're willing to share."  
  
Barrow took the pushback in stride. He probably wasn't used to hearing mailgirls tell him "no," but then Sarah wasn't yet a mailgirl.  
  
"I'd agree," Gillian supported her. "We'll be sharing Sarah's research with you as we go. She and I will be speaking weekly, on Sunday afternoons, for the next thirteen weeks. For our purposes, getting the girls to open up to Sarah is critical. For yours, too, I suspect. She'll be able to provide insight and feedback that you're not going to get from data alone, or from your mailgirls' 'supervisor' down on the 2nd Floor."  
  
It made Sarah feel like she was spying on the girls, reporting back on their conversations to Human Capital. She knew that they'd likely be suspicious of her. She'd be suspicious of her, too. But Sarah intended that anything the girls offered to her would be kept anonymous. The trick would be getting the girls themselves to believe that.  
  
"Fair enough," Barrow agreed. "How are you feeling about all this?"  
  
How did she feel? How did she feel?!! He was fucking with her again. She knew it. How was she supposed to answer that question? What did he want from her? She was submitting herself to USF, in body and soul. She was surrendering her modesty, her dignity, and even her very name. There were only a handful of people who'd ever seen Sarah Scott naked -- just four men, in fact, and rarely in the full light of day, or out of the bedroom. By seven o'clock that night, when she'd be allowed to go back to her apartment, that number would have risen exponentially. She could expect to be put down, belittled, treated like a whore. She'd be reduced to nothing more than a mindless bimbo, tits bouncing this way and that as she raced to complete menial tasks under tight supervision. She'd be spanked -- spanked! -- if she came up short anywhere. She'd been betrayed by her advisor and "sold" to USF, her honor and her self-respect sacrificed in exchange for a paper. How did she feel?  
  
She squirmed a bit in her chair, feeling the scratchiness of the fabric against her bare buttocks.  
  
"I'm nervous," she answered honestly. And then added, "But excited, too. About this opportunity."  
  
It wasn't a lie. Despite herself, Sarah was excited. She'd always been a "good girl." She'd been in the band in high school. She'd lost her virginity embarrassingly late into college. At twenty-six, she could still count the men she'd been with on one hand. This -- this opportunity -- felt like some grand adventure, an exploration far outside of her comfort zone, a chance to do something that scared her. And so, as much as she dreaded what they day had in store for her, what Will Barrow had in store for her, she was excited by the idea that she was doing something that Sarah Jane Scott would never, ever, ever do.  
  
Barrow grinned, the smile stretching from ear from ear.  
  
"Mostly terrified, though," Sarah said. "I've read enough mailgirl material to know what to expect."  
  
"Well, I promise that USF will look after you. We're two months in, and we're still getting our bearings. But ours is an upright and upstanding program, with zero tolerance for the sorts of bad actors and the worst abuses you might have read of elsewhere. I can't tell you that you won't be uncomfortable with some of what you're asked to do, but I can assure you that USF is a 'look-but-don't-touch' shop. You may hear things. You may get called names. But, you are a mailgirl, not a sex toy."  
  
That Barrow had to reassure her of the distinction between the two was less than comforting, and had the opposite effect he'd been intending. Sarah wasn't a prostitute, per se, but she'd agreed to take off her clothes and show off her body in exchange for something she wanted.  
  
"That's why we're here," Gillian responded. "With you in charge, Will, we know everything will above-board."  
  
"Cards being on the table? We've had an incident or two. We had a member of the maintenance staff well, er, 'pleasuring himself' in front of one of the girls. He's been terminated. And I had to personally reprimand one of the senior executives for being a little too handsy. Nothing too over-the-top -- he'd patted a few of the girls on their backsides on their way out of his office. But we're not going to put up with that sort of behavior. There are too many eyes on us."  
  
That Barrow was looking out for the girls only to stay on the right side of the public relations issue was perhaps not as comforting to Sarah as Barrow had hoped it would be. But his point was well-taken, all the same; USF had strict rules in place to keep the mailgirls from sliding into full-on sexual servitude. Having read accounts of less reputable programs requiring their mailgirls to "provide relief" to non-mailgirls when asked (that is, to provide oral sex), Sarah felt encouraged knowing that USF wouldn't be going down that particular path.  
  
"Good to know," Sarah croaked. Her mouth was dry.  
  
"Now -- again -- just so that you're aware, and just so that you're going in with eyes wide open, know that we've granted Mistress Zero some leeway in this regard. She'll be in charge of your morning inspections..."  
  
"We saw," Gillian interrupted. "This morning."  
  
"...she needs to be a little more 'hands-on' than we'd allow anyone else. Myself included. She's responsible for making sure grooming habits are up to the standards we've set, and she's been tasked with maintaining the discipline of our mailgirl staff. You won't enjoy it." He paused. "Or maybe you will? But Mistress Zero's job is to make sure you're performing yours with dedication and enthusiasm."  
  
Sarah had witnessed the way Mistress Zero had been "hands-on" with the girls that morning. She wasn't looking forward to it.  
  
"Now, without her here, some of her normal duties during these sorts of meetings fall to me," Barrow went on. "Have you finished with the contract?"  
  
Sarah nodded. "I have. It looks the same. By-the-book."  
  
"Good." He pushed an ink-pad in her direction, and Sarah inked her thumbprint on the final page. She was handed a tissue to wipe it off, but she'd probably need to wash her hands to get it all off completely.  
  
"Now," he said, taking the contract back and slipping it into a pink-colored folder, "a few more ground rules. All of this, I'm sure you're heard before. I'm sure you've read it in the contract. I'm sure you've seen it in the handbook. But Mistress Zero runs a tight ship, and she'd be upset with me if we didn't go through a few of the basics."  
  
"Okay."  
  
"'Yes, sir,'" Barrow corrected her.  
  
"Yes, sir."  
  
"Good. A mailgirl will be respectful. She will refer to all other members of the staff as 'Sir' or 'Ma'am,' maintaining her respect and position as the lowest in the company hierarchy." He was quoting directly from the handbook.  
  
"Yes, sir."  
  
"A mailgirl is not to refer to her betters by their given name. If permission is granted, she is allowed to utilize the appropriate and preferred honorific."  
  
"Yes, sir."  
  
"'Yes, Mr. Barrow.'"  
  
"Yes, Mr. Barrow."  
  
"A mailgirl is not allowed eye contact unless authorized by a superior."  
  
"Yes, Mr. Barrow." She found a spot on Barrow's desk, and focused on it.  
  
"A mailgirl is to be polite, respectful, humble, and thankful for any activity imparted upon her by her superiors. She follows all commands as issued, so long as those commands are themselves compliant with restrictions set out by Human Capital."  
  
"Yes, Mr. Barrow."  
  
"A mailgirl is to be referred to only by her mailroom number."  
  
"Yes, Mr. Barrow."  
  
Barrow pantomimed the signs of the cross, and announced, "I dub thee Mailgirl Number Thirteen."  
  
Thirteen, then. Sarah had been right. Or, rather, "Mailgirl Number Thirteen" had been right.  
  
Honestly, it felt like a relief. Would she be Mailgirl Number Thirteen? Would she be Mailgirl Number Eighteen? Would she be issued some sort of other designation, given her short contract and outsider's status? That matter was settled. And, with that matter being settled, it freed Sarah Scott of the weight of being Sarah Scott; from this point forward, she was just a number. She was just another mailgirl. She was only Mailgirl Thirteen.  
  
"Practice for me," Barrow went on. "Sir, per Human Capital, I am to be called by my mail room number.'"  
  
Mailgirl Number Thirteen echoed it back. "Sir, per Human Capital, I am to be called by my mail room number."  
  
He repeated it. "'Sir, per Human Capital, I am to be called by my mail room number.'"  
  
"Sir, per Human Capital, I am to be called by my mail room number."  
  
Again. "'Sir, per Human Capital, I am to be called by my mail room number.'"  
  
"Sir, per Human Capital, I am to be called by my mail room number."  
  
"Good," Barrow relented. "Or, good enough for now."  
  
Thirteen, who'd walked into Barrow's office as Sarah Scott, felt like she was being inducted into the army. Yes, sir. No, sir. Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am. Or was it a cult? The call-and-repeat. The mindless, deferential chanting of, "per Human Capital, I am to be called..."  
  
"Alright. Let's have you stand, up into 'Feet' position. You can keep your underwear on for now -- just don't tell Mistress Zero."  
  
Again, it seemed to Thirteen that Barrow was trying to get her believe that this thoughtful on his part, that this was an allowance he was granting her. Again, though, Thirteen would have been willing at this point to part ways with her thong and just be done with it. It provided little cover, and she'd already flashed her pussy at him before she'd been sent down the hall to the bathroom. That they were conspiring together, apparently against Mistress Zero, felt wrong. And, if anything, Barrow's permission to keep it on only underlined the lack of choice Thirteen had in the matter.  
  
Thirteen, though, dutifully rose from her chair. She took a step to her right, then a step back to give herself more space, and got into position. She stood flat on the floor, Barrow's rug beneath her bare feet. She parted her legs just so. She put her arms behind her back, clutching her left wrist in her right hand. She bowed her head submissively, and stared vacantly at the ground.

She'd been practicing. She'd run through all of the positions at home in New Haven, albeit while wearing her pajamas. "Knees," "Feet," and "Toes," were the important ones, she knew. But then there was "Hands-and-Knees." "Elbows-and-Knees." "Forehead-and-Knees." There was "Feet, Knees-Together," for those rare occasions when Thirteen would be allowed to close her legs. Similarly, there was "Knees, Knees-Together," when kneeling on the floor. There was "Squat," which was fairly self-explanatory, as well as the associated, "Squat, Knees-Together." Most of the positions Thirteen was expected to learn and perform were straightforwardly and simply named; it wouldn't take a PhD to understand how she'd be expected to stand, squat, and kneel.  
  
USF had shied away from referring to "Knees" as "Resting," to "Feet" as "Ready" or "Waiting," to "Toes" as "Inspection," terminology that Thirteen had seen codified elsewhere. But USF had plenty of variations upon the standard poses that Thirteen wouldn't be able to figure out in the moment. Hearing "Knees, Third Position" or "Feet, Sixth Position" didn't tell Thirteen a whole lot. She'd need to know that the first required her to put her hands flat on the floor, between her legs, while otherwise continuing to stay kneeling. She'd need to know that the second was for those occasions when she was instructed to lean up against a nearby wall -- feet flat on the ground, upper body bending forward ever so slightly, with her wrists crossed and supporting herself against said wall. And so on.  
  
Thirteen had practiced. She'd never been so bold as to practice fully in the nude, however. Or, even just in her underwear, as she was now.  
  
"Almost," Barrow said, critiquing her form. "Straighten up. We can't have our mailgirls slouching."  
  
As she did as he asked, she inadvertently looked up at him, and was immediately corrected.  
  
"Eyes down," he told her sternly, and then repeated, "A mailgirl is not allowed eye contact unless authorized by a superior."  
  
"Yes, Mr. Barrow," Thirteen mewed.  
  
"But -- no! -- keep your back straight. In fact, arch your back a bit. Chest out. More."  
  
"Yes, Mr. Barrow."  
  
"More. More! 'A mailgirl feels no embarrassment at her nudity, and knows exposing herself is for the benefit of the company.'"  
  
It was unnatural. It was uncomfortable. Her back was arched, as he'd instructed, and she was thrusting her chest out as much as she possibly could. "Look at my tits!" her body seemed to scream. "Look at my tits!" All the while, she kept her head down, and maintained focus upon an invisible, imaginary spot on Barrow's carpet.  
  
"Your feet need to be further apart," he chided her. "Shoulder-width. More. More!"  
  
Thirteen grimaced, and wondered just how broad-shouldered Barrow believed her to be. The point, though, was to expose her sex as much as possible; had she not been wearing panties -- and she most certainly wouldn't be, the next time -- her pussy would have been screaming for just as much attention as her breasts were. "Look at my pussy! Look at my pussy!"  
  
Barrow sighed. "Better," he allowed, while making clear that Thirteen was still doing something wrong. That - despite four years of graduate level education - she wasn't quite smart enough to know how to stand properly, or to follow simple instructions.  
  
This was the mailgirls's "ready" position. Upon arriving for a pick-up, Thirteen would be expected to stand in this manner -- chest out, legs apart -- to give whomever had summoned her a good, clear view of her body in its entirety. When she made a delivery, the same, until she was dismissed. As much as she may have been struggling to get it right here and now, Thirteen knew it would become more natural, more ingrained, with time. There were former mailgirls in Asia and Central Europe who, even months and years after leaving the program, found themselves standing this way almost on autopilot.  
  
"Let's try 'Toes.'"  
  
"Yes, Mr. Barrow."  
  
Legs still parted, Thirteen rose to her tiptoes. She intertwined her fingers behind her head, her arms up and elbows jutting out from either side. More cautious this time in avoiding eye contact, she picked her chin up and looked straight ahead, staring out Barrow's window to the New York skyline beyond.  
  
"Chest out," Barrow warned her. "Arch your back."  
  
Thirteen did as she was told. "Yes, Mr. Barrow."  
  
"And get your elbows back more, not forward like you have them. Perpendicular to your body. Ninety degrees."  
  
Thirteen did her best to emulate the posture she'd seen Mailgirls Seven and Eight take that morning. She thought she was doing it right. She thought she had it.  
  
"Good," Barrow said, finally. But then he quickly corrected himself. "Good enough for now, at least. Mistress Zero will help you get it right, eventually."  
  
Not only was this the position she'd be taking each morning, as Mistress Zero made her rounds and made sure that her "uniform" was up to code, but Thirteen would be expected to get up on her toes like this whenever anyone -- literally anyone -- told her to do so. Mistress Zero didn't have a monopoly on inspections. In fact, it was the responsibility of all USF employees to ensure mailgirls were presenting the best versions of themselves at all times. The instructional materials USF had distributed throughout the Plaza made that clear. She couldn't be too sweaty. Her hair couldn't be disheveled. Her make-up had to be done just so. The reason her arms were up? Or, one of the reasons, anyways? She needed to pass the "sniff test" -- there couldn't be even a whiff of body odor, or she'd fail the inspection. If she did, there were automatic demerits, and she'd be sent back down to locker room on the 2nd Floor for a shower. A shave, if necessary. Reapplication of make-up and deodorant. And then back up to whomever had failed her in the first place, for a follow-up inspection. All the while she'd be racking up demerits for lack of productivity, encouraging her to get back into tip-top shape as quickly as humanly possible.  
  
Thirteen lost her balance a bit, wobbled, but stayed on her toes. She heard a grunt from Barrow, but no comment or reprimand followed. Thirteen wasn't sure how long she could stay up like this, in this ridiculous position. But Barrow was in no hurry to release her. Instead, with Thirteen watching out of the corner of her eye, he reached for her purse and began rooting through it.  
  
It was hard to explain why, but this felt like the worst of his violations so far. As a mailgirl, she had no right to privacy of any kind while she was here at USF Plaza. "A mailgirl shall have no privacy nor expectations of privacy so long as she is under contract," read the handbook. Generally, this meant clothes; Thirteen's "private parts" were now, effectively, "public parts." But the restriction was all-encompassing, and it covered everything from bathroom breaks to the sacred and secretive contents of a girl's handbag.  
  
Thirteen swallowed hard, and prayed she didn't have anything too embarrassing in there.  
  
Even Gillian seemed to be uncomfortable with this particular trespass, shifting in her chair and clearing her throat softly. "What are you looking for?"  
  
"Ah, here we go," Barrow responded. Thirteen, eyes forward, couldn't immediately tell what he'd unearthed.  
  
"Lipstick?" Gillian asked.  
  
"Lipstick," Barrow affirmed. "Mistress Zero is usually the one who provides the girls their numbers. I don't think I even have a black marker here in my office, funnily enough."  
  
He stood, rounded the desk, and stepped towards Thirteen. As naked as she was, Thirteen felt a shiver up her spine as he approached.  
  
"Now, she's going to have redo this anyways, down in the locker room. But at least I can check off of few of the boxes here and now, at the outset."  
  
Thirteen -- or, Sarah Scott, as it were -- didn't usually wear make-up. Maybe if she were out on a date, or headed to some sort of event. But she was a graduate student, and she didn't need to be all dolled up as part of her normal, daily routine. She knew that, as a mailgirl, that was about to change. She'd be expected to apply lipstick and eyeliner, among other things, at the start of her shift. These things were to be provided to her in the locker room. But, that morning, Thirteen had gone through the motions -- lipstick, eyeliner, mascara, and blush -- and the coral red lipstick had been stashed in her purse on the way out the door.  
  
"Now, of course, this is where your waistband is going to get in the way," Barrow observed, as if regretting the leniency he'd shown in allowing Thirteen to keep her panties on. Hesitating, perhaps for show, he asked, "Do you mind if I..."  
  
He trailed off, and Thirteen was left to guess at what he was asking permission to do.  
  
"I...er...I...," she stammered.  
  
"'This mailgirl,'" Barrow corrected her. "Third person only, from here on out."  
  
"Really?" Gillian asked.  
  
Barrow shrugged. "It reminds them of what they are, first and foremost. They're not special. They're not unique. They're not individuals. They're mailgirls. Interchangeable. Replaceable. They're a function, not a person."  
  
Not a person. Thirteen cringed.  
  
"This mailgirl was too slow and too lazy to get here on time," went the chant. "This mailgirl was too stupid to follow simple instructions," went another. Not every program Thirteen had looked into required this sort of idiotic patter, this constant, pathetic self-abasement. But USF had adopted the practice, codifying it in the handbook. The company never missed an opportunity to make the mailgirls low.  
  
Gillian knew this. She and Thirteen had both openly mocked how ridiculous and over-the-top it was, back when Thirteen had brought it up during one of her naked one-on-ones in May. "Is this girl allowed to sit down?" Thirteen had asked, tone dripping with sarcasm, and the pair had had a good laugh. But, maybe Gillian had forgotten? Maybe she'd just assumed it was something in the handbook, but not actually enforced? Or, maybe -- just maybe -- she was challenging Barrow now, forcing him to explain himself.  
  
Maybe not for Thirteen's benefit. But for the benefit of her research, at least.  
  
"Um...this mailgirl..." Thirteen began, but then trailed off, herself.  
  
"Good girl," Barrow interjected.  
  
She steeled herself, and started again. "This mailgirl doesn't know what you're asking."  
  
Barrow clucked his tongue. "That'll work for now. But if you don't understand something, or something isn't clear, or someone's mumbling or has an accent, or -- hell -- if one of our employees is just a complete and total moron, you still need to take the blame. Own it. Take the blame. The fault is yours. The fault is yours for not being smart enough to follow along, for being too much of a ditz to understand something so clearly intelligible and well-thought-through.  
  
"This isn't just to diminish and demean you. Your job here -- and I'd argue that it's your most important job here -- is to build these people up. Your inferiority is their superiority."  
  
She wasn't person, just a function. And her function wasn't just to deliver the mail. Her function was to suffer, and her suffering was a tool to instill authority and self-esteem in all those employees lucky enough to avoid being tapped to join the mailgirl ranks. It made Thirteen want to gag.  
  
"This mailgirl is sorry," Thirteen said, her voice breaking in the middle. "This mailgirl was too...was too stupid to understand what you were asking."  
  
"There we go," Barrow chuckled.  
  
Gillian again said nothing. She wasn't coming to her student's rescue. She sat back, quietly, and listened as Thirteen whimpered her way through this self-denigration.  
  
"I need to just slide the waistband of your underwear down a bit, just at your hip there on the right-hand side, so I can give you your number. You can keep them on for a little longer -- we don't need to go full monty just yet. But I'm going to need to tug a little, and since I'm violating my own 'look-but-don't-touch' policy...?"  
  
"Uh...okay," Thirteen said softly. "Yes, Mr. Barrow."  
  
It was intimate. It was intimate in a way that Thirteen hadn't been intimate with anyone in months. Barrow was gentle, careful, in the way that he slipped Thirteen's thong ever-so-slightly down her hip. His fingers ran along her bare skin in a way that shot electricity up Thirteen's spine. The contact was clinical and incidental, unromantic in nature -- but the effect it had on her was affecting, all the same.  
  
She hoped he hadn't noticed her catch her breath. She hoped he hadn't caught her wobbling, ever-so-imperceptibly, on her toes.  
  
When Barrow had exposed just enough to skin to accomplish what he'd sought out to accomplish, he touched her again. This time, not with his fingertips, but with the warm, sticky tip of her coral red lipstick. First, the "1," top to bottom. Then, the "3," with slow, purposeful curves. She'd been branded with her number.  
  
The pearl white thong, light and lacy, was now askew about her midsection. The left was still in place, the elastic working doubly hard to hold the rest of her underwear up. The right, stretched around the top her right thigh, exposing her new number 13 to the room. From behind, she could feel how crooked it was at the top off her buttocks, and she knew the top of her ass crack would greet anyone new who entered Barrow's office from behind. Yes, her pussy itself was still covered; that was a "dignity" that Barrow seemed be granting her as a show of his benevolence. But the covering was really just covering for her slit itself. If this had been a week or two earlier, her unkempt pubic hair would have been spilling over the top of the thong. Today, this morning, it was just more bare skin.  
  
"Mr. Barrow," she coughed. "Can I...can this mailgirl take her underwear off?"  
  
He'd seen everything already. So had Gillian. It felt weird and desperate to cling to this last vestige of her clothes, half-on and half-off already. They'd get there anyway. They'd get there eventually. Maybe Barrow, after this feet-and-toes-and-knees-and-ankles exercise, intended to let her sit back down in the chair across from his desk, a generosity she was perhaps forgoing by making this request now. But Thirteen had gotten the point where she was done with it, and wanted get on with it already.  
  
Her eyes still straight-forward, she heard the smile in Barrow's voice instead of seeing it. "See?" he laughed to Gillian. "Eager."  
  
Thirteen blushed.  
  
"I don't know if that's the right word," Gillian responded. "But she's been preparing for today for weeks now. She's ready."  
  
Barrow wasn't ready to concede, however. "Maybe," was all he permitted the professor.  
  
To Thirteen, "Go ahead. I'll take them. You can get down off your toes."  
  
Thirteen breathed a sigh of relief. She'd half-expected him to deny her request, for no other reason than he could, for no other purpose that it was something she wanted -- apparently -- for herself. Back on her heels, she slid the thong down her thighs. Bending forward, she stepped out of her underwear -- first one leg, then the next -- and gathered the lacy material in her right hand. Dutifully, she held it out for the dark-haired man to take. He took the gift with a grin on his face.  
  
"Let's try 'Knees,'" he said next, and stepped back behind his desk.  
  
Thirteen lowered herself to the floor, and Gillian spoke up. Pointing in the direction of Thirteen's now-discarded panties, she asked, "For the 'artwork' in the hall?"  
  
Barrow nodded in the affirmative. "A thing we do on a mailgirl's first day. A 'trophy' for the Human Capital staff."  
  
Thirteen wanted to retch. Instead, she got herself into the "Mailgirl Kneeling Position," a particular posture alternately referred to as "Resting Position," "Knees," or even -- in the case of eVendr.com in a nerdy nod to work of John Norman -- "Nadu." Down onto her knees, which were spread wide open -- wider, even, than shoulder-width, having internalized Barrow's correction while in "Feet." Hands behind her, with the back of her right hand pressed flat against the top of her ass and clutching her left wrist. Eyes cast downwards, but her back straight -- arched ever so -- with her chest thrust out and calling attention to her breasts.  
  
Had her nipples been hard this whole time? She hadn't noticed. At present, however, they were practically adamantine, giving away just how terrified and excited she was in the moment. She wondered if either Gillian or Barrow noticed, and if they might write it off as nothing more than being naked in a chilly room. It was only a little cold in Barrow's office, though -- probably perfectly "room temperature" for someone wearing clothes -- so she wasn't sure if that line of defense had much merit. They'd been hard, on-and-off, back in Gillian's office on Hillhouse Avenue, but her professor had thankfully never made a comment. She hoped that Barrow would show similar restraint.  
  
Barrow flattened Thirteen's panties out on top of a file folder on his desk, closed the file folder up, and then slipped it under another, the one containing the contract she'd just inked her thumbprint on. That was the last she'd ever see of them, she thought to herself, before remembering just how wrong she was; they'd be hung here on the 18th Floor in perpetuity. She'd see them again every time she was summoned Human Capital.  
  
She was uncomfortable on her knees. Psychologically, emotionally -- of course. That was a given. Had Barrow come back over from his side of the desk, unzipped his fly, and fed her his cock, she was already in position. But she was physically uncomfortable, too, and had long been worried that this was how she was supposed to "rest" while on-duty here at the Plaza. No naked pussies on the office furniture, thank you very much. When not actively engaged in a delivery or some other assignment in the building, Thirteen was to find a designated spot for mailgirls located on each floor and wait there, on her knees, until the smartphone she was assigned called her to her next destination. Literally the only time she'd be allowed to sit down -- outside the locker room, that is -- was when she was peeing. And, given that she'd be peeing in front of a chaperone, Thirteen didn't think she'd be lingering.  
  
Again, like with "Feet," there were former mailgirls for whom this position became so natural and so comfortable that it was ingrained in them long after their contracts had ended. Thirteen had read one account of a girl insisting that getting down on her knees -- at home, in the office -- had a calming effect on her, that she was able to attain a zen-like peace. Thirteen wasn't so sure. She couldn't imagine a scenario where this actually became comfortable, where she wouldn't have to go home at the end of the day and ice her knees.  
  
Barrow glanced in her direction and sighed audibly, but didn't offer her any comments or corrections. It was clear that, in his opinion, she hadn't gotten her "Knees" stance exactly right, either. But it was also apparent that he was tossing in the towel for now, and that it would be up to Mistress Zero to drill precision into Thirteen.  
  
Instead, Thirteen heard him rummaging through a box behind his desk, and heard her professor laugh uncomfortably when he produced what he was looking for.  
  
Her collar.  
  
There were some companies that collared their girls. There were others that didn't. Off-hand, Thirteen couldn't remember whether collars had been standard-issue when DDE had launched their program out in Seattle. But, though the basics of the mailgirl world were more-or-less consistent company to company, country to country, continent to continent, there was infinite variety when it came to the little things -- even among those firms rolling out programs "officially licensed" by Hiromoto in Japan. The "Hall of Panties," for example; Thirteen had yet to read of another company displaying their mailgirls' underthings in the way that USF had. There were companies who'd ditched the lycra armbands and smartphones in favor of mailgirl-specific monitoring units, and others who'd simply issued their girls smartwatches. There were companies who insisted all mailgirls were to dye their hair bleach blonde, and others who'd gone so far as to ask girls to go under the knife and get breast implants.

Collars, then, were common. But they were not universal. Nor were they always the vicious, Medieval-looking things of the sort USF employed.  
  
"Evil," Gillian said. Her tone indicated that this was neither a criticism nor a condemnation, but an off-the-cuff reaction to the sight of the collar itself.  
  
Barrow took the comment in stride. "A necessary evil."  
  
"How so?"  
  
Collar in-hand, Barrow came back around his desk once more, and gestured to the naked blonde on the floor of his office. "Look at this girl. She's a goddess. She doesn't belong here. She doesn't belong in New Haven, for that matter. She should be in Hollywood. She should be strutting her stuff on a catwalk down in the Fashion District. She should be gracing the pages of a Victoria's Secret catalog, or splayed out across Playboy or Penthouse."  
  
There was a "but" coming. Thirteen knew there was a "but" coming.  
  
"If she wanted it, she could reduce every man here at the Plaza to a quivering puddle of jelly. More than a few women, too, depending on their proclivities. Naked? Even more so. Strip the clothes off Number Thirteen here, and she's only that much more powerful. It completely throws the power dynamic we're looking for out of whack."  
  
He held up the collar. "This? This helps restore the balance. It keeps her in her place. It signals to our non-mailgirls that she recognizes what her place is."  
  
"I'm not sure that dolling her up in bondage gear achieves what you're going for..."  
  
"Wearing it is an act of submission," Barrow disagreed. "She's not a slave. She can walk out. She can quit. But, when she puts this on in the morning? She's submitting. When she submits, when she shows deference, she's building up the ego of everyone she's submitting to. If this girl, this gorgeous specimen of the female sex, is willing to submit herself to you, what can't you do? Who can't you conquer?"  
  
As he monologued, Barrow fitted the collar around Thirteen's neck and snapped it into place. The "click" it made as it locked was like a crack of thunder, reverberating through Thirteen's ears. She was submitting.  
  
It didn't feel right. Not that it would ever feel right. But it felt too tight, and Thirteen was afraid it might constrict her breathing, or keep her from swallowing. She felt compelled to let Barrow know that something was wrong. "I...I'm sorry...I...sorry! This mailgirl? This mailgirl thinks the collar might be too tight."  
  
Barrow took a step back, gave the collar a look, and then slipped a finger between the metal and Thirteen's skin. He shook his head. "No, that's about right. I know these things aren't exactly one-size-fits-all, but it's made to be that tight."  
  
Thirteen was unconvinced, but she offered no more protest.  
  
"You'll get used it," Barrow assured her. "It's different. It is tight. I promise you it's supposed to be like that. You may end up even liking it."  
  
Gillian scoffed, speaking for herself and Thirteen both. "I think that might be a little much."  
  
Barrow cocked an eyebrow. "If there's anything I've been surprised by over the last two months, it's just how common some deep-and-dark predilections truly are. I'm not going after known exhibitionists here. I'm not specifically recruiting masochists."  
  
"Still," Gillian argued. "You've got to admit that it takes a certain kind of girl to volunteer for this."  
  
She hadn't specifically meant Thirteen, but Thirteen still winced at the remark. A "certain kind of girl." Meaning sluts and whores. Exhibitionists and fetishists. Submissives.  
  
"This mailgirl apologizes for being so stupid as to think her collar was too tight," Thirteen seethed. Her tone was defiant. Sarcastic, even. She was angry at them both.  
  
"Sarah," Gillian caught herself, recognizing what she had just said. "That's not what I meant."  
  
"Ma'am, per Human Capital, I am to be referred to by mailroom number," the girl hissed. "Mailgirl Number Thirteen."  
  
The mood was tense. Uncomfortable. A pregnant silence hung over the room.  
  
"Mailgirl Number Thirteen," Gillian began again carefully, making no attempt to hide how ridiculous she felt addressing Thirteen this way. "You're not like the other girls. You're here for research. You're not really one them."  
  
Naked, collared, and on her knees, with a red "13" scrawled across her hip, Thirteen certainly felt like one of the "other girls."  
  
"I'm just trying to keep my good friend William here," Gillian went on, "from getting a bit too broad in generalizing a perceived 'predilection' across an entire gender. Our gender."  
  
Thirteen exhaled. No, Gillian hadn't meant it. She hadn't intentionally meant to cast aspersions in Thirteen's direction. Even if - at times - it hadn't felt like it, Gillian was on her side. She was, in her way, looking out for her. Maybe the Work was more important to her than her graduate student was, as an individual. But Thirteen was here for the Work, too, and so long as her interests aligned with Gillian's, she knew her professor was in her corner.  
  
She nodded her head. She couldn't bring herself to choke out, "this mailgirl understands," but she signaled to her professor that she understood, all the same.  
  
"Maybe I'm wrong," Barrow said, interjecting. "Maybe that's a place for Thirteen's research to take her. To take us."  
  
"Maybe," Gillian allowed.  
  
"And maybe," he teased, "you'd like one of these collars to take home?"  
  
Gillian laughed, and the mood in the room lightened.  
  
"So what next?" Gillian asked.  
  
Barrow checked his watch. "We still have some time before my eight o'clock. Number Thirteen is going to wait patiently here in Human Capital, until one of the other girls comes and fetches her. But we have a few more bits and pieces, items that individuals of certain 'predilections' might be familiar with -- however common said predilections might be across certain genders."  
  
The collar, apparently, wasn't enough.  
  
"You're kidding me!" Gillian gasped, laughing uncomfortably. Barrow had produced something else, this time from his desk.  
  
"Think of it as allowing a new recruit a measure of quiet contemplation," Barrow responded cryptically.  
  
"Will, you can't..."  
  
"Mailgirls One through Twelve all received similar treatment," Barrow explained. "Mailgirls Fourteen through Eighteen have it coming later this morning. You tell me. Is she, or isn't she, a mailgirl?"  
  
Gillian was unsure of what to say next. "It's too much."  
  
Thirteen couldn't help herself. Careful to avoid eye contact, she snuck a glance in Barrow's direction. He was holding a blindfold.  
  
It was a common enough practice, especially in Europe. Especially on a girl's first day. In fact, Thirteen knew full fell that the girls of Rhine-Main Bankengruppe were hooded and gagged on Day One, and that this would have felt like standard procedure to Mistress Zero. Mailgirl Funf likely had gone through something similar on her first day. The way that Gillian had reacted, Thirteen had half-expected a silicone ball gag, a muzzle, or a bit. A blindfold seemed tame by comparison.  
  
"Gillian...ma'am...it's okay," Thirteen croaked, her throat dry. And it was. Just as the restriction on eye contact kept Thirteen from having to actually look someone in the eye, the blindfold was a bit of mercy, really. If she attracted just one or two lookie-loos, or if a crowd descended upon her to gape and guffaw, Thirteen would remain in the dark -- literally and figuratively both.  
  
"It's a part of Mistress Zero's training," Barrow shrugged. "And, really, it's a part of the fantasy."  
  
The lines between fantasy and reality were blurred here, though. A blindfold had never been something Thirteen had fantasized over, or even given much thought to. The collar, the leashes, the more BDSM-inspired aspects of her new life? They weren't fetishes Thirteen had ever daydreamed about. They weren't kinks that she'd explored with Christopher, with Brad, with Luke, with Mark. This wasn't her fantasy, but it was now her reality.  
  
Barrow slipped around behind her, and Thirteen's world disappeared. No, it was Sarah's world that disappeared; for Mailgirl Number Thirteen, this was just another run-of-the-mill cruelty and humiliation she'd be forced to endure as part of her new life. The mask was black, and leather, and Thirteen inhaled its scent. Like with the collar, Thirteen wondered if he'd secured it just a little too tightly. "Quiet contemplation," Barrow had offered, but it was just another way of "putting her in her place."  
  
"It's just a little too 'kinky' for me," Gillian said, the word coming off as stiff and unnatural.  
  
"We know our girls," Barrow answered. It wasn't a denial. Barrow wasn't trying to claim innocence, or suggest the blindfold was anything other than "kinky." No, it felt more like an accusation, like this was a kink he knew Thirteen would get off on.  
  
She wasn't entirely sure that he was wrong.  
  
"And so what now?" Gillian asked.  
  
"It's early," the man said in response. "It's going to be a little while before one of the other girls comes up to fetch Number Thirteen. Mistress Zero and I have our rounds to make, and we'll get her down to the locker room after morning breaks are through. With -- God willing -- Mailgirls Fourteen and Fifteen and maybe even Sixteen, for orientation and some initial training."  
  
Morning breaks, Thirteen recalled, were clustered around the ten o'clock hour. As it couldn't have been any later than seven-thirty by that point, that meant something like three hours from now. Barrow's kindness in letting her use the bathroom turned out to be a kindness after all. The butterflies in her stomach, though, were accompanied by a nervousness in her bladder, and three hours was no small stretch of time.  
  
"But I'm going have her sit outside," Barrow continued, "and let Mrs. Lowrie look after her."  
  
"Fourteen. Fifteen. And maybe Sixteen?" Gillian asked, brushing past the bit where Thirteen was expected to wait in the public corridor for the next few hours. "One an hour, on the hour?"  
  
"That's the plan."  
  
"How often do you get a 'no'?"  
  
"Less often than you'd imagine. The company can be fairly persuasive. We've put together specific and targeted packages for each of the candidates we've approached, and I think you'd be surprised by the willingness of our junior executives to take the pitch seriously. If you don't include the girls who've signed and then quit a day or two or five in, we've only had one out-and-out 'no.' In fact, we've rejected more girls because of tattoos than we've had girls reject the job on their end."  
  
USF had a policy against body art when it came to their girls. In a moment of weakness a month or so back, Thirteen had briefly flirted with the idea of getting herself inked up somewhere in an effort to derail her participation in this project. Nothing extreme -- just maybe something small on her ankle or on her wrist. Maybe something on her hip, something other than a coral red number thirteen. But Thirteen had thought better of it. Gillian had proposed this line of research long before the opportunity at USF had come along, and it wasn't unthinkable that Thirteen would only end up being talked into the exact same approach at a company in Silicon Valley more forgiving of that sort of thing than USF, one perhaps that also happened to be much more forgiving when it came to what they would and would not allow their employees to get away with when it came to the mailgirls.  
  
"It's a waste of time, more than anything," Barrow went on. "All that time and effort making the pitch, and getting a girl to see the opportunity for what it is, only to have her undress and have the whole thing fall apart."  
  
"Interesting," Gillian responded.  
  
And it was, too. Thirteen made a mental note to look into the topic at some point down the line, as part of her research. She was curious about what became of these particular volunteers after they washed out. After they'd signed a contract, and taken off all their clothes in front of Barrow, in front of Mistress Zero, and possibly in front of their direct supervisors or department heads, did they simply get dressed and go on with their old jobs as if nothing had ever happened?  
  
"We're after a certain aesthetic at Plaza. A uniformity, so to speak, in uniforms. At our back office in Jersey City, we may want to get a little looser with the restriction. Or if and when Executive Management gives us the green light to roll out teams at our regional offices. I'm just worried about missing out on otherwise qualified talent."  
  
Tattoos weren't exactly uncommon within the age demographic USF was targeting, even among up-and-comers and management-track young professionals on Wall Street. And so it made sense that the company would have to reconsider its stance on body art at some point. But Thirteen's curiosity was now piqued by the comment about Jersey City; it was the first time she'd heard that USF was considering expanding the mailgirl practice outside of the Plaza. If they were rolling out a program there, in the near future, she'd perhaps missed out on the opportunity to be part of a launch from Day One.  
  
Barrow punched his phone, and Mrs. Lowrie answered over the speaker.  
  
"Yes, Mr. Barrow?"  
  
"Come fetch our new mailgirl. I'm going to need you to babysit while I meet with the other candidates."  
  
"Yes, Mr. Barrow."  
  
To Gillian, Barrow asked, "Would you like to tag along? My eight o'clock is a little unique. She's a client management specialist who has gotten herself into some hot water with the husband of one her bosses. We're thinking a transfer to the mail room might be in everyone's best interest. If she's willing to consider it."  
  
"Are you sure? I'm not going to be in the way?"  
  
"No, no, no. It's nice to have a witness or two present, especially another woman. And it'll give you an opportunity to see Mistress Zero in action. As well as a better handle on what these sorts of negotiations look like with a less enthusiastic candidate than your girl here."  
  
Eager. Enthusiastic. Thirteen, Barrow continued to suggest, was easy.  
  
"Let's have a quick tour, though, first," Barrow went on. "We've got a few minutes for me to introduce you to the team that makes all this possible."  
  
Mrs. Lowrie had joined them. Thirteen had heard the door open, but she was blind behind her mask. "Up," she said, announcing herself to Thirteen. "I'll get you settled in out in the hall. Without you walking into any walls."  
  
"Yes, Mrs. Lowrie," Thirteen said mindlessly. She stood, and added, "Thank you, Mrs. Lowrie."  
  
The secretary said nothing more in response than an annoyed grunt, but placed a hand gently on the small of the girl's back and pushed in her in what Thirteen could only assume was the direction of the door.  
  
"Good luck," Gillian offered in parting. "You'll be okay. You'll be in good hands."  
  
What was Thirteen to say? "Yes, ma'am," she said in response. "Thank you, ma'am."  
  
Whatever she thought of Gillian, and however much she blamed Gillian for putting her in this position, it was unnerving to be on her own, without Gillian looking after her. Or, at least, without Gillian looking after her in her way. They were a team. They were pursuing this research together. Professor and student. Advisor and advisee. Sure, Thirteen's part in this was decidedly more hands-on than Gillian's, but Thirteen was an extension of Dr. Gillian Schang, and Thirteen feared for what was to come when she was no longer within Gillian's line-of-sight.  
  
Thirteen couldn't have taken more than a step or two out of Barrow's door when the secretary spun her around and guided her back to the floor. With one hand on Thirteen's left shoulder, and the other at the top of Thirteen's buttocks, Mrs. Lowrie hissed, "Knees."  
  
She was facing a wall. She couldn't see it, but she could feel its presence. Settling in, legs apart and hands locked behind her back, Thirteen did her best to orient herself. The door to Barrow's office was less than a foot to her left; she heard it shut, and could hear the conversation between Barrow and Gillian carrying on -- though, it was muffled, and Thirteen couldn't make out what they were actually saying or whether it was about her, specifically. To her right, and now slightly behind her, was Mrs. Lowrie's desk; Thirteen heard the older woman settle into her chair.  
  
"Straighten up," Mrs. Lowrie instructed her. "You need to get your positions locked down, or Mistress Zero is going to send you home spanked raw."  
  
Thirteen did as she was told.  
  
"I just don't understand it," Mrs. Lowrie seethed softly, so quietly only Thirteen could hear it. "You girls. Your mothers and grandmothers fought and fought and fought for equal treatment. They fought to be taken seriously, to be seen as something more than just playthings. And then, in the blink of an eye, you undermine all that. For what? Why are you doing this? For money? For your career? I don't say this lightly: it makes you a prostitute. You are prostituting yourself out for them."  
  
Mrs. Lowrie's haranguing of Thirteen was interrupted by the sound of Barrow's doorknob turning, by Gillian's voice and Barrow's voice exiting the latter's office. The secretary's tone shifted dramatically, and she bid Thirteen's professor a pleasant morning.  
  
"I'm going to introduce you to Alan Bagby," Barrow was saying to Gillian. "He's one our Senior Analysts, and the person I've leaned on the most in identifying potential candidates here at the Plaza."  
  
Gillian brushed past Thirteen without saying a word, without acknowledging that her graduate student was naked and on her knees, blindfolded and facing the wall. Instead, she asked Barrow, "'Candidates'? You keep using that term. 'Volunteers,' correct?"  
  
Thirteen could hear the smile in Barrow's voice. "Candidates for volunteering, then."  
  
Thirteen heard a gentle rap upon a door a short distance away. A round of introductions among Barrow, Bagby, and Gillian Schang. A laugh. A lighthearted pleasantry. Small-talk. Chit-chat. And then they moved on, leaving Thirteen behind with Barrow's hissing assistant.  
  
Mrs. Lowrie, however, had apparently said her piece. There were no more accusations, no more recriminations. No more talk of "prostitutes." Mrs. Lowrie had apparently turned her attention back to her desk, pecking away at her keyboard and doing her best to ignore Thirteen.  
  
And then it struck Thirteen where she'd heard the name "Melanie Lowrie" before. Melanie Lowrie had been USF's Chief Human Resources Officer, as late as last September or October, when emails had begun circulating among the company's higher-ups about exploring the mailgirl concept. Melanie Lowrie, one of just two women on USF's Executive Steering Committee, had been strongly and passionately opposed, and had penned a series of dissenting emails and memos. She hadn't been the only member of Senior Management to argue against a roll-out; at the outset, she was in the majority, with more than half of her male colleagues sharing the same viewpoint. But the emails -- and Thirteen had seen a good number of them -- became increasingly accusatory and desperate, and eventually the tide turned against her.  
  
Melanie Lowrie had been removed as CHRO before the holidays, replaced by Something-or-Other Manzanillo (Thirteen couldn't remember Manzanillo's first name offhand, but it was moot; he'd be "Mr." Manzanillo to her, anyways). Mr. Manzanillo was now Will Barrow's direct supervisor and USF's new Head of Human Resources, while Mrs. Lowrie had somehow wound up as Barrow's administrative assistant. Wearing a too-short miniskirt and a blouse with a few too many buttons left undone. How had that happened? How had Mrs. Lowrie fallen so low? Why had she accepted such a demotion? Why had she stayed with USF? Why was she in Human Capital, of all departments? There was a story there, a story Thirteen would have to suss out at the summer went on.

Maybe it explained why Mrs. Lowrie had just called Thirteen a whore, and maybe it was why -- beyond the more immediate and obvious reasons -- she seemed so disgusted with Thirteen and Thirteen's choices. Thirteen's willingness to sign a contract and run naked through the Plaza was a direct affront to Mrs. Lowrie and the fight she'd put up to keep that very thing from occurring at USF. By agreeing to the terms set out and by being so "eager" to prostitute herself out as a mailgirl, she'd undercut Mrs. Lowrie's attempts to keep USF from subjugating and sexualizing its female employees.  
  
Explained, but didn't excuse. Thirteen wasn't an activist. She wasn't one of Grace Burgmeier's Actioneers. She wasn't one of the outraged Whitestocking girls camped out in front of the Plaza. The fight wasn't hers. And while, yes, it was fair to question Thirteen's decision-making and the choices that had led her to this point, it didn't give Mrs. Lowrie the right to call her a slut and belittle her so. Thirteen wasn't even a true mailgirl -- not really. She was an outside party, neutral and non-judgmental, interested in mailgirls and the culture around them in the abstract, from an academic standpoint.  
  
And so, in that moment, Thirteen hated Mrs. Lowrie for making her feel so small. Wasn't it enough that she was blindfolded, collared, and on her knees? Wasn't it enough that she'd already been humiliated and "put in her place"? She had to talk like an idiot in the third person, and was forced to call herself "stupid" and "lazy" for things entirely out of her control. Did Mrs. Lowrie really need to pile on?  
  
She hated Barrow, too. She felt the bile build inside of her. She was a slut in his eyes, hot-to-trot and champing at the bit to take off her clothes that morning. He'd basically accused her of being a closeted exhibitionist and an unknowing submissive, suggesting that the collar was going to turn her on. It was Barrow who was responsible for all this, Barrow who'd made himself the face of the mailgirls initiative at USF, Barrow who'd written the policies and recruited the girls. He'd kept her in her panties just to fuck with her, and then kept her panties to hang in the hall and fuck with her all the more. He'd rifled through her purse to get a rise out of her. He'd tsk-tsked the fact that she'd taken it upon herself to get waxed, rather than waiting to shave in front of an audience in the locker room.  
  
And then, Gillian. The antipathy she felt for Gillian was nothing new; she'd resented her, on-and-off, for months. This was Gillian's doing. Gillian Schang, the single foremost academic authority on modern Feminism - from a sociocultural anthropology standpoint, at least -- had sold her out and sold her off to a New York megabank. It had been Thirteen who'd brought the mailgirl topic to her professor, but Gillian had wrested control of the research's direction and dismissed Thirteen's proposed methodology as timid and humdrum. Thirteen's initial unwillingness to become a mailgirl herself had led to Gillian attempting to steal the whole thing out from under her, going so far as to threaten to hand it off to Deepa Chaudhri or Liz Smith, and hand off Thirteen to another professor in the department. Thirteen hadn't so much volunteered for field study among the mailgirls as she'd been strong-armed into it, press-ganged into naked servitude by the woman she looked up to as a mentor and advisor.  
  
But she hated herself most of all. She could finger Gillian, or Barrow, or the world at-large for doing this to her -- but the truth of it was that Thirteen bore her share of responsibility for ending up in this situation. It was Thirteen who'd been weirdly fascinated with that clickbait article oh so long ago. It was Thirteen who'd decided that the mailgirl phenomenon fell neatly into her little sliver of academia. It was Thirteen who'd first proposed studying the social and cultural anthropology elements of mailgirls, and it was Thirteen who'd volunteered -- however reluctantly -- to conduct field research among them. Thirteen had signed the contract Barrow offered her. Thirteen had surrendered her clothes, her name, and her dignity. She was as culpable for her current situation as anyone. More so. Whatever horrors and humiliations awaited her, she'd done this to herself.  
  
She was mortified and terrified. She was nervous about what was to come. She was ashamed of herself, ashamed of her choices, ashamed at how she'd sold out her self-respect and her self-worth in pursuit of making a name for herself. She's submitted to Barrow. She'd surrendered her clothes. She'd put her body on display -- tits and ass and everything between her legs. She felt degraded and disgraced, and hated herself for the lead role that she'd played in getting here.  
  
...and yet...  
  
And yet the butterflies in Thirteen's stomach weren't all just fear and nerves. There was excitement there, too. And not just the sort of excitement one would feel at the outset of any new experience or new adventure. If she had felt betrayed by Gillian, she felt betrayed by her own body doubly so. She could look away if she wanted to. Shou could pretend that this morning wasn't affecting her on some deep, base, sexual level, that she wasn't turned on by the anticipation of what was to come next. But her nipples were at-attention, and she knew - without touching herself to confirm -- that she was wet. As much as Barrow had been teasing her and Gillian both about certain "predilections" when introducing her to her new collar, there was something powerful and primitive and primal in the way it made her feel. She was an animal -- a sexual animal -- and her current state of dress kept her from hiding from that fact.  
  
"A mailgirl is prohibited from pleasuring herself outside of the locker room," read the line in USF's handbook. Thirteen had scoffed at the restriction the first time she'd read it, laughing out loud at the need for such a thing to be spelled out in black and white. Not only did it suggest that the mailgirls were all wanton tramps who'd be otherwise incapable of diddling themselves whenever and wherever they were given the opportunity, the permission to do so on the 2nd Floor suggested that USF was incapable of stopping them altogether and granting them a window of opportunity to "slut it up" while off the clock. Thirteen had thought the idea ridiculous, just as she'd thought it ridiculous that day back at Pepperdine when Valerie Plympton had pointed out how common public masturbation was among Japan's mailgirl population.  
  
She hadn't understood.  
  
She hadn't felt it, herself.  
  
She hadn't walked in these girls (entirely metaphorical) shoes.  
  
She felt it now, though.  
  
Thirteen would have been lying if she had tried to suggest there hadn't been something there, undressing in front of Barrow. As academic as all this was, as routine and mundane as all this must have been to Barrow, Thirteen had wanted him to want her. She'd wanted him to find her attractive. She'd wanted him to be turned on as she slipped out of her clothes. She'd wanted to please him, to get him hard, to make him happy. And the more that Thirteen had reduced herself to a sexual object, the more she'd wanted she'd wanted to be that sexual object. He'd called her a goddess. He'd told her she belonged naked in the pages of a men's magazine. That sort of affirmation had acted as something of a feedback loop, emboldening her at the outset of her grand, nude adventure.  
  
Along the way, Barrow had corrected her posture, criticized her for not better taking direction, questioned her intelligence, and forced Thirteen herself to whine about how "stupid" she was. None of that should have turned her on. None of that should have affected her as much as it had. Getting wet while being belittled and humiliated? There had to be something wrong with her. He'd made her small. He'd "put her in her place." Why had she reacted as she had? Why did that serve only to charge her up that much more?  
  
The mailgirls of the Blackstocking movement - the former mailgirls who'd gone in one side and come out the other -- often spoke of intense self-discovery and a radical sort of honesty with oneself. She had been a mailgirl for less than hour, and she was already scared about what she was learning about Sarah Jane Scott, about Mailgirl Number Thirteen.  
  
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It was an eternity before another mailgirl was sent for Thirteen.  
  
Alone in the dark, Thirteen waited, and waited, and waited, and waited. Thirteen was sure Mrs. Lowrie would have more for her, that she'd whisper nasty comments and condescension in her direction. But, after her initial salvo, Mrs. Lowrie had simply ignored her, and pretended she wasn't there. Thirteen could hear her working -- typing away, answering phone calls, shuffling papers. She could feel her presence, looming over her a few feet away. The secretary left her desk a few times, to fetch something from the printer or to use the bathroom, and Thirteen used those moments to stretch and to shift. Her knees didn't hurt as much as she'd expected them to, but her muscles began to cramp up every so often, and Thirteen simply couldn't hold the "arched back, chest out" posture the entire time. She knew she was probably slouching, and she knew she wasn't doing "Knees" with the exact precision she was supposed to, but Mrs. Lowrie offered no further corrections.  
  
There were no more "Yowzas" or "Wows" from the Human Capital staff; they, too, mostly ignored the naked girl kneeling outside their boss's office. This sort of thing had probably become normal to the Alan Bagbys and the Chad Ostermuellers charged with tracking and monitoring the girls. What was Thirteen to them but just another naked ass in their face? Thirteen had mixed emotions about this. On the one hand, she wanted to be left alone and to be paid no mind, escaping their objectification and their remarks. On the other, a part of her wanted to be acknowledged -- this may have been routine to them, but it was a big deal to her, and she wanted her sacrifice to be appreciated. She wanted them to want her. She wanted the reassurances that they found her attractive.  
  
She heard the other mailgirl arrive behind her, padding quickly down the hallway. The girl's bare feet sounded different against the carpet than the rest of the staff's shoes. Her pace was quicker, and carried less obvious weight. And, though she wasn't running, she was breathing heavily, the rapid inhale-exhale, inhale-exhale signified she might have been before arriving in Human Capital. Or, perhaps, that she'd just climbed some number of stairs to get here.  
  
"Yes?" Mrs. Lowrie asked, when the footfalls came to a stop at her desk.  
  
"Pick-up, Mrs. Lowrie," the mailgirl explained. "Mistress Zero sent me for Mailgirl Number Thirteen. And her things."  
  
"Finally," Mrs. Lowrie sighed.  
  
The girl hesitated, as if searching for the right response, and offered, finally, "This mailgirl apologizes it took so long."  
  
Mrs. Lowrie groaned. "Save it," she warned the girl. "Like you had any say in it."  
  
"Yes, Mrs. Lowrie. Thank you, Mrs. Lowrie."  
  
Thirteen could practically hear the secretary's eyes rolling. They both, clearly, hated this drill. But the mailgirl faithfully executed her end of the exchange, standing outside the door of the Director of Human Capital.  
  
"Take her," Mrs. Lowrie instructed. "Her clothes, her purse, her shoes -- they're on Mr. Barrow's desk."  
  
"Yes, ma'am."  
  
The door opened, and the mailgirl retrieved Thirteen's things before returning to Thirteen. Without bothering to loosen the knot at the back of Thirteen's head, she tugged it up and off, and Thirteen could see again.  
  
"Come on," the mailgirl told her. "Up. Let's get you down to the locker room."  
  
"Yes, ma'am," Thirteen croaked. Her mouth was dry. She got to her feet slowly, sorely, steadying herself with a hand against the wall.  
  
"Nuh-uh," came the response. "No ma'ams. No misses. None of that between us girls."  
  
Thirteen apologized. "Sorry."  
  
"It's alright. Now, let's go. I've got a deadline."  
  
Thirteen turned and blinked. Her eyes readjusted to the light. Before her was another naked girl, the very same girl she'd witnessed Mistress Zero inspecting that morning when she and Gillian had first arrived.  
  
Mailgirl Number Seven was a mystery to Mailgirl Number Thirteen. She had files on all the others. She knew their real names. She knew what they'd been doing prior, for their "real" jobs. The profile Barrow had sent over on Mailgirl Number Seven -- which had included pictures, both clothed and unclothed -- had her as a brunette. A little taller than this girl. A little thinner. A little more endowed in the chest. Roughly the same age, but that didn't say all that much. All of USF's mailgirls were clustered around thirty years old -- some a little younger, some a little older. But this wasn't Jennfier Beckett from Consumer Products.  
  
This Mailgirl Number Seven hadn't been the most attractive girl in that morning's line-up. That honor probably belonged, rightfully, to Mailgirl Number One. Or Mailgirl Number Three. Or Mailgirl Number Eleven, if you were into that sort of cosmopolitan/exotic sort of biracial look that defied easy categorization. But this Mailgirl Number Seven was by no means unattractive; she belonged on that roster as much as any of them, and her body immediately made Thirteen self-conscious about her own.  
  
Seven was of average height and possessed a thin -- almost too thin -- spritely build. Thirteen may or may not have had a cup size on her, but Seven was smaller about the hips and tighter from behind. She was blonde, like Thirteen, with her hair done up in a bun. She had a sharp chin and a prominent nose. She had a big, wide, welcoming smile, and a brightness in her eyes that spoke to the smile's sincerity. She was adorned with - as Thirteen was - a thick metal collar and her mailroom number scrawled across her right hip. But she also wore a black lycra armband around her left bicep, holding her company-assigned smartphone in place, the last remaining elements of the standard mailgirl uniform which Thirteen hadn't yet been issued. Even dressed as she was, even mewing pathetically in front of Mrs. Lowrie, there was an intelligence and a warmth to this girl that USF hadn't yet been able to strip from her.  
  
Once again, Thirteen thought that there was something familiar about her. Thirteen hadn't seen her before; her pictures hadn't been included in the file dump Gillian and Thirteen had been provided. But Thirteen recognized her, or was half-remembering someone who looked like her. A minor celebrity, maybe. An actress in a commercial. A local newscaster. Thirteen could picture Mailgirl Number Seven, wearing a nice, form-fitting dress, delivering the weather report or reading out last night's scores from around Major League Baseball.  
  
Nodding once to confirm she understood, Thirteen followed Seven back up the hall through Human Capital, past the offices of Barrow's analysts and technicians, and out into the "Hall of Panties." That there were two Number Sevens, displaying a red lace tanga in one and a pair of skin-tone bikini panties in the other, signified that this Number Seven had replaced the previous Number Seven sometime within the last few weeks. Thirteen wondered just how long her escort had been a mailgirl, but that was a conversation for another time. Instead, she kept fixed on the girl's bare back, between her shoulders, and hustled along behind her as they made their way back to 18th Floor proper.  
  
They weren't running full-out, but Seven was still jogging at a good pace, and they breezed past occupied cubicles on either side without attracting much attention. At one point, as they crossed through the reception area, they were greeted by the smiles and the appreciative eyes of two men in suits engaged in a conversation with the receptionist. Neither said anything, but they both tracked her naked body as she passed, drinking it in as her breasts bounced this way and that out in the open.  
  
Around another corner, down another hall, and into some sort of service corridor. Women's room. Men's room. Server room. Janitor's closet. They stopped, momentarily, at the service elevator, and Seven impatiently jabbed at the "down" button a handful of times. A beat or two passed. Seven groaned audibly, glanced at the timer on her smartphone that was ticking ever towards zero, and then looked up at Thirteen.  
  
"Let's do the stairs," she said apologetically. Without waiting for a response, without letting Thirteen have any say in the matter, she crossed the corridor, pushed open the door to the stairwell, and began to descend all the way to the 2nd Floor.  
  
Elevators, for the most part, were a strict "no-no" for mailgirls worldwide. Though it seemed like an unnecessary and arbitrary cruelty to inflict upon the girls, it was a cruelty that was near-universal throughout Asia, Europe, and now in North America. There were exceptions, of course, and allowances were made for factors like carrying a heavy package or delivering a message when speed was an absolute necessity. Mailgirls made their livings on the stairs, though -- up and down, down and up, day-in and day-out -- and it sculpted girls already gifted in figure to a divine degree.  
  
At US Financial Plaza in downtown Manhattan, such restrictions were simply unworkable. The Plaza rose forty-eight stories into the sky, and there were six more levels below ground. Not only would a climb from the mailroom on B2 to the Executive Offices on the 47th and 48th Floors have been impractical, from the standpoint of time it would have taken, it would also have been have been utterly inhumane to the mailgirls themselves. USF, then, had rolled out a compromise solution: the girls were allowed to utilize the service elevators when a delivery required them to go more than ten floors. Otherwise, it was the stairs. It was up to Barrow and his staff to figure out a way of clustering deliveries within those ten floors as much as possible, with deliveries assigned to the mailgirl closest to the pick-up point instead of managers being able to request a specific girl. When the program had rolled out in April with just six girls, elevators were the norm. With the May class joining, and now Thirteen and her cohort group in June, Human Capital would be able to distribute the girls better throughout the building. Though the addition of more girls meant that the workload would be better divided, it also meant that a girl was more likely to be summoned from just six or seven floors away. Which, in turn, meant more time on the stairs for all of them.  
  
18-to-2, by Thirteen's count, was fifteen flights of stairs, meaning that Seven's decision to forego the elevator was a curious one. The impatience Seven had demonstrated in calling the elevator, however, suggested a cost-benefit analysis. They could wait on the 18th Floor, tapping their toes while the deadline on Seven's left arm got closer and closer to being upon them. Or, they could opt for the stairs, their fate more firmly in their own hands. Fifteen floors down wasn't fifteen floors up, and so Thirteen followed behind without complaint.  
  
Seven, though, had an ulterior motive. A few flights down, between the 13th and 14th Floors, she came to a sudden stop -- so sudden that Thirteen nearly crashed into her and could have sent them both tumbling all the way down. The girl turned around to face her, took Thirteen's hands in her own, and caught her breath. She was two stairs in front of Thirteen, and standing a little too close for Thirteen's comfort. Given Thirteen's current state of dress, Seven's face was at the same level as Thirteen's chest. As Seven began to speak, Thirteen could feel the other girl's hot breath on her breasts.  
  
"Listen, this may cost me a demerit or two," Seven began. "But I just went through all of this last week, and I wanted to take a minute. I know you're scared. I know you're feeling overwhelmed. But you'll get through it. I promise."

Thirteen's hands were cold and clammy, but Seven's were warm. There was an intimacy in being in the girl's embrace, and the girl radiated kindness and compassion in that moment.  
  
"You're not alone, like I was. You're going to have other girls down there today who are going through this same exact thing, who are feeling all the same things you are. They'll be there with you. And I'll be back down at lunch, with all of the other girls who've been doing this a lot longer than you or I have. That's what you've got going for you. Support. Experience. Empathy.  
  
"You're not going to get that from Mistress Zero. You're not going to get that from the rest of the assholes in this building, when you start making rounds. Just know that it's not you versus the world. It's us versus the world.  
  
"Mistress Zero is going to tell you that the hardest part is behind you. That making this decision and getting naked the first time is the hardest thing you're going to do. And you're not going to believe her. I know I didn't. But it is. It is, it is, it is. From here on in, it's just more of the same, just degrees of embarrassment and self-doubt and self-loathing that you've already faced to get to now."  
  
"Okay," Thirteen said finally.  
  
"Just reset your expectations. Know what's coming. She'll make you shower. She'll make you shave, even if...," and Seven paused here to glance down at Thirteen's pussy, "even if it's just going through the motions. She'll have you choke down lunch. It's disgusting. And you're going to want to throw up with every bite. But it gets...well...not better, exactly...but more tolerable. She'll have you up on your feet, down on your knees, crawling around on all fours, and grabbing your ankles. She absolutely will single out at least one of you for a spanking, whether it's with her hand or with a paddle or with a flogger or with whatever..."  
  
Thirteen cringed.  
  
"Just go with it. Really. If you fight it, or talk back, or push back on her at all, it's going to be worse, and she's going to end up picking on you. If you chose this, if you volunteered, if you got pressured into volunteering -- however you got here -- you're in it now. You don't get to pick and choose. It's all in. Or, you walk. You've just got to decide if you can do it, or if it's better to just deal with whatever they've got hanging over you. But, really, I'm telling you, it gets easier."  
  
"Last week?" Thirteen asked. "You did this all last week?"  
  
Seven nodded. "Last week. They had an open slot. The last Number Seven quit on them over the weekend, so I got approached. Honestly? I'd been expecting it from the beginning, so I'd had some time to consider it, which is more than you probably had."  
  
"Well, actually..."  
  
Seven ignored her. "I'm in Legal. Or, I guess, I was in Legal, before. So I knew what was coming before it was announced. But, really, lean on the other girls. Lean on us, lean on the ones who've been doing this for a few weeks. We'll get you through it. We'll get through it together."  
  
It was a rousing pep talk. And, despite Thirteen's skepticism in the message, she felt buoyed by the compassion in Seven's delivery. She felt almost encouraged in the girl's insistence of camaraderie and sisterhood. After however long she'd just spent naked and kneeling alone behind Mrs. Lowrie's desk, there was something reassuring in the realization that she wouldn't have to face the coming trials on her own.  
  
"What am I forgetting? I'm sorry. Just feeling a little rushed. We don't have that long before I get flagged for standing here like this. Oh! The bleach. Sorry. That part? Yeah, it's terrible. The girls who've been here longer - they use something different. But today? On your first day? It's going to burn. A lot. Something about what they use. It's abrasive. It's stronger. It's more chemical-y. I'm sorry. It's like a sunburn in the most unimaginably uncomfortable place. But, that, too, we all went through, and we all came out the other side."  
  
"Yeah, no. I'm not...uh...looking forward to that part..."  
  
"Oh, and then Will. Will Barrow. Or, maybe one of his analysts, depending on how it's going with recruiting. They're going to run you through measurements and history. Sexual history. For your profile on the app. Really deep-dive on that sort of stuff. Anal. Oral. Vaginal. Number of partners. Sexual preference. I don't know. Preferred position? How often you...you know...touch yourself. How recently. That sort of petty, humiliating bullshit. I wouldn't lie. I didn't lie. Or, you know what? Screw them. Lie. The point is less data collection than it to make you squirm and make you feel like some sort of slut. But don't let them. The point is, if you come off all virginal and innocent, you're just giving them that much more credit for where you are now."  
  
Thirteen had been with just four men. She didn't really have anything wild or adventurous or risqué to share, anyways. The single most exciting moment she had? Well, she was living it now.  
  
"What else can I tell you? What else do you want to know? We should get going, though. We can talk on the way." She didn't release her grip, however. She didn't turn and continue the descent. Instead, she locked eyes with Thirteen, and asked, "How are you doing?"  
  
How was she doing? How was Thirteen supposed to answer that question? How was she supposed to tell this girl, this naked mailgirl she'd just met, what she was feeling? She felt awful. She hated herself. She hated Gillian. She hated Barrow. She hated the world for doing this to anyone. And to her, specifically. She felt awkward and humiliated. She felt stupid for ever agreeing to this in the first place. She felt angry at herself for getting talked into it. She felt whorish and dirty. She felt lost. She felt broken.  
  
"I...uh...I could use a bathroom break," Thirteen responded. From the moment she'd gotten to her knees, her nervous bladder had plagued her. And, even if it was just nerves, and even if it was just in her head, it didn't change the fact that Thirteen needed to pee.  
  
Seven giggled. "Not what I meant, but okay. Can you make it to the locker room? Otherwise, we've got to go ask permission, and find a chaperone. And that means wading out onto one of these floors, and giving everyone a sneak peak of the new mailgirl."  
  
"Got it," Thirteen said. "No, I can wait."  
  
Seven met the girl's eyes once more, and held her gaze. Thirteen squirmed a bit internally, uncomfortable with Seven searching for something deeper, something more profound. And, she found it.  
  
"That other thing you're feeling? The one you don't want to admit to yourself?"  
  
She didn't have to say it out loud. Thirteen knew the one to which she was referring.  
  
"It's normal. You're not alone in that, either."  
  
And with that, they were off.  
  
"You're going to want to be the one Mistress Zero singles out," Seven continued, as they continued down the stairs. "Get it over with. The spanking, I mean. It's more psychological than it is physical."  
  
"I...I was kind of hoping to avoid that part, as much I could. Maybe put it off until next week, if it was my power to do so..."  
  
Seven snorted. "It's not. Twelve is over that bench every day. Sometimes more than once. You're not going to make it more than a few days without picking up twenty-five demerits, even if you're absolutely hypersonic in making deliveries. You're just not."  
  
"Oh," was all Thirteen said in response.  
  
"Get it over with," Seven insisted. "It's really not as bad as you think it is. It's not. I mean, maybe it's your thing anyways..."  
  
Barrow had suggested the same thing. "It's not."  
  
"Eh. Don't be so sure. I mean, there's a reason it's a thing in the first place. Outside of mailgirls, even."  
  
"It's not."  
  
"Right. Of course," Seven said skeptically. Apparently, she believed Thirteen to be some sort of closeted masochist. Given the morning she'd just had, and the morning yet to come, maybe there was, in fact, something to that hint of an accusation.  
  
"It's not," Thirteen repeated.  
  
"No, I get it. Even still, then, get it over with. If you're dreading it, if you're worrying about it, if you're scared...just get it out of the way. The second time, everything's easier. For everything. You just know what to expect."  
  
There was a certain logic to that, Thirteen supposed. Just getting undressed at the Plaza tomorrow, doing it for a second time, couldn't possibly be any more torturous than it had been that morning. Once she'd made her first delivery, the second wouldn't seem like so much of a hurdle. Once she'd been...gulp...spanked that first time, it was perhaps reasonable to assume the next wouldn't be as terrible, from a psychological standpoint.  
  
"Do I get a lot of say?" Thirteen asked. Was Seven expecting her to raise her hand and volunteer?  
  
Seven giggled again. "Fair point."  
  
Thirteen appreciated Seven's attempts to buck her up, to settle her down, to lay out the morning ahead. The other girl was like an experienced older sister, giving advice and calming her nerves. She had the faintest hint of a Boston accent. She'd been in Legal. She'd only been a mailgirl for a week. She'd also, it seemed, intimated that she, too, found her new role something of a turn on. She hadn't come right out and said so, of course, but confessing that "that other thing" was common among the girls, that that sexual excitement and arousal wasn't specific to Thirteen. And, though Thirteen couldn't have been sure, it certainly seemed that Seven's insistence that being spanked was "a thing" suggested that it may have been "a thing" for Seven herself.  
  
"I'm Sarah," Thirteen announced, as they neared the 2nd Floor. It felt improper that this girl - her big sister - not know her real name.  
  
"Nuh-uh," Seven chided her. "A mailgirl is to be referred to only by her mailroom number. You're Thirteen. I'm Seven."  
  
"Sorry," she apologized.  
  
"The one and only time anyone upstairs gets to lay a hand on you is if they catch you saying my name, or saying your name. That gets corrected right away. Whoever you were this morning, whatever department you're coming from - you're Mailgirl Number Thirteen now. Honestly? Honestly. Honestly, it's better that way. Sarah Whoever-you-are? She's not here. That's who you get to be outside of this place."  
  
"Understood," Thirteen said meekly.  
  
Still, though, Seven paused as they reached the 2nd Floor, and turned to face Thirteen once more. With one hand on the door leading to the service lobby beyond, she leaned in and kissed Thirteen on the cheek.  
  
"Michelle," she whispered. "Let's get drinks. Tonight, if you want. Or, if you're feeling overwhelmed after today, and just want to go home - that's fair, too. But let's catch up, on the outside. With our clothes on."  
  
"That sounds good," Thirteen said dumbly. She'd been thrown by the kiss. She hadn't expected it. She hadn't expected that level of intimacy or friendliness or whatever it had been. There'd been nothing sexual about it, nothing suggestive. Just a quick peck, as one would do for "hello" or "goodbye." Only, it had been shared between two girls wearing nothing but dog collars and numbers.  
  
As Seven leaned into the door and pushed it open, she cocked an eyebrow, laughed, and added, "Or with our clothes off? You know, if that's your thing..."  
  
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The rest of Thirteen's morning, into that afternoon, was as Seven had laid out.  
  
Her new friend -- Michelle -- had taken her as far as the service lobby, only for her smartphone to immediately buzz with a demerit (for being behind schedule) and to signal a pick-up in the mailroom down on B2. Seven pointed Thirteen in the direction the locker room proper, noted the presence of the toilets lining both sides of the walls along the way, and instructed her to wait, on her knees, at her locker if Mistress Zero was still somewhere else in the building with Barrow.  
  
Thirteen sat and peed, unnerved by how close the metal toilets were to one another -- three on one side of the hall, three on the other. She felt exposed on all sides, in all ways. There were no partitions, nothing to shield her from doing her dirty business from anyone coming from the service lobby in one direction or from the locker room on the other side. In the direction of the locker room, Thirteen was treated to a reverse view of what she and Gillian seen that morning -- a utilitarian metal desk and the double doors that led back out to elevator lobby beyond. The doors themselves, like the walls to either side, were mirror-glass, and a timid Number Thirteen looked back at her as she finished.  
  
As she stood, the imposing figure of Mistress Zero click-clacked in her heels into view, emerging from the left side of locker room and greeting Thirteen with a sneer.  
  
"Hands," Mistress Zero hissed.  
  
Thirteen wasn't sure she knew that position.  
  
"Wash your hands," Mistress Zero clarified. "Come wash. And then to your locker."  
  
It was just Thirteen and -- apparently - Fifteen in the locker room at that time. Just the two of them, and the tall, commanding brunette in her raspberry red dress and stiletto heels. Mailgirl Number Fourteen joined them a few short minutes later, escorted into the locker room by Mailgirl Number One. And, whatever sort of morning Thirteen was having, Fourteen's had been worse.  
  
Fourteen, too, had been decorated with lipstick. But whereas Thirteen had had her mailroom designation scribbled on her hip by Barrow, using Thirteen's own lipstick, Fourteen's number was in the same black marker as Fifteen's, as the other mailgirls' Thirteen had seen. Fourteen, however, had a little something extra -- the word "SLUT" was written across her forehead in big, bold, red letters. This wasn't Mistress Zero's handiwork; the German woman had Fourteen wash it off as soon as she arrived. This was likely a parting gift from the executive whose husband Fourteen had apparently been sleeping with. Or, perhaps, someone else entirely, someone who took issue with Fourteen's decision to join the mailgirl ranks and wanted to make Fourteen painfully aware of what that someone thought of that decision.  
  
If it had been Thirteen, she would have been in tears. She'd been close to tears already, and hadn't suffered anywhere near the abuse that Fourteen had.  
  
Fourteen, it appeared, was unfazed by it all. She carried an air of detached indifference about her, as if she were on the outside looking in, as if none of this was happening to her. It bordered on bemused, with Fourteen finding her present situation almost funny. She was above it. She recognized just how ridiculous it was. She had dark hair, dark eyes, and dark skin, a Mediterranean sort of look that suggested she came from Italian or Greek stock. Breasts no bigger than Thirteen's own, nipples flat, and dark, eye-catching areolae. There was a thin, well-kept strip of pubic hair that adorned her pubic region, an adornment she'd be forced to lose before being let loose on USF's non-mailgirl population. She, too, reminded Thirteen of someone -- the girl from the "Transformers" movies. Thirteen hadn't seen "Transformers," of course. She'd never been one much for pop culture, and she struggled to remember the actress's name. Something Fox. Melissa? Megan? Was it Michelle? Or did Thirteen just have "Michelle" on her mind...?  
  
Whereas Fourteen could have been described as detached or distant, Fifteen was seething. From two lockers away, Thirteen could feel anger radiating off the girl. She was tall -- taller than either Thirteen or Fourteen, at least -- with light brown hair, smallish breasts, and big, puffy nipples. Between her legs was a tangled mess of pubic hair; Fifteen wasn't quite ready for bathing suit season, nor for exposing herself in public like this. Whereas Thirteen wasn't sure how she measured up against Fourteen, she saw herself favorably in comparing her body to Fifteen. At worst, Thirteen belonged in this line-up. But even on her knees, with a collar around her neck, Fifteen came off as defiant. She'd do what she was told, but there was no hiding her feelings on the matter.  
  
Thirteen felt oddly comforted by the other girls' presence. Seven had assured her that she wouldn't be going through all this alone, and Thirteen felt thankful for Fourteen's indifference and Fifteen's attitude. She knew that she herself could be a bit of an emotional sponge at times. If either of the girls had been sobbing, or had come across as scared or rattled, Thirteen would have felt even more of the same. Their approaches, as differing as they were, emboldened her, gave her courage.  
  
Barrow had been hopeful to have girls Thirteen through Sixteen wrapped up by this point, and the fact that it took another hour for Sixteen to arrive, escorted by Mailgirl Number Five, suggested that at least one of that morning's conversations hadn't gone as well as he'd been hoping. Somewhere along the way, someone had declined to volunteer. Or, had volunteered, only to be disqualified for one reason or another. Thirteen wondered if Gillian was still with him, if she'd spent the day shadowing her former student as he went recruiting around the building. She was curious about the pitches that went sideways, and hoped -- for the purposes of her research -- that Gillian had been there for that one, and could fill her when they next caught up. There was a decent chance, however, that Gillian had gone only to the first meeting, with Mailgirl Number Fourteen, and was now watching this particular scene unfold in the locker room from the elevator lobby.  
  
The mirror glass turned out to be both a blessing and a curse. Thirteen knew what was out there, on the other side. She'd been part of the audience that morning, peering in and playing witness to Mistress Zero's inspection of her underlings. The fact that Thirteen couldn't see out, however, gave some measure of deniability. She could pretend the far side of the locker room was nothing more than a solid wall. That she was naked and vulnerable only to Mistress Zero and her fellow mailgirls. That this was just another women's locker room -- laid out a little funny, admittedly, without a ton of privacy within the room itself -- at some anonymous gym. She knew it wasn't true, of course, and that she was lying to herself in thinking that way. But, she could put it out of her mind, focusing only on the locker room and not whoever was out in the lobby beyond.  
  
The catch, though, was that the mirror glass reflected everything back. Thirteen could see just how wretched she appeared, collared and on her knees. Thirteen, Fourteen, and Fifteen -- joined later by Sixteen, Seventeen, and Eighteen -- stark naked, with tits out and legs apart. She watched herself shower, shivering beneath the frigid water that flowed from the showerheads. She blushed at just how exposed she was as she lathered her crotch up with shaving cream and made a show of running a communal razor across her most intimate of areas. As Mistress Zero ran her through her positions -- down on her knees, up on her toes, grabbing her ankles, squatting with legs apart, and so on -- she played spectator to it all, trembling as the reflection of Mistress Zero berated Thirteen's own reflection for being slow to get them all right.  
  
She chose to focus on the reflections of Fourteen and Fifteen, instead. When Eighteen joined them early that afternoon, Thirteen realized -- uncomfortably -- that Eighteen was doing the same thing to Thirteen.  
  
It was surprisingly easy to get caught up in the moment, to shut down any self-doubt or introspection and simply do as she was told. As weird and awkward as it all was, all Thirteen really needed to do was follow along with the instructions, offer up the occasional "Yes, ma'am" or "No ma'am," and allow herself to go numb. She got on her knees when she was told to get on her knees. She got on her toes when she was told to get on her toes. She used the facilities when she was told to use the facilities. She showered. She shaved. She dolled herself with the communal make-up. She even choked down her lunch -- a thick, runny grey gruel, served to her in a silver dog bowl -- without complaint.

Truth be told, it wasn't Thirteen's first time tasting the nutrient-rich food-substitute mailgirls were increasingly served in these sorts of programs. She and Gillian, partly to prepare Thirteen and partly out of academic curiosity, had shared a few bites from a can they'd ordered online a few weeks earlier. Neither had had more than a few nibbles at that point, and Thirteen had found herself nearly vomiting almost immediately. It was tasteless...no, that wasn't quite right; it tasted awful. It smelled worse. But it was supposedly rich in all the necessary nutrients and vitamins and what-have-you, without concerning itself over such trivial matters as taste or color or consistency. There were persistent rumors out West that it was laced with hormones intended to ramp up the girls' arousal levels and transform them into sex-hungry sluts. But Thirteen had found no evidence of that in examining the can's ingredients, and she suspected that it might have just been a lie the girls told themselves to excuse behavior caused by something more ingrained and psychological in nature.  
  
Mistress Zero, as the day went on, was joined in the locker room by Alan Bagby and Matt Doyle from Human Capital, as well as a waifish-looking blonde introduced only as Miss Henriksen. In any other setting, Miss Henriksen would have commanded the attention of a roomful of men, but it was difficult to compete with a line of naked mailgirls grabbing their ankles. For the purposes of completing their profiles on USF's mailgirls app, Mr. Bagby ran the girls through a series of deeply personal questions that ranged from when they'd first lost their virginity to whether they'd ever had anal sex -- and, if they hadn't (and Thirteen certainly hadn't), whether they thought they might enjoy it. Mr. Doyle, for his part, walked the girls through the app itself, demonstrating how to sign in, how to interpret the various buzzes and beeps, how to synch it with the scale here in the locker room, how to "bump" it against other smartphones to receive electronic communications, and how to actually schedule a pick-up or a delivery -- so that the girls could themselves walk USF's non-mailgirl employees through the process. Miss Henriksen, USF's apparent go-to beautician out of nearby Maiden Lane Spa & Salon, was tasked with waxing those girls who needed it, and applying the harsh, stinging bleaching agent around each of their assholes.  
  
The bleach, as much as it burned, distracted Thirteen from the red welts sure to be criss-crossing across her backside by that point. She wasn't sure if Mistress Zero was singling the PhD candidate out to break her down and bring her low, or if Thirteen was really that much worse when it came to the various postures and positions the mailgirls were required to take. "Tits out!" she'd call, and snap a black leather riding crop across Thirteen's backside. "Back arched! Head down! Legs open!" All accompanied by another kiss from her instrument, whistling through the air and connecting with Thirteen's tender flesh. Measuring her performance against that of Fourteen and Fifteen, Thirteen wasn't sure she was doing anything significantly worse or noticeably different from what they were doing. But it was Thirteen who was first sent to the "spanking benches." An exasperated Mistress Zero decided that the blonde needed a step up, in terms of "correction."  
  
Thirteen had never been spanked before. It simply hadn't been her parents' style. Tom Scott had been distant, even when he'd been around. And Catherine Scott -- now Catherine Ryan, having remarried -- would have taken the punishment herself, rather than have someone else lay a hand on her daughter. And so the sensation of Mistress Zero's bare hand administering smack after smack to Thirteen's bare buttocks was entirely new, a first in a day of firsts. The first two times Thirteen was sent to the bench -- and she was sent three times, before the early afternoon was over -- Mistress Zero used only her open palm, and the whole thing was more humiliating than it was actually painful. The third time, Mistress Zero had thought it necessary to bring out a wooden paddle, the sort you'd see hanging in fraternities from days gone by, to get her message across. The sound, as it turned out, was worse than the hurt. But Mistress Zero still delivered enough force to send Thirteen's whole body lurching forward each time she connected.  
  
To Seven's point, the whole thing was more mental than physical. It hurt, but not nearly as much as she had feared it would, and -- after it was through -- it was the burning sensation of the bleach around her asshole that caused the most discomfort. Thirteen had known a spanking was in her future. She'd granted USF the right to administer corporal punishment as part of her contract. But she had hoped to make it through her first week before Mistress Zero needed to exercise that right, and she had hoped she might be able to keep the spankings to a minimum over the course of the summer. She certainly hadn't expected to be bent over the bench three times before the end of her first afternoon. She'd insisted that this wasn't her "thing," that this wasn't some sort of kink she had. But her head was swimming as she counted out each blow. And when she remembered that there was an audience witnessing this on the other side of mirror glass, Thirteen couldn't deny that she felt a tingle between her legs.  
  
Thirteen was painfully aware of aches and throbs in her body. She'd never spent this much time aware of her own asshole, certainly. But her pussy, too, was alive and calling for attention in a way that Thirteen had never experienced before. It was wet, it was hot, it was awake, and -- if she'd been in the privacy of her own bedroom -- Thirteen would have felt obligated to pay it some attention. The cold shower she'd taken did nothing to tamp it down, and Thirteen's entire being felt like one big erogenous zone. Her nipples, hard from before she'd even begun to undress in Barrow's office, hadn't calmed down even once since then. A glance in Fourteen's direction -- Fifteen's, too -- confirmed that Thirteen wasn't alone in this particular predicament; they all looked as if they'd been tweaked and fluffed in advance of porn shoot.  
  
Masturbation was common among the mailgirls here at USF, and common among mailgirl programs worldwide. Hell, USF had made clear that the mailgirls were forbidden from touching themselves anywhere in the building but the locker room itself. Thirteen had already begun to see the wisdom in such limits, as a part of her felt she might have been better off if she'd been allowed to sneak off and rub one out, returning refreshed and relieved. She knew that she'd wind up masturbating here at the Plaza eventually, if for no other reason than a commitment to live the life of a mailgirl in its entirety. It had been her plan -- like with the spankings -- to make it through her first week of work before committing the act, however; there was no need to seem over-eager, and no reason to believe she'd be so sexually stimulated by her new station in life that she'd simply lose all self-control. She had been dreading it, even if she felt it was going to be necessary for academic purposes. Now, though? Thirteen was beginning to wonder if she was going to make it through the day, or if -- because of the inevitability of the thing anyways -- she shouldn't just get on with it and rescue herself from the hold her pussy had over her.  
  
"That other thing you're feeling?" Seven had assured her. "The one you don't want to admit to yourself? It's normal. You're not alone in that, either."  
  
There was a freedom in that, Thirteen felt. None of this could have been described as "normal," exactly; the world had changed some since the advent of mailgirls, but to call any of this "normal" would have been a pretty big leap. But, Thirteen's reaction to it? Her body's reaction? Maybe this was, in fact, normal for her to be feeling. Normal for a girl who'd volunteered for this sort of assignment. Reduced to nothing more than a sexual object, was it so unthinkable that Thirteen would wind up with sex on the brain?  
  
The veteran mailgirls, Mailgirls One through Twelve, trickled into the locker room shortly after twelve-thirty. Six of them had "First Lunch," which ran from twelve-thirty to one, and the remainder had "Second Lunch" from one to one-thirty. Seven was a part of this latter group, and she shot Thirteen a big, beaming smile that was equal parts sympathy and encouragement. The rookies, the trainees, the tangoes (whatever you were to call Thirteen and her cohort) were still in clutches of Mistress Zero and her training regimen, and so the two groups of mailgirls didn't have much interaction at that point. Thirteen, in fact, was still bent over the spanking bench when Mailgirls Twelve and Nine entered the locker room.  
  
If diddling themselves during lunchtime were as common among the veterans as Thirteen believed it were, the longer-serving mailgirls showed remarkable restraint early that afternoon. Thirteen wasn't sure if it was to keep the new girls from freaking out or from being scared away, or if it was shame and embarrassment on the part of the veterans in doing so in front of a whole new group of people. Either way, it wasn't until later that day, during afternoon breaks, that Mailgirl Number Nine finally went for it, breathing heavily under the shower and taking care of herself in a quick, subdued, and utilitarian manner.  
  
Mailgirl Number Sixteen joined Mailgirls Thirteen, Fourteen, and Fifteen just before they were fed their first bowl of gruel. She was every bit as gorgeous as the girls who'd been culled before her, every bit as a tall, every bit as thin, every bit as blessed when it came to chest-size and figure. Notably, however, she was black, the first African-American girl USF had roped into its program here at the Plaza. Thirteen winced as she was leashed, and couldn't help but feel extra uncomfortable the first time Mistress Zero struck her with her riding crop; white guilt and the legacy of race in America infusing Sixteen's treatment with something that much more disquieting and unnerving than the enslavement of the three white girls before her that morning.  
  
Seventeen and Eighteen arrived together early that afternoon, escorted down to the locker room by Mailgirl Number Eleven. Seventeen was a redheaded girl with puffy eyes, eyes that signaled she'd been crying earlier. In contrast to Fourteen, to Fifteen, and even Sixteen, Seventeen had a meek and timid air about her, and there was something just that much more pathetic in the way she mewed out "Yes, ma'am" and "No, ma'am" than Thirteen had heard in the timbre of the other girls' voices.  
  
Eighteen, meanwhile, was a brunette with short, chin-length hair and a clenched jaw; Thirteen could hear her nervously grinding her teeth five girls away. The description, "legs that went all the way up," got stuck in Thirteen's head the first time she laid eyes on Eighteen, and it was a phrase she couldn't shake every time she took the girl in; her breasts were just as spectacular as any of the other girls', her waistline as trim and as slender as her peers'. But those legs were a show-stopper -- long, tan, and smooth, muscular-but-not-too-muscular, and in a class all to themselves.  
  
Mistress Zero, as Seven had promised, assured them all that today was the hardest day they'd have as a mailgirl, that everything would get that much easier from here on out. There was a truth to that, as it turned out. As the day went on, it became easier for Thirteen to forget just how naked she was. Surrounded by girls in a similar state of undress, the nudity didn't bother Thirteen as much as she'd feared it would. True, she hadn't yet had to make the rounds upstairs, among men and women wearing suits and skirts and shirts and dresses - though she knew that that was coming. It was the submissiveness that she was having the most trouble with, the smallness that Mistress Zero was working hard to instill into them. "Lazy" and "slow" and "stupid," she was forced to label herself, rehearsing Human Capital approved phraseology for when she'd finally be released into the Plaza. Every time that Mistress Zero called them "girls" instead of "women," a part of Thirteen reacted viscerally. Every time the German woman hissed the word, "slut," in her thick accent, Thirteen cringed.  
  
It hurt. It landed with sting that Mistress Zero's hand, her riding crop, and her paddle had been unable to deliver. The idea that Thirteen was a "slut" was laughable on any number of levels. She was a bookworm and an orchestra geek at her very core, and she could count the notches on her bedpost -- or lack thereof -- with one hand. But there was no denying what was going on downstairs, that moistness and heat and pulse that Thirteen was feeling in her sex. She'd taken off her clothes in front of a total stranger, and then paraded her naked body through the 18th Floor and down to the locker room. She'd been spanked -- spanked! -- over a leather bench not entirely dissimilar to a pommel horse, all while an audience watched from the elevator lobby. She'd grabbed her ankles, she'd spread her legs, she'd thrust her open pussy into the air while her new dominatrix had barked orders at her.  
  
And she was, undeniably, getting off on it.  
  
When Mailgirl Number Nine finally saw fit to get herself off in the showers, Thirteen was transfixed. It wasn't that Nine was particularly confident in so doing. Nor was she nonchalant about it, either. Not exactly. No, it was the desperation that pulled Thirteen in. Beside her, Thirteen heard Fourteen's breath quicken, too, and she knew that the dark-haired girl was watching the scene unfold, just as she was.  
  
Nine didn't want to do it. There was a nervousness in the way she surveyed the open showers to her left and to her right, but also a purposeful avoidance of looking behind her to where Thirteen and Fourteen were lined up at their lockers. She was reluctant, and she was embarrassed. But this was necessary. There were no oohs and aahs, no moans or whines. The fall of the water in the shower drowned out most of the heavy panting, but Thirteen could hear it if she tried hard enough. It was the shudder at the end that shook Thirteen most, the inadvertent and uncontrollable trembling that raced up Nine's spine and signaled that she had efficiently and expertly accomplished what she'd needed to do.  
  
And with that image still lingering, Mailgirl Number Thirteen was dispatched into the Plaza.  
  
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Each of the new recruits was paired with a veteran. For Fourteen, it was Mailgirl One. For Sixteen, it was Five, in a pairing of the single African-American with the only Asian mailgirl (or, one of two, if Eleven's mixed heritage were factored in). Eighteen was assigned to Eleven. Seventeen, Six. And Mailgirl Number Fifteen was paired with Mailgirl Number Nine, fresh off her orgasm beneath the shower.  
  
Thirteen wasn't sure how Mistress Zero had made the assignments, or if there had been anything more to it than sticking one girl with another arbitrarily. But Thirteen, for her part, was paired off with Mailgirl Number Seven, and she couldn't help but be buoyed by that decision. Someone she'd met already. Someone friendly. Someone who'd taken the time to calm her down, to walk her through what to expect, to reassure her that she could do this. Someone who'd been willing to rack up a demerit or two or three just to put her arm around another girl -- figuratively, at least -- and promise her that she wasn't going through this alone.  
  
Thirteen was fitted with her black lycra armband, and assigned her smartphone just like any one of the veteran mailgirls. But, unlike the phones of those girls who'd been doing this for a while, Thirteen's was synched to Seven's. Whatever assignment Seven picked up would be assigned to Thirteen. Whatever deadline Seven had to meet would count down on Thirteen's arm, as well. Whatever demerit Seven earned -- and she was already on the wrong side of twenty -- would be bequeathed upon Thirteen, as well. When Seven hit twenty-five demerits, it would be both of them visiting Mistress Zero's spanking bench for discipline. Thirteen hoped they could avoid any more for the remainder of the day. She didn't want to be that mailgirl, the one spanked four times on her first day.  
  
What was unclear was how long Thirteen would be paired with Seven. More established programs had more formal training processes, and the "13" now inked on Thirteen's hip would have been accompanied by a "T," designating her as a "Trainee" (or, in mailgirl parlance, a "Tango," a term Thirteen hadn't yet heard around USF). Mistress Zero was nebulous on the subject, and Thirteen was left with the impression that it could be as long as a week. Or, as short as a day or two, if the new recruit "got it." What there was to "get," though, was also unclear. The smartphone on Thirteen's arm would tell her where to go for a pick-up, where to go for a delivery, and when she'd be allowed to take a quick rest on one of the mailgirl mats scattered throughout the building. In between, she only had to do what she was told to, and nothing more. This wasn't rocket science, or even high finance, and Thirteen wasn't an idiot -- no matter how many times she'd been forced to practice saying that she was.  
  
Still, Thirteen appreciated a "buddy." As unnerving as it was to step out onto the 27th Floor stark naked, it would have been even more so if she'd been alone.  
  
It was already after four-thirty by the time the new recruits had been dispatched into the Plaza, and the end of the day was within sight. That said, this was Wall Street, and Thirteen could expect the building to be bustling with activity right through the end of her shift at seven o'clock. Private Wealth Management was no exception, and if anyone had snuck out early, Thirteen certainly couldn't tell by the amount of eyes upon her as she and Seven exited the service corridor and rounded onto the floor proper.  
  
Seven, to her credit, had done her best to build Thirteen up and calm her down as they rode the service elevator up from the 2nd Floor.  
  
"You're fresh meat, sure. But this is all old news," the first blonde told the second. "At the end of the day, it's just another naked girl making a pick-up, something that's been going on here at the Plaza for weeks now. You may be a new face, but your kidding yourself if you think they'll be focused on your face..."  
  
This last bit was supposed to be a joke. Thirteen gave her mentor a sour look.  
  
"Just follow my lead," Seven assured her. "'Yes, ma'am.' 'No, sir.' 'Thank you, ma'am.' 'Right away, sir.' Collect what we need to collect, and then we're off. If you get a comment, it's in one ear and out the other -- just let it roll off you, good or bad."  
  
"Got it," Thirteen nodded. She was nervous. She would have been nervous, regardless. But the fact that she'd been dispatched to pick up Mailgirl Number Fourteen's clothes put the fear of God into her. Fourteen had arrived with the word "slut" scrawled across the forehead in lipstick, and so there was no telling what sort of situation Thirteen and Seven were now walking into.  
  
"And when someone decides to fuck with us -- and someone will, that I can promise, before the day is out -- just know that I'm here, and I'm going through it, too."  
  
Again, this was less reassuring than Seven meant it to be.  
  
"Fuck with us how, exactly?"  
  
"Nine times out ten?" she said, shaking her head. "It's 'get on your knees' or 'get up on your toes' or 'do ten jumping jacks' or some other stupid shit like that."  
  
"Jumping jacks?"  
  
Seven sighed. "Just something about mailgirls and jumping jacks..."  
  
"And the last time?"  
  
"The what?"  
  
"Nine times out of ten, you said. What happens that last time? The one out of the ten?"

Seven smiled resignedly. "That's when it gets fun."  
  
Pick-up was scheduled for the office of Craig Nagle, whom Thirteen was led to believe had been Fourteen's direct supervisor. Prior to Mistress Zero, that is. Based on Barrow's earlier comments to Gillian, and the body art Fourteen had been graced with before arriving in the locker room, Thirteen knew that there was a story here, but a story that she'd have to draw out of Fourteen at some later date. For now, she just wanted to retrieve Fourteen's things and get back to the relative safety of the locker room.  
  
Seven launched into a light jog as they exited the service corridor, and Thirteen dutifully followed behind. She was in okay shape, speaking in terms of cardio, and had visited the gym more in the past few weeks than she had in entire life up to that point. She knew that, on a typical day, she'd be dashing from one corner of the building to another at top speed, working hard to meet her deadlines and avoid demerits. This -- here, now -- was a comfortable pace, one that she felt she could handle. But, she wondered what it would feel like the first time she was given a "rush" or "premium rush" job.  
  
With the deadline they'd been given to pick up Fourteen's clothes, and the time they had remaining, Thirteen wasn't sure, however, that jogging was really necessary. Her breasts bounced uncomfortably, and she fought the urge the secure them with her hands. But, as they made their way through the cubicle farm between here and there, Thirteen appreciated the fact that they didn't linger. Anyone who caught sight of her streaking through the 27th Floor caught sight of her only for a quick second or two; she was nothing more than a flesh-colored blur. She realized that Seven was doing this intentionally, speed -- in this case -- working in their favor, allowing them to hurry past the onlookers without good, long looks or any sustained commentary.  
  
Which wasn't to say that there wasn't commentary.  
  
"Look, it's another new one!"  
  
"Oh my god, look at her!"  
  
"Hey, come back! I've got a package for you right here!"  
  
"Is that Mckenzie Clark? From Clearing? Did you see? Is that her? Mckenzie! Mckenzie!"  
  
"Jesus. Where do they find these exhibitionist bitches?"  
  
"I think I'm love, Pete..."  
  
"You're a whore!"  
  
This last one, hurled in her direction in a woman's voice. Thirteen glanced this way and that, trying in vain to identify where it had come from. She regretted it instantly. After locking eyes with a man to her right, another to his right, and with an overweight woman behind them, she hadn't found the culprit. But, it had been better when she'd kept her head down, her eyes on the floor, and stayed focused on her destination. Tunnel vision, in this case, was virtue.  
  
Seven, to her credit, never slowed, never adjusted her pace.  
  
When they arrived at Craig Nagle's office, the countdown on Thirteen's smartphone blinked twice, and then reset to zero. They'd arrived. Seven rapped gently on the door, and the pair was beckoned inside.  
  
Craig Nagle was a tall, slender man in late forties. He was balding, but had leaned in, and had trimmed what remained of his hair tight against his head. He took both naked girls in from the far side of his glasses. If this had been a cartoon, they would have fogged up instantaneously. He wasn't good-looking. But nor was he unattractive, per se. He just wasn't the sort of man Thirteen had ever expected to wind up naked with, naked behind closed doors in a confined space.  
  
Seven got into "Feet," and Thirteen mimicked her. Hands behind her back, chest out, legs shoulder-width apart, eyes down.  
  
"We're here for a pick-up, sir," Seven announced.  
  
"Right, right," Nagle stumbled. It took him a moment to remember where he was, and what they had come for. Two girls, dressed as they were, could do that to a man. "Just over there, behind you, on the hutch."  
  
Behind her, Thirteen saw the pile of clothes. Sheer bra, stockings, white blouse, suit jacket, skirt. A pair of dangerous-looking heels arranged neatly beside it, with earrings and a few other pieces of jewelry tucked into the shoe on the right. The skin that Fourteen had shed as part of her metamorphosis into a mailgirl. She didn't see any sign of the girl's panties, and didn't expect to find them here. Barrow would have taken these as a trophy.  
  
"Is she...is she okay?" Nagle asked, unsure of himself. "Joe?"  
  
It took a moment, but Thirteen realized he was saying "Jo" and not "Joe." Josephine. Or Johanna. Or something along those lines. Mailgirl Number Fourteen.  
  
"Sir, per Human Capital, she is to be called by her mail room number," Seven pointed out.  
  
Nagle looked surprised by the reprimand. Confused. A beat. A second one. And then he nodded, understanding. "Right, right. Mailgirl Number Fourteen. Is she...is she...I don't know...is she okay?"  
  
Guilt. Nagle was feeling guilt. Whatever part he'd played in this morning's conversation with Jo Whatever-her-name, he was feeling guilt over it.  
  
He went on. "I didn't know. I mean, what Susan did. I found out afterwards. I would have stopped her."  
  
Seven was confused, and looked to Thirteen. The veteran mailgirl had been out in the building when Fourteen had joined Thirteen and Fifteen in the locker room.  
  
Thirteen glanced at Seven, and then at Nagle. Was she allowed to speak? If so, was it "sir, this..." and "sir, that..."? Was it, "this mailgirl saw that mailgirl..." and all that?  
  
She swallowed, and then chose to speak to Seven directly. "Someone wrote 'slut' on her forehead."  
  
Seven grimaced, but recovered. She shrugged it off. "We've been called worse."  
  
"That someone was Susan Irvine," Nagle offered, as if both Seven and Thirteen would recognize her by name. Maybe Seven did. Thirteen certainly didn't, aside from having the context that Susan Irvine was someone higher up the food chain.  
  
"It's just...I had a call with a client. And this office...this office...it's small. If I'd known what was going to happen, of course Jo...er, Mailgirl Number Fourteen...of course she could have, should have, stayed in here. It just felt...I don't know...better to have her wait out at reception."  
  
Thirteen had waited for Seven to fetch her outside Barrow's office. Fourteen, apparently, had been sent to a mailgirl mat by the reception desk. And that, from what Thirteen could piece together, was when Susan Irvine had tagged the dark-haired girl with the insult.  
  
"I mean, I heard rumors about Jo," Nagle went on. "She was flirty. But she was flirty with everyone. Me, included. It's just how she is. It's who she is. It's...it's...it's part of the job, when you're managing clients. I had no idea about her and Don Irvine. Not really, I mean. You've seen her. Like, really seen her. Really, really. She's a knockout. A centerfold. She could have anyone she wanted...  
  
"Not that you two aren't...that's not what I'm saying. You two? Wow. Just...just...wow!" At this point, Nagle took off his glasses, absentmindedly polished them on his shirtsleeves, and put them back on. Maybe they were fogging up, after all.  
  
"I just mean...Don Irvine? Don Irvine? Don Irvine, of all people? And then, to have it used against her?"  
  
"She volunteered," Seven offered. She was trying to assuage his guilt.  
  
"Right, she volunteered," Nagle answered, but Thirteen could hear the air quotes around that last word. "I had no idea that was what it was. I've seen you girls around. I've seen you all down in the locker room. It seemed like harmless fun. Really. Consenting adults and all that. I didn't know what went in to it. I didn't know how much we leaned on you all. Not until today."  
  
"She volunteered," Seven repeated, more insistently this time. "She had a choice. She could have walked out. She could have quit. She chose this, the same as the two of us."  
  
Nagle was skeptical. "He...Will Barrow...he would have ruined her."  
  
"Maybe," was all Seven allowed. "But the girls here at USF? The young ones, the attractive ones? You're kidding yourself if you think they haven't played out that conversation and weighed that decision a hundred times over in the last two months. She volunteered. Maybe the girls back in April didn't know what they were getting themselves into, but Fourteen did. I did. Thirteen, here, did."  
  
Thirteen wasn't sure why Seven was working so hard to calm Nagle down. It seemed beyond the scope of her duties. They were here to retrieve Fourteen's clothes, and then hurry back down to the locker room. Seven, though, seemed to be counseling Craig Nagle through his regret and his remorse. Maybe it was just who she was?  
  
It seemed to sink in -- at least, a bit -- and Nagle began to nod. Absentmindedly, he turned away from Seven, and stared directly at Thirteen's breasts.  
  
Thirteen couldn't help but to blush.  
  
"I have...I have chits," he began. Thirteen wasn't sure what he was working up to. "Do you want a break? Do you want to hide in here a little while?"  
  
God, yes. As uncomfortable as Thirteen was being naked in front of Nagle, it beat running the floor. If she could just run out the clock (and she wasn't sure just how many chits Nagle had, or how much time they'd buy her), and start again tomorrow, that had to be better than exposing herself to countless more strangers.  
  
"Thank you, sir," Seven answered. "But we do have to get Fourteen's clothes back down to the locker room."  
  
"Oh, okay," Nagle said, addressing Thirteen's naked tits. "I can call you back, though, if you want a break?"  
  
"Thank you, sir," Seven repeated. "But I'm just coming off my break, and this is Mailgirl Number Thirteen's first assignment."  
  
Nagle caught himself, realized what he was doing, and then looked Thirteen in the eye sheepishly. He wanted to apologize, but then seemed to think better of it. She was naked, after all, for his benefit and his enjoyment, for the benefit and enjoyment of everyone at the Plaza. She was meant to be ogled.  
  
Still, his offer seemed sincere and heartfelt. There were no ulterior motives behind it, no truly lecherous intentions. Rather, it struck Thirteen that he was simply trying to be nice to them, to make up for whatever role he'd played in Fourteen's ensnarement earlier that day.  
  
"Right, right," Nagle replied. "I met your professor earlier today. She was with Will Barrow. You're the grad student?"  
  
Thirteen winced. She'd wanted to be the one who told the other girls what she was doing here, how she'd ended up joining their ranks. Nagle had just clumsily stolen that opportunity from her, at least in regards to Mailgirl Number Seven. She wished, in her heart of hearts, that she could go back to being mistaken from Mckenzie Clark in Clearing.  
  
"Yes, sir," Thirteen answered weakly, her voice getting caught in her throat.  
  
Nagle turned white. He looked even more nervous than he had a moment ago. "This isn't going to be part of some big expose, is it? 'Me Too' and Grace Burgmeier and sexual harassment and all that?"  
  
He was worried that he'd end up being exposed as part of that morning's conversations with Mailgirl Number Fourteen. Now it was Thirteen's turn to calm him down.  
  
"No, sir. I'm not a journalist. I'm not an investigative reporter. I'm an anthropologist." Catching herself, she amended her statement. "This girl is...was...this girl is studying anthropology."  
  
She ignored a look from Seven.  
  
"It's academic. This mailgirl is studying mailgirls. Social bonds. Cultural sorts of things. No names." She smiled weakly, and nodded in the direction of her hip. "Just numbers."  
  
It was a joke, and a weak one at that. But the panicked look on Nagle's face dissipated a little.  
  
"So, like 'life among the gorillas'?" Seven asked, finally, when the pair was safely back on the elevator. Thirteen was carrying Fourteen's clothes, while the other girl had Fourteen's shoes and an oversized pocketbook. "So you're Jane Gooddall?"  
  
"Dian Fossy."  
  
"What?"  
  
"Sigourney Weaver," Thirteen said. "Jane Gooddall was chimps. I think maybe you're thinking 'Gorillas in the Mist.'"  
  
The distinction wasn't important. Thirteen wasn't sure why she'd felt it necessary to correct Seven.  
  
They'd collected Fourteen's things, assured Nagle that they'd convey his sympathies and apologies to Fourteen when they saw her again, and darted back through the 27th Floor to the service elevator. Thirteen had avoided any temptation of making eye contact with the various spectators along the way, and ignored the well wishes, the derogatory remarks, and the cat calls her naked presence elicited. Only when the doors had closed and they had begun their descent did Seven say a word.  
  
"'Social bonds' and 'cultural sorts of things'?"  
  
"I'm sorry," Thirteen apologized. "I'm a sociocultural anthropologist. Or, I'm a PhD candidate, at least. I'm here as part of a field study. I'm here for my thesis. I'm sorry. I didn't want it to come out that way, so soon. I wanted to be the one to tell the other girls. I just...I just haven't had a chance yet."  
  
Seven laughed it off. "They'll get a hoot out of it, for sure."  
  
"Do you think...do you think they're going to have an issue with it? With me?"  
  
"I...." Seven began, but trailed off. She paused a moment to think it over, and then gave a more thoughtful answer. "No. Not if you explain it right. I'm assuming that was the truth? No names? Just numbers?"  
  
"Just numbers," Thirteen answered.  
  
"Even if you used names, though," Seven went on. "What with cell phone cameras and social media and 'Mailgirls Exposed' and the 'Post Office' and all that, it's not like anyone can keep what they're doing here a secret. You just can't make it worse for them. Just make sure you're on our side, with whatever you're doing."  
  
"Of course," Thirteen said.  
  
"And it'll help that you're right in the middle of it with them. However you got here, you're a mailgirl now. Just like the rest of us."  
  
Thirteen sighed. "Can you...do you think...can you let me tell them? When there's a good opportunity?"  
  
Seven smiled, and nodded her head. She had a nervous look on her face. "I'll tell you what...I'll keep your secret if you keep mine."  
  
"What's your secret?"  
  
"Promise first."  
  
"Okay. This mailgirl promises..."  
  
"I wrote the contracts," she blurted out.  
  
"Wait...what contracts? THE contracts?"  
  
"The mailgirl contracts, yeah. It's what USF transferred me down here to do last Fall. From Boston. I'm an employment lawyer. Sort of. I mean, when I have my clothes on. My career's taken sort of an unexpected detour over the last week."  
  
Thirteen had a thousand questions. Now, even more than before, she was entertaining the idea of getting drinks with Mailgirl Number Seven. There was so much she wanted to know, so much that Seven could potentially help her with.  
  
"I just assumed...I guess I didn't think about it...I just assumed they were written by..."  
  
"A man?" Seven laughed. "Don't get me wrong. Most of it's boilerplate. Standard language, standard terms, standard covenants and considerations and all that. I'm not the one who dreamed up demerits and corporal punishment and all the other icky stuff. Most of it I lifted directly from the Japanese. But...I'm the one who fit it all to USF, and I'm the one who snuck all of the clawbacks and conditions into this year's bonuses."  
  
"What?" Thirteen asked. This was the first she'd heard of clawbacks, the first she'd heard of anything to do with employee bonuses.  
  
"Right, so..."  
  
"So the girls who 'volunteered'...?"  
  
"They volunteered," Seven said firmly. "They volunteered. I volunteered. You volunteered. I don't know what Susan Irvine has to do with Fourteen or anything like that, but Fourteen volunteered, too. But...I'd be lying if I told you there wasn't some 'encouragement' to volunteer. By the time Will Barrow sits down with a potential mailgirl, she's already in the hole -- financially speaking -- if she can't pay back any incentives that company has already given her this year. Regular pay, too, even, in some cases."  
  
Thirteen gasped.  
  
"Yeah, there's some pretty insurmountable terms, if you can't pay it back right away. Like, immediately. It balloons up pretty quickly. Not my doing, that. At least, not my idea, even if I'm the one who helped craft the language." She was speaking quickly -- partly because the floor numbers were counting down above their heads, but also partly out of nerves. Seven had been wanting to tell someone this for a while.  
  
Thirteen felt ill. She'd known that there was some "incentivizing" when it came soliciting mailgirls. She'd have been naïve to believe otherwise. What management-track junior executive was going to willingly take off her clothes and allow herself to be demoted down to the mail room? There were a few "performance cases" among the mailgirls already selected, sure. But Thirteen had believed the others simply couldn't pass up the money and promotional opportunities that Human Capital waved in front of their faces, promises made as to what awaited them on the other side of their contracts. She'd been so single-mindedly focused on the carrot than she hadn't given much thought to the stick.  
  
"Right, so..." Seven went on, after a deep breath. "So when they came for me -- and I knew they'd come for me eventually -- I didn't have much of a choice. Morally speaking, that is. Okay, so, I guess I didn't have much of a choice, no matter what way you're speaking -- morally or otherwise. But it's my fault. Part of it, anyways. It just...it just became something that I had to do, or I'd wouldn't have been able to look at myself in the mirror."  
  
The elevator began to slow. They were closing in on the 2nd Floor.  
  
"Why me?" Thirteen asked. "Why tell me?"  
  
Seven bit her lip, and locked eyes with her own reflection in the elevator door. "You're not the only one with a secret, is all."  
  
The elevator chimed its arrival, and the doors began to roll open.  
  
"I'm going to tell them," Seven continued. "I'm getting drinks with a few of them this Friday. Come with us. You tell your thing. I'll tell mine."  
  
Thirteen wasn't sure their secrets were on the same level. She wasn't sure she wanted anything to do with Seven's. She wasn't even sure she wanted to know Seven's, for fear that she might be seen as complicit in it. And was she supposed to refrain from telling the other girls what she was doing at the Plaza, herself, until Friday? Was she going to spend the entire week pretending to be someone she was not? Mckenzie from Clearing?  
  
Seven didn't wait for a response. Instead, she exited the elevator and hurried past the line of toilets to the locker room proper, with Thirteen trailing behind her.  
  
They weren't alone in the locker room. Mistress Zero was at her desk, with her back to them, as they rounded the corner in the direction of Fourteen's locker. Eighteen and Eleven, apparently, had come and gone; what remained of Thirteen's clothes were either hung or stacked neatly in Thirteen's own locker. But Seventeen and Six were at Eighteen's locker, with Six educating the newer girl on the petty, micromanaging way mailgirls were to expected to put their clothes away.  
  
Seven gave Thirteen that same tutorial. Fourteen's jacket could be fitted with a clothes hanger, and hung neatly on the dowel than ran through the line of cubbies. Her blouse, as well. There was, thoughtfully, a skirt hanger with little metal clips, for that particular item. Seven emptied the jewelry out of Fourteen's shoe, and it clinked and clanged inside the tin cup she retrieved from the top shelf. She slid the cup back up top, and the shoes down below. Fourteen's bag -- an oversized purse that had likely been used to carry a laptop into work that morning -- was placed on the lower shelf to the left, but not without commentary.  
  
"You don't need anything this big," Seven told her, in reference to Fourteen's bag. "Just a clutch, really. Phone, keys, wallet. Everything else, the company provides, and requires you to use. Lipstick, make-up, perfume, deodorant -- all of it. And, that way, you can just put it up top, behind your smartphone charger, with any jewelry you might have."

Thirteen wasn't sure it made sense to wear jewelry to and from the Plaza, if she were just going to take it off. But, Seven's advice on the purse made sense. Given that she'd literally held her underwear stolen from her this morning and her pocketbook rifled through, it would probably be for the best to minimize the number of personal items she brought with her into the locker room.  
  
Any remaining clothes -- pants, socks, t-shirts, underthings, whatever -- were to be stacked on the lower shelf of the locker, with outerwear at the bottom and underwear at the top. None of the new girls still had their underwear today, of course, but Thirteen folded Fourteen's thigh-high stockings as best she could, and placed the girl's lacy black bra on top of them.  
  
Not for the first time, Thirteen began to worry about fitting in. Though it had been folded haphazardly up in Craig Nagle's office, and had the wrinkles and creases to prove it, it was clear that Fourteen's jacket and matching skirt were expensive. Even just the girl's bra -- black, sheer, edged with floral lace -- looked nicer than anything Thirteen owned, aside from maybe the pricey bra-and-panty set she had purchased specifically for today. She wondered what Eighteen and Eleven had thought of her own skirt, her own blouse, her borrowed blazer, as they'd arranged her things in her locker. Had they judged her? Had they jumped to conclusions about the girl they belonged to? Did her clothes give away that she didn't belong here, that she wasn't a real USF employee? Just the lack of stockings or pantyhose probably signaled she didn't really work at the Plaza.  
  
The concern was, of course, ridiculous. Being stripped bare had an equalizing effect, and Thirteen's "uniform" was no shabbier than any of her peers'. It didn't matter what Thirteen wore to the building each morning; she'd be taking it off as soon as she got here.  
  
From the locker room, Seven and Thirteen were dispatched down to the actual mail room on B2. They took the stairs. And, if Thirteen was feeling self-conscious about fitting in, and was worrying about whether or not she belonged among these paragons of the female form, "Master Hooper" certainly didn't help.  
  
Seven gave the girl a warning about what to expect, before they entered the mail room.  
  
"His bark is worse than his bite," she said. "But his bark is still pretty bad. Don't let him get to you. Don't let him affect you. He's just a bitter, angry little man. If he smells any weakness, he's never going to let up."  
  
"Okay..."  
  
"Oh, and one more thing," Seven added. "It's 'Master' Hooper. Not 'Mister' Hooper. I'll explain later."  
  
Thirteen was confused. "What, like 'Postmaster'?"  
  
"Sure," Seven chuckled, humoring her new friend. "Sure, let's go with that."  
  
Thirteen thought she was ready for anything. She was prepared to be sexualized and objectified, reduced to little more than tits-and-ass. She wasn't, however, expecting the look of disgust on Master Hooper's face when she entered the mail room.  
  
"Jesus Christ!" Hooper called out, wrinkling up his face as he did so. "First Big Bird. And now this. Barrow must be getting desperate -- he's scraping the bottom the barrel."  
  
It was like a slap across Thirteen's face. "Big Bird" was, apparently, Hooper's nickname for Seven, a nickname that was clearly a reference to Seven's prominent nose. Upon seeing Thirteen, in all her glory, Hooper was unimpressed. Thirteen, at least in his opinion, wasn't attractive enough to be a mailgirl.  
  
"Wall!" he called out. To Seven, "You know the drill. Take the new girl with you."  
  
"Yes, Master," Seven replied.  
  
"Yes...Master," Thirteen repeated.  
  
Thirteen followed Seven to a cinderblock wall off to the right. "Feet," she said under her breath. "Face the wall. Get right up against it. Touching it. He doesn't like to look at us."  
  
Whispering, she added, "...at least, not our fronts."  
  
Master Hooper hadn't heard that last bit. In fact, he'd hardly been listening to first part, either, already halfway into a loud, boisterous rant.  
  
"If he's going to replace my staff, the least he could do is send me some of the secretaries or the interns! Girls that are easier on the eyes. It's like he's got a thing butterfaces and fat-asses. He must have gotten a lot no's to send me the dregs like this."  
  
Thirteen did as she was told, and got into "Feet" against the wall. Her legs were apart. Her hands were behind her back. Her nipples grazed the rough, scratchy surface of the cinderblocks. Doing as Seven did, she bowed her head just a little, and rested her forehead against the wall.  
  
Hooper wasn't finished. "The first couple? Maybe. But we must have chased all the prettier ones out the door with this asinine program. I'd rather see hundreds of pretty girls here at the Plaza, in all their clothes, than this new dogfood here. Desperate. Looking for validation. The only way they can compete in shaking their misshapen tits around, and forcing the rest of us of to look at their fucking cellulite asses. Muffintop? Pfft. There's like a whole birthday cake -- or two! -- on this new one's hips..."  
  
Just seconds after laying eyes on Thirteen, Hooper had managed to drill right down on the things that made her most insecure, the things that she felt least confident in when it came to her body. He was right. She was an idiot to believe she'd ever fit in among the likes of Mailgirl Number One of Mailgirl Number Three, or even Mailgirl Number Fourteen -- "Jo" from Private Wealth Management. She'd talked herself into this. She'd allowed Gillian to talk her into this. But she didn't belong here. She didn't belong among these mailgirls. What had she done? For the rest of the summer, was she going to be the "ugly" mailgirl? The one Barrow was forced to take on as a favor to his old professor? Her hips, her ass -- she knew she was carrying too much weight there. She'd been dieting and exercising for the last few weeks, hoping to put her best self forward when she finally had to take off her clothes. But it hadn't been enough. At this point, all she could hope for was that being a mailgirl -- being an actual mailgirl -- would tone her up and trim her down. That the vigorous exercise of climbing the stairs and dashing from delivery to delivery, combined with the mailgirl chow, would help her shed those last few pounds.  
  
The odd thing, though, was that Hooper wasn't exactly addressing her as he continued on with his diatribe. He was talking about her, sure. About her, and about Seven, too. But he was talking to himself, like the filter was off and he wasn't entirely aware that all of this was out loud. Thirteen had been called a "whore" up on the 27th Floor, but that had felt different than this. That had been said directly to her, an insult intended for her. This? Here? Now? Hooper was monologuing, muttering a series of putdowns and abuses to himself, lashing out in an impotent rage.  
  
At some point, it became almost comical. Almost.  
  
"22nd Floor," Hooper finally called out, after a brief break in his invective. He patted a box behind them, signaling to Seven and Thirteen that they were allowed to turn back around. It was a standard USPS shipping box, wrapped in brown packing paper. "Get going. Premium rush."  
  
He smiled cruelly. Doyle, from Human Capital, had run through the differences between a regular delivery, a rush delivery, and a premium rush. The latter two required the sender to spend some of the mailgirl "chits" or "credits" that the company distributed for activities that went above and beyond a simple Point A to Point B delivery. They could be used to "hold" a mailgirl back, perhaps to get a better look at their bodies, or to run them through their positions, or to come up with some new and creative abuse. For the most part, though, chits were spent to order rush or premium rush deliveries, when a message or an interoffice communication simply had to be delivered as quickly as humanly possible.  
  
A rush delivery meant girls were given seventy-five percent on the time they were normally allowed, and a premium rush halved it. The deadlines themselves -- the normal ones -- were set things, assigned automatically by the app, based on the average time an average mailgirl took to get from one place to another. There were some complex analytics feeding into those deadlines, analytics that "learned" and were adjusted daily based on the data that girls and the smartphones they wore on their arms collected as part of their day-in and day-out routines. Doyle had admitted that, when the program first launched in April, there'd been some guesswork on the part of Human Capital around expected delivery times. Two months in, they'd pulled together enough information that those deadlines were more reasonable. Reasonable, of course, being a relative term.  
  
It was unlikely that - whatever was in this particular box -- a premium rush, this late in the day, was strictly necessary. The way it was packaged suggested it was something personal, something that didn't necessarily require that Seven and Thirteen make it up to the 22nd Floor double-time. Hooper was screwing with them, and screwing them over. He made that abundantly clear when he added another wrinkle.  
  
"Take the stairs," he said, smiling cruelly.  
  
"Master Hooper..." Seven began, starting to object. From B2, that was twenty-four flights of stairs, more than enough to allow the two mailgirls to take the service elevator. Seven was attempting to point this out.  
  
"Take the stairs," Hooper repeated, firmly. "The new girl looks like she has a few doughnuts to work off."  
  
Thirteen said nothing. Again, she felt like she'd been struck -- and not in the confusingly complicated way Mistress Zero had spanked her earlier.  
  
The timer already starting to count down on her arm -- on Thirteen's, too -- Seven thought better of arguing the point. Thirteen wondered if there was any recourse the mailgirls had in these sorts of situations. Given that anyone with the app could assign their own demerits almost arbitrarily, it likely wouldn't have mattered that Seven was in the right. Hooper could hit them with a few of his own, and then have them doubly punished by the app itself, when they missed the deadline by spending precious seconds in pushing back.  
  
"Yes, Master," Seven seethed, accepted the package, and hauled ass back to stairs.  
  
"Keep up," Seven warned Thirteen as she exploded up the stairs. "I'm at twenty-one demerits already. Let's not rack up more than two or three here."  
  
"Got it," Thirteen replied.  
  
"Talk after," Seven promised.  
  
They'd done sixteen flights of stairs down, earlier that morning, when Seven had fetched Thirteen and brought her back to the locker room. Twenty-four flights up, however, was a much different animal. The deadline grew closer and closer and closer on Thirteen's arm. Even in taking stairs two at a time, time ticked off the clock distressingly fast, and Thirteen knew they'd been given an impossible task. Even Seven had seemed resigned to the fact that they'd miss the deadline -- she was moving as fast as she was just to limit the damage, just to minimize the number of demerits she and Thirteen would be awarded.  
  
By the time they reached the 22nd Floor, Thirteen's chest was heaving and she'd long since broken a sweat. The deadline had passed, and the buzzing on Thirteen's arm signaled that they'd begun to be assigned their demerits. If they were less than sixty seconds late, it was just a single demerit. Between one and two minutes late, it was two. After that, things got exponentially worse. Thirteen lost track of number of times her smartphone buzzed, but -- by the time she and Seven finally reached their destination -- it was clear that they'd picked up at least four or five, and were now on the wrong side of twenty-five, total. Thirteen had one more trip to Mistress Zero's spanking bench ahead of her before the day was through.  
  
The cubicle-dweller to whom they delivered the box had had no idea they were even coming, and he looked surprised to have two sweating, panting mailgirls show up at his desk. The way he casually tossed the box on top of his computer bag in the corner signaled that this was, as Thirteen had expected, something personal and not work-related, and that the premium rush Hooper had ordered had been entirely to torture the two naked blondes.  
  
As their recipient had nothing for them, and no new order popped up on the pair's smartphones, Seven led Thirteen out to the elevators. There, directly across from the reception desk on the 22nd Floor, they found an unoccupied pink mailgirls mat -- a thin piece of foam reminiscent of the sort of thing Thirteen might bring to a yoga class -- and a silver dog bowl, half-filled with water. The receptionist -- or whoever sat at that desk -- was gone, but a pair of middle-aged women waiting for the elevator smiled at the two naked girls, shared a look between them, and chuckled a little at their expense.  
  
"You, first?" Seven asked, still trying to catch her breath. It buoyed Thirteen that even the veteran mailgirl had had difficulty on that climb.  
  
Thirteen just nodded. Down onto her hands and knees, she pulled back her hair and stuck her face into the bowl. The water was lukewarm, but Thirteen drank it in all the same, puckering her lips and sucking it down with a slurp. She wanted more, but she was also careful to leave enough for the other mailgirl.  
  
Behind her, Seven waited patiently with her hands atop her head, in a bastardized version of the "Toes" position, and rocked every so gently this way and that to stretch out, to fill her lungs with air.  
  
"Don't..." she panted. "Don't let Hooper get to you. It's just Hooper. It's his thing. You're a ten."  
  
Thirteen crawled, on her hands and knees, over to the mat, and made room for Seven at the bowl.  
  
Seven smiled, and added, "A thirteen, even."  
  
Thirteen settled into "Knees" on the mat, scooting over to one side in anticipation that Seven would join her after a quick drink. She took the compliment for what it was, laughed politely at the joke, and thanked the other girl.  
  
"Same," Thirteen said. "You're...you're gorgeous. I wish I looked half as good as you do."  
  
Seven, now on her hands-and-knees herself, lapped up the remaining water in the dog dish, and shot Thirteen another smile. It was big and beaming, and Seven's eyes lit up. Seven smiled with her entire face, her entire being. And it was infectious.  
  
"So I'm a twenty-six?" she giggled. "I'll have to let Mistress Zero know for tomorrow."  
  
Seven, still breathing heavily, joined Thirteen on the mat. Back arched, chest out, knees apart, and ass back on her heels. But then she did something that Thirteen hadn't expected -- she took Thirteen's left hand in her right, laced their fingers together, and squeezed. It wasn't just to reassure Thirteen -- or, maybe it was -- as she didn't let go. The two girls, hand-in-hand, knelt on their mat, sweat trickling down their bodies and their chests rising and falling with each labored breath.  
  
Thirteen was acutely aware of just how sweaty her palms were, and she had visions of Mistress Zero chasing her with a riding crop for this deviation from the standard "Knees" position. Seven had no such hesitation. Taking Thirteen's hand was natural, casual, and routine. Was this something that all mailgirls did when together? Was this sort of thing allowed? Or was it something else? A hint and a come-on? An intimacy between Seven and Thirteen only?  
  
Thirteen could feel the heat coming off the other girl's body, and she wished the mat were just a wee bit bigger. It was perfectly sized for a single mailgirl, which made sense. Once training was through, Thirteen would be on her own when out among the non-mailgirls at the Plaza. ("Textiles," Thirteen recalled absentmindedly from a program in Europe, the term mailgirls used to refer to their clothed colleagues.) Two on a mat was a squeeze. It was, in fact, intimate. Thirteen could smell the other girl, an earthy and intoxicating mixture of cheap perfume, deodorant, body odor, and -- yes -- pussy. She felt embarrassed for other girl, before recognizing that she was giving off her own particular bouquet. That, if Thirteen could smell her own sex -- and, she could -- Seven was just as aware of Thirteen's scent as Thirteen was of Seven's.  
  
"God," Thirteen blurted out, trying to distract herself. "I feel like my ass is sweating."  
  
Seven laughed.  
  
"No, seriously. I can feel it dripping down my crack." She used the back of her right hand -- the one Seven wasn't holding -- and wiped the sweat away. "This is so fucking weird."  
  
"Right?" Pause. "It gets you, though."  
  
Where was Seven going with that line of thought? Thirteen readied herself. She wasn't going to actually acknowledge it, was she? The smell of pussy? The arousal? The excitement? Thirteen wasn't sure she was ready to talk about it, and she hoped that Seven had confessed enough secrets for the day.  
  
Thankfully, Seven steered away from the particular subject. Instead, she focused entirely on the job. "It gets you. It's fucking weird. It is abso-fucking-lutely weird. We're in middle of a place of business. My place of business. Yours, too, now -- I guess. No clothes. Everything just hanging out. Everything just out there, you know? Drinking out of dog bowls, down on our knees like we're about to 'provide relief,' treated like absolute fucking shit.  
  
"...but then you get a delivery, and the only thing that matters is the clock. And, seriously, that's it. Get from here to there. And then rest of it just disappears, just fades the background. All I want to do is get there by the deadline. That's all I can think about. And, like, I'm weirdly proud of doing so. Seven in the morning to seven at night, that's the only thing that's on my mind. Or, you know what I mean. It's almost the only thing that's on my mind. It's...I don't know...freeing?"  
  
Thirteen supposed she understood. For the brief time between the mail room and the 22nd Floor, all she could think about was making it on time. Or, in this particular case, making it as "on time" as they possibly could.  
  
"I don't know," Seven went on. "It's Day Six for me, so forgive me. But, I get it. I get why girls do it. I get why they re-up. No projects. No long-term assignments. No meetings. No conference calls. None of that. None of that 'normal' bullshit. There's plenty of bullshit, don't get me wrong."  
  
"It's certainly not 'normal' bullshit," Thirteen interjected.  
  
Seven chuckled. "No, there's no such thing as normal in this job. But that's -- I don't know -- kind of exciting in its own way. Would I really -- really and truly -- prefer to be at my desk?"  
  
"I don't know," Thirteen groaned. "I think I'd take a term paper or required reading over streaking naked in front of a bunch of strangers."  
  
Seven was quiet for a moment. And then she asked, sincerely, "Would you?"  
  
They'd gotten too deep, too fast. Thirteen glanced at her smartphone, hoping to be rescued by another delivery.  
  
"I'm not...I'm not doing this because I want to be doing it," she replied. "I got talked into and coerced into the same as the rest of you. I'd never...I've never...I wouldn't...I don't know. Okay, sure, it's a thing. It's its own thing. It's exciting, I'll grant you that. An adventure. Never in a million years did I think I'd ever be able to do this."  
  
"But you still volunteered," Seven insisted. "You didn't have to volunteer. Whatever it was that led you to that point, and whatever it was you had hanging over your head if you didn't volunteer, you knew there was...something. Fuck, maybe Hooper's right. Maybe it's...I don't know...validation?"  
  
Thirteen said nothing. This wasn't a conversation she wanted to be having right now. She tried to change the subject. "That guy. What's his story? What's his deal? Just a raging asshole?"

Seven retreated, and allowed Thirteen the out. She laughed again, and said, "Yeah, that's pretty much it. You're not, technically, supposed to abuse the mailgirls like that."  
  
"Technically?"  
  
"I mean, it's frowned upon. Frowned upon sternly? But, from what I've seen -- on both sides of the locker room -- it's not enforced as strictly as the 'no touching' rule. Touch a girl? Grab at her? Do anything overtly sexual? The hammer falls. But, call her a slut? A whore? Things like that? Rag on her body? Get used to that, because you're going to be getting a lot of it."  
  
"That's...unpleasant."  
  
"You've got to let it roll off of you. Or, you know, lean into it. Just accept it for what it is. You're shoving your naked breasts in people's faces. You're waving your hoo-ha around out in the open. You get the 'slut' thrown at you? I don't know. It's not as if there's nothing to that..."  
  
"I'm not a slut," Thirteen defended herself.  
  
"No, no. No, I'm sorry. That's not what I..."  
  
"I'm not a slut," Thirteen insisted.  
  
"No, sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I'm not accusing you of anything. All I mean is that, from their point of view, knowing only that you volunteered for this, without knowing any of what got you in to this, they're going to think it. And they're going to say it. So, assholes like Master Hooper? They're going to be assholes. There's not much more to it. There's not a lot of we can do about it, as mailgirls."  
  
"I guess..."  
  
"Speaking of assholes..." Seven giggled. She was asking about the bleach.  
  
Thirteen couldn't help herself. She laughed. She squeezed Seven's hand. "Honestly? The sweat dripping down my crack kind of helps. It's not burning quite so much."  
  
Seven laughed, too. They were having a moment. A weird moment, to be sure. But there was a connection there, and Thirteen appreciated Seven for taking her under her wing.  
  
"Thank you, by the way," Thirteen said. "For this morning. Just knowing what was to come."  
  
"Don't thank me yet," Seven replied. "That cost me two demerits. Between that, and the -- fuck! -- seven demerits we just picked up, we're on the wrong side of twenty-five. You and me, that is, given that we're synched up."  
  
Thirteen exhaled. "It's fine. It's okay. I took your advice. First one to bench!"  
  
Seven leaned back, and glanced down at Thirteen's backside.  
  
"She did a number on you, huh? Don't worry about those welts. She knows what she's doing. Those are going to be gone by tomorrow morning."  
  
"Great," Thirteen sighed. "Just in time for another round."  
  
"I've got to say, the paddle's my choice. When she does it with her bare hand...it's just...icky. And...intimate. And the paddle gives your ass that nice, healthy red glow."  
  
"Ha! Yeah, no. I haven't sat down since this morning. I'm not entirely looking forward to cab ride home."  
  
"Subway," Seven coached her. "And don't let anyone give up their seat for you!"  
  
Thirteen laughed again. As she did so, she felt a pang in her bladder.  
  
"Do you think...how do we go about...I kind of need to use the bathroom, if that's possible?"  
  
"Already?" Seven asked. She didn't mean it in any sort of judgmental way, but Thirteen felt judged all the same. She might have said, "You need to use the potty? Can't you hold it like a big girl?"  
  
Thirteen cringed, and shrugged. "I've got a small bladder. Nerves."  
  
"Okay," Seven said. "Let's pick our moment, though. Let's find the right chaperone. But you've got to figure that out, and figure it out quick. Half the girls downstairs have had an accident at least once. Usually in their first week. Either because they were too scared to ask, or they waited too long and there wasn't anyone around."  
  
"Ugh," Thirteen said, recoiling from the thought. Of all the indignities she'd suffered today, that one was one too far. It was simply beyond humiliating.  
  
Thirteen felt her smartphone buzz, and she immediately wondered what she'd done wrong. How had she earned another demerit just sitting here with Seven? Were there cameras looking down on her? Was Mistress Zero upset at her for holding Seven's hand?  
  
But, no. The smartphone was signaling a pick-up, and so Thirteen and Seven -- grateful for their few moments of rest -- headed back to the stairs, and jogged up to the 26th Floor.  
  
"Pick-up" turned out to be an electronic message, one that the sender had to lean in and transfer over to Seven by "bumping" his phone against hers. Thirteen wondered about the utility of such a system; certainly, a simple email, sent from one computer to another, would have made more sense. But she recalled that some of the earliest mailgirl programs had adopted the concept for this very thing. An email was easy to overlook or ignore. Doing so was considerably harder when it was delivered by a beautiful girl, naked from head to toe.  
  
The sender was a youngish gentleman whom Seven called, "Mr. Wertz," despite the fact that Seven likely had a year or two on him. He made no effort to conceal the fact that he was looking at their breasts, and even went so far as to comment upon the fact that both girls' nipples were hard.  
  
"It must be cold in here..." he offered. The big, shit-eating grin plastered across his face told them exactly what he was insinuating.  
  
The restriction against eye contact, in the case of Mr. Wertz, was moot. Thirteen couldn't have looked him in the eye, even if she'd wanted to. Wertz was simply too focused on her chest. His concentration didn't even break when he had to lean in and bump his phone against Seven's, and he lingered just a little too long a little too closely for Thirteen's comfort.  
  
"Yeah," Seven said, as they exited Wertz's office. "Not him."  
  
As if to drive home just how ridiculous ferrying an electronic message from one person to another really was, the recipient of Wertz's communication was literally next door.  
  
"Fucking Wertz," Nick Pagliaro said when Seven and Thirteen appeared in his doorway. He leaned back in his chair, banged the wall, and shouted, "Cut this shit out!"  
  
To Seven and Thirteen, he looked sheepish and apologetic. "He did this last time, too. When we had new mailgirls. Called them one by one."  
  
"Yes, sir," Seven said. "This mailgirl remembers."  
  
Pagliaro did a double-take, and placed Seven. "Right. Last week, right?"  
  
"Yes, sir," Seven answered.  
  
"Sorry," he apologized. "He's a power user."  
  
"Sir, you're not supposed to apologize to a mailgirl."  
  
Pagliaro seemed exhausted by the whole thing. "Sure," he said, resignedly. "Right."  
  
He leaned in, quickly tapped his phone against Seven's quickly, and pulled back right away. He took a glance at the phone, sighed, and held it up to Seven and Thirteen could both read the screen.  
  
"Check out the new mailgirl!!!" Wertz had written.  
  
"I'm still not allowed to say I'm sorry?" Pagliaro asked flatly.  
  
"You're supposed to issue me a demerit if I don't correct you," Seven answered. The tone in her voice, however, suggested that she recognized Pagliaro would find this as ridiculous as Seven did, herself.  
  
Pagliaro rolled his eyes.  
  
But Seven saw her opening. He couldn't apologize, but there was something else he could do.  
  
"Sir? May these mailgirls have permission to use the bathroom?"  
  
An annoyed look flashed across Pagliaro's face, but it was only partly in their direction. It wasn't so much that they were asking to use the bathroom. The restrooms, as it turned out, were diagonally across the corridor. No, Pagliaro was further annoyed with Wertz, for putting him in this position in the first place. He seemed sympathetic to the girls' need, as if he understood that they weren't doing this to him, so much as this was being done them.  
  
"Alright," he sighed. "Let me log you both out, and I'll take you."  
  
He was about their age. Well, Seven's, at least. Good-looking, well-dressed, professional. No, he wasn't just good-looking - Nick Pagliaro was gorgeous. Brown hair that was a little bit floppy, strong jawline with a five o'clock shadow. Tall. Muscular build. Thirteen's imagination ran away from her the moment he approached, in a way that it hadn't when in the presence of Wertz or Hooper or Craig Nagle or Alan Bagby or Chad Ostermueller or any of the other men she'd interacted with that day. Maybe only Will Barrow himself had left such an impression. This - this person - was someone she could see herself with.  
  
Her heart fluttered. Her pussy throbbed.  
  
Pagliaro punched his employee ID into Seven's smartphone, registered the start of the bathroom break, and then leaned in -- close -- to Thirteen to do the same. Thirteen held her breath. However, as it turned out, this was an unnecessary step on Pagliaro's part. He looked confused when he went to go repeat the act on Thirteen's arm.  
  
"We're synched," Seven explained, shrugging. Even their bathroom breaks were synched.  
  
Pagliaro led the two girls across the hall, poked his head into the men's room to announce himself, and beckoned them in behind. For the second time today, Thirteen was in the bathroom of the opposite gender. She hadn't yet used a ladies' room here at the Plaza.  
  
Thirteen would have preferred their chaperone have been a woman. Bathroom breaks were supposed to be heavily monitored. Stall doors were to be left open, and chaperones were directed watch. Mailgirls weren't allowed even a few quick moments of privacy to pee. Thirteen was already dreading having to pee in front of this Adonis.  
  
But there'd been a reason Seven hadn't waited to ask a woman, just as there'd been a reason she hadn't asked Wertz. There was a kindness to Nick Pagliaro that she'd sensed. Thirteen sensed it, too. Just based on the limited interaction the two girls had had with him now, Pagliaro had made clear he wasn't entirely on board with the more contemptible aspects of USF's mailgirl program. He'd felt bad for them, in the way Wertz had just used them, and rolled his eyes when Seven had explained she wasn't allowed to let him apologize to them for Wertz's behavior. Similarly, he didn't follow the rules once they entered the men's room. Instead of watching them relieve themselves, he took up position by the door, and gestured past the urinals to pair of stalls beyond. He'd give them this.  
  
Seven took the first stall, and had begun to sit down without daring to close the door, however. Thirteen took the handicapped stall, and left her door open, as well. Pagliaro couldn't see in, but Seven had -- apparently -- decided not to tempt fate, and risk being caught with a closed stall door.  
  
Just as Thirteen was about to pee, though, Pagliaro cleared his throat and started talking. What was it with the men at USF? First Ostermueller, now Pagliaro. Couldn't Thirteen simply pee in peace?  
  
"Can you pass a message for me?" the man asked. "To Amanda Dobson? Mailgirl Number Three? I don't know if she's checking her cell phone. I don't know what the rules are, in terms of talking to me, of talking to employees outside of the program. Beyond all the pidgin stuff. I know they shut off her email."  
  
"Sure," Seven agreed.  
  
"It's Rachel," Pagliaro went on. "My girlfriend. She's still pissed at me. She wants me to quit. She doesn't understood why I haven't yet."  
  
"She wants you to quit?" Seven asked over the partition. "Why?"  
  
"Because of you all. She's not, like, a super militant feminist or anything. She's not part of the camp outside. But she's pissed at me, for even working here. Like I have something to do with it."  
  
"For cashing USF's checks?"  
  
"Something like that," Pagliaro sighed.  
  
Thirteen still hadn't peed. She was having performance anxiety, with Pagliaro listening. She found herself disappointed to learn that he had a girlfriend, as if there'd been some chance of anything actually happening between them. Relationships between mailgirls and regular employees were strictly, strictly forbidden -- even after hours, even away from the Plaza. But Thirteen could still fantasize, and "Rachel" had thrown a wrench into her daydream.  
  
"If Amanda could talk to her, maybe? If she could explain? Maybe Rachel would listen. You know, that the money was just too good to pass up. Or that...I don't know...that this was something Amanda really wanted to do. Maybe, like, that she'd always wanted to do something like this? It might...land better."  
  
Seven didn't bother correcting Pagliaro for using Mailgirl Number Three's real name. She let it slide. Thirteen wondered if her mentor was testing her. Was Thirteen supposed to jump in here?  
  
"I'll tell her," Seven assured him. "But, you know that you could call her up, right? You can put in a request for a specific mailgirl, if you've got a few chits. You could talk to her yourself?"  
  
"No," Pagliaro answered. "I can't. It's too...awkward. She came around this morning, with headlines from our boss. From her old boss, that is. He makes her do it every morning, and...it's just not really possible to talk to her. I tried, last week. But she's too much in character, so it's the 'yes, sir' and 'yes, Mr. Pagliaro' stuff."  
  
Seven flushed, and padded out towards the sinks. As the water began to run, with Seven washing her hands, Thirteen's bladder finally cooperated, and she was able to go.  
  
"I'm sure it's weird for her," Seven assured Pagliaro, echoing the conversation she and Thirteen had shared earlier. "It's easier sometimes to just play the part. For her to just divorce herself from whatever relationship you guys had before."  
  
"I guess."  
  
"A lot of girls just aren't coming back. They're just going to ride out their contracts and split. It's too uncomfortable, the thought of maintaining anything with their former colleagues."  
  
"There's a rumor," Pagliaro began cautiously, "that Amanda was promised a Portfolio Manager's job. Some of the analysts are already pissed, if that's true. Maybe I will be, too, if that's how this plays out. Like -- and I'm not saying what the company is having you all do is easy -- it's a shortcut. Like -- and I'm not saying that this is what's actually happening -- she's throwing sex around to get to the top."  
  
"She's not sleeping with anyone," Seven interrupted. "That's not what this is."  
  
"No, no," Pagliaro caught himself. "Sorry. Sorry! That's not what I meant. Just...she made it sound like she was coming back, is all. That's all I was saying."  
  
Thirteen wrapped up, and joined the pair by the sinks.  
  
"I'll let her know," Seven promised him. "She's got your phone number? She could call you after hours?"  
  
"She does."  
  
To Fourteen, the two girls were supposed to express Craig Nagle's guilt and condolences. To Three, they were inform her Pagliaro needed to talk, that he was hoping for a favor out of her. They were delivering messages amongst the mailgirls themselves, above and beyond their normal message-carrying responsibilities for the rest of the building.  
  
"Sorry for this," Seven apologized to Pagliaro. Cupping water from the sink in her hand, she splashed some under one arm, and then the other. "I just don't want to fail an inspection."  
  
"It's...it's fine," Pagliaro responded uncomfortably, and looked away.  
  
Seven used this as an opportunity to make eye contact with Thirteen, signaling that Thirteen should do the same.  
  
Thirteen followed suit. She washed her hands, and then her pits, quickly. Seven took it a step further, doing the same between her legs. And then, without hesitation, at the top of her ass crack, as well. The cool water felt undeniably refreshing on the heat of Thirteen's sex. And, embarrassed though she was -- Pagliaro couldn't help but watch, even out of the corner of his eye -- she did the same between her buttocks. She even went so far as to quickly rinse her asshole, wishing she had more time and more privacy better attend to her still-burning bum.  
  
"Thank you," Thirteen said, after washing and drying her hands. She meant it, too. Pagliaro had been kind to them, in a day otherwise defined by cruelties and humiliations. It was a simple thing, just letting them use the bathroom without actually watching. But it was a kindness all the same.  
  
"Of course," Pagliaro shrugged. He couldn't help himself, though -- his eyes wandered, and ran up and down her body. Casually. Unthinking.  
  
Thirteen hoped he liked what he saw.  
  
They were still in the men's room when Pagliaro re-entered his employee ID into the phone on Seven's arm, registering that their bathroom break was over. And, immediately, both of their smartphones sprung to life, calling them up to the 34th Floor. They said their goodbyes. They both thanked Pagliaro again. And then they were off.  
  
"Men," Seven said, as they began climbing the stairs.  
  
"What?"  
  
"Men," she repeated. "Women are the goddamned worst. They'll watch you use the bathroom every time. The younger ones, especially, for fear that they might be called down to Human Capital to explain themselves. And they're all such bitches about it, too. They're going to treat you worse than the men will. You'll see."  
  
It didn't taken long for Seven to be proven correct. Their next pick-up was an interoffice envelope, to be ferried between the 34th Floor and the 32nd, and given to them be a chubby, bespectacled woman in her fifties. She was having a bad day, apparently. Or, she was angry at her whole life, in general, and saw an opportunity to take it out on the two young, attractive mailgirls who showed up at her cubicle in their birthday suits.  
  
"Look at you two," she said, disgusted. "Sluts. How can you look at yourselves in the mirror?"  
  
If she were so put off by them, Thirteen wondered, why had she scheduled called them in the first place?  
  
"I bet they keep you busy upstairs," she went on. "How many dicks do you suck a day?"  
  
"Ma'am," Seven replied, "a mailgirl is prohibited from any sexual activity with a superior."  
  
"Sure you are," the woman sneered. "But those rules don't apply to executives, do they? I'm sure they're passing you little tarts around up there. I'm surprised you can even walk around to do your job afterwards."  
  
Seven chose not to reply. Instead, she said only, "We're here for a pick-up, ma'am?"  
  
It wasn't, Thirteen supposed, an entirely unreasonable assumption on the woman's part. Given their state of dress, given the things they allowed themselves to be subjected to. No matter how many program directors swore up and down that their company's mailgirls were not prostitutes, that they weren't to be touched or fondled or fucked, most people still assumed mailgirls were servicing someone there. It was just that maybe such things were restricted, based on job title or salary grade. There were some companies, in fact, at which "providing relief" was part and parcel with a mailgirl's more standard duties. So many, in fact, that the term had become part of the parlance of the times. From Thirteen's research, these were one-offs. They were smaller companies, able to fly more under the radar, able to get away with things that companies like DDE or FinderSpyder or US Financial could never dream of.  
  
What concerned Thirteen most, though, were the number of companies who'd started out on the straight-and-narrow (relatively speaking), only to succumb to will of the masses and turn their girls into full-on and full-out whores. Or the number of times she'd seen a company champion the "look-but-don't-touch" policy publicly, but look away when reports of abuses and violations began to pile up. Audrey had been of the opinion that even USF would likely go this route, eventually. Thirteen had to put her faith in Gillian's relationship with Barrow, and Barrow's reassurances that such a thing wouldn't occur on his watch. She wondered how much sway he actually held over Executive Management, however, and hoped -- if that descent were as inevitable at Audrey believed it to be -- that it'd happen after her thirteen weeks were up, and she was safely back in New Haven.

The next few pick-ups and deliveries passed without any major incidents. They were excruciating for Thirteen, to be sure -- standing in front of various men and women dressed as she was, wearing not a stitch of clothes. She blushed every time someone took a good long look at her, a reaction she hoped would pass. It immediately gave away just how embarrassed she was to be doing this, and deprived her of any attempt to feign confidence. Yet another gentleman commented on her nipples -- still rock-hard after oh-so-many hours of exposure. Another woman took her turn clucking at Seven and Thirteen, and repeatedly calling them as "sluts." A youngish guy in a cubicle -- younger than Thirteen, even -- ordered them up onto their toes, and subjected them to an inspection. Thirteen doubted that she and Seven would have passed a real inspection, but that wasn't the point here; he'd simply wanted to make a show of it, and take advantage of the fact he'd be allowed a closer, longer look.  
  
What struck Thirteen was just how mundane it was. This was all still so new to her, but almost routine to the men and women of USF Plaza. Even the cruelties inflicted upon her seemed practiced and almost old news to the people inflicting them. A handful of times, they were greeted with nothing more than smiles, handed interoffice envelopes, and sent scurrying on their way. As if all of this were normal. As if a pair of beautiful young women delivering the mail in the nude was the sort of thing that just happened in real life.  
  
Not for the first time, Thirteen worried if she'd missed out on something by not being a part of the initial class in April. The program was still in its infancy. She was only Mailgirl Number Thirteen, after all, and not Mailgirl Number Twenty-Four or Mailgirl Number Thirty-Six. But she wondered if she'd missed an opportunity to get into USF right from the get-go by hemming and hawing for as long as she had, or for not waiting to be a part of Barrow's plans at USF's back office in Jersey City. What would it have been like to be Mailgirl Number One or Mailgirl Number Two, and be among the first few naked girls to step out into the building? How had USF's other employees responded? Would her research suffer because she was just another mailgirl being put into service, and not a part of the program from launch?  
  
Maybe she was just being vain. Maybe she was, in truth, seeking validation, as Hooper had accused. She wanted jaws to drop. She wanted tongues hanging out. She wanted the men lusting after her. She wanted the women jealous. She got a few positive comments, to be sure. "You're gorgeous!" and "Look at that body!" But she was just another set of naked tits in a long line of naked tits to be paraded through the Plaza, and it was the indifference she got a number of times that was crushing. She almost welcomed the verbal abuse and the name-calling; at least it was a reaction.  
  
As the afternoon continued on, and the clock got closer and closer to seven, Thirteen got to know more about her new friend. Seven was still twenty-nine, only a few years older than Thirteen herself, but would turn thirty before the year was through. She'd grown up in Massachusetts, gone to law school right out of undergraduate, and done two years at Buckenberger Fuchs before moving in-house at USF's regional office on Dunwich Street in downtown Boston. She lived out in Prospect Heights, but admitted that she'd probably spent significantly more time here at the Plaza even before she'd become a mailgirl. Evening shifts and the occasional Saturday aside, she was arguably working less hours now than she had when she'd been in Legal. No, there was no Mister Number Seven, no prospects on the horizon -- she joked that she was "married to the job."  
  
Thirteen shared, too. No, there was no Mister Number Thirteen, no potential Mister Number Thirteen she was currently seeing. Outside of her faculty advisor, the department chair, her roommate, and a few close friends in New Haven, no one knew how she was spending her summer vacation. She was from the Bay Area. She'd gone to Pepperdine. And, yes, this was the first time she'd ever done anything like this. As divorced as Number Thirteen might have wanted to remain from the life of Sarah Jane Scott, Sarah Jane Scott managed to bleed through.  
  
What Thirteen really wanted to know, what she desperately wanted to ask, was whether Seven had given in and masturbated here at the Plaza. Seven had more-or-less admitted to deriving some measure of sexual excitement out of being a mailgirl, right from their first conversation, when she'd assured Thirteen that what Thirteen was feeling was standard. Thirteen's own apparently burgeoning exhibitionist streak occupied more and more of her headspace, and there was simply no denying that her pussy was begging to be touched.  
  
But how did one ask that sort of question? There simply wasn't a way. She'd just met this girl. "Oh, by the way," she imagined herself asking, "have you touched yourself in public yet?"  
  
The "yet," of course, because it was only a matter of time. If Seven hadn't done so already, she'd do so eventually. Just as Thirteen would. No longer was it going to be purely for academic purposes, purely so that she could fit in among the other masturbating mailgirls. No, Thirteen was going to get herself off at some point, and she was going to enjoy it. Physically, at least, no matter how much the idea of it frightened her.  
  
From the research Thirteen had done, most girls rarely made it a week or two before finally giving in to the urge and touching themselves there at work. Everyone confessed to doing so at home, off the clock and after hours -- the sexual nature of the girls' servitude being simply too overwhelming to ignore. Hell, Thirteen had masturbated herself to sleep the very first time she'd ever heard of the mailgirls concept, way back when she believed the whole thing to be nothing but an elaborate online prank. She hated to admit it, but she'd probably masturbated more times in the last few weeks, in the run-up to today, than she had her entire time in graduate school. But she'd never expected that urge to be as strong as it had demonstrated itself to be today, and had never thought she'd be so deeply under its power as to be tempted by it before her first shift was through.  
  
It was the same thing countless other mailgirls had probably told themselves going in, only to wind up diddling themselves in the stairwells or mail rooms or janitor's closets the world over. It was why rumors about hormones in the mailgirl chow had become so prevalent and so persistent. Oftentimes, Thirteen discovered while reading the accounts of her mailgirl predecessors, a girl finally "broke" after a particularly sexual encounter, one in which the teasing nature of their position was simply too much to deny, one in which the dominant-submissive aspects of their interaction with non-mailgirl employees was naked and raw. And then, out of shame and embarrassment, it might be two or three days later that they "broke" again, always rationalizing and reasoning that - since they'd already done so once -- there'd be no harm in going back for more.  
  
No girl ever masturbated just the one time.  
  
Had Seven done so, though? Thirteen found herself weirdly curious to know if she had, and strangely interested in the specifics.  
  
Thirteen wasn't gay. There were no lesbian leanings. Sure, she might have thought about it. What girl didn't? Could she deny that hearing Audrey moaning through their shared wall, when her boyfriend was down from Cambridge, turned her on? Could she pretend that she hadn't, on the rare occasion, lingered a little long on all-girl online porn? But when she touched herself, at home and in the privacy of her own bedroom, her partner was always male, always equipped with the necessary sexual organs.  
  
Thirteen had never really been around another naked girl before. Not in real life. Gillian had stripped down during one of their one-on-ones, as a show of solidarity, but that was really about it. Audrey had her own bedroom. Erica, Lauren, Jessa -- the girls she'd shared rooms with as an undergraduate, at various different points -- had gotten changed in front of her, sure (and vice versa), but it had always been brief and out of necessity. It wasn't as if they'd lounged around Krown Alpha in the nude. Thirteen couldn't even remember her sister Sophie being naked in front of her, at least not since they were little girls.  
  
Seven was undeniably attractive. How she looked. How she felt. How she smelled. God, how she smelled! The sweat, the deodorant, the perfume -- it was intoxicating. To say nothing of the other odor that hung in the air, the smell of the other girl's sex, intermingling with that of Thirteen's own. The way -- in those few, brief moments of downtime -- she laced her finger's through Thirteen's. Knees bumping as they spread their legs. Bare-skinned arms rubbing up against one another. The warmth of her body. Given that they spent nearly half of their time together ascending the stairs, and that Thirteen was trailing behind through most of that, she'd spent a good portion of that afternoon with Seven's naked backside jiggling in front of her face a few steps ahead.  
  
She could see it in the way that men looked at them when they arrived together, sweaty and out-of-breath. The hint that they'd just come from a lovemaking session in the stairwell, finding refuge and release in one another.  
  
Or maybe Thirteen was just projecting?  
  
Explorations in bisexuality were common among mailgirls, of course. So common that the term "letter-carrying lesbians" was associated with mailgirls every bit as much as "providing relief." Thirteen had read of it at DDE, at Finder-Spyder, at eVendr, and at countless other places she'd researched overseas. These girls, like Thirteen, weren't lesbians, exactly. Most of them, at least. Most of them had never even thought of themselves as bisexual, even. But it was difficult to start a new relationship, or keep an old one alive, when you were a mailgirl; it took a special sort of boyfriend who could be comfortable with the nature of the work. Girls were generally forbidden from seeing their non-mailgirl colleagues outside of the workplace (strictly forbidden, in the case of USF), and it wasn't like many of them had much time outside of the workplace, anyways. By the time that shifts were through, many girls confessed that all they wanted to do was go home, rub one out, and go to sleep. One night stands were commonplace, but so too were relationships of convenience between the mailgirls themselves. No one understood a mailgirl like another mailgirl.  
  
Thirteen had written a paper on "LUG" culture at all-girl colleges, and another on "S kankei" traditions in Japan. She knew the phenomenon wasn't unique to mailgirls, even if it had achieved some notoriety in recent years with the explosion of mailgirl programs across the globe. Unlike masturbating at the Plaza, however - which Thirteen had deemed "necessary" as part of her field study -- this wasn't aspect of mailgirl culture she intended to explore personally. Despite everything she was sacrificing already, from her clothes to her privacy to her very dignity, Thirteen wasn't willing to give up her heterosexuality for the purposes of a research paper.  
  
Still, there was something there, an attraction she felt for Seven. The other girl's warm, oversized smile had an effect on her. No matter the challenge or affront they were faced with, Seven continued to bounce back, and was able to laugh it off. Thirteen wondered if this was for her benefit, if Seven were putting on a brave face for the new recruit. Seven had just five days on her, but she had the demeanor of a big sister showing her younger sibling the ropes.  
  
"Why?" Thirteen finally asked, when they were alone together on the 8th Floor at the end of the day. It was still a few minutes before seven o'clock, and the incoming demands to their smartphones had died out. There was so many things Thirteen wanted to know, but the question she was asking now, specifically, was why Seven had agreed to help write USF's mailgirl contracts.  
  
"So, I could give you a bullshit answer," Seven sighed. "That they didn't really give me a choice. Or that, if I hadn't done it, someone else would have. Why didn't I walk out then and there? I mean, I did pull my resume together. And I went on an interview over at Young & Unglaub. But I wasn't one of the girls who stormed out of here the first I heard we were going in that direction. You know, at the time, I thought that maybe...maybe I could control it. That being privy to it, before it was announced, I could at least put some guardrails up. And, I'd be lying if I told you there wasn't some self-interest there. I convinced myself, at least at the outset, that I was part of the team, part of management, part of the decision-makers. And that, because of that, there was absolutely no way that the company would ever look at me as a candidate, myself."  
  
She went on. "But that was early on. Back then, I'd deluded myself into thinking USF was really looking for honest-to-goodness volunteers. You know, volunteers without any of the pressure. Without any of the threats or blackmail or bullying and all that. And, of course, there was no way I was ever going to volunteer. No way in hell."  
  
"But then..." Thirteen encouraged her.  
  
"But then, I don't know," Seven said. "The lawyer in me kicked in. I wanted to win. I wanted power over these girls. I'm not proud of it. But this is exciting stuff, and I mean that in every sense of the word. Who's doing mailgirl stuff, right? No one on the East Coast.  
  
"No, that's not exactly true," she corrected herself. "Young & Unglaub? The reason they wanted to talk to me? They're launching a program of their own in July. Hobson Morgan McNamara, too, is what I've heard. But, you know, this is last Fall, I'm in on the secret, and USF's going to be at the forefront of this thing here in New York. And, listen, I don't know where this Lindsey Pickering thing is going down in DC, and I'm not sure what's happening with the UAW suit out in Seattle, but mailgirls -- as a thing -- aren't going anywhere anytime soon. I'd have been one of the first few lawyers in the space here in the US. And that's something.  
  
"But it wasn't the only thing. Honestly, I don't know what got into me. It was like -- I don't know -- like I was playing the part of Mistress Zero. When Barrow told me what he wanted to do with the bonuses, that the company wanted to sneak this language in this year, and that he wanted it in every non-compete and NDA going forward, fuck if I didn't get a little thrill out of it. It was like I was dominating these girls. These girls, who weren't even mailgirls yet. I was...I mean, I really was...just, like, turned on by the whole thing."  
  
Seven was a dominant who'd been drafted into being a submissive.  
  
When Thirteen made this same observation aloud, Seven shook her head. "No, that's not it. There's a thinner line between those two things than most people would lead you to believe. But, if anything, I started imagining myself on that other side of the equation, the one being duped into volunteering. And then that was a thing, too."  
  
"A thing...like...?"  
  
"A turn on," Seven laughed. "Like, what would it be like? Could I do it? Could I really, really do it?"  
  
"So you were entertaining it then?"  
  
"No. It was like...like a daydream. Or a fantasy. No way was I actually going to raise my hand in real life. But then Barrow had a meeting with my boss, without me. And that's when I knew. It was just going to be a matter of time."  
  
There was so much more that Thirteen wanted to know. What had that conversation been like? How had Seven reacted? What had her first day been like? What had she thought of Mistress Zero? What had she thought of the other mailgirls? And yes, of course, whether or not Seven had gotten herself off yet here at the Plaza. Thirteen imagined the girl writhing in self-pleasure on the floor of the locker room, legs apart and moaning. It was an image she had a hard time shaking.  
  
But all that would have to wait. Until tomorrow, at least. As much as Thirteen appreciated Seven's offer to take her out to drinks tonight, all she really wanted to do was go home. Put on her clothes and go home. And, for tonight at least, put some distance between herself and the events of the day. But, they'd get drinks tomorrow night after work, just the two of them. And then again on Friday, with a smattering of the other girls.  
  
Thirteen didn't necessarily want to do either. She suspected that she'd likely feel the same way tomorrow at seven as she did today. But she needed to start meeting the other girls, getting to know them and their stories, building relationships with her fellow sufferers in this life. She wouldn't be attached to Seven's hip for long, and she'd soon be spending most of her days out in the Plaza alone, a lone mailgirl making her rounds. Socializing after work -- especially over a cocktail or two -- would go a long way in helping her with her research.  
  
The girls' smartphones signaled their shift was through, and that they were now allowed to return to the locker room, get dressed, and go home. Any further deep, dark confessions would have to wait.  
  
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Mailgirls Seven and Thirteen, having been up only on the 8th Floor at the end of day, were among the first mailgirls back in the locker room at the end of the day. Mailgirls Two and Twelve beat them down, and Mailgirls Five and Sixteen stepped from the service elevator just behind them. As Thirteen passed through the gauntlet of toilets and into the locker room proper, there was no sign of Mistress Zero.  
  
"She's not always here at the end of the day," Mailgirl Number Twelve explained. "Fridays, especially. She takes off right after afternoon breaks. I'd have thought she would have wanted to be here today, though. What with all of you, and this being your first day and all. But, not to worry -- I've got Evening Shift tonight. I've got her key."  
  
Mistress Zero's key. Thirteen had been wearing her collar for so long today that she'd almost forgotten about it. It had been too tight that morning, when Barrow had first fitted her with it. So tight, in fact, that she worried how she was going to swallow, and perhaps even breath. But, nearly twelve hours later, she'd adjusted. It had become a part of her.  
  
Twelve came up around behind her, inserted the stubby little key that hung from an elastic bracelet around her wrist, twisted it, and popped the collar open. Instinctively, Thirteen reached for her neck, and rubbed the hot, sweaty skin beneath.  
  
"Just leave it in your locker," Seven told her. The other girl was waiting her turn patiently, with Five behind her. Sixteen was using the facilities. "On one of the robe hooks."  
  
Thirteen pulled the collar all the way open, and then off. She thanked Mailgirl Number Twelve.  
  
Thirteen, at twenty-six years old, had displaced Mailgirl Number Twelve as the youngest girl on USF's roster. Twelve was twenty-seven, eleven months older than Thirteen. She had an MA in Communications, and had spent her entire career thus far at USF, primarily in the company's Public Relations department. Similar in height and build to Thirteen (though, one could have said that about nearly all of the mailgirls), Twelve had long, flowing blonde hair that cascaded down past her shoulders, almost to the point that she could have covered her bare breasts with those locks. What else did Thirteen know about her? Her name Allison. Allison Willoughby. And she had a pair of coral-colored, French-cut briefs hanging up on the 18th Floor.  
  
Thirteen made her way to her locker and hung the collar on one of the hooks to the left, careful to make sure it didn't click shut as she did so. Tomorrow morning, she'd have to put it back on herself, and she didn't want to have to go running to Mistress Zero for the key.

It was a blessing that the tall German woman wasn't here. Thirteen could feel it in the mood of the locker room. There was likely still an audience on the far side of mirror glass, but there was no one in the locker room with them -- mailgirls only. Just in the way that Twelve and Seven laughed together. Just in the way that Two smiled at her as Two stepped into the shower. Maybe it was just that it was the end of the day, and that they were free. But Thirteen doubted any of them would be in such good moods if Mistress Zero was there, towering over them and intimidating them.  
  
Thirteen certainly wasn't waiting around for her. Seven had picked up her twenty-fifth (and twenty-sixth, twenty-seventh, and so on) demerit that afternoon, and so there was a spanking due. Because they were synched, Thirteen would be spanked along with her, even though she'd had nothing to do with the twenty-one demerits Seven had earned before Thirteen was assigned to her. Okay, maybe that wasn't fair; Seven had picked up two while giving her a pep talk on the stairs that morning. Those two, and the ones they'd earned together, belonged as much to Thirteen as they did to Seven.  
  
Would Mistress Zero spank them tomorrow? If she came down after Thirteen had left, would she spank Seven alone? And then Thirteen the following morning? Thirteen couldn't imagine a scenario where she'd skate free entirely, but she really didn't want to be sent back to the bench for a fourth time today.  
  
She probably should have showered. She stunk. She stunk of body odor and pussy. She was covered from head-to-toe in a sheen of sweat. She desperately wanted to scrub the number "13" off her hip. And the soles of her feet were nearly tar-black, from being barefoot all day. But she could shower at home, in the privacy of her own apartment, without being gawked at. Without being forced to do so just inches from USF's other employees in the elevator lobby. Without having to do so in a line of other naked mailgirls.  
  
It wasn't even just the spanking. Thirteen just wanted to get out of here. She wanted to put the entire day in the rearview mirror. Maybe it would have been better for her research to linger behind, to observe how the mailgirls interacted with one another. To get to know them. To get a better understanding of rhythms and personalities of the locker room. But there'd be time enough for that later.  
  
She'd done the calculations. Five days a week for thirteen weeks, for a total of sixty-five days. Half the Saturdays between now and the end of her contract, to be assigned randomly and arbitrarily, for an additional six days. Seventy-one, in total.  
  
One day down. Seventy to go.  
  
Thirteen slid her smartphone from its pouch on her arm, and then removed the armband, as well. The band was wet with sweat, and she wondered how often they were washed. The phone went into the charger on the locker's top shelf, and the band was hung -- in the hopes of drying it out -- on one of the empty hooks towards the back.  
  
Her bra was waiting for her on the locker's lower shelf, just where Eighteen and Eleven had left it earlier that afternoon. She'd had no stockings, no socks, no pants -- everything else she'd worn to the Plaza today was either hanging up here or on its way to being hung up as a trophy on the 18th Floor. And so the bra -- white lace, full-cup, and underwire -- was folded neatly, cup within cup, alone. She slipped it on, and after fastening it in the back, was immediately thankful for the support. To say nothing over the coverage. The lace material kept her nipples from poking through.  
  
Next was her tank top. Then, her skirt. It felt odd be going commando, but Thirteen had to laugh at herself over the absurdity of that particular thought. She didn't bother tucking in her tank, instead just pulling Audrey's blazer on over it. She looked sloppy. She didn't care.  
  
Girls continued to trickle in. Mailgirl Number Two, still under the shower, turned and greeted Mailgirl Number Three with a big, wide smile and a simple, "Hi." Mailgirl Number Eighteen returned with Mailgirl Number Seven. Mailgirl Sixteen, with Five. Mailgirl Ten. Mailgirl Four.  
  
Then, though, just after Thirteen had leaned over and put on her sandals, a hush fell over the locker room. Thirteen didn't have to see her to know that Mistress Zero had arrived.  
  
What was she to do? She didn't want it to look like she was b-lining for door, even if that's exactly what she was doing. She didn't want Mistress Zero to think she was hiding from her, in an attempt to avoid the punishment coming to her and to Seven. Again, even if that was exactly what Thirteen was doing.  
  
Act casual, Thirteen told herself. Don't rush. Take your time in putting on your jewelry. Wait a beat or two before retrieving your purse. One. Two. Three...  
  
"Good afternoon, Mistress," Thirteen greeted her supervisor, as Mistress Zero emerged from the hall. She had managed to get one of her earrings back in, but not the other.  
  
Mistress Zero looked at her, smiled wickedly, and ordered, "Bench!"  
  
Thirteen wasn't going to be able to put this off until tomorrow, after all.  
  
"Seven, you too!" Mistress Zero barked. She glanced down at the tablet she was carrying, and went on. "Four! Twelve! You are next! And I want Six and Seventeen when they are back."  
  
Thirteen hesitated. "Do I...Mistress, do you want me to...to undress?"  
  
The German woman looked at her like she was stupid. "No need," she sneered. "Hike up your skirt."  
  
Mistress Zero called back across the locker room. "Seven! You know the drill. Show your little friend how it is done!"  
  
Seven, too, had apparently opted to forego an end-of-day shower. Whether she'd hoped to kick this punishment to tomorrow morning, too, or whether she'd just wanted to get away from the Plaza, or whether she'd thought she might be able to walk out with Thirteen -- Thirteen couldn't be sure. But Seven hadn't gotten as far as Thirteen had, and rounded Mistress Zero's desk wearing a matching bra and panty set. Mineral red bra, adorned with eyelet lace, with a clasp in the front, and a low-rise bikini sporting a tiny-but-eye-catching little bow at the waist.  
  
Again, Thirteen felt self-conscious that she had nothing like this in her wardrobe at home. Sweet-but-sexy. Alluring. Adult. Was she going to have to invest in underwear that summer? It seemed absurd, given how little she'd be wearing it.  
  
Seven made eye contact her, signaling that Thirteen wasn't to ask any more questions. Follow my lead, she seemed to be saying. Take it. Take it and go home.  
  
The pair walked to the bench together.  
  
Again, Thirteen was reminded of a pommel horse as she approached the black leather bench. She'd spent an embarrassing amount of time in the last weeks looking up spanking videos on the Internet. For research purposes, of course. To know what to expect. Mostly, girls were taken over someone's knee, or were bent over a desk, or a table, or a bed. In those cases where there was something more specific - "sex furniture," as it were -- the most common looked vaguely like weight-lifting benches, with a raised waist-bar in the middle. A handful were more like saw-horses, where the subject was expected to straddle the bench in the middle and lie down, prostrate. Inevitably, there were various other accouterments brought into play: handcuffs and ropes and other bindings, gags and blindfolds and nipple-clamps. To say nothing of the whips and paddles and floggers used in striking the girls in question. In one - one that Thirteen found herself transfixed by in particular and kept coming back to - a blindfolded girl dutifully counted out the number of times she was struck, all while moaning, rubbing her pussy with one free hand, and cumming loudly just after reaching thirteen. Thirteen had never seen anything like it before, and it was a video she returned to again and again whenever she went spelunking down into this deep, dark corner of the fetish world.  
  
She'd never seen anything like USF's bench, either, in her time online. It was wide -- wide enough to accommodate two girls, side-by-side -- and just ever-so-slightly taller than waist height. It was cushioned; Thirteen had experienced that already, first-hand, three times earlier today. The leather itself was warm, and when she'd been naked before, it had felt sticky against her skin, her own perspiration forcing her to "peel" herself off of it at the end. This time, however, she was fully clothed -- wearing shoes, even -- and she'd have a layer of material between her and the leather.  
  
Seven, going first, slipped her thumbs into the elastic waistband of red panties, and slid the back down under her buttocks, exposing the entirety of her backside. Thirteen, meanwhile, gathered the hem of her navy blue polka-dotted skirt and hiked it all the way up her thighs, until it was nothing more than belt around her midsection. She flashed her pussy in the direction of the mirror glass, and her bare behind at the line of lockers on the far wall. Both girls bent over the bench, Seven on the left and Thirteen on the right, and leaned forward. They dangled over the far side, and Thirteen averted her eyes from the reflection looking back at her.  
  
Somehow, this was more humiliating than the first three times. She was wearing a top. She was wearing a bra. Her tits would surely bounce back and forth with each blow, just as they had in prior trips over here, but now they'd be covered and contained. She'd been half out the door, though, and almost completely dressed, back on her way to being Sarah Scott. This had been easier to accept when she was just another mailgirl, naked from head to toe.  
  
Thirteen had been spanked with the riding crop those first two times, to say nothing of the one-off kisses she'd been treated to as Mistress Zero had run the new recruits through their positions. Her mistress had used her hand the last time, and it had been confusing, intimate, and "icky" (to use Seven's word). For this go-around, though, Mistress Zero connected with Thirteen's posterior using the paddle, the force of it causing Thirteen's whole body to lurch forward against the bench.  
  
The sound of it -- the "thwack!" as it landed -- echoed through the locker room and reverberated in Thirteen's ear drums. Maybe she shouldn't be so eager to shed those last few pounds from her rump, after all. A little extra cushioning would come in handy if this were become a part of Thirteen's daily routine.  
  
"Count!" Mistress Zero snarled. "Thank me."  
  
"One!" Thirteen yelped. She hadn't made her do this before. "Thank you, mistress."  
  
She'd seen Animal House. Was she supposed to ask for another?  
  
Mistress Zero went to Seven next, and Thirteen felt the girl's weight surge forward beside her.  
  
"One!" Seven called out. "Thank you, mistress."  
  
"Two!" Thirteen yipped when she was struck again. "Thank you, mistress!"  
  
"Two!" Seven repeated. "Thank you, mistress!"  
  
"Slow!" Mistress Zero snapped, and paddled Thirteen again.  
  
"Three! Thank you, mistress!"  
  
"Lazy!" the woman barked, and took her turn with Seven.  
  
"Three! Thank you, mistress!"  
  
"Too stupid to follow simple instructions!"  
  
"Four!" Thirteen whined. She wanted to cry. "Thank you, mistress!"  
  
"Too stupid to read a clock!"  
  
"Four!" Seven echoed. "Thank you, mistress!"  
  
"Too stupid to do as you are told!"  
  
"Five! Thank you mistress!"  
  
"Too stupid, even for a mailgirl!"  
  
"Five! Thank you mistress!"  
  
The paddle stung, of course. Thirteen's buttocks, already criss-crossed with welts from Mistress Zero's riding crop, were tender and sore. The paddle wasn't helping. Each time the woman connected, fire shot through Thirteen's backside. But the pain wasn't as sharp as it had been with the crop, and it was distributed. Given the choice, Thirteen could understand why Seven preferred the paddle.  
  
"Bad girl!" Mistress Zero growled, using the very language Thirteen had heard in half a dozen videos.  
  
"Six! Thank you, mistress!"  
  
"Bad girl!" she repeated.  
  
"Six!" Seven yelped. "Thank you, mistress!"  
  
"Out of shape!"  
  
"Seven! Thank you, mistress!"  
  
"Out of shape!"  
  
"Seven! Thank you, mistress!"  
  
Despite herself, Thirteen could feel a tingling between her legs, a tingling entirely different from the one she was feeling in her backside. It was a tingling that had persisted throughout the day, a heady mixture of shame and embarrassment on the one hand with arousal and excitement on the other. How could this be turning her on?  
  
"Maybe it's your thing..." Seven had suggested that morning, in the stairwell. "There's a reason it's a thing in the first place."  
  
It wasn't the spanking, exactly, that was getting to her. It certainly wasn't the humiliation -- that was a kink Thirteen simply couldn't wrap her head around. No, this was about power, the power that Mistress Zero had over her. Domination and submission. Role play. Thirteen was the meek little mailgirl, letting her mistress do to her and do with her whatever she pleased. She was the pathetic creature bowing her head and averting eye contact with her betters all afternoon. She was a thing, an object, a piece of property. Tits and ass and little more. To be stared at. To be gawked at. To be sexualized and objectified. To be fantasized over. To be fucked with. To be insulted, degraded, put in her place. Mistress Zero could do with her as she pleased, and she'd accept it willingly.  
  
That. It was that that was turning her on. It was that that had her nipples hard all day. It was that that had been stirring in her loins since before she'd taken off her clothes in Barrow's office.  
  
"Eight!" she wailed. "Thank you, mistress!"  
  
"Eight!" Seven repeated. "Thank you, mistress!"  
  
Mailgirls talked of self-discovery. They spoke of the nakedness of it all, even beyond just the nudity itself. These weren't the sorts of things Thirteen had known about herself before today. If she'd ever felt this way before, it hadn't been something she'd given much thought. She wasn't sure she liked what she was learning.  
  
She'd be forgiven if she touched herself right then and there. Four. Twelve. Seventeen and Six. They could wait their turn. They'd understand. All of them, with the exception of Seventeen, had likely given in to their baser urges at some point. And, hell, it had been a few hours since Thirteen had last seen Seventeen; maybe the redhead had already succumbed, herself.  
  
"Nine! Thank you mistress!"  
  
"Nine! Thank you mistress!"  
  
Her mind went right back to video she'd watched she'd watched so many times in New Haven, the one in which the girl got herself off while her partner spanked her. She'd assumed that there was some stagecraft there. Porn stars were paid to perform, after all. They were actors, and the high-pitched squeals and the over-the-top histrionics were all an act. But...and Thirteen might have been deluding herself here...but they had to get something out it, didn't they? Some of it had to be real. Was it so far-fetched that that girl, the one in the video, might actually be getting off on being spanked?  
  
"Ten!" Thirteen counted. "Thank you, mistress!"  
  
Beside her, Seven called out the same.  
  
Mistress Zero was through with them. For now. Thirteen stood, turned around, and guiltily locked eyes with the German.  
  
Behind her, Mailgirls Four and Twelve were waiting their turn. Both girls were still stark naked. Four, apparently, had been called out from under the shower, and was dripping wet. She had done her best to dry off using the scratchy white hand towels kept in the locker room. But she also left behind a set of wet footprints as she padded over to take Thirteen's place at the spanking bench.  
  
Thirteen started to tug her skirt back into place, only to have Mistress Zero stop her. Clutching the material in her fist, Thirteen's mistress pulled it, roughly, back northwards to examine her handiwork. She cocked her head sideways, and then -- using her free hand -- gave Thirteen one more slap, this one gentle and teasing.  
  
"Do not make this a routine," Mistress Zero chided her. "You will get a reputation."  
  
Thirteen blushed. "Yes, mistress."  
  
She wasn't done with Thirteen yet, however. She made a show of sniffing the air, and then scrunched up her nose. "Changed my mind. Take your clothes off. Shower before you leave. You smell."  
  
Thirteen was mortified. A normal reaction might have been to get annoyed. She was, skirt about the midsection notwithstanding, fully dressed, and nearly out the door. It was after seven o'clock. Could Mistress Zero even issue her any orders at this point? Would she have been within her rights to refuse them? To get angry? She didn't want to get undressed. She didn't want to shower here in the locker room, knowing that any number of people could be out in the elevator lobby, watching.  
  
Instead, she felt shame. She'd disappointed her mistress. She'd let her down. She wanted to please her. She wanted to be a "good girl."  
  
"Yes, mistress," Thirteen mewed.  
  
"Seven? You, too."  
  
"Yes, mistress."  
  
And so Thirteen returned to her locker. She stepped out of her sandals. She slipped out of her skirt. She pulled her tank up over her head, and unfastened her bra. Maybe this was going to get easier, after all. She hardly hesitated in undressing this time around.  
  
It helped that Thirteen was surrounded on all sides by naked flesh. Thirteen, prior to being sent to the spanking bench, had managed to get dressed quicker than anyone. She'd been among the first few girls back, and she'd been motivated. In the time since, only Five had managed to fully dress, wearing a pair of black mélange jogging pants and a loose-fitting tee, and was hurrying to the exit. Sixteen wasn't far behind; the African-American girl was in the last stages of pulling on a plum-striped, mid-length wrap dress that tied at the waist. The majority of the other girls were still completely naked, or wearing nothing more than a pair of panties, a bra, or both. A few -- like Fourteen and Fifteen, among others -- were even still in their collars; both Twelve and Mistress Zero were now otherwise occupied.  
  
There were four showers on one end of the locker room, and four on the other. There were no curtains, of course. No partitions between them. Just four showerheads, spaced a few feet apart, with exposed pipes running up the wall and into the ceiling. There was a small lip that kept water from escaping out into the rest of the room, and four drains planted into the tiled floor. There was no hot water, only cold, and Thirteen shivered as it hit her skin. She'd managed to suffer through the frigid water temperature earlier today, and would do so again now, but this was going to be an adjustment. She wondered if the decision to deny them a warm shower was based on anything specifically -- like, to keep them from lingering there and getting themselves off -- or if just petty cruelty in a long list of petty cruelties. Or, perhaps it was just to keep the mirror glass from fogging up and denying those in the elevator lobby their view?  
  
In the shower block on Thirteen's end of the locker room, Fourteen was under the far showerhead, closest to the wall. Nine was at the other end. Wary of Nine launching into a repeat performance of what Thirteen had witnessed that afternoon, during breaks, Thirteen chose the shower next to her fellow new recruit.  
  
"Hey," Fourteen offered, by way of greeting.  
  
"Hey," Thirteen said back.  
  
Thirteen briefly flirted with the idea that she'd just wash her body, and do her best to keep her hair dry. But, in for a penny... She ducked her head under the stream, and began to rinse her hair.  
  
As she did so, the shower to her right came on. Seven had joined her. She'd stripped back out of her underthings, and was again as naked as the rest of them.

"I'm supposed to tell you something," Thirteen said to Fourteen, remembering. "When we got your things? Craig Nagle wanted us to tell you he was sorry."  
  
"Pfft," Fourteen scoffed, shaking her head. Nagle's apology didn't mean much to her. "For the Susan thing? Or for all of it?"  
  
"All of it, I think?"  
  
"Yeah, well..." Fourteen replied. She turned a bar of soap over and over again in hands, built up a lather, and handed the bar to Thirteen. "You think he's sorry enough to switch places?"  
  
Seven, to Thirteen's right, chuckled. "I don't think Human Capital would go for that," she opined.  
  
"One or two mailboys couldn't hurt," Fourteen said dryly. "Equal representation and all that."  
  
"You think he'd make a good candidate?" Thirteen laughed. She repeated the act of soaping up her hands, and looked to Seven to see if she was supposed to continue passing the bar down the line. Seven, though, had her own. Or, at least, one of the two on this end of the locker room.  
  
"Fair," Fourteen replied. "He's not exactly someone I'd want to see naked."  
  
Thirteen thought back to Nick Pagliaro. She wouldn't have minded having him here among them.  
  
"Can I have the soap back?" Fourteen asked. "For a second?"  
  
"Sure," Thirteen said, passing it back her way.  
  
Cosmetics and toiletries, soap included, were communal property, items to be shared among the mailgirls. In addition to two bars of soap down this end of the locker room, there was a single, family-sized bottle of something simply labeled "Shampoo," and another marked "Conditioner." Nine had those down her end at the moment. Neither were what Thirteen might have bought for herself, if she were given the option, but they were sufficient. The shampoo did its job, and the conditioner smelled vaguely like coconut.  
  
More disconcerting, however, were the other communal items. Toothpaste? Sure. Lipstick, eye-liner, blush? Fine. Nail polish? Whatever. The six sticks of deodorant, though, to be shared among eighteen girls, was a little gross. To say nothing of the toothbrush situation.  
  
Thirteen had to catch Three before she left, however. Thinking of Pagliaro reminded her that he, too, had a message she and Seven were supposed to pass along, if Seven hadn't done so already. An evil part of her wanted Three to balk at the request, wanted Pagliaro and whoever "Rachel" was apart, so that the handsome young analyst would be single and all hers. It was nothing more than a fantasy, of course. Nick Pagliaro could never be hers, and she could never be his. USF forbade it. And probably for the best; Thirteen wouldn't have known what to do with him, anyways. She'd never been that girl.  
  
"How'd you do?" Fourteen asked.  
  
"It was..." Thirteen began, but trailed off. What was she supposed to say?  
  
"Yeah," Fourteen agreed, filling in the blanks. "It's been a hell of a day."  
  
Thirteen was thankful, at least, for the opportunity to be rid of number on her hip. When she got the soap back, she also reached for a pink washcloth that someone else had already used and discarded on the floor. No matter how much she scrubbed, however, she couldn't get the "13" entirely off. She succeeded only in getting it to fade a bit.  
  
"You need something more abrasive," Seven pointed out, sensing the girl's frustration. "I've got a scrub at home that does the trick. Good old St. Ives. The apricot stuff, with the exfoliant."  
  
Thirteen groaned. She might have been going home, but the thirteen was coming with her.  
  
"Honestly, though?" Nine added, jumping into the conversation. "It's not worth it. You're just going to get it redone again tomorrow."  
  
"Great," Thirteen lamented.  
  
"I gave myself a rash trying to get it off that first week," Nine laughed.  
  
"Eleven's got some rubbing alcohol in her locker, I think," Seven offered.  
  
"No, it's...it's fine," Thirteen sighed. Nine was right. It wasn't worth the effort. Mistress Zero was just going to mark her up again in the morning. Between now and then, it wasn't as if anyone was going to see her bare hip.  
  
Thirteen's fears that Nine might masturbate again proved to be unfounded. Hairdryers hummed in the distance. "Thwack!" Thirteen heard, followed by a "Six! Thank you, mistress!" The sounds of the showers themselves, the sinks, the toilets. Hushed conversation. There was a lack of moaning, however. No squeals, no shrieks, no victorious little whines. Perhaps the stories of "masturbating mailgirls" were overblown. As tempted as Thirteen may have been today, maybe self-control and self-restraint were not foreign concepts to USF's mailgirls, after all. Nine notwithstanding, none of the girls had gotten themselves off in front of the new recruits. Whether they had this morning, before line-up and inspection, or during morning breaks before Thirteen and Fifteen had been sent down -- well, that, Thirteen couldn't say.  
  
She chose not to wash her hair. Of that, she hoped she could be forgiven. She wrung it out after the water was off, and padded over to the shelves of towels between the showers and the sinks. She dried herself off with one of the hand towels (as much as possible), tossed it in the laundry, and then took a second one to finish the job. The girls weren't given real bath towels. There was no chance of Thirteen wrapping one of these around her torso and covering up.  
  
She opted out of drying her hair, too. The decision wasn't one she'd be allowed in the morning, or if she chose to take a quick shower during the day. But she could go home with damp hair. It wouldn't be the end of the world. And Thirteen just wanted to put some distance between herself and the Plaza, as quickly as possible.  
  
As it turned out, there was another reason Thirteen didn't want to linger by the sinks. Mailgirl Number One had taken up position there, at the far end, with her legs spread and one hand working furiously between them. She was bracing herself up against the edge of the counter with her free hand, and she stared directly into the eyes of her own reflection. Self-control and self-restraint, apparently, was a foreign concept to the veteran mailgirls, after all.  
  
One was in spitting distance of where Mistress Zero was paddling Mailgirls Six and Seventeen. Mailgirl Nine had taken up position uncomfortably close to the masturbating mailgirl, brushing her hair as if she were oblivious to what was happening there beside her. She couldn't have been, of course, as One wasn't exactly being quiet. But as Nine was ignoring One, so too did One ignore Nine. Mistress Zero wasn't a concern. The rest of the locker room might as well have been empty. And whether or not One remembered that there was an audience out on the other side of the mirror, she didn't let it affect her.  
  
Unless it was, in fact, affecting her? She was locked in on her duplicate in the mirror. But she might very well have been looking through her counterpart at the men and women seated out in the café area beyond, daring them to watch her. She was confident. Defiant. She wasn't running from this.  
  
"Yes...," One whined, her voice high-pitched and girlish. "Yes. Yes! Yes!"  
  
Thirteen wasn't sticking around for the climax. No make-up. No perfume. No brushing of her teeth. The single item she dared to retrieve from the sinks was underarm deodorant, and she probably could have made it home without that, even. Mistress Zero had commented on her stink, though, and Thirteen wasn't willing to take any chances in that particular department.  
  
One's cries, sharp and raw, cut through her as she returned to her locker. She was thankful, then, for a distraction; she laughed at herself, making the realization that she still had one of her earrings in. It had been in, alone, for however long her punishment and shower had lasted. Before putting her clothes back on, she rescued its counterpart from the tin cup in her locker, and inserted it into her lobe. Her necklace? Her rings? These were deposited directly into her purse. She'd carry them home.  
  
If she'd have been able to get out the door before Mistress Zero had arrived back down in the locker room, Thirteen would have missed the opportunity to connect with Fourteen and deliver Nagle's apology (Seven, for her part, promised she'd grab Three and tell her what Nick Pagliaro had asked). But she would have also missed picking up a copy of her official mailgirl handbook and her employee ID. Eight -- presumably the other girl on Evening Shift tonight, with Twelve -- had distributed thick, professionally-bound manuals to each of the new girls. Thirteen found hers in her locker, with a naked brunette -- wearing an armband and a collar -- on the cover, viewed from behind. The model didn't appear to be anyone here at USF. Thirteen didn't recognize her, though it wasn't as if she could see the girl's face.  
  
She did, however, recognize the other naked mailgirl, the one staring up at her from a small, rectangular piece of plastic. Her employee ID. It was vertical. A whole-body shot. Thirteen was on her knees, with her hands behind her back. She'd been led up atop Mistress Zero's desk for the photograph, though the inoffensive blue backdrop behind her made it look like the picture had been taken in a studio somewhere. The sole deviation from her standard "Knees" position was that she was looking straight ahead, directly in the camera, with a big, toothy grin and a come-hither look on her face. At the time, she'd worried that her eyes were going to give her away, that they'd show just how much she wanted to be anywhere but there. She needn't have been concerned. This girl, this naked mailgirl, screamed "sex." Thirteen barely recognized herself.  
  
The ID went immediately into Thirteen's purse. She couldn't bear to look at it.  
  
Skirt. Bra. Tank-top. Blazer. Sandals. Thirteen didn't wait around for Seven. She wasn't sure if she was supposed to.  
  
"Nine!" Seventeen yelped from behind her. It was the redhead's turn. "Thank you, mistress!"  
  
"Yes! Yes! Yeeeeeessssss!!!" One shrieked, signaling to all her fellow mailgirls that she was cumming.  
  
Thirteen approached the first set of double-doors leading out the elevator lobby. The girl looking back at her in the reflection looked like Sarah Scott again. Wet hair. Tank untucked. Blazer slightly askew. A little disheveled, yes. A little worse for the wear. But she was herself again.  
  
Through the first set of doors, and then the second. So eager had she been to get out of the locker room, she was unprepared for what waited beyond.  
  
As Sarah emerged, there was a crowd of people who greeted her with big, knowing, accusatory smiles. Twenty. Maybe thirty. Some, alone. Others, in groups of two's and three's and four's.  
  
There was a smattering of applause. Someone yelled out, "Yeah!!!" She heard, "See you tomorrow, beautiful!" from someone else. A woman called out, "How's your bum?" Others just whispered amongst themselves, and it wasn't being paranoid to think they were talking about her.  
  
Sarah didn't dare look back. She'd been on this side of the glass this morning. She didn't need a reminder of just how much people out here could see could see in there. Seventeen and Six were likely still bent over the spanking bench. There were others likely still in the shower. Maybe even someone peeing in the hallway on those godawful, prison-issue metal toilets.  
  
Instead, employing her training as a mailgirl, Sarah kept her head down, avoided eye contact, and hurried through the crowd. And, because she wasn't quite looking where she was going, Sarah almost walked right into Gillian Schang.  
  
"Let's get a bite to eat back at the hotel," Gillian said warmly. She wrapped her arms around the girl. "Tell me about your day."