**Mailgirls on the Run**

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**Chapter Eleven**

Post-shower Megan lay face down on her bed while Lin took photos and then soothed ointment onto the thin red lines. "Did you talk to - Heather, was it?"

"Very briefly. I told her to give community college a chance. I also gave her my email address if she wanted any more advice or information about being a mailgirl. And I pointed out that if part of her motivation was to be with Twenty-three that there was no guarantee that she would end up working at SG&T. Some of our newer mailgirls applied for a mailgirl position through Human Capital here, others came to us from the DDE training program. It's only the co-opted mailgirls, like you and I were, that are bound to a single firm and even that may be changing."

"So, what are you up to the rest of the day?"

"I've also got a dinner date. Bob Starnes wants to meet about which mailgirls we want for the racing team. But this is a working dinner, not a date; I'm probably closer in age to Bob's son than to Bob and what with Ms Aldridge being Bob's ex, that's just too weird. I figure bringing along a cushion to sit on should help send the right signals."

"Well, I'll leave you to your plotting and healing. I had planned to head back to college by now since I've got an eight a.m. class tomorrow to prepare for, but fortunately I tossed my material into the trunk just in case, so it's off to your dining room table until Susan gets off."

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Megan met Mr Starnes outside an upscale diner on Rockville Pike. He looked questioningly at the cushion that she had tucked under her arm.

"Fallout from this morning's activities. I'll explain when we get seated."

Mr Starnes asked to be seated in a booth, expecting that would give them a little more privacy. "There's always a line out the door during the breakfast hour, but seating is generally available at lunch and dinner. I often sit at the bar where you can watch the staff assemble the plates before handing them off to the waiters; one friend refers to it as the floor show."

"What do you recommend?"

"It's all good, but I tend towards the all-day breakfast choices. So, the cushion?"

"Post-race Mistress V told me I needed to go to the Mailgirls Dormitory and when I walked through the door with Fourteen, Mistress V and your ex were standing on either side of my sister who was stretched out on the spanking bench. Ms Aldridge said that I could accept six strokes of the cane or all twenty-four mailgirls, beginning with my sister, would get twenty-four. My backside is decidedly tender."

"But they'll just be beaten for some other reason Why sacrifice your backside to put off the inevitable?"

"I spent two years in their position and maybe I should have gotten used to the cane and paddle, but I felt and recall every stroke over those two years and there was always some reason. I couldn't be that reason even though I know it was Ms Aldridge, not me, that would be responsible."

"She really has it in for you. Are you sure nothing went on in Chicago?"

Megan decided not to lay out her plans to Bob Starnes - he had history with Ms Aldridge after all and certainly had more concern about SG&T's welfare than hers. "I don't ever recall meeting her husband, much less carrying on with him. I haven't decided what I'm going to do, but I need her to stop this vendetta."

"Proceed cautiously, Megan. She's a very powerful and vengeful woman."

"Oh, I will. Now about the team?"

"I believe we can pitch a half-dozen candidates to Ms Barnes and we can go over her head if our discussion with her is unsatisfactory."

"Our top six finishers were Four, Fourteen, Twenty-two, Twelve, Fifteen, and Two. Three was a dnf with a stone bruise today, but she looked very good at six and eight k. Fifteen's contract is up in September so she may not be around for the race. I would say certainly Three, Four, Twelve, Fourteen, and my sister and there's that All-American that Ms Barnes says is coming our way.

"I also think if the fifth floor has been persuaded to authorize bras, no matter how fetish-like, that we can also push for shoes to provide some protection from random rocks on the course."

Mr Starnes responded, "I think we can swing those five past the fifth floor. I would also suggest Vibram toe shoes or some other minimalist shoe brand since the women are used to running barefoot. What kind of training schedule would you suggest?"

"Twice weekly interval training in the parking lot and once a week runs on the course the six weeks before the race. More importantly, we need to give them some incentive to run well on the day."

"Having watch mailgirls eat dog food..."

"Mailgirl chow" Megan interjected.

"...out of bowls, I would think a training table with utensils and real food on the days they train and the promise of a feast if they race well might be a suitable carrot. For that I'm sure we'll have to go to the fifth floor to push through. Would it cause resentment among the other mailgirls?"

"We'd have to include them in the feast, but that could go over well indeed."

With agreement on where to go next with the mailgirls running team, Megan settled down to enjoy her huevos rancheros. Mr Starnes had gone for the lamb burger which looked to be very tasty indeed. If this was a date she could suggest sharing plates, but no.

Upon returning (alone) to her condo, Megan called Sarah and brought her up to date. Though her experience was in corporate law, Megan recalled that Sarah had spent much time her first year as a mailgirl researching all the case laws and precedents dealing with mailgirls. Her second year after their holiday experience Sarah's attention had been diverted to Sam, but Megan had faith that Sarah could understand all sides of her position and would give useful advise.

"Well, you could lodge a criminal complaint against her, but that relies on the District Attorney believing there was a case to be made and you know SG&T exerts significant influence - after all, mailgirls. You could bring a civil action against both Ms Aldridge and SG&T or you can begin with going to HR. Any of those choices could leave you badly burned - the question is which way will the fifth floor lean: swat you, ask what you want to make it go away, or take it seriously. The one thing that I am sure of is that they'd prefer to keep this an internal matter.

"Let me know if you secure the video. That would help and then I can contact the legal department at SG&T and talk about deposing mailgirls. I wonder where Fourteen's Mr Fforde would come down on this?"

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There was a divergence of opinion in the mailgirl ranks. A slim plurality held that Megan was an idiot, with the view that she was a heroine also having substantial support. Ten and Twenty-two opined that she was just trying to take care of her sister, either because of guilt feelings (Ten) or that's the way she was raised (Twenty-two). The consensus was that the incident would lead to fallout affecting the mailgirls and anything affecting the mailgirls was bound to be bad.

Eight spoke for nearly everyone when she opined "This whole running idea has just been a pain. First they force us to wake early on our one day off, go outside and run under the broiling sun (she hailed from upstate New York, Thirteen who planned to return to Miami thought it not so bad), beat us when we don't run fast enough to please them, and then beat us when we're swarmed by leering jerks who have nothing better to do on a weekend morning. I'm not blaming your sister Twenty-two, but if she hadn't run that race last year the fifth floor would have never done this to us."

Three interjected, "I was a cheerleader in high school and college and between the cheer coaches and watching the various teams that we cheered for I saw a lot of different coaching philosophies. The coaches who led through fear and intimidation didn't do well in the long run. Megan was a competitive athlete and wants to do well and now that she's been thrust into this running scam, she's going to want us to do well. She's going to push back on Ms Barnes and the fifth floor and try to make them see they've got to give us some reason to do well. Hopefully, she'll be able to talk some sense into them."

Ten added "I don't think that's why she did it, but taking six of the best from Mistress V gives her a lever to use on the fifth floor. She can make a stink that the fifth floor will have to notice. She has eighteen witnesses to the incident and some of you will be free in two months to testify without Mistress V standing over you. And the IT department has video."

"I was the one person out there today who did have an incentive," Fourteen said. I've been told that if I make the team, Human Capital will offer me a part-time contract so that I can attend classes three days a week this coming semester. When Megan sent me to the Med Center with Three I met up with the former Seven who is now a college professor. I've been admitted for this semester and they've already worked out a class schedule."

"Will they be sending you to College Park in a pet crate?" grinned Twenty.

"No, the plan is that I work Friday through Monday and then catch the train to Frederick and stay with Seven. Megan, or someone, will meet me at the loading dock with something to wear Monday evening and drop me off at the loading dock Friday morning. The only downside is that my new contract will run through the end of the year, so no escape for me in September."

Eighteen ended the discussion with, "I still say they've going to find someway to screw us to the wall - they always do."

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Megan arrived at her desk Monday morning to find that Bob Starnes had been busy. She had a meeting on her calendar at 1 p.m. with Bob and Ms Barnes and a second meeting at 3 with Jeremy, Mr Dawlish, and Mr Holt. She surmised that Mr Holt was the tennis playing VP and in looking him up found he was the Vice President that Community Relations fell under. He was in all the pictures of signing ceremonies with the Governor and the Comptroller and the Attorney General and the County Executive, not to mention just about every local politician that Megan had ever heard of.

Checking out the mailgirl app it looked like Human Capital was spreading out the paddlings for running slow throughout the week. Seven, Eight, and Twenty, all of whom had run on Sunday, were scheduled for discipline in the courtyard at 10:30. Megan decided that would be a good time to look for Damon and the video from Sunday morning. Meanwhile, there was actual work to be done.

Megan was in the stairwell heading down to the IT Department when she saw Mailgirl Nine climbing toward her carrying a box of printer paper. "Ten says you should talk to her before you go to HR about Sunday." Megan stopped, but Nine just continued up intent on making her delivery in time.

The Vice President for Computer Services had a corner office on the fifth floor - Mailgirl Five had been there many times making deliveries and he leered at mailgirls with the best of them. The actual IT techies shared space in the basement with a huge server farm; there were persistent rumors that they were supposed to be on the third floor, but refused to move. Mailgirl Five had made far fewer visits to their basement lair, but their response to mailgirls was always appreciative and generally non-threatening. Since Ms Brooks had returned to work in the Investment Group her interactions with the IT techies had always been positive - more than she could say about her interactions with the IT systems - and they had always been perfectly respectful in their dealings with her, unlike many of her colleagues. She took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

Lighting in the IT department was muted and there was a continuous, not-so-low hum of cooling fans. Many of the heads bent over computer screens were wearing headphones which made sense considering the background drone. She stopped at the first occupied desk and after getting his attention asked, "Where do I find Damon?"

The thin, t-shirt-wearing man beamed at her and said "His desk is in that room over there, would you like me to to get him for you?"

Megan gave him her best appreciative smile and replied, "No, thank you. I'll just knock on his door."

"He won't hear you. Just go in, he won't mind."

Megan crossed the room and entered into a small room which contained three desks, all festooned with multiple computer screens which were dwarfed by the big screen that covered most of one wall. It displayed a number of graphs with columns and lines rising and falling and a table of scrolling lines of data which Megan surmised showed the status of SG&T's computer systems.

Another thin, t-shirt-wearing man, this one sporting a scraggly goatee, stood up and said, "Welcome, Ms Brooks. Harry messaged me to expect you. You're even more attractive with clothes on.."

Megan blushed and said "Are you Damon?"

"In the flesh and clothes as well." He reached down to his desk and hit a few keys. "I understand that you're interested in this" and the scrolling data and graphs were replaced with videos of the Mailroom Dormitory taken from several angles showing Megan in running clothes, Samantha laid out on the spanking bench between Mistress V and Ms Aldridge, and a line of mailgirls kneeling against the wall. Megan watched Ms Aldridge gesture, followed by Megan stripping down, and ...

"I was there. I don't need to see this."

"I didn't think you were still subject to mailgirl discipline, now that you're back up with the rest of the suits."

"I'm not. Ms Aldridge - the woman standing next to the bench - told me that I could accept six strokes or each of the mailgirls beginning with my sister laid out there would get twenty-four. I'm no longer a mailgirl, but I still feel for those that are. Ms Aldridge was my boss in Chicago and she's the one that maneuvered me into becoming a mailgirl in the first place. She thinks that I had something going on with her husband."

"Well, how do you want those videos? DVDs, flash drive, file delivered to your account?"

"DVDs, I think. They seem to be a more permanent storage."

"Okay, we'll burn you a couple of copies and have them delivered to your desk by mailgirl. Come back and visit us anytime."

"Could you send it via Mailgirl Ten; I need to talk to her anyway."

"Now, Ms Brooks, you know I'm not a senior executive, I'm not authorized to summon specific mailgirls."

"Megan smiled, "Damon, I do know the difference between what you're authorized to do and what you can do. This doesn't involve any financial or propriety information so I have every confidence in your ability to make this happen."

"Well, since you put it that way, Ms Brooks..."

"Thank you very much Damon and if there's anything I can do for you."

"Don't worry about it Ms Brooks; I figure you gave us two years worth of pleasure; it's the least we can do to show our appreciation."

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Megan arrived at Human Capital to find Mr Starnes chatting with Miss Bradley. He nodded, then walked over to open the door to Ms Barnes office for her and bowed her through. Ms Barnes was seated at her desk with Mistress V standing to the side; there were no mailgirls in attendance.

Ms Barnes spoke, "Ms Brooks, I have received a full report of the incident on Sunday morning. That was a clear breach of SG&T policy. Ms Aldridge is not within my purview, but I will be forwarding this report to our senior management. Mistress V will be punished this evening in the Mailgirl Dormitory; you are welcome to attend her discipline. The security people that were on duty Sunday morning said they saw nothing, being busy with monitoring the situation in the parking lot during and after the time trial. My assumption is that you do not want information about the incident to be widely disseminated given that there is already too much emphasis placed by many on your time as a mailgirl."

Megan stopped, not even forward enough to allow Mr Starnes space to enter the room. He touched her shoulder and said, "Perhaps it would be better if you sit and allow me to close the door before we discuss this." He looked at Ms Barnes and said "Megan told me about the blackmail and beating yesterday evening."

Megan sat and responded, "Ms Barnes, I haven't decided how I want to proceed about this. Yes, you are correct, I do not want this spreading to the entire work force. As you suggest, I have enough problem living down my life as a mailgirl and taken seriously as a financial analyst, which is a major reason why I was opposed to getting involved in the mailgirls running idea. I don't need to remind my colleagues of my recent past and would much prefer they forget Mailgirl Five. And no, I have no wish to see Mistress V disciplined - those sights bring up too many painful memories, all of them well documented in the mailgirl app.

"Now, if we can move on to where we go with mailgirls and the Corporate Challenge."

Ms Barnes nodded, "Yes, let's proceed."

Mr Starnes spoke up. "Four, Fourteen, Twelve, and Twenty-two were the first four finishers Sunday, all with quicker times than anyone on Saturday. Two and Fifteen were the next to finish. Three did not finish after stepping on a stone, but ran very well in the two previous trials. Fourteen and Fifteen's contracts expire before the race, but we understand that Fourteen may convert to part-time employment through the end of the year which would make her available. I don't know Fifteen's plans. We propose that Three, Four, Twelve, Fourteen, and Twenty-two comprise the team, plus either Two or the new mailgirl that is being acquired. Six mailgirls plus Megan should allow us to field a very competitive women's team.

"We have another proposal which is highlighted by Three's injury on Sunday and that is to provide the mailgirls with what are called Barefoot Running Shoes. They were a major fad in running circles a decade ago under the theory that shoes should not alter the natural style and that mimicking running barefoot would reduce injuries and lead to faster times. As our mailgirls run actually barefoot all the time they wouldn't have to adjust to the shoes and they would provide protection from stones and other debris on the course."

Ms Barnes responded, "I will have to raise the question of running shoes with upper management. Mr Dawlish was instrumental in getting approval for the running bras which will be ordered as soon as the team is finalized. Similarly, we'll need a sponsor in the executive ranks to authorize shoes.

"Fourteen will be offered a part-time contract later this week. If she accepts she can take her mandated week's vacation for class registration and student orientation and then return to a Friday through Monday schedule through the end of the year. Fifteen is set to be transferred to an investment position in Chicago should she not renew her mailgirl contract. It has been suggested that she could remain here for training through the end of October and run the race as a normal employee. We believe that we can persuade her that will be in her best interest.

"The new Twenty-three is scheduled to arrive a week from Wednesday. I will expect you to assess her fitness level and let us know whether she will be a valuable addition to the team. Upper management will make the final decision as to the number of mailgirls that will run."

Megan interjected, "But, Twenty-three has nearly a year remaining on her contract."

"The current Twenty-three is going to a law firm in New Orleans that is initiating a mailgirl program and was looking for experienced mailgirls to provide guidance to their new hires."

Mr Starnes pressed on, "And our final recommendation is that we provide some incentive for the mailgirls to run well. We believe that they be provided with normal meals on training days and the promise of a feast for all mailgirls if they perform well on the day."

Ms Barnes stated firmly, "That's a flat no. Human Capital cannot support that suggestion. Mailgirls will do as they are told."

Megan was still processing that Twenty-three was being shipped out - what was she going to tell Heather - when Mr Starnes responded, "We've got a 1 p.m. meeting with Mr Holt, we'll raise those issues with him."

Ms Barnes sputtered, "Human Capital is the final authority on the treatment of Mailgirls, we are not threatened by appealing to the Fifth Floor."

"Just tell yourself that. I'd worry more about the upcoming news story about mailgirls running. Those crowd shots won't convey the message that Community Relations and the senior executives are trying to send. Thank you for your time. Let us know how the contract talks with Fourteen go and what the decision is with Fifteen."

Mr Starnes turned to Megan, "Remember, 1 p.m. in Mr Holt's office."

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Megan was eating lunch at her desk while reviewing a draft report on a proposal that had been presented to the Investment Committee. Mr Bratz was a believer in peer reviews, both for providing feedback to the individual analysts and to make sure his staff was cognizant of more than just the work that landed on their desks. Megan found the exposure to multiple proposals helpful; the value of the feedback largely depended on who was providing it. Some of her colleagues proved to be very insightful, others just seemed out to tear down anything that they hadn't been assigned. Several were especially negative on anything that she produced, likely a legacy of her time as a mailgirl.

She heard a soft knock on her door and looked up to see Ten entering, carrying an envelope.

"Special delivery from IT" Ten announced as she handed Megan the envelope and leaned forward to allow Megan to tap her smartphone to record time of delivery.

"Close the door. This should be the video from yesterday's "incident " as Ms Barnes characterized it. She assured me that Mistress V will be appropriately punished. I don't care about Mistress V, as far as I'm concerned she's no more guilty than the cane that scored my ass. The Security Office told me yesterday that Ms Aldridge had directed them to purge the video and they did, but of course the IT folks have their own cache."

Ten asked, "Where do you want to take this?"

"I want to stick it to Ms Aldridge; she's been tormenting me long enough. I really looked up to her, she was a terrific role model showing that a woman could succeed and be a power in her own right. But, I know how she's treated me and that can't go on."

"I can have HR quietly look into whether there have been any other incidents or complaints involving Ms Aldridge, but you know sexual harassment charges usually don't work out well for the accuser even when the charges are substantiated."

"I was thinking more of assault. The Mailgirl Program is inherently sexist, but they've sold it as a productivity enhancing project and while many of us were coerced into the program, they can point to those women who have renewed their contracts and now the women who applied to be mailgirls as proof that mailgirls have bought into the program. But, whipping my ass a year after I fulfilled my contract is a breach of faith."

"Megan, give me a chance to have HR look into this and you might see if Jeremy will pitch it to Mr Holt as sending the wrong impression to the press and the politicians. Coercing women into signing mailgirl contracts has become established practice and as you said those of us who sign up for another two years or just apply for the position have gone a long way to legitimizing the whole sordid business. But, caning you outside of the legal protection of that contract is different. To win your case however, you're going to need genuine support from HR and Community Relations and your management as well. Keep that video safe and let me see what I can find out."

Ten's smartphone buzzed. "Ah, well. A mailgirl's day is never done. I've got a pickup and delivery to make."

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Megan let Bob Starnes take the lead at the one o'clock meeting. Her caning was not mentioned. Mr Holt was receptive to the suggestion of shoes; Mr Dawlish lost interest when the lack of a significant heel became apparent. Megan wasn't sure, but she thought he might be putting them on. The meal proposal provoked more discussion. Megan finally chimed in, "Strangely, mailgirls often learn to take pride in providing prompt and reliable delivery service. It is, after all, what they do and is a positive aspect midst oppressive working conditions. None of these women were competitive runners and I don't know they will learn to appreciate running well for its own sake in a few short months. Decent food will provide an incentive all will understand and appreciate. They'll still be down on their knees eating Mailgirl Chow in the dining room four to five times a week and showcasing eighteen instead of twenty-four mailgirls will detract little from the spectacle."

Mr Holt and Dawlish did concur with the lineup of Three, Four, Twelve, Fourteen, and Twenty-two for the team plus the new Twenty-three. Mr Dawlish said that he would arrange for Fifteen's transfer to Chicago to be delayed until post-race. He also said that he would order the bras for each runner including Fifteen.

Mr Holt mentioned, "I am concerned about the mob scenes that have attended these running trials. This is not how we want to project SG&T's image. Do you expect this to continue?"

"We do expect the girls to do some training outdoors, but instead of a set schedule we'll get them outside at irregular intervals and that schedule will be shared solely with Human Capital and Security. The Corporate Challenge in October will, however, likely draw a large crowd of spectators."

Jeremy chimed in, "I've talked to Fox 5 management about their plans for the video they shot on Sunday. They plan to save it for sweeps week with promos leading up to the report. They will not provide us with a preview or allow and right of review."

Mr Holt said that he would look into it and the meeting ended on that note.

Megan dithered as to whether to watch the video of her caning before or after dinner, before or after talking to Sarah, before or after freaking out. She did rule out watching it with dinner. She finally decided not to put it off. She popped the DVD into her desktop computer -- after pulling the Ethernet cable, a little paranoid, much -- and found she had a choice of Camera 1, 2, or 3.

Camera One offered a panoramic view showing the mailgirls keeling in front of their sleeping niches and began with Mailgirl Twenty-two stretched out on the spanking bench with Ms Aldridge and Mistress V to either side. Megan watched herself come into view from off-camera and then watched the whole affair play out before her, fading to black after Megan pulled her clothing back on and left the way she came in. Camera Two showed the scene from behind Ms Aldridge and Mistress V. Megan watched herself enter through the door from the Mailgirl Locker Room and had a clear view of her face as Ms Aldridge made her demands. There was no sound, but Megan thought the video was clear enough that a lip reader could reconstruct her speech. Camera Three showed the scene from behind Megan and presented an equally clear view of Ms Aldridge and Mistress V. After watching her caning for the third time she began to think that Mistress V had been pulling her strokes. Yes, it had really hurt and left six crisp red lines on her backside, but Megan had watched Mistress V cane mailgirls for three plus years now and Megan was sure that she wasn't completely laying into her. Ms Aldridge, however, was watching with a rapt expression and didn't appear to notice how much more damage Mistress V could have done to the pale buttocks laid out before her. Megan winced with every stroke on the screen.

Trying to decide on her next move Megan settled for texting Sarah "Have video. Please call." and then set to making an omelet her dinner. She was on her knees -- after watching the video her ass throbbed with renewed vigor -- finishing dinner when Sarah called.

"I have a DVD with three videos showing from when I walked into the dormitory until I followed Ms Aldridge out the door. There are apparently three cameras covering the dormitory space, hence the three videos. Ten recommends that I give her a chance to bring it up with HR and that I see if Jeremy will push it up to the fifth floor from the Community Relations standpoint."

"Well, you have video evidence, witnesses that aren't going anywhere, and photos of your backside so your evidence won't disappear. Slow-rolling might be best and getting the fifth floor to worry about the optics of a senior executive abusing a junior employee could be a powerful lever. The fifth floor is raising the visibility of the mailgirl program with this whole racing gig so they should want to avoid linking mailgirls with general abuse of female employees. And you probably want to hold off until Fourteen's new contract is inked so that doesn't get derailed in reaction.

"Other than that, how are things going?"

"We met with Ms Barnes and proposed five mailgirls for the team, recommended that we provide them with minimalist shoes -- it's a running thing -- for training, and suggested that we could incentivise the team with better food on training days and the promise of a post-race feast. She was ok with our selections, said that the fifth floor would have to take up the shoe issue, and flatly rejected the food idea. Bob had already scheduled us to meet with Mr Holt after lunch and he was more receptive so we have hope. Besides the part-time deal for Fourteen, they also suggested that should Fifteen not re-up as a mailgirl that her scheduled transfer to Chicago be delayed until after the race."

"I'll be interested to hear how Fifteen reacts to that proposal. Chicago may not sound so good to her now that she's see Ms Aldridge in action. Oh, and you may want to send me a copy of the dvd and the photos of your whipped ass just in my guise as your legal counsel just to establish that you are taking action."

"I'll put them in the mail tomorrow -- from my local Post Office, not outgoing mail from SG&T."

Megan felt better having talked to Sarah and wondered why she hadn't heard from Brendan or should she be calling him? Then her cell phone rang and it was Brendan and she had a comfortable chat about Sunday's run and selecting the mailgirl racing team.

"My plan is to hold off workouts until the woman have bras and shoes. I did tell you about the bras, didn't I. They're virtually fetish wear, but they'll help and those women need the support since they all have more up top than I do. The other question mark is Fourteen's training since she'll be attending class during the week."

"If she's not at College Park, she could likely run with the college cross country team."

"That's an excellent suggestion. She's going to Hood in Frederick; that's a Division III school. Thank you for your help."

"Can we get together sometime this week?"

"I'd like that, but I'll need to sort out what's going on with mailgirls and running, first. The following week would work better, I think."

"I'll hold you to that. Are you up for any upcoming races? Nothing more on the track, but there are some low-key road races and cross country runs on the schedule next month."

"That might be fun, I will get back to you." and the conversation drifted to a halt

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It wasn't until Wednesday afternoon that Bob Starnes dropped Megan a note to say that the fifth floor had signed off on the mailgirl team members, the shoes, and the meals. He had previously agreed with her about waiting on the bras to start training and waiting on shoes for running outdoors; Megan planned to start the mailgirls with running on the treadmill. "Yes, they're in terrific shape, but racing 10 kilometers will be easier with some overdistance training to accustom them to running for forty minutes at a stretch."

Brendan called that evening to report that he'd researched Hood's cross country team and found that the coach was a recent graduate whose name he recognized from local running results. Looking at Hood's results from last fall Brendan opined that a forty minute 10k runner would have no problem training with the women's team. Megan pointed out that Fourteen would be working at SG&T every weekend so she wouldn't be able to run for the team; she decided she could raise the possibility with Fourteen first, then talk to Lin.

Thursday morning Megan's desktop pinged with a calendar appointment in Human Capital for 2 p.m. The attendees were listed as Megan, Ms Bratz, Mr Fforde, and Maria Hyland from which Megan deduced that this meeting concerned Fourteen's new contract. Lin had sent her Maria's paperwork and schedule, so Megan needed to ensure that the contract dates lined up with the Academic Calendar. Well, there would be a lawyer present to keep an eye on the legalities.

Megan reported on the outcome of that meeting to Lin later that evening. "Fourteen signed her contract extension today. She begins her week's vacation at 5 p.m. on the 21st which will allow her to show up for new student orientation on the 22nd and she reports back to work the following Friday at 8 a.m. She's to report to the loading dock Friday morning to strip down and don her collar and MMU, reversing the process Monday at 5 p.m. Her contract runs through the end of the year.

"Mr Fforde was surprised when I laid out the paperwork from Hood, but he recovered quite nicely and even negotiated tuition reimbursement into the contract. I met with him separately later and we discussed logistical arrangements. He'll let me know when he gets access to the storage unit with Fourteen's possessions and we'll collect appropriate clothing and whatever to drop off at your place. Fourteen spent the whole time in Ms Barnes' office on her knees, head bowed -- I don't think she quite believed we were going to pull this off until she signed the contract. Mr Fforde stood over her while she reviewed the paperwork. We'll sort out transportation on this end later.

"Oh, and I'm to meet tomorrow with the mailgirls selected for the team. Ms Barnes proposed that I meet with them in the Mailgirls Dormitory, but after I reminded her of my last visit there she scheduled the Conference Room by the Human Capital suite for 5 p.m."

Friday Megan put in a full day's work at her actual job and only saw mailgirls racing between offices delivering messages and sundries. As the day dragged on she thought of when Friday afternoons meant skipping out early to meet up with friends and colleagues at Happy Hour and the promise of weekend explorations. She'd been rather boring actually, but those times had come to a crashing halt when she became a mailgirl and here she was back to closing out the workweek enmeshed in the mailgirls' universe.

Megan walked through the open door of the Conference Room precisely at five to find six naked women kneeling on the floor with a pair of young men she vaguely recognized from the Trading Desk standing over them. "I didn't realize that you were invited to this meeting gentlemen."

The taller of the two turned and said, "What kind of meeting needs a half-dozen mailgirls in attendance? That seems excessive."

"A meeting that you are not privy to, obviously. If you will excuse us, I'd like to get started."

The other man commented, "I know what I'd like to get started on."

"I'm not interested in your fantasies. Some of us have bank business to do, so out now and close the door behind you."

The two men left still ogling the mailgirls until the door snicked closed leaving the seven women alone.

"Welcome to the SG&T racing team. You six will be training for the Corporate Challenge in October. You may be joined by the new Twenty-three when she arrives."

Four said "the new Twenty-three?" as Fifteen objected, "my contract is up in September and I'm not going to be here for the race."

Megan responded, "My understanding is that you're expected to take a position in Chicago at the end of your mailgirl contract. If you chose to do so your transfer has been delayed until the end of October. The last week of your mailgirl contract will be your second week of vacation this year and then you'll be assigned to my department until you leave for Chicago. I believe that Mr Dawlish has lined up some external training -- in finance, not message delivery -- for you during that period."

"As for Twenty-three, Bonnie is to be a mailgirl at a law firm in New Orleans. Her replacement was a college track athlete before becoming a mailgirl on the West Coast. You now know what I know.

"Fourteen can fill you in on her situation if you haven't heard yet. The other four of you will just take on the racing team as another duty."

Three asked, "So, what does that mean?"

"The training schedule hasn't been finalized yet, but I'm envisioning two sessions weekly, either outside as a group or individually in the Exercise Center on a treadmill. We're not starting training until you're outfitted with bras and shoes. Mr Dawlish is ordering the style that Seventeen wore, but in satin instead of leather. We've talked the fifth floor into approving shoes for running; they will be the minimalist style rather than a traditional shoe, but they'll offer some protection from random stones on the course. I'll let you know what we arrange. Fifteen will train with the group as long as she remains a mailgirl, Fourteen will attend any sessions held during her work hours. The good news is that the fifth floor has agreed to real food at dinner on training days -- details to be worked out."

"What is minimalist style?"

"That's a style developed about ten years back that is very light and flexible essentially trying to replicate running barefoot. It's proponents said it would revolutionize running and prevent injuries since the foot could move as nature intended. As mailgirls run barefoot normally the shoes should be a good match. Mr Starnes has taken on shoe acquisition.

"The fifth floor wants to win the Corporate Challenge. Mr Starnes and I are trying to temper their expectations, but we believe that we can do well. We have tentative approval for a post-race feast for all mailgirls assuming that we put forth a creditable effort. If there are no more questions, I'll put you all back in service and you can wait here until called."

Within moments four of the six mailgirls' MMUs buzzed and they headed off to another delivery or the Mailgirls Locker Room. Fourteen sprang up five minutes later.

Twelve spoke up, "So, Twenty-three is going to the Big Easy?"

"It's a brand new mailgirl program and they wanted some experienced mailgirls. I know that we would have appreciated some friendly guidance in those first few months. We didn't know what we had gotten into and neither did the workforce. It was a learning experience, a painful one for the six, soon to be twelve of us. Only Mistress V really knew what was going on and she was new to wielding the paddle. Believe it or not, you had it easier with a dozen women to help you through and a workforce that had adjusted to naked women running through the corridors. Not that you got any fewer stripes on your ass."

Twelve's MMU buzzed and Megan was left to her thoughts.

\* \* \* \*

Having been forced out of bed early the last three weekends to run with mailgirls Megan was up and out early on her own both Saturday and Sunday enjoying easy runs on the Rock Creek Trail before the heat and humidity ramped up. She was looking forward to the cooler days of fall. Beyond undating Lin on Fourteen's situation she had a lazy mailgirl-less two days, even spending some hours lounging by the pool.

Megan was at her desk reviewing an extremely dubious prospectus when she heard the ping of a smartphone that at SG&T announced that a mailgirl had missed her delivery time. She heard a second ping then her door was pushed open by Mailgirl Twenty-two.

"Samantha, what are you doing..." and then her voice trailed off as she saw the woman accompanying her sister. In contrast to the erect, energetic presence of Twenty-two, the other naked woman was bent over and nearly lifeless.

Samantha thrust a sheaf of papers across the desk, "I was called to the loading dock to receive a delivery for the Mailgirls Locker Room and she crawled out of the shipping crate. She's not well, she's certainly not well enough to face Mistress V." Her MMU pinged again.

Megan reached forward and tapped Samantha's MMU. "I am not responsible for mailgirls."

"No, but you have a responsibility to her as a fellow human being and I don't trust Mistress V or Human Capital to take care of her."

Megan sighed, "Here, let me send you to Human Capital to explain and I'll take..." Megan glanced down at the bill of lading "Felicia down to the Med Center."

Felicia crumpled to her knees as Twenty-two turned and headed out the door, stepping aside to allow Megan's boss, Mr Bratz to enter.

"Miss Brooks, what is going on?"

"I just took delivery of the new Mailgirl Twenty-three. Human Capital just acquired her from a West Coast firm to fill out our Mailgirls Running Team. Judging by her current appearance she appears to be an even more dubious investment than this flight of fantasy you handed me to review."

John Bratz looked at the flushed face of his favorite analyst and decided not to push the issue.

"I'm going to call the Med Center to send somebody up to take care of her and then I'll pass her paperwork on to Human Capital."

"Well yes, that sounds appropriate. I'll expect a preliminary evaluation of that proposal this afternoon." He prudently withdrew and closed the door on his way out.

Megan picked up her phone and punched in the number for the Med Center. "This is Megan Brooks in the Investment Group. I have a young woman in my office that is on the verge of collapse. You need to send someone up to bring her down for evaluation.

"My guess is a combination of exhaustion and dehydration, but my degrees are in Finance, not Medicine."

She looked at the woman bent over before her. "How long were you in that crate?"

Felicia looked up at her dully, "They put me on an overnight flight from Seattle. I was let out for a bathroom and water break at the airport at both ends, but I've spent most of the last day in the crate."

"DDE didn't ship you in that condition did they?"

"Not DDE; I came directly from Mohr Brothers. They worked me over pretty good before shoving me in the crate. They told me if my behavior didn't improve I could expect more of the same at my new job. I don't even know where I am now. I signed a new two year contract, but I wasn't told with who."

"You're at Sloan Guaranty & Trust in Maryland. I'm sending you down to the Med Center and while you're there I'll go talk to Human Capital -- they manage the Mailgirl Program here."

"Who are you and why did that mailgirl bring me to you?"

"I'm Megan Brooks. Besides being a financial analyst, I'm also the lead on the Mailgirls Running Team and the mailgirl that brought you here is my sister."

"Running team?"

"I'll explain it all to you after the Med Center has had a chance to look you over and I talk to Human Capital."

Felicity dropped her head and just looked at the ground. Megan heard a commotion outside and then her door was pushed open yet again. Nurse Allen stepped through the door and asked, "What's going on Megan?"

Megan gestured at the woman on the floor and said, "Say hello to the new Mailgirl Twenty-three. She just arrived from Seattle in a crate and my sister decided to bring her up to me. I concur that she belongs in your hands rather than Mistress V's. I'm going to take her bill of lading to Human Capital and talk to Ms Barnes, then I'll come down to the Med Center to she how she's doing. I've looked at the papers and there's just a one line statement that she's medically cleared for travel."

One of the Security folks pushed a gurney though Megan's doorway and the three of them lifted the semi-conscious mailgirl up and laid her out. Nurse Allen followed the gurney out the door followed by Megan.

Ms Barnes wasn't in the Human Capital office and Megan wasn't about to deal with her administrative assistant so she just left the paperwork and informed the woman that the new mailgirl was under care in the Med Center. Susan Allen reported that Felicity had lapsed into unconsciousness while being wheeled through the corridors.

"She didn't even stir when we moved her to the bed in Exam Room 2. I checked her vitals and everything is within normal parameters and she's breathing fine. She's underweight and probably dehydrated so I set up a saline drip. It also looks as though she's had both vaginal and anal sex recently and there is a lot of mild bruising of her buttocks and thighs.

"Her data has already been loaded into the Mailgirls Database and I have to tell you she looks a lot better in her pictures than on that gurney. She's 26, a sociology grad from Reed College in Oregon, and was hired on as a mailgirl a year ago last March. Her new two year contract is in effect as of today."

"It sounds as though there are worse places to be a mailgirl than SG&T. I hope we didn't send Bonnie, the old Twenty-three into some hellhole. I'll stop by before I leave today and see if Felicity, the new Twenty-three, has come back to us."

Megan received an email from Susan saying that Felicia was awake and available for a chat just as she was putting the finishing touches to a scathing review of the prospectus that Mr Bratz had dropped on her desk the day before. Normally Megan spent multiple days or weeks investigating proposals, but this one had been so nebulous that it hadn't taken long to review what few hard facts it contained. She finished entering her report into the system which would automatically notify Mr Bratz that it had been completed. So, she closed up her desk and headed for the Med Center.

Susan met her at the door. "I had to fend off first Mistress V, then Ms Barnes after you dumped Felicia off on me. I told Mistress V she could probably collect her in the morning after I checked her over again. Felicia is not ready to take on a normal mailgirl's load though."

"Unless she looks a hundred percent better than when she collapsed in front of my desk, I don't believe Ms Barnes would want her making deliveries. She has a way to go to look the part."

"Well, she's still in Exam Room 1. I ordered in some food and told her to take it easy."

Megan walked through the door startling the woman kneeling on the floor picking at her dinner. "I'm glad to see that Nurse Allen also ordered utensils with the food, but don't get used to that -- mailgirls eat about half their meals without benefit of hands."

The naked woman looked down and didn't respond.

"I'm Megan Brooks. My sister, Mailgirl Twenty-two, collected you at the loading dock and brought you to me. I expect that cost her six of the best as the very least; mailgirl initiative is discouraged and really if she was going to take you anywhere but the Mailgirl Locker Room it should have been straight here."

"Your sister is a mailgirl?"

"When SG&T set up its Maryland headquarters three years ago, they instituted a Mailgirl Program and I was converted from junior financial analyst to Mailgirl Two. My sister wasn't ready to plunge into the working world after college and thought being a mailgirl sounded intriguing so she applied to the program and showed up in a crate two months before my contract ended. I'm back at a desk and she's running about naked. She appears to enjoy the position far more than I ever did."

"You said something about a Running Team?"

"The Corporate Challenge is an annual team race open to all businesses and agencies in Maryland. SG&T is trying to project an image of just another responsible business in the state so they fielded a team last year and this year are hosting the 10k race. Our women's team was well back last year, but I finished in the top ten two months after the end of my mailgirl contract. Our top management wants to do well this year: they've transferred in several male runners from other SG&T offices, but have had problems recruiting fit young woman to work here. As I ran well last year, they came up with the bright idea of selecting a group of mailgirls to run for SG&T."

"A track uniform is more clothing than I've ever worn as a mailgirl."

"No, the mailgirls will run naked. Bob Starnes, my co-lead, and I did convince management, over the vociferous objections of Human Capital, to authorize a bra and minimalist running shoes for training and racing, but we ran three series of time trials around the course without even that attire. You've never seen so many wildly enthusiastic spectators at a local run before. We expect the Corporate Challenge to attract the largest crowd ever for a road race in Maryland."

"So, what does this have to do with me?"

"Well, Bob Starnes and I both pointed out that the average runner does not fit the profile of the average mailgirl. I was the only mailgirl here with a track background and I spent two years being berated for being flat-chested which I am compared to almost every other mailgirl. Human Capital said besides selecting from our own mailgirls they could have DDE search for mailgirls that had run track and acquire their contracts. So, here you are."

"Do I look like I could run a 10k now to you?"

"No, but the race isn't until October and you were an All-American just a few years ago which is a better background than the six mailgirls that we selected. Meanwhile we've got to get you healthy again. What did they do to your at Mohr Brothers."

"There were only five of us mailgirls and we were more sexual playthings than delivery girls. At my going-away party I was beaten and gang-raped before being stuffed into that crate."

"Now that you're here we can report that to the police."

"Oh, they've got hours and hours of video of all of us begging begging for sex and being obliged. Electrodes wired to your breasts and labia can convince you to say anything. I pray life will be better here."

"What little non-mailgirl-on-mailgirl sex here has all been wholly consensual and stringently punished if found out. Mostly SG&T just deals in debasement, beatings, and occasional bondage. Plentiful verbal abuse, eating Mailgirl Chow out of dog dishes, public paddlings, that sort of thing. Physically it wasn't too bad, it's the humiliation and the grinding down of any sense of self worth that hurt most. I've told them that fostering pride in running well is antithetical to the mailgirl ethos, but the Fifth Floor has their eyes focused on competing well in October."

"What's the mailgirl setup here?"

"There are twenty-four mailgirls, mostly salaried, some hourly employees. The salaried mailgirls are professional women coerced into becoming mailgirls -- they mostly have a position at SG&T lined up at the end of their contract. The hourly employees are all direct hires as mailgirls and you get paid minimum wage for the hours that you work, generally upwards of sixty hours per week. Your weekday schedule begins at 7 a.m. and goes until you're told it's over, plus a half day on the weekend. You can be called back to duty at any time. You're on site 24/7, your off hours are spent in the Mailgirls Dormitory in the basement behind the Mailgirls Locker Room -- that is the only place mailgirls are not on display though Security has cameras there. No clothing, of course; you're not permitted on any furniture, you eat what you're given, you do what you're told, and you're punished for any perceived shortcomings. You will always be addressed as Mailgirl Twenty-three and respond only to that name. You speak only when asked a question or to respectfully remind someone that you are just Mailgirl Twenty-three or to apologize when at fault and you are always at fault. No touching, no interacting with other employees beyond carrying out your duties, and Human Capital, specifically Mistress V, are the only people permitted to touch you and she does with paddle, and crop, and cane.

"That being said, you have no expenses except to pay down any debt previously incurred -- the bank handles all financial matters for you. If you default on your two year contract the bank claws back half of what you've been paid, bills you for food and lodging, and charges you the cost of recruiting and training a replacement. I've calculated that you would likely break even if you quit in the last three months of your two years. Of the eleven women that completed their two year contract three signed up for another two years, four of us returned to normal jobs at SG&T, and four left. Mailgirls Thirteen through Eighteen finish up their contracts in the next two months; I don't know what they'll choose.

"SG&T carried out its financial commitments for those of us who completed our contracts and we did well from a dollars and cents standpoint. Emotionally, I'm still trying to recover and I'm not alone.

"Welcome to Sloan Guaranty and Trust."

"...I swear Sarah, she made me feel fortunate to have been a mailgirl at SG&T. I don't know how Sam managed to get her up to my office, Felicia just looked so awful. When I checked on her at the end of the day she was alert and seemed to take in my rundown on life as a mailgirl at SG&T, but she's unhealthily thin and just physically and mentally beaten down. It looked like every motion was painful and she was just kneeling there. Susan documented her condition and took vaginal and anal samples in case we can persuade her to bring rape charges which may depend on what Human Capital decides.

"I googled her when I got home and she was a fine runner in college -- D3 All-American at 5000 meters as a soph and in cross-country as a junior with prs comfortably inside mine. She also looks a lot healthier in the photos from college. We were in terrific shape physically after two years as a mailgirl; Mohr Brothers' program did not produce the same results."

"Do I need to come as your legal counsel when you talk to Ms Barnes in the morning?"

"Well, I may very well be calling you back after that confrontation. She can't be happy with the way Felicia looks. Mailgirls are supposed to be drop dead gorgeous, not look like war refugees. The whole mailgirl idea is just perverted, but what she went through is just criminal."

"Also have Human Capital check into her financial situation. Make sure that Mohr Brothers didn't screw her monetarily as well. If there's an issue maybe you can pitch it to Fforde as a pro bono case and take his mind off Fourteen."

\* \* \* \*

Megan stopped by the Med Center on her way into work the next morning.

"She's still asleep and looks to be resting comfortably. I called your friend in IT before I left and he set up a camera in Exam Room 2 and sent the video feed to the Security Desk. I asked Security to keep an eye on her. There was a woman on duty last night and she went to the Med Center when Felicia woke up, took her to the restroom, and gave her a bottle of water and then Felicia settled back down."

Mailgirl Three was kneeling on the mat by the Admin's desk when Megan entered the Investment Group spaces. The slim brunette stood as Megan approached and with head still lowered said, "Ms Brooks, Ms Barnes would like you to see her at your earliest convenience this morning."

Megan plucked Three's MMU from the naked woman's armband and keyed in a destination. "Tell her that I'll be there as soon as I log in and see what else I have scheduled this morning." She replaced the MMU and Three turned and headed out into the corridor.

After deciding that everything else in her queue could wait Megan presented herself in front of Miss Bradley and asserted, "Ms Barnes said that she wanted to see me."

"Oh yes, Ms Brooks, please go in."

Megan entered to find Bronwyn Barnes staring at the ceiling and muttering to herself. "Oh, you're here. We have got to fix this problem."

"Which problem are you talking about -- Miss Cooper's ill-health or her rape?"

"Tits, she doesn't have tits. Soames and Peavy are going to be livid."

"Actually, she does have breasts -- on the small side as you'd expect of an accomplished distance runner, especially one who looks to be suffering from malnutrition."

"We'll keep her out of sight until we can fatten her up and that will fix the problem, right? We can just say that she's ill and keep her in the Med Center."

"I've seen photos of her in her college's Sports Information archives and she didn't appear to have much on top when she was healthy and running well. As I pointed out in our initial meeting on the Corporate Challenge, most distance runners don't fit the mailgirl profile."

"The data we got from DDE said she was 36C."

"Someone lied or had an extremely generous measuring tape."

"Damn, Peavy is going to want to see her first thing. He always wants first crack at the new mailgirls. And he is very much a breast man. Soames isn't any better, but maybe Alvado can keep him in line. No, they're both going to be going to the board to get rid of me."

"Ms Barnes, I'm more concerned about Mis Cooper's appalling physical condition and the fact that she was gang raped before being sent our way."

Ms Barnes snapped, "Mailgirl Twenty-three, not Miss Cooper. You know the protocol Ms Brooks."

"What I know is that we have a woman who has been brutalized and that should be the focus of our concern."

"She signed up to be a mailgirl. Different firms have different rules, but they should have standards and flat-chested girls do not measure up."

"Ms Barnes, do I understand that you condone how that woman has been treated?"

"No, of course not. Just look at her. I'm sure she was much more attractive before she was abused. We are going to lodge a formal complaint with DDE, they're supposed to be filling the role of an honest broker and they allowed us her former employers to send us damaged goods."

"Ms Barnes, if Twenty-three doesn't get proper medical care, I'm going straight to the police and the media about my assault and her rape. SG&T may be able to quash the criminal complaints but plenty of mud will stick to the bank."

"Well, of course, we're going to take care of her and she had better run fast or Soames and Peavy will bury both of us. I survived them bitching about you and Seven and if we win that stupid race Mr Holt will have our backs."