

The Black Hole

by Cardaniel



Sylvia used to love the darkness

**Now she's not sure
she will live to escape it**

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CHAPTER 1

Sylvia Powell gave the unknown man one last smile as he turned and walked towards his car in the underground parking garage. The outer smile was for show only, independent of the inner smile that threatened to burst into silent laughter. She hadn't given him the full treatment. It was the end of a long day, a long week, and she didn't have the energy for it. She had used the "I'm sure we'll meet again" line along with the smile, eliciting the predictable reaction – he had taken his dismissal in good grace, returning the smile, and was now disappearing from sight around the corner, no doubt imagining that she was interested, that likely she would agree to a date the next time their paths crossed in the elevator. She stopped short of asking him for his phone number, as she sometimes did when she was in a more playful mood. She loved visualizing a man sitting by his phone, awaiting the call she had assured him would come soon. She wondered how many days he would hold his breath before deciding the call would never come.

The smile melted, no longer needed. Tomorrow, she decided. Too tired tonight. Tomorrow I'll try that new bar, what was the name? Le Monde, that was it. The usual game. Flirt with a man. See how long it takes to spot the signs of a hard-on inside his pants. Breathily suggest the short trip to her apartment. Excuse herself for a quick trip to the ladies' room – I'll only be a second, dear, I promise. Leave the bar by the back or side door, which she'd scouted in advance. Afterwards, at home, turn off the lights and rub herself to a fierce orgasm, laughing and screaming with pleasure simultaneously, wondering if he was still waiting for her to come out of the ladies'. Wondering if he was still hard.

She wasn't sure why she preferred the lights off. It just seemed to work better for her in the dark. It intensified her orgasms somehow. It seemed she was able to visualize the scene better – the bar, the man shifting uncomfortably in his seat as he waited, perhaps tapping his foot in impatience for her return – when there were no competing visual distractions.

Sylvia brushed a strand of her coal-black hair away from her eyes. She smiled again. The man in the elevator had seemed quite taken with her hair, his eyes frequently shifting up to it. She knew her hair and eyebrows were striking, and she found that men's eyes often started at her hair before being magnetically drawn to her cleavage.

The parking garage was stuffy and hot, as always in this season. Sylvia hated summer, especially July. She sighed and began walking to her own car. She was so glad it was Friday. A little time to relax before another crushing week started. Depositions in the conference room all day Monday. Over the weekend she should spend some time preparing her opening statement for the court case on Tuesday. She smiled exhaustedly. Well, some fun tomorrow night, anyway.

Have to have a word with Judy Sokol on Monday, too. Ever since Judy had returned from the hospital at the start of this week, she'd seemed only half there. Her work as Sylvia's legal secretary was suffering. Yesterday Sylvia had seen her sitting at her desk, staring off into space when she was supposed to be typing a legal brief. The girl had even forgotten, for an hour, to pass along a phone message to Sylvia, from a famously impatient client. If Judy couldn't do her work at her usual level of efficiency...

Sylvia would have to think about what sort of threat to use. It wasn't easy to fire an employee without repercussions. Especially if there was a medical issue involved. Judy still had not filed the required forms noting which hospital she had been in and the dates of her stay there. The way she'd been behaving, both before and after her hospitalization, Sylvia suspected depression was involved. Very likely some psychiatric care.

Funny how people who think God is out there to help them still get depressed, thought Sylvia. Sylvia didn't believe in God, but she knew Judy did. Sylvia had often seen that little crucifix Judy habitually wore on a necklace. Not helping much now, is it, Judy?

Poor mousy Judy, with her shapeless brown hair and her Walmart clothes. About three inches shorter than Sylvia, yet somehow seeming much smaller, her face not quite plain but not quite cute. Sylvia wondered what Judy did for fun. Somehow she couldn't quite associate the word "fun" with Judy.

Sylvia's knee-length skirt swished as she walked, her clicking heels echoing on the hard concrete of the parking garage floor. She could never understand the predilection among female lawyers for pant suits. Didn't they understand how important it was to use the body they'd been born with? Sylvia always wore a skirt, to reveal her legs, and a white or cream-colored blouse of silk-like material, better than real silk for Atlanta's hot, humid weather, partly unbuttoned to the extent of showing that hint of cleavage, a small glimpse of the curve of her upper breasts, pushed up by her half-cup bra. She considered it essential, when dealing with judges, with opposing counsel, with witnesses against her clients, that her clothes should complement her own natural sexuality. If the men she dealt with lost their concentration amid fantasies of being in bed with her, if the women were intimidated to the point they could barely squeak out a nervous word, it made her job so much easier. There was so little difference, in a career in the law, between a lawyer making millions and one who could barely afford the office rent. Sylvia needed every advantage she could get. At thirty-two, Sylvia had her own successful private law practice, with four associates working for her. She knew what it took to succeed in this world.

Sylvia reached into her purse for her key ring. As she removed it from her purse, she felt a vague unease. Something seemed wrong, but she wasn't sure what it was.

She sighed again. I'm probably just losing my mind, she decided. Nothing major. She ignored the internal disquiet, depressed the small button on the key ring, and was rewarded by the cheerful chirp and deep clacking indicating the unlocking of her car doors.

Suppressing a groan that signaled to her that she was even more tired than she'd thought, she threw her purse onto the passenger seat and curled herself into the driver's seat. In a single motion she thrust the key into the ignition and turned it, listening for a moment as her engine settled into its customary soft purr.

Every muscle in her body suddenly contracted in reaction to an unexpected sound from behind her. Her heart pounding from the adrenaline rush, she started to turn, but even before she could, she saw, in the rear-view mirror, a shape rising from behind the seats. *Inside* the car!

She felt a moment of pride in her reaction. Reflexively, without panic, her hand shot towards her purse, seeking the can of Mace it contained.

Behind her a voice, so raspy and choked with emotion that she did not immediately recognize it, said, "Looking for this?" Sylvia looked in the mirror again. A feminine hand, wearing a white glove, held the spray can high enough for her to see.

Sylvia reached for the door handle, with a hand now shaking so badly she couldn't immediately get a grip on it. She froze suddenly, as a mental playback in her mind finally told her whose voice had just spoken.

Her jaw dropped. Slowly, making a supreme effort to keep the trembling out of her voice, but unable to force it down from an unusually high pitch, she said... "Judy?"

Sylvia couldn't see the humor in it, but some sort of joke this surely must be. An ill-considered office prank. Well, Sylvia thought, this could easily serve as grounds for firing. Problem solved. In the biting voice Sylvia used to break down witnesses in the courtroom, she asked coldly, "How did you get in here?"

Judy sat up straighter, showing her face in the mirror. Her hair was ruffled, from the blanket she'd used to cover herself, lying in wait on the floorboards in front of the rear seat. Sylvia merely noted that fact in passing, something glimpsed before she'd locked onto Judy's eyes. Something Sylvia had never seen before in Judy was peering out from behind those eyes. They were unnaturally bright, with excitement bordering on hysteria.

Judy spoke again, her voice more recognizable now but still unusually taut. She sounded out of breath, as if she'd just finished sprinting around the block. "I got your keys out of your purse during one of your bathroom breaks. And this." She waved the can of Mace again. "I left the rear window rolled down so I could climb back in after I brought your keys back. I nearly went nuts waiting for you to take another break later so I could put them back in your purse. I started thinking you weren't going to."

That was what had been wrong! Sylvia had found her keys at the very top of her purse! It was impossible that they would be there. They should, at the very least, have been underneath her day planner, the small notebook as important as her life's blood to her. Not to mention any number of other things Sylvia had used during the day. Why couldn't I think of that? she moaned to herself. I would at least have taken a lot more careful look inside the car before I got in.

In that same cold courtroom voice, Sylvia said, "Judy, get out of my car now. We can talk about this Monday."

With a rustle of movement, Judy lowered the Mace can and lifted something else into view. Sylvia ordered herself to stay calm, but a squeak of fear escaped her throat as she saw the gun. A Magnum. The thing would put a hole in her head bigger than her fist, Sylvia knew. "I think we should talk now, Miss Powell." Judy had never called her anything else, but always before with respect for the employer/employee relationship. It came out now as more of a taunt.

Maybe that's the reason she's wearing gloves, thought Sylvia. Fingerprints. But why keep prints off your own gun? Sylvia sat still for a moment, reestablishing control over herself, then reached again for the door handle. If I move fast enough, she told herself, I'll be a hard target to hit.

Judy reacted instantly, as if she'd foreseen the move, suddenly pressing the gun hard into Sylvia's neck. She said only one word, almost calmly: "Don't."

Sylvia froze once more. There would be better opportunities later, she was sure. This wasn't the time. She waited as she worked once more to hold off the trembling, then asked, "What do you want, Judy?"

Judy pulled the gun away, and sat back in her seat. "First, reach over to your purse slowly, pick it up by the side without reaching in, and toss it back to me."

Sylvia almost laughed. "Are you kidding me? This is a robbery? Judy, if you've got some sort of financial emergency, we could work something out without all this drama..."

Judy did laugh. "This isn't about money. I want to turn your cell phone off so there won't be any records of where we've gone if somebody calls you."

"We're... going somewhere?" This, thought Sylvia, can't possibly be good.

"First things first." Judy again pressed the gun against Sylvia's neck. "Just move really slowly."

“Okay, okay.” There is nothing I can possibly do right now, thought Sylvia, other than what she is saying to do. Opportunities may arise later, she told herself again. Sylvia leaned, as required, slowly over to the passenger seat, squeezed the side of the purse between her thumb and forefinger, and handed it back to Judy, her heart thumping wildly.

Judy, still holding the gun against Sylvia’s neck and not looking away, reached into the purse with her other hand and located the phone by feel. Flipping it open, she powered it off – Sylvia could see the light wink out – and tossed it casually back into the purse. “Now drive us out of here. I’ll tell you where to go.”

“I... thought you said you wanted to talk.”

“Not now. Just drive.”

Sylvia hesitated, mulling over possible alternatives. As there were none, she put the car in gear and backed out of the parking space. Shifting into Drive, she started the car moving towards the exit.

The commonplace act of driving the car calmed her a bit. It was easier to speak. “I’ll need my garage card to get us out of here. It’s in my purse.”

“We can use mine. I’ll hand it to you when you need it. And don’t think about yelling for help to anybody on the sidewalk or in the street. This thing will kill you even if I fire it through the back of your seat.”

“In front of witnesses, Judy? Even *I* couldn’t get you out of a murder rap then. Whatever this is about, is it worth going to prison for?”

“I’d shoot myself right after. You need to believe I’m serious, Sylvia,” she said, using Sylvia’s first name for the first time. “Look at me if you don’t.”

Sylvia gasped to see, in the mirror, Judy now sitting with the barrel of the gun in her own mouth, her thumb tapping the trigger lightly, almost playfully. Judy raised her eyebrows, and lisped around the gun, “Thee, I’m not thcared of it. But you should be.” The corners of Judy’s lips curled upward in a calm smile.

Sylvia jerked the steering wheel to avoid scraping the rear bumper of a parked car. After renewed efforts at voice control, she managed to get out, “B-But if I do what you want, then you won’t kill me, right?” Dammit, she thought, no more stammering.

Judy put the gun back in her lap, aimed forward. “If you do *everything* I want. I promise you can live through this, but only if you do exactly what I tell you. Here.” She handed forward the garage card. “Head towards the interstate after we get out.”

Sylvia rolled down her window and reached out to swipe the card through the reader at the gate. As the gate raised itself, she started to drive out, stopping suddenly as two pedestrians walked right in front of the car. Sylvia watched helplessly as they both looked at her incuriously and moved on. Sylvia moved the car through a break in the foot traffic and made a right into the street.

Judy reached for the garage card. Sylvia handed it to her. “Judy, if this isn’t about money, then what *is* it about? If you’re in some kind of trouble, we can talk about it without...”

“I’m not in any trouble. I worked all that out. This is all about what you did to me.”

Sylvia searched her brain, tossing around memories as if ransacking her bedroom closet for a crucial pair of shoes. “What do you mean? What did I do to you?”

“I’ll help you out. Christmas party.”

There seemed to be no useful memories in the closet. “What happened at the Christmas party?”

“You, with Peter. In the Xerox room.”

“With...” Sylvia’s blood ran cold suddenly. Had Judy misinterpreted a little harmless fun? Sylvia remembered asking Judy’s six-foot-six husband Peter to help her retrieve the envelope down from a high shelf, in which she’d hidden the bonus checks for the associates and staff. It was either that or climb up on a stool. Sylvia had a preference for getting men to do things for her. It was never hard. “Judy, I don’t know what you think you saw. But nothing happened.”

“From your point of view, maybe. I saw that kiss.” Judy’s voice was becoming progressively more hoarse with unspent emotions.

Okay, Sylvia thought, yes, I kissed him. A minor reward for a job well done. Always leave them wanting more, that was Sylvia’s motto. A single kiss could stir up male fantasies that would run for years. Okay, she’d been a little playful about it. That was all part of the game. Running her fingers along his necktie, kidding him about how great it must be to be so tall, then pulling him gently towards her by the tie, with that look in her eyes, her lips parting, the universal signal. Their lips meeting softly. “So I kissed him! People do it all the time, for God’s sake! It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It wasn’t just you kissing him! He kissed you! I know his body language better than anybody. He wanted you! Right then, right there, he wanted you!” She gestured with the gun. “Here’s the interstate. Get on it. North.”

Sylvia was silent as she negotiated the entrance ramp and merged into the crawling Atlanta rush-hour traffic. Friday was always the worst. Settling into the right-hand lane, she said softly, “I would never try to take him away from you. It was just a little harmless flirt.”

“You’re still talking about it the way you saw it. I saw something else. I saw the man of my dreams, the man who pledged his life to mine, the man who looked at me the way nobody ever had... I saw him look at *you* that way. Wanting *you*. And acting on it! He kissed you!” Judy’s voice began to quaver. “You... you could have any man you want. With your face, your body. There are so many out there who don’t belong to anybody. Why did you have to take mine?” Sylvia could see Judy palming the tears out of her eyes.

“Judy, I didn’t...” Sylvia frantically sought for a way to put this in some sort of reasonable perspective for Judy, her foot suddenly flying to the brake in near panic as the line of cars in front of her slowed unexpectedly. “Have... Have you talked to Peter about this?”

Judy rolled her eyes, the tears giving way to anger once more. “For four months in therapy, that’s about all we *did* talk about. Till he got sick of hearing about it. We’re separated now. And I’ve been in the hospital for major depression.” She giggled suddenly, the last thing Sylvia expected to hear. “My therapist told me I should make plans for the future. So I did. I planned all this out.”

Before she could call the words back, Sylvia blurted, “Judy, this is just crazy!”

Judy simply raised the gun back into Sylvia’s view in the mirror, still pointed at the back of Sylvia’s seat. “Yeah. Probably so. Now just shut up for a while and concentrate on driving. If you get us in an accident and we have to stop, I’ll just have to shoot you.” She waggled the gun.

Sylvia cautiously stole a look at the car in the lane to her left. Just a driver, no passengers, and he was watching the cars ahead of him. He couldn’t see the gun from where he was in any case. Sylvia couldn’t decide whether she wanted him to. She wished someone could help her, but wasn’t sure how

to solicit it without being killed. Anything she did had to take into account that Judy herself was suicidal. She had to assume Judy would kill her without hesitation, regardless of consequences to herself.

Sylvia sighed heavily and did as Judy asked: she focused on driving.

As traffic began to ease, Sylvia knew she had to try again. "Judy, for what it's worth... I would never have taken him. I'd never purposely try to break up a marriage, and..."

Judy, who had appeared nearly relaxed, suddenly stiffened. "That's not it! Didn't you get what I said? It's not about whether you wanted him. You made him want you! That's what you do! I've seen you!" Sylvia could see Judy's face redden in the mirror, felt her own heart renew its heavy pounding as Judy raised the gun back into view. "I said I won't kill you if you do what I say, but I should! I should!"

Sylvia's entire body tensed, waiting for the shot. She caught herself closing her eyes, and forced them open again, jerking the steering wheel to correct a drift into the next lane, to the accompaniment of a blaring horn from her left.

Breathing hard, she watched Judy carefully, and saw Judy struggling equally hard to control herself. It wasn't until Judy sat back again that Sylvia could let her taut shoulder muscles begin to relax.

In the mirror, Sylvia now saw that Judy was looking out the window at the passing scenery, her expression neutral. Sylvia ventured a cautious, "Could you tell me where we're going, Judy?"

Judy was silent for a time sufficient to make Sylvia doubt Judy had heard her. At last, without looking away from the window, Judy said in a calm, barely audible voice, "My parents named me Judith. It's from the Bible. The story of Judith. Do you know that story, Sylvia?"

Sylvia bit her lip. "I... don't really know the Bible the way I probably should."

Judy nodded, as if expecting that answer. Then she looked at Sylvia, and said in the same voice, "She was a killer."

Sylvia gripped the steering wheel tightly enough to leave dents. Is this it? Sylvia asked herself. Has Judy calmed down because the shoot-Sylvia-now side has won the argument inside her? She's decided she has the Bible on her side?

Judy made no move, and looked away again at last.

It took Sylvia much longer to relax this time. I make my living with words, she thought, but I can't find any here. I can talk to juries, I can talk to judges, to opposing lawyers. I can always find the words to make things go my way. But it's always because people are rational. I know what buttons to push, she told herself, when I know people will react rationally. I can't find the words when the slightest wrong one will set off a crazy lady with a gun pointed at me.

Just shut up for now, she decided. That's how to stay alive.

CHAPTER 2

In thirty minutes of driving they had left the city, suburbs, and most of the traffic behind. The area through which Sylvia drove now was mainly swampland, covered in trees standing shoulder to shoulder. In north Georgia it was either this or mountains. Sylvia was conscious of hurtling at seventy miles an hour towards an unguessable future. Where, she wondered, could we possibly be going? She knew Judy lived in the city. The possibility that Judy and Peter could afford a second home out in the boondocks couldn't be completely discounted, but seemed highly unlikely. That Judy meant to kill her in some remote area, despite her assurances to the contrary, seemed a better bet.

I could crash the car, Sylvia suddenly thought. Beside the highway there was a small gully, carpeted in long grass. I could, she told herself, probably veer into that without risking death, just to cause enough confusion so I can grab Judy's gun.

Sylvia cursed herself for her habit of not bothering with the seatbelt. The airbag might save me, she speculated, while Judy gets knocked unconscious. Sylvia frowned, remembering having heard that it didn't usually work that way. Without a seatbelt, she risked serious injury in any crash severe enough to cause airbag deployment.

I have to try crashing, she decided, but not without the seatbelt. Casually, she reached toward the door, grasped the end of the belt, and pulled it downward across her chest. She winced as she heard Judy begin to stir behind her just as she'd clicked the belt closed, and suppressed a moan when she heard Judy securing her own seat belt. Sylvia berated herself. That was so stupid, her inner voice said. I should have found some excuse to stop the car – restroom break? Then I could have buckled up when I got back in, and Judy probably wouldn't have noticed. Now it's too late. She's onto me, as far as that idea goes.

Sylvia was amazed. All of this is happening, she reminded herself, because of a few minutes of fun with Peter. Sylvia had been aware, for a long time, that the game she played carried some dangers. Maybe that was part of the attraction, she thought, but only a small part of it. The excitement came from... control, she decided. Manipulation. Exercising her ability to make a man want what she had no intention of giving him.

She had not had actual sex with a partner since college. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy it, while it was happening. The aftermath was the problem.

It had taken her several years to identify the source of the feeling of letdown that invariably followed her sexual encounters with men, which had eventually soured the taste of intercourse itself for her, knowing that the letdown was coming. After her sex partner had achieved what he wanted, all of her control over him vanished in a puff of smoke – or in a spurt of semen, more accurately. The joy she had taken in her power to lead him around by his penis – it was gone, and never to be repeated. She might have sex with the same man again, but it was never the same. She could never feel quite the same degree of power as she had with a man who had never yet succeeded in getting into her pants, and who desperately wanted to.

And so, with the same logical mind that would get her through law school, she had evolved the game, or as she realized she should probably think of it, The Game, capitalized. She could so easily bring almost any man she met to a frenzy of this-is-it-I'm-going-to-get-this-babe-in-bed! anticipation, and leave him in that condition as she went home and, focusing her mind on the man who was still at that moment wanting her, needing her, fantasizing about her, not yet realizing she was gone from his life forever, she would rub herself to a screaming orgasm far more explosive than any she had ever had with

a partner. She had given herself, she decided, the perfect sex life, a source of immense physical satisfaction that didn't require her to end up stuck with some idiot who would sit reading the sports page in his underwear and expect her to make him breakfast.

This is so unfair! she insisted to herself. It was just a kiss! Ninety-nine percent of marriages could have weathered the storm, or not even experienced a storm to begin with. Why did I have to run into the one nutcase?

She sighed. "Is it okay if I turn on the radio?"

In the mirror, she saw Judy shrug. Sylvia reached out and twisted the power knob, and spent a few minutes with the Seek button searching for an all-news station. Many of the stations, she realized in dismay, were already getting scratchy with distance, but the larger Atlanta stations were still coming in clearly. She found one just beginning a news segment, and listened for a report on the "kidnapping of Atlanta attorney Sylvia Powell." There was nothing, of course, and she realized no one could possibly know what was happening to her right now. Monday, when she failed to show up at the office, a search would begin. Or maybe the day after. Didn't the police wait twenty-four hours before starting a missing-persons investigation? The thought that Judy might still be holding her four days from now appalled her. Or will I even still be alive then? she wondered. Am I going to be dead before anybody even knows I'm gone?

After ninety minutes on the interstate, most of the radio stations had faded out, except for a few based in nearby towns, playing twangy country music. Sylvia switched the radio off, and was startled when Judy, silent for the last hour, suddenly said, "Take the next exit and go left."

Sylvia, making the turn at the end of the offramp, took hope from the sight of a Shell station beyond the bridge over the interstate. "We need some gas." Being able to get out of the car around other people would offer a chance.

Judy's responded in a flat voice, "I can see your gas gauge from here." A quarter of a tank remained.

Sylvia sighed. Another failed idea.

I can't let her get me to wherever we're going! Sylvia told herself. She fought with her terrified brain for ideas on how to stop the car without getting shot. Thinking was made harder by the quality of the road, or more accurately the lack of it. It was a two-lane asphalt country road, its edges raggedy with wear, its interior pocked with potholes Sylvia had to steer around several times a minute. They passed through a couple of tiny towns, each one's presence signified by little more than an off-brand filling station and a general store, inevitably fronted by two or three old men in rocking chairs. Between the towns, trees on either side of the road, through which farmland was occasionally visible, were sufficiently lush and crowded together as to form a nearly unbroken canopy above them. The ground beside the road was thickly covered by the inevitable crawling ivy called kudzu. It was 8 p.m., and there was still plenty of summer sunlight, but under the canopy it was hard to see. Sylvia switched on the headlights. Over the next half hour, the gas gauge needle slowly edged farther to the left. I wonder if there'll be any gas stations around when we *do* run out of gas, Sylvia fretted. Will Judy just shoot me right there?

Sylvia was startled again when Judy spoke after another long silence. "Slow way down. And turn your lights off." Sylvia complied, understanding that the point had been reached where a certain degree of furtiveness was called for. She wondered who could possibly be watching. They hadn't gone

through a town in at least fifteen minutes, and there was no traffic ahead of them or behind them, for as far as Sylvia could see. Allowing the car to crawl at ten miles per hour, her heart pounding, she wondered: is this it? Am I going to die here? It wasn't until Judy said, "Turn right, here," that Sylvia detected a minor break in the wall of trees, wide enough for a two-lane road, but unpaved.

Sylvia frowned at the contradictions presented by the road she had turned onto, as she squinted in the dim light. It clearly *was* a road, along a corridor of trees that rarely widened or narrowed – obviously the path wasn't an accident of tree distribution, but something consciously cleared – but equally obviously, it hadn't been in regular use for years, and was now overgrown with the local vegetation. Yet Sylvia could see tire tracks in the dirt, which had to be recent, as they would disappear in any heavy rain, and frequent small bushes uprooted as if by the passage of a vehicle.

There had been no sign to indicate the road's destination, or even its existence.

Judy didn't take me all the way here to kill me, Sylvia told herself over and over. She could have found ideal places for that a lot closer to home, in a lot less time than it took to get here. It has to be that she wants to show me something specific.

Sylvia gasped and braked suddenly as, after about ten minutes of car-suspension-challenging driving, the car crossed a bridge over a creek, rounded a gentle bend in the road and the "something" came into view.

There seemed to be a wall of concrete and stone across the road, about twelve feet high, topped by a tangle of barbed wire that was orange with rust. A large iron double gate, wide enough for a truck to pass through, served as the only visible break in the wall, at the point where the road met it. The gate was flanked on either side by booths that might be guardhouses. Sylvia stared at the gate, from about thirty feet away, as the car's engine idled. Her throat suddenly dry, she swallowed convulsively. "Wh-what is it?"

Judy, suddenly cheerful on the arrival at her destination, said, "It's a women's prison, Sylvia. Or was. It used to serve a dozen counties around here, but it was abandoned fifty years ago when they built the big new state prison." Judy pointed to the right of the road. "Pull the car off into the woods here. Drive it between those two trees there and turn it behind the larger one."

Sylvia maneuvered carefully to the indicated spot, and took one more look at the gas gauge. Not much left, she observed, but enough to get us back to that last gas station we passed. She turned off the engine. "Who are we hiding from?"

Judy gave a short laugh. "Nobody, I hope. As far as I can determine, nobody lives within at least two miles of here. No one wanted to be that close to a prison, and I know it's closed now, but it's not like they've had any new settlers here since the closing. I really had to dig around in the local library to find out exactly where this place was, and even with a map it took me a couple of days to find it. I didn't want to ask anybody, in case they got curious about what my interest in it was." That would explain the tire tracks on the way here, thought Sylvia. They were Judy's. Judy went on, "So nobody on Earth knows we're here."

Sylvia shivered as the last bit of information sank in. This might not be about killing me, she thought, but it could well be something worse. She opened her mouth, and could force nothing out. She coughed to clear her throat. "Ju..." She tried again. "J-Judy... Wh-what are you going to do to me?"

Judy lifted the gun higher. "I will not kill you, as long as you do everything I say. I swear that on God's name."

Sylvia blinked. Judy had made the same promise earlier, but without invoking any deities. That seemed to put a slightly different spin on it. A promise like this would mean something to Judy.

Still, it was obvious that whatever Judy had planned, it would definitely be very unpleasant, and likely very painful. And Judy had gone to extraordinary lengths to prevent any interference. We're at a prison, Sylvia reminded herself. What's she going to do, lock me up? For how long? Is there an electric chair in there?

Sylvia had to find a way to get out of this without being killed. I cannot, she told herself, *must* not let Judy get me inside that gate.

Obviously, they were about to get out of the car. Sylvia eyed the surrounding trees. If she could suddenly dart behind one and start weaving among them, Judy wouldn't be able to get a clear shot at her.

She took a few slow, deep breaths, trying to prepare her body for sudden exertion. She would have to try to click open the seat belt, jerk the door handle, and throw herself out of the car in one motion. She wasn't sure, she realized, how to get back to the car after eluding Judy. She decided she would forget the car, walk through the woods parallel to the road, hiding behind the trees, until she came to the paved road they had turned from, and try to flag down a passing car.

Her concentration on plans of escape was broken by an unexpected sound behind her. Judy had bent down to pick up something from the floor of the car. The sound had been a metallic rattling.

Judy put her free hand forward. "Give me the car keys."

Sylvia saw that Judy's full attention was on her. No quick moves, she told herself. Maybe handling the keys after I give them to her will distract her. Sylvia removed the key from the ignition, and handed the keyring to Judy. It's okay, Sylvia told herself, I'd already decided to ditch the car. It occurred to her she would also be leaving her purse behind, with her credit cards and driver's license... she sighed again. She could make do without them. People lost their credit cards and identification all the time. It wasn't the end of the world. She had qualms about leaving her day planner behind, but there was nothing to be done about it.

The sound preceding Judy's request had been caused by movement of the large satchel she now held, into which she now, without taking her eyes off Sylvia, put Sylvia's purse, after dropping the keys into the purse – all done with one hand, while still holding the gun pointed at Sylvia. And from the satchel, Judy withdrew what seemed to be the source of the rattling. "Here. Put these on before you open the door. And before you unbuckle your seat belt."

Judy dropped the device into Sylvia's hand, and Sylvia stared at it, slack-jawed. Coiled in her hand was a chain, about eighteen inches long, with what appeared to be hinged semicircles of steel at either end. "Put... what? How?"

"Oh." Judy giggled. "On your ankles. Those are ankle cuffs. Close them around your ankles. Do that before we get out of the car." She raised the gun. "Now."

Sylvia bit her lip and clamped down on the moan that threatened to tear its way out of her throat. I can't run in these! her inner voice screamed. Judy can keep up with me at a casual walk, no matter how fast I try to go! As soon as I put these on, my last chance to escape is gone.

Sylvia had never seen real handcuffs, but had seen them in television cop shows any number of times. These seemed to be the real thing.

I've only got seconds before she loses patience, Sylvia told herself. Her heart tried to bang its way out of her chest. Seat belt, door, run!

But Judy was watching more intently than ever. Sylvia knew she would be dead an instant after the seat belt clicked.

She bent over in her seat to put one of the cuffs around her right ankle. Ever conscious of the gun at her back, she slowly closed the cuff around the ankle. As the ratchet mechanism clicked, she stopped suddenly, as one last idea occurred to her.

She put the other cuff around her left ankle, while keeping her right hand on the right cuff. As she held the left cuff in place, she completed the closure of the right. With the two sets of clicks separated in time, she had decided, she might fool Judy into believing she had secured both cuffs.

She unfastened the seat belt, drew in a slow, deep breath, reached for the door handle, and froze as Judy said sharply, "Wait." Sylvia sat there, her heart pounding, until Judy said, at last, "Show me."

She cursed herself for being unable to mask her anxiety as she lifted her right ankle into view, then her left, fervently hoping the cuff hooked on her left ankle looked closed.

She saw Judy smile tightly, and waggle the gun, and shake her head, dashing Sylvia's hopes. Sylvia choked back a sob as Judy said, "Be good and finish the left."

Terrified now of what would happen if she delayed any further, she bent quickly down and closed the left cuff before she could talk herself out of it.

She sat back upright, took several deep breaths to try to still the trembling of her lower lip, and angrily brushed a tear out of her eye. She succeeded in speaking calmly. "May I get out now?"

Judy simply gave her a go-ahead gesture. Sylvia opened the door, and tried to step out normally. After the chain between her ankles jerked taut with a clinking snap, she sighed in frustration and turned herself sideways on the seat, putting both feet out and onto the ground.

Sylvia felt immediately assaulted by the stifling heat. It was normal for July, that is to say, intolerably hot – probably still 90 degrees, in spite of the waning sunlight, and breathlessly humid. It was easy to imagine she was exploring an African jungle rather than being in the same state as her comfortable apartment. She stood, feeling her high heels sinking into the soft ground. She yanked them up and out angrily and backed off two steps, then several more as Judy waved her away, obviously not wanting Sylvia too close during the vulnerable moments while Judy was getting out of the car. Sylvia remained on her tiptoes, watching as Judy emerged awkwardly, keeping the gun in one hand while using the other to heft the large satchel, over which was draped the blanket under which she'd hidden herself back in the parking garage. Sylvia held her breath, watching desperately for an opening, but saw no way to close the distance, especially in her awkward heels, quickly enough to avoid being shot.

Standing upright now, Judy set the satchel on the ground and tossed Sylvia the blanket. "Be useful and cover the car with this. You should be able to hide it completely. I measured it beforehand."

I'm sure you did, Sylvia thought grimly. She marveled at the amount of planning it had taken just to get this far. Looking down at her shoes, she decided she was worse off with them than without them, at least for the present. And what the hell, she told herself, the ankle cuffs have already ruined these panty hose. Sylvia shook her head at her lack of perspective. The loss of a pair of panty hose purchased just last week was the least of her problems. "Can I take my heels off?"

Judy shrugged. "I'll keep them in the bag for now." Sylvia bent and tugged off the shoes and tossed them to Judy. There was no point in throwing them with any force, she decided. A gun is going to beat a shoe as a weapon any day. She remained conscious of the fact that, whatever momentary advantage she might gain in any attack, there was no way to run away. And Judy was maintaining a ten-foot distance between them since emerging from the car. Sylvia watched as Judy dropped the shoes into the satchel, sighed once more and shook out the blanket.

It did indeed seem more than big enough. Made of a thin denim-like fabric, it was colored mainly leaf green, mottled with darker patches – perfect jungle camouflage, in fact. Sylvia threw it across the top of the car and walked slowly around to the other side to pull down the edges, learning within a few steps just how far she could step without the chain snapping taut and yanking at her ankles painfully. She winced occasionally as her shoeless feet encountered harder rocks in the soft earth.

As she finished, breathing hard, she felt the sweat running down her back under the silky blouse. She wiped the moisture from her forehead, only to have it reappear an instant later. She disliked physical exertion even in nice weather, and loathed it in the full heat of summer. Judy gestured for Sylvia to follow her back to the road. Sylvia used up another sigh, knowing that the last thing she wanted to do was follow Judy to wherever she was going, but Sylvia's frustrated brain was still failing to see alternatives.

She looked back as she reached the road. She could barely pick out the camouflage blanket amid the undergrowth around the trees, and only, she realized, because she knew it was there. Nobody else standing where she was, she knew, would notice its presence.

Even on the road, it was hard to walk. The chain, scraping on the uneven ground between her feet, kept snagging on small projections, twice nearly tripping her. Judy was up ahead of her, standing by the guardhouse to the left of the gate, gesturing towards the gate with her gun. "Push it open. It was locked, but the mechanism was rusted through. Then keep walking along the driveway. I'll tell you where to go."

I'd be glad to tell you where to go, Sylvia thought sullenly. Going beyond the gate, and putting herself even farther out of the sight of anyone who might possibly help her, was a very hard thing to persuade herself do. But she reminded herself, again, that Judy could already have killed her easily if that was her plan. Even if it was possible that someone might be watching them now and would witness a murder if it occurred, Judy had made it convincingly obvious that she didn't care about possible witnesses. Since she would kill herself immediately after disposing of Sylvia, any consequences of shooting Sylvia would not concern Judy at all.

I'm going to have to go in there, thought Sylvia. As dangerous as it seems, I have to do it. Because Judy, while promising not to kill Sylvia, had assured her that that would all change if Sylvia resisted doing anything Judy demanded of her. And Judy, as she had since leaving the car, remained too far out of reach for Sylvia to consider attacking her, especially hobbled as she was. She couldn't get halfway to Judy without being shot.

Sylvia moaned helplessly, and pushed against the gate. It was heavy and resisted movement, but in the end it creaked open.

CHAPTER 3

Ahead of Sylvia lay a paved drive, leading towards one large brick building, two stories, about two hundred feet across its front, and several smaller out-buildings. At least it seemed to be two stories; the lower of them was hidden behind a field of uncontrolled plant growth that probably, at one time, had been a well-manicured lawn. Several of the windows visible from where Sylvia stood were broken, most likely by weather over the years rather than vandalism, which probably would have taken out all of them. Sylvia shivered suddenly, understanding that, in this sight of the main building, she was almost certainly getting her first view of her private hell for the near future. How long? Judy, she realized, had access to her car, and could resupply herself for as long as her cash held out – hers, and the amount in Sylvia’s purse as well. Judy wouldn’t be able to use Sylvia’s credit cards, or even her own, without giving her location away, but – with no doubt whatsoever – Sylvia was sure Judy had planned for that. So how long? A week? Two?

Sylvia forced herself to start shuffling slowly along the drive, and heard Judy push the gate closed behind her. Moments later she looked back, and saw that Judy was following her at a safe distance, about fifteen feet.

I can’t believe I’m leading the way there, as if voluntarily, Sylvia thought. Not dragged kicking and screaming. Not carried unconscious. How can I be doing this?

At least the walking was easier. The pavement was broken, with segments tilted at all angles, and grass and small bushes growing between, but Sylvia could avoid the bushes, and the grass between adjacent segments made only a momentary and predictable drag on the chain, so that she came close to tripping only twice on the way to the building. And the pavement itself harbored no loose rocks to torment the soles of her feet.

Sylvia could see the main entrance to the building now, on its front side on the far right. The drive approached the right side of the building and then forked, part of it curving towards the front entrance, the other branch heading straight along the right side of the building to the rear, probably for deliveries. Sylvia took the curved branch, and the absence of any word from Judy verified that she had chosen correctly. As she reached the bottom of the steps heading up to the entrance, Judy called to her to stop, and to move off to the side. Judy, giving her a wide berth, approached the steps herself. “I’ll lead from here. Follow behind, but not too close. Remember I’ll be able to hear you.” Judy bounced up the steps, looking more energized than Sylvia could imagine being herself, and Sylvia followed, awkwardly, the chain an annoying but tolerable hindrance.

After her first steps through the doorway, Sylvia was taken aback by the oppressive heat within the building – she sensed that it was even hotter inside than it had been outdoors. What did you expect? a caustic voice within her asked. That a fifty-year-abandoned building would be air conditioned? The sheen of sweat she had worked up while fighting with the blanket had diminished, leaving a general clamminess, but now she felt renewed streams dribbling down her skin. She was suddenly conscious of being thirsty, and wondered in alarm when she would be able to get a drink.

After a short entryway that faced a set of offices, there was a corridor to the left. Judy stood at the entrance to that corridor, and said, “Close the door behind you.” Covering our tracks again, thought Sylvia. We can’t leave an open door, can we?

After Sylvia complied, Judy turned into the corridor. “The first floor is administration, and the second has quarters for the staff. I’ve cleaned out a lot of the hallway cobwebs, so this won’t be as bad as it could have been.”

Sylvia struggled with her impulse to flee. With Judy out of sight for the moment, she considered bolting away, back out the front door, but she'd be plainly visible in the wide-open area in front of the building. It was just after nine o'clock, and the light was quickly failing, but there was more than enough for Sylvia to be seen and caught before she could make it into the bushes beyond the drive.

Seeing, as usual, no other choice, Sylvia walked towards the corner and turned into the corridor to follow Judy. She struggled to keep Judy in sight, almost needing to trot in tiny steps. The corridor admitted very little of the light from the entryway behind them. Sylvia could make out doors on either side, but it was too dark to read their markings.

She'd hoped there might be places to hide, but the corridor was nearly devoid of furnishings. The temporary nature of hiding seemed to have little to recommend it, and in any case Judy would be alerted to Sylvia's first unscripted move by the change in the rhythm of the dragging chain. In fact, it occurred to Sylvia that Judy was maintaining her present pace exactly so that Sylvia would be forced to make plenty of noise. Moaning to herself, she didn't know what else she could do other than plod after Judy.

"I've got a flashlight, but I'm not going to use it until we get downstairs. The cells are in the basement."

Sylvia's moan was audible this time. She had felt sure where they were going, but to hear it confirmed added weight to her fears. And there was Judy's careful planning again. Judy had gotten to know this hallway so she could navigate it in the dark – preventing the one-in-a-million chance that someone might see unexpected lights in a supposedly deserted building in the distance and become curious.

One in a million? Even that possibility of rescue, Sylvia suddenly realized, was pure wishful thinking. There was no chance. Any light in the entryway to the building couldn't even be seen from most of the grounds, let alone from outside the property. It only showed the degree of Judy's obsession with this revenge fantasy, as Sylvia understood clearly this certainly was. Judy had run over this entire scenario endlessly as a game, as an entertaining lift from her depression, considering every one of the most minor details and preemptively guarding against any chance of failure.

Sylvia nearly stopped now, nearly turned and ran at the fastest shuffle her hobble chain would allow, daring Judy to shoot her. She couldn't make herself do it. Why can't I? she asked herself. Am I really that afraid to die? Can I really walk into what will surely be hell on Earth, for fearing the alternative that much?

A bolder, more self-confident voice spoke from deeper within her. It's not about fear of death, the voice told her. You're looking at it from the wrong angle. Everything that lives has a survival instinct. That's why the human race is still here. That's why every species still living is here. We fight to live. We fight to survive. We can't stop. I won't stop. I'm stronger than Judy imagines. I will get through this, and I'll be alive. It's not fear of death. It's a will to live.

She continued walking.

She suddenly realized she had lost track of Judy, while lost in her thoughts of death and survival. Where the hell did she go?

Sylvia did stop now, undecided whether to call after Judy, or to take advantage and run. It may be dark enough outside now, she thought. I might be able to win at hide-and-seek out there.

She couldn't make herself turn around.

With a slight hissing sound, a door just to her left closed. Her urge to run evaporating in the uncertainty of Judy's location, Sylvia reached for the doorknob – the light was so dim by now she had to hunt for it – and pulled the door open, to the sound of a creaking spring. Self-closing door, she realized. Still working after all these years. Well, all it needs to function is springs and air compression. And it's not like constant use would have worn it out over the last five decades.

Judy's voice sounded as if it was coming from below. "I'm down here. Come down the stairs."

That explains the door, Sylvia decided. Fire safety for the stairwell.

A slight brightening occurred, and Sylvia now saw the steps leading down. Judy had obviously just turned on her flashlight, as promised, at the bottom of the stairs.

I know where Judy is now, Sylvia told herself, and she's not far enough away. If I run now, Sylvia decided, she'll easily hear me, and she can make it back upstairs long before I can shuffle back to the front door.

Sylvia reached for the handrail with a trembling hand. Deeper and deeper, she thought. Every move I make takes me deeper into trouble, makes getting out of this that much more impossible.

After turning at the landing halfway down, Sylvia saw Judy now, at the bottom of the stairs, propping the door open with her foot, holding the flashlight in her right hand, with the gun held by a finger of her left hand through the trigger guard as the rest of her left hand held the satchel. Quite a load you've got there, Judy, thought Sylvia. Can I hold that gun for you? Her lip curled at the grim attempt at humor as she walked down the second half of the stairway. Judy backed away as she approached, always maintaining that safe distance. Sylvia caught the door as it began closing and pushed through it.

The stairwell was at the far end of the building. To Sylvia's left as she emerged from the stairwell was a blank wall. To the right was another wall, this one interrupted by a barred gate. Sylvia turned to face it, stepping away from the stairwell, letting the door close behind her. To her left now was a closed door, and there was an open door to her right, revealing a very large, empty room. Sylvia suspected it may have been sleeping quarters, or perhaps a lounge, for guards. Ahead of her, Judy stood in front of that gate to the remainder of the basement. It had vertical steel bars, with horizontal braces across the top and bottom, and at eye level, waist level, and shin level. It stood slightly ajar, opening outward, as if beckoning in invitation. Halfway up on its left side, a key protruded from the lock mechanism, a huge key of the sort you would use to wind a grandfather's clock. There were two keyholes, one above the other, the key itself currently in the upper one. The lock must, Sylvia decided, consist of two separate bolts for added security. Clearly, this was the entrance to the cell block, but Sylvia could see no sign of the cells yet. Judy's flashlight illuminated the area in which she and Sylvia now stood fairly well, though unevenly, but the light penetrated only a few paces into the cell area.

The air smelled dusty, dead, but it was somehow less foul than Sylvia would have expected. Maybe that makes sense, Sylvia thought. There is probably, she decided, a ventilation system designed for an era before air conditioning. There would have to be, if the inmates down here weren't to suffocate. If it didn't require electrical power, it should still be working. It even seemed a few degrees cooler than it had upstairs, though still oppressively hot. The hot air would rise in the building, she realized.

All of these thoughts ran through her head, postponing consideration of the next move expected of her: walking through that barred gate.

Sylvia knew how careful she would need to be with her words. “J-Judy? – Let’s talk about this. There could be something else that would satisfy you, as an alternative to this. We could talk and find out what that is.” I shouldn’t try to suggest what it might be, she decided. Anything I say could insult her, make her mad. Mad enough to pull the trigger. Just let her talk. Maybe an idea will surface that she realizes she likes. Better than this. *Anything* would be better than this.

Sylvia sucked in a quick breath as Judy shifted the flashlight to the hand holding the satchel and exchanged it for the gun, aiming it straight at Sylvia. Sylvia nearly cringed, started to bring her hands up uselessly to shield her body, but stopped. I’m not seeing the anger in her face, at least for now, she thought. She doesn’t look ready to shoot. Not yet. Not just for what I said.

Judy, constantly facing Sylvia, wordlessly sidled away from the gate, circling around Sylvia, always pointing the gun, her face expressionless. It wasn’t until Judy neared the entrance to the stairwell that Sylvia understood that Judy’s intent was to put herself between Sylvia and the only escape route. Well, okay, thought Sylvia. We can have a standoff right here. I can wait, and keep trying to get her talking.

And she really does want to keep me alive, Sylvia told herself yet again. There is something important to her, down here, something she wants me to do. Or something for her to do to me. She could so easily have killed me long ago, but she doesn’t want to. Not that it’s all a bluff. I believe that the second she starts to feel that her plan won’t work, she *will* kill me. But she doesn’t want to. She wants something else more. I can work with that.

Still with the gun trained on Sylvia, Judy crouched down, set the satchel on the floor, set the flashlight upright next to it to serve as a lamp, and sat down on the concrete floor. Unexpectedly, she smiled. “Can you out-stubborn me, Sylvia? Is that what you’re thinking?” She patted the satchel. “I’ve got some food in here. It could be for you, but it doesn’t have to be. It could all be for me. You must be pretty hungry by now. You haven’t eaten since lunch. Oh, and thirsty. I’ll bet you could use some water. Yes, I can see it in your eyes. All this heat, all that sweat.” She sighed theatrically. “You’ve probably been trying not to think about it, but now that I mention it…”

Shit, though Sylvia. Shit, shit, shit. Okay, let’s play it that way. Keep remembering she doesn’t want to kill me. In fact, maybe that’s an opening.

Sylvia sat slowly on the floor, folding her legs underneath her skirt with a clinking of the hobble chain, leaning back against the wall next to the barred gate, trying to be as casual as Judy. As if settling in for a long siege. “If you don’t give me water, eventually I’ll die. That’s not what you want, is it? Wasn’t that the solemn promise you made, before God? That you wouldn’t kill me?”

Judy shook her head. “You forgot the most important part. I promised not to kill you if you did everything I want. That’s not what you’re doing now. No water unless you get moving. Even if you die of thirst.”

The battle going on between the two of them had nothing on the battle going on inside Sylvia. She bit her lip, looking at the gate beside her. I don’t care what she promises, thought Sylvia. I’m not going in there. I’m going to die in there, I know it.

Survival, her inner voice said. We fight to live. Remember telling yourself that? That means sometimes you have to risk your life to keep it. Judy is, what, fifteen feet away? It’ll take me some time to get there, and she’ll have plenty of time to shoot. But *will* she shoot? Has she ever actually shot anyone? I’m sure it’s much harder than she imagines.

Sylvia was leaning towards taking that chance. I might die, she told herself, but is that really worse than what will happen if I walk through this gate? Judy promised in God's name not to kill me, and I believe her. But what if I end up wishing she *had* killed me?

Sylvia tensed her muscles, ready to lunge. Changed her mind. Changed it again. A third time. Fourth.

She gasped in startlement when Judy's voice broke in on her internal fight. "Move that way, Sylvia." Sylvia looked up to see Judy gesturing with the gun. "Over toward the wall. Away from the gate."

"Why?"

"I want to show you something."

The move didn't seem likely to increase her immediate danger. Sylvia shrugged and slid across the floor towards the wall.

In one motion, Judy raised the gun in her right hand, aimed towards the gate, brought up her left hand underneath to cup her right and support it, and pulled the trigger before Sylvia could even begin to flinch.

The explosion, in that confined space, was deafening. Sylvia screamed and, too late, clapped her hands against her ears, every muscle in her body contracting in terror. A tumult of voices inside her shouted: Am I hit? Am I hurt? She wasn't pointing it at me, I don't feel anything, they say sometimes you don't feel the bullet, no, I'd know, nothing hit me, she was pointing it away...

From outside her body, there was no sound, nothing penetrating the ringing in her ears.

She waited, trembling, for the ringing to subside. Her hands still covering her ears. Her eyes squeezed shut. Her only functioning sense was almost overwhelmed by the burning smell.

All of the gunshots, and their consequences, Sylvia had ever seen in movies or on television had not prepared her for this. So much power, she thought. So much power. In that one little bullet. I never imagined that much power. It could rip through me like I was made of butter.

There was no ricochet, no shower of plaster bits. Judy, Sylvia understood, had intentionally shot through the bars of the gate. The damage, presumably, was somewhere inside the cell block.

So much for thinking that it might not be a functioning gun, Sylvia thought. Or that Judy might not know how to use it. It's all loud and clear now. Mostly loud.

Sylvia realized Judy was saying something. She took her hands down. Judy's voice sounded tinny, far away. "What?" Sylvia's own voice was tinny as well, echoing in her head. But the ringing was fading.

"I said, do you believe me now?" Judy now swung the gun back to point directly at Sylvia, still in that two-handed grip they train police officers to use.

In a reflexive, panicked reaction that owed nothing to conscious decision, only an instinct to put some barrier between herself and the gun, Sylvia dove to her left, threw open the gate, and scrambled through it on her hands and knees, barely noticing the stinging in her ankles each time the hobble chain went taut, not stopping until her head banged into an unseen wall about ten feet beyond the gate. She cried out more in surprise than pain, rubbing the top of her head. The awareness that she was now beyond the gate that she dared not pass flooded through her conscious mind, and she spun around to crawl back, but Judy had already come past the gate, pulled it closed, and was reaching outside it to turn

the key to lock it. Sylvia knew she needed to stop Judy, but Judy was dealing with the lock mostly by feel, with her eyes fixed on Sylvia, and with the gun still in her hand that Sylvia now knew Judy had been trained, somewhere, to use. As Sylvia watched helplessly, Judy finished with the upper lock and moved the key down to the lower lock, turning it in that one as well. The door now secured, Judy dropped the key into her satchel.

CHAPTER 4

Once again Judy hoisted the satchel and flashlight in her left hand, her other holding the gun. In the dim light, Sylvia now saw that there was a wall behind her, featureless and only about fifteen feet long. She had smacked her head against it near its middle. Above her head, there was a fresh crater in the wall, with a small pile of concrete dust below it. Apparently Judy's bullet had struck there. This newly revealed wall, and the wall with the gate, formed the sides of a short, featureless corridor. Judy swung the flashlight towards her left. "Locked gate over there." Sylvia's gaze followed the light and saw that the corridor ended at a blank wall, turning a corner there into a perpendicular corridor whose entrance was, indeed, blocked by a gate, or more properly a chain link fence, a little less secure than the thick steel bars guarding the entrance to the cell block. "They used these internal gates in the cell block to keep crowds of prisoners manageable. At various times, prisoners could mingle outside their cells, but usually only in small groups."

All very fascinating, Sylvia said to herself. Congratulations on your research, she thought at Judy, but please just tell me what you want of me.

Judy swung the light to her right. Again, the corridor ran to a wall, where the entrance to another perpendicular corridor was visible. This one's entrance was wide open. "Start walking, and turn left down there. Then keep going until I say stop."

Sylvia stood and faced Judy, her arms held out in what she hoped was a calming gesture. She spoke quietly. "Judy, let's just talk for a minute. I'm sure we can find a way to make things right. Maybe something you just haven't thought of..." She cautiously shuffled a little closer to Judy.

Judy sighed audibly. "We're about to make things right, and I've spent a lot of time on it. I hope you won't make all that time go to waste by making me shoot you." She pointed the gun again, and Sylvia froze. "You're not following orders, Sylvia. Remember the consequences of that."

Sylvia, while still keeping remaining alive as her top priority, suddenly realized that was not the only reason she needed to avoid being shot. Judy, with her unexpected expertise with the weapon, might not shoot to kill at first. She might only wound Sylvia, adding the pain of a gunshot to whatever agony or humiliation she had planned. Sylvia immediately saw the value in doing without that. Still not, at present, seeing any chance of success with attacking Judy, she couldn't see any upside at all in resistance for now.

Judy gestured with the gun to the corner towards which the flashlight was still pointing. "Go. Then all the way to the end."

Still shaking, beginning to control it now to the extent that her legs managed to support her, barely, Sylvia shuffled to the corner, glad that, with Judy trailing her, she wouldn't have to look at the gun. She felt temporarily safe, in a relative way, since she was following orders, and assumed Judy wouldn't shoot her in the back. She reached the corner and turned it, walking cautiously into the darkness until Judy herself reached the corner and the flashlight began dimly showing the way ahead.

Sylvia's stomach was twisting in knots. I have to get out of this, I have to get out of this, she repeated to herself, over and over. She steered her mind away, with difficulty, from specific images of what might be about to happen to her.

The corridor down which Sylvia was walking was about twelve feet wide, but had a low ceiling, perhaps seven feet. The ceiling, for as far ahead as Sylvia could see, seemed oddly to consist of chain link sections with flat concrete just above them. Sylvia, mystified for a moment, finally realized she was

seeing more of the fences like the one that had blocked off the other corridor. The first section was hinged at the front, with the farther end suspended from a hook, from which it could presumably be detached and swung down to close off the corridor's entrance. In the very center of the entrance, a small cleat was anchored to the floor. Most likely, decided Sylvia, it served as a hasp, complete with a hole for a padlock, to secure the gate when it was swung down.

On either side of the corridor, the moving beam of Judy's flashlight now picked out prison cells. Each was fronted by a wall of steel bars, its other three walls, floor and ceiling appearing to be concrete. The cell to Sylvia's left and the one to her right appeared identical, each about fifteen feet long and seven feet wide, the bars on the long side, with a low ceiling, at the same height as the corridor. Inside, each cell was featureless, except for a narrow metal bunk bed against one of the short walls, stripped of mattresses and any other bed furnishings. On reaching the end of this first pair of cells, there was an entrance to another corridor on the left, a bare wall on the right. That corridor, like the one in which Sylvia was walking, was around twelve feet wide. Sylvia's eyes, adjusting to the dimness, saw that the corridor met another perpendicular to it – clearly, Sylvia realized, the same corridor whose entrance had been blocked at its beginning. The floor plan clarified in Sylvia's mind: the cell block was traversed by two long parallel corridors, each lined with cells on either side, the long corridors connected by short ones, the cells and cross-corridors alternating. The chain link motif for the ceiling continued, as did the occurrence of cleats, for locking the gate swung down from above, at the start and end of any section of corridor. Sylvia didn't usually examine her surroundings quite so thoroughly and compulsively, but she felt a strong need to see the nature of what would probably be her future accommodations. She didn't know why Judy didn't order her immediately into one of these cells, rather than make her walk the entire length of the hallway. Possibly Judy wanted Sylvia to be conscious of being as far from freedom as possible.

Sylvia passed by a second pair of cells, another cross-corridor, another pair of cells, another corridor. She could only see a portion of the corridor she was walking in at any one time, which gave her the impression that it continued forever.

After the sixth cross-corridor, the pattern of having cells on both sides was interrupted: the seventh section had, instead, a cell on the right, and a solid wall on the left with a single metal door in the middle of it. "Prisoner recreation room," said Judy conversationally, waving the flashlight at the door. "No idea what exactly was in it. Everything moveable was stripped out when they closed the place."

The long corridor ended with one final cross-corridor. Along this corridor, Sylvia saw at first one door on the right side, then, very dimly farther away, a second. Both doors were of metal, like that of the rec room. Sylvia, understanding she had to be at her destination, stopped and awaited further instructions, her stomach swarming with butterflies.

Judy flicked the beam of her flashlight momentarily at the farther door. "Library. No books now, of course." She then pointed the beam at the nearer door, giving it steady illumination. "This is the one we want. Move down towards the library so I've got some space here."

Sylvia, suppressing a groan, saw that Judy was being as careful as ever about letting Sylvia get anywhere near her. She moved aside, and watched intently, hoping to catch any momentary lack of attention from Judy.

The door, unfortunately, already had a key in its lock, so opening it diverted Judy for the barest of instants, leaving Sylvia still unable to mount any sort of assault that wouldn't get her shot. Judy, her eyes steadily on Sylvia, turned the key and, with a slight grunt of effort, pulled the door open. The loud creak of its opening was preceded by a whispering sound, as if from a pressure seal.

Judy beckoned to Sylvia and entered, carrying all of her burdens. Sylvia understood she had no choice but to follow. The gate through which they'd entered the cell block was a long way off, and Judy had its key with her. If Sylvia ever wanted her freedom again, she had to follow that key.

In her first moment after passing through the door, Sylvia blinked as she took in the size of the room, about twenty feet deep, eighteen across – her last thought, for some time, about anything other than what she saw in the center of the room, the one single feature of note in the room, standing between herself and Judy.

Sylvia barely heard Judy remarking, "The air is relatively fresh, all things considered. I brought a fan in here and spent a couple of days airing it out. Used up a bunch of batteries. It was awfully stale before that, and it was giving me a headache. Not that I would mind giving *you* a headache, but I'm going to be in here too. At least part of the time. Oh, that rubber seal on the door is pretty much intact, though it starts to disintegrate as you rub it. But it should last as long as I want it to."

Sylvia lifted her arm shakily and pointed. "You... you..." She wanted to say, calmly and matter-of-factly, "You want me to go in there, don't you?", but was unable to concentrate on speaking long enough to form the sentence. But she didn't really need to ask. There was nothing else she could possibly do in the room.

She was pointing at a simple free-standing cage, about six feet on each side and four feet high. Its sides were formed of vertical steel rods embedded, at the bottom, in the room's concrete floor, which served as the floor of the cage, and braced by horizontal steel strips. The roof of the cage was similarly barred.

There were no furnishings inside the cage, other than the bare floor. In the center of the floor there was a circular hole, about eight inches across, whose purpose, if women had been kept in the cage any length of time, seemed obvious to Sylvia.

Sylvia knew she could not afford, under any circumstances, to let herself get trapped in such a tiny cage, alone with Judy. Judy would be able to do absolutely anything she wanted to her, and continue doing it for as long as she wanted to. This cage symbolized, to Sylvia, the absolute end of all of her options.

Sylvia backed away slowly, shaking her head. "I... I... Judy, what if... Instead of this, maybe we can come to some sort of accommodation, something that would satisfy you – I mean, of course I know you are angry. But we can solve this. That's what I do for a living. Anyway, if we can't work this out, I'll go right in there, I promise. I won't cause any trouble. But first let's talk."

Judy smiled. "I don't expect any trouble as it is." She raised the gun once more, aiming it towards the wall. "Want to watch how much damage a bullet from this does to the wall? Like a bomb going off. In fact, it wouldn't do much less damage if it had to pass through you on the way." She swung the gun around to point straight at Sylvia.

"No!!" Sylvia went down on all fours again, and scrambled towards the cage. "How do I get in it??"

"Door is on the left side. Sorry, on your right." She continued tracking Sylvia with the gun as Sylvia moved.

Sylvia crawled frantically around the right corner of the cage, saw the cage door partly open, hinged on the far side. She pulled it open, crawled through it and into the cage. She stopped, her breath heaving, still on hands and knees, her head hanging down. For the moment she was too breathless to cry.

“Good for you, Sylvia. Now I want you to lock the door – use this key...” She withdrew a key from her satchel, stepped closer to the cage and tossed the key underhanded through the bars of the cage, carefully away from the hole in the floor, until it stopped in the folds of Sylvia’s skirt on the floor, “...and then throw the key back to me. It’s another double lock, so use both keyholes.”

Sylvia’s arms nearly gave way again, and she gave out a high-pitched moan of despair. I can’t, she told herself, I can’t, I can’t do this to myself!

In a sing-song, Judy called out, “Syl-via! You’re almost there. Don’t blow your chance of living through this now!”

Through a sob, Sylvia asked the one thing she had to know. “Are you... going to just leave me here? I need to know if I’m better off doing this or not doing it. You said you won’t kill me, but will you just leave me here to die?”

Judy sighed loudly in exasperation. “Sylvia, I made that promise before God! You heard me! If I left you here to die, that would be killing you, wouldn’t it?” She sounded like a parent patiently reasoning with a small child.

Sylvia pushed herself up to kneel upright – on her knees, her head didn’t quite brush the top of the cage. She picked up the key, and stared at it. I’m using this to give up my last chance of freedom, she thought. Brushing away tears with the back of her other hand, sniffing, she reached out to pull the door closed. The keyholes, of course, were on the outside of the lock. She checked with her finger to locate the first, then fumbled the key into it. Squeezing her eyes tightly shut, making a tight sound in her throat like a teakettle just starting to boil, she twisted the key, sensing the bolt emerging to penetrate the lock plate. After a full revolution of the key, she could turn it no further, and pulled the key out of the lock. She then found the second keyhole, above the first, used the key in that one, and pulled it out.

I’m still holding the key, she thought. I could put it back in now and unlock the door. But she won’t let me. She’ll kill me if I don’t give her the key. With one last sob, she flung the key away from her, watched it slide across the floor almost to Judy’s feet, saw Judy’s look of triumph as she bent to pick it up.

There was a bench, the room’s only other noticeable feature besides the cage, along the portion of the wall where Judy stood – really just a flat wooden shelf extending out from the wall. Judy heaved a sigh and sank tiredly onto the bench, and tossed the key back into the satchel. She bent over the gun, and Sylvia could hear a soft click. The safety catch, she decided. Judy tossed the gun casually into the satchel and sat back upright, smiling.

“Nice to be able to put that down. I’m sure you realize that I was hoping not to need to use it. I can do without it, now.” She leaned back, her hands behind her head cushioning it against the wall, and closed her eyes.

Sylvia sat on the floor, pulling her knees up, smoothing her skirt over them, wrapping her arms around her shins. She laid her head on her knees, closing her eyes. Trapped as she was, she nevertheless felt some of the tension draining away. For the first time in hours, she wasn’t being forced to do something at the point of a gun. And Judy didn’t appear to intend to do anything painful, or even threatening, to her at this time.

Sylvia nearly missed hearing Judy, she was talking so softly. “I want to tell you some of the history of this place.”

Sylvia realized she should listen closely. Any information Judy might give could conceivably help her survive. In spite of Judy's promises, dangerous things could happen here.

"This," Judy gestured at their surroundings, "is the isolation room. I'm sure you've figured out it was used for punishment. A sort of solitary confinement, with a few added twists. Oh," she said, as she saw Sylvia's quick intake of breath, "Probably not what you're picturing. Not medieval torture, whips, heated irons, anything like that. Even in the early twentieth century, which everyone agrees was not quite as enlightened to prisoners' rights as our glorious twenty-first, that sort of thing wouldn't have gone over.

"But the warden who supervised the construction of this place did have some original ideas about discipline enforcement methods. He had this room built, and used it, and because of it, discipline improved remarkably over what the staff had seen at the earlier prison. Though in any prison setting, behavior is never perfect. Every inmate was here because they broke laws. If they'd had complete control over their behavior, they wouldn't be in prison to begin with. But this room helped.

"It wasn't used for minor infractions, but they could accumulate. Collect enough demerits, and you're put in here. The first time it might be just a few hours. A second offense, for collecting that same number of demerits afterward, might be twice as long."

Sylvia looked around. She understood perfectly the humiliation a prisoner must have felt, being kept like an animal in a cage, since she was now experiencing it, burning underneath the surface level of fear for what Judy's plans might be. If it was just a matter of a few hours, Sylvia decided, she could handle it, though she was exhausted, needed to sleep, and knew it would be hard to do that on the concrete floor. She supposed one could get used to it. She felt sure, though, that it would be longer. Much longer. She suddenly felt her fear level rising again.

"For longer stays, the prisoner would be fed and watered, of course. And for sanitary facilities, she had that opening in the floor."

Sylvia had long since guessed that. She shuddered. "You... wouldn't watch me use it, would you?"

Judy simply shrugged. "I might. What will you do about it?"

Sylvia bit back an angry reply. There was nothing to be gained by it.

"Being in here wasn't too bad if the prisoner was docile enough about it. If she resisted, though, and they had to call in extra guards to subdue her, forcing her to submit, there were various levels of restraint that she'd be left with in the cage – chains, shackles, that sort of thing. Restricting her movement that way made it more difficult for her at mealtime, or when answering calls of nature."

Sylvia curled her lip. She loathed the idea of bondage, was always astonished to think she lived in a society that saw nothing wrong with handcuffing non-violent offenders upon arrest.

She suddenly shuddered violently when the significance of Judy's words occurred to her. She can't mean she's going to do that to *me*, can she? she thought. Put me in chains? I didn't fight her! Well, I did my share of resisting, but... Sylvia closed her eyes and moaned. Judy's going to apply her own rules to me, she thought. She wouldn't even be telling me this if she wasn't planning to do it to me.

"For major things, like fighting, the stay here would be several days, for the woman who started it. If they couldn't determine who'd started the fight, both women would serve time in here, one after the other.

“The longest punishment would be for the prisoner who acted as a leader, instigating resistance against the authority of the staff. She’d stay in here at least a week, maybe more.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I know all this. I stumbled on an article about this place about a year ago. It seemed mildly interesting then, as something I could shake my head over and think, how cruel people can be.

“When I was in the hospital I remembered it suddenly, and since the hospital rooms had online access, if the doctor gave permission, I looked up everything I could find about this prison. Official records, interviews with prisoners. There was really a lot of it.

“Oh, one thing you wouldn’t have realized – I was discharged from the hospital three weeks ago, not one. The doctor thought I’d made remarkable improvement, though he wasn’t sure why. It was because of this. As soon as I was out, I came up here and started looking, like I told you. I found it pretty much like you’ve seen it, except as I said, I did do a little cleaning up.”

Sylvia suddenly noticed the bars of her cage looked remarkably clean, considering the passage of time. As if steel wool had been used to scrape off the dust and rust that had surely accumulated over the years. The floor was clean as well. Judy had done more than just brush away a few cobwebs, Sylvia now understood. This had been a real labor of love. Love for the idea of what she could do here. Sylvia shuddered again. Considering the amount of effort Judy had already put into this, Sylvia found herself again revising upward the length of time she might have to stay here. How much money could Judy have set aside for this? Could she keep Sylvia here an entire month?

“Most of the original furnishings are gone, probably taken to the new prison, I guess. Nothing missing from this room, or course. There hadn’t been anything removable to start with. And I did find keys to various things, luckily. There hadn’t been any point in taking those, so they left them.

“I even found the key to that trap door over there.” She pointed, and Sylvia followed the direction of Judy’s gesture to see an unobtrusive wooden slab, about three feet square, in one corner of the room. “It goes down to the room underneath, where the prisoner’s wastes would accumulate in a bucket. When the prisoner’s sentence in this room was over, her last task was to go down, bring up the bucket, empty it out and clean it. Then she could go back to her own cell. As I said, I’ve got the key, so if you’re wondering if there’s a huge pile of shit down there, there’s not. I’ve put a more modern chemical toilet down there. It’ll keep the smells way down.”

Sylvia felt the tears starting in earnest. She hugged her shins more tightly and buried her face against her knees. She mumbled against them, “Please, could you just let me rest awhile? You’ve got me. I can’t get out. Please, I’m just so tired.”

Judy stood and stretched. “I’m pretty tired too. I just need you to do a couple more things. You’ll probably be grateful for the first one.” She reached down into the satchel and withdrew something, then walked over to the cage. She flipped the tiny thing into the cage. “You obviously don’t need those ankle cuffs anymore. This is the key. Take them off, and then throw me the cuffs and the key.”

Sylvia blinked in surprise. She felt a small bit of cautious gratitude – not voicing it in case there was something worse on the horizon, but pleased for the moment at any rate. She picked up the key, fiddled with the cuffs to locate the keyhole, and in a few seconds succeeded in unlocking them. She was glad to fling the cuffs out of the cage.

Judy picked them up, restored them to the satchel, and nodded. "The next thing I need you to do is give me all of your clothes. That was part of the protocol for the isolation cell: inmates were always confined to it naked. That was a key part of the punishment."

Sylvia scrambled up to her knees, furious, and pounded the heel of her hand against one of the bars. "No! I've done everything you've asked me, but this is just too sick! No wonder you were in the hospital! You should still be there!" Her hands gripped the bars tightly, her fingers whitening. She was for the moment so angry she had forgotten the gun, currently out of sight. Remembering it belatedly, she was still too heated to back down. She realized, despairingly, that she was sure to lose this round, as she had all the previous ones. But until that device of coercion put in an appearance, she was damned if she'd give in.

Judy simply smiled. "Are you any hungrier than you were a while ago? Any more thirsty? Some water would be wonderful right now, wouldn't it?"

Sylvia blinked at the change of subject. "What do you..." She stopped, understanding suddenly that the subject had not been changed. The mere mention of water made her simmering thirst flare into a flame of need. And trapped as she was, she was utterly dependent on Judy for anything she needed.

She thought about how long since she'd had a drink. How much water she'd lost in sweating in this intolerable heat... Stop it!

Sylvia suddenly gasped, as she realized she was in an even more desperate situation now than when she'd been facing a gun.

She remembered the feeling of relief when Judy had put the gun away, the constant tension of looking down its barrel dissipating, the danger lessened.

She understood now, all at once, how wrong she had been. The gun was no longer important. Judy had a much stronger, more effective weapon than a gun now.

Judy's smile widened. "I'll give you some time to think about it. I'll be back in a couple of hours." She walked over and picked up the flashlight and the satchel. "There's one more thing I didn't tell you. Can you guess what the name of this room was? What everybody called it?"

"How could I? Don't go, please, I..."

Judy talked over her. "They called it the Black Hole. There's no electricity for lights in the building now, of course. But this room never even had any light fixtures. Once the door was closed... well, you'll see. Or that is, you won't see. It was soundproof, too. It may be a little less so now, than when the door seal was new, but it should be close enough. Inmates who talked about this place said they shouted and screamed while they were in here, but they never heard any sounds coming out of it, not even in the nearest cells." She was slowly walking towards the door as she talked. Standing in the doorway now, she said, "I'll see you soon, Sylvia. I'm sure we can work out a deal on the food and water situation." She left, pushing the door closed behind her.

As Sylvia saw the rectangle of light from the doorway narrowing, she shouted, "No, please, wait, I'll do it! Don't go!" She had never felt so helpless. She was banking on Judy's promise not to leave her to die, but there was nothing at all she could do if Judy changed her mind. "No, please..."

The strip of light disappeared, and an instant later Sylvia heard the whisper of the door closing. She felt the world close in on her. She couldn't even determine whether her eyes were open – she

thought she could feel them blinking, but there was no corresponding flickering of her vision. There was only the black.

As if she were a marionette whose strings had snapped, she sat abruptly on her heels and buried her face in her hands on her thighs, her body wracked with the heaviest sobs she could ever remember.

CHAPTER 5

Sylvia had experienced the absence of light many times, but that was not like this. This utter blackness seemed to press against her skin, making it hard to breathe. She could sense it creeping inward, under her skin, a millimeter at a time. Sylvia realized she felt an irrational fear of opening her mouth, as if the blackness would find entry there and penetrate her completely.

Her thirst pushed back against it, competing with the darkness for her attention.

Water, thought Sylvia. I can't believe I can't just get up and run the faucet. Or open the fridge and crack a bottle of Dasani. Stop thinking about it! she ordered herself. You're making it worse!

Sylvia had been fully aware how dangerous it would be for her to enter this cage, but she hadn't really spelled out for herself exactly *why* it was dangerous. The reason was painfully obvious now.

If Judy, suddenly popping up in Sylvia's back seat in the parking garage, without the gun, had simply said, "Drive us to a deserted north Georgia prison or I won't give you any food and water," Sylvia would have laughed and responded, "Mind if we stop at a restaurant first, then? And afterwards I'll drop you off at the police station."

But now...

Sylvia had been so close, SO close to deciding to risk a gunshot, risk losing her life, as a desperate measure to avoid a fate whose nature she had actually pretty accurately predicted before it was too late to resist: ending up here as Judy's prisoner. Judy's gun, in that sense, did not trump every possible resistance Sylvia might have put up, since Sylvia had nearly decided to defy Judy in spite of the gun. The threat of a bullet had ended up working for Judy, but it might not have.

But now, Judy's new weapon, which would have been laughable in the beginning, was now the ultimate enforcer. No one, as far as Sylvia knew, could possibly choose to die of thirst when someone was offering them water. Their body wouldn't let them. Whatever Judy demanded now, Sylvia was incapable of resisting it to the point of death, because Judy's choice of a weapon made that impossible.

There has to be a way out of this, Sylvia told herself. There *must* be!

If there is some way I can get out of this cell on my own, she decided, I have about two hours to find it. That should be enough time, if the way out exists at all.

The door to the cell was to her right. She reached for it, and banged the knuckles of her right hand painfully, finding that it was a little closer than she'd thought. She rose up onto her knees and turned towards the door, wrapping the fingers of each hand around one of its bars. She pushed and pulled against the door, grunting with effort, annoyed that the activity was making her sweat away still more precious water but knowing it was worth it if she could escape the cage. Getting out of the cage would solve everything. Once out, she would wait by the door for Judy's return. Judy wouldn't be expecting to be attacked on entering. The lack of light would actually help Sylvia – Judy would have her flashlight, but even with it the light was dim, and Sylvia could strike before Judy saw her.

Shaking the cage door, Sylvia found, barely produced a rattle, and no movement Sylvia could feel. Frustrated, she rolled onto her back, lifted her feet, and pounded the cage door with them several times, using the full power of her leg muscles. The pain across the soles of her feet stopped her before long. She thought about throwing the weight of her upper body against it, using her shoulder as the battering ram, but decided she would actually be less powerful that way than using her feet – she would have to do it from a sitting position, and would have very little leverage from there.

Maybe, she thought, it might be possible to dislodge the bars from the concrete floor. Especially after all these years, maybe I can work them loose.

She took a firm hold of the nearest bar and pulled upward as hard as she could, alternating that with trying to shake it. There was no give to it whatsoever, no sound of rattling. She moved on to the next one to the left, repeating the process. I can only spend a minute or so on each one, she told herself. I have to try them all before Judy gets back.

Halfway around, it occurred to Sylvia that the cage might be complete with its own metal floor to which the bars were welded, the floor being submerged under the concrete. If that's the case, she realized, I can't possibly pull any of the bars out of the concrete. But I have to keep trying. She tried to bury another thought: that over the years, various prisoners, many of them much stronger than Sylvia, had spent hundreds of days locked in this cage, and probably every one of them had tried to do what Sylvia was trying now. Without success. It doesn't matter, Sylvia insisted to herself. I *have* to try to get out.

Once she had made a full circuit of the cage, she decided the roof of the cage might possibly offer an escape. She spent several minutes testing every bar of the roof. None of them was the slightest bit loose. Lying down on her back, she pounded on the bars above her with her sore feet, with no effect.

She was out of any options she could think of. There seemed no possible way out of the cage. Sylvia drew up her knees, crossed her arms over them, buried her face against them and wept.

My only hope now, she thought, is that Judy can't really keep me here very long. Judy, she reminded herself, is on the run from the police. The police didn't actually know that yet, but Judy's disappearance simultaneous with Sylvia's would make her a prime suspect the instant Judy was found. She could probably change her appearance enough that the local folks in these parts wouldn't match her up with a police "Wanted" poster, but with no income, able only to use whatever cash she had started with, Judy couldn't keep this up for long. It had to end soon. Sylvia had to tough it out until then. But it might be a couple of weeks. Whatever pain, both physical and psychological, Judy intended to put her through until then, there was absolutely no way to avoid.

Sylvia started crying again in the blackness. And thinking about all the water her eyes were shedding.

Sylvia squeaked and put her hand over her heart at the sudden sound of the door opening. It really must be pretty soundproof, she thought. I didn't get any hint she was coming. A second thought flashed through her head: Maybe it's not her! She dismissed it as runaway wishful thinking.

She squinted and shaded her eyes. She knew the flashlight was dim, but to her fully dilated eyes it was almost like looking into the sun.

"Well, Sylvia? Did you think about our deal for the food and water?"

Sylvia had been dreading this. "If I... if I take off all my clothes, then I can have some water?" She squeezed her eyes shut against the hot tears seeping out, not from the brightness but from the shame of giving in. But she just wasn't able to keep anything in her mind except water, and the fact that there was something she could do to get it.

"Not just for that. You have to do one more thing after that."

Sylvia clenched her hands in anger. "You said you'd give me a drink if I did that!"

Judy shook her head. "I never said that. I asked if you wanted food and water. And I said I thought we could work something out."

Sylvia tried to still the pounding of her heart. Getting mad won't help, she told herself. "What's the other thing I have to do?"

"I'll tell you after you strip."

"Tell me now!"

Judy shrugged. "I can come back in the morning. I could really use some sleep." She turned to leave.

"No!! Wait! Please!" Sylvia's hands flew to the front of her blouse, her fingers fumbling with the topmost fastened button.

Judy stopped and turned back towards her. "Throw everything outside the bars. Far outside."

She's never going to come close enough for me even to touch her, thought Sylvia. I could have attacked her earlier in the day, fought for the gun, maybe died but maybe won. It's too late for that now.

Sylvia finished with the blouse and peeled it away from her sweat-slick skin, not able to stop her hand from shaking as she extended it out beyond the bars, the blouse dangling from her fingers. Biting her lip, she tossed it away, and reached back to unfasten her bra. "Could you let me have a little drink for doing this much?"

Judy shook her head. "Nothing till you've done everything I want. This, and one more thing."

Sylvia whimpered in frustration and threw the bra out of the cage. If I let it fall too close to the cage, where I can reach it, she'll make me throw it farther, thought Sylvia. I can see how she's thinking.

"Everything you're wearing. That necklace too. The earrings. The ring. Prisoners aren't allowed to keep any personal items in this room."

The ring! Damn her! It cost me four hundred dollars! I'll be giving her that money. So she can afford to keep me here longer? Am I extending my time here by giving her this?

Sylvia hesitated, frozen with indecision. I can't let her have this ring! I can't bear thinking about giving her something that will help her extend my imprisonment! But water, water! I have to have it!

Judy turned towards the door again.

Sylvia frantically shouted, "Wait, wait! Please understand! This is hard for me!" She yanked the ring off her finger and tossed it into the far corner of the room, under the bench, hoping somehow it would be lost, knowing, to her despair, that there was nothing for it to be lost behind. She reached behind her neck to unhook the necklace and threw it out of the cage, followed by her earrings.

Judy smiled, and walked around the room picking up the various pieces of jewelry, adding them to the pile of Sylvia's clothing.

Tears flowing again, Sylvia opened the button at the side of her skirt and pulled the zipper down. Rising to her feet, hunched over, her bare back brushing the bars at the top of the cage, she pulled the skirt down, stepped out of it, and flung it through the bars of the cage. Finally, she pulled down her ruined pantyhose, sat on the concrete floor and rolled them down off her feet, and threw them out as well.

Naked now, moaning to herself, Sylvia scooted back against the bars of the cage, folding her arms across her breasts, drawing her knees up, pressed together, her feet pulled back to hide her most private place. Sulkily, she muttered, "What's the other thing I have to do?"

Judy finished gathering the clothes and stuffed them all, unceremoniously, into the satchel. From the satchel, in which Sylvia had all along heard clinking sounds even after the hobble chain had been removed from it, Judy extracted an elaborate collection of metal hardware items. Their purpose was immediately obvious.

Anger flared in Sylvia again, as she flew up onto her knees, grasping the bars of the cage, no longer concerned with hiding her body. "Judy, I'm already locked in a cage! I can't get out! There's no reason for that!"

Judy sighed, bent over the satchel and lifted out a plastic water bottle, held it towards Sylvia, and shook it lightly. The lighting in the room shimmered as the beam from the flashlight struck the surface of the water at varying angles.

Sylvia couldn't tear her eyes away from it. They tracked it in hypnotized intensity as Judy moved it slowly to the left, slowly right. Sylvia licked her lips, discovering that they were starting to crack, and almost tasted the goodness, the sweetness, the coolness as the imagined water slid down her throat.

"Do you want this, Sylvia?"

Sylvia nodded quickly, her eyes pleading.

Judy bent and picked up a length of chain and a padlock, carefully aimed through the bars and tossed them into the cage, to jingle into a pile near Sylvia's left knee. The chain was made of gleaming stainless steel, and would clearly withstand hundreds of pounds of tension. The padlocks were made for heavy duty. "Start by putting the chain around the narrowest part of your waist, and fasten it with the padlock. You don't need to make it so tight it interferes with breathing, but make it snug. Get up on your knees and do it slowly, facing me."

Sylvia, barely thinking of how exposed her body was, spared no attention on the idea of how strange Judy's demand was. She knelt in Judy's full view, keeping her eyes on the bottle as she looped the chain around her waist, with the free ends in front. She had to look down for a moment to snake the shackle of the padlock through overlapping links in the two ends of the chain, leaving about five links on each end to spare. She was about to close the padlock, but stopped, startled, when Judy said, "Wait. Let me look."

Judy took several steps closer, her eyes examining the padlock intently. She wants to make sure I don't try any tricks, thought Sylvia. Like back in the car, with the ankle cuffs. Eyes glued to the bottle, Sylvia turned the padlock slightly to make it easier for Judy to see that the shackle was indeed through the links. She gave Judy a pleading look, and immediately closed the padlock when Judy nodded.

Judy pointed to the chain. "You'll probably want to shift that around so the padlock is behind you. I'm sure it'll be more comfortable that way."

Sylvia nodded quickly, and slid the chain clockwise around her waist, her eyes still fixed on the bottle. A small whine of yearning for its contents began in her throat, repeated with nearly each breath.

Judy picked up four metal bands, each as shiny as the chain. "The smaller ones go on your wrists, the larger ones on your ankles. Let me watch when you lock them." Judy inched still closer, though still well out of Sylvia's reach, and squatted to bring her eyes down to Sylvia's level.

Sylvia snatched up one of the smaller bands. Two inches across, wide enough to cover two or three wristwatches, and about an eighth-inch thick, it consisted of two half-circles connected by a hinge. Its edges were smooth and rounded, allowing for long-term wear without scraping the skin. Three metal prongs on one side of the opening were obviously intended to fit into the three slots on the other side. Sylvia put the band around her wrist, holding her arm up so Judy could see. When Judy nodded, Sylvia squeezed the band shut. The prongs went into the slots with a secure click, making the band a permanent adornment to her wrist, until unlocked with a key. A half-ring adjacent to the now-closed slit allowed for attachments. Judy pointed and said, "Slide it around so the ring is on the inside of your wrist." Sylvia hastened to comply, anxious to finish and earn her water.

Sylvia quickly seized the other wristband, nearly dropping it twice in her nervous haste, put it around her wrist and again held it up so Judy could watch her close it. That done, she lifted her left knee to plant her foot on the floor of the cage, so she could fit one of the ankle bands around it, again closing it with Judy's permission, then reversed her pose to fasten the other. Breathing hard now, her whining louder, she pushed up against the bars, reaching out for the water that Judy held much too far away.

Judy held the bottle a little closer, still out of reach. "Uh-uh, not yet. Can't you see you're not done? Now fasten the ankle cuffs to each other." She threw another padlock into the cage. Sylvia lunged for it, sat on the floor, quickly threaded its shackle through the half-rings of both ankle bands, waited once more for Judy's okay, and pounded it closed with the heel of her palm. Her only conscious thought was of water, leaving no room for her to consider the fact that she had just hobbled herself far worse than before.

Judy said encouragingly, "Good, good! You're nearly there! Here's the last thing, and you'll be done!" She threw the one remaining chain and last padlock into the cage. "You'll probably need to get up on your knees again to do this." Sylvia quickly complied, awkwardly with her now-inseparable feet. Judy twirled her finger. "And turn around, with your back to me. I want to make sure you're doing it right." Reluctantly, not wanting to let the bottle out of her sight, Sylvia turned away.

Judy stepped even closer – obviously Sylvia had no way to attack her. "Pick up that padlock, and hang it on your left pinky, because you'll want to keep it handy." Sylvia quickly did so. "Now take the chain. Put your hands behind you, and push one end of the chain through the ring on one of your wrist bands, and the other end through the other one's ring. Pull the ends all the way through, so the chain draws your wrists together. That's it – no, keep them tight together. Now wrap the two ends of the chain around between your wrists, going opposite ways – there, like that, make a big wad of chain between your wrists holding them together. Now push one end of the chain down behind the chain around your waist, and pull the other end up behind it. Can you wrap the two ends one more time around between your wrists? There you go. Now here's the last thing, and you can drink! Lock the two ends together with the padlock – whoops, don't drop it, okay, through the ends of the chain, lock them together – there!"

Her hands trapped uselessly behind her now, held by the waist chain against the small of her back, Sylvia was conscious only of feeling intense relief – she could get the water now! She tried to walk on her knees to Judy's side of the cage, and winced as the padlock-joined ankle bracelets pinched her ankles and prevented her moving her knee forward. She eventually managed it, swinging her feet left and right as she walked, pressing her upper body against the bars, her breasts crushed against them, two of the bars pressing the sides of her forehead as she tried to get her mouth as close as she could to the bottle of precious water.

She screamed, "No! Please!" as Judy smiled and dropped the bottle back in the satchel, but Judy gave her a calm-down gesture.

“Shhh, stop, you’ve earned your water. I’m just getting it to you in a different form.” She pulled a large thermos out of the satchel, and opened it as she approached the cage. Reaching two fingers into it, she pulled out an ice cube, bent down and tossed it softly through the bars of the cage, where it bounced once on the concrete floor and skidded to a stop behind Sylvia and to her left.

Sylvia reacted instantly, leaning back from the bars and falling to her left, landing hard along the length of her upper arm. The momentary pain jolted her, but to her conscious mind it was unimportant. Rolling onto her stomach, she squirmed, rocking from side to side, inching ahead along the floor until her mouth was over the ice cube. She opened it and bit down on the cube, lifting it with her teeth, and rolled to the side to let gravity bring it down into her mouth.

To Sylvia it was heaven, the best thing she had ever tasted. She wanted to lick it, savor it, but she couldn’t stop herself from crushing it to smaller pieces with her teeth, letting the pieces slide down her throat.

She bent to lick the bit of moisture shed by the cube on the floor, but she heard a clicking sound behind her, and saw Judy had dropped in another cube. She instantly rolled in that direction, squirming towards the cube and consuming that one in the same way as the previous one.

After five cubes, the edge was off her thirst, and the desperation was replaced with a feeling of complete humiliation. She continued squirming to all points of the cage and snatching up ice cubes from the floor, but now with a conscious image of what she was being made to do, and shame for what she knew she looked like. She forced herself to continue, knowing she could get her life needs met in no other way, and not knowing how long she would have to go until her next chance.

“I’ll bet you’re hungry, too.”

Moaning in despair, Sylvia nodded. Her stomach, awakened by the invasion by water, was rumbling continually, and she couldn’t bear the thought of waiting until morning to be fed, which surely would happen if she declined now to do what she must to get food.

Judy set down the thermos, and pulled a larger insulated food cooler from the satchel. From it she pulled out a peeled orange, already separated into eight sections, and one at a time, threw the pieces through the bars directly at Sylvia, to bounce off her legs, her back, her buttocks, onto the floor of the cage. Groaning again, Sylvia squirmed again around the cage floor, snapping up pieces of orange to be chewed up and swallowed, seething with outrage and squeaking each time another piece hit her.

As she continued throwing bits of orange at Sylvia, Judy said conversationally, “I didn’t come up with this idea. They did this to the worst of the prisoners in isolation, but actually it was worse than this. The prisoners here who’d earned the longest time in the Black Hole – ones who’d acted as leaders of any form of group resistance to the authority of the guards – were put in here for a week. The rest of the cell block would be kept in lockdown – no going outside for recreation, or to the indoor rec room, or to the library, no moving from cell to cell to chat with friends. So they were all pretty mad at the woman who was in the Hole, because she’d been the leader, and they blamed her for getting them in trouble. And of course, some of them hadn’t even been involved in the mutiny, and they were being punished anyway, so they were even madder. And at feeding time in here, in the Black Hole, the guards would bring all the other inmates in here, and let them pelt the prisoner with food, and she’d be so hungry by that time that she’d crawl around and eat it just the way you are now. A lot of the inmates would be taunting her and laughing at her. Even the ones who didn’t want to participate had to, because they understood if they didn’t, they’d be in the cage next. Anyway, the whole idea was, after they’d all seen her, naked in a cage, shackled and chained like you are, squirming around for food they were throwing

at her... she was never a leader again, because the inmates never saw her as a leader again. And she never saw herself as one again either. So it really worked.”

Once the orange was gone, Judy took an entire apple and hit Sylvia directly on the buttocks with it. As it bounced away, Sylvia rolled and followed it, taking a huge bite from it, and continued turning it with her mouth and biting off chunks until she was down to the core. Judy waved at the core carelessly and said, “Push it down the waste hole, if you’re done. And lick up any little bits left. I want this cage kept clean. If you want any more meals here.”

Sylvia moaned yet again, convinced that Judy meant every word, and she picked up the core with her teeth, squirming then to the waste hole to drop it in. Then she backtracked to tongue up any small pieces she could see, on the rough concrete.

Judy, at last, dumped the rest of the ice from the thermos down through the barred ceiling of the cage, into a single pile, and Sylvia, grateful it was at least all in one place, snapped the chunks of ice up one by one, chewed up and swallowed them, and finally, though she was no longer thirsty but hoping to postpone needing water again later, sucked up the remaining meltwater from the small puddle on the floor.

She rolled onto her side, exhausted, awash in shame, but physically feeling far, far better than before.

Smiling in satisfaction, Judy picked up both the flashlight and the satchel, then stretched and yawned. “Well, it’s really been a long day, and I’m totally exhausted. I’m going to sack out in one of the nearby cells and get at least nine, ten hours of sleep. I could really use it. I’ll see you in the morning, Sylvia.”

Sylvia’s jaw dropped, and she struggled to try to sit up, giving up when she saw she couldn’t manage it before Judy got to the door. She had been sure that Judy, though leaving her in the cage, would at least let her out of all her restraints, once she’d finished having her fun with the food. Sylvia shouted from the floor, in a voice progressively louder and higher as Judy got closer to the door, “Judy, wait, you can’t leave me like this, wait, I’m locked in anyway, there’s no need for the chains, there’s no point in it, you can’t, wait, NO!!!” This last shout accompanied the slow closing of the door, as Sylvia was once again plunged into absolute blackness.

CHAPTER 6

After about half an hour, Sylvia gave up trying to get loose from her bondage with a cry of frustration. She'd tried twisting her ankles around in various configurations, with no perception that she was accomplishing anything. Both the padlock and the rings on the ankle bands which it was holding together were thick steel beyond Sylvia's strength to break or even bend, and she couldn't twist her feet around far enough to put any significant stress on them anyway. Still, she tried for several minutes. She jerked her feet in opposite directions, again and again, as hard as she could, hoping she could make the bands themselves spring open, but the bands, hopelessly thick and strong around their entire circumference, were even thicker near the latch, and they were so rigid that no amount of tension Sylvia could create from outside could even manage to put the slightest internal pressure on the latching mechanism, let alone somehow break it. She persisted, ignoring the pain of the edges, rounded though they were, digging into her ankles, until it went beyond the bearable into agony. She'd spent an equal amount of time on her wrist bondage, though it was even more hopeless. She had determined quickly that there was no possibility of slipping her hands out of the snug wristbands. The chain wrapped around between her wrists protected the attachment rings and latches from being twisted, though she continued trying long after the pointlessness was obvious, bouncing on the hard floor and growling in growing anger.

It was her sudden realization of how much she was sweating that finally made her give up; the renewal, from all the physical effort, of the production of those body fluids she couldn't afford to lose, when she had no possible way of replenishing them except by begging Judy and giving in to her demands.

With her acknowledgment of the impossibility of escaping her chains as well as the cage, Sylvia felt panic begin closing in. She lay, shaking once again, nearly hyperventilating, feeling as if the world was closing in around her and squeezing the breath out of her. She was not a claustrophobe, but the appropriate circumstances could make one out of anybody. Nine or ten hours! It had only been about two hours the last time, and, looking back on it, she realized it had been easy, though it hadn't seemed so at the time. She had had something to do to occupy her time – her attempts to find a way out of the cage had taken most of the two hours. It was pointless now to continue that, or the more recent attempts to break free of the chains: she was sure she had exhausted all of the limited number of possibilities.

The darkness alone had been bad enough during her first session, a source of some emotional distress, but at least she had been dressed, and able to move at will within the confines of the cage. Now she had not only the emotional distress, but was under stress physically as well, in ways she had never remotely experienced. She could feel her nudity in the contact, all along her body, with the concrete floor – skin rubbed raw, all of it stinging, by all the squirming she had been forced to do to eat. And being in a cage, which she now knew for certain was inescapable, was brought home so much more forcefully to her conscious mind by her inability to move. All of her vulnerabilities – her nudity, her immobility, her knowledge of being trapped, her inability to see anything – all of these reinforced each other, making her feel more helpless and exposed to danger than she had ever imagined possible. And though she wasn't thirsty at present, she knew she would be before the night was over, and she dreaded the return of that craving for something, anything to drink.

And she had to get through an entire night like this! What time was it now? Sylvia tried to track back through everything that had happened. Probably between midnight and 1 a.m., she decided. So, she thought, I'll be here, without interruption, until long after the sun comes up outside. People will be

walking in the sun, laughing, maybe starting on a weekend trip, and I'll still be here, bound naked and caged in total darkness. With nothing to look forward to at the end but further torment from a woman who has the full freedom to express all the hate she has for me!

That thought brought out the tears once more. I'm still in the first day of this! The first day of possibly weeks of misery! I left my office, living my totally normal life, looking forward to a nice weekend, just eight hours ago! It seems like so many ages since then!

All I can do, she decided, is save energy, and stop sweating. There's absolutely nothing else I can accomplish. Nothing but to wait for Judy to come back. After her night's sleep, on which she's just getting started.

I can try to sleep too, Sylvia decided. Assuming that's possible. It's the only way to make the time go faster.

No, she suddenly thought in exasperation. There's something else I have to do first.

She had been aware of, but tried to ignore, the need to pee. She was a little surprised she had got away without doing it this long, but then, a lot of her body's fluids had been finding other exits, through her sweat glands. But now she absolutely had to go, and there was no point in trying to put it off.

She thought about just peeing where she lay, but couldn't bear the thought of lying in it afterwards. Gritting her teeth in anger at the situation, she rolled onto her back, lifted her legs in the air and, having to try several times to create just the right momentum to make her body pivot on her butt, finally succeeded in throwing herself forward into a sitting position. Pressing her fingers against the floor to lift her butt so she could slide it to the side, she squirmed to her left, feeling for the whereabouts of the waste hole after each movement. Finding it at last, she positioned herself over it and, groaning with a renewed sense of shame, let go with a stream of long-withheld piss, hearing it splash into the toilet below. As it slowed, she could feel it, in the end, run back between her buttocks, an uncomfortable feeling she could do nothing about, nor avoid the shame of wetting herself. Eventually, she thought, her spirits hitting bottom, I'll have to empty out my other hole too. Don't need to do that just yet.

Now to see if sleep is possible, she thought. Laying on her side once more, hoping she was closing her eyes but not able to tell for certain, she tried to let her mind go blank – to cast aside her feelings of humiliation and shame, her terror of what the future held, the beginnings of the return of her thirst, though so far nothing like before. She couldn't, so she hoped just lying there quietly would do some good.

Sylvia couldn't tell when the dream ended. She awoke with a scream, and the terror seemed to go on. It was only very gradually that the feel of the floor against her skin reminded her where she really was.

She had found herself in one of those nonsense situations whose preposterousness never seems apparent while the dream is in progress. She had been visiting a client in prison – an odd thing for her to be doing, since she didn't handle criminal cases, but in hindsight her mind creating a prison scenario wasn't surprising at all. In some typically impossible way, the prison authorities had mistaken her for her client, and a pair of burly guards had pulled her out into the hallway, stripped her of her clothing (again, not a surprising direction for the dream to go), and began dragging her to the execution chamber. She had tried desperately to explain who she was and that a terrible mistake was being made,

but for some reason she couldn't make any sounds come out of her mouth. Arriving at the death chamber, they had tied her hands behind her, tied her feet together, stood her up on a trap door and slipped a noose around her neck – she didn't think any state in the country today used hanging for executions. Still trying so hard to make her voice work, she had awakened as they were tightening the noose.

She finally convinced herself it had indeed been a dream, without much help from her environment. Usually when she had a nightmare, a look around herself that told her she was safe in her bedroom was crucial to the process of detaching her mind from whatever horror her subconscious had produced during her sleep. But here in the blackness there were no helpful, calming visual cues at all, and feeling herself naked, with her feet held together and her hands chained behind her, matched up with the dream and prevented her from orienting herself for some time, during which the terror, rather than abating, built to a fever pitch. She continued screaming, until somehow the little differences between waking and dreaming – no noose, lying down rather than standing, no people around trying to kill her – allowed her to return to reality. But the reality, as memories returned, was as frightening as the dream had been. Despite Judy's repeated claims of having no intention of killing her, Sylvia, in the aftereffects of the dream, couldn't feel sure Judy wouldn't eventually decide to reproduce the circumstances of the dream exactly.

I am *not* going back into that, Sylvia told herself forcefully. No more dreams tonight. No more sleep.

She sat up – it was easier than it had been on the first try earlier – and scooted back to the bars behind her to lean against them. She discovered how hard it was to maintain wakefulness when there were no sights or sounds to focus on. She turned to reliving courtroom successes, periodically banging the back of her head against the bars, or her forehead against her drawn-up knees, whenever she started feeling fuzzy. She switched at some point to trying to remember songs she had liked as a teenager, trying hard to recall lyrics exactly. She had to shift her position often, awkwardly against her restraints. Somehow, hours were made to pass.

Sylvia's entire body convulsed as the door to the room banged open and light, dim though it was, flooded the room. She twisted around and saw Judy walking in.

"Judy, could you..." Sylvia stopped suddenly. She had been going to plead with Judy to let her loose, at least from the chains if not the cage, but the look on Judy's face stopped her.

Judy looked at least grim, if not infuriated. I know it can't be anything I did, thought Sylvia. I've been totally out of her sight and hearing since the last time she was in here.

But as Judy stormed past, it was very clear that her mood was entirely different from the one Sylvia had last seen. Judy was carrying, Sylvia suddenly realized, Sylvia's clothes. Sylvia held her breath, hardly daring to hope Judy might be about to let her get dressed and leave. Maybe something happened during the night, she thought, and Judy has to let me go home. Could the police be coming? But how could they even know anything yet?

Judy propped up the flashlight in its usual position and slammed the pile of clothes down on the bench. From the sound, it was obvious there were several solid objects underneath the pile striking the surface of the bench.

Judy began speaking, pacing back and forth, waving her arms. "I thought all this would fix everything. I thought it would make me feel better..." The last was in a wavery voice. Judy was, Sylvia realized, crying.

Judy spun and faced Sylvia. Sylvia felt a need to shrink back, though her back was already pressed against the bars of the cage. Sylvia desperately wanted to keep Judy talking, not only as a way to vent her anger but also as a substitute for any violent action Judy might be considering. "Judy, let's..."

"Don't call me that!! Like we're friends! Friends could never do what you did to me!"

"J... I never meant to..."

Judy sneered. "No, you just did what comes naturally. And you took away everything that meant anything to me! I woke up this morning and I thought Peter was next to me. And he wasn't! And he never will be again! Because of you!"

Sylvia was quivering, not seeing how she could come out of this without being badly hurt. At least she understood now how Judy's sudden mood shift had happened. "If you'll just..."

"I lost everything! You should lose everything too! Starting with this crap!" She stalked back over to the bench, and picked up the pile of clothing again. She carried it back to the cage, and produced one of the things that apparently had been underneath it, though by itself not big enough to cause all the noise Sylvia had heard: the key to the cage. She inserted it into the upper lock, gave it a turn, and then used it on the lower one. Sylvia could only try shrinking back once more, aware of her overwhelming physical disadvantage that made it worse than pointless to try to kick Judy or in any other way attack her.

Judy shouted, "You can do without these!", and threw Sylvia's shoes down through the waste hole. "And this," and down went Sylvia's blouse.

She had this much accomplished before the stunned Sylvia could offer the slightest reaction. Finally Sylvia was able to stammer, "NOOOO, p-please..." and rolled towards the hole to try to cover it. Judy easily pushed her out of the way and threw the rest of Sylvia's clothes down the hole.

She must be going to kill me! Sylvia's inner voice screamed. She's decided I don't need clothes because I'm going to die!

As much as Sylvia still knew it couldn't help, she started to fight with Judy now, kneeling her and bending forward trying to bite her. Judy shouted "Damn you!" and pushed her away, and then ran back to the bench. She returned in seconds and Sylvia saw, to her horror, that she held another chain and padlock.

Sylvia tried to get up so she could dive out of the cage, determined to hold off Judy by kicking or any other possible means, but she had to get onto her back first to get up, and she didn't have time to complete the move before Judy stood in front of the cage door again, blocking Sylvia's exit. Snarling, Judy reached down and rolled Sylvia onto her stomach, and pulled her joined feet off the floor. Sylvia struggled to stretch out her legs and keep them straight, but Judy sat on Sylvia's thighs and pulled her feet upward again, and Sylvia didn't have the leg strength to stop her. She could only keep shouting "No, no, no..." as Judy looped the new chain around the padlock joining Sylvia's ankles, and then around the chain between her wrists, using it to pull Sylvia's feet still closer to her hands. With a last grunt from Judy, Sylvia could feel her heels brush against her butt, and Judy thrust the shackle of the padlock through links in the two ends of the chain and closed it. Judy stood up at last, breathing hard and brushing hair out of her eyes, leaving Sylvia helplessly hogtied.

Judy growled in a low, tight voice, "Now you can't hurt me anymore." Then she backed out of the cage, stood upright and, to Sylvia's astonishment, started removing her own clothes. Sylvia gaped as, one by one, each piece of clothing Judy had been wearing, last of all her bra and panties, disappeared down the waste hole in front of Sylvia's eyes.

She's about to kill me and then herself! Sylvia's inner voice shouted. Do something! Stop her! As if Sylvia could jump out of her hogtie and subdue the crazy woman. Sylvia used every ounce of her leg strength, but was unable to separate her heels and her butt by more than a few inches. She tried desperately to kick free, hopelessly.

Judy had run back towards the bench, and was now returning. Sylvia screamed when she saw Judy was holding the gun. She's going to do it now! wailed the panicked inner voice. Shoot me in the head, in the head, please! Make it all over quickly!

Judy stopped next to the cage, a fierce grin on her lips. "You think this is for you, do you? What did I promise, Sylvia? What did I tell you?"

Sylvia swallowed hard, struggling to speak, trembling all over. "Th-that you wouldn't kill me if I did everything you said. I did, Ju-... I did! I did everything! I know I resisted a little, but there's nothing you told me to do that didn't get done. Remember? I did everything!"

Judy nodded, and for the moment, some of Sylvia's terror abated. "That's what I promised. Before God, too, didn't I? I said it before God."

Sylvia nodded eagerly, her cheek scraping against the floor. "You promised God!"

Judy turned and started pacing again. "I did. And I'd go straight to Hell if I broke that promise. Wouldn't I?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"I have a little confession to make, Sylvia."

Sylvia cringed, whimpering in renewed fear. It sounded as though Judy might say the promise had been a lie, spoken just to get Sylvia's cooperation. Though Judy's use of the word "confession" didn't exactly suggest she was about to renege on a religious obligation.

Judy waved the gun. "I only ever had two bullets in here, Sylvia. I was sure I'd need one somewhere along the way for a demonstration, and I was right. And the only other one is for me. There was never a bullet for you. I planned all along to kill myself, and I just wanted to make you as miserable as I could first. I could never kill you. Yours is not my life to take. I would have gone to Hell if I'd killed you, with or without the promise."

Sylvia's fear turned to shock. I could have ended this long before we got here! she told herself. Anywhere along the drive here, I could have stopped the car, I could have run away, and Judy would only have shot herself, not me! I was never in danger! "S-so... are you going to let me go?"

"No. But I'll give you a way you can get yourself out. I have to do that, you see. You might fail, and you might die. But that will be your own failure. God will decide whether or not you make it. That's His decision, not mine."

"Wh-wh..." Sylvia struggled against another wave of fear. "What do you mean?"

Judy walked back to the bench, to retrieve one more thing. Or two more, as it turned out.

She bent to reenter the cage, and crouched in front of Sylvia. "See this key?"

Normally Sylvia would have responded crossly, "Of course I see it!" But she only nodded.

"It's the key to the padlock I just now put on you. Reach back and see if your fingers can find the padlock."

Sylvia brushed her fingers along the hogtie chain until they came to the padlock. She nodded again.

"I'm going to put the key right here." Judy moved back a pace, and dropped to her knees before the waste hole. Very carefully, she set the key down across the edge of the hole, its prong thrust out over the hole, not exactly teetering, but looking as though a stray air current might blow it over.

Sylvia's eyes went wide, staring at the key, fears of what the key's placement might mean darting through her head. She tried to deny those fears.

Judy snapped her fingers sharply in front of Sylvia's eyes to regain her attention. She held up a much larger key. "This one is for the gate at the entrance to the cell block. See it?"

Sylvia recognized the big grandfather-clock key. She found herself only able to nod again.

Judy backed out of the cage and threw the gate key back onto the bench at the side of the room. She closed the door of the cage, relocked its door – both locks, leaving the key in the keyhole for the upper lock. She patted it. "And I'll just leave this one right here."

Judy picked up the gun once more, and walked over to retrieve the flashlight. Sylvia could see Judy's lip was quivering, and tears starting to flow once more. In a quavery voice, Judy looked up to the ceiling and said, "Okay, God, you decide." Looking down once more, she said, "I didn't kill her. The rest is up to her." She turned back towards Sylvia, and was clearly crying again. "Goodbye, Sylvia. I'm going somewhere you can't reach me. You can't ruin my life anymore."

Without another word, Judy hurried to the door. Sylvia could hear her sobbing as the wavery light of the moving flashlight spilled around the room.

Everything was clear to Sylvia now. She screamed, "NO!!! Come back!! Please!!..." As the last word came out of Sylvia's mouth, Judy, wailing, stumbled out of the door and closed it behind her, cutting off the sound of her crying and plunging Sylvia into utter blackness once more.

I've got to get out of this, now! Now!! Sylvia screamed at herself. She tried harder than ever to straighten her legs, to pull her arms loose, rocking from side to side, all her muscles straining. She tried alternating legs, kicking with one, then the other, adding her back muscles to the effort.

Suddenly, she heard what she had thought impossible: a sound from outside the room. A sound she recognized. Very quiet, very muffled, just at the edge of hearing. Sylvia froze in horror. I know that sound, she thought. I've heard it up close. And if any sound could get through that soundproof door, that would be it.

The blast of the gun being fired.

With every ounce of the power of her lungs, Sylvia screamed, "JUDYYYYYYYYY!!!!!"

Sylvia put her head on the floor and lay limp, feeling now the ache from her fruitless escape efforts in every muscle of her body. She could only quiver and repeat, "Ohmigod ohmigod ohmigod ohmigod..." Between her legs, her bladder let go. The warm liquid puddled under her thighs and seeped in under her stomach.

She knew how she was expected to free herself. And it was impossible. She could never manage it. And nobody else could free her either.

CHAPTER 7

Sylvia could feel the waves of panic crashing towards the shore of her consciousness, where they would overwhelm her ability to function rationally, drowning her in random muscular twitches, any one of which could guarantee her death. Some small power in the core of her being fought against the waves, holding her still, desperately trying to calm her, steady her breathing, let her thoughts flow freely again.

With minimal control over herself reestablished, she forced herself run it all through her mind, laying it out logically, as she always had when preparing cases for court.

Without somehow getting free of this cage, her inner law clerk told her, then out of this room, then out of this cell block, I have probably two days to live, at the absolute most. Until Monday. I can't last longer than that without water.

With Judy dead, the inner voice continued, there is no living person, other than myself, who knows I'm here. However long they search, they would never think to look here. And they're not even looking for me yet. No search will start before Tuesday, after I'm already dead.

And, the voice went on relentlessly, I can't be found by accident, by some local person. After fifty years, the chance that someone else, in the next two days, will explore this prison is laughable. The fact that Judy might possibly have been seen, and might have attracted the attention of someone who wanted to find out what was going on, can't be discounted. But any such person who decides that the prison could be Judy's goal will find the place obviously deserted. There is no car on the premises to tell them someone is here – I hid and camouflaged the car myself at Judy's direction, and I saw how invisible it was to anyone unaware of its presence. There are no lights on in the building, no doors standing open, no sign at all of anyone being here. Anyone who did go so far as to enter would almost certainly not happen to try the door to the stairway down to the basement cell block, nor have any reason to go down the stairs if they did. If they got that far, they would find the gate to the cell block locked, and the only key, the voice reminded her, is in this room with me. Surely this person, if by impossible miracle they did make it to the cell block gate, wouldn't have brought along tools to cut through the gate, in that they wouldn't have guessed such tools were needed. Nor would they feel any need to get through the gate – everything up to that point has told them the prison is deserted, and they can't possibly know I'm here, needing to be rescued, because I can't make a sound they can hear.

The only person who can save me, the voice summarized, is me.

As for doing that, getting myself out, the voice went on, I've already tried every possible way to escape this cage, when I had a lot more freedom of movement than I do now. I can only get out of it by unlocking it with the key that's sitting in the lock, above my head. But I can't get myself upright to reach that key unless I unlock this new padlock first.

So my only possible way to live through this starts with getting that padlock key, the one teetering on the edge of the waste hole. The one that will fall into the hole, irretrievably lost, at the first careless touch. And touch is the only way I can find it, because I'm blind. And I'm hogned, so the few, very limited movements I can possibly make will be disastrously clumsy.

If I lose that key, it's over. The other keys don't matter. I can never get to them.

Laying all the facts out had, at the beginning, a momentary calming effect. It was something Sylvia was so used to doing. But as she went on she felt the panic returning, coming closer, ready to take over her body and throw it uselessly at the sides of the cage.

I'm going to die here, I'm going to die here, a new voice wailed in her head, as the calm, rational voice receded to the background. I can't get out of dying. I wish, I wish, I wish so much Judy had shot me in the head like I was expecting. Instead I'm going to die of dehydration.

Sylvia knew how that worked. She had read about it. How her muscles, as the dehydration advanced, would start to cramp, first probably her legs, after they'd spent so long bent and immobile, and then spreading around her entire body – her arms, back muscles, stomach, neck. And it would go on for hours. It would seem to last forever, the pain before she died. The agony of crucifixion, without the cross.

Oh, and the delirium, of course. Visual and auditory hallucinations, all terrifying, the frantic feeling of mental clamor and confusion. There's that to look forward to too.

This, she realized, is what Judy really wanted for me.

Sylvia was already starting to feel thirsty again. Not yet to the degree she had been last night. But she hadn't had any water since then. The thirst I'm feeling now, she thought, that's the beginning of dying.

From behind the voice of doom, another one shouted over it – NO!!!!

NO! I am not going to give up! I'm here because I decided all along the way, since driving out of the parking garage, that I wanted to live! We fight to live! I will not give up!

What do I need to do to get that key?

Sylvia tried to call up the image of the key in her mind's eye, the exact way Judy had left it. The edge of the waste hole, all around, was like a vertical cliff, revealing that the concrete of the floor was about four inches thick. The key is on the side nearer me, she remembered. It's probably going to fall as soon as I touch it. I have to have my hand cupped underneath it, in the hole, to catch it when it does fall. And I have to keep the side of my hand pressed hard against the side of the hole, so there's no gap for the key to fall through. The only way to make sure I don't knock it over when I touch the edge of the hole is to start from the other side, so I'll know it's not there to be touched when I start. Then move around to it. I have to start from the other side of the cage.

Another wave of fear rolled over her. Even with that strategy, it was nearly impossible. She would never know exactly when she was going to touch it. And she had so little control over her movements – almost couldn't move at all. She visualized the attempt, and was sure that as soon as she felt the slightest touch, her fingers would flinch in panic.

She visualized that moment when she would hear the key plink down into the toilet below. When she would know that her last chance to avoid the agony was gone.

Stop it! Stop thinking like that!

The key is still in reach now, she told herself. At least, I haven't heard it fall in, and I would have, if it had.

As long as it's there, I'm alive. Try something else first.

What if there *is* somebody exploring? If they are out there now, I can be saved much faster by them than by my own efforts. And it will only take a few minutes to find out.

Sylvia drew in a breath, and screamed as loud as she ever had, "HELP ME!!!! HELP MEEEE!!! I'M TRAPPED IN HERE!!!! BEHIND THE BIG DOOR AT THE END!!!! HELP!!!! HELP!!!!!"

She went on as long as she could. She knew any rescuer would have to be in the basement already, near her end of it, for there to be any hope she could be heard through the door. It's not *completely* soundproof, she reminded herself. I did hear the gunshot. Her hopes fell as she realized she couldn't possibly make a sound THAT loud. But she kept screaming.

Soon her voice was coming out raspy and whispery. Swallowing several times failed to bring her voice back. Her throat hurt, and when she tried once more, she found she couldn't produce anything *but* a whisper.

So that's it for that idea, she thought. I've screamed my voice away. Anybody who could hear it can't be more than minutes away.

She waited. Nothing happened.

That's the end of the hope of rescue, she told herself. Time to try to get the key.

But she waited, indecisive. Again she thought, as long as I know it's there, I know I have a chance. If I try to get it, it will be gone.

Awareness of her growing thirst decided her. If I keep waiting like this, she told herself, I won't have the strength anymore when I do decide to do it.

She squeezed her eyes shut tight, and exhorted herself, Do it. Do it. Do it!! If you don't do it because you're afraid of knocking the key off and dying, then you *will* die.

She visualized it in her mind. Sylvia had never been high on any manual dexterity index, and certainly not using her left hand. I obviously need to use my right hand, she told herself, so I need to be lying on my right side, so that my right hand can get down to the floor, without my left or the hogtie chain getting in the way. I'll start out across the waste hole from where the key is, and gradually creep around the hole, pushing my hand along the side of the hole until my palm touches the key and it drops down onto my fingers.

She gasped as she suddenly realized a new problem. At present, she was on her stomach. She believed it wouldn't be too hard to get herself turned onto her right side, but then she would be facing the waste hole, rather than having her back to it. To put her back to the hole, she would have to turn onto her left side, and would have to use her more clumsy left hand to get the key.

It's okay, though, she thought in momentary relief, I have to get to the other side of the waste hole anyway. Once I get there...

No, she realized, that *still* doesn't do it. If I circle around to the other side of the hole on my right side, I'll still be facing towards the hole when I get there. There is not enough room in the cage to fix this, to orient myself so I'm on my right side with my back to the waste hole, except by having my body pass right over the waste hole along the way. I'd knock the key down into the hole before I even start working on retrieving it.

She writhed in frustration, her body bouncing slightly, before she made herself stop in near panic, realizing suddenly the vibrations she was causing could knock the key off the edge.

Okay, she told herself, it's okay, it's okay. I'll have to use my left hand. I'll just be extra extra careful, instead of merely extra careful.

And I need to get started now.

Pressing down her knees, middle, and chin to lift various parts of her body slightly off the floor so move in inchworm fashion, she wriggled to her right, until she was up hard against the bars. She

needed, she knew, to be as far from the hole as she could get before turning onto her left side. At last, after several attempts to find out what worked, getting nearly there once but coming up just short and falling back onto her stomach, which made her heart pound in fear, again, of knocking the key from its perch by vibrations, at last she managed to get herself lying on her side.

She squirmed forward towards the bars again, and began slowly, laboriously, and painfully to her skin, wriggling ahead, making a gradual circle around the periphery of the cage, arching her back as much as she could to fit into the corners made by the walls of the cage, keeping in contact with the bars so she knew she was staying away from the waste hole, until at last she was on the opposite side of the cage from where she had started. That she needed to minimize the amount of heavy thumping she did on the floor made it still harder. By the time she stopped, the sweat was streaming down her stomach, back, legs, and face, and she lay still for several minutes, trying to let her body cool. She could feel one stream in particular flowing from her armpit. On impulse she bent her head up and licked her shoulder where the stream was flowing along it, tasting the salt, trying to get some of the fluid back inside her. That's ridiculous, she decided. Like trying to stop Niagara Falls with a drinking straw.

Her mind wandered into a fantasy of holding a huge, 32-ounce tumbler of cool, clear water, drinking it slowly, feeling the wonderful stream of it flowing down into her.

Stop it! she ordered herself. I can't have water now. Later. When I get myself out of this, I can have all the water in the world, I can go swimming in it, but later!

Okay, she thought, back up to the hole, now, until you feel the hole with your hand.

With her first move, suddenly her right quadriceps muscle seized up in a cramp. She hissed in pain, unable to give voice to the scream that tried to force its way out of her. Automatically she tried to straighten her leg out, impossible against the hogtie. There was no way to stretch it, nothing she could do at all except wait it out.

Will it even stop, she wondered, or is this the beginning of the end? It's so unfair! I was almost there!

Breathing in tiny sips, she rocked with the pain, tears streaming from her eyes, until, after a time, it began to ease. Gradually it subsided.

Now she was afraid to make that same move again, fearing that the pain would start all over again.

I don't think it's so much the dehydration, or not purely that, she thought. My legs have just been bent up so long. I need to straighten them really soon.

Moving still more carefully, trying somehow to keep her right thigh relaxed as she moved, she wriggled backward towards the hole.

In a few minutes, her fingers felt the edge of the hole. She froze, breathing with her mouth wide open, trying to release tension. I'm almost at the big moment, she thought. Where I find out if I'll live or die.

Okay, she thought. Put your left hand down in the hole. Fingers cupped. Thumb up out of the way, side of your hand up tight against the side of the hole, from the index finger down to the webbing of the thumb. Don't let that side of your hand leave the concrete, for an instant, for a millimeter.

I need to travel backwards around the hole, not forwards, she realized. Damn, I wish I had practiced that!

With her back arched, she wriggled the tiniest bit in the direction her knees were pointing, keeping her hand completely still, unmoving, on the side of the hole. Then, keeping her body where it was, she very carefully, slowly, slid her left hand along the side. The care was for practice – she knew she wasn't near the key yet. She repeated the movements, body and then hand, body and then hand, until she had to stop for a rest, the sweat from her efforts pouring down her body once more. While she rested she kept her hand frozen where it was, no longer sure how far she might be from the key. At last she made herself start again. Quarter inch by quarter inch, she crept around the hole, holding her breath each time she moved, then staying still to let her breathing catch up, then holding it and moving again.

After at least fifty tiny movements, she felt the lightest touch against her palm, near the heel. She backed off carefully, the breath suddenly racing in and out of her like a steam engine.

It's still there, she told herself. It didn't fall off.

She moved her hand carefully, so carefully, upward, the whole length of the side of her hand pressed tight against the side of the waste hole. In the instant that the edge of her palm touched the key again, the quadriceps cramp came back.

KEEP YOUR HAND THERE, KEEP IT THERE! KEEP IT THERE! She fought against every instinct of her body that tried to make her curl around the pain, to make her clench her fist. Somewhere beyond the pain, she felt a tiny weight fall on the first pad of her index finger and slide towards the last pad, tipping towards the side, wedging itself between her finger and the waste hole wall. She pressed her finger against the concrete still harder, started sliding it up, feeling the key slide with it, coming slowing up with her finger, slowly up, slowly, don't let it drop any farther against your finger, there's no way to recover it if it does. Coming up by slow millimeters, her leg exploding with pain, her breath whistling in and out between her teeth. Suddenly the edge of the hole reached, the key squirting up like an appleseed pinched between her fingers and jingling onto the floor of the cage.

Is it really there, is it really there?? She curled her left hand out of the way and felt the cage floor with the fingers of her right, and found the key, pressed down on it with her fingertips and slid it closer to her, away from the hole, dug her fingernail under its edge and picked it up off the floor. Screaming silently with the pain in her leg, her ravaged vocal cords only able to make a tortured whisper.

Unlock it, unlock it, unlock the padlock! The cramp isn't going away!

Holding the key in the shaking fingers of her right hand, she pulled on the hogtie chain with her left, pulling the padlock closer. Feeling around it with her fingertips, finding the keyhole. Fumbling with the key, keeping one finger on the keyhole to remind her exactly where it was. Finding the orientation, feeling the key slide into the keyhole suddenly, turning it.

The lock sprung open. She yanked it free of the chain, felt the chain slipping between her ankles, her legs extending.

She made another whispered scream, the pain in her leg murderous as it straightened. She pushed her foot against a bar of the cage, using it to stretch her leg muscles.

The pain lessening, lessening, slowly subsiding. Gone, leaving a residual ache.

Breathing in heaves, feeling faint, nauseous.

I've got to stop for a while, she told herself. Everything else can wait. I have to rest.

She rolled onto her stomach, resting her cheek on the concrete. Utter exhaustion, and the release from the immediate threat of a painful, lingering death, sent her floating off in waves of sleep.

CHAPTER 8

Sylvia awoke, completely disoriented, with no idea where she was, desperately seeking visual cues and finding none. The memory, then, that she was still blind, bound hand and foot, naked in a cage, nobody knowing where she was, came flooding back, but with a slight positive note behind the terror: I have a way to get loose! she told herself triumphantly.

The padlock! Where is it? I need that key!

She felt around on the floor of the cage with her feet, and in moments found the padlock, the key still in it. She drew it to herself with her feet, turned to put her hands on it, extracted the key, and quickly tried the key on the lock holding her wrists chained against her back. For several minutes, her frustration growing, she tried to get it into the keyhole. Fitting the key into the hole had seemed easy enough before, even under all the stress she had faced at the time. At last she picked up the hogtie padlock and held it against the one she was trying to unlock.

They weren't the same! They were different sizes! Almost certainly they took different keys.

To make sure, she painstakingly felt the keyholes of both with the tips of her fingers. Yes, the holes were different sizes too. There was no way this key would work.

She compared the hogtie lock with the one holding her ankle bands together. And the one securing her waist chain.

No good. This key would not open any of those.

She seethed with fury. Judy had never suggested a location for the keys to these locks. Sylvia had no way to get them unlocked.

Gritting her teeth, she realized that since she could save her life without unlocking these padlocks, Judy had seen no reason to make it possible for her to do so. Her bonds, she saw, looking ahead to getting out of the prison and trying to find help, made it impossible that she could cover herself with any clothing, even if she could find some. When she finally ran across people who could help her, she would have to meet them naked and bound, unable to hide her breasts, unable to cover her private parts.

She bounced on the floor in anger.

Well, that's not important, she insisted to herself. I can get out of the cage, and I can get out of the cell block. Judy did leave the keys for those, the first of them right in the lock. That's what matters.

Sylvia rolled onto her back and sat up. She backed up against the bars of the cage, grabbed hold with her fingers, and used her hands to start lifting herself, with help from her feet.

Up on her knees, she had to examine three sides of the cage before she found the one with the lock.

She cursed again. The key, of course, functioned on the outside of the lock. It had been easy to reach when her hands had been free.

She tried several ways to reach it. At last, she found that she could just squeeze both feet out between two bars of the cage, making it possible to back up flush against the bars, reach out with her right hand and turn the key.

One lock done. She pulled the key carefully out of the lock, thinking, don't drop it, don't drop it! After all you've done, if you drop this key and it bounces away out of reach, you're still dead!

The first lock had been easy. For the second one, she couldn't seem to locate the keyhole. Trying to find it with one of the fingers of her right hand left her holding the key so precariously she had to stop. She could just barely get her left and right hand out together, and had to twist her left arm around painfully to get any of her left hand's fingers on the keyhole. She finally did, and used that as a guide to help her insert the key.

The cage door sprang open suddenly after she twisted the key, and she almost sprawled backwards onto the floor. She caught herself and walked out of the cage on her knees, her heart singing. I'm out! I'm out!

She sank back down to the floor. One more key, she reminded herself. It's over on the bench. And I know where the bench is from here.

Pushing down with her hands to lift her butt and move it forward, she inchwormed her way towards the bench. When her feet hit the wall, she lifted them up. Sure enough, they found the underside of the bench.

Minutes later she was sitting on the bench, her hand clutching the gate key, the final ingredient in the recipe of her escape. I've got it, I've got it!! I can get out of here! There's going to be some embarrassment down the road, she told herself, when I find somebody to help me, but tonight, tonight at the latest, I can be at home in my own bed! With water! I'm taking a big glass of water to bed with me! And when it's empty I can refill it!

Sylvia laughed with relief. The fact that Judy didn't try to make either the cage key or the gate key hard to find, she crowed, meant that she must have been so sure I'd never get the first key. She wanted me to know exactly where they were, and to know they were out of reach. She never thought I'd get this far.

The door to the room was in the wall opposite the bench. Sylvia dropped down to the floor, and decided that following the walls around the room would probably be better than going straight across. She would lose her sense of where she was in the room as soon as she left the wall.

When she arrived at the door wall, she realized she would have to be standing to open the door. She pressed her back hard against the wall and began using her fingers to slowly walk herself upright against it.

It occurred to her now, in dismay, that there was no question of trying to walk, once she got out of the room. Her feet were held much too close together to take steps of more than an inch. She remembered how many sets of cells were along the corridor, and her estimate of their size and the spaces between them. She had, she estimated, sixty yards to go to reach the gate once she was out of the room. It would take hours if she took those tiny one-inch steps. She just wouldn't have time, before the battle with thirst, and its accompanying dizziness, disorientation, and exhaustion overwhelmed her. And squirming that distance along the floor would be still more exhausting, as well as being hell on her skin. There was no choice at all other than hopping.

She cursed Judy again, turned left along the wall, put her elbow out so she could brush it against the wall as she moved, so she could maintain contact with it and not start going in circles, and started hopping.

She found, to her annoyance, that her breasts bounced with each hop, and that the bouncing grew steadily worse if she wasn't careful about the rhythm of her hops. She had never before had regrets about developing big breasts, but they weren't helpful now.

Her heart leapt as her fingers brushed the door. Finally! FINALLY!

She turned away from it to get both hands on the handle, holding the gate key tightly against the webbing between her thumb and index finger, turned the handle and leaned back against the door. It resisted being pushed, and her stomach twisted in knots, with the fear that Judy had locked it and trapped Sylvia inside. She realized then that opening a rubber-sealed door out of a closed room represented air pressure problems that explained the difficulty. She pushed harder. With a sucking sound, the door opened. She nearly fell, and had to hold the handle tightly to prevent it.

She turned around the doorframe and looked out of the room she had thought she would never escape.

Her jaw dropped open. She had to lean against the door frame, moaning, appalled at her denseness.

Sylvia had been imagining this moment, her first sight of the world outside the Black Hole after her escape from the cage. Sight. Seeing.

The cell block was as pitch black as the Hole itself.

What in the hell was I thinking? she demanded of herself. She had somehow been so sure there would be light out here. The only other time she had ever seen the cell block, it had been lit by Judy's flashlight. That was how she had been visualizing it now. Sylvia swore at herself again. Of course there was no Judy here, no flashlight. The entire basement, the entire sixty-yard distance to the cell block gate, was invisible to her.

Well, she reminded herself, it's not like it has a complex floor plan. There was just the one corridor to go down, to the front of the cell block, and she remembered how many cells she would have to pass along the way. She would know how far along she was the whole time, and how far she still needed to go. She would just need to proceed more slowly than she wanted, by feel rather than sight.

She could smell that familiar burning stink, from the gun being fired. She had expected that.

It made sense to return to the gate the way she had come, since she knew the exit to the other corridor was blocked. Wrapping the fingers of her right hand tightly around the gate key, Sylvia turned left around the door frame. After touching the wall to her left with her elbow, she took two hops, then once more touched the wall. She knew it would be stupid to leave the wall. The main corridor was so long, it would be easy to veer off and find herself hopping into one of the cross-corridors without realizing it, completely wrecking her sense of where she was as soon as she bumped into something that wasn't supposed to be there.

A few sets of hops-and-touches brought her to the corner where she would turn into the long main corridor. She turned right, resumed hopping, and soon found the bars of the first cell with her elbow. On her next hop, her feet nearly slid out from under her as they contacted something slick on the floor. She had to lean hard against the bars to remain upright.

Sylvia sucked in an excited breath. Could it be water, she wondered? I need a drink so much!

She was so tired of needing water.

The burning smell seemed stronger here. This must be near where Judy shot herself, Sylvia decided.

She turned her back to the bars and wrapped her fingers around them, carefully protecting the gate key, and slid down to the floor. She was sitting in the puddle now, feeling it surround her butt. So cool, so wonderful!

This close to it, she realized it had an odd smell, separate from the burning stink, a smell she wasn't familiar with. I don't care, she thought. I've got something to drink.

She rubbed the wet fingers of her left hand against each other. The liquid felt too thick to be water. Something else. What could it be doing here? It hadn't been here before.

She suddenly gasped and slid to her left, desperate to get out of the puddle. She kept sliding until her butt felt dry.

This was Judy's blood.

No! thought Sylvia. You can't be blood! You have to be water!

Sylvia understood what evidently had happened, and suddenly remembered Judy's last comment: "I'm going somewhere you can't reach me." Judy must have opened up this cell, Sylvia told herself, gone in and locked the door behind her, and shot herself inside. Her body must be right there, just on the other side of the bars, where I can't "reach her." Judy blamed me for destroying her life. She didn't want me defiling her body after death.

Sylvia's next thought horrified her: Judy may *not* have gone into the cell! Her body might be right here in the corridor with me! I could be just inches away from touching it!

Following behind that thought came another: Judy's satchel! It would have all the keys in it, the ones that would unlock all these padlocks! Is it inside the cell, impossible for me to get, Sylvia wondered, or is it right here? Almost equally useful, the flashlight could be out here too.

Momentarily overwhelmed by the thought of how much work would be involved in searching the entire available area of the cell block for a satchel that might not be anywhere she could reach it, Sylvia realized the job didn't need to be that hard. She knew Judy had shot herself *here*, either inside this cell or in front of it. Sylvia didn't require any more keys to get out of the prison, other than the gate key she was already holding, but searching the small area in front of this one cell was worth the trouble if meant she could free herself of all of the chains and restraints, before she ran into any people outside who could help her get home. Among the keys in the satchel, there should even be one for that trap door that would let her recover her urine-soaked clothes from underneath the waste hole. The mental image returned to her, reminding her of how embarrassing it would be to be seen the way she was now. Obviously it would be *very* nice to find that satchel.

I can't just search around at random, she told herself. I could easily miss it. I won't miss it if I do it in a really thorough way.

Her nose wrinkling with disgust, she worked her way sideways through the pool of blood again, pushing down hard with her fingers to lift her butt each time she wanted to shift it to the side, in alternation with shifting her legs.

Once she reached the end of the cell, she pushed herself out from the bars so she could stretch out flat on the floor. Keeping the top of her head in contact with the bars, bumping it slightly many times but not painfully, she rolled on the floor across the front of the cell, the fastest way of checking every square inch of floor for a distance of about five and a half feet from the cell bars outward. She knew she was getting a thick coating of Judy's blood over nearly all of her body now, but told herself it couldn't be helped. This had to be done.

She sighed with disappointment when she reached the section of blank wall past the end of the cell, without finding the satchel, and decided to try the opposite side of the corridor. She wriggled her way to the wall across from the cell, which she now recalled was where that recreation room was. With her toes in contact with the wall this time, she resumed rolling, until at last she reached the corner where the cross corridor started, the one with the Black Hole (she shuddered at the memory of the terror she'd suffered within) and the library. Still no satchel.

Unless it's so perfectly centered in the corridor that I missed it both times, she thought, which seems really unlikely, then it's just not here. And if it was here, Judy's body would be out here too, and I can't imagine I could have missed *that*. My first guess was right: Judy went inside the cell to shoot herself there. And she took the satchel and flashlight with her.

Sylvia realized there was one more thing to try: it was possible Judy might not have locked the cell door. She squirmed her way back across the corridor, and found the bars of the cell again – and the blood pool, as well. With her back against the bars, she took a tight grip on a bar and used it to slowly, with a lot of shifting her weight and grunting, raise herself back up to a standing position. The cell door, she remembered, was at the far end. She hopped to that end, and found the interruption in the pattern of the bars that signaled she had reached the door. She pulled outward on the bars, with no effect. She found, with her fingers, the metal rectangle housing the lock, so she knew she was in the right place.

She sighed again. Okay, she thought, she did lock herself in. Or maybe the lock engages automatically when the door closes. Either way, there is a satchel just a few feet away containing the means of releasing all these chains and locks, and I've got no way to get to it.

It's still okay, she told herself, it's okay. I've got the key I absolutely have to have, right here in my hand. Sylvia gave the gate key a fond squeeze, and turned to resume her hopping trek towards the front of the cell block.

She passed several more cells, with no liquid interruptions this time. She thought back to the blood, suddenly thinking: it's not water, but I still could drink it – the idea appalled her. It wasn't just blood, it was Judy's. I'm really thirsty, she told herself, and I can't stop thinking about getting a drink, but I'm not that far gone yet.

As she wondered, for the hundredth time, how long it would be before she did find some water, the memory suddenly came back to her: that creek! It was just outside the front gate to the prison! Just before the car reached the big wall, she reminded herself, that's the last thing we did, we drove over that little bridge over a creek! There was water flowing, glowing, sparkling! That's where I'm headed! Up the stairs, down the hallway, out the front door, hopping down that broken driveway, all my exhaustion forgotten because I'm almost to the water! I can sit in it as long as I want to, drinking all I want, letting it flow over my body, feeling so cool and refreshing. Oh, and washing away the blood too.

Sylvia hopped a little faster now, her excitement building. Past one cell, another, another, seven altogether counting the one in which Judy lay dead. Just a few more hops, she thought, and I'll be at the wall with the gate!

Her world seemed to turn upside down when first her breasts, then an instant later her face, smacked up against a barrier that had no business being there. She bounced back from it, and heard a metallic jingling sound. She felt herself going down, and thought desperately, Hold the key!! Hold the key!! as she twisted to the right to avoid landing directly on her tailbone. She landed on the side of her buttock, continuing her fall as her upper arm and shoulder banged painfully on the floor.

Breathing hard, she curled up around the pain, conscious mostly of the stinging in her right palm where the gate key had pressed sharply into the padded flesh.

Her mental confusion slowly abated to the point of allowing her to take a physical inventory. She moved her joints cautiously, and decided at length that nothing was broken. And much more important, she still had the key. She wasn't sure how she could have found it if it had gone skidding off in some unknown direction for some unknown distance.

She tried to think what could have happened. It couldn't possibly be the wall at the end, or rather beginning, of the corridor. Her elbow had been in contact with cell bars when she hit the barrier, and there should have been a dozen feet of concrete wall after the bars before she reached that corner.

She reached out her legs, and her feet almost immediately touched the bars of that cell again. She moved her feet to the right, feeling for the barrier. Her toes found a pattern of tilted squares of wire. Chain link. One of those gates, she realized. She became immediately disoriented again. The closed gate had been at the start of the *other* corridor. She tried to decide if she could have taken the wrong corridor somehow, but knew that was impossible. She was absolutely sure she had returned to the front of the cell block through the exact same corridor she had come down to begin with. She could not possibly have gotten mixed up about her directions to that extent. And this corridor hadn't been closed...

Judy! Judy closed it!

Sylvia suddenly realized Judy might well have closed off the exit before coming into the Black Hole in her suicidal rage. It would make perfect sense, Sylvia thought, desperation growing within her. Her blood ran increasingly cold when she realized how much trouble she was in. This gate, she reminded herself, and the one I saw yesterday on the other side, are blocking the only exits from the cell block. I have the key to the gate, but I can't reach the gate.

Sylvia began shaking, her breath coming faster, deeper. She felt panic beginning to build once again. She whirled around on her buttocks and backed up against the fence, pulling on it desperately, willing it to come up and clear a space for her underneath. She managed to move it slightly, but each movement towards her stopped abruptly, with a soft jingling sound. She suddenly remembered those cleats in the floor, each meant to secure one of the fences. She wriggled to the side, in front of the fence, feeling with her hand... there. There was a padlock in the hasp. Feeling behind it with the tips of her fingers, she found that the cleat now projected through a hole in the metal pipe that served as the bottom edge of the fence. When she pulled the pipe towards her, the padlock blocked the cleat from coming out of the hole. That was how the fence was locked down. Sylvia couldn't possibly open up this fence. Well, of course, she told herself, her desperation closing in once more. If the prisoners could open the things, then what were they for?

I'm dead, Sylvia thought, I'm dead, I'm dead. I can't get out of here!

No! another part of her mind said forcefully. There still has to be a way out! Judy had to make it that way, remember? For the same reason she left me keys! She can't be the one who kills me. That would make God so mad at her!

Maybe, Sylvia thought, Judy opened the fence on the other side when she closed this one. She must have! She wanted me sitting here thinking I'm trapped, and not realizing I can cross over and get to the gate from the other side. She thought I'd just give up and not check. That would be *me* killing me, not her.

Sylvia shook her head in amazement. Did Judy plan all this ahead, or was everything since this morning all a spur-of-the-moment plan to go with her suicide?

Sylvia turned her back to the fence and once more laboriously worked her way up to a standing position. She turned left and hopped to the inner wall of the corridor, here formed by the bars of the cell across from the one she'd been in contact with before she'd run into the fence. She turned there, at the corner of the cell and the fence, and hopped to the other end of the cell, where the nearest cross-corridor started.

She tried to steer her mind away from how parched she was. She had been continually sweating all along the way, still more so with the exertions of the last few minutes. As she turned the corner into the cross-corridor, she envisioned a long, lazy swim in the creek, her mouth wide open to let the water flow directly in and straight down to her stomach. Once I get to that creek, she told herself, I'll just drink and drink for hours.

She slowed down, hopping carefully, just inches ahead at a time, when she thought she was nearing the end of the cross-corridor. She knew it was possible Judy had pulled down another fence here, to block her from the main corridor. In fact, Sylvia told herself, it seems likely she'd done so. Make me back out of this cross-corridor, go to another, then another, until I find one that's open. No sense making it too easy for me.

Sylvia twisted her upper body to put her right shoulder in front, so she wouldn't be hurt like before if she did run into the fence. At last, caution taking over completely, she resorted to creeping ahead at a walk, her padlocked ankle bands allowing the one-inch steps. She knew she would either reach the corner in a moment or else nudge a fence with her shoulder.

It never occurred to her to anticipate a barrier at the level of her upper shin. Already leaning forward, she had no way to move her legs ahead to maintain balance. She toppled forward until she was stopped by a slanted surface, her whole weight suddenly smacking hard against it. She heard a loud twanging sound, and the surface she had fallen onto suddenly shifted ahead, then stopped, now upright, with a loud crashing sound. She fell against it for a second time and then, her knees buckling, she fell sideways to the floor.

Sylvia started crying. I was so careful, she wailed inside, but the damn rules keep changing!

Again, she had held onto the gate key. Some survival mechanism inside her knew how important it was, without her conscious mind needing to tell it.

For the second time, she experimented with her body to decide whether anything was broken. She ached everywhere, and was sure she would be completely covered with bruises tomorrow, but again nothing seemed to be fractured.

She turned over to back up against the thing she had run into, to see if she could decide what it was.

Her fingers told her it was simply another one of those chain link fences pulled down from the ceiling, this one intended to block the end of the cross-corridor. It was vertical now, and she couldn't understand why it hadn't been vertical to begin with...

Ohhhh no, she suddenly thought, oh no oh no oh no, please tell me I'm wrong, please tell me it's not what I'm thinking.

I know what that twanging sound was, she told herself. It was a heavy string or wire being broken by stress. It was holding the fence up off the floor. That's why the fence was slanted, like a

partly-open garage door, with the bottom out towards me, and why I hit it with my shin. There was about a foot of clearance underneath it. If I had somehow known to approach it crawling on the floor, I could have gone under it and be past it now, out into the main corridor. But Judy knew I probably wouldn't be moving on the floor, that I'd be more likely to be standing, hopping, because it's the fastest way I can move. She knew I'd come up against it standing, like I did, that it would trip me by hitting my shin, that I'd fall against it, and the impact of me hitting it would snap the string...

Oh, no, no, no, no...

Sylvia felt sure, suddenly, positively sure, that this one partly-open fence had been her one way out. She remembered, so clearly, her reasoning when she'd run up against the closed fence before: that there had to be another way out, because if Judy had blocked every exit, she would be killing Sylvia, and she couldn't do that. And now, Sylvia saw she'd been perfectly correct. Judy had indeed left her a way out, under this fence. Judy was in the clear, according to her own addled way of justifying her actions. If I've taken an exit offered to me and managed to wreck it, Sylvia told herself, then that's *my* fault, not Judy's. I *could* have come into this corridor wriggling on the floor, and Judy knew that. She could honestly say, see, Sylvia could have got out that way. Right now she's probably up there defending herself to God: Look, your Holiness, I kept my promise. It's not me that killed her.

It occurred to Sylvia, brightening slightly her mood of despair, that there was a difference between a lowered fence and a locked fence. She'd felt the padlock for that last fence, and she knew there was no way to budge that one. But this fence, she pointed out to herself, obviously *can't* be locked down. It just now fell into place. It's not like Judy could have floated in from Heaven or Hell or wherever she is and slipped a padlock in the hasp, in the last few minutes while I was sitting here.

Sylvia slid herself, by the usual laborious process, across the front of the fence until she felt the cleat that the fence was meant to be anchored to. As with the other fence, this one, now that it was in place, had allowed the cleat through the hole in the pipe along its bottom, but what was missing, as Sylvia had known, was the padlock to hold it there. Sylvia curled her fingers around the lowest wires of chain link and walked forward on her buttocks, pulling the fence behind her. It didn't really take much effort to move the fence, to make it start pivoting around the hinge in the ceiling from which it hung. Sylvia felt her spirits rising with the fence.

She ran into a problem quickly. In a sitting position, she could only get her hands a few inches off the floor. In raising the bottom of the fence a few inches, it should have been possible to get her legs under it, and then raise it farther by lifting it with her knees, then wriggle her upper body under it while her knees kept it aloft. However, in trying to turn her body on the floor so her legs could get under the fence, she couldn't quite get them there without letting go of the fence – there was nothing she could do about the fact that her hands were joined behind her back, and she could only turn so far while holding the fence.

She decided to try standing, and lifting the fence from an upright position. As she visualized it, she could gradually walk her fingers down the wires of chain link, lifting the fence higher and higher behind her, until she could bend over to rest it on her back, and maneuver the rest of her body under it. In practice, she found that as soon as she pulled the fence towards her, it banged against her ankles, stopping further progress. Moving her legs farther forward, out of the way, left her leaning backward against the fence, with no leverage to lift it.

She tried squatting, which seemed promising at first, but it was impossible to keep her balance in that position while trying to lift the fence. She fell over five times, and decided that wasn't going to work either.

If I could keep one foot way forward for balance, she thought, while kneeling with the other leg turned out of the way, that probably would work. But I can't separate my feet.

She turned around to try to lift the fence with her feet, but her toes weren't nearly strong enough to keep hold on the chain link.

She was sweating profusely again, and angry enough to pound the floor with her fist, if only she could have got her fist out from behind her back. And she was thinking about water. Water. Water. She *really* had to have some water.

I'm spending too much time here, she thought. I must have wasted half an hour trying to raise this fence, and I haven't checked to see if there might be another way out somewhere else. I've only been assuming there isn't.

With a sigh that tried to be a moan but couldn't with her voice gone, Sylvia stood once more. She felt dizzy and nearly fell, and remained very lightheaded afterward, but started hopping back towards the entrance to the cross-corridor. Reaching the corner, she went left around it, past the cell on her left, and made another left into the next cross-corridor.

As she expected, she came to a closed fence at the end of that cross-corridor. She sat, felt her way along the bottom of the fence, and was not surprised to find the padlock at the center locking the fence in place. She continued to the wall, stood again, and hopped back towards the main corridor.

Five cross-corridors were closed off by five locked-down fences at their far ends.

Sylvia had arrived back in front of the cell where Judy, apparently, lay dead. Sylvia so desperately wanted a drink now that she didn't mind the idea of drinking Judy's blood: she didn't care what she drank, as long as it was liquid. But she found that the blood had been absorbed into the concrete. She could feel the dampness and coolness on her feet, but there was nothing there that she could lick or slurp up inside her.

She went, half-consciously, mostly on automatic pilot, through the last cross-corridor, the one with the library and... that room. There was no fence at its end. Encouraged, Sylvia hopped around the corner and started up the other main corridor, the one she had never yet been in. She counted the cross-corridors, each with a fence across its entrance, the ones she knew were locked because she'd been on the other side of each one. After the fifth one, she decided, with the small part of her mind still working, that she needed to be very careful. There could be another partly-open fence up ahead. She should have thought of that earlier, but thinking was a very slow, difficult process right now.

She was barely moving when she came to the end of the next cell and her shoulder nudged up against a fence across the corridor. She eased down to the floor and sat, simply breathing for a few minutes, trying to scrape some energy together, then moved along the fence to feel along its bottom. She nodded to herself when she felt the padlock, with a false sense of calm that came from the world, and Judy, meeting her expectations.

Sylvia leaned over to curl up on the floor. If I'm going to die here, she told herself, I need to rest up first.

CHAPTER 9

Dogs, huge, hungry dogs surrounding her, growls coming from all sides, unseen in the blackness. Sylvia knew, somehow without remembering it happening, that she had been pushed down the stairs into the cellar to be food for the dogs. Naked, unable to defend herself, unable to get away, Sylvia felt terror beyond any she'd ever known, and now she felt the first bite, sharp teeth raking her skin, the dogs whimpering with excitement at the smell and taste of blood, Sylvia's blood. More bites, on her legs, her arms, her breasts, her buttocks, the pain of ripped skin and the rough tongues licking, drinking from her. She tried to scream, but was unable to voice a sound...

Sylvia was brought out of sleep by a sudden real pain that dwarfed the dreamed pain of attacking dogs. The original cramp in her right thigh had returned again, and the agony of it took her back to the cell, to the memory of the precious padlock key pinned against the side of the waste hole as the seizing muscle ripped Sylvia apart, while the remnants of her latest nightmare refused to depart, and she still sensed the dogs all around, ready to resume the attack.

Sylvia gritted her teeth, breathing in tiny sips as she threw her legs out straight, pulling her right foot backward with her left to stretch out the muscle to ease the cramp, while telling herself No dogs, no dogs, there are no dogs here, that was a dream, I'm alone, no dogs.

It *had* been a dream, she knew that. But there had been a... *solid* quality to it. That seemed the best way to describe it. The memory of it now, awake, was somehow more tangible than a normal dream.

Slowly, slowly, the pain of the thigh cramp abated, leaving a residual ache and a feeling of relief that, for the moment, nothing hurt very much. Except all of the unseen bumps and bruises covering every part of her body.

She suddenly remembered: that movie. She'd been eight years old, her brother Dylan thirteen, old enough to babysit Sylvia for the first time. She had sat with him watching that horror movie, including the scene in which a female character was shoved to fall down the stairs, into the cellar where the dogs were kept. In a low-budget solution to the problem of how to show a woman being eaten by dogs, the cellar had been invisible in darkness, and only the sounds of a snarling pack of dogs and a screaming woman had been used to allow the viewer to imagine what was happening. Sylvia had had nightmares for days, and Dylan hadn't been allowed to babysit anymore.

The woman hadn't been naked or bound, and certainly not voiceless, but Sylvia's mind had obviously added that much of her own current situation to the movie woman's fate.

Sylvia remembered fully where she was now. She'd been counting the cross-corridors, so she knew she had been stopped by a fence at the end of the next-to-last pair of cells. This was not the same fence she had seen in place yesterday at the start of the corridor. That one was ahead of her, and had to be open now; if it was closed and locked, then Judy had left her with no way out at all. Judy couldn't do that. Sylvia still had one, and only one, possible exit: through that down-but-unlocked fence she had spent half an hour unsuccessfully trying to get under, back when she had far more energy than she had now.

I have to get out of here, she told herself. I've already experienced a small part of what will happen if I don't. The cramps, the disorientation, the imaginary dogs eating me, tearing me apart. The pain, the delirium, and the terror will get much worse than they have so far, and it will all seem to last for an eternity before I finally die. I just need to hop through nearly the entire length of the building,

twice, and find a way under a fence that eluded all my efforts before. Never mind that last part, she ordered herself. I'll just have to figure that out when I get there.

The gate key, she marveled. Somehow I still have it in my hand. After all that.

She couldn't seem to think of the sequence of moves that would get her standing upright. At last she worked it out, took a few breaths, and started hopping dizzily, her elbow keeping contact with the left-hand wall of the corridor, brushing walls and cell bars in alternation.

She had lost count, and was surprised when she bumped against a concrete wall – luckily not hard, for once. Oh yes, she told herself, the back wall of the cell block. I've reached the end.

She turned right and hopped along the back wall, her left elbow soon brushing against the library door. She continued, knowing she was nearing the door to that awful room, the one where... Never mind. Sylvia found she was too exhausted to care properly about what she had gone through in that room. She suddenly remembered just before reaching it that she had left that door standing open. She began moving forward in the one-inch steps that were all she could manage in the way of walking. It took longer than she expected before she finally bumped the door, and crept carefully around it, then across the opening in the wall, bumping at last against the door frame. Easing herself around it, she regained the wall beyond it and resumed hopping. She stopped hopping once more, proceeding in tiny steps again until she bumped into another wall, signaling her arrival at the corner of the corridors. She turned right and began hopping again, relieved that her progress had taken her back to the other main corridor, without further damage to herself.

Again her elbow brushed against the alternating walls and cells, and she kept count this time. She knew what was ahead of her, but wanted to be sure when it was coming.

She felt as if this was all she had ever done in her life, as if every memory of doing anything other than hop blindly towards longed-for freedom was a figment of imagination.

By the time she reached the closed fence at the front entrance to the corridor, the muscles in her legs were trembling so badly from fatigue, and aching so much from earlier cramps, that she knew she couldn't make it any farther. She eased down to sit and lean against the fence, needing rest nearly as much as she needed water, but almost immediately shook herself to alertness, breathing hard, at the sound of growling dogs, one seeming just inches from her left ear, its panting breath billowing against her neck, a stream of what she somehow knew was saliva dripping onto her right breast. It seemed much less a dream now, seemed that much closer to the surface of her consciousness, as if it was crossing the line between dream and hallucination. There are no dogs there are no dogs! she shouted silently, and shivered with the fear that her grasp of reality without dogs was slipping, that she would fail, the next time, to banish them by force of will, or even to remember that they weren't really there. She sat upright, putting herself back in motion. Hopping was out for the time being – until she had rested, any attempt to continue that mode of movement seemed well beyond her strength. She started moving to her left by lifting her butt off the floor with her fingers, letting it swing to the side and easing it down gently so it wouldn't scrape on the floor, moving her heels afterward, and repeating the process, moving slowly across the fence, turning the corner to move along in front of the cell, turning again into the cross-corridor and moving along its length until she came to the fallen, unlocked fence.

She sat for several minutes, recalling her past efforts here and wondering what she might do that she hadn't already tried.

The trouble is, she decided, I kept having parts of my body in the wrong place, either too far away to be able to twist them around to get them under the fence, or else blocking the fence so I couldn't lift it. I need all of my body right there, at one time, ready to go under.

She worried for a time that the approach she was contemplating would get her immovably stuck underneath the fence, dooming her to die there. She finally told herself: I'm going to die for sure if I don't try this. Nothing else has worked.

She stretched out full-length along the gritty floor along the bottom of the fence, and wriggled around so that her back was turned to the chain links. Keeping a tight hold of the gate key in her left hand, she reached back with her right and wrapped her fingers around one of the wires at the very bottom, just above the metal tubing that anchored the wires along the bottom. Wriggling forward, the skin on her right side scraping the floor, she pulled the fence outward and upward. Once the tubing was far enough off the floor, she pushed her feet back underneath it to keep it from falling back, and rested briefly with the weight of the fence resting painfully on her left heel, itself atop her right. Shifting her grip now, she took hold of the tubing itself and wriggled farther forward, twisting her body as she lifted and at last getting the tubing to rest on her buttock near her hip. She lay there for a time, her body pinned to the floor by the fence, not eager to begin the next movement.

At last she took a deep breath, and began twisting her entire body, her side scraping the floor harder than ever, moving just millimeters at a time while the fence tubing remained perched on her butt. She reached a point where the fence had her so firmly pinned to the floor that she feared she couldn't move in either direction, and panic began to set in as she felt herself stuck exactly as she'd pictured it. The panic granted her an extra burst of energy and she managed to wriggle just a little farther underneath the fence, and farther still. On her stomach by now, her breasts taking the worst of the scraping, the fence on her left buttock, she felt herself get past the balance point beyond which turning under the fence became easier. The fence finally slipped off her buttock and banged to the floor, slapping Sylvia's behind and rolling her onto her back, on the other side of the fence. Ahead of the locked fence that had stopped her earlier.

Her thirst, her exhaustion, and the burning of her skin, all were forgotten just for a moment, as she exulted, I'm though! I did it!

She wanted to lay there, relaxed, basking in the elation and restoring her energy, but knew that even seconds might well count in her battle against dehydration – and also that if she fell asleep, or even let her attention wander, the dogs would return to terrorize her. She sat up, and grunted with effort as she used the back side of the fence to get herself standing upright again.

She hopped across the front of the last cell – or first, from the cell block gate – paused at the corner, and realized she would need to cross the corridor with no walls on either side to help her. Impatient to reach the gate, her energy renewed by her success with the fence, she hopped carefully ahead until she nearly lost her balance, recovered and began creeping ahead in one-inch steps. As she made the crossing, and as more time went by, her fear built that she had curved off in one direction or another. At last her head nudged a wall, at an angle from her direction of travel. She knew that her path had bent off-line at least slightly, and she thought to herself Please, please, please be the right wall. If this wasn't the wall with the gate in it, she would have to figure out which wall it was, and where she was in relation to where she wanted to go, all of which would take time she didn't feel she could spare.

She turned left and hopped along the wall, stopping when she came to metal bars. Her heart pounded. This is either the gate, she told herself, or the bars of the first cell in that corridor Judy and I came down. Sylvia thought the latter was a greater distance than she could possibly have traveled, but did not feel completely sure.

She hopped along the front of the bars, feeling them with her elbow. When the bars ended far too soon to be anything but the gate, she gave a voiceless whoop of joy. I'm here! she told herself. This is the gate! Breathing hard, she turned her back to it to feel it with her hands. The keyholes, of course,

were on the outside. She kept the key in her left hand while she reached through the bars with her right and felt for the uppermost keyhole with her fingertips. There, got it! She worked hard to throttle down the excitement now, knowing how careless impatience would make her. As carefully as she'd ever done anything in her life, she shifted the key to her right hand, reached again through the bars, pointed the key along her extended index finger, found the keyhole again with her finger, and guided the key in. She breathed a little easier for the moment as she gave the key a full turn, sensing it pulling the bolt back, then pulled the key out and began again, searching with her fingers for the lower keyhole, the key in her right palm, her fingers probing the lock surface. She crouched slightly, her legs achy but holding.

The cramp in her left calf muscle hit with no warning. All her muscles clenched with the sudden pain, the fingers of her right hand slapping against the lock mechanism, pinning the key against it. Desperately she flattened her hand on the lock, covering the key, and held it there as she walked her feet in tiny steps outward to straighten her leg to start relieving the spasm. Her sweat-slick back slipped slightly against the metal bars. Panicked that she was about to fall sideways and lose her hold on the key, she shifted her hand for a better grip, her palm momentarily losing contact with the lock. She gritted her teeth as she felt the key begin to slip, and then it was gone, hitting the floor with a pinging sound an instant later.

She slid quickly down to the floor, her calf muscle screaming at her as it tightened still further, and desperately felt the floor with both hands behind her butt. There was no key within the tiny area she could reach.

She put her legs out straight, and the cramp gradually eased. Then she bent forward, her head down, her entire body shaking, crying without a voice. I was so close, so close, so close! she thought. Judy tried so hard to trap me, and she couldn't do it. And then my own body killed me!

Soon, she told herself hopelessly, my whole body will be cramping, every part of me feeling like my leg just did. And I'll be hallucinating about those dogs, those damned dogs. Their teeth ripping my skin away everywhere on my body, the pain from it very real, but I can't bleed out from it because it isn't really happening. So it will just go on and on.

From somewhere inside, the calm, rational Sylvia fought her way to the surface of her mind. The key could have bounced in any direction, she reminded herself. I couldn't tell which way it went, but there is a fifty-fifty chance it's on this side of the gate. And even if it's on the other side, it could still be within reach. It can't be more than a few feet away. I have a better than even chance of finding it.

She wriggled to the side feeling first the gate behind her back and then the wall, and stopped, as nearly as she could judge, about three feet beyond the gate. She turned around there to lie on her side, straight outward from the wall, her toes touching the wall. She realized rolling wouldn't be sufficient. She had to keep the full length of her body in constant contact with the floor, or she could easily miss the key. She began inching her body forward along the floor, keeping herself as flat as she could, trying to make sure every square inch of floor space, for five feet outward from the wall, was touched by some part of her body as she squirmed ahead.

Once she had gone past the full length of the gate on the floor and about three feet beyond it, she began crying again. If the key was on her side of the gate, she didn't think it could be anywhere she hadn't touched. It couldn't have bounced farther away than that.

Please, please, please let it be close enough to reach, she begged the universe.

Her feet, she decided, could reach farther past the gate than her hands. She sat up in front of the gate, and thrust her feet out through the two leftmost spaces between the bars. She knew she

would be blocked from probing farther outward by the padlock connecting her ankle bands hitting the bar, but was still disappointed in how small the distance was that her feet could get past the bars.

I've got to do better than this, she told herself. She pulled her feet back, laid down on her side, and tried to put both feet through the same space. Her heels caught on the bar, and she couldn't seem to point her feet enough to get past it.

This has to work, it *has* to work, she thought. Sitting back, she pulled upward with her right foot to try to twist her left ankle band a quarter-turn counterclockwise around her ankle. The sweat around her ankle made it sufficiently slippery against her skin, and she managed to get it turned. Then she twisted her right foot around, rotating it inside its ankle band, and at last had her right foot directly in front of her left, rather than beside it. She found that arrangement allowed both her feet to get through between the bars.

She pushed them out as far as they would go, and felt along the floor beyond the gate with her left heel. She couldn't go very far to one side or the other – only straight back from the gate, really. Finding nothing, she backed out and put her feet through the next space between the bars.

Increasingly desperate by the time she had felt the floor behind ten different spaces, she gasped as her heel suddenly felt something sharp.

Please don't be a chip of concrete, don't be anything but a key! she shouted in her mind. She bore down with her heel and tried to pull whatever it was back towards the gate, but couldn't quite get enough downward pressure on it. She had already reached a point where the width of her calf muscles prevented her from pushing her feet out farther. She gritted her teeth and pushed harder, her calves feeling crushed in a vise. With her heel out beyond the object at last, she dragged her heel towards her, felt the object being pulled along. From the sound, it did seem to be something metal.

Not wanting to kick the object some unpredictable distance, she waited until it was just inches from the gate and gave it a final nudge with her heel to send it sliding just a small distance more. Pulling her feet out, shaking once more, from excitement and anxiety combined, she turned around and felt the floor through the bars with her fingers. Seconds later she was holding the key, her body limp from released tension.

She waited a few minutes, breathing deeply, slowly, mouth open, trying to calm herself – she didn't need the shakes when she tried unlocking the gate – and finally got herself upright in front of the lock.

It was a little easier now from previous practice. She located the keyhole, slid the key in, turned it. When the gate sprang open, she hopped up and down in place, whisper-shouting, "Yes!! Yes!!"

There was nothing with a lock on it between her and the creek!

She realized she had no idea what time of day it might be. It could be the middle of the night. There might not be a moon, and the outdoors might be as black as the cell block. She might have to wait hours for the sun to come up so she could find her way to the creek. No, she thought, please be daylight, please be a bright, sunny day.

She hopped towards the wall to her left, and proceeded along it, passing that lounge or whatever it was, and found the door to the stairwell. She had to negotiate the stairwell sitting down, lifting her butt with her elbows and then bring her feet up after, one step at a time. She opened the door at the top, and then... light!!

To her fully dilated eyes, which hadn't seen a single photon of light in hours, it seemed dazzling, dim as she knew it really was. It was coming from the entryway that lay to the right, around the corner far down at the end of the hallway. But it was easily sufficient to see by. I don't need to feel my way along anymore! she thought. Though she knew it was impossible, her exuberant senses swore to her that they could smell and hear the creek from here.

I beat Judy I beat her I beat her! she crowed within. I won because I wanted life and Judy didn't. Judy gave up on life.

She took a few hops down the hallway, then stopped suddenly – she had looked down to make sure her way was clear on the floor in front of her and had caught sight of her own body. She looked, she thought, like an impressionistic painting of a forest fire in a thunderstorm. Her skin, all parts of it that she could see from her breasts down her stomach and legs, was gray from dirt and dust, over an angry red coating of blood, mostly Judy's, some her own, both layers of color mixed, swirled, and streaked by the flow of sweat, most of it cross-hatched with scrapes and abrasions and mottled with bruises in various colors and stages of emergence. There was almost not a single square inch anywhere on which unblemished skin showed through. I guess it doesn't matter if I can't talk, she thought. Whoever finds me is going to know to get me to the emergency room.

But I can clean up in the creek! she told herself, resuming hopping quickly along the hallway, feeling almost orgasmic joy that her way to the Heaven of flowing water was clear. As she came to the entry hall she turned and hopped into it, grinning as she saw the door, bright sunlight streaming through narrow vertical windows in it. She overflowed with happiness at the simple act of *seeing*.

She stopped suddenly, almost falling, and stood rooted there, ten feet from the door of the building.

Wrapped around the two vertical handles, one on each door, joining them inseparably, there was a long chain, secured by a padlock. The doors couldn't be opened.

It can't be, Sylvia thought. It wasn't there when we came. Of course it wasn't. We got in.

She hopped closer to the door, and turned to feel the chain with her hands. It's on there really solid, she determined. She tried pulling the door open, with no success. She gave it a harder yank, a harsh hiss starting in her throat. I'm three feet away from being outside! she screamed within.

Obviously Judy put it there, she observed. Maybe as the very last thing before she came down to kill herself. There have to be other ways in and out of the building, Sylvia reminded herself. No building has just one way in. And Judy wasn't allowed, by her own rules, to trap Sylvia with no way out. But where are the other doors?? I don't have any energy to start...

"What in the world have you been doing, Sylvia? You're a total mess!" The voice came from behind a partly-open office door straight across the entryway from the building's entrance. Sylvia froze, looking up to see the door open fully and Judy emerge, fully dressed, rather than naked as Sylvia had last seen her. Her arms were folded, and she had a smile on her face. "I imagine you're pretty proud of yourself."

Sylvia heard a buzzing in her head, sensed a gray fog entering her vision. She had never fainted, in her entire life. Somehow, she knew that she was doing it now.

CHAPTER 10

Sylvia blinked, shifting her eyes around to take in her surroundings without moving her head – her head was sending strong suggestions that it wanted to be left alone. She saw she was still in the prison’s main entryway. She was sitting upright, seemingly against the front door. The front door that is locked with chains, her memory returned to tell her. Possibly only seconds had gone by, or whatever amount of time it had taken for Judy to prop her up this way. Judy. She was still there. If she was a hallucination, she was a very persistent one. Judy was holding up a plastic water bottle, a straw sticking out of it pointed at Sylvia. Judy, hallucinated or real, said, “Sip. Slowly.”

Sylvia lunged forward and took the straw in her mouth. She didn’t care what was in the bottle. Judy repeated, “I said slowly,” and Sylvia nodded. As Sylvia sucked in a mouthful and swallowed, Judy went on, “Gatorade. You need electrolytes along with your water.”

Sylvia didn’t care what Judy thought about her medical condition. She only knew how desperately she needed what was coming out of that straw. She continued sucking until the bottle was empty and, reluctantly engaging Judy in conversation out of necessity, whispered, “More, please.”

She wasn’t surprised when Judy shook her head. “Enough for right now. More later. Sit back, Sylvia. I can tell you some things I didn’t mention before.”

Sylvia wiped her lips on her shoulder and leaned back against the wall. Her need for water, still present, had at least sunk below the desperation line. Her mind felt more clear, and she knew Judy’s presence was very real.

She twisted her hands behind her back, trying to decide whether anything had changed about her bondage. Nothing had. Judy had backed away to her usual safe distance, so it was too late for Sylvia to head-butt her and hop away to safety, if there was any safety to be found and any chance of getting there. Sylvia felt beyond exhaustion. Her skin stung everywhere, and every part of her body throbbed with bruises and strained muscles. But for the moment she felt better than she had.

Judy sat down in front of Sylvia cross-legged, and smiled. “Obviously, that was a performance, that whole thing about killing myself.”

Sylvia sighed, and nodded.

But the blood! she thought. What about the blood? Sylvia looked down at her body.

Judy seemed to read Sylvia’s thoughts. She nodded. “Yes, that was blood. Not mine, obviously. Pig’s blood, actually. I thought it was a nice touch. Like stripping myself naked and throwing my clothes away. And the gunshot, of course. Last week I actually put a sound recorder in the Black Hole and fired off the gun outside it, just to check that the sound came through the door. All of that to make it more convincing.”

Sylvia whispered, “Why?”

Judy smiled. “Left your voice behind, did you? Anyway, you shouldn’t need to ask why. Obviously I wanted you to be totally convinced I was dead. So you’d think you were doomed. Actually, I did think, knowing how determined you can be, it was pretty likely you’d get free. I put it at fifty-fifty. I was hoping you *would* get loose, and come this far. Nothing breaks all hope like seeing freedom and then having it snatched away at the last second.”

“And... if I hadn’t?”

"I would have come down there about this time. Or maybe in a couple more hours. You wouldn't have died. If you'd knocked that key down the hole, you would have had hours thinking about how death was coming and you couldn't stop it. Same if you were caught in the maze down there. So either way it came out, I'd have fun thinking about either the terror you'd been through or the crushing loss at the end."

Sylvia looked at her wide-eyed. "You really hate me that much?" As much as it hurt to try to speak, Sylvia thought it was crucial to use this opportunity. If she wanted to beat Judy, she had to have as much information as Judy was willing to give. She had a feeling Judy wouldn't allow her many question-and-answer sessions.

Judy's eyes narrowed. "You have no idea."

Sylvia sighed and looked away. "I do now." A sudden hope came to her. If that was all Judy wanted, that Sylvia have one traumatic experience or the other... "So now you're going to let me go?"

Judy laughed. Then she took on a businesslike look. "Okay, let me tell you what's coming up. I'll finish feeding and watering you, and then I've got to go for a while. I'll be back tonight, though. See, my car is still sitting in the parking garage. The garage computer thinks I left last night at my usual time, because we used my card to get out. So I won't have anything I need to explain to the police, once I actually get my car out of there. The computer thinks *your* car is still there. So I'm driving back down to Atlanta. I'll park your car on a side street near our building, and walk to the building and get my car out, using your card, so the computer thinks it's *your* car that left the garage on Saturday. It will look like you stayed overnight, as you occasionally do when you're preparing a big case and do an all-nighter, and on Saturday you drove out. Then I'll come back up here in my own car."

An unthinkable fear began forming in Sylvia's mind. This, she thought, is all way too complex for just a week or two of fun for Judy. Unconsciously, she began shaking her head.

Judy went on, "Now, I'm going to drive back down to Atlanta again tomorrow night, Sunday, and stay at my house, so I can go in to work Monday morning. There'll be lots of confusion, where-the-hell-is-Sylvia, that kind of thing, but the police shouldn't be involved until Tuesday. I do plan to spend Tuesday night and Wednesday night in Atlanta, because the police will expect that. They may call in the evenings when they think of more questions they hadn't already asked, so I figure I need to be there. When I leave tomorrow night, I'll leave you with four days' worth of water and non-perishable food, in case I can't get back here Monday night. It's going to be up to you to ration yourself. You don't want to run out of it early."

Sylvia thought desperately. "M-my car! They'll find my car. Parked on the street."

"Of course they will. Probably by tracing where your cell phone is, because I'll turn it back on and leave it in the car with your purse. They'd find the car eventually no matter where I put it. Luckily, I can leave it in Atlanta without any trouble. That should make the police think you're still in Atlanta, but in any case it won't give them a clue where you actually are."

"But your..." She stopped, remembering the gloves Judy had been wearing. She wouldn't have left fingerprints on Sylvia's purse or cell phone. "Oh, but hair! They'll find your hair fibers in the car!"

Judy laughed. "What are you, a CSI now? I've been in your car before. When you took us out to lunch for Secretaries' Day, remember?"

The gears of Sylvia's mind spun without connecting. She opened her mouth, but could think of nothing to say with it.

“I’ll be doing a lot of driving back and forth over the next couple of weeks, until it’s pretty clear to everybody you’re not coming back. Then I’ll resign, tearfully, and say I don’t want to work for anybody but you.

“Now, I’ve already found a help-wanted ad from a lawyer about fifteen miles from here, who wants a legal secretary just part-time, about twelve hours a week. I won’t contact him until about the time I resign, and then I’ll apply for the job. So I’ll have a reason for moving up to this area.”

Sylvia shook her head more vigorously. “You can’t live on a twelve-hour-a-week job, for a little small-town lawyer.”

Judy snapped her fingers. “Oh, I hadn’t had a chance to tell you. Peter’s lawyer has offered me a very nice divorce settlement. Not as much as I could have got if I’d hired my own lawyer and really worked at it, but it’s about three thousand a month. That’s way more than I’ll really need, for the lifestyle I’m planning. The job will just add a nice extra amount of spending money, but like I said, it’s really just something that gives me an excuse to live up here.”

Sylvia had to ask. She had to know what she knew she really, really didn’t want to know. “How – how – how long are you going to keep me here?”

Judy gave Sylvia a satisfied look, as if that was the question she had been waiting to hear all along. “In this prison, you’re a lifer, Sylvia.” She paused, and grinned. She said slowly, “And I’ll never kill you. How long your life is will be totally up to you.”

Sylvia buried her face against her knees. She started to speak again, but realized her whisper probably couldn’t be heard. She looked up, tears streaming. “Please, I can’t go back in that Black Hole. Please, please, please...”

Judy cut her off. “Don’t you remember? That’s just for punishments, Sylvia. With good behavior you don’t need to be in there again. I’ve got other accommodations for you.”

“What... accommodations?”

“Regular cell. You may have gone past it earlier, but I imagine you couldn’t see what I’ve put inside it. You’ll have food, water, a bed to sleep on...”

Sylvia whispered tensely, “Light?”

Judy nodded. “Yes, even light.” She stood and picked up her ever-present satchel. “Let me get you set up down there. And cleaned up. Then I need to hit the road. Come with me.” She picked up her ever-present satchel and began walking away.

Sylvia couldn’t imagine a reason to follow her. She sat watching, waiting to see what Judy would do.

Judy turned and saw Sylvia wasn’t following. She said, “Every single exit to this building is locked up like that one behind you.” She waited.

I am not going back into that cell block, Sylvia told herself forcefully. I can never get out if I do. If I sit here, she’ll have to come back and try to make me move. When she gets close enough, I can kick her in the head. Or break her knees, if she’s standing and doesn’t bend down. She thinks I’m broken, and won’t be expecting a fight. And if I can knock her out or incapacitate her, then I can get that satchel. It’s got all the keys I need in it.

Sighing, Judy reached into the satchel and extracted a water bottle. Twisting off the top, she held it out in Sylvia’s direction and shook it. “I thought you’d learn faster, Sylvia.”

The one drink of Gatorade had helped, but hadn't been nearly enough. Sylvia looked at the offered water and her body clamored for more. It's just like before, she told herself. Judy has all the power here, just from having that water. She knows she can outwait me. Until I follow her, I have no possible way to get water. She doesn't have to come anywhere near me.

Sylvia felt all hope draining out of her, a loss no amount of liquids could replace. With almost all that remained of her strength, Sylvia worked herself to a standing position, with help from the wall. As Judy turned to resume walking away, Sylvia, tears streaming again, hopped away from the freedom beyond the locked door behind her, and followed after Judy.

CHAPTER 11

TWO YEARS LATER

Sylvia put the pencil down, and smiled. She couldn't think of anything more she wanted to put into her drawing.

In the background, to the left, was a mountain peak covered in snow, but the foreground was very temperate. A small meadow, backed by blossoming trees, sloped slightly downhill towards the front of the drawing. There was one tree closer in, standing alone, next to a lake. Sylvia always put some water into her drawings, a lake, a river, sometimes a beach.

She never literally drew herself into her pictures. She was the observer, the drawings done from her point of view. She sat back now and imagined herself looking at the tree, thinking over its potential as the place for a picnic. Perfect, she decided.

After finishing any drawing she often lay back on her bed and stared at it dreamily, letting it encompass her being, its atmosphere wash over her.

They were always drawings of sights she knew she would never see again in real life. She hadn't seen the world outside the prison building in two years, and knew she never would. Her sentence was life without parole. The pictures didn't fill her with a sense of loss, though. Looking at them, they were as real to her as if they were really the scenes they represented. She had always had a good imagination.

Sylvia carefully tore the page with the drawing out of her sketchbook. She hoped Judy would like it. Sylvia liked to imagine that Judy had Sylvia's drawings pinned up on the walls of her own room.

Judy, when she wasn't spending the night in her rented house in town, stayed in the guards' lounge, that mysterious room just outside the cell block gate. Sylvia had never seen inside the room, but she assumed Judy had decorated it very pleasantly.

Sylvia stood and put the sketchbook and pencil up on the surface of the upper bunk, at the far left end where they belonged. Judy always insisted on things being in their proper places. There were other items lined up on the bunk – several books, and a shallow plastic tub with some toiletries, such as bars of soap, toilet paper, a pack of sanitary wipes, tampons for her periods, nail clippers without the files, one or two clean hand towels, and packets of sugarless gum for cleaning her teeth.

Sylvia lay back on her bed, the lower bunk, for the moment, considering the rest of her day. The bed itself was comfortable, luckily for Sylvia, as she most of her time there, eating, drawing, reading, resting, or sleeping. It was about thirty inches wide, with a vinyl-enclosed mattress pad covered with a single linen sheet, which Sylvia exchanged for a freshly-laundered one every week. There was no pillow, but Sylvia had accommodated to the lack, and never felt a need for one anymore. She did have a thick blanket, of scratchy wool, that she could use in winter. Most of the year it was, like now, warm enough to do without the blanket, and she simply slept on top of the sheet, the blanket folded and put away under the bed.

I need to do the exercise bike, Sylvia thought. I haven't done my second stretch of pedaling today yet.

She swung her leg over the stationary bike, beside the foot of her bed and perpendicular to it along the wall, and settled onto the seat. The seat was covered in terrycloth, much more comfortable than the original hard vinyl underneath, to which her labia had sometimes stuck. Sylvia hadn't worn

clothes in two years. She didn't miss them. Not that she had ever disliked being clothed, but in her present life she didn't see any point. There was only herself and Judy, and Judy had seen her naked for so long that Sylvia didn't give it a thought.

Her only adornment, aside from the four silvery bands worn permanently on her wrists and ankles, was the wide leather collar around her neck, locked with a tiny padlock, which Judy had given her in the first week of her sentence. Sylvia remembered how much she had hated it at first, how furious it made her to be forced to put it on. She rarely noticed it now. Without it she would feel incomplete.

The bike needed to be pedaled thirty minutes every day, to charge the batteries mounted under the seat, so that the batteries kept the lights burning. Sylvia usually did her pedaling in two fifteen-minute sets, though she enjoyed pushing herself to do it all at once sometimes – that was easier now than the first time she had tried it. Electrical cords ran from underneath the bike, up the adjacent wall to the ceiling, across it and out through the bars of the cell, first connecting to two lamps mounted on the wall of the rec room across the corridor from the cell, then out to a few other lights in the cell block, and to Judy's room. Another cord connected to a big schoolroom-type clock, between the lamps. Sylvia could always tell what time it was.

Judy had told Sylvia, early on, that she wasn't going to keep constantly buying flashlight batteries, and that if Sylvia wanted light, she would have to work for it.

Sylvia was happy to have a way to maintain the light. She had no means of turning off the lights illuminating her cell, nor did she want to. Even when she was sleeping at night, she preferred the two lights shining into her cell. They were very comforting. Sylvia's cell was, to her, a place of light in a dark world.

She was terrified of the dark.

After finishing pedaling, Sylvia wiped at the dampness on her forehead with her arm. Her arm felt the bristles of her brush-cut hair, and she smiled, remembering her next haircut was coming soon. She pulled the Styrofoam food cooler out from underneath her bed, opening it to retrieve a bottle of water. It was always important to drink plenty of water. She drank about half the contents of the bottle and put it back in the cooler, then pushed the cooler back under the bed. Judy disliked a cluttered floor.

It was crucial for Sylvia to make efficient use of her floor space. She didn't have very much. There was room for the exercise bike, and the portable chemical toilet beside it, which Sylvia was able to exchange every few days for a fresh one. Judy, Sylvia understood, took the used toilets to her own house, cleaned them, and prepared them for use again. It appeared that there had once been plumbing in the cell, judging from the pair of capped pipes in the wall opposite the bars, but whatever had been attached to them, probably a standard toilet and faucets over a sink, were gone, most likely removed when the prison had been closed. Since there was no running water now, it didn't matter.

Except for things put away under the bed, there was nothing on the floor of the cell other than the bike, the toilet, two currently empty buckets, a can for trash, and a ten-gallon water-cooler bottle beyond the bike, for Sylvia's next bath. But that didn't mean there was plenty of room for other amenities. Sylvia couldn't reach very much of the cell beyond these objects. The chain connecting her ankle band to the frame of the bed, near the back wall of the cell, was only a few feet long, just long enough to allow her to mount and pedal the bike. The cell was about seven feet by fifteen feet, with the bars forming one of the long sides, and the bunk bed against the wall, bolted to it, on one of the short sides. The barred door to the cell was at the end of the wall of bars away from the bed. Sylvia couldn't reach the cell door, even stretching out as far as she could on the floor, diagonally across the cell, but

there was no reason to touch it anyway. It was locked, and the lock was even farther out of Sylvia's reach. But Sylvia hadn't even felt any motivation to try reaching the door for a long time.

Sylvia remembered that during the first few days that this cell had served as her home, she had spent hours each day trying to break one of the links of the chain that connected her ankle to the bedframe, scraping the link back and forth across the concrete hoping to wear it down, pausing occasionally when the chain became too hot to hold. She could no longer recall exactly why she had done that, since with the cell door locked, and with the gate to the cell block also locked, Sylvia had no realistic chance of escaping. She supposed she had just been thinking in terms of a step-by-step escape, with the chain as the first step. After her third day of rubbing the link on the floor, with the link worn about halfway through, Sylvia's plans came to an abrupt halt when Judy had required her to replace the chain, padlock, and all her ankle bands and wrist bands with new ones. Obviously Judy had known what Sylvia was trying to do. Judy had continued making Sylvia change her restraint equipment every three or four days thereafter, though by alternating different sets, rather than giving Sylvia a brand new set every time. No doubt Judy inspected the equipment closely for any damage before giving it back a few days later.

Sylvia didn't understand why it had been so important to escape. It didn't matter, though. That really had been a different Sylvia, the one from her before-life. Sylvia shook her head. Thinking about leaving the prison made her uncomfortable.

Sylvia felt cared for, somehow, when she was chained to the bed, locked in a cell whose door she couldn't reach. To Sylvia's way of thinking, all of the security measures just showed how much she meant to Judy. It was important to Judy to keep Sylvia here. That was enough for Sylvia.

Judy was at work right now – she worked three days a week, four hours, though she was gone well over four hours on those days. She either left for her house the night before, or else early in the morning, so she could shower, put on her makeup, and so on. Two days a week she was also gone for a time to shop for supplies. When she returned to the prison after shopping, that was one of the very few occasions when Sylvia was allowed out of her cell.

Leaving the cell for any purpose required some formalities. Judy would toss Sylvia the key to release her ankle chain, through the cell bars, which Sylvia would use and throw back. Judy would then throw into the cell whatever restraints the occasion required. Sylvia was never allowed out of her cell unless her hands were secured behind her back to a chain around her waist, and her ankles connected by an eighteen-inch hobble chain, if not directly to each other by a padlock. The former was used for most purposes. Sylvia was required to secure all of the chains and padlocks slowly and deliberately, each step done in Judy's full view, so that Sylvia couldn't pretend to lock things together without really doing so. If there was any part of the process that looked to Judy like cheating, she made Sylvia unlock everything and start over. Sylvia hadn't tried to cheat for a long time, but she was a prisoner, and Judy was right not to trust her. As soon as Sylvia had finished securing herself, and yanked against each restraint under Judy's supervision as a final proof everything was properly secured, then Judy would open the cell door.

If there were supplies to be moved, most often bagged ice for the coolers, bottled water, and food, Judy would clip a leash to Sylvia's collar and lead her upstairs. The leash was a requirement, because Sylvia would be outside of the locked cell block. Upstairs, there was sufficient light for Sylvia to see her way without electrical assistance – she only moved supplies in the daytime. The supplies would be at the loading dock, to which Judy had driven in her car and unloaded them beforehand, closing the dock's outer door before bringing Sylvia there. As Sylvia waited, her leash tied temporarily to a pole, Judy would stack boxes on a hand truck, and Sylvia's job was then to pull the hand truck behind her

(having her hands behind her was actually convenient for this work), and take it to the stairs, where Judy had covered one side of the stairway with a ramp, which had a pebbly finish so Sylvia's feet wouldn't slip. Going down the stairwell, Sylvia needed to walk backwards with the hand truck leading her down. She would then finish pulling the hand truck to the cell Judy used for storage, or to Sylvia's own cell. Often there were other things (boxes of trash, water-cooler-sized bottles of used water to be emptied by Judy outdoors, or the chemical toilets bound for cleaning) that needed to be returned upstairs, so Judy would again lead Sylvia by her leash as Sylvia pulled those up to the loading dock, again using the hand truck. In either direction, Sylvia usually needed to rest briefly on the first landing, and Judy allowed that, for at most thirty seconds. It was strenuous work.

There were rewards for doing the work, which made it worthwhile. Sylvia earned points that she could exchange for personal items. The first thing she had used her points for was seat cover for the bike, and the second was the sketchbook and pencil. She had loved drawing when she was a girl. There were also the books. Sylvia chose titles she had read as a teenager and earlier. She was currently halfway through "Sense and Sensibility." She'd loved Jane Austen in high school. And there were the Alice books, beloved at a younger age. Sylvia had read most of her books more than once in the time she'd been here. Somehow, she found she could concentrate on what she was reading better than she had in many years, especially in the absolute silence while Judy was gone, and she could lose herself completely in the world of the stories. And as an adult, the books delighted her with levels of meaning she hadn't been aware of when she was younger.

Judy had recently brought her "The Phantom Tollbooth," which Sylvia remembered from when she was ten. She would dearly love reading that again. She hadn't had a chance to start yet.

Sylvia smiled, remembering this morning. Judy had suddenly appeared outside the cell, as she often did. Sylvia had jumped out of bed to stand at attention, facing Judy, her hands clasped behind her, her head down, eyes down. She wasn't allowed to look at Judy eye-to-eye. Judy, as always, came right to the point. "I'm going to shop for supplies after work. You have five credits."

In her chronically hoarse, whispery voice – her vocal cords had never fully recovered from the damage of that night of terror when she thought she was going to die – Sylvia said, "Yes, ma'am." She wasn't allowed to call her Judy.

Judy had given her a neutral look. "Any requests?"

Sylvia's heart had pounded. She loved getting rewards, and she had worked her way down to the next item on her mental wish list. "Chocolate ice cream?" She had decided ice cream would keep reasonably well in the cooler. It wouldn't be there long. She avoided adding "Please" to the request. Judy didn't like begging.

Judy seemed to think it over. "That would be worth ten credits."

Sylvia had fought to keep from smiling. Judy liked her to be serious. "Yes, ma'am." Sylvia felt only a little disappointed she couldn't get the ice cream right away. She was excited to know that it was feasible, something to be looked forward to in the future, something she could earn.

Of course, Sylvia's life wasn't purely work and rewards. There were demerits and punishments as well, chiefly for failing to obey a command or perform a required duty instantly and without complaint, for failure to keep her cell organized, or for not meeting required standards in her exercises. Sylvia's behavior had improved markedly over the last year, and the punishments were much more rare than they had been at first.

Other than for moving supplies, and for punishments, there were only two other times Sylvia was allowed to leave her cell. One was for her walking exercise, one evening every week – one hour, making circuits of the cell block. The hobble chain was no bother during her walk. Sylvia was so accustomed to taking short, quick steps that she didn't even think about it anymore. Judy supervised the walk, observing from a lawn chair outside Sylvia's cell, sipping iced tea, and occasionally ordered Sylvia to speed up if her effort lagged, but those commands were becoming more rare as well. Sylvia remembered the way she had collapsed on her bed after her first walk, completely exhausted, her legs aching. Now she finished without breathing hard. She never considered slowing down during the part of the circuit outside Judy's sight. She knew all forms of exercise were important, as was personal self-improvement. Sylvia knew how many circuits of the cell block she could complete in an hour, and was trying to increase her distance gradually, experimenting with different breathing techniques to see if they would help.

In sum, Sylvia was usually outside her cell for about four hours each week, one for the walking exercise, three for supplies. During the one hundred sixty-four hours, out of one hundred sixty-eight, each week that she spent in her cell, her time was mostly her own, though Judy often stopped by for an inspection or to watch her exercises. Or to restock the coolers, which held about a three day supply of food and bottled water cooled by ice, or more if Judy was going to be away for a time.

Today, Sylvia felt energized after her bike pedaling duties, as she often did lately. She had no way to go for a walk now, but she could do her in-cell exercises – fifty sit-ups, fifty pushups, and twenty chin-ups on the bar Judy had installed across the top of the cell. She hadn't always done that many. As the months had gone by, Judy had gradually increased the required numbers, and sometimes, without warning, ordered Sylvia to show she could do the full set, so Sylvia needed to stay in shape to be ready.

Sylvia was very proud of her body, which was considerably more trim, muscular, and athletic than the one she had come here with.

Sylvia herself was primarily in charge of her own personal hygiene, giving herself sponge baths, in her cell, using the soap Judy provided, with water from the ten-gallon jug. Sylvia liked the way the scent of the soap remained in the cell for some time afterward.

Judy didn't provide a razor, but Sylvia didn't feel a need for one. She had been in the habit of shaving her pubic hair in her before-life, because she loved the smooth feeling of her mound when she masturbated. But she believed Judy must like her with a full bush, and the wispy black tufts of underarm hair as well, since Judy would have done something about it if she hadn't liked it.

Judy did take charge of one single item of Sylvia's personal grooming – she cut Sylvia's hair every three weeks, on the lawn chair with a towel spread under it, the last thing on the list of occasions for which Sylvia was allowed out of her cell. Under restraint, of course. There was never any exception to that. Judy made quick work of the haircut, not more than five minutes with a battery-powered hair clipper, for a brush-cut of about a half-inch length all around. Judy called it a prisoner's cut. It was easy to take care of – when bathing, Sylvia simply dunked her head into the soapy water bucket and gave her bristly scalp a firm rubbing, then rinsed it in the other bucket, afterwards drying it with the same hand towel she used for the rest of her body, which would then await exchange for a clean one. Aside from the convenience, it satisfied Sylvia that Judy wanted Sylvia's hair to be that way. Sylvia hadn't always felt that way about it. She remembered the way she had cried inconsolably over the loss of her hair, the first time – not that Judy had made any attempt to console her. But now Sylvia looked forward to the haircuts, counting the days until the next one. Because the haircuts were the only time Judy ever touched her.

Sylvia sat on her bed, drank the remaining contents of the previously-opened water bottle to replace fluids she had lost while exercising, threw the bottle in her trash can, and retrieved an apple from the cooler. She lay back on the bed, took a bite of the apple, and thought about the haircuts – and her need to feel Judy’s touch.

It did seem strange to Sylvia. She had never, ever, in her before-life, felt a physical attraction to any woman, and had certainly never tried to imagine herself kissing one. But Judy wasn’t any woman. She was Judy. She was the only other person Sylvia would see for the rest of her life. Judy provided for every need Sylvia had. It made Sylvia laugh to think of saying “She brings the light to my life,” but yes, Judy had provided the electric lights as well, banishing the darkness from Sylvia’s cell. Of course Judy was very demanding, and very strict about rules, but even that showed that she cared about Sylvia – why would she make any demands if Sylvia meant nothing to her? And Judy meant everything to Sylvia.

Someday, Sylvia reflected sadly, Judy would die. Everyone does. Sylvia was not in denial about that. It might be thirty or forty years from now, as Sylvia hoped, or she could be in an accident tomorrow. Sylvia, of course, would then die as well, with no one to supply her physical needs. But not by the dehydration death that had so terrified her when Judy first brought her here. Sylvia had a bedsheet and an overhead bar. If Judy ever went missing, so that the food and water ran out, making it obvious something had gone wrong, Sylvia could end her own life on her own terms. Sylvia had no wish to die, but she didn’t want to live without Judy. It wasn’t something she dwelled on, simply a fact of life she acknowledged.

If only Judy would touch Sylvia, or allow herself to be touched. If only Judy would hold her, run her hands over Sylvia’s skin. Sylvia was sure they would feel soft, and warm.

Sylvia was always naked for Judy, but Sylvia had seen Judy naked only once, that time in the... (Sylvia didn’t like to say the words “Black Hole,” even in her mind.) Sylvia remembered the firmness of Judy’s legs, the flatness of her tummy. Judy’s breasts were small, but they were perky, well-rounded.

Sylvia finished the apple, tossed it into her trash can, and became conscious of the tingling of her skin that her thoughts of Judy touching her always inspired. She let her right hand wander down between her legs. She always tried so hard not to do it. She knew it would not be something Judy wanted, and doing what Judy wanted was so heavily ingrained in Sylvia that she couldn’t think of defying Judy’s wishes without feeling dirty.

Aware of the shame but pushing it away, Sylvia began rubbing herself, the heel of her palm brushing against the kinky black hair that Judy must like, teasing her swollen labia with the tips of her fingers. Just touching them made her jump. She closed her eyes and moaned. Thinking about...

...her next haircut. Judy finishing with the hair trimmer, putting it down, for some reason keeping her hand on Sylvia’s head, stroking it softly, moving her hand down to Sylvia’s shoulders, rubbing them, bending to put a light kiss on Sylvia’s neck above her collar.

On her bed, Sylvia brought her left hand up to her left breast, squeezing it, pinching the hard nipple, while opening her legs a little wider, pushing two fingers of her right hand inside her, feeling the warmth, the wetness. She moaned more loudly.

Judy rubbing Sylvia’s breasts now, kissing her shoulder, licking it gently with her tongue. Suddenly Judy’s clothes are gone, and she comes around the chair to face Sylvia, pulling Sylvia up to stand in front of her, and kissing her, Judy and Sylvia both breathing hard, opening their mouths wide against each other. Judy pushing Sylvia against the bars of the cell, pulling Sylvia’s knees apart and stepping into the O made by Sylvia’s bound legs, lifting them so that Sylvia’s legs are wrapped around Judy’s waist, Sylvia tightening them around Judy, feeling Judy’s mound pressed against her sex, Judy’s

breasts crushed against hers, loving so much the way her chained hands are pinned uselessly behind her so that Judy can use her body any way she wants to. Judy kissing harder, her breath coming in gasps, her tongue pressing against Sylvia's teeth, Sylvia opening her mouth wide to allow Judy's tongue in, sucking on it, both of them wanting each other, needing each other, both of them breathing so hard and moaning so loud...

The climax exploded all through Sylvia, her entire body like dice being shaken in a single enormous hand, while lightning sent shocks through every fiber of her being. She called out, Judy!! Judy!!

The tide of orgasm slowly ebbed away, leaving Sylvia limp, wrung out.

Deeply ashamed, knowing how angry Judy would be to be used in Sylvia's fantasies, Sylvia wiped her hand on the bedsheet and turned onto her stomach. I have to stop that, she said, as she always did afterward. Judy wouldn't like it.

Sylvia felt drained, and realized it wasn't just from the energy used up masturbating. She had done it immediately after her biking time and a full set of exercises. She could usually handle all that, but it was so warm today. She sat up and opened a new water bottle, and took a long drink. I hope Judy doesn't bring something I need to pull in from the loading dock, she thought. At least I still have a couple of hours before she comes back, Sylvia thought, looking at the clock. I need to rest up, in case.

She put the bottle away, lay back down and closed her eyes for a second. It felt good...

She dreamed that Judy was clearing her throat. What does she want to say? Why doesn't she say it?

It slowly crept into Sylvia's consciousness that the throat-clearing wasn't part of her dream. Judy was standing just outside the bars, looking angry. Then it all came back to Sylvia, and she remembered what she was supposed to have been doing.

Adrenaline surged through her, and a feeling of pure panic. She sat upright on the bed instantly, her hands flying up to her mouth, and said frantically, "Ma'am, I was just... I'll do it now!! Right now!!" She jumped off the bed, her whole body shaking, pulling the second food cooler out from underneath the bed and throwing open its lid in a single motion, kneeling beside it.

On each of the three days of the week when Judy worked at the law office, Sylvia was expected to have a sandwich and soft drink ready and waiting when Judy returned. It was up to Sylvia to listen for the opening of the door from the stairwell, always clearly audible in the dead silence of the cell block. That gave Sylvia two minutes to open the cooler containing Judy's food, pull two slices of bread from the loaf package, three slices of bologna from a package of cold cuts, spread the contents of two fast-food packets of mustard on the meat, assemble the bread around the meat, put the sandwich on a paper towel, stretch out along the floor to reach through the bars and put the towel with sandwich outside the bars, pull a can of root beer from the cooler, open it, and stretch out again to put the drink beside the sandwich on the paper towel. Then stand, her head down, hands clasped behind her back, ready in case there were further orders. The quick food preparation had required a lot of practice, but she was getting very good at it, and only rarely got demerits for being slow now. She couldn't put the sandwich together beforehand – the meat wouldn't be cold if she did that, nor the root beer. Judy liked them cold. Sylvia had suffered an immediate punishment the one time she'd tried that.

Sylvia wasn't allowed to eat anything from Judy's cooler. Judy wouldn't tolerate their food being mixed. Judy kept track of what was in the cooler, so that she'd know if something was missing.

As Sylvia was reaching with a shaking hand for the bread, Judy said sternly, "Stop."

Sylvia froze, not daring to look toward Judy.

Judy said coldly, "It's not just that you weren't ready. You were sound asleep!"

It had been so long since Sylvia had seen Judy *this* angry. Sylvia still knelt by Judy's cooler, her lip quivering. "Yes, Ma'am." Judy hated excuses, and Sylvia had none to make anyway.

"Stand up."

Sylvia bolted up to her feet, turning to face Judy at last, hands clasped behind her, her head down, as required.

In a low voice, Judy asked, "What are you?"

Sylvia knew the formula. Head still down, she gave the required response. "I'm a worthless worm, Ma'am!"

"And where do worms belong?"

Her throat tightening unbearably, Sylvia could only whisper now. "In the Hole, Ma'am!" She knew better than to plead for a second chance. That only added more time to her punishment.

Without another word, Judy threw the key for the ankle chain into Sylvia's cell. Sylvia took it and unlocked the padlock, putting all of her effort into keeping her composure together, not wanting to break into sobs. Her breath came out in little catching sounds, almost like aborted sneezes.

As they came sliding into the cell, Sylvia took up the chains and padlocks in the proper order, locking her ankle bands together, putting on the waist chain, turning her back on Judy so Judy could watch her bind her hands together behind her with the chain and lock them to the waist chain. She waited, shaking, while Judy went to retrieve her flashlight.

Blinking through the tears, sniffing desperately to try to keep her nose from being plugged or overflowing, Sylvia waited while Judy unlocked the cell door. Sylvia followed Judy's retreating figure, Judy walking, Sylvia hopping, to the Black Hole.

Inside the room, Sylvia hopped directly to the cage, let herself down to her knees beside it, walked in on her knees, and pulled the door closed. After long practice, she knew how to position herself so that she could reach back through the bars of the door, turn the key in the lock, move it down to the second keyhole and turn it again, and flip the key outside the cage towards Judy. Unable to hold back the sobs now, she eased herself down to sit on the floor of the cage, leaning back against the bars.

Judy grimly picked up the key, and said, "Twenty-four hours..."

Twenty-four hours! Sylvia's punishments in at least the last year had not been longer than eight hours. It had been so long since she had spent a full day here! She could hardly draw enough breath to keep crying, but managed a whispered, "Yes, ma'am."

"...and since you couldn't be bothered to get my food and drink ready, I won't bother to give you any either." Sylvia gasped in horror, and had to clench hard to keep her bladder from emptying. Judy had never left her here for so long without occasional breaks to pelt her with fruit and ice cubes. There would be no breaks in the punishment this time, no food, no water, for all those hours. And no light. "Yes, ma'am."

Without another word, Judy picked up the flashlight, stalked to the door and slammed it closed behind her, plunging Sylvia into the darkness she feared so much.

Sylvia could only sit upright, her shoulders heaving as she cried, her body shivering despite the warmth, because lying down on the floor brought on the real panic, with so many terrified memories associated with that position. And sitting up helped her fight against falling asleep. Somehow Sylvia must make herself stay awake the entire twenty-four hours, without any sight or sound to help maintain her attention. Because sleeping, in the Black Hole, made the dreams come. Always dreams with no light, as if the blackness of the Hole even blanketed Sylvia's subconscious. Dreams of wriggling so carefully near the waste hole, only to hear the splash of the padlock key as it fell into the toilet below, forever out of reach, the sound telling her she was doomed to an agonizing death. Dreams of hopping blind through a maze with nothing but dead ends, with no sense of where she was or how to get out. And other dreams much worse, assaults from all manner of terrors she couldn't see or defend against. Dreams such as she never had in her lighted cell. They came to her only in the Black Hole.

She always woke up from the dreams screaming, in a puddle of urine, and trembled uncontrollably for a long time afterward.

This is my own fault, she lamented to herself, completely mine! I fell asleep when I had work to do! Judy does everything for me, and all I had to do was that one little thing for her! I will try so much harder from now on! And I promise, I will never, ever masturbate again!

Sylvia froze suddenly, holding her breath, as the memory returned, the one she tried so hard never to think about. The memory of why she was in prison. Of what she had done in her before-life. The terrible thing she had done.

She understood now why Judy was so angry. Understood exactly. Tasked with doing a service for Judy, Sylvia had fallen asleep instead – as if Judy's needs were unimportant. As if Judy's feelings didn't matter. While Sylvia had not defied Judy's authority for a long time, she often came up short of Judy's standards, and her occasional punishments always made her vow to do better. But Sylvia had never before acted as if Judy didn't exist, not in all the time she'd been here. Not since... the kiss...

Sylvia cried out in the darkness as loudly as she could, defying the danger of further vocal damage, "Ma'am, I'm sorry!! I'm so sorry I kissed him!! I'm so sorry I hurt you!! I'll never fail you again, ever!! I love you!!! I love you!!!" Wishing so hard for Judy to hear her, though she knew she couldn't.

END