

Chapter One

When they made the bargain, they knew they risked death. But living—if you could call existing in the Pleasure Academy living—wasn't much of a bargain.

Sure, she had three squares a day—like fricking clockwork. A bed at night—Lights Out, ten o'clock! She had clean clothes, and even the ugly uniform ranked higher than whatever she'd scrounged or stolen when freedom hadn't been just a concept.

School—mostly bullshit—but she secretly liked the French lessons. Auntie (top bitch) claimed speaking a second language helped create a sophisticated, elegant female. None of that made up for the fact that she hadn't breathed outdoor air for . . . She couldn't say exactly, but they'd scooped her up just before Christmas when the easy pickings on the street were abso gargan.

Which is how she'd gotten scooped up because, yeah, maybe a little careless.

The girl they'd brought in the week before claimed it was May—maybe—but her brain was still addled from Orientation. Plus, the new one was really young—seven or eight maybe—and cried a lot.

It didn't seem possible she'd spent a whole winter, a whole spring inside. Then sometimes, at night, in the dark, it all got blurry, and felt as if she'd lived her whole life inside the Academy.

Up at seven sharp! Make your bed and make it right, or earn a demerit. Ten demerits earned an hour in the Meditation Box.

Shower, dress, which included hairstyling and makeup appropriate to the tasks of the day. Breakfast at eight sharp. Arrive late, demerit. Poor table manners warranted a quick jab with the shock stick or worse.

She'd had it all, and the worse, before she'd learned to pretend.

On uniform days you took classes, like French or Polite Conversation, Deportment, Style, Personal Hygiene, Skin and Hair Care, and Weight Management.

Every week they measured, weighed, evaluated. And after that came Salon Day, whether you wanted one or not.

They'd had to strap her down and tranq her the first couple of times when they blasted some flaws—blemishes, a birthmark on her thigh. When they'd cleaned her teeth and did something to straighten them that ached for days after.

But the day she dreaded most? Intimacy Practice.

Sometimes it was another woman, an Academy graduate, who "taught" the proper way to undress yourself, or undress somebody else.

She'd earned the prod and an entire day in the Meditation Box for punching her instructor when the woman put hands on her.

Sometimes it was a man, and that was somehow worse because you had to touch him, too.

They made you do things—all kinds of things—except actual sex. If they had to tie you down for it, they said that served as another lesson. Some owners enjoyed tying down their consorts.

Sometimes they paired you with another student because some owners were women, or just got off watching two girls together.

And that's how she connected with Mina.

Naked in the bed, the cameras recording it all for Evaluation, Dorian resisted, turned her face away from Mina's lips.

Mina just rolled on top of her, pressed those lips to Dorian's ear. "I hate it, too. I hate it," she said, then moaned, rubbed her body against Dorian's. "Pretend you don't, it'll be over faster. You have to go somewhere else in your head, you have to pretend it isn't you. Because it isn't."

"Get off me."

"Then we both end up in the damn box. You're going to roll over, get on top. Put your hand down there between us—just do it. I'm going to make myself come. That's what they want."

She rolled over, and pulled Dorian's hand down—stronger than she looked. Then she bucked, made crazy sounds, flung her head side to side.

To Dorian's shock, Mina wrapped her legs around her, ground their centers together. "Fake it," Mina hissed. "Now, fake it now. And we're done."

Humiliating, yes, but better than being tied down, better than the shock stick or the box. So she cried out as Mina had done, and if a couple of humiliation tears escaped, it didn't matter.

"Well done." Auntie rose from her observation chair. "Very well done, both of you. "Trainee 232, as expected. Trainee 238, much improved. Enough to erase one demerit, and hopefully move you beyond the restrictions of Bondage Only status."

She waited, eyes keen.

"Thank you, Auntie," Mina said dutifully, and with a hand between their bodies, pinched Dorian.

"Thank you, Auntie."

"You're quite welcome. Now, shower thoroughly. You can have ten minutes in the Relaxation Area before you dress for dinner."

The showers in the Intimacy Area ran plush—a small benefit. Cameras recorded, of course, as the small benefit never included privacy.

But water ran hot, and steam rose.

Mina spoke in whispers under it as she shampooed.

"I'm Mina. I've been here six months and ten days I think."

"Dorian. I'm not sure, maybe five months."

"I've seen you in some of the classes. You have to pretend better. If you keep getting tossed in the box, drugged up, or smacked around, you'll never escape."

"There's no way out. I've tried. I've looked."

"If there's a way in, there's a way out." She sent Dorian a sidelong look as she carefully worked conditioner through her long red hair. "Maybe I've got a plan I'm working on, but I think it needs two."

Then she smiled, poured liquid wash onto a pink poof. "You're doing really well in French class," she said in normal tones.

Since Dorian didn't need to get hit with a brick to catch on, she shrugged. "I really like the French class. Polite Conversation is booring."

“Oh, it’s not so bad, and it’s nice to have conversation. You know, you could maybe help me in French, and I could help you with the other. Improvement means more time in the Relaxation Area, which is totally iced.”

Which was beyond boring, but Dorian shrugged again. “I guess. Is it allowed?”

“Auntie let me help a trainee with reading, so I guess. I’ll ask.”

“Yeah, you ask. She likes you.”

“I’m likable.” Her pretty, heart-shaped face lit up with a smile that fell short of her eyes. “I like being likable. One day I’ll have a master who’ll like me, and give me beautiful clothes and lots of orgasms. I can’t wait!”

Dorian saw the lie. Mina wanted out, and so did she.

So they formed an alliance.

As Dorian saw it, they had nothing much in common.

She was Black—or mostly—and Mina was as white as white got. Through snippets of conversation, she learned Mina had lived in a nice house in the ’burbs of Philadelphia.

She’d been scooped up walking home after soccer practice from her school. Private school. She had a younger brother, and two parents, four grandparents, and three best friends. She had a sort of boyfriend, too.

Dorian had lived on the streets for months before she got scooped. She’d run away from her hard-handed mother and her mother’s series of idiot boyfriends and a craphole tenement in Freehold.

She’d made it to New York only a few weeks before the scoop and had just started finding her feet. She’d found her freedom, then bam, she’d come to strapped to a bed inside the Academy.

She’d thought hospital at first, because it looked like one.

Auntie told her differently.

As she saw it, she and Mina practically came from different planets. But they had a few things in common. Hatred for the Academy and a desperation to escape it. And smarts.

Over the next weeks, the alliance grew into a friendship.

Dorian learned to pretend, and learned the benefits of pretending.

She got praise, she got little rewards. And better, even better, the sharp eyes of the instructors, the guards, the matrons, of Auntie didn’t look so often in her direction.

She built up a little trust. Not the big pile of it Mina had, but enough. If someone said something careless around her, she filed it away and told Mina.

Mina did the same. And piece by piece they put together a blueprint of the Academy. In their heads only, but they had smarts.

Then Mina found out about the tunnels.

“Number 264 killed herself. Or she’s dead anyway. She used bedsheets and hanged herself.”

Dorian felt her chest burn. “Which one is that?”

“One of the newer ones. We’re luckier because we’re in the Pretty Ones and they don’t hurt us as much as they do the Servants and Pets. Yesterday I was with Auntie, in her office, for a special evaluation, and one of them came to the door. She went out, but I listened.”

“If she’d caught you—”

“She didn’t, and there aren’t any cameras in her office. Nobody watches Auntie. She said use elevator three to take the body down to the tunnels tonight, after Lights Out, and to the crematorium. She said how the dead girl was a street rat anyway, and a waste of time and resources.”

The burn in Dorian’s chest erupted into fire. “I’m going to kill her one day.”

“Dorian, grip it. Tunnels. That’s a way out for sure.”

“You need a swipe for the elevators.”

“That’s where you come in. That’s what you do, right?”

Maybe she’d worked the streets, the tourists—and maybe exaggerated her skill just a little—but this was different.

“You want me to lift a swipe card?”

“The plan doesn’t work without it.” Mina’s absolute confidence radiated, and infected. “You get the swipe as close to Lights Out as you can.”

“Even if I get the swipe, it doesn’t work inside our rooms. We’re locked in at night.”

“Tonight we won’t be. I’ve got that part. You get the card, and at ten-thirty, take the elevator down to the infirmary. Pick me up there, then we go all the way down, and we get out.”

They’d talked too long, both knew it, but Mina risked another minute. “We’ve got to get out, Dorian. I was telling Auntie how much I wanted a handsome master to buy me beautiful things, and she said the auction was coming up soon. I wouldn’t have much longer to wait.

“They’ll sell us. We have to get out now.”

Sold, Dorian thought. No more pretending then, and no more Mina to help her stand the pretending.

“I’ll get the swipe.”

“Ten-thirty, infirmary. Something I ate didn’t agree with me.”

It didn’t seem real. For months she’d dreamed and schemed of a way out. But now all she could think of were the punishments if they got caught.

More likely when.

But they had to try. They had to or Auntie would sell them like—like a candy bar in a twenty-four/seven.

She knew, of course she knew, her ancestors had been sold into slavery, and when she’d still gone to regular school, she’d studied about the whole damn war fought over it.

But this was 2061, for fuck’s sake! People couldn’t just sell people.

But they would. They would.

She felt sick to her stomach, and really hot—like maybe she had a fever and she needed the infirmary for real.

But she reminded herself that she had a talent for one thing. She knew how to pick pockets. She knew how to take something from a mark and move on.

With fifteen minutes to Lights Out, Dorian scurried down the corridor to her room carrying a small bag. Since scurrying broke the rules, she knew the hall matron would stop her, issue a demerit and a warning.

“238!”

Heart pounding, Dorian skidded to a stop.

“Running in the hallways, one demerit. How many does that make this time?”

“Three, Matron. I’m very sorry.”

“You should be. What do you have there?”

“Hygienic supplies, Matron.” All innocence, Dorian held out the bag containing a small roll of toilet paper, a tiny tube of soap, and a tube of facial cleanser.

As the matron—a big, beefy woman with a shock stick strapped to her belt—grabbed the bag, Dorian shuffled an inch closer and, ears ringing, palmed the swipe card hooked to the woman’s left jacket pocket.

“I was getting ready for bed, and saw I was out of some supplies for hygiene and skin care. I needed to—”

“That’s two demerits, 238, the second for carelessness. It’ll be three if you’re not in your room and properly prepared for the night by Lights Out.”

“Yes, Matron. Thank you.”

She walked blindly to her room—cell, she corrected. And didn’t allow herself to shake until she’d closed the door.

She prepared for bed as usual because the hall bitch might check on her. But she kept her clothes on under the ugly nightgown.

When the lights blinked their one-minute warning, she got into bed, pulled the sheet and thin blanket up to her chin.

And as she’d feared, her door opened.

Fear exploded inside her as the matron marched to the bed.

She knew! She knew!

The woman stared down at her with mean eyes—monster eyes to Dorian’s mind. She braced for the fire of the shock stick.

But the matron just peered at Dorian’s face, swiped a finger over her cheek.

Her mouth thinned as she nodded, and without a word walked out.

Dorian heard the locks snap. And the lights went off.

She lay trembling in the dark, staring up at the faint numbers illuminated on the ceiling.

10:00 P.M.

She didn’t know. She didn’t know. Yet.

Dorian watched those numbers change, minute by minute, and visualized the Matron Monster checking each door—twenty-eight on this floor. Then she’d use the stairs—please God don’t let her decide to use the elevator this time. And check the other floors. Probably.

There had to be other floors with other rooms because she’d counted at least sixty trainees. And she didn’t think she’d seen all of them. This floor held the Pretty Ones. But there were Servants, Breeders, and Pets.

Since none of the cells had soundproofing—they wanted to hear you—she listened for voices, footsteps, alarms, any sounds.

She heard the heavy door of the stairway thump shut, and closed her eyes as tears leaked.

She still didn’t know.

* * *

In the infirmary, on the narrow exam table, Mina rolled on her side, stuck her fingers down her throat, and puked on Nurse's shoes.

"Goddamn it, 232!"

"I'm sorry." She added a few pathetic moans. "I'm sorry."

Nurse shoved a slop dish into her hands. "Use this if you have to vomit again. Stay there!"

Since the door to the infirmary was locked—the drugs, the supplies, the everything locked—where would she go?

She moaned, held her breath, moaned, then leaped up, dashed to the computer on the desk. Nurse had had to check her in, so no passcode needed.

She'd paid attention in computer class, had a geek friend. She knew what to do.

She pulled up the locks, hit the release for Dorian's door, crossed her fingers for luck, then yanked open drawers.

Nurse chewed gum. All the damn time.

And there was a pack of it. Mina grabbed two sticks and, chewing madly, dashed back to the exam table.

She had time to tuck the wad into her cheek when Nurse came back—wearing fresh shoes.

"I'm so sorry, Nurse. I'm sorry, but I feel a lot better. Just really tired and sort of weak, but my stomach doesn't hurt anymore."

Nurse grunted, took her temperature, checked her pulse.

Mina knew her skin felt clammy—but that was fear, and excitement.

"I'm not hauling you upstairs, then having somebody haul you back down again if it starts up again. You'll stay in the sickroom tonight."

"I just want to sleep."

Nurse helped her up, and Mina leaned against her as they went across the hall to the sickroom. Half the size of her bedroom upstairs, it held a cot, a rolling chair for a medical.

At the door, Mina swayed, leaned a little more weight on Nurse as she covered her mouth with her hand, spit out the gum.

"I thought . . ." She breathed out as she shoved the wad of gum against the latch. "False alarm. A little queasy, but not like before."

Nurse dumped her on the cot, used the mini tablet in her pocket to record the sickroom stay. She set a bucket beside the bed.

"You have to go, you have to vomit again, use that. If you need medical assistance, press the button on the bed guard. Don't bother me unless you need medical assistance. Understood?"

"Yes, yes. I'm so tired. I just want to sleep."

"Easy for you. I have to clean up your mess. Lights, ten percent," she ordered. "So you don't miss the bucket."

She stalked out.

Since Mina didn't have a clock, she counted off the minutes.

Nurse had to get cleaning supplies, mop up the puke, then she'd probably go back and clean up her shoes. She had a little room with a sleep chair and a screen.

Maybe she'd sit at her desk first, write up the report on the puking incident, but if she did, she'd face the comp screen, not the glass door.

Quietly, Mina slipped off the cot, moved to the door. She pressed her ear to it, heard nothing.

Now or never, she told herself, and eased the door open a crack.

No alarm sounded, so she picked the nasty gum off the latch, then crept out. Nurse sat at the desk, and everything inside Mina trembled.

She pulled the door closed behind her, heard the lock click. Though it sounded like an explosion in her head, Nurse didn't even glance away from the screen as she worked.

Mina made the dash to the elevator.

"Come on, Dorian. Please, please, please."

If Dorian didn't come—

No, no, she would. She *had* to. They had to get out, go to the police. She had to call her mom and dad. They'd come get her. And Dorian, too.

They'd be safe, and all these terrible people would go to jail.

But the minutes ticked by.

"What if Nurse decided to check on her? What if someone else got sick, and a matron brought them down? What if Auntie—

She heard the elevator hum, and instinctively stepped back, looked wildly for a place to hide.

Then braced her shoulders. If the doors opened and she didn't see Dorian, it was over anyway. Everything. She'd be punished, beaten, tossed into the box. She'd be sold at auction like a—like a painting or some fancy necklace.

A thing. She wouldn't live as a thing.

When the doors opened, she nearly cried out. Slapping a hand over her own mouth, she leaped in with Dorian.

Forgetting the gum, she gripped Dorian's hand.

"What the—"

"Sorry. Gum. I used it on the latch. SB? Subbasement, right? That's got to be it." Mina pressed the button.

Authorization required for that level.

They both jumped a foot.

"Swipe card, try the swipe card on the pad. It has to work. It *has* to."

Dorian gripped her own wrist to steady her hand, swiped the card. Mina pushed the button again.

Authorization verified.

The elevator started down.

"Someone could be down there," Dorian said. "What do we do if somebody's right there?"

"I don't know. We—we run, or try to fight. I don't know. We got this far. Oh God, oh God, I guess I never really believed we'd get this far, so I don't know."

It took forever, or seemed like it as they wrapped arms around each other.

Then the doors opened, and still wrapped around each other, they stepped out into dim light.

"It really is a tunnel."

"It goes both ways." Dorian pointed right, then left. "Which way is out?"

"We have to pick one. You pick. I feel like I might puke again."

Dorian chose right. "We should run. We might not have much time. The Matron Monster might need her swipe." She shoved it in her back pocket in case they needed it again. "Maybe she'll think she dropped it, but maybe she'll put it together."

Hands clasped, they ran. The tunnel echoed, so they spoke in whispers, filling each other in.

Then the tunnel forked.

"You pick this time," Dorian said when they stopped.

"We went right," Mina replied, "so this time left. It has to lead somewhere because that's how they removed that poor girl. We just keep going until we escape. Then we have to determine where we are. You were in New York, I was in Devon. We could be anywhere now. We break free, find out where we are, get somewhere I can call my parents. And the police."

"The police? But—"

"All the others, Dorian." In the dim, yellowish light, Mina's soft green eyes went fierce.

"We have to think of all the other girls, like us."

Maybe she felt bad for them, but Dorian's instinct said just get out and run.

"My parents will know what to do," Mina told her. "They'll come get us, no matter where we are. I miss them so much, and my stupid little brother, too. I know he's a pest and annoying, but not always. And I know I get pissed at my parents sometimes. I mean, so clueless, right? But I never ever felt afraid until the Academy. They never even hurt me. And your mom—"

"She's not like them."

"You've been gone all this time. She's got to be worried. She—"

"She's not like your parents, okay?" Everything inside Dorian hardened, coated over even the fear. "I felt afraid plenty, and she hurt me when she felt like it. If we go to the cops, they'll send me back to her or toss me in juvie or a foster. I might as well stay here."

"Don't say that, don't. My parents will take care of you, too. I promise. I swear it. Nobody's going to screw with you. They won't let that happen. And they won't let these—these *fucks* get away with everything they did."

Rather than argue, Dorian shrugged. Mina had plenty of smarts, but she didn't know how the real world worked.

"Did you hear that?" Dorian's hand viced on Mina's.

Voices echoing, footsteps running.

"They're coming. We need to run."

"No, no, they'll hear running," Mina hissed. "Like we hear them. Keep walking, close to the tunnel wall, keep moving, but quiet, quiet. Look, look up there! A ladder in the wall. We climb up, right? It has to be a way out."

When Mina reached it, she gripped the sides. "There's a cover on it. We'll need to push it off. Careful, it's a little slippery."

They wedged together on the narrow ladder.

"It's not heavy. I'm taller, let me." Dorian gritted her teeth, shoved. "I've got it. I've got it."

As she used both hands to push the metal cover, Dorian's foot slipped. Even as Mina grabbed for her, she went down, banging her knee on a rung, then feeling her ankle twist and go out from under her on the fall to the concrete.

She bit back a scream of pain as Mina pulled her up. "You're okay, you're all right. I see light. We have to go up now. They're getting closer."

She shoved Dorian up, climbed behind. "Hurry. You have to hurry."

The pain made her sick, made her dizzy, but she climbed. Climbed into pouring rain and roaring thunder.

Mina popped out like a cork behind her, then dragged the cover back in place.

Through the storm, they saw what looked like a huddle of derelict and abandoned buildings, a couple of rusted-out cars slumped on weedy gravel, a heap of busted-up planks, a lot of trash.

It smelled like a broken recycler filled with rotten fruit.

But in the distance, lights gleamed through the wall of rain.

"That way!"

"I can't run, Mina. I can barely walk. I maybe broke something."

"Lean on me. If we can get to those lights—"

She broke off as the cover shifted. With an arm around Dorian, she dragged her friend to the old lumber pile.

"We hide," she whispered. "Stay down until they go away."

A man pulled himself out of the hole. Spoke to someone below him. "There's blood on the ground, the ladder. One of them's hurt."

The Matron Monster climbed out. "I hope to fuck it's the little shit who stole my swipe. She's going to pay for it." Already soaked to the skin, she spoke into a 'link. "We found their exit, and one's banged up."

The man gave a location and orders to send more for the search. Ordered vans for a street sweep even as a third climbed out.

"They didn't get far," he said. "We were a minute behind them. Spread out and find those bitches."

"They'll find us," Mina whispered in Dorian's ear. "I'm going to lead them away."

"No!"

"I can run faster than they can, and it's raining so hard, I can get a head start maybe. Stay here, stay quiet. I'll make them think you're with me so they'll stop looking. I'll send help."

"You can't—"

Mina picked up a broken piece of wood with a jagged edge, and shoved at the bright hair the rain plastered to her face. "Stay down, stay quiet. We got out, Dorian. We're not going back."

She gripped Dorian's hand one last night. "Partners," she whispered, then ran.

"There! I see one!"

"Go, Dorian," Mina screamed. "Keep going! Don't stop!"

As Mina ran, Dorian squeezed her eyes shut. She'd tried praying a few times in her life, and it never worked. But she tried again, as hard as she could.

She heard a shout, and then a scream. Mina? Following her gut, she lurched to her feet, managed one running step before her leg crumpled under her. Her head cracked hard against a plank on the way down. She saw stars. Then nothing at all.

Under a black umbrella, Auntie stood over the body. The trainee she'd put so much time and effort into, had such high hopes for, lay like a soaked rag, impaled with a jagged spear of wood.

Useless now, she thought. Useless.

"No sign of the other one." Her head of security stood next to her. "What a fuckup. I'll have a full report for you after I debrief. Do you want her taken to the crematorium?"

"No. 238 may go to the police. It's not her nature, but in case she does, we'll turn this on her. Have that idiot Nurse get the last blood draw from 238. When the cops find the body where you'll deposit it, it'll have 238's blood on it. And have whatever 232 was wearing when we recruited her brought up. Get this disappointment in a van. You'll take care of this tonight."

"Yes' ma'am."

"I'll relay precise instructions. I want no more carelessness. Understood?"

"Loud and clear."

"Stupid, ungrateful bitch."

Auntie kicked the body once, viciously, then walked away.