

The Trade

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First Place

Chapter One

I was bred for slavery. Some woman with no food had me so that she could trade me to the factory. At least that's how they say it usually happens. I wonder if she ever thinks of me.

They don't keep records on the slaves – there's no way I could track her down. But if I could, I would ask her if she felt guilty about giving her own flesh to be raised with the beatings and the day in, day out work. Night work too, when one of the bosses feels like sneaking into my room. Maybe she doesn't know what goes on in here. Maybe no one on the outside does.

I don't know much about the outside. Only what I overhear when the bosses talk to each other. Outsiders, other than the women who trade their babies, seem to have plenty of food. It's what makes the bosses fat. My best friend Caris, who works in the shoe room with me, once had one of the bosses tell her he was going to hide her in a crate and help her escape. He promised her sweet food that she's never dreamed of, and warm baths every day, and animals for petting and playing with, not for eating. Then he stopped coming to see her. I don't know if the Outside has all those things or not, but I know that the women wear beautiful shoes.

I'm stringing tiny beads, clear blue as Caris's eyes, and stitching them onto a shoe, when a boss crashes through the door.

“To the baths,” he yells.

We just stare at him. We each have our day of the week for a bath, and none of us has ever been ordered to bathe during worktime.

“Now!” He lifts his club.

Still, we don't move.

Except Caris raises her hand a little, then a little more. "There's only one bath, Boss."

I don't know why Caris always has to be the one to open her mouth. When she gets hit, they usually hit whoever's nearest her, too, for good measure, and half the time it's me. Caris is still bruised from last time.

But the boss just says, "Well, take turns then, but make 'em fast, and put on your best clothes after."

Caris and I look at each other. This boss has lost his mind, we say silently. Best clothes? We have two sets of dirt-colored clothes each. All the same.

Girls start filing past the boss and out the door. I'm in front of Caris when we get into the hall.

"Jeba," she hisses. I hang back and let her get next to me.

She whispers, "What do you think's going on?"

"I don't know. But if he's crazy, we're going to pay for leaving the workroom, and it's going to be bad."

But we get to the bath room and there are girls from jewelry and clothing there, too. They don't know any more than we do. There aren't enough washcloths for us all to bathe on one day, so when it's our turn, the girl before us hands hers to Caris. Caris adds some water to the tub, strips, and grits her teeth as she puts a toe in the cold water.

"Hurry up," a boss barks from the doorway.

Caris doesn't even bother to cover up, she's so used to the presence of men in her bedroom. She's too pretty for her own good. Of course, being pretty is probably what saves her from getting beaten to death when she opens her impertinent mouth.

Before the boss leaves, he says, “And when you're dressed, come out to the yard.”

We bathe and dress quickly, Caris's long, wavy yellow hair and my shoulder-length dark curly hair dripping wet as we make our way to the yard. We always pretend we're sisters, or half-sisters, but we look so different it's unlikely. Kind of a joke. Sometimes I look around the shoe room and wonder, though. Luta has medium-tone skin and large brown eyes like me, and who knows who I'd find in the other buildings. Who knows how many babies my mother had, or who my father is.

In the yard, Caris and I find a bench, and I try not to let too much dirt get onto my damp feet. The bosses mill around, chat, and don't bother us as we try to draw a week's worth of sun out of the sky in however few minutes we might have. The good lighting highlights the varied colors in Caris's bruised cheek. I also notice, when I look around the small, fenced enclosure, the strange absence of the small children from the clothing workroom, but I tip my head back and close my eyes, enjoying the warm light too much to talk.

Soon, though, Caris nudges me. I open my eyes to look at her and follow her gaze to the door. My stomach cramps. An all too familiar stout, white-haired man is addressing the bosses, most of whom walk, quickly for once, back into the building. One boss, a writing tablet in his hand, follows the stout man toward us. I feel Caris hunch over and lean back slightly. The man is our Owner.

The Owner stops in front of us, looks us over with his eyes the color of “mountain ice” beads, and says to the boss, “No, yes,” without ever meeting our eyes, and moves on to some other girls. A whimper of relief escapes from Caris, but my stomach still hurts, because he's not gone yet, and even when he goes, whatever new rules he might leave behind will still have to be

implemented. I'm especially worried that I was a "yes," and Caris was a "no." I don't know what it's all about, but I worry that it could mean we'll be separated.

When he has stopped at all the girls, The Owner goes back into our building, and a boss tells us to line up at the door, which we do without speaking. Each girl receives an order when she enters.

"To your room. To your workplace. To your workplace. To your room."

Caris receives a, "To your room," and I a "Workplace," and she squeezes my hand as we part ways.

When I get to my work stool, I pick up the shoe I'd been beading when the boss sent us to bathe. Gradually the room fills up most of the way with other slaves, and the same boss that divided us comes in and says, "Look happy, or you'll regret it until the day you're dead," and then leaves us unsupervised. We look at each other, completely perplexed, and then settle back to work.

The thing is, I don't know how to look happy. I try to remember how Caris looked when she thought that the boss was going to sneak her to the outside. I raise my eyebrows and smile with my teeth showing and mouth slightly open, but it just doesn't seem like a person would make shoes with that expression all day, even if she were happy.

Have I ever been happy? Sometimes I'm less scared than other times, but happy? Once, a half wild dog found its way into our yard and Caris and I petted its wiry coat and played tug of war with it. The way it looked at me made me happy, but at the same time I knew the dog would probably be in our next stew, which made me feel worse than if the dog had never come.

I decide my happiest moment was the time Caris got chocolates from the boss who said he'd help her sneak out. After he left her room, she came and got me and shared them with me. Sitting on her bed, we ate them all, one right after the other. For one night, we were happy.

Remembering that night, I take a pair of shoes to the “finished” pile and start beading another. Why we'd need to look happy when we're all alone I cannot imagine.

I work steadily, but I can't help but stop my needle for a moment when our Owner walks in with another man. An Outsider? Our first visitor ever, at least in my workroom. I smile bigger and whip my needle through the leather before my hesitation is noticeable.

“And this is one of our shoemaking rooms,” says our Owner importantly. “Say hello, girls.”

He has never addressed us directly before. It takes us a moment to register that we're supposed to respond.

“Hello,” we say to the Outsider, smiling like someone is standing behind us pulling our cheeks back.

“Hello. Nice to meet you,” he says, and I see something I never thought I would see. An Outsider who looks as sad as one of us. I have never seen a true Outsider before, but the bosses get to live part time on the Outside, and I've never once seen that expression on one of them.

The Sad Man has very nice clothes, flowing and embroidered with a swirling black and purple design. I wonder if our girls made it. His erect posture tells me that he is in charge of his own life, and maybe others' lives too. He smiles kindly, nods, and turns to leave.

Our Owner gestures to the doorway. “And this way to our fine jewelry artists.”

And then we are working alone again. I think we are done having to look happy, but I keep a small, closed smile on my face just in case. I finish pair after pair of shoes. We've never

worked for such a long period of time without a boss at least wandering through the workroom. Usually one is there the whole day. My fingers are tired, but we know we can't stop until someone tells us to.

I let myself get lost in the colors of the beads. Everything else is dirt brown here. The tables, the floors, the walls, the stools, our clothes, our bedding. The girls from clothing and jewelry tell me that they use beautiful colors, too. I imagine an Outside with nothing brown. Every single thing lagoon blue or ruby red or grass green, like my beads.

Finally, a boss comes in. I'm careful not to stop because he hasn't told us to, but I want so badly to stretch my hands and lay my head down on the table. I'm still beading when, out of the corner of my eye, I see the boss's club raised.

“Luta,” I scream.

But there's nothing Luta can do. The club is on her back before she can move. The boss is not giving out disciplinary bruises; he's going crazy. He moves from Luta to Vondeen, and the rest of us scramble up and race to the door. I push at the others to get them through the doorway, but the boss is coming for me next. His club comes down over my head. I throw my left hand up in time. I'm through the door before I realize that my whole hand is on fire with pain. Instead of running to my room, I keep going and barge in on Caris.

“What's wrong?” she gasps.

I've woken her. “My hand.” Holding my left hand in my right, I carry it to her. I'm crying hard now that I realize the pain is not going to go away any time soon.

“What happened?”

“A boss went crazy. I think my fingers are broken.”

“But why?” Caris asks, not as concerned about my fingers as I think she should be. “They usually don't hurt you so bad that you can't work. Tell me everything that happened. Something is going on.”

“He just went crazy. Luta and Vondeen are still on the floor. They're still on the floor!” I'm starting to shake.

“I'm sorry, Sweet, I'm sorry.” She finally looks at my hand. “Can you move it?”

I try. “No,” I sob.

“Jeba, you have to try. You have to be able to work.”

“I know,” I squeal. “It won't move.”

I don't want to look into her eyes. When girls can't work, they disappear.

Caris gets me quieted down, and we agree that I might be able to get some work done with one hand, and the bosses might not notice that I'm working at a pace of about a bead an hour if Caris lets me take her shoes to the “finished” pile once in a while.

“But we need to keep our eyes and ears open,” she says. “Can you tell me anything more about what happened today? Why they separated us?”

I tell her everything that happened, even though I don't know how keeping our eyes and ears open will help us if something big's going to happen.

“So you were supposed to look happy,” she summarizes, “a stranger came in, and then the boss went berserkers. Maybe you weren't happy enough. But why would you need to look happy?” Without waiting for an answer she asks, “What did the stranger look like?”

“Not quite as old as the Owner. Not quite as fat. Sadder than I'd expect from an Outsider. Maybe we were supposed to cheer him up, and we didn't.”

Caris chews her bottom lip. “Hmm. That would be a strange way to try to cheer someone up. No idea who he was?”

I shake my head, and don't tell Caris that I've named him Sad Man.

In the workroom the next day, I almost cry with relief to see Luta and Vondeen across the table. It's almost impossible for me to bead one-handed, and to make matters worse, I'm working on no sleep because the pain in my hand kept me up all night. I don't turn in a single shoe of my own. Every once in a while when the boss isn't facing us, Caris slides me one of hers and I make plenty of noise scooting my stool back and shuffling my feet over to the pile. I pretend to take another unbeaded shoe from the center of the table, but really it's the same shoe I've had all day. We make it through the day, and I start to think we can do this until my hand heals. If it ever heals.

Three nights later, although I'm so tired I can hardly move, the pain keeps me awake again. I haven't even closed my eyes when I hear the other women start getting up in the morning, and I will myself out of bed and grab my work shirt. A boss blocks my open doorway. I cover myself, instinctively; bosses only come in our rooms for one thing. But never during waking hours. Something is wrong.

“Get your things and come with me,” he orders.

My heart starts whooshing instead of beating. Girls who can't work disappear. Someone must have finally seen Caris passing me her shoes. I hope they didn't punish her for it.

The boss doesn't look away while I change. I don't have any “things” to get, so I slip my sandals on and follow him. I hope for a glimpse of Caris in the hallway, but she's not there. Then

we walk by the workroom, and I see the back of her golden head and cough to get her attention, but she doesn't turn around. I keep walking and finally start to cry. Because Caris is okay, and because I can't say goodbye, and because I'm going to disappear.

My heart is still whooshing as we pass other workrooms and wind through hallways I've never been allowed to walk before. We end up in a big, brown, square, boss-filled room that has a door to the outside. The door is open, and a scared looking girl holding a baby is taking hesitant steps in through it. She looks around at all the bosses, chooses to go left, then right, then finally stops and waits for someone to tell her where to go.

“Over here,” an uninterested voice calls to her.

She heads for the table where a boss is waiting with a writing board. I want to see what they give her in exchange for the baby, but my boss is leading me toward the open door. I want to yell, “Don't do it! Take your baby and run away! Find another way to survive. How much food can you carry with you – ten days' worth?” They're going to make me disappear anyway, I have nothing to lose, but I still can't find my voice.

As my boss walks through the door, he nearly collides with a young man who backs up to let us pass. The young visitor is dressed much like the Sad Man, but he's about my age. He smiles at me, and my heart stops whooshing and starts beating again. It's like he wants to tell me with his smile that everything's going to be okay. But he doesn't know. He doesn't know that I'm one of the girls who can't work.

Careless, floppy curls the color of the chocolates that Caris and I shared cover his head and fall partway down his neck. His eyes are the color of shady moss beads, the deep, dark green ones with the golden flecks, and they, too, try to tell me that all is well.

Do visitors come here more than I thought? Maybe this is the room they come to when they want to order our shoes and clothes, or the furniture that men supposedly make in other buildings. Maybe he's here to buy. Whatever he's here for, once again I wish I could find my voice. I want to beg him to help me.

But we keep walking through a dirt courtyard to a guarded gate. The boss leads me through, and says, "Here she is."

I take no notice of who he's talking to, because before me is the largest animal I've ever seen. Ten times as big as a dog, maybe more. Shiny brown with a stringy black tail and hair down its neck to match, and enormous gentle black eyes.

A thin man gets out of a cart which is attached to the animal, takes my good hand, and carefully helps me up into the cart. I did not expect to be pulled to my final resting place behind a magnificent animal. I wonder what other creatures live on the Outside that I'll never get to see.

When we're both seated on a wooden bench, the man shakes some straps, and the animal pulls us away. I turn back to see the factory, and realize there are many more buildings than I'd known. Maybe some of them *do* have men making furniture. Brown buildings on endless brown dirt. I face forward again, and far ahead, something dark shimmers.