The Concourse

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Architecture, Book 4

Prelude

Adler sat down at her desk and opened the laptop. Three new messages. Two were students asking for more time. The third was Dana Shaw at the Concourse.

Subject: Recommendation request.

She read the email before she opened anything else.

They needed one female student on site after classes tomorrow. The work was paid. When a name was confirmed, a faculty partnership grant of twelve thousand dollars would post to Adler’s department account. The attached pages were the completed installation. If she had a student who matched, she should call.

She opened the file.

The first page was the main concourse downtown. Shops along one side. A coffee counter. A stone floor worn pale down the middle from years of shoes. In that walking lane, flush with the rest of the floor, sat a heavy metal grate. Under it, in a recess deep enough to take a woman’s body, a girl lay on her back, naked.

Nothing on her but the grate and the hardware.

Her arms were pulled out from her sides and fixed to the foundation. Her legs were open, knees apart, ankles fastened. Long blonde hair was spread under her head and over her shoulders. Her breasts were high and full. From the angle of the drawing you could see them clearly between the bars: the shape of them, the nipples, the way they rose when she breathed. Her waist was small. Her stomach was flat. The bars laid dark stripes across her skin and did not hide anything. Between her open legs a dark plate was seated against her, pressed to her so that every step on the grate would push there.

People were using the hall as if she were part of the floor. A man’s dress shoe was on the bars over her thigh. A woman’s heel stood on a bar across her stomach, the point of it above her navel. Another pair of shoes was coming into the frame. Nobody in the drawing was looking down yet. They were just walking.

Adler zoomed in.

The girl’s mouth was open a little. Her eyes were open. The plate sat tight enough that the drawing had shaded her wet around it.

Adler went to the second page.

Same girl from directly above. Face in the gap. Cheeks flushed. Breasts filling the spaces. The plate dark and glossy between her legs. Caption under the image: completed view, public hours.

Adler’s face was hot. She could feel her pulse in her neck and between her legs. She did not close the file.

She thought of Cassidy Lang.

She opened the Finance Society page. She advised the club. Last month’s mixer photos were still posted. She scrolled until she found the one by the windows.

Cassidy stood full length in the middle of the shot. Gold hair down her back. Pale blouse. Dark trousers. Heels. The blouse was tight across her chest. You could see the size of her breasts and the small waist where the cloth tucked in. Her hips and thighs showed in the trousers. A plastic cup hung from her fingers. She was not looking at the camera. She was already turning toward the door.

Adler put the photo next to the drawing.

Same chest. Same waist. Same long legs. In one picture Cassidy was holding a drink at a mixer. In the other a girl built like her was naked under traffic with a plate between her legs.

Adler saved the mixer photo and called the number in the email.

“Dana Shaw.”

“This is Nessa Adler. I read the request. I have the drawing open.”

“Good. Do you have someone?”

“I want to hear you say what I am looking at.”

“You are looking at the finished work,” Dana said. “She is naked in a recess in the main concourse floor. The grate locks over her, level with the stone, so people can walk the lane they already walk. The bars do not cover her. Anyone who looks down will see her breasts and her stomach and the plate and her face. The plate sits between her legs. When someone steps on the grate, she feels it there. We tell the tenants it is an art installation. She stays in the floor.”

Adler’s eyes were on the heel over the girl’s navel.

“I have a photo,” Adler said. “I am sending it.”

She sent the mixer picture. She heard Dana open it.

“Yes,” Dana said. “That is the body. What is her name?”

“Cassidy Lang. She is nineteen. She is in my Thursday section. She has the top grade. She leaves the room while I am still talking. She does not sit if she can stand.”

“You realize this is permanent,” Dana said. “If you put Cassidy Lang on my list, she does not come back to your class. She does not go back to that club. Her friends will not hear from her again. I need you to say you understand that before

I take the name.”

Adler looked at Cassidy’s turned shoulder in the photo. She looked at the naked girl under the grate. She was wet. She could feel it when she shifted in the chair.

“I understand,” she said.

“The grant posts when I confirm her. Twelve thousand to your department account. That is yours. What we pay Cassidy is for showing up tomorrow. After she is in the floor there is no paycheck to her. There is the hall.”

“What do I tell her?”

“Come to the main security desk after class. Use your name. It is paid. Call it an opportunity if you want. Do not describe the grate. Do not show her this drawing. If she sits in your office and hears that she will be naked under people’s shoes, she will not get in a car.”

“The drawing looks still,” Adler said. “Clean.”

“The drawing is for you and for the shop. Putting her in is rougher. Clothes off. On her back. Wrists and ankles bolted. Plate seated against her until it is tight. Grate dropped and locked while she is lying there in the hall. People will be walking already. I am not asking you to hold her down. I am asking you to send her.”

Adler did not look away from the mixer photo.

“I will send her,” she said.

“Say her full name.”

“Cassidy Lang.”

“I have her. I have the photo. She will be on the desk list tomorrow afternoon. If you come through after she is in, you will be walking on her. You will be able to look down and see everything in that drawing, except it will be her. I want you to know that before you hang up.”

“I will come through.”

“All right. Reply to the email with the name so the grant can post. Anything else?”

Adler’s voice came out even.

“No.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

They hung up.

Adler replied.

Cassidy Lang. Photo attached. I will send her after class tomorrow.

She sat with the two pictures side by side. Cassidy with the cup, turning to leave. The same body on its back, legs open, a stranger's heel on the bar over her stomach, the plate shiny where it pressed her.

Adler's breathing was shallow. She put her fingertips on the trackpad and held them on the plate in the drawing, then on Cassidy's blouse in the photo. She took her hand away.

She wrote to Cassidy.

Go to the Concourse after class. Main security desk. Use my name. It is a paid opportunity.

She sent it.

Twelve thousand would post. Cassidy would read the message in the morning and think she had been chosen. Tomorrow Adler would look at her in class — the hair, the blouse, the long legs — and tell her to go downtown.

After that Adler would walk the concourse and look down through the bars at her student, naked in the floor, and step where the drawing said the plate would be.

Chapter 2 — Another Door

Adler pulled the cable from the lectern and closed the laptop.

"The problem set is on the course page," she said. "Friday. That is all."

Cassidy was already on her feet. The bag strap sat on her shoulder. Gold hair hung down her back and over the front of the blouse. The blouse was tight across her chest. She felt it when she breathed.

"Cassidy," Adler said. "Come here."

Cassidy came down the steps. A boy in the aisle turned sideways to get past her breasts and did not say excuse me. She stopped at the table.

Adler looked at her face, then at her chest, then at her face again.

"You got my email," Adler said.

"Yes. I can go now."

"Go now. Main desk. Use my name. Nessa Adler."

"I know."

"Good."

Cassidy waited for more. Adler did not give her more. The look stayed on her a second longer, on the hair and the blouse and the long line of her legs in the

trousers. Cassidy felt heat in her face and lower. She read it the way she always did. Of course Adler had picked her.

“I am going,” Cassidy said.

“Go.”

Cassidy went out the side door and down the stairs. On the landing she ordered a car. She stood on the curb and did not sit on the wall. The air made her nipples tighten under the blouse. She left her arms at her sides.

In the car she sat forward. The belt crossed between her breasts and she moved it. Her knee bounced. She put her hand on her thigh and felt the heat of her own palm through the cloth. She was going downtown because Adler had put her name on a list. Paid. Opportunity. She liked both words.

Her phone lit.

Jenna: Did she keep you?

Cassidy: I am going to the Concourse. She sent me.

Jenna: For what?

Cassidy: Paid. I will tell you later.

She locked the screen. She did not want to write it out. She wanted to get there.

The Concourse took up most of a block. Stone and glass. People on the steps. She paid in the app, got out, and went up with them.

Inside it was loud. Hard floor. Fountain. Coffee. Cold air on her throat and down the open collar of the blouse. Her heels hit sharper than they had on the classroom tile. She felt each step in her calves and in the way the trousers pulled across her seat.

A man coming off the steps looked at her legs, then at her chest, then at her face. A woman with a badge did the same thing and looked away faster. Cassidy kept walking. She knew what she looked like in this light. Gold hair. The blouse. The small waist. The long legs. She had dressed for that.

MAIN DESK was to the left. She stood at the counter.

The officer wore a dark uniform. He looked up, then down the front of her, then at his screen.

“What is your name?” he said.

“Cassidy Lang. Professor Nessa Adler sent me.”

He typed. He looked at the screen again.

“Adler. Opportunity. I need your ID.”

She set it on the counter. He compared the photo to her face. The camera on the counter clicked. She felt her breasts rise with the breath she took for it.

He printed a slip and pushed it across with the ID.

“Keep that on you. Wait in the public concourse. That is the wide walk-through with the shops and the coffee. Do not go through the tenant gates. Do not go into the closed section at the far end. Someone will come get you. If you leave the building you start over here.”

“I am not leaving,” Cassidy said.

“All right.”

He pointed. She folded the slip, put it in her pocket against her hip, and walked that way.

The public concourse was full. Badges. Phones. A coffee line that was not moving. Shop glass. People passing close.

She stepped in.

A woman with a rolling bag cut across her. Cassidy’s breast brushed the woman’s sleeve. She felt it after the woman was gone.

She kept to the right.

Heads turned. She saw it happen in the shop windows and in the faces coming toward her. Chest first. Then the hair. Then the face. A man in a gray suit looked so long he had to correct his path. Cassidy did not smile at him. She did not need to.

There were benches along the glass. An empty seat. She did not take it. If she sat, the trousers would bunch at the hips and she would be parked there with salads and phones. She walked.

The bag strap dug into her shoulder. She moved it. The blouse had come untucked on one side in the car. She pushed it in with two fingers and felt her knuckles on the skin above her waistband.

At the far end, barriers closed off part of the floor. A printed sign said CLOSED. Beyond the barriers the stone looked newer. A sheet covered a gap in the middle of the lane. Cassidy slowed. She could not see under the sheet. She looked longer than she had a reason to. A man behind her said, “Excuse me,” and she stepped aside and let him pass.

She did not go closer.

She turned around and walked back.

She stepped near a pillar and texted Adler.

Cassidy: Security has my name. I am in the concourse.

Adler hearted it.

Adler: Stay on your feet. I will come through later.

Cassidy put the phone away. She was already on her feet. She could feel the floor through the heels, a rub starting at the back of one ankle, and the warm place where her thighs touched when she walked.

A man coming toward her looked at her legs and then at her chest and then past her ear. Heat went through her face and down. She kept walking.

She was thirsty. She did not get in the coffee line. Nobody in that line was moving.

She walked to the lobby end, saw the glass doors and the daylight on the steps, and turned back. Going out meant the desk again and the camera. She did not want the desk again.

Nobody said her name.

An officer passed her and glanced at her pocket and then at her mouth.

Her stomach was empty. Under that was the same heat from Adler’s table, fed now by the crowd and by every person who looked and then pretended they had not.

A woman on a bench said, “If they take that sheet off during lunch I am not fighting those people.”

The woman next to her laughed. “Then get here early and look like everyone else.”

Cassidy went past them. She did not know what was under the sheet. She knew she had looked at it too long.

She took the slip out. Cassidy Lang. Nessa Adler. She put it back. The paper was soft from her fingers.

A messenger with a crate made her turn her hips to let him by. A girl in a black skirt took a picture of the closed section and caught Cassidy at the edge of it and lowered the phone, embarrassed. Cassidy did not say anything to her.

The screens changed the hour. Cassidy felt the hour in her arches and under her arms and between her legs, where the trousers pulled when she walked.

She did not sit.

She did not go to the barriers.

She stayed in the crowd with the bag on her shoulder and the slip against her hip, waiting for someone to say her name.

Chapter 3 — The Empty Bay

Dana came back when the crowd had thinned.

“Cassidy. With me.”

Cassidy capped the water and followed. Dana took her to the barrier and lifted a section of tape.

“Watch your step. Stay on the stone until I tell you.”

The sheet was gone.

The floor opened into a rectangular recess, deep enough for a woman to lie in. Pale stone sides. At the four corners, metal brackets sat in the foundation with the bolts standing open. Between where someone’s legs would go, a dark plate was fixed to the bottom, smooth, raised enough to press up against a body. A thin line left the underside of the plate and went into the stone. The grate leaned against the wall on its end. The bars were thick. Cassidy could see it would take two people to lay it down.

Cool air came up out of the hole.

Cassidy stopped at the rim.

“Walk the edge if you want,” Dana said. “Do not get in.”

Cassidy walked.

Her heels sounded sharper on the new stone. She kept her toes back from the drop. When she looked down she saw her own blouse reflected in the dark plate, the tight cloth across her chest, gold hair hanging forward. She saw the open bolts at the corners. She felt a pull low in her belly and stood still until she could move again.

A man in work clothes packed tools against the wall. He glanced at her legs, then at Dana.

“We drop the grate in the morning,” he said. “I need this clear.”

“She is looking,” Dana said. “Then she is out.”

Cassidy walked the far side. The brackets at the head of the recess sat about where wrists would be if someone were on their back. The ones at the foot were farther apart. She did not put her arm down there. She could see her wrist would fit.

She stopped at the head of the hole and looked down the length of it. Plate at the far end. Open bolts. Cool air on her throat and on the skin above her blouse. She was wet. She hated that Dana was close enough to see her face.

“Step back,” Dana said.

Cassidy did not move for a second. Then she stepped back. The solid floor felt wrong after the edge. Her thighs were tight. She wanted to walk the rim again.

“You are done looking,” Dana said. “The shop needs this space. You are going home.”

Cassidy swallowed.

“I thought I had to stay.”

“You had to stay on your feet in the concourse while I watched you. That part is over. We are closing this section. The grate goes down in the morning. I want you at the main desk at nine. Not early. Not late. Use Adler’s name.”

The man with the tools waited.

“Front doors,” Dana said. “If someone from class texts you, do not describe this. If Adler writes, you can answer her.”

Cassidy walked back through the public concourse. People still looked at her chest. She felt those looks less than she felt the cool air from the recess and the shape of the plate.

At the main desk the officer glanced at her slip.

“Released for the night,” he said. “List says return at nine.”

Outside she ordered a car. In the back seat the belt crossed her breasts. She moved it. She pressed her knees together and looked out the window.

Her phone lit.

Adler: Dana says you looked. Are you going home?

Cassidy: Yes. She said nine tomorrow.

Adler: I will see you after.

Cassidy locked the phone.

Her knee bounced. She put her hand on it. She gave the driver her address near campus. She did not tell him to take her anywhere else. Behind her the Concourse lost detail in the glass. The recess was still open. The grate was still against the wall. She was out of the building, on her own seat, going back to campus with the plate still in her head.

Chapter 4

Dana stopped her in a narrow corridor off the shops.

Five people in work clothes waited at the far door. Dana held out a small canister. Metal. The size of a tube of lipstick.

“Mouthwash,” Dana said. “Use it. You are going to be close to people.”

Cassidy took it. Her mouth was dry. She pressed the top and breathed in.

Cold. Bitter. It caught at the back of her throat and held.

She tried to say thanks.

Nothing came out.

She tried again. Her lips moved. Her throat worked. No sound. She grabbed Dana’s sleeve.

Dana put the canister in her pocket.

“That is permanent,” Dana said. “Your voice is finished. Do not spend the next minute trying to get it back. You will not.”

Cassidy shoved her. Dana took the shove and looked at the others.

“Now.”

Hands on her arms. A hand at her waist. They put her through the door before she had her feet under her. She tried to yell. Air left and died. Tape. A rectangle cut out of the walking lane, deep enough for a body, open bolts at the corners, a dark plate at the far end, the grate standing on its end.

She threw herself backward. There were enough of them.

They sat her on the rim. Dana tore the blouse. A button ticked off the frame. Cassidy’s breasts were bare and she tried to cover them with arms two other people were holding wide. The bra was dragged down. A woman at her feet pulled the trousers and underwear off in one motion. One heel flew. The other was yanked and fell into the hole.

They tipped her back onto stone.

She wrenched a wrist free once. A woman with short dark hair put it in the bracket and held it while a man ran the bolt. Cassidy yanked. The metal stayed. She opened her mouth as wide as it would go. Silence.

Left wrist. She got a fistful of shirt. They peeled her fingers off and locked that one too.

She kicked the woman at her feet in the chest. The woman hit a post, came back with another man, and opened Cassidy’s thigh until the air hit the wet of her. The

bolt took that ankle. Cassidy threw the free leg toward the rim. Dana put a forearm across her belly and held her down while they dragged the last ankle out and fastened it.

Then she could not close her knees.

Dana looked between her legs too long. Her face was flushed. The hand that was not on Cassidy’s stomach was a fist on her own hip.

“Plate.”

They brought it up from the housing. Cold. Wide. He set it against her, tight to her clit, and put his weight on it until it locked. Cassidy’s hips ticked on the metal and could not get off it. She was soaked.

The line went into her thigh beside the housing. Deep. Her leg tried to fold and could not.

“In,” he said. “It stays.”

Dana leaned over her face. Cassidy could see how bright her eyes were.

“Listen to me,” Dana said. “That line is how you eat now. The plate carries it. You do not come up to drink or to have lunch. The supplements in it keep this body the way it is. Fifteen years is the estimate. If they choose a replacement before that, you come out for the replacement. Not before. Do you understand I am not asking you?”

Cassidy stared at her. She had no voice to answer with. Dana looked at her mouth anyway, then at the panel that had lit on the rim when the plate locked. Numbers. A pulse.

“She is up,” Dana said. “It has her.”

They lowered the grate, four of them. Bars cut the light. Iron came down over Cassidy’s breasts and her belly. She ran in all four bolts at once and went nowhere. The frame dropped the last inch. Dana locked the corners with her heel. On the last one her breath shook.

“Raise it.”

The stone under Cassidy’s back shuddered and began to lift. The whole recess came up through the hole in the floor, grate and body and plate together, toward the level of the walking lane. Cassidy felt the rise in her spine and in the plate. Shop signs slid. The ceiling got closer in strips. The frame of the grate came flush with the worn stone around it and locked there with a heavy sound she felt in her teeth.

The tape came down.

She was in the floor of the concourse. Level. Naked under the bars. Anyone who looked down could see her breasts, her stomach, the wet plate, her face.

The first stranger did not look down.

A man’s work shoe hit the bars over her left shin and then over the plate. The metal shoved up into her clit and stayed for the length of his stride. Cassidy arched and came, silent, shaking, while the panel on the rim jumped. He was already past her. A woman in heels crossed next. The point of one heel stood for a half-second on the bar above Cassidy’s navel and the plate crushed her again. Then a pair of soft soles. Then a rolling bag whose wheel struck a bar over her thigh.

Dana stood to the side and watched the numbers and watched Cassidy take the steps. Her cheeks were red. She pressed her own thighs together, hard, and did not hide it.

When there was a gap she stepped onto Cassidy herself. Heel on the bar above her stomach. The plate held. Cassidy’s mouth opened on nothing. The panel spiked. Dana’s breathing went uneven, and then she walked off onto ordinary stone.

People kept coming.

Cassidy pulled until her wrists burned. The grate did not lift. The bolts did not give. The floor around her was the same floor as the rest of the lane. She could not speak. She could not stand. She could not close her legs. Each set of strangers drove the plate into her and the panel kept reading it, and the line in her thigh ticked once, quiet, as the first feed started.

Chapter 5 — She Stays

The grate took another pair of heels. Cassidy felt the plate rise under her, hard and brief, then settle when the woman kept walking. Her clit stayed swollen against the metal. She was wet enough that the plate slid a little with every shift of her hips. She could not stop the small movements. The bolts held her wrists and ankles open. Her breasts were bare between the bars. Cold air from the concourse moved over them. Her nipples stayed tight.

People crossed. Most of them did not look down. A man in work boots stood on the bars over her thighs for three full breaths while he answered his phone. The plate pressed up and stayed there. Cassidy's mouth opened. No sound came out. When he walked off, the pressure eased and her hips tried to follow it. They could not.

She had been there long enough that the feed in her thigh had ticked twice. The supplements were already in her. She could feel the line under the tape. It did not hurt anymore. It only kept her from having to eat.

A low heel stopped at the edge of the grate.

Cassidy looked up through the gap.

Adler stood above her. She was not smiling. She was not using the voice she used at the lectern. Her eyes went to Cassidy's face, then to her breasts, then lower, to the plate seated between her open legs. Cassidy's stomach tightened. She pulled at the right wrist. The bolt did not give. Adler saw the pull.

A man coming behind Adler slowed, saw she was not moving, and stepped around her onto the stone. He did not speak. His shoe still clipped the outer bar. The plate jumped once. Adler felt it through her own feet and stayed where she was.

"You came," Adler said.

Cassidy's mouth moved. Nothing left it. Adler waited. When no answer came she nodded once, as if that settled something.

"I told you it was an opportunity," Adler said. Her voice was low enough that the people walking past had to lean if they wanted to hear it. Most of them did not lean. "I had already seen the drawing. A girl on her back under this grate. Naked. Legs open. A plate between them. People walking. I looked at that drawing and I thought of you. Then I stood in the classroom and looked at you in that shirt and told you to go downtown."

Cassidy's eyes burned. A drop ran into her hair. She could not wipe it. Adler's heel was on the bar just above her navel. The weight was steady. The plate pressed up into her clit and held. Cassidy's hips tried to lift off it. The ankle bolts

stopped them. The metal stayed seated. She was dripping around it. She could feel the wetness on the plate and on the skin of her inner thighs.

Adler shifted her weight. The plate moved with her. Cassidy's breath caught. Her breasts rose between the bars. Adler watched them.

"This is what I sent you to," Adler said. "I am not going to stand here and list everything they are going to do with you. You can feel the plate. You can feel that you cannot close your legs. You can feel that the grate is locked. That is the opportunity. I knew it when I sent the photo. I knew it when I told you to use my name at the desk."

A woman with a paper cup paused at the far end of the grate, looked down, and stepped over Cassidy's chest without putting her full weight on the bars. Adler let her. When the lane was clear again Adler put both feet on the bars above Cassidy's stomach and held still. The plate crushed up and stayed. Cassidy's back tried to arch. The bolts took the force. Her mouth opened wider. No sound. Her clit throbbed against the metal. She was close. She could feel it building and she could not stop it and she could not reach it with her hands.

Adler looked down at her face while it happened.

"They told me you would stay wet," Adler said. "They were not wrong."

Cassidy came against the plate. It was sharp and short and then it kept going because Adler did not step off. The weight held the metal where it was. Cassidy's thighs shook inside the bolts. Her breasts moved with her breathing. Wetness ran down the plate and onto the stone under her. Adler watched until the shaking eased.

"I said I would come through," Adler said. "I will do it again. You do not have to answer me."

She stepped off onto ordinary stone. Then she crossed the grate once more, slower, one heel over the plate, the other over Cassidy's left breast. The bar pressed the soft flesh. Cassidy felt the heat of Adler's shoe through the metal for half a second. Then Adler was past her and walking toward the shops with the rest of the crowd.

The next pair of shoes was already on the bars. Soft soles. Light. The plate rose and fell with each step. Cassidy lay under the grate and took them. Her wrists pulled once more and got nothing. Her legs stayed open. The line in her thigh ticked. Above her the concourse kept moving. People crossed. Some of them looked down. Most of them did not. The plate stayed seated. She stayed wet. She did not get up.