

SUMMARY:

Daddy Issues

story and illustrations
by Valerie Hope



Part One

I GUESS EVERY BOY WANTS, down deep, to be like his father. The difference between myself and the other boys I knew growing up – they at least had a shot at accomplishing it. Not so for me.

My name is Richard Lowridge, Jr. For those out there who actually *have* been living in caves for the last decade, that makes me the son and younger child of the West's foremost philosopher, Richard Lowridge, Sr. The man who penned *Perception and Reality, Desire: The Root of Metaphysical Impetus* and the last, Pulitzer- and Nobel-prize winning *Images from the Innermost*. His radical ways of thinking set conventional philosophy firmly on its ear, stirring the pot of abstract thinking in a way not done since the days of Marx and Engels.

From his customary perch on a creaky chair at a corner table in Milton House Coffee Shop, on the corner of Fifth and Commerce, the rakishly slender young man with his trademark topknot took on the whole of Western thinking and, through a Montblanc pen and pure strength of character, amassed a following among the world's intelligentsia with his bold, visionary combination of ancient Eastern philosophy and pure classical sophistry, with vast influences by Kierkegaard, Locke, Kant and his own father, a retired steel-mill worker from western Pennsylvania who had a singularly peculiar way of viewing the world and his fellow man.

Within six years since his first book, my father found and married my mother who gave birth to my older sister, Dawn and convinced an entire generation of people that human desire – acknowledged or not, shaped the individual reality for each and every human being. It stretched the metaphor that *we see what we want to see* into the greater truth that *we experience what we want to experience* and that the strength of our individual desires contained the power to shape the worlds of others if our want overwhelmed their own. He posited that Hitler came close to conquering Europe simply by *wanting* it conquered more than the citizens who lived there *wanted* it to be free. It was not until the Allies wanted to liberate it more than Hitler wanted it conquered that the tide of the war turned. The world shaped itself around certain notables, certain individuals who could out-*want* everyone around them and thereby change the world to suit them. Those with powerful enough desire could even convince others around them that the *wanting* was their own idea, and thereby give it more strength.

Lots of people quizzed me about just what it was like to be the son of such a luminary. I never had an adequate answer to suit his admirers. To me, he was just *dad*. We played catch and swam in the creek beside our

modest house, we built a fence together one summer, we fished off the pier in Stockholm the week he received the Nobel for Literature. I never even knew, until my adolescence, that my father had any life outside our little house. I sat and played Legos two feet from where the world's foremost thinker sipped espresso and penned the seminal work of Western philosophy for the twenty-first century and never knew he did anything the slightest bit extraordinary.



Dad continued the proud tradition of most great thinkers and died before his time. The chest pain started at about eight o'clock that September morning, just a mild annoyance at first, but grew throughout the day. The ambulance came for him at four that afternoon. By six-thirty, the doctor pronounced him dead. He was only sixty-two years old – still in his intellectual prime. The notes for his next book could easily fetch millions from publishers and likely tens-of-millions from private buyers. But in the moment, comforting my weeping mother, money could not have been further from my mind.

“I can't believe he's gone,” I whispered softly into her silver hair, eyes wet with bitter tears. “I just talked to him this morning. He told me to remember to pick up milk on my way home. His last words to me were to remember the fucking milk.”

My mother stroked my hand softly. “He knew you loved him, Ricky. He never doubted it.”

“I just wish I could've gotten to tell him, one last time. For me, not for him.”

My sister came into the room, a pained and fragile smile on her face. She favored mom over dad – my mother had been a renowned beauty in her day, and Dawn long since took up that mantle for herself – and she ran a manicured hand through my thick hair as she took a place on the sofa on the other side of mom. “I just put on a pot of tea,” she said reassuringly. “I figured everybody could use a cup.”

“You're sweet,” Mom said, her voice wavering with unshed tears. “But I don't want to put either of you to any bother.”

“Stop that, Mom,” I chided gently. “We're a team. We're all in this together. We share this load.”

“A hundred percent,” Dawn agreed.

Mom sniffled long, as close as she'd come to outright bawling since receiving the news. “You're only twenty-six, darling,” she began. “You shouldn't have to...”

“Twenty-six is old enough, Mom,” I corrected. “None of us is going through this alone.”

“Fair enough,” Mom said, disengaging from my arms and patting her hair unnecessarily back into place. “Best to get on with it, I suppose. What needs to happen first?”

“We have the death certificate already,” Dawn said, “from the hospital. We'll need to fax copies to his insurance company and submit it to the county clerk's office. Ricky, can you call dad's lawyer and ask for the will? I know he has one, I just don't know where it is.”

“It's in the safe deposit box at the bank, honey,” Mom said. “Along with mine.”

“Great,” Dawn said. “Ricky can take you tomorrow morning to pick it up. Mom, did Dad write anything down about funeral wishes?”

“Not really,” Mom replied. “We talked about it, once or twice. He didn't want a media frenzy. He wanted small and private, near his father's plot in Camden Cemetery. We bought plots, ages ago. He wanted it simple and quick – a few pieces of poetry, maybe some classical guitar. He told me at least a dozen times, 'don't make a fuss over me.’”

I chuckled. “Sounds just like Dad.”

Dawn nodded tearfully. “I'll call the funeral home tonight and start making arrangements. We should give a few days before the visitation. Even if we keep it small, there are going to be friends flying in from all over the world once they get the news.”

Mom blew her nose and smiled wistfully. “It will probably be the greatest meeting of thinkers gathered in one spot since the Manhattan project,” she laughed. “Benjamin will probably come from Istanbul, and Ari from Tel Aviv, and Bruce and Charles from Moscow...”

“I'm sure Michael will fly in from Kinchasa,” Dawn added.

“And Ji will come from Beijing,” I said. “Sharon from Bucharest.”

“And that funny little man with the thick glasses, from Rabat. What was his name, with the adenoids?”

“Ibrahim,” Dawn supplied.

“Right, right, Ibrahim. He idolized your father.”

She gathered both of us up into a hug, one in each arm. “I have the most wonderful children,” she said. “I am grateful every day.”

“Well, I guess Dad would say that death wanted him more than he wanted to live,” I said, slapping my thighs and rising, eager for a concrete task, something to accomplish to break me away from the sadness. “I'm gonna go and call the funeral home.”

“And I'm going to get the tea,” Dawn said, hearing the rising shrill whistle begin in the kitchen. “The number for the mortuary is written down on the pad next to my purse, Ricky, in the hallway.”

“Thanks,” I said, placing a companionable hand on her shoulder. Unlike most siblings, Dawn and I started out close and only became closer as time wore on. People remarked how unlike the typical older-sister-younger-brother pairing we behaved, and neither of us possessed a good

explanation for why. I just counted myself lucky, that my closest friend was also my sister. I hoped she felt the same.

* * *

All the glitterati of the intellectual community that we named, and a few more we didn't, arrived a few days later, stuffing the hotels nearby, but they kept their distance. Each of them, I suppose, had a private and unique good-bye to offer to the great man, but they respected the loss to his family and didn't overburden us with sympathy and well-wishing.

Dawn and I struggled through the meeting with the probate judge to go over the will – Dad's estate proved substantial, since he made millions from his book sales and speaking engagements and never really spent a dime, preferring the simple life in his simple house in the small town in rural Virginia to any rarefied air to which he might have aspired. Richard Lowridge, Sr. stayed, in his heart, a simple man to his very end. He carved out a little piece of the big wide world and branded it his own, forsaking anything more grandiose, even though the simple weight of his name would open doors to that realm. He owned a sizeable piece of the publishing company which distributed his books – a result of a bailout to his publisher back in the nineties when the Internet threatened the print industry to the point that they could no longer tempt investors. Dad wouldn't hear of it. He infused the company with fresh capital from his own pocket and published another hugely successful book – a book of reflective poetry which won multiple awards and sold over ten million copies – to cap it off. Not because he believed in the future of print, either. It was a personal favor to a friend. That was my Dad. Personal relationships superceded all other concerns. My father only concerned himself with people.



We stood as a family before the polished rosewood box, saddened beyond the point of tears. Dawn threaded her lissome hand through the crook of my elbow on one side and squeezed the quiet, forlorn figure of my mother against her on the other. Dad would approve. The family simply tightened up around his loss, becoming stronger and more resilient. Just the reaction which Dad said made family such a potent force in the universe.

I bid my father a silent good-bye, wishing not so much remained unsaid, as all children do at the end. I placed warm fingers against the cold, unfeeling wood and closed my eyes.

What happens if I want you to be alive more than the universe wants you to be dead? I asked my father's departed consciousness. Will you wake up and stop this?

I chuckled. My father answered inane questions the same way for as long as I'd been alive: a blank stare of disbelief and a comically cocked eyebrow, as if waiting for a punch line to underscore the exchange. That expression sprang photo-perfect into my mind.

“What is it?” Dawn whispered to me out of the corner of her red-painted lips.

“Just thinking about Dad and his 'I-can't-believe-you-said-that-out-loud' look,” I whispered back.

“Did you think something stupid?” she teased *sotto voce*.

“As a general rule, yes,” I teased back.

Mom clucked her tongue quietly. “You two are incorrigible,” she scolded in a whisper. “It’s a funeral, for heaven’s sake. Behave yourselves.”

“No one consciousness can define acceptable behavior,” I quoted from Dad’s second book. “Behavior, be it unacceptable or not, is the moral obligation of the growing mind to discern from the infinite series of choices between right and wrong.”

“Very nice,” Mom whispered sarcastically. “But not even Richard’s metaphysical bull can trump the universal maxim of ‘listen to your mother.’”

“We shouldn’t be laughing,” Dawn said, shoulders bouncing up and down silently. Hopefully, those behind us would mistake the movement for sobs. “People are looking.”

“Dad would *love* this,” I commented.

“Yes, he would,” Mom said. She laid both her hands on the polished wood of the casket. “Good-bye, you handsome devil. You certainly kept things interesting.”

“Bye, Dad,” Dawn said softly, placing her own hand atop one of her mother’s. “I hope you’re wrong about afterlife and consciousness, I really do. I really want to see you again.”

I laid my own hand atop the others. “I never understood a tenth of what you wrote, Dad, but I always believed you saw a world that others couldn’t. I hope it’s everything you hoped it would be.”

We stood there, a family, bruised and saddened but as *whole* as anything could possibly be, and bid good-bye to the great man who united us, silent and unbroken. I could only hope that Dad looked back at us from somewhere, in some form, and the side brought happiness to his heart.

* * *

The graveside service stayed blissfully short, under the threat of rain from a leaden overcast above us. The assemblage made a hasty retreat towards the shelter of the chapel nearby to escape the looming weather, stumbling and slipping on the uneven turf in their high heels and designer loafers, heads down and hands in pockets.

Somehow, I became separated from Dawn and Mom on my way back – they got waylaid by a couple of friends from long ago and walked in a quiet conversational knot several yards away. I'd only just reached the relative shelter of the covered colonnade overlooking the cemetery when a hand tugged at my sleeve. I turned to see Martin Lassiter, dad's publisher and long-time companion. The older man's basset-hound face looked even more haggard and depressed than usual, and his red-rimmed eyes behind the coke-bottle glasses betrayed the depth of his loss. Martin introduced mom to him, was best man at the wedding and stayed dad's confidante and devil's advocate ever since.

I gathered the family friend up into a close hug – the man had changed my diapers a time or two, after all, so handshakes seemed far too formal – and rested a hand on his shoulder.

“Martin, it's good to see you. How are you feeling?” Martin's double bypass, only six short weeks ago, still dragged him down. I could see the lingering fatigue in his eyes.

“Better,” he told me. “I still have a long way to go.”

“You look better,” I lied. “You should come to the house, soon. We miss seeing you around.”

“Likewise. Listen, Ricky, I have something for you,” he told me, digging in the inner pocket of his tailored suit. “Your dad gave this to me, a long time ago. I told him to save it for you, someday, but he insisted. Now that he's... y'know, *gone*... well, I feel like you should have it. It should belong to you.”

He passed me a battered leather notebook, the pages ratty and dog-eared. I opened it. Inside lived the scrawled handwritten first draft of Dad's famous *Images from the Innermost*, the treatise that earned him the Pulitzer and the Nobel in the same year. My eyes stung as I saw the little drawings in the margins, monsters and fantastical contraptions that he'd doodled to entertain me as I sat at the table alongside him while he worked. One of the pages even contained a detailed crayon drawing of a cow, proudly signed in my unstable five-year-old hand, between a detailed

analysis of man's capacity to deny reality and its ties to the mythical gods of antiquity.

“Martin, this is... I don't know what to...”

“It's yours, kid,” he said, patting my shoulder in that way he had that signified everything would work out. His hand slid up my back and massaged my neck a few times, brusque but loving. “It only makes me miss him more.”

“Martin, I love you,” I told him plainly.

“I love you, too, kiddo. But I gotta get inside. I poop out pretty easily these days. I need to sit myself down,” he said. His hand lingered for just a moment more, a tacit admission of his feelings for my family, and then he turned away abruptly and wended his way inside.

“Don't be a stranger,” I bade him, distracted, missing his exit because my eyes riveted themselves to that handwritten book in my hands. I stood there, leaning against one of the grey stone columns, for an unknown length of time, not even noticing when a gentle rain began to fall on the manicured grass, caressing every scribbled word and crossed-out misstatement with my soul, fighting my way through the attenuation of time to relive every single memory I could squeeze from my brain in the slightest detail. For a happy interlude, I spent one more afternoon sitting beside my father at the coffeehouse, laughing at our private silly jokes and weaving wild tales of imagination, with a father once again young and healthy and vital, full of life and energy.

“Hey,” a familiar contralto sounded softly, shattering the recollection and burying the pieces beneath the soft fall of rain in the elms. Dawn stepped up to me, her high heels clacking on the flagstones. She dug in her purse for a moment and pulled out a long white cigarette and a sterling silver lighter.

“God, I've been aching for one of these for two hours,” she said, lighting it and sucking the smoke down gratefully, eyes closed in bliss.

“Where's Mom?” I asked her, watching the curling plume of smoke she exhaled caper and dance on the breeze across the cemetery.

“I put her in the limo back to the house. Poor thing is completely exhausted,” she replied. “Whatcha got there?”

“Martin gave it to me. It's Dad's handwritten first draft of *Images*. Martin had it for years but dad wouldn't let him give it away. He decided with Dad gone, I should have it. Look, here's the pictures we drew together.”



“Holy shit,” she breathed, running a manicured nail across the crinkling pages. “I remember. You went with him to that coffee shop every morning. Nobody could believe a five-year-old could sit still for all those hours at a time, but you wouldn't leave. He carried you home fast asleep so many times.”

“Those are my favorite memories of him,” I confessed. “This is a treasure.”

“You need to keep it safe,” Dawn nudged. “For all the sentimental value, baby, that notebook is worth an obscene amount of money. You can't just leave it lying around.”

“You're right,” I agreed. “Didn't even think of that.”

“See? That's why you keep me around,” she teased.

“Nah, it's because I pity you,” I told her distractedly. My foray came across so weakly, she didn't even take the bait.

“It's really weird, isn't it?” she said, exhaling another dense lungful of smoke into the breeze. “Not having Dad here. I keep waiting to hear him bitch at me about my smoking.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I swear I heard him grumbling in my ear about how bad the limo driver was.”

Dawn laughed, deep in her throat. “He died still believing he was the only human being capable of successfully operating an automobile.”

“Did you see Martin? He's inside. You should go talk to him.”

She took another deep drag. “I will. How does he look?”

“Rough,” I told her honestly. “He really needs to give up that job. It damn near killed him last year, and now it just might finish him off. That's way too much stress for a man his age, in his condition.”

“Agreed,” Dawn said. “You tell him.”

“Yeah, right,” I laughed.

She took a final drag and tossed her half-smoked cigarette into a nearby topiary to hiss out in the deepening rain. “You should put that book someplace safe before it gets soaked, Ricky,” she told me. “And we need to get inside. With Mom out of commission, we have to represent in there.”

“Yeah,” I said, tucking the notebook away inside my jacket. “We *did* buy all that food, after all.”

* * *

Life, such as it was, returned slowly back to normal. I resumed my job as Assistant Human Resources Director for a local medical supply company called MedTech, overseeing the hirings and firings and sexual harassment seminars and doing endless PowerPoint presentations over insurance benefits and leave time. Dad hated my job – he believed strongly that I wasted my potential on such banal, trivial tasks – but he acquiesced when I convinced him of my passion for business. I loved the financial aspect, the place where economics interfaced with actual human beings. I'd wished for years to be able to go back to school and get my M.B.A., but with dad's death and mom needing a lot of coverage as she adjusted to the loss, that plan probably wouldn't bear fruit for many years – if ever.

I returned to my job with a feeling of being distinctly trapped, twisting in my gut and sucking all the satisfaction it provided before away and replacing it with a dull, heavy sense of monotony. I slumped at my desk, poring through the avalanche of emails piled in my inbox during my absence for my father's funeral.

"How you holding up, there, Rick?" an upbeat voice called from the door of my office.

Ben Jacobs leaned rakishly against the door frame, his finely-tailored suit draping stylishly across his painstakingly gym-sculpted body. Ben and I met in college, forced together into a dorm at State as freshmen. To say we became *friends* understated the depth to which we became brothers. Our connection transcended the simple commonality of most friends – Ben *understood* me. He knew what I thought the instant I thought it, he read my emotions flawlessly no matter how complex or convoluted, even if I retreated into denial. No one in my life – not even my beloved sister – connected with me on such a profound level. I tried not to dwell on it – most people didn't understand my intention if I tried to explain or quantify the depth of my friendship with Ben, chalking it up to latent homosexuality or something equally as banal. But it buoyed me up in my darkest hours. He was the first call I made when Dad died, and appeared at my side as if by magic.

"Hey, brother," I said with a forlorn sigh. "I'm trying to find some meaning in all this stuff. After Dad, y'know, it just seems so... pointless."

"I get that," Ben commiserated. "Hard to get excited about Casual Friday when you're fixated on what your mom's gonna do with that big empty house and all that time on her hands."

"Exactly."

"Don't sweat it, buddy," he said, stepping close to lean his knuckles on my desk and fix me with a level gaze. "It sets itself right. I know it doesn't seem that way right now, close as you are to it, but everything eventually finds its own level. You'll adapt."

"What the hell do I do in the meantime, then?" I asked hopelessly.

"You go through the fucking motions," he said simply.

I laughed. "What would I do without you, Ben?"

“You'd blunder through somehow,” he said. “Now c'mon. We're reviving an old tradition from the Sixties. I'm taking you out for a three-martini lunch. Get your coat.”

* * *

As much as I wished I could follow through with Ben's elegant master plan to spend the day at work trashed, I just couldn't. One martini into our three-martini lunch, my stomach began to hurt. It usually did when I went without sleep, and the last few days proved far from restful for me. I dug a package of Imodium and some Pepto-Bismol from a desk drawer when I returned to the office and dosed myself accordingly. It gave me no relief, so I informed my secretary I was going home and managed to drive myself to my midtown apartment. I changed clothes and tried to take a nap on the couch. My gastrointestinal tract had other plans for me.

When the pain didn't let up two hours later, the thought crossed my mind to keep it to myself, to just sack up and push through it, but then I thought of my father, ignoring the ischemic chest pain all day until the blockage in his heart became too large and too embedded to remove. No doctor ever said it outright, but the conceit that if my father had gone to the doctor when he first felt the pain, he would still be alive loomed large in all our thoughts over the last few days.

When the vomiting and cramps began around quitting time, I summoned a cab with a smartphone app and had it take me across town to the big downtown emergency room. I huddled in their waiting room with a blue plastic bag in my hands. After my fourth loud episode of retching, the triage nurse behind the desk moved me up to the top of the list before my horrible gastric noises had their entire waiting room diving for the garbage cans in a vast, communal sympathy-barf.

I slumped listlessly across an exam table, trying to find a comfortable position, and sat in solitude for about twenty minutes, my only company a crying baby in the curtained-off bed to my left and a wailing psych patient behind the curtain to my right. A silent tech with a hangdog expression and truly apocalyptic halitosis entered and took my pulse, temperature and blood pressure, then exited without a word. I toyed with the idea of creating enough of a ruckus to get a nurse over, but I doubted someplace as colorful as the county ER would take much notice of anything short of arson.

I'd just begun considering going home and calling my personal physician, maybe scheduling an appointment for the first thing in the morning, when the curtain parted and a tall doctor entered, the fluorescent lights glinting

from his ebony skin and a rich Nigerian accent on his tongue. A little Filipino nurse entered behind him and set about drawing blood for lab work while he spoke to me.

He looked at the chart beside my bed and then folded his hands behind his back. “Mr. Lowridge, hello, I’m Dr. Mpele,” he said amiably. “I apologize for the wait. There was an accident with a mass transit bus earlier, and we were swamped. What brings you to my emergency room today?”

“Stomach cramps,” I told him with a hiss of breath to prove my point. “Vomiting, too. It feels terrible.”



“I see,” he said, stepping closer. He laid me back on the table gently and began feeling my belly with both hands. The pressure didn't hurt very much, but when he let go and my belly returned to its normal shape, the dull cramping pain became a searing fire emanating from a spot just above my right hip. I bit my lip to keep from crying out.

“Oh, dear,” he said. He tapped the bottom of my right foot and I winced. “Tell me, Mr. Lowridge, do you still have your appendix?”

“Yes,” I answered through gritted teeth.

“Not for long,” he said. “I will send you for a CT scan of your abdomen to confirm it, but you show all the classic signs of acute appendicitis. This pain, it came on all of a sudden, did it not?”

“Yes. I was fine this morning,” I replied.

“Classic symptoms. Your appendix has become inflamed and infected. I'm afraid it will have to be removed. Tonight, if your pain is this severe. I will have Emily, here, begin an IV and give you some medicine for your pain. If you could disrobe, please, and change into a gown, I will send someone to take you to CT right away,” he said briskly, making notes in my chart as he spoke.

“I need to call my family, to let them know what's happening,” I told him.

“Of course,” he said. “But if I could recommend waiting until your CT is finished. You should have a few minutes while the radiologist reads it before you're moved into pre-op. If you wait, the line for the CT scanner can become quite long. It's first-come, first-served. There will be plenty of time after, and your pain will be managed. You will also have a confirmed diagnosis to pass on to your loved ones, not just my preliminary exam.”

“Surgery? Really, that quick?” I asked in mild disbelief.

“Yes, that quick,” the doctor replied. “If it ruptures, Mr. Lowridge, things can get very bad. We need to get it out as soon as possible.”

I flinched and hissed as the silent nurse inserted the IV into the crook of my left elbow, my attention elsewhere. She finished it quickly and taped it down, then drew several vials of blood from it before capping it off with a length of tube flushed with saline and taping it securely to my forearm.

“I'll send your orders for the CT right away. Emily, go ahead and give him a milligram of Dilaudid for the pain. Nothing by mouth from now on. Mr. Lowridge, I'll be back to see you once you come back to the ER and answer any questions you might have.”

“Thanks, Doctor,” I said miserably.

The little nurse took up the chart from where the doctor set it down and began the endless litany of questions associated with any medical procedure.

“Are you allergic to any medications? Any recent surgeries or injuries? How much do you weigh? When was the last time you ate?” she began reciting, barely waiting for my answers before moving on to the next.

* * *

“Hello?”

“Hey, Dawn, it's me,” I said, a bit groggy from the spectacular pain medication I'd received. I tried to make a mental note: dilaudid. From now on, I would ask for it by name.

“Hey, kid, where are you? I've been texting you.”

“So, that's a whole big story,” I said. “I'm in the emergency room. They're prepping me for surgery. Turns out I need an appendectomy right away.”

“Do *what* now?” she said, taken aback.

“Started having really bad cramps and throwing up this afternoon, after lunch. When it didn't go away after some over-the-counter stuff, I took a taxi to the ER. Honestly, Dawn, I thought it would be something like an ulcer or something from all the stress, they'd give me some Nexium and send me home. But I just got the CT scan done and the doctor says it's acute appendicitis. They need to take it out of me or it could rupture.”

“Holy shit,” Dawn said. “I'll be right there, Ricky. Anything you need me to bring?”

“No, I'm pretty much covered. By the time you get here, I'll probably be in pre-op waiting to go in. Listen, don't get in a big rush. You're the only one I've told so far – things have been kind of hectic and I couldn't get to my phone. Can you call and tell Mom, and Ben, and leave a message at work for me? I doubt I'll be coming in tomorrow.”

“Yeah, Ricky, sure. No problem.”

“That would really take a load off my mind,” I said. “And you can take your time getting here. Don't drive like a crazy person and have a wreck or something. Mom's probably gonna want to come too, and you know how she hates driving at night. You probably won't get to see me before I come

out of surgery anyway. So just take a minute and get here when you get here. I'm fine. I'm pretty loopy, actually, from the painkillers they gave me."

"Yeah, you sound a little fucked up," she chuckled. "I actually thought you were drunk when I picked up the phone, for a second."

"I wish," I told her. "I'm kinda considering taking a little nap. I swear, I haven't felt this relaxed in ages. Maybe I should've started abusing prescription drugs years ago."

"Hindsight is 20/20," my sister remarked. "Okay, we'll see you when you get out of surgery. Don't do anything stupid until I get there, okay?"

"Promise," I said.

"I love you, fumble-dick," she told me sincerely.

"Love you, too, bungee-tits," I replied.

* * *

The haze of the painkiller left me plenty of time to drift in my own thoughts, going back through the catalogue of memories containing my father, not quite putting me to sleep but neither leaving me entirely awake, either. My mind flashed back to a conversation so dimly remembered that the possibility existed that my brain had not developed to the point of forming proper memories, it happened when I was so young. Rain cascaded down the window of my room, and I think I slept in a crib. My mother – her hair still red-streaked sable, then, not silver – and my father with his unkempt topknot, staring down at me.

"I don't know how this could happen," my mother was saying, her face creased with worry.

"It's *want*, love. Haven't you read what I've been writing?"

"That's philosophy, Richard, it's *conjecture*. It isn't reality."

"Philosophy defines reality, Barbara," my father said. "I wanted this. I wanted it so badly."

"I know you did," she said. "But this... this isn't natural, Richard."

"How do we know that? How do we know this hasn't happened before, millions of times?"

She snapped at him. “You can't just wish things were different! You can't just... make it *be* like this.”

“I believe you can,” he said calmly. “If you want it enough.”

“And you wanted a son. This much,” Mother said accusingly.

“I did. Heaven help me, Barbara, I did. And maybe – maybe this little one here wanted it as much as I did. To be what I wanted. Maybe the two of us together made this happen.”

“That isn't possible,” Mother repeated, a little less firmly.

“This is still our baby, my love. Our child. You can't tell me you won't love him just the same.”

“Of course I will. That's not the point! I want some kind of an explanation.”

“And maybe someday you'll have it,” he soothed. “In the meantime, we have this to deal with.”

“And what will we tell Dawn?”

“That she has a beautiful, happy and healthy baby brother,” Father said simply.

In the little, scarcely-formed world I occupied at that moment in time, I could remember how badly I *did* want to be perfection to my father. How badly I did want to matter to him, to belong to him, to be what he needed me to be. And a hard knot formed inside me, beneath my tiny heart, for the first time, when I saw the disbelief and near outrage on the beautiful face of my mother. For the first time in my barely-begun life, I felt stress. What does someone that young do with stress like that?

What all children do. They learn to adapt. They find a way to live *around* it. Children accustom themselves to any kind of adversity by growing up thinking that their particular circumstance is the way life is. Blind children don't miss seeing, deaf children don't miss hearing. My life involved stress, now, and I would spend my formative years learning to live with its presence, that hard knot beneath my heart, and I would flourish nonetheless. It was the way of children.

But what would life be without that stress? Would I even know what to do without that tension inside me? Would I feel its absence more acutely than I felt the lifetime of its presence? How could I even know?

A hazy form appeared, somewhere in the space between real and recalled, and a soothing voice coalesced from the vapors surrounding my brain.

“You're about to go in, honey,” it said, so like that gentle remembered voice of my mother. “I'm gonna give you a little medicine, just a little something to take the edge off and let you fall asleep, okay?”



Soft, infinitesimal forces tugged against my arm, and something cool flowed upwards, beneath my skin. My eyes refused to focus and the haze inside my head thickened. I fought to cling to something familiar, something *real* to me as consciousness retreated before this inexorable chemical invader. The only thing I could really even sense any more was that knot, that everpresent knot, my lifelong companion that I'd grown around and developed around and learned to live despite.

And as the cool rush spread up my arm to my shoulder, and into my chest, I felt that knot begin to loosen. Its hard, unyielding presence crumbled, piece by tiny piece, flaking away inside me and leaving a blissful, yawning expanse of utter *peace* in the hole it occupied. By the time sentience left

me, that knot had disappeared, leaving me for the first time in my life completely and utterly alone with myself.

CONSCIOUSNESS FLITTED JUST OUT OF MY questing reach, coming close enough to allow me to sense my surroundings and then retreating away again. A dim sense of my sister and mother, near me, speaking softly to me and holding my hand, forced its way into my recollections through the comfortable grey haze in my brain. A happy feeling, a safe feeling. But I couldn't keep myself aware, much less awake, for any length of time at all, drifting up to just beneath consciousness and then submerging back beneath unconnected dreams.

All the while I felt that distinct *lack* inside myself – that absence of the hard knot of stress and expectation dwelling in my chest for my entire life – leaving me free and unfettered for the first time in my memory. I never had the feeling of the high school graduate or the newlywed, that boundless optimism of the world being well and truly my oyster, that any path I chose would be a good path and lead to wonderful things.

Soft light beyond my eyelids deepened over fathomless time into embracing darkness, as I half-slept in the weird twilight place the drugs created. With no real sense of *time* or *place* to anchor me, I drifted instead between *self* and *not-self*, separating those factors which shaped my life and situation into things internal and things external.

The lack of the constant companion of stress overlaying my entire life shed eerie light on the process. I knew that much of who I was depended on the figure of my father and the constant struggle to please him, to gain his pride and his approval. Dad died never being able to tell me whether or not I achieved those aims – he passed too suddenly, left too many things unsaid and unfinished. But with his passing, so passed his undeniable impetus on my life. I no longer navigated by the polestar of my father's approval – his *wants* for me – and found myself in a position of forging my own destiny, deciding for myself who I was.



But a lifetime with my father taught me that the question *who am I?* eluded the easy answer. The immense responsibility associated with establishing myself as an individual consciousness yawned in front of me like a bottomless chasm, full of uncertainty.

Every decision – from what to have for dinner to one's place and purpose in the universe – germinated at the humblest level, and if my Dad was right, it began with what one *wanted*. We could not become things we did not want to be, even on a level we did not consciously recognize. But that left the nearly unanswerable question of what I wanted to be. The sheer magnitude of such a question rocked me, threatening to bring the hard knot back into existence inside my chest, even in the somnolent wonderland I inhabited from the sedatives.

I wanted...

Peace. Prosperity. Success. Safety. I wanted a clear picture in my own mind of who I was and what I wanted, not this damnable insecurity and doubt. I wanted an end to that hard knot in my chest, that constant sense

of tightness and rigor governing my every action and thought. I wanted softness. I wanted a return to my younger days, when what my father desired from me did not outweigh the simple childish wonder of just *loving* him and being near him. I wanted to be finished with development, to be *established* in the world, no longer *becoming* but *am*. I wanted to be rid of the feeling that I vaguely disappointed my father, with my choice of career and my relative dimness in all matters philosophical, and just live in a world where being myself would have been enough. Enough for him, but also enough for myself.



The marvelous sense of softness, of relaxation, suffused my body so much that I sank, deeper into myself and into my consciousness, gaining a more complete sense of *me* than I ever had. I exorcised the eternal need to *apologize* for myself, to myself, my mother, my sister, the ghost of my father. The softness surrounded me and embraced me. I *became* softness. Even the dim sensations of fabric against my skin registered in my insensibility as caresses, now.

Blessed softness. *Rightness*. I knew now that nature *meant* for me to be soft. I had always been soft, and only now did I take up my birthright. All the softness needed, somehow, to be complete was a name. But what name, what single appellation, could one assign to something as pervasive as softness itself? What did one deign to call something so perfectly wonderful?

* * * * *

“Hope? Ms. Lowridge? It's time to wake up, sweetie,” a soft voice said from somewhere outside my pleasant haze. I stirred and managed a breathy moan. The amorphous light behind my eyelids sharpened and assaulted me, making me turn my head into a curtain of downy hair, and squeeze me eyes shut against the unwelcome intrusion.

“There you are,” the voice said warmly. “How are you feeling?”

Gummed eyes fluttered open, allowing the piercing light in and taking a long and painful moment to adjust. Blurred images coalesced, forming depth and space – a brightly lit window transected by the dark stripes of vertical blinds, haloing a cheap reclining chair, a rolling stand-tray holding a covered plate, and the sight of a tall woman with cornrow braids and a bright smile, wearing blue scrubs and with a stethoscope draped around her neck. Her warm hands touched my arm.

“Good morning,” she told me. “I'm Renée, your nurse. Your procedure went perfectly, honey. You're doing just fine. How do you feel?”

“Groggy,” I said, rubbing a hand across my smooth forehead. My fingers tangled in soft hair – very *long* soft hair, framing cheeks devoid of any of the constant stubble adorning them for the last fourteen years. I gasped, holding a lock of the soft dark auburn between two slender fingers, tipped with very long, shaped fingernails, before my eyes.

“What... what is this?” I asked, hearing my voice for the first time. A husky, whispering contralto, very warm and lilting – eerily similar to the voice of my sister, but different enough to distinguish.

The nurse, Renée, put a calming hand on my shoulder. “Are you all right, Ms. Lowridge?”

“Waitaminnit. *Ms.*? What are you talking about?” I asked. Numbed fingers released the tress of reddish hair between them and dropped towards the bed for support, interrupted in their descent by soft, sensitive protuberances carried high on my chest, capped with stiffening nipples

which tented the flimsy, overwashed cotton of my hospital gown in the chilly air.

Renée favored me with a calm, reassuring smile – I was obviously not the first person she'd met to be disoriented by sedatives – and pushed my shoulder gently back towards the bed. “Of course, Ms. What else would I call you? You're Jennifer Hope Lowridge. You're twenty-six years old, you had your gall bladder removed yesterday after you came into the ER.”

“Jennifer Hope... wait... no,” I said, rubbing my temples and clinging onto Renée's scrubs tightly. “That's not right. It can't be. It was appendicitis. And I'm not Jennifer...”

“Your mama told me everyone calls you Hope,” Renée said. “And sweetheart, I assure you, everything I told you is accurate. I just read your chart outside.”

“I don't understand,” I said. “This *can't* be possible.”

“What can't?”

“I'm not Jennifer Hope Anybody,” I said. “My name is Richard Lowridge. Richard Lowridge, Jr. I came into the ER with stomach pain and they said it was my appendix. I had my appendix removed, and I'm not Jennifer, I'm Richard. I don't have long hair, I don't have breasts...”

Renée massaged my shoulder gently, pushing me backwards towards the bed. “Sweetie, I've been doing this for fifteen years. People have some strange dreams when they're under. Really vivid, like they're real. I knew one guy who woke up believing he was the president's chief of staff. Turns out his wife left a *West Wing* marathon playing on his television in his room while he slept. But it isn't real, sweetheart, I promise you. The chart never lies. You're Jennifer Hope Lowridge, and you had your inflamed gall bladder removed. I can show you the chart, if you want me to.”

“No, no, I don't need anything like that,” I said. “Just... I'd really like to sit up, if you don't mind. I'm fine, I promise. I won't freak out.”

She assisted me up and adjusted the bed to support me, giving me my first real look at my body. Long, very muscular legs – like a dancer's – devoid of any hair or blemish poked from the bottom of the gown. I sat low over wide, shapely hips. Pert, high breasts perched on a narrow chest. Little delicate feet, their toenails enameled a bright and cheerful pink, peeked out from beneath a fold of the thin blanket.

“Are you in pain at all, sweetheart?” Renée asked me.

I assessed myself as best I could, as unfamiliar as I felt in my own body. A little pain, high on my ribcage, twinged at my movements, but nothing so acute that I doubted by ability to bear it. “No, I'm okay. It's just a little discomfort.”

“I just need to check your incision, okay?” she told me. “Lay back, this won't take a minute.”

I drew a deep breath and did as Renée bid. She unsnapped the closure on the shoulder seam of my gown and drew it aside, allowing me my first good look at my breasts. Firm spheres, proudly defying gravity with their youth, bobbed gently on my chest, rising and falling gently with my breath. Stiffened pink nipples rose from silver-dollar areolae, tightening pleasurably in the mild chill in the room, roughly the size of pencil erasers and almost begging to be touched. A little golden pendant in the shape of the Chinese character for 'wisdom' rested between them at the end of a snaking loop of delicate chain. I knew that symbol well – it adorned the heavy, masculine ring I wore constantly on my right hand, a gift from my father after returning from a book tour in the Far East.

Renée's nimble fingers, now encased in nitrile gloves, pulled back the surgical dressing with a rip of adhesive that made me hiss. I could only just visualize the little red scar against my pale skin, about an inch long just beneath my right breast, the little wild hairs of suture poking out wildly. She brushed a finger against it accidentally and I hissed in unexpected pain.

“Sorry, honey, didn't mean to hurt you,” Renée said soothingly. “Looks really good. You're barely even gonna have a scar. No sign of infection at all. You got one of the good surgeons, girl.”

I flinched a little at being called *girl*, but Renée read it as more pain and murmured an indistinct apology. She re-dressed my incision and helped me fasten my gown, drawing the threadbare curtain closed over the exposed – and quite magnificent, by my male estimation – reminders of my shift in gender, cloaking them gratefully from my sight once more.

Renée spent a bit more time, taking my vital signs and then wheeling the covered plate on the rolling tray into position over my bed. The thought of food appealed to me not one bit, but I did take two extended and grateful pulls on the large covered mug of water beside the plate.

“Anything else I can get you, darlin'?” Renée asked as she notated my chart.

I looked around the room. Most of the generic hospital amenities lay within easy reach – the call button, the TV remote and the corded phone. It took a moment to spot something that I recognized as not belonging to the hospital, but something I could not in good conscience call *mine*. I pointed to the small bundle sitting on a small shelf near the basin of the room's little lavatory.

I tried not to stutter around the alien words as I said them. “Could you hand me my purse, please, and my bag?” I asked.

“Sure, sweetie,” Renée said, scooping them up in one hand and laying them gently on my bed. She left with a promise to return in a few hours to check up on me, leaving me alone. As soon as she left I tore into the contents of the foreign bags which somehow became my personal possessions, searching for some clue about who and what I might be and what might have happened to me.



I found only clothing in the little overnight bag, packed and folded carefully in a way I never bothered myself about before. The clothes – all

comfortable and casual, but in bright colors and strange cuts, and looking absurdly small to my male sensibilities – registered both comfortingly familiar and terrifyingly alien at the same time. But even that strange sensation paled beneath the realization that the little pink brassiere I found, trimmed with dark lace, not only sprang into memory as *my bra* but more shockingly *my favorite bra*. In the very bottom of the bag rested a little makeup mirror and a small zipper-bag stuffed with cosmetics that seemed more foreign to me than the rest of the feminine clothes and accessories.

“This is so fucking weird,” I breathed, going through the little leather bag carefully and examining every item in turn, finding nothing which could give me the slightest clue to the day's events. I zipped the overnight bag and set it aside, turning to the little leather purse. Inside I found things completely suited to a young woman – a lip gloss, a hairbrush, an 'emergency' tampon, a travel-bag of Kleenex and a small bottle of perfume – alongside a ring of keys and a large woman's wallet. The wallet contained a few dollars in cash, a credit card and a drivers' license confirming everything Renée told me – Jennifer Hope Lowridge, twenty-six years old, same birthday I'd always had, red hair, blue eyes, five foot six inches tall and weighing in at a hundred and fifteen pounds.

“This can't be *possible*,” I murmured, staring at the pretty, fresh-faced girl in the license photo like a complete stranger. “People don't just wake up as other people.”

I checked in a zippered side pocket of my purse – how strange to refer to anything as *my purse* – and found a little iPhone nestled inside. A quick touch of the button showed a respectable charge on the battery, on the status bar above a picture of female me pressed cheek-to-cheek with my sister, blowing obligatory 'duckface' kisses to the camera in a stereotypical 'selfie.' The undeniable family resemblance between the two pretty girls – between *us*, if this reality was to be accepted – shone.

I thumbed the icon for my address book – not expecting the little *click* from my lengthened fingernail against the touch-screen – and paged through, looking for Dawn's number. My list of contacts contained some of the names I expected – Ben, mom, people from work – but also a bunch of new names, people I could not remember ever meeting. My predilection for listing people's contacts only by first name stymied any attempt at identifying them, names like Amber and Hunter and Jacob and Tiffany B. and Tiffany K. I could not have described my relationship with these people under torture, to be certain, but no denizen of my address book could be *that* foreign to me.

“Just how much of my life has been lived without me?” I asked. My eyes turned towards the ceiling. “Dad? Did you do this, somehow? Are you trying to prove something to me?”

I touched the 'send' button beneath my sister's picture – she stuck her tongue out at me playfully, apparently we took a lot of pictures with our phones – and pressed the phone to my ear, waiting for the call to ring through. A bright voice – the first familiar voice heard in a long time, including my own – blossomed in my ear.

“Hopie! Baby, we were worried! How are you feeling?” Dawn crowed loudly, clearly excited. Even my sister only recalled me as female, as this stranger named Jennifer Hope Lowridge. My spirits sank a little – the feeling of my life and accomplishments under the identity of Richard Lowridge, Jr. seemed to have been irrevocably erased. And being the only one who remembered him made me feel even more alone and estranged.

“Hey, Dawn,” I said dispiritedly. “I'm okay. A little sore. How's Mom?”

“Worried about you, sweetie,” she said.

“Sweetie?” I asked. “You've never called me 'sweetie' before, Dawn.”

“Are you still high on painkillers?” Dawn replied airily. “I call you that all the time, babe.”

“I'm having a little trouble remembering what happened,” I said. “How I got here.”

“You called me from the emergency room,” she told me. “You told me you were having stomach cramps. Real bad ones, and vomiting.”

“I remember that,” I said. “I remember taking a cab to the ER. That's where it gets hazy.”

“You told me not to get in any big hurry, that they scanned your abdomen and you were headed up to surgery. You told me to get mom,” she recounted. “We got here once you were in pre-op, and the doctor told us you had a seriously inflamed gall bladder.”

“Nothing about appendicitis?” I asked.

“When you called me, you said that's what you thought it was,” Dawn said. “You pretty much convinced yourself of that, between WebMD and shit like that. But by the time we got to the hospital, the doctor told me it was your gall bladder. Me and mom decided to believe him.”

"I guess I can understand that," I said darkly.

"Are you okay, Hopie?" Dawn asked, suddenly concerned about the flatness in my voice.

"Just a weird day," I said. "Really weird."

"Sounds like you could use your big sister," she said. "I'm gonna head over, okay? Besides, I just wanna see your pretty face. You threw a big scare into me, you brat."

"Sorry, Dawn. It's not like I did it on purpose," I defended feebly.

"I know, babe, I know. Relax, I'm fucking with you. But I did get a fright. I wanna see you, okay? I'm coming over."

"Okay. You know my room number and everything?"

"Yeah, Hope, I got it all written down. I'm gonna call Mom, then I'm in the car. See you soon."

* * * * *

I must have drifted off for a few minutes – Renée had come and gone, checking my vitals and taking away my untouched lunch, and I remembered very little after that – awakening to the sound of my sister's voice emanating from behind a huge bouquet of flowers. She fussed for a moment, getting them into water, then gathered me up into a huge hug, being overly careful of my tender incision, then sat herself on the bed next to me and smiled broadly down, happy tears glistening at the corners of her heavily made-up eyes.

"Damn, Hope, your timing *sucks*," she said in a rush, the relief evident in her voice. "First dad, then you wind up having emergency surgery... I can't tell you how good it is to see you, pipsqueak."

I laughed, blessedly relieved to hear her use a name that I actually remembered her using, insulting as it might be. "It's good to see you, too, Dawn."

"So, how are you? How are you feeling?" she blurted, taking my hands in hers. I noted that she physically touched me more in the last thirty seconds than she probably had in the last five years.

"I'm okay. Tired, a little freaked out – not remembering how I got here and all," I confessed. "And I had some really eff-ed up dreams. About Dad."

I swallowed hard. For some reason, the desire to call my father *Daddy* nearly slipped out when I spoke, an appellation I had not used for him since I was four years old. The conviction of how natural it felt to me alarmed me more than the desire to say it. Dawn gave me an encouraging look, patting my hand tenderly, urging me to go on.

“I really disappointed him, didn't I?” I asked around the lump in my throat.

Dawn gave me a questioning look. “We did, babe, yes,” she said. “Look at us, Hopie. I cut rich people's hair and play with makeup for a living. You balance other people's checkbooks. Neither one of us is a deep thinker, no ground-breaking philosophers. He always wanted someone to follow in his footsteps.”

“He wanted a son, though, didn't he?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Dawn replied. “Mom told me when we were teenagers. Wanted it more than anything.”

“Wanted it. *Wanted* it,” I said.

“More than anything,” Dawn repeated.

I reached across my sister's lap into my overnight bag, finding the little makeup mirror tucked in the bottom beneath the clothes – a bag I now understood my sister packed for me, inserting the mirror and the small bag of cosmetics in the fruitless hope that I would use them. I never did. I recognized a new thought that oddly registered as an old memory – a most peculiar sensation – that my refusal to budge on the subjects of cosmetics, haircare and the like drove my big sister *crazy*.

I stared at my face in the mirror for a long moment, trying to memorize the unfamiliar lines and contours – looking in a mirror to see someone who *wasn't* me unnerved me completely.

“You sure you're okay, Hopie?” Dawn asked.

I shook my head, snickering, clearing my head of the troubling thoughts. “Yeah. I mean, as okay as I can be,” I said. “Actually, I'm really fucking jumpy right now, for some reason.”

Dawn chuckled. “You're probably jonesing,” she laughed.

“Jonesing for what?” I asked.

“Seriously? How long has it been since you've had a cigarette?” Dawn asked.

“I don't smoke,” I told her.

Dawn laughed boisterously. “How many drugs did they give you, anyway?” she chuckled. “Girl, you and me both snuck our first one out of Mom's purse in junior high. Did you suddenly quit and not tell me? 'Cause if you did, you owe me, like, three cartons from all the ones you bummed off of me.”

She turned to one side, rummaging in her purse for a bit, then offered me a small pink cylinder. “Plan B,” she said. “As long as you don't get carried away, you should get away with it.”

I took the little e-cigarette and turned it over in slender fingers. The strangeness of the day grew exponentially as I considered it, considered the desire I felt to place the metal tube between my lips and inhale deeply. No matter the mysterious, unknown circumstances of my strange, foreign new life, apparently it demanded that I *live* it nonetheless.

I gave in to the desire and took a deep pull, pressing the button on my inhalation like I'd done it thousands of times. I released the caramel-flavored vapor in a long plume and actually felt myself relax, as though I exhaled my tensions, as the fragrant cloud left my lips.



Dawn studied me in my peripheral vision, brushing reddish hair behind my ear as she admired me. “You are so fucking pretty, Hope. Honestly. I wish you would finally give in and let me make you over,” she said. “I could do so much with your complexion, little Miss Never-Had-A-Zit.”

“You’ve been after me to do that for years,” I muttered, suddenly realizing it – another of the memories which sprang into my mind, describing a past I never lived.

“Fuck yeah I have,” Dawn said. “You finally gonna let me do it, or what?”

I looked at my sister – so utterly familiar to me, but at the same time so unrecognizably *alien* and *unknown* – and offered her a shy smile. “Y’know what? What the hell.”

Her shocked look widened into a huge, toothy smile. “Seriously? You’ll let me?”

I nodded. “Sure, it might be fun.”

“Oh, honey, you know how long I've been waiting for you to finally give in and say yes to that?” she giggled, hugging me side-on tightly. “I'm gonna have the guys falling all over themselves for you.”

I gulped. “Let's not put the cart before the horse,” I said.

“What is it with you and boys?” Dawn teased. “Y'know, I don't think Mom would make it if she had to deal with you coming out lesbian the same week Dad dies.”

I demurred, trying to concoct a story to deflect the conversation which might fit with my unknown history. “I, uh... I just haven't met a decent one yet.”

“And how the hell are you gonna accomplish that, Sugar Tits, if you stay cooped up in a cubicle farm with a bunch of old, married accountants, huh? Babe, we gotta get you *out* there. Socializing, meeting new people. You're stagnating in that place.”

I'm an accountant? When the hell did that happen? I thought. At least it used my business degree better than my male job in Human Resources.

“Dawn, don't push. I'll do things at my own speed. I have no desire at all to spend my nights clubbing and trolling around for some different random guy to distract me from one night to the next.”

Dawn snorted. “That's not what I meant,” she said, looking a bit offended at my terse description of her lifestyle. “But you're a damned hermit, Hopie. Even Mom notices it. Just come out for a girls' night or something. Just to get you out of that apartment.”

“One thing at a time, okay? Let me get my fucking stitches out first,” I said.

“That's my Hopie,” Dawn chuckled. “Back to normal. Boring and careful.”

“That's me,” I said nervously, giving her a fragile smile in return, hoping I could keep this subtle interrogation up. My sister proved to be an excellent source of information, knowing as she did more about me than I did about myself.

* * * * *

The next day passed quickly enough – waking early and going through all the institutional ass-covering rigamarole of being discharged from a hospital. They gave me a series of prescriptions and several printed sheets of directions for my diet and for care of my incision. I signed at least

a dozen different waivers and releases – careful to sign Jennifer H. Lowridge on each and every one, suffocating my first impulse drove me to scrawl Richard Lowridge, Jr. in my haphazard handwriting – and sat waiting in my room, dressed in a little wool skirt and opaque tights, a greyish-pink sweater which clung to curves I still wasn't comfortable having, a light black leather jacket folded neatly in my lap beneath my purse. A nurse – this one named Carolyn – came up with an empty wheelchair just about the time my stomach started grumbling from lack of food. She passed me a folder as she helped me seat myself in the silver chair, placing my feet on the plastic footrests to her satisfaction before releasing the brakes and rolling me unceremoniously into the busy medical floor. Techs in wrinkled scrubs scurried this way and that, past the back of nurses catching up on their eternal charting.

“What's this?” I asked her, watching the bustle as I leafed absently through the folder in my lap.

“You have an appointment for Dr. Casey in a week for a follow-up,” Carolyn replied. “He likes to give his new patient paperwork ahead of beforehand. Cuts down waiting-room time.”

“He's general practice?” I asked.

“Gastrointestinal,” Carolyn corrected. “The ER doctor made the referral, in case you're worried about your insurance.”

I seized upon an idea. “Could he possibly give me a referral to a psychiatrist?” I asked quietly.

“You need one?”

“I think I probably should,” I said. “I just lost my dad, and my life is crazy right now. Unrecognizable. I could really use some help.”

Carolyn patted me on my shoulder. “Honey, we've all been there. I'll get Dr. Wright to refer you to somebody. I'll call you with the number later today, okay?”

I patted her hand in reply, deeply grateful that she complied and even more so that she didn't press me for details. We backed into an elevator behind the nurses' station and made our way down to the lobby, where she wheeled me through the front doors to see Dawn and Mom, both waiting beside Mom's blue SUV underneath the portico. Mom gathered me up into a tearful hug the instant I stood up, smoothing my hair and rocking me gently back and forth – something she'd never really done to me before.

The level of affection she lavished upon me took me a little by surprise – so much more than she ever showed to her son.

“Oh, my precious little princess,” she cooed softly. “You had me so worried.”

“I’m fine, Mama, honestly,” I said. “Ready to go home.”

They fussed over me incessantly as they situated me in the back seat, making sure my seatbelt fastened properly like a toddler. They piled into the front seats and buckled in, and Dawn almost chirped the tires in her hurry to be away from the hospital.

“Ugh,” she sneered. “I *hate* hospitals. Where you wanna go, Toots? Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” I said. “I missed lunch, and didn’t have much of an appetite yesterday.”

“I can swing us through someplace,” Dawn offered.

“Nonsense,” Mom interjected. “I can make you something. I want my babies *home*, with me. Besides, anyplace we stop would be full of fat and grease. Hope can’t eat that sort of food any more, Dawn, she can’t digest it properly without a gall bladder. We’d land her straight back in that dreadful place.”

I laughed. “That sounds great, Mom,” I told her. “I don’t want to too much trouble.”

“Are you joking? You’re my baby,” she said, looking fondly over her shoulder. “There’s no such thing as too much trouble where you and Dawn are concerned. Besides, I love cooking for my girls.”

My girls. Even Mom remembered nothing about her son, Richard.

“I’ve been thinking, Mom,” I ventured, staring out the window. “If it’s okay with you, could I take a look at some of Dad’s old journals? The old ones, I mean, the ones in storage that Library of Congress keeps emailing you about.”

“I don’t see any reason why not, princess,” Mom replied, turning forward to face the windshield again. “I’ll warn you, though – most of it is indecipherable. Really high-minded philosophical rambling. Some of the ones from the early ’nineties are even in French, you know, from that year we spent in Provence. But you’re welcome to them.”

The city blurred past us, thanks to the relief of being together once more coupled with Dawn's breakneck driving. We reached Mom's house, in the wooded hills outside the city, with no real sense of time having passed at all. They made the same fuss again, helping me from the car like an invalid and ushering me into the house like I might collapse at any moment, situating me on the couch with an afghan tucked around my legs and bringing me a steaming cup of coffee while Mom clattered around in the kitchen. Mom delivered lunch – homemade chicken soup and warm crusty bread – and nodded off on the couch in the post-prandial conversation. Dawn led me upstairs to the bedroom – the bedroom we'd shared as sisters, growing up, instead of the single-occupancy room I'd known as a boy.

I eyed one of the beds covetously – the desire to curl up in the downy comforter with a book beckoned to me, even to the point where I shucked my skirt, tights and sweater and prepared myself to nestle in wearing just a pink t-shirt and a pair of lacy panties while I listened to the sound of Dawn clattering around in the adjoining bathroom. I had only just begun a thorough perusal of the lurid romance novels in the bookshelf next to the door when Dawn re-emerged, taking me by the elbow.

“Don't even *think* about it, bookworm,” she scolded, half-dragging me into the bathroom. She pointed a clear spot on the countertop among the dozens of bottles, brushes, pots and tubes. “Up.”



I slipped a stretchy headband over my hair and drew it into a hasty ponytail – strange how natural I took to the motion – while Dawn snapped open a compact and dabbed a round brush in the powder, tapped it twice to remove the excess, and began running the feathery bristles across my nose and cheeks. I giggled and squirmed a little.

“It tickles,” I confessed.

“Babe, you are gonna *love* this,” Dawn said. “I’m gonna make you look so good.”

My sister almost danced with delight while she dabbed this potion and that with brushes and sponges onto my face, spreading any number of new textures and smells across my skin. She poked near my eyes with pencils and had just stepped back, regarding me with her head cocked to one side appraisingly, when my phone rang on the counter next to me, from the depths of my purse. I dug it out with a silent nod of permission from my sister.

“Hello?”

“Is this Jennifer Lowridge?” a soft female voice asked.

“I go by Hope,” I corrected her gently, “but yes, this is Jennifer Lowridge.”

“Hi, Ms. Lowridge, this is Christine in Dr. Mallory's office. I got a referral from Nurse Carolyn Jones at St. Luke's Hospital, saying you needed to see a psychiatrist?”

“Oh, yes. Thanks for calling me back,” I said.

“Dr. Mallory has an opening in three weeks,” Christine informed me.

“That long?” I asked. “I was hoping for something a little sooner.”

“I'm sorry, but Dr. Mallory... wait a second,” Christine said. “Wait. I have a cancellation. We could actually get you in tomorrow morning at nine a.m., if you can make that.”

“I don't see why not,” I told her, relieved. “I'll be there.”

“I will email you the address and the intake paperwork,” she told me. “Nurse Jones sent me your email address.”

“That sounds great,” I told her. “Thanks so much.”

“See you tomorrow,” the receptionist said, hanging up. I barely got time to lower the phone before Dawn besieged me afresh, brandishing brushes and pencils at my eyes.

“What was that about?” Dawn asked, holding one of my eyelids down with the tip of a finger while she ran a brush across it briskly.

“I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow,” I said a bit cryptically, not quite ready to explain to my family that I needed to see a shrink. “Nine o'clock.”

“Well, that should give me just enough time to get you presentable,” Dawn said.

“You mean you wanna get up and do this again so I can be someplace at nine?” I asked.

“If that's what it takes,” Dawn told me.

“How about you stop brushing and start teaching?” I suggested.

Dawn smiled broadly. “You mean you want me to show you how to do this yourself?”

* * * * *

I put down the dated copy of *Elle* on the waiting room table, fanning out my lengthened acrylic nails – adorned with a classic French manicure, Dawn's specialty – to admire their glossy perfection for a moment before rising. Dawn had awakened early despite my assurances that I could apply my makeup without assistance, and I discovered I was glad she did. My sister made the process appear easy, but my initial foray into eyeliner and mascara painted me more clownish than elegant.

The heavy, slick feeling on my face and the dark curtain of my thickened eyelashes above my field of vision reminded me of the shocking difference in my face, now. Subtly pretty before, now polished and sophisticated with just a *hint* of come-hither sluttiness. I drew the eyes of several men in the elevator and waiting room, blushing at the unexpected attention.

The receptionist led me back into a small, comfortably-appointed office occupied by a stylish woman who sat in an armchair with a leatherbound notebook in her lap. She gestured towards a seat across from her and I sat – reminding myself to keep my knees together – and offered her a shy smile.



“So, Jennifer...” the doctor began without preamble.

“Hope,” I corrected. “I go by my middle name. Hope.”

“Pretty name,” the psychiatrist said. “So, tell me, Hope... what can I help you with?”

I drew in a deep breath. “You probably hear the same opening line from patients all the time,” I chuckled, fighting down embarrassment. “This is gonna sound crazy...”

She laughed. “You have *no* idea,” she said.

DOCTOR MALLORY LISTENED INTENTLY AS I laid out my story in its entirety, from going to the emergency room as the bereaved son of a late world-renowned philosopher and waking the next morning as his daughter, minus one gall bladder. She passed no judgment, nodding and asking a few insightful questions, not interrupting until my tale wound down after about half an hour.

“Hope, it sounds like you have an awful lot weighing on you,” she told me, making a few notes by hand before continuing. “A lot of stress.”

“That's true,” I told her.

“The best advice I can offer you is to look around you,” she said. “You're not unintelligent. You know as well as anyone that no one goes to sleep as one person and wakes up as another. It's impossible.”

“I certainly thought so,” I said.

“You're the daughter of a famous philosopher,” she said. “I'm sure you've heard of Occam's Razor.”

“Of course,” I replied. “The simplest answer is usually the correct answer.”

“Actually – and you likely know this – it's the answer with the fewest *assumptions* usually proves to be the most accurate,” she corrected subtly. “So, we go over the facts. You were under a great deal of stress. You were sedated, then anesthetized, experienced the very real physical trauma of surgery, the first surgery you'd ever had in your life. Facts. And I have the factual evidence of sitting across from a young, healthy *female*.”

“You're saying this is all in my head?”

“The fewest assumptions,” Dr. Mallory said.

“But it is so *real*,” I contested. “I can remember my life as a man. Little details. Intimate details. Things a woman couldn't possibly know.”

“Now, that is a very big assumption,” the psychiatrist pointed out. “How do you know a woman couldn't know those things? You know them, and you're a woman.”

“Am I?”

She smiled. “Have you *looked* at yourself, Hope?” she asked. “I don't doubt that you believe every single thing you told me. But belief is not fact. The facts look back at you from every mirror you pass. Tell me, Hope, where did you get the clothes you're wearing? That purse?”

I looked down at the soft, heather-grey sweaterdress I wore and the little handbag on the table beside me. “They were in my closet, at Mom's house.”

“Mm-hm,” Mallory replied. “And why would they be there, if you were really a man? Why would you have bought them and put them in your closet?”

“I see your point,” I replied.

“Anesthesia is a very powerful thing,” she told me. “Very unsettling, especially to someone who has only just now experienced it. The things people see when they're under can be extremely vivid. It could easily cross the line from vivid dream into full-blown delusion. I think that may be the case with you. But I don't see you as a delusional person, Hope. You don't give any other indication of some underlying pathology. Everything else about you paints a picture of a stable, level-headed young woman. Occam's Razor. The anesthesia is the most likely culprit, here.”

I sighed. “You do know I came here hoping you could prescribe me some medication that would make every bit of this make sense, don't you?” I chuckled ruefully.

“Most of my patients do,” she told me. “Look, I'm not a big proponent of medication for medication's sake. Let's just see how you do. Take a long look at yourself and your life. Take ownership of what you have. Come back and see me in a week. If you are still feeling this kind of anxiety about who you are, then we can talk medication.”

I reached out and took her hand as we stood simultaneously. “Thanks, Dr. Mallory,” I said. “I'll try.”

“Good luck, Hope,” she told me. “I know you can do it.”

I gathered up my purse and walked back through the exit room, stopping to schedule my next appointment and validate my parking before walking to the parking structure to retrieve my little black Jetta, the last remaining item recognizable from my former life – or my former delusion, as the case might be.

Take ownership, the doctor told me. I reflected on this as I buckled in and started my car. If I accepted that the life I awoke to find was the *correct* life, my *real* life, then any kind of ownership began with acceptance and participation. I guided my car off of the freeway I traveled, seizing on an idea, and pulled into a chain pharmacy, guiding my little Volkswagen into a parking slip and slinging my purse over one shoulder as I walked through the brisk morning breeze towards the entrance.

I could use context to accept that I was a young woman. And I had proof that I liked wearing makeup, just from this morning alone. I enjoyed looking

glamorous. I actually appreciated the attention my appearance earned me. Participating in those accepted characteristics wholeheartedly might prove Dr. Mallory's suggestion, and rid myself of the unsettling feeling of being a stranger in my own life.

I wandered down the cosmetics aisle of the drugstore, selecting everything I could remember from my sister's tutelage and a few things that just looked interesting to me. The little hand-basket I carried soon brimmed over with foundation and concealer, pressed powder and loose powder, eyeshadows and lipsticks in multiple shades. I added other things which struck me as feminine, just for good measure – a faintly floral perfume, scented body wash, volumizing shampoo and conditioner, a curling iron, a hair dryer and a little pink aluminum train-case to store it all. As I approached the counter, I grabbed copies of *Glamour* and *Allure* magazines to add to my burgeoning knowledge of style and appearance.

The saleslady raised an eyebrow at me when she saw the amount of cosmetics in my basket. I shrugged sheepishly, blushing slightly. “Pipe burst in my bathroom,” I fibbed effortlessly. “Ruined everything. Have to start over from scratch.”

“You poor thing,” she said, scanning item after item as I ran up a scandalous tab. By the time she dropped the last lip-liner pencil into the paper bag, I found myself hoping that the mysterious and unused credit card discovered in my wallet had a very high limit. The saleslady helped me out a little, retrieving a store circular from beneath her counter and scanning quite a few coupons to help bring my total back a little bit in my favor.

“Anything else, sweetie?” the woman asked.

I smoke now, right? I thought, eyeing the large display of tobacco behind the register. *Accept and participate. Take ownership.* “Give me two packs of the Virginia Slims 120's,” I said. “And a lighter.”

The woman retrieved the cigarettes and scanned them, then added a little disposable lighter with a tube of lipstick silk-screened on the case in keeping with the obviously girly vibe someone who just purchased over a hundred dollars' worth of cosmetics and skincare products emitted. I grinned, forcing down the quick flash of dismay I felt in favor of *that's so cute!* Instead.

I headed back to Mom's empty house – Dawn left for work at her salon shortly after my appointment and Mom always played golf on Thursday mornings with her girlfriends – and dumped my purchases on a huge pile

on the bed. I began sorting through them, discarding packaging and wrappers and organizing them in the little train-case, when I noticed the three dusty notebooks laying on my bedside table. Mom remembered my request for dad's old journals.

I shed my slightly dressy grey sweaterdress in favor of a much more casual pair of jeans and hoodie. I took a quick moment to freshen my makeup – something a girl who took ownership of her life would do, I hoped – and scampered downstairs to the porch to take in the lovely fall weather.



I lit a cigarette with a kitchen match – inhaling effortlessly, without a hint of a cough, like I truly *had* smoked since junior high like my wilder sister – and opened the first of Daddy's old notebooks. I didn't even notice until a few paragraphs in that I had thought of him as 'Daddy,' as naturally as breathing. Fitting, I supposed, since by all evidence I was now 'princess' in the family, and most princesses that I knew tended to be daddy's little girl. Something warm and happy blossomed in my heart when I thought those words to myself. *Daddy's little girl*. It made me feel safe and loved.

Subtle little breezes stirred the antique lace curtains on the porch windows while I read, going back through Daddy's notes beginning years before my birth. As the day neared when I entered the world, more and more references appeared in the journals about Mom's pregnancy – a difficult one, from this description – and Daddy's burgeoning hope that he would have a son. He wrote at length about his own relationship with his father, and credited Grandpa with shaping his view of the cosmos and allowing him to see the world in such a novel and innovative way. Daddy longed for a son of his own to give such an experience.

I turned the page, expecting to read about the day of my birth, but the next entry dated nearly six months later, a dry and boring treatise about man's capacity for cruelty. I flipped back and forth, riffling the pages, but nothing new arose. Only just before I closed the book did I notice the serrated stubs of removed pages near the binding – several leaves of this journal appeared to have been removed. I closed the book and set it aside, leaving my comfortable nook by the windows and thumping my way up the narrow staircase, rattling the pictures of Dawn and I having early birthdays and Christmases and gap-toothed school portraits.

I yanked down the retractable stairs to the attic and climbed up into the musty chill. Mom – a compulsive cleaner – kept the attic remarkably uncluttered, leaving a large amount of unsanded plywood floor space open. Just beyond the Christmas and Hallowe'en decorations and the big cardboard box of Grandmother's old hats where Dawn and I played tea party dress-up as girls – where had *that* memory come from? – were the four large steamer trunks I knew contained memorabilia from our pasts. Disturbed tracks in the dusty floor showed where Mom pulled aside the other trunks to gain access to the bottommost, the place where Daddy's journals rested. I hoped the missing pages would be there. I threw the clunky brass lock back and opened the case, sitting cross-legged on the floor beside it to go through the items one at a time.

The trunk only offered up little personal effects, though, little shreds and pieces of Daddy's life which brought fond tears of remembrance and grief to my heavily-mascara'ed eyes. His Boy Scout badges. A small wooden box of tin soldiers. A beautiful engraved pocketwatch, a gift to him from the Nobel committee. A medal for second place in a grade-school spelling bee. A matched gold Cross pen-and-pencil set with a card from his parents congratulating him for his high-school graduation. Two coiled locks of reddish hair, mine and Dawn's. I noticed the ribbon binding my hair revealed tinges of blue beneath the dust, though, and the little tag attached clearly said "Richard" in faded ink.

I fucking knew it! I thought, laying the hair aside and digging with renewed vigor. *I was a boy! I was named Richard. I didn't dream it, it wasn't the anesthesia – I remember it because it really happened!*

I sat myself up straight. “Hold on a minute,” I cautioned myself aloud. “Dr. Mallory warned me about this. I have to take ownership of *this* life. Even if I'm right – even if I *was* a boy, before – that still doesn't change the fact that *this* is the life I have now. A girl's life.”

Slowly, with a sense of finality, I shut the lid on the trunk. “This isn't healthy,” I told myself, standing in that strange half-stoop all attics engendered and brushing dust from the seat of my pants. I started to head back downstairs, to pour myself a glass of wine and try to forget those missing journal pages, when I looked back over my shoulder towards the least weatherbeaten of the trunks. The newest trunk, for the newest member. A timid, hopeful smile crossed my face, and I scooted the heavy trunk across the floor and sat down next to it, fumbling awkwardly – everything seemed awkward since I let Dawn convince me to glue these ridiculous plastic extensions to my fingernails – with the stiff brass lock.

The hasp finally dropped with a soft clatter and I threw the two clasps, lifting the lid on smooth hinges by the tips of my fingers on opposite corners. I handled the items inside with great care – I knew how Mom got about 'baby' things, defending them like she would the children themselves, it seemed – and set them aside with almost religious adoration. My baby blanket, knitted by Mom's dearest friend, now a rosy shade of pink instead of the muted blue I remembered seeing the last time Mom brought it out. A christening bonnet, never once used because neither my sister nor I ever received baptism, but hand-tatted lace from the wife of a noted Russian philosopher who admired Daddy's work immensely. My birth certificate in a dessicated brown envelope – Jennifer Hope Lowridge, born the twenty-sixth of May, 1988, weighing five pounds eleven ounces. Just beneath another beautiful hand-crocheted receiving blanket from someone I could not recall, I reached the mementos of my own youth, things of recent enough memory that I should be able to remember them. I hoped the items would not bring the unsettling sense of memory-but-brand-new-experience plaguing me since this happened. The feeling of intruding in someone else's life distressed me quite enough without adding to it.



What kind of girl was I? I wondered as I began sorting through the memorabilia. No sense of nostalgia grew in me, no sense of having *been* there when these items were collected, gave the whole experience a surreal cast. My first pair of ballet toe-shoes and my tutu, with a picture of myself on stage, probably around eight or nine years old, dancing *The Nutcracker*. Red-and-silver pom-poms and a few cheap plastic cheerleading trophies. A rhinestone tiara and a long sash decrying “Miss Collegiate America Semi-Finalist.” A high-school diploma indetical to the one I actually remembered, just with my feminine name, then a Bachelor of Arts from Brown in Economics and Accounting. A picture of myself, hugged between Dawn, Mom and Daddy, myself in cap-and-gown holding the same college diploma I held. Several brochures about MBA programs and a stack of old college papers. A prom picture, myself in a hideous electric-blue gown and a tall, gawky date with braces and a poorly-fitting tuxedo. Some Dungeons & Dragons books – thank God this new incarnation of myself possessed a nerdy side, too – and other sundries.

I reached into the trunk and felt the dull tugging in my nail beds as my acrylics scraped the cedar-lined bottom. I turned to begin replacing everything I had removed when my peripheral vision caught a little white envelope, wedged into the corner of the trunk. I drew it out carefully and saw the scalloped edges of ripped paper peeking out from the flap. Breathlessly, I took them out and squinted at them in the dim light of the one incandescent bulb dangling from a wire above me. The journal pages, but also a handwritten letter in my father's crabbed scrawl, addressed to *My beloved youngest daughter*.

My heart stopped. Daddy knew? Before three days ago, no one ever acknowledged me as anything other than Richard Lowridge, Jr., born male and never mistaken for anything else. Since three days ago, no one seemed to remember me as anything other than Hope Lowridge, born female and never mistaken for anything else. The date on the letter – just a month after my birth – proved that my father remembered me as a girl, just as the lock of hair I discovered proved that he remembered me as a boy.

I peered at the haphazard script in the dim light and read carefully.

My beloved youngest daughter,

I set pen to paper tonight in sadness. I do not know if you will ever read this, moreover if you will believe it if you do read it. I scarcely believe it myself, to be honest. But I feel I owe you some sort of explanation of your life, your situation, and maybe shed some enlightenment regarding any difficulties or irregularities in your life and heart that perhaps you questioned.

I must preface this tale by saying that regardless of whether or not you believe me, or even want to believe me, I loved you from the instant you were placed in my arms, still warm from your mother's exertion and peering at the world for the very first time. My heart expanded in that moment to engulf you and take you into myself, becoming a part of me that I knew in an instant I would never live without.

To understand yourself, my precious love, you must first understand me. At the birth of your sister, I knew that I would only have one, perhaps two more chances in my life to conceive my innermost dream – to be father to a son the way my father was to me. I know, now, that such a ridiculous set of restrictions diminished you from your first breath – I could have spent that same energy being father to a daughter, and you or your sister would have grown to adapt in that magical way children have. I was a foolish man, and short-sighted, and I will forever wish your forgiveness.

I have told you that reality is defined by desire. I have written books about the concept, darling, and if you do not remember my telling you then you can read all about it in several languages. What you do not know, or your sister, is that you are my proof of that concept. Because when you were born, my love, I wanted a son so badly. With every atom of me, from the depths of my soul to my shallowest conceit, I wanted a son. And I walked into your nursery one evening and discovered, you had become my son.

I will not pretend to know how it happened, what occurred on a subatomic level to change you from my daughter to my son. And please try to believe me when I tell you that it had nothing to do with how much I loved you as a daughter. Had I known what would happen, I feel certain I could have controlled that want and left you the way nature intended you. I am so sorry, darling girl, and the only thing I could think to do was to raise you and love you and nurture you as if this fantastical transformation never occurred. For all I can see, your innocent self lived none the wiser, no sense of something being amiss or not fitting properly in the world. If these problems ever plagued you in your life without my knowing, my love, then I am sorry the explanation comes so far after the fact. I was a coward not to tell you.

I still flatter myself by believing that the only reason the cosmos allowed such a change is because you wanted to be my son as much as I wanted to have a son. Somewhere, in the pure but undefined depths of your newborn heart, you wanted it as well and our desires joined to reshape the universe around us. But these are just more philosophical ramblings on my part, and I write this letter to you as a father and not a philosopher.

I wish you a good life, my dear, and hope you do not hate me for denying you a whole life in favor of the one I wished for you. I hope you never feel as though something important were missing from yourself, some part of you which must remain forever unfulfilled. I hope I did not do damage. I can tell you, with no small measure of guilt, that being your father gave me everything I ever wished from the experience, and the son I knew delighted me. Made me proud. Amazed and astounded me, every day of his life.

Please forgive me, my sweet child, for wanting without considering. My hopes for your happiness, fulfillment, safety and health remain undiminished, regardless of your gender. Despite the mistake I made, and the price you might one day have to pay for it, I remain, now and forever

Your loving father,

R

The letter sagged from numb fingers and I stared, disbelieving, into the space it occupied. My original theories suspected the exact opposite of the actual reality Daddy's letter described. I was not a boy who woke up one day as a girl – I was actually a girl who woke up one day as a boy and then woke again, on another day, as a girl again. Daddy's departure from my life – and the loss of the knotted ball of stress in my chest which accompanied me throughout my living memory, that desire to please him and be what he wanted me to be – released the warp the two of us placed on reality around me, restoring me back to the form in which I should have existed the entire time.

My girlhood wasn't the unnatural fantasy come true. My *boyhood* was.

I turned in my seat, scooting around to the original trunk I'd ransacked, and opened it anew. Beneath the surface clutter, digging down until I withdrew and held up two locks of hair.

Both tied with pink ribbons now, marked with handwritten tags: *Dawn* and *Jennifer*.

* * * * *

I dimly recalled re-packing the trunks and stumbling downstairs, foregoing the wine and pouring myself a generous tumbler of bourbon instead, pacing maniacally on the porch smoking cigarettes and muttering to myself. Of the two lives I had – the one I remembered and the new one I inhabited – both now seemed somehow *wrong*.

My lack of a real, tangible existence yawned in front of me, making me wonder if I even existed at all. To find out that the first twenty-six years of my life had been fabricated, woven somehow out of loose threads in the fabric of reality to suit the soul-deep want of my father for a son... just what the hell was I, if not Richard Lowridge, Jr. or Jennifer Hope Lowridge? Was everything I ever did, everything I ever accomplished, just some bizarre extrapolated figment of my father's imagination? Had I even *done* anything in my life to mark it as my own?

I climbed into a shower with the silly hope of washing away this conflict, letting the heat and steam soak through my skin in some attempt to ease my troubled thoughts. My mind paled into a punch-drunk numbness to escape the hammering questions pounding at the insides of my skull. I wondered if Jennifer Hope ran the whole time, like some minimized Windows program, buried in the taskbar of Richard Jr.'s progress and stake in the world. After an unmeasurable time, blissfully alone with my disquiet,

I stepped out of the shower into the steam-draped bathroom and wrapped myself in a towel.

I alternated between blind rage at my father and exquisite pity, forgetting myself and all the years of girlhood I missed in the tidal wave of emotions directed towards him, filtered through the protective shield of my deadened mind. But forgiveness shone, like a warm light over my shoulder – how could he have known? How could he have known wanting a son so badly would lead to this? I could not blame my father, it served no purpose to blame the unfeeling universe. And why did I need to blame anything or anyone? For all my father's high-minded insight to the workings of the human mind and the universe, he often retreated back to time-honored adages to explain the world to his children; his words rang back to me through the abyss, saying calmly that *we play the hand we're dealt*. Wisdom derived from his own father, that precious commodity he changed my very identity to pass along.

We play the hand we're dealt.



Valerie Hope
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Wiping a thick coat of condensation from the mirror, I gazed disconnectedly at my naked body for the first time, its soft curves and firm muscles, the inviting allure of youth shining from the taut skin. I looked down at the sterile white surgical dressing on my ribcage – the catalyst for the entire upheaval of my last few days – for a long moment, musing on the serendipity of it all, then slipped into a plain black bra and tights without the slightest hitch of unfamiliarity with the intrinsically feminine garments. I walked back into my bedroom and zipped my lithe body into a little black dress, then packed my clothes and other belongings, along with Daddy's journals, into my luggage with only the thought *I need to go home now* echoing in my overtaxed brain.

I packed my belongings into my car – taking me several trips, when I distinctly remembered days when such a load would only take me one – and left a note for my mother, informing her gently of my desire to sleep in my own bed – and took a long moment in the driveway to get my address from my driver's license and look it up on my phone's GPS. I briefly toyed with the idea of calling one of the mysterious contacts in my address book, one of the Tiffanys or Steves who participated in this mysterious, unknown life I had, to see if I could perform some subtle social interrogation to piece together more about the identity, the wants and hopes of this stranger named Hope Lowridge.

But I decided in favor of solitude, for the time being, and started my car's quiet engine, backing away from my father's house and the turbulent memories it evoked, heading into the city to find a home I'd never seen before.

* * * * *

The brightly colored trees and manicured lawns of the outskirts gave way in a blur to my right, replaced by concrete, local stone and glass interrupted with garish advertisements of the city proper. I took my time, apprehensive about what awaited me in my home, opting instead to tuck my little Jetta into an aboveground parking structure across the street from my building – a nondescript four-story block of condominiums, like dozens more in the upscale area near downtown – and walk around aimlessly for a bit, just taking stock and trying to sort through the bedlam of my troubled thoughts.

My father's words kept repeating themselves in my mind: *we play the hand we're dealt*. For me, that meant trying to cram in twenty-six years of girl- and womanhood into the space of an afternoon in some mad attempt to rejoin a life already in progress. Any accomplishment or distinction I may

have earned as a man vanished into nothingness now, and any deed or laurel accorded to me now would not be something I legitimately earned.

Moreover, I had not the faintest fucking *clue* how to be a young, urban woman. The little sidelong glances and small tokens of admiration – a door held for me here, a bit more cheerful service there – impacted me like hammer blows as I ordered a cup of coffee from a local chain shop. It made no sense – I had no mechanism in place to deal with such small differences in the very warp and weft of life at its basic level. How does one just *learn* to be a lifelong girl? I doubted the existence of some online course or night class at the community college.

I found a secluded seat in the breezy outdoor area of the coffeeshop and just watched humanity, taking special note of the young women that passed through my perception. Not just the way they dressed or walked, but how they interacted. All of the young female urbanites did their best to adapt to the latent fear in which they lived *de rigueur*, either challenging the imagined – or very real, in certain cases – rapist watching them in the bookstore or following them down the sidewalk by adopting brassy, overblown self-confidence or by shrinking into themselves. The canniest of them, the veterans of the city, went everywhere in tight groups.

The interaction of those groups fascinated me. How they talked to one another, how they listened. The innate intimacy of the social unit astounded me, as did the openness and frequency of physical touch. Overcoming my bred-in male demands for personal space by intimidation posed a particular challenge for me – but to be the *girl* nature intended me to be, I would need to grow accustomed quickly to hugs, held hands and kisses on the cheek and show no outward reaction. And I saw immediately the necessity of being freer with my compliments. In the social group, most of the young girls I observed tended to gush. In my formerly male world, saying *nice shoes* would suffice to serve as high praise. Not so my new world. Now, *ohmyGod those shoes are SO cute, I love them, where on earth did you find them?* needed saying lest I run the risk of coming across icy, or superior, to be tagged with the dreaded *b-word* and ostracized.

I realized as well I would have to grow to fear ostracism in a way that never concerned me before. To be cut out of the herd presented the ultimate punishment to a girl in these social settings. Before, as a male, such a thing would never cost me a moment's distress. But to be cast out and alone, in a perpetually predatory environment like a big city – the girls in the social group who handed down such punishment truly did sentence the offender to death. A horrible death, performed over time.

I hated the need for such protective measures, but one look at my petite body convinced me of the necessity. Before the last few days, I spent very little time wondering whether or not I would be raped or killed – that sort of thing usually existed only in prison movies – but now the specter of such violence loomed over me every time I stepped out of a door. How did women function around a baseline of such wide-eyed terror? They adapted, of course, the way humans always adapt, by finding new ways and new communities and new avenues of support. All things I would need to do quickly in order to survive.

I took my coffee after a few minutes and began walking down the sidewalk, wondering *where do I begin?* Reconnecting with some of these unknown friends? Finding more clues as to the life I led as a girl by investigating more of the mysterious life I inherited?

Or maybe something less involved? Maybe I only needed to learn to find joy and satisfaction in more simple things. Something small, something girlish – something along the lines of the confidence and delight I felt from wearing makeup for the first time, and the glamorous charge my daily application of cosmetics made in my outlook and general demeanor. I never understood, as a boy, why my mother insisted on never leaving the house before she 'put on her face.' The little spring in my step, that feeling of magazine-cover perfection I felt when I got just the right look explained all my mother's behavior. Even my sister's obsession with cosmetics, not simply making herself look good but making other women look good, too.

I walked briskly along the pavement, ignoring the clicking of my heeled suede booties on the concrete, and emerged from my musings long enough to note my surroundings. I passed my building and walked several blocks past where I lived, into a small pedestrian mall rich with the smell of cooking food and the singing of hungry birds. At least my female self picked a decent area to live – the aroma of a little mom-and-pop bakery competed with the delicious scents through the door of a little Italian *trattoria*. A little delicatessen unlocked its doors for the day next to a small boutique across from a babbling fountain. The boutique caught my eye – or more to the point, a lovely little pink topcoat on a display hanger in the window caught my eye. I scanned the store hours on the door and found it open. I pushed my way inside gently, looking around.

“Good morning,” the clerk said from the counter in the back. “I’ll be right there, okay? You caught me a little off-guard, we only just opened.”

“No problem,” I said. “Just looking around.”

“You live around here?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I told her, running my fingers along the racks. “A couple blocks from here.”

“I figured,” the clerk said. “We haven't started advertising much, so we're mostly word-of-mouth right now.” She came out from behind the counter where she worked, wiping her hands and offering me an open smile.

“Now, then,” she said. “How can I help you?”

I pointed towards the window, over one shoulder. “I was interested in that pink topcoat in the window.”

“Oh, that,” she said. “I love that. We just got it in, not a week ago. What are you, a size four?”

I blinked. In all my quests through my 'new' clothes in my 'new' closet, I never once thought to check and see what size I was. I covered as well as I could. “I actually don't really know,” I said. “I, uh... just lost a lot of weight. All my sizes have changed.”

“Really? Good for you,” the clerk said. “Let's start you in a four and see what happens.”

* * * * *

I stepped away from the boutique about an hour and a half later and *several* hundred dollars poorer. The time-honored stereotypical female diversion of impulse shopping proved to be vastly entertaining, especially crawling around a deserted boutique full of the latest season's fashions and a very charming and persuasive manager. She talked me into the pink topcoat and a matching pink fedora as well as a pair of cute pink sunglasses and a designer purse which cost more than the other garments put together but looked *really* cute on my arm. I took a few of her business cards, agreeing to tell my friends about the location and direct what business I could her way before leaving.



I'd only just gotten a second cup of coffee and lit a cigarette and started the arduous process of reconciling the concepts of 'dressing warmly' and 'bare legs' when my phone dinged brightly with my text notification. I dug the device out into the light and saw a message from my sister: **where r u?**

My manicured thumb danced as I walked: **just getting coffee**

A quick moment passed and the phone dinged merrily again: **im still coming over l8r rite?**

I smiled and tapped out a quick reply, crossing the street and closing the distance between the little pedestrian mall and my condo: **sounds gr8 no plans**

A warmth of connectedness pranced up my spine and out along my shoulders – the simple act of walking, wearing fashionable clothes and stylish makeup, feeling *pretty*... texting my sister about mundane little things, sipping overpriced coffee and just being thoroughly *young* – gave me a flush of purely feminine contentedness that I didn't expect. But simply

knowing that such simple things carried the potential for such delight brightened the day and the prospect of living life as a pretty girl.

I stood for a moment at the corner, waiting for the light to change and puffing self-satisfiedly on my long white cigarette. A young man – *handsome*, I noticed, shocking myself with the assessment – in a tricked-out Audi at the light across from me regarded me appraisingly over the tops of his sunglasses. I gave him an encouraging smile in return.

A voice sounded happily to my left, drawing my attention away from the cute young man giving me the once-over-lightly. “Oh, wow. I *love* your coat.”

A skin-and-bones brunette in an expensive designer yoga outfit stood next to me, offering me a genuine smile. I turned to face her.

“Thanks. I found it at the cutest little shop, just a block from here. La Mode?”

“Oh, next to the Italian place? I haven't been in there yet.”

“You should go,” I told her, keeping my promise to the manager to talk up her business. “Tons of really pretty stuff in there. The manager found me this purse, too, isn't it precious?”

The young woman engaged and we had a short conversation about clothes – mostly, I blindly parroted things I overheard my sister saying to her clients and girlfriends over the years without any real idea of what I said – and went our separate ways, none the better for the exchange but having shared a moment of femininity. I found myself liking 'girl world' more and more – perhaps it didn't offer quite as much of substance as 'boy world' in its interactions, or perhaps it only reflected the vastly different views of what men and women considered important. 'Girl world' offered a lot, if one stayed open to it.

I loosed a happy giggle, drawing a strange look from some passersby but ignoring their curiosity. “C'mon,” I whispered to myself happily, no longer afraid. “Let's go home, Hope. Just to see what it's like.”

* * * * *

I jangled my keys around in one hand, searching for the one unidentifiable key amongst many that opened the exterior door to my condominium

complex. I tried one or two that looked as though they might fit with no luck, finally striking gold with the last.



I wandered along the long hallway inside, following the numbers on the doors until I found the one documented on my driver's license, number 104, and let myself in on my third try, finally noticing I marked my house key with a dab of crimson nail polish to distinguish it from the others. I swung the door in on silent hinges and clicked on the hallway light to banish the gloom from the overcast day.

New-looking furnishings reflected the light softly from the overhead track fixtures, all clean and well-maintained but sparse. Either I was a minimalist or I didn't make an awful lot of money as a CPA in my little 'cubicle farm.' Even the condo itself struck me as an investment property, a good place to park money until it made a profit and offered me the wherewithal to get something better. I kept little in the way of art or personal photographs on the walls – just a few portraits of my family and some framed candid photos of my sister and I, nothing which might put a face to any of the unfamiliar names in my phone.

I entered the process of getting to know myself, after shucking my new coat and hat in the hall closet, by doing what I usually did when encountering a strange new person – I walked to my bookcase and started examining what sorts of reading material filled my house. I owned a great deal of rare, signed first-edition philosophy books inherited from my father from some of the greatest thinkers of the age, plus the foundational library he recommended – Kant, Heidegger, John Locke, Sartre, Kierkegaard and their ilk for the Western thinking and the Tao Te Ching, Buddhist Sutras and the Upanishads and Vedas for their Eastern counterparts.

Below those shelves sat a huge row of books on economics and business, many I recognized as college texts from my former life but several that I dismissed as a male for being too esoteric, too immaterial to my chosen profession or, dare I admit it, too advanced. Apparently, Hope Lowridge not only performed better in business and finance but nursed a much healthier curiosity about it, as well. A few florid books on fashion – including a few books about elementary sewing – sat next to some works regarding advanced cosmetics even including stage makeup and prosthetics, and also a long row of how-to books about making cosmetics, fragrance and haircare products at home. Those books resided on the shelf next to some quite advanced books on organic chemistry and biology of human skin and hair. Apparently, when I took it upon myself to research a topic, I spared no avenue of inquiry.

Daddy's little girl, indeed, I thought, reflecting on how like him that passion for research struck me.

I ran a manicured index finger along a shelf of fiction – my fondness for mystery and spy novels carried over wholeheartedly from my male life to my female – and many of my old favorite titles looked back at me from their nests among some new ones I always intended to read but never found the time to crack. A few digest compilations of New York Times crosswords and sudoku puzzles squeezed into the last little bits of room at the sides of the three huge bookcases, suggesting how I might pass quiet down-time by myself.

I decided Hope Lowridge might be the kind of person I liked – and not altogether unlike Richard, Jr., either, since they maintained interests in many of the same things. And of the strange new things she pursued, most of them seemed quite interesting – like the very complete rack of wine next to the kitchen next to some quite ambitious-looking cookbooks.

And why the hell not? I thought. *It's my wine, after all...*

MORNING PASSED INTO AFTERNOON UNNOTICED as I sat in my unfamiliar condo, poring through photo albums and old tax returns, receipts and anything I could find which might lead me to a more fundamental understanding of just who the the hell I actually was. I sipped wine – apparently, my original incarnation as a woman had quite a taste for the grape, which continued unabated while she slept beneath the veneer of masculinity placed over her by her father's raw desire for a son. Richard Lowridge, Jr. maintained staunch loyalty to beer throughout his life, considering wine to be effete and snobbish. Now that Jennifer Hope Lowridge lived once more, her own taste in wine came well to the fore. I couldn't remember enjoying alcohol more in my life. The labels on my small but very complete wine rack ranged from all over the country and the world, little craft vintages obviously found while on forays into wine country and small independent vineyards. If I closed my eyes, I could almost see the vague imprints of hazy memories of some of those trips, accompanied by friends and family. Like dreams desperate to be remembered after waking.

I took a few moments to change clothes, switching from the stylish sweaterdress and leggings I'd worn out into an infinitely more comfortable, “homebody” ensemble of black tank top with “Princess” on the front in pink glitter, pink Hello Kitty fleece pajama bottoms and thick pink woolly socks. Something about the change of clothes made me feel more at home – my driving desire to be glamorous, sexy and *chic* faded when I closed the door, and I could finally indulge in cozy comfort, no longer needing to make any kind of an impression.

Apparently, I never kept much in the condo which told much about me. As a CPA, I probably dutifully shredded every little scrap containing personal information, and I suspected my workaholic nature led me to spend a minimal amount of time at home in the first place, never really giving myself a chance to “move in” and make the place my own. It gave the impression of a woman with no past.

I tried not to give in to my growing frustration as I paced the living room, sipping wine and laying logs in the cast-iron stove for a cheery fire to drive away the chill from the wet morning. No clues to my own personality existed anywhere in this residence. Did I really shy away from myself so utterly?

I looked over to the 'action shelf' next to my entryway, seeing the little crystal bowl containing my car keys, my Kindle in its leather case, my purse slung over a peg on the wall, my laptop case leaning against the leg of the little table...

I chuckled. *Of course, I laughed inwardly. I'm a twenty-first century kind of girl, after all. I don't keep things like that in dusty old photo albums. My life exists digitally. It's on that computer.*

I took a seat at my dining table and poured another glass of wine – a full-bodied cabernet, this time, just to supplement the lovely little buzz I'd managed – and spent a few moments hooking up the power supply and waiting for the machine to boot. I noticed a hard-shell glasses case in the front pocket of the bag, nestled in among the scattered business cards, pens and USB cords, and slipped them onto my nose. Apparently, if Daddy was right, I just hadn't *wanted* perfect vision badly enough, since the glasses brought everything within a three-foot radius of me into much sharper focus.

The desktop showed very typical business software – Excel, Quicken and the like – and what looked like some proprietary tools specific to my company. I ignored those particular icons and delved into the personal files on the hard drive. The first folder that caught my interest bore the label “Incorporation Documents.” Inside I found a charter, by-laws and incorporation forms for an LLC called “Kissable Cosmetics, LLC.” The paperwork listed myself and my sister as principals, and a sizeable chunk of our very sizeable inheritance sunk into its coffers. *Cosmetics? I co-own a cosmetics company with my sister? How the fuck did that happen? I know nothing about makeup!*

I noticed our birthdates on the charter, listed side-by-side. Apparently, my birthday had changed to make me a year older and my sister's to make me a year younger and put our birthdays on the same day, January 22nd. *Twins? Dawn and I are twins now? What the hell?*

Dimly, I remembered a conversation with my sister, from my days as Richard, where she expressed a desire to have a twin sibling like her friend Michelle. We had been talking over drinks and I remembered expressing a similar desire. I gaped openly at the neatly typed dates on the official document. *Daddy is right!* I thought amazedly. *We both wanted it. Wanted it badly, if I remember correctly. It seemed so insignificant, at the time, just a drunken conversation between a brother and a sister in a downtown bar. But it must have tapped into something, some core desire in both of us to be closer, to derive from the same cell at the same instant.*

And the wanting made it so. I began to see the subtle differences that Daddy wrote about. It couldn't just be a simple, passing want. Or one easily fulfilled. The kind of want Daddy discussed referred to something soul-deep, something so all-encompassing that it almost crossed the line into need. My days as a male proved that I could live without it – so it

wasn't a need – but my father wanted a son, and my sister wanted a twin so deeply, so profoundly, that they could feel it in their bones. And my own want – a marrow-bred desire to be the person my loved ones wanted – matched theirs in such a way that the universe itself bent around that desire, changing itself to adapt. With the evidence plain in front of my face, it no longer seemed like magic to me. In fact, reading Daddy's calming words seemed to make it all snap into focus like my glasses had.



I paged through several folders of pictures – they looked like office parties, a few college graduation pictures, Martin Lassiter's seventy-fifth birthday party, all interspersed with tons of random pictures of me and Dawn – my *twin sister*, now – together. It occurred to me that we still didn't look alike, and not only because Dawn tended to dress a bit more revealingly and wear more make-up than I did. I had a longer nose, and deeper-set eyes. Dawn's lips were poutier. My sister stood an inch or two taller than me, and my upper body seemed larger. I giggled inwardly to notice that Dawn weighed a few pounds more than I did, as well – causing a foreign but very enjoyable flash of feminine pride.

My Facebook page and Twitter feed offered not much more as far as personal information. I rarely posted – a few self-indulgent 'selfies' wearing form-fitting evening wear and swimsuits, a handful of posts about mundane activities along the lines of “dinner with my sister and her friends, had a great time” or “heading to the coast for the weekend, can't wait to get my toes in the sand again.”

Well, it all stood to reason. Not everything about me would have changed along with my body. Before Daddy's desires wore off and returned me to my original gender, I had been a private person who kept largely to myself. Apparently, that hadn't changed. I doubted I would be a social butterfly like my sister – in fact, becoming her twin probably meant she would try even harder to drag me out to parties and social events in the hope of 'saving' me from loneliness. Dawn never understood introversion, that being alone in my home with rented movies and take-out food actually *appealed* to me.

Seconds before I decided to close the lid on the laptop and call my quest to discover myself to an end, I noticed one more folder that escaped me before, labeled “Ben.” I double-clicked it, curious as to why I would have a folder on my hard drive named after my best friend from college, Ben Jacobs.

The folder contained just a few dozen pictures of my friend – even one of him sleeping on my couch, looking terribly drunk and disheveled. Little intimate moments, secret smiles. I never noticed, before going through that small handful of pictures, how boyish he looked, what a disarming smile he had, how broad his shoulders looked, what soft hair, how handsome he looked in dark colors...

I hiccuped a gasp. *Handsome? Where the fuck did I get handsome?*

I rubbed my temples and put down a sizeable gulp of wine. *Oh my dear God. Do I like him? He's my best friend. He's been my best friend for-fucking-ever, I can't feel like... do I? Am I attracted to Ben?*

A sobering thought occurred to me. *Am I in love with him?*

I tried to conjure pictures of him in my mind as I remembered him – drinking beer in a corner bar and eyeballing the young women together, playing pool at Sticky's on Friday nights in college, putting on our good suits every summer and going out to test-drive at the Porsche and Aston Martin dealerships. When I pictured his face, I noticed a little rosy hue to the image in my brain, accompanied with a barely-perceptible little tingle in my chest and behind my eyes, a subtle raising of my heart rate and a warm flush of blood to my cheeks and chest.

I opened the last picture in the folder. A picture at the beach, the sunlight glistening off of Ben's shirtless chest as he threw a frisbee to someone off-camera. I felt a different sort of warm flush, this time between my thighs.

It's true. I think I do love him, I thought, shocked and a little dismayed. *And I think I want him, too.*

I sat back, closing the lid on the laptop to hide the arousing image from my eyes while I moaned in discomfort. I couldn't feel this way about *Ben*. Not my buddy, not the guy who wingmanned for me in the singles bars and bailed me out of jail when I got arrested for drunk-and-disorderly in college. Not the guy who could do a sixty-second keg stand and chickened out of getting a tattoo every time he had the idea and drank enough to consider it.

But none of that actually happened. Did it?

The adjectives I customarily used towards Ben – loyal, honest, funny, companionable – dimmed slightly beneath a barrage of new, unfamiliar and distinctly *uncomfortable* adjectives like sweet, gentle, romantic and – to my chagrin – gorgeous. The attraction towards him that I recently wondered about rushed through me, quickening my pulse and breathing and dampening my crotch.

The jingling of my phone with a text alert broke the spell thankfully, tearing my thoughts away from the conflict of finding myself unexpectedly in love with my best friend. Strange that the change to my lifelong friendship bothered me much more than the fact that I found myself attracted to a male. I would have thought the latter would cause me infinitely more unease. I guess I settled into womanhood – and acceptance of womanhood, more importantly – quietly, in the background, and it happened faster than I originally expected.

The text came from my sister again: **r u home?**

I texted back: **yep**

A few seconds passed before I received: **change of plans, gonna come 2 ur house instead**

I raised a quizzical eyebrow as my thumbs danced: **problem?**

Another ding, and: **neighbors r having a party its 2 loud over here**

I nodded as I sent: **cool let urself in Im gonna take a shower. c u soon**

I set the phone down on the tabletop and finished my wine. I caught myself stepping wide around the closed laptop and the disturbing pictures of Ben – and the equally disturbing feelings they evoked – like a coiled snake sat on my dining room table. Some strange compulsion took hold of me and I washed out my wine glass – *don't tell me I'm a neat freak, too, for fuck's sake* – and replaced it in the cabinet before thumping my way upstairs in my sock feet and running myself a scalding hot shower, hoping I might be able to steam away some of my worries.

The shower relaxed me, if nothing else, but did very little to assuage the wrenching feelings of attraction and raw lust which now peppered my treasured memories of time spent with Ben. My brain seemed insistent to think of him as *my best friend* and refused to admit any other terminology. But a part of me knew that my newfound feelings for him existed, buried, and would eventually have to find a way out of me before they did damage. I also knew that I harbored such feelings for him for a long time, in the background of my male life, and possibly even loved him from the moment I met him. No doubt that a slew of memories existed in that hazy place comprising my hidden female life of loving Ben from afar, of being 'friended' early in the relationship, watching him be with other women and choking down my jealousy.

I forced it from my mind as I wrapped myself in a towel and pulled my hair back under a stretchy headband. I paused in the bedroom for a moment to slip into a pair of yoga pants with a zebra-print waistband and a little blousy pink top with puffy sleeves – not quite the pajama-and-socks comfort of my alone time, but still comfortable enough. Not that my twin sister would care one bit if I came downstairs in my PJs. Dawn wouldn't care if I came down stark naked or in a suit of armor. I knew that with utter certainty.

I took note of a powerful but lovely floral smell – lavender, maybe, some jasmine, and something like cinnamon – emanating from downstairs once the steam cleared from my head. I threaded a pair of earrings through the piercings in my lobes, just a little touch of dressy to make me feel like I made some sort of an effort for my sister. I knew she didn't care – but I'm pretty sure I *did* care. That kind of concern about my own appearance shocked me, still, because of how foreign it felt to the person I was before the change.

The faint beat of some kind of music on the radio reached me, and I smiled. I liked how my sister made herself at home in my place. The sense of being twins – of sharing *everything* – made such behavior comfortable to me at a visceral level. I could do the same at her house, if I

wished, and she would feel the same way. I knew how Dawn would feel in any circumstance, it seemed, and she knew the same about me. No one had ever known me like that. Instead of alarming me, or making me concerned about my privacy, now I wondered how people lived without it.



Dawn stood at my kitchen counter, surrounded by glass jars and bottles of flower petals, seeds, essential oils and the like. A potted aloe plant stood among them. My sister smiled at me as she ground ingredients with a stone mortar and pestle.

“Hey, I think I figured out what went wrong with that new face powder we came up with,” she said, gesturing to a little bowl of sweet-smelling powder next to a makeup brush and a magnifying mirror across from me. “Give it a try, will you, tell me what you think?”

I took up the brush and applied a light dusting to my cheeks and nose. “God, Dawn, it smells *fantastic*. I love the jasmine,” I told her. “Oh, yeah. Really light. I can barely feel it on.”

She peered at my face closely. “I think we can use the same recipe to make a bronzer,” she said, making a few notes in a thick notebook by her elbow. “But it doesn’t burn like before?”

I laughed. “Nope,” I replied. “I know the cinnamon closes the pores, but last time? Damn.”

She giggled. “Closed the *fuck* out of those pores,” she laughed, still grinding away. “I cut it to a third of what it was before. And added a little bit of mica and pearl dust for a little bit of shimmer.”

I reached into my purse in the peg by the door and pulled out a notebook of my own, barely registering how I could have known it was there, and flipped it open. Rows of figures and notes in a neat, precise hand lined the pages. “What are we looking at for cost of ingredients?” I asked.

“Business, business, business. Numbers. Is this thing working?” Dawn droned, quoting Princess Unikitty from *The Lego Movie* and making me laugh openly. I flicked a dusting of face powder at her.

“Let’s see,” she said, putting down the pestle and picking up her notebook to study it closely. I noted that Dawn’s notes were much more sloppy and scrawled than my own. “Between the spices, the flowers, the aloe, the talc... I can make about three pounds of it for about eleven dollars and fifty cents worth of stuff.”

“Okay, so that’s eleven-fifty for forty-eight ounces, that works out to about twenty-four or twenty-five cents an ounce. Figure we sell it in a point-three ounce package, so that’s... um... about seven cents a unit, give or take. Figure a nice container, that’s gonna run us eleven cents a unit or so, so about eighteen,” I mumbled, jotting down figures and tapping my bottom lip with the cap of the pen. “And you’re selling this as..?”

Dawn stopped the grinding once more. “This is a microfinish powder,” she told me. “For setting foundation, or wearing alone. Gives your face a really nice matte finish.”

“Think it’s ground fine enough to qualify as ‘high-definition?’” I asked.

“Sure, if we go ahead and buy that industrial grinder we saw. Hand-ground, like this – probably not.”

“If we call it ‘HD,’ Dawn, we can sell this thing for about thirty dollars a unit,” I told her. “That’s twenty-nine dollars and eighty-eight cents’ profit per unit. Honey, that’s ninety-nine point six percent profit.”

“And that's good?” Dawn asked.

“It's obscenely good,” I said. “And you really think using all-natural ingredients like this is going to give us the quality to compete with the stuff they make in labs?”

She nodded. “All my girlfriends at the salon love our stuff,” she said. “They want to offer it to their clients. It's light, it's clean, it doesn't cause breakouts, and it covers really well. Once we get the sign-off from a few dermatologists, and figure out how to make more colors, we should be able to sell this stuff at some of the high-end boutiques.”

I closed my notebook. “You still planning to head out to Navajo country next month and look at how they make their vegetable dyes?” I asked.

“Yep,” she said. “Bought my ticket yesterday. Wish you were coming out there with me.”

“Yeah, unfortunately, I can't ditch my day job just yet,” I told her. “Can't get the time off – tax season is coming up pretty soon.”

“Mm-hm,” Dawn said. “And the fact that you'll be stuck in an office sixteen hours a day pressed up against Ben wouldn't have *anything* to do with that, now, would it?”

I blushed crimson. “My God,” I mumbled, tucking my hair self-consciously behind one ear. “Is it *that* fucking obvious?”

Dawn laughed and placed a warm hand on my forearm. “I'm your twin sister, Cupcake,” she chided gently. “You can't keep secrets from me. Besides, you've as much as told me you're in love with Ben all the times we talked about him.”

“It's rough, y'know? I get really conflicted when I think about it.”

“What's to be conflicted about?” Dawn pressed. “Just tell him how you feel. He just broke up with Cindy, right, so he's single. You're young, you're sexy as hell, you're single – he'd be nuts not to go for it and see what happens. Might surprise you, Hopie – he might feel the same way. He might be keeping it a secret for the same reasons you do.”

“He's my *best friend*, Dawnnie,” I told her plaintively. “I'm so scared I could fuck that up. I don't want to have a life where he's not in it. I can handle him not loving me, but if I make it weird and he doesn't want to be around me any more...”

“I don't think you're giving him enough credit,” Dawn said, returning to the mortar and pestle. “But that's just me.”

“I'll think about it, okay?” I said. “Want some wine?”

She smiled at me wryly. “Took you long enough to offer, bitch,” she teased.

Dawn and I stayed busy that afternoon and well into the evening, making and trying out different cosmetics on one another. I worked on my laptop while she mixed colors and ground powders, stopping my work on our business plan periodically to dust my face or paint my eyelids or lips with some new concoction. She would occasionally sit across from me and do things such as line one eye with her own make of liquid eyeliner and line my other eye with Cover Girl or L'Oreal, then carefully peer at me over time, even taking pictures with her phone, and make notes in her notebook.

Eventually, the darkness grew outside and Dawn decreed that the wine we consumed metabolized sufficiently for her to drive safely home, giving me a tight fond hug and a kiss on the cheek before she piled into her fuck-me-red Mustang and roared away into the dusk.

I threw on a blue sweater-dress – discovering that I favored the garments during chilly weather because they showcased my backside so well, with a girlish giggle – and belted it with wide leather, slipped into some stylish black patent pumps, took a brush to my hair (which curled sexily once released from the tight bun I twisted it into while I worked with Dawn) and headed out to buy myself some groceries for a quick dinner. Driving through the light drizzle falling through the streetlights, barely noticing the traffic around me or the iron-grey clouds above, my mind dwelt on Ben and my complicated feelings.

Just a few short words with my sister convinced me that I felt love for him. A very real, very passionate and very consuming love. Setting that aside for the moment, and the very real danger I felt those feelings posed to the friendship I treasured so deeply, I focused instead on the *weirdness* of how natural it seemed to feel love like that for a man. The lack of discomfort towards the feeling bothered as much, if not more, than the feeling itself. The same went for attraction to a man. I knew – I was *certain* – that I should feel strange about liking the look of men, but somehow I just *didn't*. Exploring the feeling itself should have bothered me, and it didn't. *I needed* to be uncomfortable about my preferences: how much I liked a firm, tight ass in tight blue jeans, or wide shoulders, or a man with a little bit

of beard stubble, how I preferred swarthy complexions to pale, and how dimples and freckles drove me absolutely wild. I desperately needed to be completely freaked out by those things.



Instead, I just perused the shelves in the deli section of the supermarket, my shopping basket full of feminine things like shampoo, conditioner and tampons, trying to disguise the hungry looks I leveled at the denim-clad ass of a young Latino man bent over his shopping cart to leaf through a fitness magazine. The urge to step across the aisle and just squeeze those buns with both hands nearly overwhelmed me, and the subtle interplay of the sculpted muscles in his arms beneath the linen of his shirt caused me to bite my lip suggestively and squirm a bit at the tingling wetness between my thighs.

God, did acknowledging my attraction to men open some kind of a floodgate? I wondered in a panic as I watched the lovely sway of his muscular rear end vanish around the end of the aisle. Am I a horndog, now, on top of everything else?

I tried to think about women. Supple, tight bodies and unblemished skin, the delicious curve of a breast, the smell of her arousal, the subtle taper of her wrist and her ankle. I grasped inside myself, trying to find that urgent, nearly violent arousal that I remembered. Instead I only felt a mild jealousy. Wishing I had that centerfold body, those gravity-defying breasts, that flat tummy or that bronzed skin. No desire to touch, to *enter*, remained in me anywhere. Not even a teasing desire to kiss.

I felt like a huge part of me had been *removed*. Like the phantom pain in an amputated limb. Like my attraction to the man in the tight jeans somehow profaned the old, familiar desire I felt towards women. Like I did something I wasn't supposed to do.

I sighed heavily and shook my head to clear it. That strange knot in my chest – that stress that followed me everywhere, as familiar to me as my own thoughts – took up its customary place, drawing my shoulders up into knots and making it feel like an effort to breathe.

I pressed a hand against my chest, feeling that old familiar knot. *And just like that, I'm right back where I started again.*

Swallowing hard, I hefted the shopping basket and finished my errand, forcing myself not to look at anyone, just desperate to be home and alone again, with no human contact until I left for work the next morning.

Disturbing dreams haunted my sleep, making me toss and turn, and when my alarm buzzed loudly to announce five-thirty a.m., the lack of sleep crashed through me. I yawned and stretched, rubbing my grainy eyes and trying to rouse myself to wakefulness. On a bizarre kind of autopilot, I shed the thigh-length tee-shirt in which I slept and shrugged into a pair of yoga pants and a sport bra, tied my hair back in a thick ponytail, and ran on my treadmill for forty-five minutes while I watched the financial news on MSNBC. I finished the workout with a bit of yoga, just to keep myself limber and forestall any aches and pains from my cardio.

I ducked into a hot shower while my coffee brewed in the kitchen, finally beginning to feel awake for the first time. Out, toweled off, I spent a blissful few minutes moisturizing with my sister's proprietary all-organic lotions for my body, my face and under my eyes while NPR's *Morning Edition* played in the background.

My high-tech coffee maker dinged happily downstairs in the kitchen, and I thanked my ironclad morning routine for letting me sip it in relative peace

while I sat on the low velvet stool in my room, taking the better part of an hour to apply my makeup and arrange my hair. I used the cosmetics that my sister and I developed, loving the creamy and smooth feel of them on my soft skin, applying them carefully and meticulously with the air of long-practiced routine. Indulging this newfound pride in my appearance, I dressed quickly in a matching pink panty and push-up bra trimmed with black lace, smoky hose, a conservative grey skirt and a form-fitting pink blouse. I dangled hoop earrings from my earlobes, clipped a girlish pink bow in my hair and perched my stylish eyeglasses on my nose, threaded my wrist through a large bangle bracelet and wormed my feet into some five-inch heels with a subtle platform – taller women got taken more seriously in the workplace, I believed.

I managed a quick breakfast of yogurt, fruit and what seemed like a double handful of vitamins and supplements, then packed my laptop back into my bag and slung it over my shoulder along with my purse on my way out the front door. I hopped into my black Jetta and drove the unfamiliar route into downtown – my home had only been my home for a few days, and navigation still eluded me. I did manage to find a Starbucks Coffee on the way in, and lingered a few minutes in the drive-thru lane long enough to grab a large cappuccino for my morning.

The MedTech building, where I worked for years, appeared from behind a painstakingly landscaped row of trees and I basked in the return of familiarity to my life for a moment as I guided the car into a parking slip near the entrance – another upshot of rising so early and adhering to such a regimented schedule meant arriving at work to a relatively empty parking lot. I stepped out of the car and misted the air in front of me from a bottle of D or *J'adore* perfume to mask any smell of my morning cigarette which might still cling to my clothing. I swayed rapidly into the lobby, swiping my I.D. badge across the card-reader in reception and pressing the button for the elevator.

I arrived on the fourth floor, just like I always had, and walked through the empty cubicles towards my office. But when I arrived, the sign on the door said that the Assistant Human Resources Director for MedTech no longer went by the name Jennifer Hope Lowridge. Instead, the office housed Michael Kravitz – formerly one of my staffers. I looked around hopelessly. Had my transformation tucked me underneath a glass ceiling? Did I still have a job?

I dug through my purse frantically, finally finding one of my own business cards for MedTech – I had plenty of Chief Executive Officer cards for Kissable Cosmetics, I noticed – and saw my title listed as Senior Associate of Business Affairs.

Business Affairs? That's the executive track, I thought numbly. I'm not even on the correct floor any more, that's up on sixth! Glass ceiling, hell – I got a promotion!

I walked back to the elevators and went up two more floors, into the much more spacious offices on sixth. Looking around – no one had arrived yet, thankfully, to notice my confusion – I marked that the offices surrounding the central floor still housed the executives I knew from before: James Pagliacci, Kristen Davis, Hank Wright, Larry Mendoza. I found my own cubicle in the central floor, where the actual deals got done. I sat down in my chair – adjusted perfectly for my petite, slender frame – and looked at the little personal details around my spacious cubicle, a few printed “Lolcatz” pictures, some graphs and charts, a phone list, a framed picture of my sister and I at a New Year's Eve party and a little cheery potted plant. I dropped my purse into one of the desk drawers and docked my laptop on the desk, thoroughly satisfied with myself. Everyone in the company knew, a cubicle on the sixth floor was worth a corner office on the third, fourth or fifth. I cued up a little music on an iPod found in my desk drawer, some Ariana Grande, Taylor Swift and Charli XCX, to play softly on my speakers while I worked, freshened my lipstick, sipped my coffee and dug into my work.

It took the better part of an hour for me to pore through my schedules and electronic day-planners to figure out just what the hell I worked on, then another hour just to figure out from old spreadsheets and documents where I had left off. From what I could gather from delving into my email inbox – thank God the “new me” never deleted emails either – I crunched the numbers for a major expansion of the company into Dublin, making all the money flow in the right direction so that the deal would go down as planned. Emails from some of the major executives, including the Chief Financial Officer, said that my work on this deal would determine my future with the company, perhaps even paving the way into one of the coveted corner offices. The actual work – moving money, making sure all the appropriate fees and duties got paid, making sure where and when the taxes would need to be paid – challenged me not one bit. I sailed through financial spreadsheets with no trouble whatsoever, never once stumbling over calculations or tax regulations which tripped me up inevitably during my studies as a male. Hope Lowridge possessed a head for numbers and a knack for business that Richard Lowridge, Jr. never hoped to achieve.

I paused for a moment about mid-morning, looking up from my single-minded pursuit of the deal in front of me, to notice that the office now hummed and buzzed with conversations, movement and light. I ducked out onto a secluded balcony and lit a grateful cigarette, checking my phone to

see what the world might have been up to while I got lost in the neat little columns of numbers.

Nothing fancy, just another text from my sister: **howz work?**

I texted back while I released a long plume of smoke into the chilly, damp air: **working my ass off on this Dublin deal n loving the new lipstick you made. tastes like roses**

Only a few short moments passed before she replied: **glad u like it u little future executive u**

I giggled as I took another drag, and replied: **u know it!!!**

Dawn shot back: **beats the fuck out of cutting hair n doing nails**

My thumbs danced: **u love it quit bitching**

Her next text took a little while, just because of length: **proud of u sweetie. ur gonna own that place b4 ur done. a year from now ur gonna have a corner office with a bunch of designer suits n a big pair of silicone power tits making all those fuckers do ur bidding**

I laughed aloud, tossing my lipstick-stained cigarette butt into an ashtray stationed near the door before replying: **fuck that I'm gonna be CEO of Kissable with my own private jet that I own with my sister**

I could almost feel the warmth and satisfaction of her short reply: **damn right**

I ducked back inside, taking a moment to pop a Tic-Tac to take the smoke from my breath before resuming my work inside my cubicle. The numbers swallowed me once more, drowning out the world around me. The clock on my desktop read ten minutes past noon when a soft, familiar voice snapped me from my reverie and a muscular butt and pair of legs in tailored dress slacks plopped on the edge of my desk.

I looked up over the tops of my glasses to see Ben, smiling down at me, and my heart skipped a beat. The memories of him, as a best friend, paled at seeing him once more in the flesh – *God, he's gorgeous!* – and I touched up my hair self-consciously as I returned his smile, hoping my sister's new foundation covered my girlish blush.

“What's up, nerd?” he said playfully.

“Hey,” I said a little breathlessly. “Working on this Dublin deal.”

He peered down at my screen. “Wow,” he said. “That is a *lot* of exchange rates right there.”

“Don't have a lot of experience on international stuff,” I said. “I might be getting a little carried away, making sure everything adds up, but I don't want to make a stupid mistake. This has been a great learning experience.”

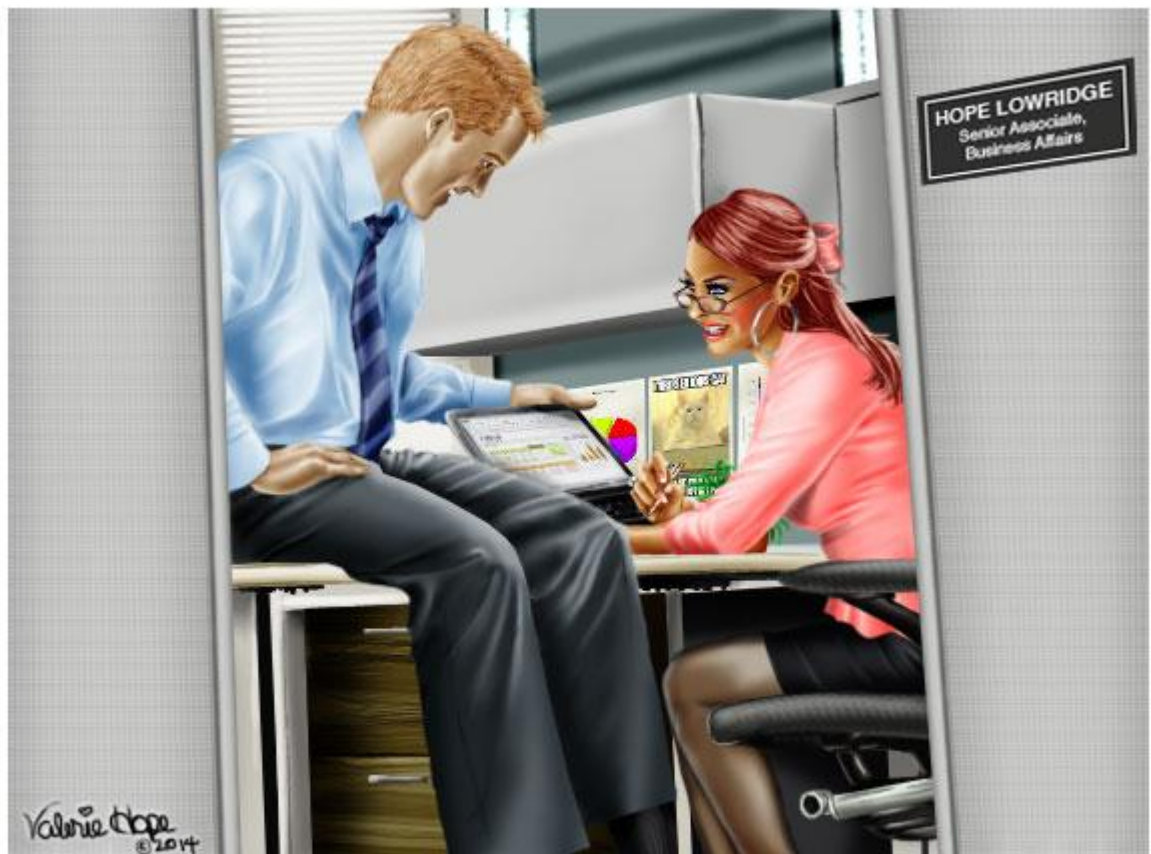
He laughed. “You are such a finance geek,” he chuckled. “I could burn your house down and you'd chalk it up to a learning experience about insurance underwriting.”

He slid a little closer and I felt my temperature rise a bit. “So, were you serious?”

“Serious about what?” I asked.

“Oh, my God, you forgot,” he said fondly, slapping his forehead.

“I *watched* you put it in your dayplanner this time. You, me, fish tacos at the new place on Seventeenth. You said you'd never had them before and you promised you would come try them with me.”



I feigned recognition. “Oh, yeah, of course. I didnt forget. I just lost track of time.”

“You totally forgot,” he said. “Get your purse. I'm not letting you back out of this one.”

I grabbed my purse, suddenly willing to go anywhere he wanted me to, crawling on my hands and knees if he decided that was better. The utter powerlessness I felt in his presence stunned me, not because it frightened me but because how much I *adored* the feeling.

He dug in one pocket as I stood and smoothed my skirt. “Can I drive this time? You drive like Grandma,” he teased.

“Sure, no problem,” I said, trying not to giggle like a half-wit from the fluttering nervousness in my chest just being near him.

He stopped and gave me a strange look. “You okay, Hope?”

I touched up my hair once more, even though I knew not a single strand stood out of place. “Yeah, I'm great,” I replied. “Why?”

“You're not acting like your usual self. Usually, I bust on you and you bust me right back. Now you're acting like calling me an asshole would hurt my feelings or something.”

I tried to sound nonchalant around the fluttering in my chest above the maddening knot of stress. “I dunno. Probably that sexual harassment seminar we had to attend,” I said, remembering an entry in my schedule from a few weeks back discovered in my hunt through my professional past. “Made me self-conscious about how I talk to people.”

He blew a dismissive raspberry as we made our way to the elevators. “Hope. Really. You've known me *how* long?”

“Okay, then, have it your way. Sexual harassment be damned. Lead the way, Cute Ass.”

He gave me a disarming smile. “After you, Sugar Tits.”

The morning's drizzle opened up into a full-blown rain as we walked into the parking lot. I stopped, suddenly fearing for my meticulous hairstyle, but

Ben proved chivalry still lived on by producing an umbrella and giving me the dizzying opportunity to press my body against his to crowd beneath it with him. The clean, masculine scent of him, all arousing pheromones and Old Spice deodorant, dizzied me instantly and I dug into my purse for a cigarette to cover the scent which threatened to drive me wild.



He produced a silver Zippo lighter from his pocket and *clinked* it open. "Allow me," he said.

I puffed my cigarette alight, cupping the dancing flame with one hand to protect it from the wind. Subconsciously, I pressed my breasts – and their attendant stiff nipples – into the firm, muscular back of his arm and felt the triceps flex deliciously against me. Warm wetness began deep inside me and coated my inner thighs with slickness, soaking my filmy panties as we walked. I carefully placed one foot directly in front of the other so that my thighs brushed gently against my swollen clitoris, sending little waves of thrilling pleasure up and down my body.

He loitered with me for a moment while I finished smoking, sparing the interior of his three-series BMW from the stale smell. I only smoked it halfway down, knowing that I bit into our precious lunch-hour time together, and piled into his front seat, treating myself to a long and informative look at his luscious backside as he slid into the driver's seat across from me.

He put the car into gear and pulled expertly into traffic. I hummed along with something on the radio, trying not to let the silence between us become uncomfortable, wishing I knew enough about my relationship with him in this life to make some small talk to fill the gap.

“You must be really distracted,” he commented as we made a right turn onto Seventeenth Street in a swish of puddled water beneath the tires. “Ordinarily, you've chattered my ear off by this point.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“You know I love it, Hope, I'm just fucking with you,” he explained. “Are you *sure* everything's okay with you? Man, that job must really be in your head.”

I forced an airy laugh. “I'm fine. Preoccupied. The deal, the thing with my sister – I've just got a lot on my mind right now. I'll try to let it all go, Benjy, I promise, and have some fun.”

“Hey, relax, I get it,” he said. “Sounds like you need somebody to go get you drunk.”

I eyeballed him, staging my voice somewhere between serious and playful. “Are you asking me out?”

He rolled his eyes theatrically. “Oh, I guess, if you insist. You're really not my type.”

“Oh, so you don't like young, hot and single?” I teased. “I *knew* you were gay.”

He laughed. “That's more like it,” he said. “But the offer stands. Any night, I'm free all week. I can meet you at Tripp's, I'll pick up your tab for you and make sure you get home.”

I tapped my bottom lip. Perhaps that very scenario – a bar I knew well from my old male life, Ben and I together, copious quantities of alcohol – could prove useful. A way to maybe tumble him into my bed, if I played my cards right, and maybe even tumble my way into his heart somehow.

“You're on,” I told him.

“Great,” he said. “We haven't tied one on together since... when was it? Three years ago?”

I found a memory from my male life that served. “Yeah, after you broke up with Kathy from Sales.”

“Right. Remember how close we came to hooking up? What a disaster that would have been.”

I tried not to sob, covering it with a coughing laugh. “Yeah. Total disaster.” My heart sank into my shoes and I fought back stinging tears. The knot in my chest tightened, choking me a little, and behind it I felt something ominously familiar, something powerful that I only recently learned to recognize.

Want. Powerful, desperate, soul-deep *want*.

“HE ACTUALLY USED THE WORD 'disaster?'” Dawn asked, passing me yet another tissue as I wept miserably on her couch. Behind me, I heard Mom pour boiling water into teacups, indulging in her time-honored tradition of soaking every problem her children encountered beneath a lake of Orange Pekoe.

I sobbed, nodding, then buried my face against my sister's shoulder and wept inconsolably. Dawn smoothed my hair, whispering little endearments in a nonsensical babble that I somehow understood – *twin-speak*, I realized dimly, the languages common to twin siblings – and rocking me gently.

The admission I feared so deeply wrenched its way out of my throat.

“Dawn, I love him so much.”

“Shh, baby, I know,” she told me softly. “I've always known.”

Mom placed a soothing hand on my shoulder and I looked up to her kind, wrinkle-mapped face while she offered me a steaming cup of tea. I took it in both hands, sipping gingerly at the scalding liquid, and sniffled loudly.

“Thanks, Mama,” I rasped.

She waved my thanks away. “Never you mind, sweetheart.”

“You know, Hope, if he can't see what he has in you, then maybe he's not good enough,” Dawn attempted, using a tissue to gently wipe away the hot tears along the sides of my nose.

“You know that isn't true, Dawnnie,” I whined. “He's good enough for me. He's fucking *perfect*.”

“I think he has a weird nose,” Mom said wryly. “And his feet smell. So, maybe not perfect.”

I snorted laughter, which faded quickly back into silent tears. “They do reek, don't they?”

“Oh, God. Like a stadium bathroom,” Dawn said, wrinkling her nose.

“I'm so sorry he hurt you, baby,” Mom said, sliding in behind me on the couch and pressing her cheek into my hair. “I hate it when my babies get hurt.”

“I did it to myself,” I said. “Walked right into it like a big blind dummy.”

“Jennifer Hope, you stop that,” Mom scolded. “You are a *lot* of things, my love, but dumb is not one of them. You're young, sweetheart. A little inexperienced. Every single woman in the world has loved someone who didn't love them back. It's just a part of it all. You *will* meet somebody. You *will* have the relationship you want. You're too good – both of you are – for the universe not to allow that.”

I blew my nose and sipped some tea. “You sound like Daddy,” I told her. “I really wish he was here.”

Mom snorted laughter faintly tinged with the pain of losing him. “He would say something terribly deep and philosophical about the inner workings of the universe and the roles of consciousness within it,” she said. “Then he'd threaten to go out and beat Ben to death with a pipe wrench.”

I nodded. “I was just thinking something like that.”

Dawn patted my hands firmly, her signal that she meant to change the subject. “You are going straight home and cleaning up,” she told me. “Then you're going to put on a slutty dress, do your hair, and we are going *out*. We are going to drink too much, dance too provocatively and just be generally scandalous. I'm gonna get you so shit-faced you will have to call in sick tomorrow. And if you happen to find yourself a cute guy, y'know, I wouldn't hold it against you if you didn't even bother to learn his name.”

“That sounds *awful*,” I told my sister.

“Nonsense,” Mom said. “I think it sounds wonderful. Get out, socialize a little. You're so driven, Hope, so focused – like your father. I think going out and being a little irresponsible with your sister would do you a world of good. And never underestimate the healing properties of a timely throwaway boy-toy, darling.”

I goggled a little. My mother – my wordly, prim and proper mother, wife of the noted philosopher, always so demure and refined – sat there calmly and told me to go out and get myself *laid*?

The differences between “girl life” and “boy life” continued to stagger me.

Dawn already texted away on her phone. “I'm calling Sarah and Gretchen,” she said. “We'll make it a foursome. And you said it yourself – it's impossible not to have fun when Gretchen's around.”

I nodded lamely, with no clue to the identities of either woman she named. “I guess I can manage it,” I told her. “As long as none of you object if I suddenly break down crying in the middle of the dance floor. I'm not making any guarantees.”

Dawn gave me a nose-ckrinkling smile. “Did you know something, Hope? I always wanted to be just like you,” she told me softly. “Ever since we were little. I've always been such a scatterbrain. Never did well in school, can't get organized, never had any kind of a plan or a direction. I just kinda blunder through life. I always wished I was like you, knowing where I wanted to be and who I wanted to be. I wanted that so much.”

I sniffled. “Funny, I always wanted to be more like you. Spontaneous, wild, not so bogged down by consequences and repercussions. Living today instead of waiting for the future.”

“Two sides of the same coin,” Mom said. “And your father always said, wanting something badly enough could reshape the universe.”

“Yeah,” I said, my voice far away and my eyes a little haunted. “He did say that.”

It turned out that Gretchen was the gorgeous, leggy blonde model we met in college who stood to be the new face of Kissable Cosmetics and Sarah, her roommate, the petite brunette makeup artist who would most likely become head of our testing and development division. Both girls arrived at Dawn's doorstep in tight cocktail dresses, laughing and giggling and

generally having fun, and poured a few preparatory drinks while Dawn and I finished getting ready.

Dawn declared that none of my clothes measured up to her standards of sluttiness and opted instead to squeeze me into a second-skin green sheath dress with built-in push-up cups. I dangled a few bracelets and some huge hoop earrings, a little crystal pendant around my neck, just to add a bit of sparkle. Dawn sat me down and did my makeup for me, using her own proprietary cosmetics to give me overly dramatic eyes and lips. She stopped just this side of whorish, and nodded in satisfaction at the results. Sarah *oohed* and *aahed* over the quality of the makeup, launching into a detailed conversation of the ins and outs of cosmetics formulation with Dawn, while Gretchen snapped a picture of me with her phone to go up on Instagram and declared me the hottest bitch in town.

They piled me into a cab shortly thereafter and ventured downtown to Mixx, a trendy little nightclub that gave the nod to the rave-like club scene without crossing the line into the thumping, oversexed atmosphere and still allowed its patrons to find places for conversations that didn't require shouting. Dawn threw down her platinum card to open a tab and ordered a bottle of expensive champagne to begin the evening, staking a claim on a booth tucked into an alcove overlooking the dance floor.



Gretchen, to my left, pointed out likely guys for me to go and talk to while Sarah, to my right, favored me with catty little jokes about the club's patrons which kept me laughing all night, especially after the champagne took hold. The other women surrounded me with unshakeable walls of support, never giving me the opportunity to cry or feel morose, always ready with a fresh glass or a dirty joke or a well-placed compliment every time they sense my mood start to descend.

We drank toasts to the future of our company while the others lauded my prowess as a businesswoman. I found myself hoping I could live up to their expectations but said nothing, only tried to swallow champagne around the thick knot of stress – my old companion – in my chest, regrown in its accustomed spot and tightening every muscle in my body in response.

Even in the face of that, however, the warmth and support of the feminine version of friendship amazed me to my core. In my male iteration, the

friends I had – even Ben – never offered the level of care about every aspect of me that these women did. They cared for my physical well-being, my self-esteem, my emotional state and my future in a way that male friends avoided. None of them missed a chance to tell me how beautiful I was, or how intelligent, how successful and how desirable I was, and for all their talk about finding myself a one-night stand to drown my sorrows, I never went to the dance floor or the bar or even the bathroom unaccompanied.

Time slipped away, leaving me thoroughly drunk and quite exhausted at midnight, still shimmying and twirling spastically on the dance floor with this random guy or that random guy. Even though the alcohol and the permissive company opened my mind to the possibility of an anonymous grope with a total stranger, no one I met that night caused the intense feelings of longing and desire flooding through me that a single glance from Ben Jacobs aroused. Somehow, the presence of these men – cute and attractive as they were – only made me feel Ben's absence more acutely.

We took separate cabs home – Sarah and Gretchen to their shared apartment and Dawn back home with myself. My sister refused to let me be alone that night, and we removed our makeup and moisturized our skin crammed side-by-side in my small bathroom, smoked a companionable cigarette in silence on my small fenced terrace and then crawled into my bed alongside one another, Dawn's slender arm draped tightly across me.

“I love you, Hope,” she whispered to me in the darkness after I snapped off the bedside lamp.

“I love you, too, Dawnnie,” I told her fondly, squeezing her arm tight around me.

“You gonna be okay?” she asked.

“I think so,” I said. “Just a little old broken heart, that's all.”

“I'm so sorry, sweetheart,” she said. “Hope *ba cumma lo.*” *Hope can feel better*, my mind translated from our made-up twin language from girlhood.

“Dawn *essa magga jan,*” I replied. *Dawn is so sweet.*

“You're really gonna go to work tomorrow?” Dawn asked. “Where you have to be around him?”

“It's work, sweetie,” I said. “I have the deal I'm working on. It's important. It means a lot to my career. I'm not gonna let this thing fuck that up.”

“You are so much stronger than me,” Dawn said.

“Not that strong,” I said. “I’m gonna make an appointment to go see Dr. Mallory. Maybe get myself some medication or something, until I get over this thing.”

“I think you should,” my sister replied. “She’s the one you told me about, that helped you so much after Dad died and you got your gall bladder out, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Gonna call her first thing in the morning.”

The grainy-eyed, leaden-brained feeling of not enough sleep assaulted me at five-thirty again, and I longed to nestle back into my thick comforter and return to my unsettled dreams, but my unshakeable sense of duty and professionalism forced me blearily to my feet once more. Dawn moaned and buried her face into the warm vacuum I left in the covers, never even waking.

My morning routine – an hour of exercise followed by a shower, doing my hair and makeup with my coffee, then getting dressed and heading out with my bag beneath my arm and my morning cigarette between my fingers – took me over, and I barely remembered my run through Starbucks and my ascent to my cubicle. I resumed the work I left off the previous day – nearly forgotten in the emotional tumult of my interaction with Ben – and waited until eight-thirty and the arrival of most of my co-workers to bring the office to noisy, bustling life before ducking out onto the balcony for a smoke and a quick call to my psychiatrist.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Lowridge, but Dr. Mallory is on vacation,” her receptionist told me after I announced my desire for a quick appointment. “Dr. Richardson is covering all her patients this month. Would you like to schedule something with him?”

I bit my lip in concern. I hated to turn my back on the trust and prior relationship with Dr. Mallory, but I did feel like I needed someone to listen to me and help me. “I think I probably should,” I told her. “Do you have anything available this week?”

I could hear the sound of keystrokes in the background. “Actually, Ms. Lowridge, you’re in luck. Dr. Richardson had a cancellation, we have an opening at four o’clock this afternoon.”

"I can make that," I told her. "I'll see you then."

I ducked back into the office, not bothering to cover the smell of my smoking this time as I threaded through the scuttling worker bees to Hank Wright's office, my direct supervisor and the Vice President of Business Affairs. I knocked on his door and he motioned me in, talking on the phone for a moment while he held up one finger to forestall my speaking.

"Great. I'll see you Friday. Thanks, Robert, I owe you one. Give my love to Suzanne, would you? Bye," he said into the phone, then laid the land-line back in the desktop cradle before standing and offering me a firm, companionable handshake.

"Hope, how are you? What can I do for you?" he said fondly, gesturing to the chair in front of his desk. I sat, crossing my legs at the knee instinctually, and noticed the barest deflection of Hank's gaze to my shapely legs. The aging VP only indulged for a moment, far too professional to let it progress beyond that tiny little cue, but it still gave me a little spark of confidence and the bitterly triumphant thought *at least someone in this damn office finds me attractive.*

"I need to duck out this afternoon for an appointment," I said. "Just wanted to let you know, I'll have the projections for Dublin's first quarter and the startup breakdown on your desk by the time I leave."

His eyebrows rose. "So soon? Kristen said that wouldn't be ready until next week."

I smiled self-deprecatingly. "All due respect, Hank, she didn't ask *me* how long it would take. Besides, we have to get this thing up and running before the new tax laws take effect and the exchange rate drops. The Euro is only gonna get stronger, the longer we wait. We have to take advantage of this while the austerity measures are still in effect in the Eurozone."

Hank smiled and rapped his knuckles on his desk. "You take whatever time you need, Hope," he said happily. "And let me tell you, your work on this project has not gone unnoticed. In here, and upstairs. Keep doing what you're doing out there."

"That's the plan," I said, standing. "Thanks, Hank."

"No, thank *you*," he said as I ducked back out the door and dove headlong into my work.

I clicked 'send' on the email containing my work at three o'clock straight up after six straight hours of painstaking work, broken only by two cigarette breaks, three bathroom stops and ten minutes to eat half a lettuce wrap from the lunch cart at noon. My phone stayed thankfully silent during that time, only a few "are you okay" texts from Dawn, Sarah and Gretchen. And even more thankfully, I never even saw Ben, not even in passing. The last thing I needed was a reminder of my broken heart to break through the convenient distraction of a deadline.

I sucked down a quick cigarette on the short, ten-minute drive to the hospital and the interminable twisting ascent up the crowded parking structure. I found a space on what seemed like the forty-eighth floor and click-clacked my heels across the echoing concrete to the repulsively urine-scented elevator, taking it down to the first level. I stepped out and noticed a free parking space right in front, just beyond the reserved parking for the on-call doctors.

Some things never change, no matter what gender you are, I thought wryly, chuckling at my luck. I made my way across the elevated walkway into the hospital lobby, then the very long walk down antiseptic tile floors past bewildered patients and beleaguered staff, half wandering lost and half nearly running from one place to another, towards the clinics and private practices.

The wait proved refreshingly short before a white-coated doctor with greying hair and a basset-hound face ushered me into a nice, airy office and introduced himself as Dr. Richardson.

"I've gone over your file from Dr. Mallory," he said. "Sounds like you had kind of a rough time after your surgery. Tell me, how is that working out?"

I shrugged nonchalantly. "There's nothing to work out. I know it was just a vivid dream, brought on by the anesthesia. I have this life, and this body, and this is what it really is. I'm over it."

"Good to hear," he said, making a note on a legal pad. "Then what brings you here to see me today?"

I cleared my throat. "It's a lot of things, really. Work is really hectic. I have a lot of people depending on me, and everybody watching what I do. It's really starting to affect me, particularly my sleep. Plus, I'm starting a business with my sister, which takes up most of my free time, and my personal life kinda came unraveled a few days ago. A guy, who I feel a certain way about, who doesn't feel the same way about me, and it all came to a head..."

He nodded knowingly. “Familiar story,” he commented. “Trouble sleeping, then. Anything else?”

“A huge knot, right in the center of my chest. So bad it makes it hard to swallow and breathe sometimes. It feels like it pulls on every muscle in my body until I'm tense all over, like I would twang like a guitar string if something bumped into me. I get these headaches.”

“Well, that's enough for me to confirm Dr. Mallory's preliminary diagnosis,” he said. “You're suffering from anxiety. I'm afraid if we don't control it, Ms. Lowridge, then one of these times that knot you talked about is going to make it hard to breathe and keep it hard to breathe, send you into a full-blown panic attack. I'd like to get in front of that before it happens rather than after.”

Dr. Richardson stood and rummaged in a cabinet next to his desk for a moment, coming out with two bottles of pills which he handed to me one at a time. I examined each one curiously, turning them over and over in my fingers as the psychiatrist pointed to each one in turn.



“I want to try these,” he told me. “For a few days, just to see how they work. Psychiatric drugs always begin as a trial-and-error affair, Ms. Lowridge, it's why they call it 'practice.' This might take a while before we get it right. The one you have there is Ativan. I want you to take that as needed – when you start to feel that knot in your chest, take one. It will relax you, just take the edge off. Give you some breathing room, so to speak.”

He pointed to the one he held. “This is Sertraline – Zoloft. It's an antidepressant. Now, I know Dr. Mallory said 'anxiety' and not 'depression,' but this medicine actually helps even you out in both cases. I'm starting you on a very low dosage, right at first – we can always raise the dosage later if we need to. This one you take daily, and you should start to see some benefit in a week to fifteen days.”

“Dr. Mallory said that she didn't want to put me on medication until we absolutely had to,” I said.

“I think we're there,” Dr. Richardson said. “I'm not saying that therapy isn't necessary. In fact, it's crucial. No pill can sort out your problems for you, that takes thinking and talking and objective opinion. You need to put some real effort into finding a therapist in the next few weeks, Ms. Lowridge. I can make some recommendations for you, people I know who have helped others in your position.”

“I'd appreciate that,” I said.

“Okay, then. I'll have you back in to see me in two weeks,” he told me, “and we'll see where we are with the medications. You find yourself a therapist, and we'll get this thing worked out, sound good?”

“Sounds great, actually,” I told him honestly.

I left the office after scheduling my next appointment and headed back to my car, trying to somehow mentally examine the ever-present knot in my chest and get a better sense of it – Daddy called that 'feeling around and trying to find its edges.' I knew it stemmed from my unhealthy – perhaps even pathological – desire to please others. And that really got to the root of the hurt I felt around Ben. Sure, being rejected by someone I loved, someone I had to go through so much to even *admit* I loved, stung, but I had enough experience of life to know that pain would not last long. What really hurt was that I didn't *please* Ben enough for him to want me in return. It blasted away at the very bedrock of my self-esteem, giving me this overwhelming sense of being *not good enough*. That feeling pervaded my whole life. Being born a girl – *not good enough* for my father. Being a

younger sibling – *not good enough* for my sister. Being myself – *not good enough* for Ben.

Was there anyone on this fucking planet to whom I was good enough?

I drove home in sullen silence, dropping my purse on the floor next to the door and pouring myself a glass of wine before changing into a woolly sweater, leggings and my favorite pink fuzzy socks. My desolate sense of not measuring up to the people I cared about the most turned subtly from sadness to resentment to outright anger. The knot in my chest seemed tight enough to pull me into myself, like a black hole between my breasts. I took Dr. Richardson's directions to heart – *when you start to feel that knot in your chest, take one* – and popped one of the little white Ativan onto my tongue, washing it down somewhat recklessly with a long swallow of wine.

I barely finished the cigarette I lit on the terrace outside when I began to feel quite dizzy. The ground seemed to sway a little bit underneath my feet, and I groped from railing to chair to doorknob to table, from handhold to handhold in a struggle to keep my balance as I made my way to a chair and flopped listlessly into it sideways, drawing my lissome legs over one arm and clicking on the television remote just to have some noise and light in my darkening condo.



My eyelids drifted down across my vision as my head lolled, alcohol and antianxiety medication acting in ruthless concert to draw me down into unconsciousness as my mind spat out the angry, bitter answer to my question. *I am the person on this planet to whom I'm good enough.* All the pain, the self-loathing, the very bending of the universe itself and the utter upheaval of my life and identity just to suit what someone *else* wanted. When would it be about what *I* wanted? When would *my* desires reshape the world around me?

I wanted as deeply and desperately as my father did, or Dawn. I wanted to be more like my sister, I wanted to be successful in business and in charge of my own destiny, I wanted Ben to love me like I loved him. What made the wants of other people more important, more *powerful* than my own? Why couldn't I have those things – Ben's love, Dawn's spirit, the success, being the high-powered executive with the designer suit and the silicone power tits, like Dawn said?

Those were the thoughts that accompanied me down into unconsciousness, settling deep inside my chest and, just at the very fringes

of my dwindling awareness, slowly attacked and dissolved that persistent knot that plagued me.

My eyelids fluttered open an unknowable time later, bringing me to the awareness of a dried-out cottony mouth, gummy eyes, and fetid breath. I moaned and rubbed my temples, yelping in shock as I stabbed myself roughly with my nails. I looked down at my hand to see my manicure – once short and sensible, now significantly longer and gleaming under a coat of perfectly-applied polish, topping the ends of my fingertips by nearly three-quarters of an inch of graceful, glossy white curve. The oversized costume-jewelry ring I wore on the index finger of my right hand that day now glittered dazzlingly, catching stray light to sparkle brilliantly. I goggled. Even with my limited experience, I knew a three-carat diamond when I saw one.

I sat up abruptly, causing a lustrous curtain of strawberry blonde hair – thicker and about ten inches longer than I had before I fell asleep, and several shades lighter than my dark auburn – to fall across my face. I spit it rudely from my lips, taken completely by surprise at its longer length, and only just happened to look down to notice the enormous swollen globes swelling the front of my sweater.

Stunned, I stared at them for a long moment, frightened to even touch them, then lifted my sweater over my head to reveal them nearly bursting the cups of my pink bra, brimming over in spherical perfection. *Power tits*, I thought numbly, my mouth falling open in slack-jawed shock. *Silicone power tits*.

I slid out of my leggings and socks, staring at the tanned perfection of my long dancer's legs and my perfect glimmering French pedicure. The pill bottle given to me at the psychiatrist's office sat next to a wineglass on the coffee-table – no longer the cheap self-assembled Danish one I remembered, but a polished masterpiece of pale wood and brass accents, covered with a vase of white dendrobium orchids – *my favorites*, I realized through my shock – and several tasteful coffee-table books which seemed centered around fashion photography and makeup.

I only just remembered the thoughts in my brain as I descended into unconsciousness, about the things I wanted from life, the validity of my own desires, and some of the examples I used to make my phantom arguments to whatever unseen jury to whom I argued my case.

I jumped up suddenly, causing my much larger and much heavier breasts to jounce painfully on my chest. I clamped my hands across the flawless curve of their tops to keep them from smacking me in the chin as I ran to my bathroom – past more expensive furniture that I didn't recognize, more art prints and pictures that I didn't remember buying or hanging. Even the trip to the bathroom took longer, since my condo grew by nearly a thousand square feet while I slept in a chair. I clicked on the light in the bathroom and gasped in shock, staring at the image in the mirror in open disbelief.



The first thing I noticed was the long, subtly curly shock of strawberry blonde hair which spilled over my shoulders and down to the middle of my back. After that came the ice-blue eyes – the only part of me still remaining from my male days – and then the positively mammoth breasts in the pink confines of the bra. Judging from the angle in which I looked down at the bathroom counter, I expected that *petite* no longer described me nearly as accurately as *long and leggy*, about five foot eight or so and weighing in at around a hundred and twenty-five pounds. I inhabited one of those impossibly firm but still undeniably curvy and feminine bodies, maybe nine

percent body-fat, usually reserved only for *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit models, *Playboy* Playmates or Victoria's Secret Angels.

I touched my face – a masterpiece of flawless, symmetrical perfection – as though it didn't even belong to me, fully expecting not to feel my own touch as I gaped into the mirror. Once my brain commanded me to mouth a few words or pucker up, wrinkle my nose or widen my eyes and I saw the reflection respond by performing those tasks did I even risk thinking of that airbrushed, glamorous beauty staring back at me as *my face*.

“My God,” I whispered, my voice now a husky soprano. “I'm *beautiful*.”

I stepped back from the mirror, stumbling a little over the bath-mat because I could not tear my eyes away from the reflection, and looked around a little. A few tasteful little decorations on the walls of the bathroom, here and there. I turned and stepped into my bedroom. A glittering view of the city skyline shone through the window before I clicked on the light – I lived up high, close to midtown, not the little mid-range condominiums surrounding the pedestrian mall near the medical center where I fell asleep.

The light blinded my eyes for a moment before adjusting to see a huge, king-size four-poster bed in polished red oak with matching dresser, vanity table and armoire. A door peeked open to give a teasing glimpse of an enormous walk-in closet. I looked on the wall next to the bathroom and saw a framed picture of my family – Mom's regal patience next to Dad's tousled, unkempt wisdom, and next to them two young girls in the first bloom of their burgeoning womanhood, maybe sixteen or seventeen years old but already promising unearthly beauty. Their faces smiled beamingly from the picture.

Not their *faces*, actually. Their *face*. The *same* face, on two beings.

Identical twins.

I shook my head roughly in the face of the sledgehammer reality that my *want* to be more like Dawn and her *want* to be more like me caused the universe to make us meet somewhere in the middle, taking our desire quite literally to the point of almost making us the butt of some cosmic joke. Beside that picture hung another, even more shocking – a picture of *one* of us, one I sinkingly believed was *me*, in a bikini posing next to a snowman, holding up a bottle of craft vodka. Beside that, another, of myself in a skin-tight evening dress, hair in an elegant up-do, arms thrown lovingly around a breathtakingly gorgeous man in a tuxedo in front of a Cadillac Escalade in a print advertisement for a local car dealership. Beside that, a picture of

myself in a sequined cocktail dress on the cover of a catalog for a local clothing store.

I'm a model? I wondered dully. *Where does that fit in with what I want?*

I stopped short, remembering a quiet and somewhat drunken conversation with Ben from one of my pasts – the latest one, where I worked in Business Services at MedTech and loved him from afar, jockeying for promotion. Ben and I went to a happy hour to celebrate some corporate victory and had a few too many, and I cried on his shoulder about my miserable luck with guys.

I wish, for once, you could be as beautiful on the outside as you are on the inside, Hope, Ben told me. *I want that with all my heart. Because if you could see it in a mirror, then maybe you would realize just what an incredible person you are, since you can't seem to see it any other way.*

That damned *want* again. Now I looked as beautiful as Ben wanted me to, which availed me nothing since my own want for him to love me the way I loved him still existed. Had it been fulfilled? How could I know?

One look at my left hand – or rather, the two-and-a-half-carat Tacori engagement ring on my left hand – answered that question. Big, happy tears gathered at the corners of my eyes. Not just love, but commitment, something the Ben I knew from my male days shied away from assiduously. Somehow, losing my identity twice to the universe bending around desire inured me to the prospect of losing it a third time, leaving nothing but joy at the idea of leaving behind Jennifer Hope Lowridge and becoming *Mrs. Benjamin Jacobs*.

A dull sense of practicality broke through the happy tears as I looked lovingly at my engagement ring: *how can Ben afford this on what he makes at MedTech?* I wondered. I knew our salaries were comparable and I wasn't exactly sure where I found the money for the coffee-table in the other room, much less the huge diamond on my other, non-matrimonial hand. Even with the inheritance from my father and my aggressive, disciplined approach to savings and investment, dropping twelve thousand dollars on a piece of jewelry, no matter how pretty and sparkly, not only lay well beyond my means but fell squarely in the realm of a bad investment. The only way I would ever buy something like that, at a price like that, would be if my disposable income were ten times that amount.

If I'm still thinking that way, then the universe didn't change my attitude towards spending, I thought, wondering if some of Dawn's impulsiveness might have prompted me to buy such a thing, maybe even cashing in an

investment or pulling out equity somewhere to finance it. Which meant that I very possibly did have over a hundred thousand dollars of disposable income. Which would mean my actual net worth to be somewhere in the millions.

Just what the fuck do I do for a living, if I make that much?

The answer came when I walked into my home office, next to the bedroom. Nestled in among the state-of-the-art computers and the two plasma-screen televisions tuned to MSNBC and Bloomberg, I saw an MBA from the Wharton Business School framed next to my bachelor's degree from Brown. And on top of the computer, a glossy print copy of *Forbes* with me on the cover.



almost laughed at the picture – a bombshell redhead in a designer suit with big silicone power tits, smiling broadly in front of a laser-cut chrome sign of a lipstick kiss, and “Kissable Cosmetics Worldwide” beneath it, with the caption *Not Just Another Pretty Face: How a Former Model Took Her*

Sister's Home Cosmetics Company from Her Kitchen Counter to an International Sensation.

I nearly dropped the magazine from numb hands. Kissable Cosmetics Worldwide? When I went to sleep, I hustled and sweated to put together my very first international deal for MedTech, learning as I went, and I woke up the CEO of an international company?

I wanted success. I wanted to be more like Dawn. I wanted Ben's love. I had them – had them beyond my wildest expectations. Engaged to be married to Ben, identical to Dawn in every way, head of an international company...

Dear God, I thought. This is almost too much. I don't think I can handle it.

The thought of coping with everything – having to re-introduce myself to my own life once more, stumble through things that should have come effortlessly to me, even the awkwardness of meeting lifelong friends for the very first time – once more while trying to do things like plan a wedding and run an international company weighed on me, making me clench internally for the inevitable feeling of the knot in my chest, drawing me tight and stretching my painfully with its tension, resuming its customary place inside me to dominate my every waking moment.

To my surprise – and my utter delight – that moment never came. My chest remained free and loose, my heart unchained and unweighed beneath the staggering volume of silicone.

I stood out on my balcony – now a windswept twenty-five floors up, a penthouse high-rise in a very affluent district – and smoked a cigarette in the hazy, brown-tinged night of city lights reflected from low clouds. Still my old brand – which actually began as Dawn's old brand – of Virginia Slims 120s, but this time carried in a sterling silver cigarette case engraved with my initials and lit with a matching silver Colibri lipstick lighter. The city buzzed quietly below me, imbuing the night with a strange heartbeat.

I smiled again at the baskets full of Kissable Cosmetics stacked on the dressing-table in my bedroom – every manner of skincare and beauty product imaginable, all made from organically-grown ingredients in a massive greenhouse near Chicago and formulated personally by my identical twin sister, tested lovingly by my friend Sarah and advertised in magazines and on the Internet adorning the gorgeous face of my friend Gretchen.

Even the yawning emptiness of my enormous bed failed to daunt me, knowing as I did with exquisite certainty that I could fill that bed with passion and love any time I wished, and soon forever. My feelings for Ben existed inside me unchanged – want and desire coupled with attachment and safety, devotion and trust – and seemed all the keener for knowing they were returned in full. Somehow that knowledge made me more than I was before, something even greater and more powerful in the universe than just a simple business tycoon.

Daddy's little girl finally came into her own, using the lessons Daddy taught her and bending the universe to her own will, no longer so desperate to please others that she lost every bit of herself in the shuffle.

An unfamiliar feeling spread in my chest, in the same place occupied by my old friend the knot – a warm, glowing tingle that suffused my limbs and lent me a strength and vivacity never before experienced. A feeling I'd never known before, but one I recognized the instant I felt it: *happiness*. For the very first time in my life – *in any* of my lives – I was truly happy.

I released the long plume of smoke into the night air, wondering if anyone in the city could see the flawless model's body on the high balcony, wearing only a skimpy bra and panties. The thought delighted me, thrilled me on a level I didn't expect, rather than coming across as an invasion. A wild, unexpected part of my brain blossomed into a reckless desire to have Ben fuck me out here, in full view, where anyone with a mind to watch could see us. I wanted to buck against him like an animal, grunting and screaming, while unseen eyes took us in. I wondered if this was how Dawn felt, before we became identical. I never knew her wild streak first-hand, but now it seemed to be a part of me every bit as much as the calm, methodical patience to hand-formulate an entire cosmetics line now seemed to be a part of her.

I looked up to the sky, sucking deeply on my cigarette, and sent an urgent thought into the stars.

Daddy, I hope you're proud of me. Maybe I'm not who you wanted me to be. But I think I finally might be who I want me to be. Please, Daddy, let that be enough.

The night gave me no answer. I stubbed out the cigarette in a crystal ashtray and returned to my bed, eager to sleep away the tattered remainder of the night so I could rise early and get to the exciting task of living my newest life.

I AWOKE BEFORE MY ALARM, refreshed and carefree in a way I never before knew, full of boundless optimism and energy. I clicked on the business news as I began my morning workout – a much more strenuous regimen than before, but one my new firmer model's body undertook without any problem at all – and breezed through the rigorous cardio and strength-training regimen with no ache or pain to plague me afterwards. I luxuriated in a quick shower – Dawn's new heat-activated exfoliator and moisturizing body wash left my skin tingling and glowing. I listened to NPR's *Marketplace* on the radio while I expertly applied my morning makeup, doing every bit the same polished, professional job on my face and hair as from my previous 'life' but now in about half or one-third the time, and poured myself an aluminum travel mug of scandalously expensive Kona coffee from my own French press for my trip, eschewing Starbucks altogether.

The car waiting for me in the parking slip of the underground structure, the replacement for my trusty Volkswagen Jetta, gleamed in the sodium lights. I barely restrained myself from clapping delightedly and bouncing in glee at the sight of the electric-blue BMW M4 convertible which awaited me, opening readily at a touch of my key-fob. I piled in happily, bringing the high-performance engine to rich, throaty life, and had to nearly physically restrain myself to keep from driving from my downtown high-rise to the upscale business park near the lake at a hundred and twenty miles per hour, just for the sheer glee of owning such an expensive and powerful automobile.

I found covered parking near the entrance, a personalized parking space reserved for Hope Lowridge, CEO with a little aluminum sign in Kissable Cosmetics' signature pink-and-silver. Scarcely believing my eyes at the tasteful brushed-aluminum lipstick kiss on the low stone sign at the entrance to the building, showing it to be Kissable Worldwide's headquarters, I walked inside briskly – still true to my form of being the first one to arrive in the morning – and took the elevator upstairs to the top floor and my executive office.



The office itself stood larger than my first apartment after college, stacked with the complicated work of running an international company. I began my introduction to this new, unfamiliar life as I had the time before, by turning on my computer and going through my old emails, examining the digital signature of my life in detail. Recent openings of offices in Paris, London and Tokyo dominated the subject lines, as well as a progressive profit-sharing plan and bonus structure for even the lowliest clerical worker in my company, giving all my employees a stake in Kissable's success. A link to a business article about Dawn and myself refusing any executive bonuses, electing instead to divide that money equally between all of our employees showed a refusal to kowtow to the questionable high-level business practices that plagued other American businesses, of golden parachutes and massive gaps between the top one percent and the bottom ninety-nine. A difference that, if the *Wall Street Journal* were to be believed, spelled the difference between our company going multi-national and staying purely domestic. We ran a business that the French, English and Japanese wanted to join. We ran a business where young, energetic people wanted to work. We had something enviable and even managed to

shame some larger companies into following our practices, biting into the market share of giants like L'Oreal and Maybelline because we cared about our employees, our customers and our environment and the big companies did not. Women (and some men) bought our cosmetics not because they preferred our products to the other companies, but because they preferred *us*.

And if the quote from me in an article from last month's *Time* magazine bore out, that was exactly the way that Dawn and I designed our company to run, based on a conversation six years ago at her kitchen table when I mentioned how much I liked the eucalyptus skin cream she made for Mom.

Not that sharing my profits with my employees bit into my bottom line. A quick look through the company's financial reports – so much more easily decipherable now than before, with a Wharton business degree on my wall and, somehow, inside my head – showed Dawn and I both to be worth in the neighborhood of twenty-eight million dollars apiece. It easily explained my huge diamonds and my expensive car, my designer dress and handbag, the enormous downtown high-rise condo and the sumptuous furniture and art on the walls.

I amused myself by checking my bank balance, still at the credit union I used during my days as Richard. My eyes widened slightly when I discovered nearly thirty thousand dollars in my checking account.

A commotion outside my office announced someone's arrival, and I looked away from my research on the computer to see a tall, leggy blonde girl dropping her purse in a drawer of the desk just outside my office, turning on her computer and draping her coat across the back of her chair. She caught sight of me through the vertical blinds and stepped into my office silently, perching a pair of stylish reading glasses on her slender nose as she brought a tablet computer to life in her hands.

“Good morning, Ms. Lowridge,” she told me briskly. “How are you today?”

I tried not to grope around for the woman's name – obviously my personal assistant – as I offered her a bright smile. “Good morning,” I replied. “What's on the schedule today?”

My assistant cleared her throat. “Let's see. You have the morning until nine, when you have a conference call with Gabrielle Montreaux at the Paris office, then lunch with your sister at eleven. Then a meeting with the CFO at one thirty and the call with the Tokyo office at three. Ms. Yamashita seems very interested in pitching you the idea of an office in Shanghai.”

“She has numbers?” I asked.

“Her assistant didn't say,” my assistant – I still struggled to catch sight of some evidence of the woman's name, since she obviously ran my life – replied. “Should I call?”

“Please do,” I said, sipping coffee. “I'd hate for them to catch me unprepared.”

“Your sister reported that the new line of haircolor will probably be ready sooner than expected,” my assistant relayed. “Her trips to India and Greece really paid off. She learned so much about early cosmetics at the museums and universities there.”

I laughed. “Don't believe the hype – she went there to party and work on her tan,” I corrected. “She sent her research assistants to the museums and universities.”

“Of course,” my assistant replied with amusement. “Anything I can do for you, Ms. Lowridge?”

“You can start by calling me Hope,” I told her, for what I suspected was not the first time. “And if it's possible, I'd really like to carve out a little time today to go and visit Daddy's grave.”

My assistant jumped a little. “Did I miss something? Is it an anniversary?”

I shook my head. “No, just a girl really missing her father the last few days. Can you make it work?”

My assistant's piercing blue eyes softened considerably. “Of course, Ms. L-
- *Hope*. Anything you want,” she told me throatily, betraying emotion.

“Want,” I mused softly to myself as my unnamed assistant left the room. “No, sweetheart – I think I'm stocked up on what I *want*, for the first time in my life.”

I left the office shortly before nine o'clock, ducking out onto the little private balcony outside reception for a quick cigarette from my silver case. My assistant – a stolen glance at the nameplate on her desk allowed me to finally know the woman's name was Larissa Hughes – ran the foyer outside my office like a military camp, brutally efficient and managed down to the second. It gratified me greatly to see her duck out onto the little patio with me and light a cigarette of her own.

“Is everything all right, Ms. Low...”

I held up a warning finger mockingly.

She smiled. “*Hope*. Is everything okay? You seem a little off your game this morning.”

I took a long drag from the cigarette between my fingers and released the curling smoke slowly. “I had a rough night, didn't get a lot of sleep,” I told her. “I think part of my brain is still home in bed.”

Larissa laughed, low in her throat. “I've had those mornings. Anything I could get you?”

“No, honey, thanks. I'm fine. Just need to finish waking up,” I told her gently. “Y'know, I've spent the whole morning letting you take care of me, I never even asked – how are things with you?”

She smiled, still seeming to be taken aback by a CEO who did things like ask about her personal life and insist she call her by her first name. She cleared her throat a little self-consciously. “Pretty good,” she said. “I took your advice about Patrick. You were right – if he doesn't want babies and I do, then I needed to take a long look at the future of the relationship. So I did what you suggested, and I think I'm going to break it off with him.”

I put a hand on her forearm, a very feminine but very *natural* feeling of sympathy flooding from me. “Oh, Larissa, I'm so sorry to hear that,” I said softly. “I know how much you cared about him.”

She gave me a small smile with just the barest gleam of being undefeated. “I did,” she said. “But we didn't want the same things. I can't just sit around, like you said, and wait for him to have some miraculous change of heart. There's what I want, and what he wants, and if they're not in sync then the world won't change.”

“Still,” she went on, blowing out a lungful of smoke into the breeze, “it sucks being single again.”

I laughed. “Trust me, you won't stay that way for long,” I told her. “And never rule out the healing power of a disposable boy-toy in the meantime.” The paraphrasing of my mother's quote made Larissa laugh, deep in her chest, and I could sense a loosening of the tension inside the young woman.

She checked her watch and dropped her cigarette into the sand-filled outdoor ashtray with a little jump of shock. “Your conference call is in ten

minutes, Hope. Best get moving,” she announced, all business and efficiency once again. I grinned, finishing my own, longer cigarette a bit hurriedly, thinking fondly that I needed to get this young woman on the executive track with a promotion as soon as I could. Although it would suck to find another assistant, I couldn't just keep a bright young person like her in such a job out of pure selfishness. She had too much to offer. I jotted a quick note to speak to Dawn about it on my smartphone screen as I followed her back inside, to the conference room and a group of waiting executives whose names eluded me.

The utter and complete lack of any background information going into things like conference calls and meetings thankfully posed no impediment to my actual functioning as a Chief Executive Officer of a company – particularly when my *über*-competent personal assistant called everyone in the meeting by name (ostensibly for a recording) before they spoke, filling in the gaps in my memory and letting me lead the meeting with some modicum of personal touch. It encouraged me to see that I filled my top executive posts with highly competent and motivated people who could solve their own problems. They tended to offer me a list of potential solutions for business predicaments and let me choose which one I thought best, instead of dumping problems in my lap and asking me what to do.

By the time we left the room, about thirty-five minutes later, I had plans in place to relocate a couple of *very* willing executives to Paris to oversee the fledgling company there as well as an A-list of very qualified and motivated French executives to supplement them, veterans of fashion houses and giant cosmetics companies who knew intimately the ins and outs of French business. I learned, anecdotally, that the French office would be ground zero for the launch of our new fragrance line, a potential multi-million dollar revenue stream, still dedicated to Dawn's philosophy of all-natural, organically-grown ingredients. We would market fragrances which might possibly require refrigeration or have expiration dates – which my marketing execs insisted could be spun into a selling point instead of a drawback, particularly if we could court the right sort of celebrity to lend her name to the product.

I left that meeting feeling much better about my ability to lead the company, spending a little time in my office returning emails to people I didn't remember in response to concerns I could not recollect. My newfound capacity to sling bullshit in response to business matters astounded me. Larissa fetched me a short time later, giving me my customary time to fix my makeup and hair before heading out to lunch with my sister.

Dawn waited for me in the lobby, handing off a crisply starched white lab coat to her own personal assistant before gathering me up into a boob-

crushing, affectionate hug. Her face didn't seem to have changed much from my memories, just enough to match my own stunning beauty and make looking at my sister like looking in a mirror. She wore her hair a bit longer than my own and carried a touch more weight around her hips, but otherwise we differed not one bit. I noticed some of the surreptitious stares from the men in the lobby. Two svelte, glamorous and *intensely* beautiful identical twins, young and firm and supple – fantasy fodder for just about any red-blooded male on the planet. The thought of some of those men masturbating to fantasies about my sister and I gave me a little shudder of naughty pleasure that I didn't expect.

“How's the new under-eye serum working out, sis?” she asked, threading her arm through mine.

I opened my eyes wide and stared at her. “You tell me,” I said.

She chuckled. “Like you have any fucking wrinkles,” she said, *booping* my nose playfully. “I just want to know how it feels, bitch.”

I shrugged. “It tingles a little going on, but after that you can't feel anything,” I fibbed, hoping that would be enough to forestall her.

“It's testing really well,” she said. “Sarah emailed me the preliminary report this morning.”

“How long before it's ready to go to market?” I asked.

“Six weeks,” she said. “We're still working on a name for the whole anti-aging skincare line. What do you think about *Jeunesse Éternelle*? I think that sounds kinda sexy, don't you?”

“Sounds kind of snooty, but it's cute,” I said. “I know it's a new demographic – selling to fortysomethings instead of twentysomethings – but I don't want to lose our playful, girly vibe. I mean, we're called Kissable Cosmetics. I'd like to hear something a little more young, more flirty.”

“I can see what you mean,” Dawn said. “But hey – enough about business. How are you holding up with Ben in Hong Kong?”

I tried not to double-take – I had no idea he traveled out of the country. Honestly, the shock of adjusting to the new circumstances of my life drove him completely from my mind. I hadn't spared Ben a second thought since I woke up that morning.

“I miss him,” I said simply, hoping that would be enough.

She hugged me fondly as we walked. “Well, no shit. He slips that giant rock on your finger and then leaves for East Asia the next morning,” she commented, digging in her purse for a cigarette once we stepped out the front door into the stiff breeze outside. “Talk about *coitus interruptus*. You two should be shacked up in a motel room someplace with your phones turned off for at least a week.”

I blushed a little. “There will be time for that later, sweetie,” I said. “Have you talked to Mom?”

“Yeah, I swung by the house yesterday,” Dawn said, drawing deep as she lit her cigarette with a match. “She's doing well. Wants us all to come over Sunday for dinner.”

“That sounds like fun,” I told my twin. “You in?”

“Sure, if you're going,” she said. “We can take my car. Where d'you wanna go eat?”

I thought for a second. “I'm in the mood for sushi, actually,” I told her.

“Oh, *yeah*,” Dawn said. “Perfect. Let's do Uzaki. See if that yummy little waiter still works there.”

I shoved her shoulder playfully. “You are *awful*.”

“You still love me,” she teased.

I looked into her eyes deeply. “More than you can possibly know,” I said seriously, an island of stillness and depth amidst our teasing sisterly banter.

She searched my face. “What brought that on?” she asked, face softening with emotion.

“It just hits me, sometimes, y'know?” I said, opting for levity in the lack of words to express my feelings. “I really, really love you. So much it amazes me. I'm so fucking *glad* you're my sister.”

“Okay, you're gonna make me cry,” Dawn said, hugging me tight. “I love you too, you silly bitch.”

I left the office shortly after the conference call with Tokyo – my representatives there moved quickly, already ramped up to start a new Japanese campaign with Gwen Stefani as spokesperson in a few short

months. Their access to manufacturing facilities and the huge greenhouses and hydroponic gardens they offered increased our worldwide output by nearly half, making the expansion into East Asia far and away our most lucrative move. The previous meeting with Linda Wright, our Chief Financial Officer, involved numbers that nearly staggered me. I had some idea of the success of my and Dawn's company, but no idea of the *wealth*. Even the expensive jewelry, clothing and furniture adorning the condo in which I awoke this morning gave me little in the way of true understanding. I awoke this morning a very powerful woman, and crawled out of my luxurious bed as a multi-millionaire.

I took a few moments to run home and change into something a bit more appropriate for a cemetery than my white-on-white Chanel suit, a simple black dress and heels and a wide-brimmed hat with black silk roses around the brim. Larissa, ever thoughtful, provided me with a lovely little bouquet of long-stemmed red roses from our production greenhouse, bred for the sweetest smell and richest color, and I couldn't help but detour into the *deeply* girly and applied a thick coat of matte lipstick – Kissable, of course – which matched the shade of the flowers exactly.

No matter how much my life changed around me, the location of Daddy's grave stayed the same – a simple little plot overlooking a copse of spruce trees where birds sang.

I set a brisk pace between the headstones, my stiletto heels sinking into the moist grass as I walked, and picked my way past memorials for many lost fathers on my way to the simple polished granite marker. I remembered selecting that marker, when I was still Richard Lowridge's *son* and not his daughter, together with my sister and my mother, tearfully remembering the unshakeably simple tastes of the world-renowned philosopher and finding wistful smiles among our pain.

The simple slab of granite loomed up at me from the lush green grass, marking the final rest of my father – the man whose desperate *want* for a son, matched with my pathological desire to please him, even as an infant – changed my entire form from infant girl to infant boy and altered the entire course of my life. It took resuming my female life – even altering it with my sister's desires and even Ben's secret wants – to realize how *miserable* I had been as a male. To say that my life improved after resuming my femininity had nothing to do with the money, or the clothes, or the glamor or beauty or youth. It belonged to the soulful joy at being *adaughter*.
A sister. A girlfriend and a fiancée. A woman.

I lowered my head, clutching the roses against my midsection, and stepped close to Daddy's grave, sniffing a little at the renewed pain of loss, the

wishing that Daddy could see his little girl, to *know* how happy I felt now that I inhabited my *real* life and lived my *real* dreams.



“Can you see me, Daddy?” I whispered softly. “Wherever you are, can you see me?”

The silent granite gave no answer.

“I know you can,” I said through happy tears. “I know you can see me, because I *want* you to.”

I lost track of how long I stood in the grass, just soaking in the memories and presence of my departed father. Somewhere in that poignant solitude, I realized I forgave him for ripping me out of the life I *should* have lived and thrusting me into some pale imitation. He wanted a son so he could share his wisdom and perception with someone the way his father did for him. I regretted that Daddy couldn't see that accomplishment transcended gender,

and the *woman* standing before his headstone did receive that wisdom and perception. He did what he set out to do, and I proved beyond doubt that a girl could learn such lessons every bit as well as a boy. Better, even. Richard Lowridge, Jr. had been a sad, miserable man stuck in a dead-end job, loveless and ungrounded. But Hope Lowridge – successful, beautiful, in love and happy – she led an enviable life.

I walked back to my car slowly, listening to the birds singing and feeling the warm sunshine on my shoulders, as I pulled a cigarette from my silver case and lit it. I started the car and pulled away, tires crunching loudly on the gravel in the parking area, making for the freeway and my condo, hopefully a little solitude and quiet to recover from the tumult of emotions I just endured. My phone – left in the car to keep my visit with Daddy from being interrupted – blinked with text messages and emails received in my absence. A message from Dawn topped my message list – **need u at the office asap** – and I sighed heavily, torn from my plans for the rest of the day by the insistent demands of my company. Still, I couldn't complain too loudly. I had several million dollars of personal worth and ran a successful up-and-coming cosmetics company. It said “CEO” on my door. If the company needed my attention, then I owed it to provide. I passed the on-ramp which led to my home and slid into the u-turn lane which would point me the other direction, gunning the powerful engine onto the freeway towards the office.

I touched up my hair for a moment in the vanity mirror behind the visor, refreshed my lipstick and hustled inside, still in my funereal clothes but *sans* hat, and stopped by lobby reception and the gawky, skinny young man with the headset who ran the front desk.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Lowridge,” he said as I approached. “Need something?”

“I got a text from my sister, saying she needed me back here right away,” I said. “Did she leave word where she is?”

“Yes, ma'am,” he said. “She asked me to send you along to the herb garden.”

I thanked him perfunctorily and dashed for a waiting elevator, just barely stopping the closing doors with an outstretched arm and headed to the basement and the elaborate growing areas occupying the lower floors of the office building. I pushed past the hydroponics areas, even the newly okay-ed marijuana growing room, since Dawn advanced some very interesting ideas about cannabis oil and its uses in cosmetics; past the enormous apiary and its titanic beehives and into the glass-topped

warehouse which extended far behind the business offices, nearly four acres of greenhouse space which formed the core of our manufacturing division. The 'herb garden,' a thousand square feet of fragrant herbs used in most of our products, remained Dawn's pride and joy, loved by my sister almost as a personal backyard garden. She spent time down there every day, wandering the neat rows of mint and thyme and species I barely recognized.

I swiped my key-card and went through the hermetically-sealed door – Dawn maintained draconian precautions against any kind of cross-pollination – into the fragrant interior.

“Dawnnie?” I called. “I got your text, baby, what's the matter?”

My heart skipped a beat as Ben stepped around the thick foliage of a cinnamon tree, smiling widely at my shock. “Hi, there,” he said, opening his arms wide to me. I didn't even remember starting to move, just seeming to awaken in the strong fortress of his arms, my cheek pressed against his firm chest and the dull, rhythmic thud of his heartbeat in my ears. His height, his mass, the sheer physical size of him conspired to make me feel small, fragile and helpless in a way that I knew should have alarmed me but instead only filled me with a warm, tingling thrill.

“I thought you weren't supposed to get home until Saturday,” I breathed, dizzying myself inhaling the clean, masculine scent of him. A scent I could clearly remember once bringing repulsion – a *stink*, I believed it to be – and feelings of threat and competition, but now one that seemed to make me float, weightless and giddy.

“I wasn't,” he said, smoothing my hair. “Dawn called me and convinced me to take an earlier flight.”

“I missed you so much,” I said, leaning up – craning my neck to an almost painful angle – and gazing into the fathomless hazel eyes which looked at me – *finally* – with pure tenderness and love.

“I missed you, too, Hope,” he said, leaning close and brushing his lips against my own. I melted into him, unsure where he stopped and I began, and threaded my slender fingers into his soft hair, loving the rough scratch of his beard stubble against my palms. I leaned into the kiss, pulling him into me bodily and hungrily, my first true flood of feminine desire driving me in a way that male desire never did.

I sagged against his chest, giggling breathlessly.

“What's so funny?” he asked.

“I am just so fucking in love with you,” I told him, the first time I ever got to say it out loud to him, the emotion leaving me in a rush. “So completely, utterly, *hopelessly* in love.”

“Why are you dressed all in black?” he asked, taking his first real look at me.

“I went to see Daddy,” I told him. “What, you don't like the dress?”

“No, I love it,” Ben said. “It looks great. Now take it off. I want you. Right here.”



I slipped out of my dress dutifully, the way *my husband* demanded, and stood before him naked and trembling with desire, the powerful musk of my arousal mingling and competing with the fragrances of cinnamon and mint in the cloying air of the greenhouse. He pulled me close, kissing me hungrily as I tore the expensive suit from his lean, muscled body, then

wrapped my legs around his waist as he lifted me up effortlessly, his powerful muscles flexing beneath my fingers, and guided him to the aching wet void between my legs to slide down onto him, feeling the sensation of someone else *inside* my body for the very first time. No longer alone inside my own skin.

My pent-up desire and longing for the man who thrust himself gently into me exploded in my chest, making me pant and moan throatily. I began to bounce up and down on him, slowly at first, then with increasing rhythm, and only a few moments of blissful, overpowering sensation – a pleasure unlike any I ever knew, and for the first time nothing external to my body but *all* inside me – rocked my fevered brain before I clenched around him. A shrill scream that I realized came from my throat echoed inside the greenhouse as I climaxed for the first time as a girl.

Cumming as a male took the form of a distillation – the deletion of every single sensation from the male mind except the pleasure emanating from the testicles, a shrinking and narrowing of the world leaving no room for outside stimulation. But cumming as a female was an expansion – a distinct, tingling sensation of every cell in my body, all pulsing in ecstasy at the same time, scouring my mind clear of everything but pleasure.

Only a few seconds after I came – never once feeling the hypersensitivity I expected after orgasm that accompanied male climax – Ben began to thrust into me more rapidly, with the barest edge of savagery, his grunts rising in an arpeggio as he neared the pinnacle of his own pleasure. I bucked against him, using my body to urge him forward even as I felt the surprising potential of a second orgasm on the heels of my first. Ben locked his hands around my waist, trying to slow the rhythm with ragged breaths.

“We can't, baby,” he panted. “I forgot a condom.”

I kissed him as deeply as I could, pushing against his restraining hands to reset the frenetic pace. The last vestiges of male sensibility left me and I found myself pure woman for the first time since my transformation. I stared deeply into his eyes. “I don't care,” I breathed, kissing him. “I don't want you to stop, Ben. Not ever. *I want* it. I *want* your cum inside me. I'm gonna be your *wife*, and I want to have your babies. You hear me? I *want* your babies. Give it to me. Don't be scared. Don't worry. We're done with not trying to get your girlfriend pregnant. Cum inside your fiancée. Cum inside your *wife*, baby. Do it.”

His handsome face, glistening with sexual sweat, blanked with surprise, both at my reaction and his own, since his pace and depth quickened and

deepened with every word out of my mouth. By the time I said “do it,” he hammered himself into me, our thighs slapping together noisily as I came once more, wrapping him tightly with my body. His fingers dug almost painfully into my buttocks as he rammed himself upwards into my soft body, all pretense at tenderness or technique forgotten. My heavy 'done' breasts bounced painfully in time with his penetration, making me yelp and squeal.

“Keep talking,” he grunted.

“Knock me the fuck up,” I moaned breathlessly into his ear. “Shoot your beautiful baby up into my belly. Give me that baby. It's time. I want it. Do what a husband is supposed to do, baby – get your wife pregnant. Please, baby. Get me pregnant. Knock me up.”

His fingers dug into my soft thighs to the point of pain and he thrust himself into me as deep as he could, groaning in a mixture of pain and pleasure, eyes screwed shut and every vein on his neck standing out in stark relief. I felt the hot splash of him deep inside my body, forging a connection more profound than ever experienced, jet after jet of his release bathing my velvet interior.

His power and urgency faded beneath me, sagging physically. I unwrapped my legs from around him and set my feet back down on the floor, following him slowly down to the tile floor to wrap myself around him in the nest of our discarded clothes, feeling his cum drip from me to cool against my inner thigh – far and away the most feminine sensation I ever felt – and I floated down across his naked, sweaty chest, awash in pure emotion.

“I love you so much,” he moaned, kissing my hair.

Dawn's eyes widened in shock, about an hour later, in the relative privacy of my office. “Oh my God,” she breathed, stunned. “You actually *said* all that?”

I blushed scarlet. “More than just said it, Dawn,” I confessed softly. “God help me, I *meant* it.”

I could not recollect anything more *natural* and *effortless* in my life as sharing every intimate detail of my latest sexual encounter – technically, the loss of my virginity, at least to my mind – with my identical twin. In fact, the thought of Dawn *not* knowing every tiny detail and nuance bothered me

deeply. As though if I didn't share everything with my sister, it didn't really happen.

"You're so organized," she said, sitting back. "I guess I just expected something like babies to be something you had all planned out."

"I couldn't keep it inside," I told her. "I was so in love, Dawn. I got this flash in my head – this image. Two beautiful twin girls, just like us. Red hair and Ben's hazel eyes. They were in my arms. And I dunno – it just came out of me. Once it started, I couldn't imagine stopping."

"I guess it makes sense, on a certain level," my twin said. "I mean, look at us. We built an empire. Babies – it's just the next logical step. It would mess up that ridiculous body of yours, though, and we'd all have to go through your bitch phase while you stopped smoking."

I laughed. "It surprised me how bad I wanted it. And feeling him cum inside me like that..."

Dawn sighed. "I wish I loved somebody that much," she said. "I wanna feel that."

"You will, baby, I know you will," I said. "Could you imagine? Both of us, *mothers?*"

"Actually, I can," Dawn said. "I've been thinking about it a lot lately. Particularly with you and Ben being engaged. About how tired I'm getting of my same old boyfriend-of-the-week schtick. Having something permanent – something baby-worthy – sounds really, really good to me right now."

She shook her head a little, shaking away the intense emotions and hiding back behind levity. "So, do you actually think it worked?" she asked. "You think you might be pregnant?"

"Don't know," I said. "I have no idea what *pregnant* even feels like. But if I am – Dawn, I'm actually *not scared*. I think... I think I actually *want* to be."

Dawn searched my face, unable to keep her refuge behind her characteristic lightheartedness in light of my quiet intensity. "I think you'll be an amazing mom," she said.

"And so will you," I said. "Just as soon as you settle down a little and pick a guy."

“Yeah, maybe,” she said. “The guy I've been seeing, from the Organic Grower's Association – you remember Brian? – I think there might be something there. I like him a lot, Hope. Enough to where it kinda scares me a little.”

“That's good,” I said. “If you give it a minute, Dawn, just be a little patient, you'll realize – that's not fear you're feeling. It's something way better. You just have to let it mature a little bit.”

“How did you get so wise?” Dawn asked, her eyes sparkling a little with moisture.

“I'm Daddy's daughter,” I explained simply.

A soft knock on the door interrupted our moment. I sat up straight, motioning to Larissa through the glass door to come in. She bustled into the office, her brisk demeanor suffusing the formerly quiet office with motion, light and energy. She stood me up, brushing a few stray seeds and husks clinging to my dress and picking one or two from my hair, asking no questions.

“I have your charcoal Prada blazer outside, just back from the cleaners,” she said. “You're very late, Hope. The fundraiser for the Lowridge Scholarship starts in fifteen minutes. I have a hot latte waiting for you outside. The Tokyo office just sent the numbers for the greenhouse expansions in Kenya and India, and a new proposal for Shanghai. I can go over them with you on the way to the car.”



She hustled me out the door, buttoning me into my designer blazer and handing me purse and coffee while I returned a few phone calls. In the lobby I noticed her light a cigarette behind a planter and slide it in between my fingertips as I walked, anticipating my every need while she conducted business on the move, bringing me expertly and concisely up-to-date with the happenings of my far-flung company, elapsed in the blissful hours spent in Ben's arms and in quiet reflection with my sister.

I fell into the brisk demeanor of Hope Lowridge, CEO like slipping my feet into my favorite fuzzy pink socks, but the clammy touches of my panties against my thighs reminded me that my fiancé's sperm still dripped from inside me, knowing that Hope Lowridge, *wife* and Hope Lowridge, *possible mother* lurked just beneath the tailored suit.

“What is this, Dawn?” I asked, trying to get my bearings the next morning as unfamiliar areas of the city's upscale downtown passed outside the windows of her overpowered, sexy little Mercedes roadster.

“It's a surprise, I told you already,” she said. “And you know I can't keep secrets, especially from you, so I have to spring in on you. So shut up, okay? Just enjoy the ride.”

I tried to forestall my rising curiosity, thinking instead of my first meeting with the wedding planner, a hyper-organized young friend of Gretchen's who bloomed into fluttering life at the words “money is no object.” In no time at all, it seemed, I had meetings with caterers, florists, bakeries and travel agents for the June date. No good talking about it with Dawn, though – any discussion of my upcoming wedding with her usually devolved into her gushing about Brian, the eco-lawyer who ran the Organic Grower's Association that worked hand-in-hand with Kissable Cosmetics, and their date to the wedding and the serious feelings growing between them.

I burped softly, smiling inwardly at the acrid aftertaste, and Dawn flashed me a knowing smile. A lovely, naughty obsession with Ben's cum now dominated my off hours, and a near-pathological desire to have it inside me led me to feats of femininity I never imagined for myself, including a developing taste for it upon my tongue, sliding down my throat to warm my belly, the way it did now. Dawn picked me up mere minutes after swallowing a huge load of my fiancé's hot cum as he stepped out of the shower. My journey into sexual womanhood seemed complete, now that I found myself a very spirited, enthusiastic and – dare I say it – *talented* cocksucker. No longer the pejorative term it had been from my male days, I now considered myself a *cocksucker* with no small amount of pride.

Dawn pulled into a small, fenced parking lot between two downtown buildings and shut off the engine. She paced for a moment beside the car, finishing a cigarette. I watched her with a small amount of envy – I missed smoking, but ever since my period didn't arrive on schedule three days ago I made a concerted effort to quit, for the sake of the baby which may or may not be growing inside my belly.

We walked arm-in-arm around the corner and I stopped dead in my tracks in front of the exclusive boutique Dawn led me towards. “Dawn, you're *kidding!*” I exclaimed, bouncing up and down a little. We stood in front of *Nuptuale*, the most exclusive and sought-after bridal gowns in the state, designed by a young woman named Ginger Palumbo. Her wait-list numbered close to a thousand, A-list from top to bottom.

“Turns out she *really* likes Kissable cosmetics,” Dawn said with a happy giggle. “And now, she never has to pay for them again. Now, get your sweet little ass in there. We gotta get you fitted. You're gonna look like a princess on your big day. I want Ben's heart to stop.”

I fairly glowed at the use of the term *princess* as I let my sister lead me inside. A very stylish and pretty assistant offered us both wine. Dawn took a glass and raised an eyebrow when I declined politely.

“Are you?” she asked softly.

“Maybe,” I replied in a whisper. “Don't know yet.”

Dawn hugged me tight and took a seat near the wall while an army of seamstresses took measurements and helped me divest myself of clothing while being led back into a changing room. After a breathless, hectic interval of being tucked and prodded and wrapped and pinned, the designer herself came in to make final adjustments and bring me back out into the showroom, making minute tugs and adjustments to the floor-length white gown with every step.



I didn't need my sister to say a word – she *knew*. And her ear-to-ear smile spoke more to me than her voice ever could. Fat tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, turning her smile to a trembling affair.

“You're so beautiful, Hope,” she whispered.

“I feel beautiful,” I said honestly. “Like the most beautiful girl in the world, actually.”

Dawn wiped her eyes carefully, as not to smudge her carefully-applied makeup, and blew me a heartfelt kiss. “Daddy would be so proud,” she said. “I wish he was here to see it.”

“He is,” I said, my own tearful smile matching her own. “I know he is.”