

# Daeva: Corporate Culture

TG Stories

Story by The Professor Illustrated by  
The Might Fenek



Book One of Three

10 ILLUSTRATIONS



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Written by The Professor

Illustrated by The Might Fenek



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# BOOK ONE

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I disliked Mike Garret the moment I met him.

I know, that seems unfair. There was nothing onerous about the man. In fact, just the opposite. He was about as perfect as a man can be, with his very dark, wavy hair trimmed just right, his sparkling blue eyes surrounded by a handsome face, perfectly tanned, his Playgirl centerfold body draped in the tasteful gray suit, which was accented by his sincere red tie on a crisp white shirt...

And when I shook his hand, it was warm and the grip firm, which would have made most men trust him implicitly.

“Danny, meet Mike Garret,” Jack Winslow, my boss and president of Winslow and Kane introduced us. “Mike, this is Danny Wheeler. He heads up our top-notch consulting team.”

“A pleasure,” Mike’s voice rumbled with masculine perfection.

“Mike will be heading up sales for the Midwest area,” Jack explained to me.

Okay, I thought to myself. Mike would certainly be an asset in selling our consulting services. He’d be officing with us here in Chicago. He was confident, presentable, presumably articulate, and from his neat appearance, I suspected a well-organized demeanor.



*"Mike will be heading up sales for the Midwest area," Jack explained to me.*

So why didn't I like him?

There wasn't time to determine that, for as quickly as Jack had brought Mike into my office, he turned and ushered him back out, presumably to meet with other members of the staff who were in that morning.

Through my open door, I could see a couple of the secretaries eying Mike as he was escorted around the office, and a little inkling of what I disliked about him became suddenly apparent. The look on the secretaries' faces told me that either of them would have gladly made love to Mike right there on their desks if he would only ask. So there it was. I don't think any man truly likes the "perfect" male. Such men engender feelings of envy and inadequacy that no man likes to see in himself.

Well, not that it mattered, I told myself. I had a girlfriend, and she had never set foot in our offices. Odds are good Cindy would never meet Mike Garret, and I'd never have to compete with him for her interest. As for the secretaries, let them dream. Odds were also good that Mike Garret had his sights set higher than on the mere secretaries who slaved away to support the sales and consulting pros at Winslow and Kane.

Besides, Cindy Moorhead was too sophisticated to fall for a man like Mike Garret. A daughter of old Chicago money – her family's commodity trading company, P. M. Moorhead dated back to

the nineteenth century rise of the city – she had the education (Vassar, with honors), the intelligence (a successful commodities broker in her father’s firm), and the beauty (blonde, blue eyes and a perfect body) that could see right through a man like Mike Garret.

Cindy and I had met when she, her father and her younger brother, Bobby, had visited the firm. Jack and I had made the presentation, and we had entered into a consulting contract with their company. It wasn’t a large one, but the Moorhead family had been impressed with what we did for them. And since I handled the consult personally, I got to know the family pretty well. Especially Cindy.

I started to get back to my final review of the Brookdale Specialties consult when Pat Anderson slipped into my office. Pat was my number one guy on the team as well as being a good friend. Pat plopped down in a chair, pushing his dull brown hair back and exposing his thinning temples. “Danny, have you met Mr. Adonis yet?”

There was no doubt about who he meant. “Yeah. I’ve met him,” I replied as casually as I could. I tried not to let the rancor carry over to my voice

“He’s got every girl in the office about to wet their panties,” Pat went on.

I frowned at Pat. He had a tendency to get just a little crass sometimes. In today’s business climate, he was bound to eventually say something that would get him slapped with a sexual harassment suit. It wasn’t that he was the stereotypical office wolf – he was properly respectful to all the women in the office. It was just that when he didn’t think any women were around, he could say the wrong things.

He saw the frown on my face. “Sorry,” he muttered. “But you know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I know what you mean.”

Pat looked at me quizzically. “I wonder where Jack found him?”

I shrugged. I had been wondering that myself. Usually, when Jack hired a new salesman, he’d run the candidates past me. After all, I’d be working closely with Garret. His sales would become my consulting assignments. I liked to think Jack and I had a better relationship than that. I had known Jack was going to hire someone to replace our last Midwest rep, but to my knowledge, he hadn’t interviewed anyone. I hadn’t even known he had interviewed Garret.

I was starting to get angry, and I couldn’t even explain to myself why. “Anything else Pat?”

Pat stood up. We had worked with me long enough to know when he was getting the dust-off. “Not really.” He shook his head at me before leaving. “I don’t think he’ll last long though.”

I shrugged again. I wasn’t going to let Pat know what I thought. In fact, though, I hoped he was right.



*“So what’s bugging you?”*

That night, as Cindy and I caught a casual drink, my girlfriend looked at me oddly over her Martini. “So what’s bugging you?”

“Huh?” Nothing’s bugging me,” I lied.

“Try again, big boy,” she grinned. “You’ve been grumpy all evening.”

Had I? Maybe I had, I admitted to myself. And when I thought about it, I knew the reason: Mike Garret. It was a stupid reason, wasn’t it?

“Well, there’s this new guy at the office...” I began sheepishly, looking down at my stir fry to avoid looking Cindy in the eye.

“A new guy in the office?” she repeated. There was a little mockery in her voice. “So what is he – your new boss?”

“Of course not,” I replied, a little nettled. “You know I report straight to Jack Winslow.”

Not only did I report to the president of the company, but to most of our staff’s thinking, I really

ran the show rather than Jack. After all, I had been there since Jack and his partner, Art Kane, had started the firm eight years ago. I had been a brash young MBA fresh out of Wharton then – just twenty-three. Through hard work and a keen sense of what our clients needed, I had worked my way up to Art’s right-hand man. When Art had sold out to Jack two years ago due to failing health, I took over his responsibilities, including running the consulting department. Jack contented himself with sales and public relations, leaving the rest of the operation in my hands. That had worked out well, for in those two years, the firm had grown forty percent in sales and a whopping sixty-five percent in profits.

“So what does this new guy do?” Cindy pressed.

“He’s a salesman,” I muttered. Of course, we called guys like him account executives, but a rose by any other name...

Cindy shrugged, taking another sip of her ginger ale. “So what’s the big deal?”

Good question. What was the big deal? Salesmen came and went, and they spent most of their time out of the office. Sure, I had to interface with them when we were setting up a new consult, but usually, Pat, or someone else on my staff, did most of the grunt work with them. I would, of course, review all the contracts and supervise the actual consults, but by the time the consult started, the salesmen were usually on to new clients.

Then Cindy surprised me – she smiled. “I think I know what’s wrong.”

Really? I didn’t. I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why I disliked Mike.

“He’s an alpha, isn’t he?” she went on.

“Huh? An alpha?”

“An alpha male,” she clarified. “You know – like with wolves. The alpha male leads the pack. That’s you.”

“So I lead the pack?” I asked, curious. Strangely enough, although I wasn’t ready to admit it to her just yet, I realized she might have something here.

She nodded. “Sure you do. Look at you. You’re only thirty-one and yet you are the top dog in the office.” Then she grinned. “And I’ll bet you’re the best looking, too.”

At the risk of being egotistical, I admitted to myself that she was right. I was physically in great shape, having played lacrosse at Rutgers in my undergrad days, and still ran at least three miles a day. And I was aware that more than a few girls watched me surreptitiously from the corners of their eyes. At six two, I was probably an inch or two taller than Garret, and with my stylishly trimmed brown hair and brown eyes, I had hear people refer to me as “ruggedly handsome.”

On the professional side, Jack had hinted more than once that he might be willing to let me buy into the business – even helping with the financing. After all, he was sixty and had a wife who

wanted him to work less and travel more. I was the obvious person to take the reins.

Cindy frowned, misinterpreting my quiet musing. “You don’t think this new guy is some sort of a threat to you, do you?”

“Of course not!” I scoffed.

But was I right? I couldn’t be sure, I realized. After all, Garret would report directly to Jack. Maybe he would catch Jack’s attention the way I had caught Art’s attention eight years ago. Sure, Jack appreciated everything I had done for the company, especially in the last two years since Art had sold out. But Jack was, in his heart, a salesman, and if Garret was as good at selling as he was impressing the secretaries in the office, who was to say where that might lead him career-wise?

I was still mulling that thought over the next day, but it wasn’t quite as pressing on my mind. There was nothing like a night of unbridled sex at Cindy’s apartment to restore my self-confidence. By the time I had headed home, I had practically forgotten all about Mike Garret.

Besides, I had other things on my mind that morning. I had a staff meeting where Pat and my other staff members updated me on our current engagements.

Pat himself handled two of our largest clients, and I was pleased to know that both were going well, with the Monocraft Enterprises account ready to pop for another year of consulting services. Pat wasn’t much when it came to management, but his consulting skills were outstanding.

Steve Bowman had equally good news. Steve was African-American, and one of his clients, Illinois Premium Properties, was one of the largest African-American owned companies in the Midwest, based only a few blocks away from our own Chicago offices. He had just met with them for breakfast and increased the scope of our engagement there by fifty percent.

Take that, Mike Garret, I thought with a smile, pleased that our department had just shown that we could sell new services, too.

That just left Tony Romano and Andrea Nelson, our two newest team members. While they had the largest numbers of clients, most of their book was smaller firms with quicker turnarounds. Both were doing well. Tony, with his Mediterranean good looks bonded well with the women financial officers who worked for many of the smaller firms. Tony had come over to us from another firm. They hadn’t been willing to move him up fast enough. He liked the pace of our organization, and the way we were moving forward, I had my eye on him to take some of Pat’s duties if Pat continued to be ineffective at management tasks.

Andrea, with her professional good looks, mid-length honey blonde hair, and outstanding client skills, was really coming along, too. As the first woman consultant hired by the firm (let’s face it: both Winslow and Kane had been pretty sexist in their hiring), I suspected she too would rise quickly in the company – especially once Jack retired. She certainly would if I had anything to

say about it.

Pat came to my office after the meeting and updated me on a couple of items that weren't for general distribution around the office. Since he was my second in command, we usually planned to spend about half an hour after the staff meeting each week. Fortunately, it was a shorter than usual meeting as everything was running smoothly. I was looking forward to a no-pressure week as Pat left my office.

But as they say, man plans and the gods laugh. Right after the meeting with Pat broke up, Andrea asked for a little time in my office. Her cube was right next to Pat's. so she wasted no time catching me before I got busy with something else. Once we were both seated, Andrea sighed nervously, then told me the bad news.

"I'm quitting," she blurted out, eyes downcast and obviously near tears.

I frowned. "Quitting? Why?"

She relaxed a little. I suppose for her, the worst was over. She had given me the bad news. "I... I have another offer - in Denver."

My mind was churning, trying to figure out what questions to ask that might allow me to say or do the right things which might make her stay with the company. I had hired Andrea straight out of Northwestern. She had been my first new hire, and the first time I had been able to have the independence to seriously consider a female candidate. She had been by far the most impressive person for the job, and in spite of Jack Winslow's muttering, I had hired her. I had never regretted it. In fact, I had planned to groom her for my job eventually, when I took over the firm.

"Why Denver?"

"My... my boyfriend is moving out there," she told me.

I knew she had a boyfriend - some guy she met a few months ago - but I had no idea it was this serious, or that he had moved to Denver. I told her as much.

"Well, yeah," she said, averting my eyes and wringing her hands. "Yeah, it could get serious."

"It sounds as if the boyfriend isn't the only issue," I ventured.

After a few moments, she told me the truth. "I'm sorry, Danny, but it's Jack."

"Jack? Our Jack?"

Now that she had alluded to the real reason, she continued, "Yeah, our Jack. He's so... so..."

"Sexist?" I prompted, almost biting my tongue afterwards. I might have just led her into a sexual harassment mess. She and I had had conversations about Jack before, but I had always been able to get Andrea to look at the long term. Jack would be gone and I would be in charge eventually.

She nodded. Though. “He just acts as if I’m one of the secretaries. Most of the other guys are okay – except maybe Pat. He can be a little... crass.”

I just nodded. No sense in denying that.

“I guess it’s just the corporate culture,” she went on. “I feel as if as a woman, there’s not going to be any future for me here.”

I leaned forward. “Andrea, you’re very well thought of around here. I think very highly of you. I want to assure you, if I have anything to say about it, your future will be very bright around here.”

“Thanks, Danny,” she sighed. “That means a lot to me. But I don’t think it’s enough to keep me here. I know the rumors are that you’ll be buying into the company, but as long as Jack is here, I don’t think I have much chance of advancement, even with your support.”

We talked for a while longer, but I could finally see that her mind was made up. Unfortunately, she was probably right, I realized at the end. Sure, I might buy in, but Jack would be the senior partner, and as long as he was around, most of our important hires and promotions would be guys like me – masculine, athletic, and Jack’s kind of people.

As was normal company policy, I approved Andrea’s two-week notice, but although she’d be paid for the time, she had to leave immediately. I took upon myself the sad duty of watching her pack up her stuff and leave Winslow and Kane forever.

Even as I watched her go, I couldn’t help but think there was something Andrea wasn’t telling me. Since when had her relationship with her boyfriend gotten so serious? Around the office, she had always indicated that he was just the boyfriend of the month. She had just started dating him a few weeks earlier. I had always suspected Andrea had a rather high libido, and she swapped boyfriends like some people I knew swapped cars – namely, to get the latest and greatest features.

I wondered for a moment if Mike Garret’s hiring had anything to do with it. Andrea had made no secret of the fact that she wanted to get into sales. Yet she hadn’t even applied for the position Mike got. She had told me she knew she’d never get the opportunity as long as Jack was doing the hiring.

She had shocked me with her resignation, and now that she was gone, I had several questions I wanted to ask her. I made a mental note to give her a call later.

I had to work late that night. Andrea was gone, and that still meant I had to shift all of her accounts to other team members. I had expected to spend the evening alone, but to my surprise, two other employees were working late as well.

One of the two was understandable when I thought about it. Tony and Andrea were friends,

probably because they were the newest members of the team, so I supposed Andrea had given Tony a heads up about her resignation. I suspect Tony was sticking around for two reasons: to impress me with his work ethic, and in the hopes that I would dole out a few of Andrea's choicer accounts to him while he was there. He probably hadn't seen it yet, but I had already e-mailed him giving him two of Andrea's most promising accounts.

The other was really a surprise, though. Mike Garret was staying late as well, something the salesmen seldom did. Oh sure, salespeople worked hard, too, but if they had anything to do after working hours, they usually took their work home with them since most of their prospect information was on their laptops. Maybe I had judged him a little harshly, I thought to myself. Apparently, he wasn't afraid to work long hours.

I called Cindy and arranged to meet her for a late dinner at Rosebud. After my day, a plate of tortellini and a glass of pinot grigio seemed like a suitable reward – especially if it was shared with Cindy.

“Want to go get a beer?”

I nearly jumped. I had been so engrossed in one of the client files that I hadn't heard Mike step into my office. I looked up at his confident, smiling face, thinking that if I had been a girl, his sincere, friendly question would probably have elicited an immediate “yes.”

“Thanks, Mike,” I said politely, fighting back my unexplained dislike for the man. “I'm meeting someone for dinner.”

Mike grinned. “I assume she's prettier than me?”

“I'd say so.”

He shrugged. “Okay. Another time. I'll see if Tony wants to go.”

“Good idea,” I agreed. Tony was single, and liked to party. Besides, maybe Tony would learn more about Mike over a few drinks. I could grill Tony later – the joys of office politics.

“See you tomorrow,” he said.

About twenty minutes later, I saw Mike and Tony leave together.

Despite my irrational dislike of Mike, I probably should have gone with him for a beer or two. Rather than having to grill Tony, I could have gleaned information myself. But there was no way I was going to miss dinner with Cindy. We were starting to get very serious about each other, and I didn't want to do anything to damage that.

Getting up the next morning was painful. One glass of wine had led to two, and then three. Cindy had kept up with me, and after dinner, we ended up back in bed at her place again. She offered to let me stay over, but I declined, pleading that I had to get in early the next day. With Andrea's

resignation, I had a lot to do.

In the shower, I thought of how I'd probably be well advised to try to replace Andrea with another woman. With more and more women rising to higher positions in some of our client companies, retaining a woman on the team seemed like a good idea. That thought was still bouncing around my head when I got into the office.

"Headhunters are already calling," Pat told me while I drew a cup of coffee. "I guess the word's already out on the street that you're hiring."

"Yeah," I growled. "And I'll bet the first headhunter call we got was from the guy who got Andrea her new job."

"Probably," Pat agreed.

I decided to make a call to that headhunter my first priority, though.

I didn't get a chance to call as quickly as I wanted. As I was just about ready to call, a sweet woman's voice called from the doorway, "Hey Danny, I just checked my e-mail. I wanted to thank you for the new accounts."



*I looked up to see an attractive young woman, dark hair and Mediterranean features*

I looked up to see an attractive young woman, dark hair and Mediterranean features, dressed in a white shell and short but professional gray skirt, standing on one black pump with her other foot raised slightly in girlish fashion.

I felt funny for a minute, as if the world had just turned upside down. It was as if I had never seen this woman before in my life... But that was foolish, wasn't it? After all, I had hired her. I recovered quickly. "You earned them, Toni," I replied to Toni Romano.

Let's see, I thought to myself, with Toni on the team, I didn't have to limit myself to hiring another woman to replace Andrea. I could concentrate on hiring the best possible candidate – male or female. Why hadn't I thought of that before?

Toni smiled, a little ill at ease. "Well, thanks anyway. I won't let you down."

“I know you won’t, Toni.”

I smiled to myself as she turned and left. Toni had looked not only uncomfortable, but almost embarrassed. I wondered why. She was usually so self-confident. That was one of the reasons I had hired her. Here I had given her two of Andrea’s best accounts, and yet she was at my door the next morning, looking as if she expected me to be upset with her. It must be my imagination, I thought.

Pat stepped into my office next, but his head was turned to follow Toni’s feminine wiggle through the office.

“Don’t stare,” I admonished him. “That’ll get you in trouble.”

Pat shook his head. “No,” he drawled. “It’s not that... I mean, well, yeah, Toni’s cute and all, but something’s bugging her this morning.”

So it hadn’t been my imagination. But what could be bothering her? I had just given her enough good new accounts to ensure that she made her bonus for the quarter.

“Maybe it’s a boyfriend problem,” I ventured.

“That could be,” Pat replied, dropping a completed review in my in-basket. “And I think I know who.” He motioned with his head toward the hallway where all the sales offices were located.

I frowned. “You don’t mean...?”

Pat nodded. “Yeah, our new Adonis. Toni’s been looking at him funny every time she sees him this morning. I don’t know, Danny. I may look, but I don’t touch. Fishing off the company pier can get a little complicated.”

“I’m with you,” I replied. “Hey, do me a favor, Pat. Keep an eye on Toni today will you?”

Pat wiggled his eyebrows. “My pleasure.”

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I pretty much forgot about the incident after that. After all, I had a lot more important things on my plate. I had two client meetings of my own that day, and between preparing for them, I had to fight a couple of fires in Andrea’s patch and still contact a couple of headhunters to find someone to take her place.

Besides, the problem pretty much took care of itself. As the week went on, Toni seemed more her usual self. Pat told me that if there was anything between her and Garret, it must have been a passing thing, for by the next day, she was avoiding Mike at every opportunity. That was fine with me. I hated office romances.

By the following week, things were getting back to normal. Cindy and I had spent the weekend in her parents' cabin up in Wisconsin. It had been pretty chilly, so we spent a lot of the weekend alone together with a fire going in the bedroom. There was nothing like good sex to get me in the mood for the following week.

The headhunters I contacted were already e-mailing me resumes, and a couple of them looked particularly promising. I could take my time, though, because the rest of the team really stepped up to the challenge, and even without Andrea, we seemed to be doing fine.

Only one thing was bothering me, though. I had noticed Mike and Steve had started getting a little chummy, and both seemed to leave early when there was a home Cubs stand. Steve was quite a baseball fan, having even played a couple of years in the minors before his arm got hurt. Given Mike's impressive physique, I wouldn't have been at all surprised to find out he was something of an athlete as well.

It was early in the baseball season, and playing hooky to see a couple of early games wasn't that uncommon, but if it continued, I'd have to say something to Steve. Salesmen's time was their own, but I expected billable hours from Steve.

I was a little surprised that Mike seemed to prefer Steve's company to that of one of our secretaries. Jack Winslow had a habit of picking real "men's men" for the sales force – the sort who liked nothing better than to bed every attractive secretary on the staff. All of the single women in the office, and a couple of the married ones, daily threw themselves in front of Mike, hoping he'd ask them out.

The only exception was Toni. Pat suspected Mike had taken her out, but Toni seemed almost frightened of Mike. If they had gone out, things probably hadn't gone well. I wanted to ask Toni about her aversion to Mike, but no manager in his right mind will purposefully set off a potential sexual harassment suit, and asking Toni about why she seemed to loathe Mike might do just that.

"Still bothered about this Mike guy?" Cindy asked me at dinner that night. We had opted for sushi that evening – just a few pieces and a decent amount of sake. I had been brooding over my ebi and Cindy had noticed.

"I guess so," I admitted. I had already told her about Mike and Steve's apparent baseball-fueled excursions. "With Andrea gone, there's too much work to do for Steve to be slacking off like this."

"I thought Tony had picked up a lot of the slack," she pointed out. "Didn't you say he got some of Andrea's best accounts?"

"You mean she," I corrected.

Cindy looked funny for a minute, then agreed, "Yeah, she."

Cindy could be forgiven. She didn't personally know any members of my team. I didn't socialize

much with the office staff; I preferred the company of beautiful women, like Cindy, and I preferred that company to be just the two of us. It was a natural mistake for her to say “he” instead of “she.”

Or so it seemed at the time.

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The next day was Friday, and I spent a good deal of it with a round of interviews for Andrea’s replacement. I sent the two best ones in to talk to Jack. He liked both men, and I was confident by the end of the day I’d have a replacement on my team and be able to get him started within a week.

That allowed Cindy and I to enjoy the weekend a little more. We went sailing on Lake Michigan Saturday with Cindy’s parents and her brother Bobby. Under the tutelage of Cindy’s father, I was getting to be a competent sailor. I had to admit, I enjoyed the experience, too. My job had left me too deskbound, and even the chilly winds of a sunny spring day on the lake couldn’t dampen my enthusiasm for what was becoming one of my favorite activities.

Bobby taught me a lot, too. He worked with Cindy and their father, and he had been sailing since he was in grade school. I liked Bobby. He was only a couple of years out of college, but had already taken to the family business. Cindy had no real desire to take over for her father, so Bobby was being groomed for the job.

So when are you and my sister getting married?” Bobby asked with a grin while we were away from the others.

I shrugged, taking a swig of my beer. Even in the chilly lake air, it went down smooth. “Not sure.”

“Don’t wait too long,” he advised, the grin still in place.

I grinned back. I was pretty sure he was right. “What about you? Any lucky girl on the horizon?”

Bobby shrugged. “I’m not an old guy like you; I’m not ready to settle down just yet.”

And why should he? I thought. I hadn’t been in any hurry either when I was his age. Besides, he was still a newly-minted product of the Harvard Business School with a healthy trust fund from his grandfather. To date, his tastes ran to receptionists with small minds and large breasts – lots of sex and not much conversation. He was probably a long ways from finding a serious girl to settle down with.

On Sunday, Cindy and I slept in at my place, leisurely alternating between reading the Sunday Trib and hopping back into bed together. Cindy was as enthusiastic a sex partner as I had ever had. I was seriously thinking about asking her to marry me, as her brother had advised.

So on Monday, I was well-rested and raring to go. Even so, Pat had beat me into the office – a

rare occurrence.

“Why so early, Pat?” I greeted him.

Pat gave me a funny look. “I’m here early every morning,” he informed me, and I suddenly realized he was right.

Pat hadn’t always been an early bird, but since Andrea left, right after... after... Oh, yeah, right after our other team member (why couldn’t I remember his name?), two vacancies in the department meant we had all been working longer hours to keep up. Sure, Jack had sent Stephanie over from Sales to help with the workload, but Stephanie was just a secretary. I had thought at first about moving her up to consulting, but she didn’t really have the background for it. Besides, Jack was such a chauvinist that it had been all I could do to get him to let me hire Toni while Andrea was on board. Two women as consultants in the department again and Jack would be too hard to live with – again.

Speaking of Stephanie, she was waiting nervously for me in my office. I hoped that didn’t mean trouble. Normally she was a trooper. African-American and absolutely beautiful in an athletic sort of way, Stephanie was efficient and reliable.

“Something wrong, Steph?” I asked her as I took off my suit coat.

“Uh, no, Danny,” she replied shyly. Maybe not, but I couldn’t get over the fact that she had a deer-in-the-headlights look.

“I still have those two interviews set up this morning?” I probed. With two openings in the department, the last thing I needed was a cancellation. Both were good candidates, and I wanted to be able to offer them jobs before the week was out. If I didn’t find replacements for Andrea and what’s-his-name, Pat, Toni and I would be working long hours for the foreseeable future.

“Uh, yes,” she confirmed in that sexy, throaty voice of hers. The girl could have made a fortune on one of those sex phone services just by saying hello.

“Great,” I said, nodding. “Was there something else?”

By now, I was sitting at my desk, and Stephanie was just standing there, looking incredibly cute in her short, yellow dress that contrasted so nicely against her dark skin. She obviously wanted to tell me something – her lips were moving, but nothing was coming out. Was she nervous about working for me? Maybe. I knew Jack gave her a rough time. I think the only reason he hired her was that she was the only African American in the company, and Jack was afraid of a discrimination suit.

Again, I thought about asking her to transfer, but as disturbed and nervous as she looked that morning, I was afraid she wouldn’t be able to handle the job on a full time basis. Besides, as I recalled, she didn’t have a degree, and that was a must in my department. I’d only be able to use her to do the more mundane chores that plagued our department. Well, at least that would be some help.

“Uh...no,” she said after a pause. “I guess not.” She turned and walked back to her desk, her sexy walk distracting me for a few moments from the pile in my in-box.

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What the hell was going on? Toni had been acting funny last week, and now Stephanie was taking a walk on the weird side. Maybe it was that damned Mike Garret. I knew he and Stephanie had been seeing each other. Both were big Cubs fans, and Stephanie had even asked for a couple of afternoons off to join Mike at Wrigley. Maybe he had dumped her. That would explain her odd manner this morning.

So there it was: another reason to dislike Mike Garret.

I did manage to get somebody hired by the middle of the week – just one person, though. I hoped to have the other opening filled by the end of the week. In any case, I was starting to feel a lot better about our department. The new guy, Jason Meadows, was going to start right away. He'd make the rounds of the various departments, sitting in with Admin for a day, and then a day in the field with one of the salesmen.

One down, one to go, I thought.

I was feeling pretty good when I got to work the next day – at least until Pat ducked in right after I had drawn my first cup of coffee. “Got a minute?” he asked.

“Sure,” I smiled. Even though I had gotten behind in my work the last few days, given the openings in my department, at least things seemed to be looking up. I had one new head count and planned to make another offer by the end of the week. “What’s on your mind?”

Pat sat across from my desk. “How did you talk Winslow into letting you hire another woman?”

Another woman? What was he talking about...?

Oh, yeah.

“You mean Jane – Jane Meadows,” I finally said, Let’s see... wasn’t Jane Meadows an old actress... married to Steve Allen? I wondered why I hadn’t thought of that until now. Or maybe I had.

“Who else would I be talking about?” Pat returned. “The sales force is starting to wonder if you’re trying to start a harem.”

“Very funny,” I mumbled. “It just so happens that he-” Now what made me say that? “I mean, she – was the best candidate.”

“Maybe so,” Pat allowed, “but she’s acting a little odd this morning.”

“Odd how?”

Pat shrugged. “I don’t know – just odd, like she’s out of it. If Winslow sees her, he’s gonna start talking about her being a ditz blonde.”

“She was out with Prince Charming on sales calls yesterday,” I reminded him. “Garret seems to have that kind of effect on girls.”

“Yeah,” Pat agreed. “First Toni, then Stephanie, and now Jane. What’s he got that we haven’t got?”

“Speak for yourself.”

Pat chuckled and left, but I wasn’t chuckling. Something was wrong, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Something was completely out of kilter, but I couldn’t say exactly what it was.

Whatever it was, it had something to do with Mike Garret. Now, I wasn’t exactly a prude. I had nothing against employees dating each other, but I had been around long enough that I knew it was usually a mistake. Feelings got hurt and egos got trampled – especially when the guy involved was as good-looking as Mike Garret. If I had to guess at what was going on, I would suspect that Mike was playing Toni and Stephanie, and they were both desperately competing for Mike’s attention.

I know; they had both been acting funny around Mike – almost as if they wanted nothing to do with him – but that could just be an act, to try to get him interested by making him think they weren’t interested. Who could understand women? My dad hadn’t understood my mom when they were living, and I couldn’t understand Cindy sometimes.

Anyhow, add to that our new girl, Jane, who probably had a crush on Mike after being with him all day, and there was a major problem with the staff.

There was only one thing to do and I needed to do it fast. I needed to have a session with Mike, and tell him to quit fishing off the company pier.

It turned out that would have to wait, though. Jack was in my office suddenly with a guy in tow. He was about twenty-five, with short blond hair and piercing blue eyes. He was well-dressed, in a suit that made him look very professional. He had a portfolio with him that he shifted to his left hand, ready to shake mine once the introductions were made.

Danny, meet Brad Winslow – my nephew.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention as I rose to shake Brad’s hand. He had a firm, confident handshake – too confident. I could tell what was coming. When you work for a small firm, the boss’s relatives were always a threat. Sometimes, there was an interfering spouse. Other times, there was an incompetent brother-in-law. And then there was the interloping nephew. That was what Brad was.

“I thought Brad would be perfect for the consulting position you have,” Jack pressed, stating the obvious.

Brad smiled. It wasn't exactly a pleasant smile.

Think fast, Danny. I only had two obvious choices, and neither would be good. Either I could fight Jack and refuse to hire his nephew, or I could give in and hire the little bastard. Either way, I was screwed in the long run. If I fought Jack, I'd probably lose the battle eventually. Either Jack would force him down my throat, or fire me and hire the kid anyway. I might be far more valuable to the company than Brad Winslow, but whoever first said blood was thicker than water knew what he was talking about.

The other choice was just as bad. If I hired him and he turned out to be incompetent – a safe assumption if ever I saw one – I'd take the blame and be fired.

But I didn't get to be Director of Consulting by making Hobson's choices. I shook Brad's hand and gave him a feral grin. “Well, Brad, why don't you and I talk?” Before Jack could say or do anything, I ushered his nephew into my office, shutting the door behind me. Before I made any rash moves, I wanted to see what Jack was up to. First, he'd hired Mike Garret without consulting me and now, he was mucking about in my department. Something was going on and I wanted to know what it was before making any decision I might regret later.

I'll give Brad Winslow one thing: he was a confident son of a bitch. He plopped down in a guest chair like he was the one who owned the place instead of his uncle. I calmly sat down at my desk across from him, leaning back and matching his casual manner.

“So Brad, you're interested in the consulting job?”

“Yeah,” Brad replied, offering nothing further.

“Did you bring a resume?” I asked, holding out my hand.

The kid looked a little offended that I would ask, but he recovered quickly, pulling a sheet of paper out of his portfolio and handing it to me. “Here you go.”

I just nodded. If he hadn't been Jack's nephew, I would have had Stephanie usher him out of the office as quickly as possible. He was nothing but a pampered little rich kid. Our clients would chew him up and spit him out in a heartbeat, and I'd spend untold hours cleaning up his messes.

The resume was about what I expected. When I hired someone, I expected to see a graduate of a top business school – something that impressed our clients. Instead, Brad was a graduate of one of those little liberal arts schools that took rich kids with no talent and gave them a degree after soaking their parents for tuition even higher than the prestigious schools. On top of that, he had no work history, in spite of the fact that he had graduated nearly two years before. Jack must have owed the little snot's mom and dad big money to be complicit in foisting this moron off on me.

“Do you know what we do here, Brad?”

He shifted uncomfortably. He hadn’t expected any questions. “Yeah... you guys consult.”

Jesus.

Okay. It was time to make my move. This was going to be easier than I thought. I sighed dramatically. “Brad, I don’t know why a sharp guy like you would want to get stuck in this end of the business.”

Brad looked confused. “But my uncle thought - ”

“Oh sure,” I broke in. “Consulting’s a good starting point, but that’s not where the action is.”

“It isn’t?”

This kid was making it too easy. I leaned back, shaking my head. “Sales is where it’s at, Brad.”

“But Uncle Jack thinks the firm needs more male consultants,” Brad protested.

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So that was it. Before Andrea left, I had two female consultants – and just Pat and I on the male side now that S... Now that my other male rep had left. Strangely, I had realized that Jack wasn’t crazy about bringing on women in consulting positions. Andrea had been the first woman I had brought on board, and Jack hadn’t been pleased. Then, when I brought Toni on...

Wait a minute. Two women in the department? Yeah. But somehow, that didn’t seem right. And now, I had brought on Jane. What was I thinking? It was almost as if I was trying to piss Jack off. Was that why he’d brought in this dunce of a nephew? And why did I have another opening anyway? Wasn’t there another consultant on my staff? An African-American guy, wasn’t it...?

“Are you okay?”

Brad’s question brought me back into the moment. “Oh!” I exclaimed, embarrassed. “Yeah. I was just thinking about something. Where were we?”

Brad replied, “You were talking about sales.”

“I was, wasn’t I?” I was rattled and I knew it. Something was wrong. “Uh... let me think about this, Brad. In the mean time, talk to your Uncle Jack about sales.”

“I’ll do that,” Brad quickly agreed, rising from his chair and hurrying out of my office. He seemed relieved to be leaving. I couldn’t blame him. He probably thought I was a little crazy. I was starting to wonder about that myself.

Pat was in my office as soon as Brad left, not even giving me time to compose myself. He frowned when he saw me. “You okay, Danny?”

“Yeah, sure,” I lied. “Sit down. What do you need?”

“Well,” Pat began, “I just got a call from our contact over at IPP. They want to know why Steve isn’t returning their messages.”

“Steve? Who the fuck is Steve?”

“That’s what I wondered,” Pat said. Then, seeing my expression, he held up his hands. “Don’t panic. I got them calmed down. I told them ‘Steve’ was out on the West Coast for a few days and I’d be handling the details. That got them calmed down.”

“Yeah, good,” I commended him. “Who’s IPP assigned to?”

“You, I guess,” Pat suggested. “Unless you hired a Steve without my knowing it.”

“Let me work on it, Pat,” I said, dismissing him. Like Brad, Pat couldn’t wait to get out of my office.

I was going to be very busy sorting everything out, I realized. I’d have to dump some of the minor stuff on Stephanie. I called her in at once.



*"Ye...yes sir?" Stephanie asked shyly.*

“Ye...yes sir?” Stephanie asked shyly. She wouldn’t even look me in the eye. And the way she stood there – her pastel yellow dress hugging her curvaceous body snugly – you would have imagined she thought herself naked.

I hadn’t really known Stephanie very well. She, of course, was just a secretary reporting to Jack. But I had known her well enough to realize something was wrong. She seemed very embarrassed, her skin not so dark that I couldn’t see her cheeks flush. For a moment, I mentally set aside the assignments I had been about to give her, determined to get to the bottom of whatever it was that was bothering her.

“Steph, please sit down,” I urged her, my voice as sympathetic as I could manage.

Reluctantly, she did so, almost forgetting to smooth her skirt properly, so I was treated to a momentary glance of spectacular thigh.

I leaned forward. “Steph, I can tell something is bothering you. It’s been bothering you all day. I know you’re just on loan to my department, but I want you to know that whatever it is, I’d like to help.”

Eyes downcast, tears forming in them, she replied, “There’s nothing you can do. It... it’s personal.”

Then I remembered: she and Mike Garret had been seeing each other. Memories flowed into my mind as I remembered how I had disapproved of him dating one of the sales secretaries. It was bad enough when he’d been seeing Toni, but at least she was in an equivalent position in another department. Stephanie had to work for the sales force. Had Mike put her in a compromising position? It would be just like him to do so, in my opinion.

“Is it Mike Garret?” I asked bluntly.

She nearly jumped out of her chair, her head bobbing up. If she hadn’t had it tied in a tight bun, her long, black hair would have exploded about her face. “What makes you say that? I mean, n...no. Nothing is wrong with Mike.”

I didn’t believe her for an instant. Besides, I hadn’t asked her if there was anything wrong with Mike – or at least not in so many words.

“Stephanie,” I began, “I know it’s been hard on you, having to work for two departments like this. But if anyone is causing problems for you – including me – I want you to tell me.”

She shook her head emphatically. “No, no, it’s not like that. Please, Mr. Wheeler, I can’t say anything more.”

Can’t or won’t, I thought, but I didn’t say that to her.

“Is there anything else, Mr. Wheeler?”

Yes, there was. I had intended to offload some minor projects on her, but I changed my mind. She

was a basket case, and assigning her extra projects might send her over the edge. “No, that will be all Stephanie.”

I called Cindy to tell her I wouldn't be able to take her out for dinner that evening. There was way too much work to do and I would have to do it. She seemed disappointed but not surprised. Then I called Pat in to tell him the bad news. We'd be working together all weekend. He took it fairly well.

“I can see if Toni can help out, too,” he volunteered.

Stephanie wasn't the only one acting strangely. Toni had been unusually agitated as well. Maybe it was the extra work I had already heaped on her. I shook my head. “I don't think she can handle any more than she already has on her plate.”

“Well, Jane is out,” Pat informed me. “She's too new.”

I nodded in agreement.

“How about asking for some help from the sales department?” Pat suggested.

“You mean Mike Garret,” I said. The other two sales guys were usually on the road – one in the Northeast and the other down South.

Pat shrugged. “Garret's better than nothing.”

He had a point. “Okay, I'll clear it with Jack.”

Jack wasn't happy about it. It was obvious he expected me to handle our consulting problems without borrowing his sales force. But he reluctantly gave in, and as the office began to clear out, Mike Garret was sitting in front of my desk.

Mike smiled at me, and for some reason, his smile made me uncomfortable. “Jack said you could use a hand,” he said smoothly.

I leaned back in my chair. “Damned straight.” I pointed at a stack of papers strewn about my desk. “With all the turnover, nobody's in the field.”

“But you've still got your contract people,” he pointed out.

I nodded. We used contract consultants in the Northeast and South districts – those areas were still developing and didn't required full-time consultants yet. “I'm just talking about your district, Mike. I haven't had a chance to train Jane yet and Toni's still getting up to speed on Andrea's accounts. Right now, Pat and I are covering everything from Indianapolis to Milwaukee.”

“How can I help?”

I was a little surprised at how sincere he sounded. He had to know I didn't like him, but there he was, offering to bail me out. A little twinge in the back of my mind thought that maybe – just maybe – I'd misjudged him. Jack thought highly of him, and word around the office was that he was making headway on bringing in new business. Still, what did he know about consulting? I had to find out.

I pushed a sheaf of papers at him. "What do you think about this?"

It was a preliminary write up for Chicago Timber and Oil, a medium-sized client that Steve was working on... Wait, who was Steve? Pat had mentioned a Steve earlier. We didn't have a Steve. Then who had been working on that account? My head was spinning.

"Labor issues in their timber division" Mike commented, perusing the write up quicker than I would have imagined possible. "I'll give them a call in the morning. I have a couple of ideas."

"Good." I should have said, "What ideas?", but I was just happy to have one more assignment off my desk.

"Anything else?"

By the time he left my office, I had turned three more assignments over to Mike. He took the extra work in stride. What remained on my desk was manageable, if I spent the weekend working on it. Cindy wouldn't be happy, but I had no choice.

The odd thing was that two of the accounts I gave Mike didn't seem to belong to anyone. I didn't remember assigning them to any of my people. The name Steve kept cropping up in my mind, but there wasn't any Steve. But Pat had said something about a Steve – somebody at IPP had asked for him. I resolved to call our contact at IPP in the morning to resolve the issue.

"So Mike's turning out okay, huh?" Cindy asked over a late night dinner at her place.

"I suppose," I allowed, taking a sip of white wine. I normally didn't care much for whites, but it seemed to go well with the omelet and salad Cindy had whipped up.

"So what's bothering you?"

"I guess I'm just tired," I told her. I couldn't very well tell her the truth – that the mysterious and nonexistent "Steve" was plaguing my thoughts. And I didn't want to worry her with all the office politics.

"Too tired for me?" she asked coyly.

"Not that tired," I assured her.

And I wasn't. The sex that night was fantastic.

I felt great the next day. I had stayed over at Cindy's, and we'd managed to go another round before going off to our respective jobs. In fact, I felt better than I had since before Andrea had resigned. When I got to the office, I learned there were no fires to put out. Pat and Toni seemed to have things under control, Stephanie seemed busy with none of her previous angst, and I could hear Mike on the phone smoothly handling one of the clients I had given him. A quick check of my messages showed no problems with my own accounts, so today I was going to devote to training Jane.

With all the turmoil, I had left Jane in a holding pattern, having her learn as much as she could from the staff. Now, though, it was time to get her productive. We met in my office right after I had handled a couple of minor calls.

I had hired Jane fresh out of Ohio State. I had been very impressed with her resume, especially after learning she had attended on an athletic scholarship, playing...

What the hell had she played? In my mind, I had almost thought "second base", but where had that come from? Obviously, she hadn't played baseball. I knew for a fact Ohio State didn't have a women's baseball team. Softball? Maybe. She wasn't tall enough for basketball or volleyball. I'd have to look at her resume again.

Actually, I was having second thoughts about her. In the interviews, she had seemed confident and in charge, but what I saw before me was a small, attractive girl with honey blonde hair and a very self-conscious manner – hardly the dynamo I remembered interviewing. What had I been thinking? But I had to give her a chance. She deserved that from me.

"Feel ready to visit a client?" I asked her.

"I... yeah, sure." She wasn't off to a good start. "I mean, I didn't know we would be seeing a client today. Do I look all right?"

She looked fine. In my few years in business, I had seen many styles among businesswomen. At one extreme were the ones that tried to look like men – pantsuits, hair in a tight bun, almost nonexistent makeup and no jewelry to speak of. At the other extreme were the women who went for the slutty look – makeup a little heavy, skirts way too short and blouses way too tight and revealing, and enough tinkling jewelry to sound like a Tibetan monastery. They looked more like receptionists than professionals. But somewhere in between, I occasionally saw the most incredible businesswomen of all –stunning creatures who dressed a little too sexy but managed to carry it off. They managed to look powerful, yet feminine, and extremely sexy without looking like they were on the make. That described Jane.

Yes, her skirt was too short – accentuated by the fact that she was trying subtly to push it a little bit further down where perfect knees were clinched together, and her blouse too tight, causing her to slump slightly to lessen the display of her absolutely perfect breasts. And yes, her makeup might look right for the boardroom, but my male imagination could see it at place in the bedroom as well. Yet somehow, she looked sexy, fragile, feminine and businesslike all at the same time.



*Yes, her skirt was too short...*

The only problem was that she look somehow embarrassed to be seen in such a way. Damn it,

why had she dressed like that if she was uncomfortable?

“You look just great,” I assured her.

She blushed.

We cabbied it to Far Horizons Biotech, a small firm and a stable client I personally handled over a year before when another person had been our primary contact. The firm was located in a refurbished warehouse a few blocks west of the Loop. Our new contact there was a woman – which I thought might make Jane feel a little more comfortable – and our project there had been to help them form alliances with a couple of similar firms that offered complimentary but non-competing products.

We were seated in the board room awaiting our client, and I immediately assumed a role of professional calmness while Jane shifted uncomfortably, aware that her long, slim legs showed provocatively through the glass tabletop.

“You’ll do fine, Jane,” I encouraged her softly. “All the hard work has been done – we’ve already set up good relationships with the partnering firms, and Dr. Glazer will just be reporting to us today with any hitches in what’s already been accomplished. She’s the new president of the company. Your job will be to note any problems and run your potential solutions by me. This account’s easy.”

She nodded nervously, and I was pretty sure she didn’t really believe me. I only hoped she’d settle down quickly or I’d have to write her off as a failure.

I had met Dr Glazer once before, but she hadn’t been one of my personal clients. Yet I was surprised when she walked into the room. I hadn’t remembered her as being so sexy. Come to think of it, I hadn’t really remembered what she looked like until she walked into the room. I was surprised I hadn’t remembered the tall, slim blonde. Even with her hair in a tight bun and her rather mundane gray suit, she exuded sex when she moved. She looked at me with her pale blue eyes, it was as if she were a predator. She looked as if she was putting on the moves for me, in spite of her wedding ring. Just flirting, I told myself.

And then she stopped.

Suddenly, her eyes were on Jane, her expression changing into shock and sadness. I was the forgotten person in the room as Jane looked back at her with the same expression. Then, as quickly as it had left, her composure returned. “Hello, I’m Becky Glazer,” she introduced herself, holding out her hand to Jane. As they shook hands, they seemed to form an instantaneous bond. Then, remembering I was there, she briefly shook my hand. “Danny Wheeler, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I replied, rising and taking her hand.

“I understood we’d be getting a new advisor,” she said, sitting opposite Jane and me.

“That’s right,” I agreed, motioning to Jane. “This is Jane Meadows. She’ll be your new consultant. I’ve already briefed her on your account.”

She smiled a little sadly at Jane. “I’m sure we’ll get along fine,” she assured me.

Jane smiled in kind. I almost felt as if a message was being transmitted – a message I couldn’t hope to understand. “I’m sure we will,” she replied.

I was pleasantly surprised at how quickly Jane grasped the needs of the client. I sat back in relief as the two of them casually discussed our project and developed an action plan for the next meeting. I had expected things to go slower – more roughly – but the two women behaved almost as if they were long lost friends. There was little for me to do.

We finished earlier than I had expected; then as we all rose to adjourn, Dr. Glazer asked, “Mr. Wheeler, do you mind waiting outside? I’d like to talk to Jane in private for a moment.”

It seemed an unusual request, but I nodded and stepped out of the room. Their conversation was out of earshot, but I could see the two women engaged in a serious and animated conversation. Although they were far away, Dr. Glazer appeared to be counseling Jane, for Jane kept nodding her head, as if our client was telling Jane something very important.

I waited until we were back into the cab to say anything of consequence to Jane. “Was everything all right in there?” I asked her.

She had an oddly contented look on her face, and she had tuned me out. So I asked her again, this time a little more forcefully.

“What?” she asked, as if coming out of a trance. “Oh...yes. Everything’s going to be fine. Becky- I mean, Dr. Glazer is going to... going to be a good client.”

I relaxed a little. “Well, you two certainly looked like you were getting along okay.”

Jane just nodded. It was odd, but at least I had one less client to worry about.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rest of the week went fine, and began to actually think everything was going to work out. Jack was a little pissed that his nephew had begun to badger him for a sales job. Through the company grapevine, I learned that he had pleaded with his uncle to move him to the West Coast to start a sales division there. We had no presence in the west, so he would be on his own to work as much (or more likely, as little) as he wanted to. He had informed his uncle that consulting was “too boring.” It remained to be seen how Jack was going to handle things, but at least he was no longer my problem.

Pat, Toni and I had worked the entire weekend, so everything was caught up. On Monday, I had assigned several small accounts to Jane and some others to Toni. Pat and I split a few larger ones, and we were set. I had one more new hire to take care of and we’d be back to full strength.

Mike Garret had pitched in, too, and we actually developed a decent working relationship. He even did some of the simpler consulting assignments and seemed particularly effective when he had to work with women clients. It figured.

Mike turned out to be a private guy – I never learned anything about his past – but I found myself starting to appreciate the guy in spite of myself. I still couldn't say I liked him, though. There was just something about him that bothered me. Cindy had been pleased to hear Mike and I were getting along better. She said I was more relaxed and a better lover. Who was I to argue?

I did have to give up my Friday night with Cindy; I had too much work to do, even though Mike had agreed to stick around Friday evening to help out. Cindy and I agreed to meet Saturday at noon at a new restaurant on Michigan Avenue she had wanted to try. Then she was going to drag me out on a shopping trip. I couldn't wait... right.

Mike and I finished up about nine that evening. He came into my office and dropped the last client review file on my desk.

"Is that everything?" I asked, rubbing my eyes. I had strained them too much reading several files of my own.

Mike nodded. "That's it. Let's go grab something to eat."

Always before, I had begged off on Mike's offer to have a beer or dinner. I still didn't particularly like him, but I had to admit he had been there when I needed him. Even Toni and Pat had ditched out on me. Pat was divorced but practically living with a woman he was anxious to get home to, and Toni had a boyfriend. At least that was the rumor around the office. Toni neither confirmed or denied it, and no one had met him.

So getting back to Mike, I figured, why not? I needed to eat something. Lunch had been half a sandwich at my desk, and I could use a beer or two to help me sleep. Cindy had a full afternoon and evening planned for us on Saturday.

I looked at my watch. "Okay, but let's make it quick. I've got a busy weekend planned."

Mike grinned knowingly. "Don't worry. I'll get you home early. I know a place not far from here that does great burgers and the service is quick. Sound good?"

It sounded great.

Maybe I was just tired, or maybe it was something else, but as we walked a few blocks in the cool spring air to Mike's suggested restaurant, I found myself lost in a city I knew like the back of my hand. I know the neighborhood was rundown – dark and with little traffic. I remembered only an oasis of neon advertising several popular beers and dim lights inside. At least the place was warm, I thought as we entered. The cool air had turned to downright chilly, and my suit coat wasn't heavy enough to ward off the cold.

Although dimly lit, the restaurant was inviting, with old, well-maintained wooden booths, a long, nearly deserted bar, and a delightful aroma wafting from the kitchen – the aroma of meat and spices.

I know it doesn't look like much," Mike commented, as if reading my thoughts, "but wait until you've tried their burgers."

He guided me to a booth near the rear of the restaurant, and as we were barely seated, an attractive young blonde in a denim miniskirt and t-shirt stretched over ample breasts was waiting to start our service.

"Danny, this is Chelsea," Mike introduced me.

"Hi, Chelsea," I responded. The girl nodded and gave me a forced smile as she placed menus and glasses of water in front of us. She looked uncomfortable, and in spite of Mike's casual manner, I saw she was having a difficult time relaxing in his presence. My defenses regarding Mike rose a notch.

"I got Chelsea her job here," Mike went on, choosing not to notice her discomfiture. "When was that?"

Chelsea didn't look up. "A year ago," she managed softly.

"Right," Mike agreed. "Are you still seeing that boy... Roger, wasn't it."

She nodded, and changing the subject asked, "Anything to drink besides water?"

"A Goose," Mike replied.

"Make it two," I added.

When she was gone, I asked, "One of your old girl friends?"

Mike smiled, looking me in the eye. "What makes you say that?"

"She seemed to know you," I pointed out, not adding out loud, but she doesn't seem to like you.

"I'm in here a lot," he explained with a shrug.

We ordered a couple of burgers and split an order of onion rings. The conversation was mundane: Where are you from? Where did you go to school? Any family? The usual trivial conversation. To be honest, Mike's answers didn't even register with me. It was as if whatever he said didn't even flow into my brain/ Funny, too, because these were the usual male bonding questions. And for some reason, I was doing anything but bonding with him.

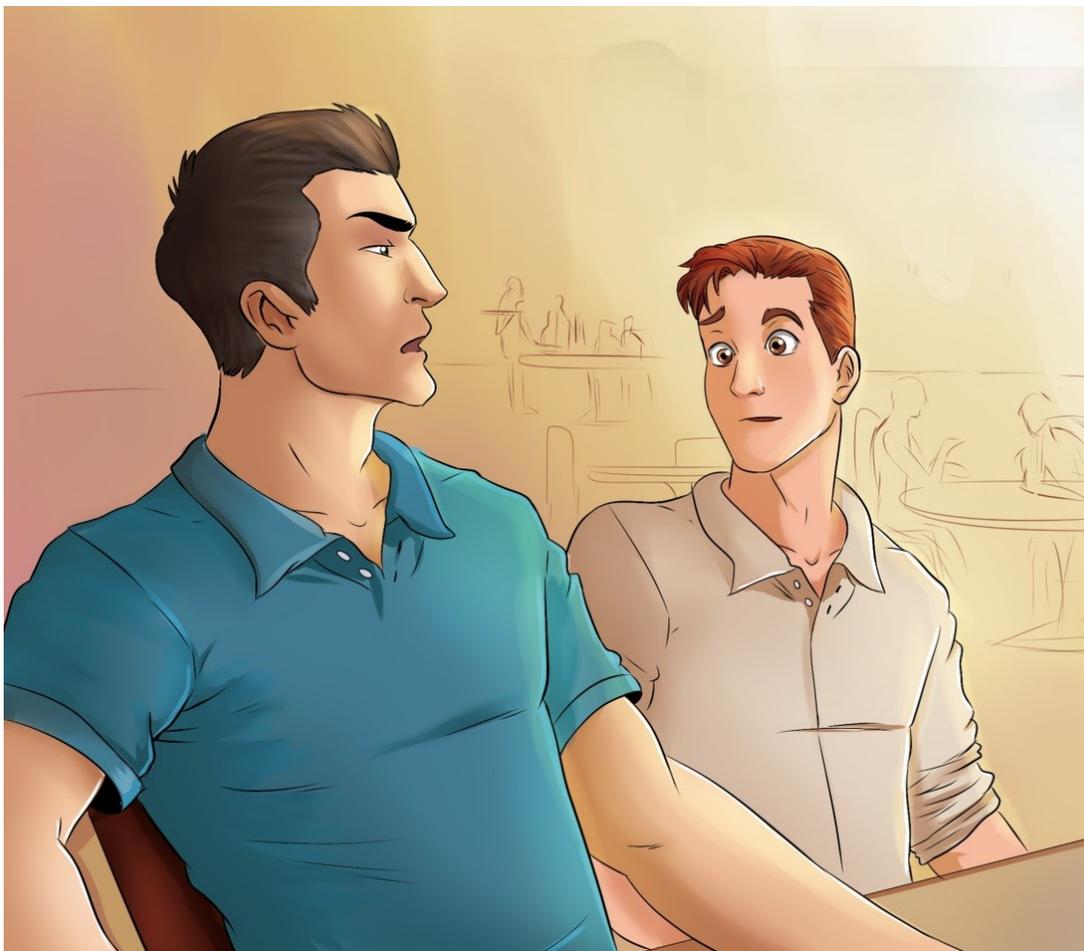
What was I doing?

I'm embarrassed to say. I just kept... looking at Mike, as if experiencing for the first time his pure male magnetism. It was as if I was seeing him as the women in the office saw him – strong, handsome, charming...

I squeezed my eyes shut as Chelsea brought us our food and two more Goose Islands. It was as if I was trying to cast out of my mind thoughts that seemed almost gay. I never looked at men the way I was looking at Mike. It didn't make sense. I was a card-carrying heterosexual in all respects.

Dinner was a blur. I know we talked – inconsequential things, really. As for the food, I didn't really taste it. And the beer... it was odd; I only had two (or was it three?). Normally, I could drink five or six before I began to tell the effects.

One thing I do remember, though. I was spending a lot of time just looking at Mike – admiring his body in a way that was neither natural for me or enjoyable. I felt uncomfortable watching him like that. After all, there wasn't a gay bone in my body.



*One thing I do remember, though. I was spending a lot of time just looking at Mike*

“Another round?” Chelsea asked as she cleared away the dishes. I hadn’t even noticed she was there.

“No thanks,” Mike told her. Then, when she was gone, Mike told me, “By the way, Chelsea used to own this place.”

Chelsea? She looked barely old enough to drink. How could she have owned this place?

“I know what you’re thinking,” Mike said. “She used to be a lot older.”

Even in my fogged brain, that didn’t seem to make any sense. “Older?”

“Nearly forty,” Mike continued, a devious twinkle in his eye. “He made me very angry, though.”

He?

“He told me I’d had too much to drink,” Mike went on. “What else is there to do in this god-forsaken world but drink? He tried to throw me out, so...” he threw his hands up in the air. “No more Charlie.”

“What are you talking about?” I mumbled. I was too confused to be frightened. My numbed mind told me I was sitting in a booth with some sort of psychopath.

“You’ll see; let’s go.” He got out of the booth. Somehow, he looked bigger than before. I had thought we were about the same size, but now Mike looked significantly larger.

“Go where?”

He shrugged. “Your place. You and I had some business to conduct.”

I was staggering on the sidewalk when Mike caught my arm. I felt as if I was in the middle of a dream – one of those dreams where you lose control of your body. Mike held me firmly as he hailed a cab. Then he opened the taxi door and carefully arranged me in the seat. As he closed the door, I slumped like a rag doll into the worn cushion.

Mike got in on the other side and gave the cab driver an unfamiliar address.

“Where are you taking me?” I mumbled, my voice not sounding quite right.

“Home.”

I frowned. “That’s not my address.”

“Don’t worry,” Mike told me – so I didn’t. I changed my position and rested my head against his shoulder. Felt good...

“What’s wrong with your friend?” The cabbie asked.

“Just too much to drink,” Mike relied smoothly.

“He ain’t gonna throw up, is he? I charge you extra if you do.”

“He’s fine.”

But I wasn’t fine – not really. I felt weak and disoriented. I had no control over my body. My thoughts were a jumble of unrelated memories – growing up in New Jersey. Playing lacrosse. My Senior Prom date with Jennie and getting laid for the first time. Going to high school. Cheerleading practice. My Senior Prom date with Jeff and getting laid for the first time...

What?

Mike nudged me. “We’re here?”

“Where?” I rubbed my eyes, trying to focus.

“Your apartment,” he replied.

It didn’t look like my apartment, I thought. Although my vision was blurry, I could tell it wasn’t my apartment. There should have been a doorman waiting for me, and a brightly-lit modern lobby behind him. Instead, the building was older and darker than mine, and instead of a doorman, there was a key card slot to allow entry. Maybe Mike had meant it was his apartment building.

I don’t really remember him helping me in the building. My next coherent thought was of being in a dark bedroom, lit only by the lights of the city coming in through one large window. Mike and I stood face to face. Well, I wasn’t really standing. Mike was holding me up, his arms around my waist. It seemed odd to me. My waist seemed to be somehow indented. And I was definitely much shorter than Mike – a good head shorter.

Suddenly, Mike pushed my chin up and lowered his face to mine. Before I realized what he was doing. He was kissing me hard, his tongue thrusting into my mouth. It felt as if it reached to the back of my throat. What the hell was he doing? I tried to resist; this was wrong, and yet...



*He was kissing me hard, his tongue thrusting into my mouth.*

I felt something I had never felt before. My nipples suddenly hardened, as did my penis. Or at least my penis hardened for a moment. Then, like a balloon losing air, it deflated until I couldn't feel it at all. Instead, I felt as if it were completely gone. Only a tingling, empty sensation remained. It felt odd, but somehow normal – and pleasant. It was as if my mind was two places at once. In one place, I was panicked by the apparent loss, but in another place, my mind was telling me that everything was all right.

We came up for air, and Mike commanded, “Sit down.”

I didn't think to resist the command. My mind was made of mush. I sat on the bed behind me as Mike pulled off all of my clothing above the waist. It came off easily, as it was all far too large for me. I gasped as my t-shirt came off, rubbing like sandpaper across my nipples. I looked down to see two very round, full breasts sitting on my chest.

He pushed me onto my back, then began yanking off my remaining clothes. And again, my mind

was two places. In one place I couldn't understand what was happening to me or why Mike was pulling off all my clothes. The other part of my mind wanted him to hurry as I looked up at his handsome face and manly body.

I lay there on the bed, my mind churning as I watched him pull off all of his clothing as well, revealing an absolutely perfect masculine physique. I could feel a slickness between my legs and a strange need for him to have his almost unnaturally large dick inside me.

I didn't have to wait long. Without a word, he was on me. There was no foreplay; there didn't need to be. I was so wet he slid into me with no trouble. Still, I gasped as I hadn't expected his full length. My vaginal muscles strained to expand as I threw my arms around him.

"You love this, don't you?" he whispered into my ear, pumping with long, smooth strokes.

"Oh yes," I breathed. And I did love it. God help me, I loved it. I wanted Mike more than anything else that I ever wanted in my life. I could feel him inside me, filling me completely. Then he began to thrust, gently at first but with rising intensity. I could feel something building inside my body, something hot and lustful, and I wanted him more desperately every moment

But how could I want him? I was a man, wasn't I? I hadn't lost my memories; I remembered being a man, but somehow, that fact seemed unimportant to me. My body seemed on fire for him. His very touch electrified me, sending shocks through my nipples and my... my...



*"You love this, don't you?"*

My what?

I was a man. I had a penis and testicles, and yet somehow I couldn't feel them. Instead, there was a feeling of emptiness between my legs – an emptiness that cried to be filled again. I remembered suddenly that I had a vagina. How did that happen? But it wasn't important. The important thing was that I had one and that I needed to be satisfied. "More," I begged.

Without a word, he began to move more insistently inside me. He drew part way out, and I was afraid he was going to withdraw his penis, but instead, he moved it out to the very edge of my... of my...

...vagina.

There was that word again.

Vagina.

I'm a man, a voice called out from within me, but it was a voice becoming more and more distant and indistinct. Instead, it was drowned out by the soft moans I was making. That need was continuing to build in me. I wrapped my arms around his torso and squeezed, as if to pull him in further. I arched my back to give him a better angle. I felt him growing still larger within me until...

Oh God!

Oh God! Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!

He was cumming inside me now, and my body shuddered with an unexpected climax of my own. I had never felt anything like it before. Then just as I thought it couldn't get any better, there were the aftershocks, which seemed to never end until everything went black.

It was morning.

I groaned, still half asleep. What a weird dream. At least it was Saturday. I didn't want to go into the office. The dream of being a woman had been so vivid, I didn't want to be thinking about it at work. It had seemed so real. And the feeling of Mike in...

No. Stop that. It was too bizarre to even think about.

I threw off the covers to scratch my chest – something of a habit of mine when awakening. But as my hand touched my chest, I got the most incredible surprise of my life. My long fingernails scratched one of my nipples, causing a sudden painful sensation. With a high-pitched yelp, I shot upright in bed, feeling my chest move unnaturally. I stared down, brushing a long strand of reddish brown hair back over my shoulder. Dear God, those are breasts, I realized. I shouldn't have breasts. Men don't have breasts. No, I realized suddenly, men don't have breasts – but I did.

Oh God. So it wasn't a dream. I just kept staring at my breasts telling myself that this couldn't be real. Mike couldn't have done this to me. No one could. This was absolutely impossible. It would have to be done with magic, and magic wasn't real – couldn't be real.

I was breathing heavily, watching with perverted fascination as the breasts rose and fell. Then I began to notice other sensations as well – the feeling of long hair running half way down my back, the thought that I was sitting on a pillow as my ass seemed fuller. Then there was the lack of sensation – the emptiness I felt between my legs.

I thought back to the dream that obviously now was not a dream. I thought back to what Mike did to me – how he entered me. I fought down the shudder of pleasure of Mike inside me. That wasn't something I wanted to address just now. But I did need to know what was now between my legs. My slender hands were holding a sheet over everything from the waist down, but now I had to see what was down there. Before I could talk myself out of it, I flung the sheet away from my body.

I was as bad as I expected. Below my new breasts was a smooth, indented waist. And below that was a trimmed patch of light reddish brown pubic hair, but nothing masculine embedded in it. Cautiously, I touched the patch of hair, feeling a stiff, sticky sensation among the curls. Again, I thought about Mike entering me. That certainly hadn't been a dream either.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, realizing as they dangled above the floor that I had lost several inches in height. How many, I wasn't sure, but I was sure the body I now had was smaller, more dainty, and undeniably feminine.

“What the hell?” I said softly, hearing for the first time my high, feminine voice. If it sounded high to me, I could only imagine what it would sound like to others, since we hear our own voice lower than it really is.

For the first time, I looked around my room. Well, it wasn't really my room – not the room I remembered as Daniel – but somehow, I sensed that this was, in fact, my room now. It was smaller than my other bedroom, and not as well appointed. Plus there were feminine touches everywhere. It was then that I noticed the full-length mirror attached to the back of my bedroom door.

Slowly, and with considerable trepidation, I made my way over to the mirror, noticing that my reflection was walking with feminine grace. I was naked, of course, and the girl who looked back from the mirror at me was naked as well. I should have been shocked, I suppose, but the shock was already over. Instead, I was more curious as to who I had become. There was nothing of my male self in the image. I was now a stranger, and I was beautiful. I had the same light brown hair as before, only now my hair was lustrous, nearly shining, with a touch of red. My eyes were still blue as well, but framed with long, alluring lashes, they were the eyes of a woman – what many would call “bedroom eyes.” My skin was flawless, and suspected I had lost a few years along the way. I looked as if I could pass for a college coed.

I had slender arms and magnificent legs, and my figure was only slightly short of voluptuous. I could be wearing a baggy sweatshirt and filthy jeans out on Michigan Avenue and still draw the

appreciative looks of every male who passed by. I could have walked right into Playboy headquarters and signed a contract to be the next available centerfold. I –

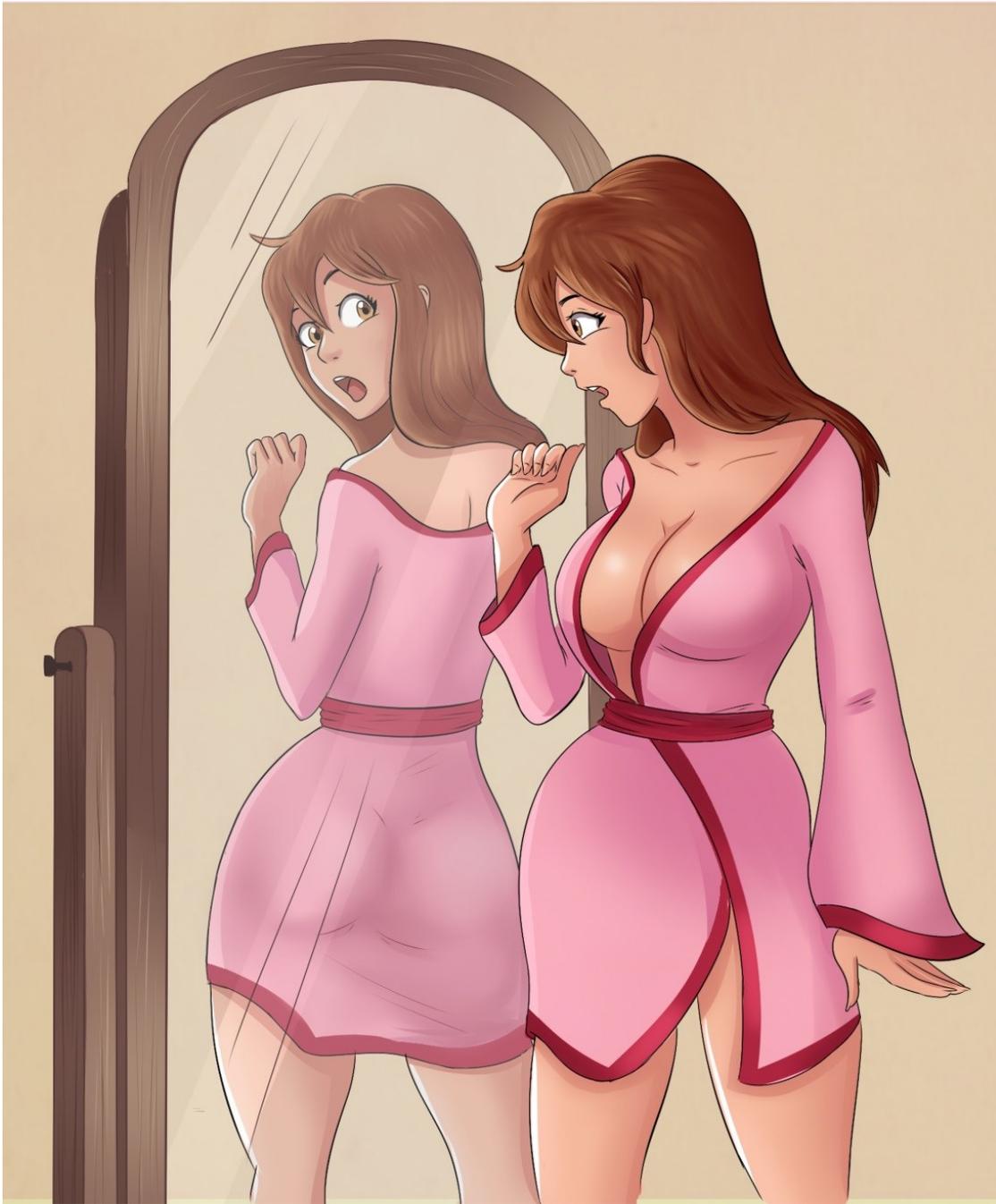
My thoughts were interrupted as the phone rang. I recognized the number at once. It was Cindy. I nearly picked up the phone, then held back. I didn't dare answer the phone. If Cindy heard my voice, she'd think I had a girl here with me. She'd never speak to me again. So I let it go to voice mail. It was all I could do. I'd check the message later.

The shock was wearing off. It's funny how quickly this was all becoming normal. I guess deep down everybody quickly loses track of the sensations their bodies are constantly sending to their brains. Men may not have breasts in the sense women do, but they do have external sexual characteristics. They aren't constantly aware of their penis and testicles unless something is rubbing against them and bothering them (or exciting them). By the same token, they aren't aware that they don't have big jiggling breasts – they just have flat chests, and unless something is rubbing against their nipples, they aren't even aware they have them.

Being a woman was just the reverse. I was getting used to the jiggle of my breasts, and suspected that sensation would be even less pronounced once I put on a bra. Likewise, the absence of external sexual organs didn't make me feel empty every moment.

I was tempted to see if using something like my finger (or the dildo I somehow knew was in my nightstand drawer) would stimulate me and make me more aware, but other things had to come first. There was questions to be answered. Who was I? Exactly where was I? What was I going to do about it? How had Mike done this to me? Was there a way to change back?

Well I wasn't going to learn any of those answers standing there naked in a strange bedroom with the uncomfortable feeling of dried cum between my legs. First things first. I took a quick shower, trying very hard to ignore my new body as I soaped vigorously but carefully. Even in a quick shower, I could feel that my nipples were more sensitive and that it wouldn't take much to make me very aware of what was now between my legs. I was also careful not to get my hair wet, bunching it as best I could in a plastic shower cap. I suspected washing, drying and styling my hair at this length would be a time-consuming project.



*I found a pastel pink terrycloth robe hanging from the back of the bathroom door.*

Rather than get dressed right away, I found a pastel pink terrycloth robe hanging from the back of the bathroom door. There was no sense in getting completely dressed until I figured out what I needed to do next. That might not be as hard as I had originally thought, I realized. If I let my mind go, I found there were subtle thoughts infringing on my conscious ones – thoughts most likely emanating from the person I now was.

First, I checked my phone for clues. I hadn't found a purse yet, so my phone was the easiest place to start. I checked my calendar first and was surprised to see I had a meeting with Cindy at one o'clock. That was just three and a half hours from now. I decided to check her message.

“Hi Dannie,” Cindy’s cheerful voice came over the phone’s speaker. “I’m texting you the address of the restaurant. You’ll love it! And, oh, be sure and wear a skirt today. There’s the cutest little boutique just a block away and I found the perfect thing for your date with Bobby tonight. See you at one!”

Boutique? Date? Bobby?

Shit.

This was getting worse and worse with each passing minute. It seemed I wasn’t the only one who realized I was now a woman. Did everybody know me as a woman? I suspected that was the case. And apparently, my life was somewhat intertwined with the Moorhead family – just in different ways. Cindy was apparently a friend now and her brother was my boyfriend. That was going to be not only weird, but extremely uncomfortable.

I went to the kitchen and started some coffee. Thank God this woman I had become still liked coffee. Then I searched around for a purse, which I found lying casually on the couch. I opened the wallet inside and got what I was looking for. My driver’s license said I was now Danielle Lynn Wheeler. I was now five six (and no, I’m not telling my weight), twenty-three years old – the same age as Bobby, and lived in a considerably less fashionable neighborhood than I had before. Beneath my wallet was an insurance card, showing my employer to be Winslow and Kane. At least that hadn’t changed, but tapping into my alternate memories, I realized I was no longer in management. In fact, I was the receptionist.

Wait a minute, I thought. If I could casually tap into these memories of my new life, why waste time searching through ID cards and documents? Why not just sit back, close my eyes, and concentrate on memories of Danielle. I plopped down on the couch and let my mind drift...

I suddenly was hit with a number of memories. I had the same parents, but instead of being the eldest of three children, I was now the youngest. Most disappointing for me was that my degree from Rutgers and my MBA were no longer in my resume. Instead, I had followed a boyfriend to Chicago right after high school, where for a short time, I had attended cosmetology school (!), but had dropped out when I broke up with him and had taken a receptionist’s job instead. My resume now contained working for three companies in the Chicagoland area (all as a receptionist). Not much to draw on, I realized dejectedly.

I had met Bobby much the way I had met Cindy. The firm had done a project for their family company, but instead of Dan Wheeler asking Cindy out on a date, Bobby had asked Danielle Wheeler out instead, in spite of the fact that our firm only got a one-shot consulting contract, since Dan Wheeler hadn’t been there to seal the deal on a larger engagement.

I came out of my mini-trance when I heard the coffee signaling that it was ready. Maybe I should try to get into a community college, I thought as I poured a cup, liberally splashing milk in it and adding a teaspoon of sugar – a level teaspoon; can’t have too many calories. I looked sexy as hell with my robe mostly open and a bare midriff and certainly didn’t want a muffin top. I –

I nearly spit out the first sip of coffee. What was I thinking? I drank coffee black since I started college. And as for college, what was this nonsense about a community college? I had an MBA. And I had no intention of baring my midriff.

God, what was happening to me?

As I remembered my life – my male life – and the thoughts of an undereducated receptionist who was foolish enough to follow her boyfriend to a strange city receded. My male mind carefully analyzed what had just happened. Drawing on Danielle's memories had forced a new persona on me, but only temporarily. Coffee with milk and sugar now tasted wrong to me. I had no intention of repeating college, and I could care less about a muffin top – unless it was on Cindy, and then I'd...

I'd what? I was a female as Cindy now. Somehow, reality had shifted, and I was just another one of Cindy's girl friends. And, I was going out on a date with Bobby, her brother. How did I feel about that? How did I feel about Bobby?

There was only one way to tell. I'd have to access Danielle's memories again. But what if I fell into her persona again? I'd have to be careful, like dipping my toe in the water. And these could be dangerous waters.

Bobby...Bobby...Bobby

Bobby was so cute. When I met him, I knew instinctively he might be the one. I know his parents thought he could do so much better, but they had warmed to me, especially after Cindy and I became friends. Cindy was like a big sister to me, but Bobby was the most important guy in my life. I wonder what his family would think if they knew he and I were sleeping together. He was the best lover I had ever had... except maybe for that one time with Mike.

No, don't go there! Mike was... well, he was Mike. I knew he'd never settle down, but what I wouldn't give to have him fuck me just one more time. Just keep thinking about Bobby. He could eat me out any time he wanted. And his stamina! He could fuck me all night long, and –

I gasped suddenly. God, I almost trapped myself again. To make matters worse, I was dripping wet between my legs. Thank God I hadn't gotten dressed. Otherwise, I'd be changing my... my... panties. I shivered, even though the robe was warm. This was just great. To add to my resume, I now craved sex. Things were going from bad to worse.

Suddenly, the phone rang again. I thought it might be Cindy again, but looking down, I saw it was Toni. Should I answer it? Well, why not? If Cindy thought I was Danielle, Toni would too. I picked it up.

"Hello?"

There was a moment's hesitation before I heard Toni ask, "Dan?"

Not Dannie; not Danielle. Just Dan. My heart leaped. "You remember me?" I asked hesitantly.

“Yeah. I do. Where are you?”

“Home,” I told her.

I could almost see her shaking her head. “Not your old home, Dan – your new home. I went by your old place, and there’s no Dan Wheeler there.”

Where was that purse? There it was – on the couch where I left it. I pulled out the wallet again and looked at my driver’s license, giving Toni the address.

“You’re close,” she said. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

I started a cup of coffee, and true to her word, Toni was at my door in ten minutes. Even dressed down in jeans and a knit top, Toni was beautiful, but I found myself looking more at what she wore and how she wore it than her body. She shook her head once she was inside. “So he got to you, too.”

What’s going on, Toni? I asked plaintively. “What happened to me?”

“Think back,” she told me. “Think back to when Mike came to work with us. Think about me.”

What was she talking about? But I did what she said. I remembered Toni – no, Tony. And then suddenly, I remembered everything. I remembered when Andrea left. There were just me, Pat, Tony and Steve in the department. Then Tony became Toni, Steve was suddenly Stephanie, and the new guy I hired – Jason – he was Jane. Reality had shifted until all of us but Pat were women. My new memories told me Pat was now in charge of the department, and having a hell of a time running things. Jack had forced his nephew onto the team without me to discourage it, and Pat was on the verge of being fired for having a dysfunctional, non-productive team.

I nearly passed out as the different streams of reality coursed through my memory. Toni helped me to the couch and poured us each a cup of coffee. I was a little more stable when she handed me the cup.

“Thanks.”

Tony gave me a wan smile. “Don’t worry, Dannie, it’ll get easier with time. The secret is to draw on the new memories sparingly. Draw too much and you’ll lose your old self entirely – like Jane almost did. If you hadn’t introduced her to that Dr. Glazer.”

I remembered what a wreck Jane was – until she met Becky Glazer. After that, she seemed to calm down. “So Dr. Glazer...” I began slowly.

“Is one of us,” she finished for me.

“My God, how many people has this happened to? Toni, what’s this all about? This is completely insane. Men don’t just change into women and have their entire lives rewritten. That would

be...”

“Magic?”

“Yeah, magic, and magic doesn’t exist.”

Toni sighed. “Of course it does. Look at yourself. Look at me. What else besides magic could do this? You probably went to that little bar with Mike Garret, went through the change, got fucked, and ended up here this morning. Does that sound about right?”

I nodded numbly. Toni knew what had happened to me – because it happened to her. Then it happened to Steve and Jason. Same song, different verse.

“As for how many people this has happened to,” Toni went on, “I don’t really know. Jane has joined a support group run by Dr. Glazer. According to her, about fifteen women who used to be men show up. Some of them are pretty screwed up.”

I nodded. I could relate. Right now, I was pretty screwed up myself. Just a day ago, I was in charge of a consulting team. Now, I was a receptionist. Being a receptionist at the firm wasn’t much of a picnic for a woman. Admittedly, Winslow and Kane had been a wee bit sexist, too. Receptionists were expected to dress professionally but just a little bit provocatively as well. It was good for business. The male clients liked what they saw when they walked in the door. Jack Winslow had remarked on that when there were no women around. A new thought from the memories of this changed reality made me realize that Jack was right. Bobby had spotted me the minute he and his father and sister had walked in the door. Now, they were clients – largely because Bobby started dating me.

“Okay, so you seem to be dealing with this and Jane isn’t doing so well. How about Steve – or rather Stephanie?”

Toni sighed. “She has good days and bad days. She got saddled with a boyfriend who is pretty macho. She fights it, but when she goes home every night, there he is. He can be pretty... demanding from what she tells me. Between ending up a secretary and getting mentally beaten up by her boyfriend, she’s losing herself.”

That could happen to me, I realized. I went from a manager to a receptionist. Plus I had a boyfriend, too. Sure, Bobby seemed like a nice guy. We had enjoyed a few beers together and even gone to a couple of Bears games together, but what would he be like alone with the new me? I had been his sister’s boyfriend, so maybe he was always on his best behavior around the male me. Alone with a girl in the bedroom, he could be a real ass for all I knew. I did know that he had dated a string of girls, never getting serious about any of them. Of course, most were vacuous beauties in low level jobs...

Did that describe me now?

“So what have you done? Have you talked to Mike about changing you back?” I asked, anxious to find out if there was a road back to my real self.

“That’s hard to do around the office. Mike’s out a lot – he’s in sales after all. I’ve tried e-mailing him and phoning him, but he never answers. I did try once at the office to pull him aside, but he just gave me a nasty leer and looked as if the only thing he wanted to do with me had nothing to do with talking.”

“So you’ve given up,” I surmised sadly.

“Given up? Hell no! I want to figure out a way to get back to my old self before I’m completely lost in this new life the way Jane and Stephanie seem to be going. At least I don’t have an overbearing boyfriend like Stephanie, or have to go to meetings like Jane does just to keep from hanging out trolling for guys in the bars every night. But what can I do? I can’t exactly go to the police. And there aren’t any wizards in the Chicago phone book in spite of what the Dresden novels say. Face it: we’re probably stuck in heels and skirts for the rest of our lives”

So Jane and Stephanie would be of no use, and all Toni could think of to do was fight the urges as long as possible. Except for helping me acclimate, she’d be worthless. As for me, I hadn’t given up. I had no intention of staying this way. I had had a good life before – rising career, good education, and a beautiful, talented girl for a companion. I was not going to be Danielle Lynn Wheeler for the rest of my life.

Period.

In spite of my resolve, though, I found tears forming in my eyes. I hadn’t cried in years, and I knew that regardless of my best efforts, these were the tears of a frustrated woman who had no idea what to do next.

“So what are you going to do now?” Toni asked gently, as if reading my mind.

“I don’t know,” I sighed. “I got a text from my girlfriend, Cindy. She’s expecting me for lunch at one with a shopping trip to follow. I don’t plan to go, though. I’ll call her and cancel.”

Toni shook her head. “Don’t do that. So you’re gay?”

“What? No!”

“Well, you said you had a girlfriend...”

I shook my head. “Cindy was Dan’s girlfriend. Now she’s just... a friend I guess. Apparently I’ve been dating her brother.”

Toni’s eyes widened. “Wow, that’s complicated.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“So you definitely need to go through the day as planned,” Toni decided. “Anything else would be out of character for the female you.”

I folded my arms, realizing suddenly how difficult that was to do with such substantial breasts. “I don’t care if it’s in character or not.”

“Yes you do,” she countered. “Until you figure out what you’re going to do about this, act natural. Be Danielle. Otherwise, you’ll complicate your own life.”

“But I’m not really a twenty-three year old receptionist. How am I supposed to act like it?”

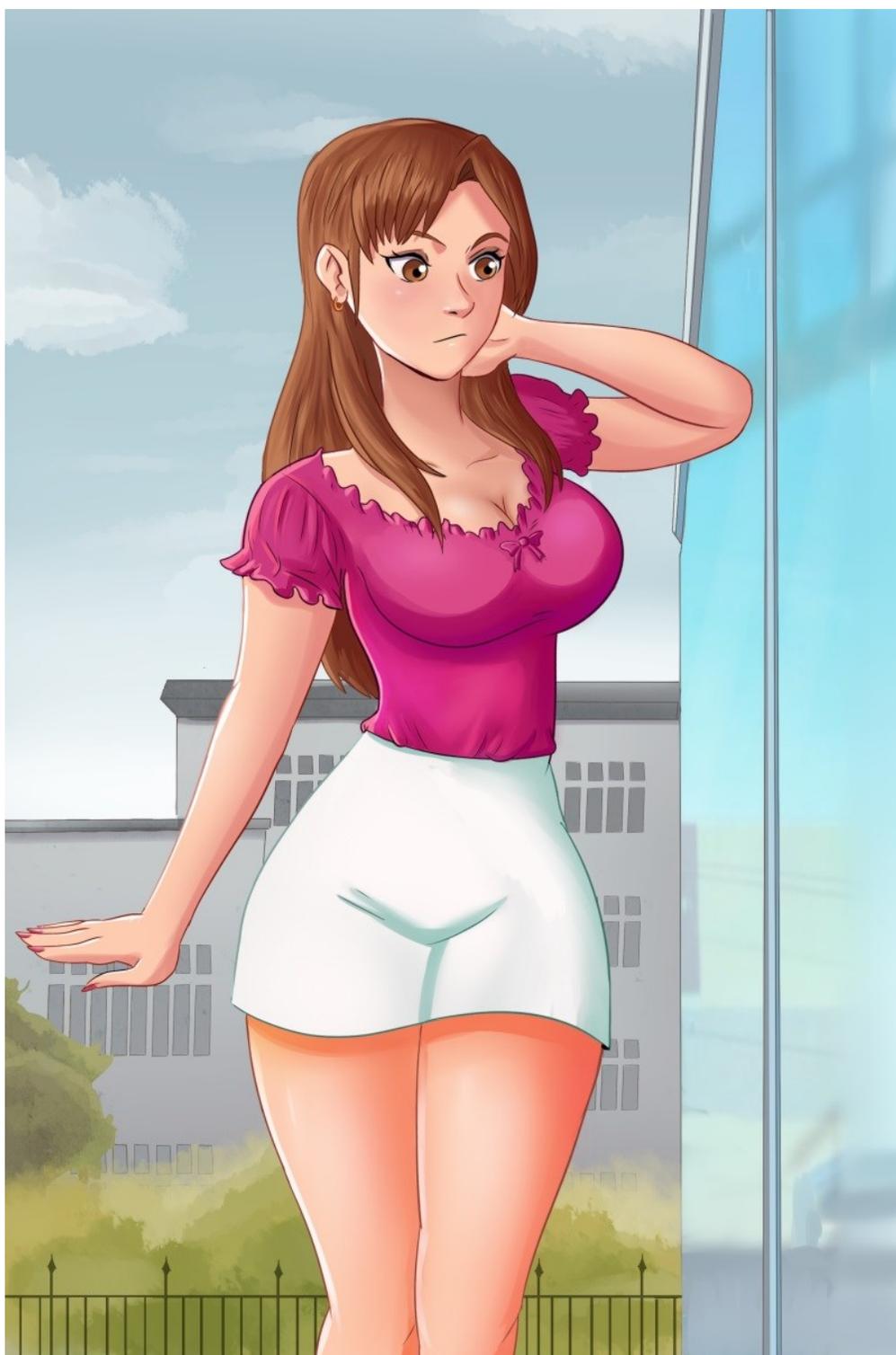
“You have to learn. Jane fought it so hard she’s having to go to meetings now just to keep her sanity. She doesn’t talk about it with me, but I can see she has major issues. Stephanie and Jane pushed against their new roles and whatever did this pushed back until they almost completely lost themselves. I went along with it – at least I didn’t fight it very much. I’m the only one of us who has managed to keep things under control.”

Had she really kept it under control? She looked like a woman, and acted like one, too. What wasn’t she telling me? Had she given in to new sexual urges? Had she been sleeping around? Was she reveling in trying on feminine finery and smiling when men opened doors for her or bought her drinks?

Maybe. But I realized on further reflection, she was still doing a great job at work. She seemed to be in control of herself. She had thought all of this out and was still in control of her life. I needed an ally badly. Stephanie or Jane wouldn’t do. I’d serve myself best by following Toni’s advice until I had a better plan. Still, the idea of having a chatty girl lunch with my former girlfriend, followed by shopping – trying on clothes, matching outfits, oohing and aahing over each other’s stylish choices – sounded like the third circle of Hell to me. But I supposed it beat hanging around my new apartment feeling sorry for myself.

“You’re right,” I admitted at last. “I need to play along – for now.”

Toni smiled. “Then let’s get you ready.”



*Toni smiled. "Then let's get you ready."*

I almost wished it had been freezing out as I walked along Michigan Avenue. The bus stop was two blocks from the restaurant, and in that two blocks, I was ogled by half of the male population of Chicago. Had it been colder, I could have been bundled up in a shapeless coat and leather boots. But on an unusually warm spring day in the city, Toni had dressed me like so many other young women I had often admired on the Miracle Mile. My top was turquoise and

matched my 4 inch high heels. My skirt was white and short – too short for business use but long enough to not be slutty. That meant a serious amount of thigh was visible, but unless I was careless when I sat down, no panties would show. The strange feeling of small hoop earrings, long bobbing hair, and breasts and hips that swayed with each step reminded me of the new woman I had become. Toni had gone light on the makeup, but when I caught a glance of myself in a store window, I realized even light makeup was enough to make me look super feminine. I wasn't a ten, I thought to myself, but I was damn close.

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